October 2004/34

Policy development

Statement of policy

This document is for information

This document sets out our revised research strategy for widening participation and fair access, which has been developed in consultation with the HE sector and other stakeholders. The strategy covers our medium- and long-term research priorities, as well as short-term or ongoing work, and includes information on specific projects proposed or in progress.

HEFCE widening participation and fair access research strategy

HIGHER EDUCATION
FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND

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HEFCE widening participation and fair access research strategy

To	Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions
	Heads of further education colleges
	Heads of universities in Northern Ireland
	Selected national bodies
Of interest to those responsible for	Widening participation, Strategic planning, Research
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Executive summary

<u>Purpose</u>

1.   This document sets out our widening participation (WP) and fair access research strategy.

<u>Key points</u>

2.   The strategy was developed following consultation with the sector and other stakeholders (in HEFCE 2004/06). Responses to the consultation are given in Annex A. This document sets out our broad priorities for research in widening participation to higher education. In particular it considers:

- our medium and long-term research priorities, as well as short-term and ongoing work

- how we intend to improve the quality of research we use

- how we will improve our capacity for taking account of external research and for linking with other bodies with research interests.

3.   Development of the strategy has been guided by three principles: the need to engage with and build on existing knowledge, the need to work in partnership, and the need to build capacity across the sector to both undertake and use WP research.

4.   The strategy focuses on four priority areas:

   a.   Costs of widening participation (paragraphs 20-27).

   b.   Evaluation of Aimhigher (paragraph 29).

   c.   Barriers to participation in HE – literature review (paragraphs 62-65).

   d.   WP research facility (paragraphs 69-70).

Action required

5.   This report is for information only.

HEFCE widening participation and fair access research strategy

Aim and objectives

6.   In our strategic plan for 2003-08 (HEFCE 2004/17) we stated that widening access and improving participation are an essential part of our mission. We aim to ensure that all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have the opportunity to do so, whatever their background and whenever they need it.

7.   This document sets out our plans for a programme of research which will inform and support the policies developed to meet this strategic aim. The aim and objectives of our widening participation and fair access research strategy are outlined below.

Aim

To ensure that policies developed to meet the Council's strategic widening participation and fair access objectives are informed and supported by a robust evidence base.

Objectives

- To build a high quality, sustainable evidence base for widening participation policy and practice and to ensure that such an evidence base is widely accepted.

- To ensure that new knowledge generated by research is properly communicated and widely understood.

- To improve our capacity for taking account of and making good use of knowledge produced in the wider research community.

- To build capacity in the higher education sector to both undertake and make appropriate use of research.

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8.   In order to deliver our strategic plan effectively, we need to develop and manage effective policies. And we need to ensure that our cycle of policy-making is well informed by higher education research and expert knowledge. In this way we will be able to follow the National Audit Office's recommendations for effective policy making (2001):

> 'Departments need to have in place well developed strategies which determine their longer term information needs, how and in what form such are to be collected, how best to share information, and the quality assurance arrangements required to ensure that the data are accurate and reliable.'

9.   This strategy addresses these recommendations in the context of HEFCE WP research. We aim in particular to:

- think about our medium- and long-term research priorities, as well as about short-term or ongoing work

- improve the quality of research we use

- improve our capacity for taking account of external research (research which we do not commission), and for linking with other bodies with research interests in WP.

10.   We recognise that in this field, even with an improved evidence base, there is still likely to be considerable uncertainty about 'how things are', and even more uncertainty about 'what works'.

HEFCE's role

11.   It is important that our role with regard to research is clearly understood. We commission and use research for developing policies. To this end, WP research and evaluation is used to:

- account for funds that have already been allocated

- make a case for future or further investment

- inform and support practitioners in the sector

- inform and engage policy makers both within institutions and in government departments.

12.   Funding student support is not within our remit. But where this overlaps with our widening participation remit, we do, and will continue to work with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to ensure that issues of student support are considered in the work we undertake.

13.   This strategy will form part of the wider long-term research and evaluation programme we are developing which will address our other core strategic aims (enhancing excellence in learning and teaching, enhancing excellence in research, and enhancing the contribution of HE to the economy and society), and cross-cutting aims (building institutional strengths and developing leadership, governance and management). This programme will be published on the web early in 2005. We will ensure that our WP research strategy links into and takes account of other work being undertaken or proposed. For example, work on foundation degrees, work-based learning routes and employability will be relevant to the research strategies for both WP and learning and teaching.

Underlying issues in WP research

14.   To clarify the research priorities for widening participation, in March 2003 we hosted a seminar which brought together HEFCE officers and sector researchers. Discussions highlighted a number of cross-cutting issues in undertaking WP research:

a.   **Definitions.** Many previous studies identified difficulties in defining what is meant by terms such as 'under-represented groups', 'non-traditional students', or 'WP students'. In a recent report on retention, Action on Access (2003, Vol I) argued that in order to identify the characteristics of a 'WP student' we need to have a starting point or 'norm' against which we can compare. However, the report goes on to argue that the concept of a 'normal' student is difficult to sustain given the level of diversity within

the student population. Therefore we need to accept that how non-traditional groups are defined and identified often varies according to the institutional and cultural context. Despite these conceptual difficulties, previous studies have identified broad groupings of people who are under-represented in HE. These include those from lower socio-economic groups, students with non-traditional qualifications for HE, disabled students and certain minority ethnic groups. However, even for these groups the uncertainties in the underlying measurements are much greater than is often supposed. Nevertheless, the idea of under-representation – that is groups with participation rates significantly below the average for the cohort under consideration – seems an appropriate working definition for the purposes of research.

b. **Measures of student success.** We recognise the need to develop more sophisticated means of defining and measuring success in HE if we are to evaluate the impact of widening participation. The 'gold standards' of A-levels and three-year full-time honours degree courses are not always appropriate measures of the success of WP activities. The development of credit accumulation frameworks and the encouragement of lifelong learning also require more flexible measures of success.

c. **Scale of research.** Much research into WP has been small scale. Such studies often provide valuable insights and case studies, and can explore an issue in depth. But it is often difficult (and unwise) to draw conclusions from them that apply to the whole HE sector. Consequently there is a need for larger-scale research, perhaps from scaling up small studies, to provide complementary sector-level data.

d. **Quality and capacity.** Linked to the previous point are concerns regarding quality of research. A lot of small-scale WP research may, at times, lack methodological rigour. We believe that there could be significant benefits in bringing together a number of disciplines to investigate WP issues, including trained researchers and WP practitioners, thereby providing different perspectives.

e. **WP research facility.** A need has been identified for a facility for WP research to perform a number of functions, including the collection and critical assessment of a range of WP research products, networking, and research advice and guidance for the benefit of WP researchers, policy makers and the wider sector.

15. We want our strategy to take account of these issues. We have tried to illustrate within it how we intend to work with our stakeholders to do so.

Guiding principles

16. Development of our strategy has been guided by three principles: the need to engage with and build on existing knowledge, the need to work in partnership, and the need to build capacity across the sector.

a. **Engage with and build on existing knowledge.** There is a large body of existing evidence and knowledge of widening participation issues. We need to critically engage

with this work to ensure that we do not re-invent the wheel. This will mean developing systems and partnerships at both national and international levels.

b. **Working in partnership.** By working in partnership we will ensure that we have up to date knowledge of work being undertaken by sector partners and others. We will also be able to pool resources and data so that we can commission larger, more far-reaching studies encompassing a broad range of perspectives. We want to develop research partnerships with other HE funders (such as the other UK HE funding bodies and the Teacher Training Agency), as well as other bodies such as the Higher Education Academy, the Learning and Skills Development Agency, the Learning and Skills Research Council and the Society for Research into Higher Education.

This strategy is an important first step in addressing partnership working. We are already working closely with the DfES, the Department of Health, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), Universities UK, the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) on various projects. We will continue to develop and expand these partnerships. We also seek to identify and develop international partnerships to ensure that our research is informed by international as well as national experience.

c. **Building capacity.** As noted in paragraph 14 above, there are concerns regarding the quality of research undertaken in WP, and the capacity within the sector to carry out methodologically robust and sufficiently broad research in this area. We are committed to working with our partners to help build this capacity and thereby drive up the quality of WP research. Through the work of our national co-ordination teams (see paragraph 71) and identifying good practice, we will seek to ensure that practitioners are aware of the benefits of using multidisciplinary teams and of working in partnership to increase the resources available to undertake research. We will also investigate whether more can be done to bring WP researchers together and ensure that infrastructures are in place to support them.

We will also encourage UK researchers to consider work that uses international comparators. Many issues might be culture-specific and therefore not transferable to the UK, but research to date has shown that there are areas of commonality and that lessons can be learned from activities and policies in other countries.

Themes

17.   For the purposes of the strategy, widening participation has been divided into six broad themes:

• the cost of widening participation
• outreach and raising aspirations
• access and admissions
• retention and student achievement

- lifelong learning
- after graduation: employability and progression to postgraduate study.

18.   Each theme is discussed further below. Much of the research undertaken under these themes can be organised around the idea of a student life-cycle, but other approaches are equally valid, such as considering WP and the institution, or WP and the subject. We are keen to be kept informed of work being planned or ongoing within other themes/approaches. We will be considering all kinds of research – from small-scale, practitioner-led, action research to larger-scale, sector-focused studies.

19.   Some research activity will cut across a number of themes. Any such research will be considered under a 'generic widening participation research' category.

The cost of widening participation

20.   We need a better understanding of the additional costs that the sector incurs in attempting to meet the WP agenda. As part of this, in the longer term, we need to consider the potential cost benefits of widened participation in HE to students, institutions, regions and the economy.

21.   In 2001 we commissioned an evaluation. The report, 'Evaluation of the HEFCE widening participation support strategy' was published on our web-site in June 2003 (www.hefce.ac.uk under Publications/R&D reports). It showed that most higher education institutions (HEIs) believed that the HEFCE funds allocated to them for WP at that time were too low (£28 million in 2001-02 and £38 million in 2002-03). Recommendations were also made to increase the WP allocation by the Education and Skills Select Committee in July 2002 and by its predecessor, the House of Commons Education and Employment Committee, in February 2001.

22.   In response to the above, in March 2003 we announced that the WP allocation for 2003-04 would total £255 million (HEFCE 2003/14), an increase of £217 million on 2002-03. This has been interpreted as representing a premium of about 20 per cent, although the calculations are more sophisticated than this would suggest. This increase in the WP allocation was funded through a re-allocation of the teaching grant.

23.   However, a study by PA Consulting, conducted on behalf of HEFCE and Universities UK in 2002, estimated that the additional costs to institutions of attracting, recruiting and supporting non-traditional students ranged from 30-35 per cent. This work was intended to be a pilot study and consequently involved only two HEIs. With such a small sample we are unable to say whether this finding applies to the wider sector.

24.   Our interest in evaluating the cost of WP was three-fold:

a. In the short term we needed to establish a firmer evidence base to support our submission to the 2004 government spending review. Consequently, we, Universities UK and SCOP commissioned consultants to undertake a study that would provide such

evidence. The final report from this study, 'The costs of widening participation in HE' is available on the HEFCE web-site at www.hefce.ac.uk under Publications/R&D reports. It describes what institutions are currently spending on WP.

b. In the medium term, we intend to work with institutions to develop and refine the methodology developed in the above study, so that they can more accurately and consistently understand:

- what they spend on WP

- the costs of a range of established WP activity

- the organisational capacity required to deliver an effective WP programme

- what resources need to be devoted to WP.

c. In the longer term we hope that this methodology will yield useful data that we will be able to use, with institutions' permission, to inform national funding priorities for WP.

25.   In addition, the new fee and student support regime, and the establishment of an Office for Fair Access, will undoubtedly affect the dynamics of the HE sector, and will have implications for the way we fund widening participation. Together with UCAS and other partners, we will monitor any such changes to assess the impact of these policies. The results can then be fed into the study discussed in paragraph 27 below. In the meantime, we have reviewed our funding method for teaching to inform allocations for 2004-05 and beyond. The review was subject to consultation (HEFCE 2003/42) and included consideration of how we allocate funds for widening access and improving retention.

26.   The HEFCE Board has agreed that we should move towards a system for funding teaching that is informed by costs. The consultation revealed support for an alternative way of determining weightings for different subjects, based on full economic costs using the Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) method. This would enable HEIs to make informed decisions based on actual costs. However, it would take at least three years to complete a TRAC-based study to identify the full economic costs of teaching in different subject areas. The study would then need to be followed by consultation with the sector before any new funding system could be implemented.

27.   In addition, we need to know how our current funding method impacts on activity that might encourage participation in HE by non-traditional groups, and whether a different model would have a greater or lesser impact on the WP agenda. We are currently developing our proposals for a programme of work to investigate this.

Outreach and raising aspirations

28.   There are a number of elements to this part of our research strategy.

<u>Aimhigher evaluation</u>

29.   The Aimhigher programme was launched in August 2004 and brought together two existing programmes: Aimhigher (formerly Excellence Challenge) and Aimhigher: Partnerships for Progression (P4P). We are working with the LSC and the DfES to develop a single Aimhigher evaluation strategy. The evaluation aims to identify what works in terms of encouraging people from under-represented groups to go into higher education, for whom, and under what circumstances. We want to determine how and why interventions work or do not work, in order to inform, influence and improve policy and practice. The evaluation will be at a national level, and also at regional and sub-regional levels.

<u>Progression from further to higher education</u>

30.   We need to examine more closely the progression routes from further education (FE) to higher education, and the transition issues that such students face. The proposed literature review on the barriers to participation in HE (see paragraph 62) will uncover existing work in this area, and from that we will determine what longer-term research is needed. We will collaborate with the LSC to ensure that this work meets the needs of both sectors. We have already completed a joint project with the LSC which looked at the issues facing students with disabilities as they progress from FE to HE (National Disability Team and Skill, 2004). We are also engaged in a project to link individual student data from further education colleges and higher education institutions in order to determine the pattern of progression.

<u>Supply and demand</u>

31.   In 2003 the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) produced an update to the HEFCE study 'Supply and demand in higher education' (HEFCE 01/62). The updated study, 'Supply and demand to 2010' is available at www.hepi.ac.uk under Articles. It shows that, following the Qualifications for Success initiative and other reforms in schools, there was an increase in the number of 17 year-olds leaving school with two or more A-levels between 1996-97 and 2002-03. The paper implies that, should this trend continue, the 50 per cent target for participation in HE may be met by an increase in the numbers entering HE with 'traditional' qualifications. This depends, critically, on the propensity of students taking the Curriculum 2000 A-levels behaving in the same way as those who gained traditional A-levels before these changes. There is no way of knowing whether this will be the case.

32.   We do know that pupils from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to stay on in education post-16 than other groups. The development of Curriculum 2000 A-levels was, in part, an attempt to encourage more students from these groups to continue in education. But we have no way of knowing yet whether this has been successful. Therefore, the increasing numbers of students with A-level qualifications, whether Curriculum 2000 or traditional, may

not necessarily include a higher proportion of students from the lower socio-economic groups. So, in terms of widening participation, this increase in the numbers gaining two or more A-levels may not move the social inclusion agenda much further forward.

33. We will continue to monitor trends in supply and demand. But we need to know more about the social and educational experiences of pupils from lower socio-economic groups as compared to their more affluent contemporaries. Specifically we are interested in the influences, decision-making processes, and advice and guidance that lead to pupils leaving school at 16 or continuing in education. The review of the barriers to participation in HE will look at issues that arise earlier in pupils' educational careers, particularly at secondary and FE level. It will also consider work that has been undertaken in primary schools, and investigate the theories presented in the general work on transitions, to deepen our understanding of the influences that affect aspirations, motivation and social inclusion.

Access and admissions

34. We need a more comprehensive view of the issues facing students trying to access HE through non-traditional entry routes. We need to know why appropriately qualified applicants from under-represented groups do not enter institutions with the most demanding entry requirements in the numbers that might be expected.

Non-traditional entry routes

35. Institutions can help to widen participation by establishing policies on admissions and curriculum to recruit students who do not come through the traditional route of A-levels taken at 18 or 19. Alternative routes include progression agreements with schools and colleges, access courses, recognition of prior learning, both experiential and formal, credit accumulation agreements/frameworks, and recognition of vocational qualifications. There is a need for evidence on how widely these alternative means of determining potential are used by HEIs in their admissions processes, and whether they are effective predictors of future success in HE, in order to ensure support for widening participation.

36. We already hold some information about the extent to which different factors are being taken into account in the admissions process. For example, the evaluation of the HEFCE WP support strategy (see paragraph 21) and the proposed HEI surveys in the Aimhigher evaluation both look at this issue. We are also looking at progression paths from FE to HE in one area, by linking the LSC's Individualised Learner Record to data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Lessons from this study will provide insights into how it might be extended to give a picture of 'non-traditional' routes into HE across the sector.

Fair access – the search for indications of potential

37. There has been dispute over the reliability of A-level results as an effective indicator of subsequent HE achievement. All the evidence that we have examined supports the position that A-level results have a strong association with HE achievement. However, to add to the uncertainty, initial offers of places from HEIs are usually based on predicted A-levels rather

than the actual grades achieved. There is widespread agreement that use of actual results would prove more reliable, but it is also generally acknowledged that in practice it would be difficult to organise admissions to make this possible.

38.   The DfES appointed Professor Steven Schwartz to lead a review of fair admissions to HE. The review questions whether it is legitimate to admit students with grades lower than those normally expected for entry, and whether a student's social or economic background should be considered in the admissions process. The final report from the review is available at www.admissions-review.org.uk/downloads/finalreport.pdf. The Secretary of State has endorsed the principles of Post Qualifications Admissions suggested by the review, and set up an implementation group to be led by Sir Alan Wilson.

39.   There have been various suggestions as to how A-level results might be supplemented by other information to give a better indication of potential, and there may be value in carrying out large scale trials of some options. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is considering proposals on how to discriminate between applicants who have all attained the highest grades at A-level. In addition we propose to undertake the following work in-house:

   a. Our analysis of schooling effects (HEFCE 2003/32), which looked at A-level attainment, will be extended to look at other factors, including the school attended at 16.

   b. We already have some data on applications and offers of places linked to the HESA records. We are holding discussions with UCAS to extend this to cover all data that is available electronically. Such a consolidated data set will enable us to explore issues within admission processes. And, as UCAS increasingly uses electronic applications, more data will become available.

40.   However, additional indicators of potential might also be useful in determining the potential of applicants without the traditional HE entry qualifications. We would need to investigate such indicators alongside the work suggested above.

Fair access – investigating bias

41.   A particular area of concern in terms of fair access is any bias against students from ethnic minority backgrounds. Shiner and Modood (2002) concluded that, particularly in some pre-1992 HEIs, there was 'a strong indication that many minority candidates face an ethnic penalty and have to perform better than their white peers to secure a place'. This finding was supported by research undertaken in 1998 by McManus, which showed that coming from an ethnic minority, as well as being male, was a negative factor in determining the chances of being offered a place in medical schools.

42.   We intend to re-analyse the Shiner and Modood data set using other indicators. Upon completion of this re-analysis, if their results are confirmed, our long-term plan is to analyse complete rather than sample data. Such data are not available at present but UCAS plans to operate a predominantly electronic application system from 2006 which may allow this

information to be captured automatically. This would then provide the level of data needed for this analysis.

Retention and student achievement

43.   We need to develop our understanding of the factors that impact on non-completion and achievement by students in HE. Research into retention is at a relatively early stage due to the focus in recent years on outreach and access issues. We established in paragraph 14 that there is a need for clearer definitions when looking at student withdrawal. But equally as important is a more flexible measure of success: the 'gold standard' of gaining the traditional three-year honours degree is not always an appropriate measure when investigating achievements of non-traditional student groups. We are currently looking at progression routes as students take study breaks and move between institutions, to assess the extent to which such flexible learning routes do lead to the achievement of HE qualifications.

Non-traditional students and non-completion

44.   Certain assumptions regarding non-traditional student groups do not always stand up to analysis. For example, it is often assumed that non-traditional students are at a greater risk of non-completion than traditional entrants to HE. However, evidence suggests that students 'disadvantaged' by attending state schools have higher expected HE achievement than students from independent schools after other factors are taken into account (HEFCE 2003/32).

45.   Further work is planned to explore the interplay in HE achievement of ethnicity, socio-economic background, disability, prior educational achievement and other factors. Such studies, using administrative data sets, can establish which factors are associated with non-completion, but they do not provide answers as to why students withdraw from their courses. However, by establishing the factors and the patterns of student withdrawal across a number of different student groups, we will be able to plan future research in this area from an informed base.

46.   We are already working to establish more up-to-date data regarding non-completion across the HE sector, and we are also engaged in work to develop more reliable proxies for social class. Both these activities will help us to develop a more comprehensive picture of the issues affecting non-completion.

47.   We are particularly concerned about any bias against students from ethnic minority backgrounds as they move through the course. As noted in paragraph 41, evidence suggests that bias may exist in offers made by some institutions to students from ethnic minority backgrounds. A further question must be whether any such bias exists throughout the period of study and the effect of any such bias on subsequent HE achievement.

48.　　We have contributed over £20 million to the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). Details are on the web at www.tlrp.org. Three of the projects funded under phase three of the TLRP have implications for WP:

a.　One four-year study focuses on the experience of disabled students in HE, to investigate the reasons for their lower success rates. It is hoped that the findings will show how change occurs in institutions and the impact of such change on their disabled students, and ultimately encourage institutions to alter their practice.

b.　Another project is a large-scale longitudinal study into the learning patterns of 150 adults aged 25 and over. It aims to provide an understanding of the reality of learning throughout life from the point of view of those for whom learning does – or does not – matter.

c.　A third project aims to increase understanding of the range of learning outcomes of an increasingly diverse higher education system. This involves investigating the social mix of students and the characteristics of the student culture and lifestyle.

49.　　Institutions want to establish what works and what does not work when it comes to retaining students most at risk of non-completion. Our national co-ordination team for WP, Action on Access, has identified case studies highlighting good practice in retention in its report 'Student success in higher education' (2003), available on request from Action on Access. But more work is needed on the reasons why some HEIs have higher non-completion rates than comparable institutions. HEPI is already undertaking some work in this area, the results of which will help to inform our plans.

Term-time working

50.　　More full-time students are undertaking paid work during term time, and there are growing concerns about the impact of this on their HE achievement. A forthcoming report from the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI), 'Impact of debt and term-time working on higher education' shows a negative association between term-time working and HE achievement, even after other factors are taken into account.

Disabled students

51.　　The factors affecting retention and success of disabled students are not clearly understood. What is known is that disabled students tend to be less successful in terms of the level or class of qualification achieved. Under the second strand of our initiative to improve provision for such students, we have invested £2.8 million in 23 projects to develop and disseminate resources for learning and teaching. Details are on our web-site at www.hefce.ac.uk under Widening participation/Disability. In the shorter-term, research is planned by the National Disability Team to look at retention issues for disabled students. The team also intends to review the audit tools used by HEIs in terms of the provision, policies and curriculum for disabled students.

Lifelong learning

52.   The European Commission defines lifelong learning as:

'All learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social and employment-related perspective.'

53.   We are developing our policy on lifelong learning in a number of ways. Lifelong learning, for example, is central to the Joint Progression Strategy that we are working on with the DfES and the LSC. Focusing on vocational learners the strategy will do more than encourage wider access to an initial experience of higher education. We will support colleges and HEIs to form lifelong learning networks that offer learners access to a range of progression opportunities such that they can move between different kinds of vocational-academic programmes as their interests, needs, and abilities develop across a lifetime of learning. The Joint Progression Strategy will be evaluated.

54.   Particular attention will be paid to work which addresses the needs of part-time students, mature students and students taking part in non-traditional modes of learning (including foundation degrees, work-based learning and e-learning). We have commissioned research into demand for flexible and innovative modes of learning, which will report in Spring 2005.

55.   We are already exploring the possibility of using the Office of National Statistics' (ONS) longitudinal study, when it is updated by the 2001 Census data, to try to identify more accurately the mature students who fall within the WP remit. We have already determined the proportions of mature students with prior HE qualifications and prior HE achievement, but we are unable, with the data currently available, to determine the socio-economic background of these entrants. This is where the ONS data will be of benefit.

56.   The proposed literature review discussed in paragraphs 62-65 will identify issues around the barriers to lifelong learning, and we will use the knowledge generated to inform our medium- to long-term research objectives.

After graduation: employability and progression to postgraduate study

57.   We need to know whether non-traditional students (for example, those from the lower socio-economic groups, from ethnic minority groups, and disabled students) continue to experience relative disadvantage upon completion of their undergraduate studies, and whether any such disadvantage is directly related to their HE experience.

Employability

58.   Existing data suggest that students from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to have weaker entry qualifications. As a result of these weaker qualifications and the propensity of such students to study locally, they tend to go to less prestigious universities and gain lower

class degrees. All of which can be expected to, and often does, give them a relative disadvantage in the labour market. There is a question as to whether, in addition to the 'indirect' effect of social background, there are additional direct disadvantages for students from less privileged backgrounds.

59.   Evidence suggests that such direct effects are small, at least for young graduates. For example, the modelling underpinning the employability performance indicators showed that social class had only a small effect on the chances of being unemployed when other factors were taken into account. Research by CHERI (HEFCE 2002) using a wider range of measures of employment success also showed that indirect effects accounted for most of the observed differences in outcomes for young graduates. Direct disadvantage where it existed was not large, and was confined to particular groups, using particular measures of employment outcomes. However, it is worth noting that it is common for disadvantages to reinforce each other, and that mature students in particular have been disadvantaged in the graduate labour market.

Progression to postgraduate study

60.   There has, so far, been relatively little interest in 'widening participation' in postgraduate education. A study by Paul Wakeling of the University of York (2002) investigated the relationship between social class and progression to postgraduate research. He showed that graduates from higher social classes were more likely to take a programme leading to a PhD, but that these differences could be accounted for by the research standing of the departments where they graduated.

61.   We have done preliminary investigations which seem to show that differences in background (which are so important in determining the chances of entering HE) are much reduced when we look at the chances of going on to postgraduate study. Through linking student records, data are available to explore this issue further, though such analysis has not been given priority. The questions may become more pertinent when we have data for the first graduates with debts from three or four years of undergraduate study without maintenance grants.

Generic WP research

Barriers to participation in HE

62.   A number of studies have already been conducted to determine the nature, preponderance and scale of the barriers to participation in HE faced by a range of non-traditional entrants. We have no wish to duplicate this work, but we believe that it needs to be brought together and the data interrogated, to identify gaps in the evidence and to determine areas of agreement and disagreement. For example, how much of a determining factor is the cost of going to HE for students from lower socio-economic groups, when all other variables are taken into account? There is much debate on this question but the studies to date have been unable to provide a definitive answer.

63.   Therefore, as an immediate measure, we are commissioning a review of the available knowledge on barriers to participation in HE. This would cover a range of different student groups, including students from the lower socio-economic groups, part-time students, disabled students, mature students, students with dependants, and students from ethnic minority groups. The resulting report will be made widely accessible to the sector, and will identify examples of good practice in overcoming or minimising the effects of such barriers. In addition to revealing the areas for further research, the review should make it easier for institutions to use this knowledge in developing their approach to WP, and for the Aimhigher partnerships to work it into their plans.

64.   Prior to completion of this review, we can draw broad conclusions about what we know and what we need to find out, as well as describe the work that is planned or in progress:

a.   There is widespread agreement that some of the most significant barriers to HE occur in the early years of secondary education, and that the aspirations and attainment of students from Years 8 and 9 needs to be raised. We also recognise that significant barriers occur much earlier, at primary and even pre-school stage, and that some institutions are already working with primary schools as part of their WP activity. This is clearly a long-term policy issue, and the lag between interventions and measured impact on HE participation will be a decade or more in some cases.

b.   It is clear that to effect changes in the shorter term, policies need to focus on young people who have Level 3 qualifications and choose not to progress to HE, and on finding effective routes into HE for mature students who were unable or unwilling to enter HE at age 18 or 19. There is currently contradictory evidence about what constitutes the real barriers for these potential entrants, particularly young non-entrants with Level 3 qualifications.

c.   We do, however, acknowledge that the concept of barriers is quite problematic. Barriers may be sociological, psychological, societal, institutional and financial. They may relate to the constitution of particular subject disciplines, to staff development, and to every aspect of the learner's educational career before and during their HE experience. In view of this we believe that it is essential to identify barriers that occur during earlier stages of education (as mentioned above); but also barriers to entry and admissions, barriers to achievement and completion during the HE experience, and issues relating to post-graduation outcomes, such as differences in initial employment outcomes that are related to the students' HE experience. As part of this, we need to identify how academic and managerial values, institutional cultures and structures within the HE sector perpetuate and reinforce barriers, in terms of both access to and progression through HE.

d.   We are interested in people who go through the application process but do not subsequently enter HE. We want to resume the 'non-starter' survey which used to be carried out by UCAS, using more reliable data, to try to establish why applicants who have received offers do not take them up. Such applicants are of particular interest because they represent the most marginal of HE non-participants. An exploration of their reasons for non-entry might provide valuable insights into perceptions of particular aspects of HE that tip the balance in the decision-making processes. We are also interested in applicants who do not receive an offer at all and those who receive offers which they subsequently cannot meet. We will work with UCAS to take these proposals forward.

e.   We believe that the underlying measures of participation, which (implicitly or explicitly) underpin the whole WP agenda, and discussions of barriers to participation in particular, may be unsafe, especially the rates by social class and ethnic group. For example:

i.   Participation rates by ethnic groups and social class for one-off surveys predominantly use whole population data via sampling, and are therefore subject to concerns about representation and accuracy.

ii.   Participation rates calculated year on year are achieved by matching administrative data on students with whole population data and this again presents a number of problems:

- between Census counts (every 10 years) there are no reliable estimates of the population in terms of age by social class and ethnicity by social class

- attributes are determined in different ways in the two data sets. In the Census ethnicity is self-assigned by the head of household; there is no guarantee that the student would assign themselves to the same ethnic identity

- in terms of social class, the situation is even more unreliable. In the Census social class is described by the head of household and is then coded by the Census. The student data on the other hand consists of a description of parental occupation by the student which is then coded by UCAS. In addition to this obvious problem of consistency, data on parental occupation is only collected for students under the age of 21.

In sum, there are problems with numbers in the population data as a whole and there is a great deal of uncertainty with regard to the characteristics of students. Therefore, we have a programme of work to try to establish reliable participation rates, using new sources of population data and the 2001 Census results.

f.   The HE module of the DfES's Youth Cohort Study explored young people's attitudes, aspirations and plans in relation to HE at age 17. The second stage of the study explored (at age 18) students' choices and experiences in relation to HE, and investigated the reasons why some young people's plans change or are not realised. The study will provide insights into why young people make the choices they do with regard to HE.

65.   We wish to encourage research that focuses on the issues of interest to practitioners: identifying and removing barriers to progression for under-represented groups. But we also wish to develop a deeper understanding of those barriers and the way they interconnect, and would therefore encourage researchers both to make explicit the theoretical framework within which they work, and to contribute to theories that improve understanding.

Longitudinal study of young people in England

66.   The DfES recently commissioned a longitudinal study of young people in England, with a main set sample of 15,000 young people and their parents. The study will start interviewing at age 13-14, which is before the critical decisions on educational pathways are made, and will follow them until they reach age 25. This age range, it is argued, is more fitted

for analysis of the increasingly extended patterns of transition between different levels of education. In addition, to generate meaningful results for ethnic minority groups, the researchers plan to achieve an additional sample of 3,750. This study will provide a rich source of data over the long term, but by its nature it will be some years before findings of relevance to actual participation in HE become available.

Administrative data held by HEFCE on HE students

67.   The HESA individualised student data, and the equivalent data from further education colleges (FECs), form the basis for much of our research into WP issues. These data have been greatly enhanced through 'fuzzy matching' to form a longitudinal record so that we can follow students as they progress through their studies, even if they change institution. This underpins our publications on performance indicators (PIs) and our research into students' progression and achievement. These data have been enhanced by linking with individual data provided by UCAS. Negotiations are under way to further enhance the data by linking with individual data held by the Student Loans Company, and the new individual records for state school pupils. These will give us a much fuller description of the socio-economic and educational background of students.

68.   In addition we have linked individual data from the LSC with HESA data for students studying HE in FECs. From this we have, for example, been able to look at student progression from HND/HNC courses to degree courses. We will try to extend this data link to include all students at FECs, to better describe the patterns of progression from FE to HE-level study.

WP research facility

69.   A need has been identified for a WP research facility, which could perform a number of functions. For example, it might:

- provide a meta-networking function for those engaged in WP research in the sector
- facilitate access to and interpretation of data
- make available a range of WP research products
- offer advice and guidance on appropriate methodologies
- assist in building capacity in the sector to both undertake and make use of WP research.

70.   To develop this proposal we are in the process of setting up a working group to consider the type of resource required, where it should be sited, ownership of the facility, the scope of the resource, the feasibility of it containing large data sets, and the advantages to the sector. If a detailed proposal is agreed, we will consult on the specification of the resource. We are keen to ensure that any such facility has capacity to take account of, and work with, other similar services in the HE sector, such as the learning and teaching portal within the Higher Education Academy.

71. We co-fund two national co-ordination teams which help us to fulfil our commitments to widening participation:

    a. Action on Access is the national co-ordination team for widening participation, and is jointly funded by us and the LSC to support WP partnerships across England. The team was appointed in October 2002, having won an open tender. It supports practitioners and institutions in developing their widening participation activities and strategies, and offers advice to the funding councils when needed. As part of this function the team is to undertake a programme of research to support us, the LSC and the Aimhigher partnerships. More information is on the web at www.actiononaccess.org.

    b. The National Disability Team (NDT) is funded by us and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland. It works to improve provision for disabled students in higher education. The NDT undertakes research to support institutions in the advice and guidance they deliver to students, and helps institutions and practitioners improve their provision. More information is on the web at www.natdisteam.ac.uk.

73. Action on Access and the NDT operate a strategic alliance to promote knowledge and awareness of disability within the broader widening participation agenda, and of widening participation within disability, thereby enhancing socially inclusive access to higher education. More information can be found at the Inclusion web-site (www.inclusion.ac.uk).

Broad issues

74. It has been suggested that we should invest in more innovative work. While we understand the need for 'blue skies' research into the issues of participation and success in HE, we have to abide by the reasons we, as a funding body, undertake research (outlined in paragraph 11). However, we continue to investigate, with our partners and stakeholders, alternative ways of undertaking research that fulfils our purpose.

75. We are concerned that research should be conducted to determine the 'value added' of HE. However, determining what is valuable and how that value can be measured is still highly problematic. We will continue to work with our partners and stakeholders to determine the feasibility of investigating this difficult conceptual issue.

76. Much of the work undertaken by institutions to widen participation is conducted in partnership with other bodies such as FECs, schools, Regional Development Agencies and community groups. This is especially true of the outreach activities undertaken as part of Aimhigher, but partnership working is not limited to this programme. Therefore, we believe that it would be beneficial to have more evidence on successful partnerships. We propose collecting examples of good practice in partnership working, which we will make available to the sector. Issues that arise from this activity will help us to identify further work that would benefit institutions and partnerships.

77. Key to the success of any research strategy is the effective dissemination of and widespread engagement with the findings. It is essential that we maintain a dialogue with a range of stakeholders and that findings from the research are delivered to these various stakeholders in a way that would be useful to them without being overly prescriptive.

78. This is an issue for HEFCE as a whole. Therefore we will work to develop a research communications strategy and a means to evaluate the impact of our research programme as part of the wider work on developing our overall research and evaluation strategy.

Conclusion

79. The above outlines our strategy for providing evidence to underpin our policies on widening participation. It will require commitment and significant investment to implement fully.

80. Previous studies have shown that the benefits of higher education to individuals and society are wider then simply economic. The Institute of Education (2003) found that graduates tended to be healthier than non-graduates, with a lower incidence of depression, obesity and smoking. They were far less likely to be unemployed and had a greater range of skills. They had a greater understanding of different ethnic groups and were more active in their communities. Graduates also tended to read more to their children, who went on to do better in reading and mathematics than the children of non-graduates. Though the researchers made every effort to compare like with like, we cannot be certain that HE is the cause of these differences; but this is likely, in part, to be the case.

81. Therefore, with such wide-ranging advantages to be gained from participating in HE, the appropriateness of our commitment to a more socially inclusive system is clear and the investment, we believe, is fully justified.

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Annex A

Responses to the consultation

Introduction

1.   In January 2004 we issued a draft of our WP and fair access research strategy for consultation (HEFCE 2004/06). We received a total of 44 written responses:12 were from pre-1992 HEIs, 12 from post-1992 HEIs, three from colleges of HE, five from specialist colleges, two from Aimhigher partnerships, and 10 from other bodies (listed at the end of this annex). Other organisations such as Universities UK and the DfES had responded to the draft strategy at the pre-consultation phase.

2.   In addition, we ran two consultation seminars in March 2004. The first in Manchester attracted 25 delegates and the second in London attracted 34 delegates. Points raised during the discussions have also been fed into this report. We would like to thank all those who contributed to this consultation for their thoughtful and useful comments.

3.   Most of the written responses received were framed according to the six questions posed on page 2 of the consultation document. Below we address each of these questions in turn, then highlight the key issues that respondents felt needed to be covered in the strategy and our responses to them (in italics).

4.   In the main, the responses were comprehensive and detailed. We make no attempt to quantify the analysis by, for example, attributing a point of view or statement to x per cent of respondents. The questions were all open ended and were subject to interpretation by individual respondents.

5.   Overall, the strategy was widely welcomed and its production was seen by many as proof of our commitment to the WP agenda as a whole, as well as our commitment to a robust research agenda. The consultation exercise has proved very useful as the responses yielded much information and constructive comment not just on our research strategy but on WP more generally, and on issues that cut across the work of the Council. The responses suggest a high level of engagement with the research agenda and a willingness and enthusiasm to be involved more widely.

Responses to the consultation questions

Do you endorse the broad approach of the strategy? If not, what elements cause you concern and why?

6.   Generally, the broad approach taken within the draft strategy was endorsed. Many respondents particularly welcomed the focus on the medium- to long-term research needs, the emphasis on partnership working, and the commitment to building capacity.

7.   However, there were concerns that the strategy placed too great an emphasis on the 14 to 19 age group, and did not pay enough attention to either the need to reach out to younger children and their families or the issues that affect older learners. There was a feeling that by following the student life-cycle, the strategy was primarily concerned with the more traditional 'campus-based' model of HE, which may not necessarily be appropriate especially in the context of lifelong learning.

8.   There was concern that a pre-occupation with large-scale national research might produce results that are too broad to be meaningful and will not take into account regional and institutional diversity. One respondent felt that it was important to recognise regional differences and the cost of low participation to regional economies, and that the economic and social impact of low (and high) participation in HE should also be a theme related to demographic and employment trends. Another suggested that while there is a need for large-scale research to provide sector-wide data, there may also be scope for scaling up small-scale institutional initiatives where there is evidence that these could be applied more widely.

9.   A role for HEFCE in establishing and maintaining clear data sets was seen as a key priority, especially to establish reliable participation rates and to create robust benchmarking data. As part of this, a need was identified for full, longitudinal tracking surveys. In addition, it was suggested that we should act as brokers, ensuring that raw data and research evidence are fully and easily accessible across the sector.

We have provided data for use by the sector (the POLAR data set on participation rates and data relevant to mature students are examples), and we have provided analyses of data for work that has been of relevance to us. However, the provision of data in the way suggested above is not necessarily an appropriate function for HEFCE. These activities might more appropriately form part of the work for the WP research facility. In addition, consideration needs to be given to the role of HESA. HESA collects statistics on behalf of HEIs as well as the funding bodies and government departments, and so is the main provider of HE data.

10.   There was broad support for the intention to build on existing knowledge and expertise, and respondents welcomed the recognition within the strategy that we need more in-depth analyses of the issues. But a couple of respondents warned against taking too retrospective an approach. They argued that there is a need for the strategy to be more forward thinking in attempting to assess the impact of future changes to the HE agenda.

11.   It was noted that there appears to be a tension in the strategy between the need to meet existing policy areas and the more risky, speculative research that might encourage the development of new policy. One respondent commented that a less cautious approach to 'blue skies' research would be welcomed, 'as fresh and rigorous questioning of approaches to WP may be one of the best ways of generating new and more successful initiatives'.

Another suggested that 'funding priorities should not exclude the need for imaginative and innovative research'.

We are currently investigating various options for developing and supporting this kind of research.

12.	There was a concern over the treatment of lifelong learning in the strategy. One respondent commented that the meaning and policy relevance of lifelong learning are larger than simply widening participation in higher education, and yet within the strategy it is treated as a sub-set of the issue rather than an overarching dimension of WP. Another suggested that we should move more quickly on issues related to lifelong learning, as parts of the sector are moving quickly to embrace and deliver non-traditional modes of delivery.

We are developing our policy on lifelong learning in a number of ways. Lifelong learning, for example, is central to the Joint Progression Strategy (JPS) that we are working on with the DfES and the LSC. Focusing on vocational learners, the JPS will do more than encourage wider access to an initial experience of higher education. We will support colleges and HEIs to form lifelong learning networks that offer learners access to a range of progression opportunities, so that they can move between different kinds of vocational and academic programmes as their interests, needs and abilities develop across a lifetime of learning. Lifelong learning and widening participation are not the same thing but they share many connections. Encouraging learners of any age to return to learning, for a variety of purposes and in innovative and flexible programmes, will create new openings and opportunities for groups under-represented in higher education. Our initial research commitments in this area will therefore focus on progression and on demand for flexible forms of learning.

13.	With regard to disability, there were opposing views: some suggested that there should be more specific mention of disability-focused research, while others welcomed the attempt to bring participation and disability research together and take a broad view of the characteristics of participation/non-participation.

While disabled students are an important group in terms of the WP agenda, the strategy should not privilege one under-represented group over another. Where there is specific research planned or under way that addresses issues relevant to particular under-represented groups, the strategy makes mention of them (such as the proposed admissions work relating to ethnic minority groups and the transition work related to disabled students). However, all under-represented groups will be covered within the broader proposals such as the review of barriers to HE, and we have made it clear within the document that this work will inform future studies of a more specific, focused nature.

Overall, do you agree with the priorities for research we have suggested?

14.   Once again, there was broad support for the suggested research priorities, particularly the work focused on the medium to long term. Respondents felt the priorities represented an apt and varied agenda and, though ambitious, were clearly set out.

15.   There was strong support for the suggested work on the costs of widening participation but there was a concern that calculating such costs was deeply problematic, as the following comments demonstrate:

a.   It is right and proper for additional costs to be reflected, but the limitations of the approach must be recognised.

We do need to ensure that we are transparent about the limitations of any methodology that is adopted.

b.   Research on costs is premised on a number of prior questions such as what we are providing students with access to, and what counts as WP activity. Consequently, there is a risk of being too prescriptive about what and who counts in WP terms.

We were very careful in the initial costs work we undertook in 2003 – to inform our submission to the Government's spending review – to ensure that the definitions of WP used were those that were meaningful to the individual institutions that took part. We did not impose our own definitions either of activity or target groups.

c.   There was concern that such work would be undertaken in terms of the cost 'burden', whereas the costs should be set against the costs of educational under-achievement by comparison with competitor economies and thereby measure the benefits of WP more widely and in the longer term.

The purpose of the costs research does need to be clearly defined, as this comment shows. We are primarily involved in undertaking this work to provide robust evidence for our spending review submissions to secure more funding for WP. Making an economic case for WP such as that suggested is outside the scope of what we are proposing. However, it is an argument that is often used to underpin the WP agenda and it is something that we need to acknowledge. But we can only do so in terms of the difficulties inherent in trying to establish a causal link between increased participation and achievement in HE and economic growth.

16.   A number of respondents welcomed the focus on retention and student achievement within the themes of the strategy. However, others were concerned that there was not enough emphasis on these areas. They felt that access and pre-entry work was being prioritised in the strategy, and argued that retention must remain as important and that research should seek the synergies between the different areas. It was also suggested that more should be done to explore the notion of student success and to look at post-entry

learner support. Related to student success, some argued that the concept of retention needs careful clarification as increasingly flexible learning opportunities in HE mean that a range of attendance patterns are possible with planned breaks. They felt that the definitions of retention are currently being constructed against a 'rapidly disappearing' gold standard of the three-year full-time degree course.

There is certainly an issue about the way retention issues have been presented in the strategy. Although retention and student achievement appears as one of the themes of the strategy, there are other areas in which it is a key component. For example, the proposal for the review of barriers to participation in HE appears under the 'access and admissions' theme but it will, in fact, cut across a number of themes – including retention and student achievement. Similarly, issues of lifelong learning also impact on retention and student achievement, especially in terms of flexible learning pathways and breaks in study. In the final strategy we have made the areas of overlap between themes more transparent.

The issue of the 'gold standard' of a three-year full- time degree course is a contentious one. We do acknowledge in the strategy that it is 'not always an appropriate measure when investigating the retention of non-traditional student groups'. However, the fact remains that a large proportion of undergraduate students continue to apply for and study on full- time, three-year courses, and there is no evidence to suggest that this model is 'rapidly disappearing'. Therefore, certainly in terms of widening participation and fair access, it is legitimate for there to be a focus on this type of provision within the strategy.

17.   Use of a 'gold standard' was also a concern for respondents in terms of access into HE. Some argued that the strategy was still focused on the traditional entry route to HE of two or more A-levels, and that there was no sense of vocational routes or fair access issues within the document. It was argued that A-levels are no longer the only indicator of likelihood to progress, and that work-based learners and vocational learners should be included in the research.

Under the 'access and admissions' theme in the final strategy, paragraphs 35 and 36 deal specifically with non-traditional entry qualifications and the need to look at how widely alternative routes into HE are taken into account in admissions processes.

18.   A further concern was that the strategy was very institutionally focused and that this should be balanced with some focus on the learner. It was suggested that research would need to engage with students in order to get some sense of their HE experience.

We agree that research with students is important but we would argue that work of this type does not necessarily come within our remit. Our focus has to be on institutions and the sector more generally, and we do need to keep in mind our reasons for undertaking research as outlined in paragraph 11 of the strategy.

19.   Linked to the above was the suggestion that we should undertake research that addresses the issues of income/poverty levels, academic culture, and perception of HE in terms of WP and fair access. It was felt that by adopting a stronger life-cycle framework we would be able to give a more significant role to family, neighbourhood and community influences, thereby tackling issues of aspirations, motivation and social inclusion. Work of this type could also look at the key intervention points for WP initiatives: many respondents rejected the position in the draft strategy that it was not appropriate for HE to intervene at primary school age. Many respondents argued that institutions were already engaged in work with very young age groups and that more research was needed looking specifically at the role and influences of both parents and teachers.

Again, we agree that such work is important to the WP agenda more generally and we would certainly want to be involved in such work. However, we believe that the DfES would be best placed to lead such wide-ranging work.

20.   Any work that looked at perceptions of HE by those currently outside the system would need to be complemented by work that looked at institutional cultures and how these might need to change in order to meet the WP agenda. In this context, it was suggested that we should look at the relationship between institutional WP units and the wider institution, how institutions allocate their funds to support WP, managerial issues and academic attitudes to and perceptions of WP. Work would also be needed to consider subject differentiation in terms of WP, especially access to different subjects by class, ethnicity and gender.

These are good points and we would expect the review of barriers to HE to cover the issue of institutional cultures and academic perceptions, and to highlight areas in need of further research.

21.   There were specific comments made about the Aimhigher evaluation. Many respondents brought up the issue of tracking people who had taken part in Aimhigher activities, to find out whether they go onto enter HE. It was argued that robust tracking systems were needed on a national basis, but that these should not overlap with work at the local level. Respondents were also concerned that the evaluation would measure the impact of Aimhigher activity as distinct from activity undertaken as part of an institutional WP strategy. It was suggested that the evaluation might be better served by examining the different models of Aimhigher partnerships and their effectiveness. Indeed, an investigation of partnerships in general that would look at their development, governance and management was recommended.

These comments have been taken on board by the Aimhigher evidence sub-group. The Aimhigher evaluation will not attempt to isolate the impact of Aimhigher activities from other activities, as it has acknowledged that this would not be possible. Rather, the survey which we are proposing to send to HEIs will ask them to assess the impact of all their pre-entry activities. It is also worth bearing in mind that the proposed area studies part of the

evaluation will investigate the effectiveness of the partnerships. This is also something that partnerships could choose to carry out as part of their own evaluation strategies.

> With regard to the proposed review of existing work on the barriers to higher education, do you believe that this should be one of our priorities?

22.   Most respondents agreed that a review of the barriers to HE should be one of our priorities, but one did suggest that there may be a danger of taking too retrospective an approach. This respondent felt that there was a greater need to be immediate and pro-active to assess the impact of future changes. However, overall, the responses were positive and offered a number of suggestions on how the review should be constructed and what should be included. These comments will prove helpful in designing the study and a selection of them are given below:

- There is a need to clearly define the purpose of the review and the approaches that it would adopt.
- The review should include examples of what works with regard to overcoming or reducing the barriers to HE to counter the dominant deficit model of WP.
- The review needs to be broad based and include both broad quantitative and smaller qualitative work.
- It will need to consider how academic and managerial values, institutional cultures and structures, perpetuate and reinforce barriers both in terms of access to and progression through HE.
- Using international comparators, the review should pay special attention to the impact of debt, top-up fees and student support arrangements.
- While retaining a focus on HE, the review should include earlier years education and later life access. It needs to give a significant role to family, neighbourhood and community forces and influences thereby tackling issues of aspiration, motivation and social inclusion in a deeper and more promising way.
- There is an urgent necessity to investigate issues of articulation between pre-HE and HE programmes in terms of curricula, and teaching, learning and assessment styles.
- The review should investigate patterns of supply and demand as these relate to the propensity to participate between various progression pathways.
- It is hoped that the review would include further exploration and research on the nature of existing structures across the HE sector (for example, HEIs, government, funding councils) that might in themselves be barriers.
- The review should link to an investigation of possible solutions and include examples of good practice in overcoming barriers or minimising their effects.
- It would be helpful if the review could identify the significance of particular barriers for specific under-represented groups.
- There is a danger that in the broad brush approach fine detail will be lost. Some factors influencing progression, retention and success may be specific for particular

under-represented groups, specific subject groups or disciplines and particular regions or sub-regions of the country. A balance needs to be found between key work on national patterns and the fine detail that is of relevance to particular target groups, HEIs and regions.

- Barriers is a problematic concept; barriers may be sociological, psychological, societal, institutional and financial. They may relate to the constitution of particular subject disciplines, to staff development and indeed to every aspect of a learner's educational career before they enter HE.
- The review needs to be careful of treating non-participation as deviance when it is a consequence of free choice rather than restricted opportunity.

The suggestions about the scope of the review do mean that it will be a broader piece of work than originally perceived. As it is going to cut across the educational sectors it should identify areas where we would need to work in partnership with other bodies (such as the DfES) to address any gaps in the evidence. The review was put out to tender in July 2004. We expect to appoint the successful team in autumn 2004 and for a final report to be delivered in July 2005.

> Do you agree with the proposal for a widening participation research facility in principle? What should be our main consideration for such a resource? Would you like to be involved in the future consultation on the more detailed proposals?

23.   Again, the majority of respondents agreed with the proposal for a widening participation research facility in principle, although a couple felt that the proposal was too vague for them to be able to comment.

24.   A common theme running through a number of the responses was the need for such a facility to be a repository of data, allowing access to different levels of information; to aid in the interpretation of data; and to respond to questions about data and research methodology more generally.

25.   A number of respondents also saw a role for such a facility in developing and facilitating WP research networks across the educational sectors. Such a facility could provide a register of research interests and encourage the formation and development of regional networks across sectors. Some felt that the facility should be virtual rather than central, and be developed as a series of co-ordinated networks.

26.   There were some concerns about the research facility. For example, one respondent felt that a decision should be made as to whether its primary function was to bring academic credibility to the subject of WP or to inform policy, strategy and practice. There was also view that the facility should be independent and subject to external scrutiny – as many of the key issues sit outside HEFCE's remit and therefore it would not necessarily be appropriate for the Council alone to provide such a service. Some felt that such a facility could either seek to control, or by default secure, a monopoly on the WP research agenda and thereby inhibit the

capacity of institutions to respond to their own research agendas. Therefore, wider sector ownership of such a facility was seen as essential by some respondents. There was also concern that any such resource should add value by its efficiency and impact and not duplicate existing work or resources (such as the Higher Education Academy or the WP research database being developed by Action on Access).

27.   Most respondents said they wished to be involved in any further consultation on this issue, and a number expressed an interest in taking part in the working group to develop the proposals.

We are in the process of establishing a working group which will include representatives from HEIs and other stakeholders such as the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), UCAS and the Higher Education Academy. There are a number of possible directions for the facility that the group would need to consider. For example, we already co-fund the Rolling Research Brief so how would this fit with the proposed facility? Would it be more appropriate for such a resource to belong to the Higher Education Academy? What would be the role of Action on Access? The first task of the working group would be to agree an action plan and timetable but we would want to have some proposals ready for consultation by spring 2005. The consultation will not be a general one, but would be limited to those who expressed an interest.

> What are your views overall on the research we are either currently undertaking or intending to commission?

28.   All respondents were generally positive about the proposed research agenda; one stated that the research was timely and urgent. The overall emphasis in the strategy on reflective academic practice was welcomed, as was the commitment to build capacity and develop effective partnerships. Support was given to specific proposals but some carried caveats. For example, there was some support for undertaking regular surveys of qualified young people who do not take up the opportunity to enter HE, as long as this does not duplicate existing work. There was also support for establishing reliable participation rates, provided that such work is carried out in a consultative manner and not imposed upon the sector. One respondent said that while they supported the proposals overall, it would be helpful to strengthen the approach to investigating the links between student support and retention and WP.

29.   A number of general comments were made about our broad approach to the research being proposed. Some felt we should develop a wider definition of what we mean by research, and take care not to disregard certain styles of research either directly or indirectly. In contrast, there was also concern that the strategy was too broad and that the proposed research was trying to cover too much. Respondents thought that it was important to keep asking in a focused and practical way if policy is widening (and not simply increasing) participation, and where the new kinds of students are entering the system. Some commented that we should keep central to our thinking the cumulative impact of the many changes taking place – which include sector differentiation and the impact of non-

educational players and factors – as well as the more narrowly defined WP activities in HE. Linked to this is the argument that WP is rarely restricted to the HE sector and so, while the need for tight remits in terms of policy is recognised, a broader approach to the research would be welcomed. As part of this, it was suggested that there should be a greater emphasis on joint research with the FE sector.

The response to the strategy from the LSDA was very positive in this area, and it has indicated a willingness to work in partnership with us on HE/FE issues. The LSDA has also said that it would be willing to share lessons from the work it has undertaken on WP issues in the FE sector.

30.   Respondents raised a number of concerns regarding the proposed research agenda. One said that research into why qualified applicants do not take up a place (that is, the proposed resumption of the non-starter survey) is superficially attractive as they represent a clearly defined, easily identifiable and manageable cohort. However, recent figures suggest that this group has always made up a very small percentage of those qualified to enter HE and numbers are getting smaller, so there is a question over whether this should be a research priority.

We are unaware of any recent figures that have been produced addressing this area but we do believe that such applicants are of interest. They are on the very margins of non-participation, so exploration of their decision-making processes with regard to HE entry could yield some interesting information on how some aspects of HE are perceived and their impact on decisions.

31.   Respondents commented on the tension between the fact that evaluation and impact measures take time, but often policy makers and funding bodies want quick answers.

We acknowledge this tension, and hope that we have mitigated it so far as possible by considering our medium and long-term research needs in this strategy.

32.   A number of respondents, while expressing general support for the proposals, also suggested other areas of research that might be considered. These are:

- Add to the work on the aspiration and transition of disabled students by undertaking or commissioning similar work on other under-represented groups. An analysis of the work done on transitions generally would be of help in such research.
- More work on tracking progression from 11 to 16 to FE to HE, particularly through the work-based learning route.
- A focus on the redesign of academic roles and adaptation of new working practices within HE is crucial, though this may be covered by the costs or barriers work.
- There is mention of foundation degrees and vocational learning but their relationship to WP and retention as subjects for research are not mentioned.
- Research into how academic subjects are perceived would be of particular interest.

- The strategy should address the contribution that specialist and postgraduate institutions make to access and participation in their regions.
- Central to any work on the progression from FE to HE is an evaluation of the effect of differing approaches to teaching and learning in FE and HE and how they impact on transition and retention.
- Would welcome a co-ordinated approach to research into the impact of an increasingly diverse student body upon pedagogical approaches, including the use of new technology.

The above are all interesting areas of further work and we will keep in mind the issues raised. The first two points should be picked up by the Aimhigher evaluation and in the data linking for the Joint Progression Strategy. We will take forward some suggestions with the learning and teaching team in the Council, and may develop joint research programmes to address some of these issues. However, there is a limit to how much we can undertake at any given time so we do need to prioritise.

> What from your viewpoint are the main unresolved issues and associated risks to implementing the strategy?

33.   The respondents identified many risks and issues, but by far the most often mentioned risk was the lack of a communications and impact strategy for the effective dissemination and use of research findings. Some felt that the sustainability of the strategy would be at risk if the research failed to contribute to measurable improvement in WP in the HE sector, and that the key to the success of the strategy would be widespread engagement with the findings. It was seen as essential that the Council maintain a dialogue with a range of communities and stakeholders, and that findings are delivered to HEIs in a way that they can use without being overly prescriptive. Some felt that we should define the standard of proof required for evidence to be 'good enough' for policy and practice.

We agree that there is a need for a communications and impact strategy. As a first step, we will feed these suggestions into our discussions about the future role of the WP national co-ordination team. We will also ensure that the suggestions are considered by the working group examining the proposed WP research facility.

34.   A number of respondents commented on the unchallenged use of terms and concepts in the discussion of widening participation and fair access. For example, one respondent said that 'the uncritical acceptance of "fair" as the remit of OFFA allows for "fairness" to be no more than transparent and fine tuned allocation of the most prestigious university places to the most fortunate and well supported among our able school leavers'. It was argued that 'there is a risk that much effort will go into making more efficient the workings of a system to entrench privilege even while the discourse of equity and wider access is used'. Another argued that WP and fair access are inadvertently presented as problematic and that this could mask their social and economic benefits. Several respondents agreed that there are still major issues of definitions to be resolved. One argued that using '(the term) under-

representation could become a problem if it is interpreted as focusing exclusively on those factors in the lives of the groups so defined which interfere with their participation in HE. It has the potential when viewed in this way of falling into a paradigm which looks as if we are blaming the victim'. Another suggested that we need to develop more sophisticated definitions of successful students.

There is certainly an issue of the dominance of the deficit model in the discourse of WP, and we will need to be aware of this when designing our research. In this case, the deficit model assumes that under-represented groups lack the necessary 'capital' (social, cultural, educational, economic) and that it is this lack that needs to be addressed. The counter-argument is that the systems, processes, cultures and perceptions operating within HEIs themselves need to be addressed, with a view to preventing the sector from reproducing and legitimising existing systems of privilege.

35.   More general methodological and data issues were also highlighted as areas to address. With regard to data issues, some of the points raised were as follows:

- An undue emphasis is placed on number-crunching evaluation and data-gathering rather than analysis and understanding. The strategy must be designed to yield new information and not simply reflect what is already happening or reinforce existing knowledge.
- There is a lack of flexibility in the performance indicators for measuring real student progression.
- There is a weakness in the availability of data, and finding measures/indicators of WP that have broad acceptability and are suitable for benchmarking.
- Sorting out administrative data and the ability to carry out decent longitudinal studies remain vital if real progress is to be made to support research that goes beyond the institutional case study.
- The burden of data gathering might become too much for HEIs and therefore, to an extent, become counter-productive.

We agree that there are always limitations to data. However, we believe that the data we use for our measures of completion, particularly for full-time undergraduate provision, is good quality. We went to great lengths to ensure that the measures took account of concerns raised at the time of their development. The PIs currently account for both intermittent study and movement between institutions. Certain assumptions are made (such as the assumption that once a student has been out of the system for two years or more they are assumed to have left it), but we believe that these are justifiable. Specific comments on how the PIs could be improved, particularly in order to take better account of the lifelong learning agenda, will be fed into the Performance Indicators Steering Group.

36.   Some of the more general methodological issues were:

- The need to determine a method by which value added can be recognised and measured.
- How the development of good quality practitioner research can be supported through the understanding of methodologies and the development of research skills.
- In wishing to determine how and why interventions work, we should not use a reductive process where interventions are subject to factorial analysis, because the voices of the subjects are not captured in such a process. The aim for greater inclusiveness in HE cannot be easily dissolved into a number of contributing factors. A more ethnographic approach is called for.

37.   Concerns were raised over the extent of our role in, and our approach to, the WP research agenda and the implications of this for the type of work that would be carried out. Some felt that the strategy implies that our focus will be on product and outcomes, and that more theoretically based qualitative research into processes and the student experience might be overlooked or under-funded. It was also felt that research commissioned by HEFCE runs the risk of being less wide-ranging and critical of policy than research undertaken with independent funding. This ties into the other perceived risk of HEFCE dominating the WP research agenda.

38.   A further risk identified in the responses was that impending changes to fees and student support would undermine the achievements to date in relation to WP policy and practice, so that the evidence base produced would have limited impact. Several respondents suggested that we are exacerbating this risk by not stating explicitly within the strategy what work we intend to undertake looking variable fees, student support, debt and perceptions of debt and subsequent employability.

In its response to the pre-consultation, the DfES suggested that our role, along with the Department, is 'presumably to research and evaluate the impact of student support on WP and progression'. The final strategy makes it clear that we will be working closely with the DfES in this area, particularly as the DfES begins to prepare data for the Commission which will examine the impact of variable fees in 2009.

39.   An issue for a number of respondents related to funding. One stated that it was important to ensure that adequate funding would be available given the breadth of the strategy. Another thought that not all national research would be relevant or useful to individual institutions and so would not be in favour of any top-slicing of funds to support the work proposed.

It is our intention that the costs of research to be commissioned will initially be met by our existing research and evaluation budget. This is of course limited so we will not be able to support all of the good ideas proposed.

40.   A further perceived risk to the strategy and the entire WP agenda was our current funding method. It was argued that this actively discourages improving retention by offering flexible pathways of study.

The issue of the WP funding method will be considered within the review of funding for teaching.

Non-HEI respondents to the consultation

Aimhigher Greater Manchester

Aimhigher North-West

Council for Higher Education in Art and Design

Forum for the Advancement of Continuing Education

Institution of Civil Engineers

Learning and Skills Development Agency

National Extension College

National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

Standing Conference of Principals

SKILL: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities and the Royal National Institute for the Blind

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

Universities Council for the Education of Teachers

Annex B

Stakeholders

1.   We have identified the following as key stakeholders in our WP research strategy:

- Action on Access
- Association of Colleges
- Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, The Open University
- Department for Education and Skills
- Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland
- Department of Health
- Economic and Social Research Council
- European Access Network
- Forum for the Advancement of Continuing Education
- further education colleges
- Higher Education Academy
- Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
- higher education institutions
- Higher Education Policy Institute
- Higher Education Statistics Agency
- Institute for Access Studies
- Joint Information Systems Committee
- Learning and Skills Council
- Learning and Skills Development Agency
- National Disability Team
- National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
- National Union of Students
- Scottish Higher Education Funding Council
- Society for Research in Higher Education
- Staff and Educational Development Association
- Standing Conference of Principals
- Teacher Training Agency
- The Sutton Trust
- UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice, Queen Mary
- Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
- Universities UK
- University Association for Continuing Education
- WP practitioners (institutional WP officers, Aimhigher co-ordinators and so on)

2.   In view of our commitment to partnership working and our desire to work internationally, we have also shared our strategy with our international colleagues.

List of abbreviations

CHERI	Centre for Higher Education Research and Information
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
ESRC	Economic & Social Research Council
FE	Further education
FEC	Further education college
HE	Higher education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher education institution
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
LSDA	Learning and Skills Development Agency
ONS	Office for National Statistics
SCOP	Standing Conference of Principals
TLRP	Teaching and Learning Research Programme
TRAC	Transparent Approach to Costing
UCAS	Universities & Colleges Admissions Service
WP	Widening participation