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Higher Education Funding  
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# ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN WALES

## A Report to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales

Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research,  
Data and Methods (WISERD)

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## Research Team

A team of researchers based at WISERD carried out the research reported here:

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The report should be referenced as follows:

WISERD (2015) Access to Higher Education in Wales, Report to HEFCW, Cardiff: WISERD.

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The Welsh Government was very generous in making available the data that permitted the development of the Widening Access Database. Colleagues in the Welsh Government also responded positively to numerous queries about these data.

We should also like to thank the large number of individuals professionally involved with implementing widening access strategies who gave up their time to undertake interviews and to participate in workshops and other events.

# Summary

## A: Key Findings

1. Young people from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds are much more likely to participate in higher education than their less advantaged peers.
2. Much – although not all – of the greater participation in higher education amongst young people from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds is accounted for by previous educational attainment.
3. Ethnic background is also a highly significant factor in determining entry to higher education.
4. The relationships between these individual characteristics (socio-economic background, educational attainment, ethnic background) and participation in higher education are broadly similar in Wales and England, despite differences in social and economic conditions and policy approaches.
5. There are substantial differences between schools in terms of the chances of their pupils participating in higher education, over and above the effects of pupils' individual characteristics (such as educational attainment and ethnic background).
6. There are substantial differences between local authorities in terms of the chances of their pupils participating in higher education, over and above the effects of pupils' individual characteristics (such as educational attainment and ethnic background) and the schools that they attend.
7. Individual social characteristics and previous educational attainment affect rates of retention in higher education institutions. However, there are also differences in retention rates between universities, even when these individual effects are taken into account.
8. Higher education students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are equally likely to attain a 'good degree' as those from more advantaged backgrounds.
9. Widening access initiatives encompass a wide diversity of activities, often targeted at different social groups.
10. Widening access to higher education involves promoting entry to a wide variety of types of programme. Accordingly, entrants have a diversity of educational experiences.
11. Widening access involves not only *entry* to higher education, but also successful progression to completion of the programme.
12. Evaluating the impacts of widening access initiatives on patterns of participation in higher education is difficult and limited, given the data that are currently available.

## B: Key Implications for Policy and Practice

1. Widening access strategies need to address complex inequalities that shape differential opportunities for higher education. These include, for example:
  - inequalities in prior educational achievement;
  - different forms and levels of knowledge about higher education;
  - differential patterns of admission to higher education (given levels of prior achievement); and
  - unequal higher education outcomes (for example, retention, qualifications achieved).
2. These complex inequalities imply that the identification of the target groups to be the beneficiaries of widening access strategies is difficult.
3. These definitional complexities are compounded by the dearth of robust data. Accordingly, there are significant trade-offs between the availability and convenience of indicators of target groups and the robustness with which they capture inequalities in access to higher education.
4. Policies aimed at widening access to higher education should recognise the diversity in the forms of higher education in which entrants can participate. This diversity encompasses not only mode of participation (full-time, part-time, distance, etc.), but also the nature of the programme undertaken (general education, vocational education, qualification aimed for or not, level of qualification aimed for, etc.) and the type of higher education institution entered.
5. Policies aimed at widening access to higher education need to engage not only with patterns of entry to higher education, but also with the guidance and support necessary to ensure appropriate levels of retention in and progression through higher education. With limited resources, this is a difficult goal to achieve in all cases.
6. The implementation of policies aimed at widening access to higher education requires effective collaboration between a number of different organisations. Achieving this is not straightforward, especially as some aspects of higher education policy generate competition between institutions.
7. Assessing the impacts of widening access strategies is essential to the development of their effectiveness. However, despite the best efforts of the professionals involved, robust evaluation is currently extremely limited, largely because of the lack of the necessary data.

## C. Recommendations

1. The Welsh Government should establish a *national strategic framework* for widening access to higher education that incorporates *all* sectors of the education system in Wales (not just the universities). This should include a specification of the *complementary* roles of different institutions in implementing widening access policies.
2. The aims and objectives of this strategic framework should clearly specify the target groups intended to be the beneficiaries of widening access policies, *reflecting the complex forms of inequality in access that are identified in this report*.
3. In addition to *national* performance indicators for the target groups, clear expectations of levels of performance in widening access should be spelled out for the universities and the Reaching Wider Partnerships.
4. These levels of performance should include measures not only of entry to higher education, but also of *retention in* and *progression through* higher education programmes (including analysis of 'value-added' by comparing entry and exit qualifications).
5. Reflecting the shared responsibility for widening access across the education system as a whole, existing monitoring of the performance of schools and colleges should be expanded to include *measures of pupil destinations (including entry to higher education)*.
6. In this context, HEFCW should reconsider the use of 'all-age recruitment from Communities First clusters and Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation areas' as its principal strategic priority. In the short term, this should be replaced by the identification of *secondary schools and colleges with the lowest rate of contextual participation in higher education*. In the medium and longer term, this should be replaced by the identification of *individual learners*, based on transparent criteria.
7. To this end, practitioners should have secure access to a *national dataset of learners in schools and colleges* that contains key information to aid the identification of potential widening access target groups, based on nationally-determined criteria (for example, measures based on educational progress over time, contextualised achievement, and membership of known under-represented groups).
8. In this context, the Welsh Government should ensure progress in *the development of the Unique Learner Number (ULN)* continues, so that in future it will be possible to identify potential widening access groups based on their ULN (that is, anonymously). This could be used across a variety of widening access activities, including the selection of participants for widening access events, in university admissions procedures and in monitoring their progress through university.
9. Universities and other providers should be required to provide *evidence of the impacts of their widening access activities*. However, it should be recognised that implementing this requirement will have significant resource implications for the institutions involved. In addition, HEFCW should support this evaluation activity through the provision of technical guidelines on carrying out robust analysis.
10. *Evidence from the evaluation of widening access strategies* should be systematically incorporated into the process of policy development.





# Introduction

**This report presents the principal findings and policy implications of a research project carried out by researchers from the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD), funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). The broad aims of the research can be summarised as follows: firstly, to develop a better understanding of the factors that shape patterns of participation in higher education in Wales; and secondly, to explore the particular role played by policy initiatives to widen access to higher education in contributing to these patterns.<sup>1</sup>**

Participation in higher education has become an important and controversial issue. There is a widespread consensus that developed countries are – or should be – transforming into ‘knowledge-based economies’. A key element here is increasing the supply of ‘knowledge workers’, the bulk of whom will be graduates of higher education programmes. This is viewed as essential to competing effectively in an increasingly globalised economy. Hence, it is widely agreed that supporting participation in higher education is key to generating both individual benefits, through improved career prospects and the promotion of social mobility, and collective benefits, through enhanced economic development.

Recognition of these potential benefits has led governments in a wide range of countries to expand

higher education provision. Certainly, in the UK, both the numbers and proportion of individuals participating in higher education have increased very substantially over recent decades. However, this process of ‘massification’ has given rise to significant questions as to the most appropriate forms through which to provide higher education and, closely related, how best to fund this expanded provision. With respect to the latter, there has been a general shift away from funding by the state towards placing significantly greater demands on students themselves and their families to support their participation in higher education.

This shift, in turn, has focused attention on the extent to which participation in higher education is distributed equitably across the population as a whole. There is, of course, a long history of the under-representation of some population groups amongst higher education students. However, over recent decades, there have been significant changes in these patterns, with participation by women (most notably), some ethnic minority groups, and people with disabilities, for example, increasing substantially. Nevertheless, major inequalities in levels of participation in higher education remain; in particular, whilst many more individuals from socially disadvantaged backgrounds undertake higher education than previously, it remains the case that they are far less likely to do so than their more advantaged peers. This is widely regarded as socially unjust, as well as entailing a loss of talent to the economy. Hence, a key question is whether

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<sup>1</sup> The full list of the objectives specified by HEFCW for the project is given in Appendix 1.

the changes in systems of financial support for students adversely affect these chances of participation. To date, the aggregate data for the UK suggest that this is not the case, although it is too early to identify the longer-term effects of the most recent changes in arrangements for student finance.

Successive UK governments have sought to balance increasing student fees with ensuring that higher education is open to individuals from as wide a range of social backgrounds as possible. However, relatively distinctive approaches have been adopted in the different devolved administrations of the UK. For example, currently, the Welsh Government has undertaken to pay the increased costs to students arising from the raising of the fees cap to £9000 per annum, as well as providing other financial support on a means-tested basis.

At the same time, all of the administrations within the UK have initiated strategies that are designed to promote the participation in higher education of hitherto under-represented groups, by compensating directly for their educational disadvantage (which, in turn, is understood to derive from their wider social and economic circumstances). Here too, there have been differences between the approaches adopted in the different UK countries. Nevertheless, in broad terms, they have focused on initiatives aimed at improving educational attainment, promoting more positive attitudes towards higher education, facilitating the access of older learners and making the process of applying to and entering universities fairer. Most recently, the two aspects of the 'widening access to higher education agenda' have been brought together (albeit in different ways in the four UK administrations), through the requirement that universities themselves produce annual strategies linking institutional plans for promoting greater access by under-represented social groups to university financing.

In spite of the prominence of these issues, however, our understanding of the social processes that underpin them and, more specifically, the evidence-base for evaluating different approaches to 'widening access' is relatively weak. And this is especially so in the context of Wales.

Accordingly, the present study has been conducted in order to begin to provide a more systematic foundation for public debate and the development of policy.

The research has two aspects. The first provides a systematic analysis of how individuals who are resident in Wales progress through secondary school, into 'sixth forms' and further education colleges for post-16 education and on to higher education. It also explores what are the key factors here in determining whether individuals progress through the education system to higher education or not. What are the relative impacts of the social characteristics of individuals, their previous educational attainment and their progression through the education system? What does this imply for the effects of barriers at the point of entry to higher education, such as fees levels, entry processes and so forth?

Given this general picture, the second aspect of the research focuses on the role played by initiatives aimed at promoting the participation in higher education of under-represented social groups. More specifically, it examines the form taken by these initiatives, the ways in which they have been implemented 'on the ground' and – most ambitiously – what have been their impacts on patterns of participation in higher education by people living in Wales.

We believe that the findings of the research have important implications for the development of policy on access to higher education. This is true not only for the Welsh Government and for HEFCW, but also for the universities and the other organisations that have the responsibility of implementing strategies aimed at widening access to higher education. Accordingly, Part 2 of this report is concerned to explore these implications of the research for policy and professional practice.

We begin in Part 1, however, with a summary of the principal findings of the research. In the next section, we outline the data and methodological approaches on which the study was based. In subsequent sections of Part 1, we present the principal findings and provide a summary account of the evidence on which they are based.





# PART 1

## A Summary of Findings

### Data and Methodology

One of the innovative features of the research reported here is that it was able to draw upon a new and very powerful data-set – the Widening Access Database – which allows us to track the trajectories of individuals resident in Wales from the compulsory phase of their education, through post-16 studies in schools and further education colleges, to higher education (to completion of their programmes).<sup>2</sup> Data for the compulsory phase was drawn from the National Pupil Database (NPD) for Wales (incorporating Pupil-level Annual Schools Census (PLASC) data). For post-16 students, two data sources were used: the Welsh Examinations Database (WED) for school-based students and the Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR) for those in further education colleges. Clearly, not all the students identified in the NPD carried on in education after the end of the compulsory phase. Finally, data on those individuals who went on to higher education (irrespective of where in the UK) were drawn from the individual student records of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). The key point here is that information from these various sources was drawn together for each individual; and it is these linked, individual-level data that comprise the Widening Access Database, which provided the basis for a major part of the present study.

For the first time in Wales, therefore, we were able to compare systematically those individuals who entered higher education with those who did not; and to do so in terms of their previous educational attainment levels, as well as a range of social characteristics (such as their gender, ethnic background, entitlement to free school meals, where they lived, the sort of school they attended and so forth). This sort of descriptive analysis provided important insights. However, in order to identify the influence of different factors in shaping patterns of participation in higher education, more sophisticated statistical modelling was required; and was possible given the nature of the information in the Widening Access Database. This modelling allowed us to specify which factors were the key determinants of participation in higher education, whilst taking account of the influence of the other contributory factors.

An equivalent analysis had already been carried out for England, where similar data to those in the Widening Access Database are quite readily available (although the same is not true, for example, of Scotland).<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, our initial approach was simply to replicate what had been done for England, not least to enable us to make meaningful comparisons between the two sets of results. However, we also extended the English analysis, in

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<sup>2</sup> Full details of the Widening Access Database are provided in our working paper, *Overview of the Widening Access Database*. See Appendix 2 for details.

<sup>3</sup> See Chowdry, H., Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Goodman, A. and Vignoles, A. (2013) Widening Participation in Higher Education: analysis using linked administrative data, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society A*, 176:2, 431–57.



particular, to see whether schools and local authorities influenced patterns of participation in higher education, over and above the effects of individual characteristics (of the sort discussed earlier). In addition, we were concerned to explore not only what determined entry to higher education, but also patterns of progression to graduation. Accordingly, we believe that our analysis not only provides new insights with respect to Wales, but also extends the more general literature.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to note, however, that our analysis has significant limitations too. The individuals included in the Widening Access Database comprise three cohorts of young people who were in Year 11 (the final year of compulsory schooling) in 2004-5, 2005-6 and 2006-7. For each of these individuals, their data from the NPD were matched with the information about them in the WED and the LLWR; and also to the HESA data relating to all students enrolled on undergraduate programmes (of whatever type) during 2007-8 and 2008-9, each with all three year-cohorts of undergraduate students included. Thus, data are available for four years of first-year entrants to HE from 2006-7 to 2009-10. What this means is that this part of our analysis is concerned with young entrants to higher education. More specifically, those who enter higher education after they are 20 years old are not included. This clearly has implications for the applicability of our results across higher education as a whole, especially to those sectors (part-time programmes, for example) where older participants are strongly represented. Extending our analysis to such older participants would clearly be highly desirable; but, at the moment, data are not available to enable this.

This gap is – to some extent, at least – addressed in the second part of the study. As we have seen, this focussed on initiatives aimed at promoting participation by individuals from social groups hitherto under-

represented in higher education, including, of course, older entrants. Here, the data utilised were of a different kind. Information was derived from extensive analysis of documents produced by the Welsh Government, HEFCW, the Welsh universities themselves (including their institutional widening access strategies and the Fees Plans for 2012-13 and 2013-14) and other organisations centrally concerned with participation in higher education. More importantly, extended, semi-structured interviews were also carried out with a comprehensive range of ‘widening access professionals’, including: individuals from the Reaching Wider Partnerships; widening access managers and lifelong learning specialists from the universities<sup>5</sup> and the further education colleges (where higher education programmes are delivered); and from a sample of institutional admissions managers and departmental admissions tutors (including both pre- and post-1992 universities).

The aim here was to explore the somewhat distinctive approach adopted in Wales since 1999 towards increasing the participation in higher education of previously under-represented groups. More specifically, our focus was on how ‘widening access’ initiatives have been implemented across the Welsh higher education system; and on what can be said about their impacts on actual patterns of participation. We were able to explore the direct experience of those with first-hand knowledge, thereby building up a unique picture of how the ‘policy system’ in relation to increasing participation in higher education has actually operated in Wales. Again, we believe that our analysis provides not only important new insights into this key aspect of the higher education system in Wales, but also contributes towards the wider literature on raising levels of participation amongst under-represented social groups.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of our methodological approach, see our working paper, *Modelling Access to Higher Education: an evaluation of previous approaches*, listed in Appendix 2.

<sup>5</sup> All the universities, including the Open University, participated, with the exception of one institution, which was unable to respond to requests for interviews.

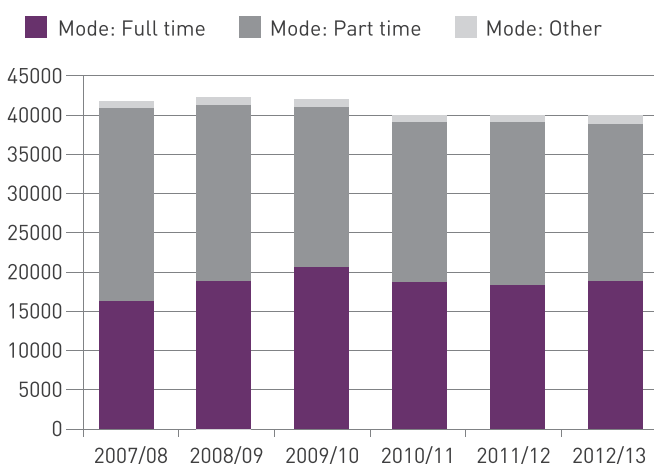
## Patterns of Participation in Higher Education in Wales

Before we present the findings from our analysis of the Widening Access database, we provide a brief account of the wider context, drawn from HESA data.

### *Trends in Participation: HESA Statistics*

The total number of Welsh-domiciled students entering undergraduate programmes<sup>6</sup> has slightly declined from 41,821 in 2007/08 to 39,994 in 2012/13. However, the number of full-time undergraduate entrants at the end of this time period is comparable to the number in 2007/08 (Figure 1). Much of the decline in overall numbers has been, therefore, in part-time participation.

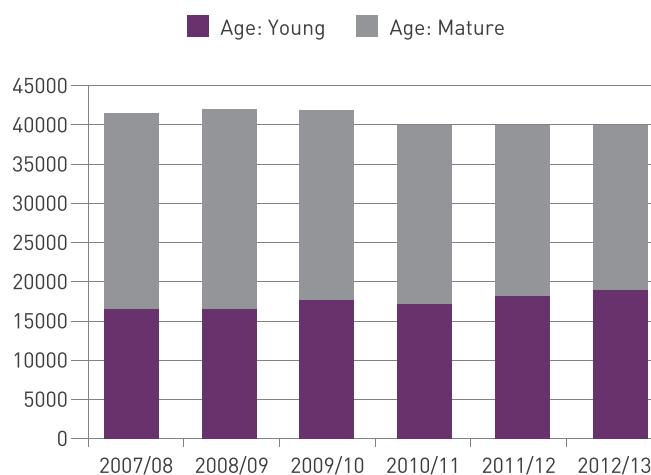
**Figure 1: Number of Welsh-Domiciled Undergraduate Entrants to Higher Education, 2007/08 to 2012/13**



A similar pattern is also reflected in the number of Welsh-domiciled undergraduate entrants by age. Figure 2 (below) shows that whilst the number of 'young' entrants - aged 20 years old or less - has steadily increased over time, the number and proportion of 'mature' participants - aged 21 years old or more - has steadily declined.

However, the number and proportion of Welsh-domiciled undergraduate entrants from working-class backgrounds (NS-SEC 4-7)<sup>7</sup> has risen considerably over this time period, from 4,338 (21.9 per cent of classified students and 10.4 per cent of all students) in 2007/08 to 5,359 (26.5 per cent of classified students and 13.4 per cent of all students) in 2012/13 (Figure 3). Conversely, there has been a decline in the number and proportion of Welsh-domiciled undergraduate entrants studying in Wales. Figure 4 shows that these have declined from some 75 per cent of all Wales-domiciled undergraduate entrants in 2007/08 (31,320) to 69 per cent in 2012/13 (27,598). It remains to be seen, of course, how far these very broad trends of change in the social composition of Welsh-domiciled students are related to policy initiatives in respect of access to higher education.

**Figure 2: Age of Welsh-Domiciled Undergraduate Entrants, 2007/08 to 2012/13**

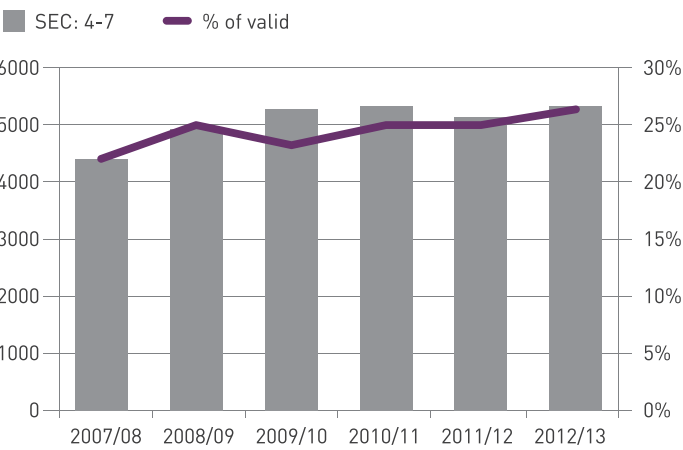


<sup>6</sup> This includes First Degree and other undergraduate students

<sup>7</sup> This includes students from families with the following occupational classifications: Small employers and own account worker; Lower supervisory and technical occupations; Semi-routine occupations; and Routine occupations. A substantial number of students do not provide information to HESA on their social class backgrounds and, therefore, cannot be classified.

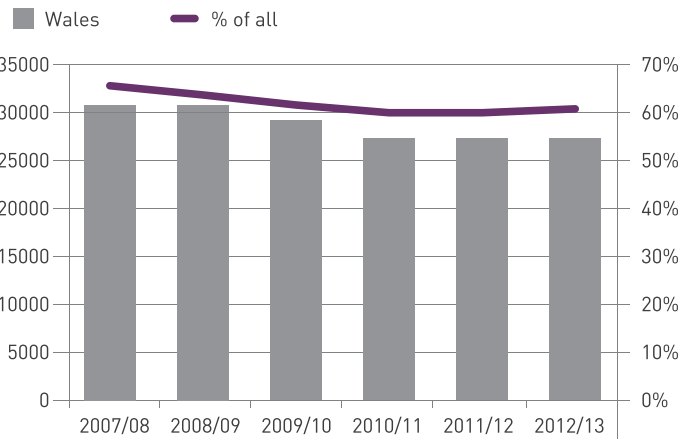


Figure 3: Participation of Welsh-Domiciled Entrants from NS-SEC 4-7, 2007/08 to 2012/13<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup> This Table includes only students for whom valid information is available on their social class background.

Figure 4: Destination of Welsh-Domiciled Undergraduate Entrants, numbers and % of all Welsh-domiciled students, 2007/08 to 2012/13



Participation in Higher Education: the Widening Access Database

We now turn to our analysis based on the Widening Access database, in order to explore some of the factors underpinning the changing trends in participation in higher education.

Table 1 provides a brief description of the 110,000 or so individuals included in the Widening Access Database from the NPD.

Table 1: Overview of the Widening Access Cohorts

	NPD Year 11 Cohort			All
	2005	2006	2007	
Gender				
Male	19,038	18,395	18,562	55,995
Female	18,333	17,971	18,236	54,540
Receiving Free School Meals (FSM)				
No	31,629	31,512	31,854	94,995
Yes	5,742	4,854	4,944	15,540
GCSE Attainment				
0 points	2,929	1,316	1,199	5,444
1-10 points	2,578	2,411	2,546	7,535
11-20 points	2,882	2,825	2,788	8,495
21-30 points	3,909	3,853	3,884	11,646
31-40 points	5,022	5,153	5,208	15,383
41-50 points	6,516	6,609	6,786	19,911
51-60 points	6,315	6,543	6,473	19,331
61-70 points	4,304	4,397	4,523	13,224
71+ points	2,916	3,259	3,391	9,566
Total	37,371	36,366	36,798	110,535

Table 2 focuses attention on the almost 90,000 who re-appear in the LLWR and WED records of post-compulsory education. This means that more than 80 per cent of the young people in the Widening Access Database make this progression to post-compulsory education within Wales. This table also shows the gender composition, the proportion receiving Free School Meals and the average GCSE points scores for categories of post-compulsory education, defined in terms of the type of qualifications for which individuals are registered.



Table 2: Participation in Post-Compulsory Education and Selected Personal Characteristics

	Total Number	Female %	Receiving FSM %	GCSE Points
6th Form A levels	28,813	54.2	4.7	61.4
FE A levels	9,593	58.7	8.5	56.5
6th. Form A levels + FE A levels	2,303	61.4	9.7	56.8
6th Form A levels + FE Vocational	2,938	56.1	8.6	50.7
6th Form Vocational	724	43.4	19.6	31.8
FE Level 3/4 Other	10,429	53.5	10.7	44.7
FE Level 2	17,701	45.9	18.5	29.7
FE Level 1	9,752	35.1	25.8	21.4
FE Entry Level	1,173	40.4	31.2	15.0
GCSEs – Both	1,483	52.1	18.1	29.2
Other Vocational Combination	4,716	50.4	13.7	42.4
Not Observed in 6th Form or FE	20,910	43.9	21.8	25.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>110,535</b>	<b>49.3</b>	<b>14.1</b>	<b>41.7</b>

Finally, Table 3 extends the descriptive analysis to the 38,000 or so individuals who proceeded to some form of higher education. This shows that women have significantly higher levels of participation in higher education than men. It also indicates that young people (both males and females) from what are categorised as ‘Black and Minority Ethnic’ (BME) backgrounds have appreciably higher rates of participation than those from ‘White Other’ backgrounds; and that the lowest levels of participation are recorded for the ‘White British’ group, with ‘White British’ males having the lowest rate of participation of all. Those receiving Free School Meals (FSM) participate in higher education much less than those young people who are not. It is also clear that previous educational attainment – shown here in terms of the average GCSE scores - is an important factor. In general, the higher the level of previous educational attainment, the more likely young people are to enter higher education (especially where their GCSE passes include core subjects, such as English, Welsh First Language and Mathematics [CSI]).

<sup>a</sup> Don’t Know/Not Stated  
<sup>b</sup> Core Subject Indicator: achieved A\*-C in GCSE English or Welsh First Language, Mathematics and Science.

Table 3: Rates of Participation in Higher Education by Selected Personal Characteristics

	Participation in HE by age 20			
	Male		Female	
	No.	%	No.	%
Overall	16,978	30.3	21,082	38.7
Ethnicity				
‘White British’	15,592	30.0	19,442	38.3
‘White Other’	298	35.6	369	45.7
‘BME’	677	40.3	791	48.0
DK/NS <sup>a</sup>	411	28.4	480	37.1
FSM				
Yes	930	12.0	1198	15.4
No	16,048	33.3	19,884	42.5
GCSE CSI <sup>b</sup>				
Yes	13,084	63.7	16,342	70.6
No	3894	11.0	4740	15.1
GCSE Points Band				
0-50	4603	12.1	4027	13.2
51-55	2351	48.8	2680	48.8
56-60	2475	62.6	3245	64.0
61-65	2320	73.1	3130	73.3
66-70	1936	82.0	2773	81.2
71-75	1368	84.7	2226	88.4
75+	1925	90.5	3001	90.8



Even this very basic analysis begins to demonstrate that there are clear patterns in participation in higher education. Moreover, these patterns are highly suggestive of some of the factors that act as important determinants of such participation. However, in order to explore these determinants more robustly, we need to undertake more complex statistical analysis. In what follows, therefore, we present our findings from this analysis, which allows us to estimate the influence of a range of factors, whilst taking account ('holding constant') the influence of other possible determinants. Two forms of analysis were undertaken. In the first, the relationships that are explored are between participation

in higher education and the characteristics of the individual young people included in the Widening Access Database (including: gender; ethnic background; date of birth; home post-code; receiving FSM; score on the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) of their area of residence<sup>10</sup>; prior educational attainment; and type of school attended). This replicated the analysis that had previously been undertaken in England. Secondly, we extended this analysis by adopting a multi-level approach, which allowed us to explore more fully the effects of not only these individual characteristics, but also those of schools and local authority areas on participation in higher education.<sup>11</sup>

## Finding 1

### **Young people from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds are much more likely to participate in higher education than their less advantaged peers.**

In order to measure individuals' socio-economic background, we allocated them to quintiles according to the score of their area of residence on the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD). In these terms, our initial analysis revealed that young people from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds are much more likely to participate in higher education than their less advantaged peers. In this regard, the situation in Wales is essentially the same as that in England (as reflected in the equivalent analyses undertaken there). This is true, despite the significant differences between the two countries in general social and economic conditions, as well as the somewhat divergent policy approaches with respect to educational provision

in general and participation in higher education more specifically.

However, our initial analysis also showed that, in Wales, unlike England, the most disadvantaged (the bottom quintile in terms of the WIMD) are not the least likely to participate in Higher Education. Rather the least likely participants are the group immediately above them (the fourth quintile), when other factors (previous educational attainment, ethnic background, receipt of free school meals, type of school and so forth) are also taken into account (although the difference between the fourth and fifth quintiles is small). This is an interesting finding. It may reflect the impacts of Welsh interventions aimed at raising levels of participation in higher education in Communities First areas; although it is important to bear in mind that in England too there have been strategies aimed at increasing HE participation

<sup>10</sup> The WIMD is the standard measure of relative social and economic disadvantage, indexing a range of measures: income; housing; employment; access to services; education; health; community safety; and physical environment. It is available for Lower Layer Super Output Areas, which are defined in terms of a mean population of 1500 residents.

<sup>11</sup> The research on which this summary report draws is described in much greater detail in the working papers that are listed in Appendix 2.



in disadvantaged areas, albeit with a different basis for identifying target areas.

It is interesting to note that the multi-level model showed that there are some significant differences between males and females, with the largest gap for the former appearing between the top and the second quintiles; whilst for the latter, the gaps are more evenly distributed across the quintiles. In addition, eligibility for FSM

affects participation independently of WIMD quintile, with females who are eligible for FSM experiencing especially adverse effects on the likelihood of their participating in higher education. Moreover, once school and local authority effects on the likelihood of participation in higher education are fully incorporated, it is the lowest WIMD quintile that is least likely to participate in higher education, rising quintile by quintile to the least disadvantaged grouping.<sup>12</sup>

## Finding 2

**Much – although not all – of the higher participation in higher education amongst young people from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds is accounted for by previous educational attainment.**

When we take account of previous educational attainment, the effects of social and economic disadvantage are very substantially reduced. Indeed, previous educational attainment emerges as the most important determinant of participation in higher education. In other words, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are much less likely than their more advantaged peers to achieve the sorts of educational qualifications that are required for entry to higher education. This emerged very clearly from both our initial and multi-level approaches. It was also the case for the English analysis.<sup>13</sup>

The implications of this finding are important. It indicates that the determinants of participation should not be understood simply in terms of circumstances at the point of entry to higher education, but rather reflect a progressive closing off of educational opportunities throughout an individual's schooling. This suggests that responsibility for the levels of participation of different social groups does not lie with the universities (and associated organisations) alone, but rather is shared across the educational system as a whole. This said, it remains noteworthy, of course, that the differences between the participation levels of young people from the WIMD quintiles remain significant, even after taking account of prior educational attainment. In other words, whilst social and economic disadvantage exerts its effects on participation in higher education in good measure through its effects on earlier educational attainment, there remain – statistically significant – effects over and above this.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For a fuller account of these findings, see our working paper, *Widening Access to higher education in Wales: Analysis using linked administrative data*, listed in Appendix 2.

<sup>13</sup> It is unfortunate that adequate data on educational attainment at earlier stages (prior to Key Stage 4) were not available for our analysis.

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller account of these findings, see our working paper, *Widening Access to higher education in Wales: Analysis using linked administrative data*, listed in Appendix 2.

## Finding 3

### **Ethnic background is also a highly significant factor in determining entry to higher education.**

Ethnic background is also an extremely important determinant of participation in higher education, second only to prior educational attainment in terms of its significance. Young people from both 'BME' and 'White Other' ethnic backgrounds are much more likely to participate in higher education than the 'White British' group. This is true of both Wales and England. Moreover, this was confirmed – for Wales – in our multi-level approach to the statistical modelling. Indeed, the multi-level analysis revealed that 'BME' males are almost two and a half times more likely to participate than their 'White British' counterparts; and for females, those from 'BME' backgrounds are twice as likely to participate in higher education as their 'White British' equivalents.

Again, this finding has important implications. It highlights, on the one hand, the relatively low take-up of higher education opportunities by 'White British' groups, especially amongst young men. On the other,

it reflects the significant increases in participation in higher education achieved by at least some of the ethnic minorities (although some remain substantially under-represented in higher education). Here, given that these effects are independent of other factors (such as educational attainment), it is likely that the sharp differences are an expression of the effects of divergent value orientations towards participation in higher education.

It is important to note, however, that the difference in the likelihood of participating between the 'BME' and the 'White British' groups is significantly reduced when we focus only on participation in undergraduate higher education programmes that are at Level 4 or above (bachelor degrees, foundation degrees, higher national diplomas and certificates and certificates of higher education). This suggests that the greater likelihood of participation in higher education for the 'BME' group is based upon participation in programmes that attract qualifications at levels below Level 4.<sup>15</sup>

## Finding 4

### **There are substantial differences between schools in terms of the chances of their pupils participating in higher education, over and above the effects of pupils' individual characteristics (such as educational attainment and ethnic background).**

Our multi-level model enabled us to explore the effects that schools in Wales have on the likelihood of participation in higher education by their pupils. Somewhat surprisingly, this revealed very substantial differences between schools in terms of the chances

of their pupils participating in higher education. Hence, those young people who attend schools with the best record of higher education participation amongst their pupils were more than two and a half times more likely for males and almost three times more likely for females to participate in higher education than the young people attending the school with the average level of higher education participation, after the effects of the individual characteristics of the pupils (educational attainment, ethnic background and so forth) have been taken into account. Pupils from the schools with the lowest records

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<sup>15</sup> For a fuller account of these findings, see our working paper, *Widening Access to higher education in Wales: Analysis using linked administrative data*, listed in Appendix 2.

of progression to higher education are some 42 per cent less likely to participate in higher education than equivalent pupils at the school with the average level of participation. To put this another way, young people who are equivalent in terms of their individual characteristics have very different chances of participating in higher education simply by virtue of the school that they attend.

However, it is much more difficult to ascertain – at least on the basis of this analysis – what it is in schools that brings about these sharp differences in the chances of their pupils participating in higher education.

Nevertheless, this finding does highlight the extremely important role played by schools in shaping patterns of participation in higher education. It underlines the point made earlier that responsibility for young people's levels of participation in higher education is shared across the education system as a whole. In addition, it raises important questions as to the most appropriate ways in which these significant differences between schools should be incorporated into the policy initiatives that aim to increase the levels of participation in higher education of previously under-represented groups.<sup>16</sup>

## Finding 5

**There are substantial differences between local authorities in terms of the chances of their pupils participating in higher education, over and above the effects of pupils' individual characteristics (such as educational attainment and ethnic background) and the schools that they attend.**

Our multi-level model also allowed us to explore the extent to which there is significant variation between local authorities in terms of the likelihood of young people participating in higher education, once the effects of their individual characteristics and schools have been taken into account. Here too, we were rather surprised to discover that there are significant differences of this kind. Hence, the chances of participating in higher education for young people who are equivalent in terms of their individual characteristics and the effects of the school they attend diverge substantially, simply by virtue of the local authority in which they are resident. Again, however, what accounts for these variations between local authorities is far from clear.

We were also surprised to note that a number of the local authorities which had the highest likelihood of young people participating in higher education in terms of our multi-level modelling (where the effects of individual characteristics and schools are taken into account) were amongst those with high levels of social and economic disadvantage and relatively poor levels of educational attainment in schools and colleges. For example, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Blaenau Gwent all fall into this category. Indeed, in Merthyr Tydfil, young men are almost three times as likely to participate in higher education as those in the average local authority; and young women are more than twice as likely to do so. However, it is important to note that the high level of participation in higher education in these areas was strongly associated with programmes attracting qualifications below Level 4. Further, more focused research would be required to explore what underpins these patterns of participation in higher education.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For a fuller account of these findings, see our working paper, *Widening Access to higher education in Wales: Analysis using linked administrative data*, listed in Appendix 2.

<sup>17</sup> For a fuller account of these findings, see our working paper, *Widening Access to higher education in Wales: Analysis using linked administrative data*, listed in Appendix 2.

## Finding 6

**Individual social characteristics and previous educational attainment affect rates of retention in higher education institutions. However, there are also differences in retention rates between universities, even when these individual effects are taken into account.**

Entry to higher education is only one element of widening participation; patterns of retention are also very important. Our analysis revealed that the likelihood of ‘dropping out’ from higher education is related to a range of individual social characteristics. Hence, males, individuals from the ‘White British’ ethnic group and those whose family backgrounds are lower in the occupational hierarchy are more likely to ‘drop-out’ from university. However, as with entry to higher education, previous educational attainment is an especially significant influence, with those with higher

levels of previous attainment being much more likely to complete their programmes.

In addition, there are significant institutional effects. Those who attend a Russell Group university, for example, are less likely to ‘drop-out’, whilst those attending a post-92 university are more likely to do so, even when differences in individual characteristics are taken into account. It is also the case that those who attend institutions within Wales for their higher education are more likely to ‘drop-out’ than those who attend universities in other parts of the UK. However, there are also significant differences in rates of retention between the higher education institutions in Wales, again even when the differing social characteristics and previous educational attainment of their student intakes are taken into account.<sup>18</sup>

## Finding 7

**Higher education students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are equally likely to attain a ‘good degree’ as those from more advantaged backgrounds.**

A further element to be considered is the level of qualification attained by higher education students, which has come to be seen as an important factor in shaping access to employment opportunities. Our analysis focused on the likelihood of undergraduate students attaining a ‘good degree’ (defined as a First or an Upper Second). The results indicate that coming from a socially disadvantaged background (whether measured in terms of the Index of Multiple Deprivation, living in a Communities First area, eligibility for FSM or family occupational background) is not a factor that

affects students’ chances of gaining a ‘good degree’. In other words, those individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who manage to get into higher education perform at an equivalent level (in terms of their degree classification) as their peers from different sorts of social background. However, males are less likely than females to attain a ‘good degree’; and those individuals with lower levels of previous educational attainment are also less likely to do so.

As with retention, there are also institutional effects on the likelihood of achieving a ‘good degree’, even when individual social characteristics and previous educational attainment are ‘held constant’. Hence, those attending a Russell Group university are more

<sup>18</sup> For a fuller account of these findings, see our working paper, *Retention in and progression through HE in Wales*, listed in Appendix 2.





likely, whilst those attending a post-92 university are less likely to leave university with a 'good degree'. In addition, those students who attend Welsh institutions for their higher education are significantly less likely to attain this level of degree, although, again, there are substantial variations between the different Welsh universities in this respect.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Widening Access Initiatives in Wales: fieldwork analysis*

In this section, we turn to the part of our analysis that is concerned with the impacts of widening access initiatives on patterns of participation in higher education in Wales. The wider context here is rather well established. Since the advent of parliamentary devolution, successive Welsh administrations have pursued a strong commitment to widening access to higher education, interpreting the latter - in broad terms - as raising the representation amongst undergraduate students of individuals from social groups which have previously been under-represented in higher education. The rationale underpinning this commitment has been two-fold: firstly, to support Welsh economic development by providing the widest cross-section of the population (and, hence, the largest pool of 'talent') with opportunities to acquire the high-level skills deemed necessary for the 'knowledge-based economy'; and, secondly, to provide a more equitable access to higher education and the upward social mobility and wider life chances it is deemed to offer.<sup>20</sup>

The Welsh Government has placed a special emphasis on the social justice aspects of widening access, reflecting not only the broadly social democratic

complexion of successive governments, but also what is seen to be an enduring and valued characteristic of higher education in Wales that can be traced back to the establishment of the University of Wales and its constituent colleges, and the other higher education institutions, during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed, it is arguable that, whilst all the UK administrations have implemented policies aimed at widening access to higher education, the importance attached to social equity marks out the approach adopted in Wales from that pursued by the UK Government in England and, to some extent at least, by the administrations in Northern Ireland and Scotland too. This strong commitment to social equity has arguably provided the most clearly articulated rationale for the distinctive position adopted by the Welsh Government with respect to student finance. For example, the current policy of insulating all full-time undergraduate students who are domiciled in Wales<sup>21</sup> (irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds) from the impacts of 'top-up' fees (which have been introduced in England *tout court*) is justified primarily in terms of ensuring that individuals from poorer home backgrounds are not disadvantaged in their participation in higher education.<sup>22</sup>

It is also the case that Welsh administrations have pursued initiatives aimed at promoting directly wider access to higher education. For example, since 2002/3, the Reaching Wider Partnerships, of which all universities and further education colleges in Wales are members, have been charged with the task of widening access to higher education, in collaboration with local authorities, schools and the voluntary sector.

<sup>19</sup> For a fuller account of these findings, see our working paper, *Retention in and progression through HE in Wales*, listed in Appendix 2.

<sup>20</sup> There are, of course, important debates as to whether these projected outcomes of participation in higher education are borne out in reality.

<sup>21</sup> Limited financial support has recently been extended to part-time undergraduate students.

<sup>22</sup> Again, there are important debates about the actual effects of this government support for Welsh undergraduates. This is also the case for the previous efforts of Welsh administrations to provide financial support to undergraduate students from Wales.



More recently, this work has been complemented by more focused initiatives, such as UHOVI<sup>23</sup>, based in the Heads of the Valleys sub-region. More recently again, statutory (regulated by HEFCW) tuition fee plans have been introduced in Wales, which serve to emphasise the critical role played by the higher education institutions in promoting more equitable access to higher education, by tying together the level of student fees charged by each higher education provider with targets for widening access outcomes.

What this implies, therefore, is that there is a relatively complex policy system in Wales (as elsewhere) whose aim is to widen access to higher education. This

policy system extends from the national level (the Welsh Government, and HEFCW, for example), to the regional organisations (especially the Reaching Wider Partnerships, but also UHOVI), to the level of the individual institutions that provide higher education programmes (the universities and further education colleges). In what follows, we provide some insights into the operation of this complex policy system, based on the extensive fieldwork conducted as part of the research project.

## Finding 8

### **Widening access initiatives encompass a wide diversity of activities, often targeted at different social groups.**

National-level policy presents widening access to higher education as a coherent programme of activities, with different organisations operating together relatively seamlessly. Our fieldwork revealed a reality which is much more complex. Widening access initiatives address a variety of distinct social groups and encompass a range of different types of activity.

In broad terms, the groups that have been targeted by widening access programmes are defined in terms of their historical under-representation in higher education.<sup>24</sup> However, it is important to note that this masks important differences between the target groups too. For example, some ethnic minority groups are over-represented in higher education, whilst this is not the case for any groups within the disabled population.

Moreover, individuals from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds have been the most consistently targeted group, where this disadvantage has generally been defined in terms of their living in Communities First areas. There is ample evidence, however, that substantial proportions of those who live in Communities First areas are not themselves disadvantaged, irrespective of the average conditions of their area of residence.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, it can be argued that all young people leaving social care have been disadvantaged by the conditions of their upbringing. In short, widening access initiatives have targeted not only different groups, but also ones whose average under-representation in higher education in the past belies significant differences in their profiles of participation. Clearly, this raises questions about the efficacy of the targeting strategy in reaching those who experience the most acute deficit in terms of their participation in higher education.

<sup>23</sup> The Universities Heads of the Valleys Institute.

<sup>24</sup> The targeting of Welsh-speakers is an exception here, where it is the nature of higher education provision (through the medium of Welsh) that is at stake, rather than straightforward levels of participation.

<sup>25</sup> For a fuller account of these findings, see our working paper, *Targeting 'Communities First' areas in Wales to widen access to higher education: how appropriate are the methods?*, listed in Appendix 2.

It is also clear that the heterogeneity of some the targeted groups has important consequences for the ways in which widening access initiatives are actually implemented. For example, national policy emphasises that it is all-age in scope. There are marked divergences in the ways that different age groups engage with widening access organisations and their activities. Hence, the Reaching Wider Partnerships have tended to focus their efforts on younger (potential) entrants to higher education, working especially closely with schools (usually within Communities First areas) in their regions.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, within some of the universities, the emphasis of their 'mainstream' widening access activities is on promoting the entry of younger people, again working closely with schools and colleges. Here, access for older entrants is characteristically separated from this into specialist lifelong learning centres, which tend to see themselves as rather marginal to the central concerns of their institutions. In other universities, however, and in the further education institutions offering higher education programmes, both younger and 'mature-age' entrants are seen to be integral to their widening access strategies and activities, albeit with a tendency to predominate in different types of programme (see below).<sup>27</sup> For all of the higher education providers, their focus tends to be on promoting widening access as a route of entry specifically to their own institution. For the Reaching Wider partnerships, on the other hand, the emphasis is on widening participation in general terms.

There is also significant *diversity* in terms of the types of activity undertaken to widen access to higher education. On the one hand, both the Reaching Wider Partnerships and the higher education institutions engage in significant outreach work designed to promote the value of learning in general and of progression through the educational system to higher education more specifically (especially

to the universities themselves). This involves engaging especially with young people – from primary school age through to Key Stage 4 and beyond – whose family and community backgrounds are less likely to engender positive attitudes towards their participation in higher education. On the other, there are also activities whose principal focus is on raising levels of attainment to the point that the young people are qualified to enter higher education programmes on standard terms. Boosting GCSE attainment in key subjects – such as mathematics, English and sciences – is a particular focus here. Whilst in practical terms both of these types of activity are frequently combined within single programmes, the distinction is analytically important. Hence, although previous educational attainment is a crucial factor in shaping patterns of participation in higher education, there are also important 'secondary effects' on participation that distinguish between different social groups even when their attainment is the same (see above). Moreover, for universities and departments which are able to select their undergraduates on the basis of their qualifications, raising the attainment of potential entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds constitutes a prime focus of their widening access activities.

The universities and further education institutions were also active (albeit to differing extents) in developing progression routes for older people into higher education programmes.<sup>28</sup> Here too, there are activities of different kinds. Some programmes of this type – Access to Higher Education courses are a clear example – aim to compensate adults for educational disadvantages experienced earlier in their lives. They 'top-up' previous qualifications and develop the kinds of skills necessary for studying at higher education level. Others focus on the 'up-skilling' of the labour-force, often at the behest of employers; these may involve individuals who already have significant educational

<sup>26</sup> Only one of the three partnerships extended its scope to embrace significant activities with older participants.

<sup>27</sup> The Open University is, of course, a special case in focusing on older entrants (although with growing numbers of younger ones).

<sup>28</sup> As noted earlier, one of the Reaching Wider partnerships also undertook substantial activity of this kind.

qualifications, but that are deemed inappropriate for their current work-place roles.

It is important to note, therefore, that 'widening access to higher education' actually encompasses a diversity

of types of activity which engage with diverse social groups. Certainly, it is difficult to discern a coherent 'community of practice' that defines a discrete policy sector.<sup>29</sup>

## Finding 9

**Widening access to higher education involves promoting entry to a wide variety of types of programme. Accordingly, entrants have a diversity of educational experiences.**

Some people understand widening access to higher education in terms of the entry of 'non-traditional' students (both young and mature-age) to *conventional* first-degree programmes. This sort of progression does constitute a significant aim of the widening access activities being undertaken in Wales. This is true for both full-time and part-time participation in degree programmes, although entrants to the latter are significantly more likely to be older (and in employment, and female). It is also the case that particular higher education institutions play a critical role in part-time first-degree provision (most notably the Open University).

However, our fieldwork revealed that this sort of progression comprises only a rather small part of what the beneficiaries of widening access do after they enter higher education. Hence, widening access activities are more likely to promote entry to other forms of undergraduate programme, such as diplomas and certificates of higher education, foundation degrees and HNDs and HNCs. Of course, it is argued that entry to

such sub-degree programmes frequently provide the basis for further progression to study at first-degree level. This is undoubtedly true; and some institutions are set-up to promote this (such as UHOVI). However, it is difficult to be categorical about the frequency with which individuals follow this kind of progression route, in the absence of research focused on this specific issue.<sup>30</sup>

In addition, for some institutions, widening access activities were reported to result in entry to a variety of vocational programmes at sub-degree level, many of which do not result in the award of certificated qualifications. For example, single modules offered in workplaces at the request of employers can be justified in terms not only of fulfilling an important 'up-skilling' function, but also building confidence and skills in adult learners that can lead to participation in more extended forms of higher education.

The crucial implication here is that individuals who enter higher education through a widening access route necessarily experience this higher education in radically different ways, according to the sort of programme and institution in which they enrol. Hence, it clearly means something different to engage in higher education through a single module delivered in the workplace,

<sup>29</sup> For a fuller account of these findings, see our working papers, *How is the Welsh Government's widening access policy delivered on a regional level?* and *What is 'widening access' to higher education? A review of approaches adopted by HEIs and colleges in Wales to 'widening access' to HE*, listed in Appendix 2.

<sup>30</sup> Not least, there are important questions to be addressed as to how institutions report participation in different types of programme, thereby shaping the official statistics on participation.



compared with engaging in a part-time Open University course delivered through e-learning at a distance or in a full-time degree programme alongside traditional higher education entrants. Accordingly, 'Access to what?' becomes a critical question. More specifically, in the

light of the rationale provided for policy, is it appropriate to ensure that investment – by individuals, employers and the state – in widening access activities produces a particular mix of participation across the range of types of higher education programme?<sup>31</sup>

## Finding 10

### **Widening access involves not only entry to higher education, but also successful progression to completion of the programme.**

Achievement of the goals set by national policy for widening access to higher education is dependent on effective implementation down to the level of individual higher education institutions. Indeed, for some universities, this actually implies effective implementation at the departmental level. Our fieldwork revealed that there are significant variations between different institutions in the ways in which they implement widening access policy.

For example, at the stage of admissions to higher education, only one university operates a policy of taking account of applicants' social backgrounds and/or previous educational attainment through a formal contextualised admissions policy.<sup>32</sup> This institution, for the most part, is able to select its undergraduate entrants on the basis of their previous educational qualifications. However, this creates significant tensions at the departmental level. Individual admissions tutors reported on the difficulties of reconciling widening access objectives with the equally – if not

more – important objective of maximising the level of educational qualifications attained by entrants. This requirement to meet potentially conflicting objectives – equity versus 'excellence' – poses a familiar dilemma that has assumed new forms in the current policy context. Other universities take account of applicants' social backgrounds by other – less formal – means. Here, however, overall admissions policy for these institutions (although there may well be significant differences between departments) is shaped significantly by the priority to recruit sufficient numbers of students to fill programmes and, thus, entry is generally far less dependent on achieving high grades in particular types of qualification.

It is also clear that achieving national policy goals has implications not simply for admission to higher education programmes, but also for successful progression to completion of the programme and attainment of the appropriate qualification. It is not enough that individuals from a wider range of social backgrounds enter universities; they will only reap the full benefits of participating in higher education (as these are conventionally specified) if they complete their programmes and attain qualifications.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> For a fuller account of these findings, see our working papers, *What is 'widening access' to higher education? A review of approaches adopted by HEIs and colleges in Wales to 'widening access' to HE, and To what extent are institutional widening access strategies delivered on a departmental level?*, listed in Appendix 2.

<sup>32</sup> At least one other university is considering adopting this approach, but only a single university had actually implemented it at the time of completing our fieldwork.

<sup>33</sup> It is acknowledged that some benefits may flow from partial completion, but there is little evidence here.

Our fieldwork revealed that, whilst most attention is paid to entry, all higher education institutions reported that they make significant provision for supporting the retention of students through their programmes and in completing their studies effectively. In some universities – although by no means all – this is couched in terms of supporting all students through to

successful completion. In others, meeting the particular needs of non-traditional students is highlighted much more, although even here specific support mechanisms tend to concentrate on the financial problems that non-traditional students are likely to experience especially acutely.<sup>34</sup>

## Finding 11

### **Evaluating the impacts of widening access initiatives on patterns of participation in higher education is difficult and limited, given the data that are currently available.**

One of the striking themes to emerge from our fieldwork relates to the importance of evaluating the impacts of widening access initiatives on patterns of participation in higher education. In particular, there was a remarkable unanimity amongst the professionals responsible for the delivery of these initiatives that robust evaluation is critical. This was attributable to their firm belief in the value of what they did and in the need to demonstrate this to policy-makers (as well as the wider citizenry).

It is also clear that considerable effort has been devoted to assessing the effects of widening access activities. This is true for the Reaching Wider Partnerships and also of at least some of the higher education institutions, although evaluation was considerably patchier in the latter. However, the effectiveness of such assessments is clearly limited by the restricted nature of the data available. Hence, for example, the Reaching Wider Partnerships are generally very assiduous in collecting data from the participants in their activities as to how

far they felt that their views on higher education had changed as a consequence of their participation. Whilst this provides important insights, it stops a long way short of establishing how far participation in widening access activities actually influences whether or not individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds enter higher education (where otherwise they would not have done so). Similarly, the universities are able to determine only to a very partial extent how far participation in their widening access programmes increases the likelihood of participants entering higher education; and this is true of entry to the same university that provided the widening access programme, but is even more problematic where entry is to other universities.

The limitations of evaluation hitherto were widely acknowledged by almost all the respondents in our fieldwork. Whilst some encouraging developments in terms of data are taking place, it was argued rather forcibly that much more needs to be done to ensure that an effective system for tracking individuals after they have participated in widening access activities is required. More specifically, such data are required on a general basis, in order that patterns can be established through appropriate statistical analysis.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> For a fuller account of these findings, see our working papers, *What is 'widening access' to higher education? A review of approaches adopted by HEIs and colleges in Wales to 'widening access' to HE*, and *To what extent are institutional widening access strategies delivered on a departmental level*, listed in Appendix 2.

<sup>35</sup> For a fuller account of these findings, see our working paper, *A review of approaches adopted by HEIs in Wales to evaluating widening access*, listed in Appendix 2.



## Summary

The research reported here reveals that the factors that shape patterns of participation in higher education by young people in Wales are broadly equivalent to those that have been identified by previous research in England. In both countries, social and economic disadvantage is a crucial factor affecting the chances of entering and progressing through higher education. However, such disadvantage influences patterns of participation to a significant extent through its influence on the levels of educational attainment achieved prior to entry to higher education. Hence, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who 'succeed against the odds' in gaining high levels of qualifications are not disadvantaged in terms of entry to or progression through higher education. This said, even when previous educational attainment is taken into account ('held constant'), there remain important differentials in levels of participation according to the extent of social and economic disadvantage. These 'secondary effects' are very likely to reflect important differences in factors such as knowledge of the higher education system and aspirations with respect to entering university between individuals from contrasting socio-economic backgrounds.

The research also revealed significant differences in individuals' chances of participating in higher education according to the school attended and the local

authority area in which they lived. These differences were observed even when the influence of individual characteristics (socio-economic disadvantage, ethnic background, gender, previous educational attainment and so on) were taken into account. Further research is required to understand better the social processes underpinning these differences.

These sorts of findings have important implications for assessments of the policies adopted in Wales that aim to widen access to higher education, specifically for social groups which have been historically under-represented. The research revealed the complexities of such policies, both in terms of the range of initiatives undertaken under the umbrella of 'widening access' and the forms of higher education (in terms of types of institution, forms of higher education programme, qualification aimed for, character of educational experience and so forth) to which access is achieved. In addition, there is significant heterogeneity in the characteristics of the individuals who benefit from widening access initiatives.

We believe that the findings of the research have important implications for the future direction of policy and professional practice in this area. In Part 2 of this Report, we explore some of these implications for policy in greater detail.



# PART 2

## Some Implications for Policy and Practice

### Introduction

Part 1 of this report outlines the main findings from the research. Here in Part 2, we set out some of the implications of the research findings for policy and practice in widening access to higher education in Wales. In particular, it proposes ways of helping HEFCW and the sector define and evidence widening access impact and effectiveness. We recognise that our proposals involve significant changes, especially in the nature and availability of data with respect to participation in higher education. However, the conclusions from our research indicate that without such changes, effective and thorough-going assessment of the impacts of widening access initiatives will be possible only to a very limited extent.

There are some limitations to this discussion. The first is that much of the quantitative research that underpins our conclusions is based on the participation of young, full-time students in universities. This work does, however, consider the many different ways in which this group participates in higher education, from first degree to further education in higher education courses. Moreover, the fieldwork that was carried out on widening access initiatives in Wales has an all-age

focus. Secondly, in line with the terms of the award, we concentrate most of the discussion on widening access at pre-entry to higher education levels. However, as is argued below, it is essential that pre-entry widening access is considered alongside widening access activities after entry to higher education.

The findings from our research suggest five inter-related questions that are critical to the future of policy and practice on widening access to higher education in Wales:

- a) How is widening access understood?
- b) Who is widening access for?
- c) Widening access to what?
- d) How should widening access be organised?
- e) How can the impacts of widening access initiatives be monitored and evaluated?

In what follows, we discuss each question in turn, before recommending the development of a new national strategy for widening access in Wales that incorporates the compulsory and non-compulsory education sectors.





## How is Widening Access Understood?

UK policy on widening access to higher education is underpinned by the recognition that there are particular groups of individuals who are under-represented in the higher education population. This arises from the observation that, over time, some social groups have been systematically under-represented in higher education compared to other groups of individuals. Typically, this relates to the low participation of individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, but has increasingly included other, or more specific, groups with relatively low rates of participation. Widening access policy is based on the view that such groups of individuals are under-represented in higher education because they do not have access to the same educational opportunities afforded to other groups (rather than, say, because their inherent characteristics make them unsuitable for higher education). Hence, by addressing or reducing these inequalities of opportunity, the implication is that all groups of individuals will become more equally represented in higher education.

In Wales, the Government's 'key message' has been a simple one. In its latest form it is expressed as: 'Higher Education should be available to all those with the potential to benefit regardless of age, gender, mode and level of study, country of origin and background'.<sup>36</sup> This aim has been implemented by initiatives that set out to raise the levels of participation of particular social groups. The latter are currently defined primarily in terms of people – of all ages – living in areas of low opportunities.<sup>37</sup> In practical terms, these include two main types of area: Communities First areas (now cluster areas) and areas with low levels of participation in higher

education in UK terms.<sup>38</sup> The rationale here is, of course, that this emphasis on area-based definitions of under-representation provides a practical and effective means of identifying those social groups (and the individuals within them) which are under-represented in higher education by virtue of their socio-economic disadvantage and relative lack of educational opportunities. Indeed, it is instructive that – albeit in somewhat different ways – such area-based approaches to defining those groups which are the principal targets of widening access initiatives have also been adopted in the other countries of the UK too.

We know that definitions of widening participation or access are contested.<sup>39</sup> Evidence from our research indicates that defining widening access simply in terms of under-represented groups entering higher education is problematic. The research clearly demonstrates the significance of prior education; this is by far the most important factor in determining the likelihood that any individual will participate in higher education. Furthermore, levels of prior educational achievement are clearly associated with different groups of learners.<sup>40</sup> However, the research also clearly demonstrates that there are particular groups who are under-represented in higher education irrespective of their prior educational qualifications. In other words, we find that there are significant differences in the likelihood of participating in higher education between different groups of individuals who have the same levels of prior achievement.

We also find clear evidence that certain higher education outcomes, such as retention and degree outcomes, are significantly associated with particular groups of

<sup>36</sup> Welsh Government (2013) *Policy Statement on Higher Education*, Cardiff: Welsh Government, p.15.

<sup>37</sup> Some particular groups are also specified, such as people leaving care.

<sup>38</sup> For example, HEFCW (2013) *Corporate Strategy 2013-14 – 2015-16*, Cardiff: Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

<sup>39</sup> Layer, G. (2005) Widening participation – variations on a theme, *Journal of Access Policy and Practice*, 3, 1, 70-88.

<sup>40</sup> See also previous research on this in Wales: Pye, J., Hardy, C. and Taylor, C. (2014) *Evaluation of the Pupil Deprivation Grant: first year evaluation report*, GSR No. 90/2014. Cardiff: Welsh Government.



individuals. In other words, some groups of individuals are also under-represented in terms of progression through to completion of courses and achieving higher levels and grades of qualifications. We would stress that widening access should not only be concerned with the participation of particular under-represented groups. It should also be concerned with the progress they make and what outcomes they achieve after they have entered higher education.

In addition, we learnt from widening access practitioners that a major inhibitor of higher education participation and progress is a lack of knowledge about higher education, including knowledge about the purpose and value of higher education, subject choices, the graduate labour market, admissions procedures, and how to succeed at university.

We suggest there are, therefore, four sets of inequalities that widening access ought to be concerned with and attempt to address:

- a) Educational prior achievement – inequalities in educational achievement prior to entry to higher education;
- b) Admission to higher education – inequalities in admission to higher education (i.e. given levels of prior achievement)<sup>41</sup>;
- c) Higher education outcomes – inequalities in higher education outcomes;
- d) Knowledge of higher education – inequalities in knowledge about higher education.

Distinguishing between these different forms of inequality, and identifying points of connection, we conclude, would help better frame the wide variety of

objectives for widening access. Furthermore, there can be no 'one size fits all' widening access policy, since the widening access policies and practices required to address each of these forms of inequality can be very different. These different forms of inequality also highlight a critical tension in widening access policy and practice between the responsibility of the higher education institutions, on the one hand, and the rest of the education sector, on the other.

#### *Educational prior achievement*

In recent years, one major element in the widening access strategies of many universities has been concerned with mitigating the impact of inequalities in prior educational achievement. This includes the use of contextualised or discounted entry offer/confirmation; that is, where applicants are given a relatively low entry requirement to reflect circumstances considered to have a systematic and detrimental influence on their levels of achievement. It also includes forms of outreach interventions where universities are directly involved in helping to raise levels of prior attainment amongst selected groups.

There are three possible reasons why widening access policies have tended to focus on inequalities in prior achievement. The first is the argument that nearly all individuals with NVQ Level 3 qualifications are thought to go on to participate in higher education. For example, Gorard suggests that 'in 1989 the proportion of suitably qualified 18-19-year-olds who attended HE was 65 per cent [...] A recent report by the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills suggested a qualified age participation rate of 97 per cent'<sup>42</sup>. The second possible explanation is that it has been very difficult, until

<sup>41</sup> It is important to note – especially in light of the all-age focus of widening access policy in Wales – that inequalities in prior educational achievement have differing implications for younger entrants compared with those older entrants whose previous education may well have been completed some time ago. This age-related divergence may also be reflected in differing entry routes into higher education.

<sup>42</sup> Gorard, S. (2005) Where shall we widen it? Higher Education and the age participate rate in Wales, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 59, 1, 3-18, p.15.

recently, directly to measure the more sophisticated form of inequality of admission to higher education because of a lack of longitudinal data on participants and non-participants. But a third possible reason involves a lack of understanding about the under-representation of particular groups in higher education. Put simply, those groups of individuals that are known to be under-represented in higher education tend to be the same groups that have relatively low levels of prior educational achievement. The link is then made that the reason for their under-representation is due to their low levels of prior educational achievement. Of course, this is not an unreasonable argument (indeed, it is what is indicated by our own research), but it is problematic when it seems to be the sole reason for their under-representation.

There is also an obvious tension between the responsibilities of the higher education sector, on the one hand, and the rest of the education sector, on the other, in addressing this form of inequality. Indeed, the Schwartz Review group states that they do 'not believe that the higher education admissions system should be responsible for compensating for social disadvantage or shortcomings in other parts of the education system'.<sup>43</sup> In Wales and England, schools receive direct additional funding to address the differential achievement of pupils eligible for FSM (that is, from households in receipt of state benefits) and non-eligible pupils. The Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG) was introduced to primary and secondary schools in Wales in 2012/13 to fund evidence-based interventions to close this attainment gap. Interestingly, research on the first year of the PDG has found little or no evidence that it is being used to (a) help raise the attainment of *above average* achieving FSM pupils, or (b) in supporting higher education aspirations.<sup>44</sup>

#### *Admission to higher education*

There has always been an implicit assumption that not all groups can be equally represented in higher education, since it typically requires students to have NVQ Level 3 qualifications prior to commencing NVQ Level 4 (or above) courses in higher education. It is more appropriate, therefore, to consider the under-representation of groups of suitably qualified individuals, which may or may not be similar to groups of individuals found to be generally under-represented in higher education. However, there is no universally agreed measure of eligibility for higher education, since the typical entry requirements for programmes in higher education vary enormously by subject and university. Furthermore, there may be some individuals, particularly mature participants, who do not have recognised NVQ Level 3 qualifications, but who demonstrate their educational ability and potential in other ways.

One way to take account of the rather selective nature of higher education is to compare the rates of participation of different groups of individuals with similar levels of prior educational qualifications (irrespective of what level of qualifications they have achieved). In other words, we use levels of educational qualifications of students already participating in higher education as measures of eligibility. By controlling for individual levels of educational achievement prior to entry to higher education, we can see that some groups of individuals are under-represented in higher education despite having similar levels of educational achievement as other groups of individuals who do participate in higher education. This form of inequality is more closely aligned to the notion of fair admissions, as described by Schwartz.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Schwartz, S. (2004) *Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice*. Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills, p.23.

<sup>44</sup> Pye, J., Hardy, C. and Taylor, C. (2014) *Evaluation of the Pupil Deprivation Grant: first year evaluation report*, GSR No. 90/2014. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

<sup>45</sup> Schwartz, S. (2004) *Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice*. Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills.





To try and explain the relative importance of distinguishing between the inequality of prior achievement and the inequality of admission, Table 4 shows the number of Wales-domiciled participants and non-participants in higher education according to their prior levels of qualifications (based on three cohorts of 15-year-olds).<sup>46</sup> Here, we distinguish further between individuals according to whether they achieved better or worse in their GCSEs and A Levels (or equivalent qualifications) compared to the average level of achievement for participants in higher education. For example, this shows that there were 62,163 individuals who did not participate in higher education by age 20 and who had below average GCSE scores and below average A Level results. However, it also shows that there were 2,130 individuals who had above average GCSE scores and above average A Level results, but who did not participate in higher education. In addition to this group, there were a further 5,103 non-participants who had below average GCSE scores, but had above average A Level results. This makes a total of 7,233 individuals who had 'suitable' A Level results, but who did not participate in higher education for whatever reason.

Of course many of these may have made active decisions not to go to university (at least up to the age of 20 years). Nevertheless, this is a significant minority of all individuals from three cohorts of school-leavers. This may only be 6.6 per cent of the overall population, but this is the equivalent of 19.5 per cent of those individuals participating in higher education by the age of 20. In other words, if all 7,233 school-leavers with above average A Level results had gone to university, this would have increased the participation rate by nearly 20 per cent. It should also be noted that this is a conservative estimate, since there will be many individuals with A Level results that are just below the average, who would still be eligible for entry to higher education (this is best demonstrated by the number of participants in higher education who had below average A level results in Table 4). These figures suggest that estimates of the proportion of 'suitably qualified' students going on to higher education, as reported by Gorard, appear to have been heavily exaggerated.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, if the figure of 97 per cent were correct, then that would suggest that less than 3 per cent of NVQ Level 3 qualified learners entered the labour market without an NVQ Level 4 or above qualification, which is difficult to envisage.

**Table 4: Wales-domiciled participants and non-participants in higher education, by prior educational achievement**

Average grades based on HE participants		Below average A Level results	Above average A Level results	Total
Non-participant in HE	Below average GCSE scores	62,163	5,103	<b>71,725</b>
	Above average GCSE scores	2,329	2,130	
Participant in HE	Below average GCSE scores	7,103	11,648	<b>37,136</b>
	Above average GCSE scores	1,600	16,785	

<sup>46</sup> The focus here is on younger entrants to higher education, making the transition directly from school or college to university. It is important to note that there are other routes into higher education that are frequently based on alternative forms of qualifications. These latter constitute an essential element in widening access policy.

<sup>47</sup> Gorard, S. (2005) Where shall we widen it? Higher Education and the age participate rate in Wales, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 59, 1, 3-18; Gorard, S., Smith, E., May, H., Thomas, L., Adnett, N. and Slack, K. (2006) *Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education*. Bristol: HEFCE.



This is certainly not to deny the importance of low prior educational achievement. Indeed, Table 4 shows that there were 62,163 school-leavers with below average GCSE scores and below average A Level results, who did not go on to university. This is a very large group, and any attempt to improve the educational attainment of these individuals will inevitably help reduce the under-representation of certain social groups. However, the number of individual learners who are most likely to benefit from a marginal increase in their prior educational achievement will be considerably smaller than this figure suggests, and is likely to be comparable to the number of above-average-achieving learners who currently do not participate in higher education.

#### *Higher education outcomes*

There is increasing focus on the progress of widening access learners in higher education, particularly in terms of retention. Similar attention is also now being given to their qualification outcomes and their employability. An important objective of ensuring the greater participation of under-represented groups in higher education is that they are able to continue through their studies and achieve suitable qualifications, such that they may enjoy upward social mobility. However, little is known about the impact of pre-entry widening access interventions on retention.<sup>48</sup> Some analysts have suggested that there is no relationship between widening access and retention. For example, Quinn uses evidence from the Danish higher education system to argue that it is possible to have successful widening access and high levels of retention.<sup>49</sup> However, our research shows that the

most important predictor of retention and 'good degree' outcomes is prior educational achievement. Quinn and others also acknowledge this. However, we would argue that some forms of widening access, particularly in addressing inequalities of prior educational achievement, target individuals at the margins of being 'suitably qualified' (as Gorard terms it). This means that they are also vulnerable to withdrawing once they are in higher education.

Our analysis here shows that, after taking into account levels of prior educational achievement, other indicators of being a widening access student (for example, being from a Communities First area) are not associated with any differences in the likelihood of them withdrawing from university.<sup>50</sup> However, since such students generally have lower prior educational achievement than other students, they continue to be over-represented in student withdrawals, and under-represented in course completions. Much further work is required to explore the complex relationships between widening access and university progress. However, this does highlight the need to focus on the successful completion and subsequent employment of under-represented groups, to ensure that increasing their entry into higher education is not the only benefit of widening access. Indeed, we would suggest that widening access should be measured on the exit qualifications of learners and not just the course aims on entry (there are other benefits of this as will be discussed later).<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Thomas, L. (2011), Do Pre-entry Interventions such as 'Aimhigher' Impact on Student Retention and Success? A Review of the Literature, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65: 230–250.

<sup>49</sup> Quinn, J. (2013) *Drop-out and Completion in Higher Education in Europe among Students from Under-represented Groups*. Cardiff: NESET.

<sup>50</sup> See also previous analysis, albeit in a single university, in Taylor, C., Rees, G., Sloan, L. and Davies, R. (2013a) Creating an Inclusive Higher Education System? Progression and outcomes of students from low participation neighbourhoods, *Contemporary Wales*, 26, pp.138–161.

<sup>51</sup> It is important to recognise that there are also significant personal and social benefits that accrue to wider participation in higher education.

### *Knowledge of higher education*

The fourth set of inequalities with which widening access strategies need to contend is that relating to differential knowledge about higher education between social groups. A good deal of emphasis is often placed on the aspirations of individuals to participate in higher education, which is often understood in terms of whether someone considers going to university or not. However, numerous surveys of young people, including those in Wales, demonstrate that young people rarely lack such aspirations. For example, a survey of Wales-domiciled 16- and 17-year-olds in 2004 found that 80 per cent of respondents said they intended to go to university.<sup>52</sup> More recently, WISERD-Education found that only 17 per cent of Wales-domiciled Year 11 pupils surveyed said they had no intention of going to university.

Rather, we would argue that some individuals can lack the knowledge about the costs and benefits of going to university and how this relates to their career and social aspirations; how to make appropriate decisions early in their educational careers to ensure participation is possible; what they can do to realise their aspirations; how to make appropriate decisions about courses; and how they can ensure they maximise the benefits of participating in higher education. This lack of knowledge about higher education and of information when making decisions relating to higher education, severely constrain the extent to which the widespread aspiration to go to university can be realised. Addressing issues of knowledge about higher education will also help

mitigate the impact of low confidence and a lack of self-efficacy.<sup>53</sup> This has been identified as a key factor in previous studies of higher education decision-making.<sup>54</sup> It is also demonstrated in part by our finding that the school a young person attends at age 15 is significantly associated with whether they participate in higher education or not, irrespective of levels of prior attainment and the socio-economic circumstances the individual experiences. Moreover, this lack of knowledge in relation to higher education is likely to be especially pertinent in the case of older individuals, who may well have deeply embedded notions that higher education is 'not for them'. Indeed, some of our fieldwork respondents who work with potential adult entrants emphasised the importance of counter-acting the effects of this sort of established 'learner identity'. Stressing inequalities in knowledge also helps emphasise that admission to higher education may not be the only desired outcome from a widening access intervention.

The notable feature about this set of inequalities is that it is inextricably linked to the other three sets of inequalities, and in different ways. This means that identifying groups of individuals who lack the necessary information to make informed decisions is very complex. Similarly, it may not be straightforward as to how to address these inequalities. Therefore, attention needs to be given to (a) how this set of inequalities relate to those highlighted above, and (b) the extent to which different education sectors and organisations need to work collaboratively in dealing with these inequalities.

<sup>52</sup> Fitz, J., Taylor, C. and Pugsley, L. (2005) Research Report 2: *Attitudes to Participation in Higher Education*. Cardiff: The Rees Review.

<sup>53</sup> Cassidy, S. (2012) Exploring individual differences as determining factors in student academic achievement in higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, 37, 7, 793-810.

<sup>54</sup> For example, Fitz, J., Taylor, C. and Pugsley, L. (2005) *Research Report 2: Attitudes to Participation in Higher Education*. Cardiff: The Rees Review; Callender, C. and Jackson, J. (2008) Does the fear of debt constrain choice of university and subject of study? *Studies in Higher Education*, 33, 4, 405-429; Dunnett, A., Moorehouse, J., Walsh, C. and Barry, C. (2012) Choosing a University: A conjoint analysis of the impact of higher fees on students applying for university in 2012, *Tertiary Education and Management*, 18, 3, 199-220.





## Who is Widening Access For?

The second question relates to the identification of under-represented groups. The discussion has already noted those groups commonly found to be under-represented in higher education. However, following the framework proposed above for understanding widening access, it is clear that the identification of target groups which experience inequalities of prior educational achievement, admission, knowledge and outcomes is not straightforward. Indeed, it may not necessarily be the same groups who experience each set of inequalities. However, there are three issues relating to who widening access is for.

First, the identification of those groups which are genuinely under-represented in higher education is hindered by a lack of reliable data. For example, in order to identify groups that experience inequalities in admission to higher education (given their prior educational attainment) requires longitudinal data of both participants and non-participants (of the kind illustrated by our own research here).

Secondly, there are numerous ways in which we can identify under-represented groups in each of the four forms of inequalities. For example, there are numerous ways in which prior educational achievement can be measured. In educational research, these tend to be classified as raw measures, contextual measures, value-added measures and contextual value-added measures. Is widening access concerned with identifying groups of individuals who do not achieve certain grades at GCSE (raw measures)? To what extent should other factors, such as the inter-relationships between gender, socio-economic circumstances and special educational needs, be considered alongside their levels of achievement at age 15 (contextual measures)? Should widening access be more concerned about the relative progress a learner has made over time, perhaps identifying 'late developers' who by the time they are in higher education may make successful progress despite having relatively low prior educational achievement (value-added measures)? Should widening access be concerned about the impact

on progress due to other circumstances that an individual experiences over time, such as the variable impact of schools, the social mix of the school intake and the neighbourhood they live in (contextual value added measures)? Educational research and policy struggles with these kinds of issues all the time, but they are just as pertinent in the identification of particular groups under-represented in higher education.

Thirdly, what is the appropriate balance between widening access amongst young learners (for example, entry by the age of 20) versus the participation of mature learners (for example, entry from the age of 21 years or above)? HEFCW is explicit about taking an all-age approach towards widening access. However, as the number of working age adults with higher education experience increases (due to the 'massification' of higher education and, indeed, the success of earlier widening access policies), the number of potential mature learners without higher education experience inevitably declines. And if more attention were to be given to increasing the participation of young under-represented learners, then this may eventually reduce the under-representation of mature-age learners. It is useful to note, for example, that between 2007/08 and 2012/13, about a third of Wales-domiciled, mature-age, part-time, undergraduate students were recorded as having had previous higher education experience in the UK lasting more than six months. Only some 16 per cent were recorded as not having had prior higher education experience. (However, for over half of these students it is not known if this was their first experience of higher education or not.)

So, how should we identify those groups at which widening access is aimed? As we have seen earlier, the dominant approach to widening access in England and Wales (and elsewhere) has been to target individuals living in particular geographical areas. One type of area-based measure, which has been widely used in England in particular, is POLAR (Participation of Local Areas). This is a classification of neighbourhoods that reflects the estimated proportion of young people participating

in higher education. Every few years, the classification is updated (there have been three iterations to date) to reflect changes in the rates of young participation in higher education. The mature participation classification is based on UK Census information, only available every ten years.

The young participation measure of POLAR is calculated using the actual number of young participants in higher education from a given area, divided by the estimated population of that area from the same age range. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has undertaken numerous exercises to check the validity and reliability of the measure, particularly to see whether the rate of participation for each area is representative or not of sub-divisions within each area. This goes some way to counter concerns about the 'ecological fallacy': that is, the extent to which the probability of participating in a given area can be interpreted as the probability of participating of individuals resident within that area.

In Wales, POLAR has also been used as one of the methods of identifying target groups for widening access. In addition to POLAR, the Welsh Government and HEFCW target individuals living in Communities First areas. These areas largely represent the 20 per cent most disadvantaged areas of Wales (as measured by the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, which, incidentally, includes a sub-measure of higher education participation). There is considerable overlap between Communities First and POLAR areas, but they are not entirely congruent.

The use of such area-based measures can be justified in three ways. Firstly, they reflect the under-representation of social groups according to where they live. But, secondly, they are also considered to provide a proxy for targeting socio-economically disadvantaged individuals. The third justification for their use is that they provide a convenient vehicle for widening access policy and

practice. For example, because they have been used for some time, and particularly in the case of Communities First areas, they have become fairly embedded in widening access activities, whether that is in terms of how they are 'managed' in the admissions process or because strong relationships between universities and communities have now been established. Area-based approaches are also convenient because they help concentrate resources, make 'visible' the interventions being applied and give the impression of tackling multiple forms of social and economic disadvantage.<sup>55</sup>

On the first of these justifications, our research provides mixed evidence about the impact of where someone lives on whether they participate in higher education or not. There are some areas in Wales, particularly the most advantaged areas, which have relatively high rates of young participation, even after taking into account differences in their prior educational achievement and other individual characteristics. However, when we consider the local authority each area is in and which school the individual attended at age 15 years, there appears to be no association between neighbourhood and participation. In other words, any effect of area on participation appears to be just reflecting the effect of local authorities and schools and the policies that they implement. This certainly questions the first justification for the use of area-based approaches, based on Communities First designation or POLAR scores, to widening access.

Similarly, there is evidence to indicate that the second justification is fairly weak. Whilst it may be correct to say that Communities First and, to some extent, POLAR areas reflect neighbourhoods with the greatest levels of socio-economic disadvantage, this does not mean that everyone living in those areas experience that disadvantage (the 'ecological fallacy'). Previous WISERD research, albeit focused on only one Welsh university, has questioned the reliability of these two measures in identifying individuals

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<sup>55</sup> Power, S., Rees, G. and Taylor, C. (2006) New Labour and educational disadvantage: the limits of area-based initiatives, *London Review of Education*, 3, 2, 101-116.



from low social class backgrounds. For example, this analysis showed that over a third of students from either Communities First or POLAR areas were from middle-class backgrounds, and that only a quarter could confidently be said to be from working-class backgrounds.<sup>56</sup> To some extent, our fieldwork interviews revealed that most widening access practitioners already acknowledge this, by directing their activities at the individuals within the target areas that they believe are in most need. However, this is often a subjective decision and there can be no guarantee that there are not more disadvantaged individuals (based on practitioners' definitions) in other areas not targeted through POLAR or Communities First.

On the third justification of convenience, it may be true that area-based approaches do provide a useful vehicle for policy intervention. However, area-based approaches 'are underpinned by overly simplistic and under-theorized conceptions of inequality and geography, which fail to recognize the complexity of processes by which social disadvantage are generated'.<sup>57</sup> They also tend to focus on family and individual pathologies of disadvantage, rather than on its underlying structural causes.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, in terms of 'convenience' there may actually be other, more useful vehicles for targeting widening access activities, such as through schools and colleges (although this approach would work much better for younger entrants to higher education).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Taylor, C., Rees, G., Sloan, L. and Davies, R. (2013a) Creating an Inclusive Higher Education System? Progression and outcomes of students from low participation neighbourhoods, *Contemporary Wales*, 26, pp.138-161. The proportion of middle-class students may reflect the very selective nature of admissions in the university in question.

<sup>57</sup> Rees, G., Power, S. and Taylor, C. (2007) The governance of educational inequalities: the limits of area-based initiatives, *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 9, 3, 261-274, p.267.

<sup>58</sup> Power, S., Rees, G. and Taylor, C. (2006) New Labour and educational disadvantage: the limits of area-based initiatives, *London Review of Education*, 3, 2, 101-116.

<sup>59</sup> It is worth noting that the intake of a school or college is not always congruent with administrative jurisdictions (e.g., the Wards that are used to define POLAR and CF areas).



## Widening Access to What?

The third question is about what policy-makers, practitioners and universities are widening access to. The higher education sector is very complex and covers a wide range of subjects, courses and levels of qualifications. In Wales, this includes courses from NVQ Level 1 through to NVQ Level 8. The most common form of higher education participation is to enrol on to first degree undergraduate courses, with an exit qualification at NVQ Level 6. However, as we have seen, our research finds that much widening access practice in Wales is concerned with participation on undergraduate courses, which can include qualifications from NVQ Levels 4 to 6. Indeed, we found that a relatively large proportion of Wales-domiciled students enrol on to NVQ Level 4 and 5 courses. Some of these students will eventually go on to complete an NVQ Level 6 qualification (that is, a first degree). However, what this demonstrates is that there can be a significant difference between the course on which a student enrolls and the nature of their highest qualification on leaving higher education.<sup>60</sup>

Many commentators and researchers have been most concerned about participation in first degree courses. It is interesting to note, however, that HEFCW simply refers to access to 'higher education courses' in their main strategic targets for widening access, without specifying to what level of course this refers.<sup>61</sup> Only in the HEFCW strategic target for retention is it more specific: undergraduate courses for full-time students and first degree courses for part-time students. Our research shows that higher education participation can be represented in at least three categories, each with their own set of findings and conclusions:

1. All participation in higher education; this includes all higher education courses, including NVQ Level 1, 2 and 3 qualifications and Welsh for Adult courses (as well

as 'bite-sized' modules, which scarcely qualify for the designation 'courses').

2. Undergraduate participation in higher education; this includes all courses from NVQ Levels 4 to 6

3. First degree participation in higher education; this includes only NVQ Level 6 courses.

Critically, our research finds that, depending on which definition of participation is used, there are important differences in (a) how we understand the merits of various widening access initiatives and (b) which groups of individuals appear to be under-represented. This is best illustrated by comparisons of the rates of participation of individuals in different local authorities in Wales. For example, there are some local authorities where overall young participation in higher education is significantly higher than elsewhere, but in terms of undergraduate participation and especially first degree participation these same local authorities have some of the lowest rates of participation. This shows that widening access may be working in different ways in different parts of Wales. Similarly, some of our fieldwork respondents suggested that there are also significant differences between areas in the levels of participation of mature-age students. These differences also suggest that widening access strategies may be operating in different ways in different areas. However, here, the effects of local labour markets and the support provided by employers for part-time participation in higher education are also key factors.

However, it is not straightforward either to base widening access on the participation of under-represented groups in first degree courses. This is because some learners prefer to take an incremental approach to their higher education experience by first enrolling on an NVQ Level 4 course, before proceeding

<sup>60</sup> It is important to note that many participants in higher education do not achieve formal qualifications, but may benefit in personal, professional and wider social terms from their participation.

<sup>61</sup> HEFCW (2014a) *Widening Access: Delivering for Wales*, Cardiff: Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

on to either NVQ Level 5 or 6 courses. This is further compounded by the use of an age restriction when calculating participation rates. For example, some students at age 19 may enrol on an NVQ Level 4 course, then proceed to an NVQ Level 5 course the following year, and then an NVQ Level 6 course at the age of 21. But if young participation rates are based on the proportion of young people who enrol on to a first degree (NVQ Level 6) before the age of 21, then these students would not be included in the participation rate, despite taking the same time of three years to complete an NVQ Level 6 qualification. The only difference is that they did not enrol straight on to an NVQ Level 6 course.

Another issue highlighted by asking the question about what policy and practice is widening access to, relates to the heterogeneity of the higher education landscape. In particular, is widening access about giving under-represented groups as much choice and opportunities as is possible, or is it about ensuring that under-represented groups have access to higher education locally, or just in Wales? This is particularly challenging if we consider widening access to conventionally 'high status' universities, such as Oxford or Cambridge or the Russell Group universities. Again, our research shows that there are some important differences in terms of which groups are under-represented in higher education depending on whether we focus on such 'high status' participation or participation outside Wales more generally. A similar argument could also be made about access to particular subjects, whether that is simply between academic versus vocational subjects, or access to specific subjects. For example, should widening access policy and practice be concerned with the under-representation of key target groups by subject? The latter is especially pertinent in the light of concerns about achieving equity in opportunities to access professional occupations after graduation and the implications that this is seen to have for social mobility.

These issues are important from the demand-side of widening access, since increasing access to the UK-

wide higher education sector offers a greater range of both subjects and teaching and learning experiences. This is important in terms of the employability and future social mobility of the under-represented groups and, indeed, for the wider development of the Welsh (and UK) economy. Policies and practices of widening access that perhaps inadvertently constrain applicants' choices could be just as damaging as the unequal access to higher education that they set out to address. Indeed, it could be argued that providing more opportunities will result in higher levels of participation generally, since learners are more likely to be able to find suitable courses that have a broader range of entry requirements.

## How Should Widening Access Be Organised?

The last set of implications reflect a profound tension in widening access policy, since what the higher education sector wishes to achieve through its widening access practices is not entirely commensurate with what national policy makers and the public would like widening access policies to achieve. This is the strain between the supply-side of widening access (that is, within the higher education sector) and the demand-side of widening access (that is, within society) and permeates through the widening access policy and practice landscape. In the context of all the devolved administrations in the UK, it could be said that this is a particular tension that Wales faces.

There are two main causes of this tension. The first is that in an increasingly competitive higher education landscape, widening access is really just a particular form of recruitment. For universities this can mean two things: (a) recruitment is ultimately more important than widening access in terms of allocating resources and evaluating impact, and (b) widening access activities are primarily a way of recruiting students to individual universities, albeit of particular groups of under-represented individuals.

The second main cause of this tension is the permeable 'boundary' of the Welsh higher education sector, where approximately a third of Wales-domiciled students study in universities outside Wales, and over a third of students studying in Wales come from outside Wales. On the one hand, this means that widening access activities funded and undertaken in Wales may benefit the recruitment of under-represented groups of students to universities outside Wales (although the numbers involved here are likely to be rather small).

On the other hand, widening access activities designed and provided in Wales may result in constraining the higher education choices of under-represented groups in Wales.<sup>62</sup> For example, our research shows that students from Communities First areas are systematically less likely to study outside Wales than equivalently qualified students outside Communities First areas. In turn, they are then also less likely to study in 'high status' universities. Indeed, the participation of Wales-domiciled students, and particularly under-represented Wales-domiciled groups, in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge has already been highlighted as a major concern by the Welsh Government, as reflected in the appointment of the then MP, Paul Murphy, as 'Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales'.<sup>63</sup> However, the main body responsible for widening access to higher education in Wales, HEFCW, has no influence over Oxbridge or any other universities outside Wales.

The same tension was also highlighted following the introduction of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ) in schools and colleges in Wales, with the aim – *inter alia* – of helping better to prepare students for university entry and study. Whilst universities in Wales could be encouraged to favour the WBQ when offering places to applicants, the same could not be said for universities outside Wales.<sup>64</sup>

Whilst the general principles and overarching aims of widening access may be shared across the Welsh higher education sector, and indeed across the different jurisdictions of the UK, the particular objectives, practices and desired outcomes of widening access differ significantly between universities. There are also

<sup>62</sup> We acknowledge that a range of factors are at work here, only one of which is widening access policy.

<sup>63</sup> See also, Murphy, P. (2013) *Interim Report of the Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales*, Cardiff: Welsh Government; Murphy, P. (2014) *Final Report of the Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales*, Cardiff: Welsh Government.

<sup>64</sup> Taylor, C., Rees, G. and Davies, R. (2013b) *Relationships between the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma and Higher Education*, GSR 06/2013, Cardiff: Welsh Government.

differences between broader societal objectives and the specific objectives of the higher education sector. Furthermore, this tension between the demand-side and supply-side of widening access may be symptomatic of the way the widening access 'system' is currently organised in Wales.

Currently, a principal focal point for widening access in Wales are the nine Welsh universities (including the Open University). Ultimately, they make the final decisions as to whether an individual can study there or not. However, the way admissions and widening access are organised within universities is complex and varies from one institution to another (as we saw earlier). This can be considered along two axes: (a) the extent to which admissions/widening access strategies and activities are centralised within a university or devolved to individual departments and admissions tutors; and (b) the extent to which particular departments are concerned with 'selecting' or 'recruiting' students to their programmes. Furthermore, universities have significant autonomy in both defining and designing their widening access activities through the production and approval of their individual fee plans.

Alongside the universities, there are three regional Reaching Wider Partnerships, involving collaboration between higher education institutions and further education colleges (and other organisations). These Partnership arrangements provide an opportunity for more long-term interventions that are more likely to focus on outreach – raising educational aspirations and preparing learners for entry to higher education. This also includes 'supporting transition', which includes the transition from primary to secondary education.<sup>65</sup> However, they are designed to work with just two target groups, individuals of all ages living in Communities First areas and looked after children and care leavers.

The main objectives of the Reaching Wider Partnerships are quite broad, giving them considerable autonomy in determining how they should meet their objectives, according to regional needs and priorities:

- Contribute strategically to HEFCW Corporate Strategy on widening access;
- Priorities and measures to align with national outcomes through a coherent provision offer across Wales;
- Support equality of opportunity;
- Ensure innovative and excellent practice is accessible across Wales;
- Enable HEFCW and the sector to measure progress and performance in key areas of widening access; and
- Strengthen the Reaching Wider brand and its key components to further promote the Reaching Wider Programme nationally and across the UK.<sup>66</sup>

This reflects an emphasis on developing activities that meet the needs of each region and stresses the need for a multi-sectorial and multi-agency approach to widening access. However, the methods by which these needs are identified (within each Higher Education Regional Partnership) are not transparent. Moreover, each partnership area includes a range of universities and further education colleges, with often very different objectives for student recruitment and widening access. Despite the best efforts of the institutions and organisations involved, it is not always clear how the objectives and subsequent activities of the Reaching Wider Partnerships are intended to relate to the objectives and widening access activities of individual universities and further education colleges. This would appear to lead to a number of issues, not least the possibility of either duplication or 'gaps' in interventions, and resourcing of widening access activities.

<sup>65</sup> HEFCW (2014b) *Reaching Wider Strategies 2014/15 to 2016/17: Guidance. Circular W14/19HE*. Cardiff: Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

<sup>66</sup> HEFCW (2014b) *Reaching Wider Strategies 2014/15 to 2016/17: Guidance. Circular W14/19HE*. Cardiff: Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, p.5.



Given the importance of Communities First areas in the targeting of individuals for widening access, one might expect the Communities First partnerships to be another key actor in these activities. Indeed, one of the objectives of the Communities First programme is to improve education and training for their residents. However, this would appear not to be the case. Most widening access initiatives in Communities First areas are largely driven by the Reaching Wider Partnerships or individual universities, rather than the Communities First partnerships. Hence, there is little articulation between the activities of the Communities First partnerships and national targets and strategies for widening access. It may be that this is a consequence – albeit certainly unintended – of the emphasis within the Communities First programme on bottom-up engagement of local communities in the development of their programmes.<sup>67</sup>

Although further education colleges are key partners in the Reaching Wider Partnerships, the role of secondary schools is much less clear. Our research has shown the ‘effect’ of schools on participation in higher education, and how that itself might contribute to the under-representation of particular groups. But despite this, there are no *formal* mechanisms in place for universities and schools to work collaboratively with regard widening access. Clearly, the universities do engage with schools, but these relationships tend to be *ad hoc* and often based on historic relationships. Although there may be greater emphasis on schools in Communities First areas, it is not always entirely clear (a) the extent to which these school intakes are congruent with Communities First areas, and (b) how the needs of pupils in different schools are systematically identified. Simultaneously, there is little *formal* emphasis on access to higher education in the schools sector, beyond the general aim of raising educational standards. For example, higher education participation or indeed any destination measures are not included in the benchmarking or performance management of secondary schools. Furthermore, as

has been highlighted earlier, initiatives that have been specifically established to address differential attainment between particular groups of children, such as the Pupil Deprivation Grant, place little or no emphasis on either participation in higher education or on raising the attainment of above-average achieving children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

It could be said that clear widening access targets at the national and university level, and a separately funded system of collaboration at the regional level, reflects an already well designed national ‘system’ for widening access. However, this system is clearly missing the role and contribution of secondary schools. It might also be argued that there is still some ambiguity over the roles and responsibilities of the different actors in addressing the under-representation of particular groups in higher education. Finally, there remains a question about whether the current national targets for widening access are the correct or most appropriate ones. However, it is also worth noting that the more extensive and ‘national’ the system of widening access becomes, the greater the tension between the competing demands of the demand-side and supply-side of widening access.

It would seem that the most appropriate way of addressing this underlying tension is to have a national system for widening access to higher education, which is based on a complete and detailed understanding of the issues that it is trying to address, that has clear and encompassing aims and objectives, and that fully delineates the priorities and responsibilities of the different sectors and bodies involved. A key to this is to ensure widening access activities and outcomes are appropriately and reliably evaluated and evidence-informed.

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<sup>67</sup> Adamson, D. and Bromily, R. (2008) *Community Empowerment in Practice: Lessons from Communities First*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.





## How to Evaluate and Monitor Widening Access?

Despite the importance placed on widening access to higher education in Wales, there is relatively little evaluation of the activities associated with this. At the national level, there is clear monitoring of the participation of particular target groups (such as part-time learners or learners from Communities First areas). Similar forms of monitoring are also undertaken at the institutional level, to ensure that universities are contributing to these national targets. However, aside from whether these performance indicators and targets are the most appropriate or not, there is little or no monitoring of other possible, or new, under-represented groups. Nor is there any national, empirically robust evaluation of the widening access strategies, including the Reaching Wider Partnerships.<sup>68</sup>

However, as we have seen, our fieldwork did reveal that universities and Reaching Wider Partnerships undertake their own monitoring and evaluation activities, albeit on a limited basis. However, our research also suggests there is no systematic approach to evaluating widening access activities either within the Partnerships or by individual universities. Instead, there is only the occasional use of administrative data and the piecemeal collection of primary data from participants attending some widening access activities. This would seem to be a broader drawback, since there are very few examples of good practice in the evaluation of widening access strategies or practices in the rest of the UK either.<sup>69</sup> Most research in this area tends to explore the decision-making processes of applicants to higher education or of students already at university.<sup>70</sup> There have been some

examples of institutional responses to the greater need for evaluation through the establishment of dedicated (and centralised) centres or teams for analysing and evaluating the impact of widening access within their own universities (for example, the Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit at the University of Sheffield and the Widening Participation Research Centre at Edge Hill University – although the latter is largely a collection of action research reports on a subject-by-subject basis).

There have also been attempts to develop evaluation guidance for widening access practitioners to help them in undertaking evaluation of their activities. For example, HEFCE produced *Higher Education Outreach to Widen Participation: Toolkits for practitioners, No. 4 Evaluation*. These toolkits tend to provide a sound outline of how to undertake an evaluation, highlighting the need for careful planning and good research design. However, the HEFCE toolkit is limited. Certainly, most studies of widening access take the form of action research that provides only a process evaluation of the activities or interventions being investigated in a particular context.

What are also required are *outcome* evaluations, necessary to judge the relative effectiveness of the investments and strategies employed. In addition to being able to judge the impact and cost effectiveness of different strategies and interventions, there are further benefits of robustly evaluating widening access activities. These include being able to use evidence to develop and design improved widening access initiatives, and to

<sup>68</sup> There have been a number of reviews of the widening access and Reaching Wider strategies, but these were largely limited, desk-based reviews. See, for example, HEA (2009) *A review of Welsh institutional widening access strategies 2006/7 to 2008/0 and Reaching Wider Funded Proposals 2008/10*; and HEA (2012) *Review of the Widening Access and Reaching Wider Strategy in Wales*.

<sup>69</sup> Gorard, S., Smith, E., May, H., Thomas, L., Adnett, N. and Slack, K. (2006) *Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education*. Bristol: HEFCE.

<sup>70</sup> For example, Donnelly, M. (2014) *The Road to Oxbridge: Schools and Elite University Choices*, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 62, 1, 57-72; (2013) *The Paired Peers Project: Key Findings*, London: Leverhulme Trust.

establish more appropriate aims (and possibly targets) for widening access.

However, there would seem to be a number of key challenges to undertaking appropriate and reliable evaluation in this area. The lack of clear guidance or examples of best practice is an obvious constraint. But there are two important methodological challenges that are difficult to overcome when evaluating widening access activities. The first is the lack of control groups or comparator groups. Ideally, to judge the relative efficacy of an intervention it is necessary to be able to compare the outcomes of a group of very similar individuals who did not receive the intervention. Relying on a comparison of pre- and post-outcomes for an intervention group can be highly misleading. The main benefit of collecting a set of outcomes prior to and following an intervention is in order to ensure the group of individuals receiving an intervention is comparable to another group of individuals who did not participate in the intervention or activity. Without this 'control' group the supposed benefits of collecting pre- and post-intervention information can be negligible.

The second major methodological challenge for evaluating widening access activities is that the impact of the intervention may not be immediately obtainable. For example, many widening access activities are designed to foster a change in attitude or perception, often many years before entering higher education. Therefore, to evaluate the impact of these kinds of activities properly, it is necessary to compare the medium- to long-term impact of these interventions. Even interventions that are designed to impart new knowledge amongst a potential group of university participants cannot be reliably evaluated on the basis of whether the participants can recall the new knowledge immediately following the activity. It is more important to know whether participants make more informed decisions using that new knowledge. An associated challenge of evaluating the medium- to long-term impact of an activity or intervention is the effect of other events or factors over the same time period. This is a further reason why comparator groups of individuals should be seen as

a pre-requisite to any evaluation of widening access activities, rather than just relying on pre- and post-intervention approaches.

Clearly, to address these two methodological challenges requires considerable capacity and resources, either because every time a group of individuals is recruited to participate in a widening access activity it may be necessary to recruit an equivalent group who will not participate in the activity, or because it may be necessary to maintain information or contact details of individual participants over a long time period. This is further complicated by the messiness of social research and the complex trajectories individuals take in to higher education. Indeed, it is possible to argue that since widening access activities are targeted at particular under-represented and often minority groups, it is almost impossible to identify 'control' groups of individuals with similar circumstances. For example, for widening access strategies or activities targeting individuals in Communities First areas, it is not entirely obvious who could be considered to be suitable comparators, since anyone outside the intervention would not be, by definition, from the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas. The extent to which any other group of individuals could be considered to be comparable is, therefore, highly questionable.

So, the methodological challenges of evaluating widening access activities are relatively easy to identify. The more difficult issue is how they should be resolved and this is largely a product of experience and informed judgement. Unfortunately, these are not qualities readily available from guidance materials or evaluation toolkits. Neither can such advice compensate for a lack of resources required properly to evaluate the impact of widening access activity.

Rather, we would argue that the impact of these two main methodological challenges could be mitigated by the greater use of large-scale administrative data. For example, our research (reported here) illustrates the use of records of young people from the National Pupil Database (NPD), the Welsh Examinations Database



(WED) and the Lifelong Learning Wales Records (LLWR). In particular, linking these datasets provides a readily available longitudinal dataset necessary to compare individuals who do and do not participate in higher education over time. This could provide the basis for improved evaluation. And a key benefit of using existing administrative data is that there are minimal costs associated with the data collection. However, accessing such data is not straightforward, nor is its analysis. But some of the analysis could be undertaken at the national level, for the benefit of all key organisations and practitioners. It could also benefit greatly in the future from the use of the Unique Learning Number (ULN).<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, university enrolment already benefits from national coordination of most undergraduate admissions (through UCAS). This means it is possible to establish systems that can monitor the impact of widening access activities irrespective of where individuals may apply to or secure a place to study.

Another key benefit is that new primary data, collected through widening access activities, could also be safely and securely 'linked' into the administrative data (for example, through the newly created Administrative Data Research Network (ADRN)). This has the benefit of enhancing the quality of the existing administrative data with information that may be more useful or insightful than would otherwise be available. It means that comparator groups could be readily identified from existing records, at no cost. It also provides a means for collating a national longitudinal dataset of participants in widening access activities. Even if this is not immediately possible, widening access practitioners should routinely obtain the necessary informed consent from their participants in (a) being able to use any

information for evaluation and research purposes and (b) in order to be able to link this new information to existing administrative data in the future. Consent arrangements, such as this, have been through a period of sustained scrutiny in recent years. However, the legal and social procedures for obtaining such consent and the way data are securely and anonymously linked and managed are improving, and best practice procedures now exist.

Clearly the use of existing administrative data will not help to evaluate all widening access activities, particularly those aimed at mature learners. However, in time, there will be detailed individual records of all learners. In the meantime, using existing administrative data where they are available could at least mean additional resources can be allocated to other areas requiring greater levels of primary data for evaluation.

To summarise, the key principles for evaluating widening access activities are:

- Include comparators where possible (that is, equivalent people who do not participate in the widening access activities);
- Take a longitudinal approach (recognising immediate impacts may not be the only impacts worth noting);
- Use existing data where possible (which includes using administrative data and obtaining proper consent for using widening access data/information); and
- Determine the 'best' or 'least worst' compromise when making decisions about the aims and design of the evaluation (few studies can be 'perfectly' designed, instead there is often a trade-off between the aims and the methodology, carefully choosing a preferred compromise is key to good evaluation).<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Unique Learner Numbers (ULN) are provided to all learners in Wales aged 14 and over in schools, colleges and other training providers (from 2012 onwards). The ULN provides the means for maintaining an accurate and detailed Personal Learning Record (PLR), but also provides the means easily and anonymously to link various education administrative datasets (e.g. UCAS ask for the ULN in university applications).

<sup>72</sup> As part of this project, we have prepared *Guidance for Evaluating Widening Access to Higher Education Activities*, which elaborates substantially on these points. We understand that this will be made available by HEFCW in due course.

*Other uses of administrative data for widening access*

Other benefits of using existing administrative data are that they could be used to target better under-represented groups and as a tool to improve the participation of under-represented groups. This kind of data is often used by universities in their admissions cycle, but used less frequently by those involved in widening access activities. For example, there are two common uses of existing data in the admissions cycle:

- Application (from UCAS) data to flag (potential) widening access applicants
  - E.g., postcode (Communities First area or POLAR), looked after children, social class, first generation entrant.
- School information (aggregated results of pupil achievement) to flag (potential) widening access applicants
  - E.g., identify schools with below average levels of pupil achievement at age 15.

How universities and admissions tutors use this information is often much less clear, however. For example, some universities operate a system of guaranteeing an offer to a 'flagged' applicant. Others may make a contextualised or discounted offer for 'flagged' applicants. The problem with these two approaches is that they are largely based on information about a group of individuals who may have very little in common with the individual applicant who is being 'flagged'. We have already raised several concerns about the reliability of area-based indicators and socio-economic information gathered in the UCAS application. Similar concerns could also be levelled at the school-level performance data being used by some universities. First, the performance data can often be dated and do not take into account year-on-year fluctuations in levels of achievement. Second, it is still a matter of 'trust' that the applicant accurately identifies the school where they undertook their GCSEs. Finally, just because a school has below average levels of achievement across its cohort does not mean that either the school or the individual applicant who attended that school experienced any greater level

of disadvantage than any other school or individual – after all, nearly half of all schools will have levels of achievement below the national average, irrespective of there being any inequalities in opportunity. Instead, it would be more appropriate to use a measure of the aggregated educational value-added a school contributes to learners' levels of achievement as a measure of educational disadvantage/advantage. It would be even more appropriate if this were then compared to the educational progress that an individual learner actually makes, providing a measure of educational achievement not available from raw examination results.

The use of existing educational records has, then, the potential to create an individual measure of 'merit', which is based on both educational achievement and potential. Such a measure has a number of additional benefits (following Schwartz' principles underpinning fair admissions):

- Transparent (could be nationally derived);
- Reliable and valid assessment method;
- Minimise barriers by incorporating different key components;
- Efficient approach to making offers and awarding places.

There are a various ways a measure of 'merit' could be defined and developed. Three examples are outlined in Figure 1: a measure based on progress; a measure based on individual and school context; and a measure of under-representation.

Figure 5: Examples of how ‘merit’ for widening access to higher education could be measured

Value-added	Contextualised achievement	Under-represented
Identify individuals who have made significant progress in educational achievement over time	Identify relatively high achievers given their individual and school-level circumstances	Identify individuals who share characteristics of known under-represented groups

Any combination of these measures could be used, alongside other demographic information about an individual, to create a widening access profile. Each measure could be used independently of one another or combined to produce an overall score. These profiles or scores could then be easily used (a) to target widening access activities, (b) to identify suitable widening access applicants at the application stage, and (c) as the basis for making contextualised or discounted offers. Furthermore, they could then be used as the basis for further monitoring of their progress whilst at university and after graduation.

## Developing a New National Framework for Widening Access

This discussion has raised a number of key questions about widening access to higher education. A number of issues have been raised, that remain largely unresolved, since they demonstrate underlying tensions in widening access strategy and the way widening access to higher education is organised. For example, there is a tension between identifying under-represented groups and recruiting high quality learners. Furthermore, individuals may be under-represented for different reasons, and hence the strategies and approaches required to address this may have to be more nuanced than they currently are.

We have also seen major contrasts in the participation rates of groups of individuals depending on the form of higher education participation we are concerned about. This may prompt a radical overhaul of the way participation in higher education is measured, placing a greater emphasis on exit qualifications as much as course entry. The discussion has also highlighted the possible mismatch in the prioritisation and interests of widening access depending on whether we are concerned with the supply-side or demand-side of participation. What may be in the interests of individuals and the public may not be congruent with the interests of the universities.

A final tension worth noting is that many activities currently considered to be about widening access, such as career and subject choices at an early age, may not necessarily lead to increases in the participation of students in higher education. Indeed, alongside ensuring there is equality of opportunity is a desire that individuals are able to make more informed decisions about whatever route they take after leaving compulsory education. This needs to be reflected in the scope of what constitutes widening access activities, how these activities are organised and how their impact is measured and evaluated.

Not all of these issues can be easily and immediately addressed. However, some of them can be alleviated, as has been outlined, through the better use of existing administrative data. This would help to ensure:

- Superior targeting of potential widening access participants that is transparent, based on achievement and potential, reliable and more efficient;
- Further nuanced interventions and admissions arrangements that can be tailored to particular groups of widening access participants;
- More robust evaluation of widening access strategies and interventions that allows for comparisons with similar non-widening access participants; and
- Better monitoring of widening access students through their higher education to ensure widening access sees participation and progress as a single phenomenon.

These issues could also be addressed through the development of a new national and coordinated framework for widening access in Wales (see Figure 6). This would bring together some of our understanding of these issues and help distinguish between the roles and responsibilities of the various key actors who can contribute in reducing the presence of under-represented groups in higher education.

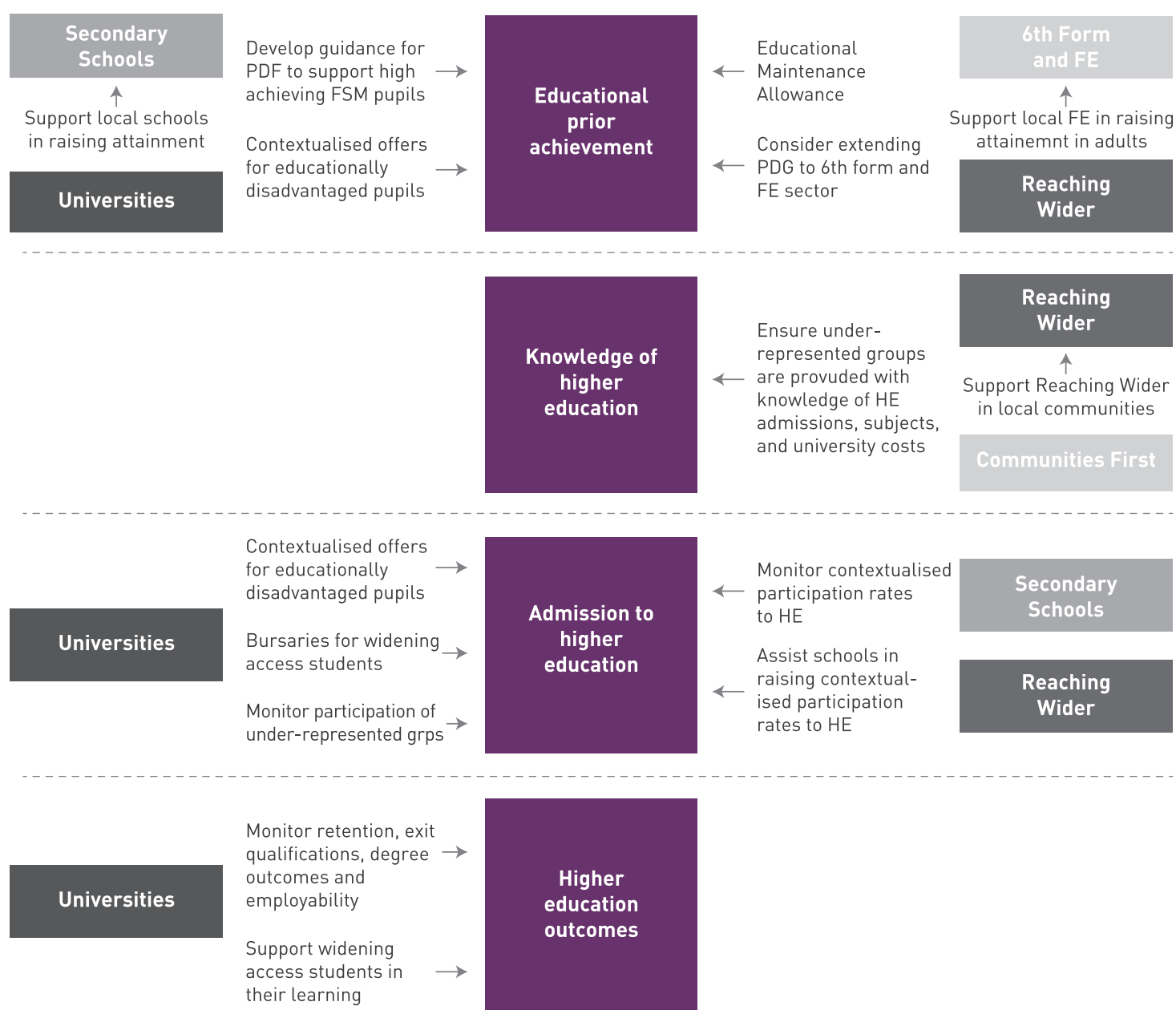
This is in stark contrast to the current model of increasing autonomy for universities to tackle the under-representation of particular groups through the agreement of their fee plans. However, the danger with this more autonomous approach is that widening access policy and practice could become even more ad hoc and piecemeal, the same criticisms often levelled at current bureaucratic and centralised systems of



control.<sup>73</sup> What does seem clear, however, is that widening access policy and practice needs to be more evidence-based. This would allow universities, schools and colleges to develop autonomous responses, whilst ensuring they contribute to the national and

coordinated aims and objectives for widening access. We would argue that this is best achieved through the development of a new national framework for widening access and through the routine use of administrative data to support this new national strategy.

**Figure 6: Proposed national framework for widening access to higher education in Wales**



<sup>73</sup> Greenbank, P. (2006) The evolution of Government policy on widening participation, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 60, 2, 141-166.

# Appendix 1

## Objectives Specified for the Research by HEFCW

To contribute to improving the evidence base to support widening access and its impact assessment in Wales, including evaluating all-age widening access policies and practices to ensure effective progress towards meeting our Corporate Strategy widening access aims and measures.

The research and outputs funded by this grant will identify, evaluate and disseminate the most effective indicators (quantitative and qualitative) of widening access policy and practice success, particularly, but not exclusively focusing on pre-entry to higher education, widening access part-time impacts and taking account of widening access Welsh medium study modes.

In evidencing some of the key widening access impact measures in Wales, the project deliverables will be informed by relevant UK and international qualitative and quantitative widening access-related research findings;

In evidencing widening access to higher education impact measures in Wales the project will identify and map widening access in Wales against key Welsh Government strategies and policies to establish where and how higher education widening access policies and practice can maximise its contribution to deliver:

- For our Future widening access expectations;
- The Programme for Government, noting the EMA HE indicator);
- HEFCW's widening access Corporate Strategy objectives across the grant funding period;
- HEFCW's Strategic Approach and Plan for Widening Access to Higher Education 2011/12 to 2013/14 priorities; and
- HEFCW's Child Poverty Strategy aims.

Specifically, the grant is provided to:

- i. Establish a 2010/11 baseline of quantitative and qualitative data available to HEFCW and/or the HE sector to measure impact and demonstrate success in all age widening access to higher education, particularly, but not exclusively, at pre-entry to HE-level, through and to full- and part-time study pathways and taking account of Welsh medium study modes;
- ii. Develop a toolkit to enable HEFCW and the sector to define and evidence widening access impact and effectiveness, value for money, and alignment with Welsh Government and HEFCW strategic priorities, particularly focusing on all-age widening access at pre-entry HE levels , full- and part-time pathways and taking account of Welsh medium study modes;(by March 2014);
- iii. Meet all HEIs, including Reaching Wider Partnerships, in Wales to raise awareness and understanding of this project's purpose and to seek views on how the project outcomes could support them;
- iv. Coordinate and deliver annual seminars/workshops, specifically in 2012/13 and 2013/14, plus an end of project dissemination event to: inform HEFCW, the sector and other interested parties of the project's findings, conclusions and recommendations; seek advice from HEFCW and the sector on issues to consider and implications for policy and practice developments and; define and disseminate effective practice (by April 2014);
- v. Publish electronic annual reports/briefings and a final end of project report to HEFCW and the sector on the project's progress, findings and emerging and final outcomes and recommendations (progress reports in July 2013 and January 2014 and final end of project report in July 2014)) plus a project inception meeting prior to the project start;
- vi. Provide six-monthly reports to inform monitoring meetings. Coordinate and provide the secretariat for six-monthly steering group meetings with HEFCW and external stakeholders including HEW, NUS Wales and other partners (July 2013, January 2014 and July 2014) and a project inception before the project begins.

# Appendix 2

## Working Papers from the research project

Wright C. 2013. Modelling Access to Higher Education: an evaluation of previous approaches. Impact and Effectiveness of Widening Access to HE in Wales Working Paper Series 1, WAQNCW2013-1 (Available here)

Evans C, 2014. Targeting 'Communities First' areas in Wales to widening access to higher education: how appropriate are the methods? Impact and Effectiveness of Widening Access to HE in Wales Working Paper Series 1 WAQLCE2014-11 (Available here)

Evans C, 2014. To what extent are institutional widening access strategies delivered on a departmental level? Impact and Effectiveness of Widening Access to HE in Wales Working Paper Series 1 WAQLCE2014-9 (Available here)

Evans C, 2014. How is the Welsh Government's widening access policy delivered on a regional level? Impact and Effectiveness of Widening Access to HE in Wales Working Paper Series 1 WAQLCE2014-8 (Available here)

Evans C, 2014. What is 'widening access' to higher education? A review of approaches adopted by HEIs and colleges in Wales to 'widening access' to HE. Impact and Effectiveness of Widening Access to HE in Wales Working Paper Series 1 WAQLCE2014-5 (Available here)

Evans C, 2014. A review of approaches adopted by HEIs in Wales to evaluating widening access. Impact and Effectiveness of Widening Access to HE in Wales Working Paper Series 1 WAQLCE2014-6 (Available here)

Davies R. and Wright C, 2014. Overview of the Widening Access Database Working Paper Series 1, WAQNCW2014-2 (Available here)

Rees G, and Taylor C, 2014. Evidence to the Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance Arrangements in Wales (Available here)

Wright, C, 2014. Widening Access to higher education in Wales: Analysis using linked administrative data. Impact and Effectiveness of Widening Access to HE in Wales Working Paper Series 1 WAQNCW2014-3 (Available here)

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