

# Impact and Effectiveness of Widening Access to HE in Wales

## Working Paper Series<sup>1</sup> – WAQLCE2014-5

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*What is 'widening access' to higher education? A review of approaches adopted by HEIs and colleges in Wales to 'widening access' to HE. Ceryn Evans*



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## Foreword

The Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD) is currently evaluating the impact and effectiveness of Widening Access to higher education (HE) in Wales. This project is funded through the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Secondary Data Analysis Initiative (ES/K004247/1); and by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). It will be completed by December 2014.

Access to higher education has become an extremely controversial area of policy, as successive UK administrations have sought to balance increasing student fees with ensuring that HE is open to individuals from as wide a range of social backgrounds as possible. Moreover, 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 abolition of the fees cap. However, the evidence-base for evaluating different approaches to widening access is relatively weak. Accordingly, WISERD, the HEFCW and the Welsh Government (WG) are collaborating on this innovative research study.

The research analyses 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 HE. It also explores what are the key factors here in determining whether individuals progress through the education system to HE 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 HE, such as fees levels, entry processes and so forth? Answers to these questions are known for England, but not for other parts of the UK.

The analysis is based on the innovative use of three linked sources of information, the data for each of which are collected initially for administrative purposes. These are: the National Pupil Database (NPD) for Wales; the Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR); and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data. By linking these together, it is possible to trace individual trajectories through the education system to entry to HE. It is also possible to compare systematically the trajectories of those who do participate in HE with those who do not. Moreover, using sophisticated statistical techniques, it is possible to determine which are

the most influential factors in shaping patterns of HE participation. Results here will be compared with those that have been produced by similar analyses in England.

A second part of the proposed study (funded by additional resources made available by the HEFCW) investigates the development of distinctive approaches to widening access to HE by successive Welsh administrations since devolution in 1999. Of key significance here is to establish the rationales that underpin the approaches adopted in Wales; and to compare these with those that have informed policy approaches in the other countries of the UK and England, in particular. In addition, the study examines the ways in which national policies have been implemented by the Welsh universities, paying special attention to the assumptions about the determinants of HE participation that are in play here. This part of the study is based on fieldwork, comprising the analysis of official and semi-official documents and interviews with politicians and senior officials responsible for widening access policies; and with the professionals inside the universities responsible for implementing these policies.

The results of the research will be fed directly into the deliberations of the WG and the HEFCW on the future development of policies on widening access to HE, which will be especially intensive over the next few years. Moreover, they will also provide the basis for working with the professionals in the universities with responsibility for implementing widening access policies, to integrate the use of analyses of administrative data more firmly into their day-to-day practices.

## Introduction

Despite major expansion of higher education (HE) in the UK over recent decades individuals from the least socially advantaged backgrounds continue to enter HE at lower rates than their more advantaged counterparts (Christie et al, 2005; Croll and Attwood 2013), and when they do, they enter less prestigious HEIs (Ball et al 2002, Reay et al 2001; Boliver 2013; Jerrim 2013). These patterns of inequalities exist in Wales, mirroring the pattern in the wider UK (Rees and Taylor, 2006).

In recognition that these inequalities have implications for social justice and the health of the nation's economy, the Welsh Government has been committed to an agenda for 'widening access' to HE over recent years. In 2009, the Welsh Government published its HE strategy, entitled 'For Our Future' in which it highlighted its commitment to widening access to higher education opportunities to those traditionally under-represented therein. The 'widening access' agenda has since been underpinned by an emphasis on increasing HE participation amongst individuals from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds and living in particular geographical areas in Wales, namely Communities First<sup>2</sup> (CF) areas and those traditionally under-represented in HE.

Commitment to addressing the impact of social and economic disadvantage on participation in HE is perhaps most evident in the Welsh Government's financial support policies for HE students. These financial support arrangements prioritise the economic rather than social dimensions of disadvantage. Since the introduction of up-front tuition fees in the UK in 2001 the Welsh Government has been committed to providing financial support for Welsh domiciled students from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter HE in an attempt to lessen the possible detrimental effects of rising rates of HE tuition on their rates of participation. Indeed, when the Welsh Government announced that universities in Wales could charge up to £3,000 a year for full time students in 2007/8, it also announced that it would provide a non means-tested grant of up to £1800 for Welsh domiciled students who study in Wales. This commitment to supporting economically disadvantaged students has endured for over a decade. Following the recent tuition fee hike in Wales in 2012/13 which allowed HEIs in

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<sup>2</sup> 'Communities First' is a community focused Welsh Government programme, introduced in 2001, aimed at supporting its anti-poverty strategy through supporting social and economic regeneration in areas of disadvantage.

Wales to charge up to £9,000 a year in tuition, the Welsh Government announced that it would cover the difference (between the basic rate of tuition and up to £9,000) if they studied anywhere in the UK. Whilst this current financial support arrangement represents a shift away from a focus on social disadvantage (current financial support is not means tested), it nonetheless reflects the Welsh Government's commitment to protecting participation amongst socially disadvantaged groups.

These financial support arrangements illustrate the prioritisation of the 'economic' dimension of socio-economic disadvantage within its agenda for widening access. However, this agenda also encompasses attention to the socio-cultural dimension of disadvantage, illustrated in the way in which pressure has been placed on HEIs to invest a proportion of their fee incomes on widening access to HE. Since September 2012, all higher education providers in Wales have to produce a Fee Plan if they want to charge above the basic rate of tuition (which currently stands at approximately of £4,000, stating how they will direct resources on activities, interventions and programmes which support widening access and the promotion of HE more generally. In addition, HEIs must also submit 'widening access strategies'<sup>3</sup> which state how they will implement the Welsh Government's widening access agenda through financial support or intervention, programmes and activities which promote access to HE amongst under-represented groups.

Evidently, both economic and socio-cultural dimensions of 'disadvantage' are prioritised by the Welsh Government's widening access agenda, yet they are implemented through different mechanisms. While the impact of economic disadvantage on HE participation is targeted through national financial support policies, both economic and socio-cultural dimensions of disadvantage are targeted through institutional fee plans and widening access strategies, and their delivery on the ground. The paper takes a critical look at how the Welsh Government's 'widening access' agenda is being implemented by individual higher education institutions in Wales, considering to what extent, and how, HEIs are implementing Welsh Government's widening access agenda through direct intervention. This will enable us to speculate its consequences (cf. Bridger et al., 2012) for rates of participation amongst less advantaged social groups. While this paper considers institutional approaches to widening access it does not consider practices which address widening access agendas at the admissions stage, for

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<sup>3</sup> Invariably referred to as the 'widening access and retention strategy' or the 'teaching and learning and widening access' strategy by institutions.

example, through the application of contextualised information or data to inform admissions. These issues will be addressed in forthcoming papers. Ultimately, this paper aims to address broader questions about to *whom* and to *what* institutions are widening access, and the implications of these approaches for equality of opportunity?

In exploring the mechanisms through which widening access policies are implemented on an institutional level, the paper draws upon Jones and Thomas's (2005) discussion of widening participation policy in England. Jones and Thomas's (2005) identified two different strands of policy in the Westminster Government's approach to widening participation; the 'academic strand' and the 'utilitarian stand'. The former strand seeks to attract 'gifted and talented' young people into higher education through methods aimed at raising aspirations and providing information, advice and guidance. The later strand recognises structural barriers to participation and posits a need for curriculum reform in order to support participation amongst under-represented groups. In our analysis of HEIs within Wales, these approaches, as well as additional ones, are clearly prevalent within Wales. These approaches reflect particular understandings of the nature of inequalities in participation in HE. The paper raises questions about the extent to which the dominant approaches, i.e. the 'academic' and the 'utilitarian' approaches are likely to be effective in producing sustainable changes to inequalities in access to HE in general, and high status forms of HE in particular.

## Methods

The data on which the following discussion is based is derived from a range of sources. Primarily, it comes from the semi-structured interviews carried out with 'widening access' practitioners (namely, widening access managers or senior widening access officers) located within HEIs. It also comes from content analysis of institutional Fee Plans relating to the years 2012/13 and 2013/14 and the latest 3 year 'widening access strategy' produced by HEIs. Analysis of these data sources explored the approaches adopted by HEIs to implementing widening access strategies with the aim of producing an accurate representation of the widening access 'work' being carried out by each of the eight higher education institutions in Wales, including the Open University in Wales.

Given that FE colleges also deliver HE opportunities, it was considered important to include a small amount of interview data with key staff members located in FE colleges in the analysis,

as a way of exploring the role of FEIs within the widening access agenda. These modest and exploratory interviews revealed that FE colleges play a crucial role within the widening access agenda, but that is reminiscent of Jones and Thomas' 'utilitarian' approach to widening access where the curriculum is a central pillar for delivering widening access strategies.

*Research question:*

*To what extent, and how, are the Welsh Government's widening access agendas implemented by HEIs in Wales?*

*Empirical questions:*

- 1) What methods are HEIs in Wales adopting to implement widening access?
- 2) Are these methods the same across the entire HE sector in Wales?
- 3) What form of HE do institutional widening access agendas aiming towards?

## **Institutional and approaches to implementing 'widening access.'**

### *Widening access through pre-entry activity.*

One of the most pertinent methods of widening access was through activities, interventions and programmes delivered at the 'pre-entry' stage designed to promote participation amongst individuals from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. These sorts of pre-entry activities aim to encourage participation in a conventional form of HE, namely, to full-time undergraduate degree schemes. This approach can be sub-divided into different methods; activities and approaches aimed at raising aspirations, or awareness of HE on the one hand, reminiscent of Jones and Thomas' (2005) 'academic strand,' and activities aimed at raising levels of attainment on the other. HEIs were not homogenous in the extent to which they delivered either sets of activities. These varying approaches reflect different understandings about the nature of inequalities in access to HE, and moreover, their implementation aims to admit particular types of HE student into an institution, as will be discussed below.

### *Widening access through raising aspirations*

This method of pre-entry widening access activity, which is aimed at raising aspirations and awareness of HE, was an approach strongly emphasised by almost all of the widening access managers interviewed, and was evident in their widening access strategies and institutional

Fee Plans<sup>4</sup>. Widening access managers placed heavy emphasis on raising aspirations and awareness of HE among individuals, particularly amongst young people from backgrounds traditionally under-represented in HE. The emphasis on raising aspirations of young people, particularly academically ‘able’ or ‘gifted and talented’ young people reflects a particular understanding about the nature of inequalities in access to HE; it assumes that inequalities in access arise from lack of aspiration, cultural misunderstanding or preconceptions about HE and insufficient advice or information about HE which serve to hinder people’s access.

Whilst such an understanding appears to rest on somewhat derogatory representations of particular social groups which posit that individuals and their families lack appropriate levels of educational aspiration, widening access managers tended to challenge pejorative representations of working-class groups which are steeped in ‘deficit’ notions of aspiration. However, they recognised that people’s capacity to construct an expectation for HE is often informed by their social circumstances, including a lack of family experience of HE and cultural and material resources and saw their role as delivering activities aimed at addressing these shortfalls and supporting young people to access HE:

*I do think some people get drawn in to what's normal in their community as well. And so you've got people who, 'It's not normal to go to university because nobody in my community does or my mum and dad didn't so I'm just going to follow the family tradition'. (Senior widening access practitioner, HEI)*

*So we work in partnership with schools to try and raise aspirations for you know the more senior kids the kind of post sixteen type students and then we have a very large portfolio of community outreach programmes and we're basically learning outreach programmes and then we've a very small research unit attached to the centre. So it's cradle to grave as I see it and that's all outreach off campus delivery (Widening access practitioner, HEI)*

The emphasis on ‘raising aspiration’ implies that aspiration is a significant precursor to HE participation. Boudon’s (1974) notion of the ‘secondary’ effects of social class is implicit within these understandings. According to Boudon (1974), the primary effects are the effects of social class on academic ability while the secondary effects are those which remain once

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<sup>4</sup> This is with the exception of the Open University (OU) in Wales which places much less emphasis on ‘raising aspirations’. This reflects the OU’s core mission of widening access through flexible and distance learning modes and its overwhelming emphasis on adult focused provision.



attainment is controlled. The latter effects young people and their parents' choices at key points of transition. It is these 'secondary effects' of social class that aspiration raising programmers aim to address:

*...my remit covers um, both uh, enabling people from a background who wouldn't normally consider coming into higher education to aspire to higher education (Strategic project manager for widening access, HEI)*

*I'm in charge of making sure that things that we do are targeted towards getting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or backgrounds of non-tradition going to HE in to the university. (Senior widening access officer, HEI)*

*I mean we're funded by the HEFCW so it's about raising aspiration, even in primary age children, that higher education should be for them. (Head of widening access, HEI)*

Many of the programmes and activities aimed at raising aspirations delivered by HEIs were not, however, exclusively targeted at high attaining or 'gifted and talented' young people, as is the case with some widening participation programmes (for example those delivered by the Sutton Trust<sup>5</sup>). Commonly, programmes such as mentoring work with school pupils, 'residential' events where school and college pupils come on to a university campus over the summer to get a 'taste' of university life and information advice and guidance sessions aimed at altering young people's perceptions or understandings of HE and raising their awareness and aspirations were delivered. These were typically aimed at secondary school pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those from families or communities with no tradition of participation in HE. Whilst much of this work was delivered at secondary school level, some institutions also worked with primary schools. These aimed to foster enthusiasm for education amongst children more generally (rather than HE specifically), with the aim of 'sewing seeds' for aspirations for higher education in the future. The emphasis on raising aspirations is reminiscent of Jones and Thomas's (2005) 'academic strand' which they identify in the widening access policy discourse. Here, non-participation is attributed to lack of expectations and deficit aspirations of young people, parents or whole communities, thus

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<sup>5</sup> The Sutton Trust funds programmes which aim to support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter HE. They overwhelmingly target their programmes on academic high flyers.

fostering derogatory representations of particular, largely working-class groups. The emphasis therefore is on raising levels of aspiration amongst young people with ‘potential’ to succeed in university, namely bright, able, or talented young people. These interventions merely aim to encourage more appropriately qualified young people to enter HE and do not require institutional reform. Thus, while widening access aimed at raising aspirations were not just aimed at the ‘high flyers’, as identified in Jones and Thomas’s (2005) ‘academic model, this approach to widening access is underpinned by an assumption that aspiration is a necessary precursor for raising levels of attainment and consequent progression to HE.

#### *Widening access through access courses and qualification top-ups*

In contrast to programmes and interventions aimed at raising aspiration were a sub-set of programmes aimed at raising educational attainment levels. This method of widening access can be further sub-divided into methods which are designed to boost attainment levels in young people (for example, through GCSE or A-level revision sessions) and those aimed at providing opportunities to gain non-conventional qualifications that support HE entry. With attention to the latter, all universities delivered provision of this kind (even if it was a somewhat marginal form of provision in some HEIs), but some institutions delivered this kind of support more extensively than others. This type of attainment raising activity typically attracts mature learners, including those who may have been out of education for some time or who have non-conventional qualifications and are not able to secure entry through traditional means (such as A-level or equivalent qualifications). This approach to widening access includes the delivery of ‘Access Courses’, the Certificate of Higher education, or courses designed to support English language proficiency designed to support individuals in becoming HE study ready. For some HEIs this sort of method of widening access was delivered through ‘Lifelong Learning’ or ‘widening participation’ centres which typically attracted mature learners.

*...So programmes like our ‘Pathways’ programme is non-accredited, so it instils confidence, study skills, IT skills it prepares them for the step up into accredited levels of study but the ‘Pathways’ programme, the, er, prep for BA Humanities programme and our Foundation certificate are all designed to afford progression towards either accredited, er, programmes or more*

*particularly towards the part-time Degree (**Widening access practitioner, HEI**).*

For other HEIs it was a mainstream part of their provision:

*..A lot of our work over the last few years has very much been using the [University's] Openings programme...which is a batch of courses and which has been designed with widening access schemes in mind. And they are a batch of short courses, twenty week courses and erm we very much promote those as an introduction into higher education... And it offers an introduction to the subject area. So we do quite a lot of erm pre-work to kind of lead into the potential of people signing up to those shorter courses as an introduction into HE. And then the potential then of progressing on to further credits. (**Widening access practitioner, HEI**).*

These methods, like those aimed at raising aspirations, target non-traditional HE students. However, rather than target young first-time HE applicants from non-traditional backgrounds, they tend to aim at mature learners entering HE in later life. Like approaches which aim to raise aspirations this approach also aims to widen access to a conventional HE experience, namely, full-time undergraduate courses with the HEI.

#### *Widening access through raising attainment*

Besides methods aimed at improving or topping-up non-traditional qualifications in order to support entry to HE were programmes aimed at raising levels of attainment in traditional qualifications such as GCSE and A-levels. Almost all institutions placed a large emphasis on pre-entry activity aimed at raising aspirations amongst young people or adults. There were, however, striking differences in the extent to which HEIs directed their resources to raising the attainment levels of traditional qualifications such as GCSE and A-levels. Higher ranking HEIs were more likely than newer universities to deliver activities aimed at this, perhaps reflecting the institutional ethos and admissions culture of such universities. Where a culture of selecting applicants with high entry grades exists, widening access resources were more likely to be directed towards supporting GCSE or A-level attainment than it was in lower ranking HEIs.

Attainment raising activities were delivered through revision sessions in curriculum subjects like English, maths or science, or sessions which aimed at study skills development in curriculum subjects. These methods of raising aspirations aim to support progression on to a conventional form of HE (traditional full-time UG programmes). Their application reflects a particular understanding of the nature of inequalities in access to HE, and one that has been widely supported by academic research. This research has shown that school level attainment, associated with social class, is the strongest predictor of application success (Wright, 2014) and participation in HE (Gorard 2005; Gorard and Smith 2007; Croll and Attwood, 2010; Chowdry et al 2012). Low levels of participation amongst particular social groups arise, in a large part, from inequalities in educational attainment associated with social class. Directing resources towards raising levels of attainment embodies this understanding of the nature of inequalities in access to HE and aims to increase propensity to participate in HE. This is reminiscent of Boudon's notion of the 'primary effects' of social class which assumes that social class background has important influence on educational attainment. As such, directing resources at raising levels of attainment amongst young people from disadvantage backgrounds reflects an assumption that alleviating attainment inequalities, (as well as boosting aspirations) will reduce inequalities in participation.

*Some [programmes] are very definitely about attainment, GCSEs, trying to get above that C boundary. Summer University is kind of a mix really because it is about giving them confidence that the university can be for them, for those 80 people that perhaps haven't thought about it or think they can cope academically or actually physically and socially as well, from a disabilities point of view...  
(widening participation manager, HEI)*

Indeed, many programmes had a dual aim of improving levels of attainment whilst also providing young people with experience of university thus raising their awareness and understanding of HE:

*For the year ten and elevens we do put on revision and homework club sessions, our colleges quite often run those, so they erm, I'm just thinking at (X HEI) they've just done a residential called I Revise, which has brought young people in from year eleven to spend a couple of days on campus, focusing on core subjects. So they might pick Welsh and English or maths and science, those four, erm to*

*help them, maybe they're C, D borderlines but without getting the grade Cs they then can't progress to college. (Widening access practitioner, HEI)*

As suggested above, higher ranking and older universities more likely to apply methods aimed at raising attainment than new post-92 universities. In applying this approach to widening access the boundaries between widening access and institutional recruitment often became blurred; widening access programmes also had an 'institutional recruitment' function. Thus, while 'attainment raising' activity might have a broad widening access function it might also meet the 'excellence' agendas of high ranking universities by potentially increasing participation of high calibre students into the institution. (Of course, widening access managers were aware that raising attainment activities delivered by a HEI might lead to participation in other HEIs). This emphasis on institutional recruitment may in part reflect the specific job requirements of the individuals I interviewed; their individual job roles varied in terms of the extent to which they had responsibilities for 'recruitment' or general widening access and promotion of HE. This senior widening access officer had 'recruitment' responsibilities as well as widening access to higher education more generally, which explains her emphasis on institutional recruitment throughout the interview.

*Erm, but it's not just bums on seats recruitment, it's about raising aspiration as well so the goal is to try and link it all together. So we're linked in with the undergraduate recruitment department so that we can see that Widening Access, aspiration raising ties in very nicely with recruitment in to bums on seats admissions (Senior widening access officer, HEI)*

Yet, even when staff members did not have explicit 'recruitment' roles in their job titles, some of them clearly delivered activities which were geared towards institutional recruitment, and it was more common for practitioners within higher status universities to be engaged in this sort of work:

*The bulk of the promotion of HE [programmes] are for year 12 and 13. Once you've got into year 12 and 13 you really are into recruitment. (Strategic project manager for widening access, HEI)*

In contrast, other practitioners were adamant that their activities were about 'widening access' to HE more generally:

*Erm my job title is now recruitment officer, I still feel that I'm recruiting to education generally because, well because I can't in faith recruit someone to a course here if I know it's not right for them because I couldn't live with myself if I did that, I've got principles that's why I went into Widening Access in the first place, as a principle thing to do and so I feel that because we've got such a broad portfolio I kind of talk about courses really in quite a whole diverse region, you know Cardiff to Carmarthen, Swansea and all our feeder colleges but I'm just as likely to say to somebody you need to go to community learning and start off with a bit of that, or have you thought about doing this course and that course, and like I just said to you, you know I've just spoken to someone who I've referred to Leicester because I can do that (**Senior recruitment officer, HEI**).*

It must be noted that despite the job title of this interviewee, her responsibilities (as she described them) were much more closely aligned with widening participation rather than institutional recruitment. She was the key member of staff at this university with responsibility for delivering widening access outreach work, hence why I interviewed her. Despite the variations in the extent to which practitioners within institutions are carrying out widening access work more generally, or delivering activities aimed at institutional recruitment, this sort of widening access has a common function. It is aimed at widening access to a particular *form* of HE, namely, to a conventional full-time HE experience.

### *Widening access through curriculum design and delivery*

So far I have discussed approaches to 'widening access' which are aimed at changing people's attitudes towards HE, raising their aspirations and attainment levels in order to support progression on to a conventional form of HE, i.e. namely, full time undergraduate courses) . In contrast to these approaches, an alternative approach to 'widening access' was identified. These methods are defined by the way in which the design or delivery of their curriculum has a 'widening access' function. These approaches support participation both in a conventional as well as non-conventional form of HE.

### *Widening access through accessible delivery of HE*

In its most recent strategy for higher education the Welsh Government placed an emphasis on flexible and accessible HE delivery in meeting its widening access agenda. Thus, the extent to which HEIs deliver programmes in an accessible format, including

part-time study options, the option to accumulate credits over a lengthy duration of time or to follow distance learning pathways is important in achieving this. Whilst all HEIs delivered HE in a ‘flexible’ or ‘accessible’ format to some extent, there was considerable variation across HEIs in the extent to which it was prominent within the institution. This approach to curriculum delivery was less commonly identified in the mainstream provision of higher ranking HEIs and tended to be more commonly used by post-92 HEIs and by FE colleges delivering HE. Although higher ranking universities (or, high tariff HEIs<sup>6</sup>) did use this method of widening access, this kind of HE curriculum was not widespread across the institution and tended to be offered through ‘lifelong learning’ centres or adult continuing education centres which are more likely to deliver ‘Access’ courses or bite-size courses. Where higher ranking HEIs did offer HE programmes in a flexible and accessible format within their mainstream provision it tended to be through delivering conventional degrees over a longer period of time to fit a ‘part-time’ format.

*It’s down in the remit of the new widening access centre to look at part-time routes through the current full-time degrees (**Widening access practitioner, HEI**)*

*I think faculties dabble at it [part-time degrees], they’re hopeless at it because all they want to do is that erm watered down mainstream stuff... (**Widening access practitioner, HEIs**)*

For some HEIs, in particular high ranking HEIs, there were evidently internal tensions between the interests of widening access managers and those of the university and its objectives around teaching and learning and meeting ‘excellence’ agendas. This approach to delivering higher education in an accessible format could be said to support access to a conventional, but accessible form of HE (ie under-graduate degree schemes).

It is cautionary to say that part-time study was not the only means of flexible delivery of HE. Moreover, for some HEIs in Wales flexible delivery of the curriculum did not specifically aim to address a widening access agenda, rather, widening access was by-product rather than primary intention. That said, for one particular university in Wales ‘widening access’ is a ‘core mission’ of the university and as such flexible delivery of the curriculum including

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<sup>6</sup> Explain UCAS’s use of the term ‘high tariff’ HEIs.

distance and bite-sized learning is the means of delivering the widening access mission of the university:

*Yeah, it is all part-time, it's all distance. And you can build up modules towards qualifications. There's definitely an increasing emphasis on encouraging people to think about whole qualifications but there's still huge amount of flexibility around saying try this 15 credit module. Build up, erm your skills and your interest. Erm, so yes, incredibly flexible, we have presentations throughout the year so you don't have to sign up in September... (Widening access practitioner, HEI)*

*Yes, I think other than the Open University we're the largest part-time provider in Wales, we [X University] are the second largest but we...were already the second largest so we have a few more. So we've been quite focused on providing part-time and online erm learning, erm it doesn't always work perfectly, the problem with part-time learning is unless you've got a significant cohort size then you end up trying to do part time in a full-time timetable. (Widening access practitioner, HEI)*

Widening access through flexible delivery of HE reflects a particular understanding about the nature of inequalities in access to HE; it presumes that inequalities in access reflect structural barriers to participation, including financial barriers and more indirect barriers like transport, childcare and work commitments. These 'barriers' are presumed to be unequally distributed across society meaning that some social groups experience them more intensely than others. Based in this premise, flexible modes of delivery of HE are presumed to reduce the impact of these barriers by providing individuals with opportunities for HE study whilst simultaneously maintaining their existing work, family, domestic commitments which might otherwise prevent them completing their courses.

Notwithstanding wider sociological questions regarding the extent to which material 'barriers' inhibit participation (Gorard, and Smith 2007), there are additional questions about what sorts of HE that curriculum delivered in a flexible form aims to widen access



to. The data revealed that conventional HE options (namely, undergraduate degree schemes) are being delivered by HEIs in a flexible format such as through part-time study options, distance learning or in community locations. However, where degrees are delivered in this format they are not delivered extensively by the highest ranking HEI in Wales, nor are they generally associated with lucrative employment opportunities. This is with the exception, perhaps, of the Open University in Wales which does offer degrees associated with professions such as Law and post-graduate degrees such as MBA programme. More commonly, vocationally centred HE programmes, including Foundation degrees or HNDs were delivered in this way, suggesting that flexible delivery operates primarily to widen access to less high status forms of HE. This calls in to question the extent to which widening access strategies implemented in this way can be instrumental in promoting equality in access to high status degrees. Clearly, greater steps need to be made in making high status courses more flexible in their delivery so that students who might be constrained by work or child-care commitments are able to access these forms of high status provision.

#### *Widening access through curriculum provision.*

A further approach to widening access identified at the institutional level is one where the design and delivery of the curriculum has a widening access function. Once again, this sort of HE was of a particular type; Foundation degrees, HNDs and HNCs could be said to have a widening access function because they are overwhelmingly pursued by non-traditional students. FE colleges were significant, but not the only purveyors of this approach, and here this approach was integral to their culture and ethos, rather than being an add-on to a mainstream delivery:

*I think that it can be summed up in that our curriculum is created to widen access, in universities they widen access by offering to disadvantaged people, ours is about curriculum. (HE curriculum designer, FE college)*

FE colleges tend to offer part-time, distance and flexible learning through courses such as foundation degrees which commonly attract mature learners who are already in employment. In this sense, the curriculum aims to widen access to a vocationally centred higher education

for those in employment, those who may already have higher level qualifications and who are wanting to up-skill or re-skill themselves for employment purposes. Jones and Thomas (2005) have described this approach as the ‘utilitarian’ approach because it emphasises the relationship between higher education and the economy. While this approach may positively contribute towards widening access to HE opportunities to those whom might not traditionally access them, this approach does not facilitate access to high status forms of HE. Moreover, this approach to widening access is underpinned by ‘double’ deficit’ model (Jones and Thomas, 2005) of the individual whereby the individual is viewed as lacking both aspiration *and* suitable qualifications. It follows therefore that the emphasis is on changing the individual towards making them more receptive to the needs of the economy. While the relationship between HE level skills and employment was not an emphasis of FE colleges alone, these were significant deliverers of programmes which bore a close relationship with employability:

*Foundation degrees is our higher education, it belongs in the FE sector. FE in HE is foundation degrees, some honours degrees, but Foundation is our niche, it’s widening access, its opportunities for people in work and getting people into work.*  
**(HE curriculum designer, FE college)**

While this sort of HE provision was delivered by HEIs as well as FEIs it was much less central to HEIs’ curriculum, and was almost absent from the provision of higher ranking universities. It was the case however, that where post-92 universities provided Foundation degrees, HNDs, HNC, or other sorts of qualifications which facilitate access to higher education or employment opportunities, this formed a significant aspect of their curriculum, and this sort of provision was often delivered in partnerships with local colleges:

*... again through our FE partners we offer more students learning through part-time roles than we do full time in the FE partner colleges so we have large foundation degree programmes in business and management, in the creative industries, in erm in health and social care which are entirely part-time*  
**(Widening access practitioner, HEI)**

Indeed, a number of post-92 universities in Wales offer a substantial amount of this sort of curriculum, often delivering it through partnership with local colleges. Where widening access is implemented in this way the delivery of HE is altered in order to meet the needs of the learner, and thus, widening access, and also an employability agenda is achieved as by-product of the curriculum delivery and its design. This, however, leaves open to scrutiny the extent to which this approach to widening access is likely to bring about greater equity in access to high status degree programmes and their associated employment opportunities.

## Conclusion

This paper has considered the extent to which, and how, the Welsh Government's widening access strategy is approached and implemented on an institutional level in Wales. In doing so, the paper addresses broader questions about whom and to what form of HE institutions in Wales are widening access. Interviews with widening access managers in HEIs in Wales and analysis of widening access strategies and fee plans revealed that HEIs were not homogenous in their approach to and implementation of 'widening access' to higher education. There is diversity across the sector in Wales in the way widening access agendas are implemented and in the form of HE widening access strategies are targeted at. These differences reflect variations in the ethos, culture and status of HEIs delivering widening access agendas across Wales.

The data revealed that the *form* of HE that widening access interventions, programmes and activities are directed towards fell into two categories. One of these is a conventional form of HE, namely, under-graduate degree programmes, the other is non-conventional form of HE which has a stronger vocational and less academic focus and tends to be delivered on a part-time basis with stronger direct links with employers (for example, FDs, HNDs, HNC etc). All HEIs in Wales aimed to widen access to a conventional *form* of HE but the manner through which they did this varied. Some universities were most likely to deliver widening access strategies through pre-entry activities which were overwhelmingly targeted at young people from disadvantaged or under-represented backgrounds. While almost all HEIs invested in aspiration raising activities, an approach reminiscent of Jones and Thomas's (2005) 'academic

strand,' far fewer directed activities aimed directly at raising levels of GCSE or A-level attainment in young people (to support their progression on to HE).

These different approaches to widening access, (i.e. those aimed at raising aspirations or raising attainment) reflect particular understanding of the nature of inequalities in access to HE. A focus on raising aspirations, providing information, advice and guidance and changing 'cultures' of understanding about HE for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to support their progression to HE is reminiscent of Boudon's (1974) notion of the 'secondary effects of social class'. This assumes that inequalities in participation can be explained by differences in aspiration, even after controlling for social class differences in attainment. These differences have been invariably explained by sociologists in terms of cultural and social capitals or class habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) which endow people with particular orientations and dispositions towards HE which position some people inside whilst others firmly outside of the HE arena (Reay et al, 2001, Ball et al 2002). Aspiration-raising activities are presumably designed to lift young people's educational aspirations through providing information, guidance and advice for young people who may not otherwise obtain it thus encouraging their progression on to HE.

Similarly, an emphasis on raising levels of educational attainment prior to entry to HE reflects an understanding of the nature of inequalities in access to HE that has been supported by extensive research (Gorard, 2005; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003). This posits that educational attainment is a strong predictor of access to HE and therefore inequalities in participation reflect variances in educational attainment. Inequalities in participation are, therefore, most likely to be formed outside of the HE arena, having begun to emerge at earlier stages of education, resulting from poverty and social exclusion (Gorard 2005; Ball et al, 2002). Given the breadth of evidence indicating the importance of attainment for predicting HE participation (Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; Croll and Attwood, 2013), particularly at GCSE-level (Gorard, 2005) we might speculate that activities aimed at raising attainment may play an instrumental role in supporting young people to access HE opportunities, and high status degree programmes in high ranking HEIs in particular.

However, important questions arise regarding the appropriateness and effectiveness of aspiration-raising and attainment-raising programmes. The extent to which 'aspiration-

raising' activities are effective might be questionable, particularly when programmes are directed at older age groups for whom the pathway to HE may well have been closed off by earlier educational experiences and attainments (Gorard et al 2001: Gorard and Smith, 2007). Moreover, both aspiration-raising and attainment-raising approaches evoke deficit understanding of individuals as lacking the right kinds of aspirations, educational attainment or both. By implication, this model of widening access does not view the curriculum as problematic, leaving the onus for change on the individual rather than the institution. A focus on pre-entry outreach activity aimed at raising aspirations or attainment levels is unlikely to stimulate institutional reform which would bring about enduring changes to inequitable patterns of participation. Such programmes allow universities to fulfil their 'widening access' duties whilst maintaining their hierarchal position. Furthermore, it remains the case that there is little evidence to show which types of pre-entry widening access interventions are most effective in bringing about changes in individuals' propensity to participate in HE (Thomas, 2011), and much less on their effectiveness in creating sustainable changes in broad patterns of participation.

In contrast to approaches which aimed to widen access to a conventional form of HE (namely, UG degree programmes offered full-time or part-time) an alternative mechanism for widening access was through the design and delivery of the curriculum. Here, it was the level of HE, and the manner in which it is delivered, which has a widening access function though its primary purpose is to provide opportunity for re-skilling and up-skilling. This form includes the delivery of part-time more vocationally focused HE such as Foundation degrees, HNDs, HNCs and was most likely to be delivered by post-92 HEIs and FE colleges in which case widening access is a by-product rather than an intention of this sort of curriculum delivery. While this approach is most likely to widen participation in HE to non-traditional HE students, including mature students and those who may already possess some HE qualifications, the extent to which this form of HE provides routes into the sorts of lucrative employment opportunities enjoyed by graduates of high ranking HEIs might be questionable. Clearly, different forms of widening access, the manner of their delivery, has implications for the sorts of skills and qualifications acquired and the forms of employment opportunities accessed.

The data discussed in the paper contributes to current debates about the underpinning aims and intentions of widening access policies? In particular, it addresses questions about how far

widening access policies, as they are implemented on an institutional level, open up HE opportunities to individuals who traditionally do not access them, and to high status forms of HE in particular. These questions are important for addressing issues in relation to social justice as it remains the case that widening access to high ranking universities has positive impacts on individuals' life chances given the lucrative labour market rewards associated with obtaining a degree from a high ranking university (Chevelier and Conlon, 2003; Power and Whitty 2008). This begs the question, should policy makers centre their attention on 'widening access' to conventional forms of higher education (UG degrees) to people who would not normally enter HE, and in particular, to high status HEIs, or should they be concerned with promoting HE opportunities for people in employment and middle-managers thus providing them with opportunities to up-skill or re-skill?

The data presented in this paper also raises questions about the impact of widening access strategies, as they are delivered by HEIs in Wales, on cross-border flows of students. As discussed here (and in other working papers associated with this project), widening access strategies are implemented on different levels, i.e. the national, regional, institutional and departmental. Clearly, different widening access strategies, and the level at which they are implemented, will have implications in terms of the student groups effected (i.e. whether it is Welsh domiciled students moving to UK institutions, or UK domiciled students studying in Welsh HEIs, or Welsh domiciled students in Welsh HEIs). Thus, different strategies ultimately implicate on the geographical mobility of students. Moreover, since a programme delivered by one HE might lead to participation in another HEI, this could potentially lead to increased rates of participation in HEIs both inside and outside of Wales. For example, widening access programmes aimed at improving participation through attainment or aspiration raising activities might ultimately improve participation amongst young Welsh domiciled students in HEIs outside Wales. As such, they might speculatively have implications for cross-border flows of students. This raises questions about the priorities underpinning widening participation policy (Croxford and Raffe 2014); should the primary concern of the Welsh Government be with promoting greater participation in HE amongst Welsh students studying in Wales, or should this concern also cover Welsh students studying outside of Wales, or non-Welsh students coming in to Wales to study. When addressing issues relating to widening access and equality of opportunity, it is important to address questions in

relation to *who* are targeted in widening access policies, what form of HE this takes and also where (geographically) widen access should aim to impact?

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