

# Impact and Effectiveness of Widening Access to HE in Wales

## Working Paper Series<sup>1</sup> – WAQLCE2014-9

---

To what extent are institutional widening access strategies delivered on a departmental level?

Ceryn Evans



---

<sup>1</sup> Working Papers are intended to present initial analysis and findings. Please do not cite them without permission of the author(s).

## 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.

## *To what extent are institutional widening access strategies delivered on a departmental level?*

---

In recognition of inequitable rates of participation in higher education amongst individuals from different social groups, the Welsh Government has implemented policies putatively aimed at widening access to HE amongst social groups traditionally underrepresented therein (Welsh Government, 2009). Given the Welsh Government's emphasis on widening access to HE in Wales in recent years, there are important questions about the extent to which, and how, national policies are implemented on regional, institutional and departmental levels. The implementation of national level policies on regional and institutional levels is explored elsewhere (papers WAQLCE2014-8 and WAQLCE2014-5<sup>2</sup>). In this paper I explore the extent to which national widening access policies cascade down through institutional widening access strategies and are implemented on a departmental level within HEIs. This consideration provides a platform on which to speculate about the potential impacts of departmental practices on rates of access and participation of students traditionally under-represented in HE.

This paper takes a look at a range of universities in Wales and a range of different schools and departments within them. While the paper does not look exclusively at admissions policies and practices it forms a central consideration. This focus on admissions policies and practices and their implementation by admissions tutors within individual departments (or schools) is important for a number of reasons. The success of individual applicants is dependent on their individual circumstances; their attainment levels, gender, ethnic and class position, the educational levels and occupation of their parents, and also, as Zimdar (2010) has argued, the decisions of powerful institutional gatekeepers. For this reason, it is important to explore how decisions are made by admissions tutors in shaping entry to selective courses, and how other departmental level mechanisms might work to widen access to those traditionally under-represented in HE.

Moreover, a focus on departmental level 'widening access' strategies helps to address wider debates about the causes of inequalities in higher education participation. These debates largely centre the extent to which inequalities in access can be attributed to biases in university's admissions processes or to wider societal causes of inequalities in attainment which impact on individuals' propensity to engage in higher education. A number of

---

<sup>2</sup> See WISERD working papers for these: <http://www.wiserd.ac.uk/research/education/current-projects/impact-and-effectiveness-widening-access-he-wales/>

researchers have argued that inequalities in access to HE do not occur at the admissions stage but at the application stage, underpinned by social class inequalities in prior educational attainment levels which primarily determine application to and access to HE (Gorard, 2005). While acknowledging the importance of prior attainment levels, others have suggested that the admissions stage of the student life-cycle has the most potential to change the composition of any university's intake (Hoare and Aitchison, 2009). As such, there are important questions about the extent to which decisions made by admissions tutors about applicants, and other mechanisms operating at the admissions stage support a widening access agenda.

### *The hierarchical structure of departments and schools in Welsh HEIs*

In Wales, as in the UK more widely, HEIs are hierarchically differentiated according to various measures. These include the research output, as measured by the REF<sup>3</sup>, the faculty-student ratios, student retention rates, the total tariff score for entry and the mean faculty salary, expenditure per student (Hussain et al, 2009) and the labour market prospects of graduates (Croxford and Raffe, 2014). HEIs are therefore located unequally on a hierarchy within the UK HE market. Similarly, schools and departments within HEIs, as well as the programmes they deliver, are also hierarchically structured. Status differences of degree programmes arise from a number of factors including the social and economic rewards associated with them. For example, degree schemes allied to medicine, dentistry and law have traditionally been associated with higher rates of graduate earnings than those allied to the social sciences (Chevalier, 2011). Schools and departments delivering these programmes become accorded with high status. Consequently, applicants compete to secure places on these programmes which are often characterised by limited places and very high entry qualification requirements. The competitive nature of access to these sorts of programmes reinforces their prestigious position and in turn the role of admissions tutors to select from a high volume of applicants for a limited number of places.

Given the status differences of varying degree schemes, courses and programmes, it is important that we explore the extent to which departments implement widening access agendas in order to address wider questions in relation to social justice. In the discussion that follows I present excerpts from interviews with admissions tutors responsible for admissions

---

<sup>3</sup> The REF (Research Excellence Framework) is a system of assessing the quality of research produced by UK HEIs. The REF is undertaken by the four UK higher education funding bodies. The funding bodies will use the assessment outcomes of the REF to allocate research funding to HEIs, with effect from 2015-16

to programmes delivered by universities in Wales. These programmes can be broadly categorised as either ‘recruiting’ or ‘selecting’. A ‘recruiting’ programme is one in which there are a greater number of places than the typical number of applicants. The entry requirements (in terms of UCAS tariff points) are typically lower for ‘recruiting’ programmes than for ‘selecting’ ones reflecting the efforts made by schools or departments in HEIs to boost recruitment to these programmes. Where there is a high volume of applicants to a course, applicants compete to secure a place. Admissions tutors for these types of programmes apply selection criteria to differentiate between high volumes of applicants. These are said to be ‘selecting courses’. Higher ranking universities<sup>4</sup> tend to have a greater number of ‘selecting’ courses and tend to fall below their benchmark in terms of admitting applicants from under-represented groups (Singleton, 2010). Newer, post-92 HEIs and those with mostly ‘recruiting’ courses tend to perform above the benchmark in terms of admitting applicants from under-represented groups (Singleton, 2010). Exploring the extent to which these different types of schools or departments within HEIs, which are of unequal status, implement institutional widening access strategies is important in addressing questions in relation to equity and equality of opportunity. Specifically, it allows us to ask questions about *who* does and does not gain access to degree schemes associated with unequal social and economic rewards.

#### *Admissions system in universities in Wales*

As discussed above, HEIs in Wales are greatly heterogeneous in terms of their ethos, cultural, and status. They are also variable in their admissions policies and procedures. As such, the role played by school/departmental admissions tutors in delivering institutional widening access strategies through the decisions they make about applicants is likely to be variable. The admissions systems of universities in Wales can be broadly categorised into those which are centralised on the one hand, and those which are devolved on the other. A centralised admissions system centralises the processing and decision making about individual applicants to a central admissions team within the HEI and there is very little room for decision making by staff members in individual faculties, departments or schools. In these cases, closer consideration will be given to other institutional widening access mechanisms.

Where there is a devolved admissions system, a central admissions office usually exists where university-wide admissions policy are developed but individual schools or departments

---

<sup>4</sup> UCAS refers to these as ‘high tariff’ institutions

implement this policy through the decisions made by individual admissions tutors. There may, in addition, be other mechanisms in place which deliver a widening access agenda and these will also be explored. Thus, while there are large differences in the extent to which individual academic schools make decisions about applicants, with academic schools in HEIs with centralised admissions systems having a limited role in this, the admissions stage nonetheless remains an important focus in assessing the extent to which it plays a part in implementing institutional widening access strategies. This focus will help to map the role of admissions in widening access across Wales, and to answer the question, to what extent are widening access strategies implemented on a departmental level?

**Question:**

*To what extent, and in what form, are institutional widening access agendas delivered on a departmental level?*

*To what extent do contextualised admissions policies help to deliver institutional widening access strategies?*

**Methods:**

The topic of university admissions is contentious. It has been brought to public scrutiny in recent years following media attention on a small number of UK based HEIs which have implemented admissions policies which purportedly favour state over privately educated pupils in their admissions policies in attempts to widen participation (BBC News, 2003). Given the relatively small numbers of HEIs in Wales (in 2014, there are only nine institutions including the Open University in Wales) it is particularly important that the HEIs which were the focus of this research remain anonymous. Thus, in an effort to preserve the anonymity of these institutions, the data presented below illustrates the full range of practices and policies which operate at the departmental stage which may operate, wittingly or unwittingly, to encourage access to students from under-represented groups. This is done without identifying the institution in which these take place. Whilst the admission tutors interviewed here were tutors for courses which overwhelmingly fitted into these broad ‘recruiting’ or ‘selecting’ categories, a small number of departments or schools were not easily fitted into these categories. For example, they might have traditionally been ‘selective’ but in recent years experienced a decline in applicant numbers so that they have put in place measures to recruit

applicants. Thus, the categorisation into either ‘selecting’ or ‘recruiting’ courses is not always appropriate.

The focus of this paper is the schools and departments in a range of HEIs in Wales, including the Russell Group University, a small number of older and post-92 universities. Phone interviews with 11 admissions tutors across a range of HEIs in Wales (including old high ranking universities and post-92 universities) were conducted, lasting between 15-30 minutes. On the whole, the admissions tutors interviewed had responsibility for admissions while also occupying academic roles (as lecturers or researchers) within their schools. In addition, interviews were conducted with four heads of admissions at four universities; these interviews were particularly important where there was a centralised admissions policy. The below discussion explores the various mechanisms by which widening access strategies are implemented through the decisions made about applicants by individual admissions tutors and other mechanisms.

#### *The use of contextual or additional information by admissions tutors*

The Schwartz (2004) report ‘Fair Admissions to Higher education’ encouraged the use of contextualised admissions as a way of promoting fair access to higher education. The use of contextualised admissions was underpinned by a rationale that prior attainment is an inaccurate demonstrator of ‘potential’ to succeed at university because social and economic circumstances can adversely affect attainment levels (Croxford et al, 2014) and therefore prior attainment should be placed in the ‘context’ in which it was obtained. Indeed, since the Schwartz (2004) report was published a number of academics and politicians (Milburn, 2012; Moore et al, 2013) have encouraged and found empirical support for the use of contextualised data and information which takes account of applicants social and economic circumstances as a way of promoting fair access, in particular to higher ranking HEIs (Milburn, 2012). Since the Schwartz report’s recommendations, a number of universities in the UK, including one in Wales, have implemented contextualised admissions arrangements within their broader admissions policies.

The formal use a ‘contextualised admissions’ policy was implemented in just one HEI in Wales at the time of the research. This university ‘flags’ applicants for additional consideration if they fall into at least one of three categories; if they live in a Welsh



Communities First<sup>5</sup> or ACORN<sup>6</sup> areas, they live in a neighbourhood of low HE participation (LPN), or they are a care leaver or are 'in care'. If an applicant is 'flagged' as having at least one of these 'contextualising' factors they are either guaranteed a typical offer, guaranteed an interview or are given additional consideration for remaining places on programmes following the publication of summer A-level results. The use of a contextualised admissions policy at this university was, in principle, a key mechanism for implementing institutional widening access strategies on a departmental/school level. Its application is underpinned by a rationale that external factors, outside the control of individual applicants, strongly inform their attainment levels and in turn their propensity to participate in HE. In principle, giving consideration of these external factors through applying contextual information is a means of identifying students with the greatest 'potential' to succeed in HE. Indeed, admissions tutors for selecting courses at this university appeared to use additional information, (such as information on applicants' school or family background) to help them identify students who apparently demonstrate 'potential' despite their circumstances;

*Here's a scenario, you've got one student who's coming from an inner city school and they've got an A and a B and a D, let's say. And then you've got another one who's coming from a fairly privileged background which you can gage from various details and references and they've been to an independent school and they've got BB and C. I think my decision would weigh up on the basis of the personal statement, on the basis of the references and the university's commitment to widening access, I would want to favour the candidate who would get the most opportunity out of what university would provide for them (**admissions tutor, mostly selective but in recent years, recruiting course**).*

Whilst this admissions tutor later admitted that this isn't a frequently occurring circumstance, it illustrates the way in which contextual information is used at the discretion of admissions tutors to help them differentiate and select between high attaining applicants. Evidently, the delivery of the university's formal widening access strategy, manifest in the contextualised

---

<sup>5</sup> CF status is granted to areas in Wales characterised by high level of socio-economic deprivation according to the WIMD. The index is comprised of 8 different types of 'deprivation' including income, health, educational, employment, community safety, access to services, housing and physical environment.

<sup>6</sup> Acorn is a targeting tool that combines demographic and geographic information to create an understanding of the people that live in different areas throughout the UK (Acorn, 2014). Information on a range of factors such as household type, housing tenure, family structure and age are used to create demographic segmentations.

admissions policy, is influenced by the discretion of individual admissions tutors. In a similar manner, additional information regarding applicants' personal, work or employment experience was also used to help identify students with particular characteristics deemed suitable for study in the school:

*Each person is addressed as a person. We also like to look at individuals' personalities because of making up the student body and to make up a nice student body if you like, a diverse and friendly and interesting student body. So personally I really like people who have hobbies, who have musical type hobbies or hobbies in the arts because I think it makes up for a well-rounded individual and it makes the student population more interesting. My colleague, he really likes it when people have done Duke of Edinburgh because his children did it and he knows how much effort it involves. So I suppose it's more looking at the qualities of the individual, we're not really interested in the prestige of the school they went to, no. (Admissions tutor, selective course)*

Evidently, the personal interests, values and concerns of admissions tutors inform how they regard the information supplied by applicants, specifically, how valuable and important they judge individual applicants' work experiences or hobbies to be. Zimdars (2010) has argued that this can bear upon the decision making process creating a bias towards applicants who are socially similar to them or share similar personal interests and hobbies. Whilst it is only possible to speculate, this may have implications for particular social or ethnic groups whose opportunity to access a course may be influenced by the extent to which they are socially similar or dissimilar to admissions tutors, and their interests, hobbies and work experiences valued by them. Thus, the use of additional information by admissions tutors to select and differentiate between a high volume of applicants might unwittingly hinder the achievement of equality of opportunity, especially where admissions tutors feel pressured to uphold the academic prestige of their school.

Indeed, emergent from interviews with admissions tutors of selecting courses at this university which uses a contextualised admissions policy was a strong sense of pressure to meet both widening access *and* excellence agendas, the latter of which appeared to exert most pressure:

*We know we are under two prevailing sets of expectations, one is widening access, the other is getting the highest grade point average...the message that comes out clearest is about the grade points, you get the tables and you get the red highlighter marks on the spreadsheets, I mean we're ok but you see the other schools and things, you see where students are falling below what their entry requirements are. (admissions tutor, recruiting course)*

This pressure was felt particularly strongly where selective programmes require applicants to have achieved high level entry qualifications. In these cases there seemed to be a greater emphasis on admitting the highest attaining applicants:

*'Because we assume A-level maths we have to look at these things [referring to other types of qualifications other than maths] ourselves to see if the content...because there is no good somebody starting that hasn't got the things we know' (Maths admissions tutor, Selecting course)*

Given these conflicting messages of equity on the one hand and academic excellence on the other, the extent to which widening access agendas can be fully met when strong 'excellence' agendas, associated with recruitment of the highest attaining students, are promoted without regulation. Indeed, this pressure to select the 'highest calibre' of students was hinted at by a small number of admissions tutors who expressed a sense that the policy of guaranteeing offers to 'flagged' applicants represents a somewhat tokenistic gesture towards widening access. Some admissions tutors expressed the sense that giving offers to applicants which are considerably higher than what they are realistically able to achieve allows the school to formerly implement the university's widening access strategy but with little effect. This is especially so given that places on highly selective programmes are likely to be filled by applicants who have achieved the necessary entry requirements before places can be filled by 'flagged' applicants:

*Personally I don't think we have quite got it right. If somebody is predicted three Ds and we make them a three A offer, I think it's just a little bit silly, I don't think they are going to achieve that, I think it's just insulting their intelligence a little bit, but that's my personal opinion. Just that I think it's not a realistic option for them. I don't think asking for somebody to increase their grades but 4, 5, 6 grades is realistic, I don't know if the school has an opinion on it. It also skews the*

*figures as well, because I'm making offers to people who are never going to materialise. (Admissions tutor, selective course)*

This sentiment was mirrored in the narratives of other admissions tutors at the same HEI:

*If they meet the predicted grades, fine, we'll make an offer because at the end of the day you make an offer to a student if they are have contextualised circumstances or not, you know, if they don't meet the grades, as an institution, you are not obliged to honour that offer, because they haven't met their side of the deal (Admissions tutor, recruiting course)*

This approach to using contextualised information perhaps indicates institutional tensions between achieving academic excellence and equality of opportunity, where excellence seems to be prioritised. A small number of admissions tutors at this university also stated how they used contextualised data to help them make decisions about applicants who have narrowly missed the entry requirements in terms of their obtained grades. Following the publication of examination results in the summer these admissions tutors typically stated that contextualised information was used when comparing two applicants (one 'flagged' and another not 'flagged') with identical 'near miss' grades if there were remaining places on the course:

*The way we're generally using it [contextual information] though is, when A-level results come out we take everybody with AAB and we would always have some places left where we take 'near misses' and we would take contextual information there so if we had a choice between two applicants with identical grades and one was contextual and one wasn't we would choose the contextual one (admissions tutor, selective course)*

Evidently, contextual information is used by admissions tutors of selective courses to differentiate and select between high volumes of applicants. Applying contextualised data in this way embodies an understanding of HE participation which not only recognises that educational attainment is influenced by external forces and therefore prior attainment may not be a strong demonstrator of talent or 'potential' to succeed at university (Schwartz, 2004), but it also embodies meritocratic notions of equality of opportunity. Comparing a flagged applicant with a non-flagged applicant with comparable grades assumes that a 'flagged' 'contextualised applicant' is presumed to have demonstrated a greater level of effort and

ability in reaching their grades (given their circumstances) than a non-contextualised applicant. In this way, the use of contextual information enables the school to formerly deliver the university's widening access strategy which aims to recruit the 'most able' students from under-represented or 'diverse' backgrounds, (as described in this HEI's latest widening access strategy), while simultaneously meeting its own 'excellence' criteria.

In contrast to this formal use of a 'contextualised admissions' policy which was in operation in just one HEI, admissions tutors in schools and departments within non-selective HEIs also used additional information (typically derived from personal statements) to help them make decisions about applicants. In many cases, individual admissions tutors acknowledged information about the 'context' in which applicants have obtained their qualifications:

*On open days or visit days all of my admissions officers will say to applicants please tell us if anything happens to your family, or problems in school, we'll keep a note of it ready for your A-level time so we'll keep a note of it if something happens and you don't quite get what you needed we'll have a reference file here and we know what's gone on. So individuals can speak to admissions tutors and parents will get in touch as well. So we are, that's what we're all about in Arts and Humanities, we're very much community based, we will give, even mature students, we'll give them opportunity (**Admissions tutor, recruiting school**)*

This admissions tutor's emphasis on giving applicants 'opportunity' reflects the way in which inequalities in access to HE are understood are being influenced by external factors which bear upon applicants' attainment and therefore their potential to access HE opportunities. In response to my question about whether contextualised information is used, one admissions tutor responded:

*Do we do that formally no, informally yes. So we look at, well you get some of that information on UCAS forms anyway but we also look at where the student is from, what their personal circumstances may be, but that's not in a formal fashion, there isn't a tick box for a single mother, lost father at the age of 2, tick, or anything like that. (**Admissions tutor, recruiting course**)*

In exceptional cases, universities used ‘compact’ agreements with individual schools whereby pupils from these schools are given lower offers. This would indicate a very particular understanding of the nature of inequalities in access to HE, one that associates school performance with individual level performance:

*Yes we have the TOP scheme (the talent opportunity scheme) so we’re actively involved in that, we’ve involved in certain secondary schools in our area so we do give certain preferential offers to people from socially deprived areas with widening access in mind (admissions tutor, recruiting course)*

Evidently, admissions tutors of both recruiting and selecting schools used additional information (regarding work, volunteering experiences, hobbies and interests), sourced from personal statements, to make decisions about applicants. However, they used it in different ways. While contextual or additional information was used by admissions tutors of selecting universities to differentiate and select applicants, it was used by admissions tutors at recruiting schools to facilitate recruitment of applicants from non-traditional backgrounds, including applicants who have been out of education for a while, have narrowly missed the entry requirements or have non-traditional qualifications. It was also used to help make decisions about applicants with the ‘Access to HE diploma’<sup>7</sup>. For example, one admissions tutor described how he would ask for samples of academic work from ‘Access’ students, others considered work or personal experiences or additional qualifications when making decisions about applicants and this helped them to decide whether it was appropriate to ‘accept’ an applicant:

*So if I can see that somebody has sat their A-levels but they aren’t up to the entry requirements and they’ve left school and have been working I will look at well, what have they been doing while they’ve been working and what have they been doing in their personal life? And in a sense they might be able to add more to the classroom experience so we look at everything- we look at extended projects, volunteering (Admissions tutor, recruiting course)*

---

<sup>7</sup> The Access to HE diploma is a qualification which prepares people without traditional qualifications to access higher education study at university.

*I look at the whole CV, I look at the school performance, I look at what they've done after school, usually for these candidates there has been a gap in traditional education so I'll look at what they've done in that time, I'll also look at more recent qualifications so whatever they may be. I pay close attention to the personal statement, I will look at references although perhaps put less weight on those, and quite often I would formally or informally interview candidates or encourage them if they're local to come up and see the school (**Admissions tutor, recruiting school**)*

These excerpts illustrate the way in which additional information (as well as informal interviews) were used more commonly by admissions tutors of recruiting universities to find reason to 'accept' rather than reject an applicant than they were by admissions tutors of selecting programmes. Indeed, interviews with admissions tutors of recruiting courses revealed that applicant interviews were used to help make decisions about mature students, those who have not been in education for a while and those who have non-traditional qualifications, rather than as a method of distinguishing and selecting between applicants:

*We interview non-traditional applicants, meaning applicants who are mature students, and more and more students are going through the OU, who have done some OU modules and so in that case we might invite them to an interview to talk to them about what we offer, so if there is so somebody who looks quite promising but doesn't quite put on their UCAS form then we would, basically we would interview anybody we weren't sure about. (**Admissions tutor, recruiting course**)*

In response to my question about whether interviews are conducted with applicants, this admissions tutor replies:

*In certain circumstances, if they have non-traditional qualifications or if they've been out of education for a bit, primarily the Access people. (**Admissions tutor, recruiting course**)*

It must be noted that no discussions were had with admissions tutors for selecting courses where interviews are conducted so it is not possible to speculate as to their function. However, it was striking that interviews tended to be used by admissions tutors of recruiting

courses to support entry of students from non-traditional backgrounds rather than as a means of selection. This is with the exception of some medical related courses such as nursing where interviews are used to assess the appropriateness of the applicant for the course which might not be fully discerned from qualifications alone.

Clearly, the use of additional information by admissions tutors is highly variable across departments and schools reflecting the institutional concerns and priorities of the HEI more broadly. While selecting departments were using additional information to meet their widening access agenda, they were also using it to select and differentiate between a high volume of applicants in order to admit the highest calibre applicants, or those who they felt would be more likely to fit into the academic profile of the school. Its use is therefore instrumental in meeting an 'excellence' agenda. Where schools or departments aim to recruit applicants, additional information is used to facilitate recruitment of applicants and therefore widening access appears to be a by-product. The overarching ethos, culture and status of the HEI at large influences the decisions made by admissions tutors and in turn the extent to which either widening access or excellence agendas are met.

#### *Recognition of non-traditional qualifications*

So far I have discussed the way in which the formal and informal use of contextual or additional information plays a part in, at least rhetorically, delivering institutional widening access agendas. The use of contextual and additional information is not, however, the only means of delivering widening access agendas on a departmental level. Given the association between social class and prior attainment, applicants from non-traditional backgrounds are more likely to hold vocational and non-traditional qualifications (such as BTECs and GNVQs) than those from socially advantaged backgrounds (Hatt and Baxter 2003). Since prior educational attainment is a strong predictor of application to and gaining acceptance by universities (Gorard, 2005), widening access strategies which are committed to improving the recruitment of non-traditional students should prioritise attention to applicants with non-traditional qualifications (ie, GNVQs, BTECs etc).

The extent to which the admissions tutors said they recognised non-traditional qualifications appeared to vary with the admissions criteria of the university more generally, namely, whether it accepts students on the basis of UCAS points or A-levels grades. These in turn vary with the status and culture of the HEI. Generally speaking, higher ranking HEIs are



more likely to accept applicants with specified A-level grades while lower ranking universities were more likely to admit applicants with a specified number of UCAS tariff points. As a consequence of the prioritisation of A-levels, higher ranking HEIs are less likely to accept applicants with non-traditional qualifications. Indeed, while almost all admissions tutors gave *some* recognition of qualifications besides A-levels there was variation in this, with admissions tutors for selecting courses placing the greatest emphasis on A-levels and placing very little value on alternative qualifications. They tended to regard the A-level qualification as the normative, gold-standard qualification and measured all qualifications against this. Strikingly, these admissions spoke almost entirely in terms of A-level grades when asked about the typical offers they gave to applicants:

*BTECs and courses, that's a bit more difficult for us, and my understanding is, the standard is a bit more difficult to determine than A-level. Not, we haven't got anything against BTECs or Access courses, and we would certainly consider them as a whole but sometimes it can be a bit difficult when there is such a high number of people applying who do have the typical three As at A-level compared to somebody with BTECS, it can be difficult for those kind of divisions.  
(Admissions tutor, selecting course)*

Given the prominence of the A-level in the entry requirements to selecting schools, as this excerpt shows, non-traditional qualifications were sometimes undermined by the sheer volume of applicants with A-levels. This meant that there was little need to accept students with non-traditional qualifications because places had already been filled with A-level applicants. Evidently, therefore, the esteem attached to A-levels in the entry criteria undermines the delivery of an institutional widening access strategy. In some cases non-traditional qualifications were accepted by admissions tutors on selecting courses (such as BTECs), but only in combination with a specific A-level (such as maths), meaning that even greater emphasis was placed on applicants attaining specific A-levels qualifications:

*The BTEC we're happy to accept, and the subsidiary diploma which is the equivalent of three A levels we accept that with three distinctions, and as long as they've got the further maths module, if not they are only able to join our foundation year, we also have people coming from other institutions and the*

*university's own international foundation year programme. (Admissions tutor, selecting course)*

By contrast, lower ranking HEIs which are more likely to use UCAS points as their entry criteria are more likely to accept students with non-traditional qualifications such as GNVQs because these sorts of qualifications can be converted into UCAS points. Moreover, non-traditional qualifications were often recognised by admissions tutors in a way that added value and supported applicants' success in entering the university. Evidently, where HEIs recognise non-traditional qualifications this was primarily a means of institutional recruitment, or to find a 'reason to accept' an applicant, as emphasised by this admissions tutor, and therefore widening access appeared to be a by-product of this:

*We do look at equivalentents and equivalentents are very important to us so we're looking at the number of applicants who come in with BTEC qualifications or level 3 numeracy in lieu of maths and English GCSE. So we look at those and consider them because we have a high proportion of mature students. We were the highest in Wales in terms of applications from mature students and students who may not have formal qualifications but who have life experience and other things that we do look at, so what we're looking at in these cases is a reason to accept them (Head of admissions, recruiting HEI)*

Evidently, the extent to which departments and schools play a role in delivering institutional widening access agendas is mediated by the nature of their admissions arrangements. Where the admissions criteria is based on the achievement of UCAS points it is more likely to except students with non-traditional qualifications (and therefore more likely to accept non-traditional students) than one which requires specific A-levels.

#### *Widening access through curriculum delivery*

Increasing the proportion of part-time provision has been a significant element of the Welsh Government's widening access strategy. Indeed, HEFCW's website (2014) states that '*part-time courses are crucial in helping people get vocational qualifications, to widen access to HE and to strengthen links to employers*'. Exploring the extent to which part-time courses are offered within departments and schools is important therefore in considering how far widening access agendas are implemented on a departmental level. While most of the

admissions tutors I spoke to stated that there was some provision of part-time study, this was largely at post-graduate levels. The extent to which part-time courses were delivered at an under-graduate level varied greatly across schools and departments and across HEIs; selecting schools were much less likely to offer their courses on a part-time basis whilst recruiting and vocationally centred schools and departments were more likely to have more extensive part-time provision:

*Yeah, part-time study is something that... 30% of applicants were part-time, 70% were full time so quite a big proportion and that's reflective in the activity of support staff. 64% of students came from Wales, 18% from England and 11% overseas. Part-time recruitment is a very big part of what we do but that's the very nature of the vocational element of the institution. We recognise that so many of our applicants are, over 50% are aged 21 and over, 39% are over 25 so in terms of maturity they do have a number of mature students (**Head of admissions, recruiting HEI**)*

Other admissions tutors stated that funding cuts meant that there was little incentive for part-time study, and when it is offered, it is simply in the form of full-time degrees delivered over a longer time period. Part-time provision played only a limited role in delivering a widening access agenda, especially in selecting courses. It must be noted, however, that within HEIs there are often widening access or lifelong learning centres which deliver an array of part-time courses. These limited interviews gave only a narrow view of the extent of part-time provision delivered in departments or schools in HEIs across Wales. They do, however, reveal that where schools are highly selective, part-time delivery is limited, which suggests that this is a marginal method of widening access in these schools or departments. Thus, the extent to which institutional widening access agendas are delivered through this mode, i.e. through the delivery of part-time programmes, is hugely variable with the department and school and the nature of the programme.

## **Conclusion**

This paper set out to consider the extent to which, and in what form, institutional widening access strategies are delivered on a departmental level. In doing so the paper explored the

extent to which national level widening access strategies cascade down to the departmental level, thus addressing broader questions about to whom, and to what form of HE these widening access policies aim at. Interviews with admissions tutors revealed that institutional widening access strategies are implemented through a variety of mechanisms on the departmental level.

One of the most important mechanisms for implementing widening access agendas on a departmental level is through the recognition of non-traditional qualifications. Given that applicants from working-class homes are more likely than their middle-class counter-parts to hold vocationally orientated qualifications like BTECs, NVQs, HNDs (Hatt and Baxter, 2003) recognition of these qualifications at the admissions stage has, in principle, the potential to increase the proportion of students from non-traditional backgrounds gaining access to HE level study. Recognition of non-traditional qualifications was, however, deeply uneven across HEIs and individual departments; admissions tutors of recruiting schools appeared to give most weight. Given that recruiting HEIs are more likely to admit applicants on the basis of UCAS points this means that they are more likely to accept students with non-traditional qualifications because these qualification can be converted into UCAS points. In contrast, selecting courses which fill their places with applicants holding A-levels appeared to be less likely to acknowledge non-traditional qualifications. Consequently, it is unlikely that they will accept a substantial number of applicants holding non-traditional qualifications. Thus, while recognition of non-traditional qualifications could potentially operate as an important mechanism for HEIs to deliver their widening access strategies, given the overwhelming emphasis placed on A-levels and the marginal recognition of non-traditional qualifications by high ranking HEIs it seems unlikely that this will be a significant method of widening access for high ranking HEIs. The limited recognition of non-traditional qualifications by admissions tutors of selecting courses perhaps helps explain why highly selective universities are less likely to meet benchmark requirements in terms of recruitment from under-represented groups while post-92 HEIs with a stronger recruitment orientation are more likely to meet these benchmarks (Singleton, 2010).

Departmental differences were also revealed in the way that additional information, supplied by applicants, was used by admissions tutors to inform their decisions about applicants. Admissions tutors of recruiting programmes and schools appeared to use additional supporting information to facilitate access to applicants who might otherwise be denied entry on the basis of academic qualifications alone. In these cases, additional information appeared

to be used to find a reason to accept an applicant (as opposed to reject them). In recruiting courses therefore, the boundaries between recruitment and widening access become blurred; both agendas appear to be supported in the admissions process. Practices which aim to boost institutional recruitment are likely to widen access to particular applicants who might otherwise be denied entry, even if this is unintentional.

Additional information appeared to be used to differentiate and select applicants by admissions tutors within selecting schools and departments. In this way, it appeared to have a role in meeting institutional ‘excellence’ agendas. We might speculate that where some aspects of applicants’ ‘additional information’ (i.e. their hobbies, prior work and personal experiences) are regarded more valuable than others by admissions tutors the decision making process of admissions tutors may serve to reinforce inequalities in access between students who have access to culturally valued ‘extra-curricular’ activities and those who have not.

In fully delivering an institutional widening access agenda, it is important that institutional admissions policies recognise the association between attainment and social background. While the use of a contextualised admissions policy would imply recognition of this, the extent to which it makes a significant contribution towards equity might be questionable given the prominence of and pressure to meet ‘excellence’ agendas within high ranking HEIs. The application of a contextualised admissions policy allows the institution to formally implement its ‘widening access’ strategy whilst also maintaining its ‘excellence’ agenda by admitting applicants with high level entry grades from non-traditional backgrounds. The extent to which both excellence and equity agendas can be met simultaneously seems questionable.

These interviews have revealed that the decisions made at the admissions stage, particularly those made by admissions tutors in selecting schools or departments, play an important role in mediating the implementation of institutional widening access strategies. In recruiting schools or departments, institutional widening access agendas are implemented through the use of additional information and through the recognition of non-traditional qualifications at the admissions stage. This paper has illustrated that differences in the extent to which courses or degree programmes aim to ‘select’ or ‘recruit’ applicants have implications in terms of the extent to which they actively promote national level policies aimed at improving participation in HE amongst under-represented grounds. This paper has revealed that

recruiting departments and schools are more likely to make steps towards this while the dominant ‘excellence’ agendas of selective schools and departments are likely to operate as a significant barrier for HEIs in delivering their widening access strategies and meeting the Welsh Government’s agenda for social justice within its HE strategy.

## References

Chevalier, A. 2011. Subject choice and earnings of UK graduates. *Economic and Education Review*. 30 (1187-1201)

Croxford, L and Raffe, D. 2014. Social class, ethnicity and access to higher education in the four countries in the UK: 1996-2010. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*. 33, (1), pp. 77-95

Gorard, S. 2005. Where shall we widen it? Higher education and the age participation rate in Wales. *Higher Education Quarterly* 59(1), pp. 3-18.

Hatt, S and Baxter, A. 2003. From FE to HE. A comparison of students entering HE with academic and vocational qualifications. *Widening Participation and lifelong learning*. 5 (2)

Hoare, A. and Aitchison, R. 2009. PQA: Pretty questionable assumptions. *Higher Education Review* 42, pp. 17-49.

Hussain, I. et al. 2009. University Quality and Graduate Wages in the UK. CEE DP 99. *Centre for the Economics of Education*.

Milburn, A. 2012. *University Challenge: How Higher Education can enhance social mobility. A progress report by the independent reviewer on social mobility and child poverty*. London

Moore, J. Mountford-Zimdars, A and Wiggans, J. 2013. *Contextualised Admissions: Examining the evidence*. Supporting Professionalism in Admissions: Cheltenham.

Schwartz Commission Report. 204. Fair Admissions to higher education: a comparative study. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Singleton, A. 2010. Educational opportunity: the geography of access to HE.

Welsh Assembly Government. 2009. *For Our Future. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Higher Education Strategy and Plan for Wales*. Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills.

Zimdars, A. 2010. Fairness and undergraduate admission: a qualitative exploration of admissions choices at the University of Oxford. *Oxford Review of Education* 36(3), pp. 307-323.