

# Impact and Effectiveness of Widening Access to HE in Wales

## Working Paper Series<sup>1</sup> – WAQLCE2014-8

---

*How is the Welsh Government's widening access policy delivered on a regional 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 Please do not cite them without permission of the author(s).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.

## Introduction

---

Widening access to higher education has been a central theme within the Welsh Government's strategy for higher education in recent years. This widening access agenda is predicated on the basis that particular social groups (namely, those from particular social, ethnic or geographical backgrounds) are under-represented in HE. Widening access to HE opportunities to these groups is purported to bring about beneficial social and economic returns for the individual and society (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). The Welsh government has developed a number of mechanisms, operating on various strategic levels (national, regional institutional), which aim to deliver this agenda. One of these mechanisms is its funding support arrangements which historically have intended to protect access to higher education amongst individuals from social and economic groups under-represented in HE<sup>2</sup>. In addition to these national level policies, the Welsh Government has a regional strategy for widening access, manifest in the Reaching Wider initiative established in 2002.

In 2002, the minister for Education and Lifelong Learning at the Welsh Assembly Government published '*Reaching Higher: Higher Education and the Learning Country*' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002). This was the Welsh Assembly Government's ten year strategy for the higher education sector in Wales which built on the preceding framework '*The Learning Country*'. In response to this strategy, the higher education funding council for Wales (HEFCW) established the 'Reaching Wider' initiative in 2002. This was manifest in the development of four regional Reaching Wider Partnerships (RWP) constituted by partnerships between universities, colleges, schools, voluntary organisations and local authorities in four different regions in Wales. These partnerships have been positioned as a key mechanism of the higher education regional strategies in delivering widening access across the regions (HEFCW, 2010) and as such have been strategic in meeting the Welsh Government's twin priorities of social justice and supporting a buoyant economy through expanding HE opportunities to social groups traditionally under-represented in it.

RWPs are funded by HEFCW and are tasked to work collaboratively with their partners (local colleges and HEIs within their region) to deliver activities, programmes and interventions aimed at widening participation in higher education amongst key target groups.

---

<sup>2</sup> In 2012/13 the Welsh Government's tuition fee policy for Welsh Domiciled students signalled a move away from supporting only students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. As from 2012/13 the Welsh Government has agreed to fund the additional rate of tuition (above the basic rate of £4,000) charged by HEIs in England and Wales for all Welsh domiciled students.

RWPs have a broad remit of roles and requirements. These include responding to regional needs and priorities as evidenced by local labour market intelligence and higher education regional strategies, working in partnership with FE colleges, Communities First (CF) partnerships and other organisations. More specifically, they are tasked to work with people from *all* ages within CF areas in delivering reaching wider activities with the aim of encouraging under-represented groups (including males, BME, learners with protected characteristic<sup>3</sup>, care leavers) to progress on to HE. This includes working with young people not yet at the point of transition to HE and those without higher level qualifications or skills. They are also tasked to deliver workplace or workforce learning, developing and strengthening effective progression routes to FE and HE via school, post-16, work and community and other learning groups.

When they were first established in 2002 there were four Reaching Wider Partnerships (one in each of the four regions in Wales; South East, South West, West and Mid and North Wales), involving partnerships between all HEIs and FE colleges in the region. However, following a circular published by HEFCW in February 2010 which set out proposals for developing a regional dimension for the planning and delivery of HE, HEFCW defined three regions for higher education planning purposes. This was ultimately aimed at meeting the '*For Our Future's*' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009) twin agendas of social justice and supporting a buoyant economy. In line with this regional strategy for the planning and delivery of HE the original four RWPs were reduced to three, mirroring the three regions established by the HEFCW in 2010. In 2011 the North Wales partnerships merged with the West and Mid Wales partnership to form the Mid and North Wales RWP so there are now just three RWPs in Wales (North and Mid Wales, South East Wales and South West Wales).

Since 2010, each Reaching Wider Partnership was invited to submit 1-year funding proposals to the HEFCW. As from 2011, in a bid to demonstrate their long-term commitment to the Reaching Wider Programme and to enable RWPs to contribute fully to the higher education regional strategies for the planning and delivery of widening access, the HEFCW moved the funding of RWP from initiative to strategy funding. Thus, as from 2011 all partnerships have been invited to submit three-year Reaching Wider strategies upon which HEFCW allocates funds to each of the RWPs. This move to strategy funding, HEFCW argued, enabled it to understand the basis on which they are supporting Reaching Wider strategic planning and

---

<sup>3</sup> Explain the term protected characteristics

delivery and provide accountability for public funding through the setting of and reporting on targets. Strategy funding was intended to enable RWPs to plan strategically over a long period of time and to encourage more strategic Reaching Wider interventions to be delivered.

Thus, RWPs currently submit three year strategies to HEFCW stating how they will use their resources to promote participation in HE amongst key target groups. While HEFCW is not overly prescriptive about the structure and content of these strategies RWPs are required to take into account the widening access priorities and policies set by the Welsh Government, for example, its agendas relating to CF areas, adult community learning and 14-19 partnerships to name a few. The HEFCW sets broadly defined non-specific targets but the responsibility for setting specific targets rests on each RWP which are then approved by the funding council. Nonetheless, CF areas and looked after children (LAC) have been mainstay targets of Reaching Wider funding for some time now.

All HEIs within a region are partners of their regional RWP. However, the responsibility of the RWP is not one of institutional recruitment, but rather, of widening participation in higher education more generally. (Although, as will be shown, institutional recruitment sometimes occurs as a by-product of RWP activity in a region). While RWPs operate separately from the institutions which sit within their partnership, RWPs and widening access teams within universities frequently collaborate to share resources and deliver activities to avoid duplication of provision. Given the strategic role of RWPs as mechanisms for delivering the Welsh Government's widening access agendas, there are important questions to be asked about the extent to which this regional strategy delivers the national level strategy and what form of higher education RWPs widen access to.

#### *Aim of paper:*

To explore regional mechanisms for the delivery of Welsh Government's widening access agendas

#### *Questions*

- 1) What kind of student and what kind of HE do RWPs aim to widen access to?
- 2) What sort of understanding about the nature of inequalities in HE do these mechanisms engender?
- 3) What can we speculate about the potential impact of widening access work delivered by RWPs on student mobilities (i.e. cross-border flows)?

These questions will be addressed by taking a close look at the *target groups* aimed at and the *types of programmes* delivered by RWPs.

### **Methods:**

The paper draws upon interviews conducted with the Reaching Wider Partnership managers and content analysis of each partnership's latest 'Reaching Wider' strategy. Interviews with RWP managers lasted approximately an hour and were recorded using a Dictaphone. The purpose of these interviews was to explore a number of interests including managers understanding of the nature of inequalities in access to HE, the key target groups and the sorts of programmes and activities delivered by RWPs. At the time of interview, there were three RWPs in Wales. There are, First Campus (this is the RWP in South East Wales); in terms of universities this encompasses the University of South Wales, Cardiff Metropolitan and Cardiff University. The South West Wales RWP which encompasses Swansea University, University of Wales Trinity St David and the Mid and North Wales RWP encompasses Aberystwyth University, Bangor University and Glyndwr University. The Open University in Wales is a partner in each of the three RWPs in Wales.

### ***Findings***

#### *Target groups*

All three RWPs placed a large emphasis on working with children and young people, reflected in the substantial amount of outreach work delivered in primary and secondary schools and colleges. The Mid and North Wales RWP had a stronger all age focus meaning that in addition to the outreach programmes delivered in primary and secondary schools it placed an emphasis on working with families and communities. Much of this work was designed to raise the skills levels of individuals living in places where deprivation is most concentrated in order to promote progression on to FE, HE and employment. They did this through a variety of programmes and events including programmes designed to give young people at risk of dropping out of education taster sessions in FE, HE and industry in order to support their retention in education. They also delivered programmes in community venues designed to support progression on to HE, events designed to foster enthusiasm for learning through bite-sized taster sessions, programmes designed to promote STEM education, and workshops designed to prepare people with skills for securing employment. While the RWPs in the South has a stronger focus on working with children and young people and the North

and Mid Wales RWP had a stronger all age focus, all three RWP targeted their resources on people living in CF areas and looked after children and young people, as directed by HEFCW. Within these broad categories, RWPs also direct their resources towards black and minority ethnic groups (BME), those with disabilities and towards supporting Welsh Medium students living in CF areas. Evidently, CF was the most pertinent means of identifying recipients groups of RWP resources, reflecting an assumption that CF is an accurate indicator of socio-economic disadvantage.

Discussions with RWP managers revealed that, on the whole, the targeting of Communities First areas was felt to be a valuable means of targeting resources. However, managers of all three RWPs raised concerns about the problems with using CF postcodes as an indicator of disadvantage. This included the possibility of excluding individuals or schools who experience high levels of socio-economic disadvantage (as indicated by other measures such as free school meal (FSM) or school performance levels) but do not live within CF areas. By the same measure, they also highlighted their frustration at having to work with pupils who attend schools with high percentages of CF pupils but who might not, as individuals, experience poverty or disadvantage. Evidently, RWP managers were aware of the ‘ecological fallacy’ (Robinson, 1950) committed when applying the Communities First label to define individual level disadvantage. They recognised that this label projects group-level characteristics on to individuals meaning that it has the tendency to erroneously label all those living in CF areas as ‘disadvantaged’. In reality CF areas are characterised by considerable heterogeneity in the social-class backgrounds of individuals living in them, as identified by Taylor et al (2013). These frustrations were voiced when I asked RWP managers how useful they felt the CF area indicator was for identifying target groups in receipt of reaching wider outreach support:

*It is to a certain extent, but I just, I don't believe it should be the only thing... and I certainly know from talking to teachers in schools, they get very frustrated by it, because it's like well what about the rest of the kids in my class, you know, who also need it. So it's not 100 per cent effective in that way, definitely not.*

*I would use it [CF postcodes] to create a bigger picture, so it would be one factor and you know definitely parental occupation would for me be, and it's not hard to get that information generally, EMA or free school meals would be another one, and just sort of build up the picture that way really. BME again, for certain*



*BME's I mean the care leavers, that's fine as a distinct target, because I think they are such a needy group. But you do get discrepancies in Communities First and I understand why because it's easy, if we could have something measurable ultimately, and you can measure post code, but it would just be one part of the bigger picture for me, definitely.*

Recognition that CF is a necessary but insufficient means of capturing disadvantage led the RWP managers to highlight the importance of using additional indicators of disadvantage in order to create a more comprehensive picture of the individuals they work with. The frustration with using CF as an indicator of disadvantage was felt particularly strongly by one RWP manager whose partnership covers large rural areas in Wales. Here the recent restructuring of Communities First into 'cluster areas'<sup>4</sup> has meant that many parts of mid and north Wales have lost their Communities First label but continue to experience high levels of disadvantage.

*I would focus on, obviously Communities First, but low participation areas, and there are kind of lots of places really and I'd also focus a lot more activity in rural areas.*

Evidently, these interviewees recognised that disadvantage is multiple and complex and can have very profound impact on people's propensity to participate. The emphasis here on rural areas is striking and perhaps reflects the way in which opportunities for learning are geographically as well as socially structured. Educational opportunities for individuals' living in rural areas are clearly presumed to be less accessible because of their geographical distance, and require more lengthy and time consuming journeys to access. However, this may be more apparent than real as evidence has shown that rates of participation in HE amongst individuals living in rural areas are higher than the average (as discussed in paper X). Nonetheless, RWP managers discussions revealed a strong sense that socio-economic disadvantage is manifest in multiple ways meaning that a number of factors need to be taken into account when considering the background context of the young people they work with:

*So you want to know what parental occupations are, you want to know if they've got their own bedroom because all of those things can be factors to reaching potential and progressing. If they've got part-time jobs and that kind of thing, any*

---

*parental experience of higher education, we look at their postcodes to see if they are in a Communities First area, any disabilities.*

*I mean it's looked after children and care leavers and Communities First, but we do, we do focus, hone in on the community first, and we do also look at things like free school meals, which I think is really important, EMA, parental occupation, disability, black and minority, ethnic groups, and again, we wouldn't just go ah look you know, it sounds odd, but you're not white therefore you're in the target group, we would look at what black and minority group and look at the underperforming ones.*

RWP managers were often sceptical about the extent to which CF (and other target groups such as BME) can be used as an unproblematic indicator of disadvantage. However, as the above interviewee points out, the category 'ethnic minority' is not heterogeneous; individuals within the broad category 'ethnic minority' experience varying inequalities and identities which differentially shape their educational experiences and their propensity to participate in HE. Clearly, RWP managers recognised this and therefore acknowledge that 'BME' should not be treated as a homogenous group since some ethnic groups are more or less likely to participate in HE than others and are unequal in terms of their access to high ranking universities. These assumptions have been supported by research which shows that black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi students are strikingly under-represented in 'old' universities (Shiner and Modood, 2002). Acknowledging this heterogeneity within broad categories such as CF or BME prompted managers to consider additional factors, such as school performance, to construct a more comprehensive understanding of individuals' experience of disadvantage.

Notwithstanding these perceived problems with using CF as an indicator of disadvantage (reflecting real methodological problems associated with its use, as illustrated by Taylor et al, 2013), its formal use in Reaching Wider strategies reflects an underpinning assumption that social and economic disadvantage is structured geographically. This in turn impacts on people's propensity to participate in HE. This assumption has justified the use of area-based approaches within Welsh Government widening participation strategies. Since CF has also been used in policy terms as an indicator of low participation<sup>5</sup> in HE the emphasis on CF

---

<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,

areas is, in some ways, perceived to be especially justified; CF not only (purportedly) defines areas characterised by particularly high levels of deprivation, but also areas with low levels of HE participation. Thus, while CF is not a direct measure of area based participation in HE (in contrast to POLAR which directly measures area-based participation in HE), it has been used in policy terms to capture areas characterised not only by socio-economic disadvantage but also low levels of participation (LPN). Thus, by targeting CF areas RWPs aim to promote participation in HE amongst a particular type of person, namely young non-traditional (or first generation) HE applicants. Given that those living in Low Participation Neighbourhoods are more likely to come from working-class as opposed to middle-class backgrounds (Taylor et al, 2013), there is some justification for this targeting of LPNs. However, given that a significant minority of individuals living in LPNs come from middle-class backgrounds and are not necessarily from non-traditional or first-generation entrants to HE (Taylor et al, 2013), LPNs are not unproblematic indicators of disadvantage. This questions the use of geographical areas (or post-codes) as a basis for defining the recipient groups of Reaching Wider resources. Arguably, RWP managers are right to use additional signifiers of disadvantage (such as school FSM rates or parental occupation) in order to help them to identify the children and young people most in need of their resources.

Besides the emphasis on CF, looked after children and care leavers were another significant target group. This emphasis reflects strong research evidence indicating that young people from local authority 'care' backgrounds are significantly less likely to make the progression to HE than young people from the general school population (Jackson and Ajayi, 2007). However, given that 'care leavers' constitute a much smaller category compared to CF in terms of the number of people RWPs are able to engage with, reference to this group was less frequent in RWP managers discussions. It must be noted, however, that all RWP managers agreed that looked after children and young people are an important target recipient group and felt that it was appropriate to invest resources into supporting this group to progress on to HE.

### ***Types of programmes***

---

employment, community safety, access to services, housing and physical environment. Rates of participation in HE are not used directly to define an areas' level of deprivation, however, the 'education' domain is characterised by average attainment levels at different key stages as well as percentage of people not entering HE at age 18-19. Thus, CF does capture an indicator of participation in HE.

Analysis of the RWP strategies and the interviews with managers revealed that two broadly defined categories of outreach programmes are delivered by RWPs. These were outreach programmes aimed at raising educational aspirations amongst children and young people on the one hand and those aimed at raising attainment (namely GCSE levels) on the other. The North and Mid Wales RWP was somewhat unique in its additional emphasis on delivering programmes aimed at supporting people's entry to employment through skills development programmes which have a particular focus on meeting regional skills shortages. RWP outreach work is distinct from the work delivered by widening access teams within universities (discussed in paper WACE2014-5) in the sense that RWPs place a greater emphasis on programmes aimed at raising aspirations and fostering enthusiasm and interest in education and learning in general rather than an exclusive focus on raising aspirations for HE specifically (which is a stronger focus of institutional widening access outreach work).

Thus, in addition to pre-HE entry outreach programmes aimed at raising aspirations for higher education aimed particularly but not exclusively at young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (largely those living in CF areas as discussed above), RWPs also delivered programmes aimed at younger age children (in primary schools) with the aim of raising their aspirations for education and learning in general. These sorts of programmes intended to have long-term impacts on HE participation. Outreach programmes of this sort included mentoring programmes with year 6 children to support their transition to secondary school or after-school 'clubs' designed to enhance curriculum subjects such as science and technology. These were typically delivered by university academics or students, designed to engage and enthuse young children in key curriculum areas, particularly those related to STEM subjects. Where outreach programmes are designed to encourage young people to aspire for HE the recipient audience tended to be young people in the final years of compulsory education or in post-16 education. These sorts of outreach programmes or activities included HE taster days or residential events whereby young people are invited on to university campuses to experience a 'taste' of university life, advice information and guidance workshops, or 'aspirational' talks in key curriculum subjects.

This focus on raising educational aspirations amongst children and young people is indicative of a particular understanding about the nature of inequalities in access to HE, one that is underpinned by Boudon's (1974) notion of the 'secondary effects' of social class. This assumes that social class differences in participation remain once attainment is taken into account. These differences are underpinned by socio-cultural differences in aspirations and

decisions at key stages of educational transition. Indeed, implicit within RWP managers' narratives about the reason why some social groups are more or less likely to participate in HE than others was a notion that cultural and social background underpins an individual's propensity to construct aspirations for and ultimately participate in HE. Participation in HE is therefore recognised as having both objective (informed by levels of prior attainment) and subjective (informed by aspirations which are in part socially and culturally constituted) elements. Indeed, RWP managers placed strong emphasis on the socio-cultural underpinnings of participation, in particular the way in which family history of participation, social and cultural expectations and resources of family knowledge and experience of HE come to bear upon participation, in some cases inhibiting their participation. As such, RWP managers saw their role as overcoming the effect of disadvantage by delivering programmes which raise people's awareness, aspirations or understandings of HE and to ultimately increase their likelihood of progressing on to HE:

*We work with primary school up to sort of 17, 18 year olds and it's part of all of our programmes about generic university life and we found the best way to erm, to help young people understand, it's not people like me sort of speaking, just giving talks or whatever, it's actually meeting university students and when they tell their stories quite often it's very evident that yes they've gone through a similar process, they went to a school and nobody in their family had gone to university. So they'll talk about how they found out about it and what they found and then how they're managing their studies and social life and things.*

*Yeah, but it's so outside people's experiences and it is thought to be for other people, you know, people with money, people with the background, you know, people whose parents are professionals, it's for everybody else.*

This emphasis on raising the educational aspirations of young people who might not expect to progress on to HE was a strong theme to emerge from interviews and was also evident in the Reaching Wider Strategies:

*'Raise Higher Education (HE) awareness amongst pupils, teachers and parents/careers'. (South East RWP strategy)*

*'To raise aspirations towards HE amongst young people and their families from Communities First areas' (South West Wales RWP)*

*'To raise, to ever increasing levels, the aspirations, confidence and self-belief of all people who live in Communities First areas' (North and Mid Wales RWP)*

The emphasis on working with young children, often at the primary school age, assumes that the propensity to participate in HE is informed by aspirations formed in childhood. 'Aspiration raising' programmes therefore intend to boost participation in HE amongst young people whose social circumstances, it is presumed, prevents them from aspiring or expecting to make the progression to HE:

*And I think you know it's showing them [primary children] the opportunities and you know they love the refectory, and it's all about building on that really and of course the older students are there and they are at a level now where they ... so they can see that they can get there [at the university] and so ... and I think that's important, so although they're young, you have to plant the seed early.*

Indeed, this emphasis on changing cultural attitudes towards HE in the community with the ultimate aim of widening access to HE more generally was emphasised by this practitioner:

*I see it as the long haul, which is about changing cultures of learning, with the overall aim of eventually giving people the knowledge that they can go to higher education if they choose to. But woven into that what I see is, in fact in the strategy there's a continuum and the continuum is from primary school right through to employment with family and community and all other agencies sort of woven into that so that what we see is that pathway whereby if we can shift people's aspirations and expectations then by the time it comes to choices in say year nine that will be on their radar.*

It is not possible to speculate about the impact of these programmes on people's propensity to participate in HE. Nonetheless, RWP managers spoke emphatically about the perceived benefits they felt their work had, especially when working with families and communities in which case they saw their work as having a 'strawberry plant' effect whereby an individual's participation on an outreach programme has an impact on their wider family or community through transferring the skills, experiences and knowledge about HE on to others.

In addition to this emphasis on raising aspirations was an emphasis on raising levels of educational attainment in order to facilitate progression on to HE. All three RWPs delivered programmes aimed at raising attainment levels in conventional educational qualifications such as GCSEs. Programmes aimed at boosting young people's educational attainment were largely in the form of GCSE revision sessions or programmes aimed at supporting the development of key skills related to curriculum subjects. These sorts of programmes aim to support progression on to a conventional HE experience, namely to under-graduate degree programmes, and are predicated on the notion that attainment is a significant predictor of progression on to HE (Chowdry et al, 2013; Gorard, 2005).

Programmes designed to raise the attainment levels of young people prior to their entry to HE suggests that RWPs role is one of transforming students prior to their entry to HE. Programmes which raise attainment levels convert potential low status students into high status ones (*reference needed*), making them more desirable and more accessible to high ranking HEIs. This sort of work may positively contribute to increasing equity on an institutional level, (through widening access to high ranking HEIs) but do not, however, contribute to widening access on an aggregate (sector) level. These sorts of programmes, arguably, don't simply divert disadvantaged students in to lower-ranking universities which may be a more likely scenario of programmes designed to raise aspirations rather than attainment. However, programmes aimed at raising attainment levels of disadvantaged students represent a win-win situation for high ranking HEIs who receive 'transformed' students (students from disadvantage backgrounds who have successfully increased their levels of attainment) without requiring any sort of change in curriculum or admissions procedures or compromise of status on the part of the HEI. Moreover, these sorts of programmes do nothing to alter young people's perceptions of high ranking HEIs, meaning that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds may continue to perceive themselves as 'strangers in paradise' (Reay et al, 2009) given the perceived cultural, social and ethnic differences between themselves and student body of high ranking HEIs. While notion of 'social discomfort' have been contested by some researchers (Brooks, 2003) who emphasise the way in which perceptions of academic ability, heavily informed by the peer group, are more likely to inform university choice than feelings of 'social-misfit' between individual and university (Brooks, 2003), it remains the case that programmes aimed at raising attainment do little to alter the influence of social contexts on young people's university choices. They also do nothing to alter the ways in which the representation of the

‘prestigious’ university evokes connotations of elitism and exclusion in the ‘public imagination’ which may operate as a powerful deterrent to participation in high ranking universities for some individuals.

Widening access rather than recruitment

A striking theme to emerge from interviews with RWP managers was the emphasis and enthusiasm with which they spoke of their work in terms of widening participation in HE as opposed to institutional recruitment. All RWP managers were emphatic that their work was the ‘real’ widening access work and highlighted the difference between their work and institutional widening access strategies for being, what they perceived, a tool for institutional recruitment. They commonly valued their responsibility for widening participation, in particular, the role they played in encouraging individuals (largely young people) to progress on to HE, wherever this may be.

*I think that's the absolute joy of Reaching Wider is that it's not recruitment and all of us, because we always say we work for reaching wider, rather than X Uni, and we're not in marketing for a very good reason...certainly the core team look on it as 'what's best for the young person?' ... I mean I certainly think there's a by-product for the university and that perhaps some students think about coming to X Uni when they wouldn't have but that's partly because they found out about a course they didn't know existed, or because sometimes they widened out to students and they want to stay local as well, which is certainly a factor...So you know, I think there's a side effect of recruitment but it's certainly not the motivation of what we do and we very much sell ourselves as reaching wider rather than X Uni and we've always been super sort of conscious of not.*

While reaching wider practitioners emphasised that their activities and initiatives were aimed at promoting progression on to HE (and not to a specific institution), as this quote illustrates, they commonly admitted that recruitment was a by-product of the outreach work they delivered. This was particularly the case where programmes were delivered in local communities where (young) people may gain experience of a particular university through programmes such as university taster sessions or advice and guidance sessions.

The emphasis on widening access to HE in general, rather than institutional recruitment suggests that RWPs play a role in meeting an equity rather than excellence agenda. This is



reflected in the way that, compared to the outreach work delivered by widening access teams located in HEIs in Wales (discussed in paper WAQLCE2014-5) RWPs were, on the whole, more likely to deliver programmes aimed at much younger children. In these cases the ‘impact’ of outreach work is longitudinal in terms of their eventual participation in HE and therefore extremely difficult to track. This sort of focus on widening access to HE in general rather than institutional recruitment might speculatively impact on student mobility whereby raising HE aspirations might encourage a young person to leave Wales for their higher education rather than remain within its borders. This contradicts the overwhelming focus of institutional Fee Plans and widening access strategies which aim to improve recruitment of Welsh domiciled CF students in Welsh HEIs (as discussed in paper WAQLCE2014-5). On the one hand RWP outreach work appears to encourage (mainly) young people from Welsh CF areas to engage in HE, anywhere in the UK, whilst institutional widening access strategies encourage people to participate in Welsh HEIs. They potentially have opposing implications in terms of cross-border flows whereby Reaching Wider programmes encourage student mobility outside of Wales while institutional widening access strategies encourage students to remain within Wales.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the role of RWPs in delivering the Welsh Government’s widening access agenda, with close attention to the target recipients of Reaching Wider resources and an exploration of the types of programmes they deliver. Analysis of RWP strategies and interviews with RWP managers revealed that resources are overwhelmingly directed towards children and young people living in Communities First areas. This area-based strategy to widening participation reflects an assumption that inequalities in access to HE are socially and geographically structured, and therefore, directing resources to individuals should increase rates of participation in these areas. As recognised by the RWP managers, however, and supported by evidence (Taylor et al, 2013) CF areas are not unproblematic means of defining socio-economic disadvantage. For this reason, outreach work aimed at individuals in CF areas may at best engage with individuals who do not need Reaching Wider’s outreach support or at worst, fail to engage with individuals who do. The use of additional indicators of disadvantage (such as FSM, parental occupation or experience of HE) to identify children and young people from families who experience the highest level of disadvantage would be

appropriate. It is timely that HEFCW supports RWPs in identifying other measures of disadvantage in order to define recipient groups of reaching wider resources.

While the RWPs varied in how they delivered specific programmes, and in the extent to which the emphasis was on children and young people of all ages, all RWP managers emphasised their role in abating the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on young people's likelihood of participating in HE. This was largely done through programmes aimed at both raising aspirations for education and boosting educational attainment in order to support progression to HE. Evidently, low aspirations and attainment, relating to social and cultural background are presumed to be key factors in determining non-participation. The emphasis on raising levels of educational attainment amongst disadvantaged young people is justified given research which illustrates the primary role of educational attainment in predicting access to HE (Gorard, 2005). Programmes which alter young people's aspiration, attitudes and awareness of HE and boost their attainment levels might positively support individual students to access elite HEIs and degree programmes and reap the associated economic rewards. However, these programmes do little to change the institutional culture of (high ranking) HEIs which might work to alienate and exclude students from disadvantage backgrounds (Reay et al, 2001). They require considerable transformation on the part of the student at the pre-entry stage, yet require no change on the part of the institution. This results in an overall gain for the institution; if RWP programmes are successful HEIs receive 'transformed' (i.e. high attaining) widening access students. The extent to which RWP outreach work will bring about long term changes in cultures of participation amongst students from disadvantaged backgrounds may therefore be questionable.

The paper addresses wider debates about social mobility which currently lie at the centre of much education policy in England and Wales. These policies currently rely on the assumption that providing disadvantaged groups with the resources that the middle-classes already have (i.e. access to elite forms of HE) inequalities in employment can be reduced. This approach, however, does not disturb the privileges of the middle-classes and so cannot improve relative rates of social mobility because it fails to recognise positional competition for a livelihood; that one person's success relies on the skills, qualifications and credentials of another's (Brown, 2000). Widening access policies, whether they are delivered on national, regional or institutional levels, fail to recognise that while encouraging participation in HE amongst individuals might successfully support their entry to elite HEIs, this does little to address

wider inequalities in life chances resulting from positional competition and labour market congestion, particularly at the top.

### References

- Brown, P. 2000. The globalisation of positional competition. *Sociology*. 34. 4. Pp, 633-653
- Chowdry, H. et al. 2013. Widening participation in higher education: analysis using linked administrative data sets. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*. 176, (2), pp 431-457
- Gorard, S. 2005. Where shall we widen it? Higher education and the age participation rate in Wales. *Higher Education Quarterly*. 59. (1), pp3-18
- HEFCW. 2010. *HEFCW's Draft Strategic Approach and Plan for Widening Access to Higher Education 2010/11 to 2012/13* [Online]. Cardiff: Available at: [http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/council\\_and\\_committees/council\\_papers\\_and\\_minutes/2010/10%20126%20wa%20approach%20annex%20b.pdf](http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/council_and_committees/council_papers_and_minutes/2010/10%20126%20wa%20approach%20annex%20b.pdf) [Accessed: 06/06/2014].
- Jackson, S and Ajayi, S 2007. Foster care and higher education. *Adoption and Fostering*. 31 (1), pp 62-72
- Reay, D. Davies, J, David, M and Ball, S.J. 2001. 'Choice of degree of degrees of choice? Class, 'race' and the higher education choice process. *Sociology*. 35 (4), pp. 855-874
- Reay, D, Crozier, G and Clayton, J. 2009. 'Strangers in paradise?' Working-class students in elite universities. *Sociology*. 43(6) 1103-1121
- Robinson, W.S. 1950. Ecological correlations and the behaviour of individuals. *American Sociological Review*. 15: 351-357
- Shiner, M and Modood, T. 2002. Help or hindrance? Higher education and the route to ethnic equality. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. 23 (2), pp. 209-232
- Taylor, C., Rees, G., Sloan, L and Davies, R. 2013. Creating an inclusive higher education system? Progression and outcomes of students from low participation neighbourhoods at a Welsh university. *Contemporary Wales*. 26 (1), pp 138-161
- Welsh Assembly Government. 2002. *Reaching Higher. Higher Education and the Learning Country. A strategy for the higher education sector in Wales*. Cardiff: National Assembly for Wales.
- 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.

