



With the support of the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Union

**„Identifying Barriers in Promoting the European Standards and Guidelines
for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level“**

IBAR

Agreement number – 2010 – 4663/001 - 001

WP6
Quality and Access
National study – United Kingdom
2011

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

IBAR Project Work-Package 6

Quality and Access – survey of institutions UK

Research Team, University of Strathclyde

Professor Ray Land
Professor Heather Eggins
Professor George Gordon
Catherine Owen
Stuart Boon

Author

Catherine Owen

Introduction

This report presents data from four UK higher education institutions, three from England and one from Scotland, about the management of their internal quality assurance systems. The research was conducted between June and October 2011 by the IBAR Project team at the University of Strathclyde.

The report focuses on the policy and procedures for managing access to higher education. It draws on data from four UK institutions and also examines the broader legislative and political environment that influences institutional practice in this area.

At present, there is no dedicated section on the management of access in the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG1)*. This report will form part of the data informing a synthesis report for this work-package of the IBAR project that will make recommendations about the status of access as an area of concern in the context of ESG1.

1. Defining access

A recent article by John Butcher, Rohini Corfield and John Rose-Adams in *Times Higher Education*¹ identifies the “fluidity of discourse” around access or widening participation and the multiple terms and concepts (inclusion, equity, diversity) with which access shares increasingly un-delineated territory. There is no single definition of access or of widening participation at a national or sectoral level in the UK, although the latter term in particular is very commonly used to describe a broad range of activities undertaken by agencies and institutions. Universities are therefore free to define the scope of their own activities, although there is an increasingly directive legislative and financial environment that would make it almost impossible for any institution to avoid undertaking work in this area.

Higher education institutions in the UK, partly through external steering and partly through their own initiatives, have pursued a raft of endeavours to widen participation in higher education over many decades. Perhaps the first major landmark in this area was the adoption of the Robbins Report (1963). Not only did the Robbins Report lead to the creation of a number of new universities, but it established the principle that university education should be available to all who were suitably qualified to benefit from it. Soon afterwards the polytechnic sector was established, further extending provision.

The next major milestone was the decision in the late 1980s to allow a further significant increase in university enrolments. The cost for institutions was a substantial reduction in the unit of resource as government sought lower costs through efficiencies.

The 2004 Schwartz Report² considered how universities might define merit and to what extent a fair admissions system might include information on the backgrounds on prospective students. In particular, Schwartz considered whether admissions criteria based on grades alone could be defended in a mass higher education system, especially when there is uneven awareness of and response to the increasing diversity of applicants, qualifications and pathways into higher

¹<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=417374>

² Available from: <http://www.admissions-review.org.uk/downloads/finalreport.pdf>

education. The effect of social background on examination performance was identified as a key reason to consider potential demonstrated by different means. The Schwarz Report was clear that it is not the task of higher education admissions to compensate for educational or social disadvantage, but that it is legitimate for higher education institutions to seek latent talent that might not be clear from examination results.

In response partly to the Schwartz Report and to the increasing challenges posed by a mass higher education system, a range of specific initiatives have operated, locally, regionally and nationally to widen participation in higher education. With the devolution of responsibility for higher education to the respective authorities in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England, distinctive variants and actions have occurred in the last two decades. All universities must abide by relevant legislation such as that on Equal Opportunities. Many university-based initiatives are not enshrined in legislation but they may be enabled by targeted financial assistance from the relevant Funding Council. HEFCE allocated £143 million in 2010/11 to support widening participation activities in institutions in England and Wales as part of the recurrent grant.

In particular, universities in England wishing to charge tuition fees above the basic level set by the government are required to commit to an Access Agreement approved by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA)³, which is an independent public body that helps safeguard and promote fair access to higher education. At present, OFFA Access Agreements only cover full-time undergraduate courses and PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) and ITT (Initial Teacher Training) courses for home/EU students at English universities and colleges. In future, subject to Parliamentary approval, they will also cover part-time students. Access Agreements do not cover postgraduate courses or apply to overseas students.

Much of the focus of OFFA Access Agreements is the removal of financial barriers to higher education for students from poorer backgrounds. Universities are required to give bursaries to eligible students and from 2012-13, following major changes to student finance in England, there will be no minimum bursary. Lower income students may also be eligible for support under the new National Scholarship Programme which is a new scheme to help disadvantaged students with the cost of going to university. Jointly funded by the UK Government and universities, it will offer eligible students a £3,000 support package to help with the cost of going to university.

However, barriers to access are not just financial and the diversity of the UK higher education system is reflected in the diversity of approaches to encouraging and supporting the aspiration of different groups of students. This study includes universities who might be broadly described as "recruiting" institutions that do not always fill all the places on all courses and whose focus on widening participation strategies might serve different purposes from those universities (also represented in this study) who are traditionally over-subscribed and could be described as "selecting" institutions.

Regardless of their strategic focus, universities are required to make a significant financial commitment towards OFFA's goal of "achieving a socially representative intake". OFFA reports an increased investment in access measures to £602 million a year by 2015-16, up from £407 million in 2011-12. This figure rises to £738 million a year when the Government's contribution to the National Scholarship

³<http://www.offa.org.uk/>

Programme is included. £602 million represents 27% of universities' collective fee income above the basic level of £6,000. This consists of:

- £414 million on financial support of which £69 million is in fee waivers
- £106 million a year on additional outreach

- £82 million a year on activities to improve student retention and success⁴.

The Access Agreements published by OFFA describe a wide range of commitments that target not only students from disadvantaged socio-economic groups, but also students that might experience different types of barriers to participation, including disabled learners, mature learners and (in some cases) learners from minority ethnic backgrounds. As in other aspects of quality managements in the UK, institutions are free to define their own arrangements and activities within a context of defensible action. Access Agreements set out the access measures that universities and colleges will put in place. Typical measures include additional expenditure on outreach activities (e.g. summer schools, mentoring, after-school tuition and links with schools and colleges in disadvantaged areas), financial support for students including fee waivers, bursaries and scholarships, and additional expenditure on activities to support student retention and success. Access Agreements also set out the targets that institutions set themselves to make progress. Targets will mean different things for different institutions depending on their access record, but must be agreed with OFFA.

If a university in England is found to have breached its Access Agreement, OFFA is able to direct HEFCE (the Higher Education Funding Council for England) to deduct a fine from the university's grant or suspend part of its grant or may refuse to renew the university's or college's access agreement, preventing it from charging full-time undergraduate students tuition fees above the standard level. There is therefore a serious financial imperative for universities in England to take the issue of access to higher education seriously.

In June 2011 the Department of Business Innovation and Skills in England published a white paper on Higher Education, *Students at the Heart of the System*⁵. In general, the proposals in this paper only apply to the higher education sector in England. Chapter 5 of the white paper deals with improved social mobility through fairer access. It summarises recent progress, for example an increase of 6600 young people from the most disadvantaged areas entering higher education in the past five years. It also acknowledges the support for these activities from the HEFCE Widening Participation Allocation. However the gap between disadvantaged and advantaged is still seen as too great and proposals are made to address it. One area highlighted is the growing gap in ability to enter the most selective universities.

Part of the solution is seen as improving the quality of advice available in schools. The Government also intends to use data on how well pupils do when they leave school in performance statistics. A study by the Sutton Trust (2009) found that even when young people from disadvantaged backgrounds gained the level of qualifications to go to a selective university they had a lower propensity to apply. Actions already taken include the *Reading Opportunities* programme where 12 leading English universities collaborate to improve access. Each potential student is paired with an undergraduate student mentor to create online

⁴ Source: <http://www.offa.org.uk/press-releases/universities-and-colleges-to-increase-their-spending-on-access-to-600-million-a-year/>

⁵ Available from: <http://discuss.bis.gov.uk/hereform/white-paper/>

individually tailored pre-application/entry support aimed at raising aspirations to enter a research-intensive university. There are also summer schools and master classes.

The Skills Funding Agency in England supports *Access to Higher Education Diplomas* to assist students with few, if any, qualifications. These are targeted at under-represented groups and are facilitated by partnerships between higher education institutions and local further education colleges. In 2010, around 28000 applications to higher education held an Access to Higher Education qualification. Some 19000 with that qualification were accepted into higher education in 2010. At 64 per cent that compares well with the overall rate of 73 per cent of applications to higher education succeeding. The Government is also working with the *Gateways to the Professions Collaborative Forum* to encourage the professions to widen access to professional careers, including through non-university routes such as Apprenticeships.

In December 2010 the Liberal Democrat MP Simon Hughes was appointed as the Government's Advocate for Access to Education and his report⁶ was published in July 2011. Hughes identifies the complexity of choice facing school pupils and the increasing importance of good, accurate information available at an earlier age to help inform good decision-making. Partnerships between all levels of education as well as with non-educational organisations should be developed to maximise the opportunities for communicating the benefits of further and higher education. Hughes also calls for greater powers for OFFA, including the use of objective benchmarks instead of measuring performance against stated intent.

An analysis of the research literature underlines the concerns of the policy makers during the first decade of the twenty-first century. It is characterized by several inter-related issues. One is the overall position of the UK in terms of the mass higher education systems which were being rapidly established worldwide (McNay 2006). In 1999 the government called for a target of 50% participation rate for England and Wales to be attained by 2010. (This did not come to pass.) A number of other countries have been able to surpass this target, notably in the Far East (e.g. Korea).

The second issue is the continual shift in the nature of the labour market, with a loss of manual, unskilled jobs and a growing demand for highly skilled workers (DBIS, 2009). If the country was not able to train sufficient skilled workers to take an effective part in the technological revolution, then its prosperity was likely to be at risk. More and more jobs have been becoming 'graduate jobs', particularly in IT and in service industries, and, partially as a result of this, society has developed a growing expectation that a degree is a necessary pre-requisite to a satisfying career (DFES 2003). It has become a rite of passage. Hence the demand for higher education has grown steadily.

The third issue, following from this, has been, and remains, of particular concern to government. 'Trends in Young Participation for England 2006/7' (HEFCE 2010) indicates the discrepancy between those drawn from higher socio-economic groups, which can reach 70% participation rates in some post-code areas, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds whose participation was running at 14% in 2001-4. When one considers that similar ranges of IQ levels are found in each socio-economic group in society, then the loss to the country of potential ability is

⁶Available from: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/education-advocate-report.pdf>

considerable (Sutton Trust and Carnegie Corporation 2009). An added concern of governments is the necessity to avoid a growing gap between those with opportunities and those without, a situation which can lead to civil disturbance (Percy-Smith 2000).

The drive to widen participation among those from disadvantaged backgrounds has met with some small success. The White Paper on Higher Education (DBIS 2011) notes in Chapter 5, paragraph 5.4 that 'the proportion of young people living in the most disadvantaged areas who enter higher education has increased by around 30 per cent (6,600 more students) over the past five years'. Even so, paragraph 5.6 states that 'currently fewer than one in five young people from the most disadvantaged areas enter higher education compared to more than one in two for the most advantaged areas'. Concern relating to retention is also examined in the research (National Audit Office 2007), (Yorke and Thomas 2003).

This rise in participation is arguably partly due to government efforts, particularly by the introduction of specific initiatives (Baxter, Hatt and Tate 2007), (DFES 2003), (Archer, Hutchings and Ross 2003), (Forsyth and Furlong 2003, *Socio-Economic Disadvantage and Access to Higher Education*), (Forsyth and Furlong 2003), (Galindo-Rueda, Marcenaro-Gutierrez and Vignoles 2004). One such initiative in England and Wales was the AimHigher programme whose objective was to widen participation in higher education by raising aspirations and developing the abilities of young people from underrepresented groups as well as providing support through the admissions and funding process to help such students to enter higher education (HEFCE 2007). Those included were young people (ages 13-30) from neighbourhoods with lower-than-average participation in higher education; lower socio-economic groups; depressed geographical areas; families with no previous experience of higher education; minority or ethnic groups, and those in foster care or with disabilities. The programme provided a range of outreach activities at a regional and area level, by means of partnerships between higher education institutions, schools, colleges, employers and other agencies. Types of activities included residential visits to universities; providing information, advice and guidance on specific issues; summer schools, mentoring schemes and study groups. The AimHigher programme was thoroughly evaluated, including longitudinal tracking studies, studies of selected area partnerships and impact monitoring. Indications as to its effectiveness appear to have been positive (HEFCE 2006b), (Hatt, Baxter and Tate 2007), (Hatt, Baxter and Tate 2008), (Thomas 2011).

Action on Access has been a broader initiative, funded by both HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) and Northern Ireland's Department for Employment and Learning (Action on Access 2010). Action on Access teams work with institutions and partnerships including Aimhigher, providing advice, information and support to their widening participation activities. A major review by Gorard, Smith, Thomas, May, Adnett and Slack (2006) assessed all the research concerned with addressing the barriers to participation in Higher Education up to that point. This included studies of the cultural dimensions of decision making (Furlong 2004), (Connor 2001), (Reay, David and Ball 2005) and (Thomas and Quinn 2006).

Another topic examined in the research has been the issue of 'fair access'. The Schwartz report (2004) made recommendations for good practice in admissions to higher education. Adnett, McCaig, Slack and Bowers-Brown (2011) examined how far transparency, consistency and fairness had been achieved. Recently the issue

of access to the highly selective universities has come in for scrutiny, with the Office for Fair Access (2010) publishing on the topic. Policies are now in place to encourage the highly selective universities to take a socio-economically broader range of students.

Considerable research has been done on the effects of changes in financial arrangements for students in the last decade. Adnett (2006) notes the variety of financial arrangements in the four countries of the British Isles, commenting on the common problems of demand, supply and cost, which were met by different solutions in each country. Davies, Slack, Hughes, Mangan and Vigurs (2007) undertook a detailed study examining the relationship of fees, bursaries and fair access. A further study by McCaig and Adnett (2009) considered the impact on widening participation and fair access of the new arrangements for English universities, in relation to the rules for attracting additional fee income and the need to sign access agreements with the Office for Fair Access. Pennell and West (2005), in an earlier financial study, examined the impact of increased fees on participation in higher education in England. The financing of higher education continues to be in flux, with yet new arrangements coming into being in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2012.

2. Institutions surveyed

The four institutions selected represent a sample of the variant types of higher education institution in the UK. After the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, polytechnics in the UK achieved degree awarding status and became universities. Our sample was selected to demonstrate the diversity of higher education in the UK and to ensure that the data collected offered a rich picture of practice across the sector.

Our sample includes:

University A, a research intensive large multi-discipline institution, formally dates from the start of the twentieth century, although it can trace its origins to earlier colleges. It is relatively large by UK standards with around 16500 undergraduate and 8000 postgraduate students. It features prominently in UK and QS university rankings and is a member of British and international groupings of research intensive universities.

University B was a former polytechnic which opted to become a university under the powers of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Subsequent mergers with colleges in the region added Nursing and Midwifery to the academic profile and three smaller campuses. The University has around 16000 students spread across five campuses. It also offers foundation awards in conjunction with partner further education colleges. Some 5000 students study in Europe and Asia for University B awards. There is a strong commitment to employment-related provision.

University C dates from the late nineteenth century. It became an independent institution in the 1960s. Further academic diversification occurred through growth and, in the 1990s, via merger with higher education colleges. Currently it has some 17000 students and a strong professional orientation. Distance learning students account for almost 20 per cent of the student enrolment. It has some world-renowned areas of research excellence.

University D is one of the newer universities in the UK, progressing from the status of a higher education college, to that of a University College and then full university status in recent decades. Mergers during that phase also diversified the academic profile. It has around 8000 undergraduate students, of which 1300 are studying for further education qualifications. Almost half of the student population are mature students.

3. Research methodology

Data collection for WP6 was conducted in three ways: firstly, as a desk study, using documents publicly available on the websites of the four institutions to uncover policies and information about institutional activities related to access. In accessing these documents, the team used a number of pre-defined search terms relating to the research questions defined by the IBAR project including “widening participation”, “access”, “disability” and “student support”. During this first phase of data collection, a number of key individuals at each institution with particular responsibility for/or interest in access issues were identified.

The second phase of data collection comprised semi-structured, exploratory telephone interviews with those individuals identified in phase one of the data collection who were available to speak to the team. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and focused on uncovering barriers to implementation of policies and a discussion of the role that activities relating to access play in terms of institutional mission.

A third phase of data collection comprised a short literature review and study of relevant grey literature to inform a consideration of the sectoral and/or national policy context of access to higher education in the UK.

During our research we identified a number of limitations and challenges to data collection which are in themselves relevant findings. In particular, we have had a number of discussions with colleagues at the four institutions we surveyed about institutional change and uncertainty. UK higher education is currently experiencing considerable turbulence because of world economic problems. This means that some of the individuals we have identified as key institutional contacts are unsure about their future role(s) at their institutions because of staff cuts and re-organisations and unclear whether they will be able to support the project at local level in the longer term. Similarly, some units or other institutional groupings engaged in access-related activities are unsure about long-term funding and whether some programmes or initiatives will continue.

In one case, a member of staff had been recommended to us by a number of her colleagues, but was reluctant to speak to us about her work. Her focus is primarily on faculty-based support for first year students in the transition phase between school and university. Although we felt that her work was highly relevant and would have welcomed the opportunity to find out more information, it was her feeling that her activities were not directly relevant to the topic of access. This situation illustrates the tensions associated with the varied definitions and understandings of “access” described in section 2 of this report.

Findings

6.1 Institutional policies on access

In all cases, no single document covers the institutional position on access. Instead, a broad mission statement is supported by a number of strategies, approaches and activities that together create a distinctive “flavour” to access activities at each institution surveyed. Interviewees described how policies on access might be “buried” in other related documentation, for example in admissions policies or widening participation strategies but in each case the institution's approach to access is closely aligned to its strategic positioning.

Two of the universities surveyed (B and D) describe themselves explicitly as “widening participation institutions” and their access arrangements reflect a strategic commitment to provision of higher education opportunities to groups who may otherwise be excluded (HEFCE identifies the following groups: people from low-income backgrounds; people from lower socio-economic groups; people from low participation neighbourhoods; certain minority ethnic groups; disabled people). Both of these institutions received degree awarding powers under the 1992 Higher and Further Education Act which require new universities to recruit from under-represented groups.

Access strategies at these types of institutions often have target-driven aims that are intended to boost recruitment numbers, usually from the local area. For example, at University B, there is an explicit aim “to increase participation by non-traditional and under-represented learners”. University B's strategy combines a variety of access routes (for example, the accreditation of prior learning or progression routes via further education colleges) with educational delivery methods including networked, work-based and e-learning that are intended to support learners from differing backgrounds. University B describes its access policy as:

“The University positively encourages applications from all sections of the community, regardless of sex, marital status, age, responsibility for dependants, socio-economic status, race, colour, ethnic or national origin, sexual orientation or disability.

The University is committed to opening up opportunities for learners from diverse backgrounds to study at the university, as part of its commitment to the role of higher education enabling lifelong learning and as a mechanism for supporting social mobility.

The University is keen to attract the widest diversity of learners from all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to study for Foundation, Undergraduate and Postgraduate degrees at the university campuses, at our partner Further Education colleges or through work-based or distance learning.”

The other two universities (A and C) may be broadly described as “selecting” institutions who have more applicants than places for many of their courses. For these institutions, the focus of access activities is to remove barriers to potential learners who may not otherwise aspire to a university education rather than to achieve pre-defined quotas, although there is some debate about how to measure success of institutional initiatives without setting at least notional numerical targets. The members of staff interviewed at these institutions described their

access strategies in terms of civic engagement or social responsibility. In both universities there is a long tradition of socially-engaged, liberal educational provision linked explicitly to the terms of their founding charter. Access policies in these institutions emphasise fairness in recruitment and selection activities and both universities have nurtured close relationships with local schools in areas of relative deprivation with the aim of raising the aspirations of young people and identifying potential recruits. University C describes its approach to managing admissions as:

"The achievement of formal qualifications is not the only barometer of a student's potential. Admissions staff will assess the application "holistically", taking into account skills, experience and abilities as well as commitment and motivation to study to establish whether the applicant has the potential to benefit from the programme and graduate successfully. Experience may include knowledge or practice gained from previous work or study, voluntary or community involvement or care responsibilities. Applications will be dealt with on their individual merits.

The University supports initiatives to promote wider access to all programmes and is committed to extend access to and participation in Higher Education. The University has a specific engagement strategy and is involved in a range of initiatives which are both regional and national in scope and aspiration. These initiatives are designed to target individuals, regions and educational establishments where culturally, geographically, socially and economically there is a historically poor uptake of higher education opportunities. The University will not positively discriminate in favour of applicants from low participation groups. Each applicant is assessed on his or her individual merits."

Three of the institutions surveyed are required to have OFFA access agreements in place (the fourth institution is in Scotland where institutions have direct agreements with the Scottish Funding Council on access arrangements). Whilst these agreements might increasingly be perceived as *de facto* institutional access policies and/or plans of action they can also be viewed with some skepticism at institutional level. This is partly because the agreements are written with an external audience in mind and are inevitably carefully constructed to create a favourable impression of institutional activity. Similarly, the agreements are perceived to be weak on measurable targets or real indicators of effect. One member of staff at University A noted that "the OFFA agreements are all about money spent and not about impact". OFFA agreements can be understood as having a fiscal thrust: they are agreements that allow institutions and government to justify the leveraging of student tuition fees by demonstrating what proportion of the income generated is being spent on access-related activities.

Although the details of access policies and/or OFFA Access Agreements differ, commonly institutions employ individuals or teams to manage access-related activities including schools and colleges liaison, recruitment and admissions and educational development and support. In some institutions, widening participation activities are undertaken by individuals or teams as part of a more generalised remit. In some cases, there are dedicated staff members who perform strategically-targeted activities and who are likely to have specific responsibility for supporting the development of institutional strategy or policy.

One notable feature of all the interviews conducted for this study was the passion demonstrated by those staff members involved in a variety of activities associated with widening access. A number of interviewees remarked on the personal and emotional dimensions of the access agenda, one interviewee is himself an alumnus of a widening access programme. Interviewees also remarked on their frustration with institutional policies or practices that are perceived as "politically timid" or that reflect the values of senior managers who don't understand the real-life experiences of non-traditional learners. In one example, a university re-designing its financial aid package for poorer students was unwilling to act on feedback from the widening participation team about the legitimacy of differing routes and study modes for potential students and designed instead a support package that reflected a highly traditional view of a "gold standard" idealised learner (i.e. a recent school leaver who studies full-time, lives in university accommodation and joins university societies).

In the same institution interviewees discussed the importance of "mainstreaming" widening participation policies so that the access agenda informs every aspect of university management. For example, recent planning for capital investment in new sports facilities created opportunities for discussion about the inclusivity of the design and the activities offered so that the new buildings would serve as much of the student population as possible, not just those involved in traditional sports societies or university sports teams and would also help the university connect with its local community.

These examples illustrate a key tension in the status of access or widening participation policies within institutions. A number of interviewees unequivocally stated that their ambition is to influence institutional culture and practice to create an environment in which widening access is no longer seen as an "add-on" or "tokenistic" but is part of normal day-to-day business. In particular, there is a desire to avoid a deficit view of access in which certain groups or individuals are perceived as problematic or deserving of special help. However, the more that an access-oriented culture permeates all institutional activity, the harder it is to argue for special allocation of funding or targeted activities, or for dedicated posts. This tension operates at both institutional and sectoral level: it may be impossible, or at least highly undesirable to set fixed benchmarks for access-related activity, but in the absence of any quantifiable standards, there will always be debate about how much resource is needed and how it is leveraged. One interviewee described an environment of almost perpetual debate at his university about the scope and scale of widening access activities: "how wide is 'wide' meant to be?" This discussion is echoed in all the institutions surveyed as financial constraints mean that every aspect of university activity is increasingly judged on fiscal grounds. One interviewee commented:

"The challenge is how to manage the balance between mainstreaming the use of money for widening participation and determining funding for specific groups and activities... it's too easy for widening participation to get lost if it is not articulated explicitly. The interesting thing is where the strategic 'hooks' are... resources follow what is seen as important, what's in the strategic plan."

6.2 The alignment of institutional policies and national policies

All of the institutions surveyed, in common with every university in the UK, are bound by equality legislation. Of particular relevance is the new draft code of conduct for Higher and Further Education published in October 2010 by the Equality and Human Rights Commission⁷. University D's statement on compliance illustrates a typical institutional response:

"The University is subject to the public sector equality duty which is intended to promote equality for all. The University is required to have 'due regard' to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act;
- advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and people who do not share it; and
- foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

To advance equality and foster good relations between people, the University aims to:

- remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by people who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic;
- meet the needs of people who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of people who do not share it;
- encourage people who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such people is disproportionately low; and
- tackle prejudice and promote understanding between people from different groups."

Universities must publish information to demonstrate compliance with legislation. University D's statement of compliance is as follows:

"The University is committed to comply with its legal requirements and accordingly it will publish sufficient information to demonstrate its compliance with the General Public Sector Equality Duty in line with the timescales set out in legislation. In particular it will prepare and publish information on:

- the effect of policies and practices;
- equality analyses undertaken;
- equality objectives;
- details of engagement undertaken.

In order to comply with its duties, the University will:

- look at evidence, engage with people such as employees, service users and others and consider the effect of what the University is doing will have on the whole community;

⁷ Available from: <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/legal-and-policy/equality-act/equality-act-consultations/closed-consultations/>

- undertake equality analyses of all policies, practices or other significant course of action;
- draw on a range of guidance and support – particularly from the HE sector organisation, the Equality Challenge Unit. The University will also be mindful of statutory guidance issued by the Equality and Human Rights Commission;
- comply with the publication requirements by publishing data that is readily available in relation to our students and employees in respect of protected characteristics;
- collect information in respect of all protected characteristics; and
- adopt equality objectives and address issues in the context of the equality duties and protected characteristics."

Equality legislation does not only apply to student admissions or access but to all university activities that involve human participants, including staff recruitment and management. It is of particular relevance in the case of arrangements made for students with disabilities. The status of these arrangements in the context of definitions of access differs across institutions. In some cases, universities see support for students with disabilities as part of a broader package of measures to support participation in higher education and descriptions of this provision are included in the Access Agreement with OFFA. In other institutions support for disabled students, whilst recognised as a crucial part of university activity, is not perceived as an access issue. The institutions surveyed all provide a wide range of activities designed to support disabled students, but were reluctant to see this provision as part of their access agenda. One reason for this might be that "access" is perceived primarily as a strategic, and therefore to some extent discretionary activity. Whilst in the current political climate no university could be seen to ignore the access agenda, the way in which access is defined and operationalised is determined by the institution. Support for disabled students is perceived as non-negotiable and is regulated through a different strand of legislation.

However, there are similar concerns permeating arrangements for students with disabilities as for those who may be entering the university under widening access agreements. One issue is "who to count" in the numbers of students who might need special support. At University B, about 11% of students self-identify as disabled on enrollment. A large number of these students may suffer from "invisible" disabilities including dyslexia. It is clear to the staff responsible for designing support activities that in the context of such high self-reporting numbers a deficit model of support is highly inappropriate and that the university's approach should be one of holistic educational provision, including attention to curriculum design and innovative delivery modes as part of everyday practice. However, there are a number of students who require specialist, targeted support and some students who are not eligible for statutory disabled student allowances for a variety of reasons (international students, students with particular attendance patterns) who receive top-up bursaries from the university to ensure that they are able to continue their studies.

In some senses, there is a feeling that good practice in provision for disabled students is widely understood and well implemented, but there are variations in practice even across high-performing institutions. An interviewee at University B noted that: "We have tracked disabled students in one faculty for ten years and they do equally well and equally badly [as any other student]. This says that this

Faculty has done well. What we haven't got is joined-up, inter-Faculty ways of sharing good practice".

A number of interviewees described the challenge of reconciling what are perceived to be highly conflicting national policy agendas. In particular, there is considerable anxiety about the misalignment between the government's push to widen participation in higher education from under-represented groups and the pressure on universities to pursue excellence by setting high admissions criteria (AAB grades at A-Level). One interviewee at University A described a seminar she attended to discuss the recent Government White Paper *Higher Education: students at the heart of the system* (2011):

"[The speaker pointed out that] it was like the chapter on AAB admissions had been written by one person and the chapter on widening participation had been written by someone else. I find it hard to see how the push for AAB students can do anything else but squeeze out students from less advantaged backgrounds. At the moment, we accept students with 3 Bs [as part of our access activities]."

Successive governments have sought to improve the information available to prospective students about the quality and performance of universities. A number of datasets, including statistics collected by HESA, the Higher Education Statistics Agency and data from students collected nationally (the National Students Survey) together form the basis of a number of league tables published by newspapers and other organisations. These league tables have become highly influential in determining university policy and priorities. Not un-controversially, they have become a key factor in university recruitment, in the extent to which institutions can select the best candidates and in determining the amount of income institutions are able to generate from fees.

A number of interviewees pointed out that data collected by HESA and used to inform the league tables is an uncomfortable fit with some of the changes that institutions need to make in order to pursue widening access activities. For example, older learners returning to education are more likely to take (or to wish to take) extended breaks during their studies. The HESA statistics count students taking a year (or several years) out from their studies as "drop-outs" and this is seen as a failure of retention on the part of the institution. This has in part prevented the development of a culture of learning that might be more amenable to different student needs.

There is some concern that the attention of senior managers responsible for all aspects of the student experience is increasingly focused almost exclusively on the institution's performance in key indicators, particularly the National Students Survey. Resources are increasingly likely to be directed towards activities that raise the institution's profile in the league tables and it is unclear how an institution's access activities are measured and expressed in terms of reputational or esteem indicators. One interviewee noted that her institution did particularly well in a league table published by *The Guardian* newspaper (which is a broadly left-of-centre publication) because the measures included indicators of "added value", showing how the institution raised the attainment of students with low entry qualifications. However, these types of measures are not commonly used and there is a suspicion that many universities would be uncomfortable about positioning themselves as institutions that accept a large number of poorly-

qualified entrants because this might be interpreted as an indicator of low overall quality.

Perhaps most fundamentally, there is a tension between sectoral and/or institutional perceptions of the value of the higher education experience and the value to the individual student. A number of interviewees described their concern that governments see graduates purely as a national workforce resource: “discrete units of economic activity” rather than recognising the broader benefits of higher education as a route towards personal growth and fulfillment. Within institutions there is increasing rhetoric about the distinctive qualities and attributes of graduates, not least as a marketing strategy to encourage recruitment and to boost graduate employability.

6.3 Making information available to the secondary sector

For a number of institutions surveyed, the development of close relationships with local secondary schools is a cornerstone of widening access strategy. For example, University C works closely with many schools and colleges and has created resources for staff designed to promote higher education to secondary school and college students. The University provides information and advice to those wanting to know more about the University or Higher Education in general. A team of Liaison Officers visits schools and colleges and delivers a range of presentations which include:

- Application Procedures and Completing the UCAS Application
- The Benefits of Higher Education
- Preparing for Interview (general advice - not subject specific)
- Student Life (a day in the life of a student)
- Student Finance/Welfare - Funding and Budgeting (including up-to-date information on tuition fees and living costs)
- Alternative Pathways into Higher Education
- Discovering Degrees Workshops - university taster sessions
- Workshops on what it is like to be a University student, what you can study and why go to University
- Summer School and Discover Learning
- Targeted workshops for particular professions e.g. medicine, dentistry and nursing
- Student Shadowing (for FE Colleges only)
- Routes from FE into HE
- Transitional Skills from FE into HE

The University also:

- Provides initial information to help school students with course choice(s) and advise on entry requirements, finance and welfare issues. A range of printed publications, including the Undergraduate Prospectus and a *Guide from Application to Arrival* is available throughout the year.
- Meets schools at the national/regional higher education careers conventions/fairs. The University attends many events in schools/colleges

as well as larger events, including the UK Higher Education conventions organised by UCAS and also European fairs.

- Organises visit days and individual visits to enable schools to see the University's campus and departments, as an individual or as a school/college group.
- Meets student ambassadors to give staff and students the "student perspective".
- Helps prospective students through the application process including Extra/Clearing for late applications or missed conditions.

University C's outreach programme has been designed to give school pupils from under-represented groups an insight into degree-level study with no obligation to proceed to a degree course. From January to March each year over 500 local high school pupils participate in interactive workshops, meet university students, enjoy subject tasters, receive campus tours, visit the University's Student Union and work with pupils from other schools. Participating pupils are required to meet at least one of the following eligibility criteria:

- Little or no parental experience of education post-16
- Limited family income
- Unskilled, semi-skilled or unemployed parent(s)
- Living in neighbourhood or other circumstances not conducive to study
- Educational progress blighted by specific family events at critical times (e.g. bereavement, illness or family break-up)
- Other exceptionally adverse circumstances or factors specified by [school] nominator

The university sees these kinds of activities as central to its mission as a civic institution with responsibilities to its local area and staff members who are involved in these activities are proud of their achievements. However, there remains a frustration that social background and school experience remain such a strong determinant of academic and economic success. Although there is recognition that school children should be offered as much information as possible about the potential benefits of higher education and a broad approval for the recommendations in the 2011 Hughes Report, interviewees questioned whether information is enough. One participant noted that the potential students from low-participation groups he works with "have the ability, but not the passport or the confidence. We give them the passport and the confidence."

Interviewees in Scotland noted the difficulties associated with the transition from secondary school to university in the standard four-year undergraduate (BA) degree system. Scottish school leavers with standard Higher qualifications, those with Advanced Highers and those with English A-Levels enter first year with different competence levels. For some students, first year studies are perceived as too easy and are therefore disengaging, for other students the foundation nature of first year study is important. There is a feeling that the pressures of transition are magnified for students entering under access agreement arrangements. University C uses student mentors as points of contact and as potential role models for students who may need additional support to manage this transition successfully.

At University A, one interviewee also talked about the pressures experienced by new entrants in the transition phase. However, he suggested that there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that some students from privileged backgrounds, particularly those from fee-paying schools, are also likely to struggle to adjust to university life. The suspicion is that students who have received high levels of support and individual attention in secondary education can find it hard to develop independent learning skills. Students from "more challenging" backgrounds are "more able to cope with life throws at them". Whilst it would be useful to have more evidence to support this perception, it does highlight a more general point made by a number of interviewees that it is hard to predict which students will do well and which will struggle and that personal prejudices or expectations, particularly those held by admissions tutors, need to be tempered by the use of robust data on the progression and support needs of previous cohorts.

6.4 Collection of data (e.g. on offers, enrollments, non-completion, graduates)

Much of the data collection undertaken by UK universities is mandated by law. **The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)** is the official agency for the collection, analysis and dissemination of quantitative information about higher education. HESA was set up by agreement between the relevant government departments, the higher education funding councils and the universities and colleges in 1993, following the White Paper "Higher Education: a new framework", which called for more coherence in HE statistics, and the 1992 Higher and Further Education Acts, which established an integrated higher education system throughout the United Kingdom. Data is collected on student enrolments at each publicly funded higher education institution in the United Kingdom and includes information on age, disability, ethnicity, domicile and gender as well as information about prior qualifications, course and mode of study, source of fees and destination after graduation.

All the institutions surveyed also participate in the National Student Survey and all of the institutions also collect local data on student satisfaction at different times and to serve local strategic needs. There is some concern that students are "over-surveyed" and this is reflected in low response rates. At University B, where typical response rates to local surveys are about 30%, there is

The institutions we surveyed reported that they are increasingly systematic in record-keeping on internal admissions procedures, including reasons for offering or not offering places. This is particularly relevant for selecting institutions who may have more candidates than places and for some courses which have special selection criteria (for example, fine art, medicine, dentistry or law). This data allows institutions to monitor the impact of widening participation strategies, but it is also used to ensure that decisions which are challenged can be properly scrutinised and justified.

In all institutions interviewees reported an "increased interest" in data from senior management, including university governors. In some cases, the data has surprised stakeholders, for example at University B governors "are always staggered by the number of disabled students we have". Where institutional mission is closely linked to widening participation activities, as at University B, governors are keen to see data on, for example, degree classification outcomes

against distinct cohorts and data systems are evolving to keep pace with these increased demands.

6.5. Disaggregation and use of data

Although the HESA data agreements mean that data collection is broadly standardised across UK higher education, it is interesting to consider how the data is used internally at universities as a planning tool and to what extent data is augmented by local information collection.

University D's most recent (February 2010) overview of enrolments by equality variables analyses 5 years of data (2005-9) to identify trends and areas for development. The executive summary of this document provides a good snapshot of the kinds of data collected and how this data is analysed and used across the institution. The first section is quoted in full below, subsequent sections of the summary present data for each of the Schools of the University and highlight areas of potential concern:

“Executive Summary

- The proportion of **Black and minority ethnic students** in their first year of study (**note:** all ethnicity data *excludes* International Students) has risen to 25% of all students in 2009, compared with 18% in 2005. There has been a percentage fall in the number of **White** students (from 2005 to 2009), but a significant percentage rise in the number and proportion of students of **Black/African** origin, from 7% in 2005 to 13.5% in 2009. The proportion of students of **Asian** origin appears to be relatively stable (2005-9): hovering between 6% and 8%.
- The University has a disproportionately high proportion of **female students** (62% in 2009) compared to the national average of male to female in the population as a whole. However, in 2009 the percentage of male students was 4% higher than in 2005 (with a proportionate fall in the percentage of female students). The general trend appears to be a consistent rise in the proportion of male students over time.
- Following a rise in the percentage of **mature students** (to 45% in 2006 from 41% in 2005 and 2004) there was a fall in the percentage to 38% in 2007. However, this rose to 43% in 2008 and 42% in 2009. From 2005-2009 the overall trend appears to be an increasing proportion of mature students.
- The proportion of **disclosed disabled students** in 2009 was 6%, a drop from 7% the previous year, which itself was a drop from a high of 8% in 2007. The trend appears to be downward (from 9% in 2005). The numbers of disclosed disabled students has increased over the past 4 years but the rate of increase has not kept pace with the general rise in student numbers - hence a falling proportion of the total student population. **The fall in the proportion of disclosed disabled students 2005-9 is of concern.”**

A number of universities have made significant investments in data systems to make the process of collecting and using statistical data easier. For example, at University B, a mandatory online process captures the follow data as new students enrol:

- Personal Information
- Contact Information
- Course Information
- Other Information (Ethnic Origin, Disability, Disability Student Allowances (DSAs), Parents Higher Education Qualifications, University Attendance by Family, Legal Care Status, Childcare Arrangements, Parental Occupation, Religion, Sexual Orientation,)
- Students' Union LifeStyle Questions
- Payment of Tuition Fees
- Image Upload/Confirmation (for Student Photocard)

Despite investment in new data collection systems, there is still some frustration about the ready availability of useful data at some institutions. One interviewee pointed out that “there is lots of it, but reports are hard to generate from the student database and the data collected for HESA is sometimes difficult to mine for our own purposes.” A number of interviewees identified the need for “a really good data analyst” to create meaningful and timely data reports for a variety of university audiences, but recognized that these skills are not always available. In other cases, data is available, but there is a recognition that it not always easy to know how to act on the information provided.

One interviewee, who was particularly passionate about the role of data as a formative tool at her institution, argues that data should only be generated if it can be used by the university to make improvements. She described a scenario in which data about patterns of admissions was used at her institution to challenge the preconceptions of admissions tutors. In one faculty, there had been a widespread, but largely unspoken belief that female students from a particular demographic group were most likely to achieve good results. Admissions processes over a number of years had therefore tended to favour this group. However, data from student records showed that male students and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were just as likely to do well. As a result of discussions based on this data admissions criteria were adjusted to ensure a wider demographic reach.

In some cases, these kinds of discussions about adjustments to practice might be harder to initiate. Interpretation and control of data can be political and freighted with personal or corporate agendas. In newer universities, where managerialist structures are more common, there may be more immediate pressure on academic staff to respond to statistical data. The danger in this kind of situation is that speedy responses might not be educationally sound or well planned and might deliver unhelpful unintended outcomes. In universities with less rigid management cultures, academic staff might be more likely to question the validity of the data, or the validity of suggested approaches to perceived problems, particularly if the message is coming from outside the department.

6.6. Support for admission and progression

In all of the universities surveyed there is recognition that access is a broader issue than merely the management of enrollments. In some cases the admissions process could be understood as “aspiration-raising at 10 or 11” when school pupils are first exposed to careers or to continuing education advice. One interviewee remarked that it might be even better to work with younger children in primary

education to expose them to the possibility of a university education before other social barriers take hold.

A variety of outreach activities to attract potential school-age applicants are described in section 6.3 of this report. Most universities also offer targeted activities to support individual students.

At University C there is a recognition that a diverse student body brings with it a responsibility to ensure that students are appropriately prepared for their higher education experience, and that the range of student needs are well catered for in terms of academic, social and personal support systems. Retention is seen as a key objective in managing the experience of a diverse student body. University C's Learning and Teaching Strategy aims to maintain a high quality, well-supported learning environment to meet the learning needs of a diverse student body. University C's Admissions Policy sets out arrangements for meeting the information and counseling needs of potential students. College and School Learning and Teaching Development Plans identify particular areas in need of College and School support. University C's academic standards procedures ensure the monitoring of retention statistics and its Strategic Framework sets retention targets for Schools and Colleges. The aim of University C's retention strategy is to improve student progression, retention and performance, by:

- ensuring that incoming students have been accurately informed and appropriately advised on their choice of programme, and are aware of the demands that higher education will place on them;
- supporting students in their transition to university studies, ensuring that they are aided in the development of appropriate study skills;
- providing social and personal support to facilitate integration into the University community;
- ensuring that a range of student services, including financial and personal support, is accessible to students;
- monitoring student progress and achievement and to identify, and where possible to reduce, barriers to retention;
- ensuring that staff are aware of the factors influencing student retention and can implement appropriate strategies for improving it.

These kinds of arrangements are common to all the institutions surveyed. Variation occurs in the level of resource available to offer expensive forms of support, for example individual academic or pastoral counseling and there is inevitably increased scrutiny on the cost of all support services.

One interviewee at University D commented on the difference between "widening access", which can be seen as removing barriers to entry, and "widening participation" which can be seen as supporting the whole student journey from enrollment to future employment and encompasses support for retention, progression and all aspects of the student experience. At University D, a "hub and spoke" model is in place to support widening participation activities: a central coordinator at institutional level works with 0.5 FTE widening participation officers in each school who are also lecturers. This model is replicated in a number of the institutions surveyed and offers enhanced local visibility and ownership of the widening participation agenda as well as the possibility of useful discipline-specific interpretations of institutional policy.

A common theme across all the institutions surveyed is the perception that students who may have entered the university under special access arrangements should not be singled out for special attention or otherwise differentiated. Whilst the very specific needs of some students with particular disabilities are carefully managed, the overall perception is that opportunities for successful study should be available to all students regardless of their access route and that concern for retention and progression should permeate the institution's educational and student experience provision. Support might take many forms, including the design of the curriculum, and might not be immediately visible or identifiable as a "widening participation" initiative. This creates dilemmas for staff members with particular responsibility for widening participation activities. Mainstreaming support for learning and providing the best possible experience for all students is a highly desirable ambition, but there is a real danger that "widening participation" as a strategic, and separately-funded, endeavour might get lost as a result.

6.7 Pattern of enrollments

Of particular relevance to this study is the extent to which UK institutions control their own pattern of enrollments. Under the OFFA access arrangements, institutions are free to define their own access priorities and arrangements and to set their own targets. Some of the participants in this study noted that this level of autonomy could be seen as a significant weakness in OFFA's ability to influence institutional practice. However it is of course highly unlikely that any institution would lobby for less autonomy. Most of the institutions we spoke to set their own internal targets for participation from defined groups (for example, those from lower socio-economic groups or from ethnic groups).

At University D an agreed statutory Equality Scheme and Action Plan (2006-10) identifies an undergraduate student "profile" that the institution aimed for by 2010 in respect of four main equality variables (socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, disability). The data collected enables the university to plot progress and the general "direction of travel" and to alert the university community to trends or patterns that do not align with institutional targets.

At University A, the current target for students gaining entry under its flagship widening access initiative is around 6% of the overall student body. Recent sector-wide commentary in the UK suggests that although the rhetoric of widening participation is well-established, widening participation activities have done little to transform the pattern of enrollments overall. University A is not uncommon in having a low percentage of students gaining access via alternative entrance arrangements and a number of interviewees pointed to the intractable nature of social stratification in the UK as a major barrier. University A notes that one of the biggest challenges to their outreach and access activities is that potential students identified in local schools fail to reach threshold attainment for admission. Whilst the university can help to raise aspiration there is the perception that the university is limited in its ability to influence educational experiences at secondary school.

6.8 Drivers of change

Whilst all the institutions surveyed recognised the "obvious" external legislative drivers influencing their activities, and in particular the enhanced role of OFFA as

universities in leverage higher fees for English students from 2012, they were also keen to point out that internal beliefs, cultures and mission also drive access-related activities. At University A, one interviewee noted that “we have been doing this for 100 years, it’s part of our founding charter... it’s what distinguished us from Oxford and Cambridge”. At University C a similar well-established civic culture and the influence of the 2004 Schwartz Report led the institution to conduct its own research into fairer admissions procedures and develop new policies.

Many of the interviewees who participated in this study have job roles that are closely associated with their institution's widening participation or access policies. These individuals perceive themselves as change agents within their universities. In some cases, they contribute to national as well as to institutional debate and policy and they initiate conversations about access issues at multiple levels within their universities. They often characterise themselves as advocates in contexts that can be indifferent or even hostile to access issues. Even when institutional culture is broadly supportive of the access agenda, they may act as lobbyists for a greater share of funding or as outliers, bringing innovative or radical ideas to institutional discussions.

Access does not appear as a category in the ESG and only one interviewee mentioned the UK Quality Assurance Agency during this study. The QAA Code of Practice for Students with Disabilities was acknowledged as a reference point for institutional activities in this area.

6.9 New ways of managing quality

The institutions surveyed vary considerably in age and history, but a common theme noted by interviewees is the increased professionalism associated with access activities. Examples include the increased collection and use of data, staff development programmes that include modules on the management of access quality (including managing admissions procedures), and changes in governance arrangements to provide dedicated decision-making fora on access issues.

Interviewees reported that certain aspects of quality management of access are perceived as overly bureaucratic, in particular the collection of data for annual monitoring, and an increased level of institution “paranoia” associated with the management of admissions processes. In particular, admissions tutors are required to be increasingly careful about recording the reason for rejection of applications, driven in part by equality and data protection legislation. In all of the institutions surveyed there is a concern that admissions procedures are fair and transparent and that potential students are judged using the best possible criteria. Interviewees shared anecdotes about a number of difficult experiences associated with admissions and the need to have defensible procedures in the case of challenges.

Interviewees also reported a generalised growth in both institutional and individual commitment to the widening participation agenda. A number of factors appear to be influencing this change. These include a change in the demographic of senior managers as a generation educated in the 1980s and the early 1990s start to move into managerial roles. In some cases, senior managers are themselves beneficiaries of widening access policies. (This change is not uniform and one of the biggest frustrations reported by staff members with a responsibility for

widening participation is a sometimes low level of understanding or sympathy among senior management. As one interview remarked, "it is necessary to defend [this] territory very, very regularly... on a weekly basis".) Another positive factor is the increased role of the students' union in access activities including outreach and mentoring schemes at a number of institutions.

An issue that is perceived as problematic in a number of institutions is managing the relationship between higher and further education provision and articulation. In some cases there is concern that student choice between higher and further education providers for some degree courses is influenced by factors other than the educational quality of the student experience (for example, students choose to study at a university rather than at a further education college because of perceived reputational gains, rather than the quality of the course). Where higher and further institutions deliver courses jointly there is sometimes dissonance between teaching methods or educational expectations, which is seen as a barrier to attainment among groups experiencing higher education through FE/HE partnership arrangements.

6.10 Monitoring and evaluation

In the broadest sense, widening participation can be understood as a long-term activity that raises the aspirations of generations within previously excluded social groupings, rather than a short-term intervention in the life of a single individual. Interviewees pointed to the "political naivety" of agencies or institutions who might believe that widening participation in higher education is an easily-achieved goal or one that can be implemented quickly and uniformly.

The collection and use of data described in sections 6.4 and 6.5 of this report offers institutions the opportunity to track progress against their access strategies and goals, including the participation of students from targeted groups. However, a number of interviewees pointed out the profound challenges associated with demonstrating the value of specific widening participation activities. The large number of variables influencing the lives of potential and enrolled students means that "proving" the impact of a single intervention or scheme is almost impossible.

At University D, where a number of small, focused projects are funded annually (for example activities within schools or which explore the potential of one approach) project leaders are asked to define both qualitative and quantitative measures that can serve as proxies for success. Robust measures are most likely to take a "holistic" view of the activity, involving multiple stakeholders and soliciting comment from multiple perspectives. One problem with this approach, however, is that it is expensive and can be time-consuming.

One interviewee spoke at some length about the need to convince senior management of the added value benefits of widening participation to the whole institution, particularly in a time of financial constraint:

"There's been a lot of investment, but demonstrating what has changed [as a result of widening participation] has to be thought about more carefully. We need to include both quantitative and qualitative stories and be much more subtle about our message... but you sometimes just don't feel able to have these sort of debates when you're fighting for survival".

At another institution, one interviewee described the tendency for academic departments to contest the interpretations of data made by senior management or by staff members responsible for monitoring and supporting widening participation:

"Causation and correlation are difficult... we often hear 'we are a busy academic department and we have better things to do.' There is a perception that some years are just better than others. Trend data is important, but no one really knows past 2012 what the 'typical' demographic will be and how we can prove that we are special."

A number of interviewees described the emotional, or personal nature of the access or widening participation agenda. To challenge often deeply held beliefs about "fairness", "equity" or the role or purpose of higher education in society, the types of data needed might be different. Case studies of success and personal narratives from people who have entered higher education through non-traditional routes are perceived as highly effective, but there are sensitivities associated with their collection and use. As one interviewee explained:

"We need more examples [of success] that we can publicise but we don't want to make people into sideshows at the funfair. People need to get on with their lives."

6.11 Problems and challenges

6.11.1 National policy

There is a strong perception amongst the participants in this study that many powerful national drivers, including the statistics collected by HESA, reinforce a unitary view of the value of higher education that is antithetical to the widening participation agenda. Narrow definitions of "success" (e.g. a degree classification of 2.1 or above and subsequent participation in full time employment) do not reflect the differing aspirations of many potential learners. Universities are increasingly scrutinised and judged on a small number of performance indicators, which create a barrier to the provision of alternative routes and diverse learning experiences. Messages from government are confusing: universities are required to direct resources to widening access to under-represented groups, but at the same time are encouraged to compete for the highest performing school leavers.

6.11.2 Institutional rhetoric vs. institutional implementation

Our desk study confirmed that widening participation is a highly-visible activity in terms of policies, publicity and mission statements at all four institutions. Given the requirement for all universities in England to agree access activities with OFFA (and similar arrangements with the SFC in Scotland) this is perhaps not surprising. However, implementation of policies varies considerably between and within institutions. Variation between institutions is an inevitable, and probably desirable, feature of a higher education system with relatively high levels of institutional autonomy and institutional diversity. However, there is a general, national concern that students from "WP" backgrounds are less likely to aspire to those institutions that are traditionally "selecting" and that the WP activities undertaken by these institutions are not addressing this problem effectively. Although the staff interviewed as part of this study were all passionate and committed to the activities they organise, there is a recognition that WP schemes are expensive, can only target a small number of individuals and that there are

"huge problems of aspiration" in some parts of UK society that universities alone might not be able to challenge. Even in institutions where the idea of widening access is very well established, there is a perception that the territory needs to be regularly re-defined, and that "the battle needs to be regularly re-fought".

6.11.3 Measurement and evaluation

The "success" of widening participation activities is highly subjective and by definition hard to measure. Whilst a number of participants in this study spoke about the long-term social effects of their activities and the difficulty of measuring impact over long time periods, senior managers and other key stakeholders are much more likely to be interested in short-term, quantitative data. There is concern that quantitative data (for example, on enrollments, progression, degree classification, employment) should be enriched with qualitative data to give a better picture of the real experience of students and a richer data set in which to base future activities.

6.11.4 Concern for the future

A change of government and an attendant programme of cuts to the public sector budget has worried participants in this study. Funding for the AimHigher programme has been terminated, the Educational Maintenance Allowance has been cut and university funding has shifted fundamentally from a public to an increasingly private model. The extent to which higher fees will dissuade students from poorer backgrounds from entering higher education is currently unclear but a number of interviewees expressed concern that paying for study is not the main barrier for many potential students that they work with. The dismantling of outreach and support networks because of squeezed education budgets means that the aspiration raising that is such a core activity for many institutions may be substantially lost.

7. Recommendations for the UK sector

7.1 Government and the UK higher education sector should work together to ensure that key statistical data required from higher education providers do not act as an unintended barrier to the pursuit of government objectives for increasing social mobility and widening access to, and attainment in, higher education.

7.2 Institutions should be encouraged to make full use of the data increasingly collected to inform and evaluate policies and practices.

7.3 Government and the higher education sector should nurture further work on the impact of policies and further evaluate and articulate definitions of widely-used but poorly-understood concepts such as "an holistic approach" to widening participation.

Appendix 1

Recent Publications Relating to Access Issues in the UK

Action on Access (2010) *Review of Widening Participation Strategic Assessments 2009*. Ormskirk: Action on Access.

Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group (2004) *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice* Admissions to Higher Education Review (The Schwartz report)

Adnett, N. (2006) 'Student finance and widening participation in the British Isles: common problems, different solutions' *Higher Education Quarterly*, 60 (4), pp. 296-311.

Adnett, N., McCaig, C., Slack, K. & Bowers-Brown, T. (2011) Achieving 'Transparency, Consistency and Fairness in English Higher Education Admissions: Progress since Schwartz?' *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65 (1) pp.12-33.

Archer, L., Hutchings, M. and Ross, A. (2003) *Higher education and social class: issues of exclusion and inclusion* Abingdon: RoutledgeFalmer.

Baxter, A., Hatt, S. And Tate, J. (2007) From Policy to Practice: Pupils' Responses to Widening Participation Initiatives. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 61 (3), pp. 266-283.

Butcher, J; Corfield, R and Rose-Adams, J (2011) Contextualised approaches to Widening participation - a comparative case study of two UK universities. FACE Conference 2011.

Cabinet Office (2009) *The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions*, London: HMSO.

Connor, H. (2001) 'Deciding for or against participation in higher education: the views of young people from lower social class backgrounds.' *Higher Education Quarterly*, 55, pp. 204-224.

Crozier, G., Reay, D., James, D., Jamieson, F., Beedell, P., Hollingworth, S. & Williams, K. (2008b) White middle-class parents, identities, educational choice and the urban comprehensive school: dilemmas, ambivalence and moral ambiguity, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29 (3), pp. 261-272.

Davies, P., Slack, K., Hughes, A., Mangan, J. and Vigurs, K. (2007) *Knowing where to study? Fees, bursaries and fair access*. London, Sutton Trust.

DCSF (2008) *The Extra Mile: How schools success in raising aspirations in deprived communities*, DCSF: Nottingham.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS) (2009) *Higher Ambitions: the Future of the Universities in a Knowledge Economy*. London: BIS.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011), *Putting students at the heart of higher education*, London, BIS.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2003) *Widening Participation in Higher Education*. London: Department for Education and Skills.
Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2003) *The Future of Higher Education*, HMSO: Norwich.

Forsyth, A. and Furlong, A. (2003) *Socio-Economic Disadvantage and Access to Higher Education*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Forsyth, A. and Furlong, A. (2003) *Losing out? Socio-Economic disadvantage and experience in further and higher education* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Furlong, A. (2004) *Cultural dimensions of decisions about educational participation among 14-19 year olds*. Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training Working Paper 26.

Galindo-Rueda, F., Marcenaro-Gutierrez, O. and Vignoles, A. (2004) *The widening socio-economic gap in UK higher education* London: Centre for the Economics of Education.

Gorard, S., Smith, A., May, H., Thomas, L., Adnett, N. and Slack, K. (2007) *Overcoming the Barriers to Higher Education*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

Gorard, S., Smith, E., Thomas, L., May, H., Adnett, N. and Slack, K. (2006) *Review of Widening Participation Research: Addressing the Barriers to Participation in Higher Education*. A report to HEFCE by the University of York, Higher Education Academy and

Institute for Access Studies, July, Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

Harrison, N. And Hatt, S. (2010) Disadvantaged Learners': Who are We Targeting? Understanding the Targeting of Widening Participation Activity in the United Kingdom Using Geo-Demographic Data from Southwest England, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 64 (1) pp. 65-89.

Hatt, S., Baxter, A. and Tate, J. (2007) Measuring Progress: An Evaluative Study of Aimhigher in the South West 2003-6. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 61 (3), pp. 284-305.

Hatt, S., Baxter, A. and Tate, J. (2008) 'The Best Government Initiative in Recent Years'. Teachers' Perceptions of the Aimhigher Programme in the South West of England. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 32 (2), pp. 129-138.

HEFCE (2007a) *Higher education outreach: targeting disadvantaged learners*, Report 2007/12, HEFCE: Bristol.

Hounsell, D. and Hounsell, J. (2007) Teaching-Learning Environments in Contemporary Mass Higher Education. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, BJEP Monograph Series*, 11 (4), pp. 91-111.

House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts Committee (2008) *Staying the Course: the Retention of Students on Higher Education Courses. Tenth Report of Session 2007-8*. London: HMSO.

House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills *Secondary education: pupils achievement*. Seventh report of the session 2002-03.

Jones, R. (2008b) *Student Retention and Success, Research Synthesis for the Higher Education Academy*. York: Higher Education Academy.

McCaig, C. and Adnett, N. (2009) English Universities, Additional Fee Income and Access Agreements: their Impact on Widening Participation and Fair Access. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 57 (1), pp. 18-36.

McNay, I. (Ed.) (2006) *Beyond Mass Higher Education*, pp.15-57, Maidenhead, Open University Press.

National Audit Office (2007) *Staying the Course: The Retention of Students in Higher Education*. London: HMSO.

National Audit Office (2008) *Widening Participation in Higher Education*. London: The Stationery Office.

Office for Fair Access (2010) *What more can be done to widen access to highly selective universities?* London, Office for Fair Access.

Osborne, M. (2003) Increasing or Widening Participation in Higher Education? A European Overview. *European Journal of Education*, 38 (1), pp. 5-24.

Passy, R., Morris, M. and Waldman, J. (2009) *Evaluation of the Impact of Aimhigher and Widening Participation Outreach Programmes on Learner Attainment and Progression*. National Foundation for Educational Research, Bristol: HEFCE.

Pennel, H. and West, A. (2005) 'The impact of increased fees on participation in higher education in England' *Higher Education Quarterly*, 59 (2), pp. 127-137.

Percy-Smith, J. (ed) (2000) *Policy responses to social exclusion. Towards inclusion?* Open University Press: Buckingham

Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2006) *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education*. Section 10: Admissions to Higher Education. Gloucester: QAA.

Quinn, J., Thomas, L., Slack, K., Casey, L., Thexton, W. and Noble, J. (2005) *From life crisis to lifelong learning: Rethinking working class drop out from higher education* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Reay, D., David, M. & Ball, S. (2005) *Degrees of choice: social class, race, gender and higher education*, Trentham: Stoke-on-Trent.

Sutton Trust (2008) *Ten Year Review of Sutton Trust Summer Schools*. London: The Sutton Trust.

Sutton Trust and Carnegie Corporation of New York, (2009) *Social Mobility and Education*, London, Sutton Trust.

Thomas, E.A.M (2001) *Widening Participation in Post-compulsory Education* Continuum: London.

Thomas, L. (2001) Power, assumptions and prescriptions: a critique of widening participation policy-making, *Higher Education Policy*, 14 (4), pp. 361-376.

Thomas, L. (2011) Do Pre-entry Interventions such as 'Aimhigher' Impact on Student Retention and Success? A Review of the Literature, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65 (3), pp.230-250.

Thomas, L. and Quinn, J. (2006) *First-Generation Entry into Higher Education*. Milton Keynes: SRHE/Open University Press.

UCAS (2002) *Paving the Way*. Cheltenham: UCAS.

Universities UK (2003) *Fair enough? Wider Access to University by Identifying Potential to Succeed*. London: Universities UK.

Universities UK (2005) *From the Margins to the Mainstream*, London, UUK.

Walker, L., Matthews, B. and Black, F. (2004) Widening Access and Student Non-Completion: An Inevitable Link? Evaluating the Effects of the Top-Up Programme on Student Completion. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 23 (1), pp. 43-59.

Watson, D. (2006) *How to Think about Widening Participation in UK HE*. Bristol: HEFCE Discussion Paper.

Yorke, M. and Thomas, L. (2003) Improving the Retention of Students from Lower Socio-Economic Groups. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 25 (1), pp. 63-75.