

February 2008/10

Policy development

Statement of policy

This document is for information

This document sets out our plans for a programme of research and evaluation which will inform and support the policies we have developed to promote and provide the opportunity of successful participation in higher education to everyone who can benefit from it. It is an update of HEFCE 2004/34.

HEFCE widening participation and fair access research strategy

2008 update

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To	Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions Heads of further education colleges Heads of universities in Northern Ireland Selected national bodies
Of interest to those responsible for	Widening participation, Strategic planning, Research
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Executive summary

Purpose

1. This document sets out our plans for a programme of research and evaluation which will inform and support the policies developed to promote and provide the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education (HE) to everyone who can benefit from it.

Key points

2. As with our previous research strategy (HEFCE 2004/34), we aim in particular to:
 - consider our medium- and long-term research priorities, as well as short-term or current work
 - improve the quality of research we use
 - improve our ability to take account of external research (research which we do not commission), and to link up with other bodies with research interests in widening participation (WP).
3. The strategy comprises three strands of work which will provide us with a much deeper understanding of the multi-level factors that affect participation in HE:
 - a. Strand 1 - Through this strand we will investigate some of the wider socio-cultural issues relating to widening participation. In this strand we have tried to capture the broad areas of interest for us in developing widening participation policy, rather than indicating specific projects.

b. Strand 2 - The second strand of our strategy will focus on the HE sector, and will look to gather evidence on issues facing the sector as a whole.

c. Strand 3 - The third strand will concentrate on gathering evidence of practice and impact at institutional/Aimhigher partnership level.

Action required

4. This report is for information only.

Background

5. Widening participation (WP) and fair access remain central to HEFCE's strategic plan for 2006-2011 (HEFCE 2007/09). Our key aim in this area is to promote and provide the opportunity of successful participation in HE to everyone who can benefit from it.

6. This document sets out our plans for a programme of research and evaluation which will inform and support the policies developed to address this strategic aim. The specific aim and objectives of our widening participation and fair access research strategy are outlined below.

Aim and objectives

7. Our first widening participation and fair access research strategy was published in 2004 following extensive consultation with the sector and other stakeholders (HEFCE 2004/34). We believe that the aims and objectives of the original strategy continue to be appropriate.

8. The aim and objectives of our research strategy are:

- **Aim**

To ensure that policies developed to meet the Council's strategic widening participation and fair access objectives are informed and supported by a robust evidence base.

- **Objectives**

- a. To build a high quality, sustainable evidence base for widening participation policy and practice and to ensure that it is widely accepted.
- b. To ensure that new knowledge generated by research is properly communicated and widely understood.
- c. To improve our capacity for taking account of, and making good use of, knowledge produced in the wider research community.
- d. To build capacity in the higher education sector to both undertake and make appropriate use of research.

9. As with our previous research strategy, we aim in particular to:

- consider our medium- and long-term research priorities, as well as short-term or ongoing work
- improve the quality of research we use
- improve our ability to take account of external research (research which we do not commission), and to link up with other bodies with research interests in WP.

HEFCE's role

10. It is important that our role with regard to research is clearly understood. We commission and use research to develop policies. To this end, WP research and evaluation is used to:

- account for funds that have already been allocated
- make a case for future or further investment
- inform and support practitioners in the sector
- inform and engage policy makers both within institutions and in government departments.

11. In addition to research projects we intend to commission, this strategy also refers to broader areas of interest for widening participation policy development where we would look to work with other stakeholders.

12. This strategy will form part of the wider long-term research and evaluation programme we are developing which will address our other core strategic aims. We will ensure that our WP research strategy links into and takes account of other work being undertaken or proposed across the Council.

Guiding principles

13. Development of this strategy has been guided by three principles: the need to use and build on existing knowledge, the need to work in partnership, and the need to build capacity across the sector to both undertake and use WP research. These principles are discussed in more depth below.

Using existing knowledge

14. An important element in our strategy is setting out a clear process for using the knowledge and understanding generated by the research. Much of this strategy has been informed by the information gathered through the implementation of our last research strategy. The explanation of our approach, in paragraphs 21 to 35, sets out the rationale behind the development of our proposed research priorities for this strategy.

15. In our original strategy, we described our contribution to the Teaching and Learning Research programme (TLRP) managed by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). In 2005 we committed a further £2 million to support a widening participation element to the programme.¹ The six widening participation projects funded will be reporting in 2008. We will work with the ESRC to disseminate the findings from these projects and use the outcomes to inform our research work across the three strands outlined in this strategy.

¹ More information can be found at www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/research/esrc.htm

16. This research strategy will be closely aligned to the widening participation communications strategy currently being developed. This will ensure that the knowledge generated by the research is effectively disseminated.

17. In keeping with the principle of undertaking or commissioning practicable research, our research strategy needs to be flexible in order to be able to respond to changing priorities.

Working in partnership

18. Our research strategy will form part of the Council's broader research and evaluation programme. Furthermore, we will ensure our strategy aligns with research outputs from other stakeholders such as the ESRC; the Sutton Trust; the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS); the Learning and Skills Council (LSC); and the Council for Industry and Higher Education. Wherever possible, we will endeavour to work in partnership with these and other relevant bodies.

19. We will also ensure our research strategy considers the international context. Although our primary concern is for WP in England, we will take care to ensure we learn from and (where appropriate) engage with the work being undertaken elsewhere.

Building capacity

20. Building capacity across the sector to both undertake and use WP research was recognised in our last strategy as a key area of work. The review of WP² conducted in 2006 showed that this is still a key issue, and more support is required to assist WP practitioners in gathering and using information to build a robust evidence base about the effectiveness of WP interventions. Therefore we will be taking active steps to address this as part of this updated research strategy. Details of this work can be found at paragraphs 72 to 76.

Approach

21. We intend to take a 'layered' approach to our research, to deepen our understanding of what the issues affecting WP are, why they exist and what we can do to best address them.

22. The strategy comprises three strands of work. Through the first strand, we will look to investigate some of the wider socio-cultural issues relating to widening participation. This will provide us with a more in-depth understanding of the context of widening participation in HE and will necessarily have a much wider focus than simply higher education. In this strand we have tried to capture the broad areas of interest for us in developing widening participation policy- communities, cultures, transitions, choices and pathways- rather than indicating specific projects.

² Widening participation: A review by HEFCE (November 2006)
www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/aimhigh/review.asp

23. The second strand of our strategy will focus on the HE sector, and will look to gather evidence on issues facing the sector as a whole. This will include the work undertaken in-house by our Analytical Services Group (ASG), as well as other specific commissioned projects. Our evaluation work will be an important component of this strand, in order to better understand how well current initiatives are working to widen participation.

24. The third strand will concentrate on gathering evidence of practice and impact at institutional/Aimhigher partnership level. This strand is essential in demonstrating the effectiveness of current WP interventions in raising the attainment and aspirations of those groups that may not have traditionally considered HE as an option.

25. We believe that this approach will help to provide a robust and comprehensive evidence base required to meet our aim as described above. We do, however, acknowledge that the way in which we have organised the proposed work into strands has created artificial boundaries and that there are some issues that would cut across the categories we have created. The three strands of our research strategy and the rationale behind them are set out below:

Strand 1

26. In 2004, Sir Howard Newby (the then Chief Executive of HEFCE) raised concerns about the lack of understanding regarding the social issues which affect widening participation. He stated ‘...we probably know less today than we did then [during the 1960s] about how family, community, school experience and social sub-cultures intersect to help or hinder both the aspirations and achievements of children from backgrounds who have not traditionally participated in higher education.’³ This view was supported in the 2006 Barriers Review⁴, which highlighted a number of areas where existing WP research had failed to provide robust answers. Consequently, we want work within this strand to address the questions of when the gap in educational equity appears and the reasons that lie behind such inequities. It would also need to establish how factors such as deprivation and dominant cultures link to perceptions of the value of education and the take-up of educational opportunities.

27. Such questions require the investigation of issues that are outside our remit. However, the impact of these issues on participation in education after the age of 16 generally, and in HE specifically, are likely to be significant. Therefore, an informed understanding of such factors is essential in the ongoing development of WP policy. We will seek to work with our partners where appropriate in order to ensure that these broader social and cultural questions are fully considered.

³ Sir Howard Newby (2004), ‘Colin Bell Memorial Lecture’, University of Bradford

⁴ Gorard, S. et al (2006) ‘Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education’, p116

28. Through this strand we will attempt to investigate such concepts as learning trajectories and transitions (the understanding and consideration of which were cited as being crucial to developing effective WP policies in the Barriers Review). We have outlined some of the themes that we believe should be pursued under this strand of activity in paragraphs 38 to 54.

Strand 2

29. The next layer of our research strategy is concerned with generating evidence at the sector level. The aim of this strand is to address broad issues facing the sector as a whole. Core to this is gaining a deeper understanding of participation and retention in HE through further collation and analysis of available data. Much of this evidence will be produced in-house by our Analytical Services Group (ASG), and details of this work can be found in paragraphs 56 to 58.

30. In addition, we will continue to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of our policies. Such evaluations are essential both in terms of assessing the effectiveness of our initiatives and in terms of deepening our understanding about how differences are made and sharing that understanding with the sector. The key evaluations currently planned or in train that have a specific focus on widening participation are the evaluations of Aimhigher, Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs), the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) demand-raising projects and the Disability Equality Partnership (DEP).

31. Other relevant evaluation programmes in the Council include the evaluation of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). The outcome of this evaluation will be invaluable in terms of further developing our understanding about the student experience, and the role teaching practice has in this. Similarly, the evaluation of the employer engagement pilot projects will be an important way for us to find out more about the potential for employer engagement and flexible lifelong learning to widen participation.^{5 6}

32. Within the sector strand, we intend to explore issues of equality of opportunity concerning students from under-represented groups in HE. This includes disabled students and the experience of those from minority ethnic groups. This area of work is particularly important in light of the results from the National Students Survey, which are being explored by our Learning and Teaching team. In 2005, the survey found that dyslexic students were less satisfied with their HE experience than their non-disabled counterparts, and that students from Asian backgrounds were less satisfied with every aspect of their course than white students.⁷

⁵ Further detail on the CETL evaluation is can be found at www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/tinits/cetl/evaluation/

⁶ Further detail on employer engagement can be found at www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/employer/

⁷ Surridge, P. (2006) 'The National Student Survey 2005: Findings' www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2006/rd22_06/

33. We wish to further investigate how the experiences of HE for men and women differ, and what impact this may have on educational outcomes. In addition to the matter of low achievement of boys in school and men in HE, we wish to explore other issues regarding the participation of men and women in HE. For example, subject 'segregation' is still clearly prevalent with engineering, mathematics and computing dominated by males while health, education and languages are dominated by women.

Strand 3

34. There is a recognised need for a greater understanding of the effectiveness of the different widening participation interventions and activities delivered by higher education institutions (HEIs) and Aimhigher partnerships. Working in partnership with HEIs and Aimhigher we are seeking to develop the processes by which much clearer evidence can be collected about what works, why and in what circumstances.

- a. The WP review, undertaken at the end of 2006, highlighted a lack of coherent evidence about interventions undertaken in HEIs. Some of the reasons for this include the attention being paid to the ways in which WP interventions influence the processes that produce educational outcomes. By this we mean the connection between specific interventions and learners' choices and attainment.
- b. There is a sense in which the 'evidence bar' has been set too high. Practitioners who cannot 'prove' that WP interventions have increased participation in HE have underestimated what they can show. So whilst it might not be possible to demonstrate a direct causal link between an intervention and outcome, it could be possible to show the strength of an association between them. A judgement could then be made on whether or not the influence of the intervention was significant.

35. Therefore, we will look to support research that addresses some of these issues and seeks to provide evidence of what works in a systematic and manageable way.

Detail of the strategy

36. Below we outline the detail of the three strands: some of the projects we have or are intending to commission, the stakeholders involved, and the questions they are intended to address. This part of our strategy will necessarily remain flexible, in order for us to be able to identify and respond to emerging issues.

Strand 1

37. More so than in the other strands of our research strategy, the proposals for research set out in this section have a much broader focus than simply higher education, and would require us to work flexibly and innovatively with partners already working on or interested in similar areas.

Communities

38. An important element to this strand will be to develop a more holistic picture of how people and places interrelate with HE, on the basis of what we already know.

39. We would like to build on the research we commissioned as part of our original strategy in the four cities of Nottingham, Sheffield, Bristol and Birmingham. The research conducted in the four cities has given us a greater understanding of the socio-cultural factors underpinning low participation in HE, and the findings from the individual projects have been synthesised into a single report.⁸ We hope that the recommendations from the research can be implemented both in the areas involved in the research, and more widely.

40. In taking this work forward, we are exploring the possibility of commissioning similar research in London and across other city regions in England. It would be helpful for further projects to be commissioned as comparative studies, to enable us to further understand the issues that may underpin the differences in participation between cities. We would also look to complete similar studies in rural and coastal areas in order to gain a similar level of understanding of the factors associated with participation and non-participation in HE in such areas.

41. As part of this strand we would also like to explore, in depth, how we might make WP interventions in these areas more effective, taking into account the knowledge and understanding already gained from the four cities research. These interventions are primarily those identified in the WP review such as summer schools, mentoring, campus visits, master classes, targeted recruitment and compact schemes (a set of arrangements between HEIs, schools and colleges that provide special conditions or consideration for entry to the HEI).. Using a case study approach, we would endeavour to engage a wide range of community stakeholders - including HEIs, colleges, schools and community partnerships - to pool their research efforts to understand the specific local conditions which may affect participation in HE.

42. The case study approach would provide us with a mix of qualitative and quantitative evidence systematically gathered from participants, teachers, parents, and data on attainment and HE access over a period of time.

43. As well as providing further in-depth information about the effects of WP work in these areas, it would also inform the capacity building work we are funding as part of strand 3 of our research strategy.

Cultures

44. Closely related to the above would be an examination of the part culture plays in determining how people think about HE. We feel it necessary to gain a greater understanding of the factors that influence opinions regarding the significance of HE, particularly amongst parents. We would expect the research to provide a

⁸ The report can be found on the HEFCE web-site under Publications/research & evaluation

sophisticated understanding of parents' thinking and expectations of education, which go beyond explanations based on 'poor parenting'.

45. There appears to be a close association between parental educational experience and the likelihood of entering higher education. There is evidence of differences between social groups in their choices of secondary school ('choosers' and 'non choosers'). Such differences may advantage some children in terms of educational attainment and participation in higher education and this has led to a focus on 'parenting' that is underpinned by judgments about 'good' parenting and 'poor' parenting.

46. We also wish to investigate the reasons for low participation among those from National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) 5 (lower supervisory and technical employees). Participation among this group is surprisingly low in comparison to other socio-economic groups, and stood at 13 per cent in 2004 - half the rate of those from NS-SEC 6 (semi-routine workers), and lower than for NS-SEC 7 (routine workers). The NS-SEC classification is not designed to be hierarchical so non- hierarchical differences in participation might be expected. Nevertheless, we might expect that, taking into account the command of resources and the status of this group, higher participation rates would be associated with this group than with NS-SEC groups 6 and 7.

Transitions

47. The evidence set out in the Barriers Review makes clear that learning trajectories are set at a young age. Consequently, early interventions are vital in ensuring that all young people, regardless of their background, understand the opportunities available to them and are encouraged to reach their potential in time to make informed and appropriate choices about their post-16 education. The 'dip' in pupils' progress when they move from primary to secondary school is well documented.⁹ We want to explore the issues that accompany the transition from primary to secondary school, in order to further our understanding about how the key transition points in a child's life affect their participation in HE.

48. Further work related to both the issue of transitions and the issue of choice, set out below, should look to examine the difference social class makes to the experience of transition between the ages of 11 and 14, and how this experience informs the decisions learners make about the subjects and type of learning programme they pursue. In particular, we would wish to find out why some learners decide not to progress to further study post-16, although qualified to do so.

Choices

49. The fair access agenda endeavours to encourage people to apply to the institution most suited to their aptitude, regardless of their personal circumstances. We wish to further identify and investigate those factors that contribute to the

⁹ Galton, M.; Gray, J.; Ruddock, J. (1999) 'The Impact of School Transitions and Transfers on Pupil Progress and Attainment'

decision-making process and attempt to assess the impact these factors have on the subject and institution chosen.

50. One area we intend to explore further is whether students from less affluent backgrounds - or from families which do not provide financial support - are disadvantaged in HE, both in attainment and in their satisfaction with their course. Unhappy and/or unsuccessful experiences by students from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to feed back through to influence the decision-making process of others.

51. The Sutton Trust used HEFCE data to show that some 3,000 students from lower socio-economic groups and/or low participation neighbourhoods do not end up in academically prestigious HE institutions in the numbers that might be thought given their achievements (prior qualifications)¹⁰. The analysis we undertook for the Sutton Trust showed how, at any given point across the attainment spectrum, state school pupils 'needed' roughly two A-level points more than those from the independent sector; although on entry tended to perform better. However, there is no explanation of why this is so. In so far as it arises because students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to apply, there is a range of possible explanations, cultural and material, but these have not been explored.

52. Part of the difficulty is that the decision to apply is made on the basis of predictions rather than attainment. Data is required which (a) places the decision to apply in the real context in which the decision was made and (b) makes an estimate of how 'appropriate' that decision was. This is difficult: the most appropriate decision may be to apply to a new university (local or not) rather than a research intensive institution. Nevertheless it should be possible to see across a substantial sample whether there is a social class pattern to the choices made.

Pathways

53. ASG has already completed a study on the attributes of students who have undertaken access courses, their progression to and achievement within HE, as well as outcomes after graduation.¹¹ It was found that, of those starting an access course, more than half continue with some formal study, with 39 per cent on degree or other undergraduate programmes. A similar study has been completed for BTEC qualifications which found that numbers of students starting BTEC courses are growing steadily. Of the cohort identified for this study who qualified for a BTEC National Diploma, 86 per cent continued with formal study, with 41 per cent undertaking a degree or another undergraduate programme. A future study is planned for apprenticeships. Through this series of work on pathways to higher education, we hope to better understand the different ways into and through HE.

¹⁰ Sutton Trust (2004) *The Missing 3000: State school pupils under-represented at leading universities*

¹¹ The report can be found on the HEFCE web-site under Publications

54. We also wish to further our understanding about the background of mature entrants in higher education. In terms of formulating future policy recommendations, it would be helpful to know whether mature entrants come from backgrounds where young participation was low. We will endeavour to answer this question by using the data captured in the longitudinal record.

Strand 2

55. Set against the context explored through strand 1, this strand of work will investigate specific WP issues currently facing the HE sector.

Participation

56. Over the next two years, ASG intends to undertake the following projects which will aim to enhance and increase our understanding of participation in HE:

- a. Extending the measurement of young participation from the 2000 cohort reported in HEFCE 2005/03 to the 2004 cohort (that is, entry aged 18 in 2004-05 and age19 in 2005-06). This work will provide a report looking at the trends in young participation and provide the foundation for the area-based measures to be used in the performance indicators and the DIUS young participation measure.
- b. Refreshed and more comprehensive local participation information. This will employ results from the national studies and develop the maps and tables on the POLAR (Participation of Local Areas) web-site.
- c. Linking the National Pupil Database into our HE participation data sets. This has the potential to transform our analysis of young participation. It will enable us to, for example, calculate HE participation rates by individual (or type of) school, GCSE profiles, ethnic group and possibility disability. We will also be able to consider the effect of school and neighbourhood on participation rates for the first time.
- d. Detailed young population projections. It is hoped to adapt the method used for the young population estimates in the participation work to give short run young population projections at national and local levels, to help in planning and provide more informed assessment of certain statistics.
- e. Part-time and flexible study. A thorough understanding of part-time study will become ever more important with any changes to fees for full-time study and the increased focus on flexible provision to meet the needs of a diverse student body and workforce. We plan to find the key characteristics of the diverse student cohort on flexible modes of study and how these affect student retention/completion. This will also help us to provide information on the impact of the changes in full-time fees on the part-time sector.

Retention

57. In addition to the work planned by ASG, a project has been completed by the National Audit Office (NAO) on retention which provides valuable sector-level data. The study has combined large scale data analysis (assisted by ASG) with a case

study approach in a number of HEIs. The NAO focused on students studying part-time, following higher education courses in further education colleges, entrants from low-participation neighbourhoods, students with disabilities and those undertaking courses in strategically important subjects.

58. We intend to work with institutions to strengthen and improve practices regarding retention, and will look particularly at taking forward the recommendation to investigate the differing reported take-up of the Disabled Students Allowance across institutions through a broad review of our policy as it relates to disabled students.

Evaluation

59. The ongoing Aimhigher evaluation is funded and managed by a partnership of DIUS/DCSF, HEFCE and LSC, with support from Action on Access. The evaluation programme involves a combination of approaches including:

- a. Large-scale longitudinal surveys of young people and tutors in schools and further education institutions, in order to provide information on the activities undertaken as part of the Aimhigher programme and young people's attitudes towards education.
- b. Surveys of HEIs, further education colleges, and work-based learning providers to find out about activities aimed at widening participation, and policies and practices around access to higher education.
- c. Area-based studies of selected Aimhigher partnerships and the schools and HEIs with which they work. Exploring policy and practice at a local level and the perceived effectiveness of the Aimhigher programme.
- d. The funders are working on extending record linking to encompass other data sources such as the National Pupil Database and Student Loan Company data. Although this work is not specifically directed towards Aimhigher monitoring and evaluation, results from it are likely to be of use to future studies.

60. Findings from the Tracking Survey of Young People by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in 2006 showed that Aimhigher is clearly changing young people's perceptions of HE for the better, and there is evidence that young people are changing their minds as they get older, preferring HE to other options.¹² We are continuing to support partnerships and institutions as they work to further develop evidence of the impact of Aimhigher and WP in general.

¹² Reports from this study can be found at www.aimhigher.ac.uk/practitioner/programme_information/monitoring_and_evaluation/1_tracking_survey_of_young_people.cfm

61. We aim to do that by identifying and encouraging good practice, and learning from partnerships and institutions. To this end, two new evidence groups comprising representatives from HEFCE, Action on Access, Aimhigher, UCAS and HEIs have been established to:

- a. Develop our understanding of what data sets are available and how they can contribute to the contextualisation and selective follow-up of WP interventions (Evidence Data Group).
- b. Identify and develop good practice in generating stronger evidence through the Aimhigher partnerships (Monitoring and Evaluation Good Practice Group). A good practice guide has been produced by this group.¹³

62. In developing the evaluation of Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) we had to consider that they had been developed using a 'bottom up' approach. This encouraged LLNs to develop innovative and locally based solutions, based around some core characteristics. If we are to develop an evidence base from which to report to key stakeholders and/or recommend further developments as the funding ends then the evaluation will need to be robust and sufficiently in depth. Only in this way can we use it to develop policy, manage risk, link with other key agendas (eg employer engagement) and support good practice as it develops.

63. The evaluation of LLNs examines their effectiveness, quality and impact. This includes evaluating overall HEFCE LLN policy, as well as the LLNs themselves. A small group of external evaluation and widening participation experts has been brought together to form the LLN Evaluation Steering Group, which has already taken a leading role in the development of the evaluation strategy. This has three key stages:

- a. An interim evaluation is running from June 2007 to early 2008, conducted by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) at the Open University. Acting as an initial progress check, it should provide an opportunity for LLNs to learn from practice to date and assess what more needs to be done. It will also provide a critical assessment of progress to enable HEFCE to consider how it will shape and steer future LLN policy and practice. The interim evaluation will combine desk research of key LLN documentation (eg business cases and monitoring reports) with eight qualitative case studies and its core focus will be on analysis of the three main activities for LLNs: curriculum development with employers; learner support; and progression agreements and credit. The evaluation will consider the extent to which *particular* approaches contribute (most) effectively to enhanced progression opportunities for vocational learners. In addition, it will seek to establish whether the same or similar outcomes were achieved more cost effectively in some approaches rather than others. Other issues such as

¹³ The Aimhigher Evidence: Good Practice Guide can be accessed at www.aimhigher.ac.uk/practitioner/programme_information/monitoring_and_evaluation/good_practice_guide.cfm

governance, partnership commitment, and the responsiveness of LLNs to key sectoral developments will also be considered.

b. Ongoing peer evaluation is facilitated through the National LLN Practitioner Forum.

c. A summative evaluation ('end-of-phase') will be undertaken at the end of the funding period.

61. The evaluation of the Disability Equality Partnership (DEP) will commence in early 2008. The evaluation will look to establish:

- how well the partnership arrangement is working to deliver disability support for the sector
- how well the three organisations are meeting their aims and objectives in relation to the partnership.

Disability

62. Working in partnership with the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), the Higher Education Academy (HE Academy) and Action on Access we intend to undertake a progress check on what has happened in light of the legislation changes and identify where good practice exists.

63. In early 2008, we will commission research that will look at the distance travelled by institutions since our last major study into the support of disabled students, which resulted in the publication of *Guidance on base-level provision for disabled students in higher education institutions* (99/04) in 1999.

64. The report recently published by the National Audit Office on retention recommended that we should commission research to explore the differences in take up of the Disabled Students Allowance across institutions. We anticipate undertaking both a general survey of all HEIs as well as more in-depth work with a selection of institutions which would look to gather information on the internal organisation of disability support, the funding utilised, the policies and procedures concerning students applying for the Disabled Students Allowance, the perception of the priority level of disability equality in the institution and the student experience.

65. The 2005 National Students Survey revealed that dyslexic students were less positive about all aspects of their courses (teaching and learning; assessment and feedback; academic support; organisation and management; learning resources; personal development and overall satisfaction) than non-disabled students. The learning and teaching team and WP team at HEFCE intend to work with the Equality Challenge Unit to investigate the reasons for the low rates of satisfaction amongst dyslexic students.

Ethnicity

66. Published work by Shiner and Modood,¹⁴ suggested the possibility of an 'ethnic penalty' faced by applicants from certain ethnic groups to older universities. HEFCE re-analysed the data used by Shiner and Modood (*Higher Education Admissions: assessment of bias* (HEFCE 2005/47)) and concluded that although a general 'ethnic penalty' specific to 'old universities' does not exist, Pakistani applicants have a slightly lower than expected offer rate across the whole higher education sector. In addition, a limited investigation of particular subjects showed that applicants from all ethnic minorities, apart from Chinese applicants, have lower than expected offer rates when applying to study law. Matters relating to applications and offers will need to be kept under review. One of the purposes of our recent request to institutions to restore our access to individualised applicant data from UCAS (the universities and colleges admissions body) is so that we will be able to take this work forward. Further work is currently being undertaken in relation to applicants to law by ASG.

67. The former Department for Education and Skills undertook an analysis of degree attainment data to find out whether ethnicity, after controlling for other factors, still had predictive power in explaining degree attainment. The report, published in January 2007¹⁵, concluded that much of the attainment gap between students from minority ethnic communities and their white peers can be explained by factors other than ethnicity (eg gender, prior attainment, disability, deprivation, subject, term-time accommodation, and age). However, even after controlling for these other factors, coming from a minority ethnic community was still found to have a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment. The research also showed that women are more likely to obtain a higher degree classification than men, except when it comes to attaining a first.

68. We, together with DIUS, and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, have jointly funded a project led by the HE Academy and ECU to re-examine the data and work with institutions to explore ways of addressing this issue. This project has run for one year, and a final report was published in January 2008¹⁶. The project team conducted an extensive survey of HEIs' institutional policies and practices in relation to differences in degree attainment between ethnic groups and between men and women. In addition, the project worked intensively with a small number of selected institutions across England and Wales to explore the experiences of staff and students at those institutions regarding degree attainment.

69. As well as practical recommendations for higher education institutions to improve understanding and practice in relation to attainment, ethnicity and gender issues, the report also identifies areas for further research to explore the link between

¹⁴ Shiner, M. & Modood, T. (2002) 'Help or hindrance? Higher education and the route to ethnic equality', *British Journal of Education*, 23(2), pp. 209-232

¹⁵ Broeke, S. & Nicholls, T. (2007) *Ethnicity and Degree Attainment*
www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RW92.pdf

¹⁶ The final report can be accessed at
www.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/detail/Ethnicity_Degree_Attainment_project

attainment and social and economic factors, to investigate the impact of teaching and learning practices and to better understand the student experience. We will work with the HE Academy and ECU to take the recommendations of the report forward.

70. In addition to the work outlined above, we intend to explore the results from the National Students Survey, which revealed that students from Asian backgrounds are less positive about their HE experience than their white counterparts. The results of the 2006 survey have recently been analysed, and the gap in levels of satisfaction between white and Asian students remains, although it has narrowed slightly.¹⁷ With our colleagues in the HEFCE learning and teaching team, we will look to work in partnership with the ECU and the HE Academy to address the issues that arise regarding different levels of satisfaction related to ethnicity.

Sex

71. There has been much recent discussion and debate about the low participation and poor performance of men in HE. We feel that more investigation is required to get a balanced picture as to when and where the differences between male and female participation in HE take place, and what impact these differences might have on degree attainment.

Strand 3

72. HEFCE's review of WP in September 2006 showed that the *quality* of the evidence gathered locally by HEIs (and sometimes, by extension, the Aimhigher partnerships with which they worked) was variable. HEIs are generally able to demonstrate what the funding is used for, and they have extensive information about the impact of widening participation interventions on raising aspirations based on the reactions of participants. However, far less is known about the impact of interventions on students' attainment or the impact on their entry to HE. More emphasis is needed on making connections between the data that is gathered as well as following up interventions over time.

73. Proposals have been approved by the HEFCE board to provide support to WP practitioners to build their capacity in information gathering and evaluation. Under these proposals, we will allocate £1.5 million to employ experienced researchers to work with institutions and Aimhigher partnerships in developing the skills, systems and processes necessary to produce the kind of evidence outlined above.

74. To provide us with greater knowledge about how this proposed work should be organised, we have provided funding to CHERI and the Centre for the Study of Education and Training (CSET) to undertake pilot projects with a selection of HEIs. These pilots have now reported, and provide a good basis for a programme of work from 2007-09 to build capacity for the evaluation of WP activities in institutions and partnerships.

¹⁷ Surridge, P. (2207) 'The National Students Survey 2006' on the HEFCE web-site under Publications/Research & evaluation/2007

75. As well as identifying the variability in quality of data collection across the sector another key finding of the recent WP review was a perception that summer schools continue to be very popular with both young learners and HE providers. There is a need to provide good quality evidence about the nature and composition of the target group and subsequent progression choices and destinations. Regional Aimhigher Summer School Partnerships have been asked to supply beneficiary data in a prescribed format which includes details of parental/carer occupations and educational background. These data will help us to know more about the nature of the summer school cohort but will also help us to track summer school participants into higher education by linking with the data sets provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency. ASG will collate, code and analyse these data with a view to providing a draft report by summer 2008. Data collected will be for the first two phases of the summer schools programme (ie 2003-06 and 2006-07).

76. In addition to providing guidance to practitioners on gathering evidence, there is also a need for us to disseminate the good practice currently taking place in the sector. Our original research strategy proposed setting up a WP research facility. In March 2006 we provided additional grant to the HEA to develop and maintain a WP research service. The aim of the research service is to provide services and activities to improve the relevance, quality and dissemination of WP research to a wide audience to further the goal of widening access and improving student success in higher education, without the duplication of effort in the sector. The research service sets out to achieve this aim by the provision of a web-based portal¹⁸ to introduce people to a range of research resources and sign-post them to find other resources; networking activities such as seminar series, conferences and discussion lists; and capacity building activity such as staff development, facilitation of collaborative research partnerships and the dissemination of WP research.

Priority areas and next steps

77. Strands 2 and 3 of our research strategy detail those projects already in train at the Council. Strand 1 sets out a much wider range of interests, within which we can identify certain priority areas:

- a. Building on the research conducted in the four cities of Nottingham, Sheffield, Bristol and Birmingham, we will commission comparative studies across London and the remaining four core city regions as well as one rural and one coastal area. This work will enable us to further understand the issues contributing to differences in participation between areas as well as those factors that are more specific to rural and coastal areas.
- b. Develop case studies to engage a wide range of community stakeholders to pool their research efforts to understand the specific local conditions which may affect participation in HE.

¹⁸ www.heacademy.ac.uk/wprs.htm

- c. Examine the factors that influence opinions regarding the significance of HE, particularly amongst parents. Research here will need to provide a sophisticated understanding of parents' thinking and expectations of education.
- d. Examine the issues that accompany the transition from primary to secondary school, the difference that social class makes to experience of transition between the ages of 11 and 14 and how such experiences inform the decisions that learners make. In particular we wish to determine why some learners decide not to progress to post-16 study even when qualified to do so. As the scope of this area of work falls outside the direct remit of the funding council, our intention is to work with other stakeholders and we would welcome others' input.
- e. Establish whether students from less affluent backgrounds or from families which do not provide financial support, are disadvantaged in HE both in terms of attainment and in their satisfaction with their course.
- f. Investigate why appropriately qualified students from lower socio-economic groups do not end up in academically prestigious HEIs in numbers that could reasonably be assumed.
- g. Undertake a review of our policy as it relates to disabled students, which will involve commissioning a study to establish the context of the development of support for disabled students and identify issues around the collection of robust data on disabled students both within the sector and between sectors. This would generate a greater understanding of the organisation of disability support within the sector, how this has developed over time and the perception of the priority accorded to disability equality within individual institutions and an examination of the experiences of disabled students.

Conclusion

78. The above outlines our strategy for research to underpin our policies in widening participation and fair access. We envisage the three strands of our strategy will provide us with a much deeper understanding of the multi-levelled factors that affect participation in HE.

79. This strategy provides a comprehensive overview of the research and evaluation projects currently in train and which will have an impact on widening participation policy development. In addition, we have set out our wider research interests although we acknowledge that it is impossible for us alone to carry out the work this implies. Our wish is to engage in a dialogue with the sector and other stakeholders to inform the direction of the research we are involved in, and to indicate where we might work collaboratively with others to pursue particular themes. Consequently, we would welcome any views on the priority areas identified in the strategy and summarised in paragraph 77 above.