Evaluation of the HEFCE Widening Participation Support Strategy

Final report to HEFCE by the Higher Education Consultancy Group and the National Centre for Social Research

Contents

1   Executive Summary: The Overall Impact of the Widening Participation Support Strategy

1.1   In January 2001 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commissioned an evaluation of its widening participation support strategy, to be undertaken jointly by the Higher Education Consultancy Group (in conjunction with the School of Educational Studies at the University of Surrey and Skill), and the National Centre for Social Research.

1.2   The evaluation was asked to examine the impact of ten specific funding strands supported by HEFCE. These included the requirement that institutions produce initial widening participation strategic statements, two sets of funding supplements, the allocation of additional student numbers, three strands of projects, the administration of access and hardship funds, and the national support and co-ordination arrangements for disability and widening participation. Since it was recognised that some of these interventions were recent, and that much change happens over a longer timescale than the evaluation, the Council stressed that *"the effectiveness of the Council's widening participation strategy should be judged by its success in encouraging and supporting institutions to become more proactive and strategic in their approach to widening participation"*. The Council was also particularly interested in understanding how policy intentions were communicated and implemented within institutions, and in the extent to which distinct types of institution responded differently to the policy priorities.

1.3   The evaluation undertook: a postal survey of heads of institutions; interviews with key informants; a telephone survey of 591 academic staff across 64 HEIs; in-depth case studies of eight institutions; a survey of disability projects; a review of project monitoring reports and consultation responses; a review of the analysis of institutional widening participation strategic statements undertaken by the national Action on Access team; and an examination of published data on recruitment. The findings described below derive from this body of evidence. In accordance with a timetable agreed with HEFCE, data were collected during 2001, therefore 2002 data are not included in this report.

1.4   The evaluation was not asked to produce output data on student recruitment nor examine other interventions by HEFCE, such as summer schools and aspiration funding. Nor does the report include specific recommendations, as it is likely that the rapidly moving widening participation policy environment will have changed considerably between drafting this report and its eventual publication. Nonetheless there are numerous policy issues that the Council and other interested parties will wish to reflect upon. HEFCE has been able to view early drafts of the report and take action on those issues raised where it feels it is appropriate to do so.

Context

1.5   There is now a great deal of activity across the higher education sector aimed at widening participation, and all institutions are playing some part. The activity is very diverse, varies to some extent according to the type of institution, and appears to have grown in recent years. However, during the three years for which performance indicator data were available (1997-1998 to 1999-2000) there was only a very slight improvement in percentages of students recruited from the identified target groups, most marked in young full time first degree students.

1.6   Measuring success in widening participation is not simple. Firstly, what is to be measured is not always clear. At both national and institutional levels the key target groups have changed over time, and attention has shifted from recruitment and admission to retention, on-course support, and access to equitable career opportunities. Furthermore, the measures of performance are problematic. HEFCE's published performance indicators (which measure recruitment from state schools, low socio-economic groups, and low participation neighbourhoods) produce different results, and the last indicator is volatile and discriminates against some kinds of institution, notably in London. However, the performance indicators, which measure absolute performance in terms of numbers recruited from the specific groups, are supplemented by institutional benchmarks, which make cross-institutional comparisons possible, since they measure an institution against others with similar profiles in terms of curriculum spread, entry qualification levels and age of students.

1.7   Secondly, measures of performance are not readily available, nor well adapted to the purpose of this report. The Council's performance indicators and benchmarks are the most consistent and accessible measures of success available, but since figures have only been published for three years historical trends are impossible to discern clearly. Furthermore, using them to measure broad institutional performance is difficult since small changes in the relative weighting of the individual indicators can produce very dramatic changes in rankings, for example some institutions are good at recruiting full time entrants from state schools but poor at recruiting mature part-timers from low participation neighbourhoods.

1.8   Thirdly, the notion of 'institutional' performance in widening participation is itself problematic. While the evidence is clear that there are cases where mission, staff attitudes, and operational structures are consistently applied to support widening participation across the whole of an institution, these are probably a minority of HEIs. Many institutions are a relatively loose collection of diverse units, some struggling to fill their student places while others are heavily over-subscribed, and some with high research performance and others with low. To state that an HEI is 'successful' at widening participation does not, therefore, necessarily mean that this mission is shared by the majority of staff or implemented consistently. For example, institutions whose overall performance is poor may have pockets of extremely successful activity, and vice-versa. Some of the large HEIs which perform well in both widening participation and research assessment may do this by concentrating on the two objectives in different parts of the institution, an option not available to smaller or more specialised HEIs.

Findings

1.9   There is no simple cause for the growth in widening participation activity. Some institutions have a long history of work in widening participation, widely understood and 'owned' by staff, with approaches to recruitment, supporting students and employability that are well embedded. Others have come to widening participation more recently, stimulated by a range of factors which include government and HEFCE incentives and exhortation, and growing recruitment problems. A few appear to be reluctant contributors, responding to HEFCE pressure.

1.10   Support for widening participation is widespread across the sector, although it takes a variety of forms and embraces a range of assumptions about what widening participation means. All research intensive universities claimed (in their strategy statements and survey responses to us) to be active in aspects of widening participation, and only five institutions suggested to us in survey responses that it should not be part of their particular mission. Three of these were specialist institutions in the performing arts who took the view that their distinct mission required them to recruit only those with many years of specialised study prior to admission,

and that in practice the opportunity to do this was not generally available to applicants from 'non-traditional' backgrounds.

1.11 Although the Council's widening participation strategy has stimulated activity within the sector, it appears to be having a differential effect. Insofar as policy has been aimed at encouraging institutions without a strong tradition of widening participation to become more proactive and strategic, it appears to have been successful. However, it has not been seen as helpful by institutions with strong existing commitments to widening participation, who believe that HEIs with no record of commitment to widening participation have been rewarded for their poor performance with additional student numbers and aspiration funding. This represents an important issue for the Council, and it seems unlikely that major advances in widening participation can be achieved without the policy having the confidence of those HEIs who are key to successful implementation. Student number data for 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 suggest that the overall pattern has been a shift of students from under represented groups from post-1992 to pre-1992 institutions, rather than a substantial increase in total numbers.

1.12 At the beginning of the evaluation a set of hypotheses were identified as underlying HEFCE's approach to widening participation. These were tested during the study, and conclusions reached on most. We have found that:

- Institutions are broadly in support of HEFCE and government commitment to widening participation.

- Initial strategic statements have generally led to the clarification of institutional approaches, and the requirement has been seen as positive in approximately three-quarters of HEIs. However, the evidence that strategy leads to action is not yet clear.

- Encouragement, rather than direction, has been effective in producing change across the sector especially among those institutions previously least active (although some forms of 'encouragement' may have been perceived as threats).

- Some institutions do demonstrate a strong and distinctive commitment to widening participation, which reflects long established cultures and structures. There is an identifiable group of HEIs for whom widening participation is a major institution wide commitment.

- Institutions can change practice in teaching and student support, and the evidence is that most are doing so, although in relation to widening participation this is much more common in post-1992 universities.

- Institutions do not, in general, have good information about their current practice and performance in widening participation, which makes internal management and monitoring problematic.

- Except for specialist staff, information about national widening participation practice in other institutions is not widely known in HEIs, although individual staff may be well be active in professional networks.

Widening Participation Strategies

1.13 A key element of HEFCE's approach has been to require HEIs to produce and implement initial widening participation strategic statements. It was believed that this would lead to a

1.14 All institutions complied with this requirement, although the quality of many initial statements was not high. Revised statements were required in October 2001 and the quality had improved. The majority of HEIs reported having found the process of producing strategic statements useful, and welcomed the opportunity to review their provision and plan coherently. However, one quarter of institutions (mainly those with established strengths in this field) saw the requirement as unhelpful, and a formality which had little impact on their practice and which confused existing strategy.

1.15 There is a correlation between the quality of these strategic statements (as assessed by the Action on Access team) and good performance in recruiting from under represented groups (as measured by the performance indicators), although a causal relationship cannot be demonstrated. However, some institutions which have performed above their benchmarks produced initial strategic statements which were felt by HEFCE to be unsatisfactory. Thus a direct relationship between plans and performance cannot be assumed.

1.16 It is too early to establish how far the strategies have led to change in practice, or to distinguish the impact of the strategies from other external interventions, of which there have been many.

1.17 There are marked differences between types of institution in levels of awareness and activity to widen participation. In general both are most developed in the post-1992 universities and colleges of higher education, and least in specialist HEIs, but there are many notable exceptions. This might suggest that some types of institution are more suited to this kind of work, or alternatively that those with longest experience are most advanced.

1.18 Measurement of performance remains problematic. Not all possible areas of under representation are addressed by HEFCE's published performance indicators, and despite explanation in various publications, there is little evidence of the details of the published performance indicators being known or fully understood, even at senior levels in many HEIs. The low participation neighbourhood indicator causes particular concern: some institutions perform very differently on it from year to year, and those in London and some rural locations appear to perform less well than might be expected from their claimed commitment and historical reputation.

Diversity

1.19 HEIs seek to differentiate themselves from each other, and HEFCE and the government are both strongly committed to promoting institutional diversity. However, government also wishes all institutions to contribute to widening participation in order to ensure that all learners have access to the full range of higher education. The tension between these two objectives has caused confusion in institutions about the real objectives of HEFCE policy, and real anger among those who claim – with some justification – that their special commitment and expertise in this field has not been recognised or rewarded. A large number of HEIs of all types feel that current policy on diversity is unclear, and would welcome clarification.

1.20 Despite the difficulties in institutional performance, it was possible to identify a group of 19 institutions that have performed, over the last three years, significantly above the mean on most of the available measures. Although not all these HEIs were covered by all the data sources available to us, the cumulative evidence appeared to confirm that in these institutions

there is strong commitment to widening participation in principle, and that considerable effort has been devoted to it over a long period.

1.21   Conversely, there was a group of institutions which have so far contributed relatively little to widening participation. Although 75 HEIs have performed significantly below one or more of their benchmarks over a three year period, 15 have done this on several indicators. These are the ancient universities, a small group of London institutions, and a variety of specialist HEIs.

1.22   Between these two groups, however, lie the majority of institutions, many with some strengths, and half of all HEIs have performed significantly well on one of the various widening participation indicators over the last three year period. It is worth noting that perceptions within higher education, and perhaps beyond, tend to be much more affected by the performance of the two extreme groups than the overall picture justifies.

1.23   Overall, we found six broad groups of institution, each of which is likely to respond differently to policy interventions and produce different results. Although the groups correspond broadly to traditional institutional typologies, there are many HEIs which diverge from their apparent peers. The six can be described as follows:

- *Strongly committed*: the 19 institutions noted above who claim explicitly in their strategic statements that widening participation is central to their main mission, and have also consistently performed well against Council benchmarks. In these HEIs widening participation is a mainstream activity, embedded in teaching and student support as well as recruitment processes. All are post-1992 universities or colleges of higher education, and only two perform significantly poorly on student retention.

- *Committed*: this consists of a larger group of institutions who claim a commitment to widening participation, and where there is some evidence to support this claim. They are likely to have modified their curriculum and structures to encourage students from under represented groups, and to have mechanisms for monitoring retention. They include most post-1992 universities and most colleges of higher education, and a small number of pre-1992 universities. It should be noted, however, that a significant number of post-1992 universities perform poorly when measured against benchmarks.

- *Emergent*: this group includes most of the pre-1992 universities, many of whom claim to treat widening participation seriously, although some report that they have only just begun to do so. Within this group there are widely divergent views about what widening participation means. Activities are most likely to involve improving the preparation of potential entrants (for example, through summer schools, compacts and access programmes), but they are less likely to have adapted their existing curriculum and teaching to address widening participation issues. Many are 'selecting' rather than 'recruiting' institutions, although most have some 'recruiting' subjects[1]. Some perform well on particular indicators (eg the proportion of mature part-timers from under represented groups).

- *Committed specialists*: a small proportion of specialist institutions (mainly art and design colleges) make some claim to commitment in widening participation. They perform well in

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[1] *'Recruiting' institutions are those which, overall, have fewer applications than places. 'Selecting' institutions have more applicants than places. It is not easy to produce reliable measures, since unambiguous measures do not exist: poor recruitment against an optimistic target is difficult to compare against good recruitment against a modest one. Furthermore, the recruiting/selecting balance varies by subject, and many 'selecting' institutions have some 'recruiting' subject areas. In the case studies institutions were asked to self define, otherwise, the distinction is based on over or under recruitment against HEFCE agreed targets for 1999-2000 and 2000-2001.*

terms of recruitment from state school entrants (probably because of their foundation course linkage with FE colleges) and the recruitment of disabled students.

- *Specialists*: specialist institutions are, in general, least involved in widening participation activity, and our survey suggests that their staff are least likely to be aware of the issues.

- *The Open University* is a special case. By virtue of its size it is by far the largest numerical contributor to widening participation, although its percentage recruitment from under represented groups is relatively low.

1.24 It is especially important to note that the widespread belief that success in widening participation is incompatible with success in research assessment is not supported by the evidence. With the exception of a small number of institutions there is no significant statistical relationship between RAE performance and widening participation benchmarks. There are HEIs which perform well on both and others which perform badly. Measured by the Council's benchmarks, two of the worst performing institutions in widening participation are post-1992 universities, and two HEIs that do well in recruitment are highly research active 'civics'. The common belief that widening participation is always something carried out principally by institutions which are incapable of carrying out high status research is not supported by the data.

Disability

1.25 Although people with disabilities are significantly under represented in higher education, disability has tended to be treated (both by HEFCE and within institutions) as a distinct issue, often differently located and with different staff and accountability arrangements. Institutional work on disability tends to focus on responding to the needs of those already admitted (or about to be), and, by comparison with other widening participation activity, relatively little attention has been given to aspiration or recruitment, despite clear and continuing under representation.

1.26 HEFCE's work on disability has been consistent. Since 1997 the work has had a clearly focused objective: to ensure that all institutions can meet an agreed base level provision, and this has more recently been enhanced by legislative levers and the need to comply with the 1995 and 2001 Acts. Sustained funding since 1993/4 has contributed to the development and understanding of good practice. This has resulted in both greater activity within institutions than previously and signs that provision is starting to become more embedded. The time that this has taken may have implications for the time required to embed widening participation initiatives.

1.27 A minority of HEIs have sought to bring disability and widening participation together, and in responses to our survey were critical of perceived confusion within HEFCE on the linkages between the two. Although the Council has recently sought to encourage greater integration, clarification of the inter-relationships between widening participation and disability and a consistent interpretation would be welcomed by institutions.

Institutional Implementation

1.28 The creation of institutional strategies for widening participation has been central to HEFCE policy, on the implicit assumptions that an institution with a clearly articulated strategy is likely to perform better than one without, and that a strategy provides the impetus for change. The requirement for institutions to submit strategic statements enables HEFCE to secure

accountability with a light touch, leaving HEIs to determine their own strategies and how they are to be implemented.

1.29   Although there appeared to be a correlation between effective widening participation performance and the existence of sound strategies (as assessed by Action on Access) this was not true for all HEIs, and it is not possible to demonstrate causality. However, in most institutions we found little evidence of systematic cascading of messages or activity down to all relevant units and staff as part of a planning system. Since the requirement for strategic statements was imposed in the middle of the period covered by the available performance indicators, the correlation between a good strategy and good performance probably reflects the fact that HEIs which have a strong record of widening participation were better prepared to write coherent strategies, rather than that good strategies necessarily produced change.

1.30   The processes of internal communication, and their influence on behaviour, were less predictable than HEFCE policy implies, or some institutional managers suggest. Academic and managerial communication channels were often quite separate, with different weight in different institutions, and messages were often received through 'bottom up' communication channels rather than 'top down' ones. Indeed, effective formal communication channels to front line staff do not necessarily exist within all institutions, and where they do it is often left to the discretion of heads of department to communicate policy as they see fit.

1.31   This is demonstrated by our telephone survey, which established that most academic staff were aware that HEFCE and government see widening participation as a priority, but were unaware of specific interventions or detailed objectives. Similarly, the majority were aware that their institution has a widening participation strategy, but few had read it, and far fewer had any hand in its formulation. All these patterns were strongest among pre-1992 universities and specialist HEIs, but even in institutions where staff commitment to widening participation was high, it was common for staff to be unaware of the detail of institutional policy and strategy.

1.32   Although academic staff awareness of widening participation is likely to have risen in recent years, the extent to which this has been a direct result of HEFCE's activity, as distinct from government exhortation, media attention or other pressures is unclear. Awareness of the specific initiatives of HEFCE is low among academic staff.

1.33   From our survey data it is clear that the most powerful influence on behaviour of individual academics in relation to both widening participation and disability is the leadership of senior managers within their institution.

1.34   A number of barriers to implementing strategic statements were regularly cited by staff, of which the most common were: lack of funding to meet the needs of students from under represented groups; systems of staff reward which favoured research; inappropriate institutional structures and communication systems; and a lack of specialist staff.

1.35   Institutional data on widening participation are often weak, and many HEIs had little sound information about their own patterns of recruitment from under represented groups on which to base monitoring or strategy, except at the most general level.

Projects

1.36   Three strands of project funding were reviewed: disability projects; regional widening participation projects; and FE to HE pathway projects. At the time of writing this report the majority of projects within these strands were still to finish, and a number were delayed at the

start which may put back their completion still further. As a result it is too early to provide a definitive view of their effectiveness or to identify specific outputs.

1.37 The disability projects, which tend to have a clear and relatively straightforward focus, appear – in general – to have been successful. Most Strand One projects are enhancing institutional activities towards base-level provision, and it appears likely that most Strand Two projects will be taken up through professional networks in addition to any institutional adoption. Questions remain about Strand Three that cannot be answered until late 2002 or early 2003.

1.38 Within both widening participation project funding strands it is clear that much good work is being undertaken, and monitoring reports suggest general institutional satisfaction with individual projects. This is also the conclusion of Action on Access.

1.39 However, there is evidence that some these projects have faced difficulties, especially arising from cross-sector collaborative arrangements, staffing problems and associated issues. Despite the good work being carried out, in their reviews of projects at the end of 2000, the Regional Advisory Networks (RANs) found that 20 of the 75 projects had problems that could be considered significant in affecting delivery, and funding was withheld or reprofiled from 32 (43%) although often for technical reasons. However this fell to 10% in 2001. The minutes of RAN meetings suggest considerable differences in the way that their project monitoring role was undertaken, and it was not always clear whether the diversity of approach was the result of considered differences between regions, or accidents of personalities.

Funding

1.40 While the additional funding made available through the widening participation premium has been generally welcomed, there were major reservations among HEIs about both the amount paid and the method of calculation. These reservations were felt most strongly among the HEIs most active in widening participation. The same was not true for the disability premium.

1.41 In general, the institutions most committed to widening participation felt that the overall level of funding for widening participation was too low, although none has produced clear costings to demonstrate this. In general, within such institutions the distinction between mainstream funding to support teaching and funding supplements to meet additional costs was not seen as helpful.

1.42 The need for institutions to fill all their student places (and therefore their contract with HEFCE) remains the strongest recruitment driver, and a number of HEIs have failed to do so. In some cases this has had a much more significant effect on institutional financial health than the under-funding of the postcode premium.

1.43 The report (and particularly Appendix I) demonstrates that the institutions that have consistently performed above widening participation benchmarks and have a shared mission associated with teaching are almost wholly dependant upon HEFCE funding (including fees). Conversely, most – not all – of those that perform most poorly against benchmarks have missions in which teaching is only one part, and where there are conflicting priorities caused by multiple funding strands many from non-HEFCE sources. It follows that under funding of widening participation (for whatever reason) has hit the former group of institutions hardest.

1.44 Excluding aspiration funding (which was outside our terms of reference), the issue which HEIs reported as having caused most concern in the use of funding was the additional student numbers scheme. There is a strong feeling – particularly among post-1992 universities – that this has had the effect of diverting students, rather than increasing the total volume and nature

of participation. Over the three years of performance indicators, there appears to be evidence to support the 'diversion' hypothesis. Whether this is wrong in policy terms depends on whether HEFCE explicitly intends to encourage the movement of such students to different institutions.

1.45   Overall, the report raises a number of serious issues about the current funding methodology, and concludes that the Council cannot assume that its approaches are robust enough to command support if the continued expansion of widening participation is to take place.

Policy Implications

1.46   The policy messages about widening participation which HEFCE (and the government) have sought to convey have sometimes lacked clarity, and the number and variety of initiatives has caused confusion about priorities and objectives. At an institutional level there is clear evidence of confusion over the details of HEFCE policy, especially about the purpose and operation of 'postcode funding'.

1.47   To date, HEFCE policy has assumed that all institutions will contribute to the national priority to widen participation, but in ways which vary by institutional mission. This study confirms that institutions are willing to do so, and also that there is a group of institutions for whom this is a central part of their mission and expertise. Future strategies will need to recognise this, both in their approach and in their focus.

1.48   The government and the Council are committed to all HEIs playing a part in widening participation, but the evidence of the diversity of institutional approaches means that a single uniform policy approach will be neither welcome or effective. Whatever policy the Council adopts should recognise this, particularly the special role which can be played by the small group of very strongly committed institutions in developing new approaches for the most hard to reach students. It might be appropriate to recognise a special role for such HEIs, by providing higher levels of financial support to enable them to work with and retain such students. This would enable them to develop and pilot strategies for working with students which other institutions could subsequently follow, and there is evidence is that this is how many current initiatives (like summer schools and mentoring schemes) have emerged.

1.49   The general implications of our findings for future policy include the need to:

- Clarify the policy objectives, in relation to target groups and institutional diversity.

- Simplify the variety of incentives and funding streams, which are not well understood and sometimes believed to be in conflict.

- Raise the level of funding to recognise the additional costs of working with the hardest to reach and hardest to retain students.

- Clarify responsibilities for widening participation and disability within HEFCE itself, where conflicting messages are sometimes perceived by institutions.

- Counteract popular prejudice (within and outside higher education) that widening participation is a low status activity conducted by institutions unable to perform well in high status research.

2   Introduction and Terms of Reference

2.1   In January 2001 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commissioned an evaluation of its widening participation support strategy, to be undertaken jointly by the Higher Education Consultancy Group (in conjunction with the School of Educational Studies at the University of Surrey and Skill) and the National Centre for Social Research. The evaluation was directed by Allan Schofield, Head of the HECG, and other members of the team were: Sophie Corlett, Skill; Professor Stephen McNair, University of Surrey; and Ivana La Valle, Clarissa White, Robin Legard and Rory Fitzgerald, all from the National Centre for Social Research.

2.2   HEFCE provides numerous funding strands to support widening participation, and because of the long term nature of increasing enrolment from groups traditionally under represented in higher education, it required a more immediate means of evaluating the effectiveness of its widening participation support strategy than relying on monitoring recruitment and retention numbers. For the purposes of this evaluation HEFCE identified that *"the effectiveness of the Council's widening participation strategy should be judged by its success in encouraging and supporting institutions to become more proactive and strategic in their approach to widening participation"*. In particular, this involved an assessment of the interaction of the various individual funding strands, and the evaluation was asked to:

- Determine whether each particular strand had fulfilled its intended objectives.

- Identify any unintended consequences.

- Appreciate which aspects of the Council's strategy worked for which under represented groups in which institutional contexts.

- Determine whether some strands had been more successful than others, and in which respects.

- Identify any synergies or tensions between the different funding strands.

2.3   In addition, the Council required the evaluation to undertake a number of more general tasks, in particular to:

- Provide a map of the policy assumptions that underpinned the Council's strategy, drawing out clear intermediate objectives and milestones along the policy chain.

- Compare the policy assumptions with emerging patterns of behaviour and highlight any weak points or unintended consequences of the funding programme.

- Forward advice on future development work, including the implications of the research findings for modifying the assumptions underpinning policy.

- Offer advice and feedback on the effectiveness of the Council's management of the programme supporting the strategy.

2.4   The evaluation was asked to examine the following ten widening participation funding strands in operation on or before January 2001 when work began:

- Initial strategic widening participation statements.

- The funding supplement for recruiting and supporting students from under represented groups (the so-called 'postcode premium').

- The funding supplement for recruiting and supporting disabled students.

- The special programmes associated with widening participation and disability projects, and the associated coordination arrangements through Action on Access and the National Disability Team.

- Widening participation funding associated with the annual additional student numbers (ASN) round.

- The administration of DfES access and student hardship funds.

2.5   These initiatives have taken place within a rapidly changing policy environment, and this has caused two difficulties for the evaluation: first, that some of the issues concerning the effectiveness of the funding strands are already widely recognised; and second, that HEFCE policy has already moved on, and there is a danger that many of our conclusions appear historic rather than current. In Chapter 13 we try and avoid this by addressing emerging issues for future widening participation policy identified by the evaluation. However, through seeing early drafts of this report, HEFCE has been able to take account of our conclusions in developing very recent policy.

2.6   There are three factors to note that this evaluation was not asked to consider:

- First, it does not include all aspects of HEFCE activities to support widening participation. In particular, it does not examine initiatives which have been introduced after January 2001 (for example, higher education involvement with the Excellence in Cities initiative), or duplicate previous studies (for example, the evaluation of summer schools – see HEFCE 01/04). This report does, however, relate its findings to the current and developing concerns of HEFCE, particularly concerning such themes as: the integration of widening participation with learning and teaching; increasing emphasis on cross-sector activities with both FE and schools; widening participation in relation to institutional mission; and the extent to which the funding strands reviewed have influenced student achievement and subsequent employment.

- Second, the evaluation does not present – and was not asked to produce – output data on student recruitment or other aspects of widening participation. Despite the need for such data to assist in monitoring progress towards meeting the government's participation targets (see Chapter 3), the Council recognised from the outset that the relatively short timescale associated with the initiatives under review meant that any attempt to collect output data would be inappropriate.

- Third, student funding was not included in the terms of reference, except insofar as it had an impact on HEFCE policies.

Work Programme and Methodology

2.7   In accordance with a timetable agreed with HEFCE data were collected during 2001, therefore 2002 data are not included in this report. With the encouragement of the evaluation steering group issues concerning disability have been integrated into discussion of widening participation activity rather than being separated.

2.8   The Council identified the approaches to data collection and analysis that it required the consultants to undertake, and also in the timing of them. A large number of data sources were used, which in order to produce evidence based conclusions have been triangulated to confirm findings from more than one source. These are set out in Figure 2.1:

Table 2.1 Evaluation Data Sources

Data source	Summary description
Postal survey of all HEIs	A short policy oriented survey sent to heads of institutions in July 2001 on five key areas in the implementation of HEFCE strategy. [See Appendix C]
Telephone survey of academic staff	A survey undertaken in early Autumn 2001 of a sample of 591 academic staff (of which 170 were heads of department) in 64 HEIs on the impact of the HEFCE widening participation strategy. [See Appendix D]
Institutional case studies	Eight in-depth case studies undertaken in Autumn 2001 in different types of HEIs on the impact of the funding strands. [See Appendix E]
Survey of disability projects	A postal survey of HEFCE funded disability projects undertaken in Autumn 2001. [See Appendix F]
Responses to HEFCE 00/50	Institutional responses to consultation over 00/50 were reviewed, many providing a detailed commentary on the funding strands being evaluated
Analysis of strategic WP statements	Action on Access have reviewed both the initial and revised institutional strategic widening participation statements for HEFCE
Monitoring reports	Annual monitoring reports for both widening participation and disability initiatives were reviewed, for both 2000 and 2001
Individual interviews	A number of individual meetings took place with both Council officers and representatives of other organisations
Project visits	Eight visits took place to a small sample of widening participation and disability projects
Coordination team meetings	Meetings took place with both Action on Access and the National Disability Team
HEFCE documentation	A review of all relevant HEFCE papers was undertaken
NAO data	The National Audit Office reports on widening participation[2] and student achievement[3] became available towards the end of this evaluation

2.9   The telephone survey data were analysed against a number of key variables to test various hypotheses relating to the impact of the funding strands. These variables were: initial widening participation strategic statements as measured by Action on Access; HEFCE benchmarks; 2001 research assessment (RAE) scores for HEIs; by recruitment to MaSN (maximum student

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[2] *National Audit Office, Widening Participation in Higher Education in England, January 2002*
[3] *National Audit Office, Improving Student Achievement in English Higher Education, January 2002*

number); institutional size; and by type of institution. Of these variables the type of institution was the one that showed most consistent differences and patterns. Only significant data associated with key variables have been included in the text of the report, and the data have been weighted to correct for differential selection probability, with the percentages presented in the tables calculated from the weighted bases. For a full explanation of the methodologies adopted in the various surveys see the relevant appendices.

2.10   At the request of the steering group appointed by HEFCE to support this evaluation a large number of quotations from survey and case study respondents have been included in the text. While this enables the 'voices' of those engaged in widening participation to be heard, it should not be assumed that the opinions cited necessarily represent a consensus view, rather they typically illustrate a point made in the text. Moreover, widening participation is a controversial area, and many genuinely held but conflicting views exist. Accordingly, where the report makes an assertion which we think is generally supported by the evidence this has usually been triangulated from the various data sources used. In the draft report all supporting data sources for such conclusions were identified in the text, but they have been removed in this final version to assist easy reading at the request of the steering group.

The Structure of the Report

2.11   The report structure seeks to do two things: first, in order to review the overall impact of the relevant HEFCE initiatives, it integrates analysis of widening participation and disability funding strands into the areas of recruitment, student achievement, and employability. Second, it reviews the effectiveness of the individual strands to date.

2.12   In order to make the main report as readable as possible the analysis and presentation of the data have not been given in full, and detailed accounts of the information obtained from the various research activities appear in a series of technical appendices. At the request of the evaluation steering group, the report and appendices include numerous quotations from relevant information sources.

2.13   After a short contextual introduction to widening participation in Chapter 3, the main issues to arise from the mapping of HEFCE widening participation policy are summarised in Chapter 4 (the full mapping paper is included as Appendix B). This raises a number of hypotheses, policy questions and planning assumptions which are tested in the rest of the report.

2.14   Chapter 5 then considers how the various funding strands have influenced institutional widening participation strategy, and issues addressed include: HEI responses to Council strategy; how widening participation has been understood within institutions and the impact of Council initiatives on that understanding; and institutional diversity and how different HEIs have responded in different ways to the widening participation agenda.

2.15   Within the context of institutional strategies, Chapters 6, 7 and 8 then provide an integrated analysis of the impact of the various HEFCE initiatives to date in the areas of recruitment, student achievement and employability.

2.16   In Chapters 9 and 10 the effectiveness of the different funding strands is reviewed, and conclusions drawn about any synergy achieved. Chapter 9 deals with the three special initiatives concerned with projects, and Chapter 10 those strands that are explicitly directed at issues concerning funding supplements and additional student numbers.

2.17   From HEFCE's perspective the work of the two coordination teams in this area (Action on Access and the National Disability Team) represent specific funding strands, so we consider

issues concerning the coordination of initiatives in Chapter 11 along with discussion of the management of the widening participation strategy by HEFCE.

2.18   Chapter 12 provides an analysis of findings from the telephone survey and case studies to review issues concerning institutional implementation, the barriers to change, and whether any clear implementation chain exists.

2.19   Finally, in Chapter 13 the report draws a number of conclusions, and summarises evidence on the extent to which the hypotheses proposed in Chapter 4 are validated. It also takes account of emerging policy specifically in the areas of: funding widening participation; HE-FE collaboration; institutional diversity; and the need for enhanced dissemination of good practice.

3 The Context of Widening Participation

3.1 In order to evaluate the impact of HEFCE's approach to widening participation it is important to set the context in which the Council's funding strands are implemented within HEIs. The main factors to have raised awareness of widening participation have included: government policy on lifelong learning (and specifically on changes in further education); the general growth in student numbers in the late 1980s and early 1990s; and the growth of regionalism. More recently a number of influential documents have been produced, in particular:

- HEFCE's publication titled Supply and Demand in Higher Education (HEFCE 01/62).

- Ministerial statements on widening participation (including the Secretary of State's letter to HEFCE of January 2002).

- The National Audit Office reports on Widening Participation and Improving Student Achievement (January 2002).

- The fourth report (on student access) of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education and Employment – now renamed Education and Skills (30 January 2001)[4].

For the sake of brevity, we have not restated issues raised in those reports. Readers unfamiliar with national data and trends in patterns of enrolment in higher education should consult these other data sources.

3.2 The government elected in 1997 was the first to give much prominence to lifelong learning. Its first major policy statement on this was the green paper 'The Learning Age', and this was followed by a substantial number of initiatives mainly aimed at encouraging participation by those drawn from groups who had not previously benefited from post-school education. In his preface to 'The Learning Age', the Secretary of State presented his vision of the future of post-school education, which made an economic case as well as one based on equal opportunities:

> *"To achieve stable and sustainable growth, we will need a well-educated, well-equipped and adaptable labour force. To cope with rapid change and the challenge of the information and communication age, we must ensure that people can return to learning throughout their lives. We cannot rely on a small elite, no matter how highly educated or highly paid. Instead, we need the creativity, enterprise and scholarship of all our people.*
>
> *To realise our ambition, we must all develop and sustain a regard for learning at whatever age. For many people this will mean overcoming past experiences which have put them off learning. For others it will mean taking the opportunity, perhaps for the first time, to recognise their own talent, to discover new ways of learning and to see new opportunities opening up. What was previously available only to the few can, in the century ahead, be something which is enjoyed and taken advantage of by the many."* (Secretary of State's preface to 'The Learning Age: a Renaissance for a New Britain'[5])

3.3 In Chapter 4 we map the major influence of the Dearing Report[6] in the rise of widening participation to policy prominence in higher education in the mid 1990s. This was

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[4] See www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmeduemp/205/20502.htm
[5] See www.dfes.gov.uk
[6] National Commission of Enquiry into Higher Education, Higher Education in the Learning Society, HMSO, 1997

commissioned by the previous government with cross-party support and a remit to make recommendations after the election. Simultaneously the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), independently of government, set up a committee, chaired by Helena Kennedy, to review widening participation in further education. Both reported shortly after the general election, but one of the most striking things about the two reports was how little attention they paid to each other. For Kennedy it was self evident that both economic and social justice arguments pointed to greater investment in further education, the sector which deals with the largest numbers of poorly qualified and socially excluded people.

3.4   The view that the major priority for widening participation was in further education was implicitly endorsed by government's subsequent policy on lifelong learning, which in general ignored higher education. 'The Age of Learning' made only four references to higher education: to set a target of 500,000 extra students by 2002; to confirm that government would introduce new arrangements for financial support for students; to monitor the implementation of Dearing; and to establish a national framework for higher education qualifications. In summer 1999 HEFCE reported to its EQUALL Committee on 25 government initiatives relevant to widening participation and developing lifelong learning. Only five included higher education, and only two of those (Education Action Zones and Widening Participation Strategic Partnerships) had any direct relevance to widening participation. Two which might have made some contribution (Individual Learning Accounts and Local Lifelong Learning Plans) explicitly excluded higher education. Our evaluation evidence suggested that this separation was mirrored within higher education, where until recently references to further education have been few outside the context of direct recruitment initiatives.

3.5   Similarly, when the government created the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), in terms of the numbers affected this was probably the most substantial structural change in post-school education since the 1944 Act. However, there was little involvement of higher education, although this has now been increased.

3.6   A further element of government policy has been the development of regional government, a trend already begun in the early 1990s but gathering pace later in the decade. The Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) have had a strong economic focus, and neither widening participation nor disability issues have been a major concern. However, alongside the growth of RDAs and regional assemblies has been the development of regional collaboration in higher education. In some regions these arrangements have been formalised, and the new entities have taken an explicit interest in widening participation. In some regions there is evidence that this regional activity has raised the profile of widening participation in HEIs, and it has certainly helped to build networks, share intelligence and strengthen the cohort of widening participation officers in institutions.

3.7   Since the 2001 General Election, the government has made it clear that it sees widening participation as the primary focus of its higher education policy, and has published three specific targets:

- A manifesto commitment to increase participation to 50% of the 18-30 years old age cohort by 2010 while maintaining standards.

- That 28% of adults should gain level four (higher education) qualifications by 2002.

- To make significant year on year progress towards fair access as measured by funding council benchmarks.

The first of these is the most demanding, and the HEFCE Supply and Demand publication (HEFCE 01/62) calculated that this may mean an additional 300,000 to 400,000 students depending on the balance between full and part time. As noted below, to date Council funding has operated upon the basis of HEIs determining their own widening participation targets within approved strategic statements, but the government has indicated recently that it may be prepared to penalise institutions which do not set and achieve demanding targets. Ministerial statements to this effect have been widely reported, resulting in a higher profile for widening participation as an issue in the media. Evidence of impact can only be anecdotal, since these interventions came after our fieldwork.

3.8   HEFCE 01/62 was a significant new statement by the Council. It argued that expansion (which was very rapid between 1988 and 1994) had almost come to a halt, and that labour market demand for graduates was being largely met. It also argued that the potential for expanding mature entry is limited, since the kind of students who made up the mature expansion of the 1980s have now all participated, and their successors have mostly participated. The paper argued that sustaining numbers and reaching the government's participation target could only be achieved by a substantial widening of participation, and pointed to the heavy difference between participation rates in high and low social and economic groups. The paper proposed both to re-examine whether current funding adequately recognised the extra costs of recruiting and supporting students from under represented groups, and to strengthen work with further education colleges (FECs) and schools to improve preparation and motivation.

3.9   These issues have recently been reviewed in the National Audit Office report on widening participation, which confirmed the nature and extent of under representation from particular social classes and from disabled people, and noted the work of HEFCE and government to redress this. It argued strongly that the major factors preventing participation by people from lower social classes were: early disengagement from education; poorer educational opportunities in school; a lack of confidence in the benefits of higher education; and difficulties over financial support. It reported that HEIs believed that HEFCE funding for widening participation did not cover the costs involved; that many part time students (for whom institutions received a part time and mature premium) were not from under represented groups; that project bidding was inefficient; and that funding models made it difficult for institutions to provide for those who wished to study discontinuously.

3.10   The parallel NAO Report 'Improving Student Achievement in English Higher Education' addressed the issue of student retention which may be an increasing problem as participation is widened. It found that overall retention, achievement and employability compared well with other countries. For the minority who did not succeed, it identified poor preparation for higher education, changing personal circumstances, financial issues (including the impact of paid work), and dissatisfaction with course or institution as the main causes. Its recommendations were for improved guidance before entry, additional pastoral care, and careers guidance on exit. It also recommended more use of intermediate qualifications for those who decided not to complete degrees.

3.11   In relation to disability, it is generally considered that there is a high level of under representation of disabled people, although there is no definitive data on the scale of the problem. The NAO report calculated that an 18 year old with a disability was 40% as likely to enter higher education as an 18 year old without a disability. However, the methodology used to make this calculation was based on the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) and is open to dispute. Without further data ambiguity is likely to continue over the extent of participation of disabled students, and it would be helpful if agreed non-participation rates could be determined. Generally the problem seems to be one of disabled students not applying to higher education, although in some cases they may be discouraged by the application

process. The NAO report noted that in most subjects the conversion rate of disabled applicants to offers was greater than for non-disabled applicants, but that in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science the rate was lower.

3.12 In relation to disability a significant driver for change has been the introduction of legislation (mainly the 1995 and 2001 Acts) whose implications for higher education are only now beginning to be recognised. There was clear evidence from our data that institutions were responding to a legislative, as well as a developmental driver. Although Part 4 of the 2001 legislation is not due to be implemented fully until September 2002, the lead up to implementation and the publicity which it has attracted, has prompted institutions to review their provision and practices.

3.13 Other relevant factors setting a context for HEFCE interest in enhancing provision for students with disabilities include:

- Improvements in the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), which have probably led directly to more students in higher education, with more coming up through schools.

- The production by HEFCE of base level provision guidelines (HEFCE 99/04).

- The publication in 1999 of the Quality Assurance Agency Code of Practice, Section 3: Students with Disabilities, which has prompted many institutions to review provision in the light of the Code's precepts. These go well beyond so-called 'base level' provision, setting up a benchmark for good, rather than minimally acceptable, practice.

- Previous special initiatives funded by HEFCE since 1993-94 which have gradually helped to enhance institutional provision for disabled students.

4   Mapping HEFCE Widening Participation Strategy and Policy Assumptions

4.1   The terms of reference for the evaluation identified the need to *"provide a map of the policy assumptions that underpin the Council strategy, drawing out clear intermediate objectives and milestones along the policy chain"*. In this section the main parts of this map are summarised, with the total mapping paper presented as Appendix B.

4.2   Widening participation is a long standing concern to the various funding bodies, going back well beyond the creation of HEFCE under the 1992 Act. Its early focus was on the participation of women (which reached parity with men in the late 1980s), including developments in areas where women were under represented, especially science and technology. During the 1980s attention turned to mature entrants, and especially to the development of part time programmes to provide flexibility to meet individual circumstances. In the early 1990s activity centred on disability and ethnic origin, with an increasingly refined understanding of the diversity within both categories. Subsequently attention turned to the problems of young men, particularly white and afro-caribbean, and of the pupils of schools with no record of sending leavers to higher education. Groups which have been addressed by individual institutions, but not by national policy, include older learners (age limits on access to funding were set at 50 in the 1992 Act and raised to 55 in 1997), people in rural areas, prisoners, and work based learners (a higher priority in further education policy initiatives).

The Main Policy Influences

4.3   In the past five years the key influences on the widening participation support strategy of HEFCE have been:

- The Dearing Report.

- Government policy (see Chapter 3).

- The Council's own evolving relationship with the sector, including particularly the development of corporate planning and maintenance of diversity.

4.4   Specifically, almost all of the HEFCE initiatives being evaluated in this study can be traced back directly to the recommendations in the Dearing Report, to the HEFCE Board's discussions of the implications of Dearing in 1998, and its advice on this to the Secretary of State. More recently, the key influence has been DfES policy.

4.5   The Dearing Report made ten recommendations concerning possible widening participation policy, which are summarised – together with action taken – in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 Recommendations of the Dearing Report on Widening Participation

	Dearing Recommendation	Action Taken by HEFCE in England	Action Taken by DfEE/DfES & Government
1	When allocating funds for expansion, priority should be given to HEIs which can demonstrate a commitment to widening participation; have in place a participation strategy, a mechanism for monitoring progress, and provision for	Implemented by HEFCE as part of the additional student number initiative. HEFCE 20/97 provided an immediate response to Dearing from the funding year 1998-99; and HEFCE 99/56 further emphasised the importance of widening participation in the	-

	reviewing achievement by the governing body (para 7.21)	allocation of additional student places. This funding is conditional on strategic statements being submitted – HEFCE 99/24	
2	The FE and HE funding bodies should fund projects designed to address low expectations and achievement, and promote progression to HE (para 7.27)	HEFCE 98/35 announced initial one year funding for 1998-99, subsequently extended in HEFCE 99/33 to the three years 1999-2000 to 2001-02. Separately HEFCE 99/07 announced a joint programme with FEFC	-
3	The HE funding bodies to consider financing pilot projects which allocate additional funds to HEIs which enrol students from particularly disadvantaged localities (para 7.35)	HEFCE 98/39 proposed a funding supplement for under represented groups, and this was confirmed in HEFCE 99/24	-
4	Government should consider restoring to full time students some entitlement to social security benefits (para 7.38)	-	Students taking time off studies because of ill health can now claim job seekers allowance once recovered
5	The total available to HEIs for Access Funds should be doubled from 1998/99, and the scope should be extended (para 7.38)	-	Access funds have risen from £45.7M in 1998-99 to £70M in 1999-2000
6	The Funding Bodies to provide funding for HEIs to provide learning support for students with disabilities (para 7.43)	Funding for this purpose was announced in HEFCE 7/00	-
7	The ILT should include the needs of students with disabilities within its activities (para 7.43)	The LTSN has undertaken a number of measures to meet this proposal (see www.ilt.ac.uk)	-
8	The scope of the Disabled Students Allowance to be extended to be available without a parental means-test and to part time students (para 7.43)	-	The scope of the DSA has been extended
9	Work to be done over the medium term to create a framework for data about lifelong learning, using a unique student record number (para 7.44)	No action taken	No action taken
10	HEFCE to fund higher education in FECs (para 22.38)	Introduced as part of the general funding methodology	-

4.6   It is evident that the recommendations of the Dearing Report led directly to all but one of the funding strands which are part of this evaluation. The exception was the special programme to support projects concerning students with disabilities that had been in existence in various forms since 1993-94, although the importance of this area had previously been reinforced in a letter from the Secretary of State in 1992 requiring HEFCE to take action on matters concerning disability. This reinforced the legal requirement of the Council to have 'due regard' in relation to disability issues within the sector. However, it is important to recognise that on the evidence available to it Dearing assumed growing demand for higher education (primarily at sub-degree level), rather than the plateauing of demand which has actually taken place. Dearing also made a number of other recommendations concerning tuition fees and student funding that were not directly aimed at widening participation as such. It follows that other than the ten recommendations it made, the Dearing Report did not feel it necessary to propose further measures to stimulate wider participation demand, an agenda broadly accepted by HEFCE.

4.7   The influences on the funding strands being evaluated thus contrast with later initiatives (for example Excellence in Cities) which were much more led by developing government policy. In Chapter 13 we conclude that this has major implications for assessing the effectiveness of HEFCE policy, which must be based on the policy assumptions operating at the time that the funding strands were introduced rather than those operating now.

Widening Participation and HEFCE Strategic Planning

4.8   The stimulus of Dearing is also reflected in changes to HEFCE's corporate planning commitments on widening participation, which has much greater priority than previously. Despite the claim in HEFCE 98/39 (on funding arrangements) that *"since its establishment HEFCE has been committed to widening participation"*, in the 1997-2000 Corporate Plan (significantly written before Dearing had reported to government) there was no mention of widening participation, only a general reference to *"encourage in higher education a widening range of opportunities through institutions which build on their strengths".*

4.9   In the subsequent 1998-2001 Corporate Plan it was acknowledged that *"the Dearing Report and the government's green paper on lifelong learning have set a strategic agenda for the long term development of UK higher education"*, and in response HEFCE introduced an explicit aim into its Plan to *"encourage institutions to increase access, secure equal opportunities, support lifelong learning, and maximise achievement for all who can benefit from higher education".*

4.10   Five activities were identified to help further this aim: introducing funding to reward HEIs; seeking ways to promote equal opportunities; adopting policies to support lifelong learning; expanding opportunities for students who did not have local access to higher education; and collaborating with the FEFC and others. No performance indicators were identified, and only a modest commitment was made to monitoring the pattern of student participation. Similarly, the growing importance of widening participation can be seen in the Council's publications.

4.11   Only a few weeks after the 1998-2001 Corporate Plan had been published, HEFCE 98/39 appeared slightly to redefine the aim set out in the plan, and consulted the sector on four key 'principles' that would underlie the future approach of HEFCE to widening participation:

- *"Access to achievement – we should encourage institutions not only to increase the participation of students from under represented groups but also help such students succeed.*

- *Increased collaboration – priority should be given to collaboration between HEIs and partners from other education sectors to improve progression routes to higher education for under represented groups.*

- *Recognising diversity – we should avoid prescription in our funding and allow for differences of institutional approach.*

- *Targeting certain groups – emphasis should be placed on improving the representation of particular disadvantaged groups*.*"

Unusually for the time, disabled applicants were listed as one target group in the last category.

4.12   In April 1999, HEFCE 99/24 reported the outcome of the consultation resulting from HEFCE 98/39, and noted particular support for: the principles underlying the proposed strategy; additional funding to be primarily mainstream but with some special initiatives; a link between

institutional widening participation strategies and funding; and HEIs having specific rather than sector wide benchmarks for participation. In May 1999 the request for initial strategic statements was issued, with invitations to bid for continued funding of regional partnerships (see item 2 in Figure 4.1). The proposals set out in HEFCE 99/24 formed the foundation for much of the operational activity associated with the funding strands evaluated in this report.

4.13   The growing emphasis on widening participation was also evident in the five year HEFCE Strategic Plan 1999-2004. Whilst the aim remained the same as in the previous plan the amount of space given to identifying policy had grown from one paragraph to a whole page (of a 12 page document). Eight specific policy commitments were made in order to achieve three outcomes specified for the first time:

- That the higher education student body should be more representative of the population.

- That there should be higher levels of student retention and achievement.

- That institutions should increasingly collaborate to share and promote good practice in widening participation.

Also for the first time three specific performance targets were introduced: that participation by socio-economic groups currently under represented in higher education should rise faster than growth in overall student numbers; that effective support for higher education in FECs should be provided within Council funding and quality assurance methods; and that measures should be adopted to improve retention, with a particular commitment to *"provide information about progression and non-completion, and establish a premium, through the funding method for teaching to encourage institutions to establish processes to improve retention"*. However, disability was not mentioned in this Plan.

4.14   The HEFCE Strategic Plan for 2000-2005 broadly repeated the planning commitments from the previous year, but with three amendments: a commitment was made to *"continue to monitor the provision by institutions for students with disabilities"* (there is no reference in previous plans to students with disabilities in the context of widening participation); support for the University for Industry (Ufi) was offered from 2000-01 onwards; and information was to be provided to HEIs about progression and non-completion in order to encourage them to establish processes to improve retention. However, the implications of the Council's commitment to widening participation did not feature in any other aspects of the Plan: for example there was no cross-reference to the section concerning the enhancement of teaching.

4.15   Other key policy measures taken at around the same time included:

- The creation of regional consultant posts by HEFCE with overall responsibility for relationships between HEIs (and HEFCE funded FECs) and HEFCE's Institutions and Projects Directorate, which has responsibility for the operational relationships between the Council and institutions. Regional teams monitored the activities of their institutions, including new strategies and developments, and met HEIs regularly to review performance. The regional consultants were involved in the allocation of project funding for work on widening participation within their regions, while the Council's Policy Division continued with central initiatives (having previously managed the disability initiatives and the previous non award-bearing continuing education programme which had a major widening participation strand).

- In August 2000 the Council published an important policy paper on institutional diversity (HEFCE 00/33) which confirmed its commitment to continued diversity, rather than imposing uniformity on the sector. It argued that diversity was one priority which needed to be balanced against a number of others (quality, equity and cost-effectiveness), but also recognised that some aspects of diversity were outside the remit of the Council. It committed HEFCE to keeping its mechanisms under review, and to exploring new ways of promoting diversity as well as ensuring that its methods or programmes were not eroding it.

4.16　Subsequently (and beyond the period covered in this evaluation) in November 2000, HEFCE 00/50 launched a new set of initiatives, including: a requirement for HEIs to produce a revised – and fuller – widening participation strategy; and funding for raising aspirations and increasing participation from under represented groups and ensuring their success. Within many institutions this publication was perceived as presenting a significant shift in priorities, towards inner cities, young people and encouraging recruitment to 'selective' HEIs, and this shift has had some effect on the perceptions of those interviewed and surveyed in the present project. Emphasis was placed on recruitment from specific geographical areas, linking this initiative to the government's Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zones programmes, with a particular focus on recruitment of young people. The implications for the recruitment of disabled applicants from such groups was not mentioned.

4.17　While these developments were taking place, a number of other events influenced widening participation and institutional priorities. Those within HEFCE's remit included the requirement on HEIs to produce teaching and learning strategies, the refinement of institutional corporate planning, and the Research Assessment Exercise 2001. Those from other sources are mentioned in Chapter 3.

4.18　At this stage a notable shift in Council policy moved emphasis away from a focus on recruitment to a broader encouragement for retention and student achievement and employability. This shift encouraged the provision of greater linkage between widening participation and the Council's own learning and teaching strategy implemented through the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF).

4.19　More generally the initial focus of the Council on recruitment attracted some criticism from those institutions with a history of involvement in widening participation, and the demand-side problems highlighted in HEFCE 01/62 have focused attention on a broader policy assessment of the action required to meet government participation targets. In the light of current government policy, there is now recognition within HEFCE that action by HEIs alone is unlikely to achieve the required participation targets, and that initial policy was too narrowly focused. Thus in making the case for much enhanced sector-wide collaboration with further education and schools, the Council's Director of Policy wrote that *"widening participation will be far more complex than we might previously have thought. It also seems as though to some extent we and others have been aiming at the wrong targets."*[7]

Widening Participation and Age

4.20　Throughout the 1980s the focus of widening participation work in higher education had been strongly on mature entrants, especially mature women returners, who increased their numbers substantially across the decade. During the 1990s, the focus of attention shifted significantly away from mature entrants towards younger ones, and a number of policy statements emphasised this shift. The 50% participation target of the government explicitly limits the policy objective to people under 30. While this is, to some extent, a recognition that not all

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[7] *B.Bekhradnia, Speech at the University of Staffordshire, 19.9.2001*

higher education entrants proceed directly from school or FEC at 19, and there is explicit recognition of work based learning routes, nevertheless the policy emphasis has shifted significantly. This affects two groups of institutions in particular.

4.21 The first is those – especially large former polytechnics – who had made this work a particular focus, strongly encouraged during the 1980s by the CNAA. (and the ILEA in London). The second is those pre-1992 universities with a strong tradition of extramural higher education, mainly large civic universities, who converted much of their provision to access and degree work aimed specifically at older learners during the 1990s. It is significant that despite a historical commitment to widening participation, these institutions do not perform above their benchmarks for young undergraduates, but a number do so in relation to mature undergraduates. Recent policy documents and discussion papers emerging from HEFCE, have included references to the importance of maintaining a lifelong perspective, but this has not been the main thrust of policy initiatives.

Widening Participation and Disability

4.22 Although the Council has supported a number of initiatives to enhance provision for students with disabilities, the policy linkage between disability and widening participation does not appear to have been consistently interpreted. To check these linkages we have reviewed Council corporate plans and major widening participation policy statements.

4.23 Within the four HEFCE strategic/corporate plans considerable variation was evident:

- 1998-2001 (HEFCE 98/23): provided the most proactive linkage between widening participation and disability, with the commitment that under the strategic aim to increase access, equal opportunities, and to support learning, the Council would *"encourage institutions to reach out to under represented groups including disabled people through funding policies".* Similarly, under a strategic aim on financial management a commitment was made to *"undertake research and have funding initiatives to improve access for disabled people".*

- 1999-2004 (HEFCE 99/31): contained no mention of disabled students.

- 2000-2005 (HEFCE 00/22): noted an aim to *"monitor provision for disabled students".*

- 2001-2006 (HEFCE 01/43): reaffirmed the *"monitoring of provision for disabled students",* noted the disability premium as an achievement under diversity, and under future commitments noted the additional £56m for improving physical access.

4.24 Similar variations existed in widening participation circulars and other documents. We do not list these in full but other than in HEFCE 99/24 disabled students appeared to be viewed as a discrete group within widening participation or not mentioned at all. Although the Council has recently sought to bring together widening participation with both learning and teaching and disability, this clarification may not yet be fully embedded within HEFCE.

4.25 Unlike widening participation, disability provision has not been monitored through performance indicators or benchmarks, and until recently there has been little pressure on institutions to have any strategy to improve their provision for disabled people. Institutional disability statements were designed primarily for students and were mainly descriptive in nature, and initial widening participation strategies were not required to cover disability, although this is now being encouraged by both the Council and Action on Access. More recently the circular letter on mainstream funding (HEFCE 7/00) indicated that institutions were expected to include

details of how they were developing provision for disabled students in their annual operating statements and in institutional strategies.

4.26 This approach is reflected in the sector, and the data available to us suggest that – in general – HEIs treat disability as separate from widening participation. In our policy survey a number of institutions commented upon the perceived confusion of Council policy on the linkages between the two, and called for clarification. For example, one HEI commented that it was confusing that the Council sometimes included disability in widening participation and sometimes did not, and another noted that *"a clear articulation of the Council's strategy, along the lines required of HEIs, would be helpful. At present it has the appearance of being piecemeal".*

Performance Indicators, Benchmarks and Targets

4.27 In December 1999 (HEFCE 99/66) the Council published its first set of performance indicators on widening participation. These provided comparative data on all HEIs, showing for each institution the percentages of entrants who were:

- Young (degree and undergraduate) from state schools and colleges.

- Young from lower socio-economic groups (SEG IIIM-V).

- Young from low participation neighbourhoods (defined as postcodes where entry rates to higher education are less than two thirds of the national mean).

- Mature with no higher education experience, and from low participation neighbourhoods.

The resulting tables distinguished full time, part time, young and mature entrants. No indicators were produced for disabled students, partly because of the difficulties in obtaining data.

4.28 At the same time the Council introduced the notion of benchmarking, whose key objective was to compare each HEI's performance with others with similar underlying characteristics. Detailed statistical analysis of institutional data suggested that three factors accounted for the majority of the variation between institutions, and were also reasonably stable over time for any given institution. They were: the entry qualifications of entrants (in A level points); the age mix of entrants (young/mature); and the subject mix offered. Thus, two institutions with the same entry qualification level, age and subject mix, could be expected to perform similarly, and any difference in participation profile could properly be attributed to better or worse performance in widening participation.

4.29 Using this data, the Council generated a benchmark for each indicator for each HEI, based on its profile of the three characteristics. Performance above or below that mark was indicative of success or failure in widening participation, and when it published the indicators it identified those HEIs where this variation (positive or negative) was statistically significant. Although the choice of factors to include in the formula included an element of subjectivity, the process of deriving the benchmark was purely statistical, and it is legitimate to say that an HEI which performed significantly above its benchmark was doing better than comparable institutions.

4.30 However, the performance indicators were not all of the same kind. While 'state school entrants' was a stable and reliable figure, 'low participation neighbourhood' was more problematic. Here, the process of generating the classification was complex, based on the 1991 Census (which did not recognise substantial population mobility in some regions), and

aggregated data in unpredictable ways. As a result, many HEIs in London performed less well than comparable institutions in the North. Furthermore, many of the applicants recruited from such areas (especially in cities or rural areas where population is mixed), are relatively 'traditional' students, as is demonstrated by the mismatch in some institutions between the three indicators. In the institutional survey (see Appendix B) the basis for benchmarks was queried by 24% of HEIs, with many of these being highly critical of the methodology.

Key Policy Documentation

4.31   The Council has published more than 50 reports and related papers on widening participation and disability since 1994. Some of the key documents relating to the period since academic year 1997-98 are shown in Figure 4.2.

4.32   Figure 4.2 illustrates the rapid developments that have taken place, and the complex policy environment that exists. Space does not permit all the policy linkages to be described in detail, but the main ones are shown by arrows. In Appendix C we have noted the challenge that this volume of documentation posed to HEIs, and that approximately 17% of those responding to the institutional survey believed that the number of initiatives was too great and the complexity of documentation unnecessary.

Figure 4.2: A Chronology of the Main HEFCE Documents Relating to Widening Participation

Date	HEFCE Reference Number	Topic	Comment
Oct 1997	20/97	ASNs: invitations to bid for 1998-99 (response to Dearing)	Widening access was one of four specific criteria for bids (results reported in 98/14)
June 1998	98/35	WP: invitations to bid for special funding programme 1998-99	Invited proposals for regional partnerships. (Outcome reported in 99/07)
July 1998	98/38	ASNs: outcomes of bids 1998-99	
Aug 1998	98/39	WP: funding proposals	Invited comments on a new strategy, including funding for disabled students and students from 'poor backgrounds'.
Oct 1998	98/56	ASNs: invitations to bid 1999-2000	Invited bids for ASNs on two grounds – rewarding quality or widening participation (outcome reported in 99/38)
Nov 1998	98/66	Disabilities: disability statements a good practice guide	
Jan 1999	99/04	Base level provision for students with disabilities	Provided guidance to institutions
Feb 1999	99/07	WP: special funding programme 1998-99 outcome of bids	
Feb 1999	99/08	Disability: invitation to bid for project funds	
Feb 1999	99/11	First Report of the PI Workng Group	Announced the intention to publish PIs
April 1999	99/24	WP: funding decisions	Set out responses to 98/39. Outlined decisions on new approaches; allocations; special funds bidding timetable; etc
May 1999	99/33	WP: request for initial strategic statements plus	Plus invited bids for special project funding with FEFC. (Outcome reported in 00/35)
June 1999	99/38	ASN: outcomes of bids for 1999-2000	
July 1999	99/44	Disabilities: request for disability statements	Requested HEIs to produce and publish disability statements as a grant condition
Sept 1999	99/56	ASNs: invitations to bid 2000-01	Outcome announced in June 2000 (00/26) ·
Dec 1999	99/66	PIs in HE – first annual publication	Presented PI tables for the first time for all UK HE institutions – covered entrants in 1997-98
Feb 2000	7/00	Announced funding supplement for students with disabilities	
April 2000	00/18	PIs in HE – consultation on updating	
June 2000	00/26	ASNs: – outcomes of bids 2000-01	
Aug 2000	00/33	Diversity in higher education: HEFCE policy statement	Set out HEFCE's policy on sustaining and promoting diversity
Aug 2000	00/35	WP: special funding programme 1999-2000 to 2001-02 bid outcomes	
Sep 2000	00/39	Additional student places and funds 2001-02: Invitation to bid	
Oct 2000	00/40	PIs in HE – second annual publication	Presented PI tables for entrants in 1998-99.
Nov 2000	00/46	Disabilities: evaluation of SLDD initiative	
Nov 2000	00/50	WP: consultation on funding proposals 2000-01 to 2003-04	Sets out policy on WP: raising aspirations, and increasing participation from under represented groups
Jan 2001	01/01	Student support funding: outcomes from 00/50	
May 2001	01/29	WP: funding decisions for 2001-02 to 2003-04	
July 2001	01/36a	WP: analysis of initial strategic statements	
July 2001	01/44	ASNs outcomes of bids 2001-02	.
Aug 2000	01/49	Student support funding: allocations for 2001-02	

Sept 2001	01/54	ASNs: invitations to bid 2002-03	
Oct 2001	01/62	Supply and demand in HE paper	
Dec 2001	01/69	PIs in HE – third annual publication	Presented PI tables for entrants in 1999-2000
Nov 2001	17/01	Student support funding: opportunities bursaries	

HEFCE Policy Assumptions

4.33 The developments noted above are underpinned by a diverse set of assumptions within the Council about widening participation strategy, both explicit and implicit. So far as the behaviour of institutions is concerned, the key assumptions appear to have been that they:

- Are broadly in sympathy with the aim of widening participation.

- Are willing and capable of acting strategically in relation to a priority of this kind, even where widening participation has not previously been part of institutional mission.

- Should not be directed, but rather encouraged, to take action on the basis of producing and implementing widening participation strategies.

- Will have different views about appropriate forms of widening participation depending on their mission.

- Have the capacity to enhance teaching and learning and student support as required to aid retention and achievement.

- Have access to appropriate information about their current practice, and are prepared to act on it.

- Have access to information about good practice nationally, and are prepared to act on it.

We have treated these assumptions as hypotheses and tested them in the report, summarising our conclusions in Chapter 13.

4.34 HEFCE also appeared to make more general assumptions of which the most important were that:

- Numerical targets for widening participation can be both defined and delivered by supply-side action within a relatively short timescale. However, although part of this assumption remains, the recent publication of HEFCE 01/62 noted that *"the sector cannot deliver expansion on its own, and that demand is the key, not supply"*.

- Partnerships and other forms of collaboration with other institutions and agencies are a cost effective instrument for widening participation.

- Council policy on institutional diversity is compatible with a requirement for all HEIs to address widening participation.

- Policy concerning disabled students does not overlap with policy concerning other under represented groups.

- The inclusion of widening participation in the corporate planning process ensures change.

For the full list of general assumptions see Appendix B.

The Overall Operation of the Funding Strands

4.35   Appendix A summarises the ten funding strands evaluated in this report, and in this section we do not duplicate data. Rather we summarise the main operational assumptions of the Council, based on the policy assumptions listed above. In brief, the purposes of the strands are identified in Figure 4.4:

Figure 4.4: Purposes of the Funding Strands

Purpose	Tool
Stimulate strategic planning	Requirement that all institutions should produce strategic statements
Recognise additional costs and reward success	Funding supplements
Open progression routes and raise aspirations	Partnership projects
Target expansion in student numbers	Additional student numbers
Support institutions in development	Support teams and initiatives

4.36   These initiatives were not launched as a single coherent programme, although they shared some broad policy objectives, and have sometimes been presented as a single whole. They related to a mass of activity within HEIs, some undertaken by individuals and units with clear remits of widening participation, but much spread across institutions and difficult to trace. Much institutional activity does not derive from or relate to HEFCE's interventions, and our data suggest that approximately half of academic staff may be unaware of HEFCE's widening participation initiatives policies – see Chapter 5.

4.37   The policy assumptions noted in paragraphs 4.31 and 4.32 have led to a number of operational assumptions about how the funding strands should work, of which the main ones are:

a)   Funding should depend on the production of initial widening participation strategic statements which should include *"an indication of how they [HEIs] plan to use the additional funds they will receive from 1999-2000 under the formula-based grant allocation notified in March. These statements should incorporate clearly defined organisational and numerical targets"* (HEFCE 99/24). By inviting statements in the context of the operating statement, the Council avoided appearing to impose solutions or strategies on institutions, encouraged greater transparency in planning, and helped ensure that widening participation remained a priority for all institutions, within the context of a diverse system.

b)   Specific objectives were not stated (and presumably not thought to be needed) for requiring initial strategic statements, or providing funding supplements for either widening participation or disability. However, implicitly objectives could be taken to be implementing Council policy. HEFCE 99/33 provided guidance about the kinds of activities which institutions might undertake in order to widen participation, but this was mainly in the context of how special initiative funding might be used. There was little guidance on the form that a statement might take. Objectives were, however, provided for the three special programmes which funded widening participation and disability projects.

c)   The funding of special programmes has been an incremental process, with the Council learning from experience and building on previous activities. Thus the very modest immediate post-Dearing commitment to support HEIs/FECs collaboration grew into

substantial project investment, which in turn has resulted in the proposed 'Partnership for Progression'. This has enabled the sector to learn from 'starting small', although arguably larger investment from the start might have been more commensurate with the priority given to widening participation.

d) The Council's policy has – of necessity – been set within its relationships with the higher education sector and its existing operational procedures over a wide range of issues. It was thus assumed that the supply centred approach noted above had the capacity to meet widening participation targets as it has done in Scotland and Wales. Only relatively recently have detailed discussions been held with FEFC/LSC on undertaking major cross-sector activities.

e) Although benchmarks have been produced to provide comparative data, a clear separation has been drawn between these and the targets that institutions might adopt to meet widening participation and disability strategies. Although HEFCE rejected adopting nationwide quantitative targets as not reflecting the *"cultural and organisational changes which may be necessary in some institutions"*, the fact that benchmarks are not targets is a subtle distinction that runs the risk of not being politically understood.

f) Evaluation arrangements should be broadly consistent with other similar HEFCE activities (for example teaching and learning), and undertaken through: annual operating statements; annual monitoring of projects; and the work of coordination teams. However, the work of the Regional Advisory Networks (RANs) and regional consultants has added an additional evaluative mechanism which is absent from other aspects of Council activity. In Chapter 11 we note that the nature of the monitoring by RANs appears to vary for reasons that are not apparent. The tensions between getting detailed data on institutional progress in widening participation and the requirements for a 'lighter touch' coming out of the Accountability Review are real, and not easily resolved.

g) The policy assumptions in paragraph 4.31 meant that no sanctions were felt to be required for failures of HEIs to comply with Council requirements, providing that approved initial strategic statements were produced and projects broadly met their specific objectives. Rather the policy was – and remains – one of encouragement, particularly for those research oriented institutions who received aspiration funding.

In Chapter 13 we draw conclusions on the appropriateness of these operational assumptions.

5 Institutional Widening Participation Policy and Strategy

5.1 As a direct result of HEFCE 99/33 all 128 HEIs in receipt of premium funding for widening participation submitted initial strategies in 1999 and updated ones by 31 October 2001 (commissioned by HEFCE 01/29). In this Chapter we review evidence on the adoption of the initial strategies, as – at the time of writing – it is too early for any data on the more recent ones to be available. We concentrate on: current institutional policy and strategy; differences in institutional understanding of widening participation; how HEIs have been influenced by HEFCE strategy; the extent to which an approved written strategy is related to impact; and the issue of institutional diversity in relation to policy and strategy.

5.2 From an institutional perspective, developing a widening participation policy should not stand apart from the overall process of strategic planning – indeed guidance from HEFCE explicitly encouraged integration. However, the requirement in HEFCE 99/33 did not fit comfortably with the timeframe associated with Council requirements for the development of a corporate plan for 1999-2000 to 2001-02. HEFCE 98/27 set out the data required from HEIs for the planning round for this period following a consultation exercise (HEFCE 98/13) which concluded that institutions should develop corporate plans on a three year cycle. As part of HEFCE 98/27 HEIs were required to set out their overall objectives and strategies, and identify the funding implications.

5.3 Accordingly, any assessment of the progress of institutional widening participation activities should be set within the context of those corporate plans. This has at least three implications:

- First, it might reasonably be expected that HEIs with a tradition of widening participation, and where the activity was already central to mission, would be more likely to have integrated provision into overall corporate plans, and that – in general – widening participation strategic statements would be more developed than in other HEIs. On balance, the analysis undertaken by Action on Access in reviewing initial statements suggests this is the case.

- Second, if corporate planning is to have any meaning it needs to be translated into institutional behaviour, and it might be hypothesised that the implementation of widening participation provision might be more advanced in those HEIs with more developed strategies. Using the Action on Access data as a base point, results from the telephone survey undertaken for this evaluation tended to confirm this hypothesis and are presented below.

- Third, for those HEIs who had already produced a three year corporate plan before being asked to produce widening participation strategies, it would be unrealistic to expect major departures from existing commitments during the current planning period. However, it is reasonable to expect that widening participation will be integrated into an overall strategic framework during the corporate planning period of 2002-03 to 2004-05.

5.4 All indicators suggested that there was general support amongst HEIs for an expansion of widening participation, although data presented below note that this support took various forms and disguised very different assumptions about what widening participation means. In our postal survey only five HEIs of the 113 responding observed that widening participation provision should be based solely in institutions that explicitly focused on this area; three of these were specialist institutions in the performing arts who took the view that their distinct mission required them to recruit only those with many years of specialised study prior to admission, and that in practice the opportunity to do this was not generally available to

applicants from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. All research intensive universities responding claimed to be active in aspects of widening participation, although, in general, the majority of their activities tended to emphasise access and recruitment issues rather than retention, support and employability.

Institutional Widening Participation Strategies

5.5 The initial strategic statements were reviewed by Action on Access (HEFCE 01/36a) using 12 indicators based on guidance originally provided in HEFCE 99/33, and their analysis concluded that there was wide variation in the adequacy of the statements. Some strengths were evident, but significant widespread weaknesses existed through a general failure to consider: targets for student retention; the use of performance indicators; targets for the recruitment of under represented groups; the integration of strategies with other widening participation activities (for example, projects based on FE and school links); linkages with other relevant activities (teaching and learning, disability provision, etc); and budgetary proposals in relation to premium funding. Internal HEFCE documents refer to significant improvement in the quality of the most recent second generation strategies. Of course, such an assessment makes a number of assumptions about what constitutes a 'good' strategy, and we return to this issue later in the report.

5.6 In our institutional survey (see Appendix C) we sought information from HEIs on the usefulness of producing the initial strategic statements[8], and 76% appeared to have found this process useful or very useful, with typical reasons being: to provide a focus for institutional activity; to assist in planning; to reinforce existing institutional commitment; to provide a stimulus for bringing together a range of activities; and to emphasise the importance of local partnerships. A large number of favourable responses could be cited from this group, for example one observed that the *"production of the widening participation initial statement proved to be a very useful exercise in itself, in that it helped the University to think through its approach to widening participation and to consider and articulate its reasons for undertaking particular developments".*

5.7 Conversely, 24% of institutions (the majority post-1992 universities) reported that they had found the requirement to write strategic statements to be of very limited value or institutionally counterproductive: thus a quarter of HEIs have found the Council's approach unhelpful. A number of reasons were cited, the two most frequently reported being:

- The HEFCE requirement for strategic statements duplicated – and in some cases conflicted with – existing institutional plans. For example, an HEI with long experience of widening participation reported that *"the statement was written to satisfy Funding Council requirements and did not fit easily into the University's annual review process or its long term review of the strategic plan and its supporting policies.... the University does not feel it has benefited greatly from HEFCE's widening participation support strategy".*

- The general approach of the Council was perceived to be dominated by short term initiatives and an absence of the funding required to meet the real additional costs involved in retaining under represented students. For example, another experienced institution observed that *"HEFCE's practice tends to assume that institutions are able to identify a few discrete activities which add up to their widening participation strategy and cost the amount allotted by formula.... It is unrealistic to expect the precise and discrete quantification implied by HEFCE practice".*

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[8] *Although our institutional survey emphasised that we were reviewing initial strategic statements, it was conducted approximately four months before revised strategies were expected, and it cannot necessarily be assumed that all HEIs were able to distinguish between the two.*

5.8   However, such views were not shared by all post-1992 universities and colleges with a long tradition of widening participation. Indeed a few were amongst those who found most value in completing strategic statements.

5.9   There was a slight indication in our survey data that the usefulness of strategic statements varied by type of institution. Colleges of higher education appeared to find the production of statements most useful (84% of those responding), followed by pre-1992 universities (79%), and post-1992 universities (70%). These data were broadly compatible with those obtained from the telephone survey and case studies, with the latter suggesting that although many colleges have traditionally been active in widening participation, the formalisation of arrangements required by the production of statements had outweighed the drawbacks found by those institutions where widening participation plans already existed.

5.10   Within some institutions new to widening participation the benefits appeared to be primarily a stimulus for action; for example one university noted in its survey response that *"the initial strategic statement did not have an office to produce it, nor did the University have anyone to oversee its widening participation activities. This limited the value of the statement, and its primary use has been to provide a University context for the establishment of a widening participation office and officer, and a starting point for the development of a three year strategy"*.

5.11   A minority of institutions in the survey questioned aspects of HEFCE's own strategy and the associated impact on institutions, and three main views were evident:

•   Thirteen percent of HEIs – almost all post-1992 universities and colleges – were explicitly critical of a perceived focus on recruitment in HEFCE thinking during the period covered by this evaluation, and commented that they saw widening participation as the core of institutional mission with all other systems relating to it. For example one observed that *"HEFCE needs to take a broad and inclusive view of widening participation that recognises the diversity of learners and the increasing diversity of study modes. There is a tendency for policy to be developed in respect of the full time 18-21 year old undergraduate and not to take full cognisance of the considerable diversity of participation that currently characterises higher education"*.

•   Approximately 10% of respondents from different types of institutions were more generally critical of the articulation of HEFCE policy on widening participation associated with the funding strands under review, for example one commented that *"a clear articulation of the Council's strategy, along the lines required of HEIs, would be helpful. At present it has the appearance of being piecemeal"*.

•   Approximately 18% of responses drew attention to the implications for the implementation of strategic statements of problems in student funding, and the demand-side difficulties of the lack of educational attainment at school level amongst under represented groups. Some of these respondents identified the influence of the various HEFCE funding strands as *"marginal"* in the face of such difficulties, and a small number were explicitly critical of the whole widening participation policy. For example, one institution – highly active in widening participation – refused to participate in the survey *"because HEFCE, and indeed government, policies in this area are a complete nonsense"*.

5.12   In most institutions there appeared to be a clear divide between disability activities and the rest of the widening participation agenda, with disability work tending to focus on those already admitted to institutions, while the rest of widening participation has focused on aspiration and

recruitment. However, a minority of HEIs had sought to bring disability and widening participation together, and were critical of perceived confusion within HEFCE on the linkages between the two (for example, one post-1992 HEI noted in its consultation to HEFCE 00/50 that *"given other HEFCE initiatives and the revised disability act, we are surprised that widening participation statements are not also required to make reference to supporting students with disabilities".*

5.13 However, in Chapter 6 we present data that suggest HEIs where staff awareness of institutional widening participation strategies is higher then average, may be more likely to target students with disabilities for recruitment purposes. Although there is no evidence of any causal link, it is likely that a more receptive approach for one group of students from under represented groups may be accompanied by similar concerns for others.

The Awareness of Strategic Statements and HEFCE Policy

5.14 Although the production of strategic statements has generally been useful in a majority of HEIs, there was less unanimity within institutions about the operational value of the statements. Two contrasting extracts from institutional responses to our survey provide an indication of the range of opinion, with one institution reporting that *"it is not our view that the request for a strategy statement has significantly altered our behaviour, other than in enhancing the level of coordination",* while another concluded that *"there is no doubt that we have accelerated our actions under widening participation in the last two years....having created and disseminated a strategy statement has undoubtedly helped our work – but it is important to recognise that there was considerable good practice in place before the HEFCE initiative".*

5.15 Of the 76% of respondents reporting the production of statements to have been useful or very useful, 15 of the 80 HEIs concerned explicitly observed that there was little institutional impact as yet. Other institutions noted significant progress in widening participation, but were not able to attribute this directly to the production of strategies. For example, one research oriented university noted that since the production of their strategy *"several important widening participation developments have occurred – although not because of the existence of a strategy document....In general, therefore, we would say that being required to produce the strategy document has not been of great operational utility as we were already committed to wide participation, but it has helped in some degree with focusing attention on the issues".*

5.16 Conversely, approximately 20% of responding HEIs (of all types) directly attributed significant operational impact to the requirement to produce strategies. For example, the respondent from one pre-1992 university noted that *"I believe as PVC for widening participation, and it is a view shared by several senior colleagues, that the ethos of widening participation is beginning to permeate the whole institution. What is interesting is that our achievement has not been at the expense of our mission as a specialist professional institution".*

5.17 Approximately 12% of respondents noted that one benefit of the production of statements was that it offered the opportunity for institutions to bring together planning of disability provision with widening participation, although in five cases (5%) the different interpretations by HEFCE of whether disability was or was not included within widening participation was felt to be unhelpful. Few institutions commented explicitly upon any operational value gained by the integration of widening participation with other relevant strategies (for example, learning and teaching) although more general linkages to retention were made, and this may have been implicit in some replies.

5.18   We sought to correlate the wide range of institutional responses on the operational value of strategic statements with the variables cited in Chapter 2, but no pattern was evident. For example, although a number of respondents noted the particular problems of highly devolved institutions in implementing widening participation statements, in some such HEIs considerable operational progress was claimed. However, on balance, the majority of responses claimed considerable operational progress on implementing widening participation activities, whether directly because of the requirements for statements or not. Thus there is evidence to support the general applicability of a conclusion made by one institution that *"if the measure of success of HEFCE's strategy is that institutions 'become more proactive and strategic in their approach to widening participation' there is some evidence that it is working"*.

5.19   To provide an indicator of the impact of strategic statements, the telephone survey sought data on staff awareness of their own institutional widening participation strategy, and the perceived priority given by HEFCE to widening participation. Although awareness is a weak measure of impact, it is a prerequisite for action, and within the short period covered by this evaluation effectively communicating new strategies is not a trivial task.

5.20   So far as awareness is concerned, respondents were asked if their institution had a formal written strategy to encourage the participation of under represented groups, whether they had read this, and whether they had been consulted or involved in its development. The results in Table 5.1 show considerable variations between heads of departments and lecturers.

Table 5.1: Staff Awareness of Their Institution's Widening Participation Strategy

	Heads	Lecturers	All academics
	%	%	%
Staff aware that their HEI has a WP strategy	85	76	76
Staff have read their HEI's WP strategy	66	39	41
Staff consulted/involved in development of their HEI's WP strategy	39	17	18
Unweighted base	170	421	591

[Base: all academics. Percentages refer to the results of three different questions]

5.21   Table 5.2 breaks down the same data into type of institution and shows that academic staff in post-1992 universities and higher education colleges were the most likely to be aware that their institution had a widening participation strategy (87-90%), followed by pre-1992 universities (69%) and specialist colleges (62%). The picture is slightly different when looking at the proportion of respondents who had actually read the strategy document: 62% from colleges had done so, 44% from post-1992 and 37% from pre-1992 universities, and 21% from specialist institutions. When it comes to involvement in the development of the strategy, staff from colleges were again most likely to have taken part.

Table 5.2: Awareness of Widening Participation Strategy by Type of HEI

	Pre-1992 universities	Post-1992 universities	HE colleges	Specialist institutions
	%	%	%	%
Staff aware their HEI has a WP strategy	69	87	90	[62]
Staff have read their HEI's WP strategy	37	44	62	[21]
Staff consulted/involved in development of their HEI's WP strategy	20	13	28	[7]
Unweighted base	319	170	54	48

[Base: all academics. Percentages refer to the results of three different questions. Figures in square brackets indicate a percentage based on fewer than 50 cases]

5.22   Academics were also more likely to say that their institution had a widening participation strategy if they were in: HEIs with lower RAE scores (89% and 79% of academics in institutions in third and fourth quartiles said their HEI had a strategy compared with 64% of those in the first quartile); and HEIs whose strategy Action on Access had given a medium or high score in their assessment (80% of their respondents compared with 71% from HEIs to whom Action on Access had given a low score).

5.23   In general, these data suggest that awareness of strategies is closely related to institutional mission and previous widening participation activity. In particular, the high levels of awareness and readership in higher education colleges suggest that this sector has been particularly effective in disseminating strategies effectively. Our case study data suggest that the relatively small size, community oriented mission, and centralised procedures of colleges have helped this process (see Appendix E).

5.24   Conversely there is some evidence that large multi-faculty institutions with high levels of internal devolution of decision making may have particular difficulties in disseminating information about widening participation strategy. However, no statistical analysis of data was possible. By its nature devolution is designed to facilitate 'grass roots' action on local priorities, and in such circumstances gaining commitment to a central initiative perceived to be driven by an external body can be a long term activity.

5.25   So far as awareness of the overall HEFCE widening participation initiative is concerned, the telephone survey asked about awareness of the Council's support strategy. As shown in Figure 5.1, although a majority of all respondents (57%) believed that HEFCE gave high priority to widening participation, only 9% believed it gave very high priority. In addition, only 13% thought that it was a low (or very low) priority, while just over a fifth were not able to answer this question.

Figure 5.1: Perceived Priority HEFCE Gives to Widening Participation
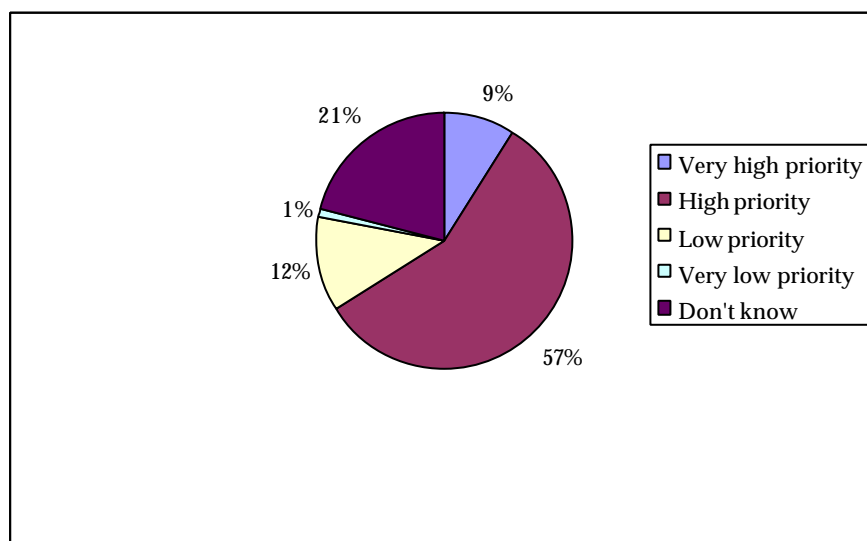
[Base: all academics]

5.26   Table 5.3 notes that academics from different types of HEIs had slightly different perceptions about HEFCE priorities. While around two-thirds of respondents from pre- and post-1992 universities believed that HEFCE gave high (or very high) priority to widening participation, the figures were lower in colleges (60%) and specialist HEIs (53%).

Table 5.3: Views on the Priority HEFCE Gives to Widening Participation Among Academics from Different Types of HEI

	Pre-1992 universities	Post-1992 universities	HE Colleges	Specialist institutions
	%	%	%	%
Very high priority	7	13	8	[3]
High priority	62	51	52	[50]
Low priority	9	19	8	[10]
Very low priority	1	-	6	[10]
Don't know	21	17	26	[27]
Unweighted base	319	170	54	48

[*Base: all academics. Figures in square brackets indicate a percentage based on fewer than 50 cases*]

5.27   As well as seeking their views on HEFCE's commitment to widening participation, telephone respondents were asked whether they could identify any specific Council initiatives. As shown in Table 5.4 knowledge of individual activities was generally low, although overall 53% of all respondents were able to identify at least one specific HEFCE initiative. Predictably, among heads of departments this figure was considerably higher at 77%. However, these data may underestimate actual awareness as staff may know of activities without being aware of the funding source.

Table 5.4: Awareness of HEFCE Widening Participation Initiatives

	Heads	Lecturers	All academics
	%	%	%
Additional funding for under represented groups	34	20	21
Funding for widening participation projects	20	13	14
HEIs asked to develop WP strategies	11	8	8
Facilitating summer schools	12	7	7
Facilitating collaboration with FE/schools	4	5	5
Providing advice/information on WP	9	3	4
Monitoring HEIs' WP performance	6	2	2
Providing bursaries (on behalf of DfES)	2	2	2
Other	24	15	15
Nothing	-	1	1
Don't know	23	48	47
Unweighted base	170	421	591

[*Base: all academics. % may add up to more than 100 as respondents could select more than one reply*]

5.28   These data suggest that much more emphasis on the importance of widening participation is required if the strategic commitment of the Council is to be implemented. In particular, the lack of staff awareness of specific activities suggests that there is much to do in further dissemination of the outcomes of HEFCE funded projects and related activities (see Chapter 9). While it could be argued that staff do not need to be aware of widening participation initiatives, much HEFCE strategy is predicated on effective dissemination of good practice, and it is difficult to see how this can be achieved if significant numbers of staff are ignorant of the main attempts to develop such practice. These data are consistent with the view that academic staff tend to think in terms of departmental activity and may have no knowledge of (or interest in) system-wide initiatives. This may have significant implications for the 'campaign' on widening participation that HEFCE proposes to mount.

Institutional Understanding of Widening Participation

5.29   Responses to our institutional survey suggested significant differences in how widening participation was conceptualised. Such differences relate to numerous factors including mission, institutional history and culture, competing priorities, and regional role. Three overall approaches emerged from the data collected:

- A dominant focus on recruitment and increasing aspiration, found – not surprisingly – mainly in selective HEIs, and representative of approximately 20% of respondents. For example, one HEI in its survey response noted that *"our strategy is to recruit the most able students, whatever their background and we are neither able nor prepared to lower our entry qualifications....The key emphasis in our strategy is therefore on increasing the pool of qualified applicants by raising aspirations and awareness"*.

- A holistic approach which integrates widening participation as part of mainstream institutional provision, including student support and employability. Approximately 25% of HEIs took this view, with one noting that *"we have always taken a long term and holistic approach to widening participation, and as well as developing links with partner colleges have developed a flexible curriculum to attract non-traditional students"*.

- A mixed approach which has concentrated upon recruitment, but is finding the need to provide new forms of provision and support if levels of student achievement are to be maintained. The balance of HEIs surveyed – approximately 55% – could be placed in this group, and one research oriented university noted that *"there are increasing reservations as to whether traditional teaching and learning methods are the most appropriate vehicle to stimulate and retain a widening cross-section of students, particularly in the first year"*.

These issues are pursued in more detail in the discussion below on institutional diversity (paragraphs 5.40 to 5.52).

5.30   Within almost all institutional strategies there was recognition that widening participation is a long term activity. An HEI with long experience in this area noted in its response to the HEFCE consultation 00/50 that *"widening participation is a philosophy as well as practice. It involves a process of transition, both cultural and financial, for the students involved, which is not achieved by a few quick fit mechanisms overlaid on traditional university structure or approaches"*.

5.31   While there is significant variation in what is understood by widening participation, during the period covered by this evaluation emphasis has generally been on recruitment. To confirm this, at the beginning of the telephone interview respondents were asked (in an open, unprompted question) what widening participation in higher education meant to them. The results showed that it seems to be conceptualised mainly in terms of recruiting more under represented students, with the replies of a substantial minority implying that this would involve institutions being proactive, for example, by targeting these groups or providing them with greater access or opportunities. Disabled applicants were scarcely mentioned in relation to questions about widening participation. Greater support for under represented groups once they enter higher education was rarely mentioned, but this might have been implicit in some answers. Employability was not mentioned at all, probably reflecting the fact that this is only beginning to emerge as an issue to be addressed in HEFCE strategies.

5.32   Not withstanding institutional commitment to the idea of widening participation, clear differences in the understanding of what widening participation meant were revealed in our case studies. In most of these, widening participation was led by enthusiasts who undertook

initiatives regardless of the level of commitment within the institution as a whole. Significant staff resistance to widening participation policy was noted in all case study HEIs but more especially in 'selective' ones. This was based on genuine concerns about threats to 'standards' within a competitive funding and recruitment environment, the ability of students from under represented groups to cope with demanding teaching, and concerns about 'stigmatising' students who had been enrolled on a differential basis from others. For example, a member of staff who had recently joined one case study HEI to run a widening participation project observed that *"there is a fear of lowering the standing of the university because the status of the university is linked to the status of the people who work there. Widening participation is not a high priority for most people. It is to do with our performance rating in the newspaper and widening participation is just perceived as something which may drag us down".*

5.33 In contrast, the explicit mission of the post-1992 case study universities was that of a teaching rather than a research institution, based around extending access to higher education to under represented student groups. Although widening participation was still primarily understood in terms of recruitment, there was a significant body of opinion that referred to the balance shifting towards retention as an equally important component of the widening participation agenda. A few respondents in such institutions expressed the view that widening participation had to be viewed holistically in terms of recruitment, retention and employability, for example *"the HEFCE widening participation strategy is about aspiration raising. It is an interlinked process of recruitment, retention and employability. If you fail in one area, the whole agenda is fouled up".*

5.34 The case studies also identified a general lack of understanding within the institutions reviewed about the policy rationale for an expansion of higher education to 50% of the 18-30 age cohort. Even in some of those institutions strongly committed to widening participation, it was felt that there was no evidence that a pool of students of the size implied by such a participation rate was either available or required.

Institutional Widening Participation Targets

5.35 Institutions were required in their strategic statements to identify appropriate targets and performance measures for improving widening participation. Partly because of the observation of Action on Access that many initial strategic statements were weak in identifying relevant targets, we sought further information on how institutions proposed to use HEFCE performance indicators and benchmarks in relation to their own widening participation strategies.

5.36 In our institutional survey HEIs were asked about the use and value of target setting as part of a widening participation strategy and views were mixed. There was general recognition of the value of adopting institutionally relevant indicators and associated targets, with higher education colleges most positive about the feasibility and desirability of target setting. Although the potential benefits of targets in any form of strategic planning were widely recognised, almost all respondents noted the difficulties of collecting data to aid real long term target setting; the particular difficulties of deriving output targets which could be accurately related to the number of variables involved in influencing achievement; and the difficulties of setting meaningful targets at a time when demand was uncertain. For example, one HEI observed that *"in summary, numerical targets are appropriate for some activities: for others they are not only inappropriate but can lead to inappropriately focused attention and effort".* Comments about the long term nature of many initiatives were frequent, as were concerns about the difficulties of influencing much demand-side activity. A number of institutions

expressed concern about "game playing" if unrealistic targets were externally imposed, with a negative consequence in the growth of staff cynicism.

5.37   The basis for Council performance indicators was queried in many data sources. The focus for most HEIs was almost always on the low participation indicator, and while there was an acceptance that HEFCE is undertaking further work to refine this, 24% of respondents objected to what they understood to be the underlying principle. For example one HEI reported that *"we do not have access to up-to-date postcode analysis, and would not use it if we had...It is useless at the level of individual selection, but as financial benefits become stronger some institutions may be tempted – and one hears rumours stronger than that – to use postcode analysis in actual selection"*. Other concerns about benchmarks included:

- The use of national indicators, for example one institution observed that *"where HEFCE have got this seriously wrong is in setting national as opposed to regional catchments....A regional benchmark that reflected the character of regional communities would be much more logical and produce a target to which we could realistically aspire to exceed"*.

- The particular technical problems of using geodemographic indicators in London and in rural areas, with the consequent financial implications for HEIs in these areas.

- The perceived problem of a lack of access to data used by HEFCE (see Chapter 4).

- The dangers that benchmarks might be used for purposes for which they were not designed, and linking funding more generally to their achievement.

5.38   Although the Action on Access review of revised institutional strategies reports greater use of targets and performance indicators, we were not able to find much evidence of institutional embedding of these, although it may be too early to expect this. For example, in Chapter 6 we note that only 7% of respondents to the telephone survey state that their own institution sets numeric targets for recruiting students from low participation neighbourhoods at programme level.

5.39   Despite these reservations, only 17% of respondents to the institutional survey explicitly opposed the process of target setting per se, rather there were genuine concerns about the robustness and reliability of data if targets are to be used with confidence. As one institution observed *"if these issues can be overcome, setting realistic targets alongside a sensible approach to reviewing can be highly beneficial"*.

Institutional Diversity

5.40   Higher education institutions are very diverse, in size, history, mission, location, subject mix and patterns of recruitment, and both HEFCE and the government are committed to maintaining this diversity. However, there is also commitment to the principle that all institutions should contribute to the broad aim of widening participation, so that students have the opportunity of access to the full range of higher education. This creates tensions, some of those HEIs committed to widening participation resent Council intervention, which gives what they perceive as less committed institutions resources to 'poach' their traditional students. Conversely the less committed, while not objecting in principle, do perceive tensions between widening participation and other priorities.

5.41   The institutions which contribute most to the broad numerical objective of increasing recruitment from under represented groups are not necessarily those with the highest percentage recruitment from those groups. This is true for a number of institutions, but the

Open University is the outstanding example, with by far the largest numbers of recruits from under represented groups, although it ranks 82nd in terms of the proportion of its entrants from such groups and it recruits no full time students at all.

5.42   Measuring institutional performance in relation to widening participation is problematic, since the various measures available do not all correlate with each other, and institutional performance changes on different indicators over time. In general, the worst performing HEIs have shown the greatest improvement over the three years for which performance indicators have been available. However, it was possible to identify a group of 19 institutions that have performed, over the last three years, significantly above the mean on most of the available measures. Although not all these HEIs were covered by all the data sources available to us the cumulative evidence appeared to confirm that in these institutions there is strong commitment to widening participation in principle, and that considerable effort has been devoted to it over a long period. This was borne out by evidence from the two case study institutions in this group. Here, attitudes to widening participation tended to be expressed in terms of social equity and a regional mission, rather than institutional financial survival.

5.43   At the other end of the scale there was a group of institutions which have so far contributed relatively little to widening participation. Although 75 HEIs have performed significantly below one or more of their benchmarks over a three year period, 15 have done this on several indicators. These are the ancient universities, a small group of London institutions, and a variety of specialist HEIs.

5.44   Between these two groups, however, lie the majority of institutions, many with some strengths, and half of all HEIs have performed significantly well on one of the various widening participation indicators over the last three year period. It is worth noting that perceptions within higher education, and perhaps beyond, tend to be much more affected by the performance of the two extreme groups than the overall picture justifies.

5.45   Such differences mean that institutions can be grouped into six broad types, and it is likely that they will respond differently to policy interventions and produce different results. Although the groups do correspond broadly to traditional institutional typologies, there are many HEIs which diverge from their apparent peers. The six can best be described as:

- *Strongly committed*: 19 institutions claim explicitly in their strategic statements that widening participation is central to their main mission, and have also consistently performed well against Council benchmarks. In these HEIs widening participation is a mainstream activity, embedded in teaching and student support as well as recruitment processes. All are post-1992 universities or colleges of higher education, and only two perform significantly poorly on student retention.

- *Committed*: this consists of a larger group of institutions who claim a commitment to widening participation, and where there is some evidence to support this claim. They are likely to have modified their curriculum and structures to encourage students from under represented groups, and to have mechanisms for monitoring retention. They include most post-1992 universities and most colleges of higher education, and a small number of pre-1992 universities. It should be noted, however, that a significant number of post-1992 universities perform poorly when measured against benchmarks.

- *Emergent*: this group includes most of the pre-1992 universities, many of whom claim to treat widening participation seriously, although some report that they have only just begun to do so. Within this group there are widely divergent views about what widening participation means. Activities are most likely to involve improving the preparation of

potential entrants (for example, through summer schools, compacts and access programmes), but they are less likely to have adapted their existing curriculum and teaching to address widening participation issues. Many are 'selecting' rather than 'recruiting' institutions, although most have some 'recruiting' subjects[9]. Some perform well on particular indicators (eg the proportion of mature part timers from under represented groups).

- *Committed specialists*: a small proportion of specialist institutions (mainly art and design colleges) make some claim to commitment in widening participation. They perform well in terms of recruitment from state school entrants (probably because of their foundation course linkage with FE colleges) and the recruitment of disabled students.

- *Specialists*: specialist institutions are, in general, least involved in widening participation activity, and our survey suggests that their staff are least likely to be aware of the issues.

- *The Open University* is a special case. By virtue of its size it is by far the largest numerical contributor to widening participation, although its percentage recruitment from under represented groups is relatively low.

5.46   In addition to the factors included in HEFCE's benchmarking there were three other influences which might have been expected to impact on performance in widening participation. These were type of institution, strength of research focus, and the level of demand for student places. We examined all three and results are reported in more detail in Appendix I.

5.47   The first, and most significant, was type of institution, where some broad classifications exist although with many exceptions. In general, the data suggested that the institutions most committed to widening participation were large, northern, urban and metropolitan post-1992 universities and some colleges of higher education. (In practice, this probably includes some HEIs in London, whose measured performance appears to underestimate their real achievements, as a result of technical problems with the low participation neighbourhood indicator.) In many of these institutions widening participation appeared to be well embedded, with significant attention being paid to curriculum change, student retention and support and employability. Many pre-1992 universities are less committed, and more focused on preparation for entry and admission. Specialist institutions in general are the least committed, and the most likely to have only recently begun to think about widening participation as an issue, although art and design institutions have traditionally recruited high proportions of students with disabilities. On almost all indicators they reported lowest levels of awareness and activity.

5.48   However, none of these institutional types were homogenous. Half of all HEIs have performed significantly above their benchmark on at least one of the performance indicators during the three year period, and there were very significant outliers. There were very low performing post-1992 universities, especially outside major cities and in the south. Conversely, there were large civic universities outside London which made a major contribution in volume terms, though often not in percentage ones. The two institutions whose widening participation performance was weakest are both post-1992 universities. Most strikingly, specialist institutions were strongly polarised, with some (notably medical institutions) performing

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[9] *'Recruiting' institutions are those which, overall, have fewer applications than places. 'Selecting' institutions have more applicants than places. It is not easy to produce reliable measures, since unambiguous measures do not exist: poor recruitment against an optimistic target is difficult to compare against good recruitment against a modest one. Furthermore, the recruiting/selecting balance varies by subject, and many 'selecting' institutions have some 'recruiting' subject areas. In the case studies institutions were asked to self define, otherwise, the distinction is based on over or under recruitment against HEFCE agreed targets for 1999-2000 and 2000-01.*

consistently badly, while others performed relatively well, especially with state school recruitment in the art and design colleges.

5.49   The second expected variation related to the divide between 'recruiting' and 'selecting' institutions and subjects. Where an HEI has a shortfall in demand for places it is likely to be more active in widening participation, and this is generally reflected in staff attitudes and awareness. There was evidence for this in the case studies and institutional survey, but the telephone survey did not find this, suggesting that staff do not, unprompted, associate the two issues. It may also reflect the fact that in recent years even very strong institutions have had some subjects experiencing under recruitment.

5.50   The third variation concerned research performance, where it might be expected that an inverse correlation would exist between high performance in the RAE and success in widening participation. However, as Figure 5.2 shows, over the system as a whole there was little relationship, and some of the large civic universities outside London have managed to maintain strength in both. Despite this, staff surveyed generally believed that pressure to achieve good RAE results was in conflict with widening participation, a view reinforced by the fact that none of the very highest performing RAE institutions do especially well in widening participation. If, as is possible, the effects of the 2001 RAE are to increase selectivity, then as a result the isolation from widening participation of a small 'research dominated' group is likely to increase, and the cost (both political and financial) of keeping them engaged will also rise further.

Figure 5.2: Comparison of RAE and Widening Participation Performance
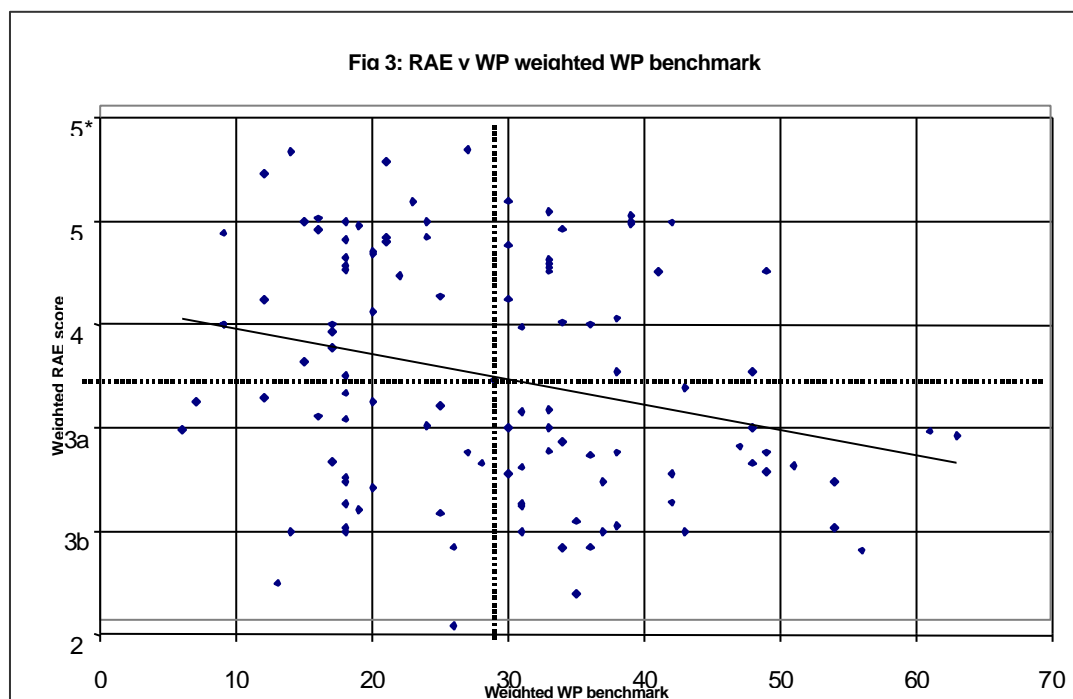
[Source: HEFCE PIs (significantly above benchmark for all groups) and THES 2001 RAE tables of weighted RAE score per HEI. For explanation of weightings see Appendix I]

5.51   The remaining question to be addressed is the impact of HEFCE widening participation strategy on the institutional performance summarised above. Unfortunately there is no simple measure that currently permits this judgement to be made with confidence. Perhaps the best – though tentative – available indicator is the assessment of HEFCE regional consultants made in recent annual operating statements. In both the 2000 and 2001 statements consultants

were asked to rate the performance of HEIs in their respective regions on a four point scale against the following question*: "Institutions have very different starting points in terms of their widening participation record. Taking into account the institutional context, and the indicators that the HEI said it would use to monitor its progress, what is your view of their achievement in the year concerned?"*

5.52 The results are summarised in Table 5.5 and suggest that it is difficult to see any consistent pattern. While there was a clear correlation between satisfactory and excellent ratings for high performing institutions, the progress of the majority of worst performing HEIs against benchmarks was also judged to be satisfactory by consultants. Allowing for the nature of the data only speculative conclusions can be drawn, including:

- That the improvements in consultant ratings represent the institutional impact of HEFCE policies.

- That there is, in practice, tension between benchmarks and other institutional activity as measures of progress in widening participation.

- That general satisfaction existed is an indication of existing good practice in a wide range of institutions irrespective of whether benchmarks are met.

Table 5.5: HEFCE Regional Consultants' Rating of HEI Widening Participation Progress

HEI Group	Year	Exemplary	Satisfactory	Poor	Insufficient information
High WP performing HEIs (19)	2000	2/19 (11%)	13/19 (68%)	3/19 (16%)	1/19 (5%)
	2001	5/19 (26%)	11/19 (58)	-	3/19 (16%)
Low WP performing HEIs (15)	2000	1/15 (7%)	8/15 (53%)	5/15 (33%)	1/15 (7%)
	2001	-	12/15 (79%)	1/15 (7%)	2/15 (14%)

6   Recruitment

6.1   As noted above, concern with widening participation and access has historically focused on recruitment and admission processes. The substantial volume of development work in the 1980s and early 1990s devised approaches (like access and foundation courses) to prepare potential students from under represented groups for admission, and to modify the admission processes of institutions through alternative selection methods. This emphasis is still strong in many institutions, and in this Chapter we assess the impact on recruitment of the HEFCE widening participation support strategy.

6.2   Across the sector as a whole a great deal of activity has taken place to stimulate recruitment from under represented groups, and our data confirmed that this has widespread support. There was little evidence of overt opposition to the thrust of HEFCE policy, although approximately 13% of HEIs responding to our institutional survey felt that it over-emphasised the importance of recruitment to the detriment of other aspects of widening participation.

'Selecting' and 'Recruiting' Institutions

6.3   Institutional survival depends on filling student places, and all HEIs are to some degree in competition with others. As a result, concern to widen participation is sometimes more a matter of survival than of principle, and those institutions having difficulty filling their places might be expected to be more active in widening participation than those with excess demand. There is evidence of this divide between 'recruiting' and 'selecting' institutions in attitudes and practice, although there may be significant disciplinary variations, and the staff we surveyed often reported modifying entry requirements (see below).

6.4   In our case studies it was evident that 'selecting' and 'recruiting' institutions were taking different approaches to recruitment. The latter group essentially saw widening participation as an intrinsic part of their recruitment policy, and had an overriding priority to market themselves to all groups of potential students, including both disabled students and those from under represented groups. This meant they had to examine the barriers preventing these potential applicants from participating in higher education, and look for ways in which to overcome them. Their marketing and recruitment policy was based on adapting the institution to meeting student needs rather than expecting students to fit into an existing system.

6.5   By contrast, the main priorities for 'selecting' case study HEIs were to maintain the quality of their student intake, to ensure that they competed successfully in public 'league tables', and in some cases to maintain their status as research institutions. However, there was considerable variation between these HEIs: some had minimal commitment to widening participation while others were already moderately involved. Whilst the latter displayed a willingness to engage with widening participation, it was clear that they felt constrained in how far they could adapt their traditional structures and practices to accommodate the needs of students from under represented groups. The principal thrust of their recruitment policy therefore was to encourage potential applicants to aspire to higher education and reach an academic level which would enable them to participate in it, and to admit those students from under represented groups whose levels of achievement did not fall too far short of the standard offer.

6.6   The impact of the HEFCE strategy on recruitment differed between the two types of case study HEI. 'Recruiting' institutions were broadly of the view that their recruitment practices were already highly developed because of the imperative to admit from under represented groups and the regional catchment area. The HEFCE strategy had therefore had little effect on

institutional thinking about recruitment, although it was useful in supporting and enhancing existing activities, and in funding schemes that they had not previously been able to undertake.

6.7   Those 'selecting' HEIs with a commitment to widening participation felt that the HEFCE strategy enabled them to engage more fully with the issue by providing funding to expand their existing activities and to look for new ways to recruit from under represented groups. The impact of the strategy on the policy of HEIs with minimal commitment was less significant, in that the combination of lack of perceived need to engage with widening participation at a senior level and insufficient financial incentive from HEFCE funding did not encourage them to make any radical changes to their existing policy.

6.8   Both 'selecting' and 'recruiting' case study HEIs were broadly in agreement that the key to widening participation of students from under represented groups was to raise their aspirations at as early an age as possible. Although HEFCE seemed to have recognised the importance of aspiration raising, the fact that premium funding and performance indicators were based on numbers recruited risked skewing the activities of the case study HEIs away from aspiration raising amongst 12 to 13 year olds in favour of attempting to recruit students aged 17.

Institutional Practice

6.9   We sought to identify the extent to which academic staff were aware if their institution explicitly recruited students from under represented groups and particularly low participation neighbourhoods. Overall two thirds thought that they did, and Table 6.1 suggests that this varied only slightly in different types of institutions.

Table 6.1: Whether Institutions Explicitly Seek to Attract Students From Low Participation Neighbourhoods

	All	Pre-1992 universities	Post-1992 universities	HE colleges	Specialist institutions
	%	%	%	%	%
Yes – definitely	48	45	53	64	[21]
Yes – probably	18	20	17	4	[24]
No	21	22	18	20	[38]
Don't know	13	13	12	12	[17]
Unweighted base	591	319	170	54	48

[Base: all academics. Figures in square brackets indicate a percentage based on fewer than 50 cases]

In general, staff in higher education colleges were most likely to report explicit attempts to increase recruitment from low participation neighbourhoods, followed by post-1992 universities and then pre-1992 HEIs. However, the numbers who specifically said that their institution did not seek to attract such students were similar across the sector. On almost all measures staff in specialist institutions showed lowest levels of awareness, although general data on the performance of such HEIs suggested that there may be considerable variation between them (see Chapter 4).

6.10   Academics in institutions performing above their benchmarks (53%) were more likely than those in below benchmark HEIs (42%) to state that their institution targeted or sought to attract applicants from low participation neighbourhoods. Interestingly, academics in institutions with the highest Action on Access ratings of their institutional widening participation strategic statements (57%) were more likely than those with the lowest scores (43%) to report that their institution targeted or sought to attract from low participation neighbourhoods. Furthermore, academics from institutions with scores in the lowest RAE quartiles (64%) were more likely

than those in the higher quartiles (40%) to believe their institution had targeted or sought to attract students in these ways.

6.11   Only 8% of academics stated that their institution sought to attract students from under represented groups by the setting of numeric targets.

6.12   While for most under represented groups attention has only recently moved from recruitment and admission to curriculum and student support issues, the reverse is the case with disability, where until recently most work has concentrated on making appropriate arrangements for those already admitted. Some HEIs reported activity at the enquiry stage, with systems for referring applicants and then making personal contact about individual needs, and such systems may be commonplace. In two case study HEIs good provision has led to a high level of recommendation by particular disabled groups. Other case study institutions made no special arrangements, which in 'selective' HEIs may be likely to have a negative impact as many disabled students need to organise their support well before they start or even before they apply.

6.13   In the telephone survey academics were far less likely to believe their institution targeted or sought to attract students with disabilities (34%) than low participation neighbourhood students (64%). The data showed a possible link between institutional widening participation and student support strategies (see Chapter 7), and 43% of academics who reported both a widening participation and a support strategy said this type of targeting definitely took place. This compared to 33% among those academics aware of a widening participation strategy only, 19% who reported a support strategy only, and just 15% where neither was reported.

6.14   The data in Table 4.2 suggest that institutions that targeted or sought to attract applicants from low participation neighbourhoods were also more likely to target or attract students with disabilities. As in other areas, higher education colleges were the most proactive type of institution on relevant measures. Over half of all academics in colleges (54%) believed their institution definitely targeted or sought to attract students with disabilities. This compared to around a third of those in pre-1992 (33%) and post-1992 (36%) universities, and just over a tenth of those in specialist institutions.

Table 6.2: Extent to Which Institutions Targets Applicants with Disabilities

	Pre-1992 universities	Post-1992 universities	HE colleges	Specialist institutions
	%	%	%	%
Yes – definitely	33	36	54	[13]
Yes – probably	14	19	8	[20]
No	38	29	32	[50]
Don't know	16	16	6	[17]
Unweighted base	319	170	54	48

[Base: all academics. Figures in square brackets indicate a percentage based on fewer than 50]

6.15   In order to try and identify the impact of HEFCE initiatives across the sector, we sought to identify the main factors which influenced institutional recruitment strategies, and in Tables 6.3 and 6.4 the views of heads of department on the importance of key drivers are identified. (Only results for pre and post-1992 institutions are reported because the sample size of heads in colleges and specialist HEIs was such that the results were not statistically reliable.)

6.16   Senior management commitment was the most important factor in both types of institution, but for both widening participation and disability it was significantly higher in post-1992 universities, possibly reflecting the greater importance attached to it and the less collegially based forms of decision making. Heads from institutions with the highest Action on Access

ratings of initial strategic statements were the most likely to say that their senior management were committed to recruiting from low participation neighbourhoods (91%). The low ratings of factors other than senior management commitment in relation to disability recruitment reaffirmed its lower priority in both types of institution. The importance of local and regional collaboration was most strongly emphasised by heads from post-1992 universities.

Table 6.3: Views of Heads of Department on Factors Influencing Institutional Recruitment of Applicants from Low Participating Neighbourhoods

	Pre-1992 university	Post-1992 university
	%	%
Senior management commitment	64	[84]
Targeting as part of local or regional strategy	55	[79]
Targeting to meet overall admission targets	45	[70]
HEFCE pressure	52	[37]
HEFCE money	49	[49]
Unweighted base	94	43

[Base: Heads in pre-1992 and post-1992 universities. Square brackets indicate sample of less than 50. Other types of HEI are omitted because of small sample size. Heads were prompted against a defined list]

Table 6.4: Views of Heads of Department on Factors Influencing Institutional Recruitment of Students With Disabilities

	Pre-1992 university	Post-1992 university
	%	%
Senior management commitment	54	[77]
HEFCE pressure	27	[28]
HEFCE money	27	[23]
Targeting to meet overall admission targets	20	[16]
Unweighted base	94	43

[Base: Heads in pre-1992 and post-1992 universities. Square brackets indicate sample of less than 50]

6.17   In general, the data in Tables 6.3 and 6.4 suggested that amongst heads of departments the influence of HEFCE policy was variable. While similarly low responses were reported in relation to the recruitment of disabled students in both pre and post-1992 HEIs, there were significant differences in relation to LPN recruitment. In pre-1992 universities HEFCE pressure was felt to be considerably more of a factor than in post-1992s (reflecting lower perception of senior management commitment), although there was no difference on the impact of HEFCE funding as a factor.

Clearing

6.18   The clearing process might be expected to have particular relevance to widening participation, since a higher proportion of applicants from under represented groups might be recruited at the last minute. However, clearing was rarely mentioned in relation to admission in either our telephone survey or case studies. In only one HEI was it raised, with a suggestion that special attention should be given to widening participation work in the sciences because so many students were being taken through clearing. In the same institution a careers adviser commented that his service saw a small proportion of students wishing to withdraw after the first term, and that these had commonly been recruited through clearing to programmes which were not their original choice.

Activities to Widen Recruitment

6.19 Activities to widen recruitment are widespread, and shown in Figure 6.1 which identifies variations to standard entry requirements. Two out of three academics could identify at least one variation made by their own institution. This was highest in higher education colleges and lowest in specialist institutions.

6.20 The five most common variations reported by staff were:

- Reduced A level point scores, cited by 42% of telephone respondents, and most common in colleges (46%).

- Special consideration for applicants from specified schools, cited by 28% of respondents. This was most common in colleges and very little used in specialist institutions (10%).

- Guaranteed interviews to all applicants from certain groups, cited by 22% of respondents.

- Special consideration for applicants from low participation neighbourhoods, cited by 24% of respondents. Here, there is little variation between different types of institution, except that specialist HEIs were much less likely to do this.

- Special consideration for those who had previously attended a summer school were reported by 17% of respondents.

The existence of these activities was correlated with those institutions with an initial strategic statement that had been highly rated by Action on Access, and with performance above an institution's widening participation benchmarks.

Figure 6.1: Proportion of Academic Staff Stating That Their Academic Unit Specified One or More Variation to Standard Entry Requirements for Applicants From Under Represented Groups
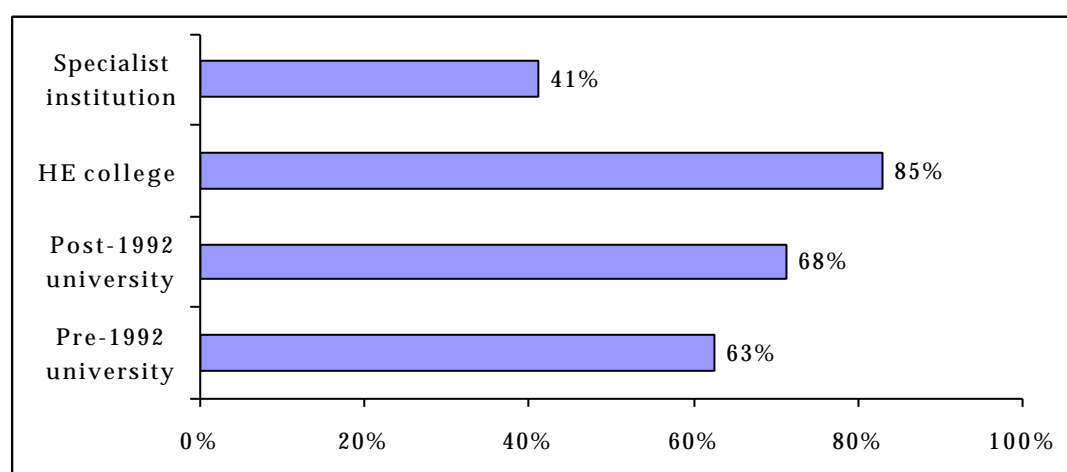
[Base: all academics]

Pre-Entry Programmes

6.21 Almost all HEIs replying to our survey reported some kind of pre-entry programme. This was also found in all case study institutions which had existing initiatives directed towards outreach work with young people in local communities and schools. All these institutions had existing

links with FE colleges and schools, for example through compact schemes, to encourage progression from FE to HE. Although HEFCE funding had been used to strengthen existing links and to develop new ones, much activity pre-dated Council support and had been funded internally.

6.22   In some cases, such compact schemes involved the use of student mentors from under represented groups to help establish positive role models for young people from low participation neighbourhoods. Several case study HEIs had expanded these activities recently although whether because widening participation now had a higher priority within the institution, or because of the HEFCE strategy, was not easy to identify.

6.23   HEIs have been running summer schools to raise aspirations since the mid 1990s: for example, one pre-1992 case study institution (with performance unremarkable on the performance indicators) reported running skills development summer schools for six years. The DfEE introduced specific funding for summer schools in 1999 under the Excellence in Cities initiative. Since the initial and primary target was to raise aspirations towards selective HEIs, and not all institutions were eligible to participate, it is not entirely surprising that they were more often mentioned in our telephone survey by pre-1992 (22%) than post-1992 universities (15%), although summer schools do also run without DfES funding.

6.24   Staff in case study institutions were particularly appreciative of the funding provided by HEFCE which had been spent on pre-entry programmes and summer schools, although they noted problems with high drop out. The evaluation of the summer schools programme (HEFCE 01/04) noted that they attracted high proportions of ethnic minority pupils, and a broader socio-economic range than the higher education population in general. However, most participants had one or both parents with higher education experience, and were already probably planning to enter before the summer school experience. It is therefore difficult to establish the extent to which HEFCE's intervention has either accelerated or initiated this, although recommendations to be more specific about eligibility criteria for participants were implemented.

Marketing Activity

6.25   Many institutions display a diverse and imaginative range of marketing activities, and all case study 'recruiting' HEIs were already aware of the importance of marketing to applicants from under represented groups. In such cases funding from HEFCE was being used to support, and in some cases further develop, a range of specific events to raise awareness and assist with recruitment.

6.26   There was some evidence in case study HEIs that the HEFCE strategy was raising the profile of marketing amongst institutions with a moderate commitment to widening participation, for example, one was offering an 'introduction to higher education' course in order to attract applicants from under represented groups. The most effective marketing activities were felt to be those which helped to dispel the negative image of higher education amongst young people from under represented groups and their parents. Initiatives designed to give young people a 'taster' of higher education such as open days, short visits, and short courses were generally felt to be especially helpful. Other effective initiatives included those where representatives of the institution were able to take part in community activities to spread the word about higher education amongst parents. However, there was a perception that less targeted marketing activities, such as recruitment fairs, were less successful in reaching under represented groups.

6.27   The telephone survey sought data from heads of departments on the specific marketing effort of their own departments and institutions. There was recognition from 42% that their institution's image did not attract applicants from under represented groups, thus setting a clear agenda for better marketing and local partnerships. This varied significantly by type of institution, with around half of academics in pre-1992 universities feeling that the image of their institution did not appeal to under represented groups, compared to 30% of those in post-1992 universities.

6.28   Other variables associated with perceptions of institutional attraction to under represented groups identified in the telephone survey included:

- Those from HEIs with the lowest proportion of young full time undergraduates from under represented groups (61%) were more likely to believe that the image would not appeal to those from under represented groups than those with the highest proportions (34%).

- Those from HEIs with the lowest proportion of mature full time undergraduates from under represented groups (61%) were more likely to believe that their institution's image would not appeal to under represented groups than those with the highest proportions (34%).

- Those from institutions with the lowest RAE scores (25%) were less likely than those with the highest scores (52%) to agree that their institution's image would not appeal to under represented groups.

This data confirmed that from the perspective of academic staff, institutional image was felt to be an important factor in creating the conditions for widening participation to be effective.

6.29   Specific marketing activities identified by heads of departments included:

- Outreach work with local schools and colleges (75% of those responding).

- Running access and foundation courses suitable for under represented students (56%).

- Producing marketing material specifically for under represented groups (42%).

- Units operating special admission schemes, procedures or entry requirements for applicants from under represented groups (40%).

- Student ambassador and mentor schemes (33%).

- Compact schemes (23%).

6.30   A specific issue raised in several case studies was who should undertake marketing. Practice varied widely from dedicated marketing staff to academics who do it on a very part time basis, and in case study institutions it was generally felt to be too great a burden for teaching staff to have responsibility for marketing alongside their other duties. It was evident in HEIs with both moderate and high commitment that having a dedicated person to deal with widening participation considerably enhanced institutional capacity to market itself.

Partnerships and Linkages

6.31   Almost all the regional projects reviewed in Chapter 9 involve activities concerning recruitment, and it is to be expected that such projects will start to influence institutional and departmental recruitment practice. However, as noted in Chapter 5, knowledge of these

projects was low among most respondents in the telephone survey. Indeed within the timescales of the projects it would be unreasonable to expect them to have had any significant influence on departmental recruitment practice to date.

6.32 However within the case studies there was some evidence of synergy; for example in one of the most strongly committed case study institutions a combined honours programme had been developed as a *"moving pavement"* which began with key skills and progressed into a degree, with elements delivered in the evenings and at intensive summer schools. The same institution also offered a foundation year at a heavily subsidised fee as a 'loss leader', with particular success in recruiting young Asian males. All these were supported by accredited prior learning which was particularly helpful for part time students. The institution described the success of these approaches as depending upon shared methodologies and explicit student support structures, so that students were less exposed to disruption by moving between institutions.

Admissions Processes

6.33 Admissions decisions are handled very differently within institutions, and the evaluation sought to review the influence of admissions procedures and systems on recruitment. Although we found a number of different approaches, there was not adequate data from our case studies to enable us to present firm conclusions in this area. What follows is therefore a tentative hypothesis which will require more work to confirm.

6.34 Based upon a number of data sources, it is possible to identify two key dimensions of organisational structure which produce a matrix of approaches to admissions:

	Centralised Widening Participation Planning	*Departmental Widening Participation Planning*
Centralised Admissions Decisions	Corporate Admissions Processes	Devolved Admissions Processes
Departmental Admissions Decisions	Collegial Admissions Processes	Individual Admissions Processes

6.35 Each of these four approaches has advantages and drawbacks, and is suitable for different kinds of organisational culture. Each has implications for the implementation of policy, since corporate strategies require the least ownership and communication, and individualist ones the most. In general, there appears to be a growth in centralised admission decision making (particularly in 'recruiting' HEIs), and, when coupled with centralised widening participation planning, these HEIs are potentially able to move quickly to adopt recruitment and admission arrangements to meet changing patterns of student demand (they tend also to be most successful at filling vacancies through clearing). Such arrangements are also helpful in ensuring that standard practice is adopted throughout an institution.

6.36 Conversely, in most 'selective HEIs' admission decisions are still taken locally by individual admission tutors. In such circumstances it may take a long time for institutional changes in admission criteria to be implemented in practice, even where a will exists to do so at institutional level.

6.37   We suggest further work by HEFCE, both to test this model and to review more generally the impact of admissions systems on the recruitment of under represented students.

7   Student Achievement

7.1   While noting that the overall completion rates in UK higher education of 78% against both benchmarks and international comparisons were *"very impressive"*, the NAO Report on 'Improving Student Achievement' observed that over 30,000 students who started full time undergraduate courses still failed to get a qualification at either degree or sub-degree level. It identified the main reasons for this as: lack of preparedness for higher education; dissatisfaction with a course or institution; changing personal circumstances; financial matters; and the impact of unpaid work. While broadly recognising that HEIs can take only very limited action to address the last three points, it noted that institutions should *"guard against bringing into higher education students who, even with appropriate support, are very unlikely to get a qualification and for whom failure may represent a significant personal cost".*

7.2   This represents a real challenge to higher education, as data presented below suggest that staff perceive students from under represented groups to be more at risk than others. In this Chapter we examine institutional activity to support the achievement of such students, and how this links with the widening participation strands under review. We do not seek to document the multiplicity of activities that the sector undertakes to provide general support to underpin student achievement, nor do we duplicate the analysis of Action on Access on approaches by institutions to introduce what they have called a 'student life cycle model'[10].

7.3   It needs to be recognised that in terms of overall funding the widening participation initiative plays a relatively small part in supporting learning and teaching. In addition to mainstream funding for teaching, the most significant Council activities to support learning and teaching have been the Teaching and Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) which has provided £89 million over the three years 1999-2000 to 2001-02 to support institutional developments, the formation of the LTSN structure (including 24 subject centres), support for the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL), and individual teaching awards administered through the Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT). These developments are also starting to provide support for academic staff working with disabled students.

7.4   The recent evaluation of the TQEF noted that it has *"made a very definite impact"* within some institutions, but that in others many long established barriers to enhancing teaching remained. Echoing issues identified in this report, it also noted that two of the five main Council aims for the TQEF were not broadly shared by HEIs: the desirability of collaborative activity to support teaching, and the need for proactive dissemination and embedding of good practice adopted elsewhere.

7.5   Institutionally, formal linkages between widening participation strategic statements and teaching and learning strategies were not initially clear, but are improving. Nationally the Council was also slightly slow in encouraging such integration: this is now part of policy. Such linkages are important, and can have real practical consequences for planning how to support students from under represented groups. Conversely the absence of such linkages can retard progress, for example where staff development takes little account of widening participation. Similar issues apply to linkages between teaching and learning and disability provision.

7.6   In the case study institutions the issue of retention had already started to concern a number of HEIs with high or moderate commitment to widening participation before the HEFCE strategy was introduced. Having taken on significant numbers of students from under represented groups, these institutions reported becoming aware of an array of academic, personal and

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[10] *Action on Access, Achieving Student Success, www.brad.ac.uk/admin/conted/action/context/ssrep.html*

financial issues such students brought with them which needed to be addressed if they were to prosper within a higher education environment. Within case study HEIs there was widespread approval of the fact that HEFCE had recognised that widening participation was not only about getting students from under represented groups into higher education but also about making sure that they completed their courses.

7.7   A number of case study HEIs with a moderate or high commitment to widening participation had identified an increased failure rate (in the order of 20%) from students from under represented groups. This tended to focus the minds of senior management on the retention issue in terms of both the image of the institution, and the implications for future HEFCE funding. There was thus considerable pressure to improve retention rates, and in a few cases this had led to the formation of a retention strategy or task force to ensure that measures were put in place to enhance support.

Institutional Strategies to Support Student Achievement

7.8   There are two main possible sources of widening participation funding to support student achievement from under represented groups: premium funding and projects. However, this represents a very small proportion of total institutional spending on teaching and student support, and one institutional typically noted in its survey response that *"any university committed to widening participation will spend many times more than the formula amount on a range of activities deeply embedded in everyday activities"*.

7.9   A further difficulty in linking funding to activities to support retention lies in the confirmation of telephone survey data that the majority of institutions do not make special provision in teaching and support for students from under represented groups: rather it was usually available to all students who needed it. However, as noted above, this may change now that retention is becoming associated with performance measurement.

7.10   It follows that (except for some projects) it is difficult to relate widening participation funding to specific outcomes associated with student achievement. However, it was evident in some case studies that the HEFCE strategy was encouraging several institutions to take a more integrated and 'holistic' approach towards delivering the full range of services to students. For example, one 'recruiting' HEI had centralised support services on one site so that students did not have to be referred from one service to another across the campus, and a 'selecting' institution with moderate commitment to widening participation had provided a 'one stop shop' for learning and student support since there were often areas of considerable overlap between the two.

7.11   So far as projects are concerned, those relating to disability have mostly concentrated on achieving base provision and non-academic student support: only four projects appeared to be directly centred on improving support within teaching environments. HEFCE 01/36a noted that only 40% of regional projects involved retention and achievement in any way, and the majority of those were concerned with enhancing preparedness for higher education. Other activities fall under the general heading of learner support, and specific work involved, induction, the use of mentors, on-course guidance, the provision of financial advice, and skills development. A review of monitoring reports and Action on Access documents indicated that much good work was developing, but at the time of writing most of it was not yet at the stage where final outcomes could be analysed.

7.12   Institutions vary on whether they have formal written strategies on retaining and supporting students from under represented groups. In order to determine the value of these the telephone survey asked respondents if their institution had a such a strategy, if they had read

it, and if they had been consulted about it. The level of awareness of and involvement in these strategies was lower than that found for the overall widening participation statement and the results are reported in Table 7.1. Just over half of heads of department (54%) and just under half of lecturers (46%) said their institution had a support strategy, with 12% of heads and 28% of lecturers not knowing if one existed.

Table 7.1: Awareness of Institution's Student Support Strategy

	Heads (%)	Lecturers (%)	All academics (%)
Aware institution has a support strategy	54	46	47
Have read institution's support strategy	38	21	22
Consulted/involved in development of institution's support strategy	22	8	9
Unweighted base	170	421	591

*[Base: all academics. Percentages refer to the results of three different questions]*

7.13 Awareness of a support strategy was higher in some types of HEIs, with 56% of academics from post-1992 universities and higher education colleges saying their institution had a formal support strategy, as against 41% in pre-1992 universities and 35% in specialist institutions.

7.14 We sought to set staff awareness of student support strategies within the context of institutional widening participation statements by exploring the proportion of respondents who were aware of both strategies. The largest group of respondents (41%) were aware that their institution had both, 35% reported only the former, while 6% said their institution only had a support strategy. Just under a fifth of the sample said their institution did not have a widening participation or student support strategy.

Changes in Teaching Practice

7.15 The telephone survey collected data on the extent to which the practice of teaching had changed to meet the needs of students from under represented groups. Three questions were asked:

- First, whether departments or units provided any policy or guidance on teaching practice to meet the specific needs of those from under represented groups. Just under half said none was provided, 31% said that it was available while 12% thought it was not necessary.

- Second, whether respondents had changed their own teaching practice to meet the needs of students from under represented groups. The majority (62%) claimed to have done so, while 20% said they had not, and a further 17% believed there was no need for them to do so. Responses from heads of department did not differ greatly.

- Third, in view of the danger that self-assessment of changes in personal practice may over-estimate actual change, respondents were also asked whether colleagues in their unit had changed teaching practice over a similar period. Figure 7.1 reports a belief that extensive change had taken place, with 45% reporting that most colleagues had made such changes – though this figure is substantially below that reported by respondents themselves.

7.16 There was a strong link between staff knowledge of the existence of institutional student support strategies and changes in teaching practice to meet the needs of students from under represented groups. 71% of academics who reported an institutional support strategy said they had changed their teaching practice, and 54% said most of their colleagues had also

done so. The corresponding figures for those in HEIs not reported to have a support strategy were 58% and 42%.

Figure 7.1: Whether Respondents Believed Colleagues had Changed Teaching Practice to Meet the Needs of Students From Under Represented Groups
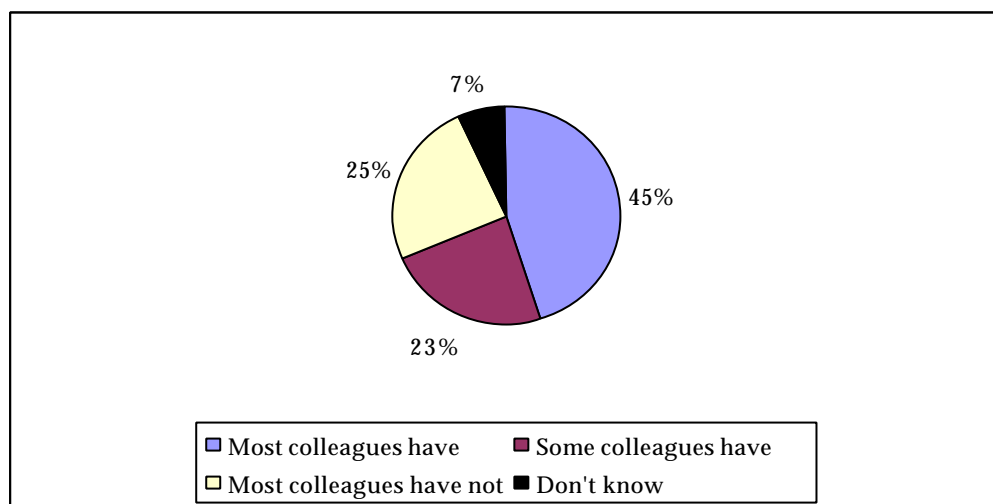
[Base: all academics]

7.17   Significant differences existed in the extent to which staff in different types of institutions have changed their teaching practice, and these are noted in Table 7.2. Academics in post-1992 universities (75%) and higher education colleges (78%) were most likely to say they had changed their teaching practice, while those in pre-1992 universities (54%) and specialist institutions (31%) were least likely to.

Table 7.2: Whether Respondents had Changed Their Teaching Practice to Meet the Needs of Students From Under Represented Groups in Different Types of Institution

	Pre-1992 university	Post-1992 university	HE college	Specialist institution
	%	%	%	%
Yes	54	75	78	[31]
No	24	14	8	[41]
Not necessary to change	21	11	14	[28]
Don't know/ Not involved in teaching	2	-	-	[-]
Unweighted base	319	170	54	48

[Base: all academics. Square brackets indicate sample of less than 50]

7.18   When analysed by type of institution, results on whether colleagues had changed their teaching practice to meet the needs of students from under represented groups showed a slightly different picture. The majority (70%) of respondents from higher education colleges believed most of their colleagues had changed teaching practice, but the equivalent figures for pre- and post-1992 universities were similar (43% and 47% respectively), with the lowest figure (24%) found amongst specialist institutions. In practice, for the reasons stated in paragraph 7.9, changes in approaches to teaching and learning are unlikely – in most cases – to have been stimulated by the needs of students from under represented groups per se, rather by the more general needs of a diverse range of learners.

Types of Student Support

7.19   The survey asked about the different types of support for students from under represented groups provided by either academic units or centrally within HEIs. Academics reported a wide range of activities run departmentally, and the overwhelming majority said their unit provided one or more of the types of support shown in Figure 7.2. Only 9% reported none of these forms of support.

Figure 7.2: Proportion of Staff Mentioning Types of Support Provided by Academic Units

Flexible learning	66%
Special skills courses	64%
Student mentoring scheme	52%
Adaptation of teaching material	48%
English language support	45%
Adaptation of assessment procedures	45%
Training/guidance to work with UR groups	34%
More contact time for UR groups	29%
Other	8%
None	9%
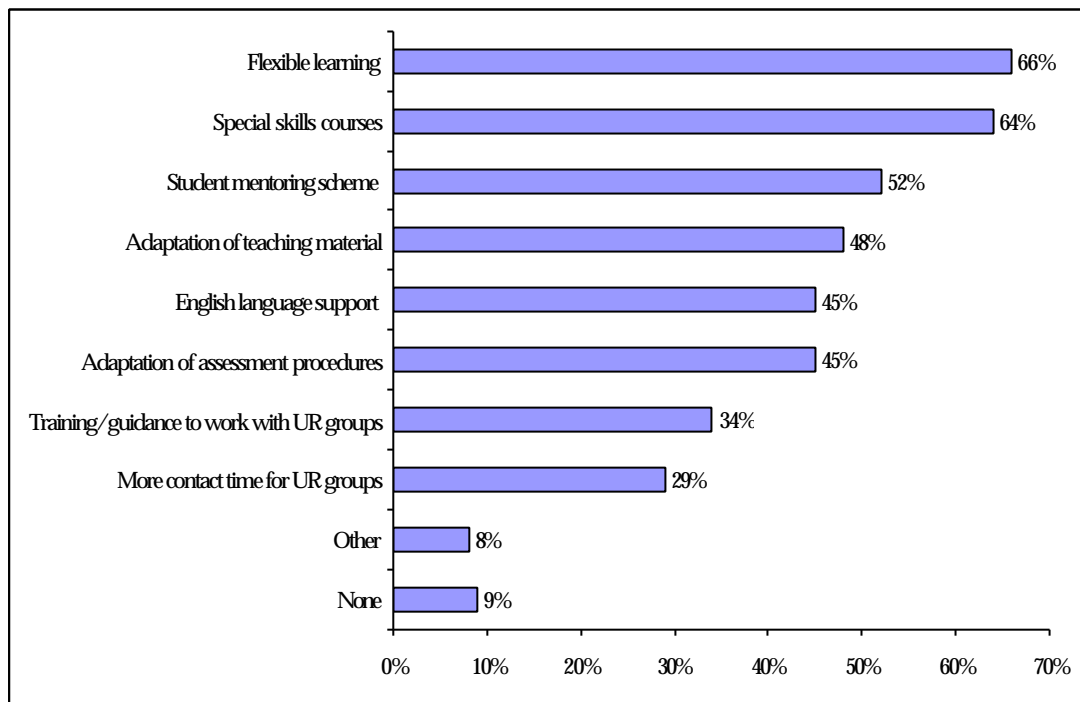
[Base: all academics. Types of support were prompted and respondents could choose more than one reply]

7.20   So far as centrally provided support is concerned, all staff said their institution provided some form of support for students from under represented groups, and the activities are shown in Figure 7.3.

7.21   The provision of some types of central support appeared to be correlated with the proportion of young full time undergraduates enrolled from under represented groups. For example, in institutions from the quartile with the highest proportion of such students, 93% of staff mentioned providing skills courses and 65% adopting special assessment procedures, compared with corresponding figures of 77% and 45% in those HEIs in the lowest quartile. Interestingly, this pattern was reversed for bursaries, which were mentioned by 55% of those from HEIs in the lowest quartile, compared with 42% from those in the first quartile. Similarly, those from institutions in the lowest quartile were more likely to say that accommodation had been adapted for disabled students (70%), compared with the highest quartile (59%).

7.22   Funding for student support was a key issue for those case study HEIs which were heavily engaging in widening participation and disability provision. Central support services generally felt that they received insufficient funding to enable them to put in place a full range of services as well as providing ongoing support. Senior managers in these institutions tended to take the view that central and academic services received an adequate allocation; however, staff

delivering support services were often critical that premium funding was provided to HEIs. They reported that finance departments were sometimes reluctant to divulge the amount of premium funding received and the uses to which it was put. As a result, some staff felt strongly that HEFCE should provide some broad guidelines on the uses of premium funding. Conversely, of course, many institutions will typically take exactly the opposite view in their formal communications with HEFCE.

Figure 7.3: Proportion of Staff Mentioning Types of Support Provided Centrally
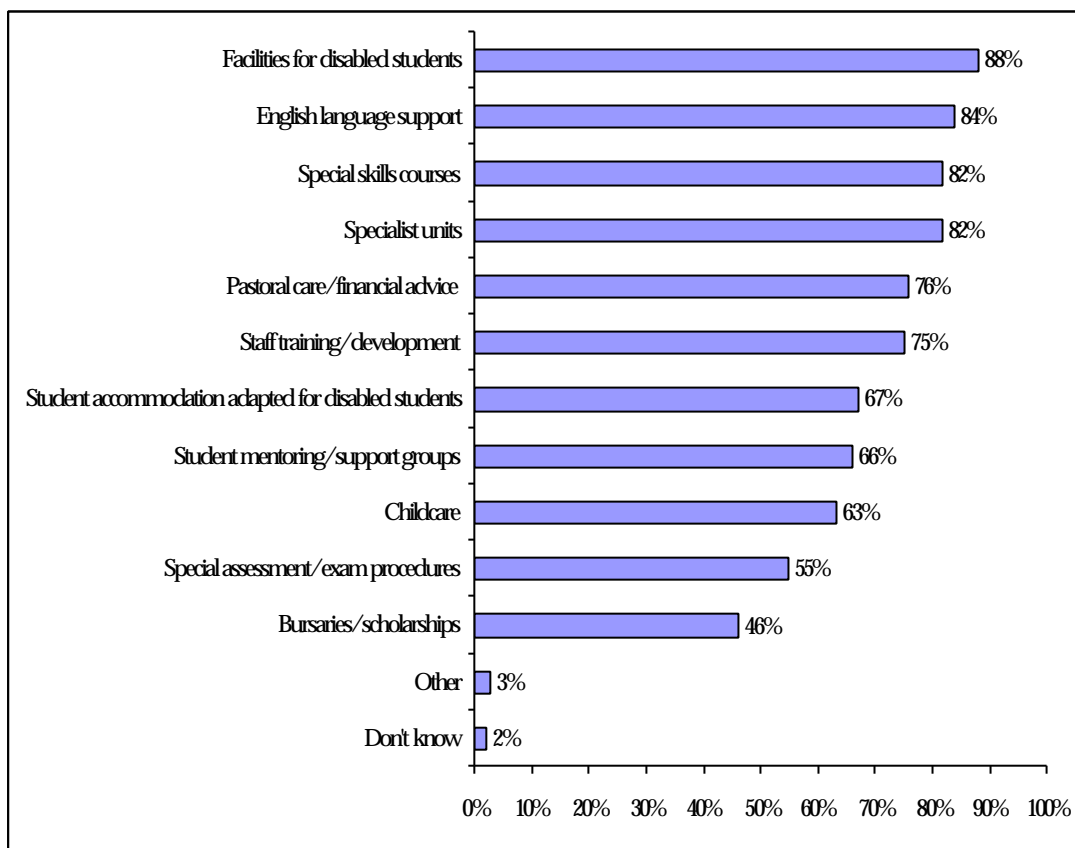
[Base: all academics. Respondents could choose more than one reply]

Monitoring Student Retention

7.23   In the telephone survey respondents were asked if their academic unit monitored retention rates for students from under represented groups, and also if they felt that students from low participation neighbourhoods and those with disabilities were more or less likely to complete their course compared with others. Only 23% of staff stated that there was monitoring within their department; 10% did not know. However, this response was higher amongst those who said their institution had a formal strategy for supporting students from under represented groups (31%), compared with 15% of those who reported no institutional support strategy. Similarly, 35% who said their unit provided guidance on teaching those from under represented groups stated that their unit monitored retention, compared with 18% of those who said their unit did not provide such guidance. The proportion of those from post-1992 universities who said their unit monitored retention was 39%, more than double the corresponding figure in other types of HEI. These differences could reflect the greater concern in post-1992 universities about retention in general.

7.24   As shown in Figure 7.4, a third of academics thought that students from low participation
        neighbourhoods were more likely to drop out than others. On the other hand, only 10%
        believed that disabled students were more likely than others to drop out, and 26% felt they
        were less likely. In terms of types of institutions, students from low participation
        neighbourhoods were believed to be more likely than others to drop out by academics in post-
        1992 universities (46%) and to a lesser extent in colleges (34%). These compared to 26% in
        pre-1992 universities and 23% in specialist institutions. Such results confirm the generally
        higher level of concern with retention in post-1992 universities, compared with the rest of the
        sector. No significant institutional variations were found in relation to disabled students.

7.25   If this perception of high failure rates for students from low participation neighbourhoods is
        matched by actual behaviour (and further work is required) there are several implications
        (considered in Chapter 12). These primarily centre on funding, and include the adequacy of
        funding levels to provide realistic support to such students, and the possible damaging effects
        of the application of HEFCE efficiency indicators to those HEIs with large numbers of students
        from such groups. In this context the comment of the NAO reported in paragraph 7.1 raises a
        major issue for the sector.

**Figure 7.4: Staff Perceptions of Whether Disabled Students and Those From Low
Participating Neighbourhoods Are More or Less Likely to Drop Out**
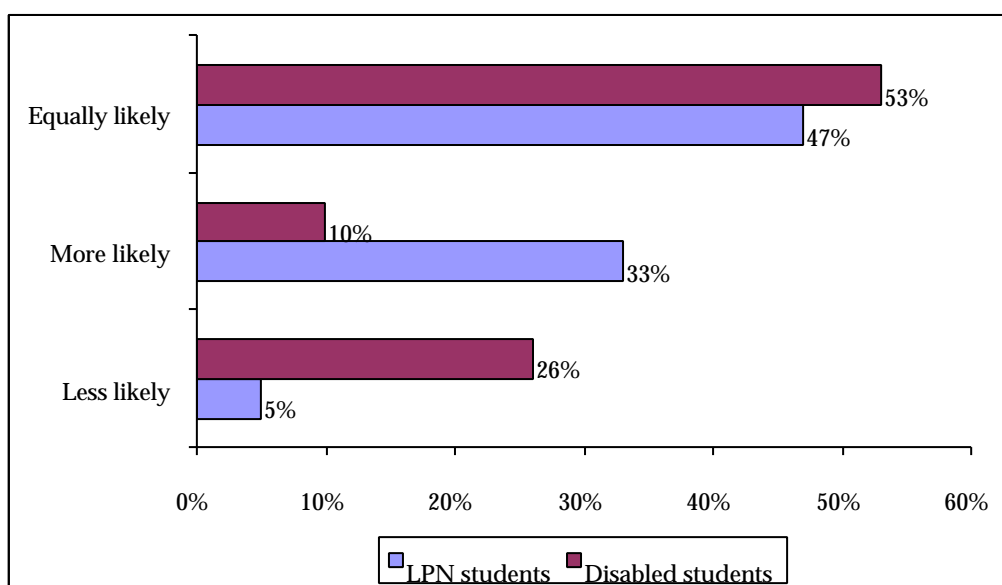
[Base: all academics]

Other Issues

7.26   Significant enhancement of student support will require the closest cooperation between those
        involved in widening participation and the LTSN. Almost all the problems of dissemination,
        strategies for institutional adoption of good widening participation practice, and so on, are
        virtually identical to those the LTSN needs to deal with if it is to meet its objectives effectively.
        Thus although regionally based activities to enhance student support and address specific
        issues in under achievement are required, they should not conflict with the work of the LTSN:
        indeed to avoid further complexity within the sector it is desirable that integration of service
        provision should exist wherever possible.

7.27   The HEFCE transparency studies have shown (Joint Pricing and Costing Steering Group) that, in general, there is cross-subsidy between research and teaching, and that both are subsidised by individual staff time. As research oriented HEIs seek to reduce any subsidy from research to teaching it is possible that some existing student support measures may be withdrawn. This might adversely affect retention although no data are yet available. Similarly where individual staff time subsidises teaching this position is only sustainable where staff motivation is consistent with teaching requirements, and this is unlikely always to be the case in relation to widening participation in all HEIs. In general, teaching is felt to be under-funded throughout the sector, and in many HEIs resources have been reduced (eg through teaching in larger groups, less teaching, more resource based independent learning etc). There are potentially significant implications for retention, as such approaches may not always be appropriate for students with little experience of higher education.

7.28   In general, staff incentives to enhance teaching remain weak in many research oriented universities (see the evaluation of TQEF). Although this may be slowly starting to change, in most HEIs research is still perceived as the dominant criterion for promotion. Institutional human resource strategies will have to address the implications of this in relation to retention for both widening participation and disability.

7.29   One issue that has received little attention to date and was not mentioned by any of the case study HEIs is the potential importance of sharing learning and library resources in meeting national widening participation policy objectives and enhancing retention. The implicit assumption appears to be that current arrangements in this area are satisfactory to cope with the large expansion in planned numbers, but evidence presented to the Research Libraries Support Group suggests that even current levels of library provision are inadequate.

7.30   This raises at least three issues:

- First, the need to ensure that additional funding to support learning resources and library materials is available to meet the planned expansion of student numbers.

- Second, it is likely that many of the additional 300,000 students that the sector will need to recruit will be distance and part-time learners, and in its current form the UK Libraries Plus scheme[11] is unlikely to be able to cope.

- Third, although there are a few local consortia which permit shared undergraduate access, there is no significant arrangement which permits undergraduate borrowing (unlike for example the position in Australia where a national borrowing scheme has recently been introduced).

7.31   In this context, a very recent study commissioned by the Research Libraries Support Programme (RSLP, 2002) has recommended that HEFCE review its existing policies for library provision to support widening participation, and we support that proposal.

7.32   In addition, in many – not all – HEIs, library access policy (and library strategy more broadly) has not taken on board changes to institutional mission involving building community links and widening participation. It is, for example, possible to find HEIs that claim to be active within their communities, but whose libraries do not permit public access or borrowing. It is difficult to see how unreasonable restrictions on library access can be consistent with widening participation strategies and the need to ensure enhanced student achievement. Some local

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[11] *This is a national consortium that enables part time and distance learning students from some HEIs to access a range – not all – of other higher education libraries*

consortia (for example in Manchester and Sheffield) are an exception to this and demonstrate good practice which needs to be more widely shared.

8   Employability

The Employability Agenda

8.1   The relevance of the higher education curriculum to graduate employment has been an issue for government since the mid 1980s, and was the major focus of the Enterprise in Higher Education programme. The notion of explicitly incorporating 'employability skills' emerged in the later stages of that programme (in the early 1990s), and some institutions set up specific activities and units to pursue this. Data in the recent NAO report on 'Improving Student Achievement' suggested that such initiatives were continuing in some form in most institutions, although not necessarily in relation to widening participation.

8.2   The employability of graduates as a current issue for government was first identified in the Secretary of State's letter to HEFCE in 1998, and thereafter appeared as a focus of attention in each annual additional student numbers bidding circular. However, it is always presented as a distinct issue, separate from widening participation and linked particularly to the role of an institution in meeting regional economic needs.

8.3   Evaluating initiatives to enhance employability has always been problematic, because of problems of definition and data collection. While specific activity to enhance employability can be observed, its impact cannot, and the more such thinking is embedded in the mainstream curriculum, the less easy it is to measure even this. Although recently steps have been taken to improve the consistency of the standard performance data collected through the First Destination Survey, data collected only six months after graduation do not provide a reliable picture of long term employability in an increasingly complex and volatile labour market.

8.4   The problems of measurement are even more difficult in relation to under represented groups. While it is quite possible that such students will find themselves discriminated against in the labour market (and some staff reported this as a common experience), obtaining systematic data on whether a student comes from such a group raises practical and ethical issues of data collection and privacy. Outcomes are thus difficult to identify and evaluate, and this could only be done over a much longer timescale than the present study allows. What can be seen is that there is a growing body of work in universities aimed at employability, but little of it is explicitly related to widening participation.

8.5   There is a clear tension for some HEIs between performance in widening participation and employability, as there is between widening participation and retention. For a 'selecting' institution, which can choose who to recruit, successful performance against the employability indicators will generally be easiest to achieve with 'traditional' students, whose experience and background is familiar to both HE and employers. Success in widening participation may thus endanger success on the employability indicator. Although this was not noted widely in case study institutions (perhaps because few staff are directly involved in both issues), some concern was expressed about the quality of employment for graduates from under represented groups. It was strongly suggested that graduates from under represented groups tended to seek and obtain less demanding and rewarding employment after graduation, driven by a combination of lower expectations and financial pressures.

Employability and Widening Participation

8.6   The link between widening participation and employability has only recently emerged as an issue at policy level, and its implications appear to be slow in penetrating some institutions. Conversely, a significant number of HEIs regard employability as central to their mission, and for years have concentrated on developing a range of employment related skills in their students. The recent NAO study noted that *"almost all HEIs told us that they build key employment skills into the curriculum"*, and it also identified a wide range of good practice in the sector. The issue so far as this evaluation is concerned is: how has the HEFCE widening participation support strategy influenced existing activity, or drawn attention to employability more generally?

8.7   Perhaps because the issue is a relatively new one for most institutions, most of the data we have collected make almost no reference to it. For example, no staff identified it as an issue in response to open questions in the telephone interviews. Evidence on the extent to which the widening participation initiative has stimulated employability within HEIs rests, therefore, on the case studies, where the issue was explored explicitly. All of these institutions reported that they were paying attention to employability in general, and references to the impact of performance indicators was common. However, in almost all cases institutions followed HEFCE in seeing this as separate from widening participation. Although a small number of widening participation projects and one disability project are addressing aspects of employability (for example, for ethnic minorities) general conclusions on this cannot yet be drawn.

8.8   A specific problem in understanding the employability issue in relation to widening participation lies in issues of confidentiality and privacy. Data protection legislation places constraints on how personal information can be used (for example, about a student's background), and staff in some 'selecting' institutions expressed concern about the ethical and practical issues raised by identifying students from under represented groups in any formal record once they had been admitted. One HEI had considered (and rejected for the time being) the idea of informing academic and support staff of the identity of students recruited under widening participation arrangements; another, where such students are a small minority, expressed concern that some students might be stigmatised. However, unless such students can be systematically identified (as distinct from them choosing to engage with support services), it will be impossible to monitor the impact of policies on employability and related issues. These problems were not generally seen as an issue in the 'recruiting' institutions, where most interviewees felt that the whole institution was addressing widening participation as part of its mainstream activities, and it would be irrelevant to identify specific students.

'Recruiting' and 'Selecting' Institutions

8.9   Views on the need for specific intervention to enhance the employability of graduates from under represented groups were polarised, most clearly between 'recruiting' and 'selecting' institutions. In some 'recruiting' institutions key staff claimed considerable experience in dealing with students from under represented groups, and pointed out that such students faced a range of distinct barriers to securing appropriate employment. Helping them overcome these and find employment required extra resources on the part of careers and other services within HEIs. One respondent reported that *"my own experience of being of ethnic origin and from working class background led me to realise that the careers service is generally geared up to white middle class students who came from an HE culture. Now I go out of my way to help students who lack knowledge: I talk to groups about employability, do mock interviews, look at their CVs and so on. Lack of awareness and lack of confidence are principal barriers to employability. In this University they are not rubbing shoulders with self-confident, articulate*

middle class people: and universities like this are not very good at giving a total experience to students because they mainly live at home".

8.10   In 'recruiting' institutions, employability was frequently linked to regional mission. In one, several interviewees commented on the importance of ensuring that their graduates were supporting the local economy, and they saw widening participation, employability and regional economic linkages as part of a coherent institutional mission: *"employability is very much part of our mission, because we recruit 70-80% of students locally, and there's a tendency for them to stay local, so employability is affected by the regional economy (the region has higher than average unemployment)".*

8.11   However, a corresponding anxiety was expressed that, by remaining tied to the locality, graduates from under represented groups narrowed their career choices, and thus obtained less long term value from their higher education experience.

8.12   In 'selecting' institutions, on the other hand, there was more scepticism about the need to make changes in response to widening participation. As the head of one careers service in a large civic university said, (reflecting a significant perception about who widening participation students are): *"I am not convinced that WP students do have particular employability or employment problems. Whether they have academic problems may be related to selection procedures being altered to fit widening participation. If the student then fails the course or does lots of resits, that may have an employability knock-on".*

8.13   In another 'selecting' case study institution an interviewee firmly commented that *"our third year students can cope".* However, in a specialist institution an interviewee recognised a particular need to provide work experience for students from under represented groups to raise confidence, and reported that potential students were asking about the institution's employment record when considering entry.

New Needs in the Employability Curriculum

8.14   When probed on the link between employability and widening participation, interviewees in case study HEIs raised issues about confidence and aspirations, and the need to ensure that graduates from under represented groups did not simply opt for familiar low status jobs, or continue the part time work they had pursued while students. Some commented on the impact of poor literacy and numeracy on employment prospects. In other cases, interviewees identified employability with issues of entry, for example in one institution specific attention was given to employment destinations in their pre-entry summer school, with the aim of raising aspirations, both towards higher education and ultimate employment.

8.15   For students from under represented groups, the main perceived barriers included:

- A lack of confidence in their ability to obtain employment leading to low aspirations.

- Unwillingness to move away from their home area to look for work, which when coupled with low confidence levels made them especially vulnerable to the vagaries of the local labour market. This was a particular problem where the local economy was in a state of decline so that graduates sometimes ended up in low status jobs. It was often a time-consuming and labour intensive task to build up an individual's confidence and job expectations.

- A lack of 'polish' at interview in comparison with other students. This was due in part to a lack of expertise in the use of written and oral language, in part a narrower range of background experience.

- A range of difficulties, including a lack of discipline in studying, which contributed to a lower class of degree and held them back from obtaining the job of their choice. Building their confidence was essential.

- A lack of clarity about what exactly they wanted, and were able to do. It was therefore important to give clear guidance and to target those sectors likely to prove of interest.

8.16   In several institutions employability was explicitly linked to disability, and the work of careers services has been covered by the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act. Disabled students, like students from other under represented groups, were believed to suffer from a lack of confidence in their ability to find work. In addition, there were a number of practical issues associated with the nature of their impairment, the type of employment they could undertake, and the support requirements for the job. Several disability projects reported using funding to improve employability guidance for disabled graduates, but final project outcomes are not yet available.

8.17   Ethnicity was also raised as an issue in several institutions: one respondent thought that the issue of employability for graduates from ethnic minorities required more research, and regretted that HEFCE did not recognise ethnicity in its performance indicators or funding. A respondent in one 'recruiting' institution commented: *"we have discovered evidence that ethnic minority students are very disadvantaged in terms of employment, and this is due to racism of the employers. So we've put in place a programme of positive action (post-graduation support eg interviewing skills, writing CVs) for those students who are having difficulty getting employment".*

8.18   By contrast, in one 'selecting' case study HEI an interviewee denied that the institution's ethnic minority graduates faced particular problems in the labour market: *"I think we're doing enough. Our graduates are well prepared for employability. Our ethnic minority students are not poor, and they don't have trouble getting jobs. As for graduates with disabilities, it's a very small number. We haven't monitored ethnicity and employability, because there hasn't seemed to be a problem".*

8.19   Funding was considered a particular issue in some case study HEIs for developing the range of services needed to deal effectively with employability issues. What was felt to be necessary was more staff to spend time bolstering the confidence and aspirations of students from under represented groups. In one case there appeared to be staff cutbacks in careers services in an institution which had deeply engaged with widening participation.

The Role of the Graduate Careers Advisory Service

8.20   Careers advisory services have traditionally been the focus of links between higher education and the world of work, especially in the pre-1992 universities. The Association of Graduate Careers and Advisory Services' equal opportunities sub-committee has considered employability issues for graduates from under represented groups, especially in relation to ethnic minorities, and Bradford and Manchester Universities have had projects funded to investigate this issue. Nevertheless, awareness of this work (or of the issue itself) appears to be low, despite the recommendations for closer integration of careers work into mainstream academic life made by the Harris Committee, set up by the DfES to review careers services (www.dfes.gov.uk/hecareersservicereview/report.shtml). Among other recommendations, that

review proposed that careers services should address the guidance needs of those who face particular barriers in the labour market, for example *"those with disabilities, those from certain ethnic minority backgrounds, older graduates and those who withdraw from higher education"*.

8.20   Across the board, central careers services offered a range of activities to cater for student needs, but it was not clear how far they had modified these to reflect a wider clientele. Services included:

- Information about careers availability.

- Careers advice and guidance.

- One to one sessions available in most services for students unclear about their career direction.

- Skills development.

- Specialist support for disabled students.

- Referrals to other support services: for example, to counselling and learning support.

8.21   In 'selecting' institutions it is clear that graduate employment is still firmly seen as the business of careers services, and a few interviewees made comments which implied that they saw it as a service for those less able to cope. However, although in one institution this position was taken strongly, in another, the head of careers reported that *"careers services used to be thought of as for the limp and the lame, but this is changing"*. Careers staff in general report wanting to play a more central role in the curriculum, and in one northern civic institution the head of careers felt that widening participation did not raise special problems for his work.

9 The Special Initiatives

9.1 This Chapter reviews the three special initiatives we were asked to evaluate:

- The funding strand to support regional partnerships (initially for one year 1998-99 and extended to three years 1999-2000 to 2001-02).

- The separate funding strand – funded jointly by HEFCE and FEFC/LSC – to improve pathways from FE to HE (three years: 1999-2000 to 2001-02).

- The funding strand to provide support to students with disabilities (three years: 1999-2000 to 2001-02).

Funding Strands to Support Regional Partnerships and Pathways From FE to HE

9.2 These are considered together because there is significant overlap of operational issues. Only one widening participation project was explicitly designed to address issues concerning disability, but the outcomes of many projects are likely to be relevant to disabled students. Within some regions cross-project collaboration has brought together those involved with widening participation and disability funding strands.

9.3 A summary of the origins of both funding strands is given in Appendix A and fuller details of the relevant policy assumptions of the Council in Appendix B, with a full list of projects in Appendix G.

9.4 Forty projects in total were supported (source HEFCE 00/35) at an average cost per project of £375,000 over three years (£125,000 pa); individual projects ranged in size from £74,150 to £2,157,000. An analysis by Action on Access (HEFCE 01/36a) noted that: 90% of all HEIs were involved in some way in regional projects; almost all projects (96%) included activities related to recruitment, whereas only 40% involved retention, and 26% employability; and 57% of projects involved some type of staff development activity.

9.5 Although all these projects involved some aspect of regional activity, they were developed to meet different needs, and HEFCE 01/36a noted the difficulty this caused for any analysis. There were several different kinds of project:

- Whole regional consortia projects: three of the nine regions (the North East; Yorkshire and Humberside; the South West) gave all their funding to regional consortia involving all HEIs.

- Sub-regional consortia projects: most of the other regions provided significant funding to support sub-regional projects.

- Topic or discipline based projects: for example in art, design and performance, and health professions education.

9.6 The improving pathways strand is a smaller one, and arose from a joint initiative with FEFC/LSC (HEFCE 99/33) designed to develop HE-FE links with lifelong learning partnerships in enhancing progression in HE through the development of those links. For 1999-2000 a total of 52 projects were supported (source HEFCE 00/35) at an average cost of £76,923; they ranged in size from £13,500 to £216,000. Some projects were jointly funded

with the regional partnerships strand, and have been run as a single activity. Some projects have been extended to meet regional requirements, and four new ones introduced.

The Projects

9.7 The Council did not wish us to undertake a separate survey of widening participation projects, but rather to review the progress of a sample as part of the evaluation case studies. Other sources of information used included: a review of annual project monitoring reports for 2000 and 2001; an analysis of the minutes of regional RANs in reviewing projects in 2001 and 2002; visits to two of the three whole region projects; discussions with the Institute for Access Studies at the University of Staffordshire (whose report on first year FE-HE collaboration in the pathways strand is summarised below); and discussion with Action on Access.

9.8 It has been impossible to determine the general overall effectiveness of projects in outcome terms for several reasons:

- First, most projects will not be completed until December 2002 (and some have had extensions granted). Indeed because of widespread late starts (see below) some of them were only a little over half-way through during the main period of our data collection.

- Second, a crucial dimension of the effectiveness of regional projects is the extent to which they are meeting regional needs, and at the moment not all of these are sufficiently clearly articulated to make this judgement possible (see below).

- Third, some projects are so complex that any overall preliminary conclusion is likely to be misleading. For example, one medium sized project alone has three main elements with 29 specific objectives and associated targets.

- Fourth, although a small number of projects have already been completed, there appears to be no systematic way of recording project impact and subsequent implementation other than through monitoring reports. Although these are valuable as a way of ensuring accountability during the life of a project, they say nothing about sustainability after a project ends. This raises major issues for future dissemination and is considered below.

9.9 It is clear that there is much good work being done within both funding strands, and – in general – monitoring reports suggest a high level of institutional satisfaction with progress. This is also the general conclusion of Action on Access. Progress in some projects has already been reported as an example of good practice in three important sources: the NAO report on widening participation; the HEFCE good practice guide on widening participation (HEFCE 01/36); and the UUK report on 'Social Class and Participation' [12].

9.10 In our case study institutions, satisfaction with projects was found to be similar to that found in monitoring reports, although a number of important operational issues were also identified. The case study HEIs were involved in a range of projects, including summer schools; raising aspirations amongst young people from lower socio-economic groups or low participation neighbourhoods; facilitating access to higher education; brokering good practice between community organisations and HEIs; facilitating progression from FE to HE; and jointly promoting the benefits of higher education with a consortium of HEIs.

9.11 The criteria for assessing the success or otherwise of a project was a subject for debate in case study HEIs. On the one hand, there were tangible benefits from a project such as an improvement in recruitment or retention or the project becoming embedded in some form.

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[12] UUK, Social Class and Participation, 2002

There was also some feeling that less tangible outcomes should not be overlooked, and one interviewee observed that *"one message that needs to go back to HEFCE is that this sort of funding has not just been about making things work that have automatically led to new students going into higher education. A lot of work has been on a much broader front. In terms of raising aspirations and changing cultures and activity, the targets are much softer and it will be difficult to have hard evidence for monitoring and assessing".*

9.12 In general, the perceived advantage of bidding for project funding in case study HEIs was that it provided a space for activities that might not otherwise be undertaken. However, there were some general concerns about the amount of time and resources involved in bidding, especially where there were doubts about the ability of the institution to embed the project once project funding ceased. One HEI highly committed to widening participation had been reluctant to bid for project funding on the basis that widening participation was already mainstream so it was difficult to identify additional activities. It was felt that focusing on the implementation of the institution's own learning and teaching strategy might be more effective in supporting students from under represented groups than any special projects.

9.13 HEIs which had run summer schools (often funded from a number of different sources) were generally enthusiastic about their value, for example one college of higher education noted that *"we have had some excellent summer schools here so the monies have acted very well as a catalyst to make things happen that might not normally have happened".* The principal of this college perceived the advantage of the summer school to be the opportunity to give young people from under represented groups a 'taster' of higher education, and to develop new relationships which helped to increase self-confidence. It also enabled them to engage with the academic and social aspects of student life, to talk with student ambassadors and gain an insight into the world of employment. A second perceived advantage was that academic staff became involved in running the summer school and often found it rewarding; moreover it was a way of raising the profile of widening participation. Similar satisfaction with summer schools was evident in monitoring reports concerning other projects.

Projects in the Context of Cross-Sector Partnerships

9.14 The value of local and regional partnerships was widely recognised by HEIs in our institutional policy survey, and 86% of respondents identified them as useful or essential to widening participation. Indeed some explicitly noted that the widening participation agenda can only be achieved through such collaboration, for example: *"we are strongly committed to successful partnerships with a range of institutions and bodies, including schools, colleges, HEIs, police, local authorities, and theatres. These are essential for widening participation as they help to extend out the 'footprint' across the region. The community links that these bodies have has given benefit to us in the context of high visibility joint working".*

9.15 More than 50% of respondents to the postal survey claimed considerable success in local partnerships, including success in the impact of HEFCE funded widening participation projects. For example, one noted that *"the joint HEFCE/FEFC project has proved very helpful to the University in developing better links...in part this is because the project has required the University to engage actively with local FE colleges and has facilitated the establishment of better contacts between individuals".* However most respondents did not provide details of project impact (despite being invited to do so): one noted that *"the University's partnership activities are both regional and national and operate at a great variety of levels. Consequently it is quite difficult to summarise their impact".*

9.16 Few responses provided new data on issues associated with effective partnership working, although a small number concurred with the view that *"the partnerships that work well and*

have most impact within the University are those where there have been clear benefits for all the partners", and *"where partnership is based on long established relationships".*

9.17 Views in case study HEIs about the HEFCE requirement that partnerships be formed for projects were mixed depending on the different experiences of institutions. Forming links with other HEIs or with FECs was felt to pose risks which could affect the ability of the project to deliver, including: inexperience in dealing with partnerships leading to tensions between partners; reluctance on the part of lead partners to engage fully with others leading to delays in reaching partnership agreements, problems over funding, and delays in starting; and difficulties in finding specialist staff to act as project coordinators.

9.18 In some cases these difficulties had proved intractable so that a different arrangement had to be agreed with HEFCE on the way forward. In others, the initial difficulties had been overcome and the partnership was proceeding smoothly and 'adding value' to the project. Amongst those case study HEIs involved there was general agreement that partnerships took time to be effective: for example over a three year project a partnership might only start to work effectively in the last year. The existence of 'added value' was felt to be the overriding consideration in determining the value of partnerships; in its absence there was a danger of diminished project effectiveness. 'Added value' could be achieved in a number of ways, for example: reaching a much wider audience than a single HEI; reducing 'initiative overload'; partners sharing good practice; and enhanced credibility provided by the formation of a consortium. For example, one HEI reported a greatly increased response from a consortium approach to under represented groups than had been experienced from a unilateral approach.

9.19 Approximately 30% of HEIs responding to our institutional survey reported active involvement in local partnerships before the HEFCE widening participation strategy, although most still believed that encouragement for partnerships had been helpful. However, a small number of dissenting views were expressed (8%) on the added value provided by HEFCE: for example one university noted: *"partnerships and relationships with FE colleges and schools (as well as other universities) have been a fundamental feature of the approach of this University to widening participation. HEFCE policy has not made a substantial positive contribution to improving this position, and – in some ways – has made it more difficult".*

9.20 Reflecting the issues identified in the case studies, the difficulties of partnerships were featured in approximately 15% of replies to the institutional survey, and several HEIs concluded that their own progress had been slowed by their involvement in collaborative activities. For example, one wrote that *"overall the problems of working in partnerships have, in our situation (and we say this as proactive partners), not helped the delivery of widening participation projects. It is likely that we could have done more – much more – without the constraints of the institutional agendas of the partners".* A similar experience caused another HEI (experienced in widening participation) to conclude that *"there is an over-emphasis on partnerships as if this were, per se, the best route. This has not always been the experience of the University".*

9.21 These concerns in both case study HEIs and in the institutional survey, strongly echo more general issues raised in the study of institutional collaboration in the first year of HE-FE pathway projects (Institute of Access Studies, University of Staffordshire, 2001). On the basis of questionnaire returns from projects and eight case studies, that review suggested that project effectiveness was often undermined by a failure to resolve important operational issues. The conclusions of that study are too numerous to summarise fully here, but include the following:

- Project application and selection processes were not sufficiently clear, the priorities of RANs not sufficiently articulated, and for any future funding there needed to be much clearer guidance at the project proposal stage. In particular, linkages to regional or sub-regional activities were often unclear.

- Partnerships set up specifically to seek funding in response to HEFCE 98/35 appeared – in general – to be less effective than those already established. Although there was much good practice, many partnerships lacked a shared vision, suffered from weak project management, suffered from poor systems to track student progress, and had few or no evaluation mechanisms in place.

- Although inter-institutional collaboration was felt to be central to widening participation, the dynamics of partnerships were often difficult. FE institutions rarely felt like full partners, with particular tensions in some projects involving pre-1992 HEIs because of different assumptions about widening participation.

- Participating institutions were involved in project activities for a number of reasons, including in many cases a strong commitment to widening participation. However, the report noted that *"market imperatives seem to dominate"*, that is much participation reflected the need to achieve institutional recruitment targets. Inter-institutional competition for students was generally evident even within projects, and the evaluation called for greater realism about the tensions between competition and collaboration within regional activities, in FECs as much as in HEIs. The rationale of the funding bodies in encouraging collaboration while at the same time encouraging inter-institutional competition through funding methodologies was felt not to be entirely consistent.

- In general, much greater guidance was required, a difficulty exacerbated by the fact that Action on Access had not been established at the start of the funding round.

- It was very difficult to sustain short term projects unless partnerships were already in place to continue the work. The report noted a need to build coherency in developing cross-sector mechanisms to aid widening participation in the longer term.

Of course, it needs to be recognised that these issues occurred in the first year of the particular funding initiative when teething troubles might be expected.

9.22 It is understood that similar problems concerning weak project management have been encountered in LSC funded projects which are being supported by Action on Access, but these are outside the remit of this evaluation.

9.23 A number of important operational issues arise from the data sources available to us.

a) Monitoring and Evaluation

9.24 For both project funding strands initial monitoring and evaluation requirements for the first year of operation were minimal, with HEIs simply being asked to provide information about progress. However in HEFCE 00/35 arrangements were strengthened to include a requirement for annual project monitoring reports, reviewed by RANs whose meetings were chaired by HEFCE regional consultants. These meetings were attended by members of the Action on Access team, though their support was not in place at the time of project selection. Separate arrangements were applied by FEFC and LSC for FE led projects in the pathways strand.

9.25 The process for monitoring these two funding strands, unusually within the Council, involves RANs and regional consultants. The reporting burden on institutions appears greater than for other special initiatives, and applies to all projects irrespective of size. Many projects are producing substantial reporting documentation in addition to the required monitoring form. For both 2000 and 2001 returns several HEIs commented adversely on the monitoring form which is not easy to complete for complex projects.

9.26 There are two conflicting pressures here: on the one hand the need for suitable accountability in a high priority area, and on the other the need for a consistent approach across the Council and between RANs. There is currently a danger that a great deal of institutional time will be spent producing monitoring data simply to comply with Council requirements, rather than being formative for the projects concerned. Within the spirit of its Accountability Review, the Council should ensure that the rationale for particular monitoring arrangements is widely known, and that the future burden falling upon projects is not excessive.

b) Project Selection and Start-Up

9.27 An analysis of monitoring reports for 2001 suggested that approximately 35% of projects reported a delayed start, usually due to difficulties in recruiting staff. This was also found in some disability projects (see below), and indeed has been reported in numerous evaluation studies on HEFCE project initiatives. There were several reasons for this: lack of adequate lead time from notification of funding to proposed project start dates; in some HEIs lack of willingness by finance officers to sanction new staffing posts before written confirmation from the funding bodies; the need to recruit externally for some appointments; and in some areas difficulties in recruiting specialist staff.

9.28 The summary of projects provided in HEFCE 01/36a suggested that a number of issues merited attention in relation to the project selection process. Projects were selected by RANs according to defined criteria (see Appendix B), but although projects were supposed to be set within clear regional criteria, these were not always made known to project holders. In particular HEFCE 01/36a noted that *"there was considerable variation in the interpretation of the guidelines issued and in the approaches adopted for the bidding process, both within and between regions. As a result there is no standardisation of the documentation nor of the resulting project structures".*

9.29 HEFCE/01/36a also noted weaknesses in the proposals of many approved projects including: lack of clearly stated targets or proposed measurable outcomes of achievement; under-developed project management mechanisms; unclear strategic relationships with institutional widening participation strategies; and in some cases unclear links with potentially overlapping regional activities and projects. The Council's ability to take action was limited because the Action on Access team only started work several months after the formal project starting date. This was unfortunate – although the general urgency to establish projects was understandable, the Council now has enough evidence from previous evaluations to be aware of the negative consequences of not having coordinating teams in place during project selection.

c) Operational Issues

9.30 Monitoring reports suggested that despite much good work a number of projects faced operational difficulties, including the staffing problems noted above. In their reviews of 2000 monitoring reports, the minutes of RANs recorded that 20 of the 75 projects (27%) had problems significantly affecting delivery, in most cases because of a late start. This had fallen in 2001 to 10%.

9.31　Project funding for these two strands is conditional on satisfactory progress, and RANs are required to take an annual decision on this. Where progress is not satisfactory RANs may withhold or reprofile the 10% of annual funding not paid until the approval of monitoring reports. Typically progress may be deemed unsatisfactory for two reasons: failure to meet planned objectives or targets; and failure to spend the funding provided (usually because of staffing difficulties) which is likely to impact on project progress. In Table 9.1 the decisions of RANs on withholding this 10% of funding are noted.

9.32　As can be seen, overall RANs withheld funding from 54 of the 135 projects reviewed over the two years (40%). However, there was significant regional variation for reasons that were not clear, for example one RAN withheld or reprofiled funding from 50% of projects while another withheld or reprofiled none. The implications of these decisions for the role of the RANs is considered in Chapter 11.

Table 9.1: Judgements of RANs on Withholding Project Funding

RAN Region	2000 Monitoring	2001 Monitoring (Feb)	Total
North West	8/14	4/13	12/27
South West	1/1	0/1	1/2
East Midlands	2/9	3/9	5/18
London	4/15	0/12	4/27
North East	0/6	0/5	0/11
South East	3/9	-	3/9
East	0/3	1/5	1/8
West Midlands	11/12	5/11	16/32
Yorkshire and Humberside	3/8	-	3/8
Total	32/75	13/60	54/135

9.33　It is important to note that this high proportion of funds being withheld or reprofiled does not mean that these projects are in serious difficulty, but it does suggest that project effectiveness is not being maximised within the timescales originally set down.

9.34　In addition to the operational problems identified above in the case study institutions and the Staffordshire study, monitoring reports reveal a number of other difficulties acknowledged by projects, including:

- Variable success in establishing new partnerships because of what several projects described as 'project fatigue' from community groups and schools in responding to an increasing number of short term initiatives.

- The need to set realistic timetables for project delivery, including the substantial lead time required for new partnerships to become effective. In the context of resource pressures on all those participating in partnerships, many projects appear to have proceeded more slowly than originally anticipated.

- The number of widening participation activities risks confusion; indeed one RAN noted in the project review meeting that *"there are too many initiatives being run in relation to widening participation and these are becoming an administrative burden and there is possibility of duplication"*.

- The need for regional projects to have greater awareness of the policy of RANs and to be more integrated into regional and sub-regional agendas.

In addition, numerous specific issues arising from individual projects need to be addressed by Action on Access or RANs.

c) Embedding and Disseminating Projects

9.35   Enhanced project support and guidance is needed to aid embedding and dissemination. In general, the value of support received from Action on Access is widely recognised by institutions (see Chapter 11). Despite the HEFCE good practice guide (HEFCE 01/36), the Action on Access web site, and other attempts to provide information on institutional activity, there is a major need to enhance dissemination. In the case study institutions there was a view from respondents involved with projects that there was insufficient feedback and dissemination between HEIs both about good practice and about what did not work in special projects. This was felt to be fundamentally important if HEIs were not to make similar mistakes or reinvent the wheel.

9.36   Within case study HEIs there was some divergence of view about the ability of HEIs to embed projects effectively. Whilst it was widely understood that such embedding was required once project funding ceased, a number of factors were identified which might prevent it. Firstly, project funding was seen to be about taking risks, and it was evident that risky ventures were not always successful: some projects were likely to fail so there was little merit in embedding them. Secondly, some HEIs expressed the view that funding for three years was far too short a period to allow a major new activity to become embedded, and that they would have real difficulty in taking forward a project without some additional financial help. As one interviewee noted: *"my criticism was always that they were too short term. You just got it moving, just got everybody enthusiastic and then the money stopped. The problem was it is all project-based funding and it never embeds fully".*

9.37   Another perceived difficulty was that for any project to become embedded, it needed strong commitment from the most senior levels. In a few cases, it was felt that the champions for a particular project were at too low a level within the institution to have sufficient clout to ensure embedding.

9.38   In other cases, embedding had been attempted by retaining a member of the project staff as a widening participation coordinator using mainstream funding, with varying success. One had led to much firmer embedding of widening participation because the individual had been able to act as a catalyst for a wide range of internal and external initiatives that otherwise could not have been attempted. In other cases, widening participation officers had felt their role was hampered by a lack of clear authority to undertake initiatives, or by resistance from other staff.

9.39   In order to try and assess institutional commitment to embedding projects and associated support for senior managers, we examined a sample of 20% of all original project proposals, and matching 2000 monitoring reports. In general, indications of support from senior managers were very weak, and only in three cases (20%) was any significant reference made to active support at senior levels. Institutional awareness of embedding was better developed, but in only one case was a detailed embedding strategy identified.

9.40   Proposals for enhancing future dissemination arrangements are made in Chapter 13.

d) Institutional Competition

9.41   Collaboration to enhance widening participation was generally welcomed in responses to our institutional survey, and numerous examples of effective collaborative activity cited. Nonetheless a minority of HEIs identified a potential conflict between inter-institutional collaboration within projects while competing over student enrolment. Several of these explicitly asked: what is the incentive for an institution with an established widening participation track record to share experience with a neighbouring HEI with less experience, particularly if that institution is also attracting students from the former through the additional student numbers mechanism? There is a consequent danger that projects may be about what HEIs can collaborate to do, rather than what actually needs to be done. Competitive tensions for students between HEIs and FECs were noted in approximately 10% of responses to the institutional survey, with one reporting that *"although we try and collaborate with our local FE college, the reality is that they have a high HE intake and we are in competition for the same students".* Some institutions reported that this issue could only be addressed as part of a broader regional approach with multi-institutional partnerships.

The Special Programme on Providing Support for Students With Disabilities

9.42   HEFCE 99/08 announced a three year extension (1999-2000 to 2001-2002) of previous programmes to support students with disabilities in order to: increase the number of disabled students; increase the quality, amount and spread of provision for disabled students; facilitate the promotion and transfer of expertise in disability provision already within the sector; and increase collaboration between institutions to ensure resources are used effectively in providing for disabled students. Previously, two one year programmes (1993-94 and 1994-95) had been established to encourage widening participation for students with special needs, followed by a third phase of funding through the SLDD initiative which provided £6 million in funding over the three years 1996-1999. This phase was subsequently evaluated (HEFCE 00/46) and a number of changes made to the organisation of the current funding round.

9.43   Monitoring and evaluation took two main forms: the completion of annual monitoring returns, and support from the National Disability Team (NDT) with all projects being visited each year during the current initiative.

9.44   In addition to the general data sources reported in Chapter 1, in considering disability projects we also reviewed annual monitoring reports for the years 2000 and 2001, visited five projects, held several discussions with the NDT, and sent a short survey to all projects (with a response rate of 45% which was disappointingly low but similar to a survey sent to projects in the previous evaluation of SLDD).

The Project Strands

9.45   Fifty projects to the value of £2 million a year for three years (1999-2000 to 2001-02) were funded for three related strands of activity:

- Strand One: to improve provision in HEIs with little current provision for, or experience in supporting, students with disabilities. 29 projects were funded, with an average total cost of £182,689 of which the direct funding body contribution was an average of £118,289. The largest amount of direct funding body support was £150,000 (four projects) and the lowest £46,500.

- Strand Two: to promote and transfer expertise and good practice. Eight projects were funded initially but support for one was withdrawn. They were significantly smaller, and average total cost was £80,262 of which the average funding body contribution was £48,073. The largest amount of direct funding body support was £50,000 (two projects) and the lowest £38,518.

- Strand Three: to encourage collaboration between institutions to make effective use of existing resources and available funds. 13 projects were funded at an average total cost of £195,458 of which the direct funding body contribution was an average of £121,580. The largest amount of direct funding body support was £150,000 and the lowest £18,799.

9.46   With the exception of some in Strand Two, most projects were funded for three years (1999-2000 to 2001-02), so it is too early to be definitive about final outcomes or whether institutional embedding will be achieved once funding ends.

Strand One

9.47   A clear aim of this Strand was to contribute to bringing institutions to base-level provision by the end of three years; hence projects were intended to support institutions with little or no systematic provision for disabled students. A number of small, and in some cases specialist, institutions that had previously had no designated disability officer were included in Strand One. Within this overall aim, the scale and ambition of projects varied, from those concentrating on appointing professional disability staff to those more ambitiously contributing significant institutional resources in addition to HEFCE funding to meet base-level standards.

9.48   Overall, the majority of Strand One projects appeared successful in improving provision to date, although monitoring reports are not impartial evidence for determining project effectiveness. In their 2001 reports many Strand One projects noted significant improvements in the delivery of institutional support services for students with disabilities as a direct result of funding. Typically reports indicated increases in the use of such services by disabled students (in some cases more than doubling), and several projects described the improvement in service quality in terms such as *"enormous"* and *"immense"*; for example one project observed *"the value of our project has been enormous. It has transformed the approach to disability that this university takes…There is an enormous amount of work to do, and we do not underestimate the scale of the task or the frustrations which lie ahead".* Another project reported an increase in students claiming the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) from 10 to 60 within a six month period as a direct result of the service established through project funding.

9.49   Similarly all 14 projects who responded to our survey believed that significant improvements in provision were taking place, although they had not yet been completed. In addition to greater service use by disabled students, other improvements cited included: the engagement of senior managers; the introduction of clear policies and procedures; more systematic approaches to support; a more professional service to disabled students; the appointment of specialist staff; disability staff's involvement in institutional committees; interest and involvement from academic staff and departments; and increases in the number of offers made to disabled applicants.

9.50   Such results should probably not be surprising since the rationale for funding was to support activity where little previously existed, but they are gratifying nonetheless. The final year of projects should see further gains in many projects. However, better institutional service provision from a previously low base does not necessarily mean that all projects will have maximised their effectiveness, and project funding by itself is unlikely to bring institutions up to

base-level standard, although 11 of the 14 responding to our survey felt it could make a major contribution. We note below that a number of HEIs reported using their mainstream disability funding to provide additional support to base-level projects.

9.51   Because Strand One projects have, in general, been concentrating on the establishment of 'basic' services, it appears – as might be expected – that there is much work to do in embedding disability support throughout institutions. This is apparent not only from monitoring reports, but also from our own survey where projects did not perceive themselves as exercising a major influence on either making the provision of central services more fully accessible to disabled students (21%) or on the delivery of academic programmes (7%), although most felt they exercised some influence. Most projects appeared optimistic about the further enhancements to be made during the period of funding, although two highlighted the difficulty of influencing the *"entrenched attitudes"* of individual staff. Many were relying on the added impetus of the legislative changes to carry through their project aims.

Strand Two

9.52   In financial terms, this was the smallest strand; only eight projects were initially funded with relatively small grants. Some projects were based on activities undertaken as part of the previous SLDD initiative (see HEFCE 00/46), and were funded following a recommendation in the evaluation of that programme that highly selective funding of a small number of projects was desirable to facilitate the dissemination of existing good practice. That evaluation saw such support as a 'one-off' with dissemination projects having a limited life-span.

9.53   Evidence to date suggests that a number of these projects are proving successful, and that funding has acted as a catalyst in attracting contributions (both financial and in kind) from institutions and individuals. The project manager of one project which had secured considerable voluntary effort from other practitioners in the sector and support in kind from the host institution, commented in a survey return: *"HEFCE funding has allowed and enabled development of resources and strategies for change …not possible through voluntary efforts".*

9.54   A pre-existing network was not an absolute requirement for success: at least one project set up a new network which is likely to continue. However, initial data suggest that the less successful projects were those without pre-existing networks or where networks were not sufficiently robust to take on or adopt the project. Such an outcome is consistent with findings from the widening participation strand on improving pathways from further to higher education.

9.55   One of the assumptions of the strand was that institutions would be willing to host projects which would be primarily for the benefit of the sector. This assumption appears to have been borne out by the survey returns with at least one institution having invested considerably in the project. Several respondents also commented on the significant benefits of being the host institution: *"because [the institution] is involved closely…in the developments, it should be at the 'frontline' in good practice examples and networking".*

9.56   Based on the data available to us, while all the remaining strand two projects appeared to be reasonably successful in disseminating their work, it is clear that some of the projects have the potential to make a greater impact than was possible in the timescale and with the funding provided. This raises an important issue about the future coordination and dissemination of good practice in relation to disability which is considered in Chapter 13.

9.57   One project in this strand was closed after 17 months, when it became clear to the NDT and HEFCE that it was not going to fulfil its original aims. We comment further on this in relation to

the coordination role of the NDT in Chapter 11, but the fact that early action was taken highlights the success of the changed remit of the coordination team.

Strand Three

9.58   This strand covered a range of activities involving inter-institutional collaboration, including developing mental health support provision, enhancing staff development in selected HEIs, and developing regional support for HE students in FE colleges. This range makes overall conclusions difficult, and they inevitably centre on the value of collaboration itself as a policy objective in this area. Responses to our survey were disappointingly low from this group of projects (5 from 13) and similar difficulties were found in the previous SLDD evaluation.

9.59   The problems of collaborative working have been evaluated before, and despite better guidance and more rigorous selection, some projects continued to experience problems. Comments made during visits, responses to monitoring reports, and our survey, suggest four typical difficulties:

• Incompatibility between the structures and cultures of the partners. One project failed to take off as a collaborative project at all partly for this reason, and is now being run as a single institutional programme. In others, the differing approaches simply made the project more difficult; for example one survey respondent commented that *the "collaborative nature of the project has felt artificial and an extra burden"*. Overall, problems of this kind are similar to those encountered in some of the collaborative widening participation projects considered above.

• Failure of the different participants to share goals and to contribute effectively. This was noted in the previous evaluation of SLDD, but seems to have been less of a problem within the current funding round, particularly where participating institutions had pre-existing agreements on which to base their collaboration. In some cases this may have been because potential problems were resolved through negotiating more formal collaboration agreements (sometimes with the help of the NDT) at the start of the project, although inevitably this slowed down the progress of the project work. The active involvement of senior managers too was cited by a number of institutions as key. Nevertheless, two of the five respondents to the disability survey believed that goals are still not entirely shared between partners, and one commented that the *"matched time commitment promised in the bid hasn't happened and never will"*.

• A tendency for some projects to be cooperative rather than genuinely collaborative. Although this problem occurs widely in project initiatives[13], it is not generally understood and better initial project briefing and guidance is required.

• Communication difficulties between partners often geographically distant. While projects had used email, phone, video- and email-conferencing, this continued to be a problem. Difficulties in communication have also played their part in the other issues raised above.

9.60   Despite such difficulties, monitoring reports indicate general satisfaction from projects with their progress to date.

Issues Arising

9.61   A number of issues concerning all three strands are evident from the various data sources.

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[13] *See, for example, a recent study for the Research Support Libraries Programme on Barriers to Collaboration in University Libraries, RSLP, 2002*

a) Embedding Activity

9.62 A problem with previous initiatives has been doubts about whether project gains have been embedded long-term, and we sought evidence on the extent to which projects felt that their work would be sustained. All but one of the Strand One respondents replying to the disability survey believed that there would be a very or fairly significant long-term impact on the institution, with many commenting that gains had already been embedded. Only two respondents expressed concern that provision might not be maintained at base-level after funding ceased, although some project workers within this strand are relatively inexperienced in managing change within a higher education environment, and there is a danger that this level of response may over estimate the ability of institutions to sustain such developments. Nonetheless, legislative requirements will be a powerful incentive towards embedding.

9.63 This view was broadly confirmed in the case studies, where respondents involved with Strand One projects took the view that the whole thrust of the bidding process was to ensure that disability became embedded across the HEI so that everyone understood that they had a responsibility to support disabled students. The NDT had emphasised the importance of embedding from the outset so that plans for this were built into the bid process. Thus one case study HEI reported that they had developed a training and dissemination strategy with agreed lines of responsibility to create the conditions for embedding. The fact that the project had the active support of the vice chancellor also helped to ensure that the level of awareness of disability was raised throughout the institution. However, a note of caution was sounded in that once project staff relinquished their duties, embedding might suffer due to the familiar tension between strategy and the needs of day-to-day operation.

9.64 So far as Strand Two is concerned, four of the five project managers who responded to the disability survey felt that the long-term impact of their work would be very or fairly significant (the fifth felt it was too early to tell). All believed that either most or all of the project activities would continue after funding ceased, in most cases because the project itself was based in a pre-existing network which would continue beyond project funding, or because project gains or resources had been passed over to such a network which would ensure their continuance and relevance. In two instances aspects of the project had been taken up by other permanent networks and were being taken further than at first envisaged. In practice, most of the projects in Strand Two involved practitioners with a long term commitment to support disability provision, and therefore sustainability through professional networks is highly likely.

9.65 Overall conclusions about embedding Strand Three activities are much more difficult to draw, and there is likely to be considerable variation between projects. Four out of the five respondents to our disability survey believed their projects would have a very or fairly significant long-term impact (although not all felt the impact would be equal in all the participating institutions), and all believed the activities would be continued beyond the life of the project. However, we cannot conclude that this sample is representative.

9.66 Within case study HEIs there were examples of moves to embed projects from Strands Two and Three in various ways, for example: setting up a rolling programme of staff training; recruiting additional posts for disability; linking with other bodies to provide a joint service; and in one case by running a programme as part of a 'year zero' course to encourage admission.

b) Bidding and Project Selection

9.67 Issues around the bidding process have been raised in previous evaluations, and current project holders of disability projects raised them again. In particular: competitive funding

arrangements to support collaborative activities; the time-consuming nature of bidding; and the danger of disability staff chasing project funding rather than pursuing more strategic goals. However, project holders did appreciate the changes to project bidding arrangements, and the support of the NDT during the two stage selection process.

9.68 One concern relating particularly to Strand One was that the bidding process was to some extent in conflict with the purpose of the strand. Although aimed at institutions with little or no expertise in disability provision, the bidding process inevitably favoured those that provided the strongest proposals, although the two stage selection process may have gone some way to counteract this. However, the fact that some larger and more experienced institutions were funded in Strand One, and that several smaller specialist institutions with no background in this area were turned down, indicates that the problem remains to be solved.

c) Staffing

9.69 The progress of a significant number of disability projects has been impeded by staffing difficulties. Second year monitoring reports suggest that approximately 25% of projects may have been so affected, and in a significant number of cases project start up was delayed. Typical problems were similar to those experienced in some widening participation projects and included: over-reliance on key individuals; difficulties of recruiting specialist staff; and institutional delays in staff appointment (an issue noted in previous HEFCE evaluations of special initiatives). In addition some Strand One projects appeared to have under-estimated the staffing demands involved, and some of them reported that it was difficult to balance the day-to-day demands on staff time with the developmental aspects of projects.

d) Linkages to Mainstream Disability Funding

9.70 A strategically important issue is how project funding relates to the use of mainstream disability funding. Knowledge of institutional arrangements over disability funding amongst project staff is variable. Monitoring reports and our survey of projects confirmed that while some staff running projects had no knowledge of mainstream funding, in general project staff appeared to have at least some information on how it was used in their institution.

9.71 Monitoring reports sought information on the extent to which projects were involved with institutional decisions concerning the use of mainstream disability funding, and a range of linkages emerged from those answering the question (not all projects did). Approximately 20% of respondents reported that project and mainstream disability funding was either completely combined or closely integrated, and in some cases mainstream funding was supporting additional project provision. In a further 30% of cases projects were actively involved in discussions on the use of mainstream funding and there was partial cross-funding. In approximately 25% of cases projects reported their involvement as being a contribution to institutional discussion on the use of the disability funding but said that the two funds were kept separate, and a further 25% identified no linkages at all: decisions about mainstream disability funding use were made elsewhere in the institution. Our own survey tended to confirm these data, with 50% of respondents aware of how some funding had been spent.

e) Dissemination

9.72 Project dissemination will become more important in the current third year of operation, but various issues concerning future approaches to dissemination are considered in Chapter 13.

f) Linkages with Widening Participation and Learning and Teaching

9.73   The lack of clarity about the general policy relationship between widening participation and disability is also found within institutions and projects, and includes linkages between disability provision and learning and teaching strategies. At a national level, it is welcome that the various coordination teams work more closely together than previously, and share a responsibility in relation to supporting DfES Innovation projects. However, at a project level greater linkage is required in some cases, and its absence reflects the lack of integration in many institutional strategies between widening participation and disability noted in Chapter 5.

9.74   In the disability survey we sought information on the involvement of the main project worker in contributing to both institutional widening participation and learning and teaching strategies, and the picture appeared mixed. Only 16% of respondents reported making a major contribution to institutional widening participation strategy and 8% to its learning and teaching strategy; 50% and 37% respectively reported some contribution; and 34% and 54% respectively reported no contribution. If disability provision is to be embedded both strategically and operationally then these figures need to improve, and further guidance to institutions on HEFCE's expectations may be useful.

10   Funding

10.1   In this Chapter we consider the principal elements of funding that are part of this evaluation: the funding supplements for widening participation (the so-called 'postcode premium') and for disability; and additional student numbers. The data collected suggest that these need to be seen in the context of total funding for teaching. Issues associated with the administration of student access and hardship funds are also reviewed.

Funding Supplement: Recruitment From Under Represented Groups

10.2   Appendix B sets out the background to this supplement and associated HEFCE policy assumptions. The allocation was £20 million in 1999-2000, and £25 million in 2000-01, rising to £37 million in 2001-02. The supplement is separate from existing premiums for part time and mature students. It was designed to address the problem of additional costs involved in the recruitment, support and retention of students from under represented groups, and HEFCE consulted a sample of institutions before setting the level of funding at 5% for each unweighted FTE. In order to avoid resources being absorbed into mainstream support for teaching, institutions have to identify the use of the funding supplement in their annual operating statement.

10.3   Within institutions there appears to have been some initial confusion about the purpose of the supplement, and whether it was intended to represent the full additional costs of recruiting students from under represented groups. The Council subsequently sought to clarify its purpose as making a contribution to the increased support costs of recruiting and supporting under represented students, and noted that it *"is not intended as an incentive to recruit under represented groups"*[14]. However, HEFCE 99/24 noted that the purpose of funding was *"to cater for the additional costs of provision for the students concerned; to support proven success in widening participation; and to provide an incentive for institutions in this respect"*. The funding does not reflect actual costs which are currently unknown. HEFCE 99/24 also provided a guide to where additional costs might be incurred, for example: additional academic support and counselling, additional contact hours, special recruitment schemes, special retention schemes, staff development, additional support facilities (eg child care).

10.4   As is widely known, a geodemographic classification (commercially licensed under the name 'Super Profiles') has been used as the basis for allocating funds, based on the postcode of the student's address at application (hence the term 'postcode premium'). Concerns were expressed at the outset about the use of such a classification, which HEFCE acknowledged to be an imperfect proxy for the social and cultural factors involved (see Appendix I). A recognised disadvantage of this approach was that without purchasing the software licence HEIs could not identify their student profiles themselves. The Council has discouraged institutions from using such data when making admission offers, and has suggested that it may not be legal for them to do so. Nonetheless there is considerable institutional criticism of the Council for not making this data available, for example one HEI responding to our institutional survey observed that *"if HEFCE want us to reach more students in these communities they must tell us where they are"*.

10.5   The overall approach by HEFCE towards funding widening participation appeared to be perceived differently in different parts of the sector. In our institutional survey, approximately 55% of pre-1992 universities and 40% of colleges appeared broadly satisfied with funding methodologies, but only six (18%) post-1992 universities. Partly this was because of aspiration

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[14] *Speech by the Director of Policy, HEFCE at Staffordshire University, September 2001*

funding and the perceived consequences of the additional student numbers policy (see below), but several pointed out that where widening participation was already a mainstream activity failure to meet the full costs of provision had major implications. For example, one institution wrote that *"HEFCE's funding system for widening participation seems unduly complicated and the purpose of the core funding unclear. The amounts involved do not reflect the true cost of the additional support required to attract and retain non-traditional students. The special initiative funding is useful but funds only ad hoc projects. The whole funding of widening participation activity needs to be overhauled".*

10.6   The funding supplement (although not the amount) was generally welcomed by institutions replying to the our survey, but the need to account for it separately from mainstream activity was criticised by a small number (9%). These tended to view it as an appropriate approach to encourage HEIs new to widening participation to recruit from under represented groups, but inappropriate where large numbers of students have traditionally been drawn from such groups. For example, one such institution observed that *"we feel quite strongly that repackaging our money in this way is not helpful to us. Having to justify to HEFCE that we will continue to do what we already do well is irritating and wastes effort. Whilst we understand the need for the sector to show that it is using public money to support government policy, we do not believe that this approach is the best".*

10.7   In practice, the funding received by HEIs from the premium varies widely, from £1,096,246 to £1,107 (2001-02), and the distribution of funding can be seen in Table 10.1 (the figures include both widening participation and disability supplements).

Table 10.1: Distribution of Widening Participation and Disability Premiums 2001-02

Funding bands for total of WP and disability premiums	Number of HEIs within bands	% overall
£1m +	2	1.5%
£750,000 – £1M	3	2%
£500,000 – £750,000	17	13%
£250,000 – £500,000	34	26%
£100,000 – £250,000	33	26%
Below £100,000	42	32%

[Source: HEFCE 01/57]

The majority of HEIs with less than £100,000 were specialist institutions, many with very low levels of activity.

10.8   The amounts involved are tiny in comparison to overall spending on teaching, and 27% of respondents in our institutional survey offered the view that overall funding for widening participation was too low, and that the level of the supplement in no way reflected the additional costs of recruiting and supporting learners from under represented groups. There is very strong institutional feeling on this issue, as can be seen in the response of one HEI actively involved in widening participation: *"offering an institution which spends £60 million pa on teaching an additional £300,000 is not a significant change, especially when the £300K has, of course, been topsliced from teaching funds anyway".*

10.9   In paragraphs 5.42 and 5.43 it was noted that there are groups of institutions who have performed either consistently well or consistently poorly against widening participation benchmarks. In Table 10.2 we identify the average funding supplement received by the top and bottom 10 HEIs in performance against these benchmarks in proportion to overall HEFCE funding. As can be seen, for all institutions the proportion of the widening participation supplement is extremely low, and for those in the bottom group almost insignificant in

operational terms. An increase in the supplement to 10% as proposed by the Council is unlikely to make a significant difference as a proportion of overall funding, particularly for those institutions whose income from non-HEFCE sources is increasing.

Table 10.2: Widening Participation Supplement as % of HEFCE Funding 2001-2002

HEIs	Average of highest 10 HEIs above benchmarks:	Average of lowest 10 HEIs above benchmarks:
WP Supplement as % of HEFCE Funding for Teaching	1.97%	0.51%
WP Supplement as % of overall HEFCE Funding	1.89%	0.28%
WP Supplement as % of Overall Income	0.40%	0.08%
Total HEFCE Funding as % of Overall Income [a]	54%	39%

[a: Note: This figure excludes tuition fees. Source HESA]

10.10 It is evident that no financial incentive is either intended or provided by these funding levels. While there is (so far as we are aware) no research evidence on the extent to which financial incentives are a motivating factor for HEIs, there are three clear examples where financial incentives have radically changed institutional behaviour: full non-EU overseas fees; the rapid rise in student numbers in the late 1980s and early 1990s fuelled by large increases in FTE funding; and the RAE.

10.11 Although data are weak, HEIs appear to vary in their use of premium funding. The fact that it can be used at the discretion of HEIs is generally welcomed, and most typically it seems to be rolled-up into central funds to support recruitment and student support, rather than being specially allocated to relevant services. For example, one HEI in their response to 00/50 observed *"as we understand it, the monies are not ear-marked but are part of our block grant. As such, it was not possible for us to provide detailed information on the use of funds, as they had been committed to maintain and enhance existing services and to create a number of new elements as part of our strategy to broad based support in both the academic and academic-related sectors for all students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds."* In Chapter 7 it was noted that this is not always popular with staff in student services and related areas who typically would like greater ear-marking for support functions.

10.12 Based on their own questionnaire data the NAO study suggests that more than 80% of HEIs claim to use the postcode premium for identifiable widening participation activities[15], but since their – and our – cases studies suggest that such data are rarely collected in detail, in our view it is difficult to attribute spending on widening participation to specific funding objectives.

10.13 Because of the difficulties of determining accurate expenditure, the NAO has recommended that HEIs should monitor widening participation costs more systematically. However, although this would be a useful development towards transparency in internal resource allocation there are dangers, particularly the implication that widening participation remains an additional activity with its own separate costs. As we note in this report, in many HEIs widening participation is synonymous with overall teaching, and discrete quantification of costs may be unrealistic. We suggest that this issue may best be addressed as part of the overall transparency review which is designed to make institutional costs more explicit, and to address issues of cross-subsidy.

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[15] *National Audit Office, Widening Participation in Higher Education in England, page 15*

10.14   HEIs are not alone in recognising that the premium may not reflect actual costs, for example the UUK in their submission to consultation 00/50 proposed an increase to 10%, and the Fourth Report of the House of Commons Select Committee of Education and Employment (2001) suggested that it should be raised to *"at least 20%"* in order to act as an incentive to recruitment. We note that the Council is undertaking research on the actual costs involved, and that it recognises the need to examine whether the additional costs incurred by institutions whose main focus of activity is to widen participation are sufficiently recognised in the current funding model.[16]

10.15   Among the 27% of institutions reporting that funding levels for widening participation were too low, a number of specific points were made including:

- Technical features in relation to benchmarks for London and rural areas (see Chapter 4) understated the need for additional resources to provide student support.

- A general decline in resources for teaching within the system, which may have had most impact on institutions with the highest proportion of learners who need high levels of support.

- High failure rates in some institutions suggesting that enhanced resources might be required to provide necessary student support (see Chapter 7).

- If the current level of premium funding has under estimated the resources required to support students from under represented groups, then the financial implications will inevitably have been greater for those institutions who have recruited large numbers of such learners. Typically these were the same institutions who were less able to cross-subsidise teaching from other sources.

- The amount paid through the supplement has been calculated on the basis of measurement in the previous year, thus funding potentially lags behind growth.

For many HEIs such factors have strained the credibility of widening participation premium funding,

10.16   In such circumstances there is evidence that some HEIs see the 5% supplement as confirmation that widening participation is not the priority it is claimed to be. As one HEI observed in our institutional survey: *"it is welcome, but its scale means it is a token gesture, and it invites ridicule as a signal of policy priorities".* Other HEIs note that the supplement only rewards recruitment and makes no contribution to institutional costs for widening participation which has a more general sector wide pay-off.

10.17   Of course, supplementary funding has taken place at the same time as some HEIs have been struggling to fill all their places, and there is little doubt that the financial incentives to fill student places (and therefore their contract with HEFCE) has minimised any possible disincentives inherent in the current levels of funding. As such, our overall conclusion is that while the funding supplement has made only a very small contribution to most of those HEIs active in recruiting students from under represented groups, for a substantial part of the sector there is no evidence that at current funding levels it has – of itself – acted as a major disincentive to stimulating activity.

10.18   If the supplement is to continue to be a central mechanism in contributing to institutional widening participation costs, it is important that the methodology and amount of funding have

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[16] *HEFCE 01/62, Supply and Demand in Higher Education, page 34*

the confidence of the sector. Based on our data, this confidence cannot be assumed even at a figure of 10%, and an important test of the Council's commitment to widening participation will be to be seen to be addressing legitimate institutional concerns in these areas.

Additional Student Numbers

10.19 Under the funding system in operation until 2003, HEFCE annually invites bids for additional student numbers (ASNs) against specific policy priorities, and for 1998-99 to 2000-01 bids were made against two specific objectives: to reward high quality learning and teaching (interpreted broadly to include factors such as employability), and to widen access to higher education. For 2001-02 these were broadened to include regional criteria, and some successful bids were designed to support partnerships that developed under the regional partnerships project stream. HEFCE consultation 00/50 records that in 2000-01 87% of ASN allocations were to HEIs with proven track records of widening participation, but it may be harder to make this direct link in the future as the criteria broaden.

10.20 The Council has become more prescriptive about the criteria for funding additional places during the three years covered by the two main policy objectives. For 1998-99 HEFCE 20/97 identified *"widening access"* as one among a number of possible criteria that HEIs could bid against, and institutional requirements for bidding were modest, demanding only *"a participation strategy in place; a mechanism for monitoring progress; provision for the governing body to review achievement; and a track record of successful activity"*. In comparison HEFCE 99/56 (which invited bids for 25,000 additional places in 2000-01) was much more specific, and it is possible to see the direct influence of the funding strands to support local and regional widening participation activities. Specific criteria included: increasing the number of students from *"disadvantaged"* backgrounds; increasing the range of HE options within a region; offering programmes leading to sub-degree competency based qualifications; encouraging collaborations with FE providers; and supporting the development of progression routes from FE to HE in partnership with local lifelong learning partnerships. For these reasons the majority of planned additional places was below degree level (19,000).

10.21 In practice, the ASN policy has coincided with recognition by HEFCE of changes in the pattern of demand and supply for higher education. Hence many HEIs who might have wished to obtain ASNs have not done so, and instead have struggled even to enrol their full student numbers. Although there is significant variation between individual institutions, HEFCE data[17] record a sector wide deficit in recruitment against MaSNs between 1998-99 and 2000-01 for pre-1992 universities of 172 compared with 14,043 for post-1992 universities.

10.22 For 2001-02 Table 10.3 identifies that a relatively small number of HEIs benefited significantly from ASN allocations while nearly one third were allocated none. In this latter group (many highly active in widening participation) enrolment declined in some cases.

Table 10.3: Distribution of Additional Student Numbers 2001-02

Funding bands	Number of HEIs within bands	% Overall
£3m +	2	1.5%
£2M – 3M	6	4.5%
£1M – £2M	17	13%
£500,000 – £1M	17	13%
£100,000 – £500,000	38	29%
£1 – £100,000	10	8%
No allocation	41	31%

[Source: HEFCE 01/57]

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[17] *HEFCE 01/62, Demand and Supply in Higher Education, page 51*

10.23   During the three years covered by the available data the total number of full time undergraduates in England increased by about 3,600 (a little under 2%). Numbers from state schools, however, rose by over 9,000, with 1,700 being from lower social and economic groups and 900 from low participation neighbourhoods. The slight overall expansion can only be accounted for by a widening of participation, without which there would have been a substantial fall. However, within this overall picture the distribution of students between institutions has not remained constant, and institutions which have performed above benchmarks have complained that the effect of ASNs has been not to expand the system as a whole, but to move students from one kind of institution to another (in general from post-1992 to pre-1992 universities).

10.24   There is little direct evidence on the extent to which such a process has actually occurred, and there is likely to be considerable variation between both institutions and academic disciplines. However, two pre-1992 HEIs in our institutional survey explicitly noted a policy of recruiting from under represented groups to fill ASN places, in order not to change their policies on A level offers for 'mainstream' students. Although data are not available to track student movement between institutions in detail, we sought to test this view by comparing recruitment in selected areas: first by comparing growth in ASNs in geographical areas where pairs of HEIs are to some extent in competition over recruitment; and second by examining actual recruitment within one urban area.

10.25   So far as the first of these comparisons is concerned, Table 10.4 charts HEFCE funding for ASNs awarded over the past three years. Although some local variation is evident in terms of both the volume and allocation of additional students, in all but one case the ASNs were higher in pre-1992 universities irrespective of the extent to which it was meeting widening participation benchmarks. This suggests the likelihood of some movement of students towards these institutions. However, it is also the case that most post-1992 universities have been allocated additional places, and assuming that these are filled they will continue to grow. For both sets of universities, a significant number of these places in 2002-03 have been offered at other than full time undergraduate levels, but we have not sought to map the distribution of part time and sub-degree places against possible student movement.

Table 10.4: Comparison of ASNs for Seven Pairs of Universities

	Universities	2001-02 £	2000-01 £	1999-00 £	3 year totals
1	Bristol	1,782,771	273,220	1,696,268	3,752,259
	UWE	428,184	254,913	415,241	1,098,338
2	Sheffield	1,234,863	1,231,269	747,698	3,213,830
	Sheffield Hallam	0	236,004	839,604	1,075,608
3	Leicester	334,143	88,056	519,675	941,874
	de Montfort	0	0	80,497	80,497
4	Nottingham	3,495,482	1,100,023	2,596,246	7,191,751
	Nottingham Trent	0	0	0	0
5	Leeds	2,739,543	1,388,076	1,211,887	5,339,506
	LMU	1,803,591	1,306,935	971,179	4,081,705
6	Newcastle	1,596,926	1,205,523	0	2,802,449
	Northumbria	281,387	0	414,625	696,012
7	Sussex	331,143	16,136	-	-
	Brighton	784,434	1,270,541	-	-

[Source: annual HEFCE final recurrent grant settlement circulars]

10.26   These financial data (which, of course, reflects different funding bands) are supported by the analysis of growth or decline in FTEs over the period 1999-2000 to 2000-01 in Table 10.5.

Table 10.5: Comparison of FTEs for Seven Pairs of Universities – 1999-2000 to 2000-01

	Pre-1992 university	FTE	Post-1992 university	FTE	Net
1	Bristol	486	UWE	74	560
2	Sheffield	492	Sheffield Hallam	-63	429
3	Leicester	-100	De Montfort	-639	-739
4	Nottingham	791	Nottingham Trent	-407	384
5	Leeds	573	LMU	404	977
6	Newcastle	151	Northumbria	-159	-8
7	Sussex	267	Brighton	211	478

[Source HEFCE PI Tables, calculated from total student numbers and relevant percentages]

10.27   A similar conclusion can be drawn in relation to our other ex ample of recruitment figures for HEIs in the West Midlands. Table 10.6 shows that over the three years 1997-98 to 1999-2000 the total number of students in the region's HEIs fell. However, this was not evenly distributed, and only the University of Birmingham increased its overall young full time undergraduate numbers. The total number is less than the increase in its recruitment from state schools, indicating that it has been actively recruiting from a wider base than before. None of the other institutions experienced a rise in numbers and three suffered substantial falls.

Table 10.6: Young Full Time UG Recruitment in the W Midlands – 1997-98 to 1999-2000

	State schools	Low social and economic groups	Low participation neighbourhoods	Total young FTE UG entrants
Aston	-179	-17	-31	-202
Birmingham	325	111	14	255
Central England	-332	-101	-83	-477
Coventry	-258	-36	-51	-316
Wolverhampton	119	55	16	9
Total in region	-325	12	-135	-731

[Source HEFCE PI tables 1997-98 and 1999-2000]

10.28   Whether this pattern is the result of widening participation policy is not clear, but had those students gone instead to the post-1992 universities in the region it would have substantially mitigated their falling recruitment problems. Significantly, Wolverhampton, the only post-1992 institution to resist this trend, is an institution which performs significantly above the mean on almost all the widening participation indicators. It would appear that its strong commitment to widening participation and a regional mission is enabling it to overcome a broad trend.

10.29   The data presented above are not a conclusive indicator of a trend in the distribution of student places, and actual patterns will be more complex than these paired comparisons suggest. It is not in our terms of reference to pursue the issue further, but there is a strong case for further research in this area.

10.30   In addition to the difficulties caused for strategic planning, a number of other potential problems have been identified in the current system of allocating ASNs and the possible movement of students towards pre-1992 HEIs:

- Student from under represented groups enrolled by 'selecting' from 'recruiting' HEIs are likely to be amongst the most capable, and the loss of such students may lead to greater overall retention difficulties for the 'recruiting' institutions concerned.

- Where institutions are using ASNs to recruit students from under represented groups but maintaining traditional teaching methods, there is a danger of increased failure rates in

institutions where they have traditionally been low. In some HEIs this may lead to criticism of widening participation itself as results published in national league tables will become more unfavourable in comparison with competitor institutions.

- Significant movement away from traditionally widening participation active HEIs potentially risks the sustainability of the long term development work with local schools and communities that has been undertaken, and therefore may undermine the very partnerships that HEFCE seeks to encourage.

10.31 In all forms of data collection the competition between HEIs for students was felt to be an important factor which often inhibits local partnerships. A number of respondents have observed that they feel that HEFCE is often rather naive about the importance of competitive pressures, for example one university noted in its response to our institutional survey that there is *"inadequate appreciation by government and HEFCE of the highly competitive and league table dominated recruitment environment that HEIs now work in. The situation we are in is that even a smallish drop in the average A level points score of a given cohort will mean an immediate slide down the next broadsheet league tables for that HEI, which will have a negative impact on subsequent applicant numbers and quality, very likely creating a downward spiral....This is the single most important strategic consideration about widening participation that most HEIs face, and yet there is no acknowledgement of the reality of the problem, let alone advice or practical help from HEFCE or government."*

10.32 It is not part of the remit of this study to comment on the extent to which Council policy should seek to protect less popular institutions, and HEFCE has already decided to change the current system from 2003. In the meantime, the revised criteria for 2001-02 could be extended further to include more regional factors, national disciplinary enrolment patterns, or other similar variables.

10.33 In Chapter 5 it was noted that there are very real differences of interpretation of widening participation within all parts of the sector, and the benefits and drawbacks of the ASN policy depends on the definition adopted. If an aspirational approach is emphasised which enables 'bright' students from under represented groups to attend research intensive universities, then the potential benefits of ASN policy appears to have been successful in encouraging student movement towards those institutions. Conversely if emphasis is to be placed on encouraging a range of diverse provision relevant to local needs, then the institutions that provide this require greater support and the ASN policy may have had a negative effect. Certainly the effect of ASN policy appears to have run counter to the recommendation of the Dearing Report that *"when allocating funds for expansion priority should be given to HEIs which can demonstrate a commitment to widening participation"*.

Funding Supplement for Students with Disabilities

10.34 This supplement provides additional support on the basis of weighted FTEs for the number of students in receipt of the disabled students allowance (DSA) as notified by institutions to HEFCE. The supplement is added to mainstream funding, and aims to contribute towards the extra costs which institutions incur when providing for disabled students. The funding forms part of institutions' block grant, but the Council has indicated that it should be used to establish at least base-level provision for disabled students. The funding has been available to all institutions since 2000-01, and is shown in Table 10.1. The DSA data are generally regarded as under-estimating the actual number of disabled students, as it is based on a system of claiming support. However while such inaccuracies are acknowledged, we heard little criticism of using this approach which appeared to be regarded as the best available.

10.35 One of the policy assumptions behind mainstream funding is that institutions should receive recognition of the additional costs they face when recruiting disabled students, but that these costs should be borne by the institution overall, rather than by a special project or fund – hence the term 'mainstream'. The Council admits that the amounts provided do not match the actual costs of providing for disabled students, and recognises that the method of calculation is not a perfect method of allocating a fixed amount of money between institutions according to approximate need.

10.36 Senior managers in institutions welcomed the fact that the premium is mainstreamed and not ring-fenced, as this avoids any 'distorting' influence on institutional behaviour caused by short term factors. However, in some cases practitioners were frustrated that funding was not being used directly to support work in student services. Others recognised that to put the funding into a special disability budget might actually threaten the disability work, either by limiting it to what the budget would cover, or because provision might disappear along with any reduction in the funding supplement.

10.37 The amounts available under the funding strand are modest (£5 million in 2000-01), and the Council recognised that the funding provides only a 'contribution' to costs. Some institutions commented that the amount was so small as to have little effect (*"peanuts"* in the words of one case study respondent). In practice, the costs falling on institutions are variable and the separate £56 million fund to support estates adaptation to meet disability legislation creates a general perception that funding for current needs is adequate. Overwhelmingly the most common disability reported from those claiming the DSA was dyslexia, which has modest additional costs associated with it. Conversely a significant increase in severely disabled students would be likely to raise a number of financial issues for HEIs. Hence, the current funding arrangements inadvertently advantage institutions taking students with less demanding disabilities and disadvantage institutions reaching out to those who wouldn't otherwise consider higher education.

10.38 The survey of disability projects suggested that a substantial number of staff working with disabled students made no contribution to discussions on the use of mainstream disability funding, or even had knowledge of how it was used in their institution. Of the 24 project managers responding to the survey 13 had had no input at all into the use of the funding.

10.39 Overall, all types of staff seemed to agree that the current balance between mainstream and special projects funding was about right for disability. While many staff believed that in principle funding should be mainstreamed, they recognised that disability issues benefited from innovation or pump priming initiatives.

Other Funding Issues

10.40 There are a number of important issues concerning the operation of the overall funding system for widening participation that influence the extent of synergy between the individual funding strands considered above and in Chapter 9.

a) The Overall Adequacy of the Current Funding Methodology

10.41 Institutional concern exists not only over the amount of funding needed to support widening participation and disability provision, but also about the need to determine the real costs of widening participation more accurately, and to make the costs of associated teaching more transparent.

10.42   We note above that HEFCE's overall approach towards funding widening participation
         appears to be perceived differently in different parts of the sector. In addition to the other
         factors involved, a substantial loss of confidence has resulted because of the so-called
         'aspiration funding' awarded to some pre-1992 universities to stimulate widening participation.
         Although it falls outside our terms of reference, in our institutional survey 25% of respondents
         volunteered critical comments, including some research intensive institutions. Only three HEIs
         – all recipients – supported the scheme, which has symbolically had a very negative effect on
         the credibility of both HEFCE and the government in relation to widening participation policy.
         The following opinion – typical of many – represents the strength of feeling: *"aspiration funding
         is socially and academically divisive, allocates money to institutions who do not need it, and is
         based on a bankrupt notion of the purpose of higher learning"*.

10.43   Ten percent of HEIs in our explicitly noted the lack of a coherent post-16 funding model to
         facilitate cross-sector activities with further education. Of these most advocated funding
         allocations based on a new methodology involving rewarding widening participation
         performance rather than formulaic allocations. Drawing a parallel with the RAE, several such
         institutions noted that excellence in research has been rewarded with substantial financial
         incentives, while excellence in widening participation has received additional support which is
         "marginal at best". For example one such HEI observed that *"it could be said that if RAE funds
         are supplied for five years on the basis of a single census which samples achievement in that
         period then resources to widen participation could be similarly organised. If HEFCE seeks
         excellence in both of these areas why not treat them equally?"*

         ### b) Project Funding

10.44   The volume of project funding, and the increasing amount of initiative based allocations was
         highly contentious. In particular, there appeared to be little unanimity of view about the
         balance between core and initiative funding. In our institutional survey 14% of HEIs were
         explicitly in favour of abolishing project based funding and consolidating all support into core
         funding, and a further 21% wanted the balance between core and project to be more in favour
         of the former. On the other hand, 15% found project funding useful and wished it to continue,
         and a further 7% wanted it increased. Even within specific sectors there was no unanimity, for
         example two very similar specialist performing arts HEIs entirely disagreed about the value of
         project funding.

10.45   The main criticisms volunteered by those who wished to see less emphasis on project funding
         were:

         • The administrative and staffing efforts involved in bidding (13% of those responding).

         • The difficulties of embedding multiple short term activities (9%).

         • The difficulties of long term planning in a project based funding environment where long
           term financial support was not available (11%).

         • The financial inflexibility associated with specific project funding (8%).

         • The administrative burden of reporting separately to HEFCE for what are frequently
           relatively small sums of money (10%).

10.46   In addition, five institutions with long experience of widening participation noted that new
         national initiatives often overlapped with their existing activities (for example, summer
         schools), resulting in additional funding for less experienced institutions. One such HEI

observed that *"we have on occasion been irritated by the succession of initiatives which have, explicitly or implicitly, required us to demonstrate that we are doing something additional for the funding. This is easy for an institution which has, until receiving funds, done very little; it is much more difficult if one is already doing virtually everything that anyone can think of and merely needs more funding to do it better"*.

10.47   The smaller numbers of HEIs who wished to see project funding maintained or increased cited:

- The importance of funds being available for use outside the main institutional resource allocation system which may well have other priorities.

- The fact that such funding may be directly available to operational staff (for example, disability or widening participation officers) rather than being used at the discretion of senior staff.

- The particular benefits for small colleges in supporting innovation (although conversely the bidding burden may be greater on them).

- The value of project funding for collaborative activities that might not otherwise be supported.

10.48   Overall, project funding to support disability initiatives appeared to command more support than that for other types of widening participation, with a typical comment being that *"funding for disability projects has been particularly beneficial in improving provision and giving the issue much greater attention than previously"*. Although few HEIs specifically commented on disability policy, of those that did almost all reported favourably on HEFCE activities, including comments on the value of projects. However, the amount of funding from additional funding was questioned in three cases, as was the suitability of the Disabled Students Allowance as the basis for funding, as those institutions commenting felt that it underestimated actual need.

10.49   For other HEIs the key issue was not the balance between core and project funding but rather the total funding available. For example one noted that *"the balance between the two forms of funding is less of an issue than the uncertainty about how much money is available each year"*.

10.50   Problems with student funding and student debt were explicitly raised by 18% of respondents in our institutional survey, although many recognised that responsibility for this rested outside HEFCE. We do not comment on this as it falls outside our terms of reference, but there was a general concern that widening participation targets were unlikely to be met unless student funding issues were addressed and demand stimulated.

Conclusions

10.51   Until the funding strands discussed in Chapter 9 have been completed, any review of funding is necessarily incomplete, for example it is impossible at this stage to determine value for money in relation to project strands. So far as the financial supplements and ASN policy are concerned, while they are generally perceived to have been effective in stimulating activity across large parts of the sector, there are widespread reservations about the effect on institutions that have a tradition of widening participation and have performed above Council benchmarks.

10.52   The Council is already committed to making two major changes to its funding methodology: increasing the widening participation supplement to 10% and abandoning its ASN policy. These steps are welcome, but by themselves do not address the widespread concerns of those in the sector who wish to see the continued expansion of widening participation.

10.53   However, the scope for additional action by HEFCE without further funding was widely recognised to be limited in view of the numerous other priorities in the sector. In the face of this, there is a danger of damaging the confidence of those institutions who have been most active in widening participation. As one post-1992 university observed simply to us: *"it is all rather demoralising"*.

Access and Hardship Funds

10.54   Separate from issues concerning the HEFCE funding methodology is the issue of institutional administration of access and hardship funds. These (to the value of approximately £85 million) were developed and introduced by the DfES (and only administered by HEFCE) to support individual students with financial difficulties. They are allocated to HEIs under their own policies and procedures to support students.

10.55   There is widespread discussion about the possible consequences of the student financial support system on applications (see, for example, the NAO report) but this was not part of our terms of reference. It should be noted, however, that the issue was widely raised in both surveys and during case study visits, where it was emphasised that institutions were seeking to recruit and retain applicants from under represented groups who were highly debt-averse.

10.57   In the experience of institutions visited, such students were often having to try and maintain a balance between keeping up with their studies and financing themselves with part time work, and this was felt to be a common cause of students dropping out of higher education. There was therefore a general welcome for the financial support provided in the form of opportunity bursaries and hardship funds. However, the bursaries were restricted to students from areas in which the Excellence in Cities or Education Action Zones initiatives were being implemented, and this meant that a number of needy students failed to qualify.

10.58   Institutions reported widespread concern about the complexity of the student support system, and the consequent difficulties for staff and students. Assessing students for the type of financial assistance appropriate to their circumstances resulted in increased administrative activity, although additional funding from HEFCE was available to contribute to the costs involved. In practice, we could find no specific data on the actual increases in workload caused by administering student support, but a reduction in complexity would be welcomed by all. In a typical response one institution noted that *"the plethora of student support initiatives has been confusing for students and for would-be students. In the University it has become a full time occupation to untangle such initiatives".*

11　Management and Coordination of the Widening Participation Support Strategy

11.1　In this Chapter we review the three main aspects of the management and coordination of those aspects of the widening participation support strategy included within our terms of reference:

- The management responsibilities of HEFCE, and its assumptions about strategic planning.

- The roles and responsibilities of the widening participation coordinating team: Action on Access.

- The roles and responsibilities of the National Disability Team: the NDT.

It should be noted that this part of the report was drafted before the restructuring of the policy section of HEFCE in summer 2002.

The Management Responsibilities of HEFCE

11.2　The multiplicity of funding strands considered in this evaluation means that staff throughout HEFCE are involved with aspects of widening participation. Overall, the responsibility for developing policy rests with the Learning and Teaching Group within the Policy Division, who previously managed earlier disability initiatives and the non award-bearing continuing education programme which had a major widening participation element. However, staff from other divisions are actively involved. In particular, regional consultants (located in the Institutions and Projects Directorate) have a central role to play in monitoring institutional widening participation activity with RANs. Although the Policy Division continues to develop policy and take forward central initiatives, because of the linkages with regional development responsibility for the new 'Partnerships for Progression' funding will be located within the Institutions and Projects Directorate.

11.3　The rapid development of widening participation activities means that the resources of the Council have been stretched to cope with the demands, and internal responsibility for supporting a diverse set of initiatives has been dispersed to a number of staff rather than being located within a widening participation unit or group. This strategy is understandable and reflects the need to ensure the most efficient use of internal staff resources. However, it also raises questions concerning coordination and the clarity of existing arrangements to those outside HEFCE.

11.4　There is a strong feeling in the sector that the current operation of the HEFCE widening participation strategy and associated internal implementation and advisory arrangements are too complex. Institutions have reported difficulties in knowing who to contact within the Council on specific issues. The problem can be demonstrated very simply by looking at the introduction to HEFCE 00/50 (which invited new widening participation proposals for 2001-2004) where no fewer than 10 Council staff were listed as possible sources of information on different aspects of funding. This gave the impression that rather than the Council concentrating on providing integrated sources of advice, responsibility was divided between those who had time available for a small aspect of the widening participation workload. Whether intended or not, such an arrangement is at odds with the policy commitment that widening participation is the most important current priority for HEFCE.

11.5   The position is complicated still further by the fact that institutions may have to approach staff of at least three different groups each with different interests: Policy; Institutions and Projects Directorate; and the Action on Access team (and for disability the NDT). Although the differences in responsibilities may be clear internally, we do not think they are clear to outsiders. The consequence of this is well summarised by a senior officer in one university active in widening participation, commenting in a response to our institutional survey of HEIs: *"The multiplicity of initiatives.... make coordination and the creation of a coherent and productive policy and programmes more complex....It is essential that these different initiatives are coordinated, not only to avoid problems but also to maximise the benefits of the partnerships on which they necessarily depend. It is not evident that the relationships between these diverse strands of activity are well considered or well understood at policy formulation level....A clear articulation of the Council's strategy, along the lines required of HEIs, would be helpful. At present it has the appearance of being piecemeal".* If such views are held at senior levels within institutions experienced in widening participation, then confusion is likely to be much greater at operational levels – as indeed our case studies found.

11.6   Partly as a response to such pressures, the Council has already proposed the development of a widening participation unit, and this is likely to be broadly welcomed within the sector. This unit will need to ensure that in addition to enhancing internal management and coordination within the Council, the external linkages with HEIs and other relevant bodies are also more clearly focused. Whether this unit will also deal with disability is unclear, but if it does not this will further emphasise the inconsistency in its linkages to widening participation.

11.7   So far as the clarity of arrangements internally is concerned, it is difficult for outside consultants to comment, but there may be subtly different priorities in the two main divisions. Among issues raised by a very small number of experienced 'Council-watchers' in some HEIs were: the extent to which regional consultants were able to advise HEIs consistently on initiatives devised by the Policy Division (for example, disability); the different levels of priority individual regional consultants were perceived to place on widening participation and disability; and the compatibility of the slightly more demanding monitoring arrangements of regional projects with those of other initiatives. Accordingly, it might be helpful for the Council to review responsibilities in internal arrangements to ensure consistency of approach as part of the introduction of the new widening participation unit.

RANs

11.8   A related issue raised by some institutions is a perceived difference in approach, and perception of role, of the RANs. Although the work of RANs at the moment is relatively modest, a greater emphasis on regionalisation in widening participation and 'Partnership for Progression' is likely to strengthen their role.

11.9   A specific responsibility of the RANs is the monitoring of widening participation – but not disability – projects. As operated, the requirements on projects are slightly more demanding than for other initiatives, and monitoring reports are being given detailed scrutiny by RANs. We note in Chapter 9 that individual RANs appear to have different patterns of decision making in relation to withholding project funding, and the minutes of the different RANs record discussion which varies widely in relation to the detail in which projects have been considered. Although this is partly inevitable within a more devolved model, it suggests that more flexibility is being exercised by some RANs (and possibly some regional consultants) than others.

11.10   The membership of RANs varies depending upon regional requirements, but typically includes representatives from the LSC, regional government offices, and other nominated bodies. They

are chaired by the appropriate HEFCE regional consultant and advised by a member of Action on Access. In some RANs a significant turnover in membership is reported in minutes, and judgements on project monitoring may have been made by members relatively unfamiliar with both individual projects and the specific context of widening participation in higher education. In these circumstances the advice of Action on Access is particularly important, and it was worrying to see that the minutes of some RANs recorded occasions when its advice appeared to have been rejected in relation to project funding decisions.

11.11   There are other issues to consider associated with the roles of RANs in monitoring projects: the volume of information required and the consistency of approach. For other related initiatives (for example, disability) a relatively 'light touch' has previously been used, and the Council has made a public commitment to encourage this as part of the Accountability Review. However, RANs have received quite substantial monitoring information from many projects, and monitoring forms require slightly more detail than those for other initiatives. Moreover, the same requirements apply to small and large projects, with a danger that the level of reporting required to ensure appropriate accountability for large regional projects may be excessive for small ones.

11.12   Consistency in arrangements (including the decisions made by RANs) is also important, and the Council should ensure that future regional monitoring does not lead to inconsistent practice overall.

11.13   It should be made clear that this issue is not a major one to date, and current arrangements are not inappropriate. However, as the work of the RANs increases it would be easy for inconsistent monitoring practices to arise by default. As part of its planning for the introduction of Partnerships for Progression, the Council should ensure that clear and consistent monitoring arrangements are in place which both meet requirements for accountability and have the confidence of the sector. Failure to do this might provide another disincentive for HEIs to seek widening participation funding.

11.14   The work and priorities of RANs also deserve to be better known within HEIs if confidence in their role is to develop. Chapter 9 notes that HEFCE 01/36a reported that many HEIs bidding for widening participation project funds were not aware at the time of the regional priorities of some RANs. A small number of responses from the institutional survey (4%) drew attention to concerns about RANs, including one institution who suspected that *"they may have their own agenda which is not the same as ours".* In another case an HEI reported that a problem over project funding had only been resolved by *"our regional consultant being flexible in interpreting what we understand to be a decision by our regional RAN".* The work of RANs is new, and good working relationships with HEIs take time to develop. If Partnerships for Progression is to be effective then it will depend upon effective communication and confidence being developed between RANs and institutions.

EQUALL

11.15   An important aspect of the management role of HEFCE is the advice it receives on widening participation from the EQUALL Committee. This was set up in March 1998, succeeding the Advisory Group on Access and Participation which had reported to the Council until April 1996. The Committee's remit was to *"advise the executive on the further development of the Council's support programme to encourage wider participation in higher education, to be implemented from 1999-2000".* Specifically it was to advise on how participation could be improved; how information could be disseminated; how institutional strategies should be monitored and evaluated; and how to undertake joint work with FEFC. It also had a remit for lifelong learning more broadly. It has a membership drawn on an individual basis from people

with relevant experience and interests from most types of HEI, from the Council, and with observers from DfES, FEFC/LSC. Since its foundation it has had three chairs, all heads of HEIs and members of Council.

11.16   The committee has met 11 times, at roughly six monthly intervals. Most recently it met jointly with the HEFCE Learning and Teaching Committee to explore synergies between the two areas of work. The present evaluation was not asked to consider the effectiveness of EQUALL in supporting HEFCE's work. There is clearly a role to be played in providing the Council with informed opinion and advice about the direction and effectiveness of its interventions, but there is also clearly a question about whether, with the increasing complexity of widening participation work, and the increasing urgency government attaches to it, a body which meets only twice a year can provide an effective steer. We propose that the Council review its future needs for advice on widening participation in relation to the activities and role of any new unit that is establishing.

Council Assumptions About Strategic Planning in Implementing Widening Participation

11.17   The Council's requirement for widening participation strategies assumes that these are not only required for purposes of accountability, but are also useful for developing and embedding institutional activity. Such an approach underpins other areas of HEFCE activity where strategies are required (for example, learning and teaching, human resource management, and so on). However, as far as we are aware the assumptions underpinning the desirability of such strategies from an institutional perspective and the relationship to the existing planning process have never been specifically articulated. There are several significant issues here: how are strategies written for HEFCE expected to inform activity? does the level of detail now required from institutions mean that strategies are becoming, in practice, widening participation plans? what assumptions are made about institutional uses of such documents and the extent to which they are known and acted on by 'front line' staff? and to the extent that the Council has a view on what constitutes a 'good' or 'full' plan is this shared by institutions?

11.18   Although now an established part of the approach of the Council in funding institutions, the idea of supporting activities on receipt of approved strategies and associated action plans is not without problems. So far as widening participation is concerned, there is a paradox in that some HEIs whose original strategic statements were felt to be unsatisfactory have consistently scored above their benchmarks. Conversely, some statements regarded as satisfactory by the Council were produced by HEIs that scored below benchmarks. A further paradox noted in Chapter 5 is that regional consultants generally reported satisfactory institutional progress on widening participation in 2000 annual operating statements for many of the HEIs whose initial strategic statements were in the process of being rewritten because they were deemed unsatisfactory.

11.19   We also understand that a small number of institutions active in widening participation may have produced strategies for HEFCE entirely because of the need for compliance, and still use their own plans internally. Thus strategies submitted to HEFCE and those implemented in practice cannot be assumed to be the same. This does not mean that institutions behaving in this way are being perverse, rather they will do things in their own self-interest.

11.20   It is clear in case study institutions that the dissemination of institutional widening participation strategies was generally more haphazard than was recognised by senior managers, who tended to take the view that policy naturally percolated down as necessary to all levels of the institution. The Council may also – mistakenly – make such assumptions. Even in those HEIs with a high commitment to widening participation, such dissemination was patchy. Formal communication channels do not necessarily exist within all institutions, and where they do it is

typically left to the discretion of heads of department and middle managers to communicate policy to staff as they see fit. Thus one manager observed that *"he had sent the policy document round by email but was not sure whether any of his staff had actually read it".* In some cases, awareness of the policy was confined to senior staff and active enthusiasts who had drawn it up.

11.21   The notion of using approved strategic plans to guide implementation of external initiatives within institutions faces other hurdles, in particular concerns about the multiplicity of initiatives in all areas and not just widening participation. The 'initiative fatigue' to which this leads limits the opportunity and willingness of institutions to respond, and runs the risk of strategies being in tension with short term funding opportunities.

11.22   It is evident from the criticisms in HEFCE 01/36a of initial statements that many institutions were unclear as to what was required in producing initial statements, despite them being welcomed as a condition of funding. Subsequently, our institutional survey has suggested that approximately 10% of institutions have reservations on the amount of detail required in reporting to the Council on the implementation of strategies, and HEFCE 01/16 explicitly noted in relation to HR strategies that some institutions felt *"that a proliferation of strategies for different initiatives will become unsustainable".*

11.23   The issues here are subtle, and only just emerging as the overall Council approach to requiring strategies in range of areas develops (for example human resources, teaching and learning). However, in order for the Council to be confident in its approach, and to ensure that its assumptions about strategic planning for future activities are matched by operational reality within institutions, we propose that it considers undertaking a small study on the effectiveness of current strategic planning requirements across a range of activities. This could:

- Usefully clarify and articulate the assumptions across the Council about strategy formulation and the expectation upon institutions.

- Identify the appropriateness of the Council strategy formulation process for HEIs, including those that are highly devolved.

- Consider the actual internal uses by institutions of various HEFCE strategies, and the resulting advantages and drawbacks.

Coordination Arrangements

11.24   The establishment of a coordinating team to support HEFCE in teaching and learning created a precedent for other coordinating teams to be established. External evaluations of Council initiatives have shown the value of such arrangements, and the potential weaknesses in HEFCE's ability to support initiatives without them. This provides a general context for the establishment of both Action on Access and the National Disability Team and in this section we review their effectiveness.

The National Coordination Team on Widening Participation – Action On Access

11.25   In the tender invitation for a national coordination team the Council recognised the need for *"a central focus for what is a complex special funding programme"* to provide support for individual projects and the sector as a whole. There were no published indications concerning the measurement of performance or the evaluation of the team, except for the tender document which noted that the team would report directly to the Policy Directorate of HEFCE.

11.26   The terms of reference of Action on Access identified 11 different responsibilities, of which the main ones were: promoting HEFCE's actions to support widening participation; supporting, monitoring, and disseminating the outcomes of projects; providing a channel of communication between HEFCE and the sector concerning widening participation; and coordinating HEFCE's relationships with regional and national networks interested in widening participation.

11.27   The Action on Access team was originally a consortium of members of five organisations active in the area: The Universities Association for Continuing Education (UACE), the National Task Group for Widening Participation Projects (NTGWPP), the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), the Forum for the Advancement of Continuing Education (FACE), and the European Access Network (EAN). All its professional members are part time (104 days a year), and individually some also hold appointments in HEIs. Some members are also active in the Access Advisory Partnership which provides support services in higher education. The team divides its work so that all members provide project support to specific regions, and hold a major operational portfolio.

11.28   Action on Access became operational after the selection and start up of projects and at a later date than intended. Despite their terms of reference stating that support was required from 1 November 1999, the selection of the successful tenderers was announced in late December, and the team was only able to take up post in Spring 2000. This delay was disappointing, in that previous evaluation reports have pointed out similar problems in the past (for example, FDTL, SLDD) and that the effectiveness of projects had suffered as a result. Had the team been in post before the selection of projects, there is a view (which we are not able to confirm) that some of the difficulties noted in Chapter 9 would not have arisen. It is particularly important that this problem should not occur in relation to Partnership for Progression, and that any coordination team should be appointed well in advance.

11.29   In general, project monitoring reports suggest that the work of Action on Access is highly regarded, although the amount of contact with projects varies somewhat according to regional circumstances. The death of one member of the team led to some reorganisation of activities until a replacement appointment was made. Direct – and continuing – contact with all projects is important and we would encourage this to have a very high priority.

11.30   One important consequence of the different levels of understanding and support for widening participation in the sector (see Chapter 5) is that in practice Action on Access undertakes a variety of activities for different constituencies. On the one hand it supports specialist project workers with a deep commitment to widening participation, whilst on the other it advises senior staff in less committed institutions on issues of institutional strategy. As for all coordination teams this raises a number of issues about its role, and the extent to which it is seen to be a part of HEFCE or independent from it. We detected some ambiguity here, in that although it is much easier to establish close working relationships with projects and institutions by establishing independence from the funding body, the formal terms of reference require the promotion of HEFCE action and project monitoring. Within the team itself there are differences of view about this possible role conflict.

11.31   Another issue concerning role conflict comes about because of the multiple roles of Action on Access members: as members of the team; separately as members of the Access Advisory Partnership; and as people filling prominent roles in other organisations connected with widening participation. When dealing with sensitive policy and operational issues institutions need to be clear about the roles that advisors are fulfilling and which 'hats' they are wearing. Only a very small number of institutions have drawn attention to this to date, but if the operation of widening participation were to become more politically contentious this role conflict might become more obvious.

11.32   Since the specification for the team was written, the number of widening participation activities has grown considerably, and with it the workload of the team. They were probably overstretched to meet their original brief, and the position has become more difficult since then. Monitoring reports suggest that there are two particular areas where additional support would be helpful:

- More contact between projects and the team would be welcomed in many cases, and experience of other initiatives suggests that significant added value for projects can be achieved by such support.

- Much more system wide guidance on widening participation policy and activities could be given. The need for this is even greater in the context of concerns about the complexity of current funding strands and support arrangements.

11.33   Related to these needs is the importance of effective dissemination of project and other widening participation outcomes. Some valuable activities have already been undertaken (for example the good practice guide, the Action on Access web site, publications and conferences), but much more remains to be done both during and beyond the life of the current team. In the context of the priority accorded by HEFCE to widening participation, the team are under-resourced to meet these dissemination needs.

11.34   One aspect of such dissemination is to ensure effective linkage with other related initiatives, and steps have been taken to strengthen links to the NCT and NDT. Support for Partnerships for Progression will need to build further on these links, and in Chapter 13 we discuss how links to the LTSN structure might be taken forward.

11.35   Although it has obvious advantages, the distributed and part time roles of team members also give rise to problems similar to those faced by the previous disability coordinating team (eQuip) which was reported on in depth in the evaluation of the SLDD initiative. These include: the need for increased coordination time between members; some difficulties in contacting individual team members; and – in some cases – conflicts over the time available to fulfil their various roles. This places a considerable burden upon individual team members, and it is also likely that their employing organisations are providing a considerable subsidy to the Council. How far this can continue is unclear. As widening participation continues to increase in importance it is likely that coordination and advisory provision will have to centre on a full time base, but when this position is reached – and the form it should take – will be a matter of judgement.

11.36   To support Partnerships for Progression the current coordination arrangements will have to be considerably scaled up, and it will be particularly important to ensure timely action and coordination roles that are clear and unambiguous to institutions. Accordingly we suggest that the Council reviews the needs for such support as early as possible.

The National Coordination Team on Widening Participation – The National Disability Team

11.37   The National Disability Team (NDT) was set up in 2000 with a three year life span. It is smaller than the Action on Access team, and initially consisted of 1.8 FTE main workers and 2 FTE administrative support. For the first year there was also a 0.2 staff developer. In 2001 the team took on additional duties overseeing Innovations Projects (with the other coordination teams) and increased to 2.6 FTE (not including administrative support).

11.38   The assumptions which underpin their role are the same as for the establishment of other coordinating teams: that projects and institutions require support to encourage the development, sharing and dissemination of good practice. The NDT based at Coventry University undertakes this role which is different from that of its predecessor in two main ways: it is led by a full time director, and its main role is unambiguously to assist and support projects. It therefore has a slightly more limited role than Action on Access, as is evident from its terms of reference: to support, advise and monitor the progress of funded projects through visits, consultancy, events and other networking; to encourage collaboration and dissemination between projects and between projects and the sector; to advise the Council on disability related matters; to provide advice and support to all institutions on matters concerning projects; and to work closely with HEFCE's other coordination teams.

11.39   The evaluation of the HEFCE SLDD initiative (HEFCE 00/46) made a number of proposals about the operation of the coordination arrangements, most of which have been acted upon. These included: strengthening the coordination role by having a full time staffing presence; placing greater emphasis on project support in order to add value to outcomes, and where necessary encouraging greater proactivity by senior managers; enhancing dissemination arrangements; and introducing greater coordination with other relevant Council initiatives.

11.40   Available data suggest that these changes to coordination arrangements have been generally helpful. Although two staff are still at some distance (being based in Manchester) the full time nature of the Director post has added stability to operations and provided a central focus for institutional contact. More effective project support has been provided (with all 50 projects being visited in the year 2000 – addressing a significant criticism of previous arrangements) and almost all monitoring reports commented favourably on the support received. For example, one Strand One project observed that the success of the project was *"almost entirely due to the support and guidance from senior managers and the NDT"*. Others commented on the helpful balance of the NDT in intervening at appropriate moments to keep projects on course, and to raise the profile of the work with senior managers. Two more negative comments supplied to us relate to specific issues about which the NDT have been informed and will need to address on an individual basis.

11.41   The NDT has an explicit monitoring role, although emphasis is still placed on project support, with HEFCE being responsible for any contractual issues. This was highlighted in relation to a Strand Two project which was felt to be in difficulties and not fulfilling its aims. Following protracted discussions and attempts to re-establish the project, the NDT recommended to HEFCE that funding be withdrawn and this was done. In our view both the decision and the manner in which it was done were wholly appropriate, and confirm the value of changes in coordination arrangements.

11.42   Although the NDT did not formally start work until April 2000, the fact that there was some continuity of membership with eQuip meant that team members were available to help with the bidding process and this was helpful in sharpening proposals. As noted above, this contrasts with the experience of Action on Access.

11.43   As in the case of widening participation, dissemination remains an issue, and project monitoring reports suggest the need for enhanced information sharing and networks. Strand One projects offer the opportunity to extend dissemination beyond existing professional networks (some of which are involved in Strand Two), and the large attendance at the Spring 2002 national NDT conference may be an indication of developing institutional interest in the area. The NDT have run a number of well attended meetings for projects, produced a range of written information, and recently set up two networks on mental health and staff development.

12   Institutional Implementation

12.1   In this Chapter we provide an overview of the institutional implementation of strategic statements, and the key factors involved in introducing change in widening participation. We also seek to identify if there are any lessons about effective implementation that can be learned from case study HEIs.

12.2   As part of the evaluation we were asked to try and identify the existence of any clear implementation chain by which HEIs translated Council widening participation policy into action. In the following paragraphs we make a number of comments on the linkages between strategy (both Council and institutional) and adoption, but there is no evidence of the existence of a 'standard' implementation chain by which widening participation informs 'front line' action. Indeed, in general, the opposite is true and the mechanisms for introducing successful institutional change are very diverse. In practice, relatively little is known about what happens within institutions between the point at which external initiatives (on any topic) are announced and outcomes achieved – particularly in those HEIs that have a strong collegial culture.

12.3   The problems of assessing cause and effect in relation to implementation in this area were well described in one response to our institutional survey. The HEI concerned has a long history of involvement in widening participation and has played an important role in a number of regional and sub-regional activities. It wrote: *"we cannot see clear relationships between causes and effects around widening participation. We are in a volatile situation in which a range of activities are taking place simultaneously (local learning partnerships, EAZs, LSCs, ESF funded projects, regeneration activities, learndirect, etc) all designed to address the educational deficits of this sub-region. In the final analysis it is almost impossible to say that a particular action has had a particular outcome and would have had that outcome whatever the context".* If this is true at the institutional level, it also makes overall conclusions about the effectiveness of individual national funding strands difficult.

Telephone Survey Data on the Barriers to Provision

12.4   Our data on implementation are drawn from two main sources: the results of the telephone survey and the case studies. As part of the telephone survey respondents were asked to provide their views on the importance of a number of potential barriers to widening participation and disability provision that had been determined as part of the piloting process for the survey. The results are shown in Table 12.1 and the two main barriers identified by staff were:

- Funding, and in particular that the allocation of funds to academic units did not either permit priority to be given to the needs of students from under represented groups, or reflect the extra amount of time required to support them.

- That in many HEIs academic staff tend to be rewarded for research excellence rather than for supporting students from under represented groups.

Although other barriers were also felt to be significant, the importance of these two factors is clearly evident in Table 12.1. Although funding is a predictable barrier (and is often identified as a barrier to all change within HEIs), the consistent identification of funding as a major issue in all data sources, lends credence to the views expressed by staff.

Table 12.1: Opinions of Academics on Widening Participation Barriers

	All %
1 Funding	
1.1 'The allocation of funding to academic units does not reflect the extra time required to support under represented students.'	91
Of which agree: To a lesser extent	20
Of which agree: To a greater extent	71
1.2 'There are not enough resources such as money, staff or materials available for the academic unit to give priority to the needs of under represented students.'	84
Of which agree: To a lesser extent	23
Of which agree: To a greater extent	61
2 Academic factors	
2.1 'Within this institution as a whole high priority is not given to adapting courses to meet the needs of under represented students.'	82
Of which agree: To a lesser extent	64
Of which agree: To a greater extent	18
2.2 'Academic staff in this academic unit are rewarded for research productivity rather than for supporting under represented students.'	75
Of which agree: To a lesser extent	21
Of which agree: To a greater extent	54
2.3 'Undergraduate programs offered by the academic unit cannot or have not been adapted to the needs of students who lack standard entry requirements.'	61
Of which agree: To a lesser extent	41
Of which agree: To a greater extent	20
3 Institutional factors	
3.1 'Within this institution as a whole high there is not adequate provision for disabled students.'	61
Of which agree: To a lesser extent	52
Of which agree: To a greater extent	9
3.2 'Within this institution as a whole there is a lack of specialist support for academic staff trying to adapt to the needs of under represented students.'	57
Of which agree: To a lesser extent	43
Of which agree: To a greater extent	14
3.3 'The image this institution presents to the outside world does not appeal to many under represented students.'	42
Of which agree: To a lesser extent	32
Of which agree: To a greater extent	10
Unweighted base	591

12.5   The importance of these two factors was evident in all types of institution as shown in Table 12.2. The emphasis on research in many pre-1992 universities can be clearly seen as 84% of academics from this category agreed that staff were rewarded for research productivity rather than supporting students from under represented groups. This compared to around two thirds of those from other institutional types. This belief in rewarding research applies even in some HEIs not active in research. This finding is not surprising, and reflects similar conclusions in other evaluations (for example, that of the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund) that for many institutions the pressures of the RAE and the lack of personal incentives for non-research activities remain significant disincentives for change. Studies undertaken for the HEFCE Fundamental Review of Research in 1990[18] showed that the rapid appointment to senior

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[18] For details see www.hefce.ac.uk/research

academic grades of relatively junior staff who were active in research was a frequent approach adopted by HEIs who wished to encourage the development of a research culture.

Table 12.2: Key Barriers to Widening Participation by Type of HEI

	All	Pre-1992 universities	Post-1992 universities	HE colleges	Specialist institutions
	%	%	%	%	%
Funding to units does not reflect the time required to support students from under represented groups	91	92	88	98	[79]
Not enough resources for unit to give priority to needs of students from under represented groups	84	84	87	84	[77]
Staff in unit rewarded for research rather than supporting students from under represented groups	75	84	62	69	[62]
Unweighted base	591	319	170	54	48

[Base: all academics. Figures in square brackets indicate a percentage based on fewer than 50 cases]

12.6   So far as the academic barriers in Table 12.1 are concerned, there was significant variation in staff perception according to types of institution, with those in higher education colleges (90%) and pre-1992 universities (84%) most likely to say that adapting courses to meet the needs of students from under represented groups in their institution was not a priority. There may be different reasons for this conclusion: in the case of colleges responses were likely to reflect the fact that many courses were already aimed at such students and therefore additional effort was not a priority. In pre-1992 universities two thirds of academics agreed that courses could not be or have not been adapted to meet the needs of students who lack standard entry requirements. This suggests that a majority of academics in pre-1992 universities may not believe that adapting provision is appropriate in order to encourage participation by under represented groups. This view was confirmed by case study findings on the approach of 'selecting' HEIs in encouraging aspirations (see Chapter 6).

12.7   The academic barriers noted in Table 12.1 were less likely to be perceived in institutions with initial widening participation strategic statements that had been highly rated by Action on Access, and with lower RAE scores. Those which performed above benchmarks were less likely to perceive problems with adapting the curriculum, while those with high RAE scores were more likely to perceive that this was unnecessary (see Appendix D).

12.8   So far as barriers involving disability provision were concerned, Table 12.1 records that a number were perceived to exist, although in all cases the majority of respondents felt that they existed to a 'lesser' extent. These were:

- Respondents who stated that their institution provided facilities for students with disabilities were more likely to say there was adequate provision for disabled students (92%) than those who did not mention that this was provided (57%). Similarly those who mentioned that accommodation was adapted for students with disabilities (93%) were more likely to say that there was adequate provision than those who did not (77%).

- Just under three quarters of academics in post-1992 universities (71%) and just over three quarters in higher education colleges (76%) agreed that their institution did not provide adequately for students with disabilities compared to just over half of those in pre-1992 universities (53%) and specialist HEIs (57%).

- Those from institutions with the highest Action on Access ratings of initial widening participation statements were more likely (67%) than those with the lowest scores (53%) to agree that that in their institution there was not adequate provision for disabled students.

- Those from institutions with the highest RAE scores (70%) were less likely than those with the lowest scores (52%) to agree that that in their institution there is not adequate provision for disabled students.

12.9 In order to explore incentives to widening participation and to identify action that might remove perceived barriers, the telephone survey asked academics two further questions: first, what additional institutional support they would like to see provided for students from under represented groups; and second, what HEFCE could do to encourage widening participation. The answers to these questions are presented in Tables 12.3 and 12.4, and as might be expected there is some overlap of data.

Table 12.3: Additional Institutional Support Academics Would Like Provided for Students From Under Represented Groups

	All %
Funding	
Additional support funding for under represented students eg scholarships	74
Additional funding directly to academic units to support under represented students	66
Recognise staff for work with under represented students e.g. pay / promotion	47
Marketing	
Material that appeals to under represented students	57
Outreach / compact work targeted at under represented students	51
Strategy / support	
More advice about supporting under represented students	49
More training about teaching under represented students	49
More central help on working with under represented students	31
Management statement that working with under represented students is priority	31
More involvement of student union	27
Facilities	
Better facilities for disabled students	53
Provision of/ help with childcare	46
None – current support adequate	3
Don't know	-
Unweighted base	591

[Base: all academics. Percentages may be more than 100 as respondents could select more than one reply]

12.10 In Table 12.3 the most commonly mentioned forms of additional institutional support identified were related to funding. The largest number (74%) of respondents wanted additional funding for scholarships or bursaries, and 66% said additional funding should be directed straight to academic units to allow them to provide support to students. This reinforced the data presented in Table 12.1 about the importance of adequate funding as a perceived barrier. Just under half (47%) felt that staff should be recognised for their work with students from under represented groups in terms of pay and promotion, again echoing data in Table 12.1. Other key types of additional support mentioned by 50% or more of respondents were: producing marketing material suitable for under represented groups (57%); outreach and compact work targeted at such potential students (51%); and better facilities for students with disabilities (53%). Only 3% said that no additional support was needed as current levels were adequate.

12.11 Table 12.4 records a wide range of replies about what HEFCE might do to encourage widening participation. However, views were only provided by a relatively small number of

respondents, and the volume of replies probably underestimates actual opinion. The reasons for a low response rate were not clear, but the unprompted nature of the question and the relative lack of awareness of HEFCE activities noted in Chapter 5 may have been factors.

Table 12.4: Academics Views on What HEFCE Could Do to Encourage Widening Participation

	% All
Funding	
More money to HEIs for WP	31
Direct funding to support good teaching eg staff development/specialist WP staff	23
More money for under represented groups eg bursaries, grants	13
More financial support to all students	11
Fund open days/outreach work/promotional schemes	8
Additional WP funding to follow the student eg funding directly to departments	5
WP funding more accurately targeted eg postcode funding not working	3
Direct funding to HEIs good at WP	3
Recognise link between WP and high drop out and stop penalising HEIs that focus on WP	1
Awareness/publicity	
Raise awareness among under represented groups of benefits of HE	9
Provide more information of HEFCE WP activities/good practice	8
Raise awareness of WP activities among front line staff	3
HEFCE needs to have better understanding of what happens in HEIs eg staff workloads too high to take WP seriously	3
Recruitment/standards	
Encourage flexible entry requirements for under represented groups	2
Ensure WP does not lead to lower academic standards	2
Other	14
HEFCE should not intervene/leave it up to HEIs	1
Don't know	7
Unweighted base	591

[Base: all academics; % may add up to more than 100 as respondents could select more than one reply]

12.12 Predictably funding was an area where academics believed HEFCE could do more, both by providing more money but also by targeting existing resources more effectively. As well as more funding for widening participation in general (mentioned by nearly a third), just under a quarter also believed that there should be more funding specifically to support good teaching practice or for specialist widening participation staff; a small group also identified the need for more funding to be directed at outreach work. More financial support for students in general and for those from under represented groups in particular were mentioned by similar proportions of respondents.

12.13 A small numbers of academics also believed that HEFCE should do more to raise awareness of the benefits of higher education among under represented groups. Others thought that HEFCE could provide more information to staff within HEIs about widening participation policy and associated activities and good practice, with a few specifically mentioning the need for HEFCE to work directly with frontline staff to raise awareness of widening participation. A very small group also believed that HEFCE needs to be 'educated' about what is realistically achievable in terms of widening participation, given the increasing staff workload in most HEIs.

12.14 The data in the four Tables above need to be read alongside those presented in Tables 6.3 and 6.4 which identified three main factors as particularly influential in recruitment: the importance of commitment from senior staff (also a major factor in recruiting students with disabilities); institutional involvement in a local or regional strategy; and pressure from HEFCE. It follows that the absence of these factors within individual HEIs is likely to have significant

consequences for the priority and speed accorded to implementing institutional strategies produced for the Council.

Case Study Findings

12.15   In undertaking the case studies we sought to confirm telephone survey data, and also reviewed key organisational factors in implementing widening participation strategies. Within case study institutions there appeared to be at least four main approaches to organising widening participation and disability matters:

- Executive management at a senior level (for example by a vice-chancellor, or deputy vice-chancellor of academic affairs or similar).

- A central widening participation or disability office, and some HEIs report using premium funding for supporting such posts.

- Management responsibility through deans to heads of department (or similar).

- Committee responsibility through an academic board or senate sub-committees.

The number of case studies was such that while we cannot reach general conclusions about the advantages of these four approaches, it was notable that institutions making most progress had a central mechanism for implementing strategies and did not just rely on academic departments or committees.

12.16   The principal factors identified in the case studies as encouraging implementation and dissemination of widening participation strategy within HEIs were:

- The commitment of senior management to widening participation.

- The setting up of widening participation groups and forums.

- The use of effective communication channels to enable transmission of policy and ideas about implementation to flow within the institution. This included the presence of someone with responsibility for promoting widening participation throughout the institution.

a) The Commitment of Senior Management

12.17   The personal commitment of senior management, particularly at the level of vice-chancellor or pro vice-chancellor, was generally acknowledged to be a key factor in the institution's commitment to widening participation. Interviewees reported the motivational benefits of senior staff support, for example one respondent noted: *"it is about leadership. If people in senior positions show that they are really committed to something, that is quite motivational for other staff. HEIs are full of individuals without a strong collective instinct. The institution is neither collegial nor democratic so leadership becomes even more important. It is not just about rhetoric but about the policies and getting things discussed on committee agendas".*

12.18   In all the case study HEIs there were individuals who, for their own personal reasons, were committed to, and actively engaged in, widening participation. For example, we encountered academic staff who had a range of interests in helping different population groups: assessing the needs of visually or hearing impaired people to participate in higher education; looking at ways of transforming the learning experience for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to raise their aspirations towards learning and, eventually, towards higher

education; and dealing with the barriers to higher education experienced by people from ethnic minorities.

12.19   In several cases, individual staff members were able to exert influence on their immediate colleagues to raise the profile, and disseminate the benefits, of widening participation. However, for the most part, individual staff acted unilaterally and sometimes even in breach of the customs of the organisational culture, for example by 'creative' implementation of admissions procedures. The ability of such individuals to influence institutional policy was restricted by lack of coordination between them.

12.20   There was a general unanimity of view amongst respondents at all levels that for any initiative, including widening participation, to become embedded it required the support and commitment of senior management. As one person noted: *"This HEI has been moving towards the widening participation agenda in the last few years. There has been a shift in lots of HEIs who have been dragged kicking and screaming into it. The personal element is so important. There are several enthusiasts who will do pretty much anything to fulfil their potential and word is spreading. The VC, because he is from a working class background, is very committed and has made a sea change. The VC's commitment cuts through a lot of things".*

12.21   There were a number of reasons why the commitment of senior management could have a profound influence:

- They were aware of directives emanating from the government and HEFCE.

- They were in a position to decide what policy should be.

- They had the authority to set up structures for delivering policy.

Two examples illustrate what could, or could not, be achieved by the commitment of senior managers. In one HEI, a former vice-chancellor had foreseen the importance of universities as the nuclei of economic regeneration within regions. This had led him to formulate the idea of early outreach and to ensure that the institution implemented it within the region. This had happened long before the HEFCE widening participation strategy came into existence. In another HEI, the general perception was that a lack of support from senior management had meant that widening participation strategy had remained no more than a *"paper commitment"*. There was no clear mechanism for implementing the strategy, and so staff were scarcely aware of it. However, there was the perception that a change at the top was likely to lead to much greater commitment to widening participation across the organisation as a whole.

b) Widening Participation Groups and Forums

12.22   One of the mechanisms which senior management were using to drive forward policy in some HEIs was a widening participation group or forum. This acted as a vehicle for conveying ideas from individuals upwards to senior management, for example about bids for special projects. In one case, the interest of one individual had led to bids for a special project to help profoundly deaf students participate in higher education. It also provided a forum for committed individuals and senior staff to pool their ideas for developing policy across the institution. As one person noted: *"the widening participation forum has been very valuable, especially for raising the whole profile of widening participation within the HEI. Before this there was not a full awareness within the wider academic community either of what was happening or why the university wished to engage in widening participation. It has given us a focus to what we are doing".*

12.23   However, in some cases reservations were expressed about the fact that the composition of working groups tended to be confined to committed individuals, and that other staff were not more widely consulted and involved in the process. A respondent in one HEI remarked that whole faculties had no input into the widening participation strategy. Where there was an attempt to implement a strategy institution-wide, there was then a risk of it being seen as the work of what was described as a *"little bunch of fascists"*. In this case, the fact that the strategy was not 'owned' by staff meant that it was unlikely to become embedded.

12.34   There appeared to be a growing awareness within case study HEIs of the need to involve academic staff, in particular in strategic decisions about widening participation. It was generally felt that resistance to widening participation activity was more likely to be encountered amongst academic staff concerned about the effect upon *"academic standards"*. One respondent at a selective institution reported considerable difficulty in enlisting the support of admissions tutors for widening participation activities because they were not experiencing any problems with recruitment from traditional sources. In another case, senior managers were aware of the need to involve a broader group of academic staff – both committed and not committed – in setting up a working group of widening participation. However, there is always likely to be a tension between the advantages to be gained by moving quickly with an enthusiastic working group, and the possible drawbacks of this being seen as a marginal activity by the majority of staff.

12.35   The effect of a combination of commitment at a senior level and the work of an active widening participation group in implementing policy was exemplified by the following example. A vice-chancellor of a recruiting HEI, concerned about possible financial penalties for poor retention rates, set up a retention task force to look into the matter. An initial profiling exercise identified several hundred students requiring help with study skills, and the necessary mechanisms were put in place to help them. As a result retention rates have been *"improving incrementally"* each year. Interestingly, the main policy driver in this case was possible financial penalty and not the implementation of an agreed strategy.

c) Communication Channels

12.36   This example highlights how ad hoc activity can be successfully adopted to address issues of institutional performance. However, it was clear from case study respondents that an obstacle to the implementation of widening participation policy was the lack of clearly defined organisational structures and communication channels for disseminating information.

12.37   In a number of HEIs, although there was active support for widening participation from senior management, there was also a divergence in how effectively widening participation policy was being implemented. Senior managers were more likely to take the view that policy was becoming embedded within the organisation, whereas other staff were more likely to think that institutional awareness of, and commitment to, widening participation was patchy. This was the case even where widening participation was seen as a core activity. For example, one person noted that *"yes, widening participation is embedded but doing the widening participation strategy statement helped to discover things that the university management was not quite aware of. For example, careers staff need to be aware of the mentoring project. There are all sorts of students here who would really benefit from work experience as mentors. However, it is difficult for careers staff to find out what is going on in that initiative. The staff running that project only see the need to market it to students, not to communicate it to other staff"*.

12.38 A number of causes were identified for a patchy communication about widening participation policy:

- Reliance by senior managers that department heads would communicate policy. However this was not always so, and for example, one departmental head reported that he had relayed the strategy statement to his staff by email but had not followed up whether they had read or digested it.

- A lack of clearly defined communication channels. In some HEIs, the lines of communication between central services and academic departments had not been firmly established leading to an inadequate flow of information.

- In 'recruiting' HEIs, the fact that widening participation was generally regarded as a core activity of the institution sometimes led senior managers to see little perceived need to communicate about it.

12.39 In those case study HEIs where widening participation was firmly established, it was generally agreed by staff at all levels that there were two specific factors that contributed to effective dissemination and implementation. Firstly, when clear lines of communication were established this also secured the involvement of all parts of the organisation. Thus one respondent noted that *"the Vice Principal is very good at disseminating information, for example the widening participation strategy statement. The widening participation working group reports to one of the senior committees chaired by the Vice Principal and this then gets fed into the hierarchy of committees within the college. Each school [faculty] is being asked to look at their widening participation commitment to see how that can be brought forward into their strategic plans".*

12.40 Second, the appointment of a nominated person to ensure widespread dissemination and implementation of the widening participation policy was regarded as crucial. For example, there was a general consensus at one pre-1992 HEI that the widening participation officer had been the single most influential factor in raising the profile of widening participation. The following has been selected from a range of possible comments to illustrate this: *"The biggest impact, I think, in the shortest space of time, has actually been the fact that we have a coordinator and manager of a range of activities, and the fact that widening participation is now managed centrally rather than it merely being the goodwill of individuals in individual departments. It has made a really big difference as now the enthusiasts are being given the opportunity to be managed better and you have someone with broader knowledge who can interface with schools".*

12.41 Conversely, where this role had made only a limited impact, this was reported as being partly due to the lack of sufficient authority to take a proactive role. One widening participation officer felt that, although senior management was committed to the idea, the ethos lower down the organisation was far more resistant. Although nominally supposed to be coordinating and raising internal awareness, the fact that the role had not been made explicit had led academic staff to see it as being about marketing the HEI externally, and therefore irrelevant to them.

Conclusions

12.42 It follows from the case studies that HEIs have been implementing strategic statements in a variety of ways appropriate to their culture and mission. No case study institutions reported using target settings approaches aimed at academic departments, thus confirming telephone survey data that this was rare (see Chapter 5). In contrast, the most typical approaches appeared to involve working groups and specialist widening participation officers, assisted –

where available – by supportive senior managers. The most effective implementation in case study HEIs was therefore often by encouragement and personal negotiation rather than by top-down planning approaches.

12.43   In summary, the major barriers to the implementation of strategies identified by the telephone survey and case studies were:

- Funding, and in particular that the allocation of funds to academic units did not permit priority to be given to the needs of students from under represented groups, or reflect the extra amount of time required to support them.

- That academic staff were frequently rewarded for research excellence rather than for supporting students from under represented groups.

- The absence of commitment of senior management to widening participation.

- The absence of appropriate institutional structures (for example, widening participation groups and forums).

- The absence of effective communication channels to enable policy and ideas about implementation to flow within the institution.

- Not having an individual (or office) with responsibility for promoting widening participation throughout the institution.

12.44   These barriers were – perhaps not surprisingly – very similar to those reported in the evaluation of other major Council initiatives, for example TQEF. Thus the data suggest that the difficulties of implementing widening participation strategies are part of a broader set of issues associated with introducing and managing change in highly complex and devolved environments.

12.45   These barriers need to be seen in the context of differing institutional missions and the consequent importance that institutions give to widening participation. The evidence from all sources suggests that there is a group of highly committed HEIs (identified in Appendix I) who have made considerable progress in addressing some of the reported barriers. However, they share a high degree of dependence on teaching funding, and are therefore especially vulnerable to weaknesses in the funding methodology. Conversely, most – not all – of those institutions that perform poorly against benchmarks have missions in which teaching is only one part, and where there are conflicting priorities caused by multiple funding strands, many from non-HEFCE sources.

12.46   In such circumstances it is unlikely that action to address the implementation issues noted above can be introduced to meet the circumstances of all HEIs. For example, increased funding of the kind identified in the telephone survey might be valuable in enhancing support for widening participation in HEIs dependant upon HEFCE teaching funds, but might make almost no impact in large diverse institutions.

13   Conclusions and Emerging Issues

13.1   In this final Chapter overall conclusions are drawn and linked with emerging issues. The Chapter does not include specific recommendations, as it is likely that the rapidly moving widening participation policy environment will have changed considerably between drafting this report and its eventual publication.

The Effectiveness of the Overall Support Strategy

13.2   There is clear evidence of a great deal of activity to widen participation across most higher education institutions, stimulated by the funding strands under review. The range of activity is diverse, and varies to some extent according to the type of institution, its specific mission, and the existing portfolio of activities. However, it is difficult to determine the extent to which the specific funding strands have contributed to this activity across the sector. For some institutions the key driver has been the development of a traditional mission, often involving long term local cross-sector partnerships. For others the main stimulus has been problems with recruitment, which is a feature of some subject areas even in quite selective institutions. For other institutions – particularly those new to widening participation – the requirements of HEFCE to produce widening participation strategic statements has been influential, stimulating considerable activity.

13.3   HEFCE identified the main criterion of this evaluation in assessing the effectiveness of its strategy to be *"its success in encouraging and supporting institutions to become more proactive and strategic in their approach to widening participation"*. When assessed against this criterion it must be concluded that, on balance, the strategy has been effective. By definition, the process of producing widening participation statements could not avoid creating the conditions for most institutions to become more strategic.

13.4   Support for widening participation is widespread across the sector, although it takes a variety of forms and embraces a range of assumptions about what widening participation means. All research intensive universities claim to be active in aspects of widening participation, and only five institutions suggested that it should not be part of their particular mission. Three of these were specialist institutions who believed their distinct mission required them to recruit only those with many years of specialised study prior to admission, and that in practice the opportunity to do this was not generally available to applicants from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. The interest of the Council in widening participation is overwhelmingly welcomed, and even those institutions critical of specific funding strands support the interest of HEFCE in the topic.

13.5   Overall, the outcomes of the funding strands appear to be having a differential effect within the sector. Thus, insofar as policy has been aimed at encouraging institutions without a strong tradition of widening participation to become more active, it appears to be successful, although real impact can only be assessed in the long term. A typical conclusion was drawn by a senior member of one such university in our survey when he wrote that *"I believe as PVC for widening participation, and it is a view shared by several senior colleagues, that the ethos of widening participation is beginning to permeate the whole institution. What is interesting is that our achievement has not been at the expense of our mission as a specialist professional institution"*.

13.6   However, the data presented in Chapter 10 suggest that Council policy has not been as helpful to institutions with a strong existing commitment to widening participation – indeed in

some cases they have been penalised where there has been substantial movement by students to neighbouring institutions awarded ASNs. It is this group who hold the most strongly negative views about Council strategy, and one HEI within this group concluded in its survey response to us that *"our University has found little of positive value in HEFCE policy on widening participation. This issue has been a strategic priority for this University for over 30 years. Current HEFCE policy does not provide effective (differential) support for those universities who have (and continue to) made a major contribution in this area and in some ways (eg 'aspiration funding' for selective universities) it has the effect of undermining the work undertaken by universities such as our own".* Such views are held by approximately a quarter of HEIs, mostly from post-1992 universities.

13.7   It is too early to establish how far the initial strategies have led to change in practice, or to distinguish the impact of the strategies from other external interventions, of which there have been many. There are marked differences between types of institution in levels of awareness and widening participation activity, and the impact of strategies is likely to vary between them. In general both are most developed in the post-1992 universities and colleges of higher education, and least in specialist HEIs, but there are many notable exceptions to this pattern. This might suggest that some types of institution are more suited to this kind of work, or alternatively that those with longest experience are most advanced.

13.8   If the government and Council target for 18-30 participation is to be met, it will be crucial to ensure that those institutions with most commitment to widening participation can operate on a firm financial and strategic footing. At the moment, most of those who responded to the institutional survey do not feel that this is the case.

Council Assumptions About Widening Participation

13.9   As required by our terms of reference, in Chapter 4 we identified a number of basic Council assumptions about widening participation which have acted as hypotheses to guide this evaluation. In this section we summarise the extent to which these have been confirmed by institutional behaviour:

a)	Institutions are broadly in sympathy with the aim of widening participation.	All data sources confirmed that all but a very small number of institutions are broadly in sympathy.
b)	Institutions are willing and capable of acting strategically in relation to a priority of this kind, even where widening participation has not previously been part of institutional mission.	Institutions are capable of taking such action, although there were different views on what constitutes an effective strategy. Producing strategic statements can make less experienced HEIs think and plan, although it is too soon to determine if this will be translated into action. The relationship between strategy and institutional behaviour cannot be assumed, and it is often unclear to HEIs how the Council expects strategies to be used.
c)	Institutions should not be directed, but rather encouraged, to take action in producing and implementing widening participation strategies.	To date, encouragement has produced results, as in the case of TQEF. Direction or legislation (as with disability) has the potential to galvanise, but unless there is broad acceptance of overall policy such an approach risks compliance rather than commitment.

d)	Institutions will have different views about appropriate forms of widening participation depending on their mission.	There are wide differences of both view and practice depending on numerous variables, of which the most significant appears to be mission. In some cases such a mission is longstanding and not a creation of HEFCE interventions.
e)	Institutions have the capacity to enhance teaching and learning and student support as required to aid retention and achievement.	The TQEF evaluation reported progress in the capacity of institutions to enhance teaching and learning. In many HEIs there is no difference between strategies designed to support those from under represented groups and other learners. Telephone survey data suggested that most academics think that practice has changed.
f)	Institutions have access to appropriate information about their current practice, and are prepared to act on it.	Such information is rarely complete, although its collection has been stimulated in some HEIs by premium funding and regional projects. As a consequence the ability or willingness of HEIs to act upon it cannot yet be determined.
g)	Institutions have access to information about good practice nationally, and are prepared to act on it.	Outside a group of enthusiasts for widening participation such information is often weak, and more guidance would be widely welcomed. The ability of institutions to act upon such information cannot be determined, but evidence from other initiatives suggests that it is a weak driver for change other than for the enthusiasts.

The Understanding of Council Policy

13.10 Despite the large amount of published information, Council policy on widening participation has not been clear to all parts of the sector. Typically one university noted in its response to our institutional survey that *"there is no clear perception of an overall national framework or initiative which HEIs are being asked to particularise at local level"*. Much clearer guidance about both policy and implementation will be required in the future. However, recent national seminars to explore linkages between widening participation and teaching and learning, and to examine supply and demand in higher education, may have helped to clarify the position. The work of Action on Access is widely valued, although they are probably under resourced for the scale of the task involved.

13.11 Overwhelmingly there is concern about the complexity of funding strands and associated activities. There are perceived to be too many initiatives, the operation of student access and hardship funding is thought to be too complex, and the arrangements for coordination and support within the Council involve different divisions and groups in ways that institutions find unclear. There is a very strong case for simplifying arrangements wherever possible, and ensuring that policy measures are 'joined up'. Several HEIs noted that this complexity was particularly difficult for small institutions where staff resources may not exist to *"keep up with the tide of paper work"* as one HEI put it. Within the sector it is recognised that not all initiatives are at the direct instigation of the Council.

13.12   Our data suggest that within institutions staff are frequently unclear about the distinctions between the various funding strands and other HEFCE interventions. Although awareness of institutional policy in general was quite high, staff awareness of Council policy was low and few staff could identify specific activities. Any future campaign to encourage either institutions or under represented groups of the importance of widening participation will have to ensure clear, coherent messages if such problems are to be overcome.

13.13   Amongst advocates of widening participation the view was widely expressed that in its initial policy statements HEFCE took too narrow a position on what constitutes widening participation, and that there is a need to encourage a broader and more inclusive view of 16+ education. Associated with this view is the perceived need for more flexible funding methodologies to enable cross-sector activities to be more easily undertaken.

Diversity

13.14   As Chapter 5 and Appendix I note, diversity is – and will remain – a major issue for institutional widening participation policy. Universities and colleges seek to differentiate themselves through distinctive missions and identities, performance in widening participation being one of these. The six groups identified in Chapter 5 on the basis of their performance in widening participation are an indication of this diversity, and no single policy is likely to accommodate all their needs.

13.15   The issue is particularly contentious at present, when there is active debate about the extent to which HEFCE and government should seek through funding levers to determine the nature of diversity, rather than leaving this to institutions and the market. Our data suggest that a large number of institutions of all types felt that current policy on diversity was unclear, and would welcome clarification.

13.16   HEFCE and government have both emphasised two not entirely compatible policy objectives. They are strongly committed to promoting institutional diversity, with every institution being excellent at its own particular mission. But the Council is also determined that all institutions must contribute to widening participation in order to ensure that all learners have access to the full range of higher education. The tension between these two objectives has caused confusion in institutions about the real objectives of HEFCE policy, and real anger among those who claim, with some justification, that their special commitment and expertise in this field has not been recognised or rewarded.

13.17   Measurement of widening participation performance remains problematic. Not all possible areas of under representation are addressed by HEFCE's published performance indicators, and, despite explanation in various publications, there is little evidence of the details of the published performance indicators being known, or fully understood, even at senior levels in many HEIs. The low participation neighbourhood indicator causes particular concern: some institutions perform very differently on it from year to year, and those in London and some rural locations appear to perform less well than might be expected from their claimed commitment and historical reputation.

Disability

13.18   So far as disability is concerned, the picture is more straightforward. Driven by the need to comply with legislative requirements, there is both greater activity within institutions than previously and signs that provision is starting to become more embedded. Sustained Council funding over a number of years has contributed to the development of an expanding base of good practice, which needs to be disseminated still more widely and actively, particularly in

terms of integrating provision within teaching and learning. Although it is too early for summative evidence and value for money conclusions, the apparent success to date of most Strand One projects suggests that there is a good case for considering extending funding to the smaller HEIs who have not yet received support, in order to assist them in achieving base level requirements.

13.19 However, as we note throughout this report, the policy linkages within the Council between widening participation and disability have been unclear and to some extent inconsistent. This also applies to the place of disability within other HEFCE strategies (for example; teaching and learning and human resources). Although brought together with widening participation under EQUALL, in practice disability has been widely viewed (including in some parts of the Council) as a separate activity. It follows that: first, the policy links between disability and widening participation need to be more clearly stated; second, the structural and organisational arrangements concerning HEFCE support for disability provision need to be considered in relation to any internal review of responsibilities for widening participation; and third, the role of the National Disability Team needs to be consistent with any revisions to other advisory and support arrangements. With the growth in importance of widening participation, and the development of Partnerships for Progression, it will be important to avoid further confusion. The future coordination function to support disability provision will need to have strong and clear links to other initiatives, and should be embedded within other coordinating arrangements.

13.20 Despite the actions taken to enhance successfully current coordination arrangements there is an important area where action discussed in HEFCE 00/46 is still required. It recommended a need for *"strong leadership by national bodies in the area of disabilities in order to help institutions meet new legal and regulatory requirements, including providing an information and training strategy to ensure that all institutions and staff are fully aware of their new responsibilities"*. Despite the considerable progress in disability provision in the sector, there remain some institutions who may be in danger of breaching legal and regulatory frameworks, with potentially severe penalties. A priority for the sector – with appropriate encouragement from HEFCE – must therefore be an information and training strategy to ensure that all institutions and staff are fully aware of their forthcoming responsibilities. As one case study noted *"it seems evident that some institutions are not yet fully aware of their responsibilities, of the gap between their current practice and new legislative requirements, or of how to meet these requirements"*. Under current arrangements it is not clear who should provide this support, as the NDT's role is centred on project assistance, UUK and other bodies have been slow to provide support mechanisms, and the Council has been cautious about being too assertive.

Institutional Implementation

13.21 Although the creation of institutional strategies for widening participation has been central to HEFCE policy in widening participation, the assumptions about how institutional behaviour matches strategies are unclear. At least two approaches are evident: first, that it is for HEIs to determine how strategies should be used with subsequent accountability being undertaken with a light touch; second, that strategies should contain much common content, need to be approved by the Council, and then be implemented as part of a formal institutional planning system. Institutions perceive considerable tension between these two approaches, and are sometimes not clear which the Council has been pursuing.

13.22 The processes of communication, and their influences on behaviour, are less predictable than HEFCE policy implies or some institutional managers suggest. Academic and managerial channels are often quite separate, with different weight in different institutions, and messages

are often received through 'bottom up' communication channels rather than 'top down' ones. Formal communication channels do not necessarily exist within all institutions, and where they do it is often left to the discretion of heads of department to communicate policy as they see fit.

13.23   As a result, our telephone survey established that most academic staff are aware that HEFCE and government see widening participation as a priority, but are unaware of the specific interventions or detailed objectives. Similarly, they are aware that their institution has a strategy, but few have read it, and far fewer had any hand in its formulation. All these patterns are strongest among the pre-1992 and specialist HEIs, but even in institutions where staff commitment to widening participation is high it is common for staff to be unaware of the detail of institutional policy.

13.24   It is clear that the most powerful influence on institutional implementation and the behaviour of individual academics in relation to both widening participation and disability is the leadership of senior managers within the institution. A number of barriers to implementation were regularly cited by staff, of which the most common were: lack of funding to meet the needs of students from under represented groups; systems of staff reward which favoured research; inappropriate institutional structures and communication systems; and a lack of specialist staff. Similar barriers were found in the evaluation of TQEF.

13.25   Institutional data on widening participation are often weak, and it was not clear whether many HEIs had access to good information about their own patterns of recruitment from under represented groups on which to base monitoring except at the most general level. This also applied to the additional costs of widening participation which are not generally known.

Future Funding and Student Support

13.26   In Chapter 10 we noted numerous reservations about the operation of the specific funding strands that we were asked to review. While the additional funding made available through the widening participation premium has been generally welcomed, there were major reservations about both the amount paid and method of calculation. These reservations were felt most strongly among the institutions most active in widening participation. The same was not true for the disability premium.

13.27   In general, institutions most committed to widening participation felt that the overall level of funding for widening participation was too low, although none has produced clear costings to demonstrate this. The amounts involved are tiny in comparison to overall spending on teaching, and approximately a quarter of respondents in our institutional survey offered the view that the level of the supplement in no way reflected the additional costs of recruiting and supporting learners from under represented groups. In general, within such institutions the distinction between mainstream funding to support teaching and funding supplements notionally meeting additional costs was not helpful.

13.28   The need for institutions to fill all their student places remains the strongest recruitment driver, and a number of HEIs have failed to do so. This has had a much more significant effect on institutional financial health than the under funding of the postcode premium.

13.29   Excluding aspiration funding (which was outside our terms of reference), the issue which caused most concern in the use of funding was the operation of the additional student numbers scheme. There is a strong feeling that this has had the effect of diverting students, rather than increasing the total volume and nature of participation. Over the three years of performance indicators, there appears to be evidence to support the 'diversion' hypothesis.

Whether this is wrong in policy terms depends on whether HEFCE explicitly intends to encourage the movement of such students to different institutions.

13.30 Institutions were divided about the benefits of initiative funding. A majority of those commenting favoured a reduction in this form of resourcing (some its complete elimination), because of its short term nature, the bidding costs and additional administrative effort involved. However, others welcomed the fact that project funds were directed at specific activities rather than being 'lost' in core funding.

13.31 Overall, the report raises a number of serious issues about the current funding methodology, and concludes that the Council cannot assume that its approaches are robust enough to command support if the planned expansion of widening participation is to take place. We note that the Council is currently reviewing aspects of its approach, and welcome this. Amongst many HEIs there is genuine concern about the funding environment, and if the current goodwill towards implementing widening participation is to be maintained then appropriate funding mechanisms will need to be found to support properly those institutions who are both most active and most successful. Such mechanisms will need to take account of the funding of the increasing volume of cross-sector widening participation activity.

Future Regional and Cross-Sector Collaboration

13.32 The Council has announced its commitment to support a major Partnerships for Progression initiative with the LSC, which will integrate many of the existing widening participation funding strands. In view of the complexity of current arrangements, this development is welcome. However, this report raises a number of issues to emerge from current funding strands, and it may be useful to summarise them.

13.33 Although much good work is being undertaken in current regional and cross-sector projects, Chapter 9 notes that numerous problems have been experienced. We do not repeat these here, but the issues raised are significant enough that it cannot be assumed that large cross-sector projects will automatically be successful, and it therefore follows that careful planning and preparation will be required. In particular, structural problems such as different funding systems, varying amounts of institutional resource flexibility, institutional competition, and the approach of some HEIs towards partnerships with FE may represent real difficulties.

13.34 Among some enthusiasts for widening participation we found a concern about how HEIs may conceive of large scale cross-sector collaboration. Data in Chapter 9 suggest that many HEIs have tended to dominate partnerships, and experienced widening participation practitioners have suggested that a much more holistic approach needs to be taken to encourage collaboration in post-16 education. Many HEIs are naturally competitive, particularly at a time when some are struggling to fill student places, and collaboration may not be easy. A major question to be addressed will be the extent to which individual HEIs are both willing and able to change existing assumptions and procedures to adopt more genuinely partnership based ways of working.

13.35 The role of RANs is likely to be enhanced under Partnerships for Progression. We found some inconsistency in the ways that they appear to be carrying out their current activities involving two conflicting pressures: the need to respond to regional circumstances while at the same time using approaches that are broadly equitable across the sector as a whole.

13.36 It will be crucial to provide enhanced support for future collaborative activities, in advance of project selection. It follows that arrangements should be put in place to ensure that the work of

the two coordination teams (Action on Access and National Disability Team) continues during any interim period.

Teaching and Learning

13.37   There is clear potential synergy between the Council's TQEF and widening participation initiatives: indeed the enhancement of learning and teaching is a crucial step in ensuring suitable retention and employability policies for under represented students. It follows, therefore, that the general conclusion of the recent TQEF evaluation that the institutional strand of funding has had a significant impact is helpful, particularly for those HEIs for whom widening participation is central to mission.

13.38   At the moment, just as linkages between the widening participation and disability initiatives are not fully developed, so there needs to be greater integration with teaching and learning and in particular the LTSN structure (although this is starting to develop). The national seminars which brought consideration of teaching and learning and widening participation were helpful in this regard. At a disciplinary level the contribution of subject centres may be particularly important, since if a subject-based approach to disseminating good practice is proven to be effective (an issue for the current LTSN evaluation), then by implication it must incorporate widening participation and disability.

13.39   The TQEF evaluation records a number of barriers to enhancing learning and teaching, many of them well recognised. Our data in Chapter 12 suggest that many of these barriers are also evident in the implementation of institutional widening participation strategies. Whilst TQEF funding has supported activities which might lower some of these barriers, that evaluation concludes that in the absence of direct incentives the main driver for change is likely to be *"a clear and coherent funding council policy that broadly commands the support of both institutions and staff"*. The implications of this for widening participation are significant, and there will need to be a similar institutional acceptance of national policy. In its approach to enhancing teaching and learning, the Council has explicitly adopted a policy of encouraging institutions, and the TQEF evaluation suggests that this is starting to succeed. There is a strong case for a parallel approach in relation to widening participation.

Dissemination

13.40   The need for greater support and guidance on all aspects of widening participation activity is a consistent feature of our data. Outside a relatively small group of enthusiasts and those involved in professional networks there is little awareness within institutions of what is happening elsewhere. So far as teaching and learning is concerned, the subject based approach of the LTSN structure has been developed precisely to meet this need. The issues here are generally well known to the Council and are not repeated here, for example, almost the whole of Chapter 6 of the recent evaluation of TQEF (on dissemination) could equally well apply to widening participation.

13.41   Although institutions could do much more to disseminate internal good practice in widening participation (particularly involving retention and student support), experience in other areas suggests that there is unlikely to be much commitment to external dissemination to other HEIs. This may be a problem for the development of regional partnerships, although close inter-institutional working may overcome some of the barriers to dissemination. There are important implications for the work of the two coordinating teams, and both Action on Access and the NDT have found their resources stretched to provide the level of institutional and project support that can provide significant added value. In the last two years, there has also been

greater collaboration between the coordinating teams than previously, and this should continue.

13.42 Partnerships for Progression will generate an extensive amount of activity and – hopefully – good practice. It will be imperative for appropriate dissemination arrangements to be in place from the start.

Future Widening Participation Policy and Council Implementation

13.43 To date, HEFCE policy has assumed that all institutions will contribute to widening participation, but in ways which vary by institutional mission. This study confirms that institutions are willing to do so, and also that there is a group of institutions for whom this is a central part of their mission and expertise. Future strategies will need to recognise this, both in their approach and in their focus.

13.44 The government and the Council are committed to all HEIs playing a part in widening participation, but the evidence of the diversity of institutional approaches means that a single uniform policy approach will be neither welcome or effective. Whatever policy the Council adopts should recognise this, particularly the special role which can be played by the small group of very strongly committed institutions in developing new approaches for the most hard to reach students. It might be appropriate to recognise a special role for such HEIs, by providing higher levels of financial support to enable them to work with and retain such students. This would enable them to develop and pilot strategies for working with students which other institutions could subsequently follow, and there is evidence that this is how many current initiatives (like summer schools and mentoring schemes) have emerged.

13.45 The general implications of our findings for future policy include the need to:

- Clarify the policy objectives, in relation to target groups and institutional diversity.

- Simplify the variety of incentives and funding streams, which are not well understood and sometimes believed to be in conflict.

- Raise the level of funding to recognise the additional costs of working with the hardest to reach and hardest to retain students.

- Clarify responsibilities for widening participation and disability within HEFCE itself, where conflicting messages are sometimes perceived by institutions.

- Counteract popular prejudice (within and outside higher education) that widening participation is a low status activity conducted by institutions unable to perform well in high status research.

13.46 The implementation of future policy will require an effective structure within the Council. In Chapter 11 we noted the complexity of internal Council arrangements for supporting the multiple widening participation initiatives, and the confusion this was causing in the sector in terms of 'who does what'. Partnership for Progression provides a useful opportunity for clarifying staffing responsibilities in a way that is both internally consistent and clear to the sector.

13.47 In Chapter 12 we produced some tentative comments on the assumptions about the role and value of strategic planning that appear to underpin the current Council approach in requiring institutions to produce both widening participation and other kinds of strategies. We

understand the potential value of this approach, but are not wholly convinced that the assumptions are either understood or completely shared within HEIs or even HEFCE. We conclude that if the Council is to be confident about its approach, and ensure that its assumptions about strategic planning are matched by operational reality within institutions, it may wish to consider undertaking a small study on the effectiveness of current planning arrangements across a range of initiatives.