This report examines the success of the higher education system to date in securing increased access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and for disabled students, and in driving down the number of students that withdraw early from their studies. It also highlights the findings from a suite of independent research reports that have also been published in July.

# Delivering opportunities for students and maximising their success

## Evidence for policy and practice 2015-2020

HIGHER EDUCATION
FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND

hefce

# Contents

# Delivering opportunities for students and maximising their success: Evidence for policy and practice 2015-2020

| To | Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions |
| | Heads of HEFCE-funded further education colleges |
| Of interest to those responsible for | Learning and teaching, Widening participation, Student services, Finance, Estates |
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## Executive summary

### Purpose

1.      This report examines the success of the higher education (HE) system to date in securing increased access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and for disabled students, and in driving down the number of students that withdraw early from their studies. It also highlights the challenges that remain, particularly with regard to unexplained gaps in participation in different localities and the persistent unexplained differences in degree, employment and further study outcomes for students from ethnic minority groups, disadvantaged groups and disabled students not in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance.

2.      Supporting this report are five independent research reports in three key areas of activity:

   a.  Critically reviewing research and practice to understand and address **differential outcomes**, in terms of continuation, attainment, and progression into postgraduate study and graduate employment.

   b.  Reviewing **provision and support for disabled students** with a particular focus on support for students with specific learning difficulties and students with mental health problems or intensive support needs.

   c.  **Developing an outcomes framework** to enable universities and colleges to understand and evidence more robustly the effectiveness and impact of their interventions in this area.

3.      Finally, the report describes what HEFCE will do to work with and support the sector to address these challenges and, crucially, to develop systematic and robust ways to measure the effectiveness and impact of the interventions they deliver within the context of the recently announced Teaching Excellence Framework and the Quality Assessment Review currently being undertaken by HEFCE and the HE funding bodies in Wales and Northern Ireland.

## Key points

### Progress to date

4. Access to HE continues to improve for young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds. HEFCE analysis has shown that the young participation rate was 4 percentage points higher than the trends in GCSE attainment implied in 2009[1].

5. Completion rates for students have improved. The non-continuation rate for full-time students has improved from a rate of 14 per cent in 2003-04 to 10 per cent in 2013-14.

6. HE providers have successfully widened access for disabled students. The number of disabled students entering HE increased from just over 16,700 new entrants in 2003-04 to just over 51,300 in 2012-13.

### Remaining challenges

7. There remains a large gap in the HE participation rates between the most and least advantaged groups.

8. The Prime Minister has set a target to double the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in HE from the level it was in 2009 by 2020. This requires a greater increase in participation rates than historical trends have shown.

9. The number of older learners participating in HE has continued to decline from just over 1 million learners in 2010-11 to under 800,000 in 2013-14[2].

10. There are unexplained differences in access to HE in different places.

11. There are worse outcomes – in terms of degree attainment and progression to postgraduate study and/or graduate employment – for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (as measured by POLAR3), students from ethnic minority groups and disabled students not in receipt of Disabled Students Allowance (DSA).

### How the system works: themes from independent research

12. There is isolated work across institutions to address differential outcomes, but it is fragmented and not well evidenced. There is a need for a joined-up sector-wide response to secure a step-change that will maximise outcomes for all students.

13. Institutional support for disabled students is now disproportionately reliant on tuition fee contributions from all students. Furthermore, the DSA process promotes a medical model of disability, which is out of step with the joined-up, student-centred approaches institutions wish to take and which are commensurate with the social model at the heart of equalities legislation.

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[1] Based on 2009 cohort. 2009 is the most recent cohort available as this is the cohort who undertook GCSE or KS4 examinations in the summer of 2009, A-level or KS5 examinations in the summer of 2011, and potentially entered higher education at age 18 in academic year 2011-12, or at age 19 in academic year 2012-13. Figures for those who undertook GCSE or KS4 examinations in 2010 will be available later in 2015.

[2] This includes all undergraduate and postgraduate, full-time and part-time provision for all UK and EU students.

14.    Despite commendable work and the progress made on both access and retention highlighted earlier, it remains difficult for institutions to demonstrate the relative impact of different interventions and approaches to support access and student success.

**What HEFCE will do**

Demonstrating effectiveness and impact

15.    HEFCE will continue to collect data from institutions on how they invest public funding and their fee income in activity to widen access, improve retention and success, and support progression to further study or graduate employment.

16.    HEFCE will work with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to ensure that there is a consistency of approach to our respective data returns and minimise duplication and burden on the sector.

17.    HEFCE will work with institutions, Government and experts in the field on the development of indicators and approaches that recognise the added value that institutions deliver to diverse groups of students.

18.    HEFCE will make it a condition of grant for any new initiatives it funds that all projects are robustly evaluated using rigorous research methods.

19.    HEFCE will continue to explore how national data sets can be further 'mined' to assess the impact of HE on UK productivity and society more broadly, and where the commissioning of further national research and sector-wide analysis is needed.

20.    HEFCE will work with institutions to understand how existing data collections and management information can more effectively be used in their evaluation of activity and interventions, particularly with regard to students' success and progression.

21.    HEFCE will continue to encourage institutions to join the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) network in order to benefit from the robust tracking service HEAT provides with respect to institutions' outreach activity.

Addressing differential outcomes from HE study for different groups

22.    HEFCE will work with Government and the sector to support the development and take-up of systemic approaches to addressing differential outcomes, and to embed this within the evolving landscape of quality assessment and teaching excellence.

23.    HEFCE is already piloting approaches to measuring learning gain and exploring approaches to understanding social capital and social agency, and we will build on this to develop indicators that demonstrate institutions' success in supporting retention, attainment and progression for students from all backgrounds.

24.    HEFCE will develop a programme to support institutions in the development and rigorous testing of interventions to address differential outcomes.

25.    HEFCE will work in partnership with other agencies such as the Higher Education Academy to help institutions achieve the shifts in culture necessary to lead to long-term sustainable improvements in student outcomes.

26.    HEFCE will continue to make the case for a student premium to support institutions in maximising the retention and success of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, building on

the advances secured to date. This will enable all institutions to continue to improve existing approaches, or develop or adopt new approaches that will maximise the outcomes for students who are particularly at risk of not reaching their full potential or of withdrawing from HE entirely.

27.    HEFCE will use the findings of the Postgraduate Support Scheme, due to be published in September 2015, to identify with Government and the sector the activities and funding approaches needed to maximise progression during the coming years, building on the outcomes from the Government's postgraduate consultation[3].

<u>Provision and support for disabled students</u>

28.    As HEFCE develops its approach to future funding and support for disabled students, we will work closely with Government with a view to ensuring that the models supported are:

- efficient
- balanced in terms of public investment and private funding through tuition fee income
- invested in approaches which impact on student outcomes and are informed by rigorous evaluation.

<u>Addressing gaps in participation in HE</u>

29.    HEFCE will continue to undertake high-quality analysis of participation patterns, and will continue to present this analysis in an accessible and useful way for those within the networks and institutions to enable them to better target their activity.

30.    HEFCE recognises that most HEFCE-fundable HE providers have access agreements with OFFA, in which they commit to spending a proportion of their undergraduate higher fee income (fee income above the basic level of £6,000 for full-time students and £4,500 for part-time students) on access measures. It is also the case that after expenditure on financial support, the second-largest category of spend is on activity to widen access into HE through outreach and other activity. In the latest monitoring of access agreements for the academic year 2013-14, institutions reported spending £92 million of their additional fee income on access activity, and are predicted to spend progressively more on this activity over the next five years[4].

31.    As a consequence, any HEFCE funding for access activity must focus on those areas where public investment can add most value beyond that made by institutions. Therefore, any future HEFCE funding to institutions will be targeted at those areas where there are known to be unexplained gaps in participation for young people.

## Action required

32.    No action is required in response to this document.

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[3] 'Consultation on Support for Postgraduate Study', BIS, March 2015.

[4] 'Outcomes of access agreement monitoring for 2013-14', OFFA, June 2015.

## Introduction

33. HEFCE has published five externally commissioned research reports, which will help to shape the Government and HEFCE's approach to supporting successful student outcomes from 2016-17. The five reports are:

- Causes of differences in student outcomes, Kings' College London, University of Manchester and the ARC network

- Support for higher education students with specific learning difficulties, York Consulting Ltd and University of Leeds

- Understanding provision for students with mental health problems and intensive support needs, Institute of Employment Studies (IES) and University of Lancaster

- Student opportunity outcomes framework research: in depth study, CFE Research

- Student opportunity outcomes framework research: data return project, CFE Research.

34. The reports, which are published in full on the HEFCE website, provide a detailed insight into the work that universities and colleges are conducting in this area and the different approaches they are taking. They consider the key challenges institutions face in terms of: securing further increases in higher education (HE) participation and continuation of study by students from diverse backgrounds[5]; addressing differential degree attainment, and differential progression into postgraduate study and graduate jobs; and assessing the impact of various interventions.

35. This synthesis report draws on the findings from this body of work, as well as recent analysis by HEFCE and others, with a view to setting out the key policy and funding imperatives for the next five years. It examines the track record of the sector to date in securing greater access to and student success within higher education. But it also highlights the challenges that remain, particularly with regard to differences in access in different geographic locations and in outcomes between student groups, and to providing robust evidence on the impact of different interventions. It identifies how HEFCE will work with HE providers, students, other HE sector organisations and Government systematically to address these challenges.

## Background

36. In February 2015, HEFCE published its 2015-2020 Business Plan, which makes clear the Council's continued commitment to access and student success. The Business Plan states:

> 'While progress has been made to improve access to higher education from under-represented groups, there is still more to do. Continuing the improvement in participation from all under-represented groups, and eliminating unacceptable disparities in achievement and progression outcomes, therefore remain important objectives on which HEFCE will continue to lead'.

37. More recent statements by the new Government, for example in the Productivity Plan (July 2015), highlight its intention to ensure that HE is 'accessible to all who are qualified and wish to

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[5] This includes students from low HE participation neighbourhoods, students from low-income households and students with protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010.

study, particularly students from disadvantaged backgrounds'[6]. Furthermore, in his speech to Universities UK on 1 July 2015, the Minister for Universities and Science emphasised the Prime Minister's commitment to double the proportion of people in higher education from disadvantaged backgrounds by 2020 (from the proportion in 2009). The Government is clear that 'over the last century, productivity growth has gone hand in hand with rising human capital, as more people have become educated and educated to a higher level'[7]. In order to yield the benefits of this, the Government is concerned not just with ensuring access to higher education, but also with securing improvements in learning and teaching, with a view to maximising the success of students in higher education and in their subsequent careers[8].

38.    This renewed commitment comes against a backdrop of strong progress within the HE sector in terms of widened access and improved retention, but also, as our Business Plan makes clear, significant continuing challenges.

39.    For example, access to HE has improved for those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds[9]. However, the achievement of the Government's target to double the proportion by 2020 is likely to require a significant rise in the rate of progress. Assuming that the target relates to the most disadvantaged group which we define as those in POLAR3 quintile 1[10], a preliminary analysis undertaken by HEFCE suggests that the participation rates for this group would need to increase by two to three percentage points per year to meet this target, whereas the trend to date has been an increase of one percentage point per year. Currently, the participation rates for these students remain far behind those students in the most advantaged groups (participation rates of 20 per cent for those from the most disadvantaged 20 per cent of the young population, compared with rates of just under 60 per cent for the most advantaged 20 per cent). Meeting the Prime Minister's target would go some way to closing the gap, assuming that the participation rates for the most advantaged students remains relatively stable.

40.    Similarly, significant progress has been made throughout the sector to improve completion rates for students, with degree non-completion rates falling from around 14 per cent to around 10 per cent between 2003 and 2013. Again, however, HEFCE analysis clearly shows how the outcomes in terms of degree attainment and progression to further study and employment differ for different groups of students, and how the differences persist even once we have accounted for factors known to influence outcomes, such as entry qualifications, sex, and subject area of study.

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[6] 'Fixing the foundations: creating a more prosperous nation', HM Treasury, July 2015.

[7] ibid.

[8] In his speech to vice-chancellors at Universities UK on 1 July 2015, the Minister for Universities and Science, Jo Johnson, spoke of 'delivering a teaching excellence framework that creates incentives for universities to devote as much attention to the quality of teaching as fee-paying students and prospective employers have a right to expect'.

[9] As measured by the third iteration of the Participation of Local Areas measure (POLAR3). POLAR classifies local areas or 'wards' into five groups, based on the proportion of 18-year-olds who enter HE aged 18 or 19 years old. These groups range from quintile 1 areas, with the lowest young participation (most disadvantaged), up to quintile 5 areas with the highest rates (most advantaged).

[10] ibid.

41.    Institutions have also been successful in their efforts to increase the participation of disabled students, with increases in the number of disabled students entering the system each year (the number of disabled entrants to HE increased from just over 16,700 in 2003-04 to just over 51,300 in 2012-13). However, HEFCE analysis has shown that while those disabled students in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance achieve better outcomes than might be expected, those disabled students without DSA support, for whatever reason, tend to achieve less well.

42.    Understanding what works – in terms of interventions and the impact they have on outcomes for individuals, the economy and society – is important to ensure that public funding and tuition fee income are being invested effectively. Institutions across the sector have developed and delivered an impressive range of interventions and approaches aimed at improving students' success and outcomes. Institutions recognise, however, that more needs to be done to better evidence the effectiveness and impact of their work. A recurring theme across all of our recently completed research is the need for robust, systematic evaluation of the different interventions made and approaches taken. In a climate of constrained public investment and greater scrutiny of learning and teaching in higher education, this is a clear and pressing priority.

43.    The Government has already announced reductions to funding for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) in 2015-16 and a shift in the arrangements for maintenance support from 2016-17. Alongside this, it has signalled its intention to consult on the development of a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), in which it proposes to include outcomes-focused criteria and metrics that will, among other things, recognise and reward those institutions making most progress in supporting the success of students from a range of backgrounds[11].

44.    In addition, the proposals for future approaches to quality assessment[12] focus on providing assurances to students and other stakeholders about the security of degree standards and the quality of the student academic experience. A key underpinning principle for the proposals is that 'one size' of approach can no longer fit all providers in an increasingly diverse HE system. The proposals therefore envisage the use of contextualised student outcomes data and the meaningful involvement of both students and external expertise to understand and improve the performance of an institution within the context of its own mission, provision and students. A more central role for a provider's own review and evaluation processes is proposed. HEFCE would expect to verify the approach and methodology adopted by an individual provider to ensure that continuous improvement activities are grounded in a thorough understanding of the available evidence base and the impact of particular interventions on student outcomes.

45.    HEFCE is also piloting approaches to measuring the learning gain of students in higher education, including acquisition measures of knowledge, skills, social capital and work-readiness. In this context, there is a clear need for universities and colleges radically to improve the quality of the evaluative evidence they produce to understand 'what works' in terms of student outcomes and success.

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[11] 'Fixing the foundations: creating a more prosperous nation', HM Treasury, July 2015, and Minister's speech to Universities UK, 1 July 2015.

[12] 'Future approaches to quality assessment in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland: Consultation', HEFCE, June 2015.

## Meeting the challenges

46.   HEFCE's extensive programme of sector analysis has been able to highlight the key areas where more needs to be done to secure successful outcomes. This work includes:

- the creation of maps showing locations where HE participation rates are lower or higher than we would expect, given GCSE attainment[13]

- analytical reports exposing the unexplained differences in attainment and progression outcomes for HE students from different groups[14]

- a retention data tool, which provides interactive charts allowing users to explore non-continuation data by student characteristics and subject of study[15].

47.   Building on this, HEFCE commissioned five research studies across three key areas of activity. These set out to achieve the following:

a.   Critically review research and practice to understand and address differential outcomes, in terms of continuation, attainment, and progression into postgraduate study and graduate employment.

b.   Review provision and support for disabled students, with a particular focus on support for students with specific learning difficulties and students with mental health problems or intensive support needs.

c.   Develop an outcomes framework to enable universities and colleges to understand and evidence more robustly the effectiveness and impact of their interventions in this area.

48.   The executive summaries from all five research reports are included at Annex A. The following sections of this report examine the core themes arising from the commissioned research and HEFCE's own analysis. They also establish the basis for HEFCE's strategy for student success during the next five years. This is built upon research findings and intended to secure a step-change in the delivery of successful outcomes for students, both to improve their life chances and to enhance their impact on the economic productivity and social inclusion of the nation as a whole.

## Demonstrating effectiveness and impact

49.   The two studies undertaken to inform the development of an outcomes framework are expressly concerned with assessing how institutions currently measure the effectiveness and impact of their work on access and student success, and how this might be developed to become more reliable and robust. However, the issue of evidencing what works is a theme in all of the studies.

50.   The overwhelming message is that, while we know from national data that the sector has made significant progress in terms of widening access and improving retention, and institutions clearly recognise the need for better evidence to underpin policy and practice, there is little evidence to date of interventions and approaches being systematically evaluated.

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[13] See www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/gaps/.

[14] See www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201403/ and www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2013/201315/.

[15] See www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/ncr/.

51.     The critical review of differential outcomes concludes that:

- many institutions have concentrated their resources in an exploratory phase of confirming the existence of differential outcomes and then understanding their causes, so interventions are quite recent and impact is yet to be seen

- relatively few interventions have therefore yet been evaluated systematically

- the time-limited nature of the funding of current initiatives has limited the scope for longer-term evaluation

- the data issues are complex

- frameworks for evaluation are needed and should be integral to project design and planning.

52.     The review of provision and support for disabled students similarly finds no systematic analysis of effectiveness, and suggests that institutions would benefit from a clear logic model to measure impact through inputs, outputs and outcomes. It finds that institutions tend to rely on patchy and anecdotal information that the support delivered is meeting student needs.

53.     This is a fundamental concern and one that is shared by institutions. It is increasingly untenable for the higher education sector not to be able to demonstrate which interventions have been instrumental in delivering the genuine progress that has been made on access and retention, and which could have the most impact on the major challenges of differential attainment and progression. In addition, the development of a TEF and HEFCE's proposals for future approaches to quality assessment provide further impetus to the need to strengthen the evidence base.

54.     A key priority for HEFCE will, therefore, be to work with the higher education sector to develop an outcomes framework which, as well as robustly evaluating the effectiveness of activity across the student lifecycle, will also support the provision of indicators that could be used in quality assessment and possibly in a TEF. Institutions with the most diverse student populations and which are doing the most to deliver added value through their learning and teaching, will need to be equipped to demonstrate this if they are to provide assurance and to secure recognition of and reward for their work.

55.     The building blocks towards this include the pilot projects HEFCE is funding to develop measures of learning gain and our work to develop measures of social capital and agency, which are known to be vital components in developing an individual's capacity to take full advantage of future career opportunities, and thereby improve social mobility and productivity.

56.     In addition, there is work undertaken by other national bodies on which we can build. For example, the Higher Education Academy has for many years been actively engaged in researching inclusive learning and teaching, black and minority ethnic (BME) degree attainment, and retention and success. It has also used the evidence it has gathered through such work to support institutions through its Change Academy programme, which facilitates fundamental review of institutional approaches and strategies. This has offered a powerful tool to influence change, but it requires a systematic and strategic approach in order to scale up the evidence that is required in the sector now.

57.     HEFCE will seek to work with the Higher Education Academy to explore further how we might build on its work to date to build capacity in the sector.

58.    There are also lessons from approaches to evaluation in other sectors. The work that CFE Research undertook to develop the outcomes framework[16] identified a number of such initiatives. Key examples include the What Works Networks, which guide decision making in public services, and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), which works in the schools sector. Established by the Sutton Trust in partnership with the Impetus Trust, the EEF seeks to:

> 'break the link between family income and educational achievement. Its role is to identify, fund, develop, support and evaluate projects to raise the achievement of disadvantaged children in the country's most challenging schools. The EEF is particularly focussed upon innovation and scaling up interventions and projects that are cost effective and replicable. Part of its mission is to use robust evidence to help schools spend money effectively and to improve teaching resources for children from low income families'[17].

59.    Randomised control trials provide the most robust approach to evaluation, but there are ethical and practical challenges in establishing control groups in higher education. The research suggests, therefore, using administrative data to identify treatment and non-treatment groups as an alternative to randomised control trials, providing an ethical and straightforward approach which may be appropriate in some circumstances.

60.    Fundamentally, HE providers need to undertake more and better quality evaluations of their activity. HEFCE and institutions are aware of the scale of this challenge, and both are equally committed to meeting it.

## Developing an outcomes framework

61.    Working with academic economists, CFE Research identified the following objectives for evaluating student opportunity activity:

- to ensure that funding is appropriately spent (accountability)
- to enable an overall assessment of the difference to student and society outcomes that can be attributed to the investment in student opportunity (impact assessment)
- to demonstrate the value of any impact (return on investment)
- to identify differences between institutions' approaches to widening participation in higher education (WP) and see if these differences are associated with differential student outcomes (benchmarking)
- to establish the effect of different types of WP interventions (what works)[18].

62.    This yielded a conceptual framework (Figure 1) from which the researchers were able to build an evaluation framework comprising logic chains and an indicator bank for the associated inputs, resources, activities, outputs, outcomes and impact statements.
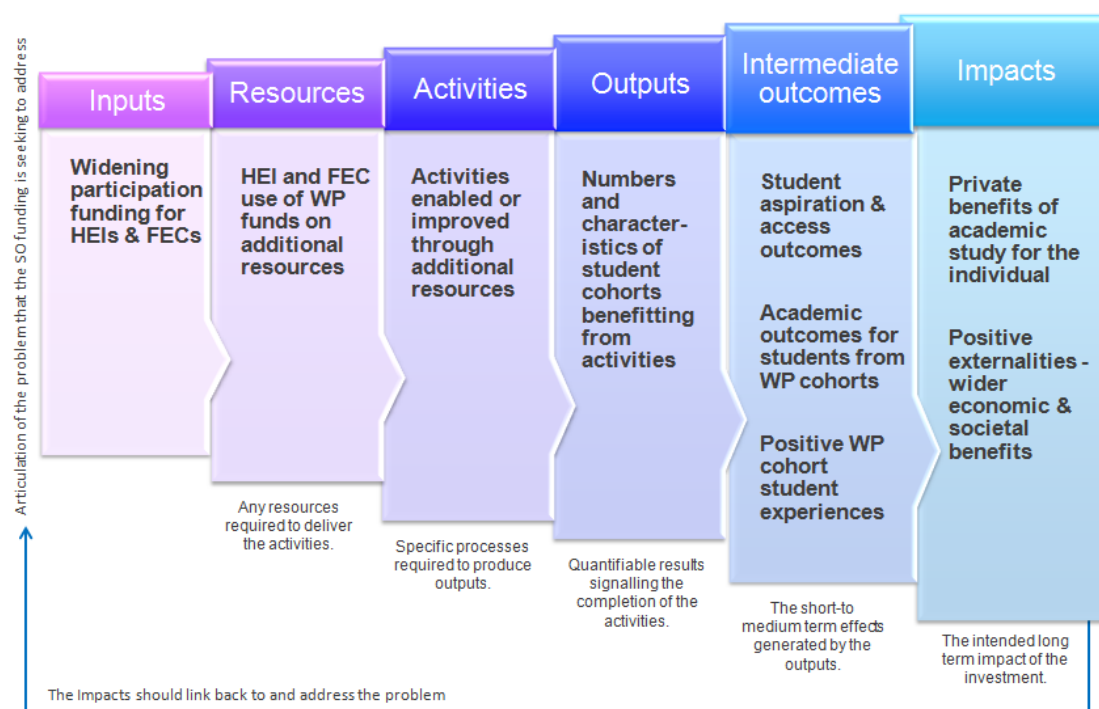
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[16] 'Student opportunity outcomes framework research: in-depth study', CFE Research, July 2015.

[17] ibid.

[18] ibid.

**Figure 1: Conceptual framework for evaluating widening participation**



Source: 'Student opportunity outcomes framework research: in-depth study', CFE Research, July 2015

63.    Having tested the logic chains and indicator bank with 25 case study institutions, CFE Research has been able to provide a comprehensive assessment of some of the key gaps and challenges for institutions in the development of robust, systematic and consistent evaluation frameworks.

64.    It is clear from the CFE Research work that, to be effective, the outcomes framework will need to comprise a number of elements and different types of data and evidence. It would include:

- data returns to demonstrate accountability for funds invested but also, if used longitudinally and in conjunction with other data sets, as part of an assessment of what works

- existing and new performance indicators

- qualitative research to understand how and why different interventions work at the local level and explore some of the more intangible benefits of widening participation beyond the economic impacts

- expansion of individualised tracking data to provide the foundation for evaluating what works

- randomised controlled trials and counterfactual studies where possible and appropriate for new interventions or innovations to existing approaches as these provide the strongest evidence of impact and what works

- matching of data from school, through HE, to graduation and into work will enable better quality evaluations of what works, impact assessment and estimation of return on investment.

65. Figure 2 illustrates how these different elements would work across the conceptual framework in Figure 1.

**Figure 2: Evaluative techniques and the levels of the evaluation framework that they can provide evidence towards**
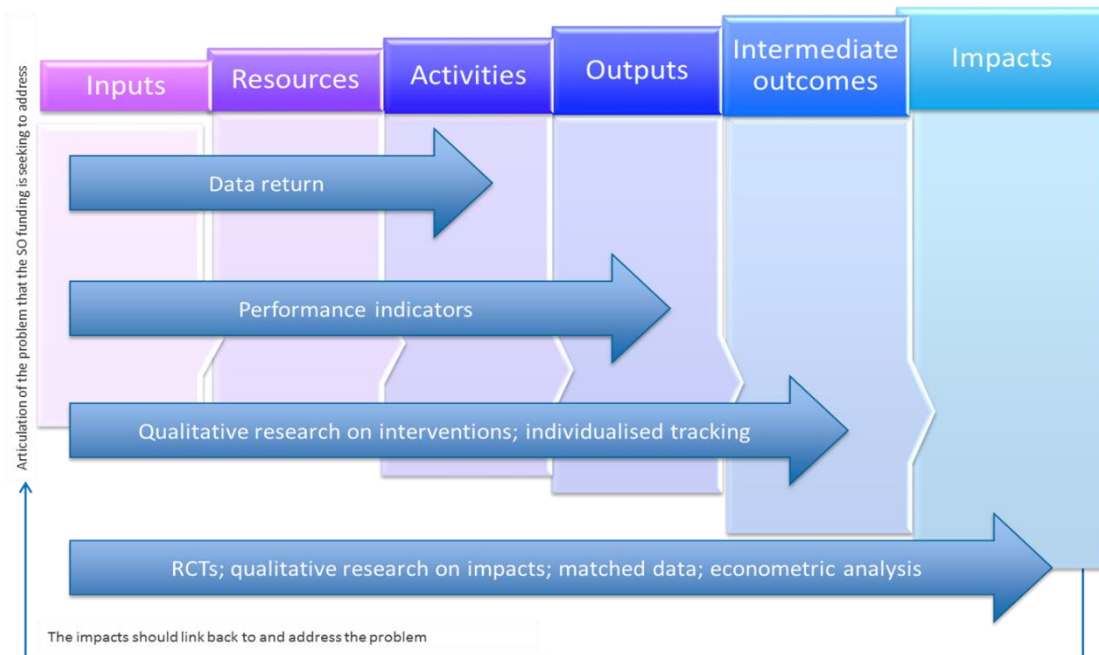


Source: 'Student opportunity outcomes framework research: in-depth study', CFE Research, July 2015

## What HEFCE will do

66. HEFCE will continue to collect data from institutions on how they invest public funding and their fee income in activity to widen access, improve retention and success, and support progression to further study or graduate employment. But we will do so in a manner that enables the returns to be married with other data sets to enable a fuller assessment of the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of activity, in line with the outcomes framework above.

67. HEFCE will work with OFFA to ensure that there is a consistency of approach to our respective data returns and minimise duplication and burden on the sector, and with other national bodies such as the Higher Education Academy to build on existing work and significantly increase the volume and quality of evaluation activity in the sector.

68. HEFCE will work with institutions, Government and experts in the field on the development of indicators and approaches that recognise the added value that institutions deliver to diverse groups of students, which may be used in the future quality assessment system and the TEF. This will build on the learning gain pilots and the exploratory work currently being undertaken within HEFCE on developing measures of social capital and agency, and it will be consistent with the imperative for institutions to review indicators and practice in their own context as set out in

the Quality Assessment Review currently being undertaken by HEFCE and the HE funding bodies in Wales and Northern Ireland.

69.    HEFCE will make it a condition of grant for any new initiatives it funds that all projects are robustly evaluated using rigorous research methods, including randomised controlled trials or counterfactual studies where appropriate.

70.    HEFCE will continue to explore how national data sets can be further 'mined' to assess the impact of HE on UK productivity and society more broadly, and where the commissioning of further national research and sector-wide analysis is needed.

71.    HEFCE will work with institutions to understand how existing data collections and management information can more effectively be used in their evaluation of activity and interventions, particularly with regard to students' success and progression.

72.    HEFCE will continue to encourage institutions to join the HEAT network in order to benefit from the robust tracking service HEAT provides with respect to institutions' outreach activity.

73.    HEFCE is committed to creating a robust, sector-wide evidence base so that future investment and support are directed to activity that delivers the greatest benefits to students, the economy and society. HEFCE is due to deliver further information and guidance to the sector on this in autumn 2015.

## Addressing differential outcomes from HE study for different groups

74.    The report looking at the causes of differences in student outcomes[19] (referred to as 'the student outcomes report' in this report) was prompted by analysis undertaken over a number of years that had shown clear and persistent unexplained differences in degree attainment, progression to postgraduate study and progression to graduate employment for particular groups of students. The groups affected are students from BME groups, students from more disadvantaged backgrounds[20] and disabled students not receiving Disabled Students' Allowance.

75.    Figure 3 shows how students from certain ethnic minority groups achieve significantly lower outcomes (in terms of degree completion, level of degree, progression into further study or employment, and progression into further study or graduate employment) than expected once influencing factors such as entry qualifications, sex, and subject area of study have been taken into account. It should be noted that where bars in the graph are shaded the difference observed is not statistically significant.

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[19] 'Causes of differences in student outcomes', King's College London, ARC Network and the University of Manchester, July 2015.

[20] As measured by POLAR3.

**Figure 3: Percentage point difference of the outcome from the sector-adjusted average for all four outcomes, split by ethnicity**
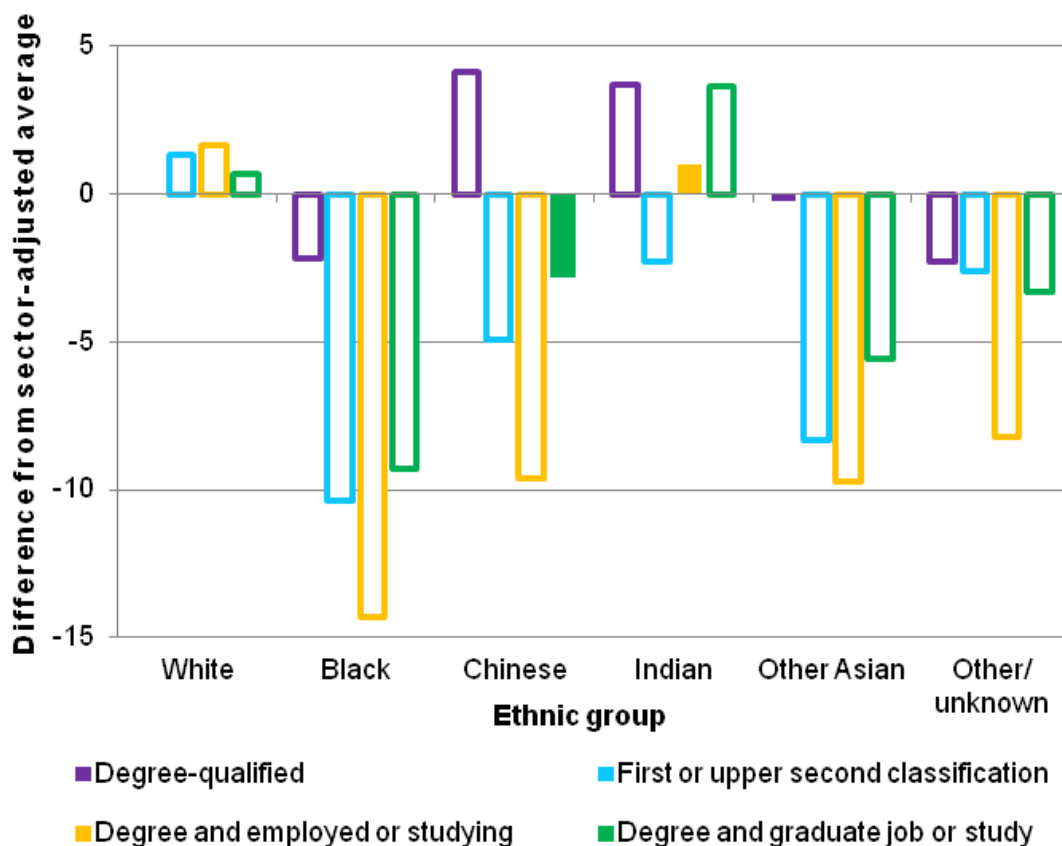


Source: Higher education and beyond: differences in full-time, first-degree outcomes, HEFCE 2013/15

76.    The research, undertaken by Kings' College London, ARC Network and the University of Manchester, investigates the causes of these differences in outcomes and suggests that there are four causal explanations:

a.    **Students' experience** in HE of their learning, teaching and assessment – the 'curriculum' in the broadest sense.

b.    **The relationships** that underpin students' experience of HE: that is, relationships among students and in their institutional environment, and with staff, all of which can either support or detract from the quality of the learning experience. In particular, if students do not have good relationships with their institution and academics, this can lead to disengagement, dissatisfaction, lack of motivation, lack of productivity and possible withdrawal.

c.    **Psychosocial and identity factors** which might limit learning and attainment, such as academics' expectations of students and students' of themselves. These may be highly

individual, although there is some evidence of 'groupthink' or 'folk pedagogies' within particular student groups[21].

   d.   **Cultural and social capital**, familial contexts and material resources of students, as well as their options for extra-curricular activities and support. These factors can affect the learning experience of students and their engagement with learning.

77.   A key theme arising from this analysis is the centrality of excellent learning and teaching to addressing differential outcomes, with particular attention paid to issues of inclusive curricular, learning and teaching and student engagement.

78.   The Higher Education Academy defines inclusive learning and teaching as that which:

> 'recognises all students' entitlement to a learning experience that respects diversity, enables participation, removes barriers and anticipates and considers a variety of learning needs and preferences. Inclusive learning takes into account educational, cultural and social background and experience, physical or sensory impairment and mental well-being'[22].

79.   The student outcomes report finds that an inclusive curriculum features prominently in accounts of engagement and recommendations to promote the attainment of ethnic minority groups. It also identifies a range of practical strategies being developed in the case study institutions. For example, one of the case study institutions has undertaken an inclusive curriculum audit which:

> 'identified the need for flexibility in the way that teaching was organised, the anticipation of prior knowledge, accessible language and clarity of documentation such as assignment briefs, the induction of students into unfamiliar pedagogies and incorporating student involvement in curricular design'.

80.   It also finds examples of innovative, cross-disciplinary collaborative approaches that had been developed to explore race and ethnicity in the curriculum.

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**Case study example: Supporting academics as change agents**

The University of Derby's Student Attainment Project, which addresses differences in the degree attainment of BME students and students from lower socio-economic groups, has concentrated on the development of tools and resources that academics can adapt and apply to their teaching contexts alongside new approaches to student communications and transition pedagogies[23].

Having rich data on the BME attainment gap at course and module level focused attention on the need to develop interventions that could narrow inequalities in attainment between student

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[21] In his book, The Culture of Education (1996), Jerome Bruner speaks of 'folk pedagogy'. This refers to how the way parents and others instruct or influence children is determined to a great extent by their implicit assumptions about how children learn and are to be taught. Many such assumptions, and practices tied in with them, are reflected in common folklore as well as overt behaviours. However, some assumptions go deep and form attitudes and prejudices, and are not overt so not always easily detected.

[22] See https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/workstreams-research/themes/retention-and-success/inclusive-learning-and-teaching.

[23] See https://uodpress.wordpress.com/.

groups. The starting point of the approach at Derby was to collect existing examples of practices and practical tools that can be applied within teaching and learning. The project draws on research and experiences from across the sector concerning disparities in attainment, including consultation with other universities. The methodology is based on the view that the most successful initiatives work incrementally and need to encompass a range of different interventions, each of which targets a particular hurdle for some students.

The learning and teaching interventions are collated into an 'easy to digest' format which is widely communicated across the institution via the staff intranet, internal events, and as part of the annual course review process. The current suite of materials is in the form of 'recipe cards' designed as a resource pack for tutors to use with students. It is a 'pick and mix' selection of activities, with 'recipes' currently on digital literacy; assignment checklists; inclusive pedagogy; information literacy; a guide for students on plagiarism; professional behaviour in the classroom; professional behaviour for placement students; study skills; tips for academic writing; tips for providing feedback; unconscious bias; understanding students; and activity for understanding assignments. Academics can download and adapt these interventions to suit their own course and for their students.

The range of initiatives to address under-performance in the Student Attainment Project is designed to benefit all students, with the expectation that some will benefit more (especially BME students and those students who may be first in their family to enter HE). The approach seeks to avoid the marginalisation of particular student groups. This commitment to inclusivity helps to ensure that in addressing the attainment gap, negative expectations about performance that may reinforce disadvantage are avoided. The 'Fit to Submit: Assignment Checklist' resource has proved most popular, and is readily transferrable between subjects. The benefits are in giving academic staff open access to some practical tools that can be adapted and used easily.

81.     The report identifies a number of examples of work being undertaken to bring more cultural and social sensitivity into the learning and teaching experience of their students. However, even within institutions, such work tended to be patchy and often reliant on individual members of staff. It also found that some subject areas were further advanced in the development of more inclusive curricula than others. Substantial revisions to curricula were, for example, more often observed in the social sciences 'where academics already had an interest in race, gender, social class and issues of inequality and social justice'[24].

82.     In addition, the report recognised the importance of engaging and involving students but noted that the extent to which students were involved varied widely, as did the method of such involvement. Although not covered in the report, consideration also needs to be given to the expectations on students themselves and the clarity of those expectations. Inclusive learning and teaching environments place a responsibility on both staff and students to engage positively and productively with all involved, recognising and respecting differences in culture and backgrounds, and creating a professional ethos in which all students are expected to engage fully with their own learning.

83.     The somewhat piecemeal approach to activity to address differential outcomes is a feature throughout the report. It notes that making significant progress requires culture change within

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[24] 'Causes of differences in student outcomes', King's College London, the University of Manchester, ARC Network, July 2015.

institutions: 'Whole institution approaches succeed when they combine "bottom-up" interventions with embedded strategic, senior support. Such approaches are likely to have more impact than any one individual approach or policy'[25].

84.    There is however, a further issue to consider. Much of the activity that the report has uncovered relates to attainment outcomes at the undergraduate level, with very little reported in terms of progression to postgraduate study and employment. Yet analysis by HEFCE and others[26] has clearly highlighted the different patterns of participation at the postgraduate level and the unexplained differences in employment outcomes for different groups.

## Postgraduate study

85.    With regard to postgraduate study, HEFCE's analysis[27] demonstrates that students from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds, who were less likely to have entered UG studies, were then less likely to progress to taught masters and postgraduate research courses, and this gap has grown across the decade. This situation is, however, reversed for 'other' shorter cycle postgraduate courses leading to certificates and diplomas, many of which are publicly funded. Figure 4 shows one-year transition rates of young full-time first-degree qualifiers at English higher education institutions (HEIs) to postgraduate (PG) courses split by low POLAR quintiles and type of PG study.

86.    Differences are also observed when looking at intentions to undertake postgraduate study compared to actual rates of PG participation. The intentions after graduation survey (IAGS) is part of the National Student Survey of final year undergraduate students and it asks whether students intend to undertake postgraduate study. Figure 5 shows how actual rates of participation appear to be affected by level of disadvantage[28] and age.

87.    These patterns, coupled with concerns about the impact of the 2012 undergraduate fees reforms, provided the basis for HEFCE's Postgraduate Support Scheme, which has tested different methods of addressing barriers to postgraduate progression between 2013 and 2015, working with 40 institutions and supporting more than 2,000 students. They also inform a growing programme of work on postgraduate research.

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[25] ibid.

[26] See 'Understanding the recruitment and selection of postgraduate researchers by English higher education institutions', Vitae, CRAC and iCeGS, September 2014, and Wakeling, P and Kyriacou, C (2010). Widening Participation from Undergraduate to Postgraduate Research Degrees: A Research Synthesis. NCCPE and ESRC.

[27] 'Trends in transition from first degree to postgraduate study: Qualifiers between 2002-03 and 2010-11' (HEFCE 2013/13).
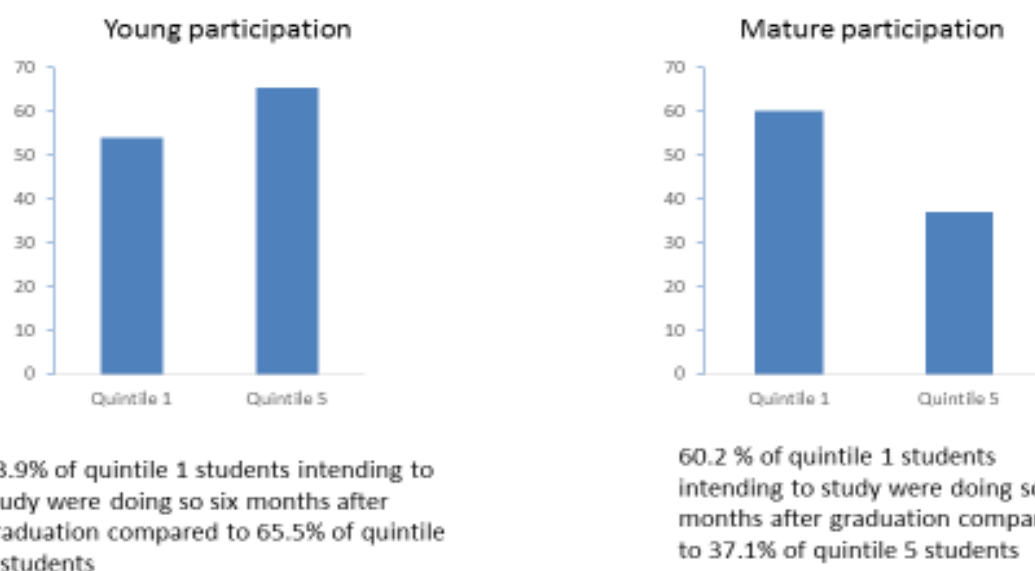
[28] As measured by POLAR3.

**Figure 4: One-year transition rates of young full-time, first degree UK qualifiers at English HEIs to PG courses split by high and low POLAR quintiles and type of PG study**
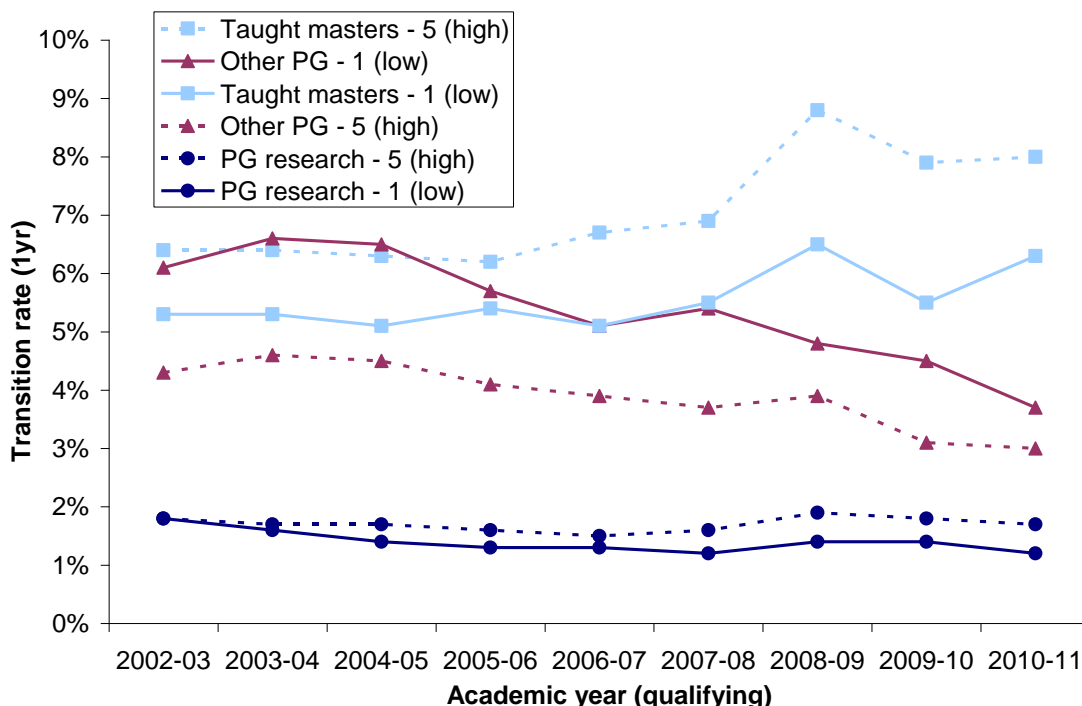


Source: 'Trends in transition from first degree to postgraduate study: Qualifiers between 2002-03 and 2010-11' (HEFCE 2013/13)

**Figure 5: Stated intention to progress to postgraduate study by actual progression to postgraduate study**



Young participation

53.9% of quintile 1 students intending to study were doing so six months after graduation compared to 65.5% of quintile 5 students

Mature participation

60.2 % of quintile 1 students intending to study were doing so six months after graduation compared to 37.1% of quintile 5 students

Source: HEFCE analysis of intentions after graduation survey, part of the National Student Survey, 2013

88.    An example of one of the projects is provided below.

> **University College London: Evaluating Mechanisms to Attract and Retain Under-Represented PGT students**
>
> UCL's comprehensive project focussed principally on providing scholarships to under-represented categories of students, but also incorporated some outreach work, research and mentoring activity.
>
> Scholarships were available across a total of 34 programmes – it was planned to provide awards for 10 per cent of the qualifying cohort on each course. Eligibility was based on financial measures, drawing on undergraduate financial assessments (although other WP factors were also taken into account).
>
> A set of outreach activities, including a summer school, were offered, tied to particular departments or programmes. The disciplinary focus arose from the different problems affecting disciplines. In some there was an absolute participation issue for UK students (for example informatics); in others there was a need to open up access to those without financial support.
>
> Mentoring support was focussed in Brain Sciences where mentors helped out with visit days, applicant contact and induction.
>
> Finally funding was also directed to a hardship fund for childcare costs (for postgraduate taught (PGT) student parents) and supported data collection and analysis about the scheme.

89.    With regard to postgraduate research (PGR), the picture is complex. A study undertaken for HEFCE to understand the recruitment and selection of postgraduate researchers[29] finds that a number of systemic issues create challenges for the effective engagement of postgraduate researchers. The report cites the range of different funding bodies involved; institutional scholarship schemes; and an extensive market in self- and employer-funded activity as all contributing to a complex set of arrangements that might be particularly difficult for those without the family and social networks to support PGR study to navigate. The report argues that 'the combination of this systemic complexity with the higher debt levels of recent graduates raises a number of social equity issues that have led some to question whether a "widening participation and access" agenda is needed in relation to PGR study'.

90.    The report goes on to suggest that:

> 'Wakeling and Kyriacou (2010) and Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson (2013) have explored these issues further, concluding that there is evidence of disparities in the recruitment of certain groups. They make the argument that it is possible to identify issues with representation at postgraduate level relating to gender, ethnicity and

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[29] 'Understanding the recruitment and selection of postgraduate researchers by English higher education institutions', Vitae, CRAC and iCeGS, September 2014.

social class, although they did find that prior attainment appears paramount in entry to a research degree'[30].

## Employment outcomes

91.    Disparities in the employment outcomes for students from different groups affect productivity by limiting human capital development and harm life chances by limiting social mobility.

92.    As with degree outcomes, HEFCE analysis[31] has shown unexplained differences in progression outcomes. Figure 6 shows the degree attainment and progression outcomes for students from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Figure 6: Percentage point difference of the outcome from the sector-adjusted average for each of the four outcomes, split by POLAR3 quintile**
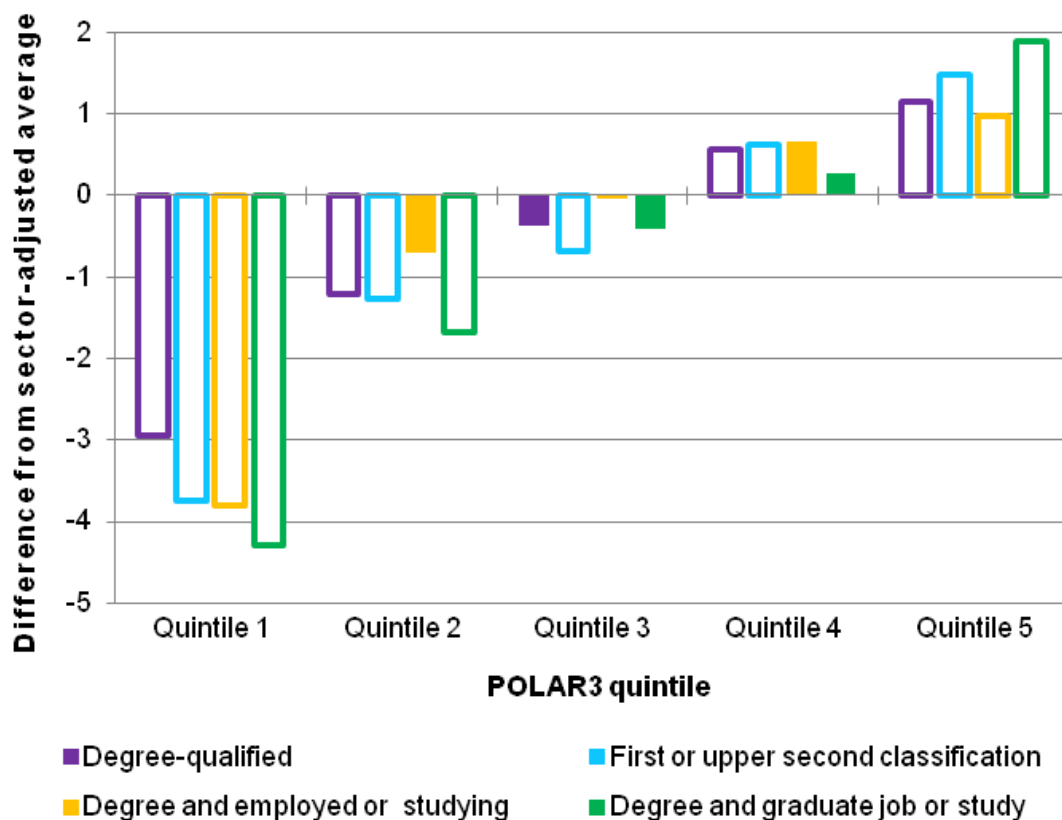


Source: Higher education and beyond: differences in full-time, first-degree outcomes, HEFCE 2013/15

93.    As Figure 6 shows, graduates from the most disadvantaged background (represented in the graph as those in POLAR quintiles 1 and 2) perform significantly below the sector average for all outcomes, including progression into employment or graduate employment, once factors such as qualification on entry, subject area of study and age have been taken into account.

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[30] ibid.

[31] 'HE and beyond: outcomes from full-time, first degree study', HEFCE, July 2013.

94.    Further analysis of the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education data by HEFCE shows how differences in employment and further studies outcomes have persisted over time. Figure 7 provides a time series for the proportions of graduates in professional employment or further study split by white students and students from BME groups.

**Figure 7: Proportions of graduates in professional employment or further study split by ethnicity**
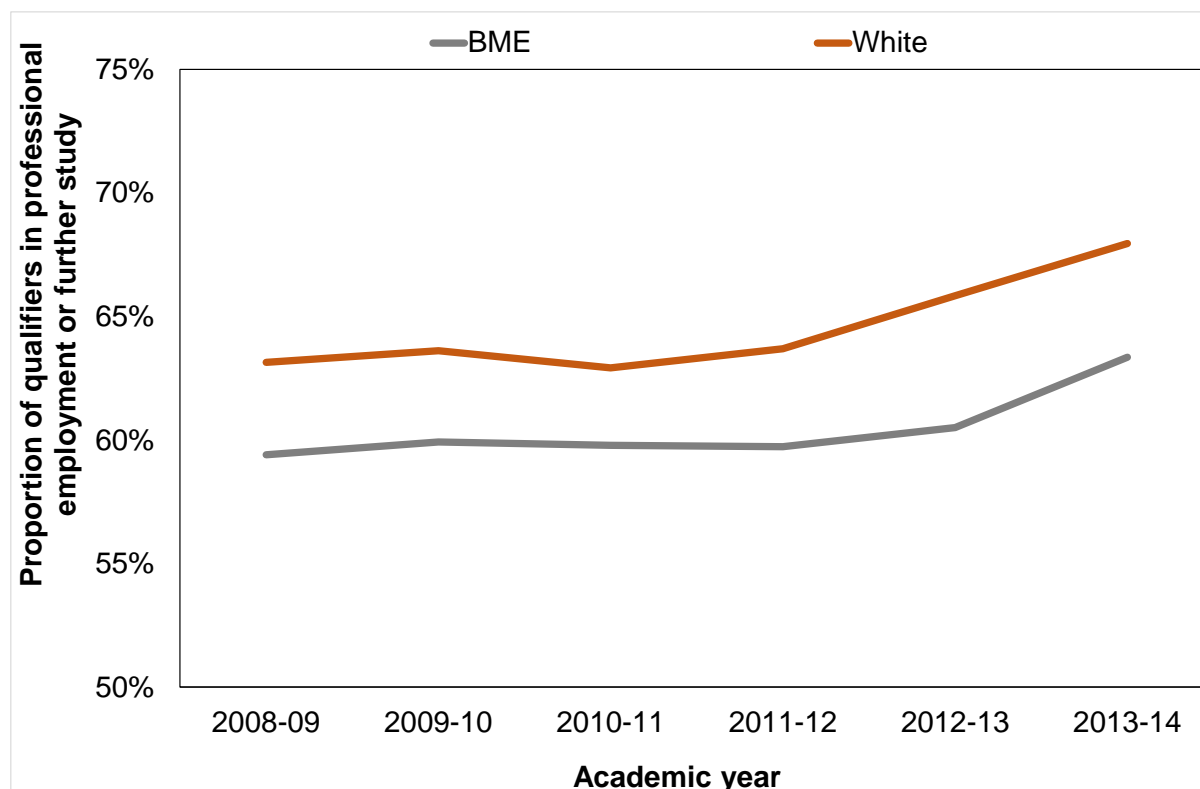


Source: internal HEFCE analysis of HESA Destination of Leavers from Higher Education 2008-09 to 2013-14 (UK-domiciled, full-time first degree qualifiers from English publicly funded HEIs)

95.    We can see a similar pattern when comparing the same outcomes for graduates from POLAR3 quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) and POLAR3 quintile 5 (most advantaged).

96.    Part of the explanation of different employment outcomes undoubtedly lies in the recruitment practices of employers. The Graduate Market in 2013 survey[32] found that a quarter of employers specified a minimum UCAS tariff when recruiting graduates, ranging from 260 to 340 points (the equivalent of BCC to AAB at A-level). This had risen from 2012, when the range was 240-320 UCAS points. The Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) Graduate Recruitment Survey 2013[33] put the proportion of employers requiring a minimum UCAS tariff even higher, at 35.3 per cent.

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[32] High Fliers Research Limited "The Graduate Market in 2013: Annual review of graduate vacancies & starting salaries at Britain's leading employers" (2013) (www.agcas.org.uk/agcas_resources/419-the-graduate-market-in-2013).

[33] CFE 'The AGR Graduate Recruitment Survey 2013' (2013).

**Figure 8: Proportions of graduates in professional employment or further study split by POLAR3 quintiles 1 and 5**
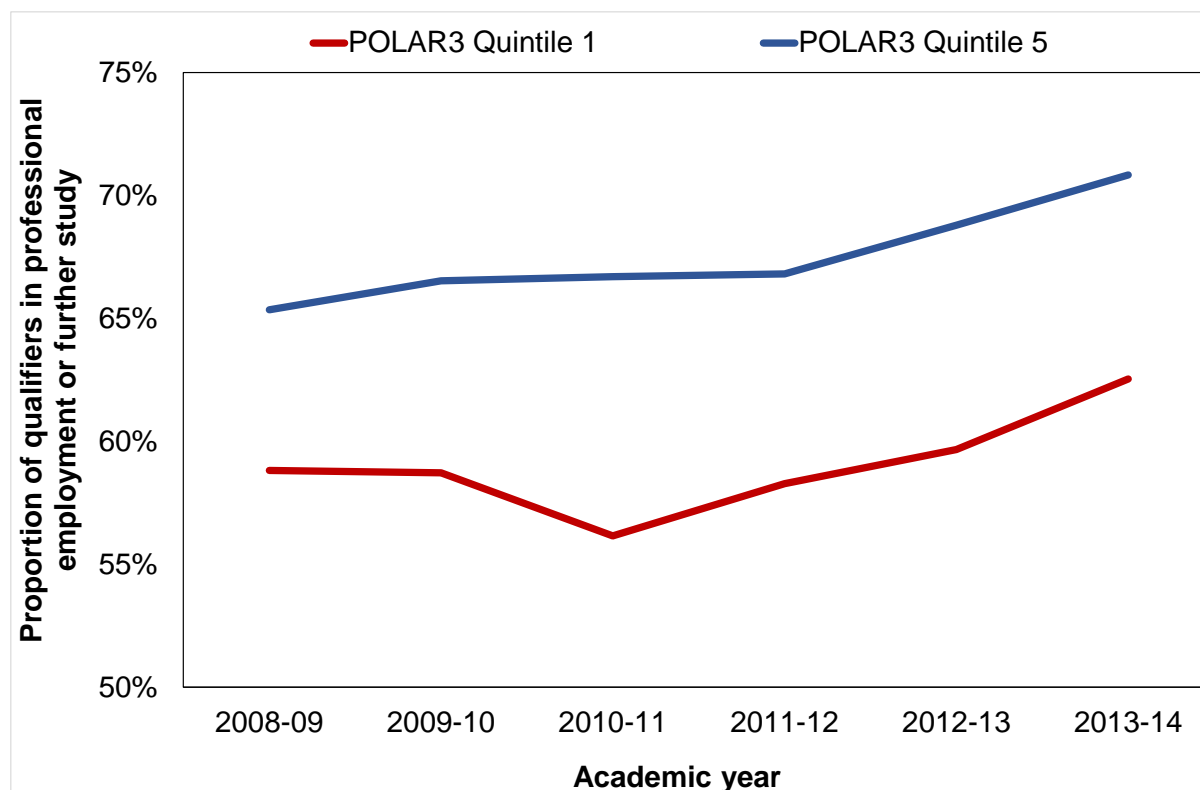


Source: internal HEFCE analysis of HESA Destination of Leavers from Higher Education 2008-09 to 2013-14 (UK-domiciled, full-time first degree qualifiers from English publicly funded HEIs)

97.    The use by employers of a minimum UCAS tariff as part of recruitment requirements potentially downplays the academic achievements of students whilst at university. Research from Hoare and Johnston (2011)[34], has demonstrated that by carefully considering contextual factors, applicants from schools in more disadvantaged areas could be accepted with between one and two A-level grades lower than those from more advantaged backgrounds and perform at least as well as their more advantaged peers entering with higher UCAS tariff points.

98.    The AGCAS/AGR Graduate success project research[35] looked at the practice of employers targeting their recruitment efforts at particular institutions, and found that this has implications both for those institutions that are targeted and those that are not. It potentially affects institutional cultures, creating a small number of favoured institutions at which student expectations will be very different. The favoured institutions are more likely to be those that attract higher proportions of advantaged students, which may lead to the entrenchment of such advantage in terms of the characteristics of the students both applying to such institutions and advancing to certain types of employment.

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[34] 'Widening participation through admissions policy – A British case study of school and university performance', Hoare, A G and Johnston, R, 2011 in Higher Education Quarterly. 36, pp21-41.

[35] 'AGCAS/AGR Graduate success project: an investigation of graduate transitions, social mobility and the HEAR' Martin Pennington, Emma Mosley and Robbie Sinclair (2013) (www.agcas.org.uk/agcas_resources/575-graduate-success-project-report-an-investigation-of-graduate-transitions-social-mobility-and-the-hear).

99.   Graduate employability and the production of a skilled graduate workforce are key concerns for both students and the success of the nation's economy. Since the 2012-13 higher education reforms, there has been greater emphasis across higher education on delivering key employability skills to students, not least due to the importance of being able to demonstrate positive employment outcomes in a more competitive environment. The development of a TEF may add further impetus to this, for example, encouraging further integration of employability within the curricula and the use of employability tools to measure and support work-readiness, aspects of which will be tested through some of the learning gain pilots.

100.   Professional accreditation can also play a key role in improving employment outcomes for students. Recognising this, the Government has set up a review of accreditation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) which is operating alongside a separate review specific to Computer Science, within which student characteristics appear particularly to influence employment outcomes. The review, which HEFCE is supporting and will report later in 2015, is considering 'the extent to which computer science graduates might benefit from degree courses which feature increased employer engagement, more up-to-date course content and, where appropriate, increased levels of work experience, taking into account the particular characteristic of students and the industry'[36].

101.   The causes of differences in student outcomes report notes some interventions that are designed to improve employability of graduates through addressing social capital issues, and it cites examples of institutions working with employers to provide employer-student mentoring, shadowing, internships and mini-internships. It also notes that a number of large employers are exploring the use of contextual data in graduate recruitment, as well as alternative approaches which remove certain information about applicants in an attempt to remove unconscious bias. The most commonly cited intervention to be adopted to improve employment outcomes was mentoring. However, the researchers were unable to locate any robust evidence of the efficacy of this approach in improving employment outcomes, and this is an area which clearly needs further research.

## What HEFCE will do

102.   Much of the practice identified in the student outcomes report is concerned with the development of a more inclusive approach to learning, teaching, assessment and the overall student experience. It is clear from the report that there is not a 'one-size fits all' solution to the problem of differential outcomes. Rather, there is a need for institutions to develop strategic frameworks within which multiple interventions can be developed, tested and, if effective, embedded in their own context.

103.   This coheres with the context-specific approach on which HEFCE and the HE funding bodies in Wales and Northern Ireland are consulting through the Quality Assessment Review, and it is relevant to the developing TEF. HEFCE will, therefore, work with Government and the sector to support the development and take-up of systemic approaches to addressing differential outcomes, and to embed this within the evolving landscape of quality assessment and teaching excellence.

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[36] See www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newsarchive/2015/Name,102069,en.html for terms of reference of both reviews.

104. HEFCE is already piloting approaches to measuring learning gain and exploring approaches to understanding social capital and social agency, and we will build upon this to develop indicators that demonstrate institutions' success in supporting retention, attainment and progression for students from all backgrounds, extending from undergraduate to postgraduate study and into employment, and including the activities institutions undertake to prepare students for HE. In doing so, we will need to ensure that any such measures do not have unintended negative secondary consequences.

105. Any work HEFCE undertakes and supports to address differential outcomes must be able to:

- drive innovation and share the risk with institutions of developing and testing new approaches

- ensure that outputs and lessons learned are shared and acted upon across the sector

- ensure that innovative and novel approaches supported by HEFCE are rigorously evaluated to establish their effectiveness and impact

- ensure that work is undertaken within the context of developing a nuanced approach to assuring teaching quality and rewarding teaching excellence.

106. With these principles in mind, HEFCE will develop a programme to support institutions in the development and rigorous testing of interventions to address differential outcomes.

107. HEFCE will work in partnership with other agencies such as the Higher Education Academy, building on its Change Academy programme, to help institutions achieve the shifts in culture necessary to lead to long-term sustainable improvements in student outcomes.

108. Taking into account improvements in retention across the last decade, HEFCE will continue to make the case for a student premium to support institutions in maximising the retention and success of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, building on the advances secured to date. This will enable all institutions to continue to improve existing approaches or develop or adopt new approaches that will maximise the outcomes for students who are particularly at risk of not reaching their full potential or of withdrawing from HE entirely.

109. HEFCE is due to publish the findings of the Postgraduate Support Scheme in September 2015 alongside the findings of survey work with institutions on the factors influencing postgraduate research patterns. We will use these findings to identify with Government and the sector the activities and funding approaches needed to maximise progression during the coming years, building on the outcomes from the Government's postgraduate consultation[37].

## Provision and support for disabled students

110. The review of provision and support for disabled students has shown that some of the biggest challenges facing institutions are: increasing demand for services; proposed changes to the way in which funding is delivered to support disabled students; moving to a social model of support; working with external agencies; and increased pressure on resources.

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[37] 'Consultation on Support for Postgraduate Study', BIS, March 2015.

111.   Increasing demand is particularly acute in terms of the numbers of students presenting with mental health problems. The IES report looking at support for students with mental health problems or intensive support needs notes that the number of students presenting with a mental health problem increased by 130 per cent across the sector between 2008-09 and 2012-13. Figure 9 illustrates this increase.

**Figure 9: Number of students with declared mental health problems**



Source: Understanding provision for students with mental health problems and intensive support needs (July 2015)

112.   However, these increases were not uniform across the sector, with the largest increases on average among further education colleges (FECs), at 168 per cent, followed by HEIs with high average tariff scores, at 157 per cent, and the smallest increases among HEIs with low average tariff scores, at 104 per cent.

113.   With regard to the numbers of students declaring a specific learning difficulty (SpLD), although the rise in numbers has not been as dramatic as those presenting with mental health problems, the increasing numbers are significant and are from a much higher base. Students with SpLDs make up over 50 per cent of the disabled HE student population, with the numbers in the system increasing from just under 56,000 students in 2008-09 to over 74,000 in 2012-13.

114.   With regard to students with mental health problems, the research reveals that not only has demand increased, with staff citing consequent challenges of managing the mounting caseloads, but the complexity of cases has also increased, including more incidents of comorbidity of mental health problems alongside other impairments. Institutions also reported increases in the numbers of students requiring intensive support, such as those with sensory impairments or students with Asperger syndrome.

115. The report maintains that this increasing volume and complexity has:

> 'led to students needing and seeking help from a greater multiplicity of services, or placing greater demands on existing ones. Support required from the mental health mentor has more than doubled at one institution and there has been a 54 per cent increase in referrals to the counselling service over the past 12 months at another'.

116. The drivers of this demand are likely to be multi-faceted, and staff in the case study institutions cited a number of factors that could be at play in generating the increasing numbers of students declaring a disability and particularly declaring a mental health problem. These factors include:

- cultural changes in the general population leading to a more open attitude to mental health and a greater willingness on the part of students to seek help

- successful campaigns to reduce the stigma attached to mental health, with the caveat that there is more to be done to normalise mental health problems

- positive changes in the healthcare sector, whereby diagnostic procedures are thought to have improved and better treatment provided, enabling people to participate in HE

- negative changes in the healthcare sector, whereby barriers to referral and high NHS waiting lists result in institutions needing to increase the level of support they provide

- success of widening participation strategies in improving access to and success within HE for disabled students

- reputation of certain institutions, in terms of the support they are able to provide to students with particular impairments

- greater pressure on students while in HE, leading to the development of mental health problems during the period of study.

117. As with the differential outcomes work, inclusion is a central theme in the studies undertaken for the review of provision and support for disabled students. Across the two reports on disability, inclusion is framed within the adoption of the social model of disability, whereby the barriers to participation and success for disabled students are viewed as being constructed by society and thus in this context by the institution and its systems and processes, rather than a problem with the individual student. Part of the solution to this is seen to be the development of inclusive curricula and learning and teaching environments, and the restructuring of support. The review finds that this coheres with the more student-centred approach being taken in institutions since the HE reforms. The focus is on reducing bureaucracy and administrative costs, while freeing up resources for more value-added activity, and on providing support across the whole of the student journey, recognising the complexity of student lives and encompassing the whole experience, extending from academic engagement to study support, teaching in classrooms and joined-up support services[38].

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[38] 'Understanding provision for students with mental health problems and intensive support needs', IES, HEFCE 2015.

118.    The report from York Consulting on support for students with specific learning difficulties identifies a number of dimensions to the academic role in supporting students with SpLDs. These include:

- identification and referral of potential SpLD students

- providing active SpLD support while also acting as teacher, mentor, advisor and assessor

- communication with the central support team

- interpretation of support needs in terms of specific adaptations and learning styles in the context of the subject matter and the area of study

- communication and progress against SpLD objectives to both the central support team and the student.

119.    However, the report also highlights the tensions within institutions with regard to the inconsistency of academic engagement across faculties or schools. The report states that all of the case study institutions 'could refer to rogue departments or out of touch lecturing staff'. It also, though, acknowledges that these tensions are often two way, with academic staff sometimes frustrated that specific adaptations they are expected to make are 'too generic and fail to reflect either the subject matter or the prevailing teaching environment'.

120.    The IES study addressing support for students with mental health problems and intensive support needs also points to the multi-faceted role of academic staff. It highlights that:

> 'Members of staff with teaching responsibilities were identified as a key source of support because of their regular, and in some cases prolonged, contact with students………..Staff tasks covered formal responsibilities that were advertised to students as a service offered by the department as well as informal support that fluctuated according to student needs. The level and nature of support provided by teaching staff was influenced by their awareness of, and ease of dealing with, students with mental health problems or students with complex disabilities whose sensory or physical requirements were unfamiliar. Support was also shaped by prior experience (both personal and professional), their discipline and profession, and access to educational development and training'.

121.    A large proportion of the support provided to disabled students is through some form of student support service within institutions. As noted above, many of these student support units within the case study institutions had engaged, and in many cases still were engaging, in a restructuring process, often with a view to making the service more welcoming, accessible and holistic in the type of support it would provide across the student lifecycle. As the York Consulting study notes:

> 'in the majority of institutions the integration of SpLD support, and disability support more widely, is being driven by a range of factors beyond the moral, equity and legal responsibilities traditionally associated with disability support. This is a recognition of the benefits of seamless support that follows the student journey in a more holistic fashion and also drives economies of scale through improved management and delivery of efficiencies'.

122.   These student support units, however badged, are the main hub for facilitating and providing the support that students need. They are often engaged in extensive outreach and pre-entry activity to ensure that students are as prepared as possible for their transition into HE; they are then integral to the induction process for disabled students, very often undertaking a triage process with new entrants to assess needs and identify relevant support and sources of support (such as DSA). They:

- work with teaching staff on the development and delivery of learner support plans and the delivery of reasonable adjustments

- ensure that services are widely available and that there are multiple access points for the service

- ensure that students are given multiple opportunities to disclose a disability at any point throughout their course of study

- provide counselling and group sessions, and tailored support.

The IES study notes that due to the often sporadic nature of many mental health problems, support needs to be responsive and tailored to individual demand. It provides a case study from Bath Spa University to illustrate how institutions can respond to such challenges:

**Example of tailoring provision: Bath Spa University**

The university recognises that the causes of mental health problems are varied: they can include abuse; rape; academic stress; bereavement; home-sickness; identity issues; body image issues; and relationship problems. These can lead to short-lived, acute episodes that can peak at certain times of the year; or longer term problems or deep seated issues that students have always had and are living with. Thus the university offers a range of provision that can be tailored to the individual. They respond to individuals on a case by case basis. Student Support triage an individual, they would then be assigned to an appropriate lead specialist who would coordinate their provision. This would include matching students to advisers; and if the student could receive DSA, would involve matching them to DSA support workers; and also monitoring progress. A student's case or need can be categorised as high ('student of concern' who is flagged as such on student records), medium or low priority depending on the risk posed to themselves or others; and this can change over time. High priority students are fast tracked, and can get through to their coordinator straight away in emergency or crisis situations. These high risk students also have a care plan which sets out what to do in an emergency. This is helpful to wider university staff such as security staff who would deal with ambulances coming onto campus, and first aiders and residential advisors who provide out-of-hours support.

123.   It is within these services that issues of funding and pressures on resources are felt most keenly and staff expressed deep concerns about maintaining current levels of support in the light of the proposed decreases in funding provided through the DSA, coupled with the continued rise in demand for their services and support.

## Changes to the funding of support for disabled students

124.   The two reports on disability reveal that there are three key sources of funding for the support of disabled students. These are:

- DSA awarded to individual students following an assessment of need

- HEFCE SO funding, which contains an element within it specifically for the provision and support of disabled students

- Other institutional income, primarily tuition fee income from the broader student population.

125.   In April 2014, the then Minister for HE announced changes to DSA funding affecting the provision of IT equipment, certain categories of non-medical help and accommodation. The proposed changes to the provision of non-medical help were deferred until 2016-17 in a later ministerial statement, and then in March 2015 a further ministerial statement announced that the proposed changes concerning accommodation, peripherals and consumables were also to be deferred until 2016-17 after a period of consultation. Therefore, the only changes to be confirmed for 2015-16 were that new students entering HE in 2015 who are recommended and agreed to receive a computer through the DSA will be required to pay £200 towards the cost.

126.   The Government consultation on the proposed changes to DSA from 2016-17 was published in July 2015[39], with a deadline for responses of 24 September 2015. The key changes outlined in the consultation concern: DSA no longer being available for the provision of certain types of non-medical help; DSA no longer being available for the additional costs of specialist accommodation where that accommodation is owned and managed by the HE provider or its agent; DSA no longer being available for various computer accessories.

127.   It is important to note that it is the expectation of Government that the support outlined above, particularly in respect of the provision of non-medical help, will continue to be provided for students and that HE providers will be expected to cover the costs.

128.   With these proposed changes to DSA, even more of the cost of supporting students will be borne by institutions, which in most cases will necessitate an increased contribution to this cost from the fee income received from all students, essentially all students paying for some.

129.   This increasing pressure on resourcing is coming at a time when demand for services is increasing, particularly from students presenting with mental health problems, two-thirds of whom will not receive individual support through the DSA. The review has shown that institutions are already facing significant challenges in meeting the needs of such students, not least in building, maintaining and resourcing their relationships with the myriad external agencies with which they need to engage. While some institutions enjoy productive and strategic relationships with such agencies, others are reliant on more ad hoc relationships, often operating at the level of individuals. Institutions are also alive to the fact that many of the agencies they deal with are themselves subject to restricted budgets, which once again can put additional pressure on institutions' resources.

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[39] 'Consultation on targeting funding for disabled students in Higher Education from 2016/17 onwards', BIS, July 2015.

130.   There is a clear concern, therefore, that the balance of funding to support disabled students could shift too far towards a reliance on the fee income derived from the student population as a whole, which may result in institutions having to make increasingly tough decisions about who and what they can support.

## Inefficiencies in the current system

131.   The review identifies inefficiencies in the DSA, particularly in terms of the diagnostic processes, but also of the package of support that students receive. Support packages are perceived to be increasingly homogenous and not adequately to reflect the needs of individual students. In addition, there is a concern that the DSA package does not change over a student's period of study and so is unable to reflect changes in their circumstances.

132.   Indeed, the DSA process itself is seen to perpetuate the medical model of disability through its medicalisation of student needs and the individualised nature of the support provided. There is a sense, therefore, in the review that the funds could be deployed more effectively and efficiently.

133.   Staff within the case study institutions were often candid in their assessment that a move away from a reliance on the DSA model of support could catalyse efforts to develop more inclusive learning and teaching approaches. But this has to be balanced with ensuring that there are adequate resources available to facilitate that transition and, importantly, to enable institutions to continue to respond to individual and increasingly unanticipated needs.

## What HEFCE will do

134.   As HEFCE develops its approach to future funding and support for disabled students, we will work closely with Government with a view to ensuring that the models supported:

- deliver efficiencies in terms of public investment

- ensure that the costs of support for disabled students do not fall disproportionately on private funding through tuition fee income, but rather are appropriately balanced with public investment through HEFCE funds and the DSA

- invest in approaches with a demonstrable impact on student outcomes

- are informed by rigorous evaluation approaches and indicators that equip institutions to demonstrate, both to their students and through activities such as quality assessment and the TEF, the extent to which they are succeeding in maximising the outcomes for their disabled students.

# Addressing gaps in participation in HE

135.   As noted in paragraph 37, in his speech to Universities UK on 1 July 2015, the Minister for Universities and Science, Jo Johnson, reaffirmed the Prime Minister's goal to double the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds accessing HE by 2020 (compared with 2009). This is an ambitious goal, which will require a faster rate of growth in participation for these groups (somewhere between two and three percentage points per year for the most disadvantaged groups) than recent trends suggest (which currently stands at one percentage point per year for the most disadvantaged groups).

136.   However, HEFCE analysis has revealed that a more targeted approach, which focusses on those areas where HE participation rates for young people are lower than we would expect, might yield a further increase in HE entrants.

137.   The Government Productivity Plan[40] is clear that the country needs to draw on the talent of all people in order to increase the knowledge and skills necessary to increase productivity. In order to achieve this most effectively, the country needs to increase its human capital through greater levels of participation in higher education, which can then increase the flow of sufficiently skilled and knowledgeable people into the most dynamic parts of the economy and areas of need.

138.   As local anchor institutions, HE providers play a key role in their local areas in terms of: raising aspirations and broadening the talent pool through both young and older learners; increasing the capacity to support local productivity and make areas more competitive; and improving and sharing prosperity through the creation of better jobs, improved public services and improved quality of life.

139.   Young learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and older learners have a higher propensity for studying in their local areas and of remaining in those areas upon graduation, and are therefore key to the development of the human capital local economies need in order to increase productivity and secure those improved services and quality of life.

## Access: young participation

140.   An effective predictor of young HE participation rates in a given locality is its GCSE attainment rate. However, recent HEFCE analysis has shown that participation rates have increased to such an extent that they exceed the rates we would expect given GCSE attainment.

141.   Figure 10 shows the actual and expected participation levels based on attainment in schools (as defined by the proportion of the cohort gaining at least five A* to C grades at GCSE excluding equivalents).

142.   The analysis shows that, based on the most recent cohort of pupils for whom young HE participation can be measured (those who undertook Key Stage 4 (KS4) in summer 2009[41]), the young participation rate was 4 percentage points higher than the trends in GCSE attainment implied: actual HE participation was 38 per cent and expected HE participation 34 per cent. This equates to an additional 25,465 young people participating in higher education compared with historical rates prior to 2003-04, when HEFCE investment in this area began to approach current levels.

143.   Despite this significant progress, the gaps in participation between the most and least advantaged remain large.

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[40] 'Fixing the foundations: creating a more prosperous nation', HM Treasury, July 2015.

[41] 2009 is the most recent cohort available as this is the cohort who undertook GCSE or KS4 examinations in the summer of 2009, A-level or KS5 examinations in the summer of 2011, and potentially entered higher education at age 18 in academic year 2011-12, or at age 19 in academic year 2012-13. Figures for those who undertook GCSE or KS4 examinations in 2010 will be available later in 2015.

**Figure 10: Young participation above and beyond trends in GCSE attainment**
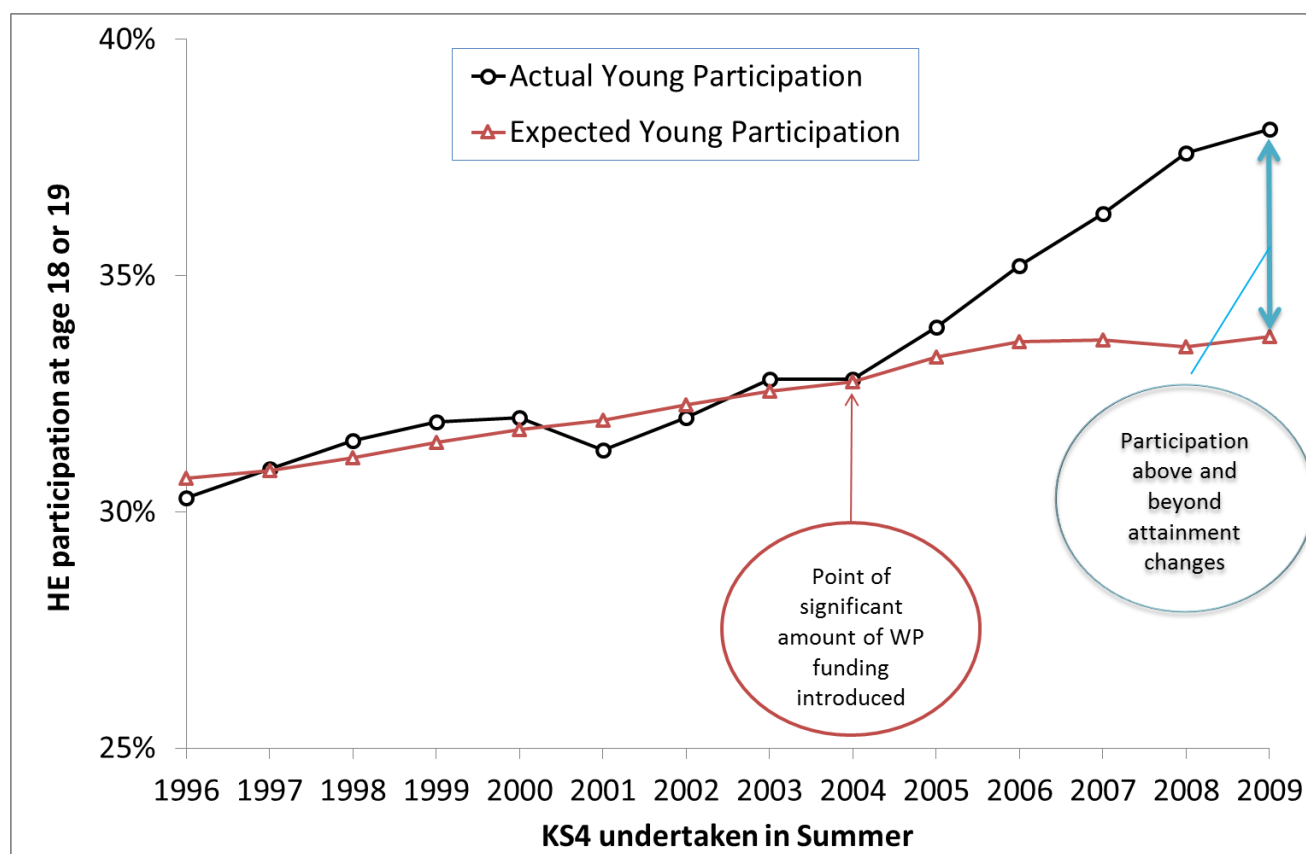


Source: HEFCE analysis of young participation data based on Trends in young participation in higher education, HEFCE 2013/28

144.   Figure 11 highlights the large remaining gaps in young HE participation between the most advantaged and disadvantaged in England. Econometric modelling shows that some of the difference is associated with the different school achievement of the children in these groups. However, there remains a significant gap that is not explained by attainment at KS4 or particular individual characteristics of the pupils[42].

145.   Gaps in young participation, therefore, persist between POLAR categories, and not all of the difference can be ascribed to prior educational attainment. Gaps are also apparent within POLAR categories, and these patterns of participation are not uniform across the country. While overall we have seen HE participation rates for students in the most disadvantaged areas rise above the level we might expect given GCSE attainment, there are areas where this is not the case.

146.   Recent work undertaken by HEFCE using the POLAR dataset has generated interactive maps, which have revealed geographical areas where progression rates for young people to HE are either lower or higher than expected given GCSE attainment profiles[43]. For example, the

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[42] This is based on young higher education participation of KS4 pupils in the maintained sector, as modelled using KS4 attainment, pupil gender, pupil ethnicity, predominant ethnicity of home area, whether the pupil received free school meals and the effects of cohort and year. Other unmeasured effects associated with the area the pupil lived in were also accounted for.

[43] See the HE cold spots in interactive maps at www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/gaps/.

maps show that in Sheffield, the Brightside constituency has a young HE participation rate of just 17 per cent, 2.5 percentage points lower than we would expect given the GCSE attainment rates in the constituency. This is in stark contrast to the Hallam constituency just a few miles away, whose young HE participation rate of 62 per cent is nearly 6 percentage points higher than expected.

**Figure 11: Trends in young participation for areas grouped by the proportion of children in lower-income households[44]**
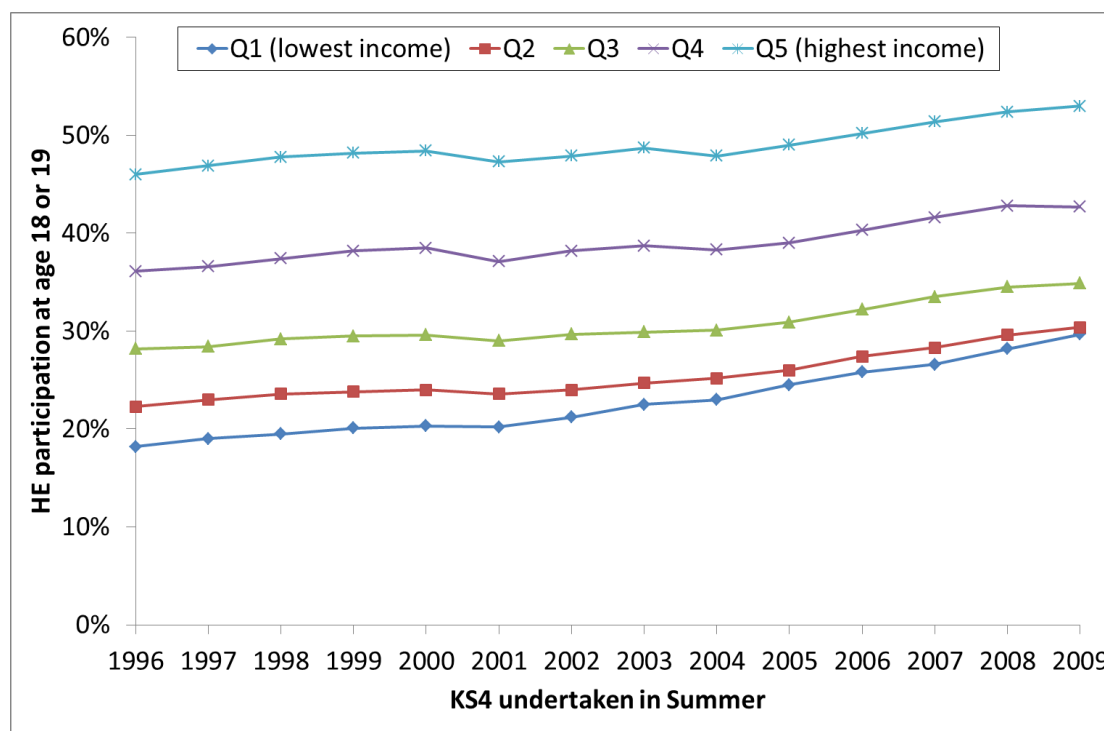


Source: Trends in young participation in higher education, HEFCE 2013/28

147.   With regard to access for young people, the analysis points to a clear need to target activity at those areas of the country where rates of HE participation are lower than expected given prior attainment rates. With the development of the HEFCE maps which identify these areas, coupled with recently published maps of school catchment areas and the infrastructure provided through the national networks for collaborative outreach (NNCOs), institutions have powerful tools at their disposal to deliver much more highly targeted and focused outreach activity.

## Access: mature participation

148.   While we have seen the overall participation rates for young people continue to increase, the same cannot be said for older learners[45]. Between 2010-11 and 2013-14, the numbers of

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[44] The chart goes to 2009, as the most recent KS4 cohort who may have entered HE is the cohort who undertook GCSE or KS4 examinations in the summer of 2009 and A-level or KS5 examinations in the summer of 2011, and potentially entered higher education at age 18 in academic year 2011-12, or at age 19 in academic year 2012-13. Figures for those who undertook GCSE or KS4 examinations in 2010 will be available later in 2015.

[45] Older learners are defined as students who are 21 years of age or over on entry to HE.

older learners in HE have continued to decline. Across undergraduate and postgraduate full-time and part-time provision for all UK and European Union students, the number of older learners has declined from just over 1 million learners in 2010-11 to under 800,000 in 2013-14 (from 54 per cent of students to 47 per cent)[46]. The most significant decline has been in the numbers studying part-time (although older learners continue to represent 92 per cent of all part-time learners). In 2010-11, the number of older learners studying part-time at undergraduate and postgraduate levels was just over 650,000. This had reduced to just under 445,000 by 2013-14.

149.   Figure 12 (taken from a HEFCE report looking into the economic and policy influences on part-time study) shows this decline plotted against full-time participation since 2002-03[47].

**Figure 12: Part-time and full-time entrants at undergraduate and postgraduate level, 2002-03 to 2013-14**
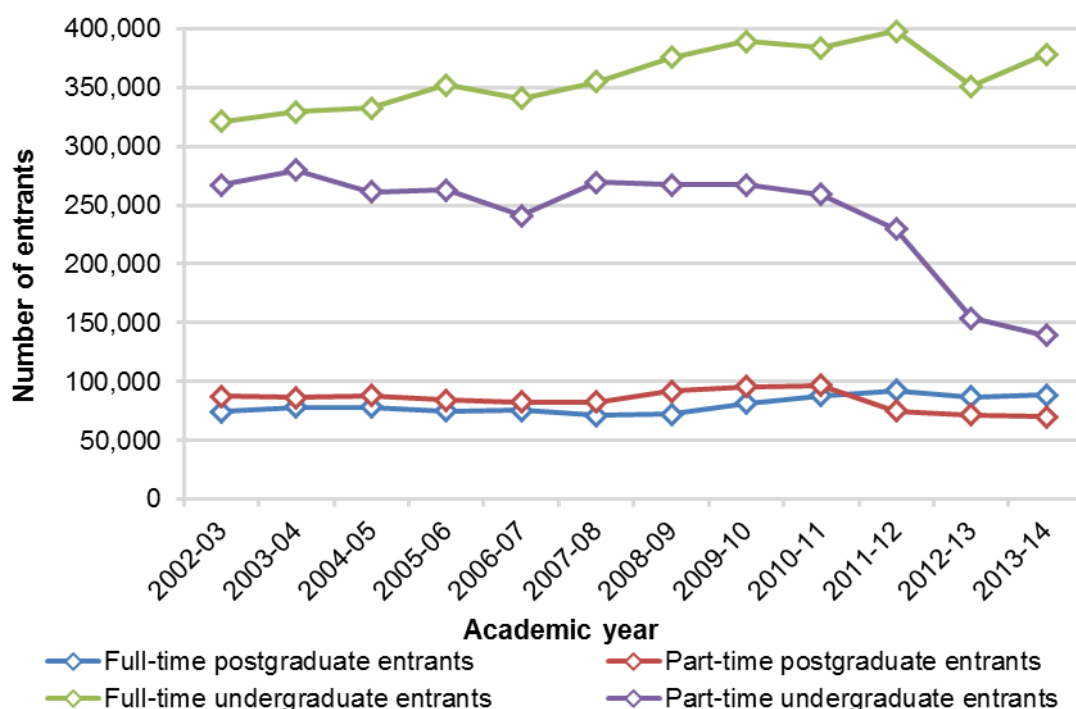


Source: Analysis of HESES and HEIFES data

150.   The same study finds that most of the part-time decline is concentrated in students registered at HEIs rather than FECs: the numbers registered and taught at FECs decreased by 15 per cent between 2010-11 and 2012-13, while those registered and taught at HEIs decreased by 38 per cent in the same period. Franchised provision has seen the greatest decline: entrant numbers registered at HEIs but taught at FECs saw a 59 per cent decrease between 2010-11 and 2012-13.

151.   The decline in part-time study results from a combination of supply-side and demand-side issues. Some of the reasons suggested for the reduction include: the absence of student loans

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[46] See the HEFCE equality and diversity data at
www.hefce.ac.uk/data/Year/2015/eddata/Title,104183,en.html.

[47] 'Pressure from all sides: economic and policy influences on part-time higher education' (HEFCE 2014/08d), www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201408d/.

for those studying for qualifications at an equivalent or lower level to ones they already hold; increased part-time fee levels and tuition fee loans resulting from the 2012 reforms to HE fees and funding; a contraction in the public sector, leading to a decline in employer-funded part-time provision; and HE providers electing to concentrate resources on full-time provision.

152. HEFCE conducted a survey in 2013 to explore HEIs' views of their top three opportunities and challenges in part-time study over the next three years. Factors cited as impacting on recruitment included fee increases, reduced support from employers, a lower level of publicly funded financial support compared with undergraduate full-time provision, and wider economic factors. In the survey, HEIs reported more opportunities for recruitment to undergraduate full-time courses than part-time courses. However, responses to a 2013-2014 survey of FECs, which asked the same questions, named undergraduate full-time and part-time recruitment from the UK as areas of recruitment opportunity with similar frequency.

153. The participation of older learners in HE is complex and requires consideration of supply-side and demand-side solutions. However, the role of FECs is clearly crucial, in terms of the provision of HE courses (whether franchised or direct) at the local level and also as partners in outreach specifically targeted at older learners. The NNCOs can provide a mechanism through which HEIs and FECs can work to engage with learners, support them into HE and contribute to local growth strategies. As part of the NNCO programme, the Open University, as well as continuing to play its crucial role as the UK's largest provider of part-time, distance learning HE, is running a national network that is specifically focusing on providing older learners with simplified advice and guidance on all the non-traditional routes to and through higher education. A continued strong partnership between HE and further education is vital, if the needs and aspirations of older learners are to be met and we are to ensure opportunities for people to engage in higher-level learning to update their skills, and maximise their productivity in the workplace and their contribution to society.

## What HEFCE will do

154. The NNCOs are currently funded until the end of the 2016-17 academic year. Networks are aware that their sustainability beyond this will depend on the value they deliver to their institutions. Networks should seek to demonstrate how they will work with their partner institutions more tightly to focus outreach activity for both young and older learners, drawing on the evidence which identifies localities in which participation is lower than anticipated.

155. Similarly, the Higher Education Access Tracker should continue its work to encourage more institutions to subscribe to the service. This will ensure that as many institutions and networks as possible are able to access high quality tracking information about the people they work with in their outreach programmes, with a view to providing the underpinning, individualised data they will need to enable them both to target their activity, and to conduct rigorous and robust evaluation.

156. HEFCE will continue to undertake high quality analysis of participation patterns, and will continue to present this analysis in an accessible and useful way for those within the networks and institutions to enable them to better target their activity.

157. HEFCE recognises that most HEFCE-fundable HE providers have access agreements with OFFA, in which they commit to spending a proportion of their undergraduate higher fee income (i.e. fee income above the basic level of £6,000 for full-time students and £4,500 for part-time

students) on access measures. It is also the case that after expenditure on financial support, the second largest category of spend is on activity to widen access into HE through outreach and other activity. In the latest monitoring of access agreements for the academic year 2013-14, institutions reported spending £92 million of their additional fee income on access activity and are predicted to spend progressively more on this activity over the next five years[48].

158.   As a consequence, any HEFCE funding for access activity must focus on those areas where public investment can add most value beyond that made by institutions. Therefore, any future HEFCE funding to institutions will be targeted at those areas where there are known to be unexplained gaps in participation for young people.

## Conclusion

159.   The research and analysis underpinning this report identifies the extent and nature of the challenges ahead, highlighting gaps in participation, unexplained differences in degree, employment and further study outcomes, and a progressively increasing gap between the support needs and funding of disabled students.

160.   This report has outlined an ambitious and focused programme for HEFCE and the HE sector. It aims to work with the grain of existing institutional endeavours to develop inclusive learning and teaching practices in order to maximise the outcomes of all students, but also to give that work greater strategic oversight and coherence so that it can deliver national progress.

161.   We recognise that if we are to maximise productivity and social mobility by securing the best possible outcomes for students, we must use the latest evidence to focus our investment and activities. This means securing a radical improvement in the indicators and evaluation approaches that institutions use to assess the effectiveness of their interventions and demonstrate what works. All of our activity to widen access, improve retention and success, and to support progression to further study and graduate employment must be underpinned by rigorous and robust evaluation and evidence of effectiveness and impact.

162.   New challenges and opportunities have arisen in recent months. The Government has set a challenging target to double the proportion of students from disadvantaged groups in HE by 2020 requiring the delivery of a faster rate of progress than historic trends have shown. In addition, the Government's Productivity Plan, and the new approaches being developed for quality assessment and teaching excellence, have the potential to provide new opportunities for institutions that are successful in maximising the outcomes for a diverse range of students to secure recognition and reward for their work.

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[48] 'Outcomes of access agreement monitoring for 2013-14', OFFA, June 2015.

# List of abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| **BIS** | Department for Business, Innovation and Skills |
| **BME** | Black and minority ethnic |
| **DSA** | Disabled Students Allowance |
| **EEF** | Education Endowment Foundation |
| **FEC** | Further education college |
| **HE** | Higher education |
| **HEAT** | Higher Education Access Tracker |
| **HEFCE** | Higher Education Funding Council for England |
| **HEI** | Higher education institution |
| **IAGS** | Intentions after graduation survey |
| **IES** | Institute of Employment Studies |
| **NNCO** | National networks for collaborative outreach |
| **OFFA** | Office for Fair Access |
| **PG** | Postgraduate |
| **PGR** | Postgraduate research |
| **POLAR** | Participation of Local Areas measure |
| **SpLD** | Specific learning difficulty |
| **STEM** | Science, technology, engineering and mathematics |
| **TEF** | Teaching Excellence Framework |
| **WP** | Widening participation in higher education |