

HEFCE November 2002/49

LSC Circular 02/23

Special initiative

Invitation to apply for funds

Regional HE/FE partnerships should submit strategic plans by 31 January 2003

This document sets out how the HEFCE and the LSC will implement a joint initiative to widen and increase participation in HE. It summarises responses to the consultation on the initiative, and invites regional HE/FE partnerships to submit strategic plans in order to release the funding. Funds total at least £60 million over three years. The document also reports on decisions relating to other HEFCE funds for widening participation for 2003-06.

Partnerships for Progression

Call for strategic plans to release funding

Learning + Skills Council

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Partnerships for Progression: call for strategic plans to release funding

To	Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions Heads of LSC-funded colleges Partnerships for Progression business planning leads (listed at Annex C) Other organisations and individuals listed at Annex A
Of interest to those responsible for	Widening participation, Learning and teaching, Strategic and corporate planning
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Executive summary

Purpose

1. Last year, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) consulted on the two Councils' proposals for a joint initiative – Partnerships for Progression (P4P) – which will address the Government's higher education participation target (HEFCE 01/73). This document sets out how we will implement the initiative in the light of the results of that consultation.

2. This document also reports on the decisions taken with regard to HEFCE widening participation funding for 2003-06.

Key points

3. The Government has set a target that, by the year 2010, 50 per cent of those aged between 18 and 30 should have the opportunity to benefit from higher education. Having consulted with the sector, the LSC and the HEFCE have decided to implement two strands of activity under the P4P initiative. These are:

- a. Supporting and extending partnerships between higher and further education (HE and FE), with dedicated staff to work with schools and FE and training providers, and a programme of regionally co-ordinated activities including summer schools, mentoring and shadowing.
 - b. A national programme of research, evaluation and dissemination.
4. The LSC does not intend to pursue separate strands to provide incentives for workplace learning and to raise quality standards, but will implement these through a combination of LSC baseline activity and an enhanced partnerships strand.
5. The HEFCE and the LSC will jointly provide a minimum of £60 million to the partnerships strand between April 2003 and March 2006. Each Council will contribute £10 million per year. We want to allow the maximum opportunity for partnerships to use funds flexibly and collaboratively, consistent with proper and secure accountability for funds. Partnerships should therefore treat the fund as a single source, with a single monitoring and accounting process, which will be routed through the HEFCE.
6. The HEFCE and the LSC have already provided funding to support the preparation of strategic plans, and we have identified a lead contact in each region who will take forward the response to this invitation (see Annex C, Table 3).

Action required

7. We invite the P4P business planning leads in each region to submit strategic plans to release these funds. Detailed guidance for preparing plans is at Annex C. Copies of strategic plans should be submitted in hard copy and via e-mail **by noon on 31 January 2003**.
8. Institutions and organisations which feel that they can contribute to the initiative should contact the P4P business planning leads. HEFCE regional consultants and lead LSC executive directors will be happy to support the partnering process. Their contact details are at Annex B.

Background

9. We live in a global knowledge-based economy, which demands a highly-skilled workforce. Economically successful countries are those that invest effectively in developing their citizens' skills and knowledge. Forecasts by the Institute for Employment Research show that between 1999 and 2010 the number of jobs in higher level occupations – the ones most likely to be filled by graduates – will grow by over one and a half million.¹ That represents 80 per cent of new jobs over the decade. The demand for graduates will continue to grow as the services and managerial/professional occupations in the economy grow. HE produces potential employees equipped with the skills required – both at degree and sub-degree level. If we do not supply this highly-skilled workforce, Britain's ability to compete in the global economy will be severely weakened.

10. We therefore need to unlock talent and potential in all sectors of society. However, at present young people from professional backgrounds are much more likely to enter higher education than those from unskilled and manual backgrounds. The gap between the top and bottom three social classes has remained at close to 30 per cent for the last five years. Well-qualified children from working-class backgrounds are less likely to stay in education after 16 than their middle-class peers, and less likely to try to enter higher education. It seems likely that this partly reflects differences in aspiration and perception. Both Councils have therefore agreed to take forward this P4P initiative to widen and increase participation in higher education.

Role of the HEFCE and the LSC in widening participation

11. The HEFCE has four strategic aims, one of which is widening and increasing participation in HE. A key objective for the HEFCE is to make measurable progress in increasing participation, compatible with the Government's target of 50 per cent of those aged 18 to 30 having some experience of higher education by 2010. This is achievable only if expansion is fully funded, and if planned improvements in staying-on rates and student attainment in schools and further education are achieved, together with an increase in student demand.

12. The LSC's published mandate is to encourage learning in the post-16 sector, and to ensure that all those who wish to access further education are able to do so. As a result it is promoting the development of new qualifications, new methods of study, and formal links between all work-based learning and HE. The LSC has a published target that by 2004, 55 per cent of those aged 16-19 will have obtained a level 3 qualification – broadly equivalent to the two A-levels required for university entrance. A target of 52 per cent has been set for those over 19. In her first grant letter to the LSC in December 2001, the Secretary of State for Education made clear her expectation that the LSC would work with the HEFCE to develop a range of progression routes for young people and adults in order to facilitate greater participation in HE.

13. The joint Partnerships for Progression (P4P) initiative is a vital part of the HEFCE's and LSC's campaign to work with others to raise aspirations and attainment, and to stimulate demand for HE. We expect that this initiative will, in the long run, be rolled out under the wider 'Aimhigher' brand.

¹ Source: Skillsbase, Institute for Employment Research, www.skillsbase.dfes.gov.uk

14. Higher education can deliver significant social benefits, and our aim is to widen, not just increase, participation. Simply reaching the 50 per cent target without widening the participation of under-represented groups will not be deemed a success. The HEFCE therefore aims to make measurable progress towards widened participation and fair access, without increasing the proportion of students who do not complete their courses, and while maintaining standards of excellence. The HEFCE expects all the institutions it funds to engage in the widening participation campaign, and expects to make the submission of widening participation strategies a condition of grant for higher education institutions (see paragraph 46 below).

Partnerships for Progression consultation

15. We published our proposals for a joint initiative in December 2001 (HEFCE 01/73). A summary is at Annex D. We published the results of the consultation in September 2002, showing that 94 per cent of respondents supported the initiative (LSC/0348/02, HEFCE Circular Letter 20/2002). This document also:

- announced funds for each region to support the process of bringing partners together, providing co-ordination and drawing up plans to respond to P4P
- identified lead individuals in each region to take this forward
- set out the transitional arrangements for funding existing widening participation special projects prior to the start of P4P, and for administering HE summer schools in 2003.

16. We noted then that we expected to give detailed implementation plans in autumn 2002, once the results of the Government's spending review had been announced. Unfortunately we have not yet received information about the specific funding for P4P. This document therefore sets out how we will implement P4P, and the minimum funding that the Councils will provide.

Issues raised in consultation

17. In the consultation, we set out four proposed strands of activity:

- a. Partnerships strand. The extension of HE/FE regional partnerships and their widening participation activities, which would be supported by both the HEFCE and the LSC.
- b. Quality standards strand. Support by the LSC for improvement in quality standards in further education and training providers working with disadvantaged students, as a means of securing an increase in the number of students achieving the qualifications needed to benefit from HE.
- c. Workplace learning strand. Incentives by the LSC for workplace learning to provide progression to HE entry.
- d. Research and evaluation strand. A national programme of research and evaluation to assess what interventions have most effect, supported by both the HEFCE and the LSC.

Quality standards and workplace learning

18. Proposals for activity to raise quality standards and provide incentives for workplace learning and progression into HE were strongly supported. However, there were concerns that we should use existing

mechanisms where possible to implement these strands, so that we do not impose additional burdens on participants in the initiative.

19. The LSC already has a quality standards strategy, and has put in place measures to improve the quality of provision available in FECs in areas of disadvantage. Initial inspection results suggest that these measures are working, and so we intend to pursue this approach.

20. The LSC's workplace learning strategy was published on 12 November 2002, and is a detailed document which will link to the HE Workforce Development Strategy. It includes measures to establish compacts which will enable those with vocational qualifications to progress to degree-level courses in higher education institutions (HEIs). The LSC believes, however, that more effort is needed to bring HE and FE together, in order to develop progression routes to HE through workplace learning. It believes that this can best be delivered by enhancing the partnerships strand, which will now complement the LSC baseline activity by providing an infrastructure for workplace learning routes.

21. The Councils believe it is unduly complex to support separate strands on these two areas within P4P. The Area Reviews being undertaken by the LSC will provide a natural vehicle for overseeing the success of the LSC's policies in these two areas, while providing data which will inform the P4P initiative (see paragraph 48). Therefore the two Councils will only support the partnerships strand and the research and evaluation strand of P4P.

Age limits

22. A major issue raised by a range of respondents was the upper and lower age limits of the initiative. The Councils proposed that the initiative should focus on young people from age 13 upwards, but many argued that work with younger children may be effective to raise aspirations. We accept the value of this work but are nevertheless aware that the Government is seeking to achieve the participation target by 2010, so work with very young children may not deliver by then. The main focus of the initiative will remain on those over 13, but we will leave it to the partnerships to judge whether additional activity with under 13s is affordable and effective. We will review this in research and evaluation activity, to look at best practice on optimum ages at which to intervene to raise aspirations and achievement.

23. Many respondents stressed that work to raise the participation of the over 30s was important. In part this was an argument that participation of this age group is important socially and economically, and hence the Government's target is drawn too narrowly. But there was also an argument that the under 30s target might be met through action on the over 30s, because these are parents and role models for younger people and because family learning is an important tool in widening participation. We would expect approaches that targeted aspiration-raising within communities, or focused on family learning, to have an impact both on the young target groups and on older learners. Again we accept these arguments but will maintain the focus in this initiative on the participation of the under 30s, since P4P has been funded to address the HE target. However, we will leave it to partnerships to determine whether work with the over 30s is effective and affordable.

Regional, sub-regional and local dimensions

24. There was considerable discussion about our linked proposals of setting a conditional funding entitlement and target for each region, and then inviting a strategic plan from HEIs and FECs and appropriate partners in response. Although these proposals received majority support, a significant

minority, particularly from the HE sector, expressed concern. In particular, respondents noted that effective activity with disadvantaged and younger students was focused at sub-regional or even local levels. The sub-regional approach enabled the activity to be tailored to local circumstances (such as specific rural or urban problems), and to draw in a wide range of community and other partners aware of those local circumstances. Sub-regional approaches might also be more effective to co-ordinate interventions with successive age groups and to provide closer control and accountability for funds.

25. There is an important distinction between approaches to planning and to activity. We need a regional view so that the activity planned will focus on priorities across the area, and be co-ordinated to support the 'supply chain' from school, to FE, to HE in order to meet the target. We will need to look at the picture across regions to determine the comprehensiveness and co-ordination at national level. The HEFCE higher education summer schools scheme will need to be taken forward regionally, to maximise choice for young people, and the HEFCE will provide a national matching service for specialised summer school provision.

26. However, we assume that much of the activity will be conducted at the sub-regional and local levels. Most of the staff undertaking these activities will come from HE and FE institutions that are substantially engaged in widening participation at operational and strategic levels. We remain flexible about how the regional view is brought together, drawing upon contributions from sub-regional and local levels. We recognise that there will be cross-border issues, within regions, between the relevant units of local planning activity, and between regions. We encourage activity to reflect natural boundaries and not to be restricted by administrative boundaries that conflict with these. Where activity is taking place across regional boundaries, we expect that the plans of both regions will recognise this. Our core principle is that there should be full coverage and that we should avoid duplication.

Funding

27. There were concerns in some responses that we would need to adopt a robust methodology for calculating targets and funds. We will provide funds differentially between regions, with more funds per capita going to regions with low HE participation rates. This reflects the fact that we expect activity to be focused on widening participation, as well as on the linked issues of improving progression through vocational and work-based routes. We would expect HE/FE partnerships to devolve funds to sub-regional or local partnerships, as they thought fit, according to the planned activity. We would expect partnerships to set out the rationale for such devolution in their plans. However, we will allow the maximum flexibility for partnerships to determine their approaches to activity by setting our allocations at regional level.

Targets

28. We were encouraged that the vast majority of respondents agreed that targets for the initiative were needed, so that the two Councils can maintain a collective focus and effort to achieve the HE target by 2010. However, there were concerns from a significant minority that targets, like plans, should be sub-regional; and that targets were more effective if they were set, and hence owned, by those who were trying to achieve them.

29. We will set the targets for this initiative in terms of the HE participation rates of young people in each region. This should deliver the 50 per cent target based on the participation rates of 18-30 year-olds needed nationally. The targets will relate to funds, so low participation regions will get more funds per

capita but also higher targets.

30. Participation rates for young people vary between regions with, as the extremes, 35 per cent in London and 24 per cent in the North-East.² Within all regions we find a much wider range of participation for smaller areas. We do not believe that it is feasible to equalise the participation rate across the country by 2010, although this must be a longer-term goal. If we did attempt to do so, and devoted all our funding to this, then the lowest participation regions would have to achieve unfeasibly high percentage gains over the period. Conversely, high participation regions would get nothing to address their smaller disadvantaged areas. We will therefore set targets that narrow but do not equalise the participation rates between regions.

31. For the purposes of this initiative, we do not intend to set targets for, or monitor, where young people go into HE. HE/FE partnerships will be able to meet their P4P targets even if the young people benefiting from the initiative go to HE outside the region.

32. We will set targets as the basis for dialogue between ourselves and HE/FE partnerships over the course of the initiative. However, we recognise that there are many factors that will affect achievement of such targets, so we do not view them as the basis for sanctions. The targets we set will be regional, otherwise we might become involved in the detailed micro-management of activity which should be decided with local knowledge. Regional targets will also give partnerships more flexibility to undertake collaborative activity across the region and across regional boundaries, where this seems appropriate.

33. Although we do not expect to link sanctions to targets, we will monitor whether partnerships are undertaking the activity they proposed, whether this is of high quality, and whether partnerships are reviewing its impact. As part of this, we expect regional partnerships to set their own targets, which may include sub-regional targets.

Summer schools

34. Respondents supported the proposal that summer schools should be funded as part of P4P. The HEFCE currently administers a scheme which supports one-week HE summer schools for year 11 school students, run by HEIs in Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zone areas. It proposed to incorporate this scheme into P4P, as well as to extend it both geographically and in types of provision. Some respondents argued that summer schools should be managed sub-regionally in order to focus on local needs, while others argued that they should be managed nationally to give young people the maximum choice of provision.

35. Following consultation, the HEFCE expects to see the regional co-ordination of summer schools so that young people in a region can choose between a range of HE experiences and types of institution. It has already provided resources to each region to set up this co-ordination mechanism. It will also set up a national matching service so that year 11 students may seek places on specialist summer schools, for example for music or art and design, which are not available in their region. (For further details on summer schools see Annex C, paragraphs 45-48.)

² Figures drawn from the cohort aged 18 on 31 August 1999, entering HE in 1999-00 or 2000-01. For further details, see Annex E.

Funding available: call for strategic plans

36. The LSC and the HEFCE have already each committed £10 million to support P4P in 2003-04, in advance of the outcomes of the Government's spending review. We have done this in order to maintain momentum towards the Government's target and to preserve capacity in the sector for widening participation. The Government recently announced that the details of the grant settlement will not be published until January 2003. As the HEFCE and the LSC attach great importance to this initiative, we have decided to provide a minimum of £60 million (£10 million a year each) for the three years 2003-04 to 2005-06 to implement P4P. We will determine final allocations when the grant settlement is made.

37. These funds are being allocated by the two funding councils, but regional partnerships should treat them as a single stream to be used in the most sensible way. We have established joint monitoring procedures within the regions and also nationally to ensure proper accountability. The HEFCE will act as the funding body and will manage the joint funds, in collaboration with the LSC.

38. We now invite strategic plans for the use of these funds in each region. Detailed notes of guidance, which provide the targets and funding for each region, are attached as Annex C.

39. We expect that the lead contacts set out in Annex C, Table 3, will take forward the response to this document. We will not consider any bids received other than through these leads. We are happy for any institution, organisation or individual to get in touch with us through HEFCE regional consultants or lead LSC executive directors if they want further information or advice in order to contribute to this initiative. Contact details are in Annex B.

European Social Fund

40. The HEFCE has issued a consultation document (HEFCE 2002/50) seeking views on whether the Council should apply for European Social Fund (ESF) grants for 2003 to 2006. The ESF may provide funding to match widening participation initiatives, including the P4P initiative. This funding would be additional to the £60 million already set out in this document. We would encourage P4P business planners to discuss this consultation with the institutions in their partnership, and if possible to present a response on behalf of the partnership at regional or sub-regional levels. Responses to the ESF consultation are due on 31 January 2003, and any queries should be addressed to esfconsultation@hefce.ac.uk

Action on Access

41. The HEFCE and the LSC have re-appointed Action on Access, the national co-ordination team for widening participation, for a further three years. The team will be greatly enlarged, to reflect the need for increased support both to institutions and to P4P projects. The HEFCE will inform partnerships of contact details for their regions when regional advisers are in place. Further information on the work of Action on Access is available on its web-site, www.actiononaccess.org, and any queries about its work should be addressed to Christine Fraser at the HEFCE, c.fraser@hefce.ac.uk, tel 0117 931 7467.

Monitoring

42. Partnerships should include details of their intended monitoring processes in their strategic plans. They will be required to return annual monitoring information to regional monitoring groups to show

whether they are undertaking the activity that they planned, and whether this is of high quality, and to show that they are reviewing its impact. This should state progress towards detailed targets set by partnerships (including at the sub-regional level). We will require an interim monitoring report on the first four months of activity in August 2003. The first full monitoring form will be returned in August 2004, to cover the first 16 months of activity (and annually thereafter). We will provide guidance on its completion when the form is sent out. Further details on monitoring are given in Annex C paragraphs 13-16 and 50.

Evaluation and research

43. Partnerships should develop their own evaluation strategies, taking account of good practice in monitoring and evaluation, which will be disseminated by Action on Access. The HEFCE and the LSC will commission an external evaluation, which will build on the monitoring data and the annual publication of progress towards targets, in order to review the impact of the programme as a whole (while minimising the burden on respondents). We will also carry out regional, sub-regional and local case studies, in order to develop understanding of 'what works'. This understanding will then be disseminated, in order to ensure continuous learning and improvement.

44. The evaluation will form part of a separate major research programme, working in partnership with other stakeholders to identify and promote effective approaches to overcoming participation barriers, including experience from overseas. The HEFCE's recent evaluation of its widening participation policies identified a need for more evidence-based guidance and good practice in this area. The programme will be underpinned by the seven principles set out in paragraph 25 of HEFCE 01/73: partnership, coherence, building on what is already there, learning from what works, flexibility, focus, and stability. In particular, it is vital that it takes account of the activities already being undertaken, and works in partnership with others.

45. The HEFCE and the LSC will host an event next year, which will bring together researchers and research users to map existing understanding and to prioritise research needs. We will then issue invitations to tender for work in particular subject areas, as part of a coherent single programme.

HEFCE's institutional widening participation policy

46. The HEFCE recently consulted on widening participation funding for 2003-06 (HEFCE 02/22). It has now agreed the following principles for HEFCE-funded institutions:

- a. Outreach activities and student progression are mutually dependent, because raising aspirations, better preparation of students, and good practice in admissions underpin successful retention in higher education. The HEFCE will therefore allow institutions to use part of their widening participation funding for institutional outreach work that relates to retention. This will apply in particular to institutions that recruit nationally; for work with students not targeted in regional P4P projects; or for those activities designed to better prepare students for higher education. However, most outreach work is expected to take place through P4P.
- b. The HEFCE provides additional widening participation funding to help institutions support the students that are most at risk of dropping out. Currently this funding is allocated through a 'postcode premium', based on the number of students recruited from areas where participation in HE is lower than average. The HEFCE proposed a number of alternatives, including previous entry qualifications, as more reliable measures for identifying students at risk of dropping out. Respondents felt that

previous educational attainment was not an effective enough measure on its own. The HEFCE is therefore considering altering the method of allocating the widening participation allocation for 2003-04, to take into account previous educational attainment and age of students, and pre-application costs for raising aspirations.

- c. To allow institutions to continue work that they had planned in their widening participation strategies for 2001-02 to 2003-04, no institution will receive a smaller widening participation allocation in 2003-04 under the new funding methodology than it did through the previous system.
- d. Respondents were strongly opposed to the idea that widening participation funding should be allocated only to some institutions. The HEFCE will therefore provide widening participation funding to all institutions, based on the revised allocation method.
- e. There was some confusion over the proposal to fund students that completed part of their studies but not a full year of programme. In particular, respondents were unclear whether there would be additional funds or whether money would be taken from the existing pot. The HEFCE will consult further on funding such students, providing further information about the alternatives and costs involved.
- f. Respondents supported the proposal that the submission of widening participation strategies and action plans should become a condition of grant for higher education institutions. This was agreed by the HEFCE Board in November 2002.

47. The HEFCE will publish a full analysis of the consultation responses, including information about funding, once the final outcomes of the spending review are announced. Any queries should be addressed to Christine Fraser at the HEFCE, c.fraser@hefce.ac.uk, tel 0117 931 7467.

LSC widening participation policy

48. The LSC has taken active steps to work with the HEFCE, the Regional Development Agencies, Sector Skills Councils, the DfES and a range of voluntary organisations to make P4P a genuinely coherent initiative. The existing joint widening participation initiative was established in 1999, and is set out in FEFC Circular 99/29. The recent evaluation of these projects by Action on Access staff has made a useful contribution towards the guidance set out in this new circular.

49. Partnerships for Progression can be usefully aligned with the LSC's remit to carry out Area Reviews of provision. This statutory duty is set out in detail in 'Success for All', and is the LSC's main tool in the drive to improve both quality and participation in the learning process. Area Reviews will both inform, and be informed by, P4P proposals.

50. The LSC is currently drawing up a strategy document for widening participation in FE for adults. The strategy will be based on local evaluation of adult learners' needs, and will complement the measures being proposed in this circular as part of the P4P initiative. In some cases, all learners, regardless of age, may be able to benefit from the opportunities made available by P4P. In others, more specific arrangements will be more appropriate. In all cases, a local evaluation of needs and barriers will be beneficial to widening participation.