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Executive Summary

This report provides a review of literature and examples of good practice throughout the full range of widening participation (WP) activities from outreach, induction and retention to employability. The WP agenda has developed over the past decade from mainly involving outreach activities for young non-traditional learners (and monitoring of attendance at outreach events) to a wider range of activities, a more strategic approach, and more sophisticated evaluation of impact. The advent of Access Agreements has increased the focus on this area in many higher education institutions (HEIs) and there is a plethora of guidance for them to consider in developing strategies for Widening Participation, Retention and Success. However, it should be noted that a number of the suggestions identified by the research require a substantial commitment to change on behalf of the institutions, and institutional commitment to WP is undoubtedly varied across the sector.

Outreach activity was, for much of the last decade, focused on Aimhigher – a national programme which aimed to raise HE awareness, aspirations and attainment of young people from under-represented groups and thereby enhance progression to HE. Whilst Aimhigher was ultimately disbanded owing to insufficient evidence of impact, it was successful in certain areas in identifying and implementing innovative approaches to outreach. Key aspects of successful programmes included:

- Strong partnerships with relevant schools and other agencies over an on-going period (preferably from primary school age). This approach allows potential students to develop a relationship with an HEI over an extended period of time;
- A range of targeted activities relevant to the age group, and to the demographics of the specific cohort;
- Provision of information, advice and guidance on university entry at an appropriate time and in an accessible format;
- First hand experiences in HE settings and with current undergraduate students. Summer schools were generally positively evaluated in this respect;
- Careful matching of student ambassadors to school pupils by subject and personal data;
- Efforts to raise confidence and aspirations, as well as enhance understanding of how to achieve those aspirations. Students need clear information about what they should do to be successful in accessing or achieving in HE;
- Monitoring and evaluation of these activities not only from learners’ perspective but also those of parents, school staff and university staff, to reduce the risk that schools may not continue to support outreach programmes.

In terms of retention and student success, there were a very wide range of different approaches taken at different institutions. However, there are several key aspects which are generally agreed to be important:
1. The need for strong commitment to WP and retention by HE leadership

2. An integrated programme of interventions from pre-entry, induction and transition to graduation including employability;

3. Commitment to and concentration on the first year experience - a crucial point in the student life-cycle and the point at which students are most at risk of withdrawal;

4. Encouraging a sense of belonging such that students feel part of the university community at an early stage. This should permeate programmes, schools and the wider university – and should include activities aimed at all students.

Specific interventions which are likely to increase the chance of student retention include:

- Provision of clear and extensive information prior to arrival. This should include a point of contact for informal questions or concerns. Access through social networking sites may be advantageous;
- Use of demographic data and early student self-assessment of confidence in various academic skills to target support through programme teams where a need is identified;
- Trained student advisors or a team of retention support officers who telephone ‘at risk’ students early in the first term to check progress. Retention support staff may also provide advice and guidance to students and staff;
- Extensive induction period which continues throughout the first term or year, possibly targeted at specific groups of students;
- Early assessment and constructive feedback to motivate learning in new entrants. Feedback surgeries for students;
- Introduction of a first year induction module on critical thinking and independent study skills for all students or target groups;
- Flexible systems for teaching and learning, assessment or course changes, and a student centred, inclusive approach;
- A strong and consistent personal tutoring system in order to provide support to students throughout their time in HE. The personal tutor has been found to play a key role in decisions around withdrawal;
- Providing institution-wide study skill support and peer mentoring/ peer learning opportunities, and fast availability of consultations especially in the first term;
- Implementing a student coaching scheme or leadership programme for students across the institution;
- Ensuring effective use of data through robust monitoring and evaluation for example attendance monitoring; first impressions surveys; progression monitoring – and using these data to target interventions towards ‘at risk’ students;
- Linking bursary criteria with attendance – and pro-actively targeting those displaying signs of educational disengagement or withdrawal.
Horizon Scanning Report: Widening Participation, Retention and Success
Research Synthesis, January 2013

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1.0 Introduction

This report builds on the earlier work reviewed as part of the Scoping Study (Cotton, Winter & Nash, 2012) and extends that work to explore the full range of Widening Participation (WP) activities in higher education (HE). It includes literature and case studies on outreach, retention and success with a clear focus on understanding ‘what works’. There is a wealth of extant literature on these topics in the UK but also internationally from Australasia, the US and Europe. In the most part this review will concentrate on that from the UK as the criteria for defining WP cohorts varies - for example Australian Universities include in their definition indigenous people and those rurally isolated in the outback. (Although definitions of under-represented groups vary, in this report, the term is used to describe young and adult learners from lower socio-economic groups, care leavers, students with disabilities and those from BME groups\(^1\)). There is also variation in the definition of terms such as retention and success, as highlighted by Thomas and Quinn (2007) and Merrill et al. (2009) internationally, and by Troxell (2010) in the US, where the word ‘persistence’ is also commonly used. Nonetheless, international literature is included in this report where relevant to the UK context. Since it would be impossible to cover all writing on the topic in a report of this nature, our review focuses on key documents including reports, conference papers, good practice guides, peer reviewed journal articles and books. The report starts, however, by considering different approaches to widening participation and their implications for appropriate WP activities.

Thomas and Quinn (2007) discuss 3 different approaches to WP and their implications for interventions when working with under-represented (non-traditional) students in HE:

1. The Academic Approach – this focuses on encouraging participation in HE by eliminating barriers such as lack of aspiration for HE and insufficient information for prospective students. The main focus is getting the student into HE rather than on retention and enhancing the student experience. The limitations of this approach are its focus on short term projects such as outreach activities to raise aspirations for HE, and a failure to change the HE institution itself with respect to admission processes or the curriculum.

2. The Utilitarian Approach – this focuses on the role of HE in serving the needs of the economy and the labour market. It therefore includes initiatives around employability, the provision of learning skills and student support modules. Work-based and vocationally oriented programmes may be set up as new forms of HE under this model. However, this may be seen as a bolt-on approach since activities are often not integrated with HE core activities such as teaching and learning.

3. The Transformative Approach – this advocates substantive changes in the functioning of HEIs to meet the needs of underrepresented groups - changing the ‘culture of the campus’ (Thomas and Cooper 2000; Thomas, 2002). This might include changes to curriculum and pedagogy but also a more flexible structure for study with different entry

\(^1\) We note, however, the increasing importance placed on inclusion of first generation students in WP activities.
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and re-entry requirements. Clearly, however, this approach is more challenging to implement.

The extent to which a higher education institution (HEI) ascribes to one or another of these models will have an important influence on the focus of Widening Participation in that institution, and this context therefore provides a backdrop to the remainder of the report which focuses on Outreach and Retention activities in support of the WP agenda.

The focus on the full breadth of the student life-cycle is relatively recent in WP activity: In the early years the main focus of the WP agenda was outreach; however, current activities encompass transition, retention, progression and success in HE. This reflects a move towards the transformative approach to WP outlined above, requiring a far wider range of activities than those which were traditionally within the WP remit. This broadening of approach has been strengthened by the intervention of OFFA (The Office for Fair Access), an independent, non-departmental public body, which was set up under the Higher Education Act 2004 to ensure that higher fees did not deter people entering HE for financial reasons and that HEIs continued to be committed to increasing participation among under-represented groups. OFFA’s current role includes scrutinising, approving and monitoring Access Agreements developed by HEIs which set out their tuition fee limits and the access measures they intend to put in place for the following academic year. These have to be submitted by all publicly funded providers of HE in England who wish to charge more than a tuition fee of £6000 in 2012/13. The Access Agreements have a wider focus than just outreach activities for raising aspirations and attainment for these learners and must also include approaches to enhancing transition, engagement, retention, achievement and success in HE for under-represented groups in HE.

2.0 Outreach: What Works?

2.1 The Aimhigher Initiative

Widening participation has been an issue of increasing importance in the UK, particularly since the 1997 Dearing Report which heralded a new phase of HE expansion. A research review by Harrison (2011) highlighted the differential chances of a young person progressing to HE with respect to the socio-economic status of their family: those from higher socio-economic backgrounds were six times more likely to go into HE than those from lower ones. In the early years of the New Labour government various initiatives to decrease this disparity were undertaken including Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in 2001 and Aimhigher: Partnership for Progression in 2003 which were integrated to provide the Aimhigher programme in 2004 (Doyle and Griffin, 2012). The aims of this programme were to raise HE awareness, aspirations and attainment of young people from under-represented groups so that more would consider progressing to HE (Hatt, 2007). Interventions involved the provision of outreach activities in schools and further education (FE) colleges, with a view to improving the educational progress of young non-traditional learners. These activities ranged from mentoring, enrichment classes, summer schools and visits to university, and were delivered by partnerships between HEIs, further education colleges, Local Education Authorities (LEAs), schools and other educational
agents located in deprived and low-participating areas (Chilosi et al., 2008). Aimhigher was disbanded in 2011 by the new Coalition government partly because of the lack of evidence as to its value despite seemingly good feedback from parents, schools and communities (Doyle and Griffin, 2012).

Amongst those casting doubt on the effectiveness of Aimhigher evaluation was a report by Chilosi et al. (2008) which notes the focus of much evaluation on attainment and progress in compulsory schooling, as well as learners’ attitudes towards HE, rather than progression to HE per se. This neglect was seen as particularly serious in view of the fact that the former proved to be a poor proxy for the latter. While interventions had a statistically significant impact on GCSE results and progress into post-compulsory education, as well as promoting positive attitudes towards HE, some reports suggest that they did not have a statistically significant effect on actual HE participation. However, issues of data access and ethics also detracted from evaluation efforts (Chilosi et al., 2008; Doyle and Griffin, 2012). Thus, the ineffectiveness of existing systems for tracking students’ progression after participating in Aimhigher activities meant that evaluating impact was problematic:

One challenge is that access to UCAS and HESA data is expensive and complex. Additionally, not all institutions monitored attendance at events, and those who change institutions, particularly at 16, are difficult to track. gaps in this important data, compounded by structural difficulties in data systems across sectors and at key student progression points, as well as the late focusing of targets for Aimhigher by HEFCE (2008) have exacerbated this problem. (Doyle and Griffin, 2012, p. 9)

The authors conclude by noting that, although Aimhigher seemed to have positive effects, it was difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle its impact from other simultaneous initiatives.

Chilosi et al. (2008) also suggested that the reason there had been little statistical analysis of the impact of Aimhigher on entry to HE was because of ethical concerns about data protection and appropriate targeting had led to limited tracking studies:

In consequence relatively little is known about what happened to Aimhigher participants after the activities, and even less is known about comparable individuals who did not take part in them. (Chilosi et al., 2008, p. 2)

The authors suggested examining school-level data, instead of individual data and trialled an alternative tracking approach using 3 different datasets about schools in an area of London. This analysis suggested that participating in Aimhigher activities increased the chances of achieving five or more GCSE grades A*-C by 3.8 percentage points, applying for HE by 4.5 percentage points, and entering into HE by 4.1 percentage points. There is thus some evidence that Aimhigher may have had some impact beyond school-level, and it is therefore worthwhile to consider the approaches to monitoring and evaluation of Aimhigher (section 2.2), as well as
research evidence on which aspects of the scheme – or other outreach activities – were considered to be most effective (section 2.3).

2.2 Monitoring and Evaluation of Outreach and Aimhigher

As early as 2000, Liz Thomas advocated more effective evaluation of WP initiatives, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and noted the importance of distinguishing between summative and formative evaluation (Thomas, 2000). However, the majority of published work on monitoring and evaluation has arisen from the Aimhigher initiative, in terms of guidance to participating institutions on evaluating their outreach activity. Hatt’s (2007) evaluation guidance was based on the experience of practitioners in the south west partnership and noted that initial guidance from HEFCE (2007/12) meant that many partnerships were only gathering short term monitoring data about their activities rather than evaluating their longer term impact. Subsequent guidance from HEFCE (2008/05) was more specific and included the need to produce an evaluation plan as a distinct element of the work. Partnerships were not expected to evaluate everything they did but to focus on core elements in their programmes. Further guidance published later that year clarified details of participant data to be collected, and provided a template for partnerships to use in an attempt to bring about some kind of standardisation (HEFCE, 2008). Examples of good practice in monitoring and evaluation cited include Leeds Aimhigher partnership which used standardised quantitative questionnaires for evaluating each WP outreach activity after it had taken place and then focused on flagship faculty projects or interventions using qualitative evaluation methods. Another Aimhigher partnership in the South West undertook a longitudinal tracking study to assess the longer term impact of WP activities on young people (Allerston et al, 2006). The cohort tracked were a sample of 550 Year 11 pupils who had undertaken WP activities since Year 9. Quantitative data such as attainment at GCSE and beyond were collected through Connexions and UCAS (the UK Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) whilst qualitative evidence was collected through questionnaires and interviews with respondents.

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) have also produced a series of studies focussed on the monitoring and evaluation used in Aimhigher partnerships and other WP initiatives (Morris et al., 2005; Irelan et al., 2006; Passy et al., 2009; Passy and Morris, 2010). The two latter reports were commissioned by HEFCE and sought to assess the contribution of Aimhigher to improved attainment and progression. The Interim Report (Passy et al., 2009) reported a number of challenges including difficulties in collecting the participant baseline data necessary to monitor attainment and progression effectively, as well as problems tracking pupils from compulsory education into FE and HE. There were also some inconsistencies in how activity data was collected and it was clear that practitioners saw their main role as delivering the activities and were less concerned about data recording. Finally the problematic use of NS-SEC (social class) data as a means of identifying socio-economic status of students was highlighted: Issues included the use of parental reports of occupation as a 2

Many of the Aimhigher partnership internal evaluations are available on the HEA website: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/search/wasrs-search-results?qt=Evaluation&programme=Aimhigher&group=All&type=Research-based+resources&sb=relevance&nh=10
proxy for students’ social class and the subjective coding decisions that were involved. Gorard et al. (2006) also noted that most interventions had little rigorous evaluation with no randomised controlled trials which made it difficult to judge the success of WP outreach activities. The subsequent NFER report (Passy and Morris, 2010), however, documented the successful use of a more focused qualitative approach that was augmented, where possible, by quantitative data in an evaluation of four Aimhigher partnerships. A HEFCE publication in 2010 noted that, whilst many institutions demonstrated good monitoring and review systems through their widening participation strategic assessments (WPSAs), they were less strong on reporting participant outcomes. HEFCE therefore proposed a model for evaluation to be included in WPSAs involving 4 elements (HEFCE, 2010):

- basic monitoring;
- assessment of targeting;
- measurement of outcomes;
- assessment of value for money.

Some Aimhigher partnerships went on to produce evaluation toolkits based on their experiences. A good example is the Greater Merseyside Toolkit (no date) which provides detail about aspects such as questionnaire design and interview schedules, and includes a generic questionnaire and attitude scales. HEFCE commissioned Lancaster University to develop a resource toolkit around Evaluation, which outlines a number of activities connected to ten ‘features’ of the evaluation process such as planning, outcome indicators, data analysis and dissemination. Finally, there is a design and evaluation matrix which was developed in Australia for assessing the effectiveness of universities’ outreach activities in schools but which could be transferred to the UK setting (Gale et al., 2010). This matrix can be used to compare different types of interventions and measure their effectiveness.

2.3 Outreach: Evidence of Successes

A number of studies were undertaken which attempted to evaluate the impact of Aimhigher outreach activities as described above and - despite the concerns raised about methods and longitudinal evaluation - most reported positive impacts. For example, Morris et al. (2005) report statistically significant associations between outreach interventions and young people’s attainment and aspirations, although these associations were not always straightforward in terms of how such activities changed young people’s ambitions. Activities identified as being particularly effective included university visits and talks by various stakeholders such as partnership coordinators, teachers and HE staff. The study also showed that the most effective strategies in promoting higher attainment and increasing motivation were those which were part of an ongoing programme of events showing the realities of life in a HEI through visits and interactions with present undergraduates. The value of a supportive and encouraging ethos within schools was also found to be key. A subsequent report (Ireland, Goldren and Morris, 2010)
2006), which followed up some students who had participated in the earlier study, found that the majority had remained in post 16 education or were already in HE. Passy and Morris (2010) also noted a range of positive perceptions of the impact of Aimhigher outreach activities on participants:

*The supporting qualitative evidence showed high levels of learner enjoyment and reflected an increased learner interest in entering higher education (HE) ... The evidence provided by colleges, schools and academies showed that involvement with Aimhigher was associated with higher than predicted attainment at GCSE and greater confidence amongst learners that they were able to achieve. One-to-one relationships with Learning Mentors and Aimhigher Associates were seen to be critical in encouraging and supporting learners.* (Passy and Morris, 2010, p.6)

The report went on to reveal that interviewees believed that there were three particular features of the partnership approach that led to the success of Aimhigher:

- the partnership infrastructure, which drew on the expertise of a wide range of practitioners;
- the energy and commitment of Aimhigher staff; and
- the coordinated processes through which learners could engage with the idea of, and be supported in their journey towards, HE.

In relation to the latter, the shift in 2008 to a more targeted approach to selecting learners and providing a progression of activities for them was perceived to have been of value:

*Activities were seen to be more clearly focused on learners’ needs and to be strengthened by an increased emphasis on careers information, advice and guidance (IAG).* (Passy and Morris, 2010, p.6)

Furthermore the various staff interviewed in schools and colleges felt that attainment was raised by:

- providing personalised support to learners so as to overcome any barriers to learning;
- raising learners’ confidence that they had the ability to achieve;
- providing clear information as to what qualifications learners would need to achieve their aspirations.

These staff also felt Aimhigher had contributed to a more aspirational and achievement-oriented culture in their institutions and led to more learners progressing to post-compulsory education.

Jones (2008) in his synthesis of research around Widening Participation, cited a review of the impact of summer schools undertaken by the Sutton Trust which indicated the excellent outcomes of these schools for participants. Benefits identified by the participants included:
• application and admissions support;
• academic preparation to ease transition;
• social benefits such as meeting like-minded people, developing social skills and confidence and meeting academic staff; and
• engagement in extra-curricular activities at university.

Thomas (2011) identifies similar factors in her review of research on the impact of pre-entry interventions, and Allerston et al. (2006) notes the importance of pre-entry activities for motivating students who might have been uncertain about higher education:

*I made a decision after I went there [for the Taster Day]; after it was so good I wanted to actually be there in future.* (Allerston et al., 2006, p. 10)

Taster days, however, were criticised for not providing sufficient time to get a sense of the culture of the institution - especially if students had travelled some distance to attend. Another criticism was repetitions of taster days for some students which became rather boring if they covered the same ground rather than progressing:

*They were all the same . . . every one we went on. Played a few stupid games in the morning, did questionnaires. They did get kind of boring by the end because we had been on quite a few and we just knew what was going to happen. We would go and do some quizzes, have some food and have a tour. And I think they could have done something that was a bit more interesting.* (Allerston et al., 2006, p. 11)

Similarly summer schools were valued for providing direct experiences of university life but criticised for being restrictive, with students given little personal freedom.

The importance of undergraduate mentors at taster days and summer schools was highlighted by students in this study for their positive contribution to bringing understanding about the realities of university life although ineffective practice was also identified such as when mentor and mentee were poorly matched either in terms of interests, age or personality (Allerston et al., 2006). A recent review of literature by Sanders and Higham (2012), also notes the importance and impact of higher education students in widening access, particularly through such schemes as student ambassadors and mentors.

In summary, effective outreach activities involve:

• strong partnerships with relevant schools and other agencies over an on-going period (preferably from primary school age);
• range of targeted activities relevant to the age group;
• provision of information, advice and guidance at an appropriate time and in an accessible format;
• first hand experiences in HE settings and with current undergraduate students;
• careful matching of student ambassadors to school pupils by subject and personal data;
• efforts to raise confidence and aspirations, as well as enhance understanding of how to achieve those aspirations.
• monitoring and evaluation of these activities not only from learners’ perspective but also those of parents, school staff and university staff, to reduce the risk that schools may not continue to support outreach programmes.

3.0 Retention and success: What works?

3.1 Understanding Retention

Differing definitions of retention have been used both in the UK and internationally (e.g. Thomas and Quinn, 2007; Westlake, 2008). Jones (2008) notes:

_A wide range of terms is used in both the UK and internationally to describe retention and its opposite. Some tend to emphasise what might be termed the student dimension, e.g. ‘persistence’, ‘withdrawal’ and ‘student success’. By contrast, others focus on the place (e.g. retained within an institution) or the system (e.g. graduation rates) and then the responsibility shifts to either the institution or government._ (Jones, 2008, p.1)

Recently, there has been a shift towards a wider focus on student success rather than simply retention and withdrawal (Merrill et al., 2009):

_As HEFCE (2008) put it recently ‘success is more than retention; and retention isn’t the only kind of success’_ (Merrill et al., 2009, p.25)

Thomas and Quinn (2007), undertaking an international literature review, also note different definitions of success in HE systems. These include completing a module, passing an assessment or progressing to the next stage or graduation.

Since the 1970s Tinto’s interactionist theory of retention has been the predominant approach to understanding retention of students in HE. This theory applies to all students and involves three periods within the student journey (Longden, 2004 cited in Merrill et al., 2009)

• ‘separation’, where a student’s individual entry characteristics directly influence departure decisions, commitment to the institution and to the shared goal of persisting to graduation;
• ‘integration’, where initial commitment to the institution and the objective of graduation affects the student’s integration into the academic and social systems of HE:
• ‘assimilation’, which entails structural integration through the meeting of the explicit standards required by the HE institution. (Merrill at al., 2009, p.14-15)
Harvey and Drew (2006) in their extensive review of the first year literature, note some of the criticisms of this model, however, including the tendency for models of social and academic integration to “reflect a traditional (white middle-class residential) college student experience” (p. 8).

More recently socio-cultural theories (Thomas and Quinn, 2007; Merrill et al., 2009) of student performance in HE have gained favour, with their focus more on how the social and cultural experiences of the student prior to HE affects their choices and their retention in the new culture of the HEI. These theories are thought to have particular significance to non-traditional students such as first generation university entrants (Thomas and Quinn 2007). Luzeckyj et al. (2011) investigated the expectations of first-generation students in Australia so as to establish the support they might need to overcome hurdles through their lack of cultural capital in HE. Nonetheless, Harvey and Drew (2006) conclude that ‘no model fits all’ (p.8) – and the tendency to treat all non-traditional students as though they were a coherent group is one weakness of much WP research.

3.2 Monitoring and Evaluation of Retention Initiatives

As early as 2007, the National Audit Office (NAO) published a report on student retention in HEIs which confirmed the strong performance of universities and colleges in retaining their students at a time of HE growth. However, it also noted that the sector conducted little evaluation of impact and transferability, despite the wide range of advice on good practice in this area, as well as inadequate evaluation of the cost effectiveness of retention initiatives. The NAO report found that most institutions collated and disseminated internal information on withdrawal rates at course and faculty level. Some also used student level information, for example on attendance, to identify students at risk of withdrawal. Only a few institutions contacted early leavers to identify the real reasons for leaving. The report recommended better monitoring of retention at all levels in an institution to improve or sustain good levels. They also recommended surveying early leavers in HEIs where there were particular problems with retention to inform subsequent changes. A Quality Assurance Agency report (QAA, 2008) the following year also noted that only a small proportion of institutions had developed effective systems for gathering and for making full use of data at both routine and strategic levels. In most cases institutions were found to be focusing on technical issues and staff development, often reportedly with some difficulty. A continuum of stages for developing data collection to improve progression and completion was outlined, which can be summarised as follows:

1 - little or no central provision of data; local sources using different definitions of concepts such as ‘progression’; consequently little use is made of data beyond descriptive presentation in annual and periodic review reports.
2 - central systems for handling data and producing reports, but staff may not yet be fully confident in engaging with the data, or completely convinced of the reliability of centrally produced data analysis. Consequently use of data still fairly limited, and some local data sources may still be in use.
3 - tools and systems in existence so that staff can obtain the necessary data, and have the appropriate skills to analyse it in an informative manner; however, this facility remains to be fully exploited, generally because of lack of central strategic oversight.

4 - fully integrated management information systems producing data fit for purpose, the analysis of which informs institutional thinking and strategic decision-making at all levels. (QAA, 2008, p.10).

At the time of this report, it was felt that the majority of institutions were located somewhere between stages 1-3, therefore much of the available student data remained a “valuable but largely unexploited resource” (p. 10). The importance of robust data information systems for monitoring and evaluating engagement, attainment, progression and retention was emphasised also in the Thomas (2012) report on the What Works? projects, as well as at related conferences and HEA seminars.

However, it is important to note that, alongside institutional data-sets, there have been a range of projects which have used qualitative methods to help understand the student experience and thereby enhance retention. In one study, first year students were asked to use video diaries to document their experiences, thus providing insights into many aspects of their lives including friendships, induction, assessment, modes of study and teamwork (Cashmore et al., 2011). Other studies have used questionnaires and focus groups to gain information about the first year experience of transition including pre-entry and induction activities, as well as experience in the new institution (Clark and Hall, 2010). These qualitative sources may give a clearer idea of why student withdraw than the raw data on numbers and demographics.

3.3 Retention: Evidence of Successes

Numerous research papers provide evidence about the success of a whole range of approaches to enhancing student retention. An area which has been identified in a review by Jones (2008) as being of great significance is the need to monitor student attendance and performance to enhance retention and success. However, the collection and use of such data is rarely straightforward. Beck and Davidson (2001) report on the development of an early warning instrument which could detect at risk students at an early stage and note that their ‘Survey of Academic Orientations’ was predictive of first semester freshmen grades. However, a Welsh study which tried to establish a predictive demographic model of students most at risk of non-completion by reviewing the relevant literature found that the factors were so complex that this was not possible (Westlake, 2008). Nonetheless, a QAA (2008) report notes increasing evidence of the development of retention strategies and policies at a number of institutions involving the identification of students at risk through the analysis of admissions and progression data.

The clearest agreement in the research literature on retention is around the importance of the first year experience: this is a key point for withdrawal and sets the scene for success in later years for those who progress. The seminal study by Yorke and Longdon (2007) into the first year experience of HE students in the UK involved over 7000 students who were surveyed
about their experiences of learning, teaching and assessment as well as the more social aspects of their lives. A key finding was that the more students knew about their HEI and their course before they arrived the less likely they were to consider withdrawing. Similarly an Australian study by Scutter et al. (2011) highlighted the importance of understanding first year students’ expectations of HE with the increase in non-traditional students. The authors noted that only 30% of new entrants had realistic expectations about the amount of study required to succeed at university. Richardson et al. (2012) reported on other factors which led to differentials in adjustment to university life by first year students. Some coped well with the transition into university whilst others did not - to the detriment of their health and well-being. The authors reported that forming close social relationships with peers, having good time management and organisational skills, together with effective coping strategies enabled students to adapt more successfully to university life.

Harvey and Drew (2006) report on a number of studies focusing solely on the first year experience of non-traditional students. Some of these studies looked at the student experience in terms of the difficulties which might be encountered that might impact on their retention and persistence (Musselbrook and Dean, 2003; Bowl, 2003; Duggan, 2004-5). Difficulties reported included students often feeling isolated especially in institutions populated mainly by traditional, middle class students; financial worries and fear of debt; and feeling threatened by large classes and little contact or support from staff. Harvey and Drew note particular issues for different groups of students: First-generation students were found to have unrealistic expectations especially around the availability of teaching staff; mature learners were more likely to feel isolated because of work and family commitments (also noted by Crosling et al., 2008); and working class students were found to have worse access to information and less peer support than traditional students. Thomas and Quinn (2007), focusing on first generation students internationally, reported that the isolation of such students often results from their different social and cultural backgrounds to more traditional students.

A large cross-European study by Merrill et al. (2009) focused solely on the retention and withdrawal of non-traditional students (albeit that the definitions of all three could vary in the different countries involved). Their literature review summarises key issues for student success and retention internationally: In the UK, these were identified as academic preparedness, academic experience, institutional expectations and commitment, academic and social match, finance and employment, family support and commitments and university support services (Thomas, 2002 cited in Merrill et al., 2009). They also note similar factors to those identified identified by the National Audit Office (2007): the wrong choice of course, lack of preparedness, lack of integration, dissatisfaction with the course, personal reasons, financial reasons and the emergence of a more attractive opportunity. Other European countries encountered different factors such as economic and labour problems.

More recently Boyle et al. (2011) emphasized the importance of integration both socially and academically on student engagement and therefore completion. They report four key messages from their study which focused on mature students, first year students, local students and part time students:
• A: Integration of the social and academic elements of university life is key to the integration of students into the School and wider University community
• B: Early imposition of structures upon students by staff appears effective in giving a sense of continuity and purpose
• C: Teams and groups working collaboratively on academic tasks enhance their social opportunities
• D: Integrating social and academic elements of university life encourages students to build relations with each other and with staff and to engage with the curriculum. (p. 14)

In a review of research by Jones (2008) a number of areas of importance were identified including: pre-entry information, preparation and admission; induction and transition support; curriculum development and pedagogy; social engagement; on-going student support; and data monitoring. Some of these issues – and others which relate to the entire student life-cycle - are dealt with in more detail in the next section.

4.0 Steps to Enhancement in Widening Participation

Part 4 of this report looks at Widening Participation interventions across the student life-cycle, using some of the categories identified in the research review by Jones (2008), as well as others which became more prominent in our research synthesis. It should be noted that a number of the suggestions identified by the research require a substantial commitment to change on behalf of the institutions, and institutional commitment to WP is undoubtedly varied across the sector. A report by the National Audit Office (NAO) in 2007 based on a large-scale study involving interviews with unsuccessful HE applicants as well as teachers in primary and secondary schools indicated that institutions varied considerably in their success in WP. Performance indicators illustrated that in 2006-07 about one fifth of institutions performed significantly better than expected in recruiting young people from areas with low participation, whilst a similar proportion performed significantly worse than expected. However, the report also notes the influence of geographical and demographic differences which may partially explain these results. Nonetheless, institutional commitment to the admission, retention and success of non-traditional students has been identified as an important factor influencing outcomes (Yorke and Longdon, 2008). However, some of the recent literature indicates that the commitment of HEI leaders may be less than strong. For example, Butcher et al. (2012) report on a study at two UK universities at which leaders perceived the WP discourse as confused and discredited. WP students were viewed by many as essentially an undifferentiated group, which the authors conclude risks non-differentiated responses through discipline/subject areas.

4.1 Pre-entry information, preparation and admission

Thomas (2011) and Jones (2008) both emphasise the importance of pre entry interventions on student retention and success, noting the impact of such interventions on pre-entry decision making, expectations about higher education and academic preparation. Thomas and Quinn (2007) provide examples of pre entry activities from their international study, including TRIO in
the US (a similar collaborative programme to Aimhigher), as well as examples from the UK. One initiative of note is the ‘Wise Up’ Summer School run at Manchester University. This is a six day event, involving academic and social activities aimed at giving Year 11 students (particularly first generation and those from lower socio-economic groups), a flavour of University life through interacting with undergraduates and teaching staff. The ‘High Skies’ scheme, a student tutoring programme at the University of the West of England (UWE) is also highlighted by Thomas and Quinn. This scheme targets school participants from low socio-economic groups, first generation, low income and low participation neighbourhoods and involves undergraduates especially identified to match these criteria who are then trained to deliver activities such as visits to schools, telephone and email support and meeting with school staff. A recent research synthesis from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) (Gazeley and Aynsley, 2012) also notes the increasing popularity of pre-entry interventions such as peer mentoring, the use of social networks and early support for disabled students.

Other studies have looked at the impact of activities just prior to students commencing their studies. For example, Crosling et al. (2008) include a number of case studies of good practice for improving student retention. One author, Kirk (2008), reports on the impact of a number of activities on the first year experience and retention of non-traditional students in a post-1992 English university, including pre-course activities such as web- and paper-based information, suggestions for pre-course reading, opportunities to visit the university for taster days and the chance to have a piece of written work assessed by a course tutor. These, along with other activities experienced through the first year such as induction, tutorials and peer learning were evaluated at the end of the year through questionnaires followed up by focus groups. In the case of the pre-course activities, the evaluation exposed some difficulties which were then rectified – for example, processes were put in place to ensure that applicants admitted through Clearing received all the information they required.

A later publication (Crosling et al., 2009) on the Australian HE sector, notes the increasing importance of pre-entry activities for improving student engagement and retention, and outlines the myriad of ways in which these activities may be structured:

*Early engagement could include the provision of timetables, course handbooks and reading lists, summer schools, or materials accessed via a virtual learning environment. Early engagement can benefit students by preparing them for their course, demonstrating what will be expected of them, and assisting them to feel a part of the institution. Institutions are increasingly interacting with students prior to entry to develop institutional and course commitment and engagement.* (Crosling et al., 2009, p.4).

Other examples from Australia include Smyth and Lodge (2012), who note the success of ‘Orientation Online’. This aims to assist those students who required information before the on-campus orientation (induction) programme, those unable to attend, or those who felt overloaded with information. This venture had proved successful in engaging students and they also felt it had led to more emphasis on the traditional campus orientation week being given over to
creating a sense of celebration and the building of peer networks. Another Australian study by McIntyre et al. (2012) evaluated academic outcomes across three cohorts of a five-day enabling programme undertaken by students from non-traditional groups such as those from low income groups, first generation, mature learners and those with lower academic ability. The research suggested that those who experienced the enabling programme were less likely to fail and more likely to achieve better results at the end of the semester than the students who did not.

In terms of admissions, Thomas and Quinn (2007) note the importance of instituting more flexible and alternative admission processes and completion routes including part time and ‘time out’ alternatives to the traditional route. Osborne et al. (2011) note the importance of HEIs considering a range of alternative qualifications (particularly vocational qualifications) in the admissions process, as well as encouraging credit accumulation and transfer and APEL (accreditation of prior experiential learning). A further focus of research on admission of non-traditional students concerns the impact of funding such as bursaries. A European-funded initiative specifically aimed at encouraging non-traditional candidates to access foundation year courses in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) included a bursary of £2000 (Newman-Ford et al., 2010). The bursary was dependent on regular attendance at lectures and seminars so an electronic attendance monitoring system was used to identify and pro-actively target students displaying signs of educational disengagement or withdrawal. The study showed that both financial assistance and effective attendance monitoring can enhance undergraduates’ chances of success. A number of other studies focused on the success of bursaries or scholarships in retaining students in HE with differing results (e.g. Carson, 2010; Harrison and Hatt, 2011). Carson (2010) found a positive influence on the student experience and retention whilst Harrison and Hatt (2011) found that the bursary’s financial incentive was not as important to students as feeling socially comfortable at their HEI. Further research into this aspect of WP would be advantageous.

4.2 Induction and transition support

It is generally recognised that the transition to university can be a difficult time for first year students (Richardson et al., 2012), and the value of induction in helping new students to equip themselves for their course and engage in university life is well recognised (Crosling et al., 2009). Increasingly induction is seen as a longer term process than simply the traditional Freshers’ week which may alienate students through information overload or simply be ignored by those to whom it appears irrelevant (Keenan, 2008; Smyth and Lodge, 2012). Kirk (2008) reports on issues encountered with traditional forms of induction, and describes key changes including phasing in activities over a longer period of time and enhancing inclusivity of e-learning sessions. Similarly Clark and Hall (2010) in their study of transition experiences report on the importance of induction for retention and success and note the increasing tendency to view it as a continuous process throughout year 1 and beyond. A comparative study by Gill et al. (2011) describes a standardised orientation (induction) introduced into one of three colleges at an Australian university. The induction focused on peer and academic support over the first semester including several ice breaker activities and student presentations. Evaluative feedback
from the programme showed that these participants were significantly more positive about their orientation programme than those from the other two colleges and their programmes.

Some studies emphasise the particular importance of relevant induction to non-traditional students such as first generation entrants (Thomas and Quinn, 2007). They note that induction events should take into consideration the potentially different needs of such students, as the impact on retention may well be more important for under-represented groups. King (2010) also includes those students entering HE through non-traditional routes such as via ‘Clearing’ as at risk of withdrawal and therefore in need of extra support during induction and transition. Whittaker (2008) notes the need for induction to combine the academic with social aspects if student integration is to be achieved. The importance of the presence of supportive staff at the time of induction was another key factor which has been stressed (Cook et al., 2005). Other interventions reported in the literature include the use of first year advisors who support students at risk by telephone and face to face (Burnett and Larmar, 2011; Box et al., 2012); implementation of a Principal Tutor role as the key point of teaching and administrative contact for first year students (Lodge, 2012); and a university-wide student advising programme offering timely advice on academic issues and on career and personal pathways (Mann, 2009). Importantly, university-wide training for staff involved in giving advice was also provided. Johnson and Hunt (2009) report on an initiative at Birmingham University involving student advisors, based in the academic skills support services, who were available to offer advice on course and module choices, as well as providing workshops and tutorials.

Some Australasian universities have gone so far as to include as part of the academic programme, a module (or similar) which aims to nourish critical thinking and independent study skills early in students’ first semester in HE (Adam et al., 2010). Crosling et al. (2009) discuss an accredited first semester induction module in operation in some universities. The module is discipline based, and involves group work to explore aspects of the transition process. This process, they argue, helps students acquire the skills and understanding of learning in higher education, whilst also developing their subject-based knowledge. These courses may be focused specifically on target groups such as indigenous first year students (see Rossingh and Dunbar, 2012 for an example). In addition, one New Zealand University reported using a specific leadership programme for first-year students, the Emerging Leaders Development Programme (ELDP) to aid transition, which offered leadership development opportunities (Elagar et al., 2011). And Kift, 2009 and Kift et al. (2010) discuss in detail the transition pedagogy developed at their Australian university which is used across the institution. This ‘transition pedagogy’ approach has been used in various institutions to develop appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes to assist transition into HE (Jenkins et al., 2012; Benske et al., 2011). This might include issues such as academic writing but also wider attributes including creative practice, identity, team work and entrepreneurial skills.

Some studies specifically reported on the success of peer learning and peer mentoring in improving students’ transition experience (Dunn and Glendinning, 2010: Andrews and Clark, 2011). The latter was one of the What Works funded projects (see Thomas, 2012) which developed, as a result of its findings, a Transition+ framework which promotes the provision of
peer mentoring both for social support during the initial transition period which then evolves and develops to include academic and longer-term support needs. Similar peer learning approaches have been undertaken in Australia (Adam et al., 2011) and the US (for ‘at risk’ students) (Mirabelli, 2009). Mirabelli notes the importance of mentors undertaking extensive training including theoretical perspectives covering social and cultural dimensions of learning. Other efforts undertaken to enhance transition include the development of learning communities (Troxell, 2010) and the use of social media such as Facebook (Jenkins et al., 2012) and SMS texting (Harley et al., 2007) to engage students successfully during transition. However, it should be noted that there is some evidence that students do not like their social outlets to be used for academic purposes (Lodge, 2010; Winter et al., 2010).

4.3 Curriculum development and pedagogy

A recent HEA research synthesis on inclusive learning and teaching in higher education (Hockings, 2010) draws on many issues which are relevant to the WP agenda in terms of retention, engagement, achievement and success. For example, one study identified difficulties encountered by university teachers in understanding the needs of non-traditional learners, many of whom came from disadvantaged backgrounds (Hoelscher et al., 2008). Several other studies over the past decade both in the UK and elsewhere have recognised the need for inclusive learning and teaching in HE if non-traditional students or those from disadvantaged groups are to be retained (Bamber and Tett, 2000; Merrill et al, 2009; Crosling et al., 2008; Cashmore, et al., 2011; Jones, 2012). Crosling et al. (2009) stress the need for understanding the diversity of WP students, their backgrounds, aspirations and interests, as well as providing relevant curricula that builds on these students’ life experiences, interests and aspirations, using inclusive language and relevant examples. They also note the importance of providing student-centred active learning so the students are involved in the learning process, as well as integration of study skills and the use of relevant, formative feedback in a timely and constructive way. Tinto, writing in 2012 about the US, highlighted the importance of effective classroom strategies for teaching and learning including ‘clear expectations, appropriate and timely support, feedback on assessment, engaging pedagogies and enhancing teaching skills’ (Tinto, 2012, p.1). The beneficial role which can be played by assessment in teaching and learning has also been addressed by other authors such as Donnison and Penn-Edwards (2011), who note the advantages of early assessment for first year students in the transitional period of their studies as a motivator for learning. It is also important that students are aware of alternative options and are able to change courses rather than withdrawing in the event of changed circumstances or interests (Milburn, 2012).

Werth et al. (2009) document a set of teaching approaches that proved successful with their first year students. These included constructivism, scaffolding, social presence and reflective practice, all of which had contributed to the positive outcomes of higher achievement, increased student retention and success rates. An innovation by Wood (2010) involved including a practice-based research element in the curriculum of her programme which also proved popular with the students and, arguably, engaged them in creative problem solving processes. Cooper and Pickering (2009) focus on the use of personalised, self-generated learning approaches
through the development and use of the Professional Identity and Values Organisation Tools (PIVOT) – based on a constructivist approach to learning. The intention of these tools is to enhance reflection through self-generated personal constructs and values and the creation of self-directed learning aims. A similar tool was used by Harding and Thompson (2011), the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI) which identifies students’ learning styles and thereby aids in their learning development. In terms of wider pedagogic approaches, there is mixed evidence about the benefits of online learning for non-traditional students: Kemmer (2011) reports that online courses can improve engagement of such students, since increased flexibility has the potential for widening access. However, drawbacks of this approach include reliance on students taking responsibility for their own learning; and the need to offer considerable support to enable equality of access to on-line learning. Osborne et al. (2011) note the potential for varied modes of delivery and timing of teaching and learning activities (evenings and weekends, short-cycle, accelerated degrees and part-time study) to offer advantages for non-traditional students.

Thomas (2012) reports on the findings from seven projects on retention and success in the What Works programme[^5] here in the UK. The findings and conclusions prove to be surprisingly consistent across all the 7 projects:

- Successful retention and student success comes from a sense of belonging to the HEI which is mainly developed through activities for all students. The institution, department, programme and module should therefore all nurture a culture of belonging through the way they function and relate to people;
- Academic programmes and high-quality student-centred learning and teaching must be a primary focus for effective student retention and success;
- Additionally student belonging develops through supportive peer relations; meaningful interactions between staff and students; developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners; and an HE experience relevant to students’ interests and future goals.

The importance of monitoring the engagement and attainment of students to identify those likely to withdraw was also emphasised in this report. Thomas notes that tracking should start as soon as possible in the academic year, since withdrawals are most likely in the first semester and after Christmas. As well as monitoring student behavior to identify at-risk students, these data can also be used to identify departments, programmes and modules with higher rates of withdrawal, non-progression and non-completion. Specific targets for retention and success can also then be set appropriately at a programme or module level. However, this approach depends upon the availability of high-quality institutional data sets, as well as a commitment to resourcing the appropriate personalized and supportive approaches to teaching and learning which are required.

[^5]: Details and reports from all 7 projects are to be found on the HEA website: [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/what-works-retention](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/what-works-retention)
4.4 Ongoing Student Support

The need for ongoing support particularly for non-traditional students has been identified in a number of papers. Bamber and Tett (2000) note the ‘alien’ environment of higher education for some students:

For its part the university must accept that the implications of offering access to non-traditional students does not end, but rather begins, at the point of entry. This means providing sustained support to students throughout the course in relation to the external and internal factors that affect the learning process (Bamber and Tett, 2000, p.57).

In order to provide support to students as and when required, it is important that monitoring processes are rigorous, however. For example, the 2007 NAO report highlighted good practice in monitoring at institutions which were able to readily identify students at risk. One university provided monthly monitoring reports to key managers and several were tracking attendance and academic attainment of students in order to pick up those who needed more support (see Appendix 1 for an example of case studies from this report).

In their European study, Merrill et al. (2010) described the importance of ongoing support for the students. Of particular importance in the UK context was the personal tutor who was identified as being the key to student decisions about withdrawal or continuation. Similarly Thomas et al. (2009) note the importance of personal tutoring and academic advising:

Academic advisors, academic faculty staff and personal tutors are often the ‘linking pin’, facilitating and brokering students’ connections to the wider higher education community and equipping them with the information and skills they need to engage (Thomas et al., 2009, p.2)

Thomas and Jamieson-Ball (2011) reported on a number of successful personal tutoring initiatives in Wales to improve retention including the successful development of a personal tutoring unit which was widely used - although a continuing challenge was to raise awareness of the unit and its work. Combining the personal tutoring with other support services has also been trialled as means of enhancing retention (Cashmore et al., 2011; Thomas and Quinn, 2007). Thomas et al. (2002) considered the most effective ways of ensuring access to all student services, particularly for those students at risk of non-completion. Examples of good practice cited include the integrated student services at Greenwich University which combined counselling, careers, mentoring, financial advice, job shop, study skills, international student support, chaplaincy, nursery and disability support which worked in multi service teams for specific purposes. This enabled effective cross-referral and therefore stronger support for students at risk. In the US there is also evidence of academic advising successfully sitting alongside other student services such as careers so that staff from both services are cross trained to cover both areas of work (Troxell, 2010).
Morey and Robbins (2011) studied two different holistic approaches to supporting first year students in different HEIs. In one, the approach included a Personal and Academic Support System (PASS), comprising three strands of support: the PASS tutorial, re-sit support provided through PASS and the systematic embedding of PASS interventions, all with an underpinning pastoral referral facility that provides integrated and holistic support to students. The second approach also concentrated on an holistic model of student support and development but consisted of two key elements: a newly configured one stop shop for student services and a university-wide system of personal tutoring. Both were found to be successful in enhancing retention:

*Holistic models of study advice and personal development are effective in making students feel they are supported towards success, whether these models are delivered across the university or locally in an academic school.* (Morey and Robbins, 2011, p.2)

Internationally, Benson et al. (2012) report on the experiences of a group of students from diverse backgrounds in Australian higher education. This project evaluated the extent to which these students succeed in HE, and findings indicated the need for academic support that went beyond pedagogical assistance (such as help with essay writing) and which was relevant to students’ diverse experiences and backgrounds. Several US institutions have developed programmes or study meetings which are targeted explicitly at students who have been identified as being at a higher risk of withdrawal (Demetriou, and Schmitz-Sciborski, 2009; Troxell, 2010). Finally, a sense of belonging and intimacy was found to play a key role in student retention - and also in achievement of good NSS results (Cashmore et al., 2011). Exploring this issue further using student surveys, individual interviews and analysis of video diaries revealed the following themes: personal tutors and other staff relationships; central services; social spaces; and clubs and societies were all key to helping students develop that feeling of being part of the university.

4.5 Employability

UK universities are increasingly focusing upon the employability credentials of their students and this is also impacting on the WP agenda in terms of equality of opportunity for non-traditional students on leaving HE. A number of publications focused on employability have therefore been considered in this review (e.g. Yorke and Knight, 2004, 2006; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Tomlinson, 2007; Pegg et al., 2012). In terms of definition, Yorke and Knight (2007) suggest that employability should be considered in relation to the attributes of students in the following four areas:

- powers of understanding (evidenced by gaining a good degree);
- application of skills (generic and subject specific);
- metacognition (capacity for reflection); and
- efficacy beliefs (and what they describe as “other personal qualities”) (p. 158)
King (2009), however, discusses the complexity of employability and notes that there is no single accepted definition and no clear thread within the various definitions in the literature.

Pegg et al. (2012) address the pedagogy of employability and describe case studies from various national and international institutions of learning and teaching that support the development of student employability in the classroom, through distance and part-time learning and in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. One example described is an initiative which identified students’ needs through using an Employability Development Profile (EDP) questionnaire for students with support from tutors, followed by the development of materials such as modules and workshops to address these needs. Some critics of the employability discourse and agenda, however, feel that it brings educational disadvantage to non-traditional students (Carroll, 2011, page 88). Carroll therefore focused specifically on non-traditional graduates and their employability skills in her three-year longitudinal study exploring the experiences of non-traditional Irish graduates in the labour market immediately after graduation. The main findings, however, suggest that they experienced little disadvantage other than to be underemployed at times.

4.6 Remaining Barriers to WP in HE.

It is clear that there are a range of ways in which interventions and changes to practice within the student life-cycle can enhance the experience and likelihood of success of non-traditional students. However, there remain a number of barriers to admission and success for these students which are described in the literature. Gorard et al. (2006) document 3 types of barriers to widening access in HE, all of which need to be considered when planning a university policy for supporting non-traditional students:

- Situational barriers created by an individual’s personal circumstances including direct and indirect costs, loss or lack of time, and distance from a learning opportunity.
- Institutional barriers such as admissions procedures, timing and scale of provision, and general lack of institutional flexibility, created by the structure of available opportunities.
- Dispositional barriers, in the form of person’s motivation and attitudes to learning, which may be caused by a lack of suitable learning opportunities or poor previous educational experiences.

A further barrier to participation identified in the 2007 NAO report was the variation in the quality of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) on career options and pathways provided by some HEIs so that in some cases students were making unrealistic applications or were put off completely from applying to HE. Foster and Higson (2008) highlighted the importance of involving the family in this respect by raising awareness about the possibility of their children entering HE. Whilst their specific focus was on families from BME groups, the advice could equally be applied to other under-represented groups.
Some studies have reported on the difficulty of effectively targeting WP students. An account of the challenges experienced by teachers in identifying students with the potential to achieve at HE level are provided by Allerston et al. (2006), who argue that selection of students for attendance at Outreach activities is often ineffective. Thomas et al. (2012) note the crucial role of teachers in enabling or preventing young people from under-represented and disadvantaged groups from progressing to HE and they argue that teacher education programmes in HE could do more to train novice teachers to become better advocates of WP. Finally in respect of which students to target for WP activities, Thomas and Quinn (2007) highlight the lack of attention by HEIs on first generation students to HE, yet they argue that parental education is a better indicator of under-represented groups than employment or financial status.

In addition, key barriers to retention of WP students include:

- Lack of commitment of HE leadership to WP retention and success;
- Patchy practice across individual institutions and across the HE sector rather than integrated programme of interventions from pre entry, induction and transition to graduation including employability;
- Lack of concentration on the first year experience together with poor induction;
- Lack of knowledge and understanding of HE staff about the wide range of needs of non-traditional students;
- Limited provision for study skills workshops in some institutions and lack of support from other student services;
- Lack of inclusive teaching and student centred learning together with patchy support from academic staff, and/ or poor feedback from on assessments;
- Lack of effective and robust monitoring and evaluation including attendance monitoring.

5.0 Good Practice Resources

Within the huge amount of grey literature on widening participation from various HEIs, a number of good practice guides have been compiled detailing various interventions and their impact on student retention. These include outputs from the STAR project (Student Transition And Retention) based at the University of Ulster (with four partner institutions: The University of Brighton, Liverpool Hope University, The University of Manchester and The University of Sunderland). This project focused on the identification, analysis, dissemination and uptake of good practice in supporting students during periods of transition from one learning environment to another and the impact on student retention. The project included case studies of best practice from a number of universities including pre-entry, induction, curriculum development and staff development as well as useful resources and links on its website. Two guides by Fitzgibbon (2009, 2010) concentrate on examples of best practice in support of the first year experience at various HEIs in Wales. The 2009 guide offers institution-wide and Faculty-level examples of Communities of Practice such as a Freshers’ Help desk and a Study Skills Drop in Advisory Service. Student engagement is also covered for example with Personal tutoring –

6 http://ulster.ac.uk/star/about/about.htm
Certificate in Supporting students and Enhancing pastoral support. The 2010 guide focuses on initiatives around the first year experience and beyond, with respect to assessment and employability. Examples included using peer assessment and feedback to facilitate learning, initial assessment and feedback surgeries and employability initiatives such as ‘Working with Employers’ and ‘Experience Works’ week.

More recently, to coincide with the HEFCE and Paul Hamlyn funded What Works programme, a Compendium of Effective Practice has been produced by the HEA and edited by Andrews, Clark and Thomas (2012). This guide has sections on various types of interventions including pre entry, induction and transition teaching and learning, peer support, data monitoring and strategic change. The interventions outlined in this Compendium all follow a similar template including detailed descriptions of the intervention, evaluation methods and evidence of impact and further references. The guide sets out many examples of good practice in improving the student experience including some pre-entry examples such as Cardiff University which instigated a bespoke online self-evaluation tool to help prospective students evaluate their ability to achieve the learning outcomes required by the programme (p.8). Another example provided reports on a project at Northumbria whereby social networking sites were used to establish “e-groups” and “e-mentoring” before students arrive at the University. In enabling students to make friends before they arrive on campus, this was found to reduce anxiety while promoting a sense of belonging before enrolment. Doyle and McGucking at Trinity College Dublin describe a website which offers support to disabled students before they start at the college and explain that this allows students to pre-identify their support and accommodation needs, and also provides them with access to study skills and assistive technology. Another intervention targeted at disabled students is the pre-induction programme for students living with Asperger’s syndrome at the University of Surrey. This programme enables new students to familiarise themselves with the campus at a relatively quiet time.

There have also been a large number of recent conferences, seminars and events around widening participation which have produced a range of resources and case studies. A 2012 conference, run by the Open University, entitled Widening Participation: Discourses for Inclusion, included an international set of papers on various aspects of inclusion in HE. The HEA were also engaged in a seminar series around retention and success in 2012 which demonstrated the widespread commitment to implementing creative approaches to identifying and improving student engagement, as well as monitoring and evaluation. An example of the latter is the traffic light system developed at Derby. This entailed an early warning monitoring system for identifying at-risk students in their first year, using not just attendance and attainment data but also extra-curricular engagement. Another monitoring system included electronic tracking of students through their login history. Additionally there are a number of research syntheses on the HEA website which encompass Inclusion and reviews of research on specific non-traditional groups such as mature learners, BME groups, disabled learners, vocational learners and those from lower socio economic groups.

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7 http://cloudworks.ac.uk/cloudscape/view/2374
8 http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2012/seminars/themes/TS060_Nottingham_Trent for example
9 http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/inclusion/Inclusion_Research_Syntheses_Main_Page
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Cotton, Kneale and Nash 2013 Horizon-Scanning Report: Widening Participation, Retention and Success


Kift, S. (2009) *Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student learning experience in Australian higher education*. Final Report for ALTC Senior Fellowship Program.


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Sanders, J. and Higham, L. (2012) *The role of higher education students in widening access, retention and success.* A literature synthesis of the Widening Access, Student Retention and Success National Programmes Archive, HEA.


Thomas, L. and Jamieson-Ball, C.(2011) *Engaging students to improve student retention and success in higher education in Wales*, HEA.


Appendix 1: Case Studies

Five examples are given here of institutions which have strengths in a specific area of WP. These have been selected to illustrate a range of ways in which non-traditional students may be supported. There are plentiful alternative examples provided through the links to Good Practice Resources in Section 5.0 of the main report.

**Falmouth University: Pre-entry Support**

Falmouth University (formerly University College Falmouth) is an Arts specialist institution which was recently awarded university status. Falmouth uses a *Tribal* information system to bring together all outreach, progression and retention data. A pre-entry ‘at risk’ register is also used for incoming students, based mainly on quantitative data about students’ backgrounds, prior qualifications, ethnicity, disability and care-leaver status. Students are also asked to rate their confidence in a number of areas of academic capabilities such as giving a presentation. A central database then identifies those courses and programmes which have large numbers of students who lack confidence in academic skills. Programme leads are contacted and additional support and skills development is offered, targeted to the areas with greatest need. Falmouth also utilises a peer mentoring scheme which has been running for 6-7 years and evaluated over 3 years. It was set up to enhance the transition between accepting an offer and enrolment, and to support those students with little family history of HE who might otherwise re-think their application during the summer period when they have little contact with the HEI. The scheme allows students to ask questions which are of concern to them but which they might be unwilling to communicate formally to the university about. The scheme now has more than 200 mentors and 2 staff co-ordinators.

*Source: Interview with WP coordinator at Falmouth University*

**University of East London: Extended induction support**

UEL is a post-1992 institution with a high proportion of WP students. Through its management information system, the university identified an increased risk of losing students who had entered through ‘clearing’ about a month after the start of term when first assignments were due and when financial and other concerns can also arise. In response, the university trained postgraduate and final year students as support advisers who telephoned the students during week four to check how they were doing. Additional capacity was made available in support services, so that all students who wanted to could have a consultation by the next day. The response to this intervention was highly positive. For example, 60 extra students attended the money advice centre during the week, and ‘crash courses’ in study skills were offered. For a relatively low cost in relation to student fees, the university’s early evaluation showed an average 1.6 percentage point decrease in the withdrawal rate, and it therefore seems probable that approximately 12 additional students were retained. A full evaluation of impact was planned for the end of a full academic year. The university also monitors the performance of students by module in order to identify modules with high failure rates, which may indicate that learning and teaching or methods of assessment need to be adjusted.

*Source: QA (2008): National Audit Office/ The University of East London*
Bournemouth University: Coaching throughout the life-cycle
Bournemouth is a post 1992 institution and, like PU, works with a number of colleges. The university has recently appointed a Widening Participation Monitoring and Evaluation Analyst and launched the Student Journey Project in summer 2012 which aims to link existing systems for the benefit of students. A major strength of their WP provision is the BU Coaching scheme. This is designed to engage students from pre-arrival (offer stage) until alumni stage. This focus on the whole of the student journey is central to their philosophy, as is the importance of developing a community and sense of belonging. The scheme covers academic, social, pastoral and other elements, and is responsive to student need. There is a strong focus on pre-entry engagement and the first year. An online link enables the student to engage with BU resources, chat to BU staff and students and link into networks (e.g. sports, music) and to begin to develop their personal portfolio from the earliest stage. The scheme may include: Group or individual coaching; Curriculum space for coaching; Extended peer-assisted learning (PAL); Online engagement and diagnostics; Mandatory work or volunteering exposure for all students; Placement support; Mentoring by alumni, business contacts or staff; Engagement in extra-curricular activity and the BU award; SU schemes such as the Leadership and Management (Duke of Edinburgh) award; Entrepreneurship development; Links to professional bodies. An extended induction is also used which gathers in intensity during the first term. This enables students to get immersed in good academic habits from day one. Induction will be refreshed for each level transition and especially focused for top up students.

Source: Interview with WP coordinator at BU.

University of Teesside: Co-ordinated retention support
Teeside is a post-1992 university of a similar size to Plymouth. In 2003 the University received support from the European Social Fund to research retention, which led to the establishment of a central retention team. This team undertakes a range of activities to support retention work across the University, including developing a central retention action plan for departments to use as a framework for their local plans, and co-ordinating retention support officers. Retention support officers offer approachable, school-based support for students, and provide a link between academic staff and student services. For example, they are responsible for contacting students who are not attending class and, if appropriate, referring them to student services or organising peer support. They also maintain retention information, support staff through advice, workshops and written guidance, and undertake research. With the funded project’s end, financial support for the team was taken on by the university. In 2002-03 the University’s continuation rate was 89.7 per cent (2.3 percentage points better than benchmark). In 2004-05 the rate had improved to 90.8 per cent (2.7 percentage points above their updated (higher) benchmark), although it is possible that other factors were involved in the improvement.

Source: QAA (2008): National Audit Office/The University of Teesside
University of the West of England: Research-informed Practice in WP

UWE is a multi-campus post-1992 university of a comparable size to PU. It has a long-standing commitment to research and evaluation around WP, and in-house research has informed their access agreement as well as underpinning their strategic plan for widening participation. It was also named as the ‘Xcel Best Institution of Widening Participation’ in 2009. UWE are currently developing enhanced tracking processes for WP students using a commercial CRM (Customer Relationship Monitoring) product. Data will be used to evaluate activities related to the Access Agreement and the Widening Participation Strategic Assessment, and a WP data analyst has been appointed. Enhanced data availability will also feed into research in this area, such that there is a clearer understanding of the student experience. Their Access Agreement notes plans for further research on under-represented groups, and notes the intention for impact on future practice:

The University will fund a pilot project in 2011/12 to track students from under-represented groups into and through UWE. The outcomes of this pilot will shape a long term initiative to track and evaluate the student experience for target students, and to inform forward planning for future years. It will be informed by current research work at the University.\(^\text{10}\)

Other strengths of UWE WP Activity include strong links with local schools which go beyond outreach activities to include CPD training for teachers and sponsorship of local schools through time and expertise (for example, their director of finance is also the director of finance at a sponsored school).\(^\text{11}\) They also offer 70 UCAS points to those students from WP cohorts who enrol at UWE. They have identified further groups that they may wish to prioritise specifically in future years, depending on funding available, including: the unemployed and those in low paid employment; apprentices; part-time students; mature students; and post-graduates from under-represented groups.

Source: Interview with WP coordinator and information from 2011/12 Access Agreement

\(^\text{10}\) The tracking project has turned into an investigation into retention with particular reference to BME students. The project is due to report in June/July [personal communication].

\(^\text{11}\) The HEA commissioned a report on the school partnerships, entitled, ‘Developing Enhanced University Partnerships with Schools in Bristol’: UWE and HEFCE 2011 Professor Ron Ritchie et al.

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2010/rd0710/rd07_10uwe.pdf
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Widening Participation: PedRIO Horizon Scanning Report
Debby Cotton, Pauline Kneale and Tricia Nash

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The Gender and Ethnicity Attainment Gap Research Project
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Joanna Blake

Paper 4
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