



Literature review of research into widening participation to higher education

Report to HEFCE and OFFA by ARC Network

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Joanne Moore, John Sanders and Louise Higham

ARC Network Ltd

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ABOUT ARC NETWORK

ARC Network provides specialist research and consultancy services which enable organisations to develop and implement strategies that promote equality in access to Higher Education. For more information about the organisation go to <http://www.aimhighernetwork.co.uk>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This report summarises findings from a literature review of research into widening participation to higher education (HE). The full report is available at: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/>.

The review was undertaken to provide an assessment of the key issues and challenges to widening participation, and highlight the policies, approaches and practice that have been shown to be most effective in widening access and supporting student success. It was commissioned to inform the national strategy for access and student success which the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) are developing.

There is evidence that the trends in HE access and participation, for example the increase in young participation rates for students from lower socio-economic groups, have been moving in the right direction. Many published reports have suggested that certain types of widening participation interventions have made positive impacts and research relating to student retention and success has revealed some consistent messages about the efficacy of particular approaches.

Scope of the review

The review covers research into widening participation to HE since the last major overview commissioned by HEFCE in 2006. The focus is mainly on research literature, including statistical analyses, published in the UK. The body of new widening participation literature is large, and the review relies mainly on published empirical research, rather than emerging, theoretical or discussion pieces. It is based therefore on practice only where this is reflected in empirical research. The review draws extensively on evaluative research emanating from both individual higher education providers and major widening participation initiatives.

Time constraints were a significant issue affecting the scope of the review since the work was completed in less than six weeks.

Links to other studies

The report is one of a series which HEFCE and OFFA have commissioned to inform the development of the national strategy, including: on-going evaluation of the National Scholarship Programme (NSP); research into the use and impact of HEFCE funding for widening participation; a longitudinal study of the impact of institutional financial support on applicant choice and on retention; analysis of participation by selectivity of HE institution; and a review of international evidence of what works in widening participation.

Context for the review

There has been a considerable expansion in participation in HE over the last two decades. Substantial progress has also been made in relation to widening access. A culture of widening participation, embracing both access and retention and success, is now firmly embedded in the mainstream of most higher education providers.

However, challenges remain: to build on and sustain the progress that has been made; to ensure the participation and success of particular groups; to deliver fair access to 'high dividend' courses and

institutions; and to deploy finite resources equitably and effectively in a period of fiscal restraint. Higher education providers are addressing these issues during a period of immense change, with new funding arrangements and uncertainties about student behaviours overlain with challenging demographics.

Widening participation target groups

‘Widening participation students’ are not a homogeneous group. They may have a range of identities, diverse social characteristics and come from a variety of backgrounds. For the purpose of this review the following key target groups were identified:

- People from lower socio-economic groups
- Mature students
- Part-time learners
- Learners from ethnic minority groups
- Vocational and work-based learners
- Disabled learners
- Care leavers

Structure of the report

Section 2 provides an overview of the main findings from the review of widening participation literature.

Findings are divided into nine themes which broadly follow a ‘learner journey’ approach:

- Outreach and progression
- Information, advice and guidance (IAG)
- Retention and student success
- Impact of financial support
- Flexible provision
- Progress to postgraduate study
- Employers
- Employability
- Economic growth and widening participation

Section 3 of the report draws out implications of the review for policy and practice and identifies gaps in research.

Audiences for the report

The report will be of interest to: policy makers and government departments with responsibilities for driving forward progress on widening participation objectives; senior managers and others responsible for decisions on higher education providers' own investment in widening participation and funding currently delivered through the NSP; and practitioners, including academics, tasked with planning and delivering widening participation within higher education providers and more widely.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE

This section of the report presents key findings from each of the nine themes used to frame the review.

Outreach and Progression

This theme covers general and collaborative outreach and progression programmes of varying intensity for individuals and groups, and activities for specific target groups. 'Outreach' is taken to apply to any activity that reaches out beyond higher education providers to engage with wider communities in order to raise HE awareness and aspirations. 'Progression' refers to targeted approaches with the specific objective of supporting under-represented young people (and others) take up opportunities for study at a higher level.

The review identified the following key findings:

- Evaluations of outreach and progression programmes highlight the importance of consistent and sustained interventions. Structured and coherent 'framework' approaches are now well established in many higher education providers.
- Most authors agree interventions need to start early and engage young people at different stages of their educational career. The evidence about the cost and impact of work at primary level is not yet sufficiently strong to support or challenge a focus on this element within outreach and progression programmes.
- The literature stresses the key role of partnerships – cross-sector and inter-sector – in maximising resources, ensuring impartiality and smoothing out inconsistencies in relation to the equitable distribution of HE outreach and progression opportunities.
- Targeting is a key issue, particularly for resource intensive activities. There are implications in terms of data for targeting, but also in relation to activities and linkages.
- Certain types of intensive interventions seem to be particularly effective such as summer schools and mentoring. However, these might be easier to measure. Detailed information may be collected on participants (e.g. through an application process, which could include permission to share data between stakeholders). In the case of older participants the transition to HE may be relatively soon so evaluation information becomes available earlier, compared to other types of interventions which target young learners at an earlier stage in their journey to HE.
- There has been a strong focus on work with schools/colleges and young people, and difficulties conceptualising and delivering outreach to mature, vocational and part-time learners are identified.
- Some target groups face particular barriers to participation in outreach and progression activities and may need specific targeted approaches, e.g. care leavers and disabled learners. Higher education providers should seek to develop outreach programmes that are sensitive to the needs of both male and female learners.

- There are challenges for evaluating progression and outreach activities, and clear approaches to evaluation need to be built in from the start. Practitioners would welcome support to improve research and evaluation.

Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

The phrase ‘Information, Advice and Guidance’ (IAG) is frequently used as an umbrella term to refer to a wide range of activities and interventions that support an individual’s ability to manage their own career. This theme examines the way in which outreach and other activity effectively delivers IAG – both intensive and extensive – to prospective students from widening participation backgrounds.

The review identified the following key findings:

- Access to HE-related IAG has been linked to improved success rates of applications and to improved HE retention rates. However, concerns are identified in relation to both access to formal IAG and the quality of IAG provided to under-represented groups. Mature and vocational learners face particular issues.
- The most successful programmes of IAG interventions for under-represented groups appear to be those which start early, are personalised, integrated into outreach and other support, and address priority information needs, including HE finance, HE applications processes and requirements and employment opportunities.
- Interventions that deliver ‘professional’, engaging IAG are particularly well received when they meet the need for ‘hot’ information. IAG interventions planned as part of outreach programmes need to start early and intensify during periods of transition.
- Providing more IAG is not enough, there is a need to improve what is already there by using informal models of intervention, supporting potential applicants to access formal IAG services where they exist and building the expertise of staff delivering those services.
- HE students and other positive role models can make a significant contribution to delivery of IAG interventions and partnerships between higher education providers can support the provision of impartial IAG.
- It is a major challenge to ensure that influencers working with under-represented groups are well informed about HE. It is vital to develop a clear strategy for reaching out to influencers, evaluate interventions and identify and share what works.

Retention and Student Success

Widening participation extends beyond simply gaining access to HE. What happens at college or university and what outcomes are achieved also matter. This theme focuses on strategies, activities and interventions which aim to enhance student retention and success in HE. It covers a large part of the student lifecycle from transition and induction through to completion and exit.

The review identified the following key findings:

- Fostering a sense of belonging lies at the heart of retention and success. The prime site for nurturing engagement and a strong sense of belonging is located in the academic domain.
- The issues underlying student withdrawal are complex and often interlinked: academic concerns, feelings of isolation or not fitting in, and worries about achieving future aspirations are highlighted in the research.
- Different groups may experience 'higher education' in very different ways. This can impact in particular ways on students' identity and vital sense of belonging. There are distinct challenges involved in engaging specific groups such as mature students and part-time learners.
- Friends, family and peers have an important supporting role in the academic as well as the social domain. They can provide informal support and bolster a sense of belonging.
- The evidence suggests that retention and success are best addressed by approaches which seek to develop: supportive peer relations; meaningful interaction between staff and students; knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners; and an HE experience that is relevant to students' interests and future goals.
- Key transition points require particular attention. Transition activities should be seen as part of a continuum that includes pre-entry activities and first year engagement. Generic features of successful pre-entry interventions include: providing information; informing expectations; developing academic skills; building social capital; and nurturing a sense of belonging.
- Universal rather than targeted approaches are the preferred model in most retention and success (including attainment) strategies. Although, specific interventions like peer mentoring and peer tutoring have been shown to be particularly effective, the precise activity is less important than the way in which it is offered and linked to other endeavours.
- The attainment gap for students from ethnic minority backgrounds is not diminishing despite growing understanding of its dimensions and vigorous endeavours to address it. New lines of enquiry have the potential to reveal fresh insights.

Impact of Financial Support

Student financial support includes both the arrangements in place to cover tuition fees (e.g. loans, fee waivers), and mechanisms to support other costs associated with HE study (e.g. grants, bursaries and scholarships). There is general agreement that HE financing systems should aim to prevent 'market failure' in HE by minimising the financial barriers to participation, as it is in everyone's interest that no one with the potential to succeed in HE is put off. This theme deals with undergraduate finance and how it relates to widening participation.

The review identified the following key findings:

- Finance is just one of a number of complex factors which underpin HE decisions. Student feedback research consistently cites finance as a key concern for students from poorer

backgrounds. Monitoring application trends following the changes to HE finance in England is a key policy concern.

- Statistical evidence concluded that changes in HE finance arrangements have not been associated with any material reduction in HE participation by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Longitudinal research into patterns of take-up of HE places before and after bursaries were introduced suggests that disadvantaged young applicants are not more likely to choose offers of places from higher education institutions (HEIs) with higher bursaries. This may reflect the importance of other variables in the decisions made by prospective students from widening participation backgrounds.
- Learners and parents from lower socio-economic groups may be less likely to view HE as worth the cost. Key anxieties are fear of failure, attitudes to debt, and concerns about employment prospects.
- Of itself financial support is not a solution to under-representation. Its role may be more in mitigating the effects of rising costs of HE on demand for places (as in the US), and supporting the success of low-income students who do progress.
- The literature suggests that financial support is most successful when it is relatively easy to understand and apply for and efforts are made to raise awareness amongst potential beneficiaries.
- Critics of the current financial support arrangements in England suggest that the impact of financial support as a policy tool for widening participation could be limited by complexity in HE finance systems and informational barriers.

Flexible Provision

This theme examines the role of flexible provision as a mechanism for widening participation. The notion of flexible provision in HE is multi-faceted. It takes in flexible modes of study in time and place and learning through different media. Sometimes described as alternative provision, flexible provision implies different admissions, curricula and delivery structures including elasticity of timetable and length of study, different locations for study including in work, colleges and universities and may include validation of prior knowledge. Part-time HE overlaps with and normally is considered part of flexible provision. However it is worth noting that not all flexible provision is part-time and not all part-time provision is that flexible.

The review identified the following key findings:

- Flexible provision is potentially attractive to students who have other responsibilities, who work or who are seeking employment, career change or development. Flexibility is only one (and not the main) feature of provision that may attract students who do not traditionally participate in HE.
- Part-time provision (an overlapping category) is also diverse and needs to be disaggregated to be properly understood. Many part-time students have characteristics associated with widening participation.

- Part-time HE may be perceived as being lower status and issues of identity may impact on the extent to which part-time learners see themselves as being ‘authentic’ HE students. Work/life/study balance issues are particularly important for part-time learners.
- Falling demand for part-time study is a major concern. Financial issues are highlighted in relation to this, particularly the substantial increases in tuition fees and the limited eligibility criteria for loans. Funding by employers for part-time study tends to be concentrated on those who already have higher qualifications.
- Although some distinctive challenges are evident, issues of retention and support for part-time learners do not differ significantly from those faced by full-time learners.

Progress to Postgraduate Study

Postgraduate study has witnessed exponential growth in the last two decades. There are different ‘types’ and ‘sizes’ of postgraduate qualifications, ranging from doctorates to diplomas, with distinct entry requirements, particular study patterns and varying costs. A broad distinction is generally drawn between research focused study (mainly for PhD degrees) and taught programmes. This review focuses on UK-domiciled postgraduate students, whose numbers have flat-lined and in some instances declined of late. It draws on evidence about the implications for different groups in terms of both accessing postgraduate provision and participating successfully within it.

The review identified the following key findings:

- Postgraduate study is emerging as ‘the new frontier of widening participation’ and has generated much recent policy interest. Postgraduate study is very diverse and needs to be disaggregated and analysed in discrete sections to be properly understood.
- Research in this area is relatively scarce, but is growing in range and depth. All parties agree that more work is needed, particularly using the centralised data that is available. Research efforts are hampered by the complexity of the provision and the extent of variation within and between HEIs.
- More and better information on the availability and costs of postgraduate provision is needed. Some recent research has indicated the extent to which increased postgraduate fees may suppress demand.
- The lack of transparency on financial support available for postgraduate students and the possible impact on undergraduate debt on progression to postgraduate study are key areas of concern.
- Aspiration raising and IAG should not stop when under-represented groups access undergraduate HE.
- Postgraduate study is very different to undergraduate study and transition can be problematic. Progression rates are linked strongly to prior undergraduate experiences of study. Institutional variations are significant – the research-intensive HEIs tend to ‘recruit their own’.

- Women access postgraduate study in lower than expected numbers, though there are variations between different types of postgraduate study and the reasons require further research. The ethnicity dimension of progression to postgraduate study is complex, but numbers are exceptionally low for some minority ethnic populations.

Employer Contribution to Widening Participation

This theme focuses on the ways in which higher education providers' engagement with employers contributes to widening participation. Improving engagement between HE and employers has been at the heart of government policy for over a decade and this review examines how the changes witnessed by the sector have had an impact on participation in HE for widening participation target groups.

The review identified the following key findings:

- HE-employer engagement is a national priority and there are signs that recent developments in funding for workforce development initiatives have helped to increase participation in HE by widening participation groups, for example, developments through the Higher Apprenticeship Fund and co-funded provision.
- There are issues around the extent to which widening participation groups are benefiting in the same way as other employees. For example, employees from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to be supported by their employer. Apprentices from widening participation target areas are less likely to go into full-time university provision than those from more advantaged areas.

Employability

This theme examines the role of higher education providers in supporting the employability of students from widening participation backgrounds and identifies the contribution made by employers in the delivery of employability interventions.

The review identified the following key findings:

- Employability of HE graduates is a long-standing concern, but the focus has intensified recently in tandem with concerns about the economic return on investment in HE. The extent to which higher education providers have responded to this agenda varies and this may in part be due to funding.
- Destination and other data suggest that students from non-traditional backgrounds are disadvantaged in the labour market, leading to questions about whether the HE sector is perpetuating existing inequalities.
- The returns between groups of students entering HE and getting a degree differ, and trend data suggests the returns are worsening for lower socio-economic group entrants. Changing circumstances such as higher tuition fees and greater competition for jobs in the labour market could lead to more negative outcomes and could reduce incentives for HE participation.

- Embedding employability into the curriculum can benefit all students and is regarded as best practice. Employability of disadvantaged groups can also be supported by innovative and targeted approaches, although there is little empirical evidence to suggest what works.
- Employers are looking for graduates who can show strong involvement in extra-curricular activities and citizenship, but some graduates from widening participation backgrounds may be less able to demonstrate involvement in these types of activities.
- Work experience is an enabler of success in the graduate labour market and higher education providers can support students from widening participation backgrounds to access structured work experience, including internship opportunities.

Economic Growth and Widening Participation

This section concentrates on themes in the literature which relate to the widening participation aspects of the HE sector's contribution to enterprise, economic development and regional economies. This contribution is in addition to the economic benefits of HE for individual graduates including students from widening participation backgrounds and HE's generic role in developing human capital.

The review identified the following key findings:

- Economic development is increasingly recognised as the 'third mission' for higher education providers alongside research and teaching. HEI engagement in economic development depends on institutional factors and traditions and the regional context is also important.
- Economic growth strategies that are more wide-ranging with a longer term perspective and a deliberate widening participation and social engagement component are more likely to bring benefits for a variety of difficult to reach social groups.
- Policies are needed which promote a more strategic approach to economic development in context, and which integrate widening participation as a core objective, whilst playing to higher education provider strengths. Otherwise the literature suggests that widening participation is at risk of getting crowded out amongst competing agendas.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Introduction

The review looked at a large volume of material. Evidence is stronger in some areas than in others. There are still some gaps in the research base, and the evidence rarely meets strict definitions of causality. However, there are instances where the balance of evidence points to a strong probability of significant impact. Recent research (much of it qualitative) has tended to put the student (and the student voice) at its core. There has been an increased focus on robust evaluation (often using mixed methods) built in from the start (e.g. Realising Opportunities) and this has been supported by the research outcomes from major national programmes (e.g. the HEFCE and Paul Hamlyn Foundation-funded What Works? Student Retention and Success programme).

The review highlights the importance of building in monitoring and evaluation from the start, and the benefits of shared approaches which permit a degree of meta-analysis in order to get better value from the large range of local studies.

This section draws out implications for policy and practice, and makes suggestions for how work can be taken forward. The implications build upon key findings and are based upon the evidence reviewed as part of this study. Detailed analysis of the evidence can be found in the full report.

Policy Makers

Policy makers may wish to give consideration to the following:

- 1. Promote understanding of what is already known about ‘good practice’**, both in terms of disseminating findings and converting this understanding into policy directions. The reports and summaries produced by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) and the What Works? programme, together with the archives and research repositories hosted by the Higher Education Academy provide a particularly useful mix of sources and resources.
- 2. Continue to endorse the notion of partnership** within higher education providers as much as between providers and across sectors.
- 3. Widen the focus beyond ‘traditional’ conceptions of HE.** This acknowledges the limitations of formulating policy on the basis of one distinctive cohort: young full-time students who enter HE through an academic route. It is particularly important to understand the distinctive characteristics of the part-time student population.
- 4. Acknowledge ‘the diversity of diversity’.** It is important to acknowledge people’s multiple identities. This involves moving beyond large monolithic categories and looking at where different social characteristics intersect. It is here that targeted interventions can often have most impact. This approach may also reveal ‘hidden’ sub-groups within larger cohorts.
- 5. Continue to focus attention on tackling inequalities.** There are a number of equality and diversity issues which are emphasised in the literature: for example, the attainment gap for students from ethnic minority groups and the low participation of care leavers.
- 6. Continue to emphasise and prioritise staff development and continuous professional development (CPD)** for those working within the HE sector and those supporting under-represented groups to access HE opportunities.

Higher Education Providers

Managers in higher education providers may wish to give consideration to the following:

- 1. Continue to examine organisational culture and to explore the fitness for purpose of current structures and practices.** Engagement and identity are crucial to student success and engendering a sense of belonging. In seeking to embed holistic widening participation strategies, work should be done on identifying areas where changes may be required, particularly in relation to organisational culture, learning, teaching and assessment, student experience, financial support and programme delivery models

2. Continue to enhance and embed organisational widening participation strategies. Higher education providers should continue to align widening participation and equality and diversity policies, and strategies and activities for student support, success and employability. It is also important to acknowledge the key contribution that can be made by HE students and other positive role models in these strategies.

3. Ensure that clear targeting strategies are in place where appropriate (e.g. in relation to outreach and progression activities) and link these to evaluation processes. A clear targeting strategy helps to make best use of resources. Equally, while individual higher education providers will prioritise and target key groups differently, clarity about their own widening participation priorities enables resources and activities to be focused and evaluated appropriately. Knowing whom you want to reach and what you want to achieve, and measuring the long-term impact on learners, all contribute to effective evaluation.

4. Continue to join policy with practice and research with action. This means striving to reduce the distance between awareness and intellectual understanding of the issues of engagement and belonging, or the challenges of inclusion and differential attainment, and practical actions to address them.

5. Build on and enhance existing partnership practices, both within and outside the organisation. Internally, this includes viewing students as partners; externally, it involves working with and learning from the experience of other sectors and organisations. Cross-sector collaboration and partnership working recognises that prioritising the needs of the learners is not detrimental to organisational priorities, even within a highly competitive environment.

6. Support and add value to existing provision, particularly in relation to HE-related IAG and improving the employability of under-represented groups.

7. Engage a wider range of ‘influencers’. Develop a clear strategy for reaching out to key influencers, such as families, teachers, tutors, IAG providers and employers. This is an area where past experience, for example Aimhigher, may offer some good practice insights.

Practitioners

Widening participation practitioners and others in higher education providers who have responsibility for delivery may wish to give consideration to the following:

1. Continue to contextualise and apply what is already known about ‘good practice’, e.g. in relation to retention and success. Practitioners have a key role in taking what is already known and applying it, which means addressing the challenge of adapting generic findings to different types of higher education providers and to particular contexts.

2. Strive to foster sound learning relationships and continue to engender high expectations and to support aspirations. The literature indicates how sustained and positive engagement in the academic domain builds a sense of belonging that is so vital to student retention and success. High expectations are at the heart of successful relationships with widening participation target groups. Efforts to realise already high aspirations should continue throughout the whole learner journey rather than being confined to pre-entry outreach activities.

3. Develop outreach programmes that are ‘professional’ and engaging. The literature identifies that under-represented groups turn to informal sources of IAG, have less access to formal IAG and prefer ‘hot’ information. Providing information is not enough and potential learners need personalised support to help them to make decisions and implement them. Such work is highly resource intensive and higher education providers need to be clear on what contribution they can make and which target groups are a priority in relation to their overall organisational objectives.

4. Support the development of better monitoring and evaluation. The review points to the need for practitioner and academic researchers to work more closely together so that there is a tie-up between what widening practitioners are doing and how the success of their work is measured. Academic researchers should be encouraged to work alongside practitioners to develop robust research practices from the beginning and to feed into an agreed national evidence strategy.

Recommended practices:

- Well targeted outreach and progression including a learner progression approach which focuses on individuals, and provides elements of intensive support (for example summer schools and mentoring).
- Broad view of outreach to include work with mature learners and employees.
- Working with key influencers especially parents and other role models.
- Developing a more detailed understanding of attainment gaps and ways in which outreach and progression activities can contribute to addressing them.
- A clear strategy for HE-related IAG which complements and supports existing provision including developing the expertise of IAG providers.
- Collaborative partnerships with a focus on sustained relationships and on communities rather than higher education providers.
- Developing student identity and engendering a sense of belonging, especially in the critical transition and first year phase.
- Simplified packages of financial support with clear criteria backed up by good information.
- Starting employability support at pre-entry and targeting students for support who are most marginalised in the labour market.
- Clear strategies for monitoring and evaluation which bring academics and practitioners together to share expertise.
- Applying findings to part-time as well as full-time learners with a view to acknowledging their contribution and valuing their status as HE students and paying particular attention to work/life/study balance and structural and support mechanisms to facilitate this.

Research Gaps

Gaps in research should be looked at in the context of national and higher education provider widening participation priorities. Approaches to research should aim at bringing together academic research and practitioner-led initiatives. The review identified the following priorities: establishing what works in HE-related IAG, particularly in light of changes in the broader careers guidance sector; continued research into successful financial support mechanisms; greater understanding of progression to and success in postgraduate study; and better data to support the evaluation of outcomes from widening participation interventions.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The report is the result of a literature review of research into widening participation to higher education (HE) which was undertaken to provide an assessment of the key issues and challenges to widening participation, and highlight the policies, approaches and practice that have been shown to be most effective in widening access and supporting student success. There is evidence that the trends in HE access and participation have been moving in the right direction. This is indicated, for example, in the increase in young participation rates for students from lower socio-economic groups (HEFCE, 2010/03). Many published reports have suggested that certain types of widening participation interventions have made positive impacts and research and development relating to student retention and success has revealed some consistent messages about the efficacy of certain approaches.

1.2 The review is designed to inform the national strategy for access and student success which the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) are developing. Although HE funding streams – institutional fee income for access work under the aegis of OFFA and HEFCE’s Student Opportunity allocation - will remain distinct under the new strategy, the approach will clarify the connection between outreach, admissions, retention and graduate outcomes, as part of a student lifecycle approach.

1.3 The review is also designed to draw together current understanding of the emerging issues and challenges to widening participation and enhancing student success.

1.4 The task is ambitious for a sector as diverse as HE is in England, even more so since recent fee changes and the state of the economy are increasing the unpredictability of student behaviour and graduate employment.

Scope of the review

1.5 The report covers research into widening participation to HE since the publication of the review of widening participation research literature commissioned by HEFCE in 2006 (Gorard *et al.*, 2006). The focus was mainly on research literature published in the UK. The body of new widening participation literature is large, and the review draws mainly on published empirical research, and statistical analysis, rather than emerging, theoretical or discussion pieces. The review therefore is based on practice only where it is reflected in the empirical research evidence base. Its key source is the wealth of evaluative research emanating from both individual institutions and from major widening participation initiatives. Literature was identified for inclusion in the review through the following:

- Searches of existing databases and collections of widening participation research. Key repositories included the archives of the Aimhigher, Lifelong Learning Networks (LLN) and What Works? Student Retention and Success national programmes held by the Higher Education Academy¹.

¹ <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk>

- Searches of academic databases and sources. We used a range of appropriate search terms and applied these to a range of academic databases (see Annex A), and followed this up by work to explore citations and referencing to expand the scope of the sources.
- Circulation of request for materials. This included targeted approaches to individual researchers working in the field and requests via academic networks including the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE) and the British Educational Research Association (BERA).

1.6 Time constraints were a significant issue affecting the scope of the review since the work was completed in less than six weeks. Annex A provides further technical information on the search strategy, including the approach to undertaking academic searches.

1.7 Gorard *et al.*'s (2006) wide-ranging review noted the paucity of material that directly addresses the impact or effectiveness of retention initiatives. Most research was relatively small-scale and comprised single institution case studies or discrete activity evaluations. Details of methodology were sometimes scant, externality uncommon and the use of a comparator group rare. There were few longitudinal or multi-institution studies and little interrogation of large datasets or significant cohorts of students. Equally, the essence of this research was rarely distilled into practical measures that might impact on students or institutions.

1.8 Criteria for critiquing the materials for the current review were agreed with HEFCE and OFFA. As part of the review process materials were categorised against their relevance to the themes of the report and against broad standards for quality research and reporting. Few of the studies drawn on in this overview were able to include experimental design features, often for sound practical and ethical reasons, and this inevitably means that they fall short of strict definitions of 'causality' (Gorard *et al.*, 2006). However, a number easily surpass more pragmatic thresholds which focus on the likelihood that an outcome was influenced to a significant degree by a particular intervention (HEFCE, 2006 in Thomas, 2011), without attributing any change solely to it. Such an approach recognises that the ecology of widening participation is complex, and whilst requiring that evidence should be robust, enables reasonable judgements to be formed about the relationship between an intervention and the outcome (HEFCE and OFFA, 2013, p.56).

1.9 Researchers and practitioners have sought to improve the critical rigour of published evaluation reports in recent years. Concerns about the quality of the evidence base have been partly addressed through an enhanced focus on evaluation as part of national programmes. For example, the What Works? national programme, delivered by 7 project partnerships involving 22 higher education providers, aimed to help universities and colleges learn how best to ensure high student retention rates, particularly for students from widening participation backgrounds. It evaluated existing retention interventions and sought to reveal the most effective practices to secure high student continuation and completion rates. The What Works? programme's projects used a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research methods to examine a range of issues and significant efforts were made to link enquiries to the existing literature and to triangulate data. The findings have particular power because they are based on robust, peer-reviewed empirical research. They also build on the experience and address the concerns of both practitioners and institutions.

Links to other studies

1.10 The report is one of a series which HEFCE and OFFA have commissioned to inform the development of the national strategy including on-going evaluation of the NSP; research into the use and impact of HEFCE funding for widening participation; a longitudinal study of the impact of institutional financial support on applicant choice and on retention; analysis of participation by selectivity of HE institution; and a review of international evidence of what works in widening participation.

Context for the review

1.11 There has been a considerable expansion in participation in HE over the last two decades. Substantial progress has also been made in relation to widening participation. A culture of widening participation, embracing both access and retention and success, is now firmly embedded in the institutional mainstream of most universities (CFE and Edge Hill University, 2013).

1.12 However, challenges remain: to build on and sustain the progress that has been made; to ensure the participation and success of particular groups; to deliver fair access to 'high dividend' courses and institutions; and to deploy finite resources equitably and effectively in a period of fiscal restraint. Institutions are addressing these issues during a period of immense change, with new funding arrangements and uncertainties about student behaviours overlain with challenging demographics. Equally, the culture and practice of widening participation remain contested (Stevenson *et al.*, 2010).

1.13 This review is not the place to rehearse the active debates in the academic literature about the purposes of HE or the positioning of widening participation within these. However, it is worth noting the vigour of the discussions. They raise important questions about the precise nature of the benefits accruing from HE and the extent to which they are being shared across society.

1.14 There is evidence that acquiring a degree brings economic rewards and other, broader benefits for the individual associated with social mobility and increased self-esteem, and these accrue to 'non-traditional' as well as 'traditional' students (Million Plus, 2013; Adnett and Slack, 2007). The non-economic benefits are evidenced in better health statistics and higher rates of engagement in voluntary and community activity.

1.15 Economic gains for the individual include monetary benefits such as enhanced earnings and employment outcomes, and reduced benefit dependency (Million Plus, 2013). The average earnings premium associated with an undergraduate degree for working-age adults is said to stand at approximately 27% compared to possession of two or more GCE A-Levels (Million Plus, 2013). A UK degree is not only a good investment for the individual: the exchequer also generates substantial long-term economic benefits. These include the additional taxation revenue arising from graduates as a result of their being in employment, and as a result of their higher anticipated earnings (Million Plus, 2013). Greater social mobility also has a direct economic pay back: estimated at an additional 4% of GDP over and above any other growth (The Sutton Trust, 2010).

1.16 Access to highly selective HEIs, as well as HE in general, is key to social mobility and there is a particular focus in recent literature on broadening access to the professions (Harris, 2010).

Structure of the report

1.17 **Section 2** describes the target groups included in the review and sets out the main findings from the review of widening participation literature, divided into nine sections which broadly follow a ‘learner journey’ approach from compulsory education, through to HE and beyond. The framework we have used to organise the findings covers the following:

Outreach and progression:	Covering general and collaborative outreach, of varying intensity for individuals and groups and activities for specific target groups (e.g. disabled learners, apprentices, Looked After Children, and specific ethnic minority groups).
Information, advice and guidance (IAG):	Looking at the way in which outreach and other activity effectively delivers IAG – from intensive to extensive – to prospective students from widening participation backgrounds, and the role that various approaches and sources of IAG play in engagement, aspiration and supporting HE decision making and participation.
Retention and student success:	Covering student support processes, academic provision, and other interventions, whether general or targeted, that explicitly support retention and success in HE. This includes evidence from ‘bridging’ activities designed to prepare students for the academic demands, social dimensions and ‘culture shock’ of HE study.
Impact of financial support:	Looking at the implication of HE finance and different mechanisms of student financial support for HE access and retention.
Flexible provision:	Covering ‘alternative’ forms of HE modes and delivery such as part-time, distance, blended, accelerated learning, and their importance for widening participation.
Progress to postgraduate study:	Drawing on evidence about the implications for different groups in terms of both accessing postgraduate provision and participating successfully within it.
Employers:	Looking at work that investigates the ways in which higher education providers’ engagement with employers contributes to widening participation.
Employability:	Covering research that explores how higher education providers add value to their students in terms of their employment outcomes.
Economic growth and widening participation:	Covering research that explores links between HE and the growth/health of local and regional economies, and implications for widening participation.

1.18 This structure is designed to locate the findings in the context of the current policy and delivery framework for HE and widening participation in England, although it is somewhat problematic due to the clear linkages and relationships between the issues and solutions at different stages. When thinking about the issues raised, we would recommend bearing in mind that in practice HE is merely part of an individual's wider life-course. Equally, transitions into and out of HE rarely follow neat linear steps.

1.19 The report does not cover matters to do with higher education provider admissions policies and entry criteria, which are seen as an institutional concern. However, the call for clarity and transparency about admissions criteria and procedures recurs consistently as a key theme within the literature included in the review. There is scope for further examination of this issue, and for higher education providers to consider whether contextualised admissions is an appropriate route to support enhanced recruitment of widening participation learners with the best potential to succeed in HE.

1.20 **Section 3** of the report draws out the main findings from the review and the implications for policy and practice. It also presents a series of suggestions emerging from the review about what else could be done to ensure progress continues to be made on widening participation for under-represented groups.

Audiences for the report

1.21 This report will be of interest to:

- Policy makers and government departments with responsibilities for driving forward progress on widening participation objectives. The review is designed to inform in particular the joint OFFA and HEFCE national strategy for promoting access and student success in HE and maximising the impact of HEFCE's widening participation funding.
- Senior institutional managers and others responsible for decisions on institutions' own investment in widening participation and funding currently delivered through the National Scholarship Programme (NSP).
- Practitioners, including academics, tasked with planning and delivering widening participation within higher education providers (and more widely) and maximising the use of resources and outcomes.

2. KEY FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 Widening participation is a somewhat generic term that has been used in relation to a range of different target groups. The Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) states:

‘Under-represented groups across higher education include students from less advantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities, students from some minority ethnic groups, and care leavers. The government also wants to support those wishing to study part-time in higher education, and mature students’ (BIS, 2011a: para 1.5).

2.1.2 The priorities given to different groups in terms of engagement in widening participation activities are often defined at an institutional level, for example, as part of an institution’s Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (WPSA). The precise targeting of widening participation has not always been clearly articulated or consistently applied. Collective descriptors like ‘people from under-represented groups’ or ‘students from disadvantaged backgrounds’ are often used as a form of shorthand, but reveal little in the way of detail. Stevenson *et al.*, (2010) have noted the ‘continuing ambiguity as to which groups comprise ‘widening participation’ students’ (p.107). More fluid and inclusive institutional boundaries have not always overlapped precisely with those of more closely targeted national programmes like Aimhigher, which focused largely on younger learners, and focused attention on indicators relating to relative deprivation².

2.1.3 Details of the different groups of students with which this review has been especially concerned are given in Table 2.1. As numerous studies attest ‘widening participation students’ are not a homogeneous group. They may have a range of identities, diverse social characteristics and come from a variety of backgrounds. For the purpose of this review a number of these key target groups were identified, because they feature prominently in the literature and provide convenient pegs on which to hang some of the discussion about widening participation policy and practice.

Table 2.1: Widening participation target groups

Young people from lower socio-economic groups	<p>Gaps in HE participation between different learner groups have been shown using a range of measures of disadvantage.</p> <p><i>Low income households.</i> Government figures show a gap of 18 percentage points between those on Free School Meals (FSM) and non-FSM group of learners entering HE by age 19 in 2009/10. However, holding secondary schooling effects constant, Chowdry <i>et al.</i> (2012), showed that students on FSM are only slightly less likely to progress to highly selective institutions once their Level 3/SCQF Level 6/7 performance is taken into account.</p> <p>Analysis by Vignoles and Crawford (2009) concluded that the differences in</p>
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² Definitions based on parental occupational and educational background, localised HE participation rates, area and household deprivation, and educational disadvantage have all featured in guidance or funding formulae across the years (HEFCE, 2009/11). Aimhigher targeting included young people resident in an area of high economic deprivation as recorded in the Index of Deprivation (within the 40% most deprived in England) (HEFCE, 2007/12).

	<p>levels of participation between FSM and Non-FSM disappears for males and is very small for females once prior attainment is taken into account.</p> <p><i>Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPNs).</i> Latest Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) performance indicators for the sector (UK) (2011/12) show that 10.2% of young full-time first degree entrants were from an LPN using the POLAR3 (Participation of Local Areas) methodology (HESA, 2012). POLAR3 shows the HE participation rates of people who were aged 18 between 2005 and 2009 and entered a HE course in a UK HEI or English or Scottish further education (FE) college, aged 18 or 19, between academic years 2005/06 and 2010/11. Wards in the lowest quintile of the distribution across the UK are used for low participation. The percentage of young full-time first degree entrants from under-represented in 2011/12 who were from an LPN ranged from 1.7% of entrants whose region of domicile was London to 19.8% of entrants whose region of domicile was the North East.</p> <p><i>First generation entrants.</i> In 2006 the odds of obtaining 5+A*-C GCSEs were four times higher for children of degree educated parents than for children whose parents did not go to higher education. The link between the education levels of parents/social class of parents and the educational outcomes of teenagers is explored by the Sutton Trust (2008b).</p> <p><i>The school effect.</i> An estimated 71% of those who studied A-levels in state schools and colleges at age 17 in 2007/08 progressed to HE by age 19 in 2009/10. For independent school and college pupils the estimated progression rate was 87%. The gap between these progression rates has fluctuated between 13 and 16 percentage points from 2006/07 to 2009/10. (BIS, 2012).</p> <p>The proportion of low socio-economic status learners accessing HE has increased since the mid-2000s, with a 30% increase in the proportion of young people living in the most disadvantaged areas entering HE in the five years to 2009, and by 50% over the previous 15 years (compared to overall increases of 12% and 22% respectively) (HEFCE, 2010/03). Despite an overall rise in HE acceptances of students from disadvantaged areas, the Independent Commission on Fees (ICOF) concluded that boys from disadvantaged areas appear to be increasingly less likely to progress to HE than girls: for neighbourhoods in the lowest 40% for HE participation in England, the number of young male acceptances fell by 1.4% between 2010 and 2012, whilst females from these areas saw a 0.9% increase. The gender gap in acceptances between male and females in this period is higher in disadvantaged areas (2.3 percentage points) compared to the 40% most advantaged areas (1.6 percentage points) (ICOF, 2013).</p> <p>The same report highlights that acceptances at selective universities rose in 2012 compared to the previous year, but disadvantaged areas were under-represented (suggesting a widening gap).</p>
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Mature students	<p>Students over the age of 21 on entry are classified as mature students. Amongst 2011/12 undergraduate entrants for England, 20.1% of full-time first degree entrants and 90.6% of part-time undergraduate entrants were mature (HESA, 2013).</p> <p>HE acceptances for mature students fell faster than the overall trend between 2010 and 2012 with 7.6% fewer acceptances (twice the 3.3% decline for younger students) (ICOF, 2013).</p> <p>Adult learners in HE are a diverse group. This poses challenges for some institutional systems where the concern has traditionally been with intakes of young students from schools and colleges. Some commentators have highlighted that HE courses that encourage access for mature students have suffered from peripheral positioning within widening participation policy and limited resourcing within institutions, particularly in relation to part-time study and student finance (O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007; Hunt, 2007). Mature students have struggled to attain parity of esteem and to develop identities as 'authentic' HE students in such contexts (O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007; O'Driscoll <i>et al.</i>, 2009). Research into the experiences of adult learners may have been neglected during a time of policy focus on younger students progressing from school or college to HE (McVitty and Morris, 2012).</p>
Part-time learners	<p>Although part-time students are a diverse group they tend to include characteristics targeted by widening participation policies: 44% of part-time students are first in family to access HE and 29% are from low income groups (Callender, 2011). Proportionally more part-time students have lower levels of qualifications compared to full-time students (Callender <i>et al.</i>, 2011). There is a significant minority which have already undertaken higher levels of learning. 40% have qualifications above level 4 (Callender, 2011).</p> <p>Since 2010, part-time undergraduate entrants have fallen by 105,000 (40 per cent) (HEFCE, 2013/03).</p>
Learners from ethnic minority groups	<p>Participation rates for students from ethnic minority groups are increasing, going from 14.9% in 2003/04 to 18.1% in 2009/10 (ECU, 2011), however, there are variations between groups.</p> <p>Attainment of students from ethnic minority groups lags behind other groups: 66.5% of White students, 49.2% of ethnic minority students, and 38.1% of Black students achieve a 'good' degree [classified as a first or upper second class degree] (ECU, 2011). In 2009/10 14% of all HE students but only 8% of first year HE students from ethnic minority groups achieved a first class degree (7% and 11% respectively achieved a third class or pass degree) (HEFCE, 2012).</p> <p>The national student survey records lower satisfaction for students from ethnic minority groups compared to White students (HEFCE, 2011/11).</p>

Vocational and work-based learners	<p>Rates of HE progression for vocational and work based learners lag behind those taking academic qualifications, although there are signs this is improving: 15.4% of Apprentice Framework achievers who completed in 2004/05 progressed to HE (tracked over 7 years), above the estimate of 6% in a previous study; 78% of the 2004/05 cohort who progressed went into part-time programmes (BIS, 2013).</p> <p>A quantitative regional study (Round <i>et al.</i>, 2012) based on the work of an LLN (and including both full-time and part-time students) confirms that vocational students are likely to be drawn from the lower socio-economic groups.</p> <p>Research commissioned by the Pearson Group highlights the typically non-linear path towards a degree via the BTEC route (London Economics, 2013).</p>
Disabled learners	<p>A major study looking at the experiences and outcomes of disabled students in HE (Fuller <i>et al.</i>, 2008), highlighted the growth in their participation in the preceding 15 years and the positive impact of equality legislation on the provision of support. The report also emphasised the heterogeneous nature of this grouping, its changing nature (with the growth of the 'dyslexic' category) and the difficulties associated with labelling.</p> <p>A report commissioned by the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) (Tunnah and Leacy, 2013) found that the number of graduates declaring themselves as disabled has increased by 86.6% over the last 10 years, with the largest increase being in those who report mental health difficulties (a massive 678.6% increase between 2002 and 2012 is reported), perhaps reflecting increased awareness and disclosure of this kind of disability. The lowest levels of increase are witnessed in blind/partially sighted graduates and deaf/hard of hearing graduates.</p>
Care leavers	<p>People who are looked after and who leave care are particularly under-represented in HE. Jackson <i>et al.</i>'s (2005) pioneering study revealed the extremely low rates of progression to HE for this group. This has improved, but remains stubbornly low with only 6% progressing to HE at age 19 in 2011 (Comerford Boyes, 2012).</p> <p>The Buttle Trust Quality Mark is awarded to institutions which provide evidence of provision of supportive interventions across the student lifecycle for care leavers³. Comerford Boyes' report (2012) on the implementation of the scheme indicates the variety of work that is taking place in higher education providers to address the specific needs of care leavers and the importance that is attached to it.</p>

³<http://www.buttleuk.org/>

2.1.4 Throughout the following sections of the report findings are presented (where available) relating to particular widening participation target groups. However, it is recognised that this imposes a degree of artificiality since individuals often have multiple or hybrid identities and are simultaneously members of a number of different groups e.g. a minority ethnic, working-class, part-time mature learner with vocational qualifications. It is important to take a range of social background factors into account when seeking to understand the experiences of key target groups. Indeed the most revealing insights may occur at the points where different variables intersect (Burke *et al.*, 2013).

2.2 Outreach and progression

Key findings

- Evaluations of outreach and progression programmes highlight the importance of consistent and sustained interventions that are individually rather than institutionally focused. Structured and coherent ‘framework’ approaches are now well established in many institutions.
- Most authors agree interventions need to start early and engage young people at different stages of their educational career. The evidence about the cost and impact of work at primary level is not yet sufficiently strong to support or challenge a focus on this element within outreach and progression programmes.
- The literature stresses the key role of partnerships – cross-sector and inter-sector – in maximising resources, ensuring impartiality and smoothing out inconsistencies in the distribution of HE outreach and progression opportunities.
- Targeting is a key issue, particularly for resource intensive activities. There are implications in terms of data for targeting, but also in relation to activities and linkages.
- Certain types of intensive interventions seem to be particularly effective such as summer schools and mentoring. However, these might be easier to measure. Detailed information may be collected on participants (e.g. through an application process, which could include permission to share data between stakeholders). In the case of older participants the transition to HE may be relatively soon, so evaluation information becomes available earlier, compared to other types of interventions which target young learners at an earlier stage in their journey to HE.
- There has been a strong focus on work with schools/colleges and young people. Difficulties in conceptualising and delivering outreach to mature, vocational and part-time learners are identified.
- Some target groups face particular barriers to participation in outreach and progression and may need specific targeted approaches e.g. care leavers and disabled learners. Higher education providers should seek to develop outreach programmes that are sensitive to the needs of both male and female learners.
- Current HE students have a key role to play in helping to deliver outreach and progression interventions and significantly enhance higher education providers’ capacity to deliver

widening participation objectives. They need to be properly recruited, trained and supported.

- There are questions to be addressed about outcomes expected for outreach and progression. Is it about raising aspiration, boosting attainment or individualised measures of success?
- There are challenges for evaluating progression and outreach activities, and clear approaches to evaluation need to be built in from the start. Practitioners would welcome support to improve research and evaluation.
- It is important to consider not just what higher education providers do in relation to outreach and progression, but also for whom and how an intervention is organised and what institutional ethos and commitment lies behind it.
- Pro-active engagement with widening participation groups can support culture change within institutions and the further embedding of widening participation objectives.

Introduction to the theme

2.2.1 This section deals with concepts of ‘outreach’ and ‘progression’. The first is taken to apply to any activity that reaches out beyond higher education providers to engage with communities and other public and private sector organisations in order to raise awareness of the institution and raise aspirations to study in HE. The second tends to refer to targeted approaches with the specific objective of supporting young people (and others) from disadvantaged backgrounds with the aim of ensuring that those who can and so wish to do take up study at a higher level.

2.2.2 This section of the review concentrates on outreach and progression work with schools, colleges and community providers. Issues to do with outreach and progression for vocational learners who are in employment (such as apprentices) have been subsumed under theme of Section 2.8 (Employer Contribution to Widening Participation). This distinction was made in order to help organise the conclusions and avoid duplication between the sections, and because traditionally higher education providers have had a separation between the employed applicants and other target groups, although the demarcation is somewhat artificial. There are also strong links to the IAG section of the report (Section 2.3).

Context

2.2.3 Research on the use and impact of HEFCE funding on widening participation (CFE and Edge Hill University, 2013) which reported on questionnaire results from 104 higher education providers and widening participation staff interviews from 31 providers, found that most have a widening participation strategy and most supplement their widening participation allocation with income from other sources. The analysis of activities confirms that outreach and progression are embedded as a significant element of their widening participation endeavours.

2.2.4 The last few years have seen a change in the policy and funding landscape for HE outreach and progression activities. The ending of the Aimhigher and LLNs programmes has meant a stronger

emphasis on the roles and responsibilities of individual institutions. It could be argued that previous priorities for partnership working and cultural change in institutions have been tempered by stronger market driven imperatives. Questions remain over how far developments made under earlier programmes will be sustained. For example, an evaluation of the LLN programme published by HEFCE (SQW, 2010) found that LLNs achieved substantial positive culture change within HE, FE and third-sector organisations, partly through the development of improved progression routes from vocational courses to HE. At the time there were positive expectations that much of the work of the LLNs was being embedded and therefore would be sustained after funding for the programme was ceased, but it is unclear whether this has been achieved in practice.

2.2.5 Similar questions remain over the potential for partnerships for outreach and progression, particularly those established under Aimhigher, to be sustained over time. Research on the use and impact of HEFCE funding on widening participation (CFE and Edge Hill University, 2013) suggests that higher education provider respondents feel that the HEFCE widening participation allocation is perhaps the only way to ensure that collaborative widening participation work continues in the face of increased competitive pressures.

2.2.6 Mature students were never a priority of the Aimhigher programme and figure only fleetingly in the outreach and progression literature. The recent drop in mature applicants to HE raises some questions about the best strategies for outreach to mature learners. Equally, progression opportunities for learners with non-traditional or vocational qualifications, a key focus for LLNs' work, remain uncertain and uneven.

2.2.7 Discrete subject based or issue-based initiatives form another part of the current outreach and progression context. The review included literature on outreach work appearing in subject specific publications particularly those associated with the STEM agenda⁴. The policy and research focus on access to the professions complements the fair access agenda and raises important questions in relation to social mobility. Nevertheless there are perhaps some dangers of limiting the scope of the debate and diminishing an appreciation of higher education providers' broader contribution to social mobility.

Brief description of evidence

2.2.8 Evidence for the outreach and progression theme came from a range of sources, although particular attention was paid to:

- Evaluations of programmes and activities (including qualitative and quantitative data of varying quality), and longitudinal tracking of participating students.
- Literature reviews, or papers where a literature review comprised a significant element of the evidence. Use was made of local, national and – occasionally – international data and scholarship.
- Theories and strategies borne out of practice, such as the application of a 'progression framework' to outreach delivery.

⁴ STEM refers broadly to a group of subjects covering science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

2.2.9 The materials include reports by Aimhigher partnership staff; by third sector bodies commissioned by government such as the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER); charities and independent bodies such as the Sutton Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation; university departmental academics and academic outreach staff; and scholarly papers. The research methods on which studies are based ranged from a close focus upon small-scale activities to national surveys. Qualitative information relayed the views of the deliverers and receivers of interventions as well as other stakeholders.

2.2.10 The lack of good quantitative data, particularly of baseline information, is a recurring theme. It was noted by York Consulting in its evaluation of the pathfinder Aimhigher Associates programme, for example, but the concern is implicit across the literature (Rodger and Burgess, 2010). It applies to all facets of outreach. A report from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), for example, found that assessing progression across vocational and applied qualifications was hampered by the limited availability of data, including information on progression rates (UVAC, 2010). These examples are representative of wider concerns that local organisations and institutions are not always putting robust monitoring and evaluation processes in place, but that there are gaps in the capture of national data that impede meaningful research. A study of Aimhigher partnerships in 2009 acknowledged the difficulties of collecting local data across different sectors, particularly in times of structural change and noted that shifts in requirement concerning the nature of the data to be collected were unhelpful. While some partnerships had implemented systems to collect and analyse data, the national picture was 'partial' (Passy *et al.*, 2009). A review of the impact of Aimhigher in 2012 also noted the pressures of different policies and short-term thinking that affected the ability of Aimhigher partnerships to deliver consistent, cumulative evidence (Doyle and Griffin, 2012).

2.2.11 In some cases, the evidence points towards conclusions for policy and practice, but this comes along with suggestions for further research to confirm the conclusions. For example, whilst a report commissioned by Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Gorard *et al.*, 2012) found some evidence that extra-curricular activities have a positive influence on HE participation, the research was unable to find a causal link because of a lack of robust evidence, particularly controlled comparison. The report calls for the introduction of interventions devised on the basis of the existing correlational work, accompanied by a programme of randomized control trials or similar. A Higher Education Academy synthesis recommends longitudinal studies to understand how pre-entry interventions link to future outcomes (Gazeley and Aynsley, 2012).

2.2.12 Some gaps were evident in the literature in relation to specific groups of learners. In particular, there does not appear to have been much research on mature learners (defined as aged 21 or over). Yet they currently represent one third of all first degree undergraduates, and are therefore by no means a peripheral group.

2.2.13 Progression for vocational learners is also an area where further evidence is needed. The evaluation of the LLN programme (SQW, 2010) concluded that any future initiatives should have very clear standardised monitoring systems from the outset to help avoid some of the problems during the early stages of the LLN, where monitoring and evaluation varied significantly across LLNs,

and was not addressed until after the interim HEFCE report. Calls for more data sharing relating to vocational progression were found in a number of papers (Sinclair and Connor, 2008).

Emerging themes, issues and challenges

2.2.14 Outreach and progression activities by higher education providers cover a range of interventions. A survey commissioned by HEFCE into the use of widening participation allocation funding found that, amongst a sample of 90 providers, all host campus visits, and most (78%) offer summer schools and other residential activities. Virtually all provide IAG to schools and colleges and make visits to schools and colleges to raise aspirations. The majority (88%) undertake outreach work to support progression and around three-quarters (73%) undertake outreach to raise attainment. Two-thirds (67%) offer mentors to target groups (CFE and Edge Hill University, 2013).

Defining the aims and objectives: aspiration and attainment

2.2.15 The literature presents evidence of differences in opinion about the fundamental purposes of outreach and progression activities, which also affect considerations of how they should be measured. Underlying this debate are contrasting views about the precise role of higher education providers in addressing the gaps in aspirations to progress to HE between different groups and/or tackling the differences in attainment that underpin under-representation in HE. Issues of agency and impact are raised, since these differences happen early in people's lives and tend to be located in their school, family and community experiences.

2.2.16 The largest statistical study, which linked a range of national datasets to track two cohorts each of half a million pupils found that 'poor achievement in secondary schools is more important in explaining lower HE participation rates among pupils from low socio economic backgrounds than barriers arising at the point of entry'. It argues that the underachieving is evident in primary and secondary school and that raising aspirations is not enough because socio economic differences emerge early in individuals' lives (Chowdry *et al.*, 2012, p. 431). Widening participation outreach and progression interventions have been shown to have a potential role to play in starting to tackle the relatively lower level of attainment by under-represented groups which is a key underlying explanatory variable in their different rates of progression to HE. For example, a review of Aimhigher evidence (Moore and Dunworth, 2011) found improved attainment for Aimhigher learners but suggests that more work is needed in recognising the range of factors involved in cases of improved attainment to help identify causal links. Another review (Chilosi *et al.*, 2010) offers 'a new method based on multiple regression analysis' to assess the impact of Aimhigher activities on a tracked cohort of students and concludes that Aimhigher was 'cost effective', having a positive impact on GCSE attainment and higher education applications. Qualitative research in schools (Hatt *et al.*, 2008) yielded positive comments about Aimhigher partnerships role in fostering improved attainment. However, there are differences of opinion within the HE sector about the extent to which tackling attainment of under-represented groups falls within the remit of the HE sector.

2.2.17 It is always a challenge for researchers and evaluators to establish a causal link between outreach and progression activities and outcomes for learners. This area is explored in a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report (Cummings *et al.*, 2012). The report suggests that aspirations may be

higher amongst those from lower socio-economic groups than is generally believed, and they conclude that there is no evidence that changes in attitudes, particularly aspirations, have an impact on attainment. The report found that a focus on changing behaviour and actions, rather than changing attitudes, might have a more direct effect on attainment. It may be telling that even such an extensive statistical study concludes that intervention must start early and focus upon the factors affecting the lives of individual children. As a study from the University of Warwick notes, contextual details are important: ‘... it would be difficult to attribute universal “rationality” to all young people since emotional and attitudinal dimensions are important to choices, with variations between groups and at different phases.’ (Stanley and Goodlad, 2010).

Issues of targeting

2.2.18 One of the conclusions emerging from the review of materials is that most reports written after 2008 demonstrate a clear understanding of the principles of widening participation targeting. However, the literature acknowledges the complexities of any mechanism for directing resources through the use of targeting criteria. While appreciating the need for the HEFCE targeting guidance published in 2007/8, Harrison and Hatt (2010) point out that ‘many young people from lower socio economic groups will be missed by a rigorous targeting guidance’ and find that ‘there is a strong bias towards urban areas inherent in the proxies’ that are routinely used. The report articulates something that has been widely acknowledged informally, that it is far harder to use the available methodologies effectively in rural areas. It is important that any new work on monitoring and evaluating widening participation policies revisits targeting methodologies for this reason, and facilitates a way for ‘local knowledge’ to be balanced with consistency of approach. Local knowledge and good links with employers, FE colleges and community group are also essential for targeting mature students, but evidence of successfully implemented outreach strategies for this group is scarce in the research literature.

Intervening early in young people’s lives

2.2.19 It is generally accepted that approaches to widening participation need to start early in a student’s educational life to be effective, and engage young people at different stages of their educational journey. Gaps in attainment for disadvantaged groups appear early on and tend to widen throughout secondary education (Chowdry *et al.*, 2012) Vignoles and Crawford, 2009). Poor reading and writing scores at primary school are significantly associated with later low achievement (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007). Longitudinal research by Croll and Attwood (2013) concluded that differences in school-level attainment, which are associated with social background factors, are by far the most important explanation for differences in rates of HE participation between social groups. The gap in attainment in exams (rather than latent potential) creates the barriers to groups progressing post-16 and into HE: analysis by the Sutton Trust for example shows that there are large numbers of high attaining disadvantaged pupils at the end of primary school who lose ground in examinations during later years, so reducing the ‘attrition rates’ of high performers has been identified as a priority (The Sutton Trust, 2008b).

2.2.20 The factors underlying gaps in educational attainment between groups are complex and beyond the scope of the current research. At the same time, the importance of expectations and aspirations for HE in raising attainment have been increasingly recognised even for very young

learners (Goodman and Gregg, 2010). Statistical analysis has confirmed that a small proportion of the HE participation gap between students of different social backgrounds is not accounted for by attainment, and there is some evidence that early intentions for HE participation are highly predictive of actual participation (Croll and Attwood, 2013). A recent study (Apps *et al.*, 2012) found that students from disadvantaged areas who went to nursery school achieved better GCSE results, and were more likely to go on to HE than their peers who had not. This perhaps indicates that outreach and progression interventions and research need to take a more holistic and longitudinal approach. However, the challenges of doing this within an environment of short-term funding initiatives and changing political priorities may be difficult to overcome.

2.2.21 Higher education provider activities with primary schools to raise aspirations, including visits by primary children to campuses, was a key recommendation by the National Council for Education Excellence about how the HE sector can help to improve achievement and aspirations for young people (DIUS, 2008). Recently student lifecycle models have tended to stress raising aspirations from primary age upwards. Evidence from those running university outreach schemes highlights that young people's attitudes to HE are often more likely to change around key transition points, such as the transition from primary into secondary school, and these transition points are an opportunity to communicate messages about HE (The Sutton Trust, 2008b, Action on Access, 2009). HE and primary school links appear to be fairly extensive: for example, at a minimum, over half of Aimhigher partnerships were found to be engaged with primary schools (Action on Access, 2009). The most popular activities with primary schools were visits to higher education providers and school based aspiration raising, and the activities delivered were often part of a coherent programme. Some activities were designed to support transition into secondary school, e.g. case studies from four universities illustrated how providers had developed infrastructure which supported primary to secondary transitions. As with other types of outreach, work with primary schools is an opportunity for higher education providers to extend their links with stakeholders and key influencers. Some Aimhigher partnerships took the approach of providing staff training in primary schools to enable staff to understand the progression routes for pupils and parents alike, or worked with parents to raise their understanding of progression routes. Parental involvement was found to be significant at this level (Action on Access, 2009).

2.2.22 As noted below (Table 2.3) intensive work with primary pupils is relatively costly and the long-term impacts on HE progression may be hard to assess. However, schemes have evaluated well in terms of immediate feedback and short-term outcomes. For example, Aimhigher interventions with primary children were well received by teachers who suggested that building understanding of HE progression would address young people's concerns and build their learner identity from this early point in their education (Burton and Bradshaw, 2011). Comments from primary teachers as part of a qualitative evaluation of a demonstration project to embed progression support into the curriculum show that the activities helped pupils to develop new skills (including speaking, listening and team work), and helped pupils to identify a wider range of career options (ERS, 2011). Other case study evaluation of primary interventions through the Sutton Trust's Into University programme showed evidence of increased motivation, self-esteem and confidence amongst the young people in the case studies (White *et al.*, 2007). The same research suggested positive benefits for primary pupils in terms of improvements in their assessed attainment. However, evaluating the

attainment impacts is somewhat problematic and relies on having a large enough sample and reliable measures of attainment. This was shown for example, in the recent evaluation of an Educational Endowment Fund (EEF) intervention to raise attainment of a primary cohort through intensive support from a concentrated programme of activity for targeted pupils from different primary schools (Gorard, 2013)⁵.

Role of key influencers

2.2.23 Parents, carers, family and friends, along with teachers and IAG professionals, should be seen as targets for engagement. Several pieces of research found qualitative evidence that friends and family continue to be a strong influence on learner decision making (e.g. McHarg *et al.*, 2007; Impact Associates, 2009) and future widening participation initiatives may want to look at addressing this, perhaps with specific work on raising awareness and understanding amongst learners' own networks. One report found that parental influence had less impact among lower socio-economic groups and emphasised instead the importance of teachers as providers of information (Moogan, 2011). Further evidence on the role of key influencers is provided as part of the IAG theme (Section 2.3).

2.2.24 An extensive report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation drew upon national and international evidence (much of it from the USA) to find evidence of association between parental aspirations, attitudes and behaviours and their child's aspirations, though that evidence fell 'short of that needed to assume a causal influence'. Nevertheless the report sees parental involvement as the most complete causal model available and recommends that 'there is sufficient evidence to proceed to an engineering phase of development' to test this. The report also stresses the need for further research (Gorard *et al.*, 2012).

Findings for different groups

2.2.25 There is clear evidence that HE participation rates vary between different learner groups as well as different socio-economic groups, and some of the available data is summarised in Table 2.1 above.

2.2.26 Literature reviewed describes the existence of outreach and progression interventions that specifically target different learner groups. The evidence suggests that interventions targeted at disabled learners have been the most prevalent, perhaps reflecting the requirement for Aimhigher Partnerships to target this group of learners, and to do so regardless of their socio-economic status (HEFCE, 2007/12). There is also evidence of significant work with vocational learners through the LLNs. There was very little evidence that fell within the scope of the review regarding targeted work with learners from ethnic minority groups, although this is not to suggest that good practice does not exist.

2.2.27 Alongside participation in targeted interventions different learner groups engage in activities that are seeking to be inclusive of learners from all widening participation backgrounds. There is

⁵ The EEF has agreed to fund a larger trial based on 1,000 pupils for summer 2013. This will be an individually randomised controlled trial with two groups.

however evidence that take up of ‘mainstream’ programmes is unequal, for example participation rates of male learners in some summer school programmes fall well below that of female learners (HEFCE, 2009/11). There is however little evidence available of the approaches taken to ensure outreach and progression activities are inclusive of all learner groups.

2.2.28 Evidence of the effectiveness of both targeted and mainstream interventions in meeting the needs of different groups is limited with much of the research describing the barriers to HE progression and little which provides evidence of what makes a difference to progression rates of different learners. Table 2.2 below summarises some of the key issues emerging from discrete research or extrapolated from a range of more general studies.

Table 2.2: Overview of key outreach and progression issues for different groups

Group	Issues identified in the literature
Disabled learners	<p>The literature recognises some of the barriers faced by disabled learners and the variable outreach provision for this group in place at higher education providers.</p> <p>Small scale research comparing the barriers and enablers to HE progression for disabled and non-disabled peers identified that disabled learners face more barriers, particular around negative attitudes of others and a lack of support to make the transition to HE (Wray, 2012). Disabled students expressed views that they did not feel they had been pushed enough to raise their educational aspirations and attainment at school (Wray, 2012). The same research identified a range of enablers including the participation in pre-entry activities, pre-entry contact with disability services and support from students and student unions. The importance of adopting the social rather than medical model⁶ of disability in research and policy making was identified (Wray, 2012).</p> <p>The definition of disability affects participation in targeted support. There are problems around the identification of disabled learners. Data is not reliable for targeting and some learners will choose not to give information about their impairment (Impact Associates, 2009).</p> <p>Disabled learners may face problems in taking part in outreach and progression programmes including problems with the availability of support staff outside school (Impact Associates, 2009).</p>
Vocational learners	<p>Progression to HE by vocational learners is proportionally lower than for people taking academic qualifications. An analysis by HEFCE (2007/35) of a cohort of level 3 BTEC students (61,684 students) using HESA data and</p>

⁶ The social model of disability ‘shifts the emphasis from personal inadequacy or abnormality to physical and societal (legal, cultural, and attitudinal) barriers experienced by a person with impairment. These barriers are viewed as disabling the person and are external to the individual. This viewpoint shifts the focus onto the rights of disabled people and the requirement for society to change’ (Action on Access, 2005).

	<p>Learning and Skills Council learner records found that out of the 56% who qualified from their course, 41% of these qualifiers went on to HE (well below the rate for A-level learners). More recent work (London Economics, 2013) suggests a contrast between the predominantly linear paths into HE by A-Level students and the more typically non-linear paths followed by BTEC students.</p> <p>Some of the evidence indicates that vocational progression tends to be into certain subject areas. A report on the transition from vocational education to HE (Hoelscher <i>et al.</i>, 2008) suggests that this could contribute further to the academic/vocational divide. The London Economics (2013) study confirms that the BTEC route typically leads to specific degree subject areas.</p> <p>Hoelscher <i>et al.</i> (2008) also note that vocational routes have not tended to widen participation into the highly selective universities. Issues have been raised about the extent to which higher education providers have clear and transparent mechanisms for dealing with the wide range of vocational qualifications in their application processes (Alison <i>et al.</i>, 2010).</p>
Care leavers	<p>An institutionalized split between the care and education systems means social workers are not encouraged to take an interest in education and are able to give only limited support to the young people in their care (Jackson and Cameron, 2012). Young people leaving care are unlikely to have strong social networks and their horizons were often limited by their educational experience. The report suggests that ‘targeted measures to promote social mobility via participation in HE ... should be an explicit aim of welfare authorities’ (p.1107).</p> <p>Systems to provide financial and personal support to care leavers in HE were found to be limited (Jackson and Cameron, 2012).</p> <p>Opportunities for young people may be hampered by ‘chronic and continuing exclusion as they move abruptly into “instant adulthood”’, and ‘the myth that one reason for poor and disrupted educational experiences among looked after children and care leavers is that they come into care because of bad behaviour’ (Rogers, 2011, p.412). This report further suggests that ‘ensuring a more supported, gradual and measured transition into young adulthood would at least go some way to addressing the significant transitional disadvantages currently experienced by care leavers’ (p.424).</p>
Male learners	<p>There is evidence that male learners are under-represented in outreach activities, for example analysis of participation in Aimhigher summer schools between 2004 and 2008 (HEFCE, 2009/11) found that girls</p>

	<p>outnumbered boys by a ratio of 2:1 and in a review of their summer school provision The Sutton Trust (2008a) reported that boys made up just 30% of 2006 summer school applicants. In HEFCE guidance for summer school provision (2008/24), higher education providers and Aimhigher Partnerships were tasked with finding ways of improving the participation rate of boys on the programme.</p> <p>There is evidence that higher education providers and Aimhigher Partnerships have sought to address this imbalance in outreach participation between the sexes. In their report to HEFCE Action on Access (2009b) identify a range of approaches developed to improve male engagement with outreach activities, some of which are targeted specifically at boys (for example through sports based activities) and others which seek to make existing programmes more attractive to male participants. The report comments on the lack of evidence regarding the relative effectiveness of different interventions although improvements in data between 2006 and 2009 were acknowledged. However, 'tentative recommendations' include continued use of male role models, ensuring interventions form part of a planned programme of support and ensuring all outreach activities are attractive to male as well as female learners. The report finds little empirical evidence to support the use of male only activities.</p>
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Evidence about effective approaches

Discrete interventions

2.2.29 Evaluations of outreach and progression activities often supply evidence that an individual initiative has 'worked' if, as a result of participation, there was a measureable shift in the aspirations, attitude, awareness and/or attainment of the young people concerned. Much of the literature is focused on the efficacy of particular types of interventions, and conclusions emerging from the review are summarised in Table 2.3.

2.2.30 The Sutton Trust (2008b) listed summer schools, campus visits and mentoring and ambassador programmes as examples of 'access activities which are proven to be more effective'. As noted earlier, what constitutes robust 'proof' is a vexed question. However, at the time, the Trust was sufficiently confident in the available evidence to recommend that activities to widen participation should include work with younger age groups and that 'schools should develop more programmes to support young people on a trajectory to HE and ... staff [should be] given the time, expertise and incentives to do this' (p.56).

Progression frameworks

2.2.31 While there is some evidence that particular approaches work, the literature suggests that a focus on discrete interventions may be the wrong approach. A 2010 review (Stanley and Goodlad) argues for a 'model of progression as a framework for action' that 'looks forward to a set of desired

outcomes' (p.7), promoting an approach centred upon the needs of the individual rather than an evaluation focused upon the efficacy of various activities. In the main, research recognises that it is participation in a range of activities and interventions which is key to progression, rather than there being a 'light bulb moment'. This was the approach taken by the Aimhigher partnerships and there is evidence of results: the NFER (2010) evaluation of four Aimhigher partnerships showed an association between learner participation and improved outcomes, as well as high levels of enjoyment and greater interest in HE as an option.

2.2.32 Several papers cite the Aimhigher progression framework as a model that helps participants to accumulate complementary experiences on their learner journey and there are calls for a focus upon progression as the 'defining concept' for widening participation (Moore and Hooley, 2011). A literature review exploring the implementation of the Aimhigher Learner Progression Framework in a range of contexts had generally favourable findings (while still noting the lack of comparators and quantitative measures of awareness, aspiration and attainment) (Stanley and Goodlad, 2010). Moore and Hooley (2011) found a 'progression matrix' developed from the Aimhigher Learner Progression Framework to be useful in a range of contexts, and a small study observed it in work based learning settings in 2010 (Kewin *et al.*, 2010). For progression frameworks to be useful they must be tailored to the needs of individual learners (Kerrigan and Church, 2009). In relation to disabled learners, one report recommended the introduction of individualised progression plans that can be monitored as the young person progresses (Impact Associates, 2009).

Collaboration

2.2.33 Much of the literature appears to infer that better cross-sector and inter-sector collaboration allows a focus upon the progression of the individual young person, rather than on institutional drivers. Strong collaboration, particularly that which creates a neutral space where widening participation can take place, is advocated repeatedly. The Sutton Trust (2008b) welcomed the development of Aimhigher Area Partnerships as agencies that could bring coherence to the provision of widening participation activities and urged the creation of 'families' of higher education providers linking with schools in geographic areas featuring low participation. The bulk of the research surveyed was completed before, or soon after, the end of the Aimhigher programme. However, there are some indicators that the programme went some way to providing that 'safe space' where tensions between institutional interests and the obligation to work to widen participation could be mediated through collaborative work.

2.2.34 Local partnership models (such as Aimhigher partnerships or LLNs) involving cross-sector and inter-sector collaboration were shown to have positive benefits in targeting and delivery, and improved outcomes for learners (Hatt *et al.*, 2008, SQW, 2010). Partnerships were seen to be the key to successful transition for non-traditional learners who need pre-entry interventions by Gazeley and Aynsley (2012). Successful partnerships have been acknowledged as a key to embedding widening participation work, which is important for sustainability. Working collaboratively helps to address tensions between institutional recruitment and working for the 'greater good' by ensuring the needs of learners are at the core of the work. Research highlights the importance of regular communication, knowledge sharing, and transparency in decision-making to ensure successful collaboration and partnership working (Wiggans, 2012).

2.2.35 An advantage of collaborative work is that it allows for the targeting of sub-groups that, taken in isolation, may not be viable groups for individual institutions to focus on. Care leavers in particular, appear to have benefitted significantly from the Aimhigher programme. This allowed the pooling of resources, locally and nationally to address the needs of this extremely under-represented group. A 2012 report on the Buttle UK kite-mark scheme urges higher education providers to 'find ways of maintaining and prolonging the life of collaborative cross-sector networks such as Aimhigher' (Comerford Boyes, p.6). The challenge of collaboration and partnerships within a competitive environment is reviewed in a Higher Education Academy literature synthesis (Wiggans, 2012). This argues that uncertainty over future funding, as well as changing institutional priorities exacerbate the challenges but do not make partnership working any less urgent or valuable in the new context.

Emerging conclusions

2.2.36 There is no evidence that a particular mix of outreach and progression activities works best, though it seems clear from the range of activity evaluations that any encouragement and support is likely to produce some positive outcomes. More intensive and sustained approaches targeted at individuals appear to get the best results. It is unclear from the evidence available whether interventions targeted at specific learner groups (for example disabled learners or care leavers) have more positive outcomes than interventions intended to meet the needs of learners from a variety of widening participation backgrounds.

2.2.37 The evidence points to a need for longer-term approaches (with consistent and robust targeting, monitoring and evaluation). There is also a call for a change of culture within institutions. Passy *et al.* (2009) emphasised the value of HEIs developing relationships with schools, while acknowledging that the changing context for schools (development of academies in particular) meant that flexibility was necessary. Where academic departments do engage with local schools and communities in a sustained and detailed way, the results are encouraging (Mitchell *et al.*, 2010).

2.2.38 To make best use of resources, more intensive activities (e.g. mentoring and summer schools) need a clear targeting strategy. Most work has concentrated on schools and colleges, with gaps in conceptualising outreach and progression for adults and part-time learners. Some groups such as care leavers and disabled learners face particular barriers to engagement.

2.2.39 In terms of measuring outcomes, the literature notes a lack of evidence. A review of sources suggests that taking a progression-based approach that focuses upon the particular circumstances of the individual learner might be more fruitful than the 'what works' approach that, implicitly or explicitly, colours much of the literature (Stanley and Goodlad, 2010). Outcome measures that acknowledge the importance of different contexts and experiences might be more productive as a true assessment of the effectiveness of programmes to widen participation. At the same time, lessons from the study by the Sutton Trust (2008a) could help to demonstrate the potential of particular schemes (including HE access programmes) to increase social mobility and achieve cost effective outcomes.

Table 2.3: Summary of evidence around HE outreach and progression developments

	Evidence	Issues
Campus visits (a range of approaches depending on where and how delivery takes place)	Seen as a fundamental aspect of any outreach programme to 'demystify' HE (Church and Kerrigan, 2011) and give learners an experience what HE is like (Passy, 2011). Visits and discussions about HE found to be associated with positive outcomes (Passy <i>et al</i> , 2009). Aimhigher evaluation suggested an association between visits to HE during Year 11 and raised aspirations (and learners who had a Year 11 campus visit had a high propensity to change their minds about participating post-18) (Morris and Rutt, 2006).	Impact may be limited unless reinforced and prepared for by discussion in schools/college (Burton and Bradshaw, 2011). Requires partnerships. Raising understanding of HE in the context of the range of opportunities available to them, and embedding of progression ethos, identified as at the heart of a core offer to widening participation learners (Passy <i>et al</i> , 2009).
Subject specific taster sessions and master classes	Reports on subject specific activities tend to record positive outcomes, through stimulating career interest in a particular subject area (CEIR, 2009, Mitchell <i>et al.</i> , 2010). Young (2010) identified a positive effect through increasing participant's 'intrinsic motivation'. Early exposure to the possibility of a profession may be key in order to allow the idea to develop (McHarg <i>et al.</i> , 2007). Subject specific interventions can help to positively stimulate and engage young people, as stressed by one respondent who said: 'I don't just mean being dragged around on an open day'. (Moogan, 2011). A HEFCE report on summer school provision and participation (HEFCE, 2010/32) noted that participants were more likely to travel further for a specialist single subject summer school.	CEIR (2009) raises issues about the targeting of programmes and identifies that clear criteria for cohort selection and communication of this to schools and colleges is needed to be effective. One of the challenges identified by Aimhigher/LLN reports is the tendency of FE colleges to take a 'whole class' approach to targeting which could negatively affect those with certain specific needs (Bowl, 2012).
Summer schools	Several studies show positive outcomes for continuation in post-compulsory education, and application to and acceptance by HE. In terms of attainment, HEFCE's Aimhigher summer school evaluation	Provision tends to depend on levels of funding, and there are variations in participation in schemes. Establishing causal relationship between summer school participation

	Evidence	Issues
	<p>(HEFCE, 2010/32), found that, taking participants' starting points into account, summer school beneficiaries attained better GCSEs than non-participants and that the effect on attainment was more significant for those with lower levels of prior attainment. Attainment levelled out at KS5, suggesting that summer school participation may have more of an effect on progression than on attainment in the longer term. In terms of progression to HE, the evaluation identified that disadvantaged summer school participants were over twice as likely to be accepted to HE as similarly disadvantaged young people who did not participate.</p> <p>Summer schools can play a particularly important role in progression to more selective institutions. Proportionally more attendees at Sutton Trust summer schools enter highly selective universities than control groups (76% compared to 55%) (Hoare and Wann, 2012). Most difference is observed for access to highly selective universities by the poorest students with high GCSE attainment.</p> <p>The development of a pre-medicine summer school for 16 year olds from deprived socio-economic backgrounds (Greenhalgh <i>et al.</i>, 2006), which engaged students in the development of the summer school itself, was found to raise pupils' confidence and motivation to apply to medical school. [Note this was a small-scale piece of action research.]</p>	and attainment/progression is problematic.
Targeted progression support	Initial findings from the targeted Realising Opportunities programme suggest that students participating on the scheme are more likely to progress to a selective university (Hoare and Wann, 2012). The	Realising Opportunities' study of research-intensive universities, noted that young people from lower socio-economic groups tended to apply to universities close to home. (Aston <i>et al.</i> , 2011).

	Evidence	Issues
programmes	<p>impact of ‘reward’ and formal recognition of achievement (guaranteed interview, certification, tariff points) is worth investigating further.</p> <p>A Higher Education Academy literature synthesis (Bowl, 2012) highlights the role played by Aimhigher and the LLN in including FE colleges within partnerships in improving progression for college learners.</p> <p>Progression agreements were found to have positive outcomes for promoting social mobility (May et al., 2012) (although separating out the specific contribution of the progression agreements is problematic).</p>	
Mentoring ⁷	<p>Mentoring in school and FE contexts can be effective when it incorporates a number of characteristics, notably: ‘psycho-social support’, that is, the preparedness of the mentor to offer support in contexts other than just academic; consistency and ready availability; and the belief by the young person that their mentor had a personal investment in their success (Rogers, 2010).</p> <p>There was little information on e-mentoring programmes and no robust evaluation in the searches undertaken, though universities working with the Brightside Trust (Smith <i>et al.</i>, 2013) found that ‘this approach may have helped overcome the social disadvantage faced by the applicants’.</p>	<p>Mentoring is resource intensive.</p> <p>It requires issues of consistency and availability to be addressed (pupils had often made an adjustment to agree to mentoring and they were put off completely if their mentor cancelled meetings or missed contact) (Rogers, 2010).</p>

⁷ It is important to note that terms such as ‘ambassador’ and ‘mentor’ were used interchangeably across some of the evidence reviewed and a detailed explanation of the models adopted was not always provided. This issue is also identified in chapter 2.3 in relation to the use of HE students in delivery of IAG.

	Evidence	Issues
Aimhigher Associates and Ambassadors ⁸	<p>Evaluation of four Aimhigher partnerships found that Ambassadors were key to helping learners believe that HE was an option for them (Reed <i>et al</i>, 2007). One-to-one support was described as critical.</p> <p>The value of student ambassadors and mentors in inter-organisation relationship building, particularly between schools and higher education providers has been noted (Mitchell <i>et al.</i>, 2010).</p> <p>Mutual benefits derive from this activity for both ambassadors and pupils (Mitchell <i>et al.</i>, 2010).</p>	<p>An assessment by HEFCE of participation in the first year of the Aimhigher Associates scheme (HEFCE, 2011/35), found that some groups (e.g. boys, and students with learning difficulties) engaged less than had been hoped. (However, there was greater equality in participation than within the Aimhigher summer schools)</p> <p>Evaluation of the 'pathfinder' Associates scheme, identified difficulties in recruiting young people in some areas, and stressed the need for the scheme to reflect school and college environments and adequate preparation in schools and colleges (Rodger and Burgess, 2010).</p>
Student ambassadors	<p>Students are a significant element of widening access programmes which can add to the delivery capacity within higher education providers (Sanders and Higham, 2012). Rigorous selection methods as well as effective training and support needs to be considered in order for them to be fully prepared for their roles.</p> <p>A study of subject specialist ambassadors observed the interactions between ambassadors and pupils and discovered that ambassador programmes created a flexible environment where it was possible to respond to the needs of different learning contexts so that 'ambassadors work as subject experts alongside pupils'. Pupils identified closely with ambassadors as fellow students who 'can</p>	<p>There are gaps in knowledge that might help to further develop the role of students in widening participation. A Higher Education Academy synthesis recommended further research on composition and deployment; matching students to learners; formal and informal roles; delivery models as well as the benefits to the student ambassadors themselves in terms of skills and future employability; as well as 'in and out-duction' (Sanders and Higham, 2012).</p>

⁸ Aimhigher Associates was a discreetly funded student mentoring scheme which offered on-going support to a defined target group of learners in schools and colleges, and was structured to develop positive relationships between undergraduate students and young learners over a full academic year. It operated nationally from September 2009 following a one-year pathfinder stage which operated across 21 partnerships in 2008/09. The numbers engaged were high, 15,900 learners from 750 schools/colleges and 3,400 Associates from 120 higher education providers, and there was a clear correlation between levels of funding and the chances of learner participation.

	Evidence	Issues
	potentially disrupt and challenge pupils' gendered, raced and classed trajectories'. (Gartland, 2012).	
Work with primary school children	<p>The literature on HE aspirations stresses the need to begin interventions early. While little of the literature reviewed focused upon work with the primary school sector, research studies acknowledged that intervening early in primary school appears to be of value (The Sutton Trust, 2008d). In feedback, learners and teachers reinforce the importance of initiating a programme of outreach interventions at a relatively early stage, as progression to HE is seen as a long-term process (Burton and Bradshaw, 2011).</p> <p>Action on Access (2009a) concluded HE partnership work with primary pupils can be effective in raising aspirations and performance of pupils from disadvantaged areas and helping to overcome the 'negative drift' that occurs at age 11.</p>	<p>The relative expensiveness of primary school work was acknowledged in a review of delivery in this area undertaken by Aimhigher partnerships. (Action on Access, 2009). Another issue identified by this study in addition to cost was that the work tended to rely on external funding such as Aimhigher so that schools made no contribution to the work⁹.</p> <p>Research has found that investment in work with primary pupils is better deployed when it is focused on targeted individuals, such as those at highest risk of falling behind in primary school (The Sutton Trust, 2008d).</p> <p>Evaluation of the long-term impact of work with primary age children on HE progression outcomes is problematic because of the timescales involved.</p> <p>The approach taken by the schools to raising aspirations and attainment on an on-going basis is likely to be the key factor in pupil attainment and progression¹⁰ (although building positive relationships with higher education providers may contribute to this).</p>

⁹ Over half of Aimhigher partnerships were engaging with targeted primary schools with half of those delivering well established programmes.

¹⁰ The Sutton Trust EEF has produced a Teaching and Learning Toolkit which summarises educational research and provides guidance for teachers and schools on how to use their resources to improve the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. <http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/about-the-toolkit/>

2.3 Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

Key findings

- Access to HE-related IAG has been linked to improved success rates of applications and to improved HE retention rates. However, concerns are identified in relation to both access to formal IAG and the quality of IAG provided to under-represented groups. Mature and vocational learners face particular issues.
- The most successful programmes of IAG interventions for under-represented groups appear to be those which start early, are personalised, are integrated into outreach and other support, and address priority information needs, including HE finance, HE applications processes and requirements and employment opportunities.
- Interventions that deliver ‘professional’, engaging IAG are most well received especially where they meet the need for ‘hot’ information. IAG interventions planned as part of outreach programmes need to start early and intensify during periods of transition.
- Providing more IAG is not enough. There is a need to improve what is already there by using informal models of intervention, supporting potential applicants to access formal IAG services where they exist and building the expertise of staff delivering those services.
- HE students and other positive role models can make a significant contribution to the delivery of IAG interventions, and partnerships between higher education providers can support the delivery of impartial IAG.
- Ensuring that influencers working with under-represented groups are well informed about HE is a challenge. Developing a clear strategy for reaching out to influencers seems crucial as does evaluating interventions and identifying and sharing what works.

Introduction to the theme

2.3.1 The terms ‘Information’, ‘Advice’ and ‘Guidance’ were originally used by those in the careers profession to indicate differing levels of services, but the phrase ‘IAG’ is now frequently used as an umbrella term to refer to a wide range of activities and interventions that support an individual’s ability to manage their own career. Provision of HE-related IAG sits within a wider context of careers guidance and the decisions individuals take about HE are usually made as part of career-related decisions. The term IAG is not one owned by the widening participation or the HE sector and its use is the subject of some debate with careers professionals¹¹.

2.3.2 IAG supports individuals to make and act upon career-related decisions, enabling them to engage effectively with opportunities for both learning and work. Empirical research has linked access to information to higher rates of retention on HE programmes for mature students (McVitty and Morris, 2012) and Futuretrack, a longitudinal large scale study tracking HE applicants, found that acceptance rates are higher for UCAS applicants who rated themselves as well informed about HE

¹¹ It is perhaps also worthy of note that the term [phrase] ‘Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance’ (CEIAG) is also in common use amongst careers-related professionals, the term [phrase] emphasising the need to include Careers Education as part of any IAG-related programme or service.

courses (Purcell *et al.*, 2008). A number of commentators have suggested that high quality IAG interventions have a significant role to play in supporting social mobility. For example, Hughes (2010) suggests that high quality, high impact careers service provision:

‘represents both a personal and a public good, helping individuals to make choices and progress and providing an essential lubricant for the economic and social mobility necessary for a prosperous “UK plc.”’ (p.1).

2.3.3 IAG not only affects the opportunity to progress to HE but ultimately can have an effect on the employability of students, with studies identifying that improvements to pre-course IAG would enable learners to have better long-term employment outcomes (Thomas and Jones, 2007).

2.3.4 This section links closely to the Outreach and Progression theme (Section 2.2).

Context

2.3.5 Arrangements for delivery of HE-related IAG are complex: schools have a duty to provide careers-related support to young people, and the National Careers Service (in operation for just over a year) has a remit to work with potential HE applicants of any age. Learning providers, such as FE colleges, HEIs, employers and voluntary and community sector organisations all add to the diversity of IAG provision. In addition, there is a growing number of web-based resources for those interested in HE, perhaps most notably the introduction of the Unistats website which hosts the recently devised Key Information Sets (KIS) developed to enable potential HE students the opportunity to compare higher education providers across a number of standard data sets (Hooley *et al.*, 2013).

2.3.6 Delivery of IAG has been shown to be a key feature of widening participation outreach programmes. As an example, delivery of IAG activities was an established, core feature of both Aimhigher (HEFCE, 2008/05) and Lifelong Learning Partnerships (SQW, 2010) and evidence is that the Sutton Trust summer school programme has successfully embedded IAG activities, and that these are valued by participants (The Sutton Trust, 2008a). However, IAG is provided to widening participation groups through a range of other HEI functions, for example through admission teams, departmental/faculty staff, careers services and disability or learner support teams.

2.3.7 The careers guidance sector has undergone considerable upheaval over the last few years, resulting in changes to services delivered to potential HE applicants of all ages. The changes include the government’s decision to establish a statutory duty on schools to secure careers advice and guidance for pupils aged 13 -16 (taking this responsibility away from local authorities) and removing the requirement for schools to deliver careers education, alongside the introduction of the new all age National Careers Service which offers telephone and web-based support to individuals of all ages and face to face support to those aged 19 and above. The impact of both changes are only just starting to take effect and there has been little empirical research to date which identifies how effective the new arrangements are in supporting HE progression for widening participation groups. A key challenge for schools is meeting this new responsibility without additional funding and without a clear model of provision (Hooley *et al.*, 2012) and there are some early indications that there are significant changes in support being offered at school level. For example following consultation with their membership, the Institute of Careers Guidance reported that careers provision in schools is

categorised by a 'marked disparity' in 'purpose, nature, quality and impartiality' (Institute of Careers Guidance, 2012). Indeed, careers guidance for young people has recently been the focus of an Education Committee review, the report from which states that 'the government's decision to transfer responsibility to schools was regrettable' and it recommends a range of actions to halt the further deterioration of IAG (Commons Education Committee, 2013). This backdrop needs to be taken into account when considering works in relation to IAG-related widening participation outreach programmes and what challenges remain for delivery of such programmes.

Brief description of the evidence

2.3.8 Much of the evidence generated by the review relates to broad IAG issues or general widening participation debates, with very little literature addressing HE-related IAG and even less regarding the role of IAG within widening participation programmes. Despite an abundance of policy documents, sector responses to changes in policy and literature reviews, there is little in the way of empirical research. Notable exceptions include:

- *Programme evaluation reports:* National and area-based research generated as part of the Aimhigher programme, supplemented by insights provided by evaluations of the LLNs;
- *Studies generated by interest groups and sector organisations:* such as the Sutton Trust, the National Union of Students (NUS) and the Futuretrack project;
- *Academic literature:* Much of the academic research considered as part of the review focused on identifying issues that impact on the decision making processes of different learner groups, and very little was found that provided evidence of the most effective interventions.

2.3.9 IAG is embedded in a range of widening participation activities as well as being a discrete intervention in its own right. It is clear from the literature that IAG interventions can be embedded into outreach activities, e.g. as part of summer school programmes (The Sutton Trust, 2008a), or as part of the activities offered by HE ambassadors on campus visits and taster days (Sanders and Higham, 2012). There is also evidence that discrete IAG programmes targeted at under-represented groups have been developed, but the research base generated by such programmes appears to be thin.

2.3.10 Materials rarely identify which models or interventions work in the delivery of IAG, instead the focus tends to be around the challenges in meeting the needs of learners. It is also worth noting that there was limited visible research undertaken with teachers and tutors or with widening participation professionals; research with learners and careers professionals dominated.

Emerging themes, issues and challenges

Access to high quality IAG

2.3.11 Studies with potential HE applicants indicate that groups under-represented within HE are less likely to seek IAG and less likely to receive high quality support. For example, the Sutton Trust found that learners from non-selective state schools receive less advice regarding HE admissions processes, and reports that teachers are 'not equipped with the knowledge and expertise to advise'

(The Sutton Trust, 2008b p.6). Concern over the accessibility of IAG is expressed in an independent report to HEFCE which examines HE-related information needs (Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and Staffordshire University, 2010). The report finds that first generation applicants are less likely to have used the main sources of public information (for example, the UCAS website), whilst prospective students from backgrounds with high rates of HE participation show a 'stronger appetite' for information. The report also identifies that a key issue in providing HE-related information is that 'many prospective students do not look for information even when they think it will be very useful' (p.6) and that tackling the demand for information is crucial to ensure equality in access to HE. Current debates regarding the value of the personal statement in HE applications also suggest that the personal statement is not a level playing field, in part due to differing levels of advice to applicants (Jones, 2012).

2.3.12 Within much of the literature, HE-related IAG often falls short of the quality needed to have a positive impact on learner progression, particularly for young people where the adequacy of HE-related IAG is determined in part by the nature of the school that they attend. The Sutton Trust's interim report to the National Council for Educational Excellence (The Sutton Trust 2008b) reported that at least half of all advice and guidance was judged by young people to be inadequate and raised concerns over the ability of teachers to support young people educated in non-selective state schools, particularly learners in 11-16 schools. A study conducted on behalf of DfES established that learners from schools with sixth forms are more likely to express an interest in HE study than those learners from an 11-16 school (Foskett *et al.*, 2008). Evidence of better access to adequate support in selective schools is also presented in a report from the Futuretrack project (Purcell *et al.*, 2008), a longitudinal tracking of UCAS 2006 applicants. For young people not currently in education or training there is also evidence that HE-related IAG is limited (Bowes, 2008; Institute of Careers Guidance, 2012) and the Cross-government Review of Information, Advice and Guidance Services for Adults Final Report (Hutchinson and Jackson, 2007) reports on deficiencies in support to adults who wish to enter HE, although both of these groups would now be covered by services offered by the National Careers Service. IAG support at school level is becoming increasingly fragmented, and planning an outreach programme that complements the approach of individual schools may become a challenge for higher education providers.

Informal sources of support

2.3.13 Under-represented groups are most likely to rely on informal sources of support when making decisions regarding HE e.g. research consistently suggests that part-time and mature learners are more likely to rely heavily on informal sources such as employers, family and friends (Foskett and Johnson, 2010; Callender *et al.*, 2009). Qualitative research with Foundation Degree (Fd) students found that tutors offered students a positive role model and were the main source of pre-entry IAG. They further reported that the students interviewed talked about general IAG in 'vague and unenthusiastic terms' (Shaw, 2012). A similar narrative is provided in a small scale study of first and second year medical students where schools had on occasion discouraged individuals from applying as they were 'not medicine material' and that participants frequently referred to other people who had a positive impact on their decision to apply for Medicine (McHarg *et al.*, 2007). Identifying that under-represented groups are more likely to access informal sources of support does not indicate whether this reflects an actual lack of need for more formal IAG (for

example mature applicants with a strong vocational focus report less need for IAG (McVitty and Morris, 2012)), a lack of awareness of what is available or simply a preference for informal support. Shaw (2012) makes the distinction between 'hot' and 'cold' information as a way to explain the differences in the way groups of learners access HE-related IAG. The author describes how working class individuals prefer 'hot' information which is 'socially embedded in networks and localities' as opposed to 'cold' knowledge that is 'produced by official sources that do not have a personal interest in the recipient of the information' (p.117).

2.3.14 Whatever the underlying reasons, reliance on informal support has implications for individuals. Hughes (2010) states that 'informal sources of Information and Advice can, in some cases, be very helpful however they may not always be reliable, impartial or accurate' (p.3). Studies have shown that applicants who consider themselves well informed are more likely to be successful HE applicants (Purcell *et al.*, 2008). Evidence from mature learners is that those who did not consult with main (formal) sources of information were less satisfied with the information they had received (McVitty and Morris, 2012).

Impartial IAG

2.3.15 The review shows the need for impartial IAG and this has the potential to create tensions for the HE sector. Clearly any IAG provided by higher education providers is at the risk of being labelled as partial or biased, regardless of whether it is part of a planned widening participation programme or not. Indeed widening participation programmes could face dual criticism, first that widening participation programmes are promoting HE above other options and secondly that advice is provided by institutions that may well be under pressure to meet recruitment targets. In their review of widening access and reaching wider strategies on behalf of The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, Hill and Hatt (2012) explore the distinctions between recruitment and widening participation. Their findings are that only a minority of HEIs understand the issues and they conclude that the 'the distinctions between widening access and marketing and recruitment are subtle and require strategic decisions which are perhaps best taken at senior level to ensure appropriate boundaries are drawn while encouraging joint work when suitable.' Clearly, the issue of impartiality is pertinent to widening participation as a whole but is particularly important in the debate over IAG where impartiality is the corner stone of all professional IAG standards. Defining impartiality within the context of widening participation outreach programmes may help support professional practice across the sector, e.g. through further refinement and promotion of the code of good practice developed by the Higher Education Liaison Officers Association (HELOA, 2011).

Work with parents and carers

2.3.16 Drawing on evaluation of the national Aimhigher programme, McCaig *et al.* (2006) report the fact that higher education providers consider work with parents and carers to be one of the most effective outreach activities. Across the literature reviewed there was no identifiable evidence of what works in influencing parents. The views of parents and carers impact strongly upon the decisions made by some young people, and it is probably not surprising to find that parents are key influencers for some young people. Tracking of Aimhigher beneficiaries (NFER, 2009) identified that the support of parents to stay in education affects the probability of a young person's progression to HE.

Findings for different groups

2.3.17 Access to IAG is an issue across the board. For example (Purcell *et al.*, 2008) identified that although most UCAS applicants reported positive experiences of the application process, 31% of respondents reported needing more help and advice. Older (25+) students, minority ethnic and first generation students were more likely to express this view. Research consistently finds there are deficiencies in IAG support for both mature learners (e.g., McVitty and Morris, 2012) and learners from vocational and work-based routes (Bowes, 2008). Mature learners have also been found to rely less on public sources of information (McVitty and Morris, 2012) and it is reported that vocational and work based learners display a 'lack of demand for IAG' (Bowes, 2008). Table 2.4 summarises the findings related to different learner groups.

2.3.18 McHarg *et al.*'s (2007) study identified the importance of family influence with future medics, with particular reference to the value of maternal support, and disabled learners have identified parental attitudes as having a strong impact on their decisions (Impact Associates, 2009). There is also some evidence that parental influence is in part determined by ethnicity. A study of college students based in sixth form institutions across Leicester examined the influence of ethnicity in HE choice. The findings suggest that decisions made by Asian Pakistani students were influenced more by family than other ethnic groups, with White students reporting the least influence (Ivy, 2010).

Table 2.4: Key challenges and issues for widening participation groups

Groups	Challenges/issues emerging from the literature review
Mature learners	<p>Some evidence that formal IAG provision for mature learners is limited (but this has been changed with the start of the National Careers Service). In general, widening participation programmes are focused on younger learners.</p> <p>Mature learners are less likely to use public sources of information before entering HE and are more likely to rely on institutional sources of information (e.g. higher education provider websites and prospectuses). (Foskett and Johnson, 2010; McVitty and Morris, 2012)</p> <p>Mature learners' decisions are more likely to be shaped by family, friends and colleagues than formal providers of IAG. Their choices are likely to relate to a desire for career progression and they are more likely to be constrained by geography when selecting an institution (Callender <i>et al.</i>, 2009; Foskett and Johnson, 2010; McVitty and Morris, 2012)</p>
Part-time learners	Part-time learners tend to rely heavily on informal sources, and do not turn as readily to professionals. Formal support, where sought, tends to be from learning providers such as colleges and universities.
Learners from ethnic minority groups	Application rates to different types of higher education providers vary according to ethnicity. There is some evidence that ethnicity affects the HE decisions of young people, with parents being particularly influential to

	<p>Asian Pakistani students.</p> <p>Students from ethnic minority groups are more likely to enter new universities than white students (with the exception of Asian Indian and Chinese students). Some groups, for example, Caribbean students are more 'risk averse' and apply for newer universities with potentially lower entrance requirements (Ivy, 2010). This may reflect other evidence outside this review but which should be considered when identifying IAG needs of learners from ethnic minority groups.</p>
Vocational and work-based learners	<p>These learners look first to learning providers to offer IAG. Tutors are the main source of support for those on college based vocational programmes (Shaw, 2012).</p> <p>There is evidence of a lack of demand for IAG, particularly from work-based learners, which may relate to a lack of need or a lack of awareness of what is available and how it can help them (Bowes, 2008). Those in employment consult with employers but like mature and part-time learners, this group also uses higher education providers to fulfil their information needs.</p> <p>The evidence is that their influencers, particularly staff delivering vocational and work-based learning programmes, would benefit from intervention.</p>
Disabled learners	<p>Disabled learners lack information about HE; in particular they have been found to need more support to understand HE finance as it applied to them.</p> <p>Disabled learners valued Aimhigher activities more than other learner groups (Impact Associates, 2009) and as a result may feel the loss of the programme more keenly than others. Disabled learners were less likely to use information provided by UCAS and were more interested in information regarding the availability of specialist equipment.</p> <p>Disabled learners have been found to be influenced by parents and by other role models (Piggott and Houghton, 2007; Impact Associates, 2009).</p> <p>Issues are identified in relation to complexities around funding resources for disabled learners and a lack of information available for young people, their advisors and their parents.</p>

Evidence about effective approaches

2.3.19 HE-related IAG is best viewed as an on-going process rather than an intervention that occurs only during transition. In the Sutton Trust's report to the National Council for Educational Excellence (The Sutton Trust, 2008b) there is clear evidence that high quality IAG is a strong facilitator of effective transition between different key stages and that in turn ensuring smooth transition from school to post-16 learning is key to a young person entering HE. The role of HE-related IAG in making and acting upon choices is clear. However, it is also evident that IAG can make a difference to levels of confidence and aspirations (Rodger and Burgess, 2010; Sanders and Higham, 2012) and could therefore be viewed as an on-going process, and one that starts from an early age in order to maximise impact. The need for early IAG intervention is identified by a number of studies, e.g. a

qualitative study of mature, HE ‘non-participants’ found that ‘CEIAG interventions, particularly in terms of raising-awareness of HE, came too late in schooling, after attitudes and aspirations have been fixed’ (Foskett and Johnston, 2010 p.235). Support for interventions from a young age was also found in McHarg *et al.*’s study (2007) conducted with medical students and ‘the importance of developing pro-higher education attitudes at an early stage’ was a key finding from the NFER’s report on the longer term impact of Aimhigher (NFER, 2009 p.24).

2.3.20 The literature gives consistent messages in relation to priority outcomes, although it is clear that HE-related IAG should be personalised and relevant to the individual, and there is consensus about where the gaps in IAG provision for under-represented groups currently lie. Several reports identify a need for information and advice about:

- *HE finance and support:* (Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and Staffordshire University, 2010; Moore *et al.*, 2011; McCaig *et al.*, 2006; Bowes, 2008).
- *Subject choices and their effect on future HE applications and employment opportunities:* (McCaig *et al.*, 2006; The Sutton Trust, 2011). There is also a substantial body of work highlighting the need for improved support to learners to enable them to make subject choices to support progression to STEM subjects/careers specifically (Stagg, 2009) and there is some evidence that the issue for vocational learners is transparent information about viable progression routes (Shaw, 2012).
- *HE application processes and requirements:* (Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and Staffordshire University, 2010; Jones, 2012).
- *Support available for disabled learners:* Disabled learners need information about specialist equipment and support to understand HE finance (Impact Associates, 2009).

2.3.21 It is also clear from the research (Alison *et al.*, 2010; UVAC, 2010) that there is more to be done to make HE admissions policies clear and transparent and information on these available to prospective applicants, particularly those from vocational backgrounds, including apprenticeships. The other side of this – related to cultural change – is that admissions staff need to know more about vocational and non-traditional pathways and qualifications so that they can give appropriate advice and take appropriate and informed decisions about potential entrants.

2.3.22 Learners need personalised support to encourage them to use information sources and help them understand the implications of their decisions. Offering additional sources of information is not necessarily the way forward, since under-represented groups access formal IAG less than groups with more of a tradition of HE entry. For example the report by Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and Staffordshire University (2010) draws on the work of the National Student Forum and identifies that:

‘the problem was not a lack of information “of which there is clearly an abundance”, but rather a lack of a coherent framework to promote existing resources and help prospective students navigate their journey into HE’ (p.18).

Evaluation of the LLNs identified that information (as opposed to advice and guidance) was usually provided to learners in part due to its cost effectiveness and there were concerns expressed that information quickly became outdated and was difficult to maintain. There were also concerns over duplication of materials that were already available (SQW, 2010). The Bridge Group (2011) also argued that prospective students do not just need information but need support which allows them to judge the appropriateness of HE provision to their individual circumstances. The need for personalised support was also a finding from a recent review of the Widening Access, Student Retention and Success (WASRS) archive which included an examination of the role of HE students as providers of widening participation outreach programmes (Sanders and Higham, 2012) in which it was established that flexible and personalised outreach was the key when working with young people. The need for personalised support within IAG activities mirrors the general finding that outreach programmes work best when are based on 'sequenced activity which form part of a learner's personalised development' (HEFCE, 2008/05).

2.3.23 IAG has played a significant role in widening participation outreach programmes. Much of the literature expresses the need for a partnership approach to HE-related IAG and the need to ensure that opportunities provided to learners in schools and colleges are embedded into a wider careers related curriculum. For example Hooley *et al.* (2012) identify the need for a curriculum led approach and identify that early Aimhigher interventions took an 'activity based approach'. IAG played a significant role in both the national Aimhigher programme and the LLNs. HEFCE guidance (2008), provided to Aimhigher partnerships, highlighted IAG as one of several core activities which were 'considered most effective' and data from a national evaluation of Aimhigher finds IAG activities are one of the most prevalent and valued forms of widening participation intervention (McCaig *et al.*, 2006). The summative evaluation of LLNs produced on behalf of HEFCE (SQW, 2010) describes how provision of IAG was one of three core activities identified to help improve HE progression rates for learners on vocational programmes. There is also some evidence that the Sutton Trust prioritises delivery of advice to learners on their summer school programme (The Sutton Trust, 2008a) with a qualitative study identifying benefits for learners in choosing a HE programme and navigating the admissions process.

2.3.24 Researchers examining HE information needs found that disabled learners were more likely to regard Aimhigher activities as a very useful source of information than for any other group of learners (Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and Staffordshire University, 2010). There is however very little reference to activities related to mature learners, although there are some examples of activities developed by HE careers services, such as the Pre-Entry Guidance Service (PEGS) for adults funded through Aimhigher and delivered by a partnership of HEIs in the Greater Manchester area (Boyd and Shaw, 2008).

2.3.25 The summative evaluation of LLNs finds that IAG focused largely on delivery of information and that this was predominately web-based (SQW, 2010). However there is reference made to delivery of specific 1-1 and group based interventions to provide awareness of options and support for applications; it is not clear what delivery models were employed and who facilitated these interventions. The report does however highlight that staff within partner organisations were targeted through LLNs, with HE and network staff providing staff development opportunities for IAG

practitioners and tutors. In particular, the evaluation found that supporting FE tutors to give accurate IAG emerged as a key priority for a number of networks.

2.3.26 In their review of the Aimhigher Greater Manchester Graduate Officer role (Moore *et al.*, 2011) researchers describe a scheme designed to use recent graduates to provide IAG to Aimhigher target learners through the provision of group and 1-1 based activities, e.g. presentations, groupwork and individual support for HE applications. Provision was largely provided to young people within their school or college setting although there was some work delivered in community based settings, for example with Looked After young people, and support for HEI based events was also provided. Although the review is unable to distinguish changes in learner behaviour as a result of the programme there is strong evidence that the role was valued across the Aimhigher partnership and by individual learners with evidence that learners appreciated the visibility and accessibility of the support. The research found that staff particularly valued the fact that Graduate Officers provided a different perspective to formal sources of IAG and that their success had been built on comprehensive packages of training and support. Research however identified that the scheme had worked well in practice as it had been developed and implemented using a partnership approach with Graduate Officers supporting needs identified at local authority level. Graduate Officers were impartial and not linked to specific higher education providers, but demarcation of roles and concerns over duplication and levels of expertise needs to be addressed.

2.3.27 A second model of discrete IAG, the Aimhigher Personal Adviser (APA) programme was delivered by a partnership between Aimhigher, schools and Connexions Nottingham (Carpenter and Kerrigan, 2009). The APA programme focused solely on work with small numbers of targeted individuals. Interventions included 1-1 mentoring support, individual CEIAG sessions, group work and supported visits to higher education providers. Like the Graduate Officer programme there was no evidence of long-term impact on learner progression to HE however the scheme was clearly valued by individuals who reported increased confidence, improved motivation and the ability to make informed career decisions.

2.3.28 Use of current and former HE students can be an effective delivery model for IAG outreach. (McCaig *et al.*, 2006) report that higher education providers consider contact with HE students as one of the most effective widening participation activities. HEFCE funded the Aimhigher Associates programme, originally as a pathfinder in 2008/2009 and then as a national programme from 2009 onwards. For national rollout HEFCE clearly identified the scheme as an IAG outreach programme (HEFCE, 2011/35) although early guidance and the evaluation of the pathfinder phase suggests its original focus was intensive mentoring (Rodger and Burgess, 2010). Evaluation of the pathfinder found that HE students, acting as Aimhigher Ambassadors, were providing information about HE and their own experiences, and that the impact was on learners' levels of knowledge and understanding of HE. The report finds that using students to 'stimulate learner interest has proved to be effective' although it also found that the intended delivery model (of 15-20 exchanges with emphasis on 1-1 support) was neither appropriate nor cost-effective.

2.3.29 The role of HE students in delivery of widening participation outreach programmes is addressed by Sanders and Higham, 2012 in their review of the HEA's Widening Access and Student Retention and Success (WASRS) national programmes archive. It is reported that students have

played a key role in delivery of outreach activities and that they have had a direct impact on the aspirations, skills, attitudes and knowledge of under-represented groups. Students are seen as valuable sources of 'hot' information that have effectively delivered a range of IAG related outcomes. The clearest impact was evident when learners and HE students engaged in sustained relationships and when students were effectively selected, trained and supported for their role, for example as part of the Aimhigher Associates Scheme or mentoring programmes led by higher education providers. The same report identifies some evidence however that there are concerns over their role as IAG providers, particularly around their impartiality and the limits of their own knowledge and experience.

2.3.30 Use of 'role models' to support the decisions of under-represented groups appears to be an important component of some HE-led provision, and there is much said in the literature about the use of role models in supporting under-represented groups make the journey to HE. For example, a study of first and second year medical students supports the need for role modelling and suggests that widening participation programmes need to choose positive role models to intervene early. It has been reported that vocational learners identify their tutors as positive role models (Shaw, 2012) and we have seen above how both graduates and students can be used effectively to deliver IAG and part of this success appears to rely on their status as a role model. In their review of the Aimhigher Graduate Officer scheme Moore *et al.*, (2011) report that Graduate Officers offer a positive role model to young people and that this helps to engage learners in discussion about HE. Sanders and Higham (2012) find that HE students are frequently termed role models and that young people value the experiences that they bring. Research also identified the importance of role models to disabled young people (Impact Associates, 2009).

Emerging conclusions

2.3.31 There are concerns about the quality and accessibility, and variability of HE-related IAG to widening participation groups, with the sense that more needs to be done, especially for young people in non-selective state schools, particularly learners in 11-16 schools (The Sutton Trust, 2008b), and for part-time and mature learners. There are gaps in knowledge about what constitutes a successful model of IAG interventions as part of a widening participation programme.

2.3.32 HE-related IAG for under-represented groups is delivered through a range of providers, with increasingly fragmented arrangements in place for young people. The challenge for higher education providers appears to be identifying the added value that outreach programmes can bring and ensuring interventions are relevant for a range of potential HE learners, not just those based in schools and colleges. The finding that widening participation target groups access formal IAG less than general HE applicants and rely more upon informal sources indicates that the issue may not just be about providing more IAG. It may also be about using informal models of intervention, supporting potential applicants to access formal IAG services where they exist and using the resources of higher education providers to support staff delivering those services.

2.3.33 The evidence is that providing information is not enough and potential learners need personalised support to help them to make decisions and implement them. The literature identifies that under-represented groups turn to informal sources of IAG, have less access to formal IAG and

prefer 'hot' information. The task for widening participation programmes is to develop IAG interventions that are accessible to learners and are delivered in engaging ways whilst enabling those who need specialist advice and guidance to access high quality specialist services. Such work is highly resource intensive and higher education providers need to be clear on what contribution they can make and which target groups are a priority in relation to their overall organisational objectives.

2.3.34 Ensuring IAG is embedded into the full range of outreach programmes at both national and institutional level will maximise opportunities for delivery. IAG interventions planned as part of outreach programmes need to start early and intensify during periods of transition. Delivery of impartial IAG may well be easier to achieve when delivered in partnership with other higher education providers and IAG should be a focus for any collaborative outreach programmes at local level.

2.3.35 Ensuring that influencers working with under-represented groups are well informed about HE is a challenge, both in finding ways of engaging them and in changing their attitudes and expectations about the HE sector. Employers, teaching staff and parents are often difficult to engage with, but have the potential to provide a positive influence on widening participation target groups. Developing a clear strategy for reaching out to influencers seems crucial as does evaluating interventions and identifying and sharing what works.

Table 2.5: Overview of evidence on approaches to delivering information and advice

	Evidence	Issues
Information (e.g. web or print based materials)	<p>Cost effective and wide reaching (SQW, 2010).</p> <p>There is clear evidence about the kinds of information different ‘sub groups’ of prospective learners need in order to make HE-related decisions (Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and Staffordshire University, 2010).</p>	<p>Maintenance of materials is resource intensive and there are potential issues around duplication of sources (SQW, 2010; Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and Staffordshire University, 2010).</p> <p>Certain groups of prospective students are less likely to use the main public sources of information and need support to use and make sense of what is already available (Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and Staffordshire University, 2010; The Bridge Group, 2011).</p>
HE-IAG provider partnership arrangements (could be formal and informal partnerships)	<p>May help to consolidate resources by adding value to existing provision. Can help to improve the quality of both formal and informal sources of HE-related IAG.</p> <p>Can provide direct support for applications (e.g. work with FE colleges) (Moore <i>et al.</i>, 2011).</p>	<p>Focus has tended to be learners in schools and colleges.</p> <p>Challenge to ensure provision reaches and is suitable for full range of potential students.</p>
Parent/key influencer projects	<p>Support of parents to stay in education affects probability of progressing to HE (NFER, 2009). Work with parents considered by higher education providers to be one of the most effective outreach activities (McCaig <i>et al.</i>, 2006).</p> <p>Of key importance for some groups, for example to disabled learners (Impact Associates, 2009). Parental influence may be in part determined by ethnicity (Ivy, 2010). Vocational learners appear to be influenced by tutors (Shaw, 2012) and those in work by employers (Bowes, 2008; Institute of Careers Guidance, 2012).</p>	<p>Lack of a clear consensus about what constitutes good practice.</p>

	Evidence	Issues
Use of role models (e.g. mentoring projects)	<p>Feedback shows highly valued by young people (Moore <i>et al.</i>, 2011). Shown to be effective when role models are positive and used early in the learner journey (e.g. medical students) (McHarg <i>et al.</i>, 2007).</p> <p>Can be well targeted (e.g. for disabled learners) (Impact Associates, 2009)</p>	Resource intensive. Relationships need to start early and be sustained.
Use of students (e.g. as part of outreach)	<p>Viewed as effective model of outreach (McCaig <i>et al.</i>, 2006). Shown to have a direct impact on the aspirations, skills, attitudes and knowledge of under-represented groups. Clearest impact is when learners and HE students engage in sustained relationships and when students are effectively selected, trained and supported (Sanders and Higham, 2012).</p> <p>Valued by recipients as a source of 'hot' information and can effectively deliver on a range of IAG-related outcomes.</p>	Some evidence that there are concerns over their role as IAG providers, particularly around their impartiality and the limits of their own knowledge and experience (Sanders and Higham, 2012).
Specialist teams (e.g. Graduate Officers, Student Ambassadors)	<p>Provide a range of activities that can be both intensive and extensive (group, 1:1) which is targeted and accessible delivery <i>in situ</i>. Valued by IAG providers as a source of expertise; offer different perspective to formal sources, and learners appreciate pro-active nature of the support (Moore <i>et al.</i>, 2011).</p> <p>Evidence of impact on positive outcomes for learners, on increased confidence, improved motivation and the ability to make informed career decisions, as well as on HE progression (Carpenter and Kerrigan, 2009).</p>	<p>Success built on comprehensive training and support.</p> <p>Linked to local partnership arrangements.</p>

2.4 Retention and Student Success

Key findings

- Fostering a sense of belonging lies at the heart of retention and success. The prime site for nurturing engagement and a strong sense of belonging is located in the academic domain. The attitudes, approaches and methods of academic staff have a key role to play, as do developments in learning, teaching and assessment.
- The issues underlying student withdrawal are complex and often interlinked: academic issues, feelings of isolation or not fitting in, and worries about achieving future aspirations are highlighted in the research.
- Different groups may experience 'higher education' in very different ways. This can impact in particular ways on students' identity and vital sense of belonging. There are distinct challenges involved in engaging specific groups such as mature students and part-time learners.
- Friends, family and peers have an important supporting role in the academic as well as the social domain. They can provide informal support and bolster a sense of belonging.
- The evidence suggests that retention and success is best addressed by approaches which seek to develop: supportive peer relations; meaningful interaction between staff and students; knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners; and an HE experience that is relevant to students' interests and future goals (Thomas, 2012a, pp.14-15).
- Key transition points require particular attention. Transition activities should be seen as part of a continuum that includes pre-entry activities and first year engagement. Generic features of successful pre-entry interventions include: providing information; informing expectations; developing academic skills; building social capital; and nurturing a sense of belonging.
- Universal rather than targeted approaches are the preferred model in most retention and success (including attainment) strategies. Although, specific interventions like peer mentoring and peer tutoring have been shown to be particularly effective, the precise activity is less important than the way in which it is offered and linked to other endeavours.
- The attainment gap for students from ethnic minority groups is not diminishing despite growing understanding of its dimensions and vigorous endeavours to address it. New lines of enquiry have the potential to reveal fresh insights.
- There is scope to do more to disseminate and embed what is already known, particularly the findings of What Works? Student Retention and Success national programme and earlier research, and to fill gaps in knowledge about specific groups.

Introduction to the theme

2.4.1 Widening participation extends beyond simply gaining access to HE. What happens at college or university and what outcomes are achieved also matter. To extend Tinto's (2008) precept, access without support (and a fair chance of success) is not true opportunity.

2.4.2 This section focuses on strategies, activities and interventions which aim to enhance student retention and success in HE. It covers a large part of the student lifecycle from transition and induction through to completion and exit. Such a broad definition effectively cements 'retention and success' within a single consolidated concept (Action on Access, 2010). This includes continuation, completion of study programme and attainment of target awards, but also transition to HE, comparative academic achievement within HE and successful progression beyond first degree to employment, or to further study and training, including postgraduate study.

2.4.3 A broader notion of 'student success' (Sanders and Higham, 2012) in which personal and learner defined perspectives can inform or challenge purely institutionally determined conceptions also implicitly acknowledges the diversity of the student body and the different ways that individuals engage with and benefit from HE study.

2.4.4 Retention and success activities are a key element of widening participation policies and practice. Most can be located at one or more points on a continuum that takes in four overlapping phases of the learner journey:

- Pre-entry preparation for, and transition to, HE: interventions at this stage can help to prepare new entrants for the academic demands, the social dimensions and the 'culture shock' of HE study. They typically include pre-enrolment 'bridging' programmes that aid students' transition into higher levels of learning and activities to help students to feel at home with their prospective peers, tutors and the systems of HE (Jackson, 2012; Thomas, 2012a; 2012c).
- Post-entry transition and induction: this phase (focusing on the early weeks) is particularly important in relation to activities that promote socialisation and the formation of friendship groups, clarify expectations and develop academic confidence, and facilitate the development of relationships with members of staff (Palmer *et al.*, 2009; Cashmore *et al.*, 2011; Thomas, 2012a).
- Experiences in HE: this phase focuses particularly on the first year but extends beyond. It is where sustained interactions with staff and where focused interventions like peer mentoring and tutoring are mainly located. Learning, teaching and assessment practices impact significantly on student engagement and experiences (Crozier *et al.*, 2008; David *et al.*, 2009; Roberts, 2011; Burke *et al.*, 2013).
- Completion of qualification, exit and progression into employment or further study: with notable exceptions (e.g. the attainment gap for students from ethnic minority groups) this phase has generally not been the focus of retention and success initiatives. However, progression to postgraduate studies and employability (covered in Sections 2.7 and 2.9 of this review) are emerging issues.

2.4.5 There is a broad emerging consensus that issues of engagement and developing a sense of belonging lie at the heart of both retention and success. The starting point is 'the human side of higher education ... finding friends, feeling confident, and above all feeling part of your course of study and the institution' (Broadfoot, in Thomas, 2012b, p.1).

Context

2.4.6 Retention and success is an important element of endeavours to widen participation. Academic or pastoral work with current students accounts for two-thirds of higher education providers' 'spend' in this area (HEFCE and OFFA, 2013). Although 'widening participation' and 'retention and success' have often been separated out in policy and funding strands, on-the-ground boundaries have often been blurred (HEFCE, 2008/05; Thomas, 2011).

2.4.7 Retention in particular took on a higher profile following the 2007 National Audit Office review and the linked Public Accounts Committee report in 2008 (House of Commons PAC, 2008). In addition to confirming the UK universities' relative success in retaining its students, the NAO report challenged the sector to produce and disseminate evidence of good practice. The What Works? Student Retention and Success national programme, co-funded by HEFCE and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, took up the invitation and provided a key focus for research activity from 2008-11.

2.4.8 Student retention and success has continued to feature prominently as part of the new post-Browne widening participation era. This reflects not simply the amount of money spent on it and the potential for economic and reputational damage to institutions with poor retention and success measures. It also indicates their broad acceptance, within the embedded culture of widening participation, of ethical, moral and social obligations to students. Attention to equality and diversity issues has underpinned much of the resulting work. This includes activities to support disabled students. In addition, following its relatively late arrival onto the institutional and research agenda (see Singh, 2011), significant national resources have been deployed since 2008 to examine issues relating to attainment gap for students from ethnic minority groups.

2.4.9 This strong focus on retention and success is unlikely to change. As the pivot of the new HE system, students may focus increasingly on the quality of their experience and the material and personal benefits that they gain from higher level study (NUS Connect, 2010). Higher tuition fees may also result in a greater emphasis on the extent to which higher education providers facilitate the success of their students (Action on Access, 2010). The KIS will make data on retention, completion and employment outcomes more accessible. Equally, continuing concerns about the stalling of the engines of social mobility are likely to ensure that student retention and success retains a high policy and institutional profile.

2.4.10 Students' relationships with higher education providers are changing. Individual institutional data reveal that up to 70% of students work at the same time as studying (Leese, 2010). HESA data on undergraduates indicate the number of full-time students who live at home and commute to HE has increased from 8% in the mid-1980s to 20% in the mid-2000s (Jackson, 2012). These trends pose significant challenges for transition and engagement activities. On the other hand, the emerging role of students' unions as key partners and the growing importance of the 'student workforce' in access

and retention activities (Sanders and Higham, 2012) offer opportunities to develop new approaches to building a culture of belonging.

Brief description of the evidence

2.4.11 Major reviews of the retention and success literature by Jones (2008) and Troxel (2010) reveal no shortage of research material in the UK or the USA. Much of this work sits alongside and intersects with significant bodies of research on widening participation, equality and diversity issues, mentoring and student support, and inclusive learning and teaching. However, as Thomas (2011) has noted, there are not always explicit connections between some of these discrete bodies of work. Key sources of evidence on retention and success include:

- *Literature reviews*: This category includes Jones' and Troxel's overviews (above) as well as reviews that focus on widening participation (Gorard *et al.*, 2006); the first-year experience (Harvey and Drew, 2006); inclusive learning and teaching (Hockings, 2010); student engagement (Trowler, 2010); and attainment for ethnic minority groups (Richardson, 2008; Singh, 2011; Stevenson and Whelan, 2013). In addition the reports of Gazeley and Aynsley (2012) on pre-entry interventions and Sanders and Higham (2012) on the role of HE students both draw on a range of research and evaluative material in the Higher Education Academy's WASRS national programmes archive.
- *Results from national research programmes*: The What Works? national programme evaluated existing retention interventions and sought to reveal the most effective practices to secure high student continuation and completion rates. What Works? projects used a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research methods to examine a range of issues and significant efforts were made to link to the existing literature and triangulate data. The findings have particular power because they are based on robust, peer-reviewed, empirical research, and build on the experience and address the concerns of both practitioners and institutions. Earlier research, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under the final phase of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) addressed aspects of retention and success via a series of robust, multi-layered research projects that focused on discrete widening participation issues. These provided rich data and a number of insights relevant to retention and success concerns, as well as suggesting starting points for further investigations.
- *Quantitative studies*: Rose-Adams' (2012) 'Leaving University Early' research report looked at retention from a reverse angle. It sought to understand which students leave HE early and what characteristics or experiences contribute to this phenomenon. Using a by-product of 'back on course', a HEFCE funded practical national project that offered an advice service to students who had left HE, the research was able to interrogate an unprecedentedly large dataset. This comprised detailed information on early leavers from full-time undergraduate programmes supplied by 86 higher education providers, supplemented with additional data collected from mainly telephone-based IAG interviews with approximately 2,700 students.
- *Mixed method studies*: Other recent research has used institutional data effectively or has created datasets imaginatively, for example by using new technologies. Much of this work is characterised by the use of mixed qualitative and quantitative methods with extensive use of focus groups and semi-structured interviews. A number of these studies have focused on the attainment gap for students from ethnic minority groups.

- *Theoretical approaches to the issues of retention and success, using alternative methodologies:* These challenge linear institutional viewpoints on retention and success (Hewitt and Rose-Adams, 2012) and shift the emphasis onto real student experiences and journeys. Such work often focuses on the interaction between ‘the personal’ and broader social, economic and cultural forces. For example Stuart *et al.*’s (2011) use of a biographical educational life histories offers new insights ‘into what affects learning and engagement with learning’ (p.493), recognising that ‘learning can never occur in a vacuum’ (p.489). Similarly, Stevenson’s (2012b) use of the ‘possible selves’ construct offers a different point of entry to issues of attainment, identity and belonging. Although such approaches have produced findings which are suggestive and exploratory rather than being definitive, they chime with current desires to hear the ‘student voice’. The perceptions, expectations and experiences revealed suggest a more nuanced and dynamic reality behind the anonymous mask of large datasets.
- *Single institution or single activity case-studies:* These often make few claims to generalisability or prediction or to attribute causality and are drawn on only when they illustrate the findings from more robust research or when viewed collectively they corroborate or challenge other empirical research. These include a number of case-studies and evaluations of specific transition activities such as academic bridging programmes, short pre-entry courses and IT-facilitated pre-entry engagement activities.

2.4.12 The What Works? programme final report acknowledges the difficulty of assessing the impact of single interventions, particularly when multiple factors and activities are potentially influencing rates of retention and success. It is a familiar refrain and one which lay at the heart of earlier critiques (Gorard *et al.*, 2006) that pointed out the lack of experimental research designs (involving comparator groups).

2.4.13 As well as the problematic issue of causality, other caveats should be borne in mind in relation to the evidence presented. Most of the easiest to capture retention and success data relates to full-time undergraduate students. There are relatively few comprehensive studies of the experiences of part-time students. Equally there are substantial variations in the extent to which the retention and success of different target groups is addressed. Another problem relates to the clunkiness of categories (for example in relation to ethnicity) in an age of multiple or hybrid identities. As Singh and Cousin (2009) warn, there are also dangers of being distracted by headline data: making correct calculations, but missing the point.

Emerging themes, issues and challenges

Transition (pre-entry support)

2.4.14 Pre-entry transition is recognised in the wider literature as a key access phase (see Gazeley and Aynsley, 2012). It is also a possible weak spot in relation to the application-admission-enrolment process. Further work could usefully be focused on ‘lost in transit’ students, non-placed applicants who are not accounted for (Wilde and Hoelscher, 2007). However, it is just one of a number of possible transition points in a learner journey. These occur at different times and for different reasons, such as transitions between levels and styles of study, courses and qualifications, places and institutions (see Scott *et al.*, 2011). A number are noted in other thematic sections, for example IAG (Section 2.3) and progress to postgraduate study (Section 2.7). Some may be relatively hidden:

for example, between Fd and top-up programmes; between work and HE; or between study in FE and HE settings (Penketh and Goddard, 2008; Cree *et al.*, 2009; Gordon *et al.*, 2010; Winter and Dismore, 2010; Pike and Harrison, 2011).

2.4.15 The research evidence relating to pre-entry transition activities is largely based on small-scale studies. It reveals an important cluster of issues around expectations, academic preparedness and pedagogical transitions. Leese (2010) highlights a gap in students' expectations and understanding of academic workloads and the notion of independent learning. It is suggested that unrealistic or inaccurate expectations are not being identified or adequately addressed during pre-entry activities and that institutions are not adapting to students' conceptions of their relationships with HE (Leese 2010; Brown, 2011; Jackson, 2012). Sustainability of activities is recognised as a challenge (Mckendry, 2012) and the role of IT appears to be double-edged. It has the potential to support students' transition to HE, but can also exclude those who have limited access to IT or are not regular and confident users of social media (Mckendry, 2012; Jackson, 2012).

Doubting

2.4.16 The What Works? findings confirm the first year as a key time of vulnerability and as the critical period for 'doubting' and non-continuation (Foster *et al.*, 2011). While the proportion of HE students withdrawing early has remained relatively static and low at just over 8% for a number of years, the programme's research reveals that a sizeable minority of students (between a third and two-thirds in different studies) had considered withdrawing from HE during their first year. Reasons for this 'doubting' are many and varied. They cluster round academic issues, feelings of isolation or not fitting in, and worries about achieving future aspirations (Thomas, 2012a, p.12). Palmer *et al.* (2009) examine the first year as a 'betwixt' space between home and HE and note the limits on institutional interventions during this transitional phase.

Early Leaving

2.4.17 The reasons why individuals leave HE early are multiple and complex. Recent evidence from the *back on course* project suggests that 'personal/financial reasons' predominate, though a significant number of students (37%) left primarily for reasons to do with either the course or the institution (Rose-Adams, 2012). In general, the study occasionally qualifies but rarely contradicts summaries of previous research findings on reasons for early leaving (e.g. Jones, 2008). It also supports the notion put forward in earlier studies that withdrawal is a process and not an event (Basit *et al.*, 2006).

2.4.18 There are also dangers in seeing early leaving as a mirror image of retention and the antithesis of 'success'. As earlier researchers like Quinn *et al.* (2005) have argued in relation to working-class 'drop-out', early leaving is often a rational decision and far from the disaster that it is frequently portrayed to be. The evidence from *back on course* interviews supports the view that the decision to leave HE is often unavoidable and is sometimes positive. The research also indicates that significant numbers of 'early leavers' (over 20%) successfully re-apply to HE (Rose-Adams, 2012). Such 'hidden retention' (in that it does not appear in institutional data) is equally a feature of small-scale study of part-time adult learners on an OU 'Openings' programme (Hewitt and Rose-Adams, 2012).

Identities and experiences

2.4.19 Crozier and Reay's 2008 ESRC study emphasised the social dimensions of the student experience and the importance of identities in creating a sense of belonging. The research briefing notes how 'students' learner identities are influenced by previous experiences at school, their current HE experience and their social circumstances' (Crozier and Reay, 2008, p.1). The latter included living at home (70% of respondents in one case-study institution) and substantial part-time work (between 10-20 hours per week). Little wonder perhaps that 'the student experience was only one part of their already busy lives' (p.3). This theme is echoed in a number of small-scale and single institution studies which explore the experiences of part-time or mature students on vocationally related courses (Jones, 2010; Davies, 2013). It also resonates with one of the What Works? project's findings which revealed 'a highly instrumental approach to HE' amongst part-time, mature and local students, and a corresponding questioning of the social aspects of an HE experience, reflected in comments about 'not needing more friends' (Boyle *et al.*, 2011, in Thomas, 2012a, p.18).

2.4.20 Stuart *et al.*'s (2011) educational life histories research suggests that ethnicity impacts in particular ways on students' vital sense of belonging and identity in HE. It interacts with and, in some instances, trumps other variables such as class, age and gender. Their ESRC-funded research significantly found that 'minority ethnic students no matter which class position they hold, described their engagement with HE differently from their White British counterparts' (p.506). An earlier ESRC investigation (Stuart *et al.*, 2009) highlights different student experiences across ethnic groups, and notes that a sense of belonging can impact on both academic confidence and well-being.

Entitlement

2.4.21 Crozier and Reay's (2008) research notes the strong sense of entitlement about going to HE and the self-assuredness about themselves as successful learners that middle-class students expressed. This is set against the lack of self-confidence and a more fragile learner identity displayed by some of the working-class students. This theme also appears in another ESRC-funded study (Stuart *et al.*, 2011) exploring the impact of life experiences on perceptions of participation in higher-level study. A strong sense of class-based entitlement is again identified in the project's educational life history interviews, though interestingly in this case it is modified by the fluid dynamics of ethnicity.

Friends, family, peers

2.4.22 Earlier retention research highlighted the critical role that 'friendship and peer support' play in many students' decisions to stay in HE (Thomas, 2002; Wilcox *et al.*, 2005; Stuart, 2006). Equally, Fuller A.'s (2008) study of mature students' non-participation pointed out the significance of 'networks of intimacy' in decision-making in relation to HE. Evidence from the What Works? programme supports these findings. This theme features prominently in both the programme's final report and good practice publications (Thomas, 2012a; Andrews *et al.*, 2012). Foster *et al.* (2011) identify 'support from family and friends' as the most frequently cited 'reason to stay' for 'doubters' (those considering leaving HE). This easily outstripped institutional support, crucial though this was in many individual cases. The Higher Education Retention and Engagement (HERE) project found that students doubt for primarily academic reasons, but social factors are generally what cause them to

remain (Foster *et al.*, 2011). Friends made at university were particularly important in this process. Other evidence from What Works? (e.g. McCary *et al.*, 2011; Boyle *et al.*, 2011; Glassey *et al.*, 2012) and elsewhere (e.g. Lane and Wilkinson, 2011) confirms the importance of friendship and social integration in helping students to remain. Higher education providers, however, face challenges in finding effective ways of relating to key influencers and tapping into this important 'resource'.

Differences in attainment

2.4.23 The differential rates and levels of achievement of different groups, particularly students from ethnic minority groups, has attracted a lot of research interest in recent years. This forms a distinct subset of material within the retention and success literature. Studies have sought to account for the complexity of factors at play while avoiding simplistic explanations which 'blame' students for their inability to persist or achieve. Summarising a wealth of research, Singh (2011) comments that:

*'Though there are many positive stories to be told about HE and the student experience, for example, the higher rate of participation of students from minority ethnic groups compared to White students, ... there is now a consistent body of evidence that indicates that BME students face inequality at all stages of the HE experience: they are less likely to be satisfied with their student experience; more likely to leave early; and are less likely to gain a good Honours degree.'*¹² (p.5)

2.4.24 Singh's review cites Broecke and Nicholls' (2007) pioneering work that concluded that 'even after controlling for the majority of factors which we would expect to have an impact on attainment, being from a minority ethnic community (except 'Other Black', 'Mixed' and 'Other' is still statistically significant in explaining final attainment' (p.3). HEFCE's (2010/03) detailed study of UK domiciled first degree entrants to full-time first degree study in 2002/3 came to similar conclusions. It found that:

'There was a large difference between the different ethnic groups in the proportion of final-year students awarded a first of upper second class degree. White finalists [students who had reached the final year] had a rate of 25 percentage points higher than the rate for Black finalists, and 20 percentage points higher than Pakistani or Bangladeshi finalists.' (p.4)

2.4.25 This attainment gap has never been satisfactorily explained. Historically two main narratives have been put forward to explain the attainment gap. One has broadly focused on institutional racism or ethnic bias. The other has tended to apply student deficit models, in which lower attainment is seen as being due to academic weaknesses, lack of ability or other individual factors or circumstances or a tendency to choose the 'wrong' (more challenging) subjects. Importantly, however, none of these explanations has been sufficiently robust to stand up to detailed scrutiny and rigorous quantitative investigation (see summary in Richardson, 2008).

2.4.26 Increasingly, the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the issue is highlighted. For Singh (2011), 'the disparity in attainment is associated with a range of personal, cultural, institutional and structural factors ... overlaid with instances of direct and indirect racism' (p.37). Others speak of other unknown variables being at play (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007; Berry and Loke, 2011). A Higher

¹² This is defined as a first class or upper second class degree.

Education Academy report (2008) concluded that the causes were unlikely to be found in 'single, knowable factors', whilst a later study Stevenson (2012a) emphasised the multiplicity of issues relating to ethnic minority attainment and the intricate interplay between them. As Singh (2011) concludes:

'all the evidence points to a complex range of differently connected factors being at play such as: previous educational experiences; curriculum content and design; teaching, learning and assessment approaches; the learning environment; and direct and indirect racism' (p.24).

2.4.27 Some of these factors have been explored in recent years. Richardson (2008; 2012), for example, argues that ethnic minority underachievement in HE is mainly due to their experience of secondary education which endows a 'double legacy': relatively poor entrance qualifications and less appropriate and effective 'conceptions of learning'.

2.4.28 There are dangers here of veering into deficit territory. However, this account has the virtue of highlighting the key role of learning and teaching in HE and the challenge of developing more effective conceptions of learning amongst its students. The possible contribution of current learning, teaching and assessment (LTA) practices to maintaining the attainment gap is also highlighted by Singh (2011). Students from ethnic minority groups interviewed by Stevenson (2012a) felt that their relative under-attainment was due to their under-preparedness and lack of subsequent academic development. However, this 'was compounded by what was regarded by some as an abject failure on the part of teaching staff to build their academic skills, develop their confidence and help them to understand the social mores of the institution' (p.14). They 'firmly located the responsibility for the attainment gap with the institution, in its broadest sense and more particularly with academic staff' (p.16). In contrast, accounts from HE staff of the attainment gap included references to institutional structures and practices, particularly in relation to LTA, but also wider societal factors and those relating to the students themselves. Berry and Loke (2011) also note that not enough was known about the extent of deficit models of students from ethnic minority groups amongst staff as the explanation for underperformance (p.46).

2.4.29 The impact of psychological factors on academic attainment is a well-established field of research (e.g. Sander, 2009). Singh's 2011 review, for example, noted the possible significance of earlier American studies 'which highlight the importance of strategies for addressing BME students' psychological well-being, sense of belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation needs' (p.27). However, the examination of such factors in relation to the attainment of particular groups (e.g. Pawson *et al*, 2012) is relatively new and contentious in the UK. Stevenson (2012b) comments that 'locating, even in part, the "cause" of ME student underachievement within individuals themselves runs the danger of collapsing explanations for the attainment gap back into a deficit model of blaming ME students for their academic "failures"' (p.104).

2.4.30 Research into language use and 'academic literacies' highlights the critical role that these play in students' HE identities and experiences. Recent OU work (Erling and Richardson, 2010; Donohue and Erling, 2012) has confirmed 'a relationship between students' writing performance and their attainment' (Donohue and Erling, 2012, p.214). However, it has also revealed something of the complexity and inter-connectedness of the processes involved. Researchers who advocate an

‘academic literacies’ approach argue for a greater focus on social practices, cultural identities, and the impact of power relations, and for more attention to be paid to language uses rather than written text (see, for example, Lillis and Scott, 2008; Scott *et al.*, 2011). Burke (2010), focusing on writing practices, argues that ‘HE pedagogies concerned with inclusion and widening participation need to create spaces for students and teachers to critically re/consider the implications of academic literacy practices’ (p.11).

2.4.31 This is not surprising since language is often seen as being at the very core of culture, identity and power. Donohue and Erling (2012), for example, comment that ‘feedback on language use seemed to go to the heart of their [interviewees’] identity as university students’ (p.214). Issues relating to use of language, levels of literacy and academic writing skills figure increasingly prominently in debates about attainment for HE students from ethnic minority groups. Stevenson (2012a), for example, notes research indicating ‘prejudiced attitudes associated with linguistic competence’ as a possible LTA factor contributing to maintaining the attainment gap (p.4). Meanwhile, Berry and Loke (2011) cite institutional learner support strategies, for example in the area of language provision and literacy skills development, as aligning closely with the BME attainment agenda. Recent research has given a welcome prominence to language and academic literacies issues, without offering simple solutions or easily implemented strategies for adoption.

Findings for different groups

2.4.32 The patterns of ‘early leaving’ revealed by the *back on course* project data support some familiar trends (identified in previous research), including the higher propensity of ‘non-traditional’ students, (for example mature entrants without recent A-levels, people from lower HE participation neighbourhoods and those from a previous educational institutional in the FE sector) to be early leavers compared to ‘traditional’ younger students with recent A-levels. Equally, early leaving appears to be most strongly linked to prior educational attainment. However, the *back on course* project data highlight the danger of simple generalisations that certain ‘types’ of students are more likely to leave early. For example, ‘applicants who originate from areas of low HE participation and whose previous education was in the further education sector or ‘other’ were found overall to have relatively weak associations with early leaving’ (Rose-Adams, 2012, p.5). In contrast, links between areas of low participation and early leaving were found to be particularly significant for younger students and those at higher tariff group institutions. This suggests that nuances and intersectionality are important in this as in other areas.

2.4.33 Headline figures for retention and success reveal lower rates of non-continuation for women (6.4% v 8.5% in 2010-11, HEFCE, 2013/07) and higher rates of achievement (see Richardson, 2008). Behind the ‘top-line’ statistics, a more nuanced picture emerges. For example, male students in England and Scotland are more likely to achieve a first class Honours degree than female students (Burke *et al.*, 2013) and women are less likely to progress to postgraduate education (Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson, 2013).

2.4.34 Retention and success issues are less well researched for some groups. Jones’ (2008) review uncovered little work relating to the experience of disabled students. Only one of the four case-study universities that Fuller M. (2008) reported on in the same year included disabled students as

part of their widening participation agenda. Despite the size and importance of mature student population in HE, there is relatively little empirical research that focuses on their retention and success, or on these issues in relation to the modes of study that they disproportionately use (part-time, distance or flexible modes of learning). This may reflect the difficulties with data for a group who may not have all come through the UCAS route. Most recent studies in this area tend to be small-scale, single institution, qualitative studies that explore issues of learner identity and highlight the difficulties of generalising from very diverse experiences (Chapman, 2012; Hewitt and Rose-Adams, 2012).

2.4.35 The particular challenges faced by part-time, predominantly mature, students in relation to transition, work-load and support are emphasised in a number of recent small-scale studies (Gordon *et al.*, 2010; Pike and Harrison, 2011; Chapman 2012; Davies, 2013). These reveal the elastic nature of terms like ‘full-time’ and ‘part-time’ and throw into relief some of the limitations of purely quantitative or institutional conceptions of retention.

Table 2.6: Key issues in retention and success for different groups

Low socio-economic groups	<p>Compared to middle-class students, working-class students have been found to lack confidence in their student identity, and have different motivations and more instrumental and restricted engagements with the social dimensions of being a student (Crozier and Reay, 2008).</p> <p>The research notes how ‘students’ learner identities are influenced by previous experiences at school, their current university experience and their social circumstances’ (Crozier and Reay, 2008).</p> <p>Low socio-economic group students are more likely to live at home and be combining study with part-time employment.</p> <p>Crozier and Reay (2008) note labels often attached by HEIs to working class students as high risk and problematic.</p>
Students from ethnic minority groups	<p>There are significant variations between ethnic minority groups in terms of retention: 88.7% of Black entrants (to full-time undergraduate courses) continue or qualify, compared to 90.4% of White students and 91.1% of Chinese students (ECU, 2011).</p> <p>‘The odds of an Asian student being awarded a good degree were found to be half of those of a White student being awarded a good degree, whereas the odds of a Black student being awarded a good degree were a third of those of a White student’ (Richardson, 2008b p.10).</p> <p>The figures for mature students are even starker. HEFCE research (2010/13) found that 25% of Black and 29% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi final-year students were awarded a first or upper second class degree, whereas the figure for White students was 61%.</p> <p>Drawing on earlier research, Singh (2011) concluded that students from ethnic minority groups ‘face inequality at all stages of the HE experience:</p>

	<p>they are less likely to be satisfied with their student experience; more likely to leave early; and are less likely to gain a good Honours degree’ (p.5)¹³. He finds being from an ethnic minority community to be statistically significant in explaining final attainment ‘even after controlling for the majority of factors which we would expect to have an impact on attainment’.</p> <p>Increasingly, the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the issue is highlighted, including: previous educational experiences; curriculum content and design; TLA approaches; the learning environment; and direct and indirect racism (Singh, 2011, p.24).</p> <p>Students from ethnic minority groups interviewed by Stevenson (2012a) felt their relative under-attainment was due to under-preparedness and lack of subsequent academic development. They ‘repeatedly referred to what they regarded as the universities’ failures to integrate them effectively and develop a sense of belonging’ (p.15).</p>
Disabled students	<p>Disabled entrants are less likely to remain in HE at the end of year one than non-disabled entrants: in 2010-11 8.2 per cent of disabled entrants did not continue compared to 7.4 per cent of non-disabled entrants (HEFCE, 2013/07), and ECU figures (2012) reveal a 2.7% disability degree attainment gap (although aggregations do not necessarily tell the full story).</p> <p>Fuller, M. (2008) compared outcomes of disabled and non-disabled students in three institutions: disabled students were more likely to complete their course than non-disabled students in two institutions, but did less well overall. In the third they did equally well. The conclusion is that institutional factors make a difference.</p> <p>Richardson (2009a; 2010a) found that for full-time undergraduate students disablement, by itself, did not play a significant role in predicting attainment. Graduates with an unseen disability showed significantly poorer attainment when demographic and institutional variables had been controlled for. The picture was less clear for part-time students gaining their degrees through the OU: students who had previously declared that they were dyslexic, were deaf or hard of hearing, or had multiple disabilities were less likely to obtain a first or upper second class degrees, but attainment of graduates who reported disabilities (in a self-report questionnaire) that they had not previously declared to the higher education provider were similar to those of graduates with no disability.</p> <p>Transition is identified as being a particular issue for young disabled learners who may have been in the same special school for 15 years, and have not</p>

¹³ As noted in Section 2.7 below, the knock-on effects of this attainment gap are significant. They extend not just to postgraduate opportunities but also to progression into graduate employment (Connor *et al.*, 2004; Gorard *et al.*, 2006; Machin *et al.*, 2009; Elevation Networks Trust, 2012).

	<p>experienced transition, or varying educational environments (Wray, 2012).</p> <p>A review of HEFCE's policy as it relates to disabled students highlights the need for inclusive approaches to pre-entry and engagement that provide information on support services and that acknowledge students may not have disclosed impairments at the application or induction stages (Harrison <i>et al.</i>, 2009).</p>
Part-time students	<p>Part-time completion rates are generally low in comparison to full-time students. A 2009 report noted substantial variation according to intensity of study. At 30% or higher intensities, 44% of students starting programmes at UK HEIs (other than the OU) went on to complete their programme within seven academic years, rising to 48% within 11 academic years. The figures for below 30% intensity were 18% and 22%. For the OU the results for higher intensity students were 17% (within seven years) and 24% (Higher Education Academy/ECU, 2008) and 10% and 15% for lower intensities [HEFCE, 2009/18].</p> <p>Case-studies have highlighted the particular challenges faced by part-time, predominantly mature, students in relation to transition, work-load and support (Davies, 2013; Chapman, 2012; Pike and Harrison, 2011).</p> <p>Transitions for this group can be multi-faceted: including top-up transitions between Foundation and Honours degrees and between the cultures of FE and HEIs.</p>
Mature students	<p>In 2011/12 the (overall) non-continuation rate for mature entrants was nearly double that of young entrants (HEFCE, 2013/07).</p> <p>Mature students are less likely to be retained (Higher Education Academy, 2009; NUS/Million+, 2012), with those from low participation areas slightly more likely to no longer be in HE (HEFCE, 2013/07).</p> <p>Mature entrants without recent A-Levels are more likely to be early leavers compared to younger students with recent A-levels (Rose-Adams, 2012).</p> <p>Mature students (alongside and overlapping with commuting, part-time and Nursing students and those with family commitments) find social integration within university difficult (Thomas, 2012a).</p>
Vocational students	<p>Hayward (2008) noted complexities and difficulties faced on transition by vocational students and a greater likelihood of such students not continuing after their first year compared to A-level students.</p> <p>A recent quantitative regional study (Round <i>et al.</i>, 2012) argues that 'it is too simplistic to say that vocational learners have significantly negative outcomes in terms of non-completion'. It paints a mixed picture: vocational entrants are more likely to leave Year 1 full-time and sandwich awards than traditional entrants. There is little difference in completion rates between</p>

	<p>vocational and traditional entrants (apart from on Year 3 undergraduate awards)¹⁴. In terms of attainment, a lower proportion of vocational entrants gain first and upper second class degrees (Round <i>et al.</i>, 2012).</p> <p>Degree outcome for students with BTEC Level 3 and 4 qualifications appear to be mixed and non-linear. Almost 43% of learners are aged 27 or above when they attain their undergraduate degree. In aggregate, a slightly higher proportion of men undertaking degrees through the BTEC route obtain a first class Honours degree than those obtaining a degree through the A-Level route (London Economics, 2013).</p> <p>Difficulties perceived by vocational students include lack of preparation for what is expected in HE, particular demands posed by specific study areas (like Mathematics) or assessment methods, and work-life-study balance (Hayward, 2008). Vocational students tend to be older, have outside responsibilities and to be less likely to engage in extra-curricular activities (Hayward, 2008).</p> <p>Research into experiences of part-time or mature students on vocationally related courses (Davies, 2013, Jones, 2010) suggest they have ‘a highly instrumental approach to HE’ and a corresponding questioning of the social aspects of an HE experience. This conclusion was reflected in comments about ‘not needing more friends’ (Boyle <i>et al.</i>, 2011, in Thomas, 2012, p.18).</p>
Care Leavers	<p>There is little research on the retention and success of the relatively small cohort of care leavers who make it into HE. There are difficulties of tracking and understandably sensitive issues of self-declaration and labelling.</p> <p>However evidence from the Buttle Trust kitemark scheme indicates plenty of activity taking place at institutional level. Pre-entry and transition interventions include targeted mentoring and practical support such as early access to accommodation. Good institutional practice includes identification of a care leavers’ ‘champion’ within institutions to promote explicit recognition of care leavers within admissions processes, induction activities and the provision of student services, and to ensure implementation of appropriate and timely support policies (Comerford Boyes, 2012).</p>

¹⁴ This research was based on the work of a LLN and includes full- and part-time students.

Evidence about effective approaches

2.4.36 The findings from two national programmes, TLRP and What Works?, together with a range of robust new research (cross-institutional or exploring particular themes), provide a strong basis for examining effective approaches to retention and success. The What Works? programme evidence has the attraction of being focused, up-to-date and possessing broad applicability. The results of the three-year programme are remarkably consistent despite spanning a wide cross-section of higher education providers and subject areas and employing a range of research methods. At the heart of its findings is a simple message: that nurturing a culture of belonging is the key to retention and success in HE. The programme's analysis of effective approaches emphasises:

- Supportive peer relations
- Meaningful interaction between staff and students
- Developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners
- An HE experience that is relevant to interests and future goals. (Thomas, 2012a, pp. 14-15).

2.4.37 The seven earlier TLRP projects explored a range of discrete themes related to widening participation. A number produced findings of relevance to the retention and success theme. For example Fuller M.'s (2008) study of the experiences and outcomes of disabled students in HE made a number of recommendations which (amongst other things) noted:

- The importance of developing an inclusive curriculum – available and beneficial to all
- The considerable variation in students' ability to engage with the social aspects of university life
- The need to pay greater attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning in HE, including additional support for vulnerable students at points of transition
- The importance of developing effective relationships with academic and support staff.

2.4.38 More recently Gazeley and Aynsley's (2012) review of the contribution of pre-entry interventions to student retention and success, drawing on material in the Higher Education Academy WASRS archive, identified a range of factors associated with improved student retention and success. These include:

- A good fit between student and institutional expectations
- Academic preparedness, including course specific knowledge and skills and more generic independent learning skills
- Social integration in the university context
- Access to additional support to meet specific needs
- The development of a robust learner identity.

A number of themes, emerging from the literature and relating to specific issues or practices, are discussed below.

Transition (pre-entry support)

2.4.39 Thomas' (2012c) analysis of evidence from the What Works? project reports found that higher education providers promote transition through combining five areas of pre-entry activity. These are identified as: providing information; informing expectations; developing academic skills; building social capital; and nurturing a sense of belonging (p.12). The project's final report places particular emphasis on pre-entry and induction activities 'facilitat[ing] students to build social relationships with current and new students and members of staff' (Thomas, 2012a, p. 17).

2.4.40 The weight of evidence emerging from a number of small-scale studies of particular pre-entry transitional activities (focusing on orientation and socialisation or academic preparedness, or in practice a mixture of the two) suggests that such interventions can have an impact but that these activities are hard to sustain. The lessons appear to be that universal, embedded approaches that build learners' confidence and self-efficacy and develop their 'learning to learn' skills can support transition for all students (Fergy *et al.*, 2008; Morris *et al.*, 2009; Perkin *et al.*, 2010; Mckendry, 2012; Glendinning, 2012).

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

2.4.41 The What Works? programme identified the academic sphere as the key site for nurturing engagement of the sort that engenders a sense of belonging. Whilst peer relations and cohort identity, and a sense of connection to a particular place, are all highlighted, the prime location for nurturing participation and a sense of belonging is the academic domain. The final project report concludes that 'high quality, student-centred learning and teaching is at the heart of improving the retention and success of all students' (Thomas, 2012a, p.31). In particular, it emphasises the importance of staff/student relationships; curricular contents and related opportunities; learning and teaching: styles and experiences; assessment and feedback; and personal tutoring. Table 2.10 reviews some of the specific interventions mentioned in the literature which have been designed to address the issues raised.

2.4.42 Recommendations around LTA take in curriculum content, pedagogy, assessment and feedback. This remains a vibrant area of research. Burke *et al.*'s (2013) research explores widening participation issues in the classroom and examines some of the complex relationships between gender, class and race, and pedagogical relations, experiences and practices. Their findings reveal uncertainties and anxieties amongst both students and academic staff. Berry and Loke (2011) also acknowledge 'the importance of finding "safe" environments for the issues of race, diversity and inclusive practice to be discussed' (p.27). The role of an inclusive curriculum features prominently in accounts of engagement (Hockings, 2010) and attainment of ethnic minority groups (Singh, 2011). Hockings *et al.*, 2008, for example, argue that sensitivity to the complexities of diversity and student-centeredness must be at the heart of 'inclusive classrooms' and pedagogies. What Works? also highlights inclusivity and places particular importance on active and collaborative learning and knowledgeable, enthusiastic lecturers. Equally, it argues that assessment practices and expectations need to be clarified early and students encouraged to use feedback productively (Thomas, 2012a).

2.4.43 Building on earlier work that looked at links between student identity, inclusion and HE pedagogy (Crozier *et al.*, 2008; Hockings *et al.*, 2008; David *et al.*, 2009) researchers have increasingly scrutinised inclusive HE pedagogies and how students engage or disengage with HE learning. Burke *et al.* (2013) highlight 'a disjuncture between the pedagogic intentions of academic staff and how

students experience these pedagogies' (p.4). Moreover, they note concern in relation to working-class and students from ethnic minority groups failing to be engaged by, or being alienated by, some pedagogical practices. Roberts' (2011) small-scale study also stresses the role of pedagogy and the importance of acknowledging the different expectations and needs of 'non-traditional students'.

Peer mentoring

2.4.44 The retention and success literature indicates that new students, especially 'first generation' entrants, benefit from interaction with, and support from, current fellow students. This is often critical to facilitating integration and fostering the sense of belonging that is so vital to retention and success in HE. Peer mentoring and other peer support schemes increasingly feature in universities' strategies 'as an alternative way of providing students with access to support and engagement' (Thomas, 2011 p.8). The scale of this activity is indicated in a 2010 survey that identified 340 mentoring programmes across 159 UK HEIs, with two-thirds being classified as peer mentoring or peer tutoring (Clark and Andrews, 2011).

2.4.45 Peer mentoring often focuses on orientation, socialisation, motivation and general support, whilst peer tutoring tends to have a stronger links to skills development and academic learning, with more experienced students 'helping fellow students "how to learn" at a higher level' (Thomas, 2012a, p.25) (see also, Longfellow *et al.*, 2008; Colvin and Ashman, 2010; Andrews *et al.*, 2012). In practice, however, the boundaries between the two are often blurred (Foster *et al.*, 2011; Andrews *et al.*, 2012). The What Works? programme provides robust evidence of the value of peer mentoring in providing support for new students during the transition to HE phase and in both the academic and social spheres during the critical first year. A key report characterises peer mentoring as 'a true win-win-win situation in which new students belong, existing students develop new skills and institutions experience minimal student attrition' (Andrews *et al.*, 2012, p.71). However, it is also increasingly portrayed not as 'special' or standalone activity, but rather as part of a nexus of changes, interventions and activities that collectively nurture a sense that HE is 'for the likes of me'.

Friends, family and peers

2.4.46 Informal interactions with friends and peers also have an important role in the academic domain. Students develop confidence as HE learners through friendship and peer support (Foster *et al.*, 2011; Andrews and Clark, 2011). One study cites friends and peers as 'an important informal source of support' and as an aid to transition (Morey and Robbins, 2011). Another investigation of the impact of non-academic student advisers and 'traditional' academic personal tutors on retention reveals the unexpectedly significant role for friends and family in advising and supporting students on a range of academic and personal matters (McCary *et al.*, 2011). Similarly a study of 'Dispositions to stay and to succeed' (Harding and Thompson, 2011) identifies 'guidance in learning from family and social networks' as a significant component. It highlights the importance of supportive peers and notes that 'when relationships are positive, students will consult each other rather than lecturers, pooling expertise, using each other to assess the standard of work required and teaching each other. Such relationships are associated with retention, enhanced experiences and success' (p.41). A recent detailed single institution study of HE pedagogies similarly noted that 'friendships act as "coping mechanisms" and support structures and can help students feel that they "belong" at university' (Burke *et al.*, 2013, p.5).

Whole system approaches and institutional culture

2.4.47 The evidence suggests that the key to improving retention and success lies not in any specific intervention, but rather through proactive strategies to foster student belonging. Specific interventions may be shown to make significant differences, in some cases improvements in retention rates by up to 10 percentage points (Thomas, 2012b), but it is what they achieve generically rather than their specific features that is crucial. The What Works? programme also concluded that universal, embedded approaches work best. The final report is unequivocal in endorsing:

‘a mainstream approach to addressing student retention through a culture of belonging that maximises the success of all students, as opposed to interventions targeted at particular groups of students. This approach, which places the academic sphere at the heart of improving student retention and success, recognises the need for institutional transformation, as opposed to a student deficit approach that blames students and/or requires them to change in order to benefit from higher education’ (Thomas, 2012a, p.72).

2.4.48 The challenge, as Stevenson (2012a) notes in relation to the attainment of ethnic minority groups, is to develop an ‘ecology of success’ incorporating ‘participation, belonging, attainment and retention; all students should be supported towards success and helped to realise their potential’ (p.18).

Using data

2.4.49 The importance of using data effectively to underpin strategies to improve student engagement, belonging, retention and success is a constant refrain in the literature produced by the What Works? programme. It informs interventions, supports monitoring and tracking, and informs evaluations. The discrepancies between different national datasets, in the absence of a unique student identifier, mean that longitudinal and multi-institutional comparisons are difficult. But the wealth of data-supported research drawn on here testifies to the creativity of researchers and the potential richness of institutional data.

Table 2.7: Summary of evidence around HE retention and success developments

Attention to pedagogy/inclusive curriculum (takes in curriculum content, pedagogy, assessment and feedback).	<p>The role of an inclusive curriculum is highlighted by What Works? and in other accounts of engagement (Hockings, 2010) and attainment of students from ethnic minority groups (Singh, 2011).</p> <p>What Works? places particular importance on active and collaborative learning, and knowledgeable, enthusiastic lecturers. Assessment practices and expectations need to be clarified early and students encouraged to use feedback productively (Thomas, 2012a).</p> <p>Sensitivity to the complexities of diversity and student-centeredness should be at the heart of ‘inclusive classrooms’ and pedagogies (Hockings <i>et al.</i>, 2008).</p> <p>Burke <i>et al.</i> (2013) highlight ‘a disjuncture between the pedagogic intentions of academic staff and how students experience these</p>
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	<p>pedagogies' (p.4). They note a particular concern in relation to working-class and students from ethnic minority groups failing to be engaged by, or being alienated by, some pedagogical practices.</p> <p>An 'academic literacies' approach argues for a greater focus on social practices, cultural identities, the impact of power relations and for more attention to be paid to language uses rather than written text (Lillis and Scott, 2008).</p>
Transition (pre-entry support)	<p>Most pre-entry transition activities focus on either orientation and socialisation or academic skills and preparedness, with different balances between these two broad purposes.</p> <p>This area overlaps with induction and later engagement activities and many of the same 'good design' principles apply. Generic features of successful pre-entry interventions include: providing information; informing expectations; developing academic skills; building social capital; and nurturing a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012c, p.12).</p>
Induction	<p>The importance of effective induction, particularly for first-generation HE students, is a recurring theme earlier retention literature (Yorke and Thomas, 2003; Harvey and Drew, 2006).</p> <p>Induction is crucial to developing academic confidence and cultural and social relationships that help create a 'sense of belonging' (NAO, 2007).</p> <p>The What Works? programme reports highlight activities that promote socialisation and the formation of friendship groups; clarify expectations and develop academic confidence; and facilitate the development of relationships with members of staff (Thomas, 2012b; Cashmore <i>et al.</i>, 2011).</p>
Personal tutoring and academic support	<p>The tutor role and 'meaningful interactions' with students are highlighted as critical: particularly where staff know their students, show interest in their progress, value their input and 'respect them, irrespective of diversity and difference' (Thomas, 2012a, p.33).</p> <p>Proactive personal tutoring has a key role in nurturing belonging and aiding academic development. More generally it highlights the importance of fostering 'academic confidence' (Thomas, 2012a, pp.42-4)</p> <p>Students are shown to have a preference for receiving their academic development and support within their academic department.</p> <p>Professional services can play a vital role for some students, but are not accessed by the majority. The very people who are most in need of help are least likely to seek it (Thomas, 2012a, pp.60-1).</p>
Peer mentoring and support	<p>New students, especially 'first generation' entrants, benefit from interaction with, and support from, current fellow students (often critical to facilitating integration and fostering the sense of belonging). As part of</p>

	<p>other interventions, peer mentoring can help to nurture a sense that HE is 'for the likes of me' (Sanders and Higham, 2012).</p> <p>Peer mentoring can be valuable in providing support for new students during transition to HE and in both the academic and social spheres during the critical first year. It is characterised as 'a true win-win-win situation in which new students belong, existing students develop new skills and institutions experience minimal student attrition' (Andrews <i>et al.</i>, 2012, p. 71)¹⁵.</p>
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Emerging conclusions

2.4.50 Much is already known generically about what works in relation to retention and success. The main challenge lies in disseminating these lessons and converting this understanding into strategies that result in focused, practical long-term actions. The findings from the TLRP and What Works? programmes, and more recent research, identify a clear way forward. This will be illuminated further by the second phase of the What Works? programme which focuses on institutional change and exploring questions posed by the first phase. However, significant challenges remain in terms of disseminating and implementing these composite findings in a context of competing priorities and an atmosphere of unprecedented change.

2.4.51 Points of transition (like pre-entry transition) should continue to be a focus of policy and research attention. However, efforts should be made to locate and investigate other more hidden transition points. Where targeted pre-entry interventions take place there is a need to ensure a greater coherence between pre-entry activities and the academic experience of the first year of HE study. Engagement activities should take into account the changing relations between students and their place of study, characterised by students spending less time on campus due to work or living at home.

2.4.52 Staff development and CPD are crucial in the light of findings that emphasise the centrality of teaching and learning relationship. The need to develop staff capacity, inclination and opportunity to nurture a sense of belonging will require leadership and resources. However, the barriers may not primarily be about resources, but about priorities and culture.

2.4.53 Sustained action is required to address the attainment gap for students from ethnic minority groups. Even though levels of awareness and knowledge are rising, progress is slow. Whilst not necessarily the prime or the only factor involved, the significance of the role of academic staff and their interactions with students from ethnic minority groups has been increasingly identified as an area for attention and further research. Within this sphere, the issue of intellectual challenge and tutor expectations has started to feature more prominently. Addressing equality and diversity issues poses particular challenges when, as the section on progress to postgraduate study (Section 2.7)

¹⁵ This unequivocally titled report - Peer Mentoring Works! - provides a detailed investigation of current peer mentoring schemes and their achievements. Its multiple case-study design captures the perspectives of around 800 students involved in pastoral peer mentoring and peer tutoring in five varied higher education providers in the UK and one in Norway.

below reveals, the sector's recruitment pool for its own academic workforce is already narrow and potentially shrinking.

2.4.54 There are other equality and diversity issues to address. For example, Table 2.6 (above) confirms that little is known about the progress, attainment and future employment of care leavers. A comprehensive notion of retention and success should also encompass less prominent or 'identifiable' groups such as: carers (Alsop *et al.*, 2008); people with mental health issues; prisoners; refugees (Stevenson and Willott, 2007); and asylum seekers.

2.4.55 Such approaches suggest a move away from a student lifecycle to a more holistic 'lifecourse' approach that recognises individuals' multiple identities, roles and experiences, beyond simply 'being a student'. This is indicated by new lines of research focusing on the impact of working or caring responsibilities, extra-curricular activities (see Section 2.9 below) and religious affiliation (Stevenson, 2012c). Having students at the heart of the system has implications for policy, practice and research as well as funding.

2.5 Impact of Financial Support

Key findings

- Finance is just one of a number of complex factors which underpin HE decisions. Student feedback research consistently cites finance as a key concern for students from poorer backgrounds. Monitoring application trends following the changes to HE finance in England is a key policy concern.
- Statistical evidence concluded that changes in HE finance arrangements have not been associated with any material reduction in HE participation by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Longitudinal research into patterns of take-up of HE places before and after bursaries were introduced, suggests that young applicants from widening participation backgrounds are not more likely to choose offers of places from HEIs with higher bursaries (OFFA, 2010). Unresponsiveness to financial incentives may reflect the importance of other variables in the decisions made by students from widening participation backgrounds.
- Learners and parents from lower socio-economic groups may be less likely to view HE as worth the cost. Key anxieties are fear of failure, attitudes to debt, and concerns about employment prospects. Higher tuition fees create more disutility for students with no family background in HE than those with parental experience of HE which could relate to how different groups value the reputational benefits from higher costs options.
- There is some evidence that giving accurate and timely information about HE finance and support, along with other HE-related IAG can increase interest in HE progression.
- Of itself financial support is not a solution to under-representation. Its role may be more in mitigating the effects of rising costs of HE on demand for places (as in the US), and supporting the success of low-income students who do progress.

- The literature suggests that financial support is most successful when it is relatively easy to understand and apply for and efforts are made to raise awareness amongst potential beneficiaries. Schemes that are more highly targeted tend to be more complex. Complexity of financial support has been identified as a barrier to prospective students from low income groups making well informed choices.
- Critics of the current financial support arrangements in England suggest that the impact of financial support as a policy tool for widening participation could be limited by complexity in HE finance systems and informational barriers.

Introduction to the theme

2.5.1 Student financial support includes both the arrangements in place to cover tuition fees (e.g. loans and fee waivers), and mechanisms to support other costs associated with HE study (e.g. grants, bursaries and scholarships). There is general agreement that HE financing systems should aim to prevent ‘market failure’ in HE by minimising the financial barriers to participation (Chapman, 2008), as it is in everyone’s interest that no-one with the potential to succeed in HE is put off. The introduction of a package of financial support for students in England, alongside variable tuition fees, was based on the view that as household income falls, the risk increases that those on the lowest incomes will be deterred from applying due to the costs involved. The costs and financial support packages available to HE students have the potential to incentivise choices about progressing to HE.

2.5.2 This section deals with issues relating to undergraduate finance. It was not possible within the scope of the review to give detailed consideration to particular types of students, such as care leavers and students with disabilities. Section 2.7 on progression to postgraduate study covers related concerns for postgraduate students.

Context

2.5.3 A key feature of HE finance in England is the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2006, and the significant increase in the maximum level of tuition fee from 2012, following the recommendations of the Independent Review of HE and Student Finance in England (2010). Changes to the publicly funded loan system were implemented to help mitigate the increase in tuition fees; under the new arrangements eligible students on full and part time programmes are entitled to a loan to cover their fees, with repayment linked to future annual income of at least £21,000.

2.5.4 To encourage students from poorer backgrounds to apply, HEIs are required to put into place bursaries (alongside outreach and student success activities) as part of their Access Agreements. There is a wide range of discretionary support provided to students through HEI bursaries. OFFA (2010) notes:

‘...bursaries are the main personal finance incentive tool for institutions that wish to increase their proportions of disadvantaged students from especially low levels – and it was an aim of the bursary system that they would do so’ (p.4).

By far the most common approach is means-tested bursaries targeting applicants below a defined income level¹⁶.

2.5.5 The NSP¹⁷ currently provides financial benefit of at least £3,000 (pro-rata for part-time students) to new entrants whose household income is not more than £25,000pa. Higher education providers are responsible for setting criteria, publicising their NSP award schemes, and making individual awards to students which include a match-funded element. The NSP is designed to complement existing institutional bursaries and other widening participation activities. Bowes *et al.* (2013a) reported that more than eight out of 10 institutions apply additional eligibility criteria alongside household income since demand for NSP exceeds the number of available awards. The award can be offered as a fee waiver or discount, and/or a free foundation year, accommodation or services, and up to £1,000 as a cash bursary.

2.5.6 Overall, higher education providers in England in the 2012/13 academic year are giving out at least £340 million in non-repayable bursaries and scholarships. This total includes the NSP institutional allocation (£53.2 million); resources allocated to non-NSP fee waivers (£39.9 million); and resources allocated to non-NSP bursaries and scholarships (£300.5 million). Non-NSP bursaries and scholarships equate to 15% of the estimated fee income above the basic fee (OFFA, 2012/06). The amount allocated across the sector to non-repayable bursaries and scholarships (£320 million) in 2013/14 is lower than for 2012/13, and has fallen from £355 million over two years.

Brief description of the evidence

2.5.7 A key issue for the review is that much of the evidence in the academic literature relates to the pre-2012 arrangements, although the changes in HE finance have led to commissioned studies looking at the implications of the financial regime on the sector including equity issues. These include a concern to monitor the implications for applicants to HE and trends in applications over time, including analysis of a million applicants' decisions since the mid-1990s (commissioned by OFFA), together with national research into bursaries and the on-going formative evaluation of the NSP (commissioned by HEFCE).

2.5.8 Overall there appears to be a lack of empirical studies into the impacts of different types of financial support, and results are not conclusive due to difficulties in identifying the causes and effects of HE attendance by different widening participation groups. Callender (2010) suggested that the extent to which bursaries and discretionary financial support is a policy instrument for improving access and widening participation is only just being documented. Comparisons of different approaches to financial support mechanisms and packages are lacking, although the review found some evaluations of HE financial support schemes, and programme level evaluations. The early

¹⁶ 'Lower income' students are defined as having assessed household income below £50,020 and 'lowest income' students as those eligible for full state support.

¹⁷ Following the spending review in June 2013, the Government announced that the National Scholarship Programme will cease as an undergraduate programme from 2015-16 and instead it will be realigned to support postgraduate students. Allocations for institutions will continue to be made as planned in 2013-14 and 2014-15 meaning that the programme will be available to undergraduate student entrants in those years.

evaluation of the NSP states that ‘the relative effectiveness of the different combinations of benefits will be examined in subsequent stages of the evaluation’ (Diamond *et al.*, 2012).

2.5.9 There is an extensive theoretical literature concerned with equity aspects of HE financing. A range of research studies (both qualitative and quantitative) have sought to collect the views of students, potential students and parents/carers looking at whether finance is a barrier to considering HE.

2.5.10 Studies from other countries can offer some broad findings but tend to relate to very different financial regimes.

Emerging themes, issues and challenges

Implications of the changes in financial support on HE take-up and widening participation

2.5.11 The cost of HE teaching and learning in England is mainly being met by students themselves, backed up by guaranteed loans, and usually drawing on family and other support. Some commentators have seen the new arrangements as representing a major and somewhat problematic ideological shift because of the wide differences in ability to pay and attitudes towards the returns from HE across the social spectrum.

2.5.12 A key area of discussion in the literature is the question of what effect changes in HE finance has had on progression to HE for under-represented groups, especially given the recent increase in fees. Analysis of overall trends in HE applications following the introduction of variable tuition fees suggested that the picture, at that point, was fairly positive with sustained demand for places, although this research relates to the previous system of variable tuition fees where the maximum chargeable was indexed to a £3,000 p.a. limit (Callender, 2009, Corver, 2010). The OFFA-commissioned longitudinal analysis of applicants’ decision making before and after bursaries were introduced concludes that:

‘the new system has not been associated with any material reduction in young participation in higher education - especially so for those from disadvantaged backgrounds - either overall or at particular types of institution’ (Corver, 2010, p.6).

Local analyses also supported the view that variable fees in 2006 did not deter many from applying (Brownless and Thompson, 2007; Harrison and Cuthbert 2011).

2.5.13 More recently, following the increase in the maximum tuition fee in England in 2012, the ICOF identified, from national flows in acceptances, ‘some evidence that the differential fee regimes in place across the four home countries are having an impact’ (ICOF, 2013, p. 8). The fall in acceptances for mature students was much steeper than for younger age groups, raising concern because ‘older age groups, who are more likely to have other financial commitments, are more likely to be worried about the implications of assuming a higher level of student debt’ (ibid., p.6). However, the report notes difficulty in disentangling the impact of fee regime changes from other factors.

2.5.14 The formative evaluation of the new NSP model has sought to make early conclusions as to the potential effectiveness of the NSP in encouraging access and widening participation, drawing on a national survey of higher education providers and stakeholders. This research raises concerns about the likely impact: those developing or administering the scheme were sceptical about the likely impact on participation rates among students from widening participation backgrounds; and over two-fifths of respondents felt it will not encourage students who would not have otherwise have applied to study in HE (Diamond *et al.*, 2012).

Risks and rewards from HE

2.5.15 The rationale for tuition fees, that the private returns from HE through enhanced future earning to individuals make it worth the investment has been questioned by some authors. Adnett and Slack (2007) examined the economic incentives for non-traditional students to enter HE, highlighting how the labour market could be a barrier to widening participation by failing to offer sufficient incentives for potential marginal entrants from less advantaged backgrounds. Their HEFCE-funded review of studies concerning the economic returns to graduates raises methodological questions which prevent firm conclusions, although it does highlight that in employment terms some groups of non-traditional graduates are penalised in the labour market (disabled learners, students from ethnic minority groups and mature entrants). This sense that educational investment may be risky for certain groups is also a feature of some of the international studies on student finance, with reference to the interconnection between the value of education and labour markets (Chapman, 2008).

2.5.16 Concerns about the cost of HE tuition and taking out loans have been shown to apply to prospective students from all backgrounds (Aimhigher Hertfordshire 2010; Atherton, McNeill and Okonkwo, 2010; Candela 2009; Suckling *et al.*, 2009; Armitage, 2009). However, there is some evidence that fear of debt and financial constraints affect lower social class students' choices of institution, more than prospective students from other social classes (Callender and Jackson, 2008). Lawton and Moore (2011), for example, found that Year 12 students from low-income households in receipt of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) were twice as likely as the non-EMA group to be 'extremely worried' about cost of HE. Callender and Jackson (2008) concluded that low-income students are more likely than their wealthier peers to perceive the costs of HE as a debt rather than an investment. Parental attitudes have also been shown to play a part and parents from lower socio-economic groups appear to be more debt-averse (Allen and Prendergast 2009; Atherton, McNeill and Okonkwo, 2010).

2.5.17 Research which aims to test non-traditional students' price sensitivity in the US suggests that the demand for HE is price-responsive for those from socially more disadvantaged backgrounds (but less so for higher income groups) (Asplund *et al.*, 2008). Applying co-joint analysis (a statistical research technique used in market research to determine the value consumers place on a service) to a survey sample of HE applicants in England, Dunnett *et al.* (2012) found that parental background influenced the importance of fee levels in the HE decision-making process. Where there is no history of attending HE, learners are more likely to be put off by higher fees. Higher socio-economic groups appear to attach more importance to price as an indicator of the reputation of the institution and are less affected by high fees. However, research into price-sensitivity is inconsistent and even in

models where students are found to be pre-sensitive, a relatively high proportion is found to make financially irrational choices and different groups respond differently (Avery and Hoxby, 2004).

2.5.18 Armitage's (2009) research revealed that other factors serve to exacerbate financial worries for prospective students from widening participation backgrounds: such groups tend to identify 'failing' as a more significant concern, and are more likely than socially and economically more confident peers to have 'the large concern that they will fail when they reach HE having spent/borrowed large sums of money with nothing to show at the end of it' (p.7). Suckling *et al.* (2009) highlighted that those from widening participation backgrounds lack confidence, and are less optimistic that the rewards of HE will be worth the costs. For a group of Aimhigher learners '...degrees seemed to offer only marginal benefits and were viewed as simply not worth it' (p.21). It has also been suggested that subject-specific differences may come into play: courses where graduates' employment is more precarious have the highest levels of concern about tuition fees and debt (Taylor and Littleton 2008).

Impact of financial aid

2.5.19 US research suggests that student financial aid policies can be effective at boosting participation by under-represented groups, with studies showing an increase of between three and five percentage points for a \$1,000 increase in financial aid (Dearden *et al.*, 2013). Nielsen *et al.* (2010) also found a positive influence of bursaries on participation, although to a lower level (1.35 percentage points) in Denmark. Nationally, Dearden *et al.* (2013) point to a 'severe lack of evidence on the effectiveness of student aid on HE participation', and have attempted to ratify this by modelling the effect of maintenance grants (re-introduced in 2004) on participation of students from low income families, using students from relatively better off families who were not affected by maintenance grants as a control group. Labour Force Survey data covering 1992–2007¹⁸ was used. The scale of impact was found to be in line with findings for aid in the US: a £1,000 increase in non-repayable support in the form of maintenance grants was associated with a 3.95 percentage point increase in participation. The authors suggest that grant aid can promote HE participation by under-represented groups and that the focus should be on an holistic package of HE finance which includes government commitment to non-repayable upfront support (such as the former maintenance grants).

2.5.20 Under current financial aid arrangements higher education providers have responsibility for setting criteria and administering National Scholarship Programme schemes, in addition to their own institutional systems of support. In general the highly selective institutions with fewer low-income students can afford to be most generous and therefore have the higher bursary offers. The literature highlights concern about a pseudo 'market' in financial support which could benefit a few high achieving individuals whilst ignoring the needs of the mass of students from widening participation backgrounds (Chester and Bekhradnia, 2008 McCaig and Adnett, 2009). Although the pattern might appear to have the potential to encourage more from under-represented groups to choose selective HEIs, there is no evidence that the support packages offered have meant that high achieving students have switched their choice to a more selective institution with a higher financial award.

¹⁸ Up-front tuition fees were introduced in 1998 with the abolition of maintenance grants. In 2006 higher deferred fees were introduced and the maintenance grant was reinstated.

Research commissioned by OFFA before the recent increase in the maximum variable tuition fee, to analyse HE application and participation choices before and after bursaries were introduced, concluded that applications from disadvantaged young people have not changed in favour of universities offering higher bursaries. Statistical models of how applicants choose between conditional offers were used. The research found: 'Since bursaries were introduced most of the increase in the participation of disadvantaged young people has been in universities offering lower bursaries' (Corver, 2010 p.2). Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were no more likely to enter institutions in the 'top third' than they were in the mid-1990s.

2.5.21 Well over half (60%) of disadvantaged applicants were found to apply to at least one institution in the highest third of institutions by bursary value, and to prefer conditional offers with higher value bursaries, but this was a general trend and did not change when bursaries were introduced (Corver, 2010). There is some suggestion that disadvantaged applicants want a relatively low offer to reduce the risk of being unplaced after the results stage. Institutional bursary levels and entry requirements are associated, which explains why a higher bursary offers may not be the strongest preference for these applicants. (Note: applicants from both advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds were found to have near identical probabilities of satisfying their conditional firm offers and were therefore considered to be showing 'equal ambition'). A model was constructed to take account of other factors, besides the level of bursary, including academic standing of the course, likelihood of an offer relative to the applicant's attainment (85% chance of satisfying the offer was used), distance between the HEI and home, and whether the applicant indicated an intention to stay at home. No statistically significant influence was found to indicate any influence from level of bursary.

2.5.22 Surveys of HE applicants suggest that bursaries do not figure high up on their list of considerations when making HE choices (Davies *et al.*, 2008, Purcell *et al.*, 2008). A review by Harrison and Hatt (2012) found little evidence to suggest that investment in bursaries has had any meaningful impact on take-up of HE by students from lower socio-economic groups including at highest status institutions. Rather, this research suggested that students targeted for bursaries are unresponsive to financial inducements, instead placing priority on provision that is 'local and socially comfortable' (p.1). Therefore, as a policy tool, bursaries may have limited impact on the widening participation and fair access agendas because other factors constrain the choices of the groups they target.

2.5.23 A further issue is that financial support has not always reached the target students at an early enough stage to influence their decision making (Callender, 2009). In relation to the NSP, some students have to wait several months after they have enrolled to find out if they qualify (Bowes *et al.* 2013). Schemes which rely on self-declaration or competitive application seem especially problematic: in one institutional level study, between a third and a half of eligible students were found to have applied for a bursary (Harrison *et al.*, 2007).

Costs of HE study

2.5.24 Wilkins *et al.* (2012) suggest that students who show high levels of anxiety about HE costs are likely to consider a much broader range of study options (including study abroad). This pattern of shifting demand for different types of HE is borne out by research in other countries: Hatt and Harley

(2005) found in Canada that increased HE costs led to more demand for HE delivered by community colleges which were seen as a lower cost option with good job prospects. Community colleges have also become increasingly popular in the US, and flexible modes of study have been used to make HE more accessible to low income students (Allen *et al.*, 2005).

2.5.25 Other research has assessed whether widening participation applicants make decisions about where and how to participate based on minimising their day to day costs (e.g. through living at home) and/or opportunities to gain additional income (e.g. going to areas with the best term-time employment opportunities). There is some suggestion in the literature that the expectations of some groups of students about the student experience are shifting: away from an emphasis on the social side of studying and towards staying at home and combining study with part-time employment (Lawton and Moore, 2011). Part-time work is perceived as essential by many socially disadvantaged students, particularly in relation to reducing reliance on parental support (Davies *et al.*, 2008).

Supporting awareness of HE costs and financial support

2.5.26 Finance comes out as a key issue for HE-related IAG (as discussed in Section 2.3). Focus group participants in research for HEFCE rated information on finance amongst the most important issue for HE-related IAG, but the researchers concluded that in some cases they were unaware of the significance of the information in relation to choice of institution or course (Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University, 2010). Advisors, employers and sector stakeholders interviewed were of the view that prospective students need clear and comparable information on costs and financial support. Importantly, this study highlighted that information on the 'hidden costs' of HE was identified as an important element in HE-related IAG. Transparency about hidden course costs has been a concern of NUS' 'Pound in Your Pocket' research programme.

2.5.27 Low levels of awareness of bursaries can deter applicants (Davies *et al.*, 2008, Lawton and Moore, 2011, Kerrigan and Church, 2011). Percy and Hudson (2007) linked misunderstanding about the costs of HE and support available to '...family background, cultural attitudes to debt and unreliable sources of information' (p.54). Charlesworth (2010) suggests that the relevant information about HE finance does not always reach young people from widening participation groups, and this is backed up by Suckling *et al.*'s (2010) research with Year 11 learners. The first stage evaluation of the NSP identified highly variable provision of information on NSP (Diamond *et al.*, 2012), although higher education providers may be getting better at promoting it over time. Potential students were found to have limited awareness of the NSP (Bowes *et al.*, 2013a).

2.5.28 Mitton (2007) listed other problems associated with take-up of student support in addition to knowledge/awareness of the existence of a benefit: perception of the likelihood that they are ineligible, and beliefs and feelings about the application procedure such as fear of stigma, or feeling inarticulate in the face of a complex application process.

Link to student retention and success

2.5.29 The review found a small number of studies concerned with the implications of financial support on student retention or success and current research is being undertaken by OFFA to inform this theme further. The existing evidence supports the view that financial support is associated with improved retention and success. However, caution is needed in interpreting these two variables as

one does not necessarily cause the other: it may be that students who access financial support are more likely to have confidence in their decision, may be better prepared for HE and have behaviour which supports successful outcomes.

2.5.30 Bearing in mind the above caveat, studies suggest that economic and psychological benefits accrue to students receiving financial support, which can help to boost retention and success of non-traditional groups. For example, research with two cohorts of recipients of the national Excellence Challenge Opportunity Bursaries, which were introduced in England in 2001/02, showed that recipients of the Opportunity Bursary were less likely than non-recipients to be worried about meeting the costs of going to HE, or report that work had affected their studies. Recipients had lower levels of debt. The scheme appeared to have led to increased retention of first year students (West *et al.*, 2008). Similarly, a five-year longitudinal study of a cohort of full-time students from low-income backgrounds holding the Opportunity Bursary and similar institutional bursaries at a post-1992 university found relatively higher levels of retention and success, and particularly positive attitudes towards their studies and their institution (Harrison *et al.*, 2007). Students in receipt of bursaries have said that bursaries enabled them to buy high-cost items related to study (commonly books or travel-related costs) or meant they did not have to go straight into part-time work alongside studying and were able to settle in better (West *et al.*, 2008, Harrison *et al.*, 2007). Even small sums of additional money appear to have a reassuring effect. Relieving anxiety in the first term may be of key importance for longer term retention and success (Robotham and Julian, 2006).

2.5.31 Sumner *et al.* (2006) focused on the psychological effect of financial worries on the student experience and argued that the impact might be more pronounced for those who have no HE background in their family. Ross *et al.*, (2006) attempted statistical analyses of the relationships between debt, stress and undergraduate performance. In their sample of medical students, 38% of low income students who said that worry about money affected their studies were found to have high levels of debt and were ranked lower for academic performance. The authors concluded that students' perceptions of their debt (rather than the level of debt *per se*) has an effect on performance.

Level of financial support

2.5.32 Asplund *et al.* (2008) suggested that equity will require that means-tested financial support to those who cannot afford the tuition fees is at a level determined by the fee elasticity of enrolment, field of study, and type of institution (the latter to counterbalance the tendency of low socio-economic group students to choose cheaper (less prestigious) options). However, there is not clear evidence about the optimum level of financial support. Common sense would suggest this will depend on the level in relation to HE costs. A number of studies were found discussing whether aid programmes in the US provide enough to cover students' basic expenses, especially if the level of awards does not keep their value over time. In looking at the main US Federal aid programme, Long and Riley (2007) found high levels of 'unmet' need, especially for those from very low-income backgrounds and some ethnic minority groups. Moriarty *et al.* (2012) drew on a literature review and secondary data to analyse the impact of a financial incentive to undertake social work qualifying education in England (the social work bursary) and this study identified unmet needs (especially for childcare and travel costs) which apply to this group of students. However the authors suggest this

bursary had helped to increase enrolment for those whose personal and financial circumstances might otherwise have prevented them.

2.5.33 Hughes *et al.* (2010) distinguish between needs-based and merit-based aid in the US, finding that institutional grants exceed demonstrated financial need¹⁹ only in a small percentage of cases across institutions. Institutional grants generally meet some kind of demonstrated financial need, though they may not meet the needs of the students with the greatest need.

2.5.34 Possession of a bursary *per se* rather than the amount of support may make a difference, based on the evaluation of Opportunity Bursaries. Outcomes in terms of retention and success were similar across Opportunity Bursary holders regardless of the amount received (Whitehead *et al.*, 2006). At the same time, students applying for and securing bursaries were highly motivated and organised, which could also feature in their success.

Findings for different groups

2.5.35 Table 2.8 summarises findings from researchers who have put the focus on the implications of HE financial support in relation to the specific motivations and circumstances of particular groups of non-traditional students.

Table 2.8: Summary of evidence about situation of different widening participation groups

Part-time students	Extending loans to part-time students reflects a policy commitment to part-time study (Callender and Wilkinson, 2013a). Callender (2011) assessed the nature and scope of financial support for part-time undergraduates, identifying limitations in the financial arrangements which do not incentivise part-time provision. Issues include restrictive loan eligibility criteria (two-thirds of part-time learners excluded); financial returns to graduates of part-time study tend to be lower than those for full-time students; these students may already have considerable financial commitments. By February 2013, only 31,700 or 21% of part-time entrants had taken out a loan while the government predicted that a third would benefit from loans (Callender, 2013).
Mature students	The evidence about the situation for mature students tends to relate to their circumstances as a whole in HE, rather than purely financial concerns. McVitty and Morris (2012) point to the need for holistic improvement in the quality of mature students' experience and engagement with HE, seeing re-consideration of student finance provision as part of a wider package. Mature students in HE have been found to have more anxieties about finance and be in greater debt than younger students, and have fewer sources of information available about finance (NUS, 2013a). Falls in

¹⁹ Defined as the difference between an assigned expected family contribution which represents their ability to pay without suffering undue financial consequences and the cost of attendance.

	<p>mature HE applicants and acceptances in the last two years have been linked to concerns over the cost of HE (ICOF, 2013).</p> <p>The theoretical materials include identification of a disjuncture between the current funding regime and the motivation and circumstances of some groups of mature learners. For example, a team at the University of Hull undertook research with mature student carers, with the conclusion that framing participation in HE as an individual financial investment presupposes that candidates are highly individualized, instrumental, and economic actors, whereas these students' life choices are based on their caring responsibilities (González-Arnal and Kilkey, 2009)</p> <p>Information on costs and financial support is felt to be of particular importance in HE-related IAG for mature students. Research with stakeholders suggests that first generation mature students want to know how much it would cost to study and whether they could afford it (Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University, 2010).</p>
Work-based learners	<p>The costs of HE have been found to be a particular barrier to participation by employed people where employers are unwilling to cover the costs (Hotham, 2009).</p> <p>Proportionally more than the average amongst employed students who leave HE early give finance as a contributing factor (Rose-Adams, 2012).</p>
Disabled students	<p>Disabled students are identified as one of the student groups facing particular financial anxiety (NUS, 2013b). Disabled students require additional support to negotiate the disability benefits.</p>

Evidence about effective approaches

Impact of financial support

2.5.36 There are question marks over the role of HE costs and financial support as a policy instrument for widening participation, in light of the fact that even countries with highly subsidised HE still record a gap in participation by lower socio economic groups (Asplund *et al.*, 2008, p.264). There is growing debate on the question of whether financial aid is an effective policy for increasing access since the long-term influence of disadvantage is likely to be more important than financial constraints at the point of HE entry. Although there are examples of aid programmes which have evaluated positively, Long (2008) suggests that 'financial aid at the last minute is unlikely to completely address concerns about inequality' (p.37).

Comparison of mechanisms

2.5.37 The literature from England and other countries provides some indication of the implications of different aspects of student finance to widening participation, although there is a lack of empirical evidence to compare between different types of schemes. Table 2.9 reviews some of the findings from UK and international research about the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches. The longer term implications of different types of support – namely loans – are somewhat untested.

Concerns are raised in the US literature about the resulting debt burden that could influence students' life chances and family decisions into the long term.

2.5.38 The international literature includes examples of other types of support not discussed here (for example commercial loans, Tax Credits, and Savings Incentives in the US). Importantly, US institutions have used employment in jobs on campus or in university-related schemes. The evidence suggests that these kinds of job opportunities can be an important source of finance for some students (Allen *et al.*, 2005).

Targeting

2.5.39 Clearly the criteria for financial aid are important considerations. When considering the most effective aid for low-income students, needs-based approaches may be better than merit-based schemes. Applying merit-based criteria, while having some institutional benefits, appears least likely to make any difference to students who might otherwise not have applied. Davis *et al.* (2013) suggest that valuing merit-based aid over a more democratic distribution misses the point about social mobility.

2.5.40 A US study suggests that financial aid (in this case tax credits, loans, and merit-based aid) has mainly benefitted the middle classes (Allen *et al.*, 2005). Here the institutions were found to focus support on a 'middle band' who are perceived to be better prepared for academic study in HE rather than 'access' students who may require more academic and other support to raise their performance in HE. This study suggests that HEIs' main concerns related to ensuring market position and maintaining selectivity, and therefore, identifies a need for policy makers to maintain some leverage on how institutions provide financial support. Based on research in the US, higher education providers with generous financial support do not necessarily improve their low socio-economic group enrolment.

Information and awareness

2.5.41 A key caveat in the assessment of schemes is that levels of information could affect take-up and effectiveness. This is given as one explanation why college enrolment rates differ by background in the US. Grants characterised as being simpler in design and application process were found to have the large impact on enrolments (Dynarski and Wiederspan, 2012). A scheme which included extensive advertising and the training of high school guidance counsellors also was shown to have a relatively large impact on enrolment (Cornwell *et al.*, 2006). Good information is important, and simplicity in terms of the design, criteria and application process appears to be important to enhancing the efficacy of financial support. Talking about the US experience, Long (2008) for example notes 'the visibility and design of aid programs matters a great deal...policies appear to have differential effects based on how well they are publicized, implemented, and the ease of application' (p.35).

2.5.42 Variety in the value and eligibility criteria for financial support across higher education providers has been identified as confusing to students and making it less likely that they will take it up, or factor it into their decision making (Chester and Bekhradnia, 2008, McCaig and Adnett, 2009, Brooks, 2012). Callender (2010) concluded from the evidence then available that there is a mismatch between government aspirations and higher education providers' actual use of bursaries, and

potential for existing divisions within and across HE to be perpetuated. Early evaluation of the NSP raises concerns that English higher education providers are not currently communicating information effectively to students, parents and other stakeholders, particularly those institutions with additional eligibility criteria, and about whether only a proportion of those who are eligible will receive an award (Bowes *et al.*, 2013a). There are also problems to do with the scheme including differences in criteria across the sector and a mixture of benefits being offered (Diamond *et al.*, 2012). In the current context a key issue may be how to get the balance right between promoting the scheme and managing expectations. It was estimated that in around half of higher education providers, less than half of those who meet national eligibility criteria will receive support through the scheme (Diamond *et al.*, 2012).

2.5.43 Evidence from other countries warns against complex systems: uncertainty about the complex federal aid system in the US was found to undermine its efficacy. Dynarski and Scott-Clayton (2007) concluded that the costs of complexity outweigh any potential targeting benefits. Emphasis on precise targeting limits the amount of definite information that applicants have on what they will receive early in the application cycle. NUS (2008) suggests it is unreasonable to expect applicants to engage with the complexities of the English system.

Importance of participation in widening participation interventions

2.5.44 Surveys of young people under the Aimhigher widening participation programme found concern about cost can be mitigated by widening participation interventions. Research with participants in Aimhigher activities found they were resolute in their decision to apply despite financial concerns (Pollard *et al.*, 2008, Charlesworth, 2010, Atherton, McNeill and Okonkwo, 2010). Evaluations of Aimhigher interventions give a sense that information and advice, alongside raised aspirations to progress, are important in addressing financial concerns. Davies *et al.* (2009) distinguished between groups of prospective students who were 'borderline' on account of their prior achievement, and 'unsure' about HE after taking prior achievement into account. Being 'unsure' was related to attitudes towards the benefits and risks of participation, level of knowledge about financial support, and information about participation in HE (important factors for most potential students regardless of socio-economic background).

2.5.45 Kerrigan and Church (2011) contend that it is imperative that financial information is integrated within HE outreach programmes. The available evidence suggests that even relatively short initiatives can have significant impact (Candela, 2009, Copley, 2010). A report from Aimhigher Hertfordshire (2010) concluded that, for many 'coming to an understanding of the financial demands of university and how to manage these demands had been a deciding factor in terms of them pursuing an application' (p.15).

Supporting attendance and success

2.5.46 An example was found of bursaries as a direct mechanism to support attendance. Fresh Start was a European funded project which allocated bursaries to non-traditional students accessing Foundation Year courses in STEM. Payment was linked to high levels of class attendance (an electronic attendance monitoring system was used to follow-up students with signs of disengagement). Research indicated that the scheme had a positive impact on attendance and progression of Fresh Start beneficiaries (although the group still had a high disposition towards non-

completion in HE) (Newman-Ford *et al.*, 2010). Schemes which incorporated 'payment by results' were highlighted as particularly effective in encouraging progression of minority ethnic groups in post-16 education (along with use of adult mentors) in a systematic review of evidence covering 1996 to 2011 (Huat See *et al.*, 2012).

2.5.47 Other research has put the focus on how bursary schemes send out positive messages to non-traditional groups that can help to get them better engaged with HE in general and help to establish stronger institutional attachment. In one study 'low-income' and 'first-generation' students said that being offered an institutional bursary 'legitimised' their presence at the university, and this was linked to the institution's role in administering the scheme (Harrison *et al.*, 2007).

Table 2.9: What the literature says about different financial support mechanisms

Type of support	Evidence	Issues
Tuition fee and maintenance loans (in England, money to cover fees and living costs paid back after graduation at subsidised rate of interest contingent on earning sufficient income)	<p>Asplund <i>et al.</i> (2008) suggest that a deferred tuition-fee system such as that in UK is less disadvantageous than full 'graduate tax' models.</p> <p>Loans contingent on income are seen as protecting students from risk (i.e. protects them from repaying their loan during periods of low income, illness, and unemployment).</p>	<p>Levels of debt may be a deterrent to participation (Callender and Jackson, 2008). Take-up rates of loans in US suggest lower socio-economic groups are more averse to debt (Long, 2008).</p> <p>Recipients may still have problems covering living costs (and may be dependent on other institutional bursaries or employment to cover these).</p> <p>Loans place a debt burden on graduates which might have long-term effect. Some groups of low socio-economic group graduates leave with higher levels of debt than others (Callender <i>et al.</i>, 2006).</p>
Needs-based bursary, scholarship or grants (income-based financial award, usually linked to eligibility criteria, and paid directly to students)	<p>Have been shown to have a positive impact on retention and achievement (Robotham and Julian, 2006, Shallcross <i>et al.</i>, 2009)</p> <p>Cash awards are perceived by higher education providers as incentivising HE (although little empirical evidence for this).</p> <p>Help retention and performance (but these effects may be biased by selection). Being in receipt of a bursary allows students to engage more in their academic work as they do not have to undertake as much paid work (Newman-Ford <i>et al.</i>, 2010, West <i>et al.</i>, 2008; Emmerson <i>et al.</i>, 2009).</p>	<p>Depending on how the scheme is administered, many who might qualify may fail to apply.</p> <p>Cash awards direct to students may not be spent wisely.</p>
Contextualised bursaries (targeted on equity criteria wider than income/needs-	Can be linked to higher education provider priorities and objectives. Providers might also use this approach to manage demand.	There are issues about how criteria are developed and applied due to the difficulty in selecting valid indicators. For example, HEFCE guidance in relation to the NSP has advised that LPN information should only be used together with individualised

Type of support	Evidence	Issues
based)	Varying eligibility criteria imply disparities between higher education providers and student cohorts (awards to students in the same income band will depend on where they study) (Bowes <i>et al.</i> , 2013b).	criteria since POLAR is not an appropriate 'stand-alone' measure of individual circumstances (HEFCE, 2013/02).
Fee waiver/fee discount (reduction in the cost of fees, could include a free foundation year)	Research with higher education providers as part of the NSP evaluation suggested that stakeholders believe fee waivers are likely to be less effective than bursaries in the short term (Diamond <i>et al.</i> , 2012). There may be some tensions in promoting fee waivers as a benefit whilst also suggesting that tuition fees are not a barrier to participation (Bowes <i>et al.</i> , 2013b).	Concerns have been expressed over potential ineffectiveness in influencing decisions to progress to HE since the benefits are not felt during time in HE (Diamond <i>et al.</i> , 2012).
Merit bursaries (eligibility criteria linked to academic performance)	Assessment of a state-level merit-based award suggests it increased overall enrolment but widened the gap between students from low and higher-income families, although the effects may depend on the level of the academic criteria used (Long, 2008). Can help to raise academic standards. Helps to increase retention (but these effects may be biased by selection).	Assessments at US colleges suggests merit bursaries impact on college choice more than enrolment (but to that extent could be an effective instrument for competition between different institutions) (Long, 2008).
In-kind support (accommodation or institutional services e.g. vouchers)	The resource is retained within the institution.	There is some evidence that this type of support is less attractive to applicants. Bowes <i>et al.</i> (2013a) suggests that students prefer 'in-hand' support which give them flexibility on what to spend it on especially cash bursaries (p. 4). However, support for accommodation costs was found to be the biggest incentive to non-applicants to apply (Bowes <i>et al.</i> , 2013b).

Emerging conclusions

2.5.48 Financial considerations play out differently for different groups of learners. There are particular issues around how widening participation learners view the risks and rewards of taking part in HE. There is some evidence that financial support can make a material difference to improving the situation of low-income students and contribute to building their identity as students to the benefit of access, retention and success.

2.5.49 Careful design and accurate information underpin effective financial support and variations in knowledge and access to information exist. There is evidence that interest in HE is increased amongst groups who receive accurate and timely financial information, especially when accompanied by support to allay other concerns which non-traditional students have about HE (e.g. academic and social concerns). Although higher education providers have made attempts to publicise financial support, prospective students lack significant information on HE financial support as it applies to them (Bowes *et al.*, 2013a). Lack of information may be a substantial barrier for many students who need financial support, especially given the complexity of the current system.

2.5.50 Providing HE as flexibly as possible may help to mitigate the effect of rising tuition fees. Research from other countries suggests that flexibility can help to make HE more affordable especially to lower-income groups, and that policymakers and higher education providers should pay attention to opportunities for more part-time routes, distance learning and community based provision. To that extent, this section should be read in conjunction with Section 2.6, although this raises broader issues about parity of esteem between HE routes for different groups.

2.5.51 Financial support comes out as important to support the success of low-income students who do progress. The main impact of financial support, especially cash awards, may be on retention (rather than access).

2.5.52 In the current context there appear to be some areas of policy relevance that could benefit from more research around the underlying factors that support take-up and effectiveness of financial support. These include: the impact and effectiveness of different types of financial awards, and criteria for them, in context; the role that marketing/information and student support plays in supporting effectiveness; and exploration of how family circumstances, including financial arrangements, create differential barriers and opportunities for different groups.

2.6 Flexible Provision

Key findings

- Falling demand for part-time study is a major concern. Financial issues are highlighted in relation to this, particularly the substantial increases in tuition fees and the limited eligibility criteria for loans.
- Flexible provision covers a wide range of programmes and includes different structures, modes, locations and times of study. It is potentially attractive to students who have other responsibilities, who work or who are seeking employment, career change or development.

Flexibility is only one (and not the main) feature of provision that may attract students who do not traditionally participate in HE.

- Part-time provision, an overlapping category, is also diverse and needs to be disaggregated to be properly understood. Many part-time students have characteristics associated with widening participation.
- Part-time HE may be perceived as being lower-status and issues of identity may impact on the extent to which part-time learners see themselves as being 'authentic' HE students. Work/life/study balance issues are particularly important for part-time learners.
- Prohibitive financial and opportunity costs may restrict choice for part-time learners. Funding by employers for part-time study tends to be concentrated on those who already have higher qualifications.
- Although some distinctive challenges are evident, issues of retention and support for part-time learners do not differ significantly from those faced by full-time learners.
- The link between flexible and part-time provision and widening participation is not always strong in policy terms, but is often observable 'on the ground'.

Introduction to the theme

2.6.1 The notion of flexible provision in HE is multi-faceted. It takes in flexible modes of study in time and place and learning through different media. It also has a strong focus on the learner. The Higher Education Academy, for example, locates learner choice at the centre of its definition, stressing that flexible learning is about enabling choice and responsiveness in the pace, place and mode of learning²⁰. For Osbourne and Young (2006) 'flexibility in the context of widening participation refers to...changes that allow students access to education in locations and modes, and at times that, to at least a certain degree, are of individuals' rather than institutions' choosing' (p.9).

2.6.2 Sometimes described as alternative provision (i.e. alternative to mainstream traditional full-time campus-based HE) flexible provision implies different admissions, curricula and delivery structures, including elasticity of timetable and length of study, and different locations for study including in work, colleges and universities or at home. It may also include the validation of prior learning. This range of meanings is captured by Osborne and Young (2006):

'... flexible provision, [is] namely that activity that is concerned with making the curriculum more accessible through changes in its structure, and in form, place and timing of delivery. Provision such as use of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), Open and Distance Learning (ODL), the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) come under the aegis of flexibility' (p.6).

2.6.3 These features – structure, form, place and timing – overlap at many points but provide a useful organising tool for describing and assessing the various manifestations of 'flexible provision'. Different structures can include modular credit accumulation approaches, Foundation Degrees or

²⁰ <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/flexible-learning>

part-time provision; different forms can include open and distance learning, e-learning, blended learning, accrediting prior or experiential learning or the use of new media and learning technologies; different places can include FE colleges, private providers, workplaces or online providers; and different timings can include, 'year-round', part-time learning or accelerated and decelerated programmes.²¹

2.6.4 The related category of part-time HE provides some challenges. Not all flexible provision is part-time and not all part-time provision is that flexible. As Callender (2011) has noted, 'there is no clear or definitive definition of part-time study or part-time students' (p.470). 'Part-time' is often used as a catch-all term for everything that does not fit into the strict time-defined conception of full-time study. In reality many notionally full-time students undertake significant amounts of paid part-time work (NASES/NUS, 2012; Pennington *et al.*, 2013). The dividing line between full and part-time study is in practice very fluid and current boundaries may make more sense to institutions than to individuals (McDonald, 2010).

2.6.5 As currently defined by agencies such as HESA or the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) part-time study is a significant feature of the HE landscape. In numerical terms over half a million people, a third of all undergraduates, study part-time. Callender (2011) also emphasises the very diverse nature of the students and provision that come within the part-time category. Nevertheless 'part-time' is a widely used and generally understood term, which crops up extensively in the 'flexible provision' literature. The areas of overlap are sufficiently strong to warrant its prominence in the discussion below.

2.6.6 There are strong links between this theme and Section 2.4 on retention and success and Section 2.8 on employer contribution. Students who take up part-time and flexible provision have to manage competing priorities which may have prior claim on their time and resources away from study (O'Driscoll *et al.*, 2009). Transition between FE and HE, for 'top-up' Foundation Degree students and for students who enter HE through alternative routes can be difficult (Penketh and Goddard, 2008; Winter and Dismore, 2010; Gordon *et al.*, 2011). Equally while flexible and part-time provision is potentially an attractive means of supplying HE, particularly if industry and employers can be involved in funding (Callender, 2011), the evidence of employer engagement or support for provision or students is not compelling (see discussion in Section 2.8).

²¹ Foundation Year (FY) programmes (sometimes called Preliminary Year or 'Year Zero' programmes) have not been included in this overview. Although a well-established feature of the HE landscape and one which was endorsed by Milburn (2012) for its potential to equip 'students from non-traditional backgrounds with the skills necessary to succeed at university' (p.54), FY programmes are viewed here as being part of the mainstream provision of higher education providers. While some programmes (e.g. in relation to Medicine) have explicit widening participation aims and outcomes (see Mathers *et al.*, 2011), the majority are geared more to conversion or access to particular subjects, particularly STEM subjects, or to international students. Few have features that would place them in the 'flexible provision' category.

Context

2.6.7 In policy terms flexible provision, including part-time learning, has had a rather unstable on-off relationship with widening participation. At times it has been courted as an important partner in efforts to widen participation; more commonly though its virtues have been recognised mainly in terms of addressing skills shortages and the needs of the economy (Callender, 2011).

2.6.8 Its credentials from a widening participation perspective are impressive. Flexible provision is often seen as a mechanism to increase student diversity (Houston *et al.*, 2011). Characteristics of students attracted to flexible provision such as those who are in employment, are mature, who are seeking career change or development, are seeking an alternative to full-time study and/or have family responsibilities, may often overlap with those of students targeted under widening participation policy. Callender (2011) noted that 44% of part-time undergraduate students 'were in families where no one had an HE qualification'. This author concluded that 'many part-time students have characteristics associated with "widening participation" students with their limited exposure to HE, low-level entry qualifications and low-income backgrounds' (p.472).

2.6.9 As many commentators have noted, though, part-time students are far from being a homogenous group. Their entry qualifications are more diverse than full-time students. Significant numbers already have degrees and other high level qualifications. They are much more likely to be older and female than full-time students. Eighty-one percent are employed, the majority in the public sector. Qualification aims are also varied. Only a third of part-time students are seeking an undergraduate degree. The majority are aiming for professional qualifications and HE certificates and credits. Part-time students also tend to be concentrated in certain subject areas and to be distributed unevenly in geographical terms (Callender, 2011). However, within this exceptionally diverse student body are many clusters of recognisable widening participation groups.

2.6.10 The OU is a significant feature of the flexible provision landscape. It is the largest university in the UK in terms of learner numbers and teaches over a third of all part-time undergraduates. Historically it has been a leading innovator in the development and application of new learning technologies. The OU had a widening access mission (amongst others) from its very inception and retains a strong widening participation ethos. Its distinctive open and distance learning approach and supported open entry policy has been successful in recruiting adult learners with low or no prior academic qualifications. Two thirds of new entrants in 2007/8 had fewer than two A-levels (Nelson and Wilkinson, 2010). Initiatives to attract students from LPNs and other widening participation activities are covered in the literature, as are reflections on the challenges of retention, and accommodating the new funding and fees structures for part-time HE (Simpson, 2006; Nelson and Wilkinson, 2010; Hewitt and Rose-Adams, 2012).

2.6.11 New course models, flexible pathways and configurations of curriculum offers developed by the OU and other providers are potentially attractive to part-time students and may contribute to widening participation in HE (Outram, 2009; Houston *et al.*, 2011). Flexible, part-time courses are often delivered through local providers or via blended, distance or e-learning mechanisms (Houston *et al.*, 2011). The organising device noted earlier (section 2.6.3) is used below to note their main features and links to the widening participation agenda.

Structures

2.6.12 A number of new organisational and delivery structures have been developed in the last 15 years. Foundation Degrees (Fds), designed primarily to address skills gaps and engage employers, are mainly delivered by FE colleges or in the workplace and often offer flexible modes of delivery. They link to the widening participation agenda through providing a route into HE for applicants with lower qualifications than for Honours degree courses. Figures for 2010 show that mature students comprised 51% of entrants, and that 24% of Fd students studying at FE colleges, and 16% studying at HEIs, were from LPNs – a key target group for widening participation policy (HEFCE 2010b in Simm *et al.*, 2012). Craig (2009) notes that less than a third of Fd students have A-levels and argues for a broad contribution to the widening participation agenda. However, discrete government funding for Foundation Degrees ended in July 2011 and their precise impact on widening participation has yet to be fully quantified.

Forms

2.6.13 The adoption by some higher education providers of different modes of delivery (open and distance learning, e-learning and blended learning), often incorporating the use of new technology or social media, is well known and has been extensively researched (e.g. Sharpe *et al.*, 2006; Hughes, 2007; Bennett *et al.*, 2008; Holley and Oliver, 2010). Learning technologies have been adopted with the aim of enhancing flexibility and enriching student learning experiences. The rationale for more flexible pedagogies is often placed within the context of providing greater student choice and the reality of more students choosing to work their way through HE (Higher Education Academy, 2013). However, evidence for the ‘widening participation impact’ of different modes of delivery is not conclusive and would merit further research (Houston *et al.*, 2011).

Places

2.6.14 Flexible provision of HE has gravitated towards FE colleges often working in partnership with or under the auspices of universities. Approximately 9% of UK-domiciled undergraduates are taught in FE institutions (Rashid *et al.*, 2011). Recent research (Rashid and Brooks, 2009) found that non-franchised college provision had a more even socio-economic spread of students, and attracted more students from more deprived low participation areas than courses in HEIs. Work based learning forms part of the repertoire of flexible provision providing alternative learning experiences, a location for vocational and professional practice, as well as a site for the delivery of learning in some instances. Recent developments also include a growth in the number of alternative providers (e.g. private/non-HEFCE funded) offering a variety of traditional and innovative HE programmes (HEFCE, 2013/03).

Timing

2.6.15 Provision of study on evenings and weekends has traditionally been a feature of flexible part-time provision. Open, distance and e-learning permit study at times to suit the individual. Institutions have also experimented with short-cycle, accelerated or decelerated degrees and weekend and summer programmes. However these have rarely been underpinned by a strong widening participation logic.

2.6.16 As noted earlier, flexible provision is a fluid and dynamic category. The development of open educational resources (OERs) (Lane, 2012) and the recent arrival of massive open online courses (MOOCs) provide examples of innovation that throws structure, form, place and timing up into the air (or more accurately the clouds). Their potential for widening participation is only just beginning to be explored (Lane, 2012). It remains to be seen whether these developments will provide a new frontier for widening participation or merely fresh grazing grounds for those with an existing appetite for knowledge and credentials.

Brief description of the evidence

2.6.17 Although there is an extensive specialist literature on flexible learning (particularly open and distance learning), only part of this relates to widening participation and there is a limited amount of recent research (since 2006). Part-time provision and the experiences of part-time learners (particularly those from widening participation groups) also do not figure prominently in the literature. The evidence examined for this review of flexible provision comprised:

- A small number of significant quantitative studies, including statistical analysis of entrant data for the OU and data for access to Medicine courses to explore issues of ethnicity, class, disability and gender in relation to admissions.
- Two major empirical studies: the first conducted in 2008 involved a survey (online and telephone) of 3,704 part-time students studying bachelor's degree, Foundation Degree or higher national qualifications across 29 UK HEIs; the second involved a statistical review of 2007/8 HESA data of part-time provision and 15 institutional case-studies. The emerging evidence from subsequent follow-up work has also been drawn on.
- Case-studies: these tend to be single HEI studies and mainly feature the introduction of new types of course structures that aim to increase participation from under-represented groups in areas such as Social Work, Medical Education and Nursing, Geography, Teacher Training and Business.
- Surveys of students' experiences of flexible provision and investigations of the outcomes for students, who enter HE at different points and with vocational qualifications and/or related experience.
- Reviews of programmes and partnerships for flexible learning: these focus on delivery links between FE colleges and HE and report on programmes and outcomes with some analysis of institutional implications.
- Reviews of the literature and policy developments relating to flexible provision, student finance, institutional arrangements, and widening participation.

Emerging themes, issues and challenges

Demand, fees and loans

2.6.18 Falling demand is the key issue relating to the potential of flexible provision to impact on widening participation. The numbers are stark. When part-time taught postgraduates and undergraduates are combined, the number of part-time entrants fell by 37% from 2010/2011 to 2012/2013 (HEFCE, 2013/03). This should be set alongside a steady downward prior trend in part-time entrants. The number of part-time undergraduate enrolments to HE (excluding the OU) fell by 8% between 2002/3 and 2008/9 (Callender, 2011; Simm *et al.*, 2012). During this period the number of OU entrants grew by 25%. However, this was before the implementation of the ELQ (Equivalent Lower Qualification) policy that removed funding for students with a qualification aim lower or equivalent to their existing qualifications (Callender, 2011). In summary, the often-predicted growth in demand for flexible part-time study to meet the economy's knowledge and skills requirements and the needs of people in work has not been realised.

2.6.19 New courses, access routes and points of entry and exit are potentially attractive to students who require flexibility in learning. However, the numbers of students overall has not increased. Flexible provision may have redistributed the same students, rather than widened and increased participation. Flexible provision is only one aspect that will attract student groups who traditionally do not participate in HE: sound financial, academic and student support structures are also underlying conditions for success (Kelly and Mills, 2007; Callender, 2011; Mathers *et al.*, 2011; HEFCE, 2013/03).

2.6.20 Callender (2011) has argued strongly that the lack of financial support for part-time study and part-time students generates disincentives for higher education providers, students and employers. The burden of funding for part-time study falls on employers and individuals. Options are also restricted when funding policy prioritises certain types of courses and gaps in student finance restrict participation. A number of the very groups of students intended to be supported under widening participation policies are effectively caught between the rising costs of part-time study and the unviable nature or the unaffordable price of studying full-time (Callender, 2011).

2.6.21 The rise in part-time fees in line with those introduced for the full-time undergraduate degrees has been cited as a possible reason for the decline in part-time applications. A survey of the seven English universities (excluding the OU) with the largest number of part-time undergraduates revealed an average fee level of £7,133 FTE in 2012/13. The OU currently charges £5,000 FTE. It is argued by some that higher fees have made a part-time study unaffordable or too risky financially (Callender, 2013).

2.6.22 The introduction of fee loans for part-time students for the first time does not appear to have provided a robust solution. It is estimated that two thirds of part-time students do not qualify for loans and therefore have to pay higher fees upfront and out of their own pocket. Women are likely to be disproportionately affected as they are over-represented in part-time provision, and to have lower incomes and less access to additional sources of finance (Callender, 2013). Earlier

research indicated that widening participation groups likely to be attracted to flexible provision in order to meet competing demands of home, work and study, were also likely to be averse to taking out private loans to pay for the costs of learning (Kelly and Mills, 2007; Callender, 2011a; Esmond, 2012). Particular groups may also be reluctant or unaware of limited additional financial assistance. Richardson (2010a) found that although Disabled Students Allowance can be claimed for part-time study, only around 50% of all disabled students received the allowance.

2.6.23 Despite some changes in eligibility criteria, the impact on widening participation ambitions of fee loans for part-time students remains problematic. Many of the same concerns raised in earlier research and commentaries are unresolved (Hunt, 2007; Fazackerley, 2009; Callender, 2011a). Numbers of part-time entrants taking out a loan have yet to reach government predictions, totalling just 31,700 or 21% of part-time entrants by February 2013 (Callender, 2013). Question marks remain about the attractiveness of such loans to part-time students since financial returns on part-time study tend to be lower than those experienced by full-time students. Equally older students are likely to have different assessments of risk and return than younger full-time students, and to have greater financial commitments (Callender, 2013).

2.6.24 There are also potential problems with the other possible contributor to part-time study costs: employers. Callender (2011) reported that less than half (41%) of students received funding support from their employer. Moreover, the distribution of financial support from employers for part-time study is unequal and advantages those already qualified including those with a degree, who are White and from middle class backgrounds. Employer preference for investing in additional vocational/professional qualifications for graduate staff excludes those in low paid jobs or with low qualifications from this source of student finance and from opportunities for furthering their professional development (Callender, 2011). Recent work by Callender and Wilkinson (2013b) has sought to highlight the different types of economic and social returns (employability, labour market progression and self-development) achieved by part-time students. However, in practice, opportunities for re-training, up-skilling and labour market progression through part-time HE may be restricted, thereby impairing economic development (Callender, 2011).

Supply and choice

2.6.25 Issues about supply and choice also come into the debate about access. Unevenness in the supply of opportunities for flexible HE, beyond those offered by the OU, means that options are in practice sometimes fairly limited (Houston, 2011). Commentators have noted that some groups of learners – e.g. older female students, those with existing but insufficient qualifications, people on a low incomes or with extensive family responsibilities - may have the least choice between flexible learning or other more traditional options, particularly in relation to their financial options (Hunt, 2007; Fazackerley 2009; Callender, 2011; Mathers *et al.*, 2011).

2.6.26 The proliferation of new, potentially cheaper, learning technologies and the opening up of educational resources does not appear to have impacted on students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Lane (2012) found that only 1% of the 20 million visitors to the OU's OpenLearn OER website over a five-year period had registered on the site and could be classified as active learners. While 'many people who are not currently students value being able to freely access and learn from self-study OER' (p.147), there was no evidence of new groups of learners being attracted to more

formal study. His pan-European review concludes that 'OER are fine for confident and experienced learners but most people who are targeted as part of widening participation schemes are unlikely to be so confident and will require other support mechanisms to achieve participation' (p.147).

Status

2.6.27 Some research indicates that the artificial boundaries between full and part-time provision and hierarchies amongst higher education providers can impact on perceptions of quality of outcome on the part of students. This is expressed in the differences in perceived status of provider, the perceived value of qualifications and the perceived or actual quality of students' experience (Esmond, 2012). Other researchers have noted that structural divisions within HE perpetuate inequalities of conditions and esteem between part-time and full-time study and their respective students (Callender, 2011). Lack of parity of esteem between full-time and part-time study is exacerbated through differential HE funding mechanisms to HEIs which privilege full-time programmes (Callender, 2011). It has been suggested that the net result is to undermine widening participation ambitions particularly in relation to flexible, part-time provision (Callender, 2011; Gordon *et al.*, 2011).

Work-Life-Study balance

2.6.28 Callender and Feldman (2009) comment that: 'all studies of part-time students recognise that study is only part of students' lives, and that it is necessarily integrated with other activities, notably paid work and family responsibilities' (p.13). Indeed the main reason for choosing part-time study is that it can be taken alongside other commitments (Yorke and Longden, 2008). The difficult balancing act entailed in part-time study is widely recognised in the established literature. A rigorous longitudinal study that looked at the part-time experience of students at a single HEI noted time management and work/family/study balance as significant concerns (Williams and Kane, 2010). Another study into the effectiveness of a part-time adult diploma Nursing programme raised issues about competing priorities expressed as 'role conflict' for female mature students with family responsibilities. The inadequacies of financial support for part-time study meant all the students on the course were working part-time in addition to home responsibilities (O'Driscoll *et al.*, 2009). Role conflict impacted on retention and success, with attrition from the programme or high levels of stress surrounding learning.

Identities and experiences

2.6.29 A number of issues related to student identities and experiences are raised in the literature. Callender and Feldman (2009) highlight identity as a central concern for part-time students and critical to determining how positively they perceive themselves. A 10-year study of part-time students' experiences in one institution revealed aspects of respondents feelings of being 'different' and at times marginalised and ignored within HE (Williams and Kane, 2010). Narratives of identity constructed by part-time students in a small scale study in one FE college revealed the limits of the extent to which they see themselves or others perceive them as 'authentic' HE students (Esmond, 2012). Another study noted that mature students are more able to perceive themselves as 'novice academics' than younger students (Chapman, 2012). These small-scale studies tally with broader investigations of class, identity and 'institutional habitus', and working class students' choice of where to study (Reay *et al.*, 2005 and 2009): they emphasise the importance of student identity.

Support

2.6.30 Williams and Kane's (2010) longitudinal single-institution study found that issues of key concern for part-time students did not differ markedly from those faced by full-time students. Adjusting to a new learning programme is difficult for all students regardless of mode or location of study. However, the research literature indicates that flexible learning students face particular challenges relating to: isolation, if working at a distance; familiarisation with new social environments and learning technologies; managing increased expectations of them as students; time management and balancing study with other commitments (Gordon *et al.*, 2010; Williams and Kane, 2010). Support for transition and continuing learning can assist 'smooth transitions' for students who enter HE through alternative routes (Gordon *et al.*, 2010).

2.6.31 Many of the 'good design' principles for retention and success activities identified through the What Works? national programme (Thomas, 2012a) apply equally to part-time and flexible learning students. Discrete research with part-time students indicates the importance of an institutional and pedagogical ethos that affirms the identities of part-time students as HE students, and develops academic and personal confidence (Williams and Kane, 2010). In addition building realistic expectations needs to be supported by clear and accurate information, proper orientation and induction, and good relationships with tutors (Gordon *et al.*, 2011; Whitehead, 2011; Baxter, 2012; Simm *et al.*, 2012).

Findings for different groups

2.6.32 Relatively little research has been done to examine the experiences of particular groups of part-time or flexible HE learners. Table 2.10 below summarises some of the key issues emerging from discrete research or extrapolated from a range of more general studies.

Table 2.10 Key issues emerging for different widening participation groups

Disabled learners	Research into the outcomes of disabled students studying through distance learning at the OU shows differential course completion and attainment for students with different disabilities. Findings suggest that prioritisation of support for students with mental health difficulties and those with multiple and restricted mobility difficulties would result in increased completion and attainment rates, with the caveat that institutions should beware of imposing a medical model of disability on student support to improve student attainment. The research also points out that most HE research focuses on disabled students as a homogenous group when in fact different outcomes are achieved by students with different disabilities (Richardson, 2010a).
Learners from ethnic minority groups	There is little evidence that part-time study is a particularly attractive option for students from minority ethnic backgrounds (Yorke and Longden, 2008). Differences between White students' and ethnic minority students' attainment on distance education programmes largely match, and for some groups exceed, those of students on conventionally delivered programmes. This cannot be accounted for by socio-economic or other variables, learning experiences or the nature of

	interactions with teachers or other students (Richardson, 2009b; 2010b; 2012). Richardson (2012) suggests that different approaches to study or conceptions of learning might usefully be investigated.
Work-based learners	<p>Those in work and seeking to attract funding from their place of work are less likely to get funding if they are in low-paid, low-skilled jobs. Employers are more likely to fund part-time vocational or professional White, middle income, graduate level workers, disadvantaging workers who have few qualifications and low status jobs. (Callender, 2011).</p> <p>Students who work are more likely to study part-time. Although there are opportunities for including work-based learning within curricula, time required for employment places demands on students' time for study. (Harvey and Slaughter, 2007; Gordon <i>et al.</i>, 2011, Cree <i>et al.</i>, 2009; Cannell and Thompson, 2010).</p> <p>Women, who may be attracted to flexible provision, are particularly vulnerable to competing demands on time and finance with regard to childcare, part-time work and part-time study (Walsh, 2006; Davies, 2013).</p> <p>Part-time students on Foundation Degrees were less likely to continue to complete full degrees than full-time students (HEFCE, 2010/12).</p>

Evidence about effective approaches

Flexible forms of delivery and timing

2.6.33 The limited evidence available does not suggest that new flexible forms of delivery and timing have had a significant impact on widening participation (Houston *et al.*, 2011). A HEFCE-funded Flexible Learning Pathfinders programme piloted a range of flexible HE level courses delivered via e-learning, distance and blended learning methods. These included a number which used new media and technology, accredited prior learning or reorganised the academic calendar to provide 'year-round' provision and student support. However, despite being conceptually intended to increase diversity, the pilots did not attract students targeted under widening participation policy, or increase the total numbers of HE students (Outram, 2009). Holley and Oliver's (2010) small-scale qualitative study of the use of blended learning and online resources indicates that it is already confident learners who tend to make better use of these study modes.

2.6.34 O'Driscoll *et al.*'s (2009) study of a part-time Nursing programme found that 'tailoring the instructional programme' went some way to widening participation for female mature students who were working part-time and/or had home responsibilities. Another earlier small-scale study of a flexible Postgraduate Certificate in Education course in London designed to increase participation from under-represented groups into Teacher Training, noted the institutional constraints that limited flexibility. It echoed the retention and success literature in stressing the importance of social interaction for students (Morrison and Pitfield, 2009). Interestingly, Baxter (2012) in her study of distance learning students notes that integration and interaction with other students was a key motivating factor in relation to student progression, but was also a factor that led to attrition.

2.6.35 The persistence of traditional teaching and learning practices (both from an institutional and a learner perspective) was highlighted in relation to a study of Enterprise College Wales, a four-year project involving collaboration between one HEI and six FE colleges. This offered an open access blended learning enterprise and entrepreneurship course with multiple accredited exit points. The case-study suggests that the course was successful in attracting mature students (80% in the 25-49 range and 14% of students aged 50+), but offers no analysis of their social characteristics (Jones and Lau, 2010).

Work-based learning

2.6.36 The evidence in relation to work-based learning is again patchy. A 2007 study noted the success of an OU 'conversion course' that offered HE accreditation for learning that took place in the workplace, but unfortunately not who took advantage of this opportunity (Harvey and Slaughter, 2007). An analysis of the student cohort is similarly not included in the initial findings from another single institution study that focused on work-based learning. This looked at the impact of a work-based learning module that imaginatively sought to utilise and build on the reality that many students, including those identified as widening participation target groups, engage in significant work during term time (Ogilvie and Homan, 2012). Further evidence related to work based learning is described in section 2.8 which examines employer contribution to widening participation.

Accreditation of prior or experiential learning (APEL), credit transfer and advanced entry

2.6.37 The strategies highlighted here have a long history, particularly in the US. Modularity and credit accumulation are now well established in UK HE and provide a form of flexibility. However, progress on credit transfer remains slow, a situation not helped by the plethora of credit and qualifications systems, including separate frameworks for HE and the learning and skills sector (Mitchell, 2010). The development of structures to recognise and accredit prior learning in the UK has been patchy and focused mainly in vocational and professional areas. Little recent research has focused explicitly on the potential of these features to widen participation (Houston *et al*, 2011).

2.6.38 A robust Scottish study of credit transfer into a Social Work degree programmes (Gordon *et al*, 2011) found that students admitted with advanced entry (usually with lower qualifications) had similar experiences on course to those completing the full programme. An evaluation of a pre-Nursing 'Portfolio of Evidence for Entry to Level 1 Study' course developed to increase diversity of students taking up nursing also suggests that such approaches can work. Analysis of institutional data found that there were no differences in progression between students who undertook the portfolio course and standard entrants (Rhodes-Martin and Munro, 2010). In general, however, the paucity of research suggests that the potential of APEL to contribute to widening participation remains unfulfilled (Houston *et al*, 2011). It is likely that Osbourne and Young's words in 2006 remain true: 'In the UK, everyone concerned with widening participation will have heard of APEL, but in practice most will not have implemented access using the tools it offers' (p.11).

Table 2.11: Issues raised in literature for widening participation through alternative provision

Type of approach	Issues in the literature
Advanced entry/credit transfer	Different entry routes to the professions of Social Work and Medicine are designed to increase diversity of student groups in HE and subsequently in the workforce to reflect population diversity. Social Work entry routes acknowledge the value of experience and work-based learning as well as vocational qualifications (Gordon <i>et al.</i> , 2011). Medical courses have developed alternative entry routes including pre-medical courses, graduate entry courses and Foundation Degrees in Medicine based on students' prior academic achievement in subjects other than allied to Medicine (Mathers <i>et al.</i> , 2011)
Foundation Degrees	An evaluation of a discipline specific Foundation Degree offered through different pathways of off-site, on-site and work-based learning at a group of FE colleges and HEIs highlights the need for alignment of HE systems in FE (induction, academic study support and support for fieldwork). Alignment between experiential and contextualised learning as part of the Foundation Degree was recommended as helping to enhance students' experiences and success (Simm <i>et al.</i> , 2012).
Use of technology (learning via new media and technology is a feature of flexible provision whether online or incorporated into blended learning courses)	<p>For those who study flexibly, or at a distance, feeling proficient in technology skills is essential as the capacity to learn independently (Kemmer, 2011; Jones and Lau, 2010).</p> <p>The role of technology in flexible learning does not always mean learning in isolation. The tutors' role in providing teaching and learning support, via ICT, to individual students on individual and group academic activity is highly significant for students of distance and e-learning courses. Tutors are required to be good communicators at a distance mediated through ICT and to be responsive to the diversity of students that open access allows. (Kelly and Mills, 2007; Gordon <i>et al.</i>, 2011).</p> <p>Equipment costs, connectivity and technical competence may influence potential students' decisions to participate or impact on the quality of their learning experiences (Kelly and Mills, 2007; Hughes, 2007).</p> <p>Institutional factors can help overcome limited technical skills of students, and staff, through ICT instruction and support to enable access to the curriculum and enhancement of the pedagogical experience through technology (Moule <i>et al.</i>, 2010; Higher Education Academy, 2013).</p>

Emerging conclusions

2.6.39 The types of provision that fall within the heading of the flexible learning category are very broad. Although this may be a strength, in terms of offering a range of alternatives that are attractive to many students who work or have other responsibilities, the actual impact of these forms of provision on widening participation may not match their potential. The research indicates that despite major technological advances little progress has been made to challenge the domination of full-time, face-to-face daytime modes. The literature hints that flexibility may have been outsourced rather than fully integrated into some HEIs' offer.

2.6.40 Policies have not always linked flexible provision to widening participation in an explicit way. Recent falls in demand for part-time study have increased the policy interest in flexible provision. This provides an opportunity for attention to be focused on development and innovation in part-time provision, including policies at national and institutional level that acknowledge the distinctive characteristics of the part-time student population and explore the possible role of this mode for groups who do not traditionally participate in HE. A number of researchers and commentators, highlighted in the review, suggest that issues of financial support for part-time study should be at the heart of any re-examination of the potential role of this mode to contribute to both social justice and economic development imperatives.

2.6.41 The evidence reviewed emphasises the importance of paying particular attention to work/life/study balance issues and structural and support mechanisms to facilitate successful student engagement with flexible provision. Equally, claims about the impact on new learning technologies on widening participation need to be investigated carefully.

2.6.42 Finally, the research indicates that divisions between full and part-time HE may be unhelpful and create barriers to participation, as well as raising issues about parity of esteem between different routes and modes of HE. Uncertainty about the status and supply of part-time provision may impact on student demand and choices. An earlier overview suggested the need for a renewed focus on 'the implementation rather than simply the espousal of flexibility' (Osbourne and Young, 2006, p.11) to bridge the distance between rhetoric and reality in relation to widening participation. A more recent synthesis highlights the importance of further research into the impact of flexible learning on widening participation (Houston, *et al*, 2011).

2.7 Progress to Postgraduate Study

Key findings

- Postgraduate study is emerging as 'the new frontier of widening participation' and has generated much recent policy interest. Little is known in detail about the students who make up the sizeable postgraduate student body. Postgraduate study is very diverse and needs to be disaggregated and analysed in discrete sections to be properly understood.
- Research in this area is relatively scarce, but is growing in range and depth. All parties agree that more work is needed, particularly using the centralised data that is available. Research

efforts are hampered by the complexity of the provision and the extent of inter and intra-institutional variation.

- More and better information on the availability and costs of postgraduate provision is needed. Some recent research has indicated the extent to which increased postgraduate fees may suppress demand.
- The lack of transparency on financial support available for postgraduate students and the possible impact on undergraduate debt on progression to postgraduate study are key areas of concern.
- Aspiration raising and IAG should not stop when under-represented groups access undergraduate HE.
- Postgraduate study is very different to undergraduate study: transition can be problematic. Progression rates are linked strongly to prior undergraduate experiences of study. Institutional variations are significant – the research-intensive HEIs tend to ‘recruit their own’.
- Women access postgraduate study in lower than expected numbers, though there are variations between different types of postgraduate study and the reasons require further research. The ethnicity dimension of progression to postgraduate study is complex, but numbers are exceptionally low for some minority ethnic populations.
- Little is known about the retention and success of postgraduate students or what works.
- Widening participation to postgraduate study has implications for the health of the sector and the vitality and diversity of its own academic workforce.

Introduction to the theme

2.7.1 Postgraduate study has witnessed exponential growth in the last two decades (Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson, 2013). This has been characterised as part of ‘the quest for more and more education’ (Lindley and Machin, 2012). The ‘silent boom of the postgraduate sector’ (Zimdars, 2007) has led to almost a quarter of all the students in UK HEIs studying at postgraduate level (Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson, 2013). A substantial and growing proportion of these (particularly those studying full-time for taught masters or doctoral research degrees) come from outside the UK (House, 2010). However such ‘international students’ and recent research relating to their experiences (e.g. Brown and Holloway, 2008) are not included within this review. The focus is primarily on UK-domiciled postgraduate students, whose numbers have flat-lined and in some instances declined of late (Smith, 2010; House, 2010; Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson, 2013).

2.7.2 Postgraduate study differs significantly from undergraduate study: a point stressed repeatedly within the literature (O’Donnell *et al.*, 2009; Smith, 2010). The very complexity of the postgraduate sector makes generalisations difficult. There are different ‘types’ and ‘sizes’ of postgraduate qualifications: ranging from doctorates to diplomas, with distinct entry requirements, particular study patterns and varying costs. A broad distinction is generally drawn within the literature between research-focused study (mainly for PhD degrees) and taught programmes. This

latter category, which accounts for just over three-quarters of all postgraduate students, is sometimes broken down further into taught masters and 'Other' postgraduate study (for a variety of professional or institutional certificates and diplomas). Such divisions, though useful, still mask something of the variety of provision and the fact that people access it at different stages in their lives and for a variety of reasons. A recent survey of student motivations revealed a mix of often overlapping extrinsic (career, employment) and intrinsic (personal, developmental) reasons for considering postgraduate taught study (i-graduate, 2013), mirroring the findings of the HEA's 2012 Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (Bennett and Turner, 2012). The 2012 NUS student experience survey confirms this pattern for postgraduate options generally (NUS, 2012a).

2.7.3 Although the postgraduate phase is treated as a discrete entity for the purposes of this review it has strong links with a number of the other themes explored. Issues of student finance are a prime concern and the IAG needs of prospective postgraduate students have been the focus of some recent work (i-graduate, 2013; NatCen Social Research, 2013). Approximately 45% of postgraduate students study part-time (Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson, 2013), though it is not always known whether this is through choice or by necessity. The link to employment is strong on many programmes (e.g. PGCEs, MBAs or professional courses in Law) and Stuart *et al.* (2008a) emphasise strong links with the workplace in many facets of their study of the postgraduate student body and their experiences. Issues of transition have also been explored in recent work (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2009; Scott *et al.*, 2011; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013; HEFCE 2013/13).

Context

2.7.4 The health and diversity of the postgraduate sector is increasingly viewed as being central to both stimulating economic growth and addressing social mobility concerns. A recent Higher Education Commission (HEC) report (2012) considered its success as 'vital to Britain's future' (p.4), whilst the Smith Report (2010) spoke about its role in 'driving growth and innovation' in a global knowledge economy. Equally, Alan Milburn's 2012 report on HE and the advancement of social mobility identified the dire consequences for social mobility if existing uneven patterns of postgraduate participation became entrenched or deteriorated still further.

2.7.5 Lindley and Machin's (2012, 2013) research using the Labour Force Survey and the British Cohort Study throws further light on these concerns. They note that the labour market rewards individuals with HE level qualifications. Within their data set, people from higher income backgrounds benefitted most from 'educational upgrading' through postgraduate study. This was in sharp contrast to individuals from lower income families. The result is that 'as the requirements of the labour market have become more demanding, this has exacerbated educational inequalities as workers with postgraduate degrees increasingly come from richer family backgrounds' (p.5). Meanwhile Wakeling (2010) has suggested that, as access to undergraduate HE widens, inequality may simply be 'passed up' to postgraduate level.

2.7.6 The issue of fees and student finance have become highly topical in this context. In particular there have been concerns that attitudes to postgraduate study might change as a result of higher undergraduate fees and concomitant rises in postgraduate fees. A key difference between undergraduate and postgraduate study has historically been in the provision of public funding

arrangements to help individuals cover the cost of their studies. A recent HEFCE overview report (2013/14) indicated that 72% of taught postgraduate students and around 40% of both postgraduate research and 'Other' postgraduate students received no funding from private or public providers. In contrast to the broadly understood national framework of funding available at the undergraduate level, potential postgraduate students have to find their way through a complex landscape of varied fees and different funding sources (research councils, charities and/or sponsors) each with distinct requirements. As Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson (2013) note 'with a few exceptions, such as for postgraduate initial teacher training, students on taught postgraduate programmes are typically self-funded' (p.13). The majority of contributors to HEC's 2012 inquiry 'supported the introduction of a state-backed student loan system for postgraduate taught provision to supplement existing sources of funding' (p.62). Shortly afterwards the NUS put forward detailed proposals for income contingent postgraduate loans (NUS, 2012b).

2.7.7 The increasing policy focus on the widening participation dimensions of postgraduate study has yet to be translated fully into discrete institutional strategies and practices. Action on Access's examination of Widening Participation Strategic Assessments (Thomas *et al.*, 2010) found that only 18 of the 129 HEIs made specific reference to postgraduate activities. However, this may be changing. Significant reviews, fresh research and major policy initiatives all suggest that a sound platform is being laid from which to explore and develop this new frontier. As McCulloch and Thomas (2013) note: 'Policy and practice for widening participation has focused firmly on routes into undergraduate study ... in England, a second phase of widening participation policy and practice is emerging, this time with a focus on postgraduate and doctoral education' (p.214).

Brief description of the evidence

2.7.8 Progression into postgraduate education has increasingly been seen as an integral component of the student lifecycle. However, research into this part of the journey is still in its relative infancy. A constant theme in the literature is the sparseness of existing research and the scope for further investigations (Wakeling and Kyriacou, 2010, Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson, 2013). A particular stumbling block facing researchers is the absence of easily accessible data on which to base large-scale investigations into the demographics of postgraduate study. In contrast to UCAS at the undergraduate level, there is no 'national clearing house for postgraduate applications' (Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson, 2013, p.14). Consequently it is difficult to investigate institutional or sector-wide trends. Equally, the fact that much postgraduate study is part-time adds to the 'data lacuna' within which researchers on the topic are forced to work (HEC, 2012).

2.7.9 This 'research deficit' (Wales 2013) is gradually being tackled and a body of high quality, imaginatively designed work is being put together in a number of fields. These studies have both anticipated and informed the growing policy interest in key aspects of progression to postgraduate study. The research reviewed has used a range of approaches:

- Research using administrative datasets: Wakeling (2009), Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson (2013) and Wales (2013), for example, use HESA's Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) to examine the immediate progression from undergraduate to postgraduate study. This allows for comparative studies on a cohort-by-cohort basis, but is

limited by the fact that only an estimated 10-20% of postgraduates are 'direct entry' students. New work by HEFCE (2013/13) on trends in transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study uses HESA data to link the first degree qualifying population to the enrolling postgraduate population in the academic years following qualification, and also reports on the longer term transition rates for the 2002/03 cohort.

- Comparative studies: Zimdars (2007) and Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson (2013) compare data sets relating to undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts to assess whether there is a marked difference in the make-up of the student body. Such comparisons illuminate broad trends but are less useful in revealing individual motivations or the interplay of the factors involved in decision making in relation to higher level study.
- Survey data: The results of large-scale surveys, such as the Student Experience Research undertaken by NUS (2012a) or the i-graduate (2013) report into the provision of information for postgraduate taught students provide detailed information on motivations for progression into higher degrees. Equally, Lindley and Machin (2012, 2013) have made extensive use of the Labour Force Survey and British Cohort Study datasets.
- Mixed mode studies: Stuart *et al.* (2008a) for example used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to address broad questions about the composition, decision-making and experiences of students studying at postgraduate level in two different English HEIs.
- Institution or discipline-specific research: Whilst the findings of such studies are not always generalisable, they offer illuminating insights into often hidden aspects of the learner journey. For example, Zimdars's (2007) comparison of the profile of postgraduate students at Oxford University with the profile of the postgraduates' undergraduate degree-awarding institution permits a nuanced understanding of the factors at play in access to postgraduate education. Similarly, small-scale studies looking at postgraduate study in specific disciplines (e.g. Tobbell *et al.*, 2010) permit some limited conclusions to be drawn.
- Issue-specific research: This includes some significant studies that focus on particular aspects of the postgraduate experience, including transitions and experiences of assessment and feedback (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2009; Scott *et al.*, 2011; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013) and begin to explore wider issues of identity and belonging.
- Other research methods: Recent researchers have broken new ground by developing fresh perspectives on important aspects of the postgraduate landscape. For example, Wales (2013) used Freedom of Information requests to HEIs to construct a previously inaccessible dataset of tuition fees by institution and subject. His research demonstrates the need for a more coordinated approach to capturing data to inform future policy.

2.7.10 In addition to the growing body of empirical work Wakeling and Kyriacou's (2010) literature review provides a valuable summary of the earlier research and opportunities for further studies. Meanwhile, McCulloch and Thomas (2013), whilst focusing primarily on doctoral education and research degrees, offer an overview of the general postgraduate literature plus a research agenda for widening participation to research degrees.

2.7.11 There are two notable gaps within the literature to date. Firstly, few studies examine vocationally orientated postgraduate courses including diplomas and certificates (for example in

Law, Health and Social Care or Veterinary Science). This area has particular resonance for issues of social mobility and access to professions that require postgraduate study for entry; since, as recent HEFCE work on trends in transition (2013/13) has shown, such 'Other' postgraduate study is particularly important for students from lower participation neighbourhoods and part-time female students. The majority of the literature looks specifically at taught masters or research degrees undertaken directly within HEIs. The second gap relates to the paucity of material on student retention and success. Given that this is such an important issue at undergraduate level, its absence from the postgraduate debate is striking.

Emerging themes, issues and challenges

2.7.12 A number of key themes, issues and challenges in relation to progression to postgraduate study emerge from this review of the growing body of research. These have been organised under a number of broad sub-headings.

Fees and student finance

2.7.13 Recent work by Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson (2013) and Wales (2013) notes the growing interest in postgraduate fees and student finance and links it to the changes in HE funding in the UK. The title of a 2012 report by the 1994 Group - 'The Postgraduate Crisis' - gives an indication of the level of concern felt within the sector about the effects of the new funding arrangements on postgraduate study. The report claims that 'greater barriers will be erected to accessing higher degrees' (p.1). HEC (2012) similarly forecasts 'a perfect storm is ahead' in terms of postgraduate education (p.6). At the heart of these concerns lie fears that prospective postgraduate students from widening participation backgrounds may be hit both directly and indirectly by the effects of recent changes in HE funding. The direct impact would be in the form of higher postgraduate tuition fees, precipitated partly by HEIs' reappraisal of postgraduate fee levels in the light of increases in undergraduate fees. The indirect impact would come via the increased debt burden that students will accrue as a result of the new funding regime for undergraduate study. This issue is being investigated currently by the British Academy and through HEFCE's Intentions After Graduation Survey linked to the National Student Survey.

2.7.14 Earlier research indicated that cost is a particular barrier in relation to postgraduate study (Taylor and Littleton, 2008; NUS, 2010), though Stuart *et al.* (2008a) noted that 'debt worry is more significant than actual debt' (p.7). More recently Wales (2013) found that postgraduate fees increased faster than inflation between 2003/2004 and 2008/2009 and also highlighted significant differences in the cost of postgraduate courses within and between providers. He notes that 'while undergraduate fees have effectively been centrally set, taught postgraduate fees are largely unregulated, may vary across subjects and are set independently by the institutions themselves' (p.6). His research reveals that a 10% increase in expected postgraduate tuition fees is associated with a reduction in the probability of progressing to postgraduate study of between 1.7% and 4.5%. This 'price sensitivity' leads him to advocate urgent research to examine the effect of increased student debt on willingness to pursue higher degrees in UK.

2.7.15 Similar concerns surface in the 2012 NUS Student Experience survey (NUS, 2012a) in which 75.9% of respondents reported that not being able to afford the tuition fees and the living costs

attached to postgraduate study could prevent them from undertaking higher level study. However, as Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson (2013) have noted the actual effects of the new undergraduate tuition fees on student progression to postgraduate study can only really begin to be assessed as the first cohort of higher fee paying students enter their final year of study in 2015. For this reason they argue that it is imperative to 'establish a "baseline" understanding of factors affecting transition to postgraduate study under previous student funding regimes' (p.9).

Role of institutions

2.7.16 The research literature indicates that the institution at which an individual's first degree was completed is a key factor in progression to higher degree study. Recent work by HEFCE (2013/13) on one-year transitions indicates that transition rates are highest for high average tariff score HEIs. Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson (2013) suggest that it is important to look at the previously neglected 'institutional dimension' of transition to postgraduate study. They contend that there is a 'prima facie case for believing that institutional practices are influencing rates of progression into higher degrees' (p.46). Their research found that the Russell Group provided a third of individuals progressing on to taught postgraduate study, despite only approximately a quarter of graduates in their dataset coming from Russell Group universities. This gap was even greater in relation to research degrees where over half of all individuals progressing had attended a Russell Group university for their undergraduate study. These findings echo work by Zimdars (2007) into the enrolment profiles of students entering postgraduate studies at Oxford University which found that 'there is a preference for graduates from the most prestigious universities' (p.12). In the absence of the necessary admissions statistics for postgraduate study, Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson (2013) can only infer that postgraduate admissions tutors 'appear to give more weight to first degrees from certain institutions' (p.41). They also suggest that these higher rates of progression into higher level study may be the result of 'advice and guidance on accessing higher degrees ... [being] ... more readily available at institutions where such destinations are already more common' (p.57).

Prior choices

2.7.17 Choices made at post-16 in terms of undergraduate destinations may also significantly influence progression into postgraduate study. As Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson (2013) note: 'If those entering higher education tend mainly to be drawn from certain kinds of institution, then there is a risk that the likelihood of entering a higher degree – and particularly a research degree – is effectively determined for many on initial entry to undergraduate study' (p.57). This interpretation is echoed in a Sutton Trust report (2010) which highlighted the higher proportion of pupils from independent schools attending the research-led universities from which the 'lion's share' of postgraduate students are derived. The inequalities which exist within undergraduate study then continue into the postgraduate level. The 'under-representation of postgraduates from poorer backgrounds is largely a function of the social make-up and school backgrounds of undergraduate university intakes to begin with – and the performance and choices of students during their first degrees' (The Sutton Trust 2010, p.13). Boliver (2013) graphically illuminates the initial stage of this funnelling process for state school applicants and those from Black and Asian ethnic backgrounds in her account of 'fair access' to Russell Group universities.

Attainment

2.7.18 Attainment at undergraduate level unsurprisingly also plays a significant role in progression into postgraduate study. Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson (2013) found that ‘graduates with a first class Honours degree have the highest rate of progression to a higher degree, with the rate declining for each successively lower grade’ (p.21). On the face of it, this appears hardly ground-breaking in the light of postgraduate course entry requirements. Its implications, however, are far-reaching when examining who actually has the right grades to study at a higher level. Echoing concerns about the attainment gap for students from ethnic minority groups noted in Section 2.4, Wakeling and Kyriacou (2010) comment that certain minority ethnic groups may ‘fall at the first hurdle’ (p. 41) of entry onto a research degree by not having secured the required degree classification at undergraduate level.

Subject

2.7.19 Progression rates to postgraduate study also appear to depend on the subject studied at undergraduate level. Stuart *et al.* (2008a) describe undergraduate study subject as a ‘highly significant predictor’ of intentions to take up postgraduate study. They found those students who studied more applied undergraduate courses, such as Engineering and Health occupations, had lower intentions to take up postgraduate study and were more likely to move directly into work. Recent NUS research (2012a) echoes this finding. Students who study ‘pure’ subjects are more likely to progress onto postgraduate study than students who studied more ‘applied’ subjects such as medicine. Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson (2013) confirm these differential progression rates depending on whether a student has studied a ‘pure’ or ‘applied’ subject. HEFCE’s recent work on transitions within one year reveals stark contrasts between the lowest transition rates (Medicine and Dentistry: 0.9%) and the highest rates (Physical Sciences: 25.4%) (HEFCE, 2013/13). There are also concerns about the potential ‘broken bridge’ between undergraduate and research degrees, especially in subjects where a masters degree is required for entry to doctoral research (HEFCE 2013/14).

2.7.20 Wakeling (2009), though talking about the representation of ethnic minority groups in postgraduate study, sums up a broader concern highlighted in the literature: ‘Choice of undergraduate degree subject and institution reflect both the academic credentials they possess and their cultural milieu. The latter includes the advice available to them, role models and judgements about suitably desirable and attainable aspirations and locations. These in turn condition the range of graduate outcomes available and the disposition of the graduate to pursue them’ (pp.106-7).

Findings for different groups

2.7.21 Research into progression on to postgraduate study largely mirrors trends seen at undergraduate level. Progression rates in relation to ethnicity and socio-economic background remain broadly similar whether looking at undergraduate or postgraduate students. Assessment of the socio-economic composition of the postgraduate student body however is ‘methodically challenging’ (Smith, 2010) due to the difficulties of finding the right metrics to apply.

2.7.22 Gender is one area of divergence. Contrary to the accepted norm that females outperform males in terms of attainment and progression into undergraduate study, recent research suggests

this is not always the case at postgraduate level. Wakeling and Kyriacou (2010) discuss how unusual it is to see gender play such a significant role at postgraduate level in comparison to undergraduate level. They found that very little research has been done to explain this gender gap in relation to postgraduate study. Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson (2013) investigated the issue of gender in progression into postgraduate education further and found a 'consistent and clear gap' between progression rates between men and women of two percentage points for taught higher degrees and a male rate of progression into research degrees of almost twice that of women. This clear 'educational advantage' for men occurs in practically all subject areas and persists when controlling for subject discipline and attainment. In contrast, recent overviews suggest that women are in the majority in 'Other' postgraduate study and overall there are equal numbers of male and female postgraduate students in the UK (HEFCE 2013/14; Lindley and Machin, 2013).

2.7.23 Wakeling's (2009) research concluded that whilst there are 'few grounds for deeming ethnic minorities to be under-represented at postgraduate level', this masks quite substantial differences between ethnic groups (p.105). His study in 2013 with Hampden-Thompson found that there was 'substantial under-representation' of particular ethnic groups, specifically Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi, in postgraduate study. Strikingly, he was able to claim that fewer than 10 graduates from each of these groups entered research degrees per academic year, noting that this is a serious concern if 'we wish to have a higher education sector that represents the society in which is based and that seeks out academic talent across all groups' (p.58). As seen earlier, the issue of ethnicity links to institutional factors. Wakeling's (2009) study found that Black students and those from Bangladeshi communities were more likely to be attending 'new' universities. Conversely, Indian, Chinese, Asian Other and Other/Mixed groups are more highly represented in 'old' universities. He notes that 'Higher education presents an opportunity for social mobility and integration but it can also reproduce existing inequalities. Access to postgraduate study for the UK's ethnic minorities is a case in point' (p.108)

Table 2.12: Findings from research into postgraduate study by different groups

Low socio-economic groups	<p>Destinations data highlight significant differences in the postgraduate progression rates of students from different economic backgrounds. DHLE data show 'students from the poorest families were between 1.8% and 2.4% less likely to progress in to postgraduate study than students from wealthiest backgrounds, even after controlling for their individual characteristics and prior academic attainment' (Wales, 2013, p.42) [Note that this research is limited to 'direct entry' postgraduate students who have entered higher level study within six to nine months of graduating from their first degree].</p> <p>Students from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds, who were less likely to have entered undergraduate studies, were then less likely to progress to taught masters and postgraduate research courses. They were, though, more likely than other socio-economic groups to progress to other postgraduate courses (HEFCE, 2013/13).</p> <p>Graduates from NS-SEC classes 1 and 2 outnumber graduates from NS-</p>
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	<p>SEC classes 6 and 7 by a ratio of seven to two amongst postgraduate students on taught higher degrees in 2010-11 (Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson, 2013).</p> <p>Research undertaken by Stuart <i>et al.</i> (2008a) suggested that family experience of HE is more relevant than occupational background as a predictor of students going on to postgraduate study. Their analysis indicated that students who were the first in their family to go into HE were less likely to go onto postgraduate study.</p>
Ethnic minority groups	<p>Differences exist between different minority ethnic groups, with 'substantial under-representation' of Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi students, in postgraduate study (Wakeling, 2009 and Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson, 2013)</p> <p>In general, students from ethnic minority groups are more likely than White students to progress to taught masters courses, but less likely to go on to other postgraduate or postgraduate research courses. This could, at least in part, relate to the region of the institution and the subject area studied (HEFCE, 2013/13).</p> <p>Institutional factors are highlighted as playing a key factor in progression into postgraduate study of ethnic minority students (Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson, 2013). Ethnic minority groups with relatively high rates of progression to postgraduate study (Indian, Chinese, Asian Other and Other/Mixed groups) are more highly represented in 'old' universities (Wakeling, 2009).</p>
Mature students	<p>Students classified as 'mature' at the time of their undergraduate studies are less likely to progress to all types of postgraduate study and were more likely to stay at the same institution (HEFCE, 2013/13).</p> <p>Prospective students who had taken time out and were considering a return to HE were more likely to beat an 'informational' disadvantage in comparison to undergraduates in their final year (i-Graduate, 2013)</p> <p>Financial considerations may be a key influence on the decisions of older students embarking upon postgraduate study. Pollard <i>et al.</i> (2008) found those most concerned about costs were aged between 25 and 34. [Note this research is based on a sample of undergraduate students on Arts courses.]</p>

Evidence about effective approaches

2.7.24 The research literature to date has focused primarily on wrestling with challenging datasets and identifying key trends and future lines of enquiry. Although much may be starting to happen on

the ground in terms of effective practice this has yet reflected fully in the published literature. The discussion below indicates how two key areas are being explored.

Information, Advice and Guidance

2.7.25 IAG emerges in the literature as a key area in relation to widening participation and access to postgraduate study. A prospective student is faced with a daunting number of decisions, from choice of institution and course content to cost and funding options. An NUS survey of postgraduate taught students (2010) found significant gaps in knowledge about finance. At present, there is no central point for information about postgraduate courses, comparable to that which is readily available through UCAS at undergraduate level. The onus is on the individual to seek this information. Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013) discuss this in terms of the 'self-efficacy' of a prospective student to navigate the maze of disparate information regarding postgraduate course choices. The Smith Report (2010) highlights the need for an 'independent reference point for someone considering postgraduate study' as clear and accurate information is vital to help inform decisions about going into postgraduate study (p.46). Recent research into the information needs of postgraduate taught students (i-graduate, 2013) confirms the scattered, piecemeal nature of current information sources and highlights the importance of qualitative course level information and human contact. A parallel report (NatCen Social Research, 2013) concluded that extending the National Student Survey to include taught postgraduate students would be unlikely to achieve the objective of enabling more informed choices by potential postgraduate students, as recommended by Smith (2010). This has led to further research being commissioned to help HEIs provide and students search for information.

Subject

2.7.26 The literature on postgraduate education tends to focus on access to as opposed to success within higher degree study. However, increasing attention is being paid to understanding transition to postgraduate study and the issues that arise within it. O'Donnell *et al.* (2009) warn against assumptions about the homogeneity of postgraduate students. They argue that progression to and success within postgraduate study is often overlooked as a transition point due to assumptions that this new period of study simply includes 'more of the same': students will have learnt all the required skills during their undergraduate studies. This study highlights the importance of 'communities' within HE and how postgraduate students must learn and adapt to these. Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013) similarly discuss the importance of on-going and targeted support for postgraduate students throughout their period of study to help them adjust to the demands of postgraduate level work.

2.7.27 A major study conducted under the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme on students' transitions from undergraduate study to employment or masters-level work focused in particular on improving formative assessment and feedback processes (Scott *et al.*, 2011). The widening participation strand of the project highlighted the importance of early experiences including admissions and induction in facilitating initial transition. It also argued that 'participatory pedagogical approaches help to support the processes of developing a sense of postgraduate identity and fitting in and belonging to a shared community of learning' (p.5). There are echoes of other related findings within the (undergraduate) retention and success theme (section 2.4 above).

These include the research project's focus on writing as a method of inquiry and learning rather than simply a 'skill' deficit to be addressed and the emphasis on broader institutional cultures and practices.

Emerging conclusions

2.7.28 The very diversity of course provision and the lack of homogeneity of the postgraduate student population mean that nuanced approaches are needed from policy-makers and practitioners in relation to widening participation at this phase of the student lifecycle. To date much of the pioneering research effort has been focused on mapping out the territory, improving data and identifying key issues for attention. Beyond the examples cited above little evidence has yet emerged in the published literature about the implementation of successful strategies to promote access and success for under-represented groups within postgraduate education. However, that is not to say that action is not starting to happen on the ground.

2.7.29 In order to combat the 'limited diversity' of new postgraduates in a highly selective university Zimdars (2007) recommends that raising aspiration activities should not stop once students enrol onto undergraduate courses. This sentiment is echoed by Stuart *et al.* (2008a) who found that family experience of HE was a significant factor influencing whether someone progressed to postgraduate study. Better organised and more accessible information may also help, particularly in relation to fees and finance. It is likely though that, in addition to the widely acknowledged need for measures to address the 'evidence vacuum' (McCulloch and Thomas, 2013), progress will be based on incremental, focused research and development activities that address the needs of particular postgraduate populations. As Wakeling (2009) noted in relation to minority ethnic participation 'measures ... at postgraduate level need to be carefully nuanced and contextualised' (p.108).

2.7.30 Beyond the wider economic and social mobility concerns identified earlier, the progressive narrow funnelling of opportunities to access postgraduate study that much of the research reveals has significant implications for the health of the HE sector and the vitality and diversity of its own academic workforce.

2.8 Employer Contribution to Widening Participation

Key findings

- HE-employer engagement is a national priority and there are signs that recent developments in funding for workforce development initiatives have helped to increase participation in HE by widening participation groups, for example, developments through the Higher Apprenticeship Fund and co-funded provision.
- There are issues around the extent to which widening participation groups are benefiting in the same way as other employees. For example, employees from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to be supported by their employer. Apprentices from widening participation target areas are less likely to go into full-time university provision than those from more advantaged areas.

Introduction to the theme

2.8.1 This section focuses on how higher education providers work and engage with employers in ways that contribute to widening participation. The employers' role in supporting higher education providers to develop employability within the student population as a whole and with widening participation groups specifically is covered in Section 2.9. This section examines how employer-HEI relationships contribute to widening participation more broadly.

2.8.2 Improving engagement between HE and employers has been at the heart of government policy for over a decade and this review examines how the changes witnessed by the sector have had an impact on participation in HE for widening participation target groups.

Context

2.8.3 Supporting collaboration between employers and the HE sector in order to improve access to higher level skills and provide support for employability initiatives has been a long-standing priority for governments. Foundation Degrees introduced in 2000, for example, offered new and accessible routes into HE, particularly for individuals already in the workforce or those preferring a work-based route from HE to employment. In 2002, 25 Sector Skills Councils were established in the UK to act as brokers between employers and providers and to act strategically to increase skills development (Payne, 2007).

2.8.4 Leitch's 2006 review of the UK's long-term skills needs influenced government policy and called for a new relationship between employers and HE. The review recommended that the UK commit itself to becoming a world leader in skills by 2020 by doubling attainment at most levels, with a focus on economically valuable and demand-led skills, and on continuity (building on existing structures)²². Higher education providers have addressed these recommendations in varying ways based on previous traditions and current levels of economic and employment engagement. There are differences in how individual higher education providers work with employers and the extent to which they adopt a strategic approach (Edge and SCRE Centre, 2011).

2.8.5 The Leitch Review (2006) gave a new impetus and raised expectations about the contribution of employers to design and deliver courses as well as fund and support them. Employers were encouraged to invest in their employees and widen the focus of HE target groups in order to drive up skill levels of adults as well as young people. The Leitch Review also suggested greater flexibility of HE provision, e.g. a negotiated content; delivery off-campus; delivery at a distance using technology and at times and a pace to suit the learners; assessment perceived as relevant to work activity; more generic learning outcomes; and study programmes available through shorter credit- or award-bearing packages.

²² The review recommended that a portion of HE funding for vocational courses be delivered through a similar demand-led mechanism as Train to Gain. The aim was to use government funding to lever in greater investment by employers at Level 4 and Level 5.

2.8.6 The rapid development of higher apprenticeships has been a key government strategy in boosting flexible, part-time and work-based HE opportunities. The government has committed to developing a 'ladder of opportunity' to higher vocational education (New Challenges, New Chances strategy), and set aside funding (the Higher Apprenticeship Fund) for the development of 10,000 higher apprenticeship places within four years (BIS, 2011b).

Brief description of the evidence

2.8.7 Some of the evidence reviewed is drawn from studies based on primary data collection and analysis, and from the interrogation of official data relating to specific courses. Research methods include surveys and interviews with employers as well as higher education providers and participants. Other evidence relies on review of research pertaining to relevant questions, and wider literature reviews of employer engagement including the identification of good practice case studies.

2.8.8 A key source is data collected on HEFCE's Employer co-funded provision. This includes an examination of data on the cohorts of co-funded students in 2007/8 and 2008/9 referring to expansions in student numbers, range of subjects studied and types of qualifications undertaken (HEFCE, 2011/12). National tracking of apprentices to higher vocational qualifications is underway (BIS, 2013).

2.8.9 Studies of HE-employer links tend to use different methods and the evidence is fragmented rather than being easy to join up. For example, evidence relates to particular types of courses/initiatives and/or institution and none of it attempts a comprehensive evaluation. The literature on HE-employer engagement covers both themes with a close relationship to widening participation and those that are more generic but which can be considered as providing indirect evidence of employer contribution to the widening participation agenda.

Emerging themes, issues and challenges

Employer investment in HE

2.8.10 The rationale for involving employers in learning and funding of HE often emphasises links between education, higher qualifications, CPD and increased performance of the economy (Walsh, 2006). Employers may not have engaged in funding HE as much as anticipated. The willingness of employers to provide flexible locations for HE learning in the workplace and to support student learning is variable (Ogilvie and Homan, 2012). Moreover, where employers do engage there may not be an explicit focus on widening participation. In general, employers who support their employees' HE are more likely to invest in employees who are White, have existing HE qualifications and are from professional and managerial social classes rather than from widening participation target groups (Kelly and Mills, 2007).

Stimulating demand

2.8.11 On the positive side, there is some evidence that work with employers stimulates new demand for HE. Reports looking at apprenticeships as a route to HE found that relatively low percentages of apprentices go on to HE, however the suggestion is that those who do progress may not have done otherwise. A HEFCE report (2009/17) looking at apprenticeships as a pathway to HE noted large variances by industry in terms of progression. Data from the cohort analysed showed

that 6% of those on advanced apprenticeships moved on to HE overall, while 67% on Accountancy apprenticeships progressed²³. Furthermore the analysis found that the highest rates of progression to HE were from those living in areas of high HE participation.

2.8.12 The benefits of progression may be concentrated in particular parts of the HE sector. An extensive quantitative analysis of apprenticeships commissioned by BIS (2013) identified clear regional differences in progression, suggesting that accessible pathways are crucial. The report recognised the important role that FE colleges play in providing HE opportunities for work-based learners, with a higher percentage of the first tracked cohort going on to HE in college rather than university (56% compared to 44%).

Meeting business needs

2.8.13 HE-employer links support employers' skills needs. A qualitative assessment of the experiences of employers who have supported the progression of advanced apprentices to HE, (Kewin *et al.*, 2011) found positive views amongst them. Unsurprisingly, their main driver in supporting the progression was an identified business need for higher level skills. There does not appear to have been much other research in this area, and if apprenticeships are to be developed, it would seem important to explore further the views and experiences of employers.

Entry criteria

2.8.14 The research identifies the entry criteria used by HEIs as a key barrier to enhanced take-up of HE through the employment route. There are frequent calls for explicit and transparent criteria for vocational qualifications to be translated into HE entry requirements. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills argues that admissions tutors should have a comprehensive knowledge of different vocational pathways. The report also highlights the need for more robust information about the number and type of learners who progress from vocational study to higher level learning (UVAC, 2010). A University of Southampton report in 2010 pointed out that apprentices who wished to progress to higher study could not always accumulate sufficient tariff points to do so. The report notes university admissions staff's limited understanding of advanced apprenticeship curriculum content and argues the case for better informed staff and for university admissions policies that take account of apprenticeship and advanced apprenticeship routes (Alison *et al.*, 2010).

2.8.15 A 2012 study reiterated the need for clear and transparent tariffs for progression from apprenticeships to HE (Thomas *et al.*, 2012). This study also emphasised the need for more effective and targeted IAG, noting that because 'apprentices are primarily employees' their needs are likely to be specific and different, and called for an agreed level of HE readiness to ensure that apprentices would become confident HE students. This echoes the findings of the earlier UK Commission for Employment and Skills report that argues for more finessed IAG, unitized and credit-based approaches, as well as accreditation of prior learning and part-time and other flexible modes of study (UVAC, 2010).

²³ It is important to note that overall numbers of apprentices progressing to HE are modest and even significant percentages represent a small number of students, for example 67% of Accountancy apprentices progressing to HE equates to just 400 individuals.

Evidence about effective approaches

Employer involvement in Higher Apprenticeship frameworks

2.8.16 Progression to HE rates for apprentices are low. This is due in part to the lack of relevant opportunities for progression. As a response some employers have engaged in collaborative working to support the development of Level 4 apprenticeship frameworks (Kewin *et al.*, 2011). The primary motivation appears to be the existence of a clear business need for higher level skills. Other drivers vary between sectors and can include a desire to develop a stock of talent for the future, regulatory requirements, and alignment with particularly aspirational employees. National tracking of apprentices (BIS, 2013) reveals some key trends which demonstrate a clear contribution to widening participation: just under half (44%) of advanced level apprentices came from areas classified as areas of low HE participation²⁴, which is well above the proportion of 18-19 year old entrants (31%). The research also notes an increase in the population of advanced level apprentices from the lowest HE participation areas, but this was below the increase in the numbers of advanced level apprentices from advantaged areas.

2.8.17 Higher apprenticeships appear to be offering opportunities to widening participation target groups, but there are differences in the type of HE accessed by higher apprentices from different areas: 57% of apprentices living in areas of the lowest HE participation progress to higher vocational education in colleges, with 43% entering a university, below the proportion of the more advantaged students entering a university (49%); those from low HE participation areas were more likely to enter part-time HE than those from high HE participation areas (BIS, 2013).

Growth of employer co-funded provision supports and the take-up of HE

2.8.18 Analysis of the HEFCE employer co-funded provision in 2007/8 and 2008/9 (HEFCE, 2011/12) showed that the number of institutions registering co-funded activity increased over the two year period from 6 to 19. In most cases the headcount returned equates to 50 or fewer FTEs, although part-time was the most frequent mode of study among co-funded students. This data suggest that this example of co-funding does not have an overwhelming impact but is extremely important for those directly involved, and may provide valuable strategic lessons for employer engagement and widening participation.

2.8.19 In 2008/9²⁵ around half of co-funded students did not hold HE-level qualifications on entry (i.e. they were participating within a HE setting for the first time). The most frequently studied subject areas were Veterinary Sciences, Agriculture and related subjects (61% in 2007/8) and subjects allied to Medicine (32% in 2008/9, when there was also a greater spread of subjects). The most frequent qualifications being studied were institutional credits (HEFCE, 2011/12).

Employers as providers of financial support to individual learners

2.8.20 An analysis of student records (HEFCE, 2011/12) showed that employers did not contribute significantly to the tuition fees of co-funded students. In 2007/8 81% of students received no award

²⁴ POLAR 3 quintiles 1 and 2

²⁵ It should be noted that this analysis is based on small numbers of co-funded students registered at the 19 HEIs participating in the early stages of the HEFCE employer co-funded initiative.

or financial backing, although this figure fell to 42% in 2008/9. However, these data are unlikely to provide a complete picture of support from employers, for example it does not capture instances where students pay fees and then seek reimbursement from their employer and should therefore be treated with caution (p.53). In both years there was additional evidence that the student's employer paid tuition fees: 9% in 2007/8 and 18% in 2008/2009. In the latter year, other payments by public bodies or charities were significant for 15% of students, and for 19% of students there was no fee or the fee was waived.

2.8.21 Hopkin and Mason's (2011) interviews with 294 employers of part-time students and 3,288 part-time students produced key findings about the employers' role in providing financial support. Roughly a third of student employees reported that their employers paid all their course fees as well as providing other kinds of support. Moreover employers were very positive about offering support for part-time study as the perceived benefits seemed to outweigh any cost disadvantages for many employers (although there was concern about the increase in HE tuition fees).

Employer support for the development and delivery of foundation degrees

2.8.22 The literature identifies two main strands within foundation degree provision: pre-entry to employment (typically full-time, predominantly male), and CPD for those in employment (part-time, predominantly female). It is argued that it is the latter group which more readily meets the qualification's objectives in terms of the work-based learning and widening participation (Edmond *et al.*, 2007). Employers involved in foundation degree provision report immediate benefits for their business. Those employers expressing concerns tended to be those least involved in design, development or delivery of the qualification. There was however considerable variation in the quality and sustainability of employer-led provision (Foundation Degree Forward (FdF), n.d).

2.8.23 Craig (2009) suggests that foundation degrees made an important contribution to widening participation. A survey found that 60% of entrants were the first in their immediate family to attend HE (FdF, n.d) and this provision has been identified as an important route to HE for older part-time students. Craig (2009) argues that foundation degrees have provided new ways for employers to contribute to the public good of facilitating greater participation in HE and have allowed HE subject curricula to be opened to wider consideration and debate.

Emerging conclusions

2.8.24 Work with employers is crucial to meeting national objectives for higher level skills. The literature provides some evidence of close partnerships between higher education providers and employers at both local and national level. However, there is limited empirical research that establishes the extent and nature of this work and the research that is available does not seek to examine the role of employers in supporting under-represented groups specifically.

2.8.25 Employers potentially play an important role in encouraging the take-up of HE and giving financial support to students. However, while they are generally positive about offering support for part-time HE study and the benefits that derive from it, in practice they are least likely to engage with under-represented groups. Some commentators suggest that a 'wider concept of HE needs to be adopted by policy makers, government, funders, stakeholders' towards policy and funding

methodologies that incentivise higher education providers to support non-traditional modes of study (UVAC, 2010).

2.8.26 It is worth exploring how HE provision might be tailored more to the needs of the employer, and how awareness of the kinds of provision and support that higher education providers offer might be raised. Admissions policies adopted by HEIs may also have a role to play, particularly in relation to those on an employed route into HE including apprenticeships (Alison *et al.*, 2010; UVAC, 2010). Admissions staff need to know about vocational pathways and qualifications so that they can give appropriate advice and make informed decisions about potential entrants.

2.9 Employability

Key findings

- Employability of HE graduates is a long standing concern, but the focus has intensified recently in tandem with concerns about the economic return on investment in HE. The extent to which higher education providers have responded to this agenda varies and this may in part be due to funding.
- Destination and other data suggest that students from non-traditional backgrounds are disadvantaged in the labour market, leading to questions about whether the HE sector is perpetuating existing disadvantage.
- The returns differ between groups of students entering HE and getting a degree, and trend data suggests the returns are worsening for lower socio-economic group entrants. Changing circumstances such as higher tuition fees and greater competition for jobs in the labour market could lead to more negative outcomes and could reduce incentives for HE participation.
- Embedding employability into the curriculum can benefit all students and is regarded as best practice. Employability of students from widening participation backgrounds can also be supported by innovative and targeted approaches, although there is little empirical evidence to suggest what works.
- Employers are looking for graduates who can show strong involvement in extra-curricular activities and citizenship, but some graduates from widening participation backgrounds may be less able to demonstrate participation in these types of activities.
- Work experience is an enabler of success in the graduate labour market and higher education providers can support students from widening participation backgrounds to access work experience.

Introduction to the theme

2.9.1 The Higher Education Academy defines employability as:

'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy' (Thomas and Jones, 2007, p.2).

2.9.2 The importance of employability is not disputed, although there is significant discussion over what is actually meant by employability and whether it is useful to define employability purely in relation to development of skills (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011; Edge and SCRE, 2011).

2.9.3 This theme examines the role of the higher education provider in supporting employability of students from widening participation backgrounds and identifies the key role that employers play in delivery of employability interventions. Further analysis of employers' contribution to supporting widening participation can be found in Section 2.8.

Context

2.9.4 Employability of HE graduates has been a focus within the HE sector over the last 15 years or more; successive governments have recognised the importance of employability and skills development to the economy and changes have taken place at institutional level, particularly around the need to embed employability in teaching and learning. There is however acknowledgement that there are differences in how individual higher education providers work with employers and the extent to which they adopt a strategic approach, and that in part this may be due to HE funding systems which provide little incentive for higher education providers to prioritise this work (Edge and SCRE, 2011).

2.9.5 There has also been on-going criticism by employers about the employability of UK graduates, with research commenting on the levels of employer dissatisfaction in relation to the skills displayed by recent graduates (CBI/NUS, 2011), although research commissioned by UKCES identifies dissatisfaction in only a minority (Shury *et al.*, 2010).

2.9.6 The focus on employability has increased recently. Since 2010 higher education providers have been required to produce a public statement outlining what they do to promote employability. This statement forms part of the Unistats website in which KIS are embodied. In order to assist employers to differentiate between graduates and to support graduates to evidence their achievements, the sector has also recently introduced the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). This provides graduates with a detailed record of their academic extracurricular achievements in addition to their degree classification. There is also a growing discussion at policy level over the inequality in access to internships and the impact of unpaid opportunities on social mobility.

2.9.7 This renewed focus on employability is in part due to the belief that employment outcomes associated with individual higher education providers and individual courses is of growing importance to prospective students. The suggestion is that an increase in tuition fees and the acknowledged decline in graduate employment rates could lead prospective students to look more closely at the value of their HE experience in relation to labour market outcomes. But there are other reasons why discussions over employability continue to grow. With an increasingly diverse student population there has been a growing recognition that students from non-traditional backgrounds are disadvantaged in the labour market, leading the academic community to question whether engagement in HE is actually a route to social mobility or whether the sector is continuing to perpetuate existing disadvantage. As a result, higher education providers and the research

community have looked to quantify what disadvantage exists; the causes of this disadvantage; and what interventions they can support to ensure HE contributes to levelling the playing field.

Brief description of the evidence

2.9.8 A good proportion of the material available focuses on graduate outcomes, usually based on analysis of data derived from the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) which provides a robust source of information; but on initial outcomes only, with data collected approximately six months on from completion of studies. The data does allow up to date analysis against different variables, for example gender, class and ethnicity, and provides access to information about the possible winners and losers in the graduate labour market. The longitudinal tracking study, Futuretrack research project, provides a picture of graduate outcomes in relation to a wider range of factors known to improve employability. The results of this study are drawn on throughout this overview. During the final phase of this review AGCAS and the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) released a report of their 6-month project investigating graduate employability and social mobility (Pennington *et al.*, 2013). The review has sought to include some of their key findings, within the time limits available.

2.9.9 Within the material reviewed there are also a number of relatively small scale qualitative studies attempting to identify factors that impact on choices made by individuals during their HE studies and during their transition to employment. Most of these studies examine the role social, cultural and economic capital play in shaping the outcomes for under-represented groups: most do not set out to identify what works but to identify the issues.

2.9.10 There is a sizeable resource providing guidance to higher education providers on implementation of employability programmes, particularly the pedagogy of employability, some of which give examples of existing practice, although there is an absence of data on the effectiveness of the approaches presented and there is little that fell within the scope of the study which squarely addresses good practice in the support of under-represented groups.

Emerging themes, issues and challenges

Disadvantage in the labour market

2.9.11 Under-represented groups are disadvantaged in the graduate labour market. Literature reviewed indicates that there are differences in employment outcomes for under-represented groups giving rise to a generally accepted view that certain groups of students face disadvantage in making the transition into graduate level employment. Longitudinal tracking of UCAS 2006 applicants (Purcell *et al.*, 2012) indicates that although socio-economic group did not seem to determine employment outcomes, participation in extra-curricular activities is 'clearly associated with labour market advantage' and that, amongst the cohort tracked, socio-economic background was the likeliest determinant of whether a respondent had taken part in such activities. The study also identified that younger students living at home were the most likely to be working in a non-graduate job, however they were also the least likely to have achieved an upper second class degree or above. Research conducted for the National Equality Panel in 2009 (Machin *et al.*, 2009) also identified disadvantage between different groups, even when taking into account factors such as the

higher education provider attended and the degree classification achieved. The report identified significant differences in the employment status and income levels of different ethnic groups, e.g. Black male graduates earned 5.3% less than White males 6 months after graduation. The report also identified that the most significant difference in income was generated when comparing graduates from state and independent school backgrounds.

Employer decision making

2.9.12 One of the arguments put forward is that under-represented groups are disadvantaged in the labour market due to the fact that they are more likely to attend low or middle tariff universities and that recruitment decisions made by employers are influenced by the institution an individual attended. Morley and Aynsley (2007) identified that information on quality and standards was being used by some employers in a way that could undermine equity and widening participation initiatives. Over a quarter of employers were preferring to use league tables/Top 20 lists in their decision making processes and 80% of employers cited the importance of the reputation of a higher education provider in their decision making about recruitment of individual graduates. The argument presented was that reputation was based on real or imagined league tables; grapevine knowledge; personal, regional and professional networks; performance of past graduates; and prejudice against new universities. The report concluded that: 'The hierarchy of opportunity within the labour market often appeared to correspond to a highly stratified higher education sector' (p.229). Research undertaken by UUK/CBI (2009), confirmed the finding that employers do consider the university attended an important factor to be considered when recruiting graduates but this was seen as a priority by only of 8% of employers. Pennington *et al.* (2013) found that 74% of employers felt that the institution attended did not affect their view of an applicant, however there were large variations between large employers and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), with the latter significantly more likely to be influenced by institution. This study also identified that employers were selective in their recruitment activities, with around half of their sample saying they targeted specific higher education providers when seeking to employ a graduate.

Impact of extra-curricular activities

2.9.13 There is significant evidence that employers are seeking to recruit graduates with a well-rounded HE experience, with some research suggesting that employers are actually suspicious of graduates who had a narrow HE experience (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). Tchibozo (2007) examined the effect extracurricular activities had on the transition from HE to the labour market. From the survey of 119 graduates it was found that participation in extracurricular activities had a significant influence on the transition process, finding that employers most appreciated those activities where students were classified as leaders or had engaged in citizenship activities.

2.9.14 At the same time research has established that under-represented groups are less like to participate in extra-curricular activities which leave them in a weakened position when entering the labour market. For example, 67% of Futuretrack respondents from a routine or manual background had taken part in extra-curricular activities compared to 80% of graduates from a higher managerial or professional background (Purcell *et al.*, 2012) and the same report also found that students from higher tariff universities were much more likely to have taken part in extra-curricular activities. Recent findings from the AGCAS/AGR Graduate Success Project confirm that disadvantaged learners

(e.g. first generation entrants or those studying at a lower tariff university) were more likely to report a lack of time to engage in extra-curricular activities and that those in non-graduate jobs or unemployed graduates were more likely to say they had not had time to participate in such activities (Pennington *et al.*, 2013). Mature research participants have also reported minimal participation in extracurricular activities, due to work and family commitments (Redmond, 2006). Redmond referred to this as a 'wash n go' existence, where students came to take part in academic studies and left swiftly upon finishing. Redmond argued that this type of student was deprived of the opportunity to develop the cultural capital so valued by employers. Stuart *et al.* (2008b) also identified differences in levels of participation in a range of extra-curricular activities, with working class students less likely to be involved in clubs/societies, councils/committees, volunteering and other hobbies.

2.9.15 However, not all studies have identified a low level of participation in extra-curricular activities. Holdsworth and Quinn (2010) sought to test the theory that volunteering activities were dominated by the middle class. Their research, conducted with over 3,000 HE students across Merseyside, found that the 'characteristics of student volunteers reflect those of non-traditional students rather than middle class entrants into higher education'. Researchers argue that when the traditional view of extra-curricular activities (for example voluntary work and sporting activities facilitated by higher education providers) is applied, other valuable activities are neglected (e.g. local students may continue to participate in non-university activities or undertake non-paid caring roles). This finding is backed up by Futuretrack research (Purcell *et al.*, 2012) in which it is identified that students attending general HE colleges were more likely to have pursued an activity outside of the college rather than within it, which may well be linked to the fact that only 30% of respondents studying in a general HE college thought their institution had excellent opportunities for extra-curricular activities (as opposed to 85% of those in the highest tariff universities). Adopting a wide definition of such activities and enabling students to articulate their involvement in these is key in developing employability (Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010).

Career planning

2.9.16 Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) found little involvement in extra-curricular activities amongst their sample of working class students, indeed their research identified that students were less involved in activities than before their transition to HE. They also found that those not working were no more likely to engage in extracurricular activities than those who were working and they suggest it is not just about the time to engage, it is about recognising the importance of doing so. They go on to suggest that their research indicates that a lack of engagement in career decision making activities is not just about a lack of time but about the way in which students put their career on hold in order to focus on academic work. This focus on academic success is mirrored in other studies (Redmond, 2006) and it is suggested that sacrificing a wider HE experience in order to achieve an upper second class degree is not necessarily the best way to achieve graduate level employment (Pennington *et al.*, 2013). Pennington *et al.* (2013) also identified that non-advantaged learners delayed job applications and that this was associated with less positive labour market outcomes. The report also highlights that advantaged graduates reported being better prepared for interviews and assessment centres, had a better understanding of the job market, were more likely to have attended employer-led events and were slightly more likely to seek help with a job application.

Higher Education Achievement Report

2.9.17 Following a number of substantial pilot projects, a number of institutions are in the process of developing and implementing strategies to roll out the HEAR. Although there is little empirical evidence available yet surrounding the impact of its wider use, Pennington *et al.* (2013) report that currently 23% of employers surveyed were aware of its existence, with significantly different levels of awareness between large employers (56.5%) and SMEs (12%). Overall SMEs had a more favourable attitude to the HEAR, with large employers less likely to report an intention to change recruitment practices to accommodate the HEAR. The HEAR is in part a mechanism for providing employers with information about a graduate's participation in extra-curricular activities and given earlier findings over reduced levels of engagement in such activities by students from widening participation backgrounds it could be argued that the HEAR has the potential to reinforce the differences between those able to engage in recognised activities and those that are not.

Findings for different groups

2.9.18 Employability prospects of graduates differ between widening participation groups, as shown in Table 2.13. Gender differences should also be noted: although male and female graduates access work at similar rates (HECSU/AGCAS, 2012), four years on the gender distribution of graduate earnings are strikingly uneven (Purcell *et al.*, 2012)

2.9.19 The returns to students from entering HE and getting a degree do not appear to be universal, promoting some to question if the labour market could act as a barrier to non-traditional students entering HE (Adnett and Slack, 2007). According to one study (although a health warning is given regarding the data) there appeared to be significant economic rewards to marginal entrants to HE suggesting that there are potentially net social benefits from dismantling the barriers preventing widening participation. However, some groups, e.g. 'late learners', may incur labour market penalties in terms of hourly wages and hours worked (Conlon, 2005). These data point to the presence of economic incentives for non-traditional learners, but changing circumstances such as higher HE tuition fees and greater competition for jobs in the labour market could lead to more negative outcomes and could reduce incentives to HE participation.

Table 2.13: Employability issues for different groups

Low socio-economic groups	Low socio-economic group graduates are more likely to go into low status jobs on graduation. Amongst English domiciled full-time first degree graduates graduating in 2010/11 aged 20-22 years, who were in full-time employment six months after graduating, the estimated percentage for those classed as from low socio-economic group households (Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) 4-9) on entry to HE who went into professional and managerial positions (SOC 1-3) was six percentage points below their peers from higher socio-economic group households (66% compared to 22%). The gap has widened from three percentage points in 2005/06 (BIS, 2012).
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Disabled students	<p>Disabled graduates have relatively good employment outcomes. Recent analysis of the DLHE shows that disabled graduates overall have employment rates almost on a par than their non-disabled peers and that salaries have been increasing in recent times. However, there are some significant differences when the nature of the disability is considered. Those with visible disabilities face most disadvantage in the labour market, e.g. graduates who fall into the 'wheelchair/mobility difficult' category have the highest rates of unemployment. Deaf and hearing impaired graduates have seen significantly improved levels of labour market success (AGCAS, 2012). Tunnah and Leacy (2013) in their review of data from 2002 -2012 find that employment outcomes of disabled graduates have improved gradually, although there is clear evidence of the impact of the economic downturn particularly for those graduating in 2009.</p> <p>The importance of transitions for disabled students in relation to entry to, progress through and exit from HE has been highlighted: graduates had to make decisions on disclosure, e.g. on entry to the labour market, often with little guidance or support.</p> <p>Drawing upon data from two transition projects (Piggott and Houghton, 2007) found that disabled young people were disadvantaged due to lack of work experience and that they believed they had faced discrimination in their search for employment.</p> <p>There is some evidence that most disabled graduates are not utilising targeted employability interventions and it was suggested that this practice could actually 'isolate or label' disabled students (Note: these results should be viewed with caution both due to sample size and due to lack of clarity regarding research methodology) (Piggott and Houghton, 2007).</p>
Part-time learners	<p>Part-time learners tend to undertake their programme whilst already in full-time employment and that their motivation to study is largely related to the desire to progress within their career, according to evidence from the Futuretrack project (Callender and Wilkinson, 2013a), which reported on the impact of part-time study on individuals two years post-graduation.</p> <p>Part-time learners have high employment rates and have high rates of continuous employment with 80% of graduates employed by the same organisation after their programme of study²⁶.</p> <p>Part-time learners who receive careers IAG whilst studying their programme report higher levels of job satisfaction²⁷.</p>

²⁶ There was also evidence of an upward shift in occupational status in 10% of respondents and this was more significant for women.

	<p>The support needs of part-time learners tend to include helping them to recognise the value of their experiences and providing interventions that develop the long-term career management skills which will enable them to progress within their chosen field (rather than developing transferable skills) and there is less focus on embedding opportunities for work experience since these learners may already be working.</p>
Mature students	<p>There is a lack of clarity over the impact of age on graduate outcomes, with differing findings being presented. One of the difficulties identified by Woodfield (2011) is the lack of research that breaks the age of graduates down into anything other than the categories of young or mature, and the importance of a number of other variables, e.g. gender, previous employment history, degree class and mode of study.</p> <p>The most prevalent view is that mature students are disadvantaged in the graduate labour market, that they are more likely to be in non-graduate employment and find career progression more difficult (Purcell <i>et al.</i>, 2007) and that they are less able to capitalise on extra-curricular activities which makes them attractive candidates to employers (Redmond, 2006). In their report on the Graduate Success Project, Pennington <i>et al.</i> (2013) conclude that age does impact on broad employment outcomes but that there is little evidence that it affects whether someone enters a graduate or non-graduate job. The report also identifies that 87% of employers surveyed felt graduates should be able to relocate to find employment and this clearly is an issue for those who are unable to do so.</p> <p>However, analysis of bespoke DLHE data provided by HESA showed that mature graduates were not disadvantaged in the labour market and were actually advantaged in their ability to secure graduate level work, which they suggest is in part due to their broadening of the definition of graduate level work and more specifically to the inclusion of part-time work when identifying positive labour market outcomes (Woodfield, 2011).</p> <p>Work experience and the ability to make use of HE experiences appear to be more important than age in determining graduate outcomes. Longitudinal research conducted as part of the Futuretrack project highlights the disadvantage faced by younger full-time students who were the least likely to hold a graduate level job (Purcell <i>et al.</i>, 2012).</p>
Vocational learners	<p>In employment terms, a higher proportion of BTEC plus degree holders are in employment compared to A-Level plus degree holders (90% vs. 88%), though their earnings tend to be lower (London Economics, 2013).</p>

²⁷ Job satisfaction levels were highest amongst those that had changed their job, but stayed with the same employer or those who had changed from part-time to full-time work.

Evidence about effective approaches

2.9.20 The review found little research examining how engaged under-represented groups are with higher education provider employability programmes and no systematic research of the impact of interventions on employment outcomes for under-represented groups (although there was a large amount of anecdotal evidence). As a result it is unclear whether approaches being developed are working and little robust evidence to suggest which interventions have an impact.

Targeting helps to improve uptake

2.9.21 Careers and employability departments have sought to increase the take-up of their services by students from widening participation backgrounds through innovative and targeted approaches. HE careers services have a key role to play in the employability agenda and have responded to the challenge of employability by developing employability strategies whether through developing links with employers, developing employability modules or identifying needs of different student groups (Williams, 2007; Edge and SCRE, 2011). It is also reported that certain groups of students are less likely to access HE careers services; however recent findings presented by Pennington *et al.* (2013) suggest similar levels of take-up between advantaged and disadvantaged groups with just small differences in take-up of job application support. Research conducted with 16 HE careers services acknowledges that determining whether a student is disadvantaged in relation to career development is difficult, particularly in relation to class (Williams, 2007).

2.9.22 The literature suggests that HE careers services have seen the main issues as reach and ensuring equality of access to employability support. Research with careers advisers identifies methods that services had used to maximise their reach to a diverse student population. Careers services had developed alternative delivery modes (e.g. email and telephone support) and were attempting to integrate with other support services (e.g. co-location in a one stop shop) in order to ensure that their services were accessible. Targeted services were reported for particular student groups, but for which there were mixed views over the effectiveness of the approach. Thomas and Jones (2007) give examples of targeted initiatives at a range of HEIs, but do not attempt to provide evidence of their effectiveness in improving employability. Williams (2007) also identified that careers services were attempting to embed employability into the academic curriculum either through modifications and enhancements to student learning or as institutional modules. The report did not report any empirical evidence of the impact these changes had on employability of students in general or in under-represented groups specifically.

Embedding employability within the curriculum is viewed as best practice

2.9.23 A consistent theme within literature is the importance of ensuring employability is embedded into the curriculum (e.g. Williams, 2007; Pegg and Carr, 2012; Thomas and Jones, 2007) rather than being viewed as an activity that is additional to a student's academic programme. The argument presented is that under-represented groups have a reduced capacity to engage in activities outside the curriculum and therefore embedding employability into teaching and learning for all learners is the most effective solution. It is also acknowledged that by embedding employability students are engaged throughout the whole of their programme. Thomas and Jones, (2007) suggest that the curriculum can be used to develop awareness of employability; enable

access to work experience and provide opportunities to reflect on gained experience; improve levels of confidence, self-esteem and aspiration; and finally increase understanding of the labour market and improve job search skills.

Links with employers are key

2.9.24 Building links with employers is a key part of an employability strategy, and employers are key partners in delivery of employability programmes (Williams, 2007; Bennett *et al.*, 2008; Mason *et al.*, 2009; Edge and SCRE, 2011). Although research has identified variable practices in partnerships between employers and higher education providers there is widespread collaboration between the sectors, with research identifying HE careers services as the key facilitator of such partnerships (Pennington *et al.*, 2013) with some work conducted at faculty level (Edge and SCRE, 2011). It is further suggested that the success of employability strategies is limited if employers are not involved (Williams, 2007). Across the material a number of ways in which employers have supported employability of students is identified, for example through delivery of work placements (Edge and SCRE, 2011; Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and CRAC, 2011), mentoring of students (Thomas and Jones, 2007), on campus workshops and presentations (Williams, 2007). Much of the material describes the support employers provide for the student population as a whole although there are some examples of activities provided by employers specifically for non-traditional students (Thomas and Jones, 2007).

2.9.25 Williams (2007) makes the point that employers are not a homogenous group and that larger employers have the resources to find ways of recruiting a full range of graduates but perhaps this is less easy for SMEs to achieve. Although the Wilson Review (2012) identified that 81% of employers involved in the HEFCE-sponsored internship scheme were small businesses and that the scheme had supported the engagement of small companies with higher education providers. It is further reported that employers would appreciate a more proactive approach from careers services in order to support them in developing strategies for recruiting a more diverse workforce (Williams, 2007).

Work experience helps outcomes

2.9.26 The value employers place on work experience is well documented, for example the report by Edge and SCRE (2011) states that their research and wider literature has clearly established the value of placements and internships in promoting employability and Bennett *et al.*, (2008) found that employers held positive opinions regarding the usefulness of work placements and that whether an individual had completed a work placement was more important to the majority of employers than the degree class or higher education provider attended. Futuretrack analysis identified that long-term employment outcomes are affected by participation in work experience, with those graduates in unpaid work or unemployed having the highest number of respondents with no such experience. This finding is confirmed by Pennington *et al.*, (2013) who found that two thirds of graduates in a negative outcome (e.g. unemployed) had no work experience. Furthermore the study found that two thirds of those in graduate jobs had work experience as opposed to around half of those in non-graduate jobs.

2.9.27 However, it is also apparent that employers value certain types of work experience over others. For example Bournier and Millican, 2011, identified that employers prefer substantial periods

of structured, relevant work experience as opposed to casual employment, such as bar work or temping. They also reported that there was some evidence that employers in the study particularly valued voluntary work experience. This is also identified by Pennington *et al.* (2013) who report that 38% of employers preferred unpaid relevant work experience to paid but unrelated work experience. Similar findings are reported in research with employers seeking to identify graduate identity in which it was reported that employers emphasised the quality of work experience, and the research suggested that experience does not count unless graduates can reflect on the experience and translate it into a demonstration of their employability (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). The value of structured work experience was also identified by Mason *et al.* (2009) in a review of employability skills initiatives in 34 departments across eight HEIs, with research identifying a strong correlation between participation in sandwich placements and general employment and employment in graduate level jobs. However, more recent work suggests that part-time relevant work was rated more highly than a placement (Pennington *et al.*, 2013). The consistent theme across all the studies is the importance of graduates being able to make the links between their experience and its relevance to their learning and their career.

2.9.28 There is evidence that HEIs have significantly increased their support for learners to access work placements as part of the programme of study (Edge and SCRE, 2011) although there is a suggestion that this varies widely between different subjects and there is little research to indicate the take-up of such opportunities with under-represented groups of learners and the impact on their employability.

2.9.29 Concerns are raised however regarding the falling numbers of opportunities available to undergraduates and graduates to gain work experience, particularly in relation to internships (Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and CRAC, 2011). There is also evidence that engagement in sandwich degree programmes is falling, although the review of HEFCE-funded internships in 2011 identified that the decline was not as severe as previous research had suggested (Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and CRAC, 2011). Clearly the suggestion in the literature is that falls in sandwich degree students are due to concerns over lengthening of study programmes and the accrual of student debt (Bennett *et al.*, 2008; Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and CRAC, 2011). The Wilson Review (2012) makes strong recommendations to help address these concerns, including reduction in fee levels by individual institutions and the introduction of incentives via HEFCE number controls.

Access to internships

2.9.30 Pennington *et al.* (2013) found that two thirds of employers report that getting an internship offers graduates the best chance of later being offered employment and therefore issues around access to internship opportunities is particularly pertinent. Evidence from the review of HEFCE-funded internship schemes found that overall the programme had increased access to internship opportunities but that it had not necessarily widened access, and that graduates accessing internships were 'high achievers' (Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and CRAC, 2011). There is similar evidence regarding the take-up of internships via The Graduate Talent Pool (GTP) launched in July 2009 to support graduates to gain experience and employment during the height of the recession. Research undertaken by Day and Mellors-Bourne, 2011 found that those who had registered on the site in the first six months of the scheme were 'higher achievers' with two thirds of them holding upper second

or first class degrees and with a strong representation from Russell Group universities. These graduates were also most likely to be successful with their applications. The report concluded that employers were recruiting graduates with significant work experience and that the scheme was failing to reach out to those who needed most support within the labour market. Both studies (Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and CRAC, 2011; Day and Mellors-Bourne, 2011) identified that graduates from ethnic minority backgrounds were more likely to engage with internship schemes (e.g. by registering their interest or applying for vacancies) but were less likely to be successful at securing an internship.

2.9.31 A significant number of internships are unpaid, for example this was the case with around half of those in the GTP in 2010 (Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and CRAC, 2011) and there is evidence that unpaid internships are particularly prevalent in sectors where demand for internships is high (for example in legal professions). Concern was expressed in 2011 that removal of HEFCE-subsidised internships would lead to an increase in unpaid opportunities (Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and CRAC, 2011). The review did not identify any empirical evidence regarding the take-up of unpaid internships by widening participation groups but there is significant discussion at policy level regarding the possible impact on access to certain professions. The significance of this debate is reflected in the Wilson review of business-university collaboration (2012) which makes strong recommendations regarding access to internships:

‘Ideally, every full-time undergraduate student should have the opportunity to experience a structured, university approved undergraduate internship during their period of study. Where such internships are paid, government should examine the feasibility of supporting companies that host students through a tax credit or grant mechanism. Where internships are unpaid, universities should use their OFFA funds to support eligible students rather than condone a policy that could inhibit social mobility’ (p.40).

The review goes on to recommend the continuation of the HEFCE-sponsored internship scheme.

HEIs employ undergraduates

2.9.32 Employment of students by higher education providers contributes to employability for students. Providers act as a regular employer of their own students, offering valuable opportunities for students to develop their employability. Research (Sanders and Higham, 2012) shows that it is common practice for higher education providers to employ their existing students to work on both widening participation schemes, e.g. as ambassadors and mentors and on programmes seeking to increase retention and success, e.g. as peer mentors. Such schemes have sought to recruit HE students from widening participation backgrounds specifically and analysis of the Aimhigher Associates programme identified that these students were more likely to be employed in this role. This and other research (for example, Gallacher and Raffae, 2012) identifies that employment opportunities provided by their higher education provider are a valuable mechanism for developing employability skills and in helping individuals to make career-related decisions. Neither research report commented on the difference these schemes make to an individual’s long-term chances of securing employment but certainly students report benefits such as improved confidence, development of skills and in many instances there is also financial reward. However, there is little evidence in the published literature to suggest that higher education providers are supporting

students employed in these roles to identify and articulate the skills they have developed in their role and this is perhaps a lost opportunity.

The value of part-time work

2.9.33 Whilst the literature acknowledges the value of structured work experience there is evidence that students are under increasing pressure to undertake part-time work. Stuart *et al.* (2008b) found that students from lower socio-economic groups spend more time in paid employment and were more likely to report that other commitments and activities had a negative impact on their academic performance. Pennington *et al.* (2013) report that 57% of graduates surveyed had worked part-time whilst studying and that these respondents were more likely to report being in a positive employment outcome. The study however did find that those who had part-time work experience were slightly more likely to be in a non-graduate job and Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) found that students in their sample were more likely to remain in their term-time jobs after they had completed their studies and that this led to them to feel less like they needed to find graduate employment.

2.9.34 In response to the increasing need for students to undertake part-time, term-time working, higher education providers have developed methods of providing academic transfer for the learning derived from part-time employment. Research conducted at the University of Huddersfield Business School (Blake and Worsdale, 2009) set out to identify the extent of part-time working and to assess the feasibility of developing accreditation. Research conducted with all Business School undergraduates identified that approximately 66% of students had a term-time, part-time job, although this figure reduced to 58% amongst final year students. Detailed interviews with a small number of students revealed that students were able to fit work around their studies rather than let it interfere as earlier studies had suggested and that they perceived a range of benefits from being in employment, including development of skills and confidence. Seventy-one percent of students reported a desire for academic credit and the research led to the accreditation of a personal development and work-based learning module. Development of a similar module is reported in research conducted by Manchester Metropolitan Business School (Shaw and Ogilvie, 2010) which also developed academic credit for part-time and voluntary work and again, although it was too early to present long-term findings, the report concluded that at least two thirds of respondents reported increased job satisfaction and qualitative interviews identified a number of students for whom the module had helped them progress within their workplace.

2.9.35 The module developed by the University of Huddersfield included reflective writing skills and portfolio preparation in order to support students to reflect on workplace practices and provide evidence of their learning. In Greenbank and Hepworth's 2008 study it is suggested that working class participants were unaware that it was not the work experience itself that was of importance but the learning derived from it and they also found that students selected part-time work on the basis of pay rates and convenience rather than relevance to their long-term career plans. These findings suggest that supporting learners to identify relevant paid employment and provide opportunities for them to reflect on any work they undertake may help in 'making a virtue out of a necessity' (Shaw and Ogilvie, 2010). Academic transfer may be one way to assist in maximising the

impact of part-time work, although it would be useful to know how such modules are perceived by potential employers.

Emerging conclusions

2.9.36 Employability is affected by a huge range of factors, including not least the choices a student makes before entering HE and the recruitment practices of graduate employers. It is vital therefore that the approach to developing employability is not just viewed as improving the skills, understanding and personal attributes of current students, rather higher education providers need to ensure pre-entry work and employer partnerships are considered as mechanisms in developing employability. The window of influence for providers may be small and approaches need to be based on evidence.

2.9.37 Employability strategies may not always be explicit in how they will address the needs of under-represented groups, and do not always assess impact over the long term, or take-up of interventions by different student groups. There are gaps in knowledge about whether interventions affect the student population equally.

2.9.38 Under-represented groups may well be least likely to engage in extra-curricular activities and thus these students may well benefit most from embedding employability within teaching and learning practices. However, the evidence is unclear as to whether this approach meets the needs of individual of students, getting the balance right between targeted, generalised and specialist support would appear of particular importance.

2.9.39 Under-represented groups need clear, early guidance on how they can make the most of their overall HE experience in order to enhance their employability skills. Clear messages about the value of extra-curricular activities and work experience need to be conveyed at an early stage and individuals provided with support to make well informed individual decisions over the choices they make on programme.

2.9.40 Ensuring access to high quality work experience (including paid internships) and supporting students from widening participation backgrounds to reflect on their learning from part-time employment appears to be of particular importance.

2.9.41 HEIs can help employers to develop practices to recruit a diverse workforce. Clearly HEcareers services play a pivotal role within this but a strategic approach drawing on resources from across the institution would increase the impact of this work. Research with employers suggests they would benefit from more proactive engagement with higher education providers and that relationships at local level would best support the needs of SMEs, who appear most at risk of missing out on partnership approaches.

2.9.42 Identifying opportunities for supporting pre-entry IAG for under-represented groups is suggested and closer relationships between those involved in pre-entry IAG and on programme employability support may provide more seamless support.

2.10 Economic Growth and Widening Participation

Key findings

- Economic development is increasingly recognised as the ‘third mission’ for higher education providers alongside research and teaching. HEI engagement in economic development depends on institutional factors and traditions. The regional context is also important.
- HEI economic growth strategies that are more wide-ranging with a longer-term perspective and with a deliberate widening participation and social engagement component are more likely to bring benefits to a variety of difficult to reach social groups.
- Policies are needed which promote a more strategic approach to economic development in context, which integrate widening participation as a core objective, and which play to higher education providers’ strengths. Otherwise the literature suggests that widening participation is at risk of getting crowded out amongst competing agendas.

Introduction to the theme

2.10.1 This section concentrates on themes in the literature which relate to the widening participation aspects of the HE sector’s contribution to enterprise, economic development and regional economies. This is in addition to the economic benefits of HE for individual graduates including those from disadvantaged areas and HE’s generic role in developing human capital.

2.10.2 Huggins and Johnston (2009) note that the benefits of HEIs are wider than individual wealth creation. They have a role in supporting regional and national economies. Some have also commented that it is in HEIs’ own interests to promote economic development since there is linkage between the prosperity of regional economies and the health of their institutions. Others, however, have noted that the role of higher education providers extends beyond stimulating economic growth and supporting local businesses. It takes in a wider conception of modern universities engaging dynamically with their local communities and taking on their ‘fuller responsibilities as neighbours and citizens’ (Association of Commonwealth Universities, 2001, quoted in Jones and Williams, 2008, p.3).

2.10.3 The local and community development aspects of higher education providers’ role are not covered extensively in the literature, though a recent Joseph Rowntree Trust report (Robinson *et al.*, 2012) provided an overview of the different dimensions of universities’ engagement with disadvantaged communities. It also concluded that more work is needed to gauge how communities benefit from relationships with universities and ‘how these initiatives and interventions can best be evaluated; and how universities can do more to ensure that their economic benefits and impacts reach disadvantaged communities’ (p.6). Interestingly, such communities featured prominently in the origins of many access and widening participation initiatives (see Diamond, 2008).

2.10.4 Current perspectives on widening participation are primarily national and individualistic, with a strong focus on ‘economic returns’. Even social mobility which has social justice at its core is increasingly linked as a policy objective to the economy. The Sutton Trust (2010), for example, estimated that boosting social mobility would contribute an additional 4% of GDP over and above

any other growth, and concluded that ‘social mobility is not only a matter of social justice; it is also an economic imperative’ (p.4).

Context

2.10.5 The role of the HE sector in economic growth is increasingly examined and debated. As Jones and Williams (2008) note ‘universities are [increasingly] expected to play a far more proactive role in contributing to social and economic (and skills) development within their regional context’ (p3). Various initiatives introduced by government in the past decade have aimed to encourage and support the sector’s role in economic development. The Wilson Review (2012) charts the history of government policy on business-university collaboration and reports on the ‘huge progress’ made over the last decade. The literature also notes the development of an enterprise ‘third mission’ for higher education providers existing alongside conventional research and teaching activities. The sector contributes to regional economies, and higher education providers have the potential to drive economic growth, especially where they are working as part of regional economic development strategies. The Wilson Review (2012) reported on the Coalition Government’s clear commitment to business-university collaboration and ‘the importance of universities in supporting the government’s priority of economic growth’ (p.20). There are a number of ways in which higher education providers support economic development including:

- *Higher education providers as businesses in their own right:* purchasing goods and services.
- *Research and development and creation of new businesses:* higher education providers have been identified as having a particular role to play in supporting ‘clusters’ (i.e. concentrations of interconnected companies in a particular field).
- *Developing the workforce:* not just by providing highly skilled graduates, but also through continuous professional development and other education programmes which serve regional labour markets, and through research into skill needs and developing workforce best practices.
- *Engagement at a local community development level:* Many higher education providers contribute to regional development through cultural activities and the promotion of social inclusion, and through wider organic links between business and higher education providers and communities.
- *Physical regeneration, in terms of developing real estate:* higher education providers play a particular role in making investments in areas which may not attract private sector investment.

Brief description of the evidence

2.10.6 Evidence about the impact of HE involvement in economic growth is imperfect, especially in relation to the contribution of the widening participation agenda. Different research methods are employed in the literature including:

- *Qualitative studies:* For example, case-studies of academic enterprise and regional economic growth (Wollard *et al.*, 2007), and a review of qualitative data from an international project to inform the role of universities in the 'cultural health' of their regions (Doyle, 2010).
- *Analysis of outcomes and impacts:* For example, the literature includes a study of the impact of science and technology spin-offs from a cross section of London HEIs using quantitative and qualitative methods (Chapman *et al.*, 2011).
- *Secondary research:* For example, a discussion about the regional impact of university enterprise drawing on a wide range of literature and analysis of published data sources (Huggins and Johnson, 2009), and a review of HE policy in post-devolution UK, using policy documents, secondary data sources, and the proceedings of six seminars (Gallacher and Raffe, 2011). Hale (2006) examined a range of empirical findings in order to discuss widening participation and equality of opportunity.

2.10.7 The quality of monitoring data affects the extent to which the scale and nature of the benefits from higher education provider involvement in economic development have been captured in the literature. As an illustration of poor data quality in this area, the detailed study of university-related companies in London (Chapman *et al.*, 2011) found that few HEIs had strategies to identify and monitor the whole portfolio of university-related companies. Despite difficulties in gathering data at institutional level, HEFCE provides an annual analysis of knowledge exchange through the Business and Community Interaction Survey (HEFCE, 2012/18). Data collected from 159 publicly funded HEIs showed a continued growth in knowledge exchange between HEIs and private, public and third-sector partners, with a growth rate (in cash terms) of 4% from 2010/2011, despite a difficult economic climate.

Emerging themes, issues and challenges

2.10.8 The impact of higher education providers supporting economic growth is attracting increasing attention as, in the context of economic recession, many other sectors have been contracting.

The strong economic contribution of higher education providers

2.10.9 HE as a sector in its own right is strong and contributes significantly to the UK economy, in addition to their role in increasing the stock of human capital (Kelly *et al.*, 2009). Analysis on behalf of Universities UK (Kelly *et al.*, 2009) calculated that through both direct and secondary effects the HE sector generated over £59 billion of output and over 668,500 full time equivalent jobs throughout the UK economy in 2007/8 (up from nearly £45 billion five years earlier). The sector was analysed as a conventional industry including an assessment of sources of revenue, employment created, output generated and export earnings attracted. A key measure of its contribution to the national economy is its impact on GDP. In 2007/8 HE contributed over £31 billion to UK GDP (representing 2% of UK GDP in 2008). There are also multiplier effects through employment and student expenditure within host regions that significantly heighten the indirect wealth-generation benefits of higher education providers.

HE as a driver of economic growth

2.10.10 Using the UK's creative economy as an example, research indicates how the role of HE, in its widest sense, serves to drive the UK economy (EKOS, 2010). The creative sector as a whole accounts for more than 7% of UK GDP. Higher education providers contribute to this through: research that supports innovation in the creative economy; new models for interacting with creative businesses; acting as hubs for innovation at the heart of regional creative clusters; the development of talent and high-level skills for the creative economy; activities that enhance the employability and enterprise skills of students and graduates; provision of tailored and high-quality CPD to the creative industries. Higher education providers also support the creative economy through: anchoring regional clusters; facilitating connections and creating new routes to market opportunities; building international reputations and credibility; and supporting active networks (business, academic and public sector partners)²⁸.

Link to HEI strategic priorities

2.10.11 Whilst the literature notes the development of an enterprise 'third mission' for HEIs existing alongside research and teaching activities, initiatives linked to this strand vary in scale, scope and content. How institutions have engaged with the economic development agenda depends on how it fits with their overall strategic ambitions (Wilson, 2012). Some higher education providers clearly see their potential to contribute to and support economic growth in their region through the emergence of a knowledge-based economy and an emphasis on innovation. However, institutions aspiring to global reputation and world ranking may see the 'third mission' as more of a distraction than HEIs giving greater priority to a regional role. The motivations of universities to embark on academic 'enterprise' vary. An important pragmatic objective cited is to decrease reliance on HEFCE funding in response to the progressive reductions in unit funding. Becoming a more enterprising institution is seen by some universities as a way of delivering economic growth in their region.

2.10.12 HEI engagement in the economic development agenda is likely to reflect the character and history of individual institutions, with different practices and policies. In fact the literature questions how well HEIs have developed clear and targeted strategies towards economic development and planning/managing their academic enterprise. For example, Doyle (2010) suggests that cultural engagement between regions and universities usually manifests itself not as an aim in its own right but rather as a spin off from a variety of other agendas and there may be some *post facto* rationalisation that highlights unplanned outcomes.

2.10.13 The evidence suggests that HEIs do not give sufficient priority to widening participation, both directly, and indirectly, as a wider spin off from a range of enterprise activities. A particular dilemma may be about deciding which strategies to pursue and balancing shorter-term wealth creation gains with longer-term benefits more associated with community engagement and provision for non-traditional learners. Moreover, some commentators (for example Gallacher and Raffe, 2012) have identified potential for enduring conflicts between the mission of HEIs in economic

²⁸ The point is made that there is still potential to expand the creative economy and it clearly matters that HE continues to perform a key role, encouraging and supporting innovation in the sector. However, a greater alignment is called for between HE policy and creative industries policy: recommendations emphasise the need for both national and regional/local policy actions including greater funding flexibility (EKOS, 2010).

development and their traditional focus on research and teaching. This may impact indirectly on the pursuit of a widening participation agenda and increase the likelihood that it would be 'crowded out' (Gallacher and Raffe, 2012).

Evidence about effective approaches

2.10.14 There is some suggestion in the literature that engagement of higher education providers in economic development, at both national and regional levels, has the potential to create wider spheres of influence and that through these linkages benefits can accrue to HE participation in general and widening participation in particular. However, given that there are significant differences between higher education providers and their regional and local contexts and a wide range of economic growth activities, questions remain about the extent to which the 'third mission' contributes to widening participation, and whether it is possible to disentangle the key success factors that might impact on widening participation.

2.10.15 One example in the literature illustrates the potentially wide-ranging nature of the HEI contribution. An HEI case-study (unnamed) was found to have research and academic enterprise developments totalling some 33 different activities (Woollard *et al.*, 2007), alongside community outreach activities. The impact was evaluated under four areas of contribution: built environment, health care/bio-medicine, cultural/creative studies, and business enterprise. In this case-study, significant benefits were identified in terms of contribution to skills/training knowledge transfer; cultural diversity; achievements in terms of social inclusion; and other aspects such as the contribution to local area regeneration.

2.10.16 Against this varied background, there is some evidence that the relevance of HEI engagement in the process of economic development to widening participation differs across regions as well as institutions. Huggins and Johnston (2009) identify differences between more and less competitive regions. Weaker regions tend to be more dependent on their universities for income and innovation. The findings show that this dynamic at regional level will have implications for choice of strategy, and type of coordination and organisation. The impact of different regional and HE characteristics is also highlighted by a discussion of cultural engagement, using two UK HEI case-studies (Doyle, 2010). Attention is drawn to the regional context where the overlap between cultural development and engagement and widening participation is a feature. This particular region had significant pockets of under-participation and creating routes into HE was a major part of the engagement work in the region. One prominent initiative was a partnership between one of the HEIs and local colleges as a means of providing local access to FE for those living in what were described as 'cultural islands' in the region.

2.10.17 The notion that higher education provider economic growth strategies that are more wide-ranging with a longer-term perspective and with a deliberate widening participation component are more likely to bring benefits for a variety of difficult to reach social groups is implicit rather than explicit in the literature. There is a range of views regarding the strategic actions that institutions undertake to become entrepreneurial (Woollard *et al.*, 2007). The case-study above shows the range of steps taken by one university in the UK. A key point emerging is that overall there appears to be a lack of strategic direction, coordination and alignment of HEI economic growth programmes in

relation to the objectives of widening participation, and that the benefits or potential benefits of this approach are often not transparent.

Emerging conclusions

2.10.18 Through the emergence of a knowledge-based economy, and emphasis on innovation, some higher education providers clearly see their potential to contribute to and support economic growth in their region. Although this 'third mission' for HE is increasingly accepted in the literature, some key questions remain: To what extent do higher education providers develop clear and targeted strategies to deliver 'third mission' activities? How well coordinated and managed are they? What impact do they have?

2.10.19 HEIs' economic development activities reflect their histories, strengths and previous local and regional partnerships. This leads to particular spheres of influence with consequences for economic growth portfolios and capacity to contribute to widening participation. The diversity of higher education provider types means that the regional role of HE should be interpreted in distinctive ways on an institution-by-institution basis.

2.10.20 One of the key challenges is identifying what to include in an economic development strategy, given the interdependence of higher education providers within the region and the local competitive environment. It is important to recognise that portfolios of enterprise projects may need to balance the direct wealth creation aims with other beneficial activities such as building reputation, demonstrating best practice, building skills, widening participation, and human capital creation. It is likely that the key partners involved could benefit from more demonstration examples that show wider participation is not a distraction and that there are synergies between economic development, and HEIs' teaching and research missions. The data presented earlier about the economic benefits of obtaining a UK degree, not only to the individual but also to the Exchequer and to the wider economy, should be used to showcase the economic and social imperatives.

2.10.21 Widening participation does not appear to feature strongly in the discourses on HE's contribution to economic development, even when wider notions of social inclusion are being addressed. There appears to be a gap in the literature in relation to identifying and sharing good practice in terms of 'third mission' activities across the policy cycle. For example, little evidence was found to inform good practice in establishing strategies and policies, identifying funding and resources, developing programmes and activities, setting up organisational and operational procedures, doing monitoring and evaluating, and learning the lessons from practice.

2.10.22 The literature is unclear about the extent to which activities identified as economic development are additional or simply re-labelling of what has always been done. There are also implications for monitoring and evaluation as systems appear to be insufficient with an absence of the necessary tracking and collection of data. It is possible that many higher education providers are not aware of all of the economic growth activities taking place in their region which have emanated from their direct or indirect involvement. They may also not fully appreciate their impact and potential influence on widening participation.

2.10.23 The most important role of higher education providers at the regional level may continue to be their human capital creation capacities and ability to produce highly skilled and employable new labour market entrants in the form of their graduates. The extent to which students stay after graduation, contributing to the economic and social health of the region, is an important variable in consolidating the regional benefits. This has links with the discussion in the previous sections on employers (Section 2.8) and employability (Section 2.9).

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 The review has looked at a large volume of material. Evidence is stronger in some areas (such as retention and student success) than in others (such as economic development). There are still some gaps in the research base, and the evidence rarely meets strict definitions of causality. However, there are instances where the balance of evidence points to a strong probability of significant impact. Recent research (much of it qualitative) has tended to put the student (and student voice) at its core. There has been an increased focus on robust evaluation (often using mixed methods) built in from the start (e.g. Realising Opportunities) and this has been supported by major national programmes of research (e.g. the HEFCE/Paul Hamlyn Foundation-funded What Works? programme).

3.1.2 This section is designed to complement the review of widening participation research outlined in the previous section by drawing out some of the implications of the findings for policy and practice, and making suggestions for how the work can be taken forward. The implications are grouped into those emerging from the review for national policy makers and government departments, institutional managers and policy makers, and widening participation and other practitioners in higher education providers.

3.1.3 The review clearly highlights the importance of building in monitoring and evaluation from the start, and the benefits of shared approaches to monitoring and evaluation which permit a degree of meta-analysis in order to get better value from the large range of local studies.

3.1.4 Given the range of breadth of the literature it would be impossible to reflect all the findings and conclusions here. The databases and archives for widening participation, and the publication lists of key organisations such as HEFCE, the Higher Education Academy, the Sutton Trust and NUS provide a rich source to be mined by those developing their policies and practices for under-represented groups.

3.1.5 At the same time the review also revealed gaps in the knowledge and evidence base in relation to the key themes. Suggestions for specific further research, and ideas for developing the processes for collecting further intelligence on the relevant issues, are included in final section (Section 3.5) below.

3.1.6 Some specific recommendations for managers and practitioners in higher education providers about effective ways of working in relation to particular interventions have been highlighted in sections 3.3 and 3.4 respectively. These are based on evidence in the literature of 'what works' to promote HE access and progression outcomes for widening participation groups,

3.2 Policy Makers

3.2.1 Policy makers have a key role in setting the framework in which developments in provision can be implemented, both in terms of the priority given to interventions which support widening

participation, the funding/resource framework, and opportunities for sharing and building on knowledge and expertise within the sector.

3.2.2 Underpinning notions of effective widening participation practices is the sense that the philosophy and ethos of the approach taken is at least, if not more, important than the specific details of the interventions. Central characteristics of effective approaches include notions of commitment to inclusiveness, sustained relationships, openness, and understanding of student needs. Working in this way may suggest a move away from a student lifecycle to a whole 'lifecourse' approach that recognises individuals' multiple identities, roles and experiences. New lines of research focusing on the impact of working or caring responsibilities, extra-curricular activities and religious observance; evidence of the importance of families and key 'influencers' in access, retention and success; and renewed interest in mature learners, all point to the possible value of a more holistic approach.

3.2.3 Policy makers may wish to give consideration to the following.

Promoting understanding of what is already known about 'good practice'

3.2.4 A lot is already known, generically, about which types of interventions, and ways of working, have been shown to have particularly good outcomes for widening participation groups. The challenge is in disseminating these findings and converting this understanding into policy directions that result in focused, practical long-term actions. The review highlighted that some of the evidence is better developed than others (gaps are dealt with in Section 3.5 below).

3.2.5 The following offer particularly useful sources and resources which we would recommend:

- The findings from the What Works? programme, building on earlier research, have identified a clear way forward in relation to retention and success. This will be illuminated further during the second phase of the programme focusing on institutional change and some of the further questions posed by the first phase. However, significant challenges remain in terms of disseminating and implementing these findings in a context of competing priorities and an atmosphere of unprecedented change.
- The archives, research repositories and developmental resources hosted by the Higher Education Academy. This includes resources from a range of major national programmes (including Aimhigher, LLNs, FdF) and significant research material on flexible learning, employability and retention and success (including disability equality and ethnic minority groups).
- The reports and summaries produced during the final phase of the TLRP, funded by HEFCE through the ESRC.

Continue to emphasise and prioritise staff development and CPD

3.2.6 Staff development would appear to be crucial in the light of repeated findings that emphasise the centrality of teaching and learning relationship. For example, in relation to student retention and success, the need to develop staff capacity, inclination and opportunity to nurture a sense of belonging will require leadership and resources. However, the barriers may not primarily be about resources, but about priorities and culture.

3.2.7 In relation to HE-related IAG, developing and promoting national best practice guidelines for all staff in delivering pre-entry IAG may help to support the practice of individual practitioners.

Continue to endorse the notion of partnership – within institutions as much as between institutions and across sectors

3.2.8 Collaborative partnerships can offer coordination, impartiality, breadth of offer and economies of scale. They can operate in a number of different dimensions. The role of relationships between different parts of institutions is highlighted in some of the literature and there are models of good practice in relation to working in partnership with students' unions and the wider student body. There is extensive evidence of the benefits of partnership working across and between sectors. It is notable that delivery by third sector organisations featured fairly little in this review (see Shaw, 2008). This is perhaps not surprising given that most of the research in the literature was conducted at a time when a number of government-funded initiatives (Aimhigher, LLNs) were operating. However, it signals that the new partnerships involving a wider range of partners may be needed to address new challenges such as access for mature students, the engagement of parents and key influencers and the progression of care leavers.

Widening the focus from 'traditional' conceptions of HE

3.2.9 This acknowledges the limitations of formulating policy on the basis of one distinctive cohort: young full-time students who enter HE through an academic route. There is a need for culture changes at national level towards a wider concept of HE. This is particularly relevant in relation to progression from vocational courses, part-time and mature learners and support for flexible modes of study.

3.2.10 Acknowledging the distinctive characteristics of the part-time student population might stimulate helpful developments suggested in the literature, such as:

- Examining the validity and usefulness of current divisions between full and part-time HE and the fairness and equity of current policies (e.g. in relation to fees and eligibility and availability of loans).
- Exploring strategies for stimulating demand for part-time HE particularly for mature learners.
- Re-examining the fairness and economic utility of the ELQ stipulation, and exploring policy initiatives that incentivise employers to fund opportunities for low-paid, poorly qualified staff who have the potential to benefit from HE.
- Stimulating fresh approaches to transition, retention and support that recognise the work-life-study issues faced by all students and by part-time learners in particular.

3.2.11 It is possible to 'track back' many of the issues explored in the widening participation literature to the opaqueness and hidden codes that HE presents to new learners. There is a role for policy makers in continuing to challenge institutions to review apparent mismatches between self-conceptions (as progressive, knowledge-led institutions) and practical actions, for example in relation to admissions policies or teaching, learning and assessment strategies.

Acknowledge the diversity of diversity

3.2.12 At the same time as focusing attention and resources on key widening participation groups it is also important to acknowledge people's multiple identities. This involves moving beyond large monolithic categories and looking at where different social characteristics intersect. It is here that targeted interventions can often have most impact. This approach may also reveal 'hidden' sub-groups within larger cohorts.

Continue to focus attention on tackling inequalities

3.2.13 There are a number of equality and diversity issues which re-occur in the literature to address:

- Sustained action is required to address the attainment gap for students from ethnic minority groups. Even though levels of awareness and knowledge are rising, progress is slow. Whilst not necessarily the prime or the only factor involved, the significance of the role of academic staff and their interactions with students from ethnic minority groups has been increasingly identified as an area for attention and further research. Within this the issue of intellectual challenge and tutor expectations has started to feature more prominently. Addressing equality and diversity issues poses particular challenges when, as the progress to postgraduate study review (Section 2.7) reveals, the sector's recruitment pool for its academic workforce is already narrow and potentially shrinking.
- Although much has been done in recent years to target care leavers, little is known about the progress, attainment and future employment of care leavers.
- A comprehensive notion of inclusion, retention and success should encompass less prominent or 'identifiable' groups such as: carers; people with mental health issues; prisoners; refugees and asylum seekers.

3.3 Higher Education Providers

3.3.1 Managers in higher education providers may wish to give consideration to the following issues that are suggested by the detailed review of the research literature.

Further enhancing and embedding organisational widening participation strategies

3.3.2 Higher education providers which have a clear strategy for how they will work with under-represented groups in a range of settings, that draws together the contributions of different departments or functions and identifies clear institutional priorities, appear to be able to demonstrate better results. Providers should aim for joined-up thinking: this means continuing the process of aligning widening participation and equality and diversity strategies, and strategies and activities for student support, success and employability.

3.3.4 Higher education provider widening participation strategies should be clear about the contribution that can be made by HE students and other positive role models within higher education providers as part of this strategy. This is not only because HE students have been shown to have a particularly beneficial effect in terms of widening participation outcomes (especially in

raising aspirations and boosting young people's motivation) but also because working in this way can enhance institutional delivery capacity and individuals' engagement and capability.

3.3.5 Clear arrangements for effective evaluation, measuring the long-term impact on learners and their influencers, should be built into relevant strategies.

3.3.6 In seeking to embed widening participation strategies, work should be done on identifying areas where changes may be required. A good starting point may be to assess the fitness for purpose of current institutional structures and practices. The review identified the following areas as being crucial for maximising widening participation objectives:

- *Organisational culture:* Nurturing student identity and a sense of belonging, essential to engaging with and supporting non-traditional students, poses significant practical challenges in terms of organisational culture and change. At the micro-level it entails providing better access for students to the secret codes, the informal demands and the often unspoken institutional assumptions – what one study has called the 'hidden curricula' of many universities (Gibney *et al.*, 2011). At the macro level it is important to interrogate an institutional culture that is often opaque, difficult to understand and hard to embrace for those who lack a tradition in HE.
- *Learning, teaching and assessment:* The process of developing an inclusive fit-for-purpose HE offer, appropriate for a diverse and changing student body, remains unfinished. The role of assessment and feedback in nurturing student engagement and enhancing retention and success would also repay attention. More generally, if departmental level is the preferred location for academic support and the locus for developing a sense of belonging, how well prepared are all lecturers to provide this support and what is the complementary role of professional support services?
- *Student experience:* This involves aligning institutional policies that impact on the HE student experience, recognising the many 'external' factors that impact on retention and success, and seeking to embed a holistic view of students that takes in the personal as well as the institutional dimension.
- *Financial support:* Overly complicated systems of financial support may be counter-productive, and schemes based on complicated targeting or additional criteria to needs-based criteria may be hard to justify on notions of fairness. Moreover, having a financial support offer is not enough, schemes need to be backed up by effective strategies for providing information and removing barriers to take-up, and financial information should be integrated into wider IAG.
- *Delivery models:* Providing HE as flexibly as possible may help to engage a wider range of students (and for some could mitigate the effect of rising tuition fees).

Targeting of widening participation

3.3.7 To make best use of resources, more intensive activities need a clear targeting strategy, and whilst it is accepted that there are issues with how different groups should be defined and prioritised, higher education providers could aim to be clearer at institutional level about their own widening participation priorities. Some higher education providers, particularly the more selective institutions, have sometimes tempered this view with a concern to prioritise activities with groups who have the best potential to succeed in their own institution. Ideally, approaches to targeting should include getting the balance between including a wider range of potential beneficiaries and

narrower targeting on high-achieving young people. Knowing whom you want to reach and what you want to achieve, and measuring the long-term impact, all contribute to effective evaluation.

Engaging a wider range of 'influencers'

3.3.8 Ensuring that influencers working with under-represented groups are well informed about HE is a challenge, both in finding ways of engaging them and in changing their attitudes and expectations about the HE sector. Employers, teaching staff and parents are often difficult to engage with but have the potential to provide a positive influence on widening participation target groups. Developing a clear strategy for reaching out to influencers seems crucial as does evaluating interventions and identifying and sharing what works.

3.3.9 Often the target groups for outreach activities are somewhat narrowly focused on young people in schools and colleges. Institutional widening participation strategies may want to consider identifying intermediaries as target beneficiaries (as well as potential students), especially parents, teachers/tutors, IAG practitioners and employers, in future outreach programmes. This is an area where past experience, for example Aimhigher, may offer some good practice insights. Interventions should focus on enabling these 'intermediaries' to increase their understanding of the HE sector and develop their capacity to support or respond to HE-related IAG needs of widening participation groups. In relation to parents, the aim should be to give those families without an HE background access to the insights and understanding about the potential economic and social benefits of HE displayed by parents who have been through HE. Without information and encouragement at home, young people from lower socio economic group households with potential to succeed in HE may be increasingly put off by the costs involved. The same applies in relation to teacher/tutor intermediaries in schools and colleges which lack a tradition of sending large numbers of pupils to HE. These may also have a need for support from higher education providers on how to engage more pro-actively with HE application processes. Evidence suggests such work is going on but higher education providers may want to take a more strategic approach.

Continue to join up policy and practice and research and action

3.3.10 This means reducing the distance between awareness and intellectual acceptance of the issues of engagement and belonging, inclusion and differential attainment, and practical actions to address them. Stevenson (2012a) illustrates this vividly in relation to achievement of students from ethnic minority groups. She notes that a 'commitment to inclusive learning, teaching and assessment practices' featured strongly in the narratives of staff that she interviewed,

'[h]owever, there was a general lack of knowledge of any teaching and learning strategies that had specifically reduced the BME attainment gap. While some staff believed that such activity was taking place, "somewhere in the university", they were unable to provide any specific information' (pp.10-11).

Support and add value to existing provision

3.3.11 Areas where higher education providers can play a particular role in adding value to existing provision include:

- Supporting IAG providers, both formally and informally, to ensure HE-related IAG is well-informed. Work at a local level with National Careers Service teams seems of particular

importance, given their new remit for supporting mature HE applicants. Opportunities to develop future teachers to provide informal IAG during their initial teacher training should be considered by higher education providers and their school partners. Supporting under-represented groups to make best use of existing sources of IAG should be a crucial component of any outreach intervention. Designing interventions which complement other provision is also part of this; IAG interventions planned as part of outreach programmes need to start early and intensify during periods of transition.

- Work with careers and employers to identify opportunities for improving employability (including through enhanced pre-entry IAG). Higher education providers need to continue to work with employers and employers organisations to support the development of practices that enable the recruitment of a diverse workforce. Clearly HE careers services play a pivotal role within this but a strategic approach drawing on resources from across the institution would increase the impact of this work. Research with employers suggests they would benefit from more proactive engagement by higher education providers and that relationships at local level would best support the needs of SMEs, who appear most at risk of missing out on partnership approaches.

Build on and enhance existing partnership practices, both within and outside the institution.

3.3.12 Internally, this includes viewing students as partners in teaching and learning, acknowledging the importance of the 'student workforce' in delivering retention and success activities, linking strategically with students' unions, and recognising the particular contribution that family and friends can make to retention and success.

3.3.13 Externally, it involves working with and learning from the experience of other sectors and organisations. External partnerships can play a particularly important role in relation to:

- *Information and advice on HE and options:* Delivery of impartial IAG may well be easier to achieve when delivered in partnership with other higher education providers and IAG should be a focus for any collaborative outreach programmes at local level.
- *Work in schools/colleges and communities:* The evidence points to a need for a longer-term approach to initiatives which operate at a community rather than institutional level (with consistent and robust targeting, monitoring and evaluation). Higher education providers should encourage schools and colleges to develop on-going collaborative arrangements and partnership strategies rather than merely seeing links with higher education providers as 'one-off'. Schools should identify a senior member of staff to lead the institution in delivery of HE-related IAG and any CEIAG delivery plan should make reference to how partnerships with higher education providers will be fostered and how widening participation outreach programmes can be embedded in the curriculum to the benefit of target learners.

3.3.14 Cross-sector collaboration and partnership working may require a culture change within higher education providers, one which recognises that prioritising the needs of the learners is not detrimental to institutional priorities, even within a highly competitive environment. It would be particularly useful and timely to review how much of the collaborative work of Aimhigher, the LLNs, and other funded initiatives, has continued post-funding, in order to start getting a picture of the embedding and sustainability of partnership working.

3.4 Practitioners

3.4.1 Widening practitioners and others in higher education providers who have responsibility for delivery may wish to give consideration to the following points that emerge from the research literature.

Contextualise and apply what is already known about 'good practice'

3.4.2 Practitioners have a key role in taking what is already known and applying it, which means addressing the challenge of adapting generic findings to different types of institutions and to particular contexts.

3.4.3 Addressing this challenge will require practitioners to develop their expertise and means they need the support and capacity to develop their own solutions. This may be particularly the case in relation to supporting the outcomes of students from widening participation backgrounds. The evidence shows that retention and success is often underpinned by 'a sense of belonging to a particular place within the university, most usually a departmental building or a small campus' (Cashmore *et al.*, 2011, in Thomas, 2012a, p.32), but how does this play out in different settings, for part-time students, and in quasi-virtual settings like the OU? More generally, how can HEIs with a long history of more 'traditional' HE provision better target and foster the engagement of part-time, mature or commuting learners, with busy and complex lives? Moreover, if universal mainstream activities and interventions are the preferred model of intervention, in what circumstances are targeted interventions deemed most appropriate and effective? Attention to local detail and deep knowledge of the student base, and priorities for future action, is required in order to address these issues appropriately.

Engender high expectations, and on-going support for raising aspirations

3.4.4 As in so much of the education system, expectations are at the heart of the most efficacious relationships that higher education providers have with widening participation target groups. As Vincent Tinto (cited in Troxel, 2010) noted, as the first of his five conditions for student retention, 'students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that expect them to succeed' (p.41).

3.4.5 Practitioners in higher education providers have a key role in: sending out messages to learners at an early stage that HE is within their reach; building their belief that they have the potential to succeed in HE; supporting them to fulfil their potential and make the best HE choices for them; engendering motivation and academic preparedness; fostering student identity and aiding employment outcomes. Widening participation practitioners should see raising aspirations as an on-going process that continues throughout the whole of the interaction between under-represented groups and higher education providers, not just confined to pre-entry outreach activities. There may be particular opportunities to address aspirations in relation to:

- Expectations of successful degree outcomes
- Rewards from HE in relation to careers and labour market outcomes
- Further progression, including continuing to raise the aspirations of undergraduates to consider progress to postgraduate study.

Developing programmes that are ‘professional’ and engaging

3.4.6 The task for widening participation programmes is to develop interventions that are accessible to different groups of learners and are delivered in engaging ways whilst enabling those who need specialist support to access it. The literature identifies that under-represented groups turn to informal sources of IAG, have less access to formal IAG and prefer ‘hot’ information. Providing information is not enough and potential learners need personalised support to help them to make decisions and implement them. Such work is highly resource intensive and higher education providers need to be clear on what contribution they can make and which target groups are a priority in relation to their overall institutional objectives.

Better monitoring and evaluation

3.4.7 The review points to the need for practitioner and academic researchers to work more closely together so that there is a tie-up between what widening practitioners are doing and how the success of their work is measured. A review of Aimhigher in 2012 argued for practitioner research and case-studies to be set to rigorous criteria and involve inclusive methodologies (Doyle and Griffin, 2012, p 86). This review gave the impression of implicit frustration on this topic in both camps.

3.4.8 The work on evidence appears to suggest that, in order to develop embedded, recognisable and transparent evaluation systems that work locally at the level of institutions and partnerships, academic researchers should be encouraged to work alongside practitioners to devise a model that works on the ground but is also robust. So many studies mention a lack of evidence. Academic researchers should be encouraged to work alongside practitioners (many of whom are qualified researchers) to develop robust research practices from the beginning and to feed into an agreed national evidence strategy.

3.4.9 HEIs should pay particular attention to monitoring and evaluation of interventions with students who are already in HE, as well as those engaged at the pre-entry stage. For example, monitoring and evaluating the takeup of employability interventions by different student groups, such as employability modules, careers service-led activities and work experience placements, would enable better assessment of whether planned interventions are reaching the student population equally and highlight how internal strategies and practices could be modified accordingly.

Recommended practices

- Well targeted outreach and progression including a learner progression approach which focuses on individuals, and provides elements of intensive support (e.g. summer schools and mentoring).
- Broad view of outreach to include work with mature learners and employees.
- Work with key influencers especially parents and other role models.
- Developing a more detailed understanding of attainment gaps and ways in which outreach and progression activities can contribute to addressing them.
- Strategy for HE-related IAG which complements and supports existing provision including

developing expertise of IAG providers.

- Collaborative partnerships with a focus on sustained relationships and focus on communities rather than institutions.
- Developing student identity and engendering a sense of belonging, especially in the critical transition and first-year phase.
- Simplified packages of financial support with clear criteria backed up by good information.
- Starting employability support at pre-entry and targeting students for institutional support who are most marginalised in the labour market.
- Clear strategies for monitoring and evaluation which bring academics and practitioners together to share expertise.
- Applying findings to part-time as well as full-time learners with a view to acknowledging their contribution and valuing their status as HE students and pay particular attention to work/life/study balance and structural and support mechanisms to facilitate this.

3.5 Research Gaps

3.5.1 Gaps in research have been highlighted, and these should be looked at in the context of national and institutional widening participation priorities. Approaches to research should aim at bringing together academic research and practitioner-led initiatives. Some of the recommendations relate to improving data availability as a starting point for facilitating more insightful research and better evaluation.

Identifying what works in HE-related IAG

3.5.2 There is very little empirical evidence of what constitutes a successful model of IAG intervention as part of a widening participation programmes, although this is not to say that anecdotal evidence does not exist within the HE sector. What evidence is available stems from the approaches developed as part of the Aimhigher programme, interventions that may well have ceased with the closure of the programme. Research is needed to establish what works in the current context, and priority should be given to research that identifies models that have a demonstrable, long-term impact on learners and their influencers.

Research into successful financial support mechanisms

3.5.3 More information is needed on the impact of HE finance arrangements on participation and success in HE by widening participation groups, and monitoring of this needs to be put in place. Key questions remain over whether prospective students from widening participation backgrounds will be deterred from applying, or their choices will be affected by financial considerations causing them to cluster in local or lower-fee institutions. However, fairly sophisticated methods of data linking and tracking are required to be able to assess the impact of different financial packages. The US may offer lessons here since longitudinal data has been collected for a number of years at state level (Allen *et al.*, 2005). Researchers at OFFA are undertaking initial scoping to understand the impact of

financial support under the new system of fees and student finance, as well as researching the effect of institutional bursaries on retention before the introduction of higher fees, to be reported later in 2013.

3.5.4 Consideration of financial support mechanisms should include role of marketing and information in take-up of financial support, and work to identify the design elements that are most effective, with a view to making recommendations about how to reach targeted students.

3.5.5 Context should be taken into account as part of this work – to give more direction on matching appropriate financial support policies to different groups of students and institutions. Policy makers need to take the particular family, community, and policy context of a specific student into account when forming policies, as well as how the eligibility criteria for financial support relates to widening participation priorities. The barriers may be different for different groups, and not all will require the same support to be successful in HE.

3.5.6 Research could also look into the relative effectiveness of schemes across institutions which offer a large number of low value awards and those which offer a smaller number of high value awards, and between awards of different types.

Progress to postgraduate study

3.5.7 More could be done to fill the ‘evidence vacuum’ in this area and to monitor and promote progression to and retention and success in postgraduate study. Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson (2013) and other authors included in the current review point to areas which they see as key to understanding the postgraduate landscape. These include systems which would facilitate greater understanding of access and progression, specifically datasets on postgraduate trajectories to match similar information available at undergraduate level. HEC (2012), for example, recommends encouraging higher education providers to use a postgraduate UCAS system, UK PASS, to enable a better capture of who is applying for postgraduate courses and also to track demand.

Importance of networks in supporting access, retention and success in HE

3.5.8 The importance of family, friends and peer support is a recurring theme in the literature. Robust evidence in other sectors also points to the significant impact that interventions focused on parental involvement can have on children’s educational outcomes (Cummings *et al.*, 2012). The mechanisms by which higher education providers might harness the particular contributions of family and friends to widening access and retention and success ‘efforts’ would repay further study. It is also worth noting that many mature students are also parents.

3.5.9 Research into student access and success in relation to financial (as well as emotional) support could be an element of this work. It is reasonable to suppose that family support plays a key role in enabling HE participation for some groups. There is scope for more research into how family circumstances, including financial arrangements, create barriers and opportunities for different groups. The role of families may increasingly be important in relation to accessing financial support, interpreting information, understanding financial support mechanisms and helping with application processes, as well as playing a key role in sustaining high educational aspirations.

Supporting employability

3.5.10 Further longitudinal research to identify the impact of HE-led employability interventions would support the sector in understanding what works and help inform institutional employability strategies.

3.5.11 In addition, national research to assess the impact of the HEAR on the employment outcomes of under-represented groups is recommended.

3.5.12 Another area where more research would be beneficial is in relation to the returns from investment in HE for low-income graduates in the labour market, to help inform a view about the utility of HE for different groups. This research could also give consideration to the long-term effects of the burden of loans, and if this impacts differently for different groups of graduates.

Better data to support the evaluation of outcomes from widening participation interventions

3.5.13 Large scale datasets which are capable of tracking outcomes for young people and others involved in widening participation interventions are likely to have a key role in play in facilitating systematic evaluation of investments in widening participation, at institutional and national levels. Work to improve the quality and availability of administrative data on young people's progress should be a vital component within any evaluation strategy, in order to support making well informed decisions about where future funding can be expected to have the best effect. There are some examples of studies based on the linking of datasets capable of detailed analysis of the factors which impact on individuals' progress toward and into HE (Chowdry *et al.*, 2012) and the Welsh Funding Council and Welsh Government have chosen to track the trajectories of Welsh domiciled students²⁹. At regional level some higher education providers are collaborating on data projects to track and evaluate widening participation outcomes.³⁰

3.5.14 More could be done nationally to facilitate tracking of the progression outcomes of participants in widening participation interventions over time and between sectors. This could include facilitating access to administrative data on learner progress and outcomes. Continuing the move towards a unique learner identifier would benefit widening participation research and help to explore issues like the progression of small populations (e.g. care leavers) or the extent of 'hidden retention' (lateral progression or positive outcomes following early leaving).

²⁹ Funded by HEFCW and ESRC, undertaken by the Wales Institute for Social & Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD). <http://www.wiserd.ac.uk/research/current-projects/impact-and-effectiveness-widening-access-he-wales/>

³⁰ HEAT – Higher Education Access Tracking - now has 20 university members collaborating on a web-enabled database tool that enables data on participants in widening participation activities to be linked to HE application and entrant data and can be integrated with HE level student data.

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ANNEX A: SEARCH METHODOLOGY

Primary information sources

- Work already undertaken by OFFA/HEFCE to identify key sources (including sources identified in the parallel or other recent or current studies and materials referenced within interim strategy).
- The widening access and participation, retention and student success archive and other resources on the Higher Education Academy website.
- Key themes within the Higher Education Empirical Research database (<http://heer.qaa.ac.uk/>) were searched, particularly where gaps within the evidence were identified.

Search of academic databases

- Search terms were identified, trialled and refined in consultation with HEFCE and OFFA (see Table A1). Boolean and wildcard operators were used as required.
- Preliminary searches to determine appropriate databases were undertaken and as a result Scopus, Academic Search Complete (EBSCO) and Ingenta Connect were identified as providing literature that met the inclusion/exclusion criteria.
- Studies were selected through initially screening the titles, abstracts and executive summaries against the inclusion/exclusion criteria. Those documents that did not meet the inclusion criteria (see below) were disregarded.
- A Microsoft Excel spread sheet was created and was used to import the citations for further relevance check. All searches were reviewed for duplicates which were removed. Finally, full copies of papers were obtained and subsequently stored for the comprehensive review.

Hand searches

- Hand searches of the materials (following citations to identify any articles or reports that might be of relevance to the review, and pursuit of these), looking at secondary references and bibliographies.

Call for evidence

- A targeted call for evidence was made through relevant research networks, namely the Higher Education Academy, BERA and SRHE.

Inclusion/Exclusion criteria

- Peer reviewed research publications
- Articles which are available electronically
- Non-peer-reviewed publications i.e. consultancy reports, NGO reports
- Studies which are evaluative and based on empirical research, although articles which contained recent literature reviews were included as they could support empirical research
- Studies applicable to the UK
- Studies which directly involve HE
- Literature published in English
- Literature from 2006 onwards

Table A1: Search terms applied

Either	And	Add
Flexible Learning:		
Widening participation Widening access Social mobility	Part-time provision or degree or course or learning Distance learning Open learning Blended learning e-learning Flexible learning Recognition/ accreditation of prior learning Non publicly funded For profit Non HEFCE funded	Retention Success Progression Withdrawal
Economic Growth:		
Widening participation Widening access Social mobility Higher Education	Economic growth or health Economic Local or national or UK economy Labour market Regional growth	
Employability:		
Widening participation Widening access Social mobility	Employability or Employability skills Graduate employment Employment outcomes Extracurricular activity Career progression or support Internships	Evidence Evaluation Success Impact Effectiveness Assessment What works
Employers:		
Widening participation Widening access Social mobility Higher Education	Employer Sector or Sector Skills	Engagement Partnership Role Sponsorship Collaboration
Progress to Postgraduate Study:		
Widening participation Widening access Social mobility Access Progression Entry	Study or education or degrees or programme and postgraduate Degree or level study and higher	Evidence Evaluation Success Impact Outcomes

Transition		
Impact of Financial Support:		
Widening participation Widening access Social mobility	Financial support/benefit Student finance Bursaries Scholarship or National scholarship programme Fee waiver or remissions Student loans or debt Subsidies	Evidence Evaluation Success Impact Effectiveness Assessment What works
Outreach and Progression:		
Widening participation Widening access Social mobility	Activities or programme or scheme and outreach Activities or framework or programme or scheme and progression Collaboration or Partnership or target group	Evidence Evaluation Success Impact Effectiveness Assessment What works
IAG:		
Widening participation Widening access Social mobility Under-represented groups Low socio-economic groups Disadvantaged groups	IAG or Information advice and guidance or pre-entry advice or pre-entry guidance Pre-course information or pre-course advice or career advice or career guidance or career education CEIAG	
Transition:		
Widening participation Widening access Social mobility	Pre-entry programme or activities Summer programme or activities Bridging programme or activities Transition programme or activities Induction programme or activities Orientation programme or activities Academic preparation	Evidence Evaluation Retention Success Impact Effectiveness
Retention and Success:		
Widening participation Widening access Social mobility Retention or Success or Non-completion or Withdrawal or student success Retention and success	Mentor or Buddy Peer and support or tutor or networks Academic or learning and support Curriculum and design or change Learning and Teaching Learning or Learner and Assessment	Evidence Evaluation Success Impact Effectiveness Assessment What works

ANNEX B: ACRONYM LIST

AGCAS	Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services
APEL	Accreditation of prior or experiential learning
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
CEIAG	Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance
CPD	Continuing professional development
DLHE	Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education
ECU	Equality Challenge Unit
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
Fd	Foundation Degree
FdF	Foundation Degree Forward
FE	Further education
FSM	Free School Meals
HE	Higher Education
HEAR	Higher Education Achievement Report
HEC	Higher Education Commission
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IAG	Information, Advice and Guidance
ICOF	Independent Commission of Fees
KIS	Key Information Sets
LLN	Lifelong Learning Networks
LPN	Low Participation Neighbourhoods

NAO	National Audit Office
NASES	National Association of Student Employment Services
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
NIACE	The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
NSP	National Scholarship Programme
NUS	National Union of Students
OER	Open Educational Resources
OFFA	The Office For Fair Access
OU	The Open University
POLAR	Participation of Local Areas
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprise
SRHE	Society for Research in Higher Education
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TLRP	Teaching and Learning Research Programme
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UKCES	United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills
UVAC	University Vocational Awards Council
WASRS	Widening Access and Student Retention and Success
WPSA	Widening Participation Strategic Assessment