

(non-disclosable for policy development)

Student Experience, Teaching and Quality Committee
Summary of Widening Access Round Table Strategic Discussions
26 June 2009

Context

1. The SETQC June meeting's strategic discussion item focused on widening access policy (WA), including the Reaching Wider initiative (RW). The purpose of this agenda item was to advise Council on the strategic priorities for widening access policy development beyond 2010.
2. A HEFCW officer introduced this agenda item and drew members' attention to: the widening access-related recommendations in the *Review of Higher Education in Wales* (April 2009); the Welsh Assembly Government's statement in response to the *Review* (June 2009); HEFCW's remit letter 2009-10; the recently published key widening access-related performance indicators 2007/08; and a series of questions set out in paper SETQC/09/07 designed to facilitate the discussion.
3. In addition to the WA aspirations set out in the 2009 HEFCW Remit letter, the introductory presentation drew attention to the purposes and aspirations of HE, as identified in the Jones Group's review, which included:
 - i. creating the environment to challenge and support individuals to achieve the highest levels of educational, intellectual and personal fulfilment, for those with the ability to benefit from HE, regardless of their background;
 - ii. nurturing a democratic, civilised and inclusive society; and
 - iii. creating an intellectually ambitious, articulate, critical culture in Wales which enables individuals and communities to contribute effectively to civic, cultural and democratic life.

Discussion Outcomes

WA Strategic Aims

4. In relation to the strategic aims of future widening access developments, most members concluded that:
 - i. future WA policy developments should be underpinned by a strong evidence base, which took account of key socio-economic trends. Currently, demographic changes and the economic recession were both impacting on HE numbers, making planning difficult. Demographic trends indicated that, in the medium-term fewer younger students (under 21 years) were likely to progress to HE. However, in the short-term, applications to HE had increased from people of all ages, as a result of the global recession. These twin drivers suggested that HEIs' WA strategic priorities should include increasing participation by older students (over 21 years) and developing further flexible and part-time modes of study. At the same time, HEIs should recognise the

need to continue raising the educational aspirations of particular groups of young people as a contribution to the social justice agendas.

- ii. Similarly, the recession and demographic factors might impact on admissions practices and retention-related policies by:
 - increasing the demand above current supply for undergraduate, postgraduate, full- and part-time places from people of all ages;
 - affecting the 'student experience' resulting in, for example, larger teaching groups, greater demand for support services and limited availability of accommodation;
 - requiring a cap on student numbers, as in England, because of the funding implications;
 - increasing the number of mature applicants as employment opportunities diminish and the demand for retraining rises;
 - reducing the number of students accepted with non-traditional qualifications (typically WA students), as more 'A' level students enter HE rather than the workplace;
 - reducing the number of employer-sponsored full- and part-time places;
 - reducing the places available through the UCAS clearing system and the new adjustment period;
 - affecting retention if students could not achieve their first choice course/HEI: the wrong course choice was a key factor in non-continuation.
- iii. Whilst acknowledging these trends, members felt that HEFCW's widening access policy should continue its aim of encouraging a diverse and inclusive student population in HE.
- iv. To ensure WA student success, HEIs should develop further a 'lifelong learning framework' to enable learners to progress to and through HE: the Credit and Qualifications Framework (CQFW) would underpin this framework. At the same time, further investment in student support mechanisms would be required to ensure student retention.
- v. Widening access student graduates should be supported to achieve their full potential both in HE and in the workplace. To inform WA policy development more evidence may be required of WA students' subject choices in order to be confident that HEI was widening access to the professions, the sciences, vocational subjects and languages, regardless of class, gender or disability.

WA Strategic Priorities

5. In relation to widening access strategic priorities, most members concluded that:
 - i. Given limited resources, WA funding should be sharply focused to achieve the agreed strategic objectives and to maximise outcomes.
 - ii. Subject areas which would contribute to the regeneration of the economy (science, engineering, technology and maths (STEM), health and related subjects, professional and creative industries-related subjects) should be prioritised. WA provision should recognise the need for, and deliver, pathways to and through these subject areas.

- iii. Priority actions for WA included contributing to cultural change within HEIs, for example, raising awareness of the benefits and needs of a diverse student body and exploring the employer/WA and FE/HE interface to develop further high-level learning opportunities.
- iv. Members agreed that priority groups should encompass people of all ages but target those from lower socio-economic groups; people living in areas of multiple deprivation and geographically isolated communities; males, particularly young working class males; and some BME groups currently under-represented in HE, including economic migrants. It was generally considered that the issues relating to Welsh medium were being strongly addressed through the Jones Review and the work of the Coleg Ffederal, and those relating to NEETs groups (those not in employment, education and training) could be more directly addressed initially by other organisations.
- v. To widen access and to develop further the regional work of the Reaching Wider Partnerships, HEIs required secure, long-term funding and clear steers from the Welsh Assembly Government on key priorities for HE. In turn, HEIs needed to ensure a joined up approach to working with other key Welsh Assembly strategies, policies and with other providers to maximise outcomes and add value to existing work.

WA Reconfiguration and Collaboration

- 6. In relation to the structures and mechanisms required to deliver widening access beyond 2010, most members concluded that:
 - i. The Reaching Wider initiative should be reviewed, taking account of the *Transforming Education and Training* policy outcomes and the adult community learning developments. Some members suggested that a pan-Wales approach was required, while others considered that a regional approach was more appropriate to meet local need and align with the Welsh Assembly Government's focus on regional planning.
 - ii. Sector skills groups, employers and training providers should be encouraged to contribute to widening access and Reaching Wider strategic developments.
 - iii. The HE/FE interface, including regional HE/FE collaboration/mergers to support WA developments, should be considered more fully. Within this context, there may also be a need to incentivise HE/FE collaboration to ensure the development of effective progression routes to and through FE and HE.
 - iv. All widening access funding mechanisms should be reviewed to ensure they facilitate the delivery of widening access priorities.

Measures of Success

- 7. In exploring how widening access, including the Reaching Wider initiative, should demonstrate its future success, members recognised the difficulties in directly

attributing outcomes to WA interventions. In this context, most members concluded that:

- i. It was important for HEFCW and the sector to agree a definition of widening access in Wales, which might be different from other UK definitions.
- ii. WA in HE should demonstrate clearly how it contributes to key Welsh Assembly Government policies and priorities.
- iii. It was important to clarify at the outset outcomes that were both measurable and meaningful.
- iv. The Scottish Funding Council 'basket of measures' model should be considered further.
- v. HEIs' widening access work should be measured against clear bench marks and evidence bases.
- vi. HEIs might be encouraged to identify their own indicators of success, taking account of their mission, purpose and regional markets.
- vii. Qualitative and quantitative data could contribute to success measures.
- viii. HEIs might commit to making differentiated contributions to WA, depending on their mission and purpose. This would enable the HE system as a whole to achieve its WA strategic aims, rather than each HEI being measured against the same criteria.
- ix. Effective partnership working could be a measure of success, demonstrating collaboration, added value, avoiding duplication, etc.
- x. While graduate employment rates might be a measure, external factors, such as recession, might adversely impact on its achievement.
- xi. HEFCW should ensure that WA funding mechanisms reward success and active engagement with WA policy aims.