

Cylchlythyr | Circular

Strategic Approach to Widening Access to Higher Education 2013/14 to 2015/16

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To: Heads of higher education institutions in Wales
Principals of directly-funded further education colleges in
Wales and other interested parties
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HEFCW's *Strategic Approach to Widening Access to Higher Education (our Approach)* sets out our commitment to delivering the Welsh Government's widening access expectations set out in the [Policy Statement on Higher Education](#) (June 2013) and other related strategies. In developing our *Approach* we have revised and built on the first [Widening Access Strategic Approach](#) (2010/11 to 2012/13) and taken account of our [Corporate Strategy](#) 2013-14 to 2015-16.

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Introduction

1. HEFCW's *Strategic Approach to Widening Access to Higher Education (our Approach)* sets out our commitment to delivering the Welsh Government's widening access expectations set out in the [Policy Statement on Higher Education](#) (June 2013) and other related strategies. In developing our *Approach* we have revised and built on the first [Widening Access Strategic Approach](#) (2010/11 to 2012/13) and taken account of our [Corporate Strategy](#) 2013-14 to 2015-16.
2. HEFCW's *Strategic Approach to Widening Access 2013/14 to 2015/16* sits beneath HEFCW's Corporate Strategy and alongside HEFCW's [Strategic Approach to the Student Experience](#) and our [Child Poverty Strategy](#). It should be read in conjunction with these documents and understood within the broader context of existing and emerging strategic developments, including as set out in our Fee Plan Guidance circulars for the period, Our [Strategic Equality Plan](#), the [Agreement on Skills and Employability for Wales](#) and our [Part-time Higher Education Position Statement](#).
3. Its purpose is to provide a fuller picture of our strategic intentions and promote a clear understanding of widening access (WA) policy and practice in Wales, as we recognise inconsistencies in meaning and messages are unhelpful for the sector, our partners and for learners. Our intentions in setting out our *Approach*, are to be: challenging in our aspirations; clear on our agenda for action; realistic in managing expectations, and transparent in providing a mechanism for measuring progress and demonstrating success.
4. The context in which higher education (HE) operates continues to evolve rapidly. We recognise that while Wales has devolved education powers, our education providers operate regionally, nationally, across the UK and internationally. Changes to UK and Welsh higher education funding and student finance has included changes to the way in which higher education institutions are funded, including for widening access.
5. Higher Education institutions' responses to government policy, including strategic actions to deliver WA, are also influenced by diverse factors, including missions, geography and partnerships. Within this context, our *Approach* confirms how we will support the higher education sector and its partners to deliver the WA objectives outlined within the *Policy Statement* on higher education and continue to build on the progress made against the key Welsh Government priorities of contributing towards social justice and supporting a buoyant economy.
6. We recognise that we are publishing our revised *Approach* as the Welsh Government commissioned [Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance Arrangements](#) begins its work and at an early stage in the [Higher Education \(Wales\) Bill's](#) development. Our widening access policy implementation, as set out in our *Approach*, will take account of these developments.

7. This *Approach* has been informed by advice from HEFCW's Student Experience, Teaching and Quality Committee (SETQC) and partnership discussions.
8. As part of our policy development process, we have undertaken an initial impact assessment screening to assess the impact of its implementation on groups with protected characteristics. In addition our screening takes account of the impact of implementation on the Welsh language and issues of sustainability. The outcomes of this screening are available upon request.

HEFCW's Corporate Strategy 2013-14 to 2015-16

9. Our *Approach* should be understood within the context of HEFCW's Corporate Strategy. Our Corporate Strategy establishes WA as one of five strategic themes which will contribute to delivering our vision of '*sustainable, accessible, internationally excellent higher education in Wales*¹’.
10. Our strategic themes are interdependent. In particular, there is a close relationship between the themes of widening access, student experience and skills, employability and enterprise. In addition, equality of opportunity and sustainability underpin all our strategic themes and are, therefore, included in this *Approach*, as well as being incorporated under other themes. Where priorities and actions are being taken forward under other strategic themes and priorities, our *Approach* has not focussed on them in detail, nevertheless, we recognise the importance of them to widening access.
11. Our Corporate Strategy establishes our high-level approach to WA policy implementation with the overarching objective to '**secure inclusion, progression and success in higher education**'.

Corporate Strategy Widening Access Measures

12. HEFCW's Corporate Strategy identifies four high-level measures in relation to widening access.
13. The primary target for WA continues our focus on those individuals domiciled within the Communities First (CF) cluster areas and, in this Strategy period, in the bottom quintile of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) areas. It measures improved access and progression for people of *all ages* in locations where such opportunities are low, including the Heads of the Valleys.

¹ See [HEFCW Corporate Strategy](#) pages 10-13

A rise in the proportion of all Welsh domiciled students studying higher education courses and further education colleges in Wales who are domiciled in the bottom quintile of wards in the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation or in Communities First cluster areas, from 20.0% in 2011/12 to 22.4% in 2015/16 (a rise of 11.8%)

14. The second measure focuses on participation and seeks:

An increase in the proportion of all UK domiciled students studying higher education courses at higher education institutions and further education colleges in Wales who are from UK low participation areas from 33.2% in 2011/12 to 35.3% in 2015/16 (a rise of 6.3%)

15. The third measure focuses on the number of full- and part-time students successfully completing their learning objectives, thus recognising the importance of ensuring WA learners' success in and beyond higher education. It seeks:

A decrease in the percentage of full time undergraduate students no longer in higher education following year of entry from 9.2% in 2010/11 8.2% in 2015/16 (a drop of 10.7%); and

A decrease in the percentage of part-time first degree students no longer in higher education two years following year of entry from 33.7% in 2011/12 to 30.1% in 2015/16 (a drop of 10.7%).

16. The final measure focuses on part-time learning opportunities assessing:

The percentage change in the number of part-time students attending higher education courses in Welsh higher education institutions and further education colleges to be equal to, or greater than, the comparable figure for the UK.

17. In addition to these measures, we monitor the sector's performance against our other Corporate Strategy measures to inform our understanding of WA-related performance within them. We monitor other WA indicators, using pre-existing data and taking account of other relevant UK performance indicators where appropriate. Indicators include the recruitment and retention of disabled students, ethnic minorities, care leavers, age profile, learners in receipt of Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and the Assembly Learning Grant (ALG), male participation and socio-economic class. Wales has performed well in most widening access indicators, therefore, our approach to monitoring will be risk-based, with more detailed monitoring and further action where concerns arise.

HEFCW's role

18. Our role in relation to widening access to higher education is to:
- i. with Welsh Government and higher education providers ensure that widening access approaches respond to, and align with, Welsh Government priorities;
 - ii. ensure a strategic approach to higher education-related WA collaborative developments across Wales;
 - iii. work with partners, including Further Education Colleges and Careers Wales, to improve progression to and through HE;
 - iv. inform WA policy developments through strategic links with relevant national and international agencies;
 - v. ensure that our policies are evidence-based;
 - vi. develop, implement and review a range of mechanisms to achieve our strategic objectives;
 - vii. support the Reaching Wider Programme to ensure that it adds value to our priorities and retains and builds on its multi-agency and innovative partnership approaches;
 - viii. ensure that equality of opportunity underpins the development and implementation of WA policies and practice²;
 - ix. promote and disseminate current and effective WA practices and to mainstream the lessons learnt across Wales, the UK and internationally.

HEFCW's Strategic Approach to Widening Access to Higher Education

Definition and aim of widening access

19. **'Widening access to and through higher education'** is the term we use in Wales to define our strategic intentions in this policy area and frame our strategic objectives. We recognise that other parts of the UK use different terms which prioritise different WA priorities.
20. The aim of widening access is to secure inclusion, progression and success in higher education to enable learners across all age ranges and backgrounds, who face the highest social and economic barriers, to fulfil their potential as students, lifelong learners, citizens and employees.

² HEFCW, as a Welsh Government Sponsored Body, has equality and diversity duties under the Equality Act 2010.

21. Widening access to and through higher education will contribute to social justice, social mobility and wellbeing and the skills and economic prosperity of individuals, of communities and of Wales.
22. We are committed to evaluating and refining our definition of widening access to contribute to advancing equality of opportunity agendas. In addition to meeting our statutory responsibilities, our intention is to drive cultural change and proactive approaches to ensure that equality and diversity issues are fully integrated into our own and higher education institutions' policies and practices and meet Welsh Government priorities.

'Hard to reach' individuals and groups

23. The Welsh Government is committed to engaging the hardest to reach individuals and securing their progression to and through higher-level learning. We recognise that defining 'hard to reach' is challenging. Subject to further clarification, we consider 'hard to reach' would include individuals and groups: based in Communities First cluster areas; the bottom quintile of the lower super output areas of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD); low participation neighbourhoods; workless households; those families experiencing 'in work poverty'; pupils in receipt of Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), pupils eligible for free school meals; carers or those with a care background; ex-offenders.

Summary of our widening access strategic intentions

24. We will:
 - i. prioritise all-age recruitment from Communities First cluster areas and areas in the bottom quintile of the lower super output areas of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD);
 - ii. improve participation and success in HE by all-age groups under-represented in higher education, including those from UK low participation areas;
 - iii. secure and increase articulation and progression pathways into higher education including FE and HE, HE in FE and to Welsh medium HE;
 - iv. promote fair admissions, and Wales as the destination of first choice, for higher education including to students from Wales and the UK;
 - v. prioritise higher-level learning and skills, retention and student success;
 - vi. increase flexible learning opportunities, including part-time study, workplace learning and technology-enhanced learning;

- vii. support widening access approaches to delivering the International Action Plan for Wales;
- viii. improve fair access to the professions, high level skills and the priority sectors contributing to economic prosperity;
- ix. support UK and national duties and Welsh Government priorities relating to tackling poverty, raising educational aspirations and attainment, social mobility and equality of opportunity;
- x. prioritise widening access sustainability;
- xi. maximise the potential for collaborative, cross-sectoral, multi-agency approaches regionally and nationally; and
- xii. improve the evidence base to support WA and impact assessment demonstrating effective practice and success in WA to HE;

25. Our priorities within these strategic objectives are set out below, together with our initial actions. Separate circulars will provide information on implementation.

Priorities within our widening access strategic intentions

Prioritise all-age recruitment of individuals domiciled in Communities First cluster areas and those in the bottom quintile of the lower super output areas of the WIMD

26. The recruitment to, and success in, higher education by people of all ages from [Communities First cluster areas](#) remains a core commitment of WA policy in Wales, as this is a long-term agenda. As a Welsh Government Sponsored Body, HEFCW will maintain its contribution to this policy area. The new Communities First cluster structures, confirmed in January 2013, will deliver against three priorities: prosperous communities, learning communities and healthier communities.³ Effective engagement with the Communities First cluster structures at all levels will support the sustainable delivery of WA provision in these communities.
27. To improve access and progression for people in locations where educational aspirations and learning opportunities are low we will prioritise the recruitment and success of people living in Communities First cluster areas and those living in the bottom quintile of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation ([WIMD](#)).

³ *Communities First*, Wales Audit Office (July 2009). See: www.wao.gov.uk The Wales Audit Office report, *Communities First* (2009) identifies two complementary strands as fundamental to the effective regeneration of these communities: local partnership working; and programme 'bending', or alignment, to direct resources from appropriate public programmes and organisations towards Communities First areas

28. To ensure a continued Wales-wide focus to widening access it is important to take account of the needs of those living in rural areas of Wales, as well as urban areas. The Welsh Government recognises that Welsh universities are in a: *'prime position not only to transform the futures of the next generation but also to transform the communities within which they are situated.'*⁴ Our all-age, nation-wide WA objectives contribute to breaking the link between deprivation and educational attainment by supporting tackling poverty and social mobility agendas in disadvantaged communities.

We will:

- A1 *broker effective engagement with Communities First cluster structures;*
- A2 *ensure fee plan targets prioritise Communities First and bottom quintile of the WIMD communities;*
- A3 *with partners, measure the sector's commitment to reducing the attainment gap, improving access and progression for people in locations where such opportunities are low against all-age targets related to Communities First clusters and the bottom quintile of the WIMD learners, including the Heads of the Valley's area, as defined in our Corporate Strategy;*
- A4 *support the Welsh Government's education and training strategic priorities, including those set out in its Programme for Government, HE Policy Statement for Higher Education, Tackling Poverty Strategy, Child Poverty Strategy and Refugee Inclusion Strategy;*

Improve participation and success in HE by all-age groups under-represented in higher education, including those from UK low participation areas

29. All-age provision is a cross-cutting theme of our WA policy. The Welsh Government recognises that *'higher education has the potential to inspire and develop individuals of any age and encourages them to continually develop throughout their lives so that they are not only equipped with the skills required for work but also can contribute to their communities.'*⁵
30. Individuals, groups and communities under-represented in higher education are a widening access priority and we are committed to securing a diverse and inclusive student population. Wales continues to perform well, compared with other parts of the UK, in attracting students from under-represented backgrounds, including those from low participation neighbourhoods, state schools, and those with disabilities⁶. However, further sustainable progress, including embedding effective WA and diversity practices throughout higher education will ensure a positive WA student experience. We recognise that more must be done to tackle the education-related aspects of poverty, including child poverty, as set out more fully in our [Child Poverty Strategy](#).

⁴ [Policy Statement on Higher Education](#) p.17

⁵ Policy Statement on HE

⁶ HEFCW equalities monitoring data

31. Welsh universities have responded positively to supporting looked after children and care leavers. We expect universities and their partners to maintain and go beyond their current commitments to looked after children and care leavers, taking account of the [Buttle UK quality framework](#) and sustaining high-quality interventions tailored to the individual needs of these students. HEFCW has published its [statement of commitment](#) to the education of looked after children and care leavers as we recognise the continuing need to address the challenges faced by looked after children and care leavers of all ages and at all stages of their education. We will encourage sustained collaboration with further education providers and other agencies to promote and share approaches to supporting looked after children and care leavers to and through their education.
32. In supporting educational aspiration and learning success, we recognise the role that family and intergenerational learning plays in creating learning cultures in homes and communities and in encouraging citizenship. Diverse WA interventions will contribute to providing adults, parents and carers with the confidence and skills to access higher-level learning and employment, as well as supporting children's attainment and contributing to tackling disadvantage.
33. Our [Strategic Equality Plan](#) (2012-2016) establishes our commitments and statutory responsibilities in relation to the 2010 Equality Act. Our WA strategic intentions extend beyond compliance.
34. To further inform our understanding of the nature of, and trends in, under-representation, we will work with universities, the National Union of Students Wales, the Association of Managers of Student Services in HE (AMOSSHE) and UK-wide organisations, including the Equality Challenge Unit. Our actions to ensure we make effective progress against our strategic equality objectives and improve our consultation and engagement mechanisms will be guided by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. The evolution of equalities legislation means that current progress is uneven across all areas of equality and, in some instances, initial steps are required to improve our evidence base to make more rapid progress. Effective management information systems should inform ambitious fee plan target setting and drive universities' performance.

We will:

- A5 *encourage universities to: monitor and take action to ameliorate differences in selection, attainment or retention patterns; develop appropriate student support mechanisms; and disseminate effective practice to support under-represented groups in HE;*
- A6 *review our Child Poverty Strategy;*
- A7 *promote the Buttle UK framework and effective practice in supporting looked after children and care leavers;*
- A8 *deliver our Strategic Equality Plan objectives, working closely with partners;*

Secure and increase articulation and progression pathways into higher education, including FE and HE, HE in FE and to Welsh medium higher education

35. We will work with the Welsh Government, universities and colleges, Universities Association of Lifelong Learning Cymru (UALL Cymru), Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, Colegau Cymru, NIACE Dysgu Cymru, Careers Wales and other partners to align WA developments with post-16, skills and adult and community learning priorities to enable a coherent, regional approach to progression pathway planning and implementation.
36. First generation WA HE applicants, those with caring, work or other responsibilities and students studying flexibly may be unable to relocate in order to study. In this context, further regional provision, including technology enhanced learning opportunities, should be core components of the widening access offer. Universities within the three HE regions of Wales have developed a range of collaborative models to work in partnership with further education colleges, education and training providers, employers, sector skills organisations and Careers Wales.
37. We have signalled that higher education providers' regional strategies, informed by local labour market intelligence should secure better subject availability, flexible opportunities, easier geographical access, clearer progression routes and, overall, a higher degree of responsiveness to local needs⁷. Regional strategies can develop and embed innovative progression routes around Foundation Degrees and Higher Level Apprenticeships. We have funded the Cadarn learning portal⁸ in north and mid Wales and the recognition of prior learning (RPL) experience project⁹ in south east Wales: both projects promote access to higher-level study.
38. We are committed to embedding of the Universities Heads of the Valleys Institute ([UHOVI](#)) into regional structures and mainstreaming it into the core business of the University of South Wales (USW) by 2016. The second phase of UHOVI will focus on hard to reach learners, providing bite-sized and other learning opportunities in a range of locations, to contribute to upskilling, economic prosperity and the regeneration of the heads of the valleys region.

We will:

- A9 *promote collaborative arrangements that deliver coherent regional learning opportunities;*
- A10 *broker more strategic, multi-agency dialogue and clearly articulate the contribution of higher education providers;*
- A11 *promote and monitor the development of Foundation Degree and Higher Level Apprenticeship routes within the regions;*
- A12 *promote mechanisms for recognising and accrediting prior learning;*

⁷ See HEFCW circulars reference numbers: [W10/16HE](#) and [W10/06HE](#)

⁸ [Cadarn learning portal](#)

⁹ [RPL project](#)

- A13 *support cross-sector events to promote widening access to HE priorities and champion effective practice;*
- A14 *review our policies on HE in FE franchising;*
- A15 *with USW, secure the long-term sustainability of UHOVI;*

Promote fair admissions and Wales as the destination of first choice for higher education students from Wales and the UK

39. Fair admissions principles were established in the Schwartz report (2004). While respecting the autonomy of universities in admissions, confidence and transparency in admissions systems and practices is imperative. Admissions practices should not be a barrier to widening access. The Welsh Government has confirmed that *'fair admissions procedures, underpinned by high-level professional practice and informed by effective practice are also key to ensuring equality of opportunity in HE¹⁰.*' Working with universities, UCAS, including the UCAS Welsh Standing Group and the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme (SPA) we support clearly articulated practices which identify applicants with the greatest potential and likelihood of success, regardless of background or other factors. Universities should ensure that contextualised admissions processes are informed by consistently high-quality information and data which takes account of factors affecting Welsh domiciled students and they should explain and promote their use to external audiences to. In addition, we consider that the use of the Unique Learner Number (ULN)¹¹ to verify qualifications and awards, aligned with the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR), would enhance management information.
40. The Policy Statement expects that *'Universities in Wales should aspire to become the destination of first choice for students from Wales, the UK and across the world'¹²*. Ambitious higher education provider fee plan targets around the promotion of higher education will underpin this expectation. While UK- and EU-domiciled accepted applicants for full-time undergraduate entry to Welsh HEIs in 2013/14 increased, as have Welsh domiciled applicants to Welsh HEIs¹³, part-time undergraduate applications have declined across the UK, though to a lesser extent in Wales. In a dynamic admissions environment, more needs to be done to promote higher education opportunities regionally, nationally, across the UK and internationally for undergraduate and postgraduate students studying flexibly or full-time.
41. The Welsh Government expects there to be *'stronger strategic collaboration between HE providers and careers services in Wales ... to explore new and innovative ways of attracting students of all ages and*

¹⁰ [Policy Statement on Higher Education](#), p19

¹¹ <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/schooldata/ims/learnerregistration/?lang=en>

¹² [Policy Statement on Higher Education](#), p.15

¹³ UCAS data.

*backgrounds into higher education*¹⁴. We recognise that HE applicants and graduates of all ages require support to make informed study choices, underpinned by impartial information, advice and guidance. In June 2013, HEFCW and Careers Wales signed a memorandum of understanding articulating and promoting the organisations' shared commitment to maintain effective working relationships which contribute to supporting learners in Wales and the implementation of mutually relevant Welsh Government policies. In addition, HEFCW is represented on the [Welsh Government's Wales Strategic Forum for Career Development](#) which provides a strategic focus for the family of careers service providers in Wales¹⁵. Our *Student Experience Approach* sets out our commitments in relation to [Key Information Sets](#) and the Higher Education Achievement Report¹⁶.

We will:

- A16 *promote the contribution of widening access to delivering social justice and economic prosperity;*
- A17 *champion, with partners, Welsh HE as a destination of first choice;*
- A18 *engage effectively with UK-wide organisations to ensure they recognise fully the implications of distinct HE policy and priorities in Wales;*
- A19 *fund research into cross-border flows (Wales and England) to inform our understanding of admissions trends;*
- A20 *encourage effective practice in HE admissions at all levels and study modes;*
- A21 *monitor UK and Wales-specific data related to mode of study and learner characteristics to inform policy implementation;*

Prioritise higher-level learning and skills, retention and student success

42. The successful completion of learning objectives underpins a positive learning experience and is central to our *Approach*. In prioritising learning, student success and retention we acknowledge that a multiplicity of factors influence completion rates: WA characteristics amongst them. Our previous Corporate Strategy student success measure is forecast to be met¹⁷. We recognise the diversity of part-time study trajectories, but we are clear that more should be done to increase successful completion of part-time learning objectives. We support universities to continuously improve their rates of completion and performance in relation to the [UK non-continuation indicators](#).
43. Our *Student Experience Approach* recognises that reviewing and revising approaches to: curriculum design; curriculum content; pedagogical and assessment issues; and programme delivery, to take account of the needs

¹⁴ [Policy Statement on Higher Education](#), p17

¹⁵ [Welsh Government Wales Strategic Forum for Careers Development](#)

¹⁶ Strategic Approach to the Student Experience, p.8

¹⁷ Corporate Strategy 2010/11 -2012/13 student success measure: A 2.7% rise in the module completion rate for undergraduate enrolments in Welsh higher education institutions from 87.6% in 2008/09 to 90% in 2012/13.

of a diverse student body, will contribute to enhancing the student experience for all learners. Such approaches to affect a positive cultural change should extend to securing an excellent student experience at pre-entry and entry levels. We have promoted the closer alignment of universities' learning and teaching and widening access strategic planning as we recognise the opportunities and benefits that such an approach can deliver. We encourage universities to ensure that learning and teaching and widening access strategic plans are aligned.

44. Our *Corporate Strategy* includes a target to measure the increase in the number of students who successfully complete their learning objectives. We will work with the sector and partners to provide leadership in developing and disseminating evidence-informed practice to enhance learning, retention and student success and we will work with universities to develop, embed and promote effective practice.
45. Our Corporate Strategy identifies a success measure for the National Student Survey ([NSS](#))¹⁸. The NSS is important in enabling students to express views on their study experiences, and to inform potential applicants' decision-making. In addition, universities should consider how they enable the views of WA learners, including at pre-entry stages, to contribute to enhancing provision and meeting learning needs.

We will:

- A22 *fund WISERD to improve the WA evidence-base underpinning policies and practice;*
- A23 *analyse HE data, with particular emphasis on under-represented and equality groups to inform ambitious target-setting and meet and go beyond our statutory duties;*
- A24 *identify and promote effective practice on retention and success;*
- A25 *support the Higher Education Academy to provide leadership and enhance the WA student learning experience, retention and success.*

Increase flexible learning opportunities, including part-time study, workplace learning and technology enhanced learning

46. The Welsh Government recognises that *'higher education providers should promote ... new and different progression pathways, study modes and locations available'* and they should *'provide an appropriate offer to people at all stages of life, through a variety of programmes and through a flexible and dynamic delivery system'*¹⁹. Community outreach is a fundamental component of effective engagement with 'hard to reach' individuals and communities. We expect all higher education providers to maintain and extend their offer outside campus walls, outside 'traditional teaching hours'

¹⁸ [Corporate Strategy](#) NSS measure: The three year rolling average score of Wales in the NSS 'overall satisfaction' question will be equal to, or greater than, the comparative score for the UK' p.16

¹⁹ [Policy Statement](#) on HE, p.17

and into communities, workplaces and workspaces. While recognising the resource implications, evidence suggests that such opportunities to reach new markets and add value to existing provision exist through partnerships with trade unions; employers; community and third sector groups; sector skills councils; a range of external and match funding; and innovative teaching and learning approaches. Traditional working and learning practices are changing: full- and part-time study definitions are blurred for many learners, therefore, innovative, sustainable and collaborative approaches to supply and demand are required.

47. [HEFCW's Part-time Higher Education Position Statement](#) sets out our strategic vision and the requirements to drive up supply and demand for part-time higher education in Wales.
48. Widening access contributes, and can do more, to respond to knowledge and higher level skills gaps at regional, national and individual levels arising from: re-skilling and skills requirements; an ageing demographic; and changing patterns of paid and unpaid activity. We recognise that lifelong learning opportunities, across the whole life course, are increasingly important in maintaining and updating skills and delivering the wider benefits of learning as the workforce ages²⁰. There are issues of social mobility and access to the professions and the priority sectors for WA post-graduate students, as we set out elsewhere in our *Approach*.
49. Extending and promoting the range of learning opportunities, removing real and perceived learning barriers and enabling more people to develop personal, transferrable, vocational and entrepreneurial skills is fundamental to our *Approach*. We support demand-led flexible learning opportunities and encourage new supply routes to and through higher education. It is essential, therefore, that in implementing our *Approach* we align it with the Welsh Government's Adult Community Learning strategic priorities, developments with learning and teaching through technology including the recommendations of the [Online Digital working group](#) and Welsh medium and language strategic priorities identified by the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol. We endorse the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales ([CQFW](#)) which offers greater flexibility and increased portability when moving between learning providers and employers.

We will:

- A26 *align widening access policy developments with the HEFCW Part-time Higher Education Position Statement and vision;*
- A27 *take account of the recommendations from the Online Digital Learning working group in policy developments related to flexible, accessible inclusive learning;*

²⁰ [Learning Through Life](#): *The Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning* highlights the contribution that diverse learning opportunities can make to 'control over individual and group destinies, health and wellbeing, cultural identity and democratic tolerance. *Learning Through Life Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning* (NIACE, 2009, p.1)

- A28 *build on our assessment of flexible and part-time higher education, taking account of UK research and the Future Directions quality enhancement themes;*
- A29 *promote progression routes to and through Welsh medium higher education, working with Y Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and partners;*

Support widening access approaches to delivering the internationalisation of higher education

50. The Welsh Government recognises that ‘*Student mobility can enhance employability and personal development, offer greater opportunities for linguistic development and raise a greater cultural awareness and global mindset that is vital for Wales ...*’.²¹ Our *Student Experience Approach* references actions to contribute to internationalisation as it impacts on students²².
51. In relation to widening access, we will work with Higher Education Wales, universities and further education colleges, the UK HE International Unit, the British Council and others to promote widening access student mobility and international learning opportunities, supporting universities to identify and overcome barriers faced by WA students in gaining international study and work experiences, in the broadest sense, to enhance their graduate skills.

We will:

- A30 *Work with partners to promote internationalisation across HE, including targeting WA learners, regardless of their background or mode of study;*
- A31 *encourage universities to tackle the barriers to, and promote the benefits of, international experiences, enabling widening access students to enhance mobility and skills;*

Improve fair access to the professions, higher level skills and the priority sectors contributing to economic prosperity

52. UK Poverty and social mobility reports between 2009 and 2013 identified barriers impacting on ‘in work’ poverty and ‘fair access to the professions’. In Wales, we interpret issues of fair access more broadly to include access to graduate level employment in the professions, in higher level skills and the priority sectors. Fair access to employment and skills requires that education and training at all levels are available to as wide a pool of talent as possible. Social mobility and fulfilling one’s potential are key aspects of wellbeing, social justice, social mobility and economic prosperity. Increasing access to some professions is challenging, given that the requirement for post-graduate qualifications may be a barrier for WA students already managing undergraduate or other financial and family

²¹ [Policy Statement on Higher Education](#), p.13.

²² [Student Experience Approach](#), p.11.

commitments. Working with universities, further education colleges, Sector Skills Councils and partners we support developments to increase flexible and technology enhanced learning, the recognition of prior learning and continuous professional development focussed on employers' requirements. Foundation Degree and Higher Level Apprenticeship developments will increase access to new regional, professional learning opportunities.

53. Widening access makes a significant contribution to upskilling and economic prosperity. It promotes lifelong learning and raises educational aspirations. With further education partners and others we are committed to securing more locally accessible higher education which provide pathways into flexible and/or work-based opportunities, including continuous professional development. Routes into science, technology, engineering and maths/medicine-related (STEM) professions, pathways in the arts and creative industries sector, including arts-related professional development²³, and more flexible, higher-level vocational pathways²⁴, underpinned by effective information, advice and guidance, are key mechanisms for widening access to, through and beyond higher education.
54. Our *Student Experience Approach* recognises that Foundation Degrees together with Higher Level Apprenticeships can deliver new routes to further and higher education and higher-level employment. HE regional strategies will contribute to managing and expanding these pathways and increasing access to higher level learning.

We will:

A32 *identify and disseminate effective international, national and Welsh practice in improving access to the professions, higher-level skills and the priority sectors;*

A33 *support collaborative, sustainable, flexible pathways enabling progression to Foundation Degrees and Higher Level Apprenticeships and beyond;*

A34 *develop further our relations with the careers service family, including Careers Wales, to promote higher-level study and vocational qualifications and skills and to inform learner choice;*

Support UK and national duties and Welsh Government priorities relating to widening access, including tackling poverty, raising educational aspirations and attainment, social mobility and equality of opportunity

55. We are committed to contributing to advancing equality and diversity agendas, going beyond our statutory duties arising from the Equality Act 2010. We acknowledge universities' commitment to improving student support and we work with them to drive cultural change and proactive

²³ [In line with the Welsh Government's Arts in Education independent review recommendations.](#)

²⁴ See HEFCW Strategy on Enhanced Learning and Teaching through Technology: circular [W08/12HE](#)

approaches to ensure that inclusive practices are embedded fully across their organisations.

56. We work with the Equality Challenge Unit and its Welsh Standing Group, take account of the Equality and Human Rights Commission in Wales's regulatory work and, with our partners, secure equality of opportunity in higher education.
57. HEFCW is the designated relevant authority for the assessment and enforcement of statutory tuition fee plans in Wales. Through fee plan guidance we ensure that all higher education providers in Wales charging more than basic fee rates set ambitious targets in relation to equality of opportunity and the promotion of higher education and that they deliver on their fee plan commitments.
58. The [Child Poverty Act](#) 2010 and the [Welsh Government's Children and Families \(Wales\) Measure](#) 2010 established a statutory framework to drive actions to eradicate child poverty. We report progress on HEFCW's [Child Poverty Strategy](#) 2012-13 to 2015-16 to our Student Experience, Teaching and Quality Committee annually and we will review our Strategy by March 2014 in fulfilment of our duties under the Welsh Government's 2010 Measure. The Measure identifies 13 broad aims, of which HEFCW is well-placed to contribute '*to help young persons participate effectively in education and training*' and, in addition, we expect to make some contribution '*to reduce inequalities in educational attainment between children*'; and '*to provide parents of children with the skills necessary for paid employment*'²⁵. We take account of the Children's Commissioners' [Child Poverty Strategy](#) and work with the sector to contribute to this priority.
59. [A Wales Audit Office report](#) on the Communities First programme commended HEFCW for its 'programme bending', aligning WA agendas with the Welsh Government's flagship regeneration programme²⁶. Widening access to higher education makes an effective contribution to Welsh Government strategic priorities, including but not limited to: educational attainment, tackling poverty and child poverty, regeneration, economic upskilling and employability, Welsh culture, language and bilingual agendas, science and arts in education priorities. These agendas are long-term and require strategic and 'joined up' approaches. Working with Welsh Government, universities and other partners, we ensure that widening access contributes effectively and sustainably to Welsh Government strategic priorities.

We will:

A35 *work with universities to deliver our Strategic Equality Plan objectives;*

²⁵ [HEFCW's Child Poverty Strategy, W12/11HE](#)

²⁶ [Wales Audit Office](#) Communities First report (2009), p.61

- A36 *continue to align WA policy implementation with Welsh Government WA-related expectations;*
- A37 *encourage coherent approaches, and champion universities' contribution, to Welsh Government's widening access-related priorities;*
- A38 *challenge institutions to set ambitious fee plan targets to advance equality of opportunity expectations set by HEFCW and the Welsh Government;*

Maximise the potential for collaborative, cross-sectoral, multi-agency approaches regionally and nationally

60. Our 2014-15 [remit letter](#) prioritises regional coherence. This requires a bolder approach to regional planning and coordination. It is a condition of HEFCW funding that we have regard to regional coherence.
61. Widening access continues to make progress in developing inclusive, cross-sectoral approaches, including through the regional Reaching Wider Partnerships. Higher education WA interests are normally well-represented on regional and national provider networks. We have substantial evidence of the sector's effectiveness in forming flexible partnership configurations to attract European and other external funding to support innovative practices or action research.
62. We work closely with the higher and further education sectors to secure more sustainable regional collaboration and delivery, enabling learner progression to all higher education provision, regardless of regional boundaries. Within this context, we recognise fully the regional, national, UK and international remit of HEIs. Regional working further aligns supply and demand as outlined in other parts of the *Approach*. Multi-agency, cross-sectoral working is fundamental to avoiding duplication, extending learner choices, increasing the diversity of the student population and delivering long-term widening access solutions to complex social and economic agendas.

We will:

- A39 *broker more multi-agency strategic dialogue to promote more effective cross-sectoral working;*
- A40 *support strategies which articulate clearly the regional role of widening access, including through the Reaching Wider Programme;*
- A41 *assess regional strategy developments to ensure they deliver the Welsh Government's regional coherence expectations;*
- A42 *disseminate effective practice from UHOVI and other innovative, collaborative programmes disseminating their outcomes across Wales and the UK, as appropriate.*

Prioritise widening access sustainability

63. We are committed to securing the sustainability of widening access to higher education in Wales. Widening access to HE is a public good with multiple benefits. While we recognise that increased costs are incurred in supporting some under-represented groups, we are confident that best practice in supporting under-represented groups will enhance all learners' experiences and ensure a more diverse student population.
64. The Welsh Government considers its full-time, undergraduate fee and funding system and its part-time students' funding support to be effective mechanisms underpinning social justice²⁷. Effective fee plans articulate how higher education providers will use a proportion of their full-time fee income to sustain and develop further their equality of opportunity and widening access provision. We ensure that fee planning remains a mechanism for embedding and sustaining higher education providers' commitment to widening access.
65. The Welsh Government's expectation is that we will '*provide funding to the part-time sector in Wales at broadly current levels in real terms.*'²⁸ Welsh Government expect us to develop innovative approaches to part-time higher education, including incentivising part-time study for postgraduates, employer-led courses and bite-sized provision, alternative models for the provision of part-time study, and the promotion of best practice.

We will:

- A43 *review the extent to which fee plans deliver Welsh Government and HEFCW Corporate Strategy equality of opportunity and promotion of higher education-related expectations;*
- A44 *assess the extent to which fee plan targets and investment are aligned and contribute to institutions' WA strategic intentions to effectively support, further enhance and sustain widening access to higher education in the long-term;*
- A45 *monitor part-time fee levels and any impact of the introduction of part-time loans from 2014/15;*
- A46 *work with Welsh Government, the Review of Higher Education and partners to inform part-time policies and strategies;*

Improve the evidence base to support widening access and impact assessment and demonstrate effective practice and success in widening access to HE

66. We commission independent evaluations of widening access in Wales, including the Reaching Wider Programme²⁹, and we reviewed our approach to widening access before inviting Reaching Wider Strategies.

²⁷ [Welsh Government Written Statement](#), 2011.

²⁸ [Remit letter](#), paragraph 26

²⁹ See www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/publications/circulars/circulars_2007/w0709he%20circ.pdf and Higher education Academy review of Widening Access and Reaching Wider Partnerships Strategies [2009](#) and [2012](#)

We are committed to undertaking further evaluation, as appropriate, to inform policy development and demonstrate impact and success.

67. Widening access evaluation recommendations proposed that more should be done to improve institutions' WA evidence base and inform strategic and operational developments³⁰. We accept that evidencing performance is a complex issue for widening access across the UK and internationally. Therefore, we have provided grant funding to [WISERD](#) to support the sector to improve WA data collection and analysis, demonstrate impact and drive performance. We will use WISERD report's outcomes, due in late 2014, to work with the sector, to inform policy development and implementation, recognising that continuous and systematic data collection and analysis supports the business case for widening access. We will take account of UK and international WA evaluations and data sets to inform policy developments and contextualise the sector's progress and achievements.
68. We consider that the benefits to the education sector and planners of adopting the unique learner number, from the [Learning Record Service](#), are clear. We will participate fully in the development and implementation of this system across Wales and work with the Welsh Government, universities and other partners to promote its use across the Welsh education sector.
69. We recognise quantitative and qualitative widening access and equalities data contributes to the richness of the evidence of impact and success. We will work with WISERD and universities to demonstrate effectively the impact, extent and diversity of widening access engagements. The Reaching Wider Partnerships, with further education colleges and other partners, are well-placed to capture, collate and promote widening access practice underpinned by evidence of success, within their region.

We will:

- A47 evaluate WA and equality practices to ensure effective progress towards delivering Welsh Government expectations and HEFCW Corporate Strategy priorities;*
- A48 fund WISERD to improve the WA evidence-base, inform planning and articulate impact;*
- A49 collect and disseminate examples of promising practice in widening access including from international and UK sources as well as from Wales;*
- A50 champion widening access in higher education in Wales.*

³⁰ Higher Education Academy review of Widening Access and Reaching Wider Strategies 2010/11 to 2013/14, [2012](#) p. 6

Equality and Diversity

70. We are committed to contributing to advancing equality and diversity agendas. In addition to meeting our statutory responsibilities, our intention is to drive cultural change and proactive approaches to ensure that equality and diversity issues are fully integrated into our own and the sector's policies and practices and meet Welsh Government priorities.
71. Our *Strategic Equality Plan 2012-13 – 2015-16* sets out our commitment and statutory responsibilities regarding the 2010 Equality Act. It states that: *'We will monitor institutional actions and sector performance, and where necessary provide support to enable improvements in sector performance in equality,'* and includes a number of objectives relevant to this Strategic Approach.
72. However, our strategic intentions extend beyond compliance. Each year as part of our commitment to equality and diversity, we collect, analyse and publish on the HEFCW website statistical data pertaining to the sector's performance regarding equality and diversity. We also include a summary of our statistical analysis in our equality and diversity annual report. We use this information to help shape our equality and diversity activities within the sector.
73. We also publish an *Equality Annual Report*, and include equality of opportunity within institutional fee plan guidance. The fee plan guidance also references the Welsh Government [Together for Mental Health](#) Strategy, which all HEIs have committed to taking forward³¹.
74. We will support HEIs to meet their statutory responsibilities working with the Equality Challenge Unit and its Welsh Standing Group and taking account of the work of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which has a regulatory role in Wales on behalf of the Welsh Government. Areas such as under-representation in higher education, fair access and fair admissions, retention, student success and access to the professions and higher-level skills are some of the many aspects of widening access which should be considered in relation to equality and diversity.
75. In addition, as part of our policy development process, we have undertaken an initial impact screening to assess whether there are any unintended consequences or negative impacts on individuals with protected characteristics. The outcomes of this screening are available upon request.

³¹ You may also wish to take note of circular [W13/31HE](#), *Equality and diversity in higher education: promoting mental health and wellbeing*, which includes examples of effective practice.