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Circular

Widening Access to Higher Education Feedback

21 September 07   **Ref: W07/37HE**

To:	Heads of higher education institutions in Wales; Principals of directly funded further education colleges
Summary:	This circular provides feedback on a number of widening access and disability reports; reports on widening access strategy monitoring arrangements; and confirms details of institutional widening access strategy fund allocations for 2007/08
Response by:	No response requested
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Lywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
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INTRODUCTION

1.   This circular provides feedback on a number of widening access and disability reports; reports on widening access strategy monitoring arrangements; and confirms details of institutional widening access strategy fund allocations for 2007/08.

BACKGROUND

2.   This circular includes feedback to institutions on a number of strategic documents and plans submitted to the Council over the last year in order to access widening access funding:

  • Institutional widening access strategies, covering the period 2006/07 – 2008/09 were requested in circular W06/08. We are circulating feedback on these strategies later than planned to enable the outcomes of the Arad Consulting evaluation of widening access and the Reaching Wider initiative, and the consultation with the sector on those outcomes, to be taken into account. As part of the submission of their widening access strategies, many institutions cover their plans for disability provision for students funded through the widening access fund or premium funding;

  • We announced an additional allocation to HEIs (£750k in total) to support widening access priorities (circular W06/08HE refers). The first priority for this additional allocation was to develop a Reaching Wider articulation strategy to 2010 for agreed work with HEIs' regional Partnerships.   The funding was to be spent by the end of July 2007 and reported to us, through the annual monitoring statement (AMS process) by 9 November 2007.

3.   The Welsh Assembly Government's 2006/07 remit letter requested us to

'*take stock' of widening access and the Reaching Wider Initiative, in order to advice the Assembly on whether, and if so, what changes should be made to ensure that progress continues towards progressively opening up higher education opportunities to all parts of our society'.*

In response to our remit, we

  • submitted to the Welsh Assembly Government, in February 2007, *A National Evaluation of Widening Access Funded Activity and Reaching Wider Initiative Evaluation Report* by Arad Consulting and signalled that we would submit further advice after consulting with the sector;

  • submitted our further advice in June 2007, on the future direction of widening access and Reaching Wider, which took account of the sector-wide evaluation consultation report and further work by Arad Consulting. The Arad Consulting evaluation report, and the further report to support the consultation process, is available on the HEFCW website (www.hefcw.ac.uk).

WIDENING ACCESS STRATEGIES 2006/09

4.   Generic feedback on the widening access strategies is attached as **Annex A**. Feedback is focussed on how the new strategies are responding to key UK-wide and Welsh Assembly Government policy developments and agendas, which have significant implications for widening access. These key policies and priorities are outlined in the guidance circular W06/27HE. We also include examples of the sector's work in relation to more general widening access priorities, themes and developments. Many of the examples at individual institutions are widely known through publicity and conference

dissemination events. These examples are illustrations rather than an exhaustive list and, in the same way, by mentioning a particular activity we are not implying that similar activities do not also exist. Feedback on disability provision plans is attached as **Annex B**.

5.   Some of the key points relating to widening access strategies and disability provision plans are noted below:

- Most institutions used Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) performance indicators to benchmark performance. The extent to which key *Reaching Higher* widening access priorities and targets were covered varied considerably between strategies, although all institutions highlighted activities targeted at Communities First groups;

- Whilst some institutions included forward projections, most institutions set targets for 2006/07 only. We retain some concerns about the nature of target-setting in the context of the use of the annual monitoring statement to monitor progress;

- Recognising the all-age Reaching Higher widening access targets, most strategies provide a wide range of all age provision, although some are 'stand alone' activities without clear progression routes onto or from them. However, there are some good examples of progression being coordinated between institutional widening access activities and Reaching Wider partnership activities;

- Most strategies included some activities to improve work-related and personal transferable skills as positive responses to the emerging Leitch agenda and changing demographics;

- Actions to improve retention played a significant part in all widening access strategies, with one HEI submitting a widening access and retention strategy clearly linking access to HE with mechanisms to support students through their studies;

- Most institutions acknowledge that work to support care leavers is at an early stage, with plans for developing this work. Whilst only one institution confirmed its intention to achieve the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark for Care Leavers in Higher Education during 2006/07 two others are considering working towards this award during the strategy period;

- Not all institutions are making the important link between their disability provision plans and their Disability Equality Schemes. In the light of the DES requirement, it could be beneficial if institutional provision for disabled students could be mainstreamed, releasing funding for more innovative and time-bound projects to support disabled students and entrants.

ARTICULATION STRATEGIES 2005/06 TO 2006/07

6.   Feedback on the articulation strategies is attached as **Annex C**. The articulation strategies set out, from the HEIs' perspective, some of the issues already considered by RW Partnerships in their audit reports (2002 and 2004). During 2007/08 we will invite the Reaching Wider Partnerships to examine the potential for further alignment with HEIs' widening access provision. This new work will build on previous audit work and take account of the issues raised by the articulation strategies. The audit work will underpin the development of the new Partnership funding proposals from 2008. Some of the key points arising in the feedback are noted below:

- All strategies confirm a commitment to regional Partnership working and some of the articulation work was informed by the audit process already undertaken by the Reaching Wider partnerships;

- All HEIs within one partnership shared their widening access strategies. We particularly commend this sharing of strategies, especially where this provokes a coordinated response to regional planning;

- A common feature was the use of the funding to increase the work with Communities First groups;

- A number of institutions commented on the added value of closer alignment of institutions' widening access activities and Reaching Wider partnerships, with one considering its partnership as a 'key catalyst of change agency and innovation in practice';

- Because of closer alignment between HEI and Partnership work, some strategies report that HEIs have 'mainstreamed' Reaching Wider Partnership work into their widening access core provision, thereby releasing Partnership funding to develop different or innovative activities.

OUTCOMES OF THE EVALUATION

7. Where appropriate our feedback on the 2006/09 strategies includes references to the evaluation report findings, conclusion and recommendations. The Arad report recommendations are listed in circular W07/09HE. Responses to the consultation are summarised at **Annex D**. Some of the key points are noted below:

- A range of additional issues/factors were raised for consideration arising from the consultation;

- The vast majority of responses noted the difficulty of demonstrating the impact of widening access activities and that the lack of target definitions contributed to the problems of impact measurement;

- Responses indicated that the evaluation did provide an accurate assessment of the Reaching Wider initiative, although there were some reservations about the time-limited nature of the findings;

- All respondents considered the report's recommendations on working with care leavers to be reasonable and practical.

NEW WIDENING ACCESS STRATEGY MONITORING ARRANGEMENTS

8. From 2006/07 monitoring of widening access strategies is undertaken through an annual monitoring statement (AMS) format. The AMS reporting format implies that institutions identify specific and measurable targets at the start of the strategy period against which we can measure annual progress towards the strategy aims. To facilitate this, and to make comparisons between strategies, in the AMS reporting template we have grouped strategic aims under headings that represent four aspects of widening access activity: pre-entry, entry, outreach and continuing. If we have not chosen the most appropriate category heading, institutions may wish to move targets between these headings when they report progress in November 2007.

9. As this is both the first year of the new strategy period and the AMS reporting format we are open to discuss with institutions any aspect of their strategy, targets or the reporting format. Institutional widening access strategy allocations for 2007/08 are included at **Annex E**.

GENERIC FEEDBACK ON 2006/09 WIDENING ACCESS STRATEGIES

PLANNING, CONSULTATION AND STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

1. Most widening access strategies were developed through an institution-wide consultation process. Where this happened, several strategies report that the process contributed towards developing a widening access culture across the institution. One institution suggested that a risk of not consulting on the new strategy in this way might be a lack of commitment to, and ownership of, the strategy by the institution's staff. This inclusive approach to strategy development also provides a good opportunity for widening access and other staff to ensure alignment between widening access planning and institutional and other academic priorities.

2. Whilst most HEIs developed their strategies in consultation with internal stakeholders, few HEIs mention any mechanisms for seeking advice on new strategies from communities and/or potential participants. This is an issue raised in the Arad Consulting evaluation findings. The Arad report notes that: *'the inclusion of widening access target groups in the development of widening access strategies is not widespread across the HE sector as a whole'* (p17) and that: *'the views of the learners and potential learners are often excluded in the planning and development of widening access provision.'* (p17). However, the evaluation did provide specific examples of ways in which links with local communities influenced the direction and content of more 'one off' widening access events.

3. Most strategies comment on the inter-relation between the widening access strategy and other institutional strategies including institutional strategic planning, and plans relating to: learning and teaching, Third Mission, Human Resources, Collaboration and Partnership, Equal Opportunities, Race Equality and Disability Equality schemes, marketing and recruitment, the academic portfolio, and resources. All strategies also reference their considerable commitment and positive contribution to the Reaching Wider Initiative. Whilst we had anticipated greater reference to Supplementary Income Stream (SIS) and Variable Fee plan funding and their use to support widening access , overall it is nevertheless encouraging to see most widening access strategies relating to a much wider range of institutional plans than in the previous strategy cycle. This alignment of institutional strategies, together with the internal consultative approach to widening access strategy development, demonstrates a strong commitment to embedding widening access work within HEIs and provides an effective mechanism for raising the profile of widening access good practice across the institution and we are pleased to see this.

4. Most institutions contextualise their past widening access performance and their anticipated progress during 2006/09 against the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) UK-wide performance indicators. This provides HEIs with a set of UK benchmarks against which to measure their performance. Some HEIs also reference the use of their own data sources. However, the Arad report suggests that the 'degree to which such analysis offers a robust basis for the development of widening access strategies is questionable given that those consulted [for the evaluation report] were of the opinion that the degree of monitoring and tracking of student cohorts that currently takes place is relatively low' (p14). Further reference is made to tracking and monitoring in the section on black and other ethnic minority students below

5. While we recognise the place of the HESA performance indicators, the key driver for Welsh widening access developments during the period 2006/09 remains the Welsh Assembly Government's *Reaching Higher* strategy to 2010. The extent to which higher education institutions reference their widening access strategies against its priorities and

targets varies considerably. We still look to institutions, through their widening access and other provision, to make a significant contribution to the four all-age widening access *Reaching Higher* target areas (relating to work with Communities First areas, Welsh medium learners, disabled students and black and ethnic minority students).

TARGET SETTING AND MONITORING

6.   One strategy drew attention to the challenges of setting meaningful targets in the light of the, as yet unknown, impact of variable fees and the Wales Spatial Plan implications for regionalisation.

7.   Possibly because of such emerging agendas, most strategies only set targets for 2006/07, although a few make forward projections to 2007/08. We appreciate that these targets may change and we are open to discuss revising targets as strategies evolve. During the course of 2006/07 one HEI discussed with us issues affecting the achievement of a key target and we agreed an alternative action to ensure an overarching strategic aim was met. This in-year monitoring and discussion of clearly defined targets ensured that strategy funding was utilised effectively.

8.   However, we have some concerns about the nature of some target setting in this first year of AMS reporting. In some cases, the targets set continue to be 'broad-brush' rather than specific. For this reason, we suspect that some institutions may be better placed to judge their widening access 'distance travelled' over the strategy period than others.

ALL AGE WIDENING ACCESS PROVISION

9.   A key feature of the *Reaching Higher* widening access targets is the all-age focus. Recommendation eleven of the Arad Consulting report suggests that 'Both Reaching Wider Partnerships and individual institutions should take steps to address the all-age remit of the Reaching Higher widening access targets and ensure that adult learners, including those already in employment are targeted more pro-actively through a range of widening access activities.' (p. 62) Most of the 2006/09 widening access strategies provide a wide range of all age provision, often building on extensive previous experience and good practice. New activities include: increasing family and intergenerational provision, providing continuing professional development courses for visual arts practitioners, defining new curriculum areas/skill set requirements for engaging with local authority regeneration agendas, developing tracking and monitoring systems for community and workplace learners, and staff development to ensure the effective delivery of a work-based learning curriculum.

10.   Where widening access strategy development is less robust there appears to be a more disjointed response to providing learning opportunities across the age ranges. In these few cases, disparate 'stand alone' activities appear to be offered without clear progression routes onto or from them. However, at their best, HEIs offer a range of widening access opportunities specifically tailored to meet the needs of learners at different life and learning stages. Several institutions refer to plans to develop a 'continuum of education provision supporting, access, development and participation ... for primary through to third age [learners]'; or ensuring that an 'access to PhD' continuum is embedded in all academic departments' strategic developments; or references to 'a simple lifelong learning continuum from pre-entry, entry, continuing and outreach' opportunities. We commend this structured, all-age approach to developing provision.

11.   Two strategies offer examples of institutional widening access activities being provided up to an agreed age level, at which point targeted learners are signposted to Reaching Wider Partnership funded activities with the option to return to further institutional widening access provision on completion of the Partnership funded activities. These two examples, from different regional Partnerships, illustrate not only effectively coordinated,

partnership working, but also the potential for a region to provide a breadth of widening access opportunities across a wide age range. This all age work appears particularly relevant given the implications of changing demographics as highlighted in *Vision into Action* (Learning Country II).

COMMUNITIES FIRST GROUPS

12.   All institutions highlight activities targeted at Communities First groups. Activities range from 'one-off' events to more strategic longer-term interventions. The more robust strategies share certain key features which aim to embed the widening access activity within the community and support learners to and through HE. These features include: working with established local groups; offering all-age provision to develop a learning culture within families and communities; ensuring that educational and funding advice and guidance underpins all learning opportunities; tracking and monitoring the progress of community/work-based learners into and through HE; providing on-going support in HE through targeted retention strategies.

WELSH MEDIUM WIDENING ACCESS PROVISION

13.   The sector's response to the *Reaching Higher* Welsh medium target has, to date, been set within the overall context of institutional strategies for Welsh medium provision. In November 2006, the sector agreed, under the auspices of Higher Education Wales (HEW), to establish a national strategic framework for Welsh medium provision. This sector-owned national framework marks a major step change in institutional commitment to strengthen Welsh medium provision and good progress is being made. Circular W07/25HE provides further background information about these developments. Institutions may wish to consider the implications for Welsh medium widening access-related provision within this wider context.

14.   One strategy identifies future actions including targets for increasing the percentage of students undertaking some element of their course through the medium of Welsh. To achieve this, the HEI commissioned research to identify issues of Welsh medium supply and demand, including Welsh medium widening access-related issues. Another widening access strategy acknowledges that an institution-wide coordinated approach to raising the profile of Welsh medium opportunities is essential to maximise impact. It further notes its own increased links with the Mantais campaign, coordinated by the Welsh Medium Teaching Development Centre, to raise awareness of Welsh medium university education.

15.   However, we had anticipated that the strategies might have made greater reference to: institutional strategies for Welsh medium provision; their planned or actual links with the Welsh Medium Teaching Development Centre; or references to upskilling adults in Welsh language skills, in response to the emerging Leitch agenda.

16.   The HEFCW Widening Access Committee has discussed the new Welsh medium framework and the Welsh Medium HE Sector Group will be considering in more detail the place of widening access work within a national development plan. We will ensure good communication between these two groups and we plan to cross-reference widening access strategies against the national development plan to inform the work of the Welsh Medium HE Sector Group. In future, we would look for greater activity within widening access strategies to support Welsh speakers and Welsh medium provision and for this to cohere with and enhance the institution's role within the national framework. As part of this, we would welcome new innovative activities providing progression routes into Welsh medium HE study.

BLACK AND OTHER MINORITY ETHNIC (BME) COMMUNITY WIDENING ACCESS PROVISION

17.   The sector continues to respond positively to equalities issues. During the period 2003/04 to 2005/06 students from minority ethnic groups represented 6% of Welsh domiciled UCAS applicants and 19% of UK domiciled applicants. These figures should be read within the context of only 2.1% of the Welsh (and 7.8% of the UK) population being from a minority ethnic group.

18.   Against this background, widening access strategies provide evidence of a substantial body of work with BME communities. New activities include: auditing skills gaps and the medium-term learning requirements of new economic migrant groups; developing provision in consultation and partnership with ethnic community networks; planning to exceed institutional benchmarks for BME student recruitment; and providing staff training on diversity issues. Given the positive contribution that widening access is making to institutions' work with BME community groups, HEIs may want to ensure that this work is included within their race equality action plans.

19.   HEIs undertake much of this work in partnership with further education colleges (FECs) and with local and national stakeholder groups. Some HEIs plan to increase their black and other minority ethnic community undergraduate or community learning recruitment, some are planning specific events which reach out to BME groups, including refugees, asylum seekers, migrant workers, Romany gypsies and Irish travellers, and some are planning to further develop existing provision previously supported by European or other funding.

20.   HEIs may wish to use their own data to break down BME community recruitment and retention rates by, for example, racial group and subject category to ensure that they are opening up all aspects of provision to a wider range of BME communities.

DISABLED STUDENTS

21.   During the period 2003/04 to 2005/06 the number of disabled students has increased by 15% whilst the total number of students in Wales has increased by 5%. In the same period, the percentage of disabled students in receipt of the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) has increased by 25.2% and the percentage of disabled students not in receipt of DSA has increased by 17.4%. **Annex B** provides further information on the sector's progress in this area.

COLLABORATIVE WORKING

22.   In addition to HEIs' substantial contribution to the Reaching Wider Partnerships, a feature of both this strategy period and the previous one is a strong focus on developing and maintaining good working relationships with a wide range of partners. In order to address effectively the challenges of delivering the widening access agenda, one strategy noted the need for 'robust and innovative' partnerships. The 2006/09 strategies demonstrate the breadth and diversity of widening access-related partnership working with Further Education Institutions and with transnational, national and regional organisations. Institutions work with voluntary sector organisations also continues to create a range of progression pathways for learners who may not immediately consider HE as an option. Some recent partnerships include: linking with Careers Wales to provide on-going tracking and monitoring of widening access students, working with regeneration projects developed by the Welsh Assembly Government, Community Consortia for Education and Training (CCETs) and local authority partnerships to provide higher level skills training and economic upskilling.

VOCATIONAL WIDENING ACCESS PROVISION

23.	Most strategies include some activities to improve work-related and personal transferable skills and such developments are positive responses to the emerging Leitch agenda and to changing demographics. Two strategies include plans for the development of Foundation Degree centres and, since the last strategy period, other modes of learning, including distance and blended are being piloted with employers.

24.	One strategy includes plans to develop new work-related provision to meet employers' demands and, at the same time, to provide a staff development programme within the institution to ensure that a work-based learning approach to curriculum development is embedded within its organisational culture.

STUDENT SUPPORT AND RETENTION

25.	Actions to support retention play a significant part in all widening access strategies with one HEI submitting a 'widening access and retention strategy', clearly linking access to HE with mechanisms to support students through their studies.

26.	The Arad Consulting evaluation report recommends that HEIs 'should be encouraged to conduct their own detailed monitoring into the causes of non-completion within their institution as a means of informing future innovative approaches to student support'. The report suggests that successful student support interventions have been informed by institutions' analysis of their own student data on non-completion and that 'As such it would appear that such systematic data analysis should be a foundation stone in the development of any student retention strategy and implementation plan'. Several strategies provide evidence of their improved performance in relation to retention, whilst two other HEIs plan to review their retention practices, focusing on the referral processes, data collection, data analysis and attendance monitoring systems.

27.	The Arad Consulting report noted that HEIs agreed that student 'non-continuation' rates increased during periods away from campus, for example, during vacations and semester breaks, or where students studied via franchise or outreach programmes. The report suggests that, if this is the case, greater attention to providing off-campus support might be needed. In the 2006/09 strategies there is clear evidence that some HEIs are responding to the needs of students studying outside the traditional working day/term by providing on-line study skills support or information points accessible during the evening and on Saturdays.

LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVERS

28.	Our 2007-08 remit letter requests that HEIs maintain a focus on providing adequate support for looked after children and care leavers. In 2007-8 we have been specifically requested to encourage the sector *'to work with the Buttle Trust towards gaining the Quality Mark for Care Leavers'.* We will report, in December 2007, on the sector's progress in supporting looked after children and care leavers and would welcome further examples of innovative work in this area.

29.	The Arad Consulting evaluation report made four recommendations relating to looked after children and care leavers. Recommendations twelve to sixteen focused on research and dissemination of good practice in multi-agency work with looked after children and care leavers; the need for institutional staff development around the specific needs of looked after children and care leaver students; increased cross-sector working with care agencies to provide maximum support; and marketing the range of support available to these students. Whilst we acknowledge that looked after children and care leavers

represent a small group within widening access cohorts, good practice in relation to the often complex needs of this group will benefit all widening access cohorts.

30. Most strategies acknowledge that their work to support care leavers is at an early stage, but they include plans for developing this work further and there were direct references to actions recommended in the Arad report. Such actions to support care leavers throughout their studies include: research to provide an evidence base for developing appropriate interventions; targeted aspiration-raising activities and compact schemes for looked after children delivered in partnership with local authorities; working collaboratively with organisations supporting young people in care; and implementing new and robust support mechanisms, including targeted bursaries, to meet identified needs. Only one strategy confirms its intention to achieve the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark for Care Leavers in higher education during 2006/07, but two other HEIs are considering working towards this award during this strategy period. We would welcome, during this strategy period, more HEIs reporting their achievements against the Frank Buttle Trust's *Going to University from Care* recommendations. These recommendations are annexed to circular W06/27HE.

Generic Feedback on Institutions' Disability Provision Plans

BACKGROUND

1. All but one higher education institution (HEI) provided information on their progress against their 2005/06 Disability Provision Plans (DPP), and detailed their objectives for their 2006/07 implementation plans. Institutions have demonstrated an increasing awareness of the need to ensure that the DPP is consistent with their overall strategic goals and plans and continue to show how the strategies are monitored, evaluated and inform future planning, including consultation and involvement with stakeholders, both internally and externally.

LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT

2. We are pleased that a number of the plans have reportedly been informed by appropriate legislation, but whilst most institutions have referred to their institutional Disability Equality Scheme (DES) and accompanying Action Plans, this has not been consistent across the sector. We expect that all institutions are now fully informed of the 2005 Disability Discrimination Act (commonly referred to as the Disability Equality Duty (DED)) and will concentrate increasingly on positive action and improved outcomes for disabled people, including reference to other areas of equality legislation to ensure parity of opportunity for students with cross-strand or multiple identities.

3. We welcome the incorporation of DPP plans into DESs or Single Equality Schemes (SESs), but expect that institutions will want to clearly identify within their schemes the specific support provided to disabled students within the Widening Access context, including proposed and actual expenditure of the Disability Premium.

FUNDING

4. A considerable percentage of funding continues to be used for appointments to help progress institutional strategies and provide all aspects of student support, including assessors, tutors and support workers.

5. Much of the funding set aside by institutions for developments is used for additional staff. However, in light of the recent changes to disability legislation, it could be beneficial if institutions were able to consider measures to eventually fund them as part of core activity, thus consolidating posts and services and releasing premium funds to support new Widening Access initiatives. Whilst most institutional plans identified clear targets for the utilisation of their DPP funding, a small number of institutions did not focus so strongly on clear outcomes for the use of this funding.

6. Institutions sometimes remark that provision for disabled students can involve considerable financial and time commitments, and that the DPP funding does not effectively cover all aspects of this support. However, institutions increasingly demonstrate that provision for disabled students can be mainstreamed within all aspects of an institution's work, and it is this that we wish to see championed and taken forward to release DPP funding for more innovative and time-bound projects to support disabled students.

GOOD PRACTICE IN DISABILITY PROVISION

7. Some themes and examples of good practice that emerged from institutions include:

- addressing issues pertaining to non-Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) eligible students, including equipment banks and specialist tuition for non-DSA students;
- increasing support for disabled students whilst their DSA application is being processed;
- employing additional staff to manage increases in disabled student numbers;

- supporting disabled international students;
- engagement of senior staff in disability planning/provision;
- providing specialist IT support for students using assistive aids and technologies;
- reducing the length of inter-semester breaks to minimise the hiatus in work patterns;
- Disabled Students' Forums, work and support groups;
- extending Learning Support provision throughout the summer period;
- improving awareness of mental health issues, including more Mental Health specialist posts, therapeutic support and training programmes;
- improving estates and emergency egress;
- developing Mentor schemes specifically for disabled students;
- tackling disabled student retention;
- improving links with local groups, organisations and initiatives, including the Commissions and disability organisations; and
- increasing staff development opportunities, particularly for part-time staff and those working within the community.

Generic Feedback on Institutions' Articulation Strategies

INTRODUCTION

1. This feedback identifies the main themes, developments and good practice in the articulation strategies, rather than providing a complete account of all provision funded from this allocation.

SHORT TO MEDIUM TERM PLANNING

2. As the articulation funding was a 'one-off' allocation, we anticipated that HEIs would want to embed provision developed with this funding within the 2006/09 widening access strategies and most strategies did this. Generally, institutions agreed that articulation strategies were useful in setting out their approach to realising the shared goals of the Partnerships' and the institutions' widening access work.

3. All strategies confirm a commitment to regional Partnership working. Several articulation strategies note that their institutional widening access planning was informed by their RW Partnership's critical audit work, with one institution building in to its own widening access planning cycle a review of its Partnership's regional audit.

4. We are pleased that all HEIs within one regional Partnership shared their widening access strategies, with one institution seeing this strategy discussion as enabling 'strategic transparency' across the region. The same Partnership also coordinated discussions between HEI members on the submission of articulation strategies to identify common themes and interests. We particularly commend the sharing of widening access strategies and implementation plans, especially where this goes beyond the exchange process to what one HEI describes as a 'group analysis of common themes and interests along with objectives and outcomes'. This coordinated response to regional planning indicates a mature Partnership relationship and good practice, which other Partnerships might wish to consider.

REACHING HIGHER TARGETS

5. The use of articulation funding to increase work with Communities First groups is a common feature of all strategies. In some cases, HEIs gave articulation funding to Partnerships to extend existing Reaching Wider provision while, in other cases, HEIs provided progression routes for Communities First students completing Partnership activities. One strategy drew particular attention to the importance of identifying Welsh medium progression routes.

THE ADDED VALUE OF CLOSER ALIGNMENT OF WIDENING ACCESS AND REACHING WIDER PARTNERSHIPS

6. Some strategies report that their widening access funding and/or staffing supports Partnership activities, while others record that good practice developing within the Partnerships is being adopted by their institutions. For example, innovative Partnership work with black and ethnic minority groups, disabled students and Welsh medium provision is shared with the HEIs' Student Support and Disability Officers to enhance the undergraduate student experience.

7. One strategy considers its Reaching Wider Partnership to be 'a key catalyst of change agency and innovation in practice.' It credits the Partnership with creating 'a greater awareness of the needs of future students and, as a result, [the HEI] is placing particular emphasis upon extending its student support mechanisms to existing and prospective

students.' The same institution also refers to the efficiency gains, from Partnership working, across all member HEIs together with a reduction in unnecessarily duplicated provision. We are particularly keen to capture evidence of the impact of Partnership working on HEIs' widening access work. We would welcome further examples where measurable efficiency gains or unnecessary duplication have been achieved through Partnership working.

8. Collaborative working through the Reaching Wider Partnerships has generated a range of high-quality widening access bilingual teaching materials for example: the Ladders toolkit, the peer mentoring handbook, the critical thinking study pack and the mentoring handbook. One articulation strategy suggests that Partnership working has 'arguably improved quality in school intervention activity and developed a more consistent and higher quality standards of marketing, mentoring and advice…'.

REGIONAL BARRIERS TO PROGRESSION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

9. Not all strategies consider the issue of regional barriers to progression; those that do report that the Partnerships had identified regional barriers at an early stage in their development and used this data to shape their priorities for action. Generally, strategies acknowledge that concentrating on the *Reaching Higher* widening access targets within a region ensures a strong Partnership focus on some of the most under-represented groups in higher education. For some HEIs these groups had not previously been such a high priority.

10. Several strategies focus on the issue of under-achievement at key stage three resulting in de-motivation and barriers to accessing higher-level education and training. The strategies report that in many cases HEIs and Partnerships work jointly to fund and deliver aspiration-raising and up-skilling activities to this cohort. In some instances, the rationale for choosing to use Partnership or widening access funding for this work is not always explicit and, in future reporting, it would be helpful for us if HEIs would clarify their rationale.

11. Strategies generally focus on barriers to higher education and work with more established minority ethnic communities, rather than the barriers faced by new and increasing groups of minority ethnic communities from, for example, eastern Europe. HEIs and Partnerships may wish to consider whether they can best meet the needs of these more recent ethnic communities by working as individual HEIs, as Partnerships or jointly. Another consideration might be the extent to which these new community groups need new and different opportunities, for example, outreach and/or flexible learning provision combined with second language work, support to establish their UK qualification equivalence, tailored advice and guidance workshops, support from role models or work-based learning.

12. Some strategies suggest that limited work force development opportunities and undefined work-based progression routes to HE-level qualifications represent barriers to HE for some employees. Other strategies set such barriers within the context of the low average wages in certain areas and the lack of family and childcare provision to support adult learners, combined with a perceived or real lack of study time. One strategy highlights an opportunity for potential new areas of development within a partnership framework around work-based learning, supported accreditation of prior learning and prior experiential learning. The strategy considers that gaps still exist in the *'whole area of partnership working between HEIs in Wales and the local and international businesses in the broad area of work-based learning and learning recognition.'* The strategy highlights work in this area as being particularly significant for Welsh HEIs as, with the support of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW), they are able to accredit learning from level four. In the light of the emerging Leitch agenda HEIs may wish to consider further their response to issues relating to regional barriers to progression to higher education.

13. Some strategies interpret 'connectivity' as widening access funding facilitating progression routes to and from the Partnerships' target populations. For example, one HEI, having identified a gap in Partnership provision for mature learners, is extending its widening access community education programme to provide follow up learning opportunities on campus for groups of mature learners. Others define 'connectivity' as the provision of additional activities/student places within established provision.

14. Where both widening access staff and Partnerships provide widening access opportunities we would welcome additional examples of good practice in relation to: supporting effective transition between programmes; maintaining relationships between schools when the widening access/Partnership provider changes; tracking and monitoring when lead providers change and; how agreement is reached on reporting outcomes and success when student cohorts are shared.

15. Because of closer alignment between HEI and Partnership work, some strategies report that HEIs have 'mainstreamed' Reaching Wider Partnership work into their widening access core provision, thereby releasing Partnership funding to develop different or innovative activities. One strategy notes that '[Partnership] activity … will be securely embedded in the new Widening Access Strategy and the emphasis on the continuum from primary school, through secondary, post 16 and adult and continuing education will help strengthen the role played by widening access, both within .. [the] University and across the Partnership'. Another HEI reported that it 'already spends its widening [access] funding in complementary ways to the [Reaching Higher Reaching Wider] RHRW Consortium and has long since ended any competitive events'.

16. All strategies report an increase in joint working with FE partners arising from the close working relationships established through their Partnerships. Some institutions are undertaking a review of their FE relationships to optimise collaboration and ensure visible progression routes for learners, others plan to develop FE/HE open days and FE workshops to emphasise HE progression opportunities. Again, work within Partnerships has identified progression gaps in certain subject areas and modes of study (including Welsh medium and bilingual provision). Several HEIs have supported widening access posts with a remit of promoting pathways to HE for FE students. One strategy suggests that Partnership activities could also lead to developing a shared FE/HE curriculum.

17. Articulation strategies from two different Partnership regions suggest that the Partnership structure and closer working relationships between HEIs has strengthened funding proposals to HEFCW, the Welsh Assembly Government and others. Several smaller institutions drew attention to the economies of scale created through Partnership working. Similarly, all strategies comment that support for small numbers of 'hard to reach' groups, such as people from a care background, is more effectively developed and delivered through Reaching Wider Partnership structures.

18. One strategy notes that there is potential for the Wales-wide duplication of provision in the areas of mentor training, virtual learning environments and summer school activity. The Widening Access Committee (WAC) will consider such issues and it agreed at its June 2007 meeting to establish a WAC sub-group to consider a Wales-wide summer school strategy.

COLLABORATIVE WORKING

19. Although all HEIs have many established relationships with a wide range of external providers, strategies report that Reaching Wider Partnership working had extended or enhanced these links. In some cases, HEIs and Partnerships share responsibility for regional network representation on groups such as 14-19 Partnerships. This coordinated

approach to collaboration demonstrates mature partnership working and a reduction in competitive and duplicating practices.

20. In addition to producing the articulation strategies, almost all HEIs planned to use any residual funding from this allocation to develop further widening access provision, against the priorities identified in circular W06/08HE.

21. The best strategies costed individual activities funded by this allocation. The clear costing of activities at an early stage, together with precise target setting eases the burden of reporting at the end of the funding period.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES

22. The following examples are not intended as an exhaustive list, but they illustrate some aspects of good practice arising from the articulation strategies:

- The increased focus on 'in-reach' strategies to raise awareness within HEIs of Partnership activities, to share innovative work and best practice, and to improve the standards of all outreach working;
- The fostering of 'strategic transparency' between regional HEIs, including the sharing of widening access strategies and articulation strategies;
- The shared responsibility for HEI representation on regional networks;
- The use of Partnerships' critical audits and other toolkits to inform widening access developments;
- The joint provision of widening access opportunities to ensure region-wide learning opportunities across all age ranges and ability levels;
- The embedding of new articulation-funded provision to ensure sustainability in the medium- to long-term.

A Summary of Consultation Responses to the *National Evaluation of Widening Access Funded Activities and the Reaching Wider Initiative* by Arad Consulting Ltd

INTRODUCTION

1. Circular (W07/09HE) invited responses from the sector on the above evaluation report by Arad Consulting. We received responses from seven HEIs, three Reaching Wider Partnerships and one FEC.

WIDENING ACCESS: CONSULTATION RESPONSES

2. The consultation responses considered the report's findings in relation to widening access to be a broadly accurate assessment of provision, focusing on key issues, though several respondents noted limitations, many of which we had already acknowledged, and some responses were contradictory. Some responses suggested additional issues for consideration including:

   - the problem of changing or unclear Reaching Higher WA target definitions;
   - the lack of long-term funding and strategic planning;
   - consideration, by the former Welsh Assembly Government Department of Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills and HEFCW, of funding models to integrate funding for levels 3 /4 and the use of parallel HE/FE frameworks for quality assurance;
   - the need to reconsider fees policies for 'taster courses' and asylum seekers and refugees;
   - information gaps on data collection, impact measures and progression;
   - the impact of European funding changes and the new Convergence Funding;
   - the implications of responding to the Graham Report, Leitch and Webb Reviews;
   - provision of informal, non-accredited and smaller (less than 10 credit) modules to facilitate HE progression.

3. Opinion was divided on the benefits of sharing information on institutional funding models (see report recommendation four) with four of seven responses seeing little or no benefit. Possible benefits were identified as: informing an institution's strategic approach to funding WA provision; ensuring funding accountability and; sharing good practice. However, it was clear that a single funding model for Wales would be neither desirable nor practical.

4. The evaluation report found limited evidence to demonstrate the impact of WA activities and all but one response agreed with this view and cited the lack of target definitions as contributing to the problems of impact measurement. All but one HEI called for a unified Wales-wide approach to data collection. The consultation also asked for additional impact examples to be provided and four HEIs submitted case studies. A Wales-wide unified approach was recommended for WA tracking and monitoring, with one HEI recommending compulsory data collection linked to funding allocations with all HEIs required to introduce strong impact measures. However, no responses reflected on HEIs' own data mining capacity.

5. Factors for this Committee to consider when advising the Assembly on future developments were considered to be:

   - raising Assembly awareness of the long-term gestation of widening access impacts;
   - the need for adequate, long-term, sustainable funding to support long-term progression interventions;

- the implications for widening access cohorts of fees, viz.: (i) the current fee structure, and, (ii) if the Welsh domiciled student fees change post 2010 (iii) fees policies for part time students and: (iv) fee implications for asylum seekers and refugees;
- the amount of non-HEFCW-funded WA provision and the implications for 'mainstreaming' provision with the demise of Objective One funding;
- The range of Assembly policies impacting on HE WA provision.

THE REACHING WIDER INITIATIVE (RW): CONSULTATION RESPONSES

6. Responses indicated that the evaluation did provide an accurate assessment of the Reaching Wider Initiative, with some reservations about the time-limited nature of the findings. Respondents generally approved of a review of the RW remit, Partnerships, regions, target definitions. HEIs also noted that the following key issues should have been considered:

- funding options beyond 2010 and staffing implications;
- changes to the regional structure of some Partnerships and to RW targets;
- the effective communication and sharing of good practice between Partnerships;
- HEFCW's insufficient cross-project fertilization and dissemination of best practice;
- the negative impact of not having central information sources ie RW website or Assembly led provision incorporating Student Finance Wales, Careers Wales etc.;
- whether the Welsh medium Reaching Higher target should remain a RW widening access target;
- how to further involve FEIs and other key stakeholders;
- the need for centralised policies on Looked After Children, Child Protection, etc

CONSULTATION RESPONSES TO THE REPORT'S CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

7. The two cross-cutting issues for comment were the dissemination of good practice and WA provision for adults. Respondents provided a wide-range of examples of how good practice might be disseminated, largely led by HEFCW. Some respondents considered work with adults to be a new RW target requiring additional funding whilst others suggested that additional expertise would be needed for WA providers to work with employers.

PEOPLE ENTERING HIGHER EDUCATION FROM A CARE BACKGROUND

8. All respondents considered the report's recommendations on working with care leavers to be reasonable and practical. Issues of concern included: some funding issues; the complexities of working with this small group and; the need for a multi-agency response to supporting this group. Several HEIs recommended that HEFCW develop policy on care leavers in HE and take the lead on Wales-wide multi-agency liaison.

Widening Access Strategy Allocations 2007/08

Institutions	Eligible Students	Total Enrolments	Eligible Enrolments as % of an Institution's Total Enrolments	90% pro-rata to Eligible Students (£)	10% pro-rata to Eligible Enrolments as % of an Institution's Total Enrolments (£)	Total Allocation (£)
University of Glamorgan*	3,593	14,105	37	415,943	33,435	449,378
Aberystwyth University	808	7,949	10	93,538	9,036	102,574
Bangor University	759	6,373	12	87,866	10,844	98,710
Cardiff University	1,765	17,889	10	204,325	9,036	213,361
University of Wales, Lampeter	478	2,839	17	55,336	15,362	70,698
Swansea University	1,459	9,370	16	168,901	14,458	183,359
University of Wales Institute, Cardiff	1,062	6,541	16	122,942	14,458	137,400
University of Wales, Newport	1,903	7,262	26	220,301	23,495	243,797
North East Wales Institute of Higher Education	941	5,385	17	108,935	15,362	124,297
Swansea Institute of Higher Education	833	4,301	19	96,432	17,169	113,601
Trinity College, Carmarthen	309	1,741	18	35,771	16,266	52,037
Total	17,503	97,860	235	1,610,290	178,921	1,789,212

* University of Glamorgan funding includes the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama allocation

Note: Figures may not add to totals because of rounding adjustments