Embedding widening participation and promoting student diversity

What can be learned from a business case approach?

SUMMARY
About this document
This document summarises the findings and implications of an Higher Education Academy commissioned research project looking into the drivers for, and benefits of, embedding widening participation (WP) and promoting student diversity when set against the costs and barriers. The project explored the evidence that might support the development of a business case model and a policy language for WP and student diversity across the higher education sector.

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1. Key findings

a. A business case for embedding widening participation and promoting student diversity can be made by considering what motivates Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to undertake widening participation, and what the beneficial outcomes of their delivery are to each institution.

b. The way in which HEIs shape and deliver their widening participation and student diversity policies is influenced by and contingent upon both internal and external factors. Given that HEIs are different in their history, mission, location and market position, any overarching approach to embedding widening participation and student diversity needs to recognise that ‘one size’ does not fit all. A business case approach provides an opportunity to respond to institutions’ own priorities whilst providing a common framework in which to develop this work.

c. HEIs’ commitments and obligations to behave in a socially responsible manner and respond to government policy sit alongside and interrelate with recognition of the institutional opportunities and benefits to be derived from embracing student diversity. Consequently a business case model that draws on both ethical justifications and an analysis of institutional benefits is the most appropriate for the higher education (HE) sector.

d. Government policy, funding frameworks, the marketisation of the HE sector and individual institutions’ own market position, together with an overarching commitment to corporate social responsibility, represent key drivers in the behaviour of institutions with respect to widening participation and student diversity.

e. There is inconsistency in understanding of the terms ‘widening participation’ and ‘student diversity’ both in terms of meaning and implication at all levels. This influences how both are approached within institutions, from department to department and function to function, as well as from institution to institution. A common business case framework may help to overcome this issue.

f. Although there may be clear and overtly stated commitment to embedding widening participation in an institution, significant barriers often exist with respect to its implementation. However, the commitment of senior staff, appropriate management accountabilities and organisational structure can be instrumental in breaking down internal barriers to embedding WP.
g. Taking forward a business case approach could be beneficial to the HE sector in facilitating a more consistent understanding of what the embedding of widening participation and student diversity might look like, bringing benefits to both individual HEIs and the sector as a whole.

h. Understanding stakeholder group perspectives in relation to widening participation and student diversity is crucial to gaining ‘buy-in’ to institutional strategy, policy and practice. Everyone needs to be able to identify what the benefits are for them.

The remainder of this document presents contextual and methodological information about the study, and discusses these findings and associated issues in more detail.
2. Why consider a business case approach?

‘Business case’ arguments have become increasingly dominant in attempts to persuade organisations in the private and not for profit sectors to be proactive in relation to tackling employment disadvantages and develop a positive approach to supporting and valuing diversity of employees and customers. Such arguments identify the benefits to organisations of tackling inequalities and changing organisational practices to support diversity.

Whilst HEIs now use the language of ‘diversity’ in their employee policies, some linking this to a business case for change, there is little evidence in discourse or practice of how learner (customer/consumer) diversity can deliver business benefits to the sector.

There has been much publicity about and justification for widening access to HE, for example, in respect of its macroeconomic and social benefits. However, little attempt has yet been made to establish the benefits for individual HEIs that may result from engaging in WP activities. If such a case were to be demonstrated it could be argued that this might provide a powerful lever for change in the search for ways to embed WP in HEIs’ policy and practices given recent reductions in direct funding levers.

The purpose of this research has been to explore and develop the business case approach in relation to widening participation and student diversity in HE. It specifically considered the following:

- can a business case for widening participation and student diversity be identified?
- is a business case approach relevant in the promotion and embedding of widening participation and diversity in higher education?
- if so, how could an HEI develop its own business case?

In doing so it has looked at evidence about the drivers for, and benefits of, WP and student diversity from a range of internal stakeholder perspectives. It has also assessed evidence about the direct and indirect costs of a more embedded and/or strong focus on WP and student diversity.

In drawing these findings together it presents an overview of a business case approach to student diversity that may be used by HEIs both to support moves towards a greater student diversity and simultaneously provide additional benefits to the ‘business’ of HE.
This publication is intended to provide an accessible summary of the findings contained in the full research report, demonstrate to HEIs how a business case can be constructed and present a useful resource for HEIs to utilise in the embedding of widening participation and inclusive policy and practice.
3. Research approach

The research sought to explore:

- the rationale and drivers for HEIs engaging in WP and student diversity
- the perceptions of key stakeholders involved in developing, promoting and implementing WP and diversity policy and practice
- the models underpinning WP and diversity practice and the critiques, strengths and weaknesses of these
- the extent to which WP and diversity are embedded in policy and practice across the student lifecycle, from outreach work, through to progression after graduation
- the ways in which the costs and benefits of WP and diversity are understood, evidenced and articulated by different HEI stakeholders
- the costs and benefits of WP and diversity to the HEI, as perceived by different stakeholders.

The broad focus of the research required both an exploration and analysis of the extant literature and new research evidence in order to identify examples of how WP and diversity policy and practice are constructed, understood and implemented by different internal HEI stakeholders. This was particularly important because the literature in this area has tended not to focus on the specific benefits to HEIs of embedding WP or diversity practice, nor on exploring specific stakeholder perspectives.

The research consisted of:

- a literature review, which drew on both published and ‘grey’ literature
- a review of corporate policy documentation from over 40 HE institutions
- in-depth case studies of eight HEIs, which drew on documentary analysis of the case study institutions’ policy and strategy documents and in-depth interviews conducted with key stakeholders. This aspect was designed to build on the existing research literature.

This study sought to gain in-depth knowledge of the WP and diversity policy and practice of a range of HEIs, operating in different national, regional and local contexts. A case study approach was selected as the most appropriate method to achieve an understanding of complex issues and to enable contextual analysis. Case study institutions were drawn from across the UK with all nations being represented. This provided an illustration of the HE landscape at the present time highlighting the complexity and variety which exists across the sector.
4. Can a business case for widening participation and promoting student diversity be identified?

4.1 The rationale for exploring a business case

Widening participation in higher education remains a key policy commitment of the UK Government. Currently WP is one of the core strategic aims of the funding councils and investment is significant. Whilst there are differences in policy and practice across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there are common elements which include emphasis on partnership and collaboration between HEIs and with other sectors, payments to institutions to support the retention of students from underrepresented groups and recognition of the need to improve vocational routes into and through HE (Thomas et al., 2005).

Widening policy represents a positive driver for change, it is important to recognise that there are currently fewer external funding levers to stimulate and promote that change than in the past. However, HEIs are now required to comply with the requirements of anti discrimination and equality legislation designed to protect and uphold the rights of social groups, including the right to gain access to education. The legislation includes a duty to be proactive in promoting positive attitudes to equality. But, legislating to change beliefs and attitudes is problematic and further ways are needed to achieve the cultural and systemic changes necessary to move WP and student diversity ‘from the margins to the mainstream’.

The recent review of WP by the English funding council (HEFCE, 2006a) acknowledges the progress made over the past five years in terms of HEI support for WP, but it also recognises the need to find ways to develop and nurture this commitment. HEFCE sees ‘cultural change and the organisation, management and leadership changes that go with it’ (HEFCE, 2006a:82) as critical. The Scottish Funding Council, (SFC) has noted that HEIs need to take account of their mission, their market and finances in order to determine the extent to which they have a ‘business case’ to contribute to WP (SFEFC/SHEFC, 2005).

In summary, there is significant commitment to embedding widening participation in national policy. However, some of the funding levers to promote this agenda are no longer available. This study therefore considers
what factors encourage HEIs to drive forward and sustain the WP agenda and the extent to which these contribute to making a ‘business case’ for WP.

### 4.2 Factors pointing to a business case

The widening participation agenda within institutions is influenced by national policy, targets, funding and the rhetoric of access and inclusion. These are all useful levers for change in respect of institutional policy and practice. However, this study has identified that little consideration has been given to the fact that widening participation and promoting student diversity may actually make institutional economic sense. Little or no reference to a ‘business case’ approach to widening participation was found in the formal literature.

The analysis of HE corporate policy documentation, however, indicates that there are a variety of drivers (both internal and external) which may underpin an HEI’s approach to WP and the promotion of change. Internal drivers are concerned with making the university more attractive to learners and other stakeholders. External drivers include legislative requirements, government policy agendas, statutory responsibility and notions of social justice. These drivers were found to be consistent despite the wide diversity of institutional contexts included in the review of corporate documentation and particularly across the case studies.

In their corporate documentation, most HEIs make explicit their commitment to contributing to wider social and economic development and to acting in a socially responsible way – known as ‘corporate social responsibility’ (CSR). This moves an institution’s parameters of interest beyond stakeholders such as employees, students and funding councils to include wider social partners and organisations, such as local communities and employers, and broader responsibilities such as protecting the environment. Case study findings demonstrate that CSR is a key consideration in the way in which institutions shape their approach to widening participation and student diversity.

Significantly, there are strong links between a commitment to corporate social responsibility and potential business benefits to be derived by institutions. This arises from greater marketisation of the HE sector. Such benefits include:

- maintaining and developing a good reputation in the context of more public scrutiny
- exploiting business development opportunities through creating a distinct position in the marketplace
● creating and/or protecting the HEI’s ‘brand’
● building credibility and trust with current and potential ‘customers’.

In a situation where an increasingly competitive market for students necessitates that UK universities employ strategies to maintain market position, a strong argument can be made for taking a business approach to WP. Internal and external drivers which can be shown to have implications for the ‘bottom line’ and which relate to business success can be seen to sit alongside the notion of corporate social responsibility linking directly to the reality of a marketised HE sector. As HEIs have to operate within this market environment, it can be argued that institutional self interest must necessarily be an important factor or driver in all their activities and consequently in any attempt to embed widening participation and student diversity within HEIs.
5. Why do HEIs operate in the way they do in addressing widening participation and student diversity?

In order to progress a business case for the embedding of widening participation and student diversity it is important to understand why and how HEIs currently undertake WP activities.

5.1 Reasons for engaging in widening participation

Those factors that motivate HEIs to engage in WP are key in identifying where HEI self-interest lies. The literature review identified the following drivers and associated benefits to answer the question “why do HEIs engage in WP?” (see Table 1).

Institutional drivers can be seen to be both internally and externally imposed but this distinction can become blurred. For example, it could be argued that the internal driver to increase student numbers in order to achieve institutional viability and/or growth is related to the external imposition of Funding Council grant models. Indeed, analysis of case study responses revealed a range of complexly related reasons and drivers underpinning HEIs’ decisions to engage in WP. Key reasons included:

a) Student recruitment: reasons here were more closely linked to individual HEIs’ market position, particularly as it related to student recruitment and business development. Three broad positions were apparent across HE case studies in relation to opportunities for student recruitment, depending upon whether WP was:

i) seen as unconnected to student recruitment
ii) necessary in order to tap into the ‘pool of talent’ (this might represent a meritocratic philosophy and/or a response to future demographic change)
iii) necessary for survival (institutional, departmental or course).

These three positions were clearly correlated with institutional type and market position and reflect the findings of Greenbank (2006) in his analysis of HEI behaviour in relation to WP and student recruitment.
Table 1: The drivers and potential benefits of WP and student diversity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Driver</th>
<th>Potential benefits</th>
<th>References</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increasing student numbers (internal)</td>
<td>Financial viability of individual courses, departments or whole institution</td>
<td>Ball et al, 2002; Forsyth &amp; Furlong, 2003; Greenbank, 2006; Morgan-Klein &amp; Murphy, 2002; Osbourne, 2003; Reay et al, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tapping the pool of talent (internal)</td>
<td>Attracting a larger pool of highly qualified (gifted and talented) applicants, which enhances reputation and/or maintains high academic standards</td>
<td>Greenbank, 2006; Langlands, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving teaching and learning (internal)</td>
<td>Improved learning outcomes for all students</td>
<td>Gurin et al, 2002; HEFCE, 2002; HEFCE, 2006b; JM Consulting, 2004; Parker et al, 2005; Riddell et al, 2004; Warren, 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing access to funding streams (internal)</td>
<td>Additional support for institutional strategic aims or to ensure financial viability</td>
<td>HEFCE, 2002; HEFCE, 2006a; Higher Education Consultancy Group &amp; National Centre for Social Research, 2003; Institute for Access Studies, 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generating new roles and markets (internal)</td>
<td>Reduced reliance on Funding Council grants</td>
<td>Ball et al, 2002; Glasson, 2003; Higher Education Academy, 2006; Layer, 2005; Leitch, 2006; Morgan-Klein &amp; Murphy, 2002; Osbourne, 2003; Reid &amp; Brain, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate social responsibility (external)</td>
<td>Demonstrated commitment to institutional mission and value statements</td>
<td>Garriga &amp; Melé, 2004; Thomas et al, 2005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
b) **Improvements in teaching, learning and the social environment**: based on belief that a diverse student body enriches the learning and teaching experience, improvements were viewed in the context of enriching the culture of the HEI and creating a more dynamic social mix; positive impacts on learning outcomes; innovation in teaching and assessment practice; and professional practice and job satisfaction.

c) **Business development**: benefits sought included the opportunity for knowledge transfer and research; development of vocational provision; and identification of new markets, products and revenue streams, particularly in local and regional communities, and capitalising on a WP reputation.

d) **Obligations in relation to Government policy, legislation and funding arrangements**: this included responding to the ‘duty to promote’ equality by not merely following the letter of the law, but also by acting positively and proactively in changing procedures and cultures.

e) **Social justice and corporate social responsibility**: based on a commitment to social justice, behaving in a socially responsible manner and making a contribution to wider socio-economic development, serving both local and regional communities, the identified benefits included the opportunity to capitalise on the different qualities, knowledge and viewpoints which a diverse student body might bring to the education experience and an enhanced reputation/brand.

It is important to note that within institutions there was a high degree of consistency in the identification of drivers and benefits, but this was not the case across institutions. This is due to the fact that an HEI’s approach to widening participation and student diversity is contingent on a range of contextual factors emanating from outside the institution, as well as on institutional strategy.

### 5.2 Operating in context

As for any business, the way in which HEIs shape and deliver their policy and practice in respect of widening participation and student diversity is influenced by, and contingent upon, internal and external circumstances. The following contextual factors were identified as key influencers on HEI approaches to WP.

a) **History and mission**: mission commitment, particularly in respect of inclusion, was reported across all institutional types, but a sense of history appeared to provide an even stronger rationale for some institutions.
b) Institutional self-identity: the way in which individuals defined or characterised their institution appeared to be important in terms of both the importance attached to WP and diversity and the approaches taken to it.

c) Location and ‘regionality’: location affects the potential diversity of students and the supply of specific under-represented groups. Actual and perceived locational factors can have an effect on the scale and type of engagement in WP activity by an HEI.

d) National policy and legislation: there are some distinct differences in educational policy across the four countries of the UK. National policy and legislation have shaped not only the nature of provision in each country, but also the level of cohort participation in HE and WP policy and practice. For example, in Scotland there is a greater tradition of HE in FE provision, and a higher rate of participation in some form of level three learning.

e) Market position: HEIs are in differing positions in the market for the provision of HE and/or for potential students. In part this can be accounted for by their location, history and mission. A crude divide can be made between those whose market position implies that they can be, and are, largely ‘selecting’ institutions and those which are primarily ‘recruiting’ institutions. Published league tables appeared to be influential in locating HEIs in terms of their ‘rank’. HEIs that saw themselves to be ‘lower’ in ranking used this as a rationale for pursuing WP.

These contextual factors are not listed in any ranked order, but are weighted differently in respect of priority within each institution. They all affect the way in which a HEI develops its approach to widening participation, and student diversity and how the institution responds to its internal and external environment.

5.3 Institutional culture and organisation

The way in which WP and diversity are understood within an institution determines the nature of WP activity, the way it is structured and the extent to which it is embedded.

a) How is WP and diversity understood?

The study found no definitive understanding of the terms widening participation and diversity in either the literature review or the case studies. Further, differing understandings influence the way in which
widening participation and student diversity are approached, not just from institution to institution but also within institutions: from department to department and function to function.

Understandings of WP differed on two dimensions, between:

- a focus on pre-admissions and admissions, and a focus on the whole of the student lifecycle (as per HEFCE, 2001)
- a definition that rested on specific targeted groups and one that did not target but sought to be inclusive more generally.

In addition the following issues were identified:

- the WP paradigm within an institution did not always link closely to the definitions provided by respondents
- there was more consensus on the definition of the term ‘student diversity’, though only a minority offered a clear definition. However, all were less likely to use the term spontaneously in their answers than the term WP
- where the term ‘diversity’ was used, this was sometimes within the context of ethnic diversity
- there appeared to be no correlation between those who defined WP in relation to pre-admissions and either job role (stakeholder group) or institutional ‘type’.

It is therefore clear that widening participation is potentially a problematic term being used variously to denote particular activities, an outcome, or even to define a group of students. Furthermore, some of the targets with which the term is associated are more about increasing than widening participation – for example the 50% HE participation target. The concept of achieving and managing greater student diversity is arguably less open to this range of interpretations and therefore less problematic. However, at present it is not a term fully understood by, or accepted within, the HE sector. The promotion of the term ‘student diversity’ to describe a desired outcome to which WP activities may contribute might therefore help to alleviate potential confusion.

At the same time, if HEIs are able to develop their own business case for WP activities and student diversity, defining the terms in their own context and in line with their own priorities – why they do what they do and what the benefit is to the institution – may promote a more consistent understanding of widening participation and student diversity within institutions and lead to a more embedded approach.

Similarly, institutions wishing to develop a business case and embed WP and student diversity may find reflecting on the meanings of these terms to be
an instructive starting point. A deeper understanding of WP and diversity, which is likely to be tailored to the institutional context, could assist HEIs to define who they want to target, what they want to do and why (i.e., the potential benefits to the institutions). This in turn could contribute to the development of a stronger ‘business case’ for widening participation.

b) Structuring WP and diversity

The study highlighted a range of institutional structures, both in general terms and with respect to the way in which WP is organised and managed. The following points were identified as being significant in relation to embedding WP and diversity:

- a centralised approach to WP can result in only this team/unit taking responsibility for diversity issues (Thomas et al. 2005). This study highlighted that, in some instances, where dedicated WP staff are employed other staff do not see it as their job to engage with the agenda or understand its relevance to them. In others, the WP team are perceived as having ‘marked out’ their territory and other staff in the institution feel they cannot legitimately take part in some WP activities.

- there is a potential problem where a dedicated WP unit ‘ringfences’ the ‘outreach’ aspects of WP. This can lead to their work being divorced from other aspects of the student lifecycle, for example, systems to support disabled students as an ‘in-reach’ activity.

Barriers to embedding can be perpetuated by this territorial approach to both outreach and in-reach activity, even within a HEI that is extremely committed to WP and has a strong reputation for it. However, where a link between senior staff commitment to WP and organisational structure was identified this served to begin to dismantle internal institutional barriers in respect of ‘buy in’ and the perceived relevance of WP to core business, for example, where WP appears as a cross-cutting theme in the strategic plan, supporting WP policy and being championed at PVC level.

It is therefore crucial for HEIs to examine and reflect on whether their structure is perpetuating a culture which mitigates against embedding widening participation and student diversity across the whole institution.

c) Embedding WP and diversity

Interpretation of the term ‘embedded’ varied across HEIs and largely represented a pragmatic response to the market position and context of each institution. This was particularly noticeable towards either end of the ‘recruiting-selecting’ spectrum, where HEIs honed their response to WP...
and diversity in a way that reflected their actual and future student intake and their market niche. Thus it can be seen that:

- within a ‘recruiting’ institutional context the approach to WP and diversity is more likely to be built across the whole institution around the diverse needs of actual and potential students, providing, for example, programmes of academic preparation and support integrated throughout the curriculum.

- within a ‘selecting’ institutional context the term ‘embedded’ is more often used with reference to recruitment and admissions, suggesting an understanding of embedding that does not extend to other aspects of the student lifecycle. In contrast to the approach of ‘recruiting’ institutions, this institutional type was less likely to provide integrated measures to support a more diverse range of students.
6. Why would an institution NOT embrace widening participation and student diversity?

In the language of a business case approach, a ‘cost – benefit’ analysis would be expected. However, the justification for some HEIs taking what might be regarded as a cautious approach to WP and student diversity were expressed largely in terms of the costs and risks of taking a more proactive approach. There was little evidence of the systematic ‘weighing’ of costs versus benefits.

6.1 The ‘cost’ of widening participation and student diversity

Although there was a general awareness of the sources of WP funding, which in practice tend to be a mixture of core funding (including WP premium funds) and externally generated project funding, the cost of WP activity was difficult for HEIs to identify, other than where specific project funding was being used. As identified in HEFCE’s recent review (2006a), it is difficult, and often impossible, to disaggregate WP activity funded from the WP premium (allocated as part of the core grant) from generic work of the institution funded from the institutional grant. Where a dedicated WP unit exists with specifically allocated funding it is easier to demonstrate cost-benefit.

Across all institutions, whatever the approach to WP in respect of distribution of funds and identification of costs, there are clearly difficulties and drawbacks to be dealt with in matching the actual cost to the delivery of activity. In the HE sector therefore it may be more appropriate to consider cost-benefit in a whole institution context rather than breaking down the costs and benefits of specific activities.

Irrespective of the difficulty of undertaking a cost-benefit analysis, the need for additional resources to ensure the development of practice to support a diverse student population was consistently identified. Cost was identified as a potential barrier with respect to providing appropriate student support for learning and teaching. There is a prevailing perception that students from ‘WP backgrounds’ require higher levels of support and make greater demands on teaching staff than traditional students. Additional demands included pastoral care and the development of a wider range of learning and teaching skills. This could be perceived as a barrier.
 Embedding widening participation and promoting student diversity

HEIs have always been committed to the professional development of their staff and it is through this route that some of these issues could be overcome. It is also incumbent on HEIs to address the fact that engaging in innovative and inclusive learning and teaching can bring benefits to all students as argued by Warren (2002) and HEFCE (2002) and subsequently borne out by case study findings.

Retention is a pertinent issue for all HEIs under the current funding regime. There is a tension between WP targets and the funding regime which can operate as a disincentive to recruiting students from non-traditional backgrounds. For example, within the current linear model of student progression which is based on a full time three year degree programme if a student changes programme, even for appropriate reasons, within the current funding regime they are deemed to have left the programme.

6.2 The ‘risks’ of widening participation and student diversity

Two key ‘risks’ were also consistently identified as barriers to embedding WP and student diversity. The notion of ‘dumbing down’, or concern about academic standards, emerged as a strong theme in relation to both HEIs’ own academic standards and to the wider HE sector, with league tables posing a potential barrier to overcoming this concern. It was suggested that league tables of performance indicators do not measure excellence in teaching, but are a proxy measure of the demographics of the student population.

However, despite the potential difficulties that students from WP backgrounds may face, there is clear evidence from both the literature review (Hatt et al, 2003) and case study findings that these students can be very successful. For example, it was pointed out in one of the more traditional institutions that the retention and success of such students was higher than for those from the traditional A-level route. What now needs to be identified is what sort of environment enables these students to achieve this success.

Not only were concerns expressed that engagement in WP activity makes specific demands on resources for student support, but this was also expressed in terms of diverting funding from existing provision, for example being used to support WP activity rather than academic staff. Consequently
some groups of staff perceived that it could have a negative impact on “core business”, such as teaching and research, and on the student body itself.

These concerns, when added to negative perceptions of the implications of WP for retention and student support needs, drives the sector towards the notion that what is ‘good’ in HE terms is synonymous with ‘exclusive’ or difficult to access, arguably perpetuating the deficit model of WP. This is a barrier to be addressed across the whole sector.
7. Stakeholder perspectives

As with any business strategy it is important to understand the perspective of all key stakeholders within an organisation in order to ensure that their priorities are taken into account and to enable them to understand how the strategy will benefit them. The notion of ‘buy-in’ is crucial to successful implementation and the overall business rationale has to be demonstrated in order to achieve this. This study therefore considered the perspectives of key stakeholder groups who are affected by WP and student diversity.

In each institution its own ‘institutional view’ was generally dominant across all stakeholders. However, there were small, but notable, differences in views between different stakeholder groups.

a) Senior managers/corporate staff

Senior managers and staff with corporate responsibilities focused on the wider needs of society and the economy rather than simply institutional benefits:

- overall they were very positive about WP and student diversity at the broad, societal level
- social and ethical arguments were presented, focusing on benefits to the region or country
- there was understanding of the potential benefits to the institution, both currently and in a future context, e.g. changing demographics
- responses were nuanced in relation to institutional market position. Those from older HEIs provided a rationale around social responsibility and ‘pool of talent’ drivers, whilst those from newer HEIs focused on recruitment benefits and issues in respect of attracting less academically prepared students.

Senior managers and corporate staff are receptive to the argument for widening participation and student diversity that rests on both ethical/social and business benefits. Consequently a business case argument that draws on both is likely to be appropriate for this group.

b) Widening participation staff

Widening participation staff are very positive about WP and student diversity. However, their understandings and definitions of key terms vary, their perspective and approach often being shaped by the market position of their HEI. These staff are particularly aware of the wider benefits of WP activities, for example, market intelligence that may be collected through outreach activities. This is potentially of considerable value to HEIs and
currently is largely under exploited. The only other stakeholder group to raise this issue were business and community staff. WP staff, however, tended not to mention other benefits, such as student recruitment, perhaps because the benefits to students were assumed to be self-evident.

c) Admissions staff

Willingness to engage in WP was confirmed for this stakeholder group although no issues emerged that could be ascribed specifically to the admissions role and there were no indications of how admissions staff, in general, react to the widening participation and student diversity agenda, or the implications for their own work. It can be said therefore that this stakeholder group whilst generally positive displayed no clear stakeholder position. Rather this was institution-specific.

d) Academics

Learning, teaching and assessment implications, both positive and negative, dominated the narratives of this group of stakeholders. The challenges of teaching a more diverse student body were expressed very clearly, and the additional pressure this could create. For example, whilst there was some recognition of the need for inclusive learning and teaching, which was recognised as good practice, this also represented an additional burden. However, student diversity was sometimes viewed as a positive opportunity to develop professional skills in teaching. Some highly specific benefits at subject level were also identified, such as course viability and the potential contribution to learning experiences. In contrast, where the current student body is less diverse, increased diversity could be perceived as a threat by this group, or the implications understood only in vague terms.

e) Marketing staff

This group identified that diversity could be used to demonstrate institutional strength in the market place, for example, making the university more attractive to potential applicants. There are, however, some tensions between the role of WP to raise aspirations generally and the role of marketing to recruit students. It could therefore be beneficial to institutions to restructure marketing around diversity principles.
f) Student support staff

Whilst this stakeholder group were able to see a wide range of benefits from widening participation and student diversity, these were balanced by concerns about the resources needed for support, and/or the resources lost through lower retention rates. Staff who play a direct student support role, eg student services or learning support tutors, need reassurance that sufficient resources will be given to enable them to meet the demand for their services from students. It was also indicated that some staff, eg librarians, are not always adequately prepared to meet the needs of a diverse student body.

g) Business and community, and research staff

The perspective provided by this stakeholder group reflected the fact that they do not feel directly engaged with the widening participation and student diversity agendas although staff involved in continuing professional development (CPD) and business training projects are more able to appreciate that their work has an impact on student diversity. However, this is often not based on a widening participation rationale. This stakeholder group also identify the fact that being viewed positively by the community and by business could lead to development and funding opportunities.

h) Students and student representatives

This stakeholder group expressed two main, but contradictory, views about widening participation and diversity, taking on the one hand a social justice stance and on the other a self interested position. Passionate concern about diversity and social justice sits alongside concern for maintenance of the quality of (their own) student experience. However, in this context understandings of diversity may not extend to social class diversity, but rather be limited to ethnicity.

The importance of “localness” was also raised by this group, identifying that an HEI that links itself with its locale will encourage a more diverse range of students. If an HEI is part of the local landscape and clearly makes itself accessible to local people then it becomes part of the ‘local self’ and is not contrary to the ‘habitus’ of those who may otherwise be under-represented, notably those from lower socio-economic groups (Bourdieu, 1984).

The agreements and differences identified within each staff group need to be recognised and addressed in the development and implementation of widening participation and student diversity policy and practice in order to ensure ‘buy-in’ and ultimately embedding.
8. Is a business case approach relevant in the promotion and embedding of widening participation and student diversity?

One of the key drivers for all HEIs in addressing WP and student diversity is corporate social responsibility. As has been demonstrated this does not preclude a ‘business case’ rationale for embedding WP given the marketisation of the sector and the benefits to be derived from CSR in this context.

Accepting that corporate social responsibility, marketisation and market position are not mutually exclusive, if HEIs are able to develop their own business case rationale for their delivery of WP and student diversity activities this could also promote a more consistent understanding of what these terms actually mean, leading to more embedded outcomes within individual institutions.

Further, in allowing institutions to develop their own approach and rationale for embedding WP within their own institutional context and in line with corporate aims and objectives, the business case approach may be regarded as a useful tool through which to develop a greater understanding of the role of WP and student diversity in higher education leading in turn to a greater embedding of inclusive policy and practice across the sector.
9. How can an HEI develop its own business case?

In order to provide guidance and support to enable HEIs to embed WP and student diversity a toolkit has been developed.

9.1 Toolkit approach

The toolkit addresses two key issues identified by the research:

a) Developing a shared understanding of diversity

The study revealed a patchy understanding of the term ‘student diversity’, both in terms of its meaning and of its implications. The word ‘diversity’ often appeared to be associated with ethnic diversity which, though important, represents only one aspect. Indeed, diversity was sometimes understood at the level of ‘groups’ sharing similar or identical needs, and the heterogeneity of ‘groups’ was not recognised. This is of critical importance in terms of providing materials that will support HEIs to manage and/or increase the diversity of their student body based on a business case approach. Without this fundamental level of understanding of diversity, and what it implies, the entire approach is undermined.

The toolkit therefore includes a substantial resource on understanding student diversity. This can be used as part of a change process or for other staff development purposes. The immediate and overriding benefit of this will be that it will help HEIs minimise the risk of costly litigation. Given the recent changes in equality legislation this will be of value to all institutions whether or not they plan to embark on a full business case analysis, addressing their rationale in both social/ethical and self interested/economic terms, for embedding widening participation and promoting student diversity across all aspects of their operations.

b) Costs and benefits of WP and increasing student diversity

Another important finding of this research is that the costs and benefits of WP and promoting diversity tend to be articulated as general assertions, personal impressions or beliefs. The evidence base for assessing the costs and benefits of WP and promoting diversity needs further development, both at the institutional level and in relation to specific stakeholder groups.
The ‘stakeholder planning tools’ within the toolkit provide examples of the kinds of questions that need to be asked, and the type and level of evidence that may need to be gathered to assist in this process.

### 9.2 Toolkit contents

The toolkit may be used within an institution or with a group of people from across several institutions. It contains the following sections:

**a) Powerpoint presentation providing an introduction to the following topics:**

i) Widening Participation, Diversity and the HE Context  
   Different perspectives on diversity; student diversity and how this links to current views of WP; different approaches to WP across the HE sector

ii) Developing a Business Case  
   Why engage with WP and student diversity; assessing institutional benefits; costs, barriers and risks

iii) Moving Forward  
   Devising and implementing change

**b) Trainer notes, including participative group activities**

**c) ‘Take away’ materials including:**

Discussion questions to be used in group sessions to encourage participants to consider key aspects of embedding widening participation and student diversity in relation to their own institution and role, eg corporate planning, learning and teaching, marketing, admissions, student recruitment, etc.

Internal stakeholder business case planning templates, which present key strategic questions that will enable a business case rationale to be identified in each operational area. Examples of these are demonstrated below in 9.3.

Cost and Benefit Mapping Template to be used to analyse information gathered from stakeholder consultation and the business case planning templates. Again, an example is set out in 9.3 below.

These materials accompany each identified section of the powerpoint presentation and will help HEIs to assess their current position in respect
of widening participation and student diversity and identify how a business case might be developed to meet the needs of key internal stakeholder groups, gaining overall ‘buy-in’ and demonstrating institutional benefit. They can be used as a package or as individual tools as appropriate to each institution’s circumstances.

9.3 Using the toolkit

How these tools are used will vary from institution to institution. For example, considerable judgement will need to be exercised in using this information to initiate change. In addition to the immediate costs and benefits, consideration will need to be given to issues of reputation, current and future market position, competition, and institutional specialism or niche. The relative importance of social justice and corporate social responsibility will also have to be judged with respect to institutional mission, history, identity and reputation. Furthermore the views of various internal stakeholder groups will certainly have to be considered when evaluating how effective a change process is likely to be. The training materials and planning templates within the toolkit have been designed to assist institutions in thinking through all of these issues.

For example, the internal stakeholder business case planning template provides a tool to enable stakeholders to link instrumental (self-interest) business case arguments with ethical/social mission business case arguments by treating WP/promoting diversity both as a desired policy outcome in itself, such as the achievement of a more diverse student profile, and as a catalyst or mechanism for achieving other stakeholder goals, such as greater innovation in learning, teaching and assessment.

The following examples look at the development of corporate strategy and the operational area of learning and teaching. These templates are completed as illustrative examples. They should be completed initially on the basis of key strategic questions. This information should also be supported by evidence from within the institution itself, from other HEIs and from relevant literature and research. This ensures that an emerging business case rationale is grounded in evidence from both research and practice, rather than on misconceptions or anecdotal perceptions of the impact of widening participation on an institution.
Stakeholder Business Case Plan

STRATEGIC

Widening participation/promoting diversity as a mechanism for achieving corporate goals

### Illustrative strategic questions
- How can a more diverse student body enhance our learning and teaching, research and third stream activities?
- What role can WP/promoting diversity play in enabling the institution to provide local/regional/national benefit?
- How can WP/promoting diversity contribute to increasing student numbers locally/regionally/nationally/internationally?
- How can WP/promoting diversity stimulate course and curricula development?
- What role can WP/promoting diversity play in enhancing the learning culture/student experience?
- How can WP/promoting diversity contribute to increasing student numbers locally/regionally/nationally/internationally?
- What role can WP/promoting diversity play in developing new partnerships and meeting demands of key stakeholder groups such as professional bodies?

### Illustrative evidence required
- Examples from other HEIs
- Recruitment, retention and transition figures
- Student feedback
- Partnerships developed
- New courses developed

Widening participation/promoting diversity as an outcome of university-wide strategy

### Illustrative strategic questions
- How is WP and diversity represented in key plans, strategies and policies/is there a W P/diversity strategy, eg has W P/promoting diversity informed the admissions policy, has W P/promoting diversity informed the learning & teaching strategy?
- Is there high level commitment to promoting WP and diversity across the institution/who is the senior champion?
- What mechanisms and structures are in place to ensure effective implementation of the strategic commitment to WP and diversity across the institution?
- How are resources allocated to support WP/promoting diversity activity?
- Are staffing resources deployed appropriately/effectively?
- Is there a common understanding of WP/promoting diversity in the context of the institution and how it relates to corporate goals?
- How do WP/promoting diversity inform development opportunities for all staff?

### Illustrative evidence required
- Examples from other HEIs
- Recruitment, retention and transition figures
- Staff feedback
- Relevant staff development opportunities provided
- Identification of resource allocation
Stakeholder Business Case Plan

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Widening participation/ promoting diversity as a mechanism for achieving learning and teaching goals

Illustrative strategic questions
- How can a more diverse student body facilitate innovation in pedagogy and assessment?
- What role can WP/promoting diversity play in increasing student numbers and tapping the pool of talent?
- How can WP/promoting diversity stimulate course and curricula development?
- What role can WP/promoting diversity play in enhancing the learning culture/student experience?
- How can WP/promoting diversity stimulate course and curricula development?

Illustrative evidence required
- Examples from other HEIs (see page 29)
- Existing literature and research (see page 29)
- Recruitment retention and transition figures
- Student feedback
- Partnerships developed
- New courses developed

Widening participation/ promoting diversity as an outcome of learning and teaching policy and practice

Illustrative strategic questions
- What is our student profile and recruitment, retention and transition profile?
- To what extent are recruitment, retention and transition issues analysed in terms of WP/promoting diversity?
- How does Teaching, Learning & Assessment (TLA) policy and practice support WP/promoting diversity?
- How is the TLA linked to other institutional stakeholders?
- How does pedagogy and assessment facilitate the inclusion of a diverse student body?
- How can curricula be best developed to attract and retain diverse groups of students?
- What teaching and learning support systems are in place to ensure student success?
- What partnerships can be developed to support curriculum provision?

Illustrative evidence required
- Examples from other HEIs (see page 30)
- Existing literature and research (see page 30)
- Recruitment, retention and transition figures
- Student feedback
- Range of assessment practices
- Quality of learning support
**WP/Promoting diversity as a mechanism for achieving learning and teaching goals**

**Examples from other HEIs**

Using the diversity within the classroom to contribute to group discussions by drawing on different experience (Institutions C and F).

Using the diversity of the cohort as a resource for developing the professional identity of individuals on a professional course (Institution C).

Diversity in the classroom is an opportunity to build the professional skills of teaching staff (Institution C).

A more diverse student body is reportedly beneficial for students in terms of their learning, social and professional development (Institutions A, F, G).

Outreach work supports the development of partnerships that can have a positive impact on curriculum and new course development (Institutions A, F).

**Existing literature and research**

Argument that the changes to curriculum provision and learning, teaching and assessment, which have occurred alongside the transition from an elite to a mass participation HE sector, benefit all students and can have a positive impact on higher level and critical thinking skills (HEFC E, 2002; Warren, 2002; JM Consulting, 2004, HEFC E, 2006b).

Positive correlation between informal interactions with ethnically diverse peers in higher education institutions, and learning outcomes (Gurin et al, 2002).

Provision of a more inclusive curriculum tends to be resource intensive (JM Consulting, 2004; Layer et al, 2002), may compete with other institutional priorities such as research (HEFC E, 2002) and may have an impact on overall quality, standards and performance indicators within the institution (HEFC E, 2002; Boxall et al, 2002).
WP/ Promoting diversity as an outcome of learning and teaching policy and practice

Examples from other HEIs

Embedding academic literacy skills in the curriculum for all students (Institution A).

Using a review of curriculum in light of SENDA requirements to improve teaching and learning for all students (Institution H).

An increase in the diversity of students must be met with appropriate resourcing for non-embedded as well as embedded support so as to avoid overloading student services (Institution C) and the student union (Institution F), but not at the expense of funding for direct teaching costs (Institution E).

Development of more practical and vocational subjects may increase the diversity of the student body (Institution A, Institution F).

Existing literature and research

Identifying the characteristics of prospective learners during course design is good practice in teaching and learning, and particularly important for working with non-traditional groups. (HEFCE, 2002:22).

Student diversity challenges existing practice (HEFCE, 2002).

Some academics routinely make adaptations and extend the curriculum to make it more accessible to a wider group of students. However, this relies largely on the goodwill of individuals and departmental funding where this practice does not accord with institutional strategy and creates tensions (Parker et al, 2005).

Institutional changes to facilitate the inclusion of one group of students may benefit all students (Craig and Kernoff, 1995; Ramsden, 1987; Warren, 2002).
One of the benefits of using the planning tool would be to encourage stakeholders to link ethical/social mission/corporate responsibility with instrumental rationales so that an institution-specific case for WP/ promoting diversity could be developed that addresses the interests of key internal stakeholder groups.

These tools will therefore assist institutions in gathering the data they need to understand, firstly, the benefits that may be gained by adopting a more embedded approach to WP and managing student diversity and, secondly, to assess the costs of achieving this.

This information can be mapped using the Cost and Benefits Template illustrated in Table 2, below. This overview will enable an HEI to identify where it is currently being successful in embedding widening participation and where it might want to address gaps in provision or divert resources to provide greater benefit in both an ethical and economic context.

It is hoped that HEIs will make use of this toolkit to take forward their understanding of widening participation and student diversity and how it relates to their corporate mission, student recruitment, retention and overall experience and successful outcome.

The toolkit can be accessed via the Higher Education Academy website (www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/institutions/wp).
Table 2: Illustrative costs and benefits template to assess the business case for embedding WP and promoting student diversity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Possible business case themes</th>
<th>Potential benefits</th>
<th>Potential costs</th>
<th>Illustrative evidence to assess the business case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase student numbers</td>
<td>HEI growth or market survival; Increase and/or diversification of HEI income base; If pursued through diversification of provision may lead to the benefits identified later in the table.</td>
<td>Costs of setting up and running WP projects; Costs of setting up and running new courses allied to possibility of failure to recruit; Student drop out; Market image and reputation.</td>
<td>Student recruitment figures and profiles; Student retention, progression and completion; Costs of projects and recruitment activities in relation to recruitment and income generated; Costs of drop out and retention provision against income generated from recruitment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tapping the pool of talent</td>
<td>Maintaining/improving academic profile and student achievement; More diverse student body; Meeting pressures from employer and professional accreditation bodies such as the BMA to diversify the student body</td>
<td>Costs of setting up and running WP projects; Project failure; Student drop out.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving and/or developing teaching and learning</td>
<td>Improved teaching, learning and assessment practices; Innovation in teaching, learning and assessment; Improved student retention, progression and completion; Improved links between teaching and learning, assessment and demands of key stakeholder groups such as professional bodies and employers.</td>
<td>Staff development; Student support; Impact on standards and HEI reputation.</td>
<td>New teaching, learning and assessment methods; Student retention, progression and completion figures; Student assessment and feedback; Teaching staff assessment and feedback; Assessment and feedback from key stakeholders; Graduate transition to employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New courses/markets and diversification of provision</td>
<td>New markets accessed e.g. CPD, foundation degrees; New income sources; Developing local and regional profile; HEI growth or market survival; New partnerships developed.</td>
<td>Start up costs of new courses; Lack of demand and take up leading to failure or limited success; Staff development/recruitment costs; Impact on image/reputation of the HEI.</td>
<td>New courses started; New forms of delivery; Student recruitment; Student retention, progression and completion; Income and expenditure for new courses; New partnerships developed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Higher Education Funding Council for England (2006b) Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education. Bristol: HEFCE.

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