Executive summary

The scope of this review covers the Widening Access (WA) strategies submitted to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) by each of the ten Higher Education (HE) institutions based in Wales, the one submitted by a UK-based institution with a regional centre located in Wales, and those put forward by the three Reaching Wider Partnerships (RWP). The WA strategies cover the period 2011/12 to 2013/14 and followed on from previous strategies submitted for the period 2006/7 to 2008/9 and extended for a further two years. The RWP had previously submitted short-term proposals for funding and this was the first time they had been asked to submit strategies. The review was undertaken for HEFCW by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) using two independent associates.

The review welcomed the strong commitment to widening access demonstrated in the strategies by the HE sector in Wales. The Welsh Government and HEFCW have continued to regard WA as a priority and the strategies showed that the institutions and Partnerships were enhancing their approaches to contribute to a regional framework to further this agenda. There were seven examples of excellent practice which were effective and innovative contributing to high quality WA work in Wales. In some areas, such as Partnerships and work with looked-after young people, Wales is ahead of the other nations in the UK and is leading the way with these developments. These examples of excellent practice were complemented by numerous examples of good practice which were demonstrated by many institutions and partnerships. The good or excellent practices were not universally employed, however, and those HEIs and RWP which are not currently using these approaches are advised to consider whether they have the potential to improve their WA work.

Examples of excellent practice

The reviewers noted some instances where institutions, Partnerships or the HE sector in Wales have led the way by implementing practices which research studies and experience have suggested are effective, yet which have not, to date, been widely adopted elsewhere in the UK. In these respects, the institutions, Partnerships or the HE sector in Wales are acting as innovators in the field of WA and the reviewers would like to commend these examples as excellent practice. The following examples of excellent practice were demonstrated by some institutions and Partnerships in Wales.

E1. Wales is to be congratulated for its strong commitment to widening access in HE which is demonstrated by the Welsh Government’s policy, HEFCW, the HEIs and the RWP. The retention of collaborative Partnerships is particularly welcome as they provide a strong focus for regional outreach work and institutions are acting as agents of economic and social change to deliver social justice and support a buoyant economy. WA in Wales is inclusive of all age groups and this distinctive feature is to be commended.

E2. The institutions and Partnerships in Wales all showed a strong commitment to looked-after young people and care leavers. All institutions have obtained the Buttle UK HE Quality Mark and this was reflected in the work with looked-after young people, their carers and care leavers. The approaches were well planned, monitored and evaluated and were even supported by research in some cases. This demonstrates an example of excellent practice and the robust approach to this group by all HEIs and RWP in Wales represents a real strength of WA in Wales.

E3. Some institutions demonstrated a holistic approach involving, for example, alignment of key priorities, such as widening access and teaching and learning; synergy with other agendas in particularly equality and diversity; the engagement of a wide range of staff from across the institution; and ‘wrap around’ support for regional initiatives. This represents excellent practice which embeds widening access and equality and furthers the development of cost effective approaches.
E4. A regional framework for WA is beginning to emerge in some regions in Wales. Such a framework involved a strategic approach to planning by HEIs and RWPs and facilitates WA work by making best use of each partner’s expertise to contribute to a coherent approach towards the target groups.

E5. A few institutions showed close links between WA and learning and teaching (L&T) by submitting joint strategies or by combining the two strategies in one document. In one case, the institution demonstrated an integrated approach by prioritising the development of coherent pathways to an excellent learner experience aiming to produce ‘high performing employable graduates irrespective of background and individual characteristics.’ Another example was to produce a table showing explicit links between WA and L&T enhancement projects. Both these approaches were innovative and showed how institutions attempted to address the challenge of working with two separate funding streams.

E6. The importance of two-way communication between the HE regional strategy board and one of the RWPs provides an example of excellent practice in collaborative working, based on mutual respect. The recognition of the Partnership’s expertise in understanding the beneficiaries’ perspectives is particularly noteworthy.

E7. One excellent example of alignment between the RWP strategy and those of partner HEIs was demonstrated. The Partnership’s strategy referred specifically to:

- the sharing of strategies and other documents,
- the inclusion of the Partnership’s objectives in WA strategies for all partners HEIs,
- the location of staff within the WA ‘driving centres’ of the HEIs,
- joint staff development to promote good practice,
- curriculum enhancement by extending 16-19 curriculum,
- delivering programmes with partner colleges,
- the formation of an action plan by July 2012 to increase alignment with regional strategy.

Examples of good practice

The reviewers noted that there were many instances where institutions, Partnerships or both were adopting approaches whose effectiveness has been validated by research and which have been commended as good practice. The effectiveness of these practices has led to their uptake by increasing numbers of institutions and Partnerships within Wales, the UK and elsewhere. The following are examples of good practice which were evident in the WA and RW strategies of some institutions and Partnerships in Wales.

G1. Some institutions and Partnerships demonstrated good practice with respect to the use of data to establish an evidence base for WA and to provide contextual information about their region. Some institutions and Partnerships had:

- made use of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data to assess performance and set targets,
- provided excellent examples of qualitative evidence through case studies,
- tracked discrete groups of students,
- referred to external awards, requests for repeat activities and their reputation,
- used attitudinal surveys to gather evidence about changes in HE awareness and aspirations,
- undertaken institutional research and used it to inform their work.

These examples are significant as they help institutions and Partnerships to demonstrate the value of the work they do.
G2. One Partnership had developed a constructive approach to strategic alignment by referring to the five priorities for RWPs (HEFCW 2010, 2011) and using them to develop their aims and objectives, delivery mechanisms and SMART measures of success. This approach ensured alignment between the aims and objectives, activities and measures of success.

G3. Some institutions demonstrated good practice in distinguishing between, yet linking, WA with marketing and recruitment so that WA teams can:

- inform the recruitment process to encourage students to apply for courses in which they are likely to succeed,
- feed in to the induction process to ease the transition between the student’s prior educational experience and the HE environment,
- assist in the use of contextual data to inform the admissions process.

G4. Institutions and Partnerships had developed approaches which have been successful in achieving their objectives and making a difference to people’s lives. These include, for example, delivering HE in workplace or community venues, curriculum development, GCSE revision programmes, summer schools, mentoring programmes, and engagement with Welsh medium learners.

G5. The University of the Heads of the Valleys Institute (UHOVI) provides a good example of collaboration between two institutions and a RWP to provide access to HE opportunities in an area with significant economic and social deprivation.

G6. All Partnerships and institutions demonstrated good practice through the involvement of a member of the senior management team who was responsible for providing leadership for WA and for the WA strategy.

G7. All RWPs had strong links with schools. One Partnership was represented on the 14-19 Partnerships in their region while another noted that their activities were becoming embedded in the school curriculum. Both these approaches reflect the strong working relationships that have been developed and maintained between schools and the RWPs.

G8. Some institutions had developed an effective approach to monitoring student performance within the institution by grouping interventions such as the development of personal tutoring, academic skills centres, and use of new protocols for academic feedback under a general heading of study support. The measurable outcomes were stated in terms of improvements in retention or degree attainment (class of degree) for particular cohorts, such as students from Communities First (CF) wards. Other institutions might consider whether such an approach would be applicable to them.

G9. RWPs and HEIs referred to a notable list of partner institutions and organisations involved in working with them towards shared objectives. These included community learning networks, charitable trusts, networks to support foster carers, other HEIs, Further Education (FE) colleges, the Trades Union Congress, Sector Skills Councils, voluntary sector organisations and many others. This collaborative approach avoids duplication, provides good value for money, and adds value to provision that might otherwise be delivered in isolation or as a ‘one-off’ activity.

G10. Some HEIs and RWPs demonstrated good practice by ensuring that learners experienced a series of activities which build cumulatively to support them along their chosen educational path.
Several institutions were developing channels of communication with their students, such as advisory groups, course representatives, and focus groups, whereby students from WA groups were encouraged to advise the institution on their WA and L&T initiatives, including the outreach work. With the growing importance of listening to and taking account of the “student voice”, these developments are to be commended.

The missions of HEIs in Wales varied considerably and institutions had developed strategic approaches to reconcile their commitment to WA with their institutional mission and purpose.

Some institutions showed good practice with respect to part-time students by, for example, including information about part-time routes at pre-entry events, providing mentoring, study skills development, student support and careers advice tailored to accommodate their part-time learners.

Areas for further development
Drawing on the review of the institutional and Partnership strategies, this section provides suggestions of areas for development by HEFCW, institutions and Partnerships.

For HEFCW
The reviewers recommend that HEFCW should:

Dh1. Consider the ways in which it could facilitate further and encourage the submission of joint Leaching and Tearning (L&T) and WA strategies by institutions. Joint strategies promote synergy between these two important aspects of an institutions’ work and further the development of a holistic approach to WA. Although the submission of joint strategies was permitted by HEFCW, the need to demonstrate financial accountability for two separate funding streams deterred some institutions from attempting to submit joint strategies and HEFCW should consider how they might help institutions to address this challenge.

Dh2. Encourage institutions and Partnerships to capture the medium and long term outcomes of their activities so that these can feed into evaluation. Although HEFCW required HEIs and RWPs to submit short and medium-term outcomes, many interpreted the medium-term outcomes as the short-term outcomes from activities they were intending to undertake in the medium-term and thus lost the opportunity to capture longitudinal evidence about the impact of their activities.

Dh3. Prompt institutions and Partnerships to provide more detail about management and governance, equality and diversity and the intended impact of WA activities, including the monitoring and management of risk.

Dh4. Consider whether the time has come to encourage Partnerships to move towards more balanced representation on the Partnership’s management group and to explore the ways in which Partnerships could give more responsibility to the non-HE sectors without compromising the financial accountability of the lead HEI.

Dh5. Work in partnership with organisations such as the HEA to encourage HEIs and RWPs to share good practice across the sector.

Dh6. Review the WA guidance on part-time students to ensure that, in future, institutions provide specific information about part-time students and their support.
**Dh7.** Monitor the extent to which institutions continue to work with specific student groups, such as younger students (e.g. primary to year nine) and care leavers, to ensure that institutions do not cut back on these activities as a consequence of economic austerity. If negative trends are observed, HEFCW could consider issuing guidance or taking additional action to combat them.

**For institutions and RWPs**

Although many institutions and Partnerships are demonstrating examples of good or excellent practice, these could be adopted more widely across the sector. Institutions and Partnerships are advised to review their approaches to WA with a view to:

**Dip1.** Considering ways in which they can further develop their evidence base by combining a range of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Some institutions made good use of HESA Key Performance indicators, case studies, Institutional research, and tracking. An evidence base is extremely important in enabling HEIs and RWPs to assess their progress, celebrate success and demonstrate the difference they are making.

**Dip2.** Further developing their mechanisms for sharing experience so that they are able to promote the spread of excellent and good practice across the sector in Wales, the UK and elsewhere.

**Dip3.** Considering the use of intermediate indicators of success to reflect the stages learners pass through as they progress towards HE and develop a range of tools to measure progress.

**For institutions**

Those institutions which have not adopted some of the following practices might be able to improve their WA strategies and their practice if they:

**Di1.** Distinguish carefully between WA, outreach, recruitment and marketing to ensure that their approaches are separate from, but informed by, each other so that students can benefit from a holistic approach.

**Di2.** Consider the ways in which they might strengthen their regional framework to ensure that institutions and Partnerships used their particular expertise to support learners at all stages along their journey towards and through HE.

**Di3.** Review their internal communications mechanisms to ensure that information gathered from WA regional meetings is fed back to the institution and informs planning and delivery.

**Di4.** Consider ways in which they can address disability and other equalities alongside widening access to adopt an integrated approach to social inclusion.

**Di5.** Assess their approaches to monitoring the performance of students from key target groups once they are in the institution.

**Di6.** Consider whether they could take further steps to improve the progression, learning opportunities and support they offer for part-time students.

**For RW partnerships**

Those RWPs which have not adopted some of the following practices might be able to improve their WA strategies and their practice if they:

**Rp1.** Develop more strategic approaches to be clearer about the alignment between their mission, aims and objectives, delivery mechanisms and SMART targets.
Rp2. Consider the ways and extent to which they are aligning the WA strategies of the RWPs and HEIs and whether these approaches could have been more explicitly referenced in each other’s strategies.
Review of Widening Access and Reaching Wider Strategies in Wales

Introduction
The scope of this review covers the Widening Access (WA) strategies submitted to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) by each of the 10 higher education institutions based in Wales, the one submitted by a UK-based institution with a regional centre located in Wales, and those put forward by the three Reaching Wider Partnerships (RWPs). The WA strategies cover the period 2011/12 to 2013/14 and followed on from previous strategies submitted for the period 2006/7 to 2008/9 and extended for a further two years to align with the publication of For our Future (DCELS 2009), the Welsh Government’s Strategy for HE. The RWPs had previously submitted short-term proposals for funding and this was the first time they had been asked to submit strategies.

Approach
The review was undertaken for HEFCW by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) using two independent associates, each of whom has extensive experience of widening participation through working and researching in further and higher education. Their experience ranges across the UK and beyond.

The reviewers worked closely with HEFCW and the HEA to develop an evaluation framework for the review which would ensure a consistent, coherent approach was taken. The framework relied heavily on the key policy documents from HEFCW and the Welsh Government so that the review could focus on the extent to which the strategies would be able to contribute to widening access to higher education in their region in Wales. The evaluation framework was published online and institutions and Partnerships were invited to comment. The reviewers noted that only one institution took advantage of this opportunity. This respondent considered that the framework was comprehensive and recognised the support they received from the HEA. They hoped that the review would not lead to further administrative work which has the potential to reduce frontline delivery as resources are limited.

Once the framework was agreed with HEFCW, it formed the basis for the review. Each WA and RWP strategy was reviewed against the framework and the reviewers noted points of interest under the key headings. The reviewers then adopted a regional approach and considered together the RWP strategy and the WA strategies of the HEIs in each region to assess the extent to which these came together to contribute to HEFCW’s Corporate Strategy priorities and the Welsh Government’s For Our Future (DCELS 2009) expectations. This approach enabled the reviewers to identify different approaches and to consider the extent to which they were innovative or their effectiveness was validated by research studies or experience elsewhere. The reviewers noted that the strategies showed instances where approaches, which had been validated as effective by research but which have not been widely adopted as yet, had been taken up by one or a few institutions or Partnerships or by the whole HE sector in Wales. In these cases, the HEIs, RWPs or the HE sector in Wales are acting as innovators in the WA field and it was decided to identify these as excellent practice, as there is the potential for other countries in the UK and indeed further afield to learn from experience in Wales. Practices whose effectiveness has been confirmed by research or experience and which have been taken up fairly widely were identified as good practice. Using these categories, seven examples of excellent practice and 13 examples of good practice were identified. This is an impressive record of which the Welsh HE sector should be proud.

Taking account of the high priority accorded to WA by the Welsh Government, HEFCW, HEIs and RWPs in Wales and the constraints on resources arising from global economic uncertainty, the reviewers considered the ways in which further progress could be made. While many institutions and Partnerships are demonstrating examples of good or excellent practice, these could be adopted more widely across the sector and these points have been noted as areas for further development by HEFCW, HEIs and RWPs. The strategies included information about resources, outreach activity, admissions, induction, student support and pedagogic practice indicating that the process of strategy development had brought staff together to consider the contribution they could make to the recruitment, retention and success of students from under-
represented groups. This whole institution approach is to be commended and was evident to varying degrees in all the WA strategies (see E3).

The review began while the strategies were still being resubmitted to HEFCW following feedback. Although the resubmission process was valuable for the institutions, Partnerships and HEFCW, its timing was challenging for the reviewers as they were working with documents that were still going through this iterative process. It did, however, enable the reviewers to gain insight into the revision process and to see its positive benefits. A comparison between the initial drafts with the later versions indicated that the process of receiving feedback from HEFCW, revising and resubmitting the WA and RWP strategies, had helped many institutions and Partnerships to refine their strategies to achieve a closer alignment between their mission, aims, objectives and measures of success. Consequently, the WA and RW strategies improved in later drafts enabling institutions and Partnerships to demonstrate more effectively their contribution to widening access across Wales. The revision process thus served a useful purpose resulting in strategies that accurately reflected the commitment of institutions and Partnerships to widening access, and all parties are to be commended for their positive approach to strategy improvement which reflects their commitment to WA (see E1).

**Contextual background**

**Economic and political context**

The HE sector in Wales is currently facing a series of economic, political and social challenges which it shares with other countries in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world. Both the Welsh Government and HEFCW recognise widening access as a priority (see E1 above) and HEFCW has largely protected WA funding. Nevertheless the economic recession is putting limits on public finances including funding for higher education. The contraction in the labour market encourages more students to turn to education but, with a cap on student numbers, excess demand for HE places can arise. HE institutions are expected to deliver across a range of agendas including research, learning and teaching, community engagement, business regeneration and so on. While some of these are natural allies to widening access, others are less closely connected and all policy areas compete for the use of finite resources.

Against this background it is important for HEIs and RWPs to ensure that WA funds are spent in such a way so that they make an effective contribution to the Welsh Government’s two pillars of social justice and a buoyant economy; to HEFCW’s priorities; to the regional HE strategy and to the institution’s mission and purpose. A coherent WA strategy is useful in helping to keep these objectives aligned and guides future planning and delivery. The review found that WA and RWP strategies indicate that the HEIs and RWPs in Wales are addressing these challenges so that they can act as agents for social and economic change in Wales, and they are to be commended for this endeavour (see E1 above).

**Social justice and a buoyant economy: some considerations**

The Welsh Government’s strategy for HE, *For Our Future* (DCELS 2009) notes that:

> ‘The benchmark for its effectiveness will be the contribution higher education in Wales makes to two fundamental Welsh Government priorities identified for Wales:
> 
> - To deliver social justice
> - To support a buoyant economy.’ (DELS 2009: p9)

Although the institutions and Partnerships showed in their strategies that they were mindful of these challenges, it is important to recognise that the extent to which the HE sector can contribute to these two ‘pillars’ depends on many factors, not all of which lie wholly within the remit of the sector. Levels of attainment in the schools sector, for example, affect the potential of students to enter HE and succeed once they are there. Although pre-entry work with potential students enables HEIs to contribute to raising aspirations, enhancing the curriculum and motivating learners to realise their potential, the WA teams’ contribution to educational attainment will inevitably be small compared to that of schools and other providers of education. If school performance were to fall, especially in Communities First areas, it might be
difficult for the institutions and Partnerships to achieve their targets for Communities First entrants, and yet this forms an important element in their strategies for the delivery of social justice.

Similarly, the economic performance of trading partners influences aggregate demand and employment. A buoyant economy depends upon a combination of supply- and-demand-side factors. While the HE sector can contribute significantly to the supply-side through, for example, raising skills levels, producing employable graduates and providing a strong research base to stimulate investment, its demand-side influence is more limited. Some businesses might be more reluctant to invest, increase employment or embark on new ventures if international markets are unstable and consumer demand is falling at home and abroad. Supply-side measures alone cannot ensure a buoyant economy so HE’s contribution to this ‘pillar’ includes ensuring that Wales is able to respond quickly once demand revives.

**Delivering to two agendas**

The HEFCW guidelines (HEFCW 2010, 2011) formed the basis for the strategies of institutions and Partnerships. These guidelines reflected the Welsh government’s expectations and HEFCW’s priorities and also required the institutions and Partnerships to include key points of information in their strategies. The HEIs and RWPs were attempting to fulfil two functions through their strategies. Firstly they had to comply with the HEFCW guidelines in order to secure WA and RWP funding and deliver a number of SMART outcomes which would form the basis of annual monitoring. Secondly, the WA strategies had to play a role in the institution’s mission and purpose and its response to For our Future, namely that ‘Individual providers will focus and build on their own strengths and missions’ (DCELS 2009: p11).

Funding represents a strong lever for change and the review has welcomed the identification of significant change in the sector since the last review of WA strategies (HEA 2009). In these recent submissions, institutions have recognised the impact of the WA strategy on the institution’s own performance in terms of the retention, progression, attainment, satisfaction, and employability, areas which enhance the experience of its own enrolled students. Given the need to address the widening access agenda both inside and beyond the institution, it is understandable that institutions sometimes appear to be “riding two horses”. They are addressing the expectations of the Government and HEFCW for widening access in terms of outreach work, particularly in a regional context, while at the same time implementing approaches to raise the quality of the student experience across the student lifecycle. It is not necessarily that the two agendas are incompatible, but they are ambitious. The institutions’ strategies demonstrate the ways in which they intend to work to address these agendas simultaneously, and they should be commended for engaging with these challenging issues (see E1 above).

**The pace of change**

There is a sense of urgency in For Our Future (DCELS 2009) which emphasises ‘the need for significant change and a different way of working’ (p9) from the HEIs and Partnerships. The Welsh Government wants to see ‘a new model for HE’ so that those sections of the population with little tradition of entering HE can be engaged in the future, participation is maximised, inequalities are addressed, and a larger proportion of the population achieves higher level skills. The HE institutions in Wales mirror the variations found elsewhere in the UK so that institutions cater for particular student populations in terms of age, area of residence, preferred mode of study and so on.

Similarly, part-time, short-cycle, flexible delivery is more deeply embedded in some institutions than in others. Consequently, there is considerable variation in the extent to which institutions are already working on these agendas. Some institutions are well on the way to implementing the For Our Future agenda while others still have some distance to travel. The expectations of HEFCW and the Welsh Government are exacting and will require the Partnerships and institutions to continue to demonstrate their strong commitment to widening access.
Critical assessment

Widening access has a strong track record in Wales, with institutions having WA strategies for at least the last ten years. The request for strategies to cover the period 2011/12 to 2013/14 provided institutions and Partnerships with an opportunity to look back over the previous funding period, reconsider their work in the light of emerging policy priorities and the changing economic and social environment, review the evidence they had collected, assess the extent to which they had realised their objectives, celebrate their successes, and consider areas for further development. Their existing work inevitably provided the starting point for the new strategies. Continuation of existing work has many merits; it enables institutions and Partnerships to build on their experience, to maintain relationships with their partners in schools, colleges, communities and workplaces and allows their activities to evolve and develop. Evaluating past practice usually forms the first step in planning for the future.

The extent to which the HEIs and RWPs in Wales used this opportunity to review their past experience critically varied considerably. The most effective strategies appeared to have been written not just for HEFCW but also with a variety of other audiences in mind; they contributed to cultural change within their institutions by making clear to academic and professional staff the evidence on which the new strategy was based.

There were some good examples (see G1 above) of the use of quantitative or qualitative evidence and these are to be commended. Some institutions, for example, had used their HESA benchmark data to evidence their success to date or to set targets for the future. As this data is readily available and published every year, it can be used by institutions to assess their absolute and relative position and can form a useful starting point for an assessment. Those institutions which had not referred to their HESA data might have benefitted from doing so (see Dip1 above).

Some institutions and Partnerships informed their analysis of past performance by looking at data about the subsequent educational progression of groups of students with whom they had worked. Tracking pre-HE is resource intensive, and Partnerships and institutions lack the capacity to track all those with whom they work. However, collecting data about a sample cohort can provide useful insights. There were good examples (see G1 above) of institutions and Partnerships tracking summer school participants, identified cohorts in schools and those on feeder programmes to see what proportion progressed into HE. In some cases, students’ progress can be monitored via an intermediary such as schools, local authorities, or Career Wales, providing the necessary consents have been obtained. There were some good examples of institutions and Partnerships adopting these approaches.

Although it is rarely possible to establish causality conclusively, information about subsequent educational careers of widening access students provides an invaluable source of information to inform future planning, and we were pleased to note that many of those institutions or Partnerships who had not been tracking their students recorded their intentions to establish a tracking or monitoring system in the new strategy period. Given the complexities of this process, it would be useful for institutions and Partnerships to share experience so that they can spread good practice, learn from each other and address common issues in the most cost-effective way (Dip2; Dh5 above).

After students have entered HE, institutions routinely collect data about their progress and a great deal of useful information can be obtained by analysing this data through institutional research. This can highlight, for example, whether students from WA target groups are as likely as other groups to enter the institution after they have received an offer, to withdraw early, or to perform as well as or better than the institutional average. There were a few examples of institutional research in the critical assessment section and this demonstrated good practice (see G1 above). Other institutions would have been able to enrich their strategies had they made more use of institutional research.
Qualitative evidence is also important and one institution had made excellent use of case studies to highlight their achievements (see G1 above). The extent to which institutions and Partnerships use case studies or learner profiles on a regular basis to celebrate success and model good practice was not clear but they can form a useful part of an evidence base and they could have been cited more widely in this section of the strategies. Institutions and Partnerships also noted their successes by reference to external awards, requests for repeat activities and their reputation (see G1 above).

Some also referred to the results of short-term evaluation tools such as attitudinal surveys to measure whether participants at a pre-entry event knew more about HE after the event than at the beginning (see G1 above). The funding constraints arising from the current financial climate sharpen the need for HEIs and RWPs to ensure that they use their WA funding effectively and that they are able to demonstrate the impact and success of their activities to make a case for the continuation of funding. Although most Partnerships and institutions were providing some evidence of their success, in many cases it would have been useful to draw on a wider range of evaluative techniques to evidence and assess their past performance (see Dip1 above).

They were also good examples (see G1 above) of institutions and Partnerships using the evidence base to draw out important lessons to inform future planning, thus learning from experience, so that they were better able to accommodate their target groups. This process creates a virtuous cycle whereby evidence informs planning and practice which in turn gives rise to more evidence, and so on. The use of evidence to inform practice was not, however, universal. Some institutions missed the opportunity to undertake a critical assessment and used the section to provide a descriptive account of the main features of the past four years’ work. With respect to pre-entry engagement, institutions need to take care to clarify the distinction between their widening access activities and other activities with local schools or community groups which are not focused specifically on WA targets. Although most of the activities had a widening access dimension, in a few instances this was not readily apparent and these institutions need to distinguish carefully between widening participation and marketing and recruitment work (see Di1 above).

The assessment of past practice gives an indication of the types of activities which Partnerships and institutions had delivered in the past strategy period. There were some good examples of activities which had been highly successful in meeting their objectives, such as GCSE revision programmes, summer schools, community engagement with BME groups and working with Welsh medium learners (see G4 above). In some cases, however, there was insufficient detail in the strategies to know whether these successful events were ‘one-offs’ or formed part of a coherent series of activities to engage learners over a longer period.

Some HEIs used the opportunity to introduce new institutional and regional priorities which would shape their future strategies. A good example of this approach was provided by the institutions which cited their intention to reduce withdrawal rates, especially in the first year. They were thereby using their WA strategy as an opportunity to link assessment of the previous WA strategy to future interventions in this area, such as enhanced advice and guidance on module or programme choice.

**Alignment of WA with L&T**

Most WA strategies reference institutional policies, including those concerned with Learning and Teaching (L&T), Fee Plan, Admissions, Retention, Estates, Equality and Diversity and Welsh Medium. A number of institutions demonstrated good practice: they went further than merely naming these policies, and made explicit reference to their key aspects and how they impacted on and connected to the WA strategy. The most often cited example of this was the institution’s learning and teaching policy. It was interesting to note how HEIs were dealing with the overlap between WA strategies and L&T strategies given the increasing emphasis from the Welsh Government, HEFCW and the institutions themselves on the performance and progression of students. The reviewers identified three approaches to aligning WA with L&T along a continuum:
i. broadly recognising synergies between WA and L&T;
ii. detailing links between L&T, quality enhancement and WA (e.g. through a matrix); and
iii. producing a joint strategy encompassing both WA and L&T.

The first approach was the simplest and the most widely adopted. The two strategies were separate, leading to distinct SMART measures for each, and the institutions mentioned the places where the strategies covered issues relevant to both agendas such as inclusive curriculum development, student engagement and work-based learning.

The second approach was adopted by two institutions which had worked together to produce their WA and L&T strategies and to combine them in a joint document. These institutions acknowledged WA as a theme that underpinned their joint L&T strategy which was then operationalised in the form of a number of Quality Enhancement projects. The combined WA strategy led to SMART outcomes and these institutions were able then to produce a table which showed the links between the enhancement projects and the WA aims. This was an innovative approach (see E5 above) as it enabled the institutions to make explicit the links between WA and L&T from the standpoint of their impact on learners. It would be beneficial for other HEIs to attempt this approach as it would enable those working in institutions to engage in the WA agenda as part of the mainstream approaches to improving the student experience rather than as a collection of outreach activities and on-course pastoral and academic support measures.

Finally, one institution submitted a joint strategy covering both WA and L&T. Its approach sought to emphasise the integration between these two policy areas by prioritising the development of coherent pathways to an excellent learner experience aiming to produce ‘high performing employable graduates irrespective of background and individual characteristics.’ Although HEFCW explicitly permitted the institutions to submit joint WA and L&T strategies, few did so. This was perhaps because, as one institution noted, the submission of joint strategies had the potential to complicate the monitoring and reporting process. The challenge was to provide SMART measures of success and subsequent annual monitoring returns for HEFCW that take account of, and relate to, the different funding allocations for L&T and WA.

The one institution that made a joint submission was required by HEFCW to provide two executive summaries, one for L&T and one for WA. These summaries demonstrated one way in which the challenge of working with and monitoring two separate funding streams could be met. The summaries aimed to demonstrate how each of the strategy’s ‘strategic enablers’ – that is employability, creative curriculum design, students as partners, partnership and collaboration, academic staff development and accreditation, and scholarship and research to inform learning, teaching and widening access could be referenced against WA priorities as well as those of the institution in general. In other words, the HEI sought to explain how its L&T strategy met the needs of the general student population as well as responding to WA cohorts in the institution and WA agendas (see E5 above). The summaries aimed to resolve the challenge of working with two funding streams.

Since WA and L&T are so closely aligned, the submission of joint strategies makes eminent sense and promotes synergy between these two important aspects of an institution’s work. HEFCW should consider the ways in which it could facilitate the submission of joint T&L and WA strategies by institutions so that institutions are able to demonstrate financial accountability for two separate funding streams (see Dh1 above).

**Distinction between marketing and recruitment**

All institutions responded to the request to distinguish between widening access, marketing and recruitment, and it was interesting to see the variety of responses. The motivation for posing such a question usually arises from an urge to ensure that activities designed to be impartial and funded as part of a WA to higher education programme are not delivered by institutional staff who promote their own institution above others. The second reason is to ensure that WA funds are being used to widening access, not for more traditional recruitment purposes.
When the mission of the institution is directly aligned to the WA agenda, the relationship between WA, marketing and recruitment is likely to be close simply because a greater proportion of the HEIs’ student population is recruited from local region where the WA activity is delivered. In this respect the presence of the institution in a deprived area is likely to translate into general recruitment. Nevertheless these institutions will encounter those whose abilities, subject interests or aspirations might best be met at another institution and they need to ensure that impartial advice and guidance is delivered at ages or stages at which prospective students have yet to decide where they might wish to study. Traditionally HEIs have resolved this issue by confining impartial advice to WA teams to work with prospective students at least a year away from institution applications. As soon as a student is being advised on university applications, HEI-specific recruitment teams generally enter the picture and work with prospective students, sometimes alongside WA teams. Another approach is to segment the applicant populations with recruitment teams working with non-WA populations and WA teams working with WA populations.

The advantages of a close working relationship between WA, marketing and recruitment can result in the following which provide examples of good practice (see G3 above):

- Intelligence about WA cohorts can be understood by recruitment and marketing teams so that students are given appropriate advice and guidance resulting in recruitment on to suitable courses. Some institutions in Wales noted they expected this would reduce their attrition rate in the first year.
- The HEI is likely to be more efficient and avoid duplicate activities, especially around transition or induction. The “first 100 days” is just one example of good practice among many which highlighted the importance of supporting transition and WA teams’ understanding of the prior educational experience of students with whom they have been working, including the learners’ expectations of higher education, can inform the design of such programmes.
- The use of contextual data in some HEIs, especially the more selective ones, demonstrates how the admissions process can benefit from as much information about the students as possible. WA intelligence could be used more explicitly in many institutions to inform the admissions process, thus creating a constructive alliance between WA and admissions teams.

Although some HEIs understood these issues, they were in the minority. Others merely described how the teams worked separately, thereby missing the opportunity to acknowledge and address the opportunities for, and complexities of, collaborative working. The distinctions between widening access and marketing and recruitment are subtle and require strategic decisions which are perhaps best taken at senior level to ensure appropriate boundaries are drawn while encouraging joint work when suitable (see D1 above).

Mission and Purpose
Despite sharing the same policy context and facing the same challenges, each of the HE institutions in Wales has a distinctive mission and purpose. Consequently, the weight they attach to their priorities differs with implications for their approach to widening access. Researchers have developed a number of different models of widening participation or access (see Jones and Thomas 2005 and Layer 2005). Some institutions in Wales demonstrated the model of widening access that Jones and Thomas (2005) referred to as the ‘academic approach’ whereby the institution seeks to attract academically-able young people into an unreformed higher education system. Others were keenly aware of the economic imperatives and adopted a ‘utilitarian’ (Jones and Thomas 2005) or ‘regeneration’ approach ‘based on the premise that HE qualifications are seen as a route to greater prosperity and because an HE presence will secure inward investment’ to the region (Layer 2005 p82). Indeed the WA strategies of the HEIs in Wales reflect in microcosm the full spectrum of approaches to widening access seen across the UK. All the institutions in Wales should be commended for developing strategic approaches that unite their particular mission with their commitment to WA (see G12 above).

All HEIs’ and RWPs’ strategies showed how they were contributing to delivering a fairer society by, for example, reaching out to learners in Communities First areas, enhancing support mechanisms so that students from under-represented groups are retained and succeed, developing part-time routes into and through HE
and extending the range of programmes offered through the medium of Welsh. The contribution to a buoyant economy, however, was more prominent in some strategies than in others. Some approaches explicitly focused on skills for employment, including work-based learning programmes based on credit accumulation that could be delivered flexibly.

For the RWPs this is the first time they had been asked for a strategy as opposed to a short-term proposal for funding. The opening section dealing with the RWP mission and purpose is crucial in that the remainder of the strategy should align with the RWP mission. One Partnership developed a constructive approach by referring to *For our Future* (DECLS 2009) and HEFCW guidelines (HEFCW 2010, 2011), in particular utilising the five priorities for RWPs. These then led directly to regional objectives which in turn led to the development of the SMART measures of success. This approach ensured alignment between the aims and objectives, activities and measures of success and provides an example of good practice (see G2 above). The other Partnerships should consider this approach or develop alternative models to better demonstrate alignment between their mission, aims, delivery mechanisms and targets.

**Strategic aims and objectives**

HEIs presented clear aims and objectives for their WA strategies. However, a variety of approaches were noted which partly reflected the different missions of the institutions and indicated the extent to which the WA strategy was integrated into the main priorities of the institution. Most HEIs concentrated on the life-cycle approach which allowed them to link their strategy’s aims and objectives directly to the initiatives and activities described in their SMART outcomes.

Other institutions supplemented the life-cycle approach with more emphasis on institutional priorities for their own WA students. Typically these included work on degree outcomes, the use of flexible learning to enhance part-time provision, and initiatives to encourage greater engagement by WA students, for example in the take-up study abroad opportunities. Some institutions used this section to emphasise particular groups with whom they were working, typically care leavers and disabled students. Institutions also used this section to emphasise new areas on which they wished to focus. The introduction of contextual admissions, the development of academic skills centres and skills development including employability skills, sometimes linked to access to the professions, were notable examples where HEIs wished to publicise approaches that were new to them.

Partnerships’ strategies included well-crafted aims and objectives which closely reflected the challenges outlined in *For our Future* (DECLS 2009), the regional profile and HEFCW’s priorities such as Welsh Medium learners. One Partnership, for example, described ‘a programme of regular interventions, in target schools, colleges and communities to offset low aspirations and increase the culture and social impact of higher education.’ Other RWPs had very clear aims and objectives and related these to their expectations.

**Regional dimension**

HEFCW’s guidance for this section of the strategies was specific in confirming that the RWPs were to provide the WA mechanism for the HE regional strategies. HEFCW also expected to see alignment between WA and RW provision so that both HEIs and RWPs were contributing to HE strategy development, to meeting learner needs and to responding to regional labour market information. This section of the strategy thus provided the opportunity for institutions and Partnerships to outline key challenges in the region and the ways in which they were going to contribute to their solution, through aligning with each other, with the regional strategies and with the regional learning partnerships. Institutions addressed this section in very different ways. Some demonstrated excellent practice by explaining how activities and initiatives were strategically planned in partnership with RWP to contribute to the attainment of regional priorities (see E4 above) while others merely described the operational mechanisms.
Most institutions described the features of their region and communities and some exhibited good practice by evidencing key features with reference to publicly available data about levels of employment, deprivation and educational achievement (see G1 above). The picture of the economic and social conditions in the region provided the context against which the institutions explained how they were meeting the needs or addressing barriers through encouraging participation from Communities First wards, providing lifelong learning opportunities, particularly for part-time learners, and working with employers. One institution demonstrated excellent practice by explaining how it had repositioned its academic provision to take account of the regional HE strategy and had thus contributed to a coherent programme of post-compulsory provision, including foundation degrees, in the region. The University of the Heads of the Valleys Institute (UHOVI) also provides a good example of collaboration between two institutions to provide access to HE opportunities in an area with significant economic and social deprivation.

Some institutions also demonstrated excellent practice (see E3 above) by describing how they supported the RWP and the regional agenda by topping up their institution’s RWP allocation with institutional funds or contributions in kind. For instance, institutions cited office space, chairing time of senior staff and sometimes a dedicated post within the institution as examples of support for the Partnership. One institution described the “wrap-around support” that it provided for a regional initiative which was funded through its WA funding. It seems clear that some institutions were contributing resources towards regional work for which they were not necessarily claiming credit.

This was most apparent in the time of academic and professional staff and there were a number of examples where teaching staff were, or would be, involved in work with schools, colleges and community groups. In many instances, this work was funded through other income sources, but was being delivered in line with widening access regional targets. This synergy requires a considerable commitment to widening access and in most cases a cultural shift to enable this holistic approach to be adopted, sanctioned and valued by the institution in a systematic manner. Those institutions which demonstrated this approach are to be commended for excellent practice. The joined up approach was not apparent across all institutions, and some institutions might be advised to consider the extent to which their activities support the regional agenda and the ways in which they might use their funding streams strategically to support a variety of agendas at institutional and regional level (see Di2).

For RWPs, the regional dimension is very significant as the RWP strategies form an integrated part of the HE regional strategy providing for the delivery of WA across the region. All three RWP strategies demonstrated good practice provided a clear understanding of their regional context, and used this evidence to focus their activities on Communities First areas and looked after young people (see G1 above). Two of the Partnerships noted that they were consulted on the development of their regional HE strategy and demonstrated that there are formal mechanisms for the RWP to report to the HE regional strategy board. Indeed one Partnership went further and noted that there are arrangements for two-way communication as the Partnership has the advantage of direct access to learners and other stakeholders enabling it to provide informed advice to the regional strategy board. This suggests a mature and well-established relationship between the Partnership and the regional strategy board based on mutual respect and is a very positive development representing excellent practice (see E6).

The HE regional strategies all demonstrated a commitment to learners, employers and businesses and the RWP strategies echoed these themes. They showed evidence of the ways in which the Partnerships were contributing to both social justice and a buoyant economy in their region by engaging with adult learners in the workplace or community and with younger learners in schools and colleges. The HEIs have also been involved in the development of the HE regional strategy and there were references in their WA strategies to overlapping membership of steering groups to ensure that the institutions remain informed about regional strategy developments.
All RWPs were clear that their strategies needed to take account of their partner institutions’ WA strategies as well as the HE regional strategy. A common approach was through joint planning and representation of institutional staff on RWP committees. Most HEIs explained that the alignment between their WA strategy and the RWP strategy occurred through the presence of institutional senior managers on RWP committees. Although this is important, it is not sufficient; partner institutions also need to ensure that they have internal mechanisms in place to disseminate the information and to ensure that the requisite actions are implemented (see Di3 above).

The extent to which institutions and Partnerships have moved towards providing a shared framework for HE provision and outreach work across the region differed considerably. At the very least, the links between the HEIs, the RWPs and the HE regional strategy appeared to be sufficient to avoid wasteful duplication or gaps in provision and some went further than this. One Partnership went considerably further and demonstrated alignment between its RWP strategy and those of partner HEIs by referring specifically to:

- the sharing of strategies and other documents,
- the inclusion of the Partnership’s objectives in WA strategies for all partners HEIs,
- the location of staff within the WA ‘driving centres’ of the HEIs,
- joint staff development to promote good practice,
- curriculum enhancement by extending 16-19 curriculum,
- delivering programmes with partner colleges and the formation of an action plan by July 2012 to increase alignment with regional strategy.

This is an impressive list representing an example of excellent practice (see E7 above). Other Partnerships should consider the extent to which they are adopting similar approaches and whether they could have been more explicitly referenced in their strategies (see Dp2 above).

There were also examples where RWPs were starting to map institutions’ work onto RWP work and one Partnership talked about how this would enable them ‘to focus on alignment, planning and delivery’. Mapping represents a very positive development, and the greater the trust and openness within the Partnership, the more accurate, comprehensive and successful these maps and subsequent alignment will become. These approaches show how these institutions and Partnerships are beginning to move away from a piecemeal approach towards a holistic regional model for widening access and they should be commended (see E4 above).

A regional framework for widening access outreach work requires a proactive approach to work out how all HEIs could best use their expertise to contribute to the achievement of shared objectives. This approach is beginning to emerge in some regions in Wales and this represents excellent practice (see E4 above). It is essentially what was envisaged by the Higher Education Progression Framework (Action on Access 2008) developed - but never fully implemented - in England for Aimhigher partnerships and their partner schools, colleges and HEIs. The demise of Aimhigher means that the development of a coherent regional approach to widening participation has lost momentum in England and the HE sector in Wales is to be commended for taking the lead to further this agenda (see E1 and E4 above).

One important development in recent years in Wales and England has been the emergence of 14-19 learning partnerships to consider a coherent curriculum across these age groups. In Wales, one RWP was explicit about their links with the 14-19 networks and noted that they had maintained a presence on all 14-19 learning networks in their partnership region. In the other RWPs there was clear evidence of close working relationships and that the RWP activities were becoming embedded in the school curriculum. This represents a very positive development indicating that schools were recognising the ways in which the RWPs could contribute to the achievement of their own objectives for pupils. These examples demonstrate good practice (see G7 above) in building and maintaining sustainable working relationships with schools and are to be commended.
Management and governance
Research studies of widening participation across the UK (Thomas et al 2005; Shaw et al 2009) have noted the importance of senior management involvement in widening access to facilitate decision making, promote an integrated institutional approach and contribute to long-term stability. All the WA strategies from institutions and Partnerships in Wales demonstrated this approach and noted that responsibility for the leadership of their WA strategy was in the hands of a senior member of the institution’s management team, usually at either Deputy or Pro-Vice-Chancellor level (see G6 above). In some cases it was clear that the person responsible for widening access had responsibility also for contingent areas such as, for example, learning and teaching, equality and diversity, and admissions, providing opportunities for the convergence of different aspects of the widening access agenda.

Beyond this, however, the amount of detail given in the strategies about management and governance varied considerably. Disappointingly, in some strategies this section contained merely a description of formal roles and committee reporting structures. Studies (Thomas et al 2005; Shaw et al 2009) have suggested that institutions across the UK adopt organisational structures for managing widening access which vary along a continuum between a dispersed or a centralised model and it would have been useful to have more information about the this aspect of the institutional management of widening access as they have implications for the potential to embed or marginalise widening access within the institution.

Some institutions in Wales appeared to have a dispersed organisational structure whereby each faculty and service had responsibility for widening access. While this model can encourage a sense of ownership and contribute to cultural change, the danger is that it can lead to a ‘piecemeal approach with little or no connection between the different activities’ (Thomas et al 2005; p175) and does not foster a strategic approach to widening access. Although this can be overcome through effective management structures, there was insufficient detail in the strategies to assess whether or not this was the case.

Other institutions in Wales seemed to be adopting a centralised approach to widening access with clear leadership from a central unit or team. Although this model helps to ensure a co-ordinated, focused approach across the institution, its disadvantage lies in disenfranchising those in the faculties and services who can feel that widening access is not their job (Thomas et al 2005; Shaw et al 2009). This model can also inhibit the embedding of widening access across the institution unless there are clear mechanisms for engaging the faculties and services. Once again, there was insufficient detail in the strategies to assess whether or not this was the case. This is unfortunate and it would be useful for HEFCW to continue to encourage institutions to use this section to reflect upon their organisational structures and consider the extent to which they were contributing to cultural change within the institution (See Dh3 above).

In some strategies, there was an explicit recognition of the ways in which widening access work was both informed by and would contribute to other closely related strategies, such as L&T, retention, innovation and engagement. This approach was often characterised by clear SMART measures of success to which the other strategies would contribute. For example SMART targets might be set in terms of student attainment of class of degree recognising that progress towards this target would result from the combined of various initiatives. Those institutions in which the WA management was confined to the operational management of the initiatives are advised to consider the adoption of this approach.

With respect to the RWPs, the executive or steering groups were chaired by the lead HEI and included representatives from all the other HE partners. These groups also included representatives from other partner institutions such as schools, FE colleges, and Career Wales, although these were in the minority. The management of the Reaching Wider Partnerships could be described as typical of the diffused spider model (Woodrow 2002) which gives equal status to the HE partners and includes other partners, but not with parity in terms of representation. By way of comparison, many of the steering groups for the Aimhigher partnerships in England adopted this model in their early years but then moved on to try and achieve a balance in representation from FE colleges, local authorities, HEIs and other partners. Although the lead
Aimhigher HEI retained financial responsibility for its partnerships’ Aimhigher budget, many of the steering groups were chaired by senior staff drawn from outside the HE sector, such as the Principal of an FE college, a senior executive in the local authority or the head teacher in a partner school. In this way the formal structures of Aimhigher emphasised collaboration, promoted shared ownership of the planning and management of the programme and contributed to cultural change across the partner institutions. HEFCW should consider whether the time has come to encourage Partnerships to move towards more balanced representation on the Partnership’s management group and to explore the ways in which Partnerships could further engage the non-HE sectors in their governance, without compromising the financial accountability of the lead HEI (see Dh4).

In Wales, the HE-led management group was sometimes supplemented by operational or stakeholder groups with a far broader membership to ensure wide consultation and communication across the Partnership. The amount of detail provided varied considerably and in one case it was impossible to assess how the Partnership was managed or whether there were structures in place for reporting to the HE regional strategy group, whereas in other cases there was greater clarity and this was welcomed.

**Equality of opportunity**

Most institutions and Partnerships had followed the HEFCW guidelines and addressed this section by ensuring that an equality impact assessment of the strategy had been undertaken and most institutions and Partnerships also reported the findings of the equality impact assessment either in full or in summary form. These were positive and typically indicated that the implementation of the strategy would be likely to have a beneficial effect on the target groups. In some cases, however, the results were not reported at all and this was unfortunate.

An equality impact assessment represents compliance but as the widening access agenda shares many characteristics with other equalities issues it would have been beneficial if institutions and Partnerships had been more proactive and adopted a holistic approach to social inclusion. Indeed, the Higher Education Academy report on the previous WA and RWP strategies (HEA 2009) recommended that HEIs should ‘work towards a whole institution approach to widening access, taking account of equality and diversity, student support, retention and success and progression beyond HE’ (para 15.1).

To implement this recommendation, the institutions could, for example, have used the findings from the impact assessment as a tool to improve the quality of their widening access work by exploring the ways in which work to widen access and promote student success might be aligned with institutional policies and practice to promote equality and diversity more generally. About a third of the institutions had adopted an inclusive approach to widening access and equality and diversity by, for example, designing the curriculum to accommodate all learners including those from widening access target groups and those with protected characteristics. This approach obviates the need for additional changes on a case-by-case basis, reducing the burden on staff, making better use of resources, promoting social inclusion and enhancing the student experience. It represents an example of excellent practice (see E3 above). Institutions are recommended to consider ways in which they can address disability and other equalities alongside widening access to adopt an integrated approach to social inclusion (see Di4 above).

There was evidence in some institutions and Partnerships of work around student engagement. A number of institutions were developing channels of communication such as student advisory groups, course representatives, and focus groups, whereby students from WA groups were being encouraged to advise the institution on their WA and L&T initiatives, including the outreach work. With the growing importance of listening to and taking account of the “student voice”, these developments are to be commended (see G11).
Measures of success

This section was challenging to both Partnerships and institutions. It required Partnerships and institutions to consider what outcomes they might expect from the activities and how they could measure progress towards their aims and objectives. Effective measures of success should be aligned with the WA or RWP mission, the aims and objectives and the activities, bringing the main elements of the strategy together into a coherent whole. This is a demanding task which some institutions and Partnerships negotiated better than others.

The review of the previous strategies (HEA 2009) noted that the strategies were measuring outputs – that is activities and events - rather than strategic outcomes in terms of the expected impact on participants. In addition, a number of institutions and Partnerships lacked baseline data against which to reference their outcomes. There has been an ongoing dialogue between HEFCW, Partnerships and institutions about the widening access outcomes and this has resulted in substantial improvements to both the short and medium term outcomes. The reviewers welcomed this and noted that the final submissions of the strategies provided many good examples of successful SMART outcomes that were well-aligned with the aims and objectives and could enable the institution or Partnership to monitor progress effectively in the future.

While most short-term outcomes are clear and appropriate, there is ambiguity over the medium term outcomes. Most institutions and Partnerships have focused their attention on short-term outcomes from the activities they expect to undertake in the medium-term, that is 2012/13 and 2013/14. This interpretation will provide financial accountability for HEFCW, showing that institutions and Partnerships have spent their funding allocation on delivering the activities approved in their strategies. This approach, however, does not capture the medium-term and long-term outcomes from the activities undertaken in the current year and does not demonstrate clearly what will change as a result of a three-year funded programme. For example, young people who take part in a mentoring scheme in year 11 might be expected to achieve better than predicted grades at GCSE in the short term. The mentoring programme might, however, also lead to medium-term outcomes in terms of progression to post-compulsory education, the submission of an HE application, HE entry, study and success. In this scenario the medium-term outcomes feed into the evaluation of the programme showing impact by assessing the difference the activities have made to the lives and subsequent educational trajectories of the intended beneficiaries. HEFCW should consider the ways in which they could support institutions to capture the medium-term and long-term outcomes so that the HEIs and RWPs can effectively demonstrate their success and intended contribution to meeting the expectations of For our Future (DECLS 2009)(see Dh2).

The WA and RWP strategies were required to provide targets and outcomes for both the short-term and medium-term and some Partnerships and institutions had shown clear evidence of their expectation that a proportion of learners should progress through their pre-entry programmes towards HE entry, developing their HE awareness and the skills for HE study as they did so. This represents good practice (see G10 above) as the targets and outcomes demonstrated progression through the outreach activities and these longer term relationships can help to develop realistic expectations of HE which promote retention and success. In some cases, however, the medium-term targets for outreach were only specified in terms of HE entry. Although this is undoubtedly the final goal, there are a number of stages through which learners pass before this point is reached. For some groups, such as learners in the early years at secondary school, HE entry might be several years distant, and intermediate outcomes such as improved GCSE grades or remaining in post-16 education might be more appropriate. Not all strategies made use of these intermediate indicators and those institutions which have not used them are advised to consider the ways in which they might improve their measures and demonstrate their success more effectively (see Dip3 above).

Some institutions in Wales had developed a useful approach to monitoring the performance of students from key target groups within the institution. They grouped interventions such as the development of personal tutoring, academic skills centres and use of new protocols for academic feedback and linked them under a general heading of Study Support. The measurable outcomes were stated in terms of improvements in
retention or degree attainment (class of degree) for particular cohorts, such as students from Communities First areas.

In the current economic climate, the alignment of related provision adds value to each separate service and can provide cost savings. This approach to delivery and evaluation represents good practice (see G8 above) and other institutions might benefit from considering whether it would be applicable in their institution (see Di5 above). The evaluation of the WA and RWP strategies is challenging for Partnerships and institutions, partly because of the difficulty of establishing causality. Reaching Wider or institutional outreach work does not happen in isolation. There was evidence that institutional and Partnership activities had been developed in co-operation with other organisations and institutions such as community learning networks, charitable trusts, networks to support foster carers, other HEIs, Further Education (FE) colleges, the Trades Union Congress, Sector Skills Councils, voluntary sector organisations and many others. This integrated approach represents good practice (see G9 above) and is certainly a strength as it avoids duplication and provides good value for money. At the same time, it presents a challenge at the evaluation stage as it becomes more difficult to disentangle the impact of Reaching Wider or institutional WA outreach work from that of other funding streams.

Similar issues arose with respect to monitoring applications to, or retention within, an institution. Academic skills centres, for example, are designed to improve the student experience by offering advice and guidance for students tackling assessments in specific subjects. The centres are open to all students but may be of particular benefit to students from WA cohorts, especially if they have followed non-traditional entry routes. When such centres are funded with contributions from WA funds they should be monitored to demonstrate their contribution to WA aims and objectives, possibly through the use of SMART outcomes. In practice, it is difficult to prove causality in relation to a student’s subsequent academic performance, but evidence of use of the service by specific students and improved academic performance would be persuasive, and could be corroborated through feedback from students.

**Risk**

Most institutions and Partnerships had conducted a risk assessment which was attached, usually as an appendix. These assessments typically identified the nature of the risk, the severity of its impact, the likelihood of its occurrence, preventative strategies and the post holder responsible for taking action. Some institutions and Partnerships took the opportunity to send messages to funders about the negative implications arising from uncertainty about future funding. A few institutions had not included a risk register at all and they should be encouraged strongly to do so. The strategies did not make it clear how risks would be monitored and acted upon, so this should be an area for development by all institutions and Partnerships, which could be facilitated by HEFCW (Dh3 above).

**Strategic approaches to delivery**

The amount of detail which the institutions and Partnerships provided about the delivery of their strategies varied considerably. Some were very clear about what they intended to deliver for their identified target groups and how their activities mapped onto their strategic priorities or their aims and objectives while others only included their delivery activities in their outcomes grid. Although the outcomes grid identified the anticipated impact and the ways in which it would be measured, it was not always clear how these mapped onto the institution’s or Partnership’s mission, aims or objectives. Since strategic alignment between the mission, aims, activities, intended outcomes and measures of success is central to an effective strategy, this omission is unfortunate. It is recognised that extensive detail of activities and operational issues is beyond the scope of a strategic document, but HEFCW requires a reasonable level of detail to understand the level of investment HEIs and Partnerships are making and how the high level aims and objectives and outcomes will be achieved.
Some institutions had designed a programme of activities to reach out to, support, retain and promote the success of widening access students across the whole student lifecycle. Although all institutions engaged with students pre-entry, some appeared to focus their activities close to the point of entry while others reached out actively to younger age groups or those with some distance still to travel until HE entry is reached. Pre-entry engagement ensures that WA students are prepared for the HE learning environment, can experience a smooth transition into the institution, are retained and succeed in realising their educational objectives. Given the cap on student numbers and the economic recession, many institutions which have in the past had to develop outreach activities to recruit students have begun to find themselves oversubscribed. Under these circumstances, there is a possibility that outreach work with younger age groups might be cut back or left entirely to the RWP. This may be an issue that HEFCW wishes to monitor and review over the lifetime of these strategies, and provide additional guidance or take further action if necessary (Dh7 above). Indeed the focus of the institutional pre-entry engagement seemed to be on the older school age learners or adults who are near the point of HE entry and at least one institution noted that these groups yield the most immediate return. The RWPs all showed evidence of engaging with the pre-16 age groups and this work is important to motivate young people to progress to post-16 education.

There was evidence that some Partnerships had planned their outreach work to deliver a coherent and progressive series of activities to meet the evolving needs of the target groups as they progressed towards HE. Studies of Aimhigher Excellence Challenge in England (Golden et al 2006) found that one activity was rarely sufficient to ensure HE progression. Learners benefit from a sequence of activities to raise and build their motivation for HE (Hatt et al 2009). The Action on Access report on the HE Progression Framework (2008) in England divided the pre-HE journey into three stages: the introductory stage in which students come to recognise what HE has to offer; a developmental stage during which students explore different types of courses and institutions to consider which suits them best, and a consolidation phase which supports learners as they make decisions about HE and submit an application.

This approach sees the journey towards HE as a continuing process implying that it is good practice to ensure that learners experience a series of activities which build cumulatively to support them along their chosen educational path. Indeed one RWP and at least one HEI were demonstrating good practice, as this approach was reflected in their strategies (see G10 above).

Part-time provision

Institutions varied considerably with respect to both the number and the percentage of students who were studying part-time. While some institutions offered many of their programmes on a part-time basis and considered part-time learning to be an important part of their portfolio, others had only limited part-time undergraduate provision. These differences affected the extent to which the institutions referred specifically to part-time students across the lifecycle.

Part-time learners are not a homogeneous group and through their strategies, institutions demonstrated a variety of different ways in which different types of learners were studying on a part-time basis. Some, for example, were studying specially designed bite-size modules in a community or workplace venue away from the main campus making them both part-time and distance learners. Indeed one institution referred to the fact that students can build up ‘modular credit which…. can lead to a complete qualification without the need to attend the premises of the institution’.

However, part time study also encompassed those who were studying their programmes on a part-time modular basis alongside full-time students but taking longer to complete. All of these groups might require different kinds of support over the student lifecycle and the strategies gave institutions and Partnerships the opportunity to show how they were accommodating these groups.
Some institutions were far more explicit than others about the extent of their part-time provision, the information about part-time routes available at WA outreach events and their support mechanisms for part-time students. While some HEIs stated that all their courses could be studied on a part-time or full-time basis, others were more reticent about part-time provision, especially at the undergraduate level. Similarly, some institutions and Partnerships made it clear that their WA outreach work with schools, colleges, community groups and employers included information about part-time routes into and through HE, (see G13 above) whereas others were not explicit about the extent to which part-time routes were routinely included at pre-entry levels.

Part-time students are also entitled to support after they have entered HE to ensure that they adjust to the HE learning environment, are retained and progress through their programmes. Induction programmes, mentoring, study skills development and careers advice featured in this respect across many institutions and there is clearly scope here for overlap with the T&L strategies. Some part-time students will benefit from support delivered in alternative ways to full-time students, perhaps via the web; although some institutions demonstrated good practice in this respect (see G13 above), it would be beneficial if all HEIs considered whether they could improve the progression, learning opportunities and support they offer these students by adopting some of these measures (Di6 above).

Despite the significant funding which HEFCW has provided to support part-time learners and guidance about part-time provision, some of the strategies provided little detail about their plans for this area of their WA activity, and references to part-time students and part-time provision were widely dispersed across the strategy document. The extent to which and the ways in which part-time students from WA groups were being supported pre-HE entry and post-HE entry were not always clear from the strategies. HEFCW might consider whether they want review the WA guidance on part-time students to ensure that, in future, institutions provide specific information about part-time students and their support (Dh6).

**Welsh Medium Provision**

All institutions and Partnerships referred in their strategies to the measures they were taking to support Welsh-speaking students, and most of them noted the extent to which they were working with the newly established Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol. One institution specifically referred to supporting cultural development in Wales and noted the contribution that Welsh medium provision could make to this agenda. While not all institutions had a wide range of provision they were all keen to stress the measures they were taking to strengthen Welsh medium provision, for example, in recruiting Welsh medium academic or support staff (including some WA staff), growing Welsh medium or bilingual provision, offering part-time courses through the medium of Welsh or for people to learn Welsh. With respect to WA outreach work, Partnerships and institutions were highlighting Welsh medium provision in institutions so that Welsh language speakers in Communities First and other areas were aware of their options. There was also a range of widening access outreach work being undertaken through the medium of Welsh. One Partnership, for example, was running a mentoring scheme bilingually and in Welsh and it was evident that the Partnership does the vast majority of its Reaching Wider work bilingually, as a matter of course.

**Care leavers**

All institutions and Partnerships demonstrated a strategic and operational commitment to supporting looked-after children and their supporters and thereby demonstrated excellent practice (see E2). At the beginning November 2011, all 10 institutions based in Wales have the Buttle UK HE Quality Mark [http://www.buttleuk.org/pages/quality-mark-for-care-leavers.html](http://www.buttleuk.org/pages/quality-mark-for-care-leavers.html).

There is a huge amount of work being undertaken by all the institutions across all of the areas specified by the HE Quality Mark, namely in raising aspirations and achievements; in having appropriate admissions procedures; in providing entry and ongoing support; and in monitoring the implementation of the HE Quality mark. In terms of pre-entry work we noted that most institutions, as well as working directly with looked after children in summer schools and other aspiration raising activities, were also engaged in working with local
authority care teams, foster carers and staff in children’s homes. All institutions had targets for increased applications and enrolments and many made reference to fee plan funded bursaries from 2012/13. Entry and ongoing support for care leavers was described by fewer institutions but generally the approach was characterised by a named person ensuring that the care leaver was aware of all appropriate support mechanisms and was named as the contact person during the care leaver’s time at the institution. In terms of monitoring, it is worth noting that the Buttle UK requirement for HE Quality Mark holders is for them to complete action plans, to submit reports, to submit numbers of care leavers and to participate in gathering feedback from care leavers via a standard questionnaire. It was clear that most institutions are using these instruments to demonstrate the impact of their approach both for internal reporting requirements and for external purposes, such as for HEFCW’s monitoring procedures.

We also noted that a number of institutions were involved in research in this area often in partnership with national and regional networks such as foster carers and local authorities and that there were plans for this research to be disseminated through networks which many institutions were setting up on both a national and regional scale.

All Reaching Wider Partnerships also demonstrated a vigorous commitment to working with looked-after children and their supporters (in line with HEFCW guidance). The Partnerships had programmes and targets for aspiration work with care leavers and foster carers, often referring to the Welsh Government’s Child Poverty Strategy. RW Partnership work in this area was also referred to in institutional WA plans both in terms of targeted activity and in dissemination of research findings and in provision of information and other resources. The RWPs were expanding their work with care leavers and we welcomed this development. We noted that Partnerships were engaged in work with care leavers who are studying in Further Education and we thought this development should be encouraged. We noted that in Wales the new Buttle UK FE Quality Mark had been successfully piloted and that at present two FECs pilot colleges have the award with a third FEC pilot college in the process of reapplying following an institutional merger. The development of the FE Quality Mark is based on similar principles to that of the HE award, namely that it provides the institution with the opportunity to develop and demonstrate a commitment to care leavers at the pre-entry, admissions, and on course stages of their education.

It is clear to us that in Wales there is a tremendous opportunity to build on the commitment we have seen in both HE institutions and RWPs, and potentially in Further Education Colleges (FECs). One could envisage a scenario, if the present approaches were maintained and developed and communicated across Partnerships and sectors, that FECs and HEIs and RWPs would collaborate in working directly with care leavers and their supporters on aspiration raising activities in schools and in the community; providing information, advice and guidance at pre-entry and application stages; collaborating on transition and pre-entry support arrangements; and in capturing and disseminating the care leaver experience of further and higher education.

We suggest that the Buttle UK HE Quality mark has been an important factor in the initial engagement and subsequent approach taken by institutions and Partnerships in this area of work. Most institutions intended to utilise the Buttle UK evaluation requirements as a way of both recording the impact and their work and receiving external recognition, although we are aware that a few institutions are considering whether to withdraw from the scheme due to the recent increase in the subscription. We recognise that HEIs in Wales have developed robust approaches to engaging care leavers and their carers and have the potential to make a significant contribution to furthering this work across the UK. Furthermore, it would be a retrograde step if a common framework which care leavers and their supporters recognise and is currently shared by all 10 HEIs was not to be sustained, especially as there is potential to extend it to FECs as well. This would create a system for the support of this vulnerable group which is unrivalled across the UK (see E2 above). HEFCW may wish to consider further ways of encouraging institutions and Partnerships to continue to widen access to care leavers and to contribute to the Buttle UK HE Quality mark (Dh7 above).
**Conclusion**

The review welcomed the strong commitment to widening access demonstrated by the HE sector in Wales. The Welsh Government and HEFCW regard WA to HE as a priority and the strategies showed how institutions and Partnerships will continue to contribute to Welsh Government expectations and HEFCW WA priorities. There were many examples of excellent and innovative practice with respect, for example, to:

- developing an institution-wide approach to widening access recognising the synergy with other institutional priorities,
- improving the use of qualitative and quantitative data to support and monitor widening access,
- work with looked after young people, care leavers and their carers.

Many institutions also demonstrated good practice by, for example:

- their approaches to data collection and monitoring,
- their support for part-time students,
- the extent to which they had aligned WA with other key priorities
- their ways of reaching out to and supporting their key target groups.

The good and excellent practice examples were not demonstrated across all HEIs and Partnerships to the same extent. Those HEIs and RWPs which are not currently using these approaches might consider the extent to which they are applicable in their own context and whether they have the potential to improve the outcome of the WA work.
References


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