The evaluation of widening participation activities in higher education: a survey of institutional leaders in England

Assessing Impact and Measuring Success (AIMS) project Working Paper 1: June 2015

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1. Executive summary

1. This paper reports the results of an online survey of senior managers with responsibility for widening participation (WP) in English universities. 57 institutions participated, giving a response rate of 38 percent. The questionnaire primarily focused on (a) the targeting of WP activity, (b) concepts of success, (c) perceptions of 'successful' WP activities, (d) perceptions of institution WP success, and (e) approaches to evaluation.

2. Use of 'low participation neighbourhoods' (LPNs) as markers for disadvantage is ubiquitous both in terms of targeting activity and monitoring success within the field of WP. However, over half of respondents were concerned about their precision in identifying individuals, with a third having doubts about their internal validity.

3. Conversely, Free School Meals were seen as largely valid and precise. They were extensively used for targeting activities, despite some concerns about availability and reliability, but very rarely as a basis for monitoring success. In general, there were few linkages mentioned between WP activities and the Pupil Premium, despite its prominent social policy position and the individual nature of the targeting of school resources. This would appear to be a misalignment in policy and practice between educational sectors.

4. Many respondents were circumspect about their ability to focus activity on disadvantaged individuals. Around half found it difficult to exclude relatively advantaged individuals from accessing activities, with approaching a third having limited confidence in the role of schools in nominating appropriate individuals. A quarter of respondents excluded disadvantaged individuals from outside their target schools from accessing their activities.

5. There is evidence for the reliance on LPNs distorting perspectives and priorities, with over half of respondents seeing the recruitment of an advantaged individual from a disadvantaged areas as equally or more important to their institution than a disadvantaged individual from an advantaged area.

6. Respondents' confidence was generally high in the effectiveness of their activities in dispelling negative stereotypes about higher education (HE), increasing knowledge about HE and increasing aspirations for HE, as well as stimulating applications to their own institution. They were markedly less confident about raising or expanding young people's career-related horizons or, in particular, improving their attainment at Key Stage 4 and 5.

7. College-based respondents were generally less confident in the success of their WP activities. From the narrative comments provided, these tended to be focused mainly on their own further education (FE) students as a means of ensuring progression into HE, rather than being outwardly focused. This practice may have ramifications in terms of the options available to these students and other prospective students in the local area.

8. The portfolio of activities considered to be the most effective generally followed those that have dominated practice over the last ten years: campus 'taster' visits, information visits to schools and summer schools. These were often seen as being enhanced (or dependent, in some cases) on the involvement of current students as ambassadors. A small number of respondents enthusiastically highlighted less common practices, including engagement with primary schools, parents and community organisations.

9. Consistent with (5) above, there was more hesitance with respect to raising attainment, with some respondents specifically seeing this as outside their remit. Subject- or skills-based enrichment and student tutoring/mentoring were felt to be most effective in this context. Very few respondents mentioned careers-based or career-led activities, but it is unclear whether this was through a lack of use or low perceived effectiveness.

10. Responses suggested that a substantial minority of institutions were blurring the lines between WP and marketing/recruitment activity. This was often euphemistically referred to as 'outreach work', which lacks the explicit social justice positioning of WP. These respondents tended to make strong reference to their institution's mission around 'equality of access' and activities that were 'open to all' at the expense of targeted programmes for disadvantaged groups or individuals. These respondents tended to describe organisational structures that were similarly blurred.

11. In contrast, the answers provided by around a half of the respondents gave a clear impression of individuals driven by a strong sense of social justice – analytical, reflective and focused on challenging structural disadvantage. This suggests that there may be a growing paradigmatic division within the HE sector, with the social justice motivation tending to be somewhat more prevalent in Pre-1992 universities.

12. There were clear signs of uncertainty around evaluation of activities. Nearly all respondents were intending to improve their practice in this area and there was an interesting contrast between the approaches most commonly used and those felt to be most effective. Approaches that specifically explore causal relationships were the least widely used, while there was considerable confidence placed in the value of longitudinal studies.

13. Looking forward, there was some degree of momentum towards adopting longitudinal tracking studies as some form of sector standard, but there were also some dissenting voices that saw more value in improved qualitative research and that had professional concerns around experimental studies. The availability of high-quality data was probably the most widespread challenge, but limited resources and the ability to draw causal conclusions over long periods of time and in complex environments were also common responses.

2. Method

Data were collected between September and November 2014 using an online questionnaire delivered through the SurveyMonkey service. Invitation e-mails were sent to 151 English institutions submitting Access Agreements to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) for whom a WP contact could be reliably identified; two reminder e-mails were sent after roughly two and four weeks. Most of these were provided by OFFA through their database of institutions willing to be researched, but others were identified through web searches or telephone calls.

The questionnaire used a variety of question types, mixing closed tick-box responses and Likert scales with open comment boxes. The software forces full completion, so there was limited missing data, although the scale of completion of the comment boxes was highly variable, with some respondents giving long explanations, while others provided a few words or none. On the whole, however, a good quantity of data was provided by most respondents, although there remains some danger in the analysis that the views of the more verbose are over-represented.

A total of 57 institutions replied, constituting a headline response rate of 38 percent. For the purposes on analysis, the sample was broken down into three categories representing (a) Pre-1992 (higher status) universities, (b) Post-1992 (lower status) universities, and (c) colleges, including specialist colleges. Table 1 shows the response rates by category, with the highest from Pre-1992 universities and the lowest from colleges. There was no apparent pattern in which institutions within these categories were more likely to respond, with a good mixture by status, campus configuration and geographical region. It could be hypothesised that respondents were those having a greater interest (personal, academic or managerial) in evaluation.

Table 1: response rates by institutional types

Category	Invited	Responded	Response rate
Pre-1992 universities	43	19	44%
Post-1992 universities	60	22	37%
Colleges	48	16	33%

The responding individuals had a diverse range of job roles, including Director of WP/Outreach, Director of Recruitment, Dean of Students, Director of HE and Pro-Vice Chancellor. This is likely to represent different institutional arrangements and responsibilities around WP practice. There was no obvious difference in the nature of responses depending on the job role of the respondent. As a general trend, responses tended to be somewhat longer and more academically-grounded from Pre-1992 universities, while Post-1992 responses were more procedural. College responses tended to be more tentative and to note the small and/or focused nature of their HE intake.

For the purposes of analysis, the quantitative data were transferred to SPSS v20, including a dummy variable for institutional type. The textual comments were subjected to a thematic analysis to enable them to be summarised effectively, alongside the illustrative quotes used within

this report. The sample size did allow the potential for limited significance testing for differences between institutional types. However, as this was of questionable robustness, the test results (χ^2 and Kruskal-Wallis) are not specifically reported herein, with the testing being used instead to guide which relationships are highlighted in the text.

3. Results

3.1 Use of WP markers

Respondents were asked to indicate which WP markers their institution used for targeting young people and which had specific performance indicators or milestones attached. A list of five common markers was provided and respondents were invited to add their own:

- Eligibility for free school meals (and, by association, Pupil Premium)
- Low participation neighbourhoods (through POLAR or similar)
- Parental occupation (through NS-SEC or similar)
- Parental education / first-in-family to enter HE
- Ethnicity

Figure 1: use of WP markers for targeting and as milestones
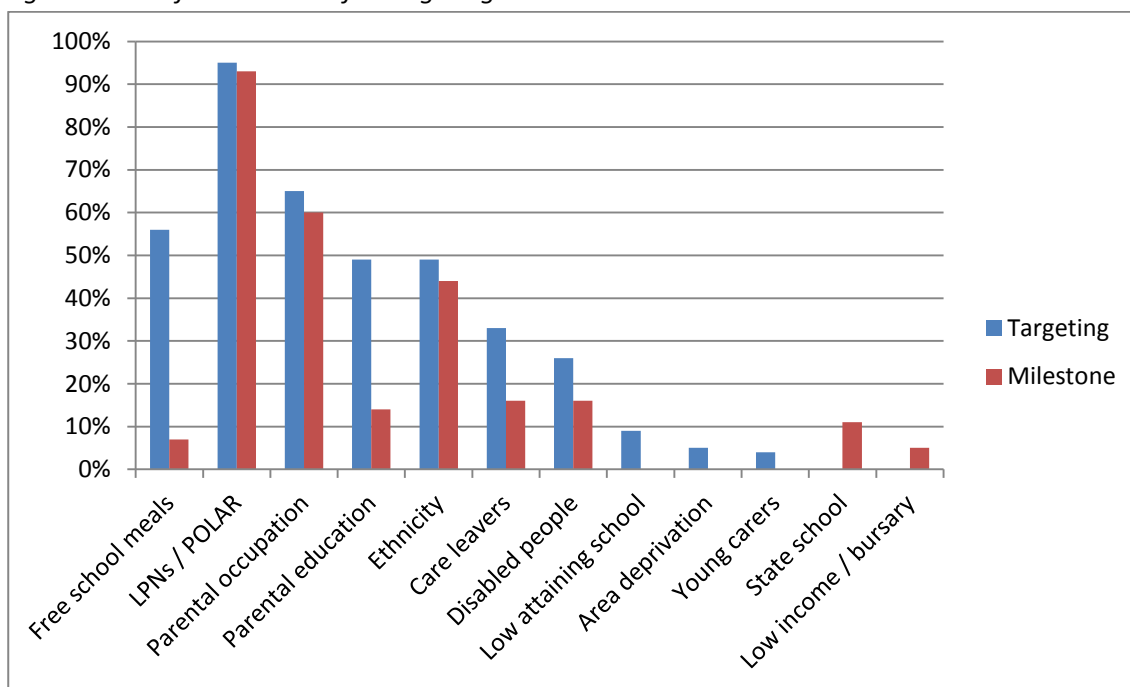
Of particular note in Figure 1, free school meals and parental education were used far more widely for targeting purposes than in the context of milestones. For example, 56 percent of institutions used free school meals to identify potential students, but only 7 percent have specific targets in

place for their admission; a further 5 percent also used the overlapping criteria of bursary eligibility in their target-setting.

As can be seen in Figures 2 and 3, in general, colleges used fewer WP markers than universities for either purpose, and particularly less likely to use free school meals, parental occupation and parental education – possibly due to difficulties in obtaining this data for HE students. Pre-1992 and Post-1992 universities tended to make similar use of WP markers, except that the latter were more likely to focus their attentions on minority ethnic groups, care leavers and disabled people, while the former stressed parental education (for targeting) and occupation. The ubiquity in the use of LPNs occurs across all three institutional types.

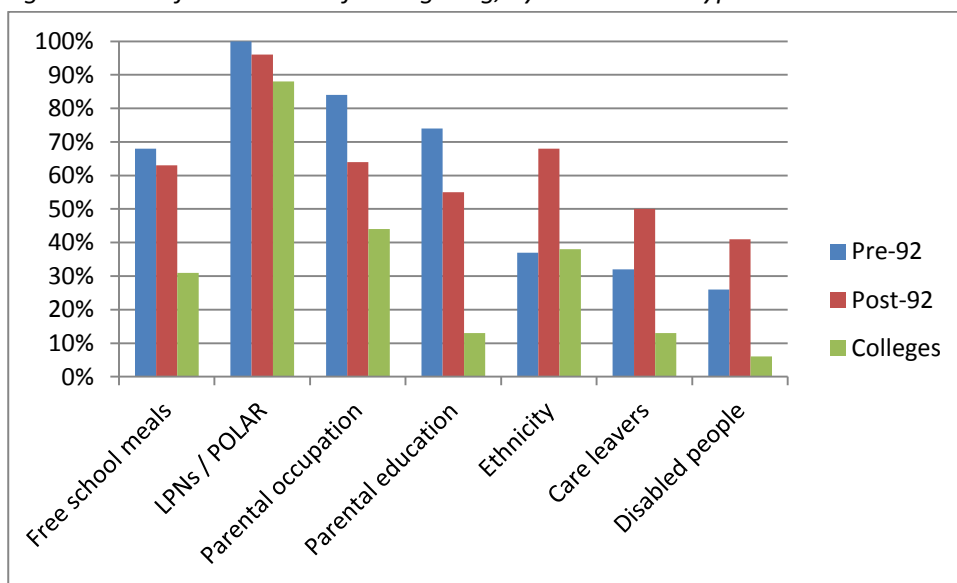*Figure 2: use of WP markers for targeting, by institutional type*
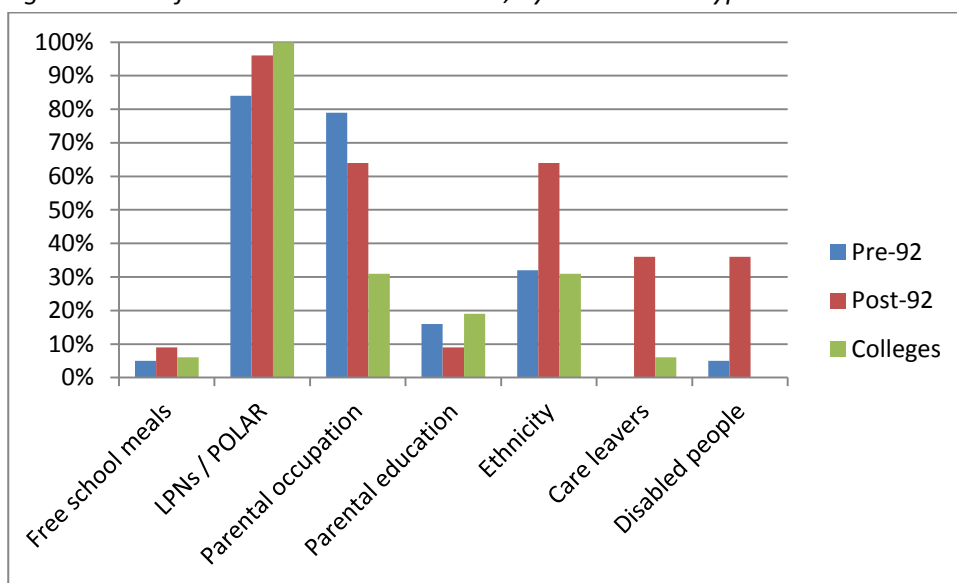

Figure 3: use of WP markers as milestones, by institutional type

Respondents were then asked to assess the practical usefulness of the five main markers across four criteria:

- Availability of data
- Reliability of data – i.e. its completeness and accuracy
- Validity of data – i.e. the extent to which it represents disadvantage
- Precision / granularity of data – i.e. the extent to which is it useful in targeting individuals

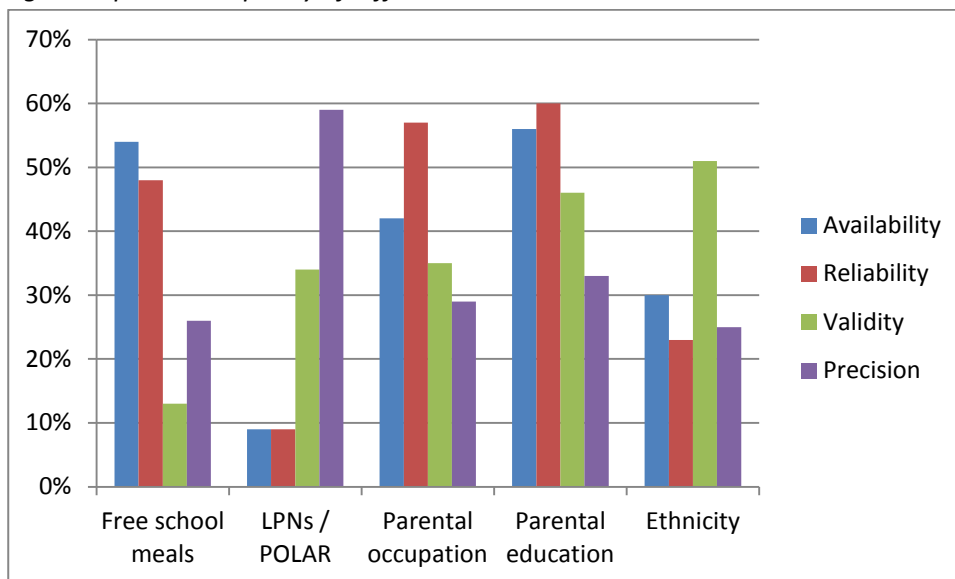*Figure 4: perceived quality of different WP markers*

Figure 4 shows that LPNs are viewed as being readily available and accurate, which is unsurprising given the easily operationalised link to postcodes. However, they are viewed as having significant weaknesses with validity and precision. Parental occupation and education shared similar issues with validity, although they were felt to be considerably more useful in identifying individuals, albeit with around 30 percent of respondents still believing this to be problematic. Free school meals was felt to be the most valid as a marker of disadvantage, but the data were not felt to be readily available or accurate. This is surprising given that schools have ready access to this information, not least to enable them to administer the Pupil Premium. While information about young people's ethnicity was felt to be available, reliable and individual, there were understandably strong concerns about the existence of a direct link to disadvantage.

Combining elements of Figures 2, 3 and 4 brings some the contradictions in practice and belief into sharp focus; the validity and precision data have been inverted in Figure 5 to show respondents' comfort with each marker, rather than their concern. Here we can see that free school meals is considered a highly valid and precise approach to targeting young people and is widely used for this purpose; however, it is not generally part of institutions' WP milestones, which is likely to be a pragmatic decision about the availability of data. Conversely, LPNs have lower perceived usefulness, but are very widely used in both targeting and monitoring.

Figure 5: usage and perceived quality of different WP markers
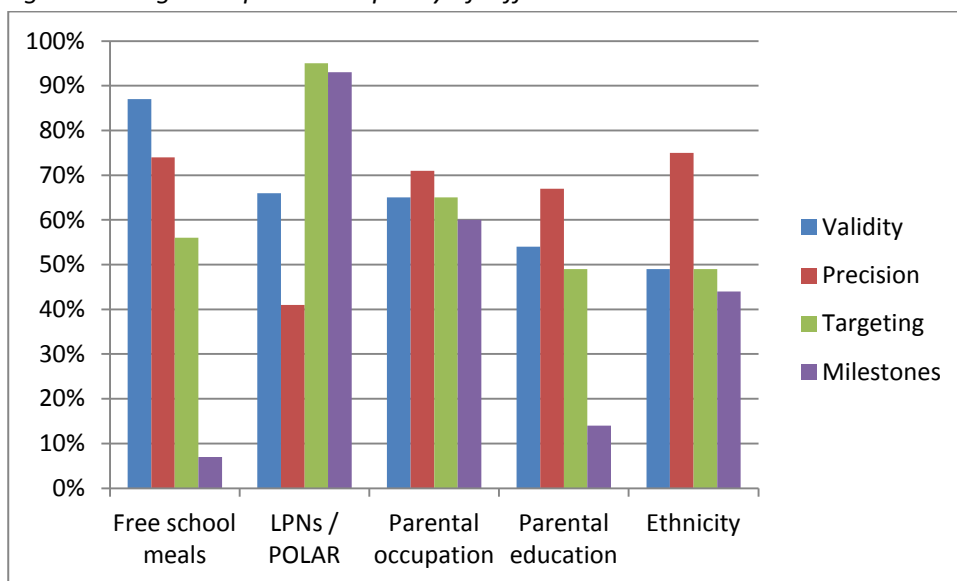
3.2 School-based targeting

Given that most WP activity is routed to some extent through schools, respondents were asked to provide details about how this was achieved in their setting. The majority (73 percent) focused their activity in schools serving disadvantaged areas, although a small minority (7 percent) preferred to target disadvantaged individuals in more advantaged areas, perhaps reflecting the communities in which they were located.

The remaining 12 institutions (20 percent) with differing school-based targeting approaches offered a range of responses. Some targeted all schools within their geographical area, with one tempering this by saying that it was *"all that will work with us"*. Two colleges saw their WP activity as focused primarily or exclusively on progression for their own FE students, rather than work with local schools. Two Pre-1992 London universities described complex systems for prioritising work with schools based on a scoring algorithm and likely reflecting the sheer number of schools within close proximity. Another Pre-1992 university made the point that their WP and recruitment activities were combined and implied that it was therefore difficult to describe where one began and the other ended; this is a theme to which we will return later.

Given that the majority of respondents described that their institution initially targeted their WP activities through schools serving disadvantaged areas, a key issue was the extent to which this yielded the 'right' individuals to participate. Three-quarters (77 percent) of those targeting disadvantaged schools reported they also made efforts to ensure that access to WP activities was extended to disadvantaged individuals from advantaged schools/areas. In general, this was achieved by having a portfolio of activities that were not school-based and to which access was either completely open or specifically restricted to disadvantaged individuals. Summer schools and structured pre-entry schemes (often badged as 'Access to [institution]') were particularly mentioned in the latter regard, being promoted within targeted schools, but also accepting

applicants more widely. It was also common for respondents to note that their focused WP activities dovetailed with their recruitment and marketing functions, providing a degree of coverage in schools that might contain disadvantaged individuals. Respondents from a small number of institutions based in deprived areas explained that they felt that open events were successful as all local people would meet the criteria for disadvantage.

In contrast, only 48 percent restricted advantaged individuals in the disadvantaged schools/areas from taking part. This was reportedly achieved by close liaison with teachers in schools and the publication of strict criteria. However, it was apparent from some of the answers that confidence in this process was not always strong; for example, two respondents reflected on the word 'ensure' in the question, explaining that it was more accurate to see it as an aspiration, while a further two quoted a percentage threshold (between 65 and 70 percent) of disadvantaged pupils that schools were expected to meet for their WP activities. It was also common for respondents to draw a contrast between 'high intensity' activities (e.g. mentoring) that were rigorously controlled and 'low intensity' ones (e.g. campus visits) that were offered on a open basis to all pupils in target schools, regardless of personal circumstances; the latter often overlapped with marketing activity, particularly in those institutions where the functions were combined. Within the responses, there was a degree of tension between institutions (mainly Pre-1992 universities) that had strict and systematised criteria and institutions with a commitment to *"equality of access"* to their activities to extend their reach as widely as possible.

In both instances of controlled access to their WP activities, Pre-1992 universities were more likely to ensure a focus on disadvantaged individuals than Post-1992 universities and colleges. In the latter case, all Pre-1992 universities described attempting to block access for relatively advantaged individuals, compared to 35 percent of Post-1992 universities and 11 percent of colleges.

As noted above, it is common for institutions to rely on schools to undertake an initial filtering of their pupils to identify a potential cohort for participation in WP activities – particularly the highly resource-intensive ones. 72 percent of respondents were generally or always confident that this process yielded an appropriate disadvantaged group, but this left 28 percent feeling relatively unconfident. Confidence was lower in colleges (46 percent), while Post-1992 universities were the most confident that schools were identifying the 'right' individuals (91 percent, compared to 74 in Pre-1992 universities).

The explanations provided by respondents around their confidence in schools' ability to filter effectively were enlightening. There were widely differing opinions about the ability of schools and teachers to distinguish disadvantaged pupils, with some feeling that they knew their pupils best, while others thought that the approaches used were variable and not always reliable. Several institutions described a close working relationship with clear criteria, but others reported *"lapses"* especially in respect to unfamiliar markers like the Index of Multiple Deprivation or LPNs, exacerbated by *"a lack of joined-up thinking"* in schools, especially due to staff changes or absences. One Pre-1992 respondent considered whether overly rigid targeting actually dissuaded some schools from engaging with them.

Others voiced an opinion *"that sometimes schools may have their own agendas as to who might benefit from interactions"* and that some teachers were *"unscrupulous"* in seeking to give extra support to 'gifted and talented' pupils outside of institutions' targeting criteria or who will *"best represent the school externally"*. This was seen by some institutions to be a significant risk to their targeting, potentially mitigated through long-term engagement with schools and particular teachers, as well as through the *"quality of partnership and shared agendas"*. The respondents who earlier reported a commitment to equality of access tended to answer this question along the same lines, feeling that within-school targeting was irrelevant given the overall profile of local young people. An extended quote from a Post-1992 university excellently illustrates these quandaries and concerns felt by many of the respondents:

> "It is a mixed picture. I am always confident with the schools in our core WP programme that we have worked with for years … that we have buy-in in terms of targeting. I am also happy to rely on the judgement of the coordinators in these cases. We have had instances where a school/college has agreed to targeting learners and at the event it is obvious they have not, and at the other end of scale we have had instances where school coordinators have become angry when we have declined to offer an activity when they have refused to engage in targeting disadvantaged learners. In the past at one event at a different university, [one of my colleagues] actually overheard young people complain that they were only there because the trip to [an adventure park] was full! At another event, the exact same group of young people from a high performing school in a more advantaged area had been to other local universities on each day that same week doing similar generic aspiration activities. What an absolute waste of HE resources. It has been my experience that these sorts of situations usually occur with schools who were never part of the Aimhigher programme."

3.3 Concepts of WP success

Respondents were asked to answer five dilemma-style questions relating to forms of success in WP activity. These were couched in terms of a personal judgement within an institutional context: *Which would you consider to be the bigger success for your institution?* They were simplified hypothetical scenarios and slightly provocative in tone, which understandably led to a small number of respondents commenting that they found them hard to answer or that *"not everyone in the institution might agree with [their] answers"*. One Post-1992 university respondent explained that their proximity to an elite university – and their complementarity – had influenced their answers.

Table 2: options for dilemma-style questions

	Option A	Option B
Which would you consider to be the bigger success for your institution? *('Equal' was also a permitted answer)*	Making someone think more positively about HE	Making someone think more positively about post-compulsory education and training in general
	Increasing applications to your institution	Increasing applications to other institutions
	Increasing applications from disadvantaged areas/schools	Increasing applications from disadvantaged individuals
	Recruiting an advantaged individual from a disadvantaged area	Recruiting a disadvantaged individual from an advantaged area
	Recruiting a disadvantaged individual with good grades	Recruiting an advantaged individual with excellent grades

The dilemma nature of the questions was reinforced by the answers, which showed considerable variation between respondents, with all three possible answers being used in all five cases (Figure 6). Respondents from two Post-1992 universities asserted that the institutional missions were geared to equality of access rather than targeted interventions, with the implication that the dilemmas were not relevant to their situation. Four respondents answered 'equal' to all five questions, but otherwise respondents varied their responses to the different questions.

Figure 6: responses to dilemma-style questions
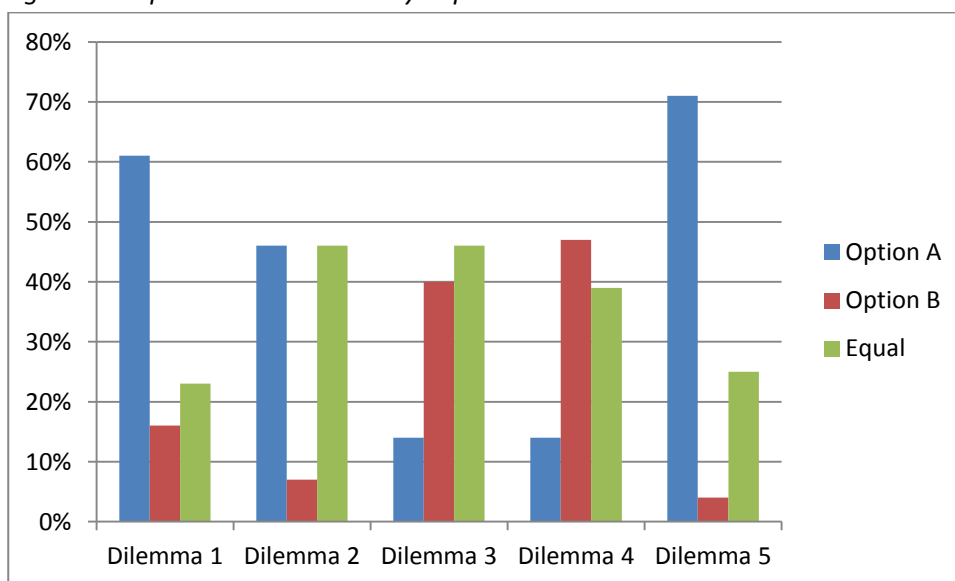
However, and interestingly, there were no patterns by institutional type. This perhaps suggests that views on the scenarios are more driven by the values of the respondents than the institutional missions of their workplaces; this was an unexpected finding, as the questions had been designed with the intention of revealing expected differences.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of respondents (61 percent) saw their role as focused on making young people think positively about HE, although a large minority felt that promoting wider post-compulsory options were also part of their remit. Equal numbers (46 percent) felt that success would be constructed around increased applications to their own institution specifically and more generally to HE. This suggests that approaching half of the respondents conceptualised their role as having a wider social justice component rather than focusing solely on institutional concerns.

The third dilemma related back to previous questions about area-based and individualised markers for disadvantage. Many more respondents prioritised individual circumstances over geographical ones (40 percent, compared to 14 percent), but the most frequent response was that these were deemed to be equal successes. Combining categories, 60 percent of respondents felt that increasing applications from a disadvantaged area or school would be a success for their institution, regardless of the applicants' own financial or social situations.

This theme was continued in the fourth question. Nearly half of the respondents (47 percent) felt that it would be a greater success to recruit a disadvantaged student from an advantaged area than vice versa. However, the remaining 53 percent believed recruiting an advantaged student from a disadvantaged area was equally (39 percent) or more important (14 percent) to their institution. This perhaps speaks for the ubiquity of 'low participation neighbourhoods' in determining institutional planning and practice around WP, with the milestone taking precedence over the social justice objectives.

The final question was designed to probe respondents' views around the juxtaposition of WP and academic entry standards. A large majority (71 percent) stressed the importance of disadvantage over grades, with just two respondents feeling that 'excellence' was preferable – interestingly, neither was from a Pre-1992 university. This was the most emphatic difference in responses among the five questions. The remaining quarter saw the two successes as equivalent for their institution, which perhaps reflects the respondents' location within their institution and the trade-offs that those with a combined recruitment and WP role are asked to make.

3.4 Perceived institutional WP success

Moving on from the dilemma questions, respondents were asked to express how successful their institution's WP activities had been impacting on eight measures of the attitudes, behaviour and outcomes of prospective students.

Respondents felt that their institutions had been 'very successful' at improving knowledge about HE and general aspirations towards HE (both 56 percent), as well as dispelling negative stereotypes (51 percent). More modest successes were claimed for aspirations towards their own institution, which may reveal the rather loose connections (and related contradictions) between WP and recruitment activities. Success around career aspirations, both general and specific, was more muted still, with the majority of respondents feeling that their institutions had been 'quite

successful' (75 and 60 percent respectively), with a small group of respondents not seeing career aspirations as part of the remit for WP activities.

Figure 7: perceived success of WP activities in relation to various outcomes
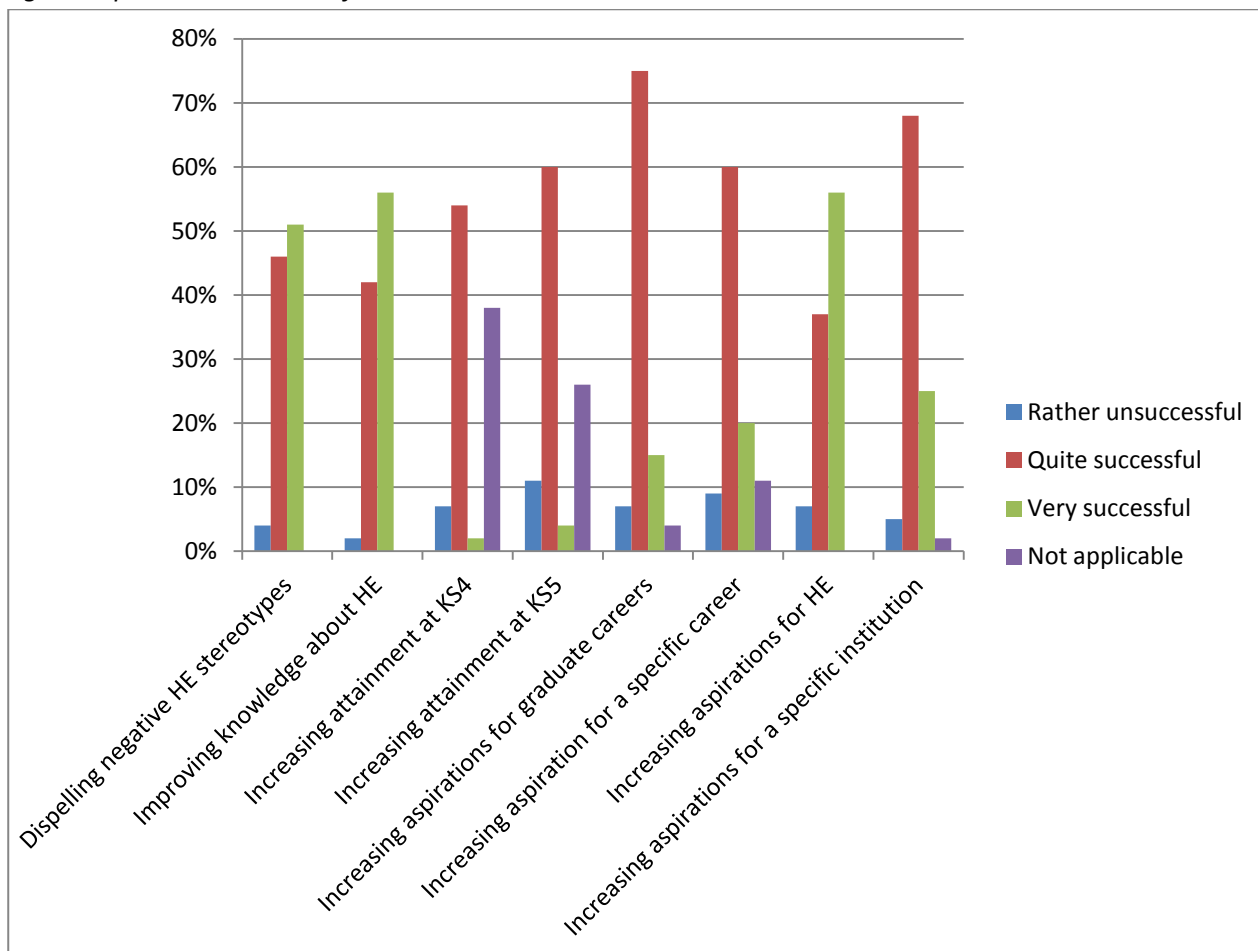
This was even more notable with respect to the impact of WP activities on qualification attainment. Over a third (38 percent) of respondents felt that their institution was not concerned with raising results at Key Stage 4 and a quarter (26 percent) held the same view about Key Stage 5. Among those whose WP activities did target attainment, most did feel that they had been 'quite successful', with only tiny numbers feeling that they had been 'very successful'.

These data give the strong impression that providing information and increasing aspirations are considered to be the core WP activity for institutions, with reasonably high confidence in their efficacy, although there was less certainty about their role in generating applications. Career-related work was seen as being less important and less successful, but work to help young people to improve their grades was not on the radar for around a third of institutions and felt to only be partly successful in the vast majority of the remainder. Within this, KS4 was seen as being less relevant and less successful than KS5.

Within the sample, confidence in the success of WP activities was generally lower in colleges than both types of universities, the latter having similar profiles of responses. This was particularly

marked with respect to improving knowledge about HE and increasing general aspirations. In the former case, only 13 percent of college-based respondents reported being 'very successful' compared to 73 percent in Post-1992 and 74 percent in Pre-1992 universities. In the latter, the figure was 25 percent for colleges, 63 percent for Pre-1992 universities and 73 percent for Post-1992 universities; this may, in part, be due to the discipline-specific nature of some of the colleges (e.g. arts), where their WP mission is confined to limited subject areas. Interestingly, there were no meaningful patterns in reporting relevance or success in raising KS4/KS5 attainment.

3.5 Successful WP activities

Respondents were asked four sequential questions about which of their own portfolio of activities they felt were most successful in four key stages of WP: demystifying HE, raising aspirations for HE, raising attainment and increasing applications for HE.

Table 3: most successful WP activity by outcome (number of respondents in brackets)

Demystifying HE	Raising aspirations for HE	Raising prospective students' attainment	Increasing applications to HE
Campus visits / taster days (20)	Summer schools / taster weeks (14)	Subject enrichment / masterclasses / revision sessions (15)	Summer schools / taster weeks (12)
School visits / information presentations (13)	Campus visits / taster days (13)	Student mentoring / tutoring (15)	School visits / information presentations (11)
Summer schools / taster weeks (9)	School visits / information presentations (12)	Compact schemes / ongoing sixth form engagement (6)	Campus visits / taster days (10)
Interaction with student ambassadors (9)	Interaction with student ambassadors (7)	School visits / information presentations (4)	Compact schemes / ongoing sixth form engagement (7)
Student mentoring / tutoring (5)	Engagement with primary schools / parents (5)	Summer schools / taster weeks (3)	Student mentoring / tutoring (7)
Engagement with primary schools / parents (4)	Subject enrichment / masterclasses / revision sessions (4)		Subject enrichment / masterclasses / revision sessions (4)
Open days / HE fairs (3)			

Other activities mentioned: providing Foundation Degree programmes; shadowing students; financial support to FE students; after-school clubs; engagement with parents; signposting community centres and third sector programmes; pastoral support; links with industry; alumni talks; social media; making reduced offers.

There were varying approaches to answering these open questions. A minority of respondents provided very short answers with just the name of an activity. More commonly, respondents explained some of the details behind the activity and how they applied to their own student intake or organisational context. Some of these explanations were extensive, reflective and carefully argued, such that it has been possible to undertake some limited (and cautious) thematic analysis on the answers provided. Many respondents named multiple activities for each question and this is reflected in the numbers and analysis below.

Seven respondents chose not to engage with these questions in the way intended. One left all four blank, with the other six stating (in slightly different ways) that they felt that a long-term sustained programme of activities for young people would meet all four aims and that they not able to separate these out. This, of course, is congruent with well-established thinking around WP, although it does beg the question of how these institutions know which activities to include within their programmes. Similar points were made by some of the other respondents, but these nevertheless provided an assessment of which activities they felt more readily contributed to success on these measures.

The portfolio of activities mentioned in the responses will be familiar to anyone working in the field. Campus visits and taster days have been the mainstay of WP activity for twenty years and are still seen as making a key contribution to demystifying HE, raising aspirations and increasing applications, appearing in the top three responses for all three. Reciprocal visits to schools by university staff were marginally less likely to be seen as important, although these were seen to be particular effective where they included the participation of student ambassadors or other exemplar students. Summer schools and taster weeks are a more recent development, although many universities (especially Pre-1992) have been offering these for ten years. These were judged by respondents as being the most important tool for raising aspirations and increasing applications. While only mentioned by around 10 percent of respondents, engagement with primary schools and parents of primary-aged children were seen as highly-effective in demystifying HE and raising aspirations. In generally, parental engagement was not widely mentioned, but where it was, the support for the effectiveness of this was particularly marked; it is unclear whether it was not mentioned more widely due to lack of use or perceived ineffectiveness.

The question with markedly different answers was that pertaining to attainment. In this instance, subject-specific workshops or 'master classes' or those focused on 'study skills' were felt to be the most effective, alongside student-led mentoring or tutoring – each was mentioned by around a quarter of respondents. Six respondents (mainly in pre-1992 universities and specialist colleges) pointed to structured compact programmes with particular schools or groups of prospective students. However, this question garnered the least confident assertions of effectiveness and, notably, four respondents specifically declined to answer as they felt that this was out-of-scope for their institution's activities.

Several other observations can be made. Among those based in colleges, it was common for respondents to discuss their college's focus on internally recruiting students from Level 3 FE programmes in order to meet their WP objectives. As such, their successful activities tended to focus on identifying and wrapping support (academic, financial and pastoral) around those students felt able to progress. This has more of the appearance of supply-chain management than WP as it is traditionally conceptualised and begs questions about the likelihood of such individuals exploring wider options.

Within universities, there were a number of instances where the lines between WP activities, outreach and recruitment were blurred; this presumably reflected organisational configurations. These respondents were more likely to mention corporate marketing events like school visits, open days and HE fairs than activities involving significant contact with academics or students, although there was clearly a degree of overlap. These were somewhat more likely to be Post-1992 universities, while respondents from Pre-1992 were more likely to describe complex schemes of activity with a greater academic focus.

Surprising through its absence was any significant mention of the role of careers or links to industry as tools to change the attitudes or behaviour of prospective students. Only two respondents mentioned this form of activity explicitly, with three others alluding to it through the specialist nature of their subject mix. This absence can be interpreted in two ways: either these forms of activity are felt to be of low effectiveness or they are simply not being used in a widespread way.

Finally, a number of particular exemplars are worthy of note. For example, one Post-1992 university respondent described an age-staged series of activities moving from primary school (*"exposing them to a university environment and making this inspirational and fun"*), through supporting decisions at the end of Key Stage 3, to providing academic skills input in Key Stage 4 and subject-based enrichment activities at Key Stage 5; this sort of approach was echoed by a Pre-1992 university. A respondent from a Pre-1992 university described having dedicated science space on campus for attainment-raising work with visiting young people. Another Pre-1992 university respondent was able to evidence their answers with reference to the results of structured activity evaluations, including before-and-after attitudinal questionnaires, participant tracking and teacher feedback, enabling them to hone their activities over time.

3.6 Evaluation of activities

Two-thirds (68 percent) of respondents were 'generally' or 'very' confident in the evidence base underpinning their activities, although only six respondents (10 percent) identified with the latter position. The remaining 32 percent were quite confident, except one respondent who had no confidence at all; this group was slightly more likely to contain college-based respondents. Despite the generally high confidence, 91 percent of respondents were looking to improve their

evaluation processes; the remainder were not necessarily those who were already very confident, although there was some overlap.

*Figure 8: use of different forms of evaluation of WP activities*
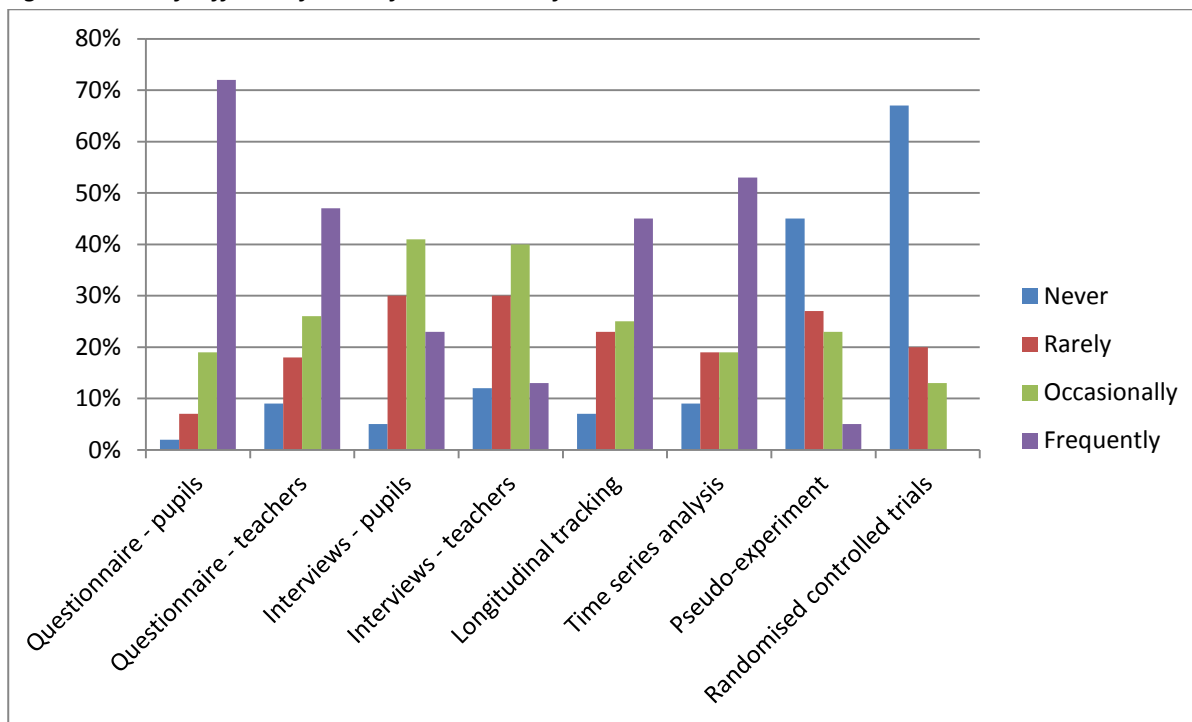
As can be seen in Figure 8, the most frequently used evaluation approaches were questionnaires completed by prospective students, time series analysis, longitudinal tracking and questionnaires completed by teachers; these four approaches were substantially more prevalent than the use of interviews with prospective students or teachers. The two approaches on the list that were very rarely used were pseudo-experimental studies and randomised controlled trials, with nearly half of respondents never using the former and two-thirds never using the latter.

The profile of evaluative techniques used by the two university groups was broadly similar, although Post-1992 universities were much more likely to report using time series analysis on a regular basis (82 percent, compared to 37 percent). However, colleges' use of evaluation was generally much more limited than universities', the only exception being the use of interviews with prospective students. For example, 38 percent of colleges used questionnaires with prospective students, compared with 91 percent of post-1992 universities and 79 percent of pre-1992 universities.

Respondents were asked to nominate which of the evaluative techniques provided the 'most reliable evidence for success'. Longitudinal tracking was by far the most popular option, being chosen by 58 percent of respondents. This pattern held for all three institutional types, although there were interesting differences in the second most popular choice – in Pre-1992 universities, this was randomised controlled trials (16 percent), in Post-1992 universities it was time series analysis (23 percent) and in colleges it was questionnaires from prospective students (25 percent).

Figure 9: form of evaluation considered 'most reliable', institutional type
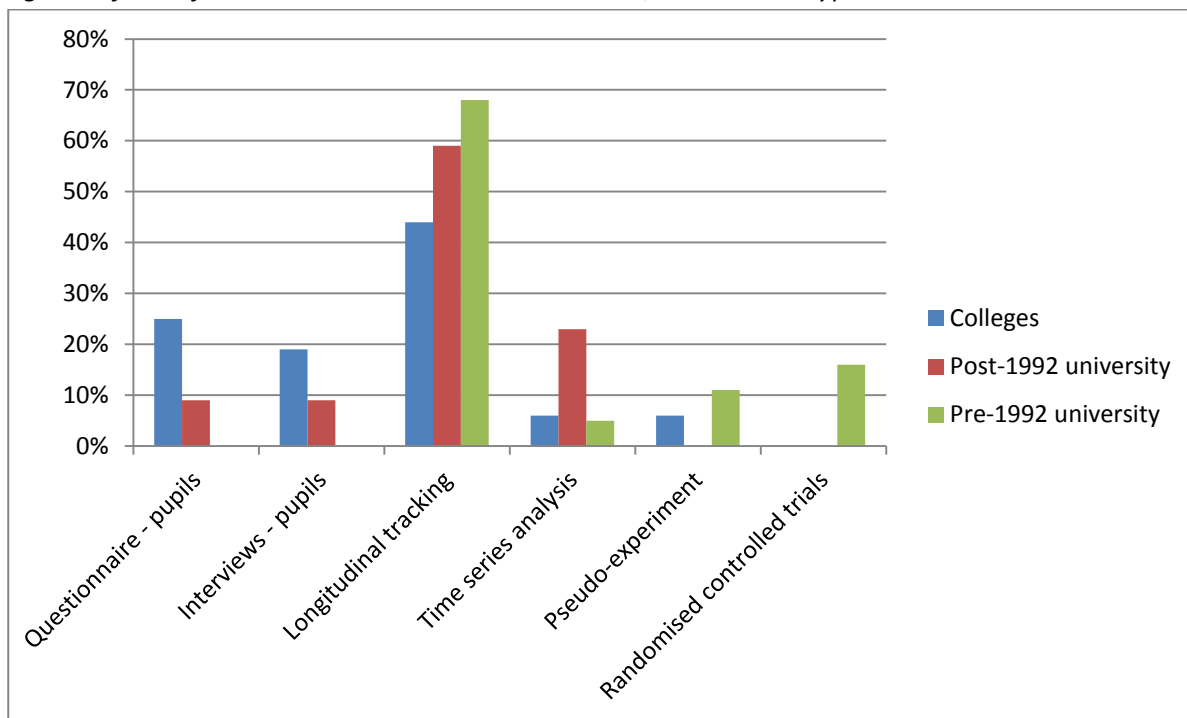
A small number of respondents used the comment space within the questionnaire to make one of two recurring points. Firstly, some noted that all the techniques listed were flawed or had operational shortcomings. For example, one Pre-1992 university respondent explained that *"longitudinal studies are excellent but so time-consuming as to [be] next to impractical for a university WP unit to do on a regular basis"*, while another opined that *"randomised controlled trials [are best] in theory but isolating from other influences is challenging"*. A college respondent who had reported using questionnaires frequently also then reflected that *"we feel the questionnaires are of limited value"*.

Secondly, some respondents reflected on the need to vary evaluative techniques for either the activity or the type of evidence that was required for a particular organisation approach. The following extended quote from a Pre-1992 university respondent illustrates this:

> *"We think it depends on the success measures you are using and the objectives of a particular activity and programme. Where possible we adopt a flexible methodological approach to allow us to investigate the specificities of particular activities. Across a broad range of activities we have found a combination of questionnaires and focus groups / interviews to provide an effective core base of evidence. We also monitor institution performance in terms of the rate of application and intake for key WP groups and compare each year with previous ones."*

Another Pre-1992 university respondent saw a broader agenda for evaluation beyond the simple monitoring of activities: *"We need to develop research and evaluation strategies that encourage institutional change as well as supporting students through aspiration and attainment raising*

interventions". A comment from a Post-1992 university suggested that *"we might too readily go on to the back foot when we are challenged on the evidence. Perhaps we have plenty of evidence but too little analysis of what it tells us and too little articulation between the various data sets we have"*, drawing a useful series of distinctions between data, analysis and evidence.

3.7 Improving evaluation practice

As noted in the previous section, the vast majority of respondents were seeking to improve their evaluation practices. They were also asked to reflect on how they intended to do this and the challenges that they saw; 45 respondents offered information, but 12 left this answer blank including all those saying that they had no plans to improve.

The most common improvement planned was a shift towards tracking and longitudinal studies, which was mentioned by 11 respondents, many of which specifically cited the HEAT software (*www.highereducationaccesstracker.org.uk*) which is being marketed to institutions. It was generally considered that being able to collect data across multiple activities and interventions would provide more useful evaluative data. Another two respondents discussed shifting to more quantitative methods, including using control groups. Conversely, three respondents were moving their institutions in the opposite direction and seeking to develop their practice around qualitative evaluation and case studies. A more general theme to improvement, mentioned in various ways by four respondents, was the development of academically-grounded research capacity and a structured framework into which it might fit. Finally, three respondents were seeking to improve their evaluation with respect to young people who did not enter their institution or HE at all; this presumably was to discover the reasons for these choices, although it was not explicitly stated.

The remaining improvements were heterogeneous, including some that were specific to the institutional context. They included increase working with partner organisations, investigating the success of WP entrants within the institution, a new focus on school-based attainment and researching why recruited students made the choices that they did.

Three clear major themes emerged with respect to the challenges of improving evaluation practices. The first was simple, mentioned by eight participants and succinctly expressed by one Pre-1992 respondent: *"Resource"*. The second combined two closed-related challenges around data – availability and quality, mentioned by seven respondents each. The respondents highlighting data availability talked about the costs associated with purchasing information about progression to other institutions (*"the UCAS problem"*, as one put it, as UCAS owns this data and will only sell it to institutions in certain restrictive formats), poor data provision from schools and low response rates from young people who had participated in WP activities. Those highlighting data quality were likely alluding to the same difficulties although they did not expand on the term. In general, there was a sense that respondents felt that they did not have the data to generate the evaluative judgements expected of them by their institutions and external agencies.

The third major theme was related to data, but focused on ideas around proof, causality and impact; this was mentioned by ten respondents. Aside from a general concern about how it is possible to prove that a particular activity has a specific outcome when the lives of young people are diverse and complex, respondents mentioned a disparity between the long-term nature of WP work (especially when working with younger children) and the short-term reporting horizons that were expected of them. Respondents also commented on the difficulties in evaluating individual activities that were part of a portfolio approach, especially when their own belief was that the effect was cumulative, rather than a particular intervention having impact.

Two other multiple responses are worthy of note. Three respondents, all from colleges, saw the behaviour of schools as a challenge to their activity and its successful evaluation as some refused to work with what they saw as competitors for Level 2 and 3 qualifications. Two respondents used the questionnaire as an opportunity to push back against what they saw as an increasing pressure to use experimental approaches to WP activity. Both felt that there were strong ethical and practical issues that made this type of evaluation unpalatable in terms of restricting access to certain activities for some young people deemed to be a control group. While there were only two such comments offered, these were from respondents whose answers had been particularly substantial and considered throughout.

4. Conclusion

This report provides a snapshot of contemporary practices in widening participation, taken four years after the end of the national Aimhigher programme. Over one-third of institutions participated and there are clear variations in philosophy, approach and practice both within and across different institutions types.

There remains something of a crisis for widening participation practitioners. Progress in closing the participation gap has been slow, especially given the national and local resources expended since the Dearing Report. Arguably, the progress that has been made has more reflected improved school outcomes than the actions of institutions, as well as being concentrated in Post-1992 universities (and colleges), while the social mix of elite universities has stagnated.

In this context, ideas around 'success' and 'proof' continue to vex senior practitioners. Since 2008, there has been increasing pressure to show tangible results, effectiveness and value-for-money invested, both internally and from government. Many institutions have 'bought-into' this agenda and are striving to improve their evaluative processes, albeit that they may express frustration at the mechanistic expectations, unrealistic timescales and lack of resources available. Others appear to be in a more reflective paradigm of having confidence in their WP activities and 'pushing-back' or rejecting the 'what works' doctrine altogether.

There were some clear areas of consensus on success, all of which are quite well-established. Long-term engagement with young people is more likely to bear fruit than one-off activities, while

strong and trusting school partnerships with shared aims are vitally important. Aspiration-raising activities work best with the involvement of student ambassadors from disadvantaged backgrounds; summer schools can have a very strong impact, but are resource-intensive.

However, there were also notable areas of difference. Attainment-raising was seen as out-of-scope or an area of weakness for many institutions, while others saw it as much more important to their WP mission. This may be due to a tacit and uncritical confidence that raising aspirations for higher education (over that for a particular career) inevitably increases motivation and feeds into attainment. Approaches focusing on primary schools, families and career-led aspirations were rare and seemingly in decline since the ending of Aimhigher. Open days, school visits or taster days were seen as vital by some, particularly in Post-1992 universities, but trivial (in WP terms) or even counterproductive by others.

These differences showed a degree of relationship with institutional type. Post-1992 universities recruit heavily from disadvantaged backgrounds and were more likely to focus on increasing the numbers coming through their doors, blurring lines between WP, outreach and recruitment in the face of a more competitive market. Colleges reported focusing their efforts on retaining their own students into higher education in order to resist the lure of (particularly Post-1992) universities. Conversely, Pre-1992 universities reported complex and refined targeting algorithms to find young people with the potential to meet their testing entry requirements and encourage them to 'stay local'. The data therefore suggest that not only are admissions stratified by institution, but that the ethos and approach to WP is also increasingly stratified and has, in many places, the flavour of supply-chain management, rather than being grounded in broader social justice aims.

Finally, there was evidence for continuing issues with targeting. The ubiquity of LPNs as a performance indicator signalled some confusion in priorities, with a danger of perverse incentives to recruit from defined areas rather than focusing on individual disadvantage or the community capacity-raising that was a feature of Aimhigher. Furthermore, many institutions were sceptical about the ability and willingness of schools to identify the 'right' young people, leading to damaging issues of leakage and deadweight. The lack of usage of free school meals as a marker for disadvantage and little joining-up with the Pupil Premium was a surprising finding.

In summary, therefore, the four years since the demise of Aimhigher have seen some important changes in WP practice. On the one hand, WP and recruitment activities have moved to overlap as a competitive imperative replaces a social justice one. On the other, the mission and approaches of different institutional types have moved apart as the shared vision of cooperation fostered by Aimhigher has withered away. It remains to be seen whether the newly-created National Networks for Collaborative Outreach will reverse this trend.