Access to Success

AN INTEGRATED REGIONAL STRATEGY FOR WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION
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5. SUMMARY
In order for Northern Ireland to secure a sustainable, globally competitive economy and to achieve the growth in the numbers of people with high level skills which will make this country world class, we must encourage participation from students from sections of society which have not traditionally benefitted from higher education.

Future social cohesion and international economic success will require the efforts of all of our people. To deny opportunities to talented people simply because their personal circumstances or social background has created educational disadvantage, seems very difficult to understand or justify. At the same time, to achieve the highest possible standards, we must ensure that our higher education institutions have access to the very best pools of talent available across all of the community.

A few months ago, I had the pleasure of launching Graduating to Success\(^1\), the first Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland. Now, Access to Success, the strategy for widening participation in higher education, seeks to build upon that work by ensuring that talented individuals are given every opportunity to benefit from the higher education that is right for them, irrespective of their personal or social background. This strategy also complements the Success Through Skills\(^2\) and the Further Education Means Business\(^3\) strategies and reinforces my Department’s integrated approach to providing skills, supporting people and promoting jobs.

A consultation document, prepared by the Department in partnership with experts from the education, public and private sectors and other government departments, was launched in 2011. The feedback received during the public consultation process has enabled my Department to develop a new approach to widening participation in Northern Ireland based on a future vision of the sector in which the people who are MOST ABLE but LEAST LIKELY to participate are given every encouragement and support to achieve the necessary qualifications to apply to, and to benefit from, the higher education that is right for them.

\(^1\) http://www.delni.gov.uk/graduating-to-success-he-strategy-for-ni.pdf
\(^2\) http://www.delni.gov.uk/success-through-skills-transforming-futures
\(^3\) http://www.delni.gov.uk/fe_means_businessplementation_plan_-_june_06.pdf
I would like to express my personal thanks to all of the representatives from the universities, further education colleges, student union bodies, post-primary schools, government departments, the Higher Education Authority, Dublin and the Higher Education Funding Council for England, as well as local community groups, representative groups for persons with disabilities, and private individuals for their contributions to the development of this strategy.

Working together, in partnership, we can ensure that all of our people have equal opportunities to develop our talent and that as a society we can realise our full potential for economic and social development - therein lies future progress.

Dr Stephen Farry MLA
Minister for Employment and Learning
1. INTRODUCTION
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1.1 Widening participation in higher education by students from those groups which are currently under-represented, in particular students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with disabilities and learning difficulties, is a key strategic goal for the Department for Employment and Learning.

1.2 The Department’s vision for widening participation is that any qualified individual in Northern Ireland should be able to gain access to higher education, irrespective of their personal or social background.

1.3 Widening participation in, and ensuring fair access to, higher education is not simply a matter of social justice but is also an economic imperative if Northern Ireland is to remain competitive in the face of unprecedented economic challenges.

1.4 A recent report by Oxford Economics\(^4\) noted that higher skills levels are associated with higher productivity, higher wage levels and higher employment rates. The report also determined that the Northern Ireland economy will have an increasing need for people with higher level skills (levels 4-8) over the next 10 years and that higher level employment opportunities would be more biased towards degree level qualifications.

1.5 However, the challenge to develop a highly skilled workforce is not just about providing new, young graduates with the skills needed. Since around 80% of the 2020 workforce has already completed formal education, a major focus has to be on the upskilling of the existing workforce. Employers need to better understand the benefits of upskilling their current employees and in turn the future providers of higher education need to become more flexible in delivery to accommodate the diverse learning needs of the mature student.

1.6 In 2010, the Department for Employment and Learning brought together a group of senior representatives from the education, public, private, and community and voluntary sectors to help to develop a new integrated regional strategy to promote wider participation in higher education in Northern Ireland. Through a number of expert sub-groups they sought to develop a cohesive and comprehensive approach to build a common platform to understand and tackle the issues.

1.7 That work resulted in the publication of a Consultation on a Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education, in March 2011. Among the key recommendations of that work were that the Department should develop:

- a prioritised list of the under-represented sections to be targeted by an integrated Widening Participation Regional Strategy, together with a range of time related goals for participation rates for persons from each group/section;

- a range of integrated initiatives and/or programme based solutions to address identified barriers to participation or progression in higher education (HE); and

- improved funding formats and management systems to support the delivery of the strategy.

Between March and June 2011, the Department carried out a public consultation on its vision for widening participation and the conclusions and recommendations of the Regional Strategy Group and its sub-groups.

The public consultation attracted over 30 detailed responses from a wide range of organisations and individuals from both the demand and supply sides, representing a high proportion of the key stakeholders. The consultation process endorsed the need for a strategic approach to widening participation and confirmed widespread support for the Department’s vision for widening participation and for the development of a new integrated regional strategy. Some of the key responses are outlined below:

- Government should attach a high or very high priority to widening participation because of its importance to social and economic regeneration;
- the Department’s vision for widening participation was viewed as appropriate, if ambitious and challenging;
- the targeting of disadvantaged groups should be based on sound evidence specifically gathered to assess the effects of multiple disadvantage;
- ideally support should be focused on individuals rather than cohorts but must also be based on agreed common measurement of disadvantage;
- there should be a single coordinated approach in Northern Ireland to aspiration raising, based on close collaboration between all the partners, to promote higher education in general rather than any single institution;
- existing recruitment processes were seen as fair, however, the strategy should recognise the early barriers that some groups face;
- there is a need to continue to develop non traditional routes into higher education through Adult Access Courses and increased part-time opportunities;
- there was considerable support for the use of contextual data to support applications – without diminishing the importance of the role of pre-existing qualifications in the preparation of the student for success in HE;
- there was support for enhanced application procedures for stubborn pockets of under-representation; and
- there was support for a student centred approach with tailored support mechanisms which recognised the importance of pre and post – recruitment activities to ensure successful retention and progression.

A summary of consultation responses has been published on the Department’s website at www.delni.gov.uk.
1.10 In April 2012, the Department published *Graduating to Success*, the Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland. That document recognised the Department’s role in promoting wider participation in higher education but also acknowledged that there are certain operational responsibilities that fall outside of the Department’s remit and recommended the publication of a separate strategy for widening participation.

1.11 Using the results of both the cross-sectoral analysis from the expert groups, and the responses received from stakeholders in the public consultation, the Department has developed a new integrated regional strategy for widening participation in higher education. *Access to Success* outlines the challenge, articulates a vision for the future and maps the actions required to deliver it. It draws together a number of existing programmes and related strands of work so that new actions may be developed and implemented in a coordinated way.

1.12 As with the Higher Education Strategy, partnership is the key. Government has its role to play, but the acquisition of higher level skills is also the responsibility of the employer and the individual. The Department will take forward the proposals contained in this document in partnership with higher education providers, disabled group representatives, employers and their representative bodies, individuals and trade unions, the Voluntary and Community sector, and other Government Departments and Agencies in order to deliver the longer-term vision. Success will depend on cooperation between HE institutions, Government, employers, individuals and social partners; and a shared vision of what together we can achieve.
2. THE CHALLENGE
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2.1 The challenge to widening participation in higher education in the United Kingdom began with the publication of the Robbins Report in 1963. Robbins rejected the concept of “...a limited pool of ability...” and argued that higher education could help to overcome the social disadvantages of birth. Over thirty years later the Dearing Report noted that, although overall participation in HE had increased significantly, there were still some groups that remained under-represented. Dearing noted specifically the large differences in the participation rates of advantaged and disadvantaged socio-economic groups.

2.2 The 1998 Green Paper, “Higher Education for the 21st Century – Response to the Dearing Report”, highlighted the need to actively promote the ‘inclusion’ of persons from previously under-represented groups, such as ethnic minorities, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and low participation neighbourhoods. The paper also encouraged higher education institutions to be more responsive to the needs of the economy.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

2.3 The 2009 Milburn Report5, observed that social mobility has slowed in recent years and cited a number of examples to demonstrate that family income is often a major indicator of future successful entry to the professions. The report also made it clear why entry to the professions, and the educational opportunities that provide access to them, is the key to a new wave of social mobility in the years ahead.

2.4 The Hughes Report6, published in July 2011, made a number of specific recommendations for practical and short-term actions by schools, government departments and higher education institutions to ensure maximum access to all colleges and universities by all appropriately qualified students.

2.5 Widening participation in higher education represents a great opportunity as well as a great challenge. On average, one in three jobs today is professional (in London over half the workforce is already employed in professional or managerial jobs), and that figure is set to increase significantly as the economy becomes more service-oriented and professionalised.

2.6 If the perception is allowed to grow in some communities that entry to higher education and the professions is “for others”, it will have a damaging effect on aspiration and attainment and lead potentially to a growing disenchantment and sense of alienation within those communities.

2.7 At its heart, widening participation in higher education is an issue of social justice. However, there are other compelling reasons why widening participation is critical for Northern Ireland. Firstly, there is the need for greater social inclusion; too many in our society continue to experience disadvantage and exclusion. Secondly, there are the benefits which graduates as individuals, and society in general, can derive from HE. Thirdly, there is Northern Ireland’s increasing need for a highly skilled workforce.

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ECONOMIC CHALLENGE

2.8 The educational profile of a country is an increasingly significant determinant of its economic competitiveness and consequently all developed countries are actively seeking to improve the education and skills profile of their working age populations.

2.9 In 1963 there were 25,000 18 year olds in Northern Ireland and, of these, just 6.4% had gained two A Level passes before leaving school and only 4.8% went forward to higher education. By 1981, 18.2% of school leavers were achieving 2 A Levels or more and 15% progressed to courses at third level education. However, by 2009/10 the figures were 53% achieving 2 A Levels or more with 42.2% progressing directly to higher education in the following year.

2.10 Northern Ireland’s GCE A Level results compare favourably with other regions in the United Kingdom. In terms of higher level qualifications within the workforce, Northern Ireland is broadly average within the United Kingdom (excluding the impact of the South East) with 29% of people qualified at Level 4 or above. In Europe, Northern Ireland ranks ahead of both Germany and France, but the Republic of Ireland has considerably more graduates in employment with 34% qualified at Degree or Post-Graduate level. However, in global terms many countries perform more strongly than Northern Ireland, with Canada, the US and Finland being notably higher.

WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

2.11 Northern Ireland also has an enviable record in widening participation to higher education. At just over 50%, the Northern Ireland Age Participation Index compares favourably with participation rates in England and Scotland (NB there is no comparable measure for Wales). Furthermore Northern Ireland’s HE institutions outperform HE institutions in the UK in terms of the proportion of young people from lower socio-economic groups. Data from the 2010-11 HESA Performance Indicators show that 39.4% of Northern Ireland’s young full-time first degree entrants were from Socio-Economic Classes 4-7, compared with the UK average of 30.6%.

2.12 Over the last decade the Department has pursued twin objectives in HE of promoting excellence and widening participation. It has steadily increased funding to the HE Institutions, taking account of a growing student population and inflationary pressures. In academic year 1998/99, Northern Ireland’s two universities received a total of £111.9m in institutional core block funding. For the academic year 2010/11, the universities received a total of £201.2m, representing an increase of 80%. To encourage the continued development of HE in FE, Department for Employment and Learning funding has also risen by 35% in the last five years from £20 million in 2006/07 to over £27 million in 2011/12.

2.13 The Department currently addresses the widening participation agenda in Northern Ireland through a number of policy initiatives and a range of specific funding mechanisms. In academic year 2011/12 the Department provided total funding of approximately £2.5m to widen participation in HE.

7 Lockwood Report “Higher Education in Northern Ireland” (1965)
2.14 Since 2000, the Department has encouraged Northern Ireland’s HE institutions to produce their own widening participation strategies and has supported their implementation with an increase in the block grant (see WP Premium funding below). The universities and colleges produce Widening Participation strategies and action plans which detail their activities and widening access targets, which include not just entry targets but also retention and employability targets. Over the last ten years the institutions have embedded widening participation activities much more strongly within their overall strategy planning and implementation.

2.15 In 2006, the Northern Ireland Executive introduced new HE tuition fee arrangements. This included a provision that any institution that wanted to raise its full-time undergraduate tuition fees above the minimum level was required to have an Access Agreement in place which would outline its provision of student support, including bursaries and outreach activities. The philosophy behind Access Agreements was that the introduction of higher fees should not have a detrimental effect on widening participation and that institutions are explicitly committed to increasing participation of under-represented groups.

2.16 Since December 2009, the Department has asked the HE institutions to submit an annual Widening Participation Strategic Assessment to review critically their progress to date and to determine their future priorities. The Strategic Assessments and the Access Agreements are complementary while having clearly distinct roles.

2.17 The Department has also implemented a range of specific funding mechanisms to support widening participation in HE. These include premium funding which is paid to the universities and project funding for specific pre-recruitment outreach activities.

2.18 Widening Participation Premium Funding is intended to support the embedding of widening participation in the HE institutions. This funding helps to support the range of initiatives and activities outlined within the university’s Widening Participation strategy. The premium funding is added to core teaching funds to recognise the additional costs associated with recruiting and supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds and with supporting students with learning difficulties or disabilities.

2.19 The Department provides the universities with two types of premium funding through their annual grant letters of offer:

- **Widening Participation Premium** - this is paid to HE Institutions in recognition of the additional costs of recruiting and retaining students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This funding stream recognises that there are extra costs involved, for example in relation to on-course support. The premium is paid on the basis of the number of students enrolled from disadvantaged backgrounds and amounted to approximately £1.4 million in 2011/12.
• **Widening Access Premium** – this is paid to HE Institutions for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. The institutions use this funding to provide specialist equipment and/or specific support for such students. The level of Widening Access Disability premium allocated to the HE Institutions is based on the number of full-time undergraduate students in receipt of Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) and amounted to around £250,000 in 2011/12.

2.20 The Department also provides special project funding to allow the universities to make access to higher education available to under-represented groups, and to develop partnerships with schools with traditionally low levels of participation in HE. For example:

• **Step-Up (University of Ulster)**, is a science-based programme of academic and vocational activities delivered by schools in areas of social and economic disadvantage, in conjunction with the university, industry and government. The partner organisations collaborate to teach the twelve unit GCE Applied Science qualification, which is equivalent to two A Levels. Pupils are given access to University facilities such as laboratories, computers and libraries. The programme consists of tutoring of students both in the school and the University, a four day residential Summer School, enhanced university induction; and mentoring support and guidance to students during their university course. 93% of Step-Up graduates progress directly into university in Northern Ireland or Britain. The Department is providing funding of almost £500,000 for the Belfast and Magee Step-Up programmes in 2011/12.

• **Discovering Queen’s (Queen’s University)**, is aimed at introducing potential students from disadvantaged backgrounds to higher education through a range of activities connected with the university. It includes certified learning which allows students to enter a degree programme of their choice with other than the normal A Level requirements. The targeted group are pupils in non-selective, all-ability post primary schools who have experienced disadvantage of opportunity, in particular pupils who have no family experience of higher education; have limited family income; are a member of an ethnic minority group; or whose progress has been limited by adverse personal circumstances, eg. divorce / disability / bereavement. In the 2010/11 academic year 3,636 participants attended 51 separate Discovering Queen’s events. The Department is providing funding of £235,000 to support Discovering Queen’s in 2011/12.

**CONTINUING UNDER-REPRESENTATION**

2.21 The consultation process identified that there were still stubborn pockets of under-representation of certain groups within higher education. The Targets expert working group specifically identified under-representation from:

• persons in SEC Groups 5 – 7;

• students from low participation/high deprivation neighbourhoods;

• young Protestant males from areas of high deprivation; and

• adult learners, particularly work-based learners.
2.22 As noted earlier, Northern Ireland has the highest proportion of people from the SEC groups 4-7 in higher education in the United Kingdom. However, when SEC group 4 is excluded from the “lower-SEC” definition, the percentage of Northern Ireland students coming from lower SEC groups drops quite substantially, from over 39% to about 25%. The 2001 Census indicates that SEC groups 5 – 7 make up 45% of the general population.

LOW PARTICIPATION NEIGHBOURHOODS

2.23 The universities tend to attract a higher proportion of undergraduate enrolments from those areas which are least economically deprived in Northern Ireland. Over the last three years the proportions of Northern Ireland domiciled undergraduates at NI HE Institutions from the 20% least deprived/most affluent areas has decreased slightly from around 24% in 2008/09 to 23% in 2010/11, while the proportions from those living in the quintile of most deprived areas remained static over this time period at 14%.

YOUNG PROTESTANT MALES

2.24 The expert working group concluded that overall Protestant and Catholic participation in HE was broadly in line with religious background of the community at school leaving age. However, the expert group noted that young Protestant boys were less likely to participate in HE, but more likely to participate in FE, than their Catholic counterparts. The sub-group noted a pocket of under-representation of young Protestant males from lower socio-economic groups and from lower participation neighbourhoods, particularly in urban areas.

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

2.25 While the expert group found no significant evidence of under-representation of persons with disabilities, particularly within the most relevant age cohorts, it recommended the inclusion of all disabled learners within the widening participation support initiatives in recognition of the significant additional difficulties faced by that group in accessing higher education.

SUMMARY

2.26 The universities, colleges and other providers of higher education have done much to promote widening participation in Northern Ireland and participation rates among young people in the region are much higher than in other parts of the United Kingdom. However, it is an irony that the more successful the educational system becomes, the greater the gap between those who pursue educational attainment and those who fall out of the structures.

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The determined efforts of the last decade to widen participation in higher education have been very successful. Nevertheless there are substantial discrepancies in the extent to which people from different socio-economic backgrounds and from different neighbourhoods currently participate in higher education. Sizable sections of the community are still not realising their proper opportunity to achieve their full potential and to contribute as much as they could to the collective good of society.

The Department also acknowledges that the demand for places in Northern Ireland will be likely to increase as a result of changes in tuition fees for higher education in other parts of the United Kingdom. There is an attendant danger that this may in turn lead to a rise in the A Level grades and qualifications needed to secure a place at a Northern Ireland HE institution. The consultation document noted that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to attain lower grades in their A Levels than their more advantaged peers with similar underlying ability. While the availability of places in Great Britain would remain unchanged, students from less advantaged backgrounds may not be financially able to avail of them and there is a danger that some may be squeezed out of the system as a result.

In response, an additional £3 million per annum is being made available to finance an additional 700 full-time places in STEM disciplines over the next three years. Forecasting the impact that fee changes elsewhere might have in Northern Ireland is difficult. Therefore, the Department will actively monitor demand and will seek additional resource to provide more places locally if required.

Northern Ireland will need to have an even more highly skilled workforce by 2020. However, it is clear that current skills targets cannot be met from the existing young graduate output and that the situation is likely to be exacerbated by the expected demographic changes. Since almost 80% of the Northern Ireland workforce has already completed full-time education, it is inevitable that participation must increase for mature students and adult returners. Therefore, in addition to the increase in full time Maximum Student Number allocation (MaSN) places outlined above, the Department has allocated an extra £1.3 million next year (2012/13) to provide an additional 1,000 part-time places in HE and FE.

Evidence suggests that when HE candidates with the necessary talent and attainment are included in the applicant pool they are treated fairly. In the same way, once admitted to HE similarly qualified students from disadvantaged backgrounds do at least as well as their more affluent peers. Therefore our collective efforts must be focussed on ensuring that the people who are MOST ABLE but LEAST LIKELY to participate are given every encouragement and support to achieve the necessary qualifications to apply to, and to benefit from, the higher education that is right for them, irrespective of their personal or social background.

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9 A Consultation on a Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education. Department for Employment and Learning, March 2011
3. THE VISION FOR PARTICIPATION
3.1 The Department wishes to take forward the implementation of an integrated regional strategy to widen participation in higher education by students from disadvantaged backgrounds and from groups which are under-represented in HE. For the strategy to be effective, it will require significant commitment from the Department for Employment and Learning as lead department, Department of Education, Department for Social Development, Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and other stakeholders including the universities, the university colleges and the six regional Further Education Colleges.

3.2 The Department’s view is that any appropriately qualified individual in Northern Ireland should be able to gain access to higher education that is right for them, irrespective of their personal or social background or location of study. Learners should be able to progress to a level which fulfils their potential and to get proper recognition and respect for their achievements from employers, educationalists and the wider community.

3.3 The future vision is that by the year 2020, Northern Ireland will be internationally recognised as a region where participation in higher education is accessible to all citizens based on academic potential and regardless of social background.

2020 VISION

3.4 In our vision of 2020, a regional awareness campaign, beginning with familiarisation programmes for pupils in primary schools, will ensure that the costs and benefits of higher education are readily understood and all pupils can identify the relevance of higher education to their own lives. Educational attainment among pupils at post primary level will be among the highest in Europe with 70% achieving 5 GCSE passes at A* – C grades, including English and Maths. Timely careers advice will ensure that pupils are well prepared for the examination subject choices that will be required for entry to appropriate higher education programmes. Students will receive relevant advice and guidance, based on accurate labour market intelligence, on the most appropriate options for mode and location of study to achieve their ambitions.

3.5 By 2020, application to higher education will be facilitated through admission processes that consider both academic performance and relevant contextual data to create an even playing field for selection. Recruitment procedures, agreed at regional level, will take more account of the circumstances in which student entry qualifications have been achieved and will recognise that equality of qualifications does not necessarily reflect equality of effort or potential.

3.6 In 2020, the better preparation of potential students prior to entry to higher education will have significantly improved Northern Ireland’s student retention rates to be among the best in the UK. Students will be better prepared for the demands of higher education and will be more likely to be in the right courses. Post entry support systems, for those considered vulnerable to drop out, will mean that Northern Ireland’s HE Institutions also have among the highest HE qualification achievement and graduation rates as benchmarked against their comparator institutions in Great Britain.
3.7 In 2020, there will be even stronger links between universities and employers. Higher education will be recognised as entrepreneurial, innovative, encouraging the growth of enterprise and providing strong, coherent services and support for businesses. Intermediate and higher level skills in the workforce will be significantly improved through the development of relevant professional and technical modular qualifications, taken mostly on a part-time basis. Appropriate student funding systems will support part-time study by the adult learner.

3.8 Achieving this vision of seamless progress to and through higher education will be challenging but much has already been achieved in respect of widening participation in Northern Ireland.

3.9 The objective of this strategy and implementation plan is to improve fair access to higher education across all sectors in Northern Ireland by promoting the relevance of higher education to all individuals with the capacity to benefit, and increasing the number and effectiveness of widening participation initiatives and activities. Ideally the end result should be that every potential applicant, across every sector of society, should be able to:

- identify the relevance, and potential benefits, of higher education to develop the higher level skills increasingly required to benefit from future employment opportunities;
- have an equal opportunity to access higher education based on their ability to benefit and to succeed; and
- access the required support to overcome any personal or social disadvantage that might prevent them from completing the higher education programme that is right for them.
4. A PROGRAMME FOR IMPLEMENTATION
4. A PROGRAMME FOR IMPLEMENTATION

4.1 In order to deliver this ambitious vision, a programme of implementation has been developed which takes account of the advice and feedback received in the consultation exercise.

SCOPE AND TIMESCALE

4.2 The Access to Success implementation plan will operate across a number of Departments, divisions, agencies and education representative bodies. Its achievement will depend on the effective coordination of a large number of existing and new actions within the overall ambit of widening participation. Although this document envisages a 2020 timeframe for its full effects to be realised, the focus for its delivery will initially be three years, when the plans will be reviewed and renewed as required to meet the needs at that time.

COMPONENTS

4.3 The component strands of the strategy will be mapped against five key themes that underpin the vision. These themes are:

• Understanding the Demand Side Needs
• Raising Aspiration and Attainment
• Enhancing Recruitment and Selection
• Improving the Quality & Relevance of Support for Retention and Progression
• Streamlining the structures for Involvement & Investment

4.4 Key Actions are set out in respect of each initiative, with a more detailed summary of key milestones contained in Appendix B.

THEME 1

4.5 UNDERSTANDING THE DEMAND SIDE NEEDS

4.5.1 Accurate information about the nature and scale of under-representation within higher education is essential in devising strategies and action plans to bring about significant change. Information must be accurate, timely and, most importantly, consistent to determine the need, focus and level of the intervention required. Additionally, a clear understanding of the relationships between the demand side (students, employers and communities) and the supply side (higher education providers) is critical to stimulating greater engagement and investment in higher skills development.
4.5.2 In the consultation phase, the Targets expert group stressed the importance of having access to appropriate long-term trend data not only to better inform the identification of groups at risk but also, in the longer run, to support the delivery partners to offer timely interventions to meet changing circumstances of contemporary conditions.

4.5.3 Therefore the Department will engage with the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study (NILS)\(^{10}\) to gather long term data on educational attainment outcomes by NILS cohort attributes. Using the baseline profile of qualification levels attained by 2001, the work will track subsequent movements among multiple sub-groups to identify under-represented population groups in relation to HE participation and to examine subsequent behaviour of the population sub-groups of interest.

Key Action 1: The Department will engage in a longitudinal study of educational attainment to identify patterns of disadvantage when applying to higher education.

INFORMATION REVIEW

4.5.4 The Department for Employment and Learning holds a range of statistical data in relation to HE participation at the UK and Northern Ireland level. These include data on:

- NI domiciled enrolments to UK HE Institutions;
- Enrolments at the Northern Ireland HE Institutes; and
- Enrolments in higher education at regional Further Education Colleges.

4.5.5 Within these broad categories there is a range of sub-categories including participation by Region of Study; SEC grouping; MultipleDeprivation Measure; Age; Disability; Ethnicity; Gender; Religion; Dependents; and Mode of Study. These data provide much of the evidence base for future policy making with regard to higher education.

4.5.6 The consultation process identified a number of difficulties relating to some of the existing sources for data collection. Most of the data on HE enrolments at UK HE institutions is gathered at UK level by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and incorporates UCAS admission data. This poses a number of difficulties. For full-time undergraduate courses, information on student SEC is collected by UCAS. However, the student response to this field is optional and consequently many respondents choose not to provide this information, thus reducing the value of the data gathered on SEC background. It is difficult to be sure if data fluctuations from year to year were due to genuine changing trends or to greater, or lesser, numbers of students providing the information.

4.5.7 Information on disability can be similarly compromised as much of the data is based on student self-reporting. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence to suggest that disabled students are loathe to disclose a disability on entry but may be more willing to make their condition known as they become more comfortable with their institution.

\(^{10}\) A large-scale, representative data linkage study consisting of approximately 500,000 people, or 28% of the Northern Ireland population, to track the major life events by using information from a variety of sources against the baseline of the 2001 general Census returns
4.5.8 Statistics can also be vulnerable to changes in data collection, collation and reporting by a third party agency. For example, the UCAS decision to stop publishing information on SEC groups in favour of a post-code based measure of neighbourhood participation, known as POLAR, has significantly diminished the consistency of this data over time. These inconsistencies can constitute a significant weakness in relation to evidence based policy making with regard to equality of access and widening participation.

4.5.9 Therefore, the Department, in conjunction with the Department of Education, the HE Institutions, school representatives and other stakeholders, will conduct a review of all pre and post-entry data, and its existing sources, currently gathered in respect of participation in higher education. The review will examine and remove any obsolete practices and will seek to identify any locally sourced information sets that are not currently available for widening participation purposes.

**Key Action 2:** The Department working in conjunction with DE and the HE Institutions, will review and improve the mechanisms used to gather comprehensive and reliable data pertaining to access to, and participation in, higher education.

**APPLICATIONS AND ADMISSIONS**

4.5.10 The aim of this work is to more clearly identify, at individual level, the most disadvantaged students/groups when applying to higher education. This would help to increase understanding of the patterns of application and acceptance, and to direct and focus institutional efforts to support wider participation.

4.5.11 The Department will also encourage the universities and colleges to collect and report in their Access Agreements a wider range of information on applications as well as admissions. This should include the development of Key Information Sets (KISs) on the following:

- the number of applications to different courses, particularly those leading directly to higher paid jobs;
- the offers made to applicants, including subjects and grades required; and
- the number and profile (ie. WP status) of applicants actually admitted to each course.

4.5.12 Over time this information should help to increase understanding of the patterns of application and acceptance, and to direct and focus institutional efforts to support wider participation. Longer term the identification systems should help to facilitate a greater use of contextual data in HE admissions systems.
INDIVIDUALS NOT COHORTS

4.5.13 In Northern Ireland, the groups targeted for widening participation interventions have historically been defined by cohort, including SEC groups 4-7, persons with disabilities and people with learning difficulties, first-in-family, cared-for children, etc. This approach was broadly supported by the findings of the Targets expert working group when it recommended that the following cohorts should be targeted for inclusion in future widening participation support initiatives:

• SEC Groups 5 – 7
• disability (physical, sensory or learning)
• low participation neighbourhoods (areas of high deprivation)
• young Protestant males (from areas of high deprivation)
• adult returners, particularly work-based learners

4.5.14 However there are a number of difficulties inherent in taking a cohort based approach to targeting individuals for widening participation support. To begin with, the combined sum of people falling into each of the currently identified widening participation cohorts could make up about 70% of the total Northern Ireland population, which makes something of a mockery of the term, “to target”. The current universities’ Access Agreements and Strategic Assessments indicate that over 50% of all enrolled students are in receipt of some form of widening participation support at this time.

4.5.15 The use of broad groupings as a method of targeting can also give rise to ecological fallacies; ie. a statistical error where the characteristics of a known group are ascribed to each and every individual member of that group. For example, to assume that everyone who lives in the Belfast BT9 postcode area has a higher than average income when significant pockets of deprivation exist within that area. Or, to assume that having a medical condition constitutes an educational disability without any assessment of how that disability restricts one’s ability to perform in the education environment. Simply to belong to, say, SEC group 7 does not, by itself, indicate any disadvantage when seeking entry to HE. It is only when being a member of the under-represented groups imposes restrictions on the individual that a disadvantage is subsequently realised.

4.5.16 In an environment of finite resources it is essential to target these resources to where they will have the greatest effect and impact. There is an imperative to distinguish the multi-faceted nature of disadvantage and to recognise people as individuals. Membership of one disadvantaged group, of itself rarely confers a specific educational disadvantage. However, when combined with other indicators of disadvantage the cumulative effects can eventually pose insurmountable obstacles for the individual.
4.5.17 There is growing recognition of the multiplier effect of disadvantage and increasingly the highly selective universities have been exploring the use of “contextual data” in the application process to try to counter inequities. Contextual data can be used as part of a holistic decision making process when considering applications to HE from an increasingly diverse application pool. At its simplest, contextual data is a method of recognising the personal circumstances of an individual applicant. It includes consideration of additional personal details such as SEC grouping, applicant postcode linked to low participation areas, receipt of other support measures such as Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), disrupted schooling, the overall performance of the school-attended at GCSE and a range of other hard and soft data.

4.5.18 Therefore, the Department, working in conjunction with DE, the HE Institutions and other relevant stakeholders, will determine and agree a set of metrics to assess the scale of disadvantage of applicants to higher education. The outcome of this work will be a system that should be able to recognise and take account of multiple disadvantages to make a quantifiable assessment for most candidates that will be used to assess an individual’s need for support. This will include the development of tailored support packages and the required levels of bursary or other practical support. The patterns of information can also be used to identify any previously unrecognised “cold spots” in relation to participation in higher education.

4.5.19 The Targets Expert group also noted the changing nature of disadvantage within potential target cohorts, pointing out that today’s minority may be tomorrow’s mainstream. Therefore the assessment of the level of widening participation support measures required by a student should be an iterative process that recognises the changing circumstances of the individual as he/she progresses through the student/learner cycle.

4.5.20 It is vital that reliable, consistent and universally agreed data is available to all stakeholders to clearly identify successful initiatives and to accurately measure progress year on year. Success will require a clear focus on what works and the development of a spirit of cooperation between partners in government, education and wider stakeholders, based on a set of common, agreed measurements and a robust set of evaluation principles and guidelines.

Key Action 3: The Department, working in conjunction with DE, the HE Institutions and other relevant stakeholders, will determine and agree a set of parameters for the identification of widening participation cohorts and individuals at each stage of the student/learner experience based on multiple disadvantages and including an assessment of individual needs.
THEME 2

4.6 RAISING ASPIRATION AND ATTAINMENT

4.6.1 Research studies show that among the advantages graduates derive from higher education are better jobs prospects and higher pay. The employment rate for graduates in Northern Ireland currently sits at 87%, which is considerably higher than the 63% employment rate among non-graduates. Graduates are also expected to command substantially higher salaries in the labour market. From April to June 2011, the average gross weekly earnings of a graduate were 87% higher than that of a non-graduate. On average, Northern Ireland graduates earn £13,000 per year more than non-graduates.

4.6.2 Currently, talented people from disadvantaged groups (the most able: least likely group) who could apply to HE are disproportionately not doing so. Some are, of course, making entirely rationale decisions to follow a different path in an apprenticeship or other form of training or further education, but many will have made less informed decisions simply lacking any aspiration to pursue a path in HE because of a range of real or perceived personal barriers. HE is not something that they view as being relevant to their lives but is meant for “others”. They may have had no previous family experience of HE or, worse still, the previous family history may be negative, creating a bias against education.

4.6.3 The key to generating more qualified applicants for HE, from the widest possible range of social and educational backgrounds, is to raise awareness of the potential for higher education to improve one’s career prospects, earnings potential and quality of life.

4.6.4 To be successful in achieving higher level qualifications, people need to possess a number of characteristics. These include the aspiration to improve their educational level, confidence in their ability to do so, and the drive and determination to succeed in higher education. An individual’s aspirations, and their ability to realise those aspirations, are usually determined at a very early stage in their life.

EXISTING STRATEGIES

4.6.5 There is considerable evidence that the earlier that a child is introduced to the concept of higher education the more likely they are to consider participation as a real possibility for themselves. The Department of Education is pursuing a number of strategies that are critical in providing a solid foundation for widening participation in higher education. Every School a Good School is the overarching Department of Education policy for raising standards and tackling underachievement. The policy sets out ambitious targets to increase the proportion of school leavers, achieving 5 or more GCSEs (or equivalent) at A*-C including English (and, for those learning through the medium of Irish, Gaeilge) and Mathematics.
The Revised Curriculum and Entitlement Framework is now in place in all grant-aided schools. At the critical age of 14, when young people start to make important choices, the Entitlement Framework provides a much broader, better balanced and more coherent range of subject choices. ‘Count, Read: Succeed’, the Strategy to Improve Outcomes in Literacy and Numeracy, aims to support teachers and school leaders in their work to raise overall levels of attainment in literacy and numeracy among young people and to narrow the current gaps in educational outcomes. It emphasises the central role of the teacher in raising standards in literacy and numeracy to ensure that every child fulfils her or his potential, including by identifying and addressing underachievement quickly and in a systematic way. The Extended Schools Programme aims to improve educational outcomes and life chances for young people from disadvantaged areas by helping to re-engage parents with education and raise aspirations of the community as a whole. Finally, the Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion will ensure that children and young people who have special educational needs are encouraged and supported to reach their full potential.

4.6.6 The availability of good advice and guidance is also critical to successful participation in HE. Too often people make particularly poor choices about courses of study due to a lack of advice on their choice of subject and the qualifications required for entry to certain courses and institutions. Preparing for Success, a joint all-age Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy delivered by the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, aims to develop more effective career decision-makers, leading to increased and appropriate participation in education, training and employment.

4.6.7 Another area where better advice will be increasingly critical in the future is the relative costs and benefits of HE. Students from backgrounds where HE is less understood and valued, are less likely to appreciate the probable personal benefits that will accrue on completing successfully a course of higher education. Benefits such as higher wages, greater job satisfaction and the wider social benefits discussed earlier. This is particularly true given the ongoing confusion about the relative costs of HE. Many in disadvantaged communities, particularly boys, do not readily see the advantages to be gained from a personal investment in HE and, with a lack of role models, they may opt for an intuitively better option of an alternative occupation coupled with the avoidance of student debt. Although the Effect of Variable Tuition Fees report indicated that the introduction of fees had done little to deter applications to HE, it is clear that more needs to be done to publicise the full range of financial supports that are available to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
While the term HE generally refers to post-secondary education it is, in essence, any formal education that takes place at level 4 or above. That can include accredited career training, or the continuing education of adult returners and work-based learners. HE is increasingly necessary in employment. Securing a higher education makes jobs easier to find and promotions easier to acquire. In addition to the career and financial prospects, a higher education often results in a greater level of job satisfaction for employees. If Northern Ireland is to develop the highly skilled workforce necessary to compete in the global economy of the future, it will also be important to raise awareness of HE among those already in the workplace and to stimulate their aspirations to acquire new and higher level skills through renewed participation in HE.

The programmes operated by the Northern Ireland HE Institutions have proved very successful in increasing applications and participation by under-represented groups. However, although intended to be complementary, there is evidence that elements of the Queen’s, University of Ulster and the University Colleges’ programmes are sometimes overlapping; targeting the same schools and occasionally allowing gaps in coverage, particularly in more rural areas.

At a more general level, some activities have been criticised as being too focused on recruitment to specific institutions rather than promoting access to HE more widely. This is important because while these activities are designed to widen participation they are, in most cases, also designed to strengthen and support the recruitment of all students. To target resources for maximum impact the focus of widening participation activities must be kept firmly on the “Most Able: Least Likely”.

CENTRALISED AWARENESS RAISING

Therefore, in line with the responses received in the consultation process, the Department will develop and implement a centralised awareness raising programme of the benefits of higher education. Coordinated by the Department, with input from all HE providers, the Department of Education and the Careers Service, the programme will utilise multiple media channels designed to reduce early community barriers to participation. A phased and themed campaign will target schools, communities and the workplace to raise awareness of the potential value, and accessibility, of higher education to all in the community.

Also in line with the responses to the public consultation the awareness campaign will be both integrated and regional; promoting the benefits of higher education in general rather than any one institution or pathway through HE in particular. It will provide a common platform and single brand identity for widening participation that will be included in all of the individual institutions’ subsequent outreach activities.

11 Review of Widening Participation Funded Initiatives Report. FGS McClure Watters. DEL October 2010
Key Action 4: The Department, in conjunction with the HE institutions, will develop and implement a single integrated regional awareness raising programme to increase the profile and relevance of higher education and skills in under-represented communities and in the workplace.

OUTREACH PROGRAMMES

4.6.13 All of Northern Ireland’s HE Institutions are engaged in outreach programmes with non-selecting schools and local communities as part of their own Widening Participation Strategies. These programmes are principally focussed on raising aspirations and encouraging young people to engage with learning usually with a view to encouraging applications from under-represented groups. Most have, to varying degrees, attainment raising elements within their programmes.

4.6.14 Even with high aspirations, the single most important factor\(^{12}\) in determining the probability that a person will progress into HE is the strength of the student’s qualifications gained in second-level education. Despite Northern Ireland’s successes in good educational results at the top end of GCSE performances across the United Kingdom, unfortunately there remains a very long tail of underachievement in post-primary level education.

4.6.15 The academic aspirations and attainment levels of individuals are closely correlated with their social background and the school that they attended. The difference in educational attainment between socio-economic groups is well documented and it is clear that social class-origins remain the greatest predictor of academic success and failure, and also of future location in the labour market\(^{13}\).

4.6.16 This is the case in Northern Ireland where consistently pupils from the poorest electoral wards have significantly lower educational attainment levels than pupils from the most affluent electoral wards\(^{14}\). Children entitled to free school meals are only about half as likely to get five or more GCSEs, including English and Mathematics at A*-C, as other children.

4.6.17 As outlined in paragraph 2.28, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who do progress beyond GCSE are, unfortunately, also likely to attain lower grades in their A Levels than their more advantaged peers with similar underlying ability. More advantaged students account for a disproportionately high percentage of the top grades at A Level.

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4.6.18 There is also evidence of significant underachievement among persons with disabilities. There is often a limited belief among teachers, and some parents, that children with congenital disabilities will aspire to HE and FE\textsuperscript{15}. There are significant differences between those with congenital disabilities and those who acquire their disability during or after entry to HE. More needs to be done to raise the aspirations and attainment levels among those with a disability. HE could contribute to this aim through:

- targeted outreach programmes aimed at raising aspirations amongst young people with disabilities both in mainstream and special schools; and
- opportunities for people with disabilities who do aspire to higher education to sample courses through summer schools to equip them with a better understanding of university life and an opportunity to meet academic staff and other students who have made the transition to university.

4.6.19 Educational disadvantage is multi-faceted, both in its causes and in its consequences. It arises primarily from the dichotomy of experiences from the school and non-school environment of the individual and the extent to which the culture and values of the community are reflected in the school and, conversely, the extent to which the educational aims and objectives of the school are valued in the host community.

4.6.20 Educational systems function in the context of wider inequalities in society and disadvantage is as much about the experiences of communities as about the experiences of individuals. It is vital that the HE Institutions reach out to communities to change perceptions and project a more inclusive atmosphere that attracts more learners from low participation neighbourhoods.

4.6.21 It is clear that the most significant factors in raising attainment are predominantly issues for schools to resolve. Nevertheless, the universities and colleges currently make very important contributions to support the schools in their efforts to raise attainment through their outreach programmes, school college links and additional learning opportunities.

4.6.22 The universities and colleges deliver programmes that work directly with pupils and students in non-selective post primary schools in order to support attainment. Initiatives include a range of curriculum based workshops and academic enrichment programmes to empower students with the knowledge, skills and confidence to succeed in higher education. The aim is to assist potential applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds to maximise their potential. The success of Step-Up provides just one example of how new innovative approaches can be adopted to raise pupil attainment in difficult academic subjects in schools with existing low participation rates in HE.

\textsuperscript{15} Disabled Students and Higher Education. Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (2009)
4.6.23 Therefore the Department will seek to expand the range of aspiration and attainment raising programmes at school, college, community and the workplace. The Department will make available increased project funding, on a competitive basis, to encourage all institutions offering higher education courses to develop new community outreach programmes designed to raise the educational attainment levels of students to enable entry to higher education. Outreach activity will be undertaken in partnership with local schools and colleges in under-represented areas and also with adult learners in the workplace and in local communities. School / Community outreach programmes should incorporate attainment raising elements and should not be just awareness-raising / marketing. Summer schools (or similar) should form part of the outreach programmes.

4.6.24 The experience gained over the last 10 years of widening participation in both Ireland and Great Britain is that sustained actions, delivered over a number of years and coordinated so that they do not duplicate the efforts of other institutions or organisations have a much greater impact than isolated and uncoordinated interventions. To achieve a high level of integration the new widening participation outreach programmes will be overtly “badged” with the generic widening participation branding developed in the single awareness raising programme. Programmes may cover any of the identified widening participation cohorts of disadvantage or disability and will incorporate significant attainment raising elements.

4.6.25 The new initiatives to raise aspiration and attainment will have the additional benefit of supporting the Department’s strategy to address the particular needs of those young people who have disengaged from the economy and society as a whole; namely those who are not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).

**Key Action 5:** The Department will make additional funding available to support the expansion of the range of aspiration and attainment raising programmes at school, college, community and the workplace.

**THEME 3**

4.7 ENHANCING RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

4.7.1 Until relatively recently recruitment to higher education took place within a small clearly defined band of eligible contenders with largely homogeneous sets of qualifications. However, the structures of the educational system have changed enormously over the last two decades. Many more people are gaining the minimum qualification requirements for participation in higher education but crucially they are gaining those qualifications in a much wider variety of formats and across a much greater range of subject areas.
4.7.2 Decisions taken about how best to select students will need to take account of the major changes taking place in wider education structures. In making choices concerning recruitment and selection it is essential to recognise that amongst potential students there will likely emerge a greater degree of diversity and strengths as a result of a broader system of education. While future students may not present themselves with a set of common qualifications, their prior experience of education should not be overlooked as an indicator of preparedness for a HE course.

EXTENDED OUTREACH

4.7.3 Entry to higher education is linked to attainment and educational attainment is heavily linked to social background. Therefore to combat the effects of social and other disadvantage requires a concerted and coordinated effort to promote inclusivity in HE. As outlined in Theme 2, a most effective mechanism for recruiting learners from a range of widening participation cohorts is through the provision of programmes specifically designed to support the student in reaching an appropriate level of academic attainment. In Britain, some institutions offer “Extended Outreach” schemes which explicitly link their programmes to clear access routes for disadvantaged students. For example, on successful completion of a programme a student may be guaranteed to have their application considered or be offered an interview or, in some cases, be guaranteed the offer of a place at the institution.

ADULT ACCESS

4.7.4 In Northern Ireland the most common and well-established of these are Adult Access courses which target those who lack traditional A Level qualifications and who have been out of the full-time educational system for some time. The courses are designed to support and encourage students through a route which combines the study of academic disciplines with focused training in the skills necessary for both HE and employment. The involvement of both university and college staff ensures a smooth transition from FE to HE for adults who are frequently from lower socio-economic backgrounds, or those who have experienced other disadvantages.

4.7.5 The specific arrangements between HE and FE encourage partnership between these sectors and ensure that students are prepared for study at the appropriate level. Such investment in the pre-entry stage, with a proven record of success, could be extended to other cohorts with adaptations made to suit their particular needs. For example, one cohort for whom this pathway has been explored is the 16-19 year old students who have demonstrated some academic potential but who would not ordinarily progress to HE.

4.7.6 By drawing on and developing the experience and good practice of the traditional Access mode, an alternative access route could be developed to meet the needs and the admission requirements for entry to university. Such programmes could include modules on skills, employability and personal development. As with the established model, students who reach an agreed standard at the end of the two-year course could be offered a university place.
4.7.7 However, it is important to ensure that all Access Course graduates, including those who do not intend to proceed directly to a specific university programme, have their academic achievement recognised beyond the confines of the specific teaching institutions. Therefore the Department will encourage Northern Ireland’s HE institutions to collaborate to develop a regional standard model for Access Courses across all institutions with agreed entry standards and output levels, and linked to the Qualifications and Credit Framework.

WORK-BASED LEARNERS

4.7.8 Wider and fairer access to higher education is not just a social imperative but also an economic one. As already mentioned, around 80% of the Northern Ireland workforce of 2020 has already left compulsory education. Unleashing the talent and expertise of this workforce means that HE institutions must be more innovative in their provision and conscious of learner requirements. Such innovation must consider alternative forms of progression including advanced apprenticeships, Foundation Degrees and other professional and technical HE programmes within a credit based flexible framework.

4.7.9 The successful development of HE will hinge on providing opportunities for different types of people to study in a wider range of ways than in the past. Such opportunities must reflect the demands from employers and learners requiring a greater diversity of models of learning. In addition, the provision must be attractive not just regarding pace, place and price but also the usefulness or marketability of the acquired qualification in an economically focussed and competitive job market.

ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (APEL)

4.7.10 As the economy becomes ever more “professionalised” there will be an increasing need for growth in life-long education to skill and re-skill the existing workforce to meet new workplace demands. While pre-existing educational qualifications will remain important for entry to higher education, increasingly the recognition of prior experiential learning will be crucial to upskilling the adult workforce. Northern Ireland has a potential competitive advantage in this area. In 2010, universities and FE colleges in Northern Ireland developed and successfully piloted the first collaborative, regionally agreed system of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) for entry into Foundation Degrees. The Department will continue to encourage the promotion and expansion of the APEL system of entry to HE in order to achieve a higher level of uptake of Foundation degrees within the workplace.
FOUNDATION DEGREES

4.7.11 Within the past few years, the introduction of the Foundation Degree, delivered by the local FE Regional Colleges, has offered a close-to-home opportunity for people who face travel barriers to participation in higher education. Foundation Degrees are intended to be intermediate, work-related HE qualifications, designed in collaboration with employers and delivered in FE Colleges in partnership with HE institutions. Although Foundation Degrees are recognised as higher education Level 5 qualifications in their own right, they have also opened up new articulation routes into HE by offering the opportunity for articulation to specified related Bachelors Degrees.

4.7.12 However, Foundation Degrees have not yet been recognised or embraced by either employers or students as widely as they should. There exists a major challenge to increase public awareness of Foundation Degrees generally and specifically among employers.

4.7.13 Therefore the Department will be taking forward a range of actions to raise the profile and increase the number of students enrolling on Foundation Degrees. This will include supporting the universities and colleges with the implementation of a new agreed framework for the validation and re-validation of existing courses to rationalise the qualification. The new system for Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) will also facilitate entry for learners with non-traditional or no qualifications. The Department will also undertake a promotional and publicity campaign to increase awareness and demand for Foundation Degrees among employers across Northern Ireland. The aim of this project is to increase the number of learners studying full-time or part-time for a Foundation Degree each year to 2,500 in 2015.

**Key Action 6:** The Department will work in partnership with universities, FE colleges and employer representatives to increase the number of enrolments in Foundation Degrees each year to 2,500 by 2015.

THE USE OF CONTEXTUAL DATA IN ADMISSIONS

4.7.14 As early as 2004, the Schwartz Report on Fair Admissions to HE commented, “The evidence suggests that equal examination grades do not necessarily represent equal potential. In the UK, young people from skilled manual, partly skilled or unskilled family backgrounds are less likely to achieve high grades in A level examinations than those from professional, intermediate or skilled non-manual backgrounds”.

16 Fair Admissions to Higher Education. Prof Steven Schwarz. DfES, 2004
4.7.15 The Schwartz Report concluded that the evidence gathered in its review supported the belief that the admissions process across the UK was generally fair, but admitted that, *inter alia*, there was variation in admissions processes across the sector and unevenness in the treatment of the increasing diversity of applicants, qualifications and pathways into HE. Following Schwartz, a number of developments were put into place including the establishment of the Delivery Partnership and Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA). SPA is now advocating actively the use of contextual data in the admissions process in the interests of transparency and fairness in the admissions process.

4.7.16 Contextual data can be defined in two ways: hard data which is supplied through government agencies which can provide reliable tracking mechanisms across schools and colleges; and, soft data, supplied by the applicant in their application process. SPA hopes to make progress to ensure that central hard data on qualifications, student performance and socio-economic background may be supplied reliably and made available through the UCAS admissions process.

4.7.17 The Department is supportive of the use of contextual data in admissions to help to support widening participation from disadvantaged and under-represented groups, but recognises that much additional work needs to be undertaken through Key Actions 2 and 3 to ensure consistency in the basket of data made available to HE institutions. Nonetheless, the Department believes that this is an appropriate and valid way for institutions to broaden access and that this should be a significant area for attention by the HE institutions in addressing ways of enhancing selection processes to assist widening participation in HE.

**ROUTES OF EXCEPTIONAL APPLICATION**

4.7.18 In the Republic of Ireland, the Higher Education Access Route is a college and university admissions scheme which offers places at reduced points to school leavers who have the ability to benefit from and succeed in higher education and who come from socio-economic groups in Irish society that are under-represented in third level education. Each college or university taking part in the HEAR scheme has set aside a quota of places on a reduced points basis for students entering through the scheme. This quota is different for each third level institution. As well as receiving a reduced points place, HEAR students may also receive a variety of academic, personal and social supports while studying at third level. Each college and university decides what support it can offer depending on its policies, practices and the resources available to it. When applying for the HEAR scheme, applicants must:

- provide satisfactory evidence of socio-economic circumstances;
- meet the minimum entry (matriculation) and subject requirements of the participating college or university; and
- compete for one of the quota places based on actual Leaving Certificate results.
4.7.19 The Disability Access Route to Education in the Republic of Ireland operates as a supplementary admissions scheme for school leavers with disabilities enabling application through the Central Admissions Office, the Republic’s equivalent of UCAS, on a reduced points basis. The programme operates on very similar lines to the HEAR scheme but requires the applicant to provide evidence confirming that the disability has had a significant impact on educational performance.

4.7.20 In Northern Ireland, the HE institutions are frequently asked to take into account some exceptional circumstance when considering applications to HE courses and, on occasions, may adjust their offer criteria if the circumstances of the individual applicant are considered to be sufficiently extraordinary. However, there are two main problems with this process. The systems are not standardised and therefore open to differing interpretations by institutions and admissions officers; and not publicised thereby potentially increasing unfairness between those who have the presence of mind to make the appeal and those, perhaps less familiar with HE, who do not. The current processes do not provide a clear and unambiguous route for the consideration of exceptional cases of disadvantage.

4.7.21 The Department will encourage the higher education institutions to develop and pilot regional standardised exceptional application procedures for the most disadvantaged applicants. To maintain a close targeting of the Most Able : Least Likely, eligibility criteria should be strict and should eliminate all but the most disadvantaged applicants. To benefit from the programme applicants should be clearly identifiable as a person of multiple disadvantage, meet the minimum entry requirements for the relevant course and provide satisfactory evidence of how the disadvantage / disability has negatively affected educational attainment. However, in line with stakeholders’ views in the consultation process the proposal should not be a quota scheme nor should applicants be guaranteed places.

4.7.22 Universities are autonomous bodies and have a responsibility in law to set their own admissions criteria. Nevertheless, agreement to participate in a regional system that recognised disadvantage in selection might permit the admissions process to proceed with at least a fuller consideration of the future potential of the candidate. Application through such a programme might assist an applicant in getting into the pool of eligible candidates but the decision on who to admit would remain the responsibility of the admissions officers for the relevant course, but based on a holistic assessment of the individual applicant.

**Key Action 7:** The Department will encourage HE institutions to develop agreed regional programmes for a standardised route of exceptional application to higher education.
4.8 IMPROVING THE QUALITY & RELEVANCE OF SUPPORT FOR RETENTION AND PROGRESSION

4.8.1 Failure to complete a chosen course of study can be an expensive business for all involved. Expensive for the student who will have paid fees for no valuable outcome; expensive for the institution that will have invested time, money and other resources; and expensive for society with the loss of a valuable MaSN place that cannot be taken up by another student at a time of very high demand for higher education.

4.8.2 A National Audit Office report\(^{17}\) in 2007 suggested that there is a balance to be struck between widening participation while improving retention, because students from different backgrounds will need different support structures to complete their courses successfully. This would appear to be confirmed by the Northern Ireland experience of having both the highest participation rates and lowest student retention rates in higher education in the UK.

4.8.3 The Review of Widening Participation Funded Initiatives\(^{18}\) confirmed that Northern Ireland has the lowest level of full-time first degree entrants who completed their courses and qualified at the same HE Institution (87.7% vs 88.6% for the UK); the lowest level of those who transferred to another HE institution to complete their education (2.1% vs 2.8% for UK); and the highest levels of non-continuation after the first year of HE (10.2% vs 8.6% for the UK).

IDENTIFICATION OF THOSE AT RISK OF NON-COMPLETION

4.8.4 No one single reason has been found which explains why students drop-out of higher education. In 2007, the Department commissioned an analysis of how the probability of a first year student proceeding to the second year of his or her studies is influenced by personal characteristics and circumstances. The resulting report\(^{19}\) indicated that there is indeed a high correlation between those considered at risk of non-completion and the widening participation cohorts identified earlier.

4.8.5 For example, there is a clear gender difference with around 13% of males dropping out of courses compared to less than 9% of females across Northern Ireland institutions. This is quite significant as male participation in HE is also lower than female participation. The limited data available also indicates that those with a disability who participate in HE are less likely to complete than those without a disability. Data also appears to indicate that the older a student is on entry to HE the more likely they are to drop out; 14.4% among those aged 25 and older compared to 9.6% of those aged under 20 years. From the statistics available it appears that there is a marked difference in the completion rates for Catholics and Protestants. While Catholics are more likely to participate in HE they are also more likely to drop-out than Protestants.

\(^{17}\) Staying the Course: the retention of students in higher education. National Audit Office (July 2007)

\(^{18}\) Review of Widening Participation Funded Initiatives Report. FGS McClure Watters. DEL October 2010

\(^{19}\) Staying the Course: An econometric analysis of the characteristics most associated with student attrition beyond the first year of higher education. M Bailey and V K Boroah. (January 2007)
4.8.6 The statistical information clearly indicates that those from the lowest socio-economic groups are not only less likely to participate in higher education but when they do they are also less likely to complete. In particular those from socio-economic groups 5-7 have the highest non-completion rate of any social grouping in Northern Ireland. The data available indicated that of all the demographic characteristics socio-economic classification is the greatest predictor of non-completion.

**BARRIERS TO COMPLETION**

4.8.7 However, it is believed that various personal, social and academic factors interact to cause student drop-out. International research suggests that the factors influencing the probability of dropping out of higher education can be categorised into two distinct groups, those that pre-date HE entry and those that occur after entry to HE. Unfortunately the pre-entry factors influencing student retention and progression tend to exacerbate disadvantage among widening participation cohorts.

4.8.8 There is much research, mostly conducted in the USA, that indicates that the higher the level of parental education, the more likely it is that students will complete a higher education programme of study successfully. Parents who have attended university may be more likely to discuss university options and educational expectations with their children\(^{20}\). It is also suggested that a lack of parental experience in education may lead to a lack of encouragement and support for HE in that household\(^ {21}\).

4.8.9 The statistical data from Northern Ireland indicates that the higher a student’s qualification on entry to HE, the higher the likelihood of completion of their chosen course. Students from non-selective post primary schools, and mature students, are more likely to enter HE with a mix of non-traditional qualifications and are typically less likely to achieve the highest UCAS tariff points.

4.8.10 Research also suggests that aspirations and family support are critical to student success. It appears that students perform better and are more likely to succeed when their families affirm their choices and encourage them to stay the course. This is especially important for populations which are under-represented\(^ {22}\). An appropriate amount of parental involvement and support can help to offset, to a degree, the negative impacts of poverty\(^ {23}\).

4.8.11 Increased student drop out is a problem at an international level and the phenomenon has been subject to a considerable amount of academic research. While no definitive root cause has been uncovered, it would appear that many of the pre-recruitment widening participation initiatives outlined and recommended earlier in this report can significantly mitigate a premature withdrawal from a course of study.

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\(^{20}\) Blue-Collar Scholars?: Mediators and Moderators of University Attrition in First-Generation College Students. Julia A. Martinez; Kenneth J. Sherr; Jennifer L. Krull. Journal of College Student Development, Volume 50, Number 1, January/February 2009, pp. 87-103 (Article)

\(^{21}\) Are the Factors Affecting Dropout Behavior Related to Initial Enrollment Intensity for College Undergraduates? Stratton, Leslie S; O’Toole, Dennis M; and Wetzel, James N. Research in Higher Education, Vol. 48, No. 4 (June 2007): 453-486


POST ENTRY FACTORS

4.8.12 Extensive national and international research over the past three decades indicates that many of the post entry explanations provided by non-traditional students for dropping out of higher education are largely attributable to a lack of social and academic integration. The body of research indicates that students from working class backgrounds, minority ethnic communities and mature students often can feel out of place in the university environment and find it difficult to involve themselves in student activities. The importance of a positive first-year experience in HE cannot be underestimated in building confidence, positivity and commitment to a ‘new way of life’.

4.8.13 Fortunately post entry factors can also have very positive effects on student retention and progression. There are a number of initiatives that institutions can undertake that appear to mitigate the impact of social and academic isolation and serve to improve retention and progression among non-traditional students.

4.8.14 Strong senior management commitment to widening participation can drive institutions to improve the quality of the student experience and improve retention and progression rates. Activities to recruit and retain students, particularly from non-traditional backgrounds, are integral to these institutions rather than seen as an add-on to core activities.

4.8.15 The available evidence suggests that retention rates are best in institutions that require those with responsibility for course delivery to strive to adopt best practice, in teaching and assessment methods, to meet the needs of students. In addition, retention is better in institutions where staff recognise that the provision of appropriate support and guidance to students is an essential and core aspect of their job.

4.8.16 Extensive research indicates that students who are involved in mentoring programmes are more likely to continue with their studies than their counterparts who do not participate in such programmes. The role of the mentor can be central to the integration and academic success of the student. In the best mentoring programmes the mentor offers academic (career advice, information, problem solving etc) and pastoral (social and emotional support – counselling and listening) support to the student.

4.8.17 The positive effects associated with involvement in student induction or orientation programmes have been well documented. Students who take part in institutional orientation or induction programmes are less likely to drop-out than those who do not. The most successful induction programmes appear to have much in common in that they seek to introduce students to the HE Institution as an academic community, the academic framework in which they will learn, the staff who will deliver the course and assess their performance, and the individual member of staff who has responsibility for advising them on both academic and pastoral matters.
4.8.18 Effective personal tutoring is an important factor in the retention and success of non-traditional students. Many institutions provide additional academic support through personal tutoring systems, with students allocated to staff who provide pastoral and academic support. Effective academic support helps to equip an increasingly diverse student body with the skills necessary to succeed in HE.

4.8.19 Institutions with student services that are effective, proactive and have good links with the rest of the institution tend to be good at retaining students. The ‘one-stop shop’ approach to student support appears to be highly effective in increasing access to and improving the quality of student services.

ATTENDANCE MONITORING

4.8.20 Students who start to miss lectures and tutorials can fall behind and put at risk their chances of completing their course. Retention is generally better in institutions which monitor the attendance of their students and where academic staff follow up non-attendance as part of their normal responsibilities. Contacting absent students to enquire into their circumstances, stressing the importance of attendance and, where appropriate, signposting to the support that is available are all measures proven to help reduce absenteeism and improve student retention. Beginning in September 2013 the Department will require HE institutions to actively monitor the attendance of all students in receipt of widening participation support.

**Key Action 8:** The Department will require HE institutions to actively monitor the attendance of all students in receipt of widening participation support.

USE OF BURSARIES AND FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

4.8.21 Martin Harris’24 report on access to highly selective universities in Great Britain reached some mixed conclusions on the value of financial bursaries in promoting widening participation. On the one hand his research found that information on bursaries was not always known by students, their parents, and more critically their careers advisors, before applying to university and therefore could not have had a significant impact on widening participation. On the other hand he also found clear evidence that a significant minority of students from low income backgrounds were influenced in their choice of university by the bursary package and that this increased with the size of the bursary. Harris also noted that the highly selective universities were offering bursary packages that were several times more than the average across the sector but without any real evidence of an increase in applications from working class candidates. Therefore, he strongly recommended that the highly selective institutions should examine the scope to divert part of their bursary expenditure into extended outreach and school focused activities.

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24 What more can be done to widen access to highly selective universities? A Report from Sir Martin Harris, Director of Fair Access, April 2010
4.8.22 Research on bursary schemes suggests that they may improve retention as they help to reduce levels of debt and ease transition into HE. In addition, they can also serve to reinforce the student’s perception of the institution’s commitment to them. Some institutions already use the timing of the award of bursaries and scholarship to encourage students to engage more fully in their studies and to reward progression.

4.8.23 Legislation requires that all HE institutions that wish to charge more than the minimum fee per annum must have an Access Agreement, agreed by the Department, that specifies the financial support for lower income students in the form of bursaries, scholarships and any other commitments. The Department requires that information on financial support should be published to ensure that all students should know, before they take up an offer of a place, what the fee and support levels will be for each year of their course. Institutions are free to set their own bursary limits but there is a minimum expectation for a core bursary to be payable to all students on a full maintenance grant. All HE institutions in Northern Ireland currently pay bursaries at higher levels than the minimum required.

4.8.24 Targeted bursary payments are a legitimate way for institutions to pursue fair access and to help improve retention rates. However the expense of an institution’s bursary programme should be set against the cost of its other support measures. The emphasis should be on achieving value for money in each support initiative rather than focused on paying larger cash bursaries for individuals.

4.8.25 Student loans represent a significant cost to both the student and collectively to the Northern Ireland budget. The focus in the future should be on lowering costs to both the student and the public purse. In line with the Harris recommendation the Department proposes that Northern Ireland institutions should examine the scope to divert part of their bursary expenditure not only into extended outreach programmes but also into additional support measure to improve student retention. Fee waivers and other forms of direct support can be much more cost effective than bursaries. In addition to the initiatives outlined earlier, institutions may wish to use their considerable buying power to provide subsidised books, IT and other course materials to reduce the costs to the individual student.

4.8.26 The Department will continue to provide Premium Funding to recognise additional costs based on the number of identified WP students attending but will encourage the HE institutions to provide supplementary support systems, tailored to individual needs and based on identified multiple disadvantage, for widening participation students as they enter into and progress through higher education.

**Key Action 9:** The Department will support HE institutions to develop additional support measures for students to sustain continuing participation.
**PHILANTHROPIC BURSARIES**

4.8.27 The Aisling Bursary Programme is a local innovative approach encouraging students from disadvantaged backgrounds in West Belfast to consider higher education as an option. Aisling Bursaries are granted to students who experience financial barriers to participating in HE and FE to help them defray their education costs and thereby achieve their ambitions in terms of securing education qualifications.

4.8.28 The bursaries are generated from donations from local small and medium-sized enterprises and larger Belfast firms, as well as from private individuals. Since the bursaries were launched in May 2000, almost £400,000 of private sector funds has been allocated to 460 higher and further education students. The Belfast Media Group (Andersonstown News) is a key sponsor of the Bursary Programme.

4.8.29 Community scholarship programmes have the potential to help to break down community barriers to participation and improve university/community liaison. The Department has begun discussions with a number of community groups and a scoping exercise is already underway to determine the capacity required to undertake such programmes within local communities. The Department will work with motivated communities to help build capacity at local level and to help to identify private sector bodies as potential sponsors. The Department will assist communities to develop an operational model for delivery, including application, adjudication and selection criteria.

**Key Action 10:** The Department will work with local communities to develop and pilot philanthropic bursary / scholarship programmes across Northern Ireland.

**THEME 5**

4.9 STREAMLINING THE STRUCTURES FOR INVOLVEMENT & INVESTMENT

4.9.1 At present all HE institutions that wish to charge more than the minimum tuition fee are required by legislation to secure Departmental approval for an Access Agreement that details all of the support available to students to promote widening participation. In addition, each of the universities and university colleges are further required to submit an annual Widening Participation Strategic Assessment which includes details on the level of resources committed to widening participation and the methods and targets by which it measures the success of its initiatives.
4.9.2 Analysis of the most recent Access Agreements and Strategic Assessments indicates that the total fee income for universities and university colleges is in excess of £77 million, received from around 24,500 fee paying students. In turn, the HE institutions invest over £24 million in a variety of widening participation initiatives including student bursaries, outreach activities and other student support measures, representing around 31% of total fee income. Direct bursary support to students accounts for 46% of all support provided with only 6.5% being spent on pre-recruitment outreach activity. Almost 12,500 students were identified as being in receipt of widening participation support, representing 51% of the total identified fee payers.

4.9.3 As might be expected, given the high levels of participation in higher education in Northern Ireland, there is a significant proportion of the student body identified as widening participation. However, at 51% the identification of widening participation students would seem to considerably exceed the numbers included in the SEC and other identified widening participation cohorts. Clearly we need better systems of identification that will provide more focus on those most in need as outlined in the Key Actions of Theme 1. It is also clear that, in line with the Harris findings, HE institutions will need to develop a better balance between student bursaries and pre-entry outreach programmes.

4.9.4 Beginning in 2012 the Department proposes to begin a process to simplify the infrastructure around widening participation and for the first time to include all of the funded institutions offering higher education courses within the arrangements.

4.9.5 Access Agreements and Widening Participation Strategic Assessments will be amalgamated into a single Widening Access and Participation Plan (WAPP). This plan will be submitted to the Department annually by all fee charging institutions to be agreed by the Department 12 – 18 months in advance of the proposed fee year. The agreed WAPP, which will be published, will include a summary of the institution’s widening participation strategy, observations on the institution’s past achievement against regional benchmarks and a detailed programme of anticipated progress each year towards the institution’s own targets. “Persons or groups of interest” will be specifically reported upon in the HE institutions’ new WAPP to be introduced from 2013, along with specific actions and targets for improving representation from each under-represented group in the coming year. These documents will also include commentary from the recognised student body at the institution.

4.9.6 Institutions will remain responsible for setting and publishing their own performance targets for widening participation and the mix of components within the WAPP will be a matter for individual institutions but the Department will give greater weight to aspects such as:

• the scale and nature of outreach activities with schools and colleges particularly in disadvantaged areas;
• the scale and nature of outreach activities to adult learners both in the workplace and in disadvantaged communities;
• the use of summer schools or other attainment raising programmes;
• the number and value of fee waiver and other direct assistance programmes; and
• specific targeting of the Most Able : Least Likely students.

4.9.7 Institutions will be required to gather and report admissions data on regionally agreed Access Performance Indicators (API) on the numbers of students admitted from the target groups identified in Theme 1. Performance targets should include a programme of defined progress to be made each year (set within a rolling 3-year time frame) against appropriate benchmarks to be agreed with the Department in advance. Although regional targets will be primary, comparisons will still be made against HESA benchmarks for the UK.

4.9.8 As a consequence of the recent changes to student fee arrangements in Britain, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) will no longer have any oversight of Access Agreements for Northern Ireland institutions. Under the new arrangements the Department will discuss and agree the WAPP with each institution on an annual basis. WAPP will be published by each institution after it has been agreed by the Department.

4.9.9 In addition, the Department will publish a composite Annual Report on Widening Participation in Higher Education that will outline the current position, identify any under-representation for the groups defined by Key Action 3 and include specific improvement actions for groups of interest.

**Key Action 11:** The Department will amalgamate Access Agreements and Widening Participation Strategic Assessments into a single Widening Access and Participation Plan which will be submitted annually for approval by all funded fee charging institutions offering higher education courses.

4.9.10 The starting point for expenditure on widening participation from 2012 onwards will be the current levels of expenditure. It is expected that there will be a gradual rebalancing of institutions’ widening participation spend from student bursaries to community outreach and attainment raising activities. The Department will continue to make Widening Participation Premium funding available to assist with the extra costs of retention for WP students but it is expected that levels will reduce over time as it will become payable only for the most in need as determined by Key Action 3. There are no anticipated changes to the payment of Widening Access Premiums.

4.9.11 Departmental support for Premium funding will reduce but project funding will be increased proportionately to encourage the development of new outreach initiatives as outlined in Key Action 5. This funding will be available to institutions on a competitive basis. Departmental funding will be more directly linked to widening participation activities and achievements and will be underpinned by the Additionality concept.
4.9.12 Institutions will be required to ensure that their widening access and participation support is clearly set out and publicly available and that students are advised of that support for the whole duration of their course before they begin their first year. All HE providers will be expected to invest on the scale of between 20% and 30% of student fee income in widening participation activities and programmes. A higher percentage of spend will be expected from those with the furthest to go in widening participation than from those in more diverse institutions.

SANCTIONS

4.9.13 The autonomy of the institutions in the admissions process remains undiminished. The Department will have no role in the admissions process and may only set conditions which relate to the promotion of widening access and participation. Partnership will be key to make progress through agreement.

4.9.14 However, if in the Department’s view students have been disadvantaged, or there has been a wilful or serious breach of previous commitments, the Department will retain the right under current legislation to not approve or renew the annual WAPP. This would remove the institution’s right to charge its students above the basic level. However, the Department also has a range of other sanctions available should an institution breach or fail to deliver its access commitments, including to:

- impose a fine of up to £500,000;
- require that institutions make restitution if students have been disadvantaged or commitments have not been honoured.

4.9.15 Since the fees regime in Northern Ireland has not changed, there are no proposals to change the current sanctions for non-compliance. However, the Department will continue to monitor the arrangements with OFFA to ensure that neither local institutions, nor local students, are disadvantaged in any way.

4.9.16 It is envisaged that the strategy will phase in the necessary changes to existing widening participation structures between 2012 and end of March 2015.
5. SUMMARY
5. SUMMARY

5.1 By most measures Northern Ireland has had the most successful widening participation outcomes in the United Kingdom over the last few years. The region leads the way on many important measures of equality in participation. Moreover, that increased participation has been across the board and has included all groups within society. Representation from most target groups is better in Northern Ireland and widening participation activities and programmes are now fully embedded in the HE institutions’ corporate strategies. This has not come about by accident but rather through the hard work of the local HE institutions and a systematic approach encouraged by the preparation and implementation of annual Access Agreements and Widening Participation Strategic Assessments.

5.2 However, there remain stubborn pockets of disadvantage that will require a more concentrated approach to defeat. People from the SEC groups 5 – 7; those with disabilities, physical, mental and learning; young males, particularly young Protestant males from low participation areas; people from areas of multiple deprivation; and older learners, specifically learners in employment are not participating in HE to the potential detriment of themselves, society and the economy. However, it must be remembered that disadvantage is multi-faceted and that these groups are not homogeneous. It is, therefore, essential that the solutions developed to support participation in higher education are tailored to the individual rather than the group.

5.3 The overall thrust of this strategy will be to focus, as much as possible, on individual students. The twin keys to the strategy are Integration and Regionality. It’s about getting all of our higher education providers to work to common definitions and measures for widening participation, while developing their own unique approaches within a common framework.

5.4 The new arrangements to centralise awareness raising of HE, supported by new focussed attainment raising programmes at school, community and workplace levels should help to provide that more targeted approach. Aspiration begins with information and there is evidence that good, timely information and guidance, or the lack of it, can have a profound effect on a young person’s progression options. Raising educational attainment levels is critical to ensuring the widest possible pool of applicants to higher education from across the entire spectrum of society. The University of Ulster’s Step-Up is an exemplar programme and has won national acclaim for its work. It is therefore appropriate to invest in other such programmes to promote better access from communities and groups with lower participation rates.

5.5 Enhanced recruitment and selection procedures will be essential for the institutions to maintain, and increase where possible, their linkages with low participation groups both in school and in wider society. Institutions should avail themselves of every opportunity to consider all relevant information pertaining to an applicant and that may necessitate the use of contextual data to combat the inbuilt inequalities encountered by the disadvantaged and under-represented groups in society.
5.6 Widening participation extends beyond recruitment and selection and covers the entire student journey to graduation and progression to the world of work. The difficulties post recruitment and selection are different from those that went before and often affect a very different cohort of student. Nevertheless careful targeting of students at risk and the provision of appropriate support, coupled with improved use of bursaries, fee waivers and other forms of direct support will be vital to reducing the currently unacceptable levels of drop-out of students from higher education courses in Northern Ireland.

5.7 The simplification of the infrastructure around widening participation and the rationalisation of the existing requirements for HE institutions to submit annual Access Agreements and separate Strategic Assessments to be incorporated into a single published document should help students, parents and careers advisers to better understand the institution’s widening participation strategy within a rolling three-year context, its achievements against targets for the last year, and the specific targets and actions that each institution has set to be achieved in the coming year.

5.8 The inclusion within the widening participation structures of all funded institutions offering higher education courses, including the FE Colleges, will allow those institutions to publicise, and get recognition for, their excellent record in achieving fair access and the work that they have been undertaking to attract the most disadvantaged members of the community to participate in higher education.
## Appendix A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding the Demand Side Needs</th>
<th>Raising Aspiration and Attainment</th>
<th>Enhancing Recruitment and Selection</th>
<th>Improving the Quality &amp; Relevance of Support for Retention and Progression</th>
<th>Streamlining the structures for Involvement &amp; Investment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Longitudinal study of educational attainment to identify patterns of disadvantage when applying to higher education.</td>
<td>4: Single integrated regional awareness raising programme.</td>
<td>6: Increased enrolments in Foundation Degrees.</td>
<td>8: Attendance monitoring of all students in receipt of widening participation support.</td>
<td>11: Introduction of an annual Widening Access and Participation Plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Review of data pertaining to access to, and participation in, higher education.</td>
<td>5: Expansion of aspiration and attainment raising programmes at school, college, community and the workplace.</td>
<td>7: Encouragement of regional programmes for a standardised route of exceptional application to higher education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3: Identification of Widening Participation students based on multiple disadvantages and including an assessment of individual needs.</td>
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<td>9: HE institutions to develop additional support measures for students to sustain continuing participation.</td>
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<td>10: Philanthropic bursary / scholarship programmes.</td>
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### SUMMARY OF KEY MILESTONES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INITIATIVE</th>
<th>MILESTONES</th>
<th>DATES</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| **Key Action 1**: Longitudinal study of educational attainment to identify patterns of disadvantage when applying to higher education. | • Service level contract agreed and awarded  
• First report to establish baselines  
• Annual reports on cohorts progress | Jan 2012  
Sept 2012  
Annual |
| **Key Action 2**: Review of data pertaining to access to, and participation in, higher education. | • Project team established by TEASB  
• Review existing procedures  
• Agree new data sources | Sept 2012  
Mar 2013  
June 2013 |
| **Key Action 3**: Identification of Widening Participation students based on multiple disadvantages and including an assessment of individual needs. | • Project team established by TEASB  
• Identify cohort characteristics  
• Develop full identification system | Sept 2012  
June 2013  
Mar 2014 |
| **Key Action 4**: Single integrated regional awareness raising programme. | • Project team established  
• DFP approval for campaign  
• Programme launch | Sept 2012  
Mar 2013  
Sept 2013 |
| **Key Action 5**: Expansion of aspiration and attainment raising programmes at school, college, community and the workplace. | • Policies, programmes and resources identified  
• Baseline data and progress measures established for the sector | Dec 2012  
March 2013 |
| **Key Action 6**: Increased enrolments in Foundation Degrees. | • Baseline 1,147  
• Secure DFP approval for advertising campaign  
• To achieve 1,500  
• To achieve 2,000  
• To achieve 2,500 | 2010  
June 2012  
Sept 2012  
Sept 2013  
March 2015 |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>INITIATIVE</th>
<th>MILESTONES</th>
<th>DATES</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Action 7</strong>: Encouragement of regional programmes for a standardised route of exceptional application to higher education.</td>
<td>• Preliminary discussions with HE institutions • Establishment of working groups to identify key issues • Agreed standard measurements • Launch programmes</td>
<td>Sept 2012 • Oct 2012 • Oct 2013 • Sept 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Action 8</strong>: Attendance monitoring of all students in receipt of widening participation support.</td>
<td>• Pilot • Standard monitoring</td>
<td>Sept 2012 • Sept 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Action 9</strong>: HE institutions to develop additional support measures for students to sustain continuing participation.</td>
<td>• HE institutions will outline plans in annual WAPP</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Action 10</strong>: Philanthropic bursary / scholarship programmes.</td>
<td>• Discussion begun with 3 community groups • Launch first 2 programmes</td>
<td>June 2012 • Sept 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Action 11</strong>: Introduction of an annual Widening Access and Participation Plan.</td>
<td>• Pilot • Annual process</td>
<td>Dec 2012 • June 2013 • Ongoing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

CONSULTATION RESPONDENTS

List of Respondents

A
Advice NI
Alliance Sector Skills Council

B
Belfast City Council
Brownlow Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board

C
Colleges NI

D
Disability Action

F
Forum for Adult Learning NI
Foyle Learning Community

I
ILEX
Institute of Engineering and Technology (Engineering Policy Group NI)
Irish Congress of Trade Unions
N
National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers
Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders
Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action
Northern Regional College

O
Open College Network NI
Open University

P
Prince’s Trust

Q
Queen’s University Belfast

R
Royal National Institute for Deaf

S
South Eastern Regional College
Southern Regional College
St. Mary’s University College, Belfast
Stranmillis University College
Ulster Teachers Union
University and College Union
University of Ulster

Voice of Young People in Care

Women’s Support Network

Individuals:
Dame Geraldine Keegan
Padraig Canavan
John Farren
Marie Lindsay
Fabian Monds

The Department also undertook a number of open public consultation events in partnership with the following organisations:
Belfast Workforce Development Forum
Northern Workforce Development Forum
North West Workforce Development Forum
Southern Workforce Development Forum
South West Workforce Development Forum
THE DEPARTMENT:
Our aim is to promote learning and skills, to prepare people for work and to support the economy.

This report can be made available in other formats on request.

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