WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HE:
MAPPING AND INVESTIGATING THE STAKEHOLDER LANDSCAPE

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Non-Participation in HE Project

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Introduction

National policy to widen participation (WP) in higher education (HE) remains high on the UK political agenda, as the evidence continues to indicate the under-representation of some groups: particularly, those from lower social class backgrounds and certain neighbourhoods (*inter alia* Gorard *et al* 2006, Reay *et al* 2005, Archer *et al* 2003). The Government's target that 50 per cent of 18-30 year olds should experience higher education by the year 2010 has under-pinned the development of policy, strategies and initiatives designed to produce a more representative student population. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has provided the strategic lead and funding to support this activity. Its allocation to institutions for WP activities has risen to 344 million pounds for 2006-07 (from £284 million in 2005-06). In addition, it has funded national initiatives such as the Aimhigher programme and the Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs), in partnership with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and Department for Education and Skills (DfES). Aimhigher seeks to raise the educational aspirations from under-represented groups and is particularly focused on school-age teenagers. The LLNs aim to increase progression to HE provision by those following or who have followed vocational or work-based routes.

A study[3] funded by the ESRC, and undertaken as part of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), has provided the opportunity to explore the range of stakeholders involved in WP activities and to begin to map how they are working, often

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[3] *'Non-Participation in Higher Education; Decision-making as an embedded social practice'* (2006-2008), is being conducted by a team of researchers at the University of Southampton, RES 139-25-0232. Professors Alison Fuller and Sue Heath are co-directing the research and Karen Paton is the project's Research Associate. For more details about the study and research team visit www.education.soton.ac.uk/nphe

in complex partnership arrangements, to fulfil WP policy objectives. Interviews have been conducted with over 30 key informants representing policy, provider and employer stakeholders at national, regional and local levels. They have identified existing approaches to WP in HE and perceptions of the barriers to take up for 'client groups'. The evidence suggests that there are multiple and conflicting voices positioned within different levels of the WP stakeholder landscape.

This paper starts to map stakeholder involvement and relationships within the context of one sub-regional area in the South East of England. It draws on the perspectives of key informants as a lens through which to further understanding of how WP policy is being framed and (re-)contextualised in practice. The contrasting stakeholder voices allow us to consider the inter-play between funding and targets, and collaborative approaches to the implementation and delivery of government policy at local level.

The paper is organised in five sections. The first provides a brief outline of policy development in this area and indicates that since 1997, collaborative and partnership approaches have been promoted as a key way of achieving nationally set WP goals. The second section introduces the key informant component of our research and summarises the data that has been collected. The third section presents our initial mapping of the stakeholder landscape drawing on evidence from the key informant interviews. In section four, we focus on how the 'delivery' of WP in HE is operationalised via stakeholder networks; and provide illustrative evidence of the range and type of 'partners' and relationships. In the final section, we conclude that current WP activity stems mainly from the priorities, funding and targets laid down by national policy and that this is generating collaborative arrangements between stakeholders, although how these will be sustained over time is unclear. In addition, the analysis indicates that current efforts are focused on young people with little attention being paid to adults (20+).

1. Policy driven 'collaboration'

The concept of WP in HE, as distinct from simply increasing or expanding participation, has taken root in the policy discourse relatively recently, and arguably, in the years following the publication of Lord Dearing's review of HE in 1997 (Maringe and Fuller

2007, forthcoming). A policy focus on widening and not just increasing participation places an emphasis on social justice and equity. The aim seems to be the eventual achievement of an ideal model where the pattern of participation mirrors the characteristics of the general adult population. In particular, policy makers are exercised by the 'problem' of under-represented groups, and particularly those from lower socio-economic groups. For example, in 2000, just over 18% of young people from manual, partly skilled and unskilled family backgrounds attended HE compared to 48% of those from families with professional and non manual occupations (DfES 2003: 7).

The main thrust of the Dearing recommendations relating to WP were based on the premise that students from lower socio-economic groups were failing to access HE because of poor qualifications, low aspirations and flawed educational decision making (NCIHE, 1997: 101-113): in other words, their weak representation was attributed to individual 'deficits'. The Dearing report endorsed greater collaboration between providers as a means of WP and especially interventions which increased the flexibility and range of provision. In particular, it recommended that the expansion of HE should mainly be at sub-degree level with 'ladders and bridges' developed to encourage progression to full degree attainment. Importantly, Dearing recommended that additional public funds should be allocated to institutions to enable them to develop links with schools in disadvantaged areas and whose pupils were unlikely to participate in HE. A collaborative model was also linked to the creation and development of new sub-degree level provision (Foundation Degrees).

Following Dearing and the election of the New Labour government, WP in HE became a key national policy goal, driven particularly by Tony Blair's announcement in September 2000 of a target of 50 per cent of the 18-30 population to participate by 2010. The creation of this policy target was reinforced through the availability of public funding to support WP and its distribution via HEFCE to higher education institutions, to develop WP strategies and activities. These included the development of collaborative arrangements designed to attract more young people from under-represented groups and to promote Foundation Degrees as a key vehicle for achieving this goal. Examples of such initiatives included, Excellence Challenge (2000) and Partnerships for Progression (2002), which have subsequently been incorporated under the banner of Aimhigher. HEFCE also developed the mechanism of target setting as a policy lever on the WP behaviour of HEIs and began to publish data on the achievement of

performance indicators measuring the extent to which the student population has been diversifying (these include, for example, % of students from State schools, % from lower socio-economic groups, and % from low participation neighbourhoods). The publication of the latest White Paper on HE (DfES 2003) sees WP moving to the centre ground of national HE policy-making. This is evidenced by HEFCE (2003) making 'fair access' its first strategic objective. Latest policy continues to foreground the need to raise academic aspirations amongst under-represented groups using the key policy drivers of funding, targets and monitoring of key performance indicators.

The government has also recently made money available to fund a joint initiative by HEFCE, DfES and the LSC to establish regional Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs). These are designed to improve the rate of progression to HE by people following vocational pathways and attaining vocational qualifications. The 'partnering up' of HEFCE, DfES and the LSC to develop and support an initiative that spans the traditional divide between the learning and skills and higher education sectors provides an example of how new forms of cross sector collaboration are emerging at the national level as well as between providing institutions and support organisations. The two publicly funded policy vehicles for achieving WP targets, Aimhigher and LLNs, have been designed to use institutional collaboration and partnerships as the mechanism to achieve WP targets (see appendix A for summary statements from relevant web sites).

The 'partnership approach' to WP in HE is consistent with the wider New Labour strategy of creating and using stakeholder networks and collaborative arrangements to implement a range of public policies (see *inter alia* Ball 2006, Cardini 2006 and Barnes *et al* 2004). The initiatives and relationships relied on to deliver results are couched in a benevolent discourse that fosters collaboration, partnership and networking as the way to achieve what national policy constructs as shared goals. Summarising New Labour's 'partnership approach' to policy implementation and delivery, Cardini argues that:

> …a powerful shift has been articulated to redefine and legitimate partnerships as a benevolent and original form of social coordination that moves away from and beyond the Conservative's use of a competition narrative to promote instead collaborative and participatory practices. (2006: 396)

We suggest that policy implementation in the area of WP in HE provides one further illustration of the government's approach, as diverse stakeholders are encouraged to

work together to achieve the aim of a more representative student population. In some similarity, Hodgson and Spours suggest that the attempt to promote collaborative arrangements amongst national, regional and local stakeholders in the area of 14-19 educational policy reform can be seen as 'a manifestation of the political era and a reinforcing element within it' (2006a: 687). With regard to the development of the14-19 phase, stakeholders would include the DfES, QCA, LSC, OFSTED, public and private education providers and so on. From the perspective of WP in HE we can also detect a range of players including, HEFCE, DfES, HEA, UCAS, HEIs, FE colleges, schools, providers of advice and guidance services, and beyond to include public and private sector employers, Trades Unions and community groups. The 'collaborative model' for 14-19 is associated with the use of controlling devices (funding, targets and inspection) to shape stakeholder behaviour at all levels (Hodgson and Spours, 2006b). These top-down policy mechanisms are also being used to steer institutional behaviour in relation to WP in HE and can be viewed as at odds with the benign rhetoric.

Hodgson and Spours draw on Bowe *et al*'s (1992) 'policy triangle' model to point out that policy creation, implementation and practice provide three 'contexts' (the context of influence, the context of policy text production and the context of practice) within which there can be interaction between policy and stakeholders, and which provide an explanation for divergence between the policy as stated and the policy as practiced or experienced:

> The [policy triangle] model thus helps to explain why policies may be conceived in one way at the level of policy text production, for example, but be interpreted in another at the level of implementation, and how both intended and unintended outcomes may occur. (Hodgson and Spours 2006a: 689)

In relation to WP in HE, there are likely to be tensions between market driven institutional behaviour with regard to student recruitment for example and the policy push for collaboration. Given the nature and relevance of the policy process to understanding perceptions and trends in widening the student population, it is important for us to try and capture the array of stakeholders involved in WP in HE policy implementation and delivery: a) to map the stakeholder landscape; b) to identify inter-stakeholder relationships; and c) to identify stakeholders' roles and foci (including which groups are targeted) in this area. A key question for us is how centrally and nationally determined WP policy is implemented and contextualised through the behaviour of, and interaction

between, diverse stakeholders at national, regional and local level. In order to explore these issues we have conducted a wide range of key informant interviews and it is to this aspect of our research that we now turn.

2. The Research

Interviews were carried out with 32 key informants mainly during the period May to August 2006. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and are currently being analysed with the help of a qualitative data analysis computer software package (Atlas ti). At this stage the detailed analysis is incomplete so the findings reported here should be seen as provisional. The stakeholder data provides the broader context for our main research which will explore how attitudes to higher education and decisions about non-participation are embedded in networks of intimacy, consisting of family members and close friends. The geographical focus for the study and for the identification of local and regional key informants is one county in the South of England. The profile of our key informant sample is as follows:

Policy Inception

	Number of interviews
National policy makers and organisations	5
Regional and sub-regional policy makers and organisations	6
Publicly funded intermediary organisations	5
Higher education institutions	7
FE and FHE colleges	5
Training Providers	2
Employers	2
Total	32

Macro level

Meso level

Micro level

Implementation and Delivery

The sample was generated through two main methods. We drew up an initial target list of national, regional and local organisations addressing participation issues in the

selected county. A snowballing technique was then used to develop and extend the sample. Our early key informants were able to identify other 'players' in the local stakeholder landscape and we successfully followed up many of these contacts. This was a particularly effective way of exploring the range of organisations involved (peripherally and more centrally) in such a complex and diverse area of practice. Within our key informant sample, we have representation at three organisational levels: these can also be broadly located along the policy process continuum of inception, implementation and delivery:

1 At the *macro level* and associated with policy inception, are the policy-making organisations that address WP at a national level, such as the DfES, HEFCE, NIACE and UCAS.
2 At the *meso level* and associated with policy implementation there are regional and sub-regional policy makers and organisations, as well as publicly funded intermediary organisations implementing government policies through regional partnerships. For example, SEEDA, LSC, Aimhigher and Connexions.
3 At the *micro level* and associated with policy delivery we have covered a wide range of educational institutions providing further and higher education[4]. Also at the micro level we have training providers. We have found these to be a varied group with a diverse range of funding sources (voluntary and private sector) and we have tried to represent this diversity in our sample. Finally we have a small sample of employers within the micro level of our sample. These cover both the public and private sector and provide us with the opportunity to understand how these employers are approaching widening participation issues for their workforces.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature, thus allowing key informants to say what is important and relevant in their role and to their organisation, as well as inviting them to respond to the following range of topics:

- Approaches to widening participation
- The focus of widening participation activities
- Perceptions of the barriers to take up of higher education
- The information institutions hold on HE participation
- Partnership arrangements

The interviews provided rich insights into the various perspectives and voices positioned within different levels of the stakeholder landscape. The next section of this paper will

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[4] Since the straightforward divide between FE and HE is breaking down, we have ensured that we have included in our sample both HEIs providing FE provision and FEIs providing HE provision, as well as FEIs and HEIs in the more traditional sense.

explore this diversity of perspectives and practices and show that approaches to and understandings of WP differ significantly at the organisational and individual level.

3. Mapping the Stakeholder Landscape

In this section of the paper, we develop an initial mapping of the stakeholder landscape based on our key informant interviews. We do this by analysing the data in terms of the role and focus of WP in HE and the age groups which are targeted in stakeholder activity.

Role and focus of WP

Interviewees were all asked to outline their role and focus in relation to WP in HE. Preliminary analysis of the data suggests that stakeholder's involvement needs to be differentiated by person (our individual key informant) and organisational roles. The degree of relevance reported ranged widely and seemed to fall in to three types a) where WP in HE was the interviewee's personal as well as their organisation's role or core function - the *sine qua non* of all their activity. We have characterised this as 'integrated commitment'; b) where although WP in HE was central to the interviewee's role they worked in settings where it was one of a number of priorities, or indeed of peripheral concern, characterised here as 'mixed commitment'; c) where WP in HE was a secondary or even marginal interest in terms of their own role and that of their organisation's. We have categorised this as 'peripheral commitment'. The latter two categories in particular are broad and encompass a variety of configurations of individual and organisational role and focus.

The largest proportion of our interviews fell into the 'peripheral commitment' category, with slightly fewer falling in to the 'mixed' grouping and very few categorisable under 'integrated commitment'. Figure One depicts this profile graphically.

Figure One: Stakeholder distribution in terms of personal and organisational commitment/concern to WP

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            /\
           /  \
          / A  \        Integrated commitment
         /------\
        /        \
       /    B     \     Mixed commitment
      /------------\
     /              \
    /       C        \  Peripheral commitment
   /_____\
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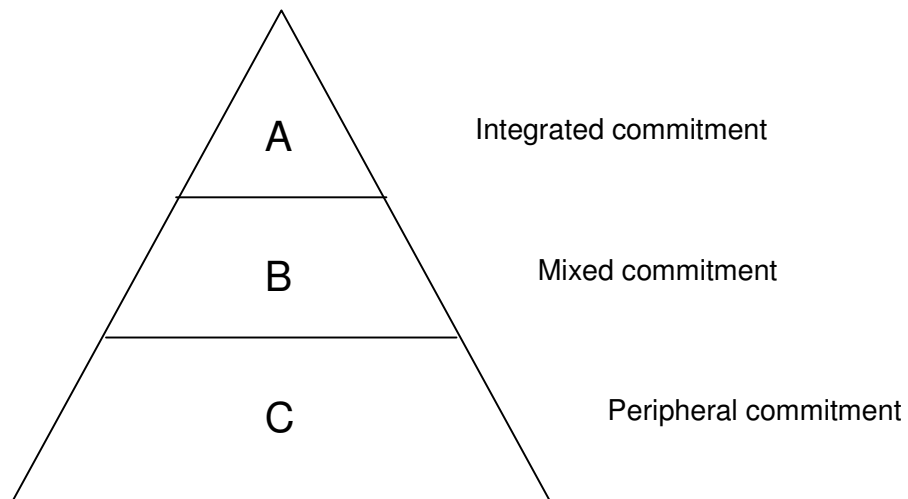
Differentiating the extent to which WP in HE is the core concern of individuals and their organisations, and assessing the distribution of stakeholders across the three categories is helpful. It shows that WP in HE is rarely stakeholders' core concern in the sense that there is an alignment of purpose between the individual interviewed and their organisation, and it is the central focus of both. The three 'models of commitment' can be illustrated though three of our KI interviews.

Integrated commitment

This KI is Director of an Aimhigher partnership, as such WP in HE is integral to both his personal and his organisation's roles. He facilitates and co-ordinates the work of Aimhigher at a local partnership level. This involves running a wide range of activities to engage and motivate young people from all walks of life, who have the potential to enter higher education but are under-achieving, undecided or lacking in confidence. He explains:

> Aimhigher is part of a national project, a government project; to try to increase the participation of particularly underrepresented and disadvantaged groups in higher education… our main focus is aspiration raising events and activities for school children. (Director, Aimhigher partnership)

Some examples of local Aimhigher activity include: offering information, advice and guidance to potential HE students and their teachers and families, organising summer schools, taster days, master classes and mentoring schemes to raise the aspirations and attainment of young people with the potential to enter HE, working with employers and training providers to progress students onto vocational routes to HE, working to encourage those already in the workplace to become full-time, part-time or distance learning students, campus visits, residential summer schools, master classes and taster days, mentoring programmes, and online and other information sources that demonstrate progression routes. Activities at a regional and area level are supported by national Aimhigher activity.

Mixed Commitment

This KI is Head of Marketing at a post-1992 university. The Department provides a wide range of marketing and communication functions across the University. Our interviewee is responsible for coordinating the widening participation activities of the University. She explains:

> [our remit is to] go out and broaden horizons and to talk to people about higher education and what benefits it might have in a way of giving them information, giving the confidence to make the right decisions along their progression through education.

Whilst WP is becoming increasingly important to this university it falls amongst a number of other competing priorities. The university's core purpose is to be a centre of excellence in providing higher education and doing research. Therefore, although WP is central to the KI's personal role, it remains secondary to the overall University mission.

Peripheral Commitment

This KI is the Team Leader of an organisation which offers information, advice and guidance to adults over the age of 19. The aim of their activities is to provide ongoing support to adults (particularly those with few existing qualifications) who are looking to enter learning or employment and to help them improve their career prospects by learning new skills, retraining or gaining new qualifications. Its service is delivered through a team of advisors who work in an outreach capacity in a number of settings including family learning centres, libraries, jobcentres, the probation service, trade

unions, colleges, training providers, and Connexions. Widening participation in HE is only of marginal or secondary interest in terms of the KI's own role and that of the organisation, although he explains that the service is tailored to individual needs with advisors discussing HE options as appropriate:

> I mean I wouldn't say we have a specific focus [on widening participation], I mean it's something that as I said the resource is provided by Aimhigher… although the [his organisation's] advisors, certainly those that are guidance trained, look at HE as a potential option for clients, but… the guidance has to be appropriate, it has to be right for them… the focus is really only those yet to achieve a level 2 qualification. (Team leader, Information, Advice and Guidance provider)

Summary

In the case of 'integrated commitment', the organisation has been created solely as an instrument for implementing government policy. The mixed commitment category is more heavily populated and provides evidence of the growing policy and funding reach associated with WP in HE as, for example, universities and colleges appoint individuals to roles with a specific WP brief. Such appointments can usually be seen as responses to the sorts of top-down funding, targets and monitoring drivers being utilised at the national level to influence institutional behaviour. The third category represents more peripheral stakeholders. Evidence from the interviews indicates that such respondents were aware of the growing importance of WP in HE in national policy and had in most cases started to recontextualise this in terms of the relevance of HE to their own 'constituencies' (e.g. workforce, trades union members, clients and trainees). However, these ('peripheral commitment') KI organisations have not as yet been directly identified as targets for government WP in HE policy. If policy makers wish to include the sorts of groups (of non-participants) with whom these stakeholders engage, they will need to find ways of facilitating or encouraging their movement (up) into the 'mixed commitment' category. It will be interesting to monitor the extent to which the recently introduced LLNs (focusing on vocational and work-based progression) develop effective colloborative working with a broader range of organisations.

The large majority (approximately three quarters) of all stakeholders in our sample were focused on young people up to age 19. Those publicly funded organisations concentrating on the post-19s were more interested in increasing adult basic skills in line

with the Government's targets on level 2 attainment across the population. In contrast, one of our employers was focused on upskilling its workforce in order to meet changing business and skill requirements. This included supporting employees to gain higher level work related qualifications as appropriate.

Preliminary analysis of the data is indicating that the mapping presented in this paper should be seen as a shifting landscape. It provides a snapshot of the extent (or depth) of current policy reach into stakeholder behaviour as well as the range of organisations that can be located in the territory. The diverse character of the stakeholder landscape generates a dynamic policy implementation context and illustrates that the policy process is relying on multiple partners 'to deliver'. However, for the majority of organisational stakeholders WP in HE policy is not their sole or even core concern.

4. Delivering WP in HE (through partnership)

The topic guide developed for the KI interviews was designed to give respondents the space to identify and talk about their priorities and concerns. Interviewees were asked to identify organisations with which they worked. They were not strongly led by the interviewer to elaborate this aspect of their behaviour as we were interested in exploring the extent to which and in what ways respondents themselves raised and discussed partnership arrangements and collaborative working. The lists of organisations with whom stakeholders networked were very similar and included: education providers (universities, colleges and schools), local and regional government bodies, and other publicly funded intermediary and advisory organisations (e.g. Connexions, local LSC). Perhaps, not surprisingly, macro level stakeholders such as HEFCE, DfES and UCAS were mainly mentioned as part of the 'context of influence' rather than being conceived as 'partners'. In the rest of this section, we outline and illustrate two emerging themes: formal partnership arrangements and voluntary collaboration.

Formal arrangements

As already mentioned, the Government views collaboration and partnership working as central to the delivery and implementation of its WP in HE agenda. This can perhaps be seen most strongly in the development of the Aimhigher programme. The Aimhigher; Strategy and Action Plan for the area being researched states:

The overall vision of the Aimhigher [name of] partnership continues to be that it makes an effective contribution to widening participation in higher education in the southeast region of England and thereby supports the national campaign to increase participation for those aged 18-30. This will be achieved by building on the successes of established partnerships and strategies and by developing new collaborative programmes to raise aspirations and achievements of under-represented groups

The Partnership comprises:

- Connexions
- Further Education Colleges
- Local Learning and Skills Council
- Local Authorities
- Adult advisory organisation
- Partnership Network Ltd (including Educational Business Partnerships)
- Schools
- Sixth Form Colleges
- Universities
- Regional development agency
- South East England Development Agency

This Partnership builds on previous collaborative working (from the former 'Excellence Challenge' and 'Partnerships for Progression' programmes) and encompasses links with key local and regional stakeholders as well as being informed by regional and national policy making organisations including HEFCE and DfES.

The function of Aimhigher is to broker and coordinate the roles of partners, and to ensure that resources are distributed appropriately between those involved. Each partner takes the lead on an action programme and receives funding to run WP in HE activities. So, for example, each university partner focuses on one of the following issues: awareness and aspiration raising on campus; awareness and aspiration raising off campus; developing progression routes within the flexible curriculum; staff development and training; and research and dissemination. Similarly, other partners take the lead in other areas including, information advice and guidance; work based learning activities; events championing vocational routes; and improving recruitment and retention. Information about the range of activities is included in the Aimhigher action plan and this also specifies outcome indicators and impact measures based on the original HEFCE priority areas (which have been adapted to align with local area context).

Although different action programmes within Aimhigher are led by different organisations, most are also involved in a range of WP 'action programmes'. To foster this activity, Aimhigher staff are located in four universities in the area. As an Aimhigher Progression Manager explains:

> The way that Aimhigher is set up is that everyone is based in a higher education institution. But my role… well there's different action programmes in Aimhigher and they are led by different institutions. Most institutions have activities across a range of action programmes so say the umm off-campus which would mean in-school activities would be led by… I can't remember who it is now, but let's say that it's the University of X, but everybody, so A University, the University of B, C and X would have off-campus activities going on, but it's led by X.

In this way, Aimhigher workers although not affiliated to or employed by the University, work in collaboration with the institution to lead on a particular strand of Aimhigher activity in the local area. Activities are supposed to be generic, for example, aspiration-raising (rather than recruiting to individual HEIs). As one university KI explains:

> Widening participation is all part of marketing here at the University. It's not directly a sales tool or a recruitment tool but it's something that we feel in terms of with the access agreements and the preponderance towards widening participation that we should be doing and that sort of expertise lies within my team. The Aimhigher workers are also part and parcel of my team, so they work specifically on Aimhigher activities but they sit within the broader team of educational outreach for the University. The Aimhigher work that we do here involves going out to schools and colleges and giving talks and presentations… but we're not just talking about the University [name], we are talking about higher education in general and what it might offer… what it's about is broadening people's aspirations and horizons and telling them what opportunities higher education can offer.

However, it was noted by many of our key informants that young people may be influenced to go to the institution which has targeted their school/college. As a respondent from another university explains:

> The whole idea of Aimhigher and widening participation is to actually provide a positive and balanced experience of the opportunities that they can seek at any stage in life. It is a universalistic message… but the plus point for institutions themselves, the universities delivering the project is that hopefully they would have had those positive experiences at our campuses, hopefully they will choose us as one of their choices and end up coming to us.

This raises the question of whether some 'non-traditional' student groups are being channelled towards local HE institutions and courses which might not be 'suitable'

choices for them. This potentially could lead to negative experiences of HE and/or greater drop out rates amongst these students.

Aimhigher has also identified priority schools and colleges with which to work and on which to concentrate finite resources. The original target lists of schools were primarily based on HEFCE Polar data sets which focussed upon the location of schools within low HE participation electoral wards. The lists were refined by considering low school attainment levels at key stage 4. Two priority lists were identified: high priority 'A' schools and a smaller 'B' list (secondary priority) schools (54 schools are targeted in the area being researched). In addition a single target list of 15 colleges was developed based on student deprivation data available from the LSC and by considering location in low participation areas and other aspects of the local context.

> All the schools in [this area], they are sort of ranked in terms of whether they are in a particular area of deprivation and also on their achievement rate. So generally it's the schools that have the lower achievement rates and have a higher index of deprivation which are actually targeted [by Aimhigher]. So we do have two lists; one is like priority schools to work with and then we have the other schools. The priority schools are then divided up between the four universities so that we don't sort of have a mix and muddle of you know three universities working with one school and nobody working with another school, so yeah that's all been sorted out. (University KI)

Another university interviewee explained the collaborative relationship between Aimhigher, schools, colleges and universities in his city:

> The aspiration raising activities that we do for Aimhigher from years eight to eleven, we target schools which fall into deprivation, or they have a high proportion of widening participation target groups that the Government fund. We have a cohort from year eight and that cohort of students is invited back. It's a small cohort because it is one hundred per year group for the sub region, because Aimhigher works on a sub-regional partnership [name of partnership]…. So each institution has got this target of getting one hundred students per year group, between years eight and eleven (total of five hundred students) through their doors to participate in aspiration raising activities… We target local schools and colleges. For example we are working with five local colleges and offering them twenty places each; that's how we get our one hundred students per year group… In terms of co-ordination we have split the schools … to work with so we are not overlapping; we are not saturating the schools. …So we have got clear defined groups that we are working with and they all fall under widening participation

She went on to outline the nature of the University's relationship with young people:

> …in year eight we get one hundred students in for a non-residential two day academic event, in year nine there's a taster day they come back and do, in year ten they do a three day residential and in year eleven another taster day. And then we work in colleges locally in year twelve to provide a full taster. So it's building a relationship and actually, rather than doing a one-off in year eight and then they never hearing about university again until year eleven, we try to build up a relationship with them over time (university KI)

With Aimhigher's emphasis on targeting down the age ladder, much importance is also placed on working with primary schools. These target groups are now being reached by its partners. For example, work with primary schools is being developed by university WP teams in conjunction with national Aimhigher initiatives:

> We are working more with primary school children. We used to be focused more on secondary schools but now we're working with primary. We have a programme, an Aimhigher project called [name]…I know it sounds a bit naff but with year fives it actually works very well. It's about learning about university a little bit. (University KI)

In addition to Aimhigher activities, HEIs are also involved in developing their own WP activities through direct funding from HEFCE:

> There's different funding streams for widening participation. So there's the Aimhigher strand and there is what the University gets from the funding council for widening participation. And what HEFCE do is look at our student cohort each year and determine how many of those students come from what they determine to be widening participation postcodes, so we get an additional premium for that. So there's a sum of money, something in the order of about 1.5 million per year that the university gets to support those students and to reach out to them before hand (university KI)

At one university young people from age 11 to 18 are invited to identify with age-related schemes (brands) that aim to work incrementally to develop their self-confidence, as well as their knowledge of what HE can offer.

A Careers Advisor at the University adds:

> The idea of [scheme] is to see them all the way through from age 11 to 18. Just to give them a chance, well progressively to see what university life is like and then when they get to post16, people like me get involved to help them with the more serious bits of getting into university if they decide that is what they want to do.

Compact Agreements provide another example of partnership working between HEIs and schools/colleges to encourage non-traditional participants.

Ok Compact partner colleges and schools. What we are trying to do there is to have a relationship with all the post-sixteen education providers within [the county] and bordering areas. And the Compact is a tool which enables us to give special consideration and support. So those would be people from under-represented groups, people who are struggling financially as well as people who have health issues or have caring responsibilities, or anything which makes it particularly difficult to succeed and to get the entry requirements that we require from the standard student, we will look at possibly making a lower entry offer for those people. (University KI)

Colleges and schools also receive money from Aimhigher to work collaboratively on WP activities as well as from the LSC through the funding attached to schemes such as Train to Gain and the Increased Flexibility programme.

The bulk of public funding for WP in HE is channelled into projects which require collaborative working with schools and colleges, and so are targeted at young people. Less emphasis is placed on reaching other communities, and particularly adults.

Most of what we do is with schools and colleges. We do quite a bit of community work and family learning and again we do that in conjunction with the city and lifelong learning. I would like to do more but again it's a case of [a lack] of resources, money and people. (University KI)

It appears from the interview data that 'formal' collaborative arrangements to support WP in HE are strengthening between educational institutions in the area. This approach has mainly been driven by Aimhigher and its predecessor government supported schemes but is also fostered by the way HEFCE uses funding mechanisms to influence institutional behaviour. There is some evidence then that institutions and particularly universities are reinforcing the collaborative model through their 'own' initiatives. In this regard, the attention of some respondents is being turned to whether partnership arrangements are being co-ordinated effectively:

With widening participation, the universities have begun to do a lot more work within schools and now they are all beginning to work with primary schools, but I think we need to join it up so that we aren't repeating because I think schools get inundated with initiatives and activities being offered to them and if they are being offered it from all over, then it does kind of get quite confusing and I think that there is a way of working together which is why I think the partnership thing is so important. (University KI)

Voluntary activity

Whilst policy levers such as funding and target setting underpin the development of inter-institutional collaboration, the strength of these relationships often appears to rely on the good will and enthusiasm of individuals. In our data we have examples of enthusiastic and committed individuals collaborating with a wide range of organisations to deliver activities aimed at encouraging local people into further and higher education opportunities.

> [name] is a college that has as a main strategic aim widening participation and we've had some success in widening participation as a college… our commitment to widening participation is a firm part of the College's plans… because a big personal ambition of mine is to encourage more youngsters to go to university and it's great to see that's exactly what's happening. (College Principal)

In contrast, another College Principal observed:

> We do teaching and training; we're not social workers, we're not community workers, so we don't have that expertise

Commitment to WP also varies at the university level as the following two contrasting quotations reveal:

> Research is there, teaching is there and administration is there as it was in the old days. Widening participation is somewhere that probably can't fit with most academics…WP is not the University's main mission… the external drivers are what influences us so the Office for Fair Access and in order to charge variable fees the university has to put in what was called an access agreement to show that it was going to be recognising the importance of a diverse body… so it mainly did that because it had to. (University KI)

> Widening participation is a very strong strategic plan; it is a very clear mission of the university… Our new Vice Chancellor has already said in her initial statements in print and spoken that she has five key areas she wants to focus on; one of which is widening participation and other of which is partnerships. And these two go hand in hand really. So I would say that this institution is very keen to increase numbers of students from non-traditional backgrounds. (University KI)

Genuine commitment from the top is seen as critical to WP but so is the interest and goodwill of staff at other levels

> If you've got someone leading it at the top is foursquare behind WP or foursquare behind community engagement then it's a lot easier to get academics further down the food chain whatever you want to call it, to actually engage you know as opposed to working with people, all we can do, we're quite lucky in a way because we can only work with the people who want to work with us. If we hadn't got a

> stick, we've got a bit of money we offer as an incentive, but effectively the people who are doing it do it on top of their day job. (University KI)

This last comment highlights the potential vulnerability of WP in HE activity. If either the external WP drivers and/or the enthusiastic individuals working in the field are taken away, how sustainable are current levels of commitment likely to be, especially when market pressures might be pulling institutional behaviour in other directions?

5. Conclusions

Evidence from our key informant interviews has confirmed the wide range of stakeholders involved in implementing and delivering national WP in HE policies and targets. The map of the stakeholder landscape we are developing indicates the complexity of both the types of stakeholder and the nature of relationships. The interviews also suggest how important it is to understand the relevance of WP in HE to the stakeholder's core mission. This is in relation to both the perspective of the individual key informants and the organisations and institutions they represent. The paper has suggested a three way categorisation of stakeholder commitment: integrated, mixed and peripheral to differentiate between both the key informant and organisational/institutional roles. This conceptualisation highlights the different degrees of involvement in WP in HE within the stakeholder landscape. In particular, it allows us to locate our interviews along core - periphery dimensions for interviewee and institution and to assess their alignment. Stakeholders falling into the integrated and mixed commitment categories, particularly those representing educational institutions were most likely to talk about their involvement in and experience of partnership arrangements and inter-institutional collaboration.

In addition, we have suggested that stakeholders can also be categorised in relation to the groups with which they are concerned. The principal divide here was between those who focus on the pre- and post- 19s. From the perspective of our wider research interest in 'non-participating' adults, there is very little attention being paid to post 19s who are currently potentially recruitable to HE, such as those adults with level 3 qualifications. Currently there appears to be no publicly supported agency with primary responsibility for WP amongst this group and little publicly funded advice and guidance for individuals.

The evidence from these interviews suggests that government supported (via policy and funding) local and sub-regional inter-educational institution partnerships have been constituted and in the case of Aimhigher have been formalised in Partnership agreements. However, the quality and strength of collaborative arrangements and practice are dependent on WP remaining a national policy priority and on the personal commitment of senior managers and staff to the WP 'cause'. In this sense the collaborative practice encountered in these data often seems delicately poised between a weakly and strongly collaborative model[5]. Moreover, the question of whether collaborative approaches embodied in initiatives such as Aimhigher are actually succeeding in WP amongst under-represented groups is, as yet, under-researched. This is partly at least because many of those young people that have taken part in WP activities have yet to reach 19.

Finally, we would argue that current WP policy and targets are too narrowly focussed on young people, such that the equity status of WP policy can itself be called into question. As these data are indicating, partnership arrangements in the main revolve around educational institutions and their students. Very little attention has been directed at wider community or employer involvement in the WP in HE agenda and, consequently, large sections of the population who might benefit are not being included. It will be interesting to monitor the extent to which the LLNs will provide a catalyst for outreach work on WP in HE with older groups located in the community and, or the workplace. The lack of engagement by WP policy and practice with adults who have not participated in HE means that there is a gap in the research and policy literatures about how these groups construct HE and perceive its relevance to their lives and those of their families and friends.

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[5] Ten features of effective collaborative arrangements in the 14-19 phase have been identified by the Nuffield 14-19 review. It is likely that many of these features would be relevant in strengthening collaborative WP in HE activity.

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Appendix A

Aimhigher

Aimhigher is a national programme which aims to widen participation in higher education by raising the aspirations and developing the abilities of people from under-represented groups. Aimhigher partnerships build cross-sector relationships which break down the barriers which institutions and systems can unwittingly create for learners.

Funded activities include summer schools to give school pupils a taste of university life, mentoring by students, and visits by staff from higher education providers to work-based training providers. Target groups are identified by Aimhigher areas, and include young people from neighbourhoods with lower than average HE participation, those from lower socio-economic groups, and people from families with no previous experience of HE.

Aimhigher remains our primary vehicle for collaborative work across the schools, further education and higher education sectors. We will work with the Department for Education and Skills, Department of Health and the Learning and Skills Council to develop this programme over the longer term.

(accessed 14 November 2006 at www.hefce.ac.uk/aimhigh/)

LLNs

HEFCE, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), and the DfES are working on joint approaches to encouraging progression into and through higher education. We already work in partnership on the Aimhigher initiative, and we are now developing a joint strategy to advance vocational and workplace progression into and through higher education (the Joint Progression Strategy). As part of this, we have been supporting the development of Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs). Initial guidance for LLNs can be found in HEFCE Circular Letter 12/2004. LLNs are supported through funding provided from the Strategic Development Fund.

Regular updates on the progress of LLNs are available.

In summary, LLNs will:

- combine the strengths of a number of diverse institutions. Each LLN will involve a number of further education colleges and higher education institutions (including at least one research-intensive institution). It will also have consulted with the local Learning and Skills Council, Regional Skills Partnerships, appropriate Sector Skills Councils and other key stakeholders
- provide appropriate information, advice, guidance and support for learners on vocational pathways
- locate the progression strategy within a commitment to lifelong learning, ensuring that learners have access to a range of progression opportunities so that they

can move between different kinds of vocational and academic programmes as their interests, needs and abilities develop

- bring greater clarity, coherence and certainty to progression opportunities
- develop progression agreements and ensure that they operate effectively across the network
- develop the curriculum as appropriate to facilitate progression
- value vocational learning outcomes and provide opportunities for vocational learners to build on earlier learning and to re-engage with learning throughout their lifetime.

The aim is to make the whole higher education offer available to vocational learners across a lifetime of work and study

(accessed 14 November 2006 at www.hefce.ac.uk/lln)

NON-PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
Decision-making as an embedded social practice

A team from the Schools of Education and Social Science at the University of Southampton has been awarded research funding as part of the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme's focus on widening participation in higher education (HE). The two year study (April 2006-March 2008) will examine the extent to which HE is conceived as 'within the bounds of the possible' for non-participants and will explore how attitudes to HE and decisions about non-participation are embedded within 'networks of intimacy', consisting of family members and close friends. It hypothesises that such networks provide a critical context within which individuals' thinking about participation is embedded.

The research involves two overlapping parts: stage one will draw on existing large-scale survey data to develop a macro-level account of (non-) participation in the general population and a critique of the extant literature on educational decision-making. The implications of the emerging issues will be explored in the qualitative study (stage two).This will involve case studies of sixteen networks of intimacy. We will identify non-participating adults at different stages in the life-course and who may, or may not be economically active, to provide 'entry points' to each network. Each case study will involve an initial structured interview with each 'entry point' individual to determine educational and employment histories, household and family composition, and details of their self-defined network of intimacy, followed by semi-structured interviews with each of these individuals plus five 'network members' who are identified as sources of influence in the decision-making process. The focus at the macro and micro levels on non-participants and on adults at various stages in the life-course make this research distinctive, as existing widening participation research has tended to focus on non-traditional applicants and students, and particularly on adults below the age of 30.

The geographical focus of this study will be the Southampton and Hampshire area, which offers a mixed picture in terms of HE participation. Southampton has one of the lowest rates in the country; only 1 in 10, 18 year olds entering full-time undergraduate courses, whereas in parts of Hampshire the rate is much higher. The research will provide opportunities for representatives of local, regional and national organisations with a direct interest in participation issues to be involved in the development of the research through involvement in the project's advisory panel. To maximise impact, the study's findings and recommendations will be communicated through a series of targeted events for policy makers and widening participation practitioners.

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