

Understanding a whole institution approach to widening participation: Summary report and recommendations

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Research Overview:

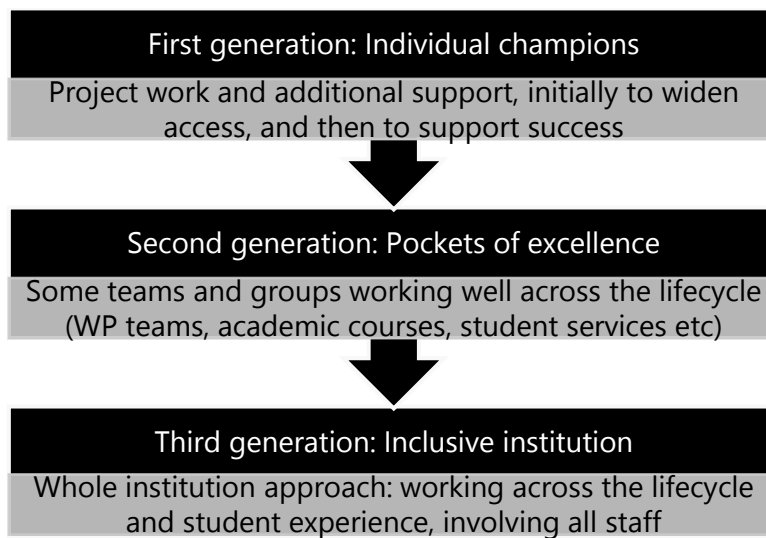
1. Widening participation (WP) in higher education (HE) is an international, UK-wide and English policy objective, and research has suggested that a whole institution approach contributes to achieving WP outcomes. There is however a lack of understanding about how to implement a whole institution approach, and little or no evaluation of the process or the outcomes.
2. The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) commissioned this small scale, exploratory research to address the following questions:
 - What is involved in a 'whole institution' approach to WP?
 - How can a whole institution approach be implemented and managed?
 - What strategies and tools can be used to evaluate a whole institution approach to WP?
3. A mixed methods research design was used combining a literature review, five institutional case studies and a participatory workshop. The case studies were undertaken in institutions that have made progress in implementing a whole institution approach, and offered diversity in terms of size and selectivity; all perform well in relation to widening access and non-continuation indicators. They were:
 - Aston University
 - Kingston University
 - Solihull College University Centre
 - The University of Sheffield
 - University of Worcester

Implementing approaches:

4. The core – and essential – features of a whole institution approach, which should be embraced by all institutions, are:
 - a. A whole lifecycle approach to WP is adopted.
 - b. Staff from departments, services and units from across the institution are involved in WP (i.e. not just 'professional WP' staff).
 - c. There is a clear and explicit institutional commitment to WP, defining target groups and expected outcomes as appropriate.
5. Additional characteristics of a whole institution approach, which are useful for institutions wishing to extend themselves beyond the minimum requirements, are:

- a. Working with a wider range of WP target groups
 - b. Expanding the student lifecycle incorporating admissions, marketing, attainment, access to postgraduate study.
 - c. Embedding WP into all roles and considerations across the institution
 - d. Involving students, alumni and the students' union in WP
 - e. Ensuring data, evidence and research inform all stages
 - f. Allocating WP resources across the institution
 - g. An integrated rather than fragmented approach based on sharing, collaboration and co-ordination
6. Institutions can be seen to be maturing in their work to widen participation, initially relying on individual champions, then developing pockets of excellence, and striving towards a whole institution approach.

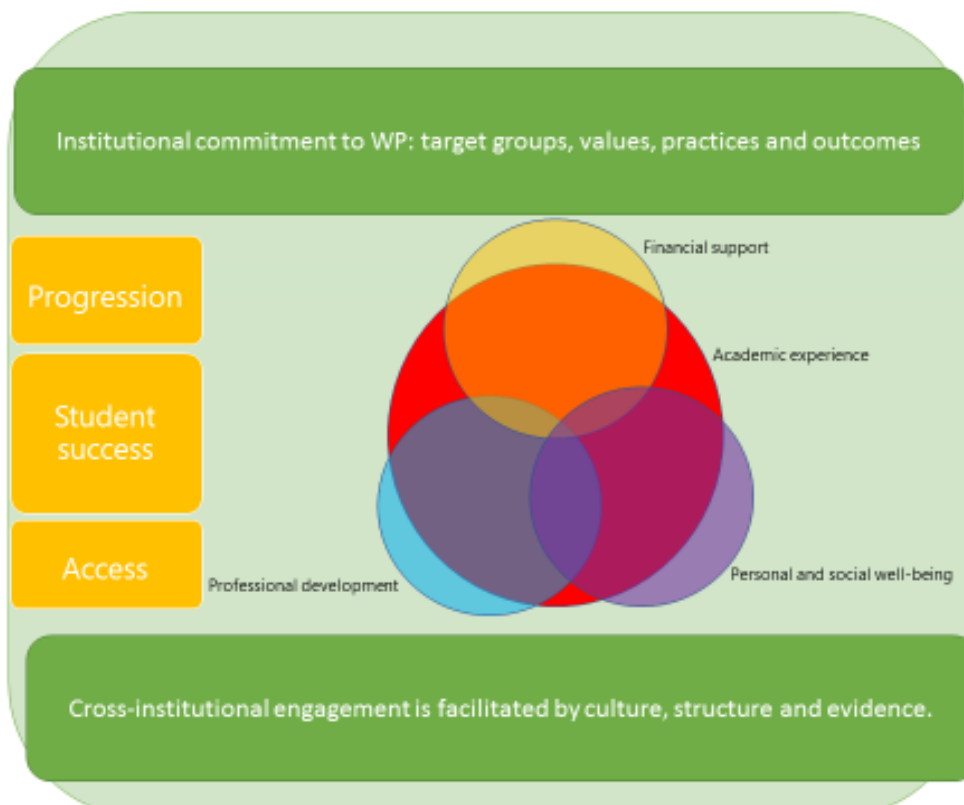
Figure 1: Institutional approaches to widening participation maturity model



7. A whole institution approach requires alignment and consistency across the institution to create an inclusive approach which all students benefit from irrespective of where they are located within the institution, and which extends not just across their lifecycle, but throughout their daily lived experience, incorporating their academic experience, and also their personal and social well-being and their professional development.
8. Implementing a whole institution approach requires a top-down, bottom-up approach, developing an inclusive culture and structure. Culture refers to the values, attitudes and practices of the staff (and students) within the higher education providers (HEP), while structure refers to the institutional policies, processes and organisation (e.g. of financial and human resources) of the HEP and its sub-units.
9. The interplay of culture and structure should enable people to be sufficiently well informed and have the capacity and commitment to implement inclusive practices, while the structure both facilitates and ensures this, and provides co-ordination across the institution, promoting integration and consistency of outcomes – and avoiding duplication, fragmentation and gaps in provision.

10. The essential strategies for implementing a whole institution approach, which ensures both the structure and the cultural context is facilitative of WP are:
- a. Vertical alignment: A whole lifecycle approach to WP is adopted.
 - b. Horizontal alignment: Staff from departments, services and units from across the institution are involved in WP (i.e. not just 'professional WP' staff).
 - c. Institutional commitment and leadership: There is a clear and explicit institutional commitment to WP, defining target groups and expected outcomes as appropriate.
 - d. Pragmatic approach to change: A top-down, bottom-up approach is adopted, developing a culture and structure that promote and supports inclusivity and consistency. This incorporates:
 - i. Staff capacity and engagement: The values, attitudes and practices of the staff and students within the HEP promote and support WP.
 - ii. Institutional structures facilitate ownership and communication: The institutional policies, processes and organisation (e.g. of financial and human resources) of the HEP and its sub-units promote and support WP across the institution.
 - iii. Evidence informed and accountability: Data and evidence is used to understand the issues, ensure staff accountability, monitor student experience and outcomes, inform strategic and operational decision-making, and evaluate the process and impact.

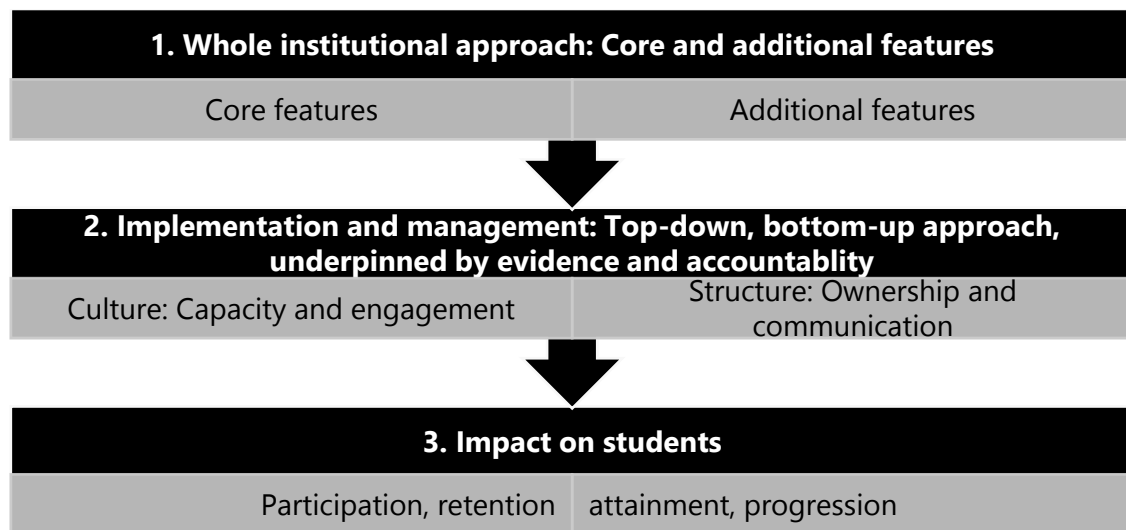
This whole institution approach is summarised in Figure 2



Evaluating approaches:

11. The evaluation model identifies three stages and is informed by a broad theory of change: *"If all parts of the institution are engaged in WP then diversity will be reflected in and inform the culture and structure of the organisation. If diversity informs the culture and structure of the organisation, then policies, processes, values, attitudes and practices will enable the successful participation of all students regardless of personal characteristics or disposition, educational background, current circumstances or cultural issues."*

Figure 3: Evaluation model



12. The purpose of stage 1 of the evaluation model is to check which features of a whole institution approach exist.
- Accountability could use the indicators listed above, and these can be used to assess whether there is any scope for improvement, by addressing questions such as:
 - How have staff and teams engaged with and experienced this feature?
 - How have students engaged with and experienced this feature?
 - What has worked well and why?
 - What has not been successful and why?
 - What are other HEPs doing?
 - What could be done differently in the future?
 - Evidence might be collected through:
 - Self-evaluation workshop, inviting staff and students from across the institution to provide examples and reflection on improvement.
 - Survey of staff and/or students' views and experiences.
 - Focus groups with staff and students.
 - A 'citizens' jury' inviting colleagues to share their views and experiences and allowing students to 'pass judgement' on the HEP's progress towards a whole institution approach.

13. The purpose of the second stage of the evaluation model is three-fold: accountability, improvement and impact (of the essential strategies listed above).
- a. Progress towards implementation (accountability) could be assessed using a simple scale, coupled with the presentation of evidence and examples. A simple scale might be:
 - Not started/no evidence available
 - In progress (early stages)
 - In progress (advanced)
 - Completed/exemplary
 - b. Improvement could be assessed by working with those roles or teams involved in or affected by particular essential strategies to collect evidence that addresses questions such as:
 - How have people experienced the strategy?
 - What has worked well and why?
 - What has not been successful and why?
 - What could be done differently in the future?
 - What else could we do?
 - c. Examining the impact of a strategy could be combined with collecting evidence about improvement by answering the following types of question:
 - What have people learnt?
 - How have people changed their practice, what do they do differently now?
 - How has this affected staff and students?
 - Are there any unintended consequences?
 - d. Evidence could be collected from staff teams and students through a wide range of methods which aim to uncover practice and develop understanding about experiences and issues at a local level, for example:
 - Self-evaluation process completed by different teams/units within the HEP, perhaps including reflection on priorities for improvement.
 - Self-evaluation workshop, inviting staff and students from across the institution to provide examples and reflection on improvement.
 - Survey of staff and/or students' views and experiences.
 - Interviews or focus groups with staff and students, or attending a team meeting.
 - A 'citizens' jury' inviting colleagues to share their views and experiences and allowing students to 'pass judgement' on the HEP's progress towards a whole institution approach.
14. The final stage of the evaluation model is to evaluate the impact of a whole institution approach.
- a. This might use student outcomes measures such as the following rates in relation to specific WP target groups:
 - Application
 - Admission
 - Continuation

- Completion
 - Attainment
 - Employment
 - Progression to further study
- b. In designing the evaluation of the impact of a whole institution approach on student outcomes it would be prudent to draw on existing work within the institution, and the growing body of applied research and evaluation guidance to support institutions in achieving this goal.

Recommendations:

15. This research study makes recommendations to institutions, students' unions and associations, and the Office for Fair Access, the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Office for Students.
- a. Institutions should:
- i. Ensure they meet the core features of a whole institution approach as a minimum.
 - ii. Look for opportunities for improvement by reviewing the additional characteristics identified through the case studies.
 - iii. Consider progress towards maturity, drawing on the step-by-step guide to implementing a whole institutional approach, presented below.
 - iv. Evaluate progress towards a whole institutional approach drawing on the indicators listed above and the evaluation tools presented below.
- b. Students' Unions and Associations should:
- i. Adopt and promote a whole institution approach within their own institutions.
 - ii. Review the structure and culture of the union to consider the extent to which it exhibits the essential strategies that contribute to an inclusive culture and structure.
 - iii. Review the inclusivity of union activities such as representation, services, events and societies.
 - iv. Look for opportunities for collaboration with the institution to embed WP across the whole student experience.
- c. The Office for Fair Access, HEFCE and the Office for Students should:
- i. Clarify expectations regarding a whole institution approach, including timescales.
 - ii. Provide support to institutions to move beyond the minimum standards towards maturity.
 - iii. Undertake action research to test out and refine the tools developed through this study in a wider range of institutional contexts.
 - iv. Undertake evaluation of the impact of a whole institution approach on outcomes for students from WP target groups.