Access, retention and success: Aligning widening participation and equality strategies
Acknowledgments

Collaborative research between ECU, the Open University in Scotland and the Open University’s Centre for Inclusion and Collaborative Partnerships with support from their equality and diversity team. Written for ECU by Dr Lindsay Hewitt and John Rose-Adams.

The research team would like to thank all the institutions involved in the research, including all those that responded to the sector survey and the individuals who were interviewed from the following institutions:

- University of Dundee
- University of Edinburgh
- Glasgow Caledonian University
- Glasgow School of Art
- University of the Highlands and Islands
- Open University in Scotland
- University of the West of Scotland

Further information

Freya Douglas
info@ecu.ac.uk
Access, retention and success:

Aligning widening participation and equality strategies

Contents

Introduction 1
Widening participation and equality in higher education 1
About the research and using this report 1
The drivers for aligning WP and E&D strategy 2
The benefits of a joined-up approach to WP and E&D 3
Background 4

Examples of alignment between WP and E&D 6
WP and age 6
WP and disability 9
WP and race 11
WP and sex 12
Mainstreaming and inclusive approaches 17

Enabling alignment of WP and E&D 20
Strategy and structures 20
People and resources 26
Data for planning, monitoring and reporting 30

Conclusion 34

Recommendations 36
Recommendations for senior management 36
Recommendations for E&D and WP practitioners 37
Recommendations for SFC 37

© Equality Challenge Unit, May 2013
Introduction

Widening participation and equality in higher education

At their heart, both widening participation (WP) and equality and diversity (E&D) in higher education institutions (HEIs) are concerned with advancing equality of opportunity for disadvantaged groups. WP traditionally focuses on socioeconomic disadvantage and typically addresses the access opportunities for underrepresented groups of students, seeking to support their retention or success. E&D spans a broader range of needs and circumstances for students and staff, and may also seek to address issues of access, retention or success, with a focus on those within protected characteristic groups, as defined by the Equality Act 2010.

Institutional WP and E&D efforts may focus on the same groups of students who share a protected characteristic that is underrepresented in the HEI. For example, a WP strategy may explicitly target, or inadvertently reach, students from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds, disabled students, students of different genders, or older or younger students. Likewise, E&D strategies may support students who come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Despite these commonalities, WP and E&D functions are historically quite distinct within an institution, usually delivered through separate strategies. The motivating idea behind this project was that alignment between WP and E&D work around access, retention and success could achieve a more joined-up approach to advancing equality of opportunity for students.

About the research and using this report

This report presents findings of Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) research, conducted by the Open University (OU) in Scotland, into alignment between WP and E&D in Scottish HEIs. It includes examples of alignment of institutional strategy and practice and factors found to enable alignment. It concludes with recommendations for the sector, with specific recommendations for senior managers, WP and E&D managers or practitioners, and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

The research is relevant for HEIs in England, Northern Ireland and Wales seeking to embed E&D in WP strategy. It identifies approaches and activities that could support English HEIs to deliver the targets and milestones included in their Office for Fair Access access agreements.
The drivers for aligning WP and E&D strategy

Equality legislation

The public sector equality duty (PSED) of the Equality Act 2010 requires institutions to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations for students across the protected characteristics of age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race (including ethnic or national origin, colour or nationality), religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. The duty requires institutions to work to address issues of inequality of access, retention or success for those who share a protected characteristic.

ECU’s website has further information on current equality legislation: www.ecu.ac.uk/subjects/equality-act-2010

Scottish government priorities and outcome agreements

Over the past eight years, WP in Scotland has been influenced by Scottish government policy which is implemented through SFC funding policy. The focus of funding has been on regional collaborative activity designed, alongside other measurements, to widen access to higher education by targeting particular schools and colleges.

For 2012/13, to enable the sector to demonstrate fulfilment of Scottish government priorities in the pre-legislative paper Putting learners at the centre, SFC negotiated outcome agreements with each of Scotland’s 19 HEIs. These are intended to support differentiation across the sector by allowing institutions to highlight their own priorities in relation to national outcomes.

SFC asked HEIs to set objectives on widening access that would deliver on the national outcomes of ‘access to university for people from the widest possible range of backgrounds,’ ‘efficiency of the learner journey and improved retention’ and ‘equality and diversity’. This research has looked at 2012/13 outcome agreements.

New guidelines for 2013/14 outcome agreements specify that E&D should be considered as a horizontal theme across outcome agreements and outcomes should be set around participation, retention and completion of students from protected characteristic groups.
To achieve this, institutions will need to bring their direction for E&D into their outcome agreements across the required key themes, and give particular consideration to including protected groups in their outcomes for patterns of participation and student journey.

The benefits of a joined-up approach to WP and E&D

**Better use of resources**

Certain aspects of WP and E&D work have the capacity to deliver on both WP and E&D aims. Bringing the two together at strategic level and developing effective, coordinated activity can increase the impact of work.

Some WP work specifically seeks to improve the participation of, for example, older students or disabled students. However, WP work that focuses on socioeconomic disadvantage can also reach those from certain protected groups as the demographics within targeted deprived postcode areas may include higher proportions of underrepresented groups, for example, minority ethnic or religious groups. Understanding where crossover exists and coordinating work that seeks to reach and support these groups could increase the impact of resources used.

**Improved outcomes for students**

Some E&D work may focus on equality issues to do with retention and attainment. There is an opportunity to connect WP and E&D in these areas to ensure a smoother path for students and no gap in support, so that students are supported to achieve the best possible outcomes.

**Mainstreaming WP and E&D across the institution**

Aligning WP and E&D strategy will help institutions to demonstrate that they are meeting the Scottish specific duties (that underpin the PSED) to mainstream equality across the functions of an institution.
Background

Scottish context

The 19 HEIs in Scotland vary in age, size, subject mix and location. The strategic and structural approach taken in relation to E&D and WP within an HEI are partly influenced by the unique characteristics of the institution. Approaches to WP therefore vary in a number of ways including:

- strategic and operational approaches, often as an extension of recruitment activities and involving initiatives such as summer schools and pre-entry support
- contextualised admissions that consider factors beyond academic entry requirements
- transition of students from colleges into first degree programmes in HEIs
- post-entry support delivered through services for all students, or specific activity directly linked to transition into the HEI

In Scotland, WP activity has traditionally focused on socioeconomic disadvantage. This is often determined by:

- residence in an area included in either the most deprived 20 per cent or 40 per cent (MD20 and 40) Scottish index of multiple deprivation (SIMD) data zones
- attendance at a ‘low performing school’ (both in attainment and progression to higher education)
- having no parental experience of higher education

HEIs often refer to these students as ‘WP groups’. Cohorts of students covered by the Equality Act are often referred to as ‘protected groups’. These terms have been used in this report. However, practitioners widely recognise that these simplified categorisations do not reflect the reality of individual identities and experiences. SIMD can indicate residence in an area deemed to be deprived, but not the attributes of or disadvantage experienced by the individual student; protected characteristics can be reductive and fail to recognise multiple factors affecting disadvantage.
Introduction

Research aims

The purpose of the research was to identify existing practice around the alignment of WP and equality strategies and to develop guidance on how to enhance WP and E&D work through joint working. In particular the research sought to establish the intersections between HEIs' strategy and practice in WP and E&D in terms of protected groups, specifically:

- WP strategy and practice that supports the access, retention and success of students from protected groups
- E&D strategy and practice that supports access, retention and success of underrepresented groups
- Mainstreamed strategy and practice that addresses access, retention and success of both WP and E&D groups
- How WP and E&D departments and staff are positioned in their institution, and how they work together
- Other evidence and examples of productive joint working and alignment of institutional approaches to WP and E&D

Research methodology

The research aimed to gather data from a wide range of sources and included:

- Interviews with lead WP and E&D contacts from a range of HEIs
- A survey of Scottish HEIs
- Desk research covering publicly available high-level strategic documents, including the 19 outcome agreements for 2012/13

Efforts were made to achieve a representative sample, however it should be noted that there were more participants in the survey from post-92 HEIs than other institution types.

Due to timing of the research it was not possible to include analysis of the equality outcomes that HEIs developed and published on 31 April 2013 to meet the Scottish specific duties.

Sector research

Universities Scotland is building an evidence base of successful widening access interventions to provide a basis for informed policy development, and assist institutions in developing initiatives that are most likely to deliver positive outcomes.
Examples of alignment between WP and E&D

Participating institutions observed that, for the most part, areas of their WP work that reached protected groups focused on disability, race and sex, and groups historically included in WP funding policy, such as mature students.

Institutions generally only reference gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, religion or belief and sexual orientation in broad statements indicating compliance with the Act. However, most institutions’ outcome agreements reference the intention to collect and analyse data on all protected characteristics, therefore building a broader evidence base to enable future work to address any issues.

WP and age

Historically, WP activity has focused on work with schools where progression to higher education is low. These are often in more deprived socioeconomic areas. While younger learners have therefore been at the centre of much WP activity, their age has not generally been the reason for these students being targeted.

HEIs have also specifically targeted older or mature students in WP activity for a number of years, partly due to funding policy.

Older students

A number of HEIs refer to recruitment and retention of older students in WP strategy and outcome agreements.

Glasgow Caledonian University’s (GCU) outcome agreement makes an explicit link to activity to reform the institution’s learning and teaching strategy with an ambition to be more flexible, highlighting ‘the role of universities in meeting the needs of adult learners’. It notes that advanced entry, together with recognition of prior learning and contextualised admissions are important aspects of this approach.
In its outcome agreement, the **University of Edinburgh** mentions the acceptance of older students onto its programmes, specifically through its access and credit for entry courses. [www.ed.ac.uk/studying/access-courses/intro](http://www.ed.ac.uk/studying/access-courses/intro)

The **OU in Scotland**, perhaps because of its institutional focus on adult learners, demonstrates evidence of working with older students. Wide-reaching articulation activity with a large number of colleges is evident in its outcome agreement, including delivery of OU courses within colleges to target older students in regional settings. The OU in Scotland also engages in partnerships that address older learners in the workplace.

A successful partnership between Rolls Royce, Unite the Union and the OU in Scotland delivers engineering degree programmes to Unite members, the majority of whom are shop floor workers who have not traditionally accessed higher education. The students are predominantly more advanced in their working life.

This project explores workplace higher education delivery and approaches learning in the workplace:

‘Most of the Rolls Royce workers that we have studying have been in the industry for two decades or more. In the past they have not had the opportunity to study at HE level – in general this wasn’t seen by either the company or the workers as an option.’

The **University of the Highlands and Islands** (UHI) has predominantly mature students. In its outcome agreement, UHI referred to an institutional acknowledgment of the differing needs of full-time and part-time learners, and sets a target to ‘continue to meet the needs of older and part-time learners’. A number of initiatives or partnerships to enhance access opportunities for older students have been pursued.
Younger students

Outreach work that focused specifically on younger learners was evident at both the OU and UHI where younger students are less well-represented than at other HEIs.

The OU’s work to engage school-age students includes an overt widening access and participation focus in Scotland. In its outcome agreement, the OU states that its curriculum is ‘providing opportunities to have a much more diverse sixth-year menu for study, irrespective of geography, across Scotland’.

In interviews, OU staff described the focus on retention of younger learners as unique to the institutional context:

“So age, for example, comes out high in the OU in the opposite way perhaps it does in other institutions in that younger students are at a higher risk of not completing their course with us than older students.”

UHI observed increasing numbers of younger students as part of the institution’s projected expansion in its outcome agreement, which for them raised issues about developing their curriculum and meeting the needs of larger numbers of younger students.

Older and younger students

Some institutions gave examples of outreach initiatives that reach both older and younger potential students.

GCU reported that its Caledonian Club was able to reach a wide range of ages, through activity such as student mentors targeting pupils and their parents, to raise educational aspirations.
Examples of alignment between WP and E&D

WP and disability

HEIs have a longstanding focus on supporting disabled students once they enter the HEI through dedicated central funding. Staff noted how support has developed and been mainstreamed across different student support services. The research included few references to specific WP activity directed towards disabled students, which could be due to the fact that support is mainstreamed and therefore not necessarily an element of WP.

Some institutions indicated in their outcome agreements that proportions of disabled students were at or above sector benchmarks or averages and therefore did not require specific attention. Some made commitments to maintaining current proportions of disabled students, while others included detail of specific activity to support the entry and retention of disabled students, sometimes focusing on students with particular impairments.

Pre-entry support

The University of Dundee has established work on testing underlying attributes of dyslexia to support students with learning differences into higher education:

‘We’ve found loads of candidates, probably about one in ten, who have struggled with words or numbers when at school or college and have always just thought “I’m better than this but I can’t do it.” And the sense of relief for those who discover they have an issue beyond their control for which they can get help is really another delight of the job … 90 per cent of the people then have gone on to the full test and a good number have been found to have underlying conditions of which they’d no previous knowledge … they’d got to the age of 25 without anyone picking up they were dyslexic.’
Examples of alignment between WP and E&D

GCU’s outcome agreement describes specific pre-entry activity supporting disabled students:

‘We have recently enhanced the services and facilities we provide for disabled students through a number of activities and actions, including:

- support for incoming disabled students through the provision of pre-entry study skills workshops
- support for students on the autism spectrum through a summer transition programme and a student mentoring scheme’

Retention

Edinburgh Napier University included activity to improve retention of disabled students in its outcome agreement:

‘Building on the appointment (2012) of a mental health adviser, self-help tools purchased (2012) and positive feedback to date, continue to address the growing incidence of depression and anxiety in students, by providing effective therapeutic solutions and referral (eg online therapeutic tools which can provide cognitive behavioural therapy, etc, on a self-help or guided self-help basis).’
WP and race

Race includes ethnic or national origin, colour or nationality. References in the research data tended to focus broadly on BME groups, which may reflect a focus that pre-dates the Equality Act 2010.

The relationship between socioeconomic disadvantage and race

Either in strategic documents or interviews to relationships, several institutions made perceived or evidenced links between socially disadvantaged geographical areas and ethnicity.

Interviews with two institutions suggested acknowledgment of unintentional overlap between work to widen access in deprived areas and ethnicity:

‘For example, if we’re focusing on north Glasgow as an area, then the sort of ethnic make-up of that area might be very different to the east end of Glasgow. So I think there are overlaps. I don’t think it’s deliberate.’

‘Poverty, class, will go across all the protected characteristics as well. It’s not as if there are only certain protected characteristics and socioeconomic groups so of course that’s across the piece.’

In its UK-wide widening access and success strategy the OU has a priority group defined as ‘black and minority ethnic students from low socioeconomic groups’, which the OU in Scotland also observes.

Access and race

Following SFC guidance issued for the production of 2012/13 outcome agreements, several institutions compare themselves to sector-wide and institution benchmarking data on recruitment of BME students, but only two of the participating HEIs set targets and commit to activity that are specific to or encompass race.

Queen Margaret University sets a target to maintain the proportion of its students from BME groups at 11.9 per cent in 2011/12. The University of the West of Scotland aims to maintain and encourage the diversity of its student population by a range of equality variables that include (but are not limited to) ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic status.
**Outreach activity**

Some institutions included outreach work in their outcome agreements with partners that had a link to widening access for underrepresented ethnic groups.

The OU mentioned partnership work with Multicultural Family Base which, along with other partnerships, contributed to recruitment of more than 200 students in 2011/12. It plans to build on and develop an improved system for monitoring this activity.

The University of the West of Scotland outlines a targeted programme of information and marketing to attract a more diverse range of students to engage with specific subject areas, for example, efforts to attract more Asian students into the school of education.

**WP and sex**

Institutions had established a wide range of activities with a primary or secondary aim of addressing gender inequality in participation, both in relation to women and men.

The majority of activity to address female underrepresentation focuses on science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM) subjects.

Some interview participants recognised that location may affect opportunities for women, particularly in terms of available subject choice:

‘If you’re a low-income woman in some parts of the west of Scotland for example I think you have a different range of choices than a better-off woman living in Edinburgh … in terms of the curriculum that you can access and the kinds of qualifications you can take and then the kinds of avenues that open up in terms of employment.’
Access for women in STEMM subjects

The interviews and outcome agreements provided a range of evidence of WP activity that address the underrepresentation of female students in STEMM subjects.

The University of Dundee works with the college sector to increase female participation in STEMM subjects, recognising that the issue is larger than can be addressed just by university outreach:

‘Short summer schools with low or no entry requirements cannot replace years of poor development in mathematical, numeracy and science skills, which makes transition to STEMM in higher education especially difficult. This is a joint problem of the secondary, further and higher education sectors. Either a higher summer school entry gate is required for these areas or else reliance on other sectors to fill the gap.’

In its outcome agreement, UHI mentions its Stemnorth team, which works directly with schools to promote STEMM participation, in particular with girls through events such as ‘girls in physics’. This work makes use of role models with the intention to raise the aspirations of school-aged girls to university study.

Through a WP outreach project, academics in the school of computing at the University of the West of Scotland work with secondary schools to address underrepresentation of women on their courses.
Edinburgh Napier University’s outcome agreement demonstrated a wide ranging approach to WP in STEMM subjects, aiming to grow STEMM applicant numbers overall. Within this, there was a focus on women and commitments to:

= continue the positive work with the Scottish Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology (SRC), maintain support for their programme of activities and build on the specific work related to our schools/STEMM subjects in 2011/12

= increase the student retention rate for full-time undergraduate Scottish-domiciled entrants studying STEMM subjects who are female from 83.5 per cent (average over the analysis years) to the sector average of 87.5 per cent (2013/14 entrants)

Athena SWAN

All of the institutions referenced the Athena SWAN Charter in their outcome agreements. Typically, these noted which award the institution was pursuing, and sometimes associated activities. However, Athena SWAN predominantly focuses on staff issues therefore these statements do not often relate to WP.

Notable exceptions include the University of St Andrews which detailed how it had ‘recently developed partnership links with the SRC and Inter-connect to establish a schedule of onsite career development workshops for women working and studying in STEMM subjects at the university’.
Access for men

Some HEIs set broad targets in their outcome agreements, largely around recruitment. For example UHI aimed ‘to achieve sector average for proportion of male students (2010/11 UHI 42 per cent v sector 44 per cent)’.

Several institutions have outreach activities and initiatives to address an underrepresentation of men at institution level and in specific subject areas.

**GCU**’s Caledonian Club works with schools to raise aspirations and access opportunities in low progression areas. The club is a focus for encouraging male participation and GCU has seen increasing proportions of male entrants since 2008. GCU states in its outcome agreement that in 2012/13, it will analyse the key issues and set recommendations to inform the establishment of joint initiatives with school and college partners to address issues such as attainment and aspirations of male learners and increase applications from male learners in the longer term.

Outcome agreements also made reference to the pursuit of specific targeted outreach.

**The University of the West of Scotland** will develop information and marketing to attract men into teaching.

**The human resources team in the business school recognised that** ‘few men were applying for HR modules and [we] have started to discuss what can be done to encourage them to apply’.
Examples of alignment between WP and E&D

**Retention of men**

**Robert Gordon University** described building on the success of partnership working for articulation in its outcome agreement:

‘Positive results provide the university with the confidence that the approach it is taking, ie with partners, is the right one. As the university moves forward these approaches will be extended to incorporate and improve MD20 and male adult returner student achievement.’

**Queen Margaret University** set out targets to increase male retention in its outcome agreement, which also relate to age, and several actions to support these including:

- to enhance QMAdvance pre-entry course to reach target groups – originally offered to older students, this will be extended to include target groups and male students

- to enhance QMConnect mentoring programme to extend provision to include welcome meetings, additional group mentoring (halls and under-18s) and twice weekly drop-ins for students in a central social area – this will encourage students who may not wish or be able to commit to regular mentoring and will be open to all students with a focus on target groups including male students
Mainstreaming and inclusive approaches

The research data revealed WP strategy and activity that could be described as ‘inclusive’ of equality or where equality was ‘mainstreamed’ and therefore encompassed all students, regardless of background, and so sought to address the needs of students from protected and WP groups.

Retention

A number of institutions included a commitment to improving retention of students in general.

The University of Glasgow’s outcome agreement describes a mainstream ‘generic’ approach to student retention, with demonstrable success:

‘Our own research supports this approach as we are aware that factors such as disability or BME origin are not significant factors in student withdrawal at this university … This generic approach has paid dividends. We have achieved increases in year one continuation of close to 1 per cent per annum for the last three years, to reach 93.1 per cent in 2011/12.’

Interestingly, the approach is described as beginning to ‘top-out’, ie increases in success are slowing, and the university is now beginning to develop data and analysis to support more specific, targeted interventions to improve retention, with a specific focus on students from SIMD MD20 areas.

UHI’s outcome agreement notes its aim to increase student retention across all groups through improved data collection, action to support student confidence, and using research to inform activity.
Student support

Participating institutions demonstrated a range of inclusive approaches to student services, which were directed at all students, regardless of background.

**Glasgow School of Art** does not have a specific disability service (this was initially a response to their small size and associated lack of resource), instead, their learning support and development service works with all students and was described as having a positive effect on the proportion of students declaring a disability as it is not dependent on prior self-disclosure:

‘If you look at disability we have the highest disclosure of disability in Scotland and I think it’s about the third in the UK, and that I put down absolutely to the fact that we haven’t made people define themselves as disabled before they can actually access support and disclose something. So we get them, we can work with them, and then if it’s appropriate they can decide whether they want to go down this route of defining themselves in some way in relation to disability.’

**The University of Dundee** contacts all new students and applicants to encourage disclosure of circumstances, including disability. When students disclose an impairment, they are strongly encouraged to contact disability support services. This role is described as the ‘intelligent signpost’:

‘When somebody comes along with any requirement our role is not to tell them the solution assuming we were arrogant enough to think we knew what was best for them, rather our mission is to smoothly guide them to the expert professionals who exist to provide that support.’
Examples of alignment between WP and E&D

**UHI** highlighted its online ‘red button’ service, which aims to provide an inclusive way for students to give feedback. In seeking to improve and enhance student experience and support early identification of issues, the university promotes the red button, which allows all individuals to raise an issue or describe how their expectations have not been met. The scheme signposts students to the student charter and operates alongside its formal complaints procedures. [www.uhi.ac.uk/en/students/support/red-button/red-button](http://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/students/support/red-button/red-button)

**Protected characteristics now covered by the Equality Act 2010 PSED**

Some interviewees reported difficulty in extending activity to target religion and belief, sexual orientation and gender reassignment. Institutions are reliant on students disclosing these characteristics, so it could be difficult to know which students may need or want specific additional support.

A generally inclusive approach would not exclude these students, however, there are opportunities for institutions to be proactive in considering their specific needs.
Enabling alignment of WP and E&D

Strategy and structures

Embedding WP and E&D in strategic plans

All participating institutions acknowledged the importance of aligning WP and E&D agendas at a strategic level. Some HEIs include both WP and E&D in their overall strategic plans, and there were some examples of these being aligned in a deliberate manner.

In its strategic plan 2012–16, the University of Edinburgh defines E&D and WP together as one strategic theme and sets out an approach to embedding the principles of equality, inclusion and diversity throughout its community. The university’s WP and E&D practitioners were directly involved in shaping the university’s strategic plan objectives.

Embedding WP and E&D in operational plans

In its operational plan, Glasgow School of Art includes commitment to:

- ‘demonstrate equity by improving the diversity of our staff and student body
- ‘develop and embed the new academically led widening participation strategy and commence implementation’

WP and E&D embedded in practice

For some institutions, it was felt that WP and E&D were so much core to the principles of the institution, that no further explicit ‘embedding’ was required. They were familiarly described as being ‘in the blood’ of the institution, or other similar phrases.

Alongside affirmations of an institution’s culture and spirit supporting embedding of WP and E&D, there were also suggestions that, unlike for WP, legal compliance acted as a primary driver for some E&D work:

‘We have to, as a matter of course, review all our policies annually to ensure they are still compliant, certainly with legislation anyway – that’s obviously the very technical side – but just the spirit, I think, of our approach towards learning and teaching, admissions and WP is kind of, is part of our culture I think, it’s quite embedded.’
Compliance was seen by some as a double-edged sword: while it could lead to some not going further than required by law, it also kept E&D on the agenda. The survey revealed that institutions were aware of the importance of having both E&D and WP embedded as a mechanism to: ‘raise greater awareness and understanding among the staff that are involved in delivering the learning experience.’

**Recommendation for senior management**

Seek to explicitly include WP and E&D in overarching institutional strategy to foster a culture of inclusive practice and ensure both are addressed in practice across the institution.

Some HEIs chose to express how WP and E&D were aligned with their institutional values and direction of travel within their outcome agreements.

**Glasgow School of Art**’s outcome agreement described an approach to equal opportunities aligned with its institutional values:

‘The alignment of equal opportunities equity and diversity with the central purpose, values and quality of our core educational activities is the foundation from which we engage with and respond to the requirements of legislation relating to discrimination and equality.’
The University of the West of Scotland used its outcome agreement to bring together intersecting parts of its WP and E&D strategy, presenting an overarching outcome around the diversity of its student population to:

‘maintain and encourage the diversity of its student population as measured by a range of equality variables that include (but are not limited to) ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic status.’

It has supporting actions that straddle both WP and equality, such as marketing to target ethnic groups, men or women, developing more inclusive learning and teaching, and encouraging domestic and overseas students to integrate and learn from each other. The university also commits to develop equality outcomes in 2013 that will align with this outcome and activity, thus joining up its outcome agreement and equality strategy going forward.

**Recommendations for senior management**

- Capitalise on outcome agreements as an opportunity to bring together institutional WP and E&D strategy for students.

- To make E&D a ‘horizontal theme’ in outcome agreements, bring institutional strategy for E&D into each of the themes where relevant, and give particular attention to including protected groups in outcomes for patterns of participation and student journey.

- Formally review WP and E&D strategy for shared aims and objectives in terms of access, retention and success and crossovers between target groups.

- Involve WP and E&D experts and practitioners when developing relevant sections of institutional strategy and outcome agreements, particularly to advise on opportunities for alignment of their work.
Aligning outcome agreements and equality outcomes

Most institutions were in the process of developing equality outcomes and as such were not yet able to include their equality strategy in their outcome agreements.

The University of the West of Scotland intends for WP objectives to be coherent with equality outcomes:

‘[We] will be working more closely together on equality outcomes. So what will our targets, objectives and actions be on WP? And will that be something we can present coherently across the whole institution?’

The 2012–13 outcome agreements were agreed at a stage when institutions were still developing their equality outcomes for the April 2013 deadline. Institutions reported that this limited the opportunity for embedding of equality in outcome agreements.

Most of the surveyed institutions reported that developing the next round of outcome agreements, which should benefit from lessons from the first round, should hopefully go some way towards resolving these issues.

Recommendation for senior management

= Include equality outcomes relating to students within future outcome agreements to ensure these institutional commitments to advancing equality are delivered through strategy and activity across the institution.

Recommendation for SFC

= Consider a review and alignment of the timings and reporting requirements for outcome agreements and equality outcomes.
The Scottish sector is increasingly expected by the SFC to include consideration of contextual factors in their admissions processes. Some institutions, such as the University of Edinburgh, have been doing so for some time already.

Outcome agreements revealed broad evidence that institutions were responding to this driver, where they had not previously done so, seeing contextual admissions as ‘trying to level the playing field for those who have not had the same opportunity as their more advantaged peers.’

There was some evidence of inclusion of protected characteristics in admissions processes in institutions’ outcome agreements.

**Edinburgh Napier University** explicitly includes provision in its admissions for:

- applicants who have suffered educational disruption or adversity which is deemed to have had a direct impact on their educational progress
- applicants who are returning to study after an extended period outside of education
- applicants with a disability

Its outcome agreement makes a commitment to:

‘extend established evaluation and planning processes and linked reporting to provide the additional granulation needed, specifically in 2012/13 to develop management information to provide fuller information from point of application in relation to MD20, MD40, STEM, gender and age, and to identify other groups and those with protected characteristics … through the review of contextualised data, embed this information in the admissions process (2013 entry).’

This indicates a positive direction in terms of bringing together a wide range of contextual data and information – including applicants’ protected characteristics – to inform admissions decisions.
Several further examples of contextual admissions processes suggested a degree of alignment of WP and E&D in admissions.

**Glasgow School of Art**’s outcome agreement included explicit mention of the protected characteristics in describing its ‘holistic’ and ‘contextualised’ approach to considering applications.

In its outcome agreement, **GCU** emphasised the importance of credit transfer, advanced entry and recognition of prior learning in its approach. While this does not explicitly support protected groups, it is likely to benefit older students and other students from protected groups.

**Recommendation for senior and admissions management**

- Further develop contextual admissions policies to include more specific recognition of how socioeconomic disadvantage and protected characteristics can impact on educational attainment.

**ECU (2012) Equitable admissions for underrepresented groups**

[www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equitable-admissions-for-underrepresented-groups](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equitable-admissions-for-underrepresented-groups)
People and resources

WP and E&D staff working together

Relationships between WP and E&D staff varied in closeness, from ad hoc informal arrangements to monthly meetings. Where formal structures were not in place, informal ways of working developed. In most cases staff judged these to be working well. For example:

‘I don’t think that a strategic decision’s been made to say, you know, when WP’s been planned E&D has been built into it as part of that plan … colleagues that have asked me to be involved.’

The position of E&D within an institution affects the working relationships between WP and E&D colleagues. For example, one institution placed emphasis on E&D compliance, resulting in a more distant relationship with WP activity.

‘Occasionally from time to time we’ll have interaction but it’s probably at the rate of two or three times a year, if that … here it’s much about compliance.’

Some institutions saw delineation in activity, with WP activity focused on pre-entry, and E&D focused post-entry:

‘I think if we’re talking about the student’s experience, E&D focuses on certainly from induction … but WP I think there’s probably a bit more focus on the pre-entry … my perspective is WP’s around recruitment and sort of the routes in … I’m not sure we’re trying to deliver the same things. I think they’re complementary.’

Such delineation can cause tension, with disagreement between E&D and WP staff around who best can deliver certain outcomes. For example:

‘It seemed to us that WP were kind of pushing it back to say ‘well that’s an equalities issue’ is for us to look at the UK domicile black and minority ethnic groups and actually look at how come we’re not getting the application from those groups. Which seemed to be very much a WP area to look at.’
Enabling alignment of WP and E&D

**Recommendation for senior management**

- Take advantage of opportunities to review and formalise working practices between E&D and WP practitioners to enable coordination of work.

**Recommendations for E&D and WP practitioners**

- Proactively engage with colleagues in order to identify opportunities for collaborative work.
- Involve each other in developing local strategy and activity at an early stage.

**Engaging academic or other staff in delivery**

Institutions referred to tension and difficulties with engaging some academic staff in WP and E&D activities. Some staff worried that the WP agenda could potentially have implications for the maintenance of academic standards:

‘I think academically there’s probably a slightly different perspective and, again it’s probably not across the board but, anecdotally, some academics might challenge why are we doing this WP in terms of … it might compromise academic quality, or the quality of students might not be the same, and it has an impact on their time.’

However, it was observed that areas of resistance among staff could be overcome with the support of clear evidence:

‘They are always a challenge too because they may think the WP agenda’s dumbing down, for example. But we have, again, evidence is that the tracking shows that they do well. So it’s all about evidence base.’

Participating institutions observed important connections between WP and E&D aims and academic engagement, because ‘that’s where you need to make the difference: in the actual design and delivery of the programmes. And it’s the programme teams that need to be engaged in these agendas.’
Institutions saw the importance of mainstreaming WP and E&D into delivery:

‘With the people who are delivering on the ground. I don’t think that either the equality person, or unit, or the WP person or unit can deliver the agenda. It needs to be delivered through the people who are delivering. So that’s the learning and teaching people, it’s the student support people.’

Institutions felt that tensions arose where academic staff time was already stretched, so made efforts to link WP and E&D activity to professional development initiatives:

‘I think a lot of this stems, in terms of professional development for the staff actually. The challenge therefore is that staff are incredibly overworked . . . being able to find the time to either engage in a formal thing like a seminar or a workshop or a linking programme is difficult enough but being asked to critically review what you do is quite difficult.’

The Caledonian scholars and associates programme at GCU is a cross-institutional initiative that forms part of the continuing professional development programme that supports individuals to develop innovative learning and teaching projects. Academic staff receive funding towards professional development and the associated projects.

GCU’s learning, teaching and assessment strategy identified a number of relevant themes for projects that have included retention and progression, internationalisation and employability. The programme was described as ‘another conduit to raising these sorts of issues about equality and diversity and inclusive curriculum and flexibility.’

[www.gcu.ac.uk/lead/leadthemes/acceleratecpd/caledonianscholarsandassociates]
Enabling alignment of WP and E&D

Recommendations for senior management

- Ensure responsibility for the delivery of WP and E&D aims, objectives and outcomes is identified and assigned in operational plans within each function across the institution, for example academic departments, learning and teaching and student support.

- Provide resources for staff development on WP and E&D for key staff groups and make it a part of continuing professional development.

Recommendation for E&D and WP practitioners

- Identify opportunities for joint staff engagement and development activity to help staff increase their knowledge and confidence to meet the needs of WP and protected groups.

Champions and leadership that bring the two together

Institutions noted the benefits of high-level leadership for WP and E&D initiatives. Senior managers need to lead by example and generate enthusiasm and inspiration across the institution:

‘You’ve got a senior team that have got widening participation in their blood. You’ve got … our principal … sitting round the table … he’s been there since day one. He’s fully aware what the problems and challenges are out there and what we should be doing.’

Some institutions reported more distributed approaches, for example through the use of executive leads across faculties rather than relying on a single leader at vice-chancellor or principal level. Importantly, several interviewees described the need for more than a ‘top-down’ approach, and a combination of management leadership with grassroots initiatives was described more than once as the optimal model.

Recommendations for senior management

- Actively lead and champion the institution’s WP and E&D strategy, as individual leaders and as management groups.

- Consider assigning senior leaders as advocates or champions for WP and E&D to ensure high profile and accountability for this work and to support mainstreaming.
Data for planning, monitoring and reporting

The institutional outcome agreements voiced strong support for better use of external data, including national, sector and benchmark groupings. External data can be used to support decisions to target specific student groups. Benchmarking provides the evidence to establish where proactive and positive action can be prioritised.

The research provided examples of internal data being used to support strategy development.

The **University of Edinburgh** produces detailed reports through its equality and diversity monitoring and research committee, which give thorough statistical breakdowns of student and staff groups, and which have included a special focus on social class.

**GCU**’s outcome agreement describes its integrated student information system which is capable of monitoring and tracking the retention and progression of students, with detail across student variables and academic programmes.

Some institutions have built data reporting and monitoring into strategy and institutional structures. For example, the **OU**:  

‘At university level the [WP] management group and actually the vice-chancellor’s executive see these things all the time as well. These figures on – across the university are broken down by the individual nations that make up the university as well as the widening access characteristics … and also some aspects of equality and diversity nature as well. So, you know, on a regular basis we review what we think the most urgent issues are.’

Institutions remarked on a growing emphasis on data in demonstrating impact and effectiveness to government and the **SFC**.

‘[UHI has an institutional approach of] monitoring and reporting … jointly with E&D targets using the same internal reporting mechanisms … both are fully integrated into our outcome agreement resulting in shared monitoring and reporting.’
Enabling alignment of WP and E&D

Data on gender identity, religion and belief and sexual orientation

UHI’s outcome agreement referenced a data improvement project to develop ‘meaningful student data, including equality and diversity data’, which is ‘increasingly being used to inform strategic planning at academic partner, faculty and subject levels.’

‘This data will continue to improve when we begin to capture more comprehensive protected characteristics from applicants and enrolling students.’

Data on the student journey

Several institutions found that they needed to undertake further work to increase understanding of the student experience through institutional data. For example:

‘How we make sense of data I think we find it quite challenging. So while we can publish the high-level stuff about the ethnic profile or the gender profile of our students and perhaps where they’ve come from, I think we find it a bit more challenging in terms of how we go beyond that high-level stuff and make it more meaningful analysis.’

SFC’s emphasis in outcome agreement guidance for 2013/14 on targets to increase retention rates for WP and protected groups should act as a driver to prompt more detailed analysis and use of retention data. However it would be helpful for the sector and SFC to recognise that activities need to be focused on reducing the differences in retention and completion rates between groups as well as increasing the participation of specific groups. For example, if retention for disabled students is lower than it is for non-disabled students, greater equality is achieved where an institution can increase retention for disabled students at a faster rate than it can increase retention for non-disabled students.

Several institutions had developed increasingly sophisticated methods of monitoring, reporting and evaluating student behaviour, including the use of qualitative data.
The University of the West of Scotland’s approach drew from multiple sources and extended from pre-entry through to graduation and employment:

‘It’s a mixture of looking at the evidence base in relation to the quantitative data through planning and management information and talking to our academic colleagues, talking to our service providers, talking to the students themselves … So we’re talking at the student lifecycle stage, pre-entry right through to graduation.’

GCU referenced longitudinal qualitative institutional research which focused on progression to honours degree achievement and considered whether particular student groups perform differently to others.

**Recommendations for senior management**

- Use a combination of internal data, external data and benchmarking to establish where proactive and positive action can be prioritised.

- Extend data collection to encompass the full range of protected characteristics at each stage of the student journey.

- Consider joined-up WP and E&D data collection and reporting systems.

- Ensure that mechanisms for reporting and performance management of WP and E&D activity are established, and linked to institutional strategy.

- Support greater understanding of the experiences of E&D and WP target groups to facilitate development of effective aligned strategy through qualitative research.
Enabling alignment of WP and E&D

Recommendations for WP and E&D practitioners

- WP staff should collect and analyse data on the protected characteristics of their target groups in so far as this is possible.
- E&D staff should consider the socioeconomic backgrounds of students included in their strategies.

Recommendations for SFC

- Support institutions to set meaningful and aspirational outcomes or targets in their outcome agreements through encouraging them to use a range of internal and external data.
- Consider guidance on retention and completion in relation to protected characteristics, so that emphasis is given to reducing differences in retention and completion between groups.
Conclusion

WP and E&D strategies and practices in Scottish HEIs intersect and overlap in a range of areas and in a variety of ways. Some of these are intentional and explicit, others are incidental and informal, and perhaps are not fully being exercised to achieve maximum impact. While there were examples of collaborative strategic level working between the two areas, the shared aims and intersecting target groups of each have not been fully determined or articulated in strategy in many cases.

A range of contextual factors have not only shaped HEI strategy, and how WP and E&D are embedded and operationally situated within individual HEIs, but also how these areas are conceived and implemented and as a result, the opportunities for alignment. Historical factors including internal and external drivers have encouraged delineation in WP and E&D strategy.

The overlap of students targeted through WP and E&D initiatives challenges a simplistic categorisation of what a ‘WP student’ or an ‘E&D student’ looks like. SIMD, school progression rates and other measures of socioeconomic background are not the only indicators of disadvantage, and nor are they perfect. Protected characteristics taken on their own, are also potentially reductive definitions, and could fail to recognise multiple identities and multiple needs. More holistic WP and E&D strategies are built on a more sophisticated understanding of disadvantage through use of a broader selection of measures that can recognise multiple identities and the interplay between them.

The introduction of outcome agreements and the specific duties to produce equality outcomes and to mainstream consideration of equality are movements that encourage recognition of these multiple identities and alignment of strategy. Once HEIs have set their equality outcomes in April 2013, and in light of SFC’s new guidelines for 2013/14 that asks for E&D as a horizontal theme across outcome agreements, we may see more integration.
It is important for HEIs to monitor and analyse student outcomes to refine and evaluate an aligned strategy. This may involve finding more sophisticated measurements of participation and outcomes, perhaps including more qualitative data and inclusive research to better understand students’ experiences and support needs in relation to access, retention and success.

WP and E&D strategies are both concerned with the opportunities made available to people and recognise that individuals have a range of needs and circumstances which institutions must understand and respond to in order to lower barriers to participation and success. Bringing together the wealth of expertise and practices developed by WP and E&D practitioners to develop inclusive, sophisticated and embedded institutional strategy is one way in which institutions can increase their impact in advancing equality of opportunity.
Recommendations

Recommendations for senior management

= Seek to explicitly include WP and E&D in overarching institutional strategy to foster a culture of inclusive practice and ensure both are addressed in practice across the institution.

= Capitalise on outcome agreements as an opportunity to bring together institutional WP and E&D strategy for students.

= To make E&D a ‘horizontal theme’ in outcome agreements, bring institutional strategy for E&D into each of the themes where relevant, and give particular attention to including protected groups in outcomes for patterns of participation and student journey.

= Formally review WP and E&D strategy for shared aims and objectives in terms of access, retention and success and crossovers between target groups.

= Involve WP and E&D experts and practitioners when developing relevant sections of institutional strategy and outcome agreements, particularly to advise on opportunities for alignment of their work.

= Include equality outcomes relating to students within future outcome agreements to ensure these institutional commitments to advancing equality are delivered through strategy and activity across the institution.

= Further develop contextual admissions policies to include more specific recognition of how socioeconomic disadvantage and protected characteristics can impact on educational attainment.

= Take advantage of opportunities to review and formalise working practices between E&D and WP practitioners to enable coordination of work.

= Ensure responsibility for the delivery of WP and E&D aims, objectives and outcomes is identified and assigned in operational plans within each function across the institution, for example academic departments, learning and teaching and student support.

= Provide resources for staff development on WP and E&D for key staff groups and make it a part of continuing professional development.

= Actively lead and champion the institution’s WP and E&D strategy, as individual leaders and as management groups.

= Consider assigning senior leaders as advocates or champions for WP and E&D to ensure high profile and accountability for this work and to support mainstreaming.
Recommendations

- Use a combination of internal data, external data and benchmarking to establish where proactive and positive action can be prioritised.

- Extend data collection to encompass the full range of protected characteristics at each stage of the student journey.

- Consider joined-up WP and E&D data collection and reporting systems.

- Ensure that mechanisms for reporting and performance management of WP and E&D activity are established, and linked to institutional strategy.

- Support greater understanding of the experiences of E&D and WP target groups to facilitate development of effective aligned strategy through qualitative research.

Recommendations for E&D and WP practitioners

- Proactively engage with colleagues in order to identify opportunities for collaborative work.

- Involve each other in developing local strategy and activity at an early stage.

- Identify opportunities for joint staff engagement and development activity to help staff increase their knowledge and confidence to meet the needs of WP and protected groups.

- WP staff should collect and analyse data on the protected characteristics of their target groups in so far as this is possible.

- E&D staff should consider the socioeconomic backgrounds of students included in their strategies.

Recommendations for SFC

- Consider a review and alignment of the timings and reporting requirements for outcome agreements and equality outcomes.

- Support institutions to set meaningful and aspirational outcomes or targets in their outcome agreements through considering a range of internal and external data.

- Consider guidance on retention and completion in relation to protected characteristics, so that emphasis is given to reducing differences in retention and completion between groups.
Equality Challenge Unit

ECU works to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education across all four nations of the UK, and in colleges in Scotland.

ECU works closely with colleges and universities to seek to ensure that staff and students are not unfairly excluded, marginalised or disadvantaged because of age, disability, gender identity, marital or civil partnership status, pregnancy or maternity status, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation or through any combination of these characteristics or other unfair treatment.

Providing a central source of expertise, research, advice and leadership, we support institutions in building a culture that provides equality of both opportunity and outcome, promotes good relations, values the benefits of diversity and provides a model of equality for the wider UK society.

Did you find this publication useful?

Your feedback will help us to improve and develop our publications and resources, and help us to ensure that we produce materials that support your work.

Please take a few minutes to complete our publications feedback survey: www.surveymonkey.com/s/ecu-publications-feedback

You can also email us with your feedback: pubs@ecu.ac.uk