

## 2.3. EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONAL CASE STUDIES

### Introduction and summary

After considering the 41 surveys from higher education institutions across the European Higher Education Area, the Access to Success project sought to identify interesting case studies and practices that could be used to exemplify some of the national and institutional disparity on this topic. The extent to which HEIs develop and execute policies and strategies for improving access and retention depends considerably on national policy frameworks and incentives, societal composition and structure of the higher education system. This becomes strikingly clear in the following collection of articles, which span universities in the UK, Sweden, and Denmark. (Four articles from HEIs that completed the survey in Europe were included in this Compendium).

One should clarify that this sample is highly unrepresentative of the wider Europe, across which there is little consensus on terminology surrounding access and retention, what it entails, and to what extent governments, institutions and individuals are in fact responsible.

For example, the Compendium includes two articles from universities in the UK, a country that has a long-standing political framework for 'widening participation' (WP) and a widely accepted vocabulary on the subject. Particularly with the recent rise in student fees in the UK, government agencies have been created to monitor equal access and universities audited regarding their strategies.

**Kingston University**, which provides a case study, launched its Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (WPSA) in 2009. This identifies disadvantaged student target groups and seeks to improve the student experience through policies, strategies and initiatives based on reliable data. This case study describes innovative programmes, such as the Compact Scheme for students with no family history in higher education, and the steps

the institution took to identify concrete means of measuring their improvements in access and retention.

**Edge Hill University** prioritises widening participation as one of the universities' six core aims, and implements it through what is called a 'lifecycle approach', based on the notion that widening participation has to be addressed throughout students' interaction with HE, not just prior to entry or at the point of admission. Outlining several different programmes, ranging from outreach, to progression/transition programmes, to collaborative provision of qualifications with industry partners, Edge Hill provides a holistic vision of the different strategic elements in improving access and retention. This article also gives the political context of the widening participation in the different regions of the UK and the funding modalities that have been put in place to support institutions.

From a different perspective, the article from **Uppsala University** in Sweden frames the access discussion in the Swedish context and couples the gradual and controversial reform of admissions policies in Sweden with widening participation. In order to avoid selective measures that would undermine Swedish welfare policies, widening participation in Sweden has meant integrating the so-called new groups of students on equal terms with traditional students. In Sweden, one can identify a case of multi-faceted system reform intended to increase university accessibility (upgrading non-university institutions in the 70s, and the establishment of regional HEIs). The new universities were intended to play a crucial role in reducing regional discrepancies in participation.

Once again the political framework is relevant, as Swedish universities are now required by law to produce local actions plans for student recruitment. The article presents the various measures that Uppsala University has taken and critiques their efficiency, from outreach visits, to peer counselling, to varied student services for

specific underrepresented groups. An important point is made regarding measuring the success of such initiatives in widening access and improving retention, which is extremely difficult.

An article from **Aarhus University**, Denmark, discusses retention and success of students through their coordinated educational counselling effort, that aims to ensure that students with specific educational difficulties can realise their potential to complete higher education. The university conducts extensive research for the

development of new processes and methods within the practice of counselling and special needs education. The author also points to the Bologna Process reforms, and associates retention and student success directly with this process. No mention of the Bologna Process is made in the article from the UK, nor from other countries, which is interesting since the Bologna Process does have as one of its action lines promoting the 'social dimension' in higher education. This would suggest that this discourse around access and retention in Europe is still nationally rooted.

### 2.3.1. Access and retention at Kingston University, London, UK

*By Steve May*

This article outlines some of the innovative approaches to ensuring that a multi-faculty university meets its civic goal of closer engagement with the local community through implementing strategic objectives of widening participation and supporting the progression of non traditional groups through to graduation and employment.<sup>19</sup>

#### **Institutional profile and mission**

Kingston University is a broad-based higher education institution in South West London which makes a significant contribution to the local community and economy, not least as one of the largest employers in the area. It supports 22,000 students in seven faculties: Art and Design and Architecture; Arts and Social Sciences; Business and Law; Computing, Information Systems and Mathematics; Engineering; Health and Social Care Sciences; and Science. 53% of students are female, 41% mature (over 21 years on entry to the university), 78% full-time, 23% postgraduate, 17% overseas and 53% from non-white ethnic groups.

With one in 10 students coming from families with no previous involvement in university study, Kingston University has a high profile commitment to widen participation to traditionally underrepresented groups. Its mission includes:

“to promote participation in higher education, which it regards as a democratic entitlement; to strive for excellence in learning, teaching and research; to realise the creative potential and fire the imagination of all its members; and to equip its students to make effective contributions to society and the economy”. (Kingston University 2009)

#### **Background**

In its 2001 election manifesto (Labour Party 2001), the UK government committed to increase the numbers of students having experience of higher education (HE) in the UK to 50% of all aged 18 to 30 by 2010. While this is no longer government policy, it has instigated a number of studies and initiatives designed to widen participation in higher education including AimHigher, targeted at students below the age of 16; and the provision of additional funds for universities to attract and retain undergraduates.

The findings by the government-commissioned Leitch report (2006) that lower levels of participation in higher education of some groups in society has important implications for the wider society in terms of social justice and meeting the skills development necessary to remain competitive in a changing global economy confirmed the national importance of driving forward vocational training such as Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) and increasing the numbers of graduates. In addition, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has funded the support of STEM subjects (science, technology, mathematics and engineering) where there is a mismatch between supply and demand and that are of strategic importance to the nation (HEFCE 2006).

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<sup>19</sup> This article was written in the autumn of 2009.

The AimHigher network was instigated from pre-existing bodies by HEFCE in 2004 to “deliver a coherent national outreach programme operating most intensively on the most disadvantaged areas” through raising aspirations and motivation of learners in schools, further education and the workplace and by raising attainment of potential HE students studying for academic and vocational qualifications. With the introduction of student fees, the Office For Fair Access (OFFA) was set up in 2005 as an independent, non-departmental public body which aims to promote and safeguard fair access to HE for underrepresented groups through the implementation of approved higher education institution access agreements which set out how they will safeguard and promote fair access - in particular for students from low income groups - through bursary and other financial support and outreach work.

However, following changes in the economic and political climate, the government has reduced the funding available to institutions for growth in student numbers to 10,000 places, while the increased demand from qualified school leavers is estimated to be 50,000. The government is also committed to a review of the current fee arrangements which is likely to result in a rise of the current £3225 cap for United Kingdom (UK) students.

Lifelong Learning Networks were set up by HEFCE in 2005 with the overall objective of improving the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education.

The National Audit Office report (2007) recognised the importance of retention of students at UK institutions. It concluded that, while comparing well with other countries, there was scope to improve retention rates, and that accurate monitoring and provision of appropriate student support was essential to maximise progression and performance. HEFCE recognises that students with low or non-traditional entry qualifications are likely to need additional support and it provides extra funding to HEIs based on the number of these entrants each year.

The future of HE over the next decade is likely to be shaped by the Higher Education Framework, scheduled to be published by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) later this year, and the outcome of the UK general election in 2010.

### **Institution policies and actions on access and retention**

In 2009 Kingston University produced a Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (WPSA) that details its access and retention policies and strategies for implementation and ongoing evaluation. Its policies relating to access and retention can be characterised by the following six approaches:

1. Evaluating and researching cutting edge practice in international, national and regional partnerships that stimulates, informs and validates the University’s strategy, including working closely with local authorities, schools and colleges.
2. Embedding the responsibility and actions taken to widen participation throughout all the University’s teaching faculties and professional support departments including marketing, academic development, admissions, information services, student services and planning.
3. Ensuring that all those studying on Kingston University programmes receive a satisfying experience both inside and outside the classroom and are placed at the centre of the process by measures taken to widen participation and provide a supportive and inclusive curriculum.

4. Recognising and meeting the financial commitment required to widen participation by funding effective and efficient schemes.
5. Supporting the role played by collaborative partners whose delivery of Kingston University programmes is characterised by the participation of students underrepresented in higher education.
6. Effectively utilising institutional and external data in identifying the impact of measures to widen participation and validate approaches at all stages of the student lifecycle.

The University has agreed that the following cohorts will be the focus of the WPSA: Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups; vocational learners; lower socio-economic groups; disabled students; and special care leavers.

It seeks to improve the student experience through policies, strategies and initiatives based on reliable data and has committed itself to the production of an enhanced suite of student management information reports, designed to inform better both the operational and strategic decision-making processes within the institution.

This approach is also designed to ensure that the information, once reviewed and analysed, is presented for consideration to the relevant committees with the responsibility for making cross-institutional decisions and the authority to ensure that such decisions are followed through.

### Most important measures undertaken in recent years

The table below gives a brief summary of some of the measures taken to improve access and retention, with references to publications giving further detail.

Measure	Brief description
University Retention project	In 2002 the university commissioned wide ranging research into issues related to student retention. (See May & Bousted 2004).
AimHigher	The London South AimHigher network was housed at Kingston University, thereby enabling closer links between the university and work done by AimHigher to increase access of underrepresented groups.
Progression Agreements	These are designed to enable successful completers of specific courses at partner institutions to be admitted onto programmes at the university. (See Hill, Fergy & Marks-Maran 2006). The university also operates seven Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) progression agreements with local colleges to publicise explicitly the requirements for students studying on vocational programmes.
Compact Scheme	As part of its Access Agreement the university provides additional financial and pastoral support to assist the progression in HE of students in local authority care and from non-traditional backgrounds studying at partner colleges who are able to provide evidence of potential to succeed in higher education. (See Woods, May & Hill 2008).
Use of Institutional data	Through detailed monitoring of student application to enrolment and progression through to graduation, this measure has enabled more effective targeting and evaluation of initiatives. (See May & Hill 2008).
Peer support	Evidence has shown that learning from peers can be extremely effective and is likely to improve retention and progression rates. Each faculty runs peer support scheme(s) designed to best enable students to learn from one another. (See Smith, May & Burke 2007).
Student support officers	Faculties have to provide staff to monitor the attendance of students and, where necessary, to contact them and refer them to appropriate support.
Academic Skills Centres	Each faculty provides the option to its students of additional support, particularly in English and Mathematics, to improve their attainment and hence retention and progression rates.
Faculty projects	The university Academic Development Centre (ADC) annually distributes monies to faculties to support initiatives aimed at improving the learning experience of all students. (See Webb & Hill 2003). It now utilises the HEFCE Teaching Enhancement and Student Success (TESS) funds - distributed to HEIs on the basis of their student profiles to help improve retention, teaching and learning and research informed teaching - for this purpose.

## Lesson learnt and good practice

The developments of the university Compact Scheme and institutional data sets representative examples of good practice and lessons learned through experience.

### The Compact Scheme

The scheme is aimed at students whom college staff believe have the ability to succeed but whose potential may not be reflected by their existing or predicted qualifications, and who meet one of the following eligibility criteria: in receipt of Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), the first in their family to go to university, under the care of their local authority, mature applicants who have no previous experience of higher education themselves (i.e. they have not completed a degree), or are in receipt of an Adult Learning Grant. The university faculties have agreed to consider Compact applicants with predicted qualification below the standard entry requirement for their chosen course. It is a requirement that all such applications are supported by a reference which provides evidence of the candidate's ability to succeed and reasons why their existing or predicted qualifications may not reflect their academic potential.

To steer them through the application process, Compact candidates are provided with a single point of contact to provide information, advice and guidance on all relevant issues including courses, fees, funding arrangements and accommodation. Each successful applicant receives a bursary on enrolling (£1000 for Care leavers and £300 for others) and the same amount each year that they progress to the next level of their course. They are invited to a pre-enrolment welcome event which aims to prepare them for their first few weeks at university, often a difficult transitional period, particularly for students who have no family tradition of higher education or support networks at home. Following enrolment, each student is contacted by the Compact Coordinator to identify any problems and remind them that a single point of contact exists for any queries they may have.

The evaluation after two years of the Kingston University Compact Scheme indicates that it is helping to engage students and increases the likelihood of their progressing to higher education by helping them through this crucial transition phase and giving them the security of a known single point of personal contact. In addition, it is clearly strengthening the links with the local community through increased liaison with colleges and schools and thereby helping to meet the civic mission of the University.

Feedback from one college, recently interviewed for a case study commissioned by HEFCE (2008), suggests that the Compact Scheme has increased motivation and engagement and focussed staff more closely on the HE application process and course entry requirements.

“For us there is no down side, we only have to supply a reference and we have the opportunity of persuading more of our young people to apply to university.”  
(HE Careers Adviser)

We expect to extend and refine the evaluation to include the gathering of details of predicted grades, conditions of offers, and actual grades for all Compact applicants who were made conditional offers. This, we anticipate, will help us to identify issues around the accuracy of predicted grades supplied by colleges, the appropriateness of offers made by the faculties and why some students do not confirm their place with Kingston University (e.g. if actual grades are much higher or lower than expected). We also plan to monitor the university course module results and the take-up of Academic Skills Centre

support. Previous evaluation (May, Hill, Webb and Allibone 2008) has indicated that this is an effective way of raising the retention and attainment of non-traditional students.

### Institutional data suite

The development of a suite of datasets to monitor the progression of non-traditional students stemmed from a realisation that, while there was a recognised range of good practice across the institution, it was difficult to determine the variation in the real experience of students and the extent to which a positive approach to Widening Participation was truly embedded. The development started with the setting up of a working group made up of staff from the Widening Participation, Learning and Teaching, and Applicant Services units. The group decided to create datasets from the university-held admissions and enrolment data, to present it in easily readable tabular format which allows comparisons between groups of students and to encourage its use across the university. A second team, consisting of staff involved in data analysis from the Widening Participation Unit, Student Data and Systems Development Unit, Planning Department, and Marketing Section, was then set-up to undertake the technical development of new datasets. Having agreed the range of variables needed, the team developed four reference files: the first detailing all applications to the university; the second all enrolments; the third linked these to enable tracking from application to enrolment; and the fourth linked enrolment files over consecutive years to give the progression of students. The datasets can each be used as a means of identifying areas where the underlying data might inform particular WP initiatives and faculties are encouraged to request this. Figure 1 outlines the five datasets which were distributed to key staff within each faculty.

**Figure 1 - Widening Participation data suite**

Stage	Dataset	Description
1	Headline data	Key HEFCE Access, retention and employment performance indicators.
2	Access	Conversion rates at each stage from application to student enrolment (see May & Hill 2007).
3	Retention	The first year retention of students with traditional and non-traditional qualifications from year 1 to year 2 (see May & Hill 2007b).
4	Degree Class	Degree classification awarded by entry qualification bands used in the allocation of additional funding to support retention.
5	Employment	Type of employment or further study by entry qualification band and degree classification.

However, we have found that it is not enough to provide data in a user friendly form and to offer to mine it to produce bespoke datasets that help to answer specific questions (May & Hill 2008). Staff may be aware of a university mission to widen participation and a plan to engage with local providers, but faculty priorities mean that this does not necessarily hold sway. It was for this reason that we have promoted an exchange of views and a consensus from the bottom upwards through developing a Widening Participation action plan. In following this route Kingston University is complementing its approach of listening to the student voice in the development of policy and support systems such as the Supportive Learning Environment Initiative for Health Care Students (see Hodgson, May & Marks-Maran 2008). In particular, the bringing in of admissions and marketing staff, who already work with all faculties, together with the provision of an overview of the data, has increased awareness amongst staff of the interactions and contributions of all. For example, interest was raised by the illustration of linkages between the level, source and criteria for the funding of WP with students whose progression was tracked.

The dual approach of bringing staff together and providing accessible data through listening to their needs is resulting in the increased use of the datasets. From this we conclude that the underlying explanation for the success of this methodology at Kingston University stems from an understanding of the drivers for action for all involved in the delivery of education and with an interest in WP (from the strategic visions of the government, HEFCE and university Vice-Chancellor to the conflicting priorities experienced by marketing, admissions and teaching staff).

We are currently involved in further embedding access and retention work at Kingston University into the planning and administrative procedures of the university through the Academic Development Centre by considering:

- Annual monitoring outcomes and data on student performance (including WPSA priority groups) to identify courses/programmes or student groups for specific investigation or support.
- Annual monitoring outcomes to identify good practice to be rolled out across the faculty and/or the university.
- How the development of new programmes or the development of existing programmes could be supported by the ADC.
- How the faculty could be utilising TESS funds to implement an action plan.
- Communication of issues to be addressed to other departments (especially Student Services and Administration, Registry, Planning and Information Services).

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