

### 2.3.2. A whole-institution approach to widening access and promoting student success across the student lifecycle, Edge Hill University, United Kingdom

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#### Edge Hill University

Edge Hill University (EHU) in the North West of England has been delivering higher education for 125 years. Initially EHU provided teacher education for women, it received full degree awarding power in 2006 and research degree awarding power in 2008. The University has a wide portfolio, offering programmes in most subject and professional areas (with the exception of Medicine, Veterinary Science and Engineering), along with a growing portfolio of postgraduate and professional development programmes. The University currently has 23,622 registered students, of whom 7,748 are full-time, with the remaining 15,914 on a mix of part-time degree programmes and professional development programmes. The first year full-time degree population is 68% female, 98% from the UK and 89% from the North West of England.

The University has a very strong commitment to widening participation (WP), which is understood to mean widening access to HE *and* promoting student retention and success within HE and beyond. Widening Participation is one of the six core aims of the University's Strategic Plan 2008-2013<sup>22</sup>. The University is currently fourth in the league tables of English universities for recruitment from low participation neighbourhoods and twelfth for recruitment from State Schools. 72.5% of Edge Hill University students fall into one of more of the following Widening Participation performance indicators: Indices of Multiple Deprivation; Low Participation Neighbourhoods; NS-SEC Groups 4-7 or assessed family income of below £25,000 per annum.

The University adopts a lifecycle approach to WP (HEFCE 2001). This model emphasises the idea that widening participation has to be addressed throughout students' interaction with HE, not just prior to entry or at the point of admission. The model identifies the following key stages in the student lifecycle:

- **Aspiration raising:** Providing information and promoting awareness about higher education opportunities to potential students in schools, colleges, communities and workplaces.
- **Pre-entry activities:** Supporting students so they develop the confidence, skills and knowledge to apply to higher education (HE) and make the transition as effectively as possible.
- **Admissions:** Ensuring that the process of applying to, and being selected for, higher education is fair.
- **First term/semester:** The transition to higher education is often difficult for students, but especially for those with additional needs or with more limited family support. Induction

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<sup>22</sup> available at <http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/about/vision/strategicplan>

arrangements are central to achieving this transition successfully - providing information about academic expectations and cultures, institutional systems and welfare support, and facilitating the development of social networks, particularly for students who are not able to participate in traditional student activities. Effective transition can help to improve rates of initial retention and ongoing success.

- **Moving through the course:** Pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, finance and part-time employment, student services etc. may all enhance or inhibit student retention and success.
- **Progression:** This describes the student's move from higher education into employment and/or postgraduate study. There is evidence of discrimination in progression opportunities for students from underrepresented groups. So institutions can work to prepare for, and support the progression of, these graduates.

The lifecycle approach is supported by a whole-institution approach to widening participation. This is in contrast to some higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK which focus primarily on the pre-entry phases of the student lifecycle and who do not engage staff in WP from across the institution.

## Widening participation in England

In an effort to overcome underrepresentation of significant parts of the population in higher education, the English, Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish funding bodies have sought to encourage HEIs to widen participation. Devolution has resulted in different policies in the four jurisdictions of the UK, but, in summary, there is an emphasis on partnership and collaboration between HEIs and other sectors (especially in England, Wales and Scotland) to extend aspirations and applications to higher education (HE), payments to HEIs to support the retention of students from underrepresented groups, and recognition of the need to improve vocational routes into and through HE. By contrast, variations in approach can be seen with regard to student finance, especially the introduction of deferred 'top-up' fees and maintenance grants (in England and more recently Wales), and the differential rates of funding to support widening participation activities.

In England, WP, combines wider access to HE and improved student success in HE. It is defined as:

... helping more people from under-represented groups, particularly low socio-economic groups, to participate successfully in higher education. (DfES 2006).

... raise aspirations and educational attainment among people from under-represented communities to prepare them for higher education, ensure success on their programme of study, improve their employment prospects and open possibilities for postgraduate study, and give them opportunities to return to learning throughout their lives<sup>23</sup>.

Widening access seeks to address inequalities with regards to who gains entry to higher education. HEFCE has defined a number of target groups<sup>24</sup>, who are underrepresented nationally in HE. Target groups include students from lower socio-economic groups (i.e. those whose parents are employed in semi-skilled and unskilled labour, or who are unemployed), and those who are disabled – this includes both physical and learning disabilities.

<sup>23</sup> HEFCE <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/>

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2007/07\\_12/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2007/07_12/)

...these learners are from lower socio-economic groups (groups 4-8 in the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification, NS-SEC), and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who live in areas of relative deprivation where participation in HE is low... we expect that few will have parents or carers who have themselves had experience of HE...it is appropriate that we should prioritise learners whose parents/carers do not have that experience<sup>25</sup>.

It should perhaps be noted here that in the UK there is comparatively limited access to HE, and this is accompanied by comparatively high rates of retention.

Approximately 43% of the age participation index (API) – young people aged 18-21 – participate in HE and about 85% of these complete their programmes within three or four years. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) defines retention in two ways:

- **Completion rate:** the proportion of starters in a year who continue their studies until they obtain their qualification, with no more than one consecutive year out of higher education.
- **Continuation rate:** the proportion of an institution's intake which is enrolled in higher education in the year following their first entry to higher education.

This is a narrow definition of student retention, and offers little flexibility for students who wish to change subjects, courses or institutions, or who need to take more than one year out from their studies. This has been critiqued as it is particularly unsympathetic to the needs of students from WP target groups, such as working class students (Quinn et al 2005) who might want to engage with HE in different ways (e.g. over a longer period of time, or with an extended period away from study). Restricted access to HE, and institutional and personal penalties for non-completion, mean that the UK has comparatively high rates of retention and success, but that certain groups of students are disproportionately disadvantaged. Appendix 1 provides more detail about English policies to widen participation in HE.

### Edge Hill approach to widening participation

EHU engages with WP throughout the student lifecycle. WP is linked directly to student recruitment, and there is recognition of the challenges this brings in relation to teaching, learning and assessment, and the cultural and social experiences of students and staff. WP activity therefore includes curriculum development in all three faculties, and a commitment to improving social and economic opportunities of local and regional communities. The University sees the inculcation of inclusive values as one of the overall outcomes of the educational experience.

This was originally articulated in the WP Framework which provides for:

- i. Adoption of Widening Participation as a key theme in the Institutional Corporate Plan
- ii. Embedding WP in all relevant Institutional policies, strategies, action plans and practices
- iii. Utilisation of the Student Life Cycle Model as a framework within which issues relating to supporting the successful progression of students from compulsory education into Lifelong Learning can be addressed
- iv. Employing Widening Participation as a catalyst for portfolio development referenced through Institutional and Faculty Academic Development Plans

<sup>25</sup> Further details are available from [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2007/07\\_12/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2007/07_12/)

- v. The development of appropriate institutional targets
- vi. Regular monitoring through the AMR process as an integral part of institutional Quality Management arrangements.

The full WP Framework has been superseded by the Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (produced June 2009)<sup>26</sup>.

The University has a solid infrastructure that supports and encourages widening participation initiatives, and organisational structures which reflect both the commitment to, and the ownership of, Widening Participation. In addition to a Widening Participation Service, headed by a senior manager (Director), each faculty has a nominated senior manager (Associate Dean) with responsibility for Widening Participation and these staff work together as a team with nominated staff from services and support areas to form the University's Widening Participation Group (a sub-committee of Equality, Opportunity and Student Success committee). There are three other related working groups covering Retention, Recruitment & Marketing and Fees, Bursaries & Scholarships for which the Director of Widening Participation is an ex-officio member.

The needs of students from widening participation target groups are firmly embedded within the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy and within the operational plans of all services. This ranges from Estates and IT strategies where the issues of social space for students who continue to live in the family home are considered, through to the more obvious Learning and Student Support strategies for students with disabilities and specific learning difficulties. Innovations within curriculum and programme development from each faculty (e.g. foundation degrees, collaborative partnerships with FE colleges and schools, workforce development programmes) fully support the widening participation agenda. Finally, the creation of a Widening Participation Research Centre in 2007-8 has given the university a focus for learning from, and reflecting on, practice and to highlight the excellent research that our staff undertake in the field of Widening Participation.

### **Specific examples of Edge Hill University's approach to widening participation throughout the student lifecycle**

This section provides summary details of some areas of our WP activity.

#### **a) Outreach**

Our outreach work focuses on achievement-raising, at both pre- and post-16, to support increased progression, and much of this is done through a partnership approach<sup>27</sup>. For example, the Greater Merseyside AimHigher project (of which EHU is a strategic and delivery partner) has been a key contributor to the increase in HE participation from the most deprived quintile between 2002/03 and 2006/07. During this period participation from this group has increased by 7.9% in Greater Merseyside compared to the national average of 1.9%.

<sup>26</sup> Both are available from the Edge Hill University website.

<sup>27</sup> See [http://www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=17\\_7](http://www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=17_7) for information about AimHigher, a national programme of local partnerships to promote progression from school and college to HE

- We have developed a new range of pre-entry preparation for HE programmes to improve academic skills, critical thinking and the transition experience with the intention of improving student success. These are cross institutional developments.
- We have developed our own IAG provision which we believe is unique in approach, working not only with enquirers and applicants but in taking this service into the workplace. We are also developing a range of staff development provision for school teachers and IAG specialists, accredited by the university, and which can be used towards a range of postgraduate qualifications.
- The University is committed to working with some of the ‘hardest to reach’ communities including Children Looked After, those in pupil referral units, ex-offenders, local BME groups and those with disabilities or specific learning difficulties.

## **b) Access Provision**

The University has four main approaches to assisting students without entry level qualifications to gain access to higher education:

- Fastrack which is a seven-week, full-time, intensive programme, resulting in an entry qualification to Edge Hill University.
- Fast Forward which is a blended learning variant of Fastrack, with a significant on-line component and taken over 30 weeks.
- For those applying for shortage subjects in initial teacher training we offer a 30-week, part-time, face to face ‘Fast’ route covering subject knowledge followed by the full-time Fastrack programme.
- We offer GCSE (level 2) equivalency tests and revision packages for those intending to apply for programmes of initial teacher training or for classroom assistants applying for Foundation Degrees.

The ‘Fast’ programmes are accredited by the Open College Network. They have successful completion and retention rates of over 95% for the full-time routes and 80% for the blended learning (compared to c50% for similar programmes nationally). The annual target across these programmes is 350 learners. The GCSE Equivalency programme is inspected regularly by OfSTED. The programmes currently support over 500 learners and have an 80% success rate.

## **c) Alternative sites of learning through collaborative provision**

For some students travelling to the University campus presents a barrier to participation. Through a partnership approach the University is able to offer HE and support a wide range of learners in other sites of learning, such as local further education colleges and employers. One of the most innovative developments is the delivery of full-time foundation degrees over two years, with students attending college on one day per week only; the other elements being delivered and supported within the workplace. This enables students to continue working whilst achieving a Foundation Degree. Employers have been particularly supportive of this model with assignments linked directly to the student’s experience in the workplace. Further, rigorous, but flexible and responsive validation processes have been developed for employers to gain academic credit for ‘in-house’ training programmes. Many of the

students studying with our collaborative partners are mature students whose circumstances determine that they cannot travel far to study, and/or cannot afford to leave employment.

#### d) Managing the student experience in HE

We believe that retaining students requires a holistic approach to the delivery of the whole student experience from recruitment through to award. New student induction is a key element of this approach but retention is more than a first week/first year issue. Crucially, we believe that developing a sense of belonging through life-cycle support and the establishment of learning communities with a strong cohort identity geared to the promotion of autonomous learning lies at the heart of a successful, motivated and self-confident student body. The Retention Strategy Working Group prepares an annual Progress Report and Action Plan which is approved by the Academic Board and sets the priorities for the coming 12 months. Actions are grouped in themed areas which emanate from the Strategy and are particularly geared to the at-risk characteristics of many of our students:

- i. **Student Engagement.** Incorporates setting student expectations and collecting and responding to student feedback. Specific activities include the development of the Hi website for applicants and the GO portal for on-course students, support for training student course representatives and the implementation of regular student surveys at critical points.
- ii. **Community.** Work in this area seeks to develop the reality of a cohesive academic and social community and includes significant additional resources to develop the Students' Union, the creation of more social spaces on campus, for activities geared to off-campus students, provision of new student residential accommodation, and support for cohort-based social activities. Plans for the development of a 'student village' are well advanced.
- iii. **Academic.** This area concentrates on the accessibility of academic provision through reviewing the framework within which programmes are delivered, with the intention of ensuring that students are enabled to engage fully with the academic process. In particular, this has covered assessment strategies and the use of formative assessment, student workloads, study skills, recovering failure, tutor contact time and the academic regulations. The work of the Undergraduate Framework Group is critical to this area (see below).
- iv. **Intervention.** Accepting that the reasons students discontinue with their studies are individual, providing intervention at the right time is a key aspect of our strategy. This is largely based on tracking mechanisms which pick up student non-attendance, non-submission or erratic performance. The University has developed sophisticated systems for progress review meetings which are triggered from the tracking systems and result in individualised learning agreements which set out student and staff responsibilities to enable continuation. The development and training of Personal Tutors is critical to the successful delivery of the intervention strategy.
- v. **Course Organisation and Management.** This area concentrates on specific operational issues which affect the students' experience such as timetabling. The University has invested in a new timetabling system which will enable student access to personal timetables.
- vi. **Data.** Configuring the student record system and associated reporting tools so that staff can more easily access data to assist in the management and analysis of student retention at programme, department, faculty and institutional level.
- vii. **Sharing Experience.** The University commits significant resources to sharing experience through the work of the Retention Strategy Group, Conferences and research projects.

- viii. Bursaries.** Edge Hill is committed to the provision of direct support to students both as a means of stimulating recruitment from low participation neighbourhoods and underrepresented groups and as a means of encouraging retention through the recognition of excellence. Further details are available in our Access Agreement.

### **e) Learning and teaching**

There is a centrally planned learning and teaching strategy, and complementary, corresponding planning takes place in the three faculties. Widening Participation is embedded throughout the Learning and Teaching Strategy. For example, the new Undergraduate Framework has been designed and validated to place stronger emphasis on the student experience, with due regard for working with the diversity of needs, the first year experience and success factors. This Framework provides a summary of the key principles the University expects to be addressed in programme design. Specific Foci are addressed by high order questions which programme developers and validation panels must address in full. These include: fully articulated plans to ensure a managed and supported process at each of the key transition points; appropriate mechanisms by which to assess AP(E)L and assist students in developing academic skills, e.g. CPD portfolios or the use of validated shell modules; evidence of support for students during their learning process, with a particular focus upon the first year experience and formative assessment as a condition of validation. In addition, each of the three Faculties develops its curricula to meet the needs of students from diverse groups.

### **f) Central services**

Student Services & Careers provide a comprehensive range of centralised services at Edge Hill, encompassing direct support for students; contributions to the activities focused on enhancing the student experience; direct support for staff; strategic leadership for equality and diversity issues for students; as well as contributions to activities outside the scope of core support service provision and risk management.

Direct support for students includes: the Student Information Centre Information Desk; the provision of information on Childcare; general welfare and legal advice; Counselling and Supervisory Services for staff and students; Support for Disabled Students; Financial Advice, Guidance and Support; Accommodation and support for residential and non - residential students; Health Care; targeted support for Care Leavers; the provision of Careers Advice & Guidance; support for volunteering and Job Club provision; support for students at outreach centres.

## **Conclusions**

The Edge Hill approach to widening access to higher education and promoting student retention and success is two-fold: it operates across the student lifecycle and involves the whole institution. This approach is underpinned by a strong strategic commitment to widening participation and the use of evidence and data to inform strategic and operational decision-making. This therefore reflects good practice identified in the available research evidence<sup>28</sup>.

It is however still challenging to retain a diverse and dispersed student body, both at this institution and nationally. It is for this reason that the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) together

<sup>28</sup> See Jones 2008, [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/wprs/WPRS\\_retention\\_synthesis](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/wprs/WPRS_retention_synthesis)

with the Paul Hamlyn Foundation have provided £1 million funding to explore which interventions are effective at improving student retention and success, especially in relation to students from targeted WP groups<sup>29</sup>.

Edge Hill University is continually striving to improve its student experience. One area which is currently under review, and which is likely to have a positive impact on student retention and success, is personal tutoring.

## Appendix 1: Widening participation policies in England

Over the last ten years the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has introduced a number of measures.

- One of the earliest approaches was special initiative funding, which involved institutions bidding for comparatively small pots of money for short-term projects (usually a maximum of three years, and often much shorter periods). The bidding process, the short-term contracts and the lack of funding security made this an unpopular way of allocating resources for widening participation with HEIs.
- AimHigher has been the major vehicle for widening access to HE. AimHigher supports regional and area partnerships between HEIs, schools, colleges, employers and other agencies to promote interest in higher education, encourage applications and prepares potential entrants for study at the higher level. These partnerships are required to increase participation in each geographical area and to address low rates of participation by students from lower socio-economic groups, low participation neighbourhoods and by those with disabilities. The area partnerships have confirmed funding until July 2011, though the funding for regional partnerships ceased on 31 July 2008.
- Annual performance indicators were introduced in December 1999 (HEFCE 99/66) and are now available annually from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). These measure the extent to which each HEI meets its “institutional benchmark in relation to recruiting students from state schools, lower socio-economic groups (based on parental employment) and low participation neighbourhoods (or “postcode indicators”). Although the “institutional benchmarks” are intended to restrict comparisons to similar types of institutions only, the indicators are often used for purposes other than those for which they were intended and they have led to comparison between institutions – a practice which is discouraged by the funding council (on the grounds that comparisons may not take account of institutional specificity).
- Postcode indicators have been utilised to provide HEIs with additional premium funding to enable them to recruit students from under-support and outreach work. Increased fee income will be used to attract students from lower socio-economic groups and underrepresented groups and support their additional needs in higher education. The allocations are determined on the basis of students who complete their year of study. The formula funding for the widening participation allocation for both full-time and part-time students is split: approximately 20% for widening access and 80% for improving retention and student success.

<sup>29</sup> Further details of this programme are available at: [http://www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=11\\_3](http://www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=11_3)

- HEFCE also makes a mainstream disability funding allocation to institutions reflecting the proportion of students in receipt of the Disabled Students Allowance.

In 1999 HEIs were asked to prepare Initial Strategic Statements (99/33), and, building on this process, in 2001 they were asked to prepare a “Widening Participation Strategy and Action Plan” for the next three years (HEFCE 01/29). Although this is no longer a requirement, the funding council encourages institutions to continue to prepare a widening participation strategy.

- The Higher Education Act 2004 allows HEIs to charge students top-up fees of up to £3000 per year from 2006. Although this is seen by many as detrimental to the goal of widening participation, students no longer have to pay up-front tuition fees. In addition, institutions are required to have a bursary scheme in place to assist poorer students and to make every effort to ensure that applications are socially inclusive. The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was established as part of the 2004 HE Act to work collaboratively with institutions to meet these conditions and ensure that the introduction of variable tuition fees has no detrimental effect on widening participation (OFFA, 2004/01). Institutions that decide to raise full-time undergraduate tuition fees above the standard level must submit an Access Agreement to OFFA setting out how they will safeguard and promote fair access – particularly for students from low income groups who aspire to HE – through bursary and other financial support. All HEIs in England charge top-up fees, and early evidence shows that outreach and bursary support differs markedly between institutions, largely dependent on their mission and market position.
- The government has targeted the promotion of fair access as a key priority area. In its higher education Widening Participation Strategy (DfES, 2003), the government outlined the action being proposed under four headings: attainment, aspiration, applications and admissions. As part of its proposals for admissions, the government argued for admissions to be on merit, achievements and potential, irrespective of class, background or school attended. The strategy also referred to the commissioning of research, led by Professor Steven Schwartz, to identify good practice in admissions. The Schwartz Report (2004) provides recommendations for fair and transparent admissions processes to promote equality. The report proposed five principles of a fair admissions system:
  1. It should be transparent
  2. It should enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and their potential
  3. It should strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid
  4. It should seek to minimise barriers for applicants and
  5. It should be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate structures and processes.

The government hope that all universities will adopt these principles and those wishing to charge a higher tuition fee will need to demonstrate to OFFA that they subscribe to them. Amongst others, OFFA is charged with a principal duty to promote fair access. The extent to which HEIs have adopted the five principles is the subject of a review of admissions being co-ordinated by the organisation Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA).

- The government is committed to improving the parity of vocational and academic qualifications. This will require improving vocational routes into and through HE. Lifelong Learning Networks were created as an outcome of the Joint Progression Strategy (2004) developed by HEFCE, the LSC, and DfES to advance vocational access and work-based learning and progression into and through HE. The networks are formed by groups of further and higher education institutions to offer improved/new progression routes for vocational learners and promote lifelong learning<sup>30</sup>.
- Recent equality legislation requires HEIs to develop and implement equality schemes for race, disability and gender. The legislation dictates that HEIs must take a holistic approach: they must be proactive and make anticipatory adjustments to their policies and practices, rather than expect assimilation by students. It is necessary for HEIs to consider their culture and ethos and demonstrate that they are working towards the generation of a positive and proactive learning environment. This necessitates the leadership and commitment of senior managers. The equality legislation covers institutions and employers as well as all aspects of their delivery as service organisations.
- In England just over 10% of HE is delivered by Further Education colleges (FECs) –HE in FE. Around 160 FECs are directly funded by HEFCE, the remainder being indirectly funded through partnerships, franchises and consortium arrangements. HE in FE is a key element in delivering HE opportunities to those who may wish to study locally, who may progress to higher education via vocational and work-based routes, and who may have returned to learning through the familiar setting of an FE. The 2003 White Paper made it clear that the government sees FECs as being significant in delivering their HE widening participation objectives, mostly in terms of foundation degree provision. Foundation degrees were launched in September 2001. They were designed to be a new intermediate vocational HE qualification, developed in partnership between FE colleges, HE institutions and employers. Foundation Degrees are required to make provision for those achieving the two-year foundation degree to progress to a full honours degree<sup>31</sup>.

Mostly recently English HEIs and FECs with at least 100 FTE HE students have been asked to prepare and submit a Widening Participation Strategic Assessment. These require institutions to present details of their strategic approach to widening participation (within their institutional context), demonstrating the institution's commitment to widening participation, setting out its aims and key objectives, setting appropriate targets and milestones for the future and identifying investment in widening participation. In addition, institutions should append their access agreement, high level admissions policy and other supporting information.

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<sup>30</sup> [www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/pubs/lifelong.doc](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/pubs/lifelong.doc)

<sup>31</sup> See [www.fdf.ac.uk](http://www.fdf.ac.uk) and [www.foundationdegrees.org.uk](http://www.foundationdegrees.org.uk).