Student Opportunity outcomes framework research programme: Data return project

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Report authors:

Lindsey Bowes
Professor Peter Davies
Professor Liz Thomas
Dr Gill Wyness
Clare Foyle
Rachel Moreton
Dr Guy Birkin
Tanguy Sene

For more information about this report please contact Lindsey Bowes:

CFE Research, Phoenix Yard, Upper Brown Street, Leicester, LE1 5TE

T: 0116 229 3300 Lindsey.Bowes@cfe.org.uk
www.cfe.org.uk

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ABBREVIATIONS

EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
FE	Further education
HE	Higher education
HEAT	Higher Education Access Tracker
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher education institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HMRC	HM Revenue and Customs
ILR	Individualised Learner Record
MIS	Management information systems
NNCO	National Networks for Collaborative Outreach
NPD	National Pupil Database
NSP	National Scholarship Programme
NSS	National Student Survey
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
POLAR	Participation of Local Areas classification groups
RCT	Randomised control trial
SLC	Student Loans Company

SO	(HEFCE's) Student Opportunity (funding)
UCAS	University and Colleges Admissions Service
UK PIs	UK Performance Indicators
ULN	Unique Learner Number
UPN	Unique Pupil Number
WP	Widening participation
WPSA	Widening Participation Strategic Assessment

PREFACE

Higher education (HE) matters – as it always has – for the transmission of knowledge and skills, the promotion of core values and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. But because skill-biased technological change is driving up the demand for skills it matters today also for national economic performance. Furthermore, skills have a shorter shelf-life than previously, so skills need to be refreshed regularly if they are to stay relevant. Taken together, these trends imply a need for education and training that is larger, more diverse, and repeated, in the sense of periodic retraining. HE contributes to those investments in human capital by endowing graduates with broad, flexible problem-solving skills. It is no accident that participation rates have risen in almost all countries, with no sign of slowing.

For investment to be effective, however, there needs to be efficient matching between students, who are diverse in their aptitudes, interests and potential, and higher education institutions (HEIs), which are diverse in many ways, including academic approach, mode of teaching, and target group of students.

Widening participation (WP) policy and practice fulfils a key role in the matching process. For example, a central element for widening access is an understanding of student choices in the face of the constraints they face. The sort of questions that arise include why students choose certain courses, what factors might influence those choices and, within those, which factors might be amenable to policy intervention at a national or institutional level. Equally, it is important to know what factors constrain student choice – most particularly about whether or not to apply to university – and, again, which of those constraints can be ameliorated by appropriate intervention.

It is not possible to fully answer questions like these without data on individuals – both individuals who go to university and those who do not. The sources of such data include the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), who have information on where students have come from, the universities themselves (who have information on the process which the student went through) and HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the Student Loans Company (SLC), who have information on important aspects of labour-market outcomes, including earnings.

In sum, WP is important not only for reasons of social justice but as an essential element in efficient investment in human capital – in today's world countries cannot afford to waste talent. More and better data are an important ingredient in designing policies to widen participation further and more effectively.

Nicholas Barr, Professor of Public Economics, London School of Economics

14 May 2015

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

0.1 This report is the final output of one of two related projects to develop an evaluation framework to better evidence the impact of funding to widen participation in HE. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) provides annual funding to HE providers for activities to widen access to HE for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, to support them to achieve and to improve graduate outcomes.

0.2 HEFCE commissioned CFE Research, working in collaboration with economists from the London School of Economics and the University of Birmingham, to develop and pilot a data return to gather more detailed information to help understand the relationship between the HEFCE funding and the resulting activities, outputs and outcomes.

0.3 Current WP monitoring and research is primarily focused on input measures such as the type of activities institutions undertake and their aggregate costs. Little has been done at a national level to assign robust metrics that measure impact and outcomes for individuals, social or economic returns or value for money. The lack of evidence of impact is an issue for government, funding councils and institutions and there is an international call for rigorous and consistent evaluation of WP interventions in order to establish programme effectiveness.

0.4 This report provides details of the development of a pilot data return that aims to address these issues. It includes the rationale for the chosen design, the results of the piloting process, including feedback from institutions, and recommendations for next steps.

Methodology

0.5 We selected a sample of 15 higher education providers to ensure a broad variety of institution types were represented on the project. The tariff level of institutions and retention rates (of disadvantaged entrants and overall) were taken into account during the sampling design and three specialist and further education (FE) colleges were also included.

0.6 The design of the pilot data return was informed by a questionnaire and follow-up interviews with the sample institutions which explored the monitoring and evaluation that currently takes place and the types of data that might be available for returning to HEFCE.

0.7 We also developed a conceptual framework that was used to understand the relationship between inputs, activities, resources and outputs and outcomes (such as student success measures) that lead onto impacts.

0.8 A pilot data return was designed that comprised tables detailing activity and resource spend by type of WP activity, including the total number of WP individuals reached, and an individualised return for collecting information about the individuals reached.

0.9 The pilot data return was sent to the participating institutions and the returned spreadsheets and feedback were analysed to understand the strengths and limitations as well as the barriers to collecting data in this way. Further interviews were carried out with sample institutions to establish a deeper understanding of what could be collected in a data return and for what purpose, current barriers and future possibilities.

Summary of findings

0.10 Of the 15 institutions that participated in the pilot, only ten institutions were able to populate the data return with partial information about expenditure on activities and resources, and only one institution was able to provide individualised data.

0.11 One reason for incomplete pilot data returns is that current systems do not capture data in the requested format. But if a new data return was implemented in the same form as the pilot, this would have implications for institutional systems (how data is collected and held) and resources (the time and expertise required to complete returns). Changes to data returns could also impact the types of WP activity delivered, with certain activities becoming more attractive because they have a lesser burden associated with data collection. In addition, greater clarity regarding the purpose of the data return would be needed.

0.12 This project identified the following purposes of evaluating WP spend and activity:

- to ensure that central government funding is appropriately spent (**accountability**)
- to enable an overall assessment of the difference to student and society outcomes that can be attributed to WP funding (**impact assessment**)
- to demonstrate the value of any impact (**return on investment**)
- to identify differences between institutions' approaches to WP and to see if these differences are associated with differential student outcomes (**benchmarking**)
- to establish the effect of different types of WP interventions (**what works**).

0.13 Whilst a data return could be used to meet all of these objectives, the process would result in a significant burden for some institutions. Meeting these objectives is imperative for HEFCE and the HE sector, but our exploration of evaluation of WP in the related project[1] demonstrates that different data collection methods and evaluation

[1] See CFE Research (2015) *Student Opportunity outcomes framework research: In-depth study*. Bristol: HEFCE

approaches are better suited to achieving these objectives. The most appropriate purpose of the data return is to ensure accountability.

0.14 Alternative approaches to data collection could provide further evidence of impact. In particular, the value of collecting individualised data was highlighted by the economists working on the project. We identified some good practice, with methods for collecting individualised data established at some universities (using the Higher Education Access Tracker). Other data collection methodologies could be explored that use a sample rather than a whole-sector approach to returning data.

0.15 Robust methodologies for evaluating the impact of WP spend and activities could be supported by wider individualised data collection. Extending the data return could provide evidence to help support the achievement of the other objectives outlined above. But a range of different data sources and evaluation methods are necessary to achieve the objectives fully and in an effective and efficient manner.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1 (short term): Future data returns should continue to collect data on funding and broad, high-level categories of activities, for the purpose of assessing accountability.

Recommendation 2 (longer term): HEFCE should consider, alongside the sector, whether additional data collection could provide further accountability. The learning from the research suggests that the following points should be considered if further data is required:

- be proportionate - the burden of collecting and reporting data should be in line with the funding an institution receives
- minimise likely impact on institutions' decisions as to what to fund – the data return should not inadvertently encourage institutions to invest in activity purely because it is easy to report on
- have a clear purpose – this should be communicated to institutions completing the return so they understand what the data are for and how the data will be used
- implement with sufficient lead-in time to enable institutions to set up appropriate data collection systems before activities or expenditure to be reported take place – re-engineering of data at a later date is burdensome and results in inconsistent and inaccurate reporting
- remain consistent over time, as far as possible – this will allow institutional and sector-level comparisons over time.

Recommendation 3 (short term): HEFCE should consider the best practice data collection techniques for collecting individualised data already taking place in the sector (such as HEAT). Any learning about what is possible using tracked data should be shared so that others in the sector can either opt in or develop similar approaches.

Recommendation 4 (longer term): HEFCE should consider how best to encourage the use of robust evaluation techniques in evaluating WP spend and activities.

Recommendation 5 (longer term): HEFCE should consider the extent to which a subset of the sector could be involved in future data collection and returns processes, where the purpose of that return goes beyond accountability.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we set out the background of the project and its aims and objectives. The chapter also provides an overview of the methods used.

Widening participation

1.1. Since the publication of the Kennedy[2] and Dearing[3] reports, the term 'widening participation' (WP) has featured prominently in successive governments' policy initiatives aimed at addressing the under-representation of certain social groups in HE including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and students with disabilities. WP interventions aim to ensure that people with the ability to benefit from HE have equal opportunity to participate, regardless of background, age, gender, ethnicity or disability. Such interventions do this by raising aspirations towards HE and by removing barriers to progression.

1.2. More recently, WP policies have been driven by concerns about social justice, social mobility and the needs of the knowledge economy. Social mobility boosts entrepreneurialism and enterprise resulting in faster technological progress and stronger levels of growth.[4] Conversely, low levels of mobility can constrain growth through the misallocation of human resources.[5] The HE sector plays a key role in helping to improve social mobility by providing a route for individuals to obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to enter high value occupations. This includes widening access to HE to those from lower socio-economic and disadvantaged groups.

1.3. HEFCE has developed a commitment to a lifecycle approach to WP, concerned with retention and success outcomes as well as access to HE, aimed at ensuring WP students are supported to achieve a good degree and progress successfully into work or further study. This approach has been developed over time but reiterated in the HEFCE and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) joint national strategy.[6] As a result, interventions at institutions are increasingly focused throughout the whole student lifecycle; greater emphasis is now placed on improving the

[2] Kennedy, H. (1997) *Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education* Coventry: Further Education Funding Council. Available at: http://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/9063796.pdf (Accessed: June 2015)

[3] Dearing, R. (1997) *Higher education in the learning society* Leeds: National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education. Available at: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/ (Accessed: June 2015)

[4] Hassler, J. and Rodriguez-Mora, J. (1998) *IQ, Social Mobility and Growth* Institute for International Economic Studies, Stockholm University, Seminar Papers No 635, January

[5] Murphy K, Scheifer A & Vishny R (1991) The Allocation of Talent: Implications for Growth *Quarterly Journal of Economics* Volume 106(2): 503-530

[6] OFFA and HEFCE (2014) *National Strategy for Access and Student Success*, London UK: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/299689/bis-14-516-national-strategy-for-access-and-student-success.pdf (Accessed: June 2015)

retention rates of students considered at risk of non-completion and also on the employability, attainment and progression of WP groups.[7]

1.4. Application rates to HE in England remain highly differentiated by social background although the difference between those living in advantaged and disadvantaged areas is diminishing. In the last ten years, application rates to HE for young people from all backgrounds have increased, and the largest increase has occurred amongst those from disadvantaged backgrounds.[8] Between 2004 and 2012, the application rates of young people living in the most disadvantaged areas increased by over 60 per cent,[9] but the overall gap between the most and least advantaged remains wide. Students from disadvantaged areas remain under-represented in all institutions except those with the lowest tariff entry requirements. Students from the top 20 per cent of advantaged areas are seven times more likely to attend the most selective universities than the 40 per cent most disadvantaged.[10] Once in HE, students from the most disadvantaged areas are, overall, less likely to be retained and succeed than the most advantaged, although this gap is also narrowing, which is perhaps in part explained by the improvements seen in entry qualifications.[11] Furthermore, WP students are now being retained at the same level as their non-WP peers in many, particularly selective, institutions.[12]

1.5. HE in England has undergone substantial changes over recent years, most notably in relation to the student funding system and the allocation of student numbers. From 2015-16 the government has lifted the cap on the number of undergraduate students that English higher education institutions (HEIs) can admit. Tuition fees have increased substantially and a greater proportion of the cost of HE is now borne by the student. In an attempt to ensure that students from low-income families were not deterred or prevented from progressing into HE by financial issues, institutions charging fees above the basic level of £6,000 per annum for a full-time undergraduate programme or £4,500 per annum for a part-time programme are now required to produce an access agreement. These detail fee limits and describe how institutions will use a proportion of their additional fee income (expected to be around 30 per cent of fee income over £6,000 for institutions with low numbers of disadvantaged students) to promote fair access and improve retention and success through financial and non-financial support. A wide range of support has

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[7] OFFA (2014) *Access agreements for 2015-16: key statistics and analysis*. Bristol, UK: Office for Fair Access. Available at: https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Access-agreements-for-2015-16-key-statistics-and-analysis.pdf (Accessed: June 2015)

[8] HEFCE (2013) *Trends in young participation in higher education.* Bristol, UK: Higher Education Funding Council for England. Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2013/201328/HEFCE_2013_28.pdf (Accessed: June 2015)

[9] UCAS Analysis and Research (2012) *How have applications for full-time undergraduate higher education in the UK changed in 2012?* Cheltenham, UK: UCAS. Available at: https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/ucas_how_have_applications_changed_in_2012.pdf (Accessed: June 2015)

[10] Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty (2012) *Fair Access to Professional Careers*. London, UK: Cabinet Office. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61090/IR_FairAccess_acc2.pdf (Accessed: June 2015)

[11] UUK (2014) *Trends in Undergraduate Recruitment*. London, UK: Universities UK. Available at: http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2014/TrendsInUndergraduateRecruitment.pdf (Accessed: June 2015)

[12] See the UK Performance Indicators: www.hesa.ac.uk/pis (Accessed: June 2015)

been put in place to mitigate the impact of the funding reforms on disadvantaged students. This includes bursary and scholarship arrangements such as the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) and changes to the system of loans (such as deferred repayments and an increase in the threshold of earnings required before the loan must be repaid).

Student Opportunity funding

1.6. HEFCE allocates funding from the government to universities and colleges, including funding to support activities to widen participation in HE. The Student Opportunity (SO) allocation for each institution is based on a formula and provides funding to support activities throughout the student lifecycle, from widening access to HE to supporting progression into further study or graduate employment.

1.7. In 2015-16, HEFCE will allocate £380m under the SO allocation, comprising:

- £68m to recognise the extra costs associated with recruiting and supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds currently under-represented in HE
- £20m to widen access and improve provision for disabled students
- £279m improve the retention of students most at risk of not continuing their studies.

1.8. In addition to the SO allocation, a further £13m has been provisionally allocated by HEFCE to fund National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) in 2015-16. This funding, which is not recurrent, is provided to networks of universities and colleges to establish a nationally-coordinated approach to help individuals to access HE.[13]

1.9. Funds for WP purposes were first introduced in 1999-2000 with the specific objective of widening access to HE. The allocations for 2003-04 also included for the first time funding to support students at risk of not completing their course. The majority of HE providers combine the SO allocation with a variety of other funding, most notably additional fee income. HEFCE-funded HEIs submit annual monitoring returns to HEFCE and OFFA in order to report on their investment in WP activity. Access agreements help to support institutions and OFFA to account for institutional expenditure on WP as well as to report against targets. In addition, a Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (WPSA) was required by HEFCE from 2009 to 2012. In 2012-13 an interim WP strategic statement was requested instead, recognising the changes being made to HE funding at the national level. These statements were further updated by institutions in 2013-14 but are no longer required from 2014-15.

1.10. In the current fiscal climate and the context of ongoing cuts to public expenditure, there is an increasing need to understand the impact of WP funding and the extent to which it offers value for money. Since 2009, HEFCE has published guidance to help institutions develop their approaches to evaluating their WP activity and spending, and OFFA, in its guidance to institutions

[13] HEFCE (2015) *Guide to funding 2015-16: How HEFCE allocates its funds*. http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/2015/201504/2015_04.pdf

on the development of their access agreement, now places a greater emphasis on the importance of evaluation.[14]

1.11. During the last three years HEFCE and OFFA have commissioned several pieces of research to develop a better understanding of the impacts of funding for WP on the participation and achievement of under-represented groups. The findings contributed to their joint national strategy, [15] which is designed to promote fair access and student success in the English HE system. Most published research relating to effective approaches to WP is conducted at the level of the individual institution. There are few common approaches to collecting, recording and disseminating data about WP practice and impact at the national level. Those national evaluation frameworks that do exist, for example in Australia, Ireland and the USA, appear to be limited to institutional data which varies in quality and may or may not be published and shared with the wider sector or policy makers.[16]

1.12. These previous studies found that institutions perceive that the investment in WP has a positive impact and this is reflected in improved performance against key indicators. However, institutions have not been required to disaggregate and systematically account for expenditure against their SO allocation. In addition, institutions have been encouraged to embed WP within mainstream activities. Assessing the impact of activities and related expenditure is more difficult as a consequence. Furthermore, institutions are currently accorded a degree of flexibility in the way they use the funding and evaluate effectiveness. This presents additional complexities when attempting inter-institutional comparisons and benchmarking. Finally, the wide range of other factors that influence access and success in HE means that providing evidence of return on investment and impact is a particular challenge.

Aims and objectives of the project

1.13. This project is one of two related projects that aim to help HEFCE and participating institutions develop a fuller understanding of the impact of work to widen access to HE and increase successful participation in HE in England. The specific aim of this data return project is to improve the reporting process in order to better enable the impact of the SO funding to be demonstrated. In order to achieve this aim, this project has two key objectives:

- **to develop a conceptual framework** for understanding the return on investment from expenditure on WP, including the SO allocation, in terms of the activities it supports and the benefits arising for individuals, the local community, the economy and society more

[14] OFFA (2014) *How to produce an access agreement for 2015-16.* Bristol, UK: Office for Fair Access. Available at: http://www.offa.org.uk/guidance-notes/how-to-produce-an-access-agreement-for-2015-16/ (Accessed: June 2015)

[15] BIS (2014) *National strategy for access and student success in higher education*. London, UK: Department of Business, Innovation and Skills Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/299689/bis-14-516-national-strategy-for-access-and-student-success.pdf (Accessed: June 2015)

[16] Bowes, L. Jones, S. Thomas, L. Moreton, R. Birkin, G. and Nathwani, T. (2013) *The Uses and Impact of HEFCE Funding for Widening Participation* Bristol, UK: HEFCE Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/indirreports/2013/Uses,and,impact,of,WP,funding/The%20uses%20and%20impact%20of%20HEFCE%20funding%20for%20widening%20participation.pdf (Accessed: June 2015)

broadly, and

- **to propose a revised annual data return** for universities and colleges that receive the SO allocation, with the aim of developing a stronger evidence base for understanding the uses of SO funding and the impact on widening access, student success and graduate outcomes.

1.14. The project engaged with institutions to explore the issues and challenges of disaggregating and demonstrating the impact of SO funding.

1.15. A related piece of work explores how the conceptual framework could lead to an understanding of the impact of a wider range of access and student success activities and expenditure. This piece of work is also being undertaken by CFE and draws on the findings from the data return project.

Method

Sampling

1.16. The design and testing of a revised data return was carried out with the assistance of a sample of 15 institutions that provide HE. Institutions were purposively selected to represent the diverse make up of the sector and the differing levels of funding distributed to institutions by HEFCE. Four higher than average tariff on entry institutions participated, along with two average tariff on entry institutions, three lower than average tariff on entry institutions, three specialist institutions and three FE colleges. The total amount of SO funding allocated to each institution in 2014-15 ranged from just over £100,000 up to just over £8m. FE colleges were selected based on geography and overall SO allocation received, with institutions receiving less than £100,000 excluded from the sampling. Institutions already known to be tracking and evaluating WP activities were also prioritised in the sampling.

1.17. The retention rates at institutions, as published in the UK performance indicators[17] (UK PIs) were also taken into account in the sampling. These include institutional retention rates for all entrants as well as the retention rates of entrants from low-participation neighbourhoods. Each performance indicator includes a benchmark that demonstrates how well the institution is performing against the sector average, which has been adjusted to take into account institutional differences. Institutions were grouped based on retention performance against the benchmark into the following categories: higher than expected retention for all entrants, higher than expected retention for disadvantaged entrants but lower retention for all entrants, higher than expected retention for all entrants but lower retention for disadvantaged entrants, lower than expected retention, as expected and no data available (this applied to FE colleges whose data is not published as standard in the UK PIs).. It should be noted that this grouping was undertaken for the purpose of this project and is not part of the standard performance indicator data. The spread of institutions selected is shown in Table 1.

[17] See the UK Performance Indicators: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/pis (Accessed: June 2015)

Table 1: Institutional sampling

Retention	High tariff	Medium tariff	Low tariff	Specialist	FE
Higher than expected for disadvantaged entrants and overall	1	1	1	1	
Higher than expected for disadvantaged entrants but lower overall				1	
Higher than expected overall but lower for disadvantaged entrants	1				
Lower than expected for disadvantaged retention and overall	1	1	1	1	
As expected	1		1		
No retention data available					3

Scoping

1.18. In the first stage of the project we developed a conceptual framework to help us design the data return in a systematic way. The framework identifies the key steps linking the SO funding with the intended long-term impacts and suggests the types of information needed to evidence each step.

1.19. During the scoping phase we also explored evidence available (and what might be feasible to gather) on the impact of institutions' activity and expenditure on widening access, supporting student success and improving graduate outcomes, and within that, what the SO allocation specifically delivers.

1.20. We asked participating institutions to complete a short questionnaire and take part in a follow-up interview by telephone. These interviews explored what kinds of monitoring and evaluation currently take place within institutions, the opportunities for sharing best practice or expanding this work and also the barriers that exist that make reporting difficult. In total, 13 institutions completed the questionnaire and 15 took part in the interviews. The two institutions that did not complete the questionnaire reviewed it internally prior to the interview and engaged in a discussion of the issues raised. The results of the scoping phase of the project are reported in Chapter 2 of this report.

Developing a pilot data return

1.21. The conceptual framework and findings from the scoping activities informed the development of a pilot data return. The data return was designed to allow institutions to annotate their responses and thus provide feedback about the process, data availability and other data

sources which may have been overlooked. The pilot data return took the form of two spreadsheets. The first related to expenditure data, split by activities and resources. The second was an individualised return, collecting student information about all recipients of interventions (see appendix). The spreadsheets were accompanied by detailed guidance on how they should be completed. The detail of our rationale for the design of the pilot data return is reported in Chapter 3.

Piloting of data return and consultation with institutions

1.22. The pilot data returns were sent to the 15 participating institutions to complete and comment on. We then carried out visits to each of the institutions and consulted with key staff members on the pilot data return. While all 15 institutions provided feedback on the return, only ten institutions were able to partially populate the return with data on expenditure on activities and resources. Only one institution was able to also provide some individual student data.

Analysis and review of return

1.23. The data provided in the returns was reviewed and the comments from participating institutions collated and analysed to identify common themes. The results of this stage are reported in Chapter 4. We held a round table discussion to share our findings and help develop our recommendations. The research team, including CFE's economist associates and HEFCE were represented at this meeting. This information was used in consultation with HEFCE to develop recommendations on how improved data on the use of the SO fund should be gathered to provide a sound basis for future evaluations of impact. Our recommendations are presented in Chapter 5.

2. PROJECT SCOPING

This chapter reports the results of the scoping phase of the project. It includes information on the development of a conceptual framework and findings from our initial consultation with HEIs.

A conceptual framework

2.1. To guide our work on developing an improved data return for evaluating the SO funding, we began by developing an outline conceptual framework – see figure 1. The framework identifies the key steps linking the SO funding with the intended long term impacts and suggests the types of information needed to evidence each step. The framework incorporates the following elements:

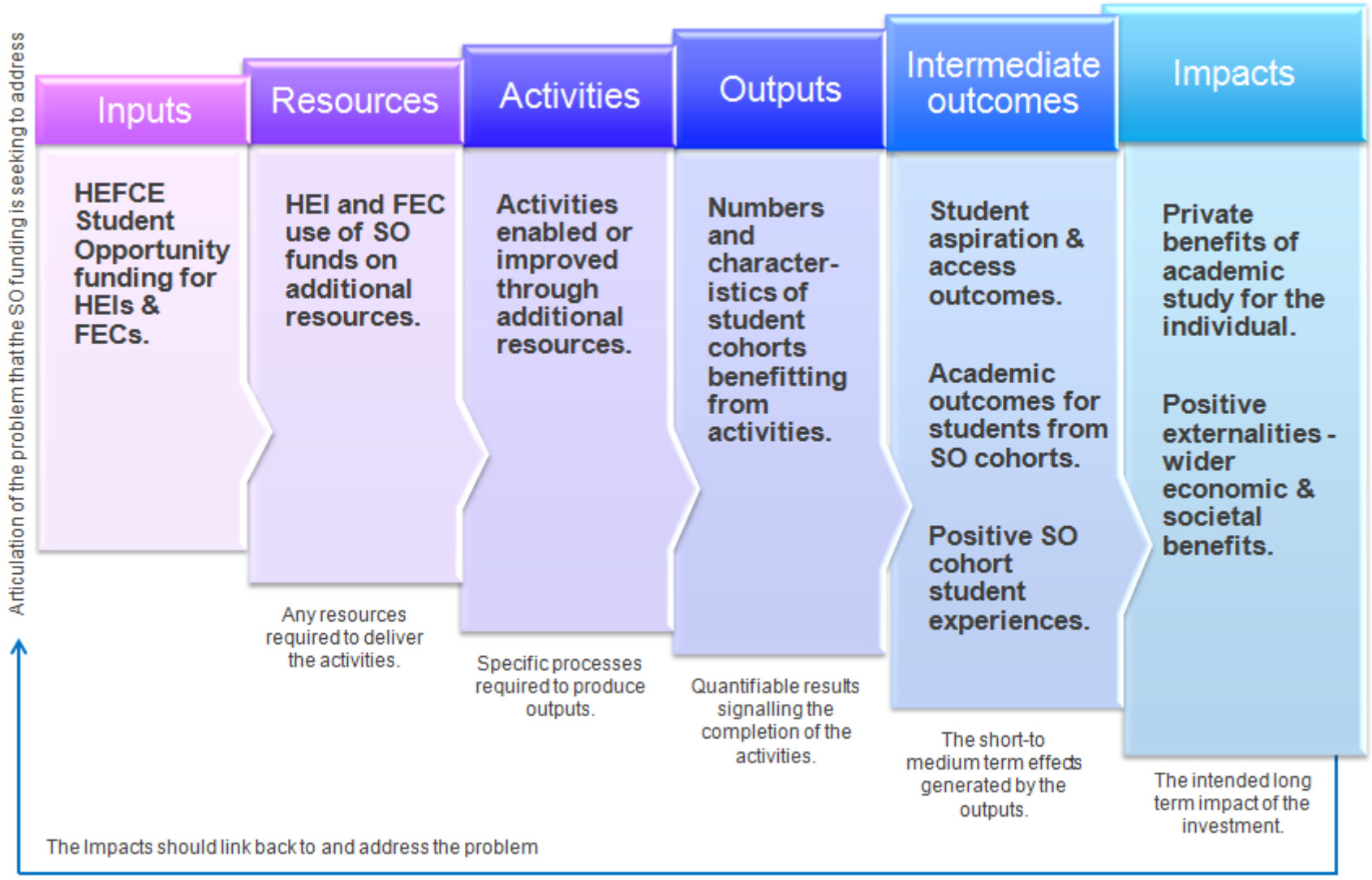
- **inputs**, in this case the HEFCE SO funding
- additional **resources** funded to deliver WP activities, such as staffing, infrastructure or consumables
- **activities** enabled or improved through the additional resources.
- **outputs** delivered by the activities – in this instance the number of target students benefiting
- **intermediate outcomes** or the short- to medium-term effects generated by the outcomes, for example progression to HE and academic achievement of WP students
- **impacts** including the private benefits to individual graduates and positive externalities for wider society and the economy.

2.2. The framework describes the steps between inputs, outcomes and impacts. Each step is potentially measurable and relationships between inputs and outcomes could be mapped by comparing whether changes in one is associated with any resulting changes in the other.

2.3. The conceptual framework was discussed at a roundtable event convened by HEFCE in August 2014. The event brought together the research team and policy-makers, economists and academics with expertise in the areas of HE and impact evaluation[18] to discuss and provide advice on conceptualising the impact of SO and other WP funding, which data should be collected and what other research should be undertaken to evidence the social and economic returns on WP activities.

[18] Members of the research team in attendance were: Dr Abigail Diamond (CFE), Rachel Moreton (CFE), Prof Liz Thomas (CFE Associate), Prof Nicholas Barr (LSE), Dr Gill Wyness (LSE) and Prof Peter Davies (University of Birmingham). HEFCE staff in attendance were: Prof Madeleine Atkins, Dr Mark Gittoes, Sarah Howls, Christopher Millward (Chair), Richard Smith and David Sweeney. Other attendees were: Dr Gavan Conlon (London Economics), Dr Claire Crawford (IFS), and Graeme Harrison (Oxford Economics).

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for evaluating the impact of Student Opportunity funding



2.4. The conceptual framework informed the development of the pilot data return (see Chapter 3). It was subsequently developed into a set of more detailed logic chains and indicator bank to support improved evaluation of SO funding and WP activity more generally. The development, testing and refinement of these tools are covered in detail in the report on the related in-depth study that has been conducted alongside this project.

Initial consultation with universities and colleges

2.5. To inform the design of the pilot data return, we asked the 15 institutions taking part in the study to complete a short questionnaire and participate in a follow-up interview. 13 institutions completed the questionnaire and all took part in the interviews. A range of institutional staff participated in the initial consultation including members of the senior executive and heads of planning, WP, student recruitment and student services. Previous work carried out in this area[19] demonstrated the variety of approaches to WP across the sector and the need for better and more evaluation of what works and why. The findings from the questionnaires and interviews with institutions confirm what the earlier project found. But it also provides greater detail on the lack of consistency in data collection and monitoring and some of the challenges related to this. This section reports the findings from the initial consultation.

Target groups

2.6. The types of individuals that institutions target with their SO allocation are somewhat varied, demonstrating the different interpretations of and priorities for WP in the sector. However, the majority of institutions include a combination of low participation neighbourhoods (as defined by POLAR) and parental income as part of their targeting approach. Many mid- and low-tariff institutions reported that on-programme support to improve retention or student success is often mainstreamed or embedded, suggesting that a broad group of students benefit from the activities funded.

2.7. The focus of WP activities differs considerably by type of institution, with the institutions' mission often influencing the outreach, retention, success and disability support policies and practices. For example, institutions that attach importance to working closely with their local community and acting as an 'anchor institution'[20] in their area design their outreach and support functions with this in mind, working closely with local authorities, colleges and schools. Similarly, universities with a strong emphasis on employability target and monitor activities based on employment indicators, comparing disadvantaged graduate outcomes to the outcomes of other student groups.

2.8. Higher tariff and specialist institutions tend to focus on outreach and widening access activities, reflecting the split of SO funding received for this work. Specialist institutions in particular

[19] Bowes, L. Jones, S. Thomas, L. Moreton, R. Birkin, G. and Nathwani, T. (2013) *The Uses and Impact of HEFCE Funding for Widening Participation* Bristol, UK: HEFCE Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/indirreports/2013/Uses,and,impact,of,WP,funding/The%20uses%20and%20impact%20of%20HEFCE%20funding%20for%20widening%20participation.pdf (Accessed: June 2015)

[20] A case study based on an anchor institution is contained within the report for the related project to explore in-depth the wider impacts of WP spend and activities.

described how they worked with increasingly younger cohorts, including in primary schools, to ensure that they had the skills, support and aspiration to study in HE in their specialist area.[21]

Storage of data and reporting capability

2.9. Institutions were asked to comment on their ability to collect, store and report on the WP individuals that they target. As many of the indicators of disadvantage are a requirement of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) student return, the majority of institutions collect and hold information on their current students. However, it should be noted that FE colleges are not required to complete the HESA returns, submitting data via the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) instead. Whilst similar flagging of students exists, some categorisations are subtly different and the ability to benchmark and compare to other institutions outside of FE is more difficult.

2.10. Institutions that are most advanced in terms of collecting and reporting data include those that are subscribers to the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT – see Box 1) and are able to report across the breadth of the student journey, including outreach activities. Some larger institutions have management information systems (MIS) teams and these produce a wealth of standardised reports, allowing a wide range of staff access to WP information and statistics. Smaller institutions in particular do not necessarily have these resources.

Box 1: Higher Education Access Tracker: HEAT[22]

HEAT is a collaborative service developed by the sector to help member universities to target, monitor and evaluate outreach programmes. A key part of HEAT is the database – this provides a web-based data capture system that tracks student engagement in outreach activities delivered by subscribing institutions. The database allows individual HEIs to produce monitoring information about their WP offer, such as deprivation profiles of their participants and contact hours spent on particular activities. The HEAT data can also be matched with data from external agencies such as HESA. In this way HEIs can learn about the pattern of application, acceptance, enrolment and ultimately achievement in higher education of their WP participants and evaluate the effectiveness of their activities. 34 institutions currently use the service, and this is expected to rise to 65 over the next 12 months. HEFCE have signalled their support for HEAT by providing funding to facilitate a roll-out of the service across the country through a series of geographical hubs linked to a central team at the University of Kent.

2.11. Specialist institutions and those with lower numbers of HE students commented on the issues associated with reporting on small numbers, particularly when splitting data into demographic categories. They commented on the conflicting demands of reporting and maintaining student confidentiality and data protection.

[21] See case study on Trinity Laban in the report for the related project to explore in-depth the wider impacts of WP spend and activities.

[22] https://www.highereducationaccesstracker.org.uk/

2.12. Many institutions commented on the issues associated with having multiple sources of information, with enrolment data and support information stored separately for example. Accessing data from other sources can also be problematic. Some institutions have approached UCAS to help track outreach activity to application. However, institutions perceive that the data are not always fit for purpose and that the service is prohibitively priced.

Monitoring and evaluation

2.13. Both the questionnaire and the follow-up interviews explored the extent of current monitoring that takes place. In terms of monitoring expenditure, over half of the 13 institutions that took part in the survey were able to state the proportion of their spending on outreach, retention and success and disability support that is funded from their SO allocation (nine of 13 responded for outreach and retention and success spend, seven for disability support spend). Monitoring spend remains problematic for the remaining institutions, with many stating that the total amount spent on WP was difficult to calculate and therefore so was the proportion of the contribution from the SO allocation. Many embedded activities benefited WP students but the cost could not be calculated. Also, smaller institutions (in this case, FE colleges) that were not required to complete existing monitoring returns, discussed later in this chapter, found this question problematic.

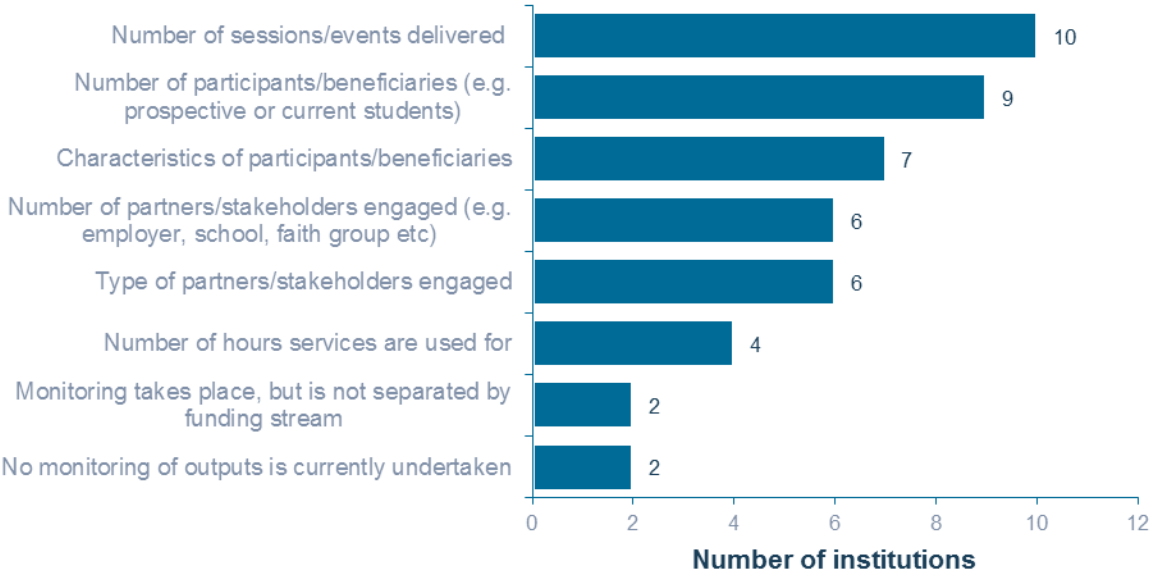
2.14. Many of the institutions apportion the SO funding internally across institutional departments and faculties, making onward monitoring difficult at present. Calculating proportional spending on different aspects of WP in the future could be possible but would mean a change in internal monitoring and accounting. We explore further some of the implications in the following chapter.

2.15. Institutions were asked about the monitoring that they carry out of their activities funded by the SO allocation. We defined monitoring as the immediate quantifiable results of the interventions that have been carried out, such as the numbers and characteristics of the participants and feedback on events. The majority of institutions monitor the number of sessions or events that they put on (ten of the 13 institutions that completed the questionnaire) and the number of participants at these events (nine of 13) as shown in Figure 2 (overleaf).

2.16. Two institutions carried out no monitoring whatsoever. A further two carried out monitoring activities but could not separate out the funding streams that may have contributed to results. Again, when interviewed about their responses, many institutions stated that the embedded nature of some of their work meant that monitoring spend and take-up is problematic, with activities like pastoral support and changes to pedagogy particularly difficult to monitor.

2.17. Many institutions commented on the limitations of their systems to be able to carry out more in-depth monitoring of activities and of spend. Even institutions with robust MIS and reporting in place spoke of the difficulties in developing reporting, given the time taken to work with the software providers and the multiple demands on internal teams. However, the majority of institutions also talked about the need to carry out more monitoring for internal purposes despite the barriers that make it difficult to do so.

Figure 2: Responses to institutional survey on approaches taken to monitor WP activities



2.18. Institutions were also asked about the evaluative activities that they carry out. All institutions that responded to the questionnaire said that they carry out some level of evaluative activity; however this often appears to focus on monitoring the results such as retention rates and degree classifications, rather than evaluating what interventions have most impact. Some institutions have developed their own evaluation frameworks and many spoke about the cycle from delivery of activities, to monitoring and evaluation and how this work informs the development of policies, practice and delivery of WP activities. Many institutions also commented on the influence that the OFFA agreement has had on their practice, with further evaluation planned or being implemented in light of OFFA's reporting requirements. It should be noted, though, that the majority of FE colleges are not required to complete an OFFA agreement because their fees for undergraduates are below the standard limit. Many institutions have developed performance indicators and statistical measures of performance for evaluative purposes but also discussed the importance of qualitative measures, including student feedback and behaviour change analyses in understanding the impact of interventions. In some institutions, researchers or research units are carrying out impact evaluations; there is also evidence that some commission independent evaluations. One specialist institution described how academics were involved in retention evaluation activities and were publishing their research findings in journals.

2.19. Institutions were asked about the extent to which they were expected to show value for money or a return on investment for the work that they carried out. The relationship between WP work and value for money is a complex one. The purpose of WP activities for many institutions is to encourage students who have the ability to enter HE to do so but with an emphasis on ensuring students are supported to choose the best institution for their individual needs. Similarly, many institutions talked about the support, advice and guidance for current students to help them engage with their studies and make the best decisions about their studies and future career. Instead of absolute measurements of enrolment or retention being used to understand best value, many institutions spoke of making sure the right support and guidance was offered to students. Student

feedback was also discussed, with the best rate of return for WP activities being the one leading to the better feedback from the individuals participating in it.

2.20. Some mid- and low-tariff institutions described how their recruitment and WP teams had merged, further complicating the issue of determining the value for money of the service that they provide. There is an inherent tension between recruitment and the achievement of wider WP objectives as institutions seek to respond to the pressures of increased competition within the sector as well as the need to raise aspirations amongst under-represented groups towards HE in general. However, all institutions stated that the commitment for carrying out widening access and outreach work remained and that spend in this area was seen as being well invested.

2.21. Many institutions also discussed the challenges associated with evaluation. Some institutions, particularly those that were specialist or smaller in size, commented on their inability to access resources or allocate time for evaluative activities. Other institutions were able to evaluate activities at an institutional level but not at the level of individual activities, making it difficult to determine which activities were having the most impact. Knowing what to evaluate was also an issue identified by institutions. Many stated that they wanted to carry out more evaluations but needed more support to understand what they should be evaluating and the best ways of going about it. One respondent commented that on-programme performance at their institution had improved but they were unable to identify whether the observed impact was attributable to one intervention or to the whole suite of activities.

2.22. Sharing of best practice is difficult. When institutions were asked about evidence of what worked and how it compared to others in the sector, many institutions talked about their local WP and practitioner networks. These acted as a forum for discussing and comparing initiatives and ideas. However, there were very few examples of institutions using national or international evidence to inform their work, with only a small number of institutions working with researchers or independent evaluators to inform their work and very few referencing literature or conferences

2.23. Institutions are stronger on monitoring than evaluation. There is a recognition that more needs to be done to evaluate activities in order to understand how best to use the resources and funding available and to demonstrate value for money. While there are some institutions making good progress in this regard, barriers to better evaluation remain for others. These findings echo similar studies, which conclude that much of the evaluation of WP activities that institutions carry out focuses on assessing volume and satisfaction with activities.[23] It is hoped that this project will go some way towards improving the infrastructure to support better evaluation at local as well as sector level.

[23] Bowes, L. Jones, S. Thomas, L. Moreton, R. Birkin, G. and Nathwani, T. (2013) *The Uses and Impact of HEFCE Funding for Widening Participation* Bristol, UK: HEFCE Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/indirreports/2013/Uses,and,impact,of,WP,funding/The%20uses%20and%20impact%20of%20HEFCE%20funding%20for%20widening%20participation.pdf (Accessed: June 2015)

Existing monitoring returns

2.24. Institutions are currently required to complete a monitoring return to report on their use of the SO allocation and, where they have one, their progress against their access agreement. There are additional tables for completion for institutions in receipt of NSP funding. Annual returns were introduced by HEFCE in 2009 (OFFA had introduced monitoring returns prior to this) when they requested strategic assessments and have developed through time, with guidance issued annually which describes the reporting requirements in that year. The data is collected for the purpose of monitoring the SO allocation, access agreements, and the NSP at institutions across one academic year. In particular, the return allows OFFA to assess the extent to which institutions have met their obligations set out in their access agreements and the progress they have made towards their milestones and targets. It also allows both HEFCE and OFFA to understand the overall investment in WP that has been made by each institution and how much of this was funded as part of the OFFA access agreement and how much was from the HEFCE SO allocation.

2.25. The 2013-14 return[24] comprises 22 tables, of which 11 relate to the NSP funding, two describe the institution's access agreement milestones and targets and a commentary about progress against them, one displays the most recently published performance indicators and two summarise the fees charged to full- and part-time students. The remaining six tables are concerned with spend on WP, financial support and OFFA-countable spend, and information on evaluation, evidence and impact, as well as equality and diversity activities. The table on WP spend was collected for both HEFCE and OFFA, whereas the remaining tables were collected for OFFA only.

2.26. Data on the amount spent on WP activities is split into access, student success and progression. The evaluation, evidence and impact section of the return to OFFA is designed as a series of drop-down lists, describing the extent of evaluative activities taking place at the institution. It uses Kirkpatrick's evaluation model, organised in four levels: reaction, learning, behaviour and results.[25] The reaction level is reached if institutions gathered feedback about activities. The learning level requires assessments of knowledge and skills before and after an intervention. Observations of individuals through time, such as tracking through their educational career, is the sort of evaluation required to reach the behaviour level. Finally, the results level is reached if local or national datasets are used to evaluate the changing levels of participation in HE. Institutions are also asked to provide a commentary describing their best examples of evaluation activity. The equality and diversity section asks institutions to provide information about evaluating impact taking into account protected characteristics. The latest outcomes of access agreement monitoring were published in June 2015.[26]

2.27. The current returns provide a broad understanding of the current spend on WP activities and the evaluative activities taking place and enables HEFCE and OFFA to better understand

[24] Guidance notes available here: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/20428/

[25] See http://www.kirkpatrickpartners.com/OurPhilosophy/TheKirkpatrickModel

[26] OFFA (2015) *Outcomes of access agreement monitoring for 2013-14*. June 2015/04 Outcomes. https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/2013-14-monitoring-outcomes-report.pdf (Accessed June2015)

institutional behaviour. However, there is not enough detail to evaluate the effectiveness of individual activities, allowing for the sharing of best practice.

3. DESIGNING THE PILOT DATA RETURN

In this chapter we discuss the rationale for developing a new data return for the SO allocation and the issues that need to be taken into account in its development.

Key challenges

3.1. Demonstrating the impact of WP activities can be problematic for the following reasons:

- **diversity in institutional approaches to WP** – institutional approaches to financial support, access and retention vary resulting in a myriad of different programmes across the sector, making tracking and evaluation at a system level difficult
- **establishing cause and effect** – this can be challenging given a variety of societal, policy, institutional and individual circumstances can influence outcomes
- **disaggregating impact** – linked to cause and effect, it is often difficult to disaggregate components of individual schemes and identify which are the most and least successful
- **availability of research evidence** – the majority of the knowledge about what works in terms of access, retention and success strategies is held at an institutional level by staff working directly with students and is not always systematically published, aggregated or discussed at national policy levels
- **sampling issues** – evaluating interventions at institutional level is a challenge from a robustness point of view. Sample sizes will inevitably be quite small for single institution studies and this will limit the likelihood of finding a significant effect of an intervention even when there is one
- **time and capability** – institutions often lack the time or have limited expertise available to evaluate their own WP activities
- **external validity** – interventions that are found to be successful at one institution may not be valid at another.

3.2. The issues described above have all presented challenges for HEIs in England seeking to evaluate their WP activity.[27] Institutions have the flexibility to set their own priorities for WP and tailor their approaches accordingly. Most institutions adopt an integrated approach to WP, whereby the access agreement is fully incorporated into the WP strategy and the additional fee income is

[27] Bowes, L. Jones, S. Thomas, L. Moreton, R. Birkin, G. and Nathwani, T. (2013) *The Uses and Impact of HEFCE Funding for Widening Participation* Bristol, UK: HEFCE Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2013/wpusesimpact/ (Accessed: June 2015)

combined with other sources of WP funding to form a single pot.[28] This impacts on an institution's ability to differentiate the distinct contribution that different sources of funding (including spend associated with the access agreement and SO allocation) make to their overall WP performance. The challenge of disaggregation in order to establish causal relationships is compounded when activities are mainstreamed across the institution and embedded in teaching practice and pastoral care as the impact of a particular intervention or funding stream becomes hard to evidence in isolation (and indeed, disaggregating such activities will again erode sample sizes).

3.3. There are also practical challenges for some institutions. The initial consultation with institutions, described in Chapter 2, demonstrated that smaller institutions find it particularly problematic to evaluate their activities. Many smaller institutions do not have the necessary infrastructure in place to collect and review data, including the staff with the requisite skills. Therefore, the costs involved in developing the infrastructure as a proportion of the income received through fees and the SO allocation are often prohibitive.

Understanding what works

3.4. A large amount of work has already been undertaken to understand what works in terms of widening access and improving retention and success. For example, the 'What works? Student retention and success change programme' funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and HEFCE identified, evaluated and disseminated effective retention practice across 22 institutions.[29] In order to strengthen the evidence base, there is a need to understand what works, for whom and in what educational, institutional or regional context. In order to build a national picture there is also a need for more consistent reporting across institutions. To achieve this, the monitoring and evaluation of activities and expenditure needs to be improved. The development of a revised data return could contribute to this process if it was able to capture sufficiently detailed data on the magnitude as well as the reach of each intervention and was able to track engagement with individuals as well as programmes of interventions at the different stages of the student lifecycle.

Purpose of SO funding data return

3.5. A revised SO data return could fulfil or contribute to a number of potential aims:

- to ensure the SO funding is appropriately spent (**accountability**)
- to enable an overall assessment of the difference to student and society outcomes that can be attributed to the SO funding (**impact assessment**)
- to demonstrate the value of any impact (**return on investment**)
- to identify differences between the institutions' approaches to spending their SO

[28] Bowes, L. Thomas, L. Peck, L. Moreton, R. and Birkin, G (2013) *The Uses and Impact of access agreements and associated spend.* Bristol, UK: OFFA. Available at: http://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Uses-and-impact-of-access-agreements-and-associated-spend.pdf (Accessed: June 2015)

[29] See: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/workstreams-research/themes/retention-and-success/widening-access-programmes-archive/what-works (Accessed: June 2015)

allocation and to see whether these differences are associated with student outcomes (**benchmarking**)
- to establish the effect of different types of interventions funded by the SO allocation on student outcomes (**what works**).

3.6. The type of return required and the data collected depends on which of these objectives is being addressed.

3.7. The 'impact assessment' and 'return on investment' objectives are necessary to justify the public investment in SO and to understand the impact of this investment at a sector level. However, from an economics perspective, it is difficult to provide evidence that supports a causal link between investment and student outcomes, for a number of reasons. For example, institutional allocations are made on the basis of the number of disadvantaged students and the allocation is supplemented in most institutions with other sources of funding, including additional fee income. Also, there are significant variations in total institutional spend on WP activities and the proportion of total spend comprised in SO funding across the sector. Within this model, attributing variation in outcomes to variation in funding is problematic.

3.8. The benchmarking objective would provide an understanding of institutional differences in spend and outcomes. This would improve understanding of the activities and outputs delivered with SO funding and how these vary between institutions. It might also be possible to compare student outcomes within institutions that spend their SO allocation as part of general student support to those within institutions that use it to fund specific activities and attribute any difference in outcomes to the type of spending at play. This could give a broad indication of whether one strategy is associated with stronger outcomes. However, if it is the case that institutions with different types of spending also differ in terms of the composition of the student body – e.g. if those with high proportions of more disadvantaged students opt for a general student-support option – it may not be possible to distinguish a funding effect from a composition effect with the currently available information.

3.9. The 'what works' objective is most likely to yield useful information for the sector and for government in the medium and longer term. For each type of intervention funded, an understanding of the impact of that intervention could be developed which would provide an evidence base for future projects, funding and decision-making by institutions and policy makers. However, a framework for consistently evaluating these activities (such as that developed by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) for schools – see Box 2) is not currently in place at a sector level or at the majority of institutions. Establishing protocols and putting the infrastructure in place to enable institutions to carry out the necessary evaluations would take time and the results of these evaluations would not emerge immediately.

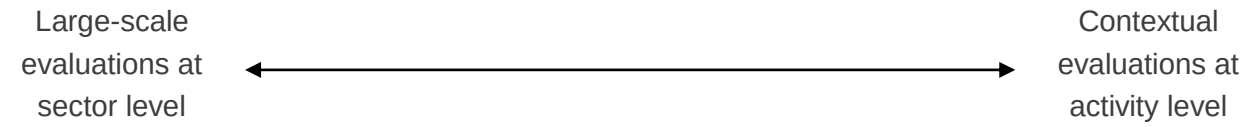
Box 2: Education Endowment Foundation: EEF[30]

The Education Endowment Foundation is an independent grant-making charity that has a key aim to break the link between family income and educational achievement. It aims to do this by identifying and funding innovative practice and by providing the mechanisms to have these evaluated. The evaluations are then shared on their website as part of a 'teaching and learning toolkit' that combines this information with education research from the UK and around the world. This toolkit is interactive and aims to encourage schools, government, charities and others to apply the evidence and adopt the most effective innovations.

All projects funded by the EEF are subject to independent quantitative impact evaluation to estimate their effect upon children's attainment, combined with a process evaluation to understand the overall success of project delivery. To ensure rigour and continuity, the EEF assesses evaluation proposals according to minimum methodological standards, including: providing credible estimates of counterfactual scenarios, proposed measures of attainment, power calculations and analysis plan, minimisation of attrition and bias, appropriate process evaluation, the practicality of the research design, quality of the pilot phase (if applicable) and value for money.

Potential approaches to designing a data return

3.10. There is a spectrum of approaches to designing a data return that could meet the stated objectives:



3.11. At one extreme, large-scale evaluations could be carried out at sector level. This would involve collecting robust, consistent data either from a representative sample of institutions or from across the whole sector. Individualised student data could be collected as well as further information about institutional spend on activities and resources.

3.12. The key benefit of this approach is that data is captured at the level of the individual in a standardised form from across the HE sector and is amenable to analysis at a national as well as a local level. Furthermore, the data can be used to benchmark institutional performance against a common set of indicators and the performance of other similar types of institutions; it also affords the possibility of matching information to other administrative data to track individuals prior to and throughout HE (using the National Pupil Database (NPD) and HESA data) and into the labour market (using the HESA destinations data, SLC data or tax records). However, the information would lack detail about activities; while it would be possible to determine how many and the

[30] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/ (Accessed: June 2015)

characteristics of the people who benefitted from an activity, it would not be possible to determine in detail how an activity was delivered or establish cost-effectiveness. Furthermore, as set out above, without good comparators it would be difficult to attribute outcomes to activities. This would limit the extent to which it was possible to determine the relative effectiveness of different approaches and activities.

3.13. Systems based on Unique Pupil Numbers (UPNs) and Unique Learner Numbers (ULNs) are already in place, although use is patchy. These could be developed in order to implement this approach (for example, a flag could be added to the NPD to identify if a pupil had experienced some kind of WP activity, and what type – then the pupil could be tracked through to university using HESA data). Some progress has been made through, for example, initiatives such as HEAT which is currently being used by 21 institutions and is being rolled out across the country with support from HEFCE. However, it should be noted that HEAT does not currently have national reach. Furthermore, HE institutions currently use diverse systems for identifying and tracking students. Further measures would, therefore, need to be put in place capable of tracking individuals through the entire student lifecycle.

3.14. At the other end of the continuum, individual activities could be independently evaluated, building up an evidence base of effective interventions. To ensure robustness, each activity being evaluated would need to be trialled at a number of institutions concurrently to provide large enough sample sizes. Independent evaluations would ensure that impact is measured efficiently (by evaluators with the access to information and techniques that may not be accessible within the WP team or practitioners in an institution), effectively (through a consistent, robust approach, calling upon the latest research) and objectively.

3.15. The current funding system allocates money to institutions and requires high-level monitoring data on how SO funding is spent as part of the returns process; whilst evaluating the impact of funded activities is encouraged, there is currently no requirement for institutions to do so. Therefore, it may be desirable in future to require more evaluation of specific projects or initiatives from either individual institutions or preferably - in order to boost sample sizes and hence the chance of finding an effect - consortiums. Many institutions work with others in the sector to deliver outreach activities currently and the new HEFCE-funded NNCO provide a further opportunity to support the monitoring and evaluation as well as the delivery of this work.

3.16. One approach could be to utilise policy incentives or levers that encourage independent evaluations to be carried out and the results shared. This approach would, over time, build up an evidence base on effective interventions without the need for all institutions in receipt of SO funding, including those with relatively small allocations, to evaluate all activities to the same extent, helping to reduce the burden on administrators. The burden is a key consideration for smaller institutions in particular as the cost of monitoring and evaluating the impact of SO funding could exceed the amount allocated. An alternative approach, using a sample either of institutions or students within institutions, could help to reduce the burden of data collection; however, while this approach may allow a sector-level understanding of impact to be developed, it does limit the ability of each institution to reuse the information to understand impact at a local level.

3.17. Independent evaluations within in a sector framework would help to fill gaps in the evidence base and develop a fuller understanding of what works in which context and why, allowing for an

assessment of the assertion that the same kind of intervention has very different effects in one context compared to another. Evaluating discrete projects in this way also opens up the possibility of establishing control or comparisons groups to improve the ability to attribute impacts to the activities funded. It also supports innovative approaches to WP as these could be tested and evaluated within the framework and in comparison to other approaches.

3.18. A combination of both evaluations and a data return would provide a fuller picture of the use and impact of the SO allocation. Standardised data on expenditure, activities and individual student level data would enable benchmarking and cross-sector evaluation. This could be complemented by activity-level evaluations of a smaller number of initiatives. The latter could also make use of the data collected for the cross-sector returns. As the evidence base of 'what works' is developed, the universal funding could be monitored to assess the extent to which it is spent on activities that are 'proven'. In this way, over time, it would be possible to achieve the second and third objectives set out in Paragraph 3.5 and to begin to extrapolate information to help with the first objective. Indeed, even if individual level data were not available from the data return, the information on spending by activity, in conjunction with firm evidence of the efficacy of different activities (established elsewhere) would allow HEFCE to judge if the SO money is being spent in the best way. Moreover, this approach allows us to capture the impact of a university which spends money on WP in schools, resulting in the targeted pupils attending a different university.

3.19. However it is crucial that there is a means of checking the veracity of the data returns. It is necessary to be fully confident that the data returns provided by the institutions are consistent and have the same meaning across institution in order to make conclusions on the validity of their approach (see Paragraphs 4.28 – 4.31 for more on this).

Designing a data return

3.20. The draft conceptual framework, developed at the start of this project (see Figure 1), describes the steps between inputs, outcomes and impacts. Each step is potentially measurable and relationships between steps can also be quantified. To be able to use this information to quantify the relationships between steps, two things need to be in place: (i) collecting more finely-grained categorical data (e.g. on more types of activity) and (ii) collecting data in ways that allow linking between activities and participants and between activities and resource use.

3.21. An approach that combines universal data collection and activity-level independent evaluations allows for impact to be understood at the level of different types of activities. The parallel work that took place alongside the data return project to further understand the impact of WP expenditure and activities further develops our understanding of the relationships between WP work and the impacts seen for individuals, the local community and for society more broadly.

3.22. Taking into account the conceptual framework, activities, resources, outputs, outcomes and impacts should all be considered when designing a new data return to allow for sector-wide benchmarking, monitoring and evaluations. We explore data return requirements for each of these items in the following paragraphs.

Activities

3.23. There are two ways of approaching a data return that details the choice of activities on which institutions spend their SO allocation. One way is to assume that institutions have a good knowledge of 'what works' in their locality and that they are spending their money in the way which achieves the best possible impact as a result. With this assumption, the evaluation of the use of the SO allocation does not need to pay any attention to the activities in any one institution. However, this does not allow the full impact of the SO allocations to be quantified at a national level. It should also be noted that the lack of quality evidence of 'what works' means it is doubtful that we can make this assumption with confidence.

3.24. The alternative assumption is that institutions do not yet know the relative effectiveness of different interventions, a standpoint supported by the review of literature and scoping interviews with institutions. In order to address this, the data return would need to be amended to facilitate the collection of data which could be used to understand the relative effectiveness of different activities at sector-level. In this case, it would be very important to gather data on different activities with the classification of activities sufficiently finely grained to enable subsequent comparison of effectiveness that is able to distinguish what works from what does not. At present, the data return collects information on very broad categories (see paragraphs 2.24 to 2.27 for further information on existing data returns.

3.25. The data return activities can be grouped to show outreach, student retention and success and support for disabled students. Outreach activities can also be further grouped into activities aimed at pre-16 year olds, post-16 year olds and activities with adults, communities and employers, based on the breadth of work that takes place in this area. It is recommended that the categorisation of activities within the outreach areas is based on the work of HEAT, given that they have developed a typology based on the activities across the network. Further typologies of the activities that take place to improve retention and support disabled students could be based on existing research and initial conversations with pilot institutions.

3.26. The activities can also be flagged to show if they were conducted in collaboration with others in the sector. This will allow users of the data to understand how widespread collaboration on different activities is and to further understand the detail of how activities are delivered.

3.27. There are three ways in which data could be gathered on students that take part in the activities listed:

- data on the total number of students participating in each type of activity
- data on the total number of students participating in each activity and characteristics of the students participating in each activity
- student identifier information which would allow matching participants in activities to their NPD and HESA records.

3.28. The first method would be essential to judging effective deployment of resources: as a minimum we need to know how many students benefitted from an activity. The second and third methods also provide this information but go beyond it. The second method is a requirement for

evidence of effective targeting of activities towards disadvantaged students. The third requires the collection of the UPN of any school student participating in an activity and the HESA student number of any HE student participating in an activity, or personal information, like name, date of birth and postcode, to allow for fuzzy matching.[31] A second data return to collect this information could be developed to sit alongside the financial information collected from institutions, building on the data collection methodologies employed by HEAT.

Resources

3.29. Collecting data on resources allows an estimation of the cost of providing activities which can then be compared to benefits. Linking resources to the activities, the students targeted and benefits achieved is essential to allow for a full value-for-money calculation to be carried out.

3.30. The more detailed the breakdown the more useful the data will be. The crucial point here is that knowing that 'some' money has been spent on staff time or on estates, for example, rather than how much, has limited use. What is required is an estimate of how much money has been spent, even if this is subject to a small or large degree of measurement error.

3.31. The resources section can be designed to mirror the activities section and the total spend across each should therefore match, so that resources and the activities can be reviewed together.

Outputs and outcomes

3.32. Data relating to outputs and outcomes for target groups already exists. Enrolment, retention and success indicators for students can be disaggregated at an institutional level by various measures of disadvantage. However, it is difficult to relate this information back to the individuals targeted as part of outreach work and to the SO funded activities that they participated in throughout their student journey. We therefore suggest that individual-level student data should form part of the data return. This is likely to be similar to the data collected for HEAT.

3.33. When seeking to determine the outputs and outcomes of the SO allocation it is important to distinguish between educational outcomes and subsequent labour market or societal outcomes. The labour market and society valuations need to be estimated nationally on the basis of valid and reliable samples and these valuations used to provide multiplication factors to be applied to educational outcomes. They should not be estimated at an institutional level based on the educational outcomes an individual institution achieves.

3.34. It is also a difficult task to estimate the relative success of different interventions in terms of educational outcomes. It is not feasible for every institution to resource robust causal estimates of every intervention it uses. In order to determine the relative success of different interventions, the likely success of interventions can be calculated in terms of the impact it is expected to have, the relative cost of implementation and the evidence available to support the effectiveness of the intervention. The proposed independent, activity-level evaluations would provide the necessary

[31] This refers to the process involved in matching individualised data from multiple datasets when a unique identifier is not consistently used in all datasets. Variables such as name, date of birth and postcode are used as proxies. Multiple variables are used to minimise errors caused by mismatching data for individuals who share the same name or date of birth.

robust evidence to support this. This is a similar approach to the toolkit developed by the Sutton Trust and the EEF,[32] which has been designed for school leaders to best invest the Pupil Premium and to improve the attainment of disadvantaged pupils.

3.35. The final design for the draft data return consisted of three spreadsheets, two of which were linked. The first spreadsheet described the types of WP activities, split into broad categories based on the groups targeted, for example, pre-16 students, adults, disabled students. Financial spend information was requested, divided between the income stream (SO allocation, OFFA-countable and other). The second linked spreadsheet was designed to collect resource spend. This was split across the same activity areas and showed which resources (for example, staff time or printed resources) had been used to deliver the activities. These two spreadsheets were linked and were designed to show the same total spend. The final spreadsheet was used to collect identifying information about the individuals that had taken part in the activities (see appendix). CFE developed detailed guidance to support the institutions engaged in the pilot to complete these returns.

3.36. The aim of the pilot was to assess institutional capability for completing a robust return. We aimed to find out which elements were most challenging and the data that may be available in the short term. This will allow us to develop an approach to data returns in the long term, taking into account data availability, institutional capacity and willingness to adopt a new approach.

[32] Higgins, S., Katsipataki, M., Coleman, R., Henderson, P., Major, L.E., & Coe, R. (2014). *The Sutton Trust - Education Endowment Foundation Teaching and Learning Toolkit.* October 2014. London: Education Endowment Foundation.

4. RESULTS OF THE PILOT

This chapter summarises the results of the pilot data return. It covers the way institutions approached completing the return and the challenges involved. It goes on to explore the impacts on implementing a more detailed data return in future, and considers the extent to which such a return could improve evaluation.

Piloting the data return

4.1. The pilot data return was issued to the 15 participating institutions in December 2014, to be returned by Friday 30 January 2015. Ten institutions provided some data and a further two provided written commentary on why they were unable to provide any data. The response to the data return are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Data return responses

Institution type	Number of institutions in sample	Completed the Activities and Resources spreadsheets	Completed the individualised student details spreadsheet	Provided written feedback
High tariff	4	1		3
Medium tariff	2	2		2
Low tariff	3	2		1
Specialist	3	3		3
FE	3	2	1	2

4.2. All of the medium-tariff and specialist institutions in the sample attempted to complete the Activities and Resources spreadsheets, with the majority of FE and low-tariff institutions providing data. Only one of the four high-tariff institutions provided activity and resource spend data however. An FE college was the only institution able to provide individualised student data.

4.3. Following the submission of the pilot data return, institutional staff (including members of the senior executive and heads of planning, WP, student recruitment and student services) were consulted. The aim was to better understand how they experienced the data return process, the opportunities for providing alternative data in the future and the challenges associated with implementing such returns.

4.4. In particular, the following matters were explored:

- the level, type and quality of the data that institutions were able to supply
- the barriers that may have prevented institutions from providing data

- the changes institutions would have to make to complete the pilot return, if required in future
- any data that may have been identified by institutions that could have been provided as an alternative.

Completing the data return

4.5. This section summarises feedback provided by institutions on how they went about completing the data return, the challenges faced and how these might be addressed in a revised data return. It covers how institutions approached different parts of the return, the particular challenges faced by FE colleges and the extent to which the resulting data is likely to be consistent and reliable.

Reporting spending on resources and activities

4.6. Institutions were asked to provide financial spend information, detailing the WP activities and resources that they provided, split by the funding input (OFFA-countable, SO allocation and other). The typology of activities was organised into five main areas: pre- and post-16 access and outreach work, outreach work with adults, communities and employers, retention and success activities, and supporting disabled students. The typology of outreach activities was based on that developed by HEAT.

4.7. Providing data with the required level of granularity for the pilot data return was a particular challenge for institutions. It is clear that many institutions are already attempting to monitor and evaluate their WP activities or are actively looking at improving their systems. While many have some data that could be returned on SO funding, it is at a much higher level of aggregation than was requested and in different categories to those used in the pilot data return. The SO allocation is very rarely ring-fenced to be spent on specific activities. However, in some institutions, the widening access and outreach activities are very specifically targeted to particular groups and so these are easier to track. Many activities funded by the SO allocation are embedded in programme delivery, particularly those relating to student retention and success.

4.8. Without any lead-in time to set up systems and collect data in a new format, the typology of resources and activities used in the pilot data return presented difficulties for some. Currently, each institution codes expenditure to its own categories. Therefore, data had to be re-engineered to fit the data return categorisations. Activities delivered do not always fit neatly into the categories and current recording of activities often needed to be further disaggregated. For example, many institutions knew how many visits to schools they had conducted as part of outreach work and the cost of these visits but the detail as to the type of outreach work was not necessarily captured. A visit to a school could involve presentations about student finances and how to apply, as well as a formal activity for pupils more broadly related to raising aspirations. One institution described an event with employers that involved school pupils as well as current students. They found it difficult to know whether it should be recorded as an outreach activity or a student success activity, or whether the spending should be apportioned between the two and, if so, how to apportion this appropriately:

> [There's the example of] vocational events that we put on. They include master classes, they include schools talks, they include FE development, they include public access; they include employers. So...they tick lots of those boxes rather than just one, they actually encompass them.
> **FE College**

4.9. In some instances, institutions ended up placing quite different activities in the same category.

> ...we couldn't quite fit what we were doing into that list, so we ended up putting pretty well everything as a project, which actually is the wrong term because project sounds short-term or one-off, and it's not.
> **Specialist institution**

4.10. Splitting spending on outreach activities into activities targeted at pre- and post-16 young people and adults, communities and employers was problematic for many. Institutions often deliver activities that cut across these age boundaries. This is particularly the case at institutions where outreach is seen as a progressive programme of different activities over a period of time that supports access. One institution pointed out that pre-16 activities covered a wide spread of age groups and activities that were very different in terms of scale and intended outcomes. Grouping activities together in this way was not felt to be helpful as a basis for analysing impact or value for money.

4.11. Providing reporting categories with clear and detailed definitions well in advance of reporting periods will be important for future revised data returns and should help to mitigate some of the difficulties encountered as systems could be set up using the agreed categories. However, it is unlikely that any typology will ever meet all institutions' preferences. We know that there is great diversity of WP activities and there is a balance to be struck between providing a list that is comprehensive and one that is easy to use and not excessively long while still offering a level of granularity to enable meaningful analysis. The provision of guidance would be required a calendar year prior to implementation for the majority of institutions, needing lead-in time to develop monitoring and accounting systems and to factor the work in alongside internal projects. Some smaller institutions were concerned about being able to resource the work effectively even with a significant amount of lead time and guidance, with key functions already under resourced and reliant on a small number of key staff.

4.12. Most institutions taking part in the pilot already send returns to OFFA and HEFCE. They therefore have data on WP expenditure overall. To complete the pilot data return, some of the institutions simply reapportioned this spend data, reassigning the data into the more detailed categories provided. However, the apportionment was often based on rough estimates of the likely proportions spent on different areas, rather than based on actual spend.

> ... we were never going to say, 'Hand-on-heart, you can audit us to within a penny of what's here,' because we knew that wasn't going to be true. It's not random numbers. Do you know what I mean? It's a, kind of, weighted estimate based on what we know.
> **Specialist institution**

4.13. Accounting for the OFFA-countable expenditure was an easier task in some instances than accounting for the SO funding because there are clearer definitions of which activities this funding can be used for and there has been greater emphasis on tracking and reporting expenditure over recent years. In contrast, the SO allocation has historically been received as part of the wider HEFCE grant. As a result, many institutions devolve the SO allocation to faculties or use it to fund embedded activity in academic areas. This makes it difficult to track. One institution explored these embedded activities in detail. Their involvement in the pilot data return project led them collect additional data from academic departments on activities taking place to widen participation. This provided the institution with useful and interesting data on the range of activities underway. However, it was not possible to determine spending on the different activities, still less so to say what proportion of spending came from SO funding.

4.14. The difficulties associated with identifying specific activities funded by the SO allocation and evaluating the impact and value of this specific strand of funding are extremely challenging. Requesting further detail on how it is used could result in institutions changing the way they use the funding – this is discussed below in Paragraphs 4.41 and 4.42. One consideration of the data return is therefore whether the data collected is about a more targeted or narrowly defined group of WP students. Alternatively, the data return could focus on gathering data to assess the value for money and effectiveness of a range of activities, rather than a particular funding stream.

4.15. Some activities are easier to disaggregate and report on than others. Bursaries and scholarships were mentioned as relatively easy to report upon because the exact expenditure is recorded and the individual recipients are known. Specialist staff time was cited as being much easier to track. For example, staff involved in providing additional learning support are expected to account for their time in most cases, recording how many students they work with and in some cases the proportion of WP students they supported. Work with disabled students was also thought to be easier to track by some institutions. The majority of the spend in this area was on assessments and equipment for students, but some was apportioned to academic areas to improve access to learning. Many of these activities are embedded in course delivery (such as providing notes prior to lectures). Embedded expenditure such as this is harder to separate out.

4.16. The wider work to support students through their studies, such as on-programme support and access to tutors, is much harder to track, particularly at the individual level. One institution was able to provide figures of the additional spend on staff time but could not identify how many WP students accessed additional tutor support, other than calculating this as a proportion of the overall student body.

4.17. Apportioning spend to staff time can also be problematic, however. Even staff who are dedicated to outreach work may have a number of responsibilities, including recruitment.

Timesheets would have to be mined to work out the exact proportion of time each staff member spent on WP activities. Similar difficulties were frequently raised with regard to tracking academic staff spend. It is difficult to know which elements of staff time could be counted towards WP work and proportionally how much of that time was countable on the pilot return. Providing exact data on this kind of scenario would be extremely bureaucratic to achieve. It is worth re-considering therefore the value to be gained from requesting detailed breakdowns of spending on resources versus the burden that collecting this data would present. The data return was designed to provide the most robust data possible; however it may be possible to evaluate the effectiveness of activities with a reduced data return that focuses on what is most practical to record.

Providing individual data

4.18. Institutions were asked to provide data on the individuals that took part in WP activities. Tracking individual participation in activities is key to linking expenditure with impact. Individual data can be linked to other records to determine whether individuals progress to HE, whether they successful achieve a qualification and their destinations on leaving HE.

4.19. All but one institution taking part in the pilot were unable to provide individual data. This was mainly due to data protection restrictions but some institutions also reported that it was difficult for them to disaggregate activities at an individual level because of the embedded nature of the retention and progression interventions in particular. Some level of tracking of individual students appears to take place at most institutions. This ranges from monitoring application and enrolments for individuals from target schools in low participation neighbourhoods to sophisticated tracking systems like the HEAT (see Box 1 on page 21).

4.20. Where individual records on participation in WP activities have been collected by institutions, sharing notices are not in place to provide the data to third parties. If individual-level data were to form part of a revised data return, appropriate consent would need to be sought at the point of data collection. This could be particularly problematic for outreach activities with primary school-aged pupils, where consent should be sought from parents. Additional time and resource would need to be invested to ensure that data is collected consistently and that appropriate procedures have been followed, particularly if the data is to be shared in future.

4.21. Even where individual data is collected, this tends to relate to those participating in more intensive and longer-term activities rather than one-off activities or more informal interactions. The individual data will therefore only ever provide a partial picture of the reach or effectiveness of activities funded by the SO allocation. Also, monitoring and tracking at an institutional level can only capture local activity. A national scheme could allow for a greater understanding of the impact of activities from across the sector. For example, one institution stated:

> I think even measuring the impact of the outreach work can be complicated because if you run a project which is long term you could...track that, but for example if you've done activities in a particular school that only engages with us once or twice, we don't know if... it's that one activity that we did with them that [makes the difference]. Or is it because they've interacted with other universities?
> **Low-tariff institution**

4.22. HEAT provides a good example of the potential for longitudinal tracking of students who participate in WP activities and for linking this data to outcomes including progression to and success within HE. This type of data offers the best opportunity for understanding the association between interventions and outcomes, and therefore meets a key requirement for any evaluation. One of the institutions consulted who has been a member of HEAT for some years now has the data to demonstrate that certain types of activity are more likely to result in progression to HE and that students who engage in more activities and in higher-intensity activities are more likely to progress to HE.

4.23. While providing individualised data as part of a return may be challenging, there are clear benefits to collecting better longitudinal data on individual interactions with WP interventions. HEFCE should consider how institutions can be encouraged and supported to do this. Consideration should also be given as to how data returns could incorporate reporting of outcomes based on longitudinal data in a consistent format that could demonstrate sector-level outcomes.

Challenges for FE colleges

4.24. In addition to the issues described above, FE colleges faced some challenges specific to their circumstances. Some colleges described how difficult it is to separate out spend specifically targeted at WP in HE given the complexity of their delivery model. Colleges conduct outreach activities that span both FE and HE, encouraging pupils to consider further study at college with the option to move on to a degree. Calculating the cost of these activities may be relatively simple as the activity has to be accounted for, however working out how much of this cost should be apportioned to HE WP is problematic. Similarly some support services that may encourage retention and success are provided to both FE and HE students.

4.25. Some HE students at FE colleges are taught in partnership with an HEI, which may receive the HEFCE funding for the student, including any SO allocation. Despite differences in how students are funded, a commitment is made to provide a parity of experience to all students so they all have the same access to services and the same embedded support. Institutions found it difficult to determine whether they should include among beneficiary numbers students who have received interventions but whose funding is directed through another institution.

4.26. Small institutions and colleges in particular spoke of how small class sizes and one-to-one support are intrinsic to their mission. Therefore these would not be considered as ‘additional’ spend to support WP students, although arguably these things contribute to improving retention and success. This raises the question of what the priority aim is for the data return – to ensure accountability of public funding or to establish what activities have greatest impact on WP.

4.27. FE colleges do not carry out the same returns as universities. They are not required to complete the HESA Student return and instead return data on HE students as part of the ILR return, along with their FE students. Some of the categorisation of students is different in these returns, such as the way disabilities are defined and how areas of deprivation are defined. This means that some data from the pilot data return for FE colleges is not comparable with that from HEIs.

4.28. The smallest amount of SO funding received by participating institutions was just over £100,000. We avoided piloting the data return with institutions who received less than this, although many institutions (mainly FE colleges) receive smaller amounts. A question for the design of a future data return could be whether all institutions who receive SO funding should be required to complete it, or whether some may be exempt or only be required to provide partial information. If the majority of funding is covered by returns, would that be sufficient?

Consistency of approach

4.29. The section above demonstrates some of the challenges institutions had in providing details of expenditure on and beneficiaries of different activities to support access, retention and disabled students. Institutions took different approaches to apportioning spend from different sources to different types of activity. Where an activity did not fit neatly into one of the pre-defined categories, institutions used their own judgement about where to report the expenditure and beneficiaries and how to apportion it if initiatives cross categories.

4.30. The differing cultures of WP practitioners, finance officers and strategic planners also presents issues in terms of consistency of approach. The different language used by each area and their understanding of the purpose and requirements of the return was raised by one institution as being a barrier to completing it. The differences in organisational understanding of what is required from the pilot return was also raised by a second institution who suggested that different sets of data could be provided depending on who completed the return for the institution. This is not a reflection of their data quality but instead the result of the amount of data manipulation that needed to take place to complete the return.

4.31. The fact that institutions are interpreting the requirements of the return differently is problematic and this was raised as a concern by a number of institutions. The data in the pilot return is reliable only if institutions approach the completion of it in a similar way. The more uniform the completion of the return, the more robust the data will be. There are a number of different ways in which the pilot return can be completed and understood. Some activities may be counted as WP work by some institutions but not by others. Some institutions include recruitment activities in WP returns whilst others choose not to. Also some embedded activities may be accounted for in different ways.

4.32. Consistency of reporting is important, particularly if the data is to be used for benchmarking or comparisons between institutions. To help achieve this, detailed guidance on defining and interpreting key terms and categories would be needed. Instigating a uniform approach to data collection, reporting and evaluation means training and support would need to be provided to institutions. Allowing time for any new approach to bed down is also important for achieving the necessary consistency. Understanding develops over time and concepts would become more

widely understood. We explore the importance of continuity in data collection regimes further in the following section.

The impact of a new data return for SO expenditure

4.33. The preceding section highlighted some of the challenges institutions faced in completing the data return. In this section we summarise some of the likely impacts, on systems, resources and approaches to WP that institutions said would result from a data return like the one piloted being rolled out.

Impact on systems

4.34. In order to complete a data return of the type piloted, institutions would need to hold data relating to WP activity and resource spend at the level of detail required. This could involve changes to the way that financial information is tracked through an institution and changing the codes that expenditure is recorded against. It could also mean changing the way staff time is tracked, as additional staff time for tutorials or extra classroom support are key ways in which the SO allocation is used. Several institutions expressed concern at the amount of changes that would be needed internally to complete the pilot return and the time and cost involved in these. Institutions commented that the additional resource required to change and maintain systems would be a further burden and the cost associated with carrying this out would lead to a reduction in spend on WP activities.

4.35. Institutions strongly recommended that any change in reporting requirements should be communicated well in advance of the returns period, allowing for systems to be put in place for collecting data. This also avoids the need for complicated re-engineering of data after the fact.

4.36. Frequent changes to reporting requirements also add additional pressure to reporting teams. Even small changes can be disruptive and therefore once implemented, any new system should be allowed time to become established and changes avoided if at all possible.

Impact on resources

4.37. Many institutions also commented on how resource intensive the returns process would be if the pilot data return was implemented. The number of services and academic departments that data would need to be collected from to provide a precise level of detail would be extremely time consuming.

4.38. The growing demands on planning, finance and reporting teams were raised by a number of institutions. The internal requirement for data and information, enabling strategic planning and decision making has increased at all institutions, given the increased complexities associated with rising fees. Similarly, the external requirement for data and information is also increasing, particularly associated with demonstrating impact and evaluating effectiveness. External data requests, such as the pilot data return, are often completed by these central teams and the institutions involved in the pilot return suggested additional resource would be required to resource this work.

4.39. A number of the smaller, specialist institutions, including FE colleges, have fewer dedicated staff involved in finance, planning and reporting. They commented that an increased reporting burden would have significant impacts on the workload of key HE staff members, whose broad remit meant that they already struggled to manage the amount of work required from them.

4.40. Again, it is necessary to weigh up the benefits of collecting different types of data through a data return against the burden this imposes on institutions and the impact of this. It may be that collecting a smaller amount of data that is more robust is more useful than aiming to gather larger volumes of data, on many different things, that ends up being poor quality. The data return should therefore focus on collecting only the essential information that can practically be sourced. What this is depends on the primary purpose of the data return.

Impact on institutions' approach to WP

4.41. It is widely recognised that selection of metrics and performance indicators will – to some extent – influence behaviour, and not always in the desired direction. Institutions highlighted ways in which a requirement to disaggregate SO spending and report on specific activities may affect the decisions taken about how to spend it.

4.42. For example, one institution expressed concern that the categorisation of activities and the resources in the data return could lead to changes in behaviour, with the choices of what activities to fund being limited to those that are can be easily coded. This could mean that innovative approaches to WP are not pursued due to the complications involved in coding and returning these activities. Another institution suggested that their current model, where SO funding is devolved to faculties to use as they see fit, would probably be replaced by allocating funding to a single large project in order to make the reporting easier.

> The only option would be to have one thing that you spent it on. [The SO allocation is] not big enough to do multiple things if you've then got to also track multiple things
> **High-tariff institution**

The data return as an aid to evaluation

4.43. Given the resource and other implications of introducing a new, more detailed SO funding return, it is important that the resulting data is of value in terms of enhancing monitoring and evaluating SO funding in particular and WP activity more generally. Ideally, a data return should provide information that is useful not just at a sector level to HEFCE, but to the individual institutions completing it. In this section we explore perceptions of the institutions on how useful the resulting data would be.

4.44. A couple of institutions commented that the pilot data return would be useful internally – for example, from a strategic perspective, allowing senior managers to see the full breadth of activities and resources involved in WP work. However, these benefits were not felt to be sufficient to justify the additional resource required to complete the returns.

4.45. Most institutions consulted questioned the value of the data return in being able to demonstrate impact and value for money – at both institutional and sector level. All ten institutions that returned data commented that only partial data is available. Therefore, the information returned does not represent a full picture of their WP activities and resource spend, with many (particularly embedded) activities difficult to account for. There is concern therefore that the data return would not be an accurate reflection of WP activity. As highlighted above, inconsistencies in completing the return mean comparisons and benchmarking are not advisable. Year-on-year comparisons of data are also currently said to be difficult because specifications for returns change frequently. This is another reason why changes to reporting requirements should be avoided if possible.

4.46. A number of institutions described how they take a holistic approach to outreach work, offering a framework of activities to a school. These are designed so that pupils engage in outreach activities in each school year and in some cases are designed to support individual development into HE from raising attainment and aspirations early on in their secondary education, to offering information, advice and guidance if that individual chose to apply. The combination of activities that are provided as part of outreach or to support students may be more influential than one activity alone. However, it was unclear to institutions how the pilot return could be used to capture and understand the cumulative effects of this type of work.

4.47. Similarly, the data return does not reflect the fact that some individuals will benefit from multiple interactions with the same service over a period of time, for example as is the case with mentoring. This makes it difficult to make valid value-for-money judgements or carry out robust evaluations of effectiveness of these types of service based on the data return.

4.48. Institutions argue that WP is more complex than simply saying ‘we’re doing these activities and they lead to this outcome’. A number of different factors influence outcomes, including many that are beyond the influence of the institution, such as family support for students. The data return does not offer a way of attributing outcomes and impacts to specific activities and funding streams.

4.49. The difficulty in unpicking which activities (and funding streams) are having most impact is illustrated by an example provided one institution. They put an action plan in place to improve student experience, based on the feedback from students. This featured 60 actions that were implemented over the next academic year. An improvement was seen in National Student Survey (NSS) results in the following year. However it was not possible to know which of the actions had the most impact, which had no impact and which combinations of actions were most effective.

4.50. Institutions are eager to use evidence from evaluations of initiatives in order to better understand what works and to replicate successful initiatives underway in other institutions. However, they also recognise that activities and initiatives are situated in a wider context which influences their effectiveness; what works in one institution may not transfer successfully to another. It is important in this regard therefore that data returns can be analysed and understood in the context of information about where students are recruited from, the institutional offer and culture, the local labour market and so on. Several institutions consulted said they would find the opportunity to add commentary, contextual information and qualitative data to support and enhance their data return positive.

4.51. While there is a desire to improve local evaluation of WP activities and make better use of data, the clear consensus from institutions consulted was that the pilot data return was unlikely to help them achieve that goal. What might be useful or required at a national level, is not perceived to be useful at an institutional level for informing operational decisions. As one interviewee put it:

> ...there is a balance there between what is actually useful for us and what is useful for external reporting, and if it was useful for us, we'd be doing it already.
> **High-tariff institution**

4.52. As stated in Chapter 3 and reiterated above, the full picture of impact cannot be achieved purely though a data return. Instead, the data needs to be combined with contextualised evaluations of activity at a more local level. The development of a wider, more comprehensive framework and approach to evaluating WP is covered in the sister project.[33]

Summary

4.53. Many institutions expressed support for a return or reporting process that allows them to understand the impact of their work. However, the pilot data return presented a number of practical challenges for institutions. Institutions have not been required to disaggregate or account in detail for how the SO funding is used. Funding often supports embedded services and it is difficult to separate out the different funding streams, resources and beneficiaries for these. Spending was often reported as an apportionment in different reporting categories based on estimates rather than actual expenditure. Furthermore, activities as understood and monitored by institutions often cut across different categories. These challenges resulted in inconsistent approaches to completing the data return.

4.54. Some of the challenges encountered can be addressed. Reporting templates with clear definitions and guidance should be circulated to institutions well in advance of the returns period, allowing for systems to be put in place for collecting and reporting data. Institutions say that one way the additional burden could be avoided is by providing year-on-year consistency in what is required. It was also noted that consistent data allows for comparisons over time, enabling institutions to understand local changes as well as to benchmark themselves against similar institutions and nationally.

4.55. Sharing individual-level data is not generally feasible as part of a data return, but longitudinal tracking of student interactions with WP provision linked to data on key outcomes has great potential. More institutions should be supported and encouraged to collect this data. Consistent ways of reporting the outcomes of this tracking should be explored and could form a key part of future data returns.

4.56. Consultation with participating institutions, and other research on this topic, has shown that the benefits of SO funding that go beyond the additional resources and activities purchased and

[33] CFE Research (2015) *Student Opportunity outcomes framework research: In-depth study*. Bristol: HEFCE

the impact that flows from these. Not having to disaggregate SO funding allows a degree of flexibility and freedom to implement a range of approaches and embed provision within the work of the institution. An alternative approach to weighing the value of the SO funding is to consider what the impact would be on the behaviour, priorities and activities of institutions if it were to be removed. Other research suggests that institutions would be likely to focus more narrowly on activities that benefit their own institution, rather than more altruistic activities to raise aspiration to HE generally, and on activities with proven results rather than more innovative projects.[34] There is also evidence that the SO funding is important in emphasising the importance of WP. As this interviewee explains:

> What would happen if this went away? It would no longer be in the university's interests, other than moral and regulatory, to do any of this stuff. ... [The funding signals] that it matters to the government and it matters to the institution.
>
> **High-tariff institution**

These types of impact are not captured by a data return approach. Indeed, some of these benefits, particularly in terms of flexibility, may be sacrificed for more detailed reporting on expenditure.

4.57. In designing the data return, we identified a number of possible objectives, as described in Paragraph 3.5. We also hoped for the return to be useful at both sector level, through aggregation of data, and locally, to inform evaluations and decision-making. However, by striving to achieve these different objectives in a single data return, it may be that none is achieved effectively. The pilot and consultation with institutions have been valuable as they have uncovered a number of issues that need to be addressed and helped identify some guiding principles that should inform any revised data return. The purpose of a data return and the questions that it should address need to be more tightly defined. By agreeing a more focused set of requirements for a data return, it should be possible to create a tool that is more effective in achieving these.

[34] Bowes, L. Jones, S. Thomas, L. Moreton, R. Birkin, G. and Nathwani, T. (2013) *The Uses and Impact of HEFCE Funding for Widening Participation* Bristol, UK: HEFCE Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/indirreports/2013/Uses,and,impact,of,WP,funding/The%20uses%20and%20impact%20of%20HEFCE%20funding%20for%20widening%20participation.pdf (Accessed: June 2015)

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter summarises the key findings from the research and offers recommendations for the future.

Findings from the research

5.1. This report has described the design and piloting of a draft data return for evaluating WP spend more fully. In consultation with 15 institutions, a revised data return was piloted and feedback from institutions was gathered to inform our findings.

5.2. A number of objectives can be achieved in an evaluation of WP, which a data return could potentially contribute to. The full list of objectives explored in this report are:

- to ensure that central government funding (the SO allocation) is appropriately spent (**accountability**)
- to enable an overall assessment of the difference to student and society outcomes that can be attributed to WP funding (**impact assessment**)
- to demonstrate the value of any impact (**return on investment**)
- to identify differences between institutions' approaches to WP and to see if these differences are associated with differential student outcomes (**benchmarking**)
- to establish the effect of different types of WP interventions (**what works**).

5.3. Each of these objectives are explored in turn below and the opportunities and barriers involved in creating a data return to meet each objective are discussed, taking into account the findings from the research.

Accountability

5.4. Establishing accountability remains an important function of the SO allocation data return and is a purpose of the current return (see Paragraphs 2.24 to 2.27). It may be a consideration for HEFCE to assess whether the current return is meeting their requirements for accountability and, if so, whether any further changes are required for this purpose.

5.5. Should changes be required, it should be noted that sufficient lead-in time is required by institutions to make changes to MIS systems and data-collection methods, as described in Paragraphs 4.34 to 4.36. Institutions were clear about the impact of providing highly detailed data (see Paragraphs 4.37 to 4.40) and therefore, if more granular data is required, how this is introduced may require further consultation with the sector.

Impact assessment

5.6. Impact evaluations aim to provide an objective test of outcomes and the extent to which these changes to can be attributed to a policy or intervention.[35] The piloted data return included individualised data. This information could be used to track individuals from intervention through to outcomes (such as graduation and employment) through matched data with HESA records.

5.7. Providing individualised data was problematic for all but one institution in the pilot (as described in Paragraph 4.19) but existing schemes, like HEAT, demonstrate that it is possible for some institutions to track students using sophisticated techniques. A question remains as to whether all institutions should be required to complete future returns (see Paragraph 3.16), and this is particularly pertinent in regards to individualised data. Potentially, with the growth of HEAT, a large sample of sector data could be available for onwards research that could be matched to other datasets for evaluation purposes (see Paragraph 3.12).

5.8. The data requirements and methodologies for carrying out impact assessments are explored in more detail in the sister project, which demonstrates that the best techniques for carrying out impact assessments are randomised control trials (RCTs) or counterfactual studies, coupled with improved individualised data and data-matching. Assessing the impact of SO funding cannot be achieved fully through a data return process. Yet being able to evaluate impact remains an important objective. As stated in Paragraph 3.18, a combination of both evaluations and a data return (or individualised data) would provide a fuller picture of the use and impact of the SO allocation.

Return on investment

5.9. Establishing the impact of funding and WP activities is a necessary pre-requisite to calculating the return on investment. Once the outcomes delivered have been established, it may be possible to attach value to these. Values can be attached to some outcomes more easily than others, for example: the lifetime earnings premium that results from having a degree. Other outcomes, such as the enhancement of individual social capital, are less amenable to valuation.

5.10. Our consultations made it clear that the benefits of HE are broader than purely an economic impact and future data returns could provide an opportunity for the provision of qualitative or narrative data to accompany the quantitative data to enable some of these wider benefits to be captured.

Benchmarking

5.11. Benchmarking is possible where data is consistent through time and where appropriate measures exist. It is therefore important to consider how changes to data collection are made through time, aiming for consistency where possible. Similarly, institutions will need to provide consistent data to enable benchmarking and this can be challenging, as described in Paragraphs 4.29 to 4.32. The types of support and guidance provided to institutions may improve consistency

[35] HM Treasury (2011) *The Magenta Book*: *Guidance for evaluation* London HM Treasury https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/220542/magenta_book_combined.pdf (Accessed: June 2015)

through time. A question remains as to whether the data return adds any value to benchmarking activities over and above existing data sources such as the UK PIs. However, if further individualised data was captured and analysed, a wider range of indicators may be developed.

What works

5.12. Understanding what works, in what context and why is important in WP, as this would provide an evidence base to institutions, informing their onwards spend of WP funding. The level of detail required from a data return to capture data on individual activities, however, renders the return difficult to populate by institutions, as discussed in Paragraph 4.19. Qualitative studies are a preferable way of capturing information on the contextual factors influencing the implementation and success of interventions, discussed in further detail in the sister project.[36]

Recommendations

5.13. In order to agree a more tightly defined set of objectives for the data return, and to inform our recommendations, we held a meeting in May 2015 at which the research team, including CFE's economist associates, and HEFCE explored the research findings and how a data return might best meet HEFCE's requirements.

The primary purpose of a data return

5.14. Not all of the five objectives for an evaluation framework could be satisfactorily achieved through a single data return process. However these objectives are still important for different audiences, including HEFCE and institutions. It is imperative that these objectives are met as part of a wider evaluation framework for WP, but this could be better achieved in other ways, rather than through a data return process alone. In the final report of the related project that investigates the wider evaluation of WP we set out the range of data sources, collection methods and evaluation techniques needed to address these objectives.[37]

5.15. The level of detail required in a data return that could be used for impact assessments, benchmarking, assessing a return on investment or for understanding what works means the approach is prohibitive from an institutional perspective. Therefore, a data return for SO funding is primarily useful for the purpose of accountability. The data could also be useful in an assessment of what works, providing information on the use of SO funds, but only if combined with other data on the outcomes experienced by SO graduates, such as employment outcomes or destinations post-graduation.

5.16. Accountability remains an important function of the SO funding data return. The current data return (see Paragraphs 2.24 to 2.27) provides a broad understanding of current spend on WP. This provides an adequate level of accountability that the funding is indeed being used on WP. We recommend that this does not need to be enhanced in a revised data return. This research has

[36] CFE Research (2015) *Student Opportunity outcomes framework research: In-depth study*. Bristol: HEFCE

[37] Ibid.

made clear that more detailed reporting of expenditure on activities is likely to affect the types of activities the SO funding supports, is burdensome and does not produce more accurate data.

Recommendation 1 (short term): Future data returns continue to collect data on the proportion of SO funding (and other sources such as OFFA-countable funding) supporting broad, high-level categories of activities, for example outreach work, academic and pastoral support for current students. **Recommendation 2 (longer term):** HEFCE to consider, alongside the sector, whether additional data collection could provide further accountability. The learning from the research suggests the following points should be considered should further data be required. The data return should:

- **be proportionate** - the burden of collecting and reporting data should be in line with the funding an institution receives
- minimise likely impact on institutions decisions as to what to fund – the data return should not inadvertently encourage institutions to invest in activity purely because it is easy to report on
- **have a clear purpose** – this should be communicated to institutions completing the return so they understand how the data will be used
- **be implemented with a sufficient lead-in time** to enable institutions to set up appropriate systems to collect data before activities or expenditure to be reported take place – re-engineering of data at a later date is burdensome and results in inconsistent and inaccurate reporting
- as far as possible **remain consistent over time** – this will allow institutional and sector level comparisons over time.

Other possible approaches in the future

5.17. The current approach to collecting data on the onward spend of the SO funding provides a broad overview of the activities taking place in the sector and the basis for assessing institutional accountability in relation to WP spend. However, the data return could be expanded to address which interventions are most effective – the 'what works' and impact assessment objectives.

5.18. Additional data collected from institutions could be exploited in a number of ways to evaluate the effectiveness of WP spend. For example, it might be possible to compare student outcomes within institutions that spend their SO allocation as part of general student support to those institutions that use it to fund specific activities and attribute any difference in outcomes to differences in the approach to spending. This could give a broad indication of whether one strategy is associated with stronger outcomes. However, it may be misleading if there are composition effects at play, for example effects from other interventions or other influencing factors on individual students.

5.19. A second possibility is to gather information on the effectiveness of different types of WP spending using RCTs, such as those carried out by the EEF, and then use the aggregate-spend data to assess the relative costs of interventions and whether institutions are indeed spending the SO allocation money in the right places. RCTs are the 'gold standard' means of evaluating policies, and provide highly robust evaluations. However, as discussed by roundtable participants, they are also difficult to implement in practice, since there are questions of morality (e.g. why should some students receive a benefit but not others?) and often risk of 'pollution' (e.g. HE staff might choose

which students should receive the benefit or programme rather than assigning them at random). Although challenging, these risks can be overcome. It should be noted that RCTs are easier to implement for discrete interventions, targeted at a particular group of students or following a change in policy or strategy. Evaluating existing embedded activities through RCTs is extremely problematic. Therefore, RCTs should be complemented by more in-depth and deep-dive qualitative investigations of what works. These ideas are explored in more depth in the sister project.[38]

5.20. As discussed by roundtable participants, the most promising means of assessing the impact of the SO allocation is to use individual-level longitudinal data on students to observe which students receive the programme, which type of programme, and their eventual educational or labour-market outcome. This allows the construction of appropriate control groups to test the impact of treatments such as summer schools.

5.21. The most efficient means of collecting such data should be to combine datasets that already exist, such as combining the NPD and HESA student record data to track individuals from school (where they may have received a WP programme) to university. A model already exists that collects data on interventions and maps these to HESA data in HEAT, which could either be extended or replicated. Again, this could be linked to RCTs or more qualitative analysis to uncover the successful intervention mechanisms. Linking such data with SLC and HMRC records would then show fee-payment and labour-market outcomes that could be used to calculate return on investment and impacts of the interventions.

Recommendation 3 (short term): HEFCE should work closely with HEAT to understand what evaluations are possible with the data collected by them and what results are possible to share with the sector about what works in an outreach setting. The learning about what is possible using tracked data should be shared so that others in the sector either opt in or develop similar approaches.

Recommendation 4 (longer term): HEFCE to consider how best to encourage the use of RCTs in evaluating WP spend and activities.

5.22. A question remains as to whether these future evaluation methods should be carried out by every institution in the sector or whether a sufficiently representative sample could be identified to return data instead. If the return is to be used purely for accountability purposes, it appears sensible to request data from all institutions that received funding. However, if the return was to be expanded to address the impact or what works objectives, a representative sample may be more appealing.

Recommendation 5 (longer term): HEFCE should consider the extent to which a subset of the sector could be involved in future data collection and returns processes, where the purpose of that return goes beyond accountability. This could be a model with funding linked to evaluations like the EEF, described in Box 2 (page 29). Alternatively, a selected sample of institutions could be encouraged and supported to carry out additional evaluative work that provides evidence at sector level.

[38] Ibid.

APPENDIX: THE PILOT DATA RETURN

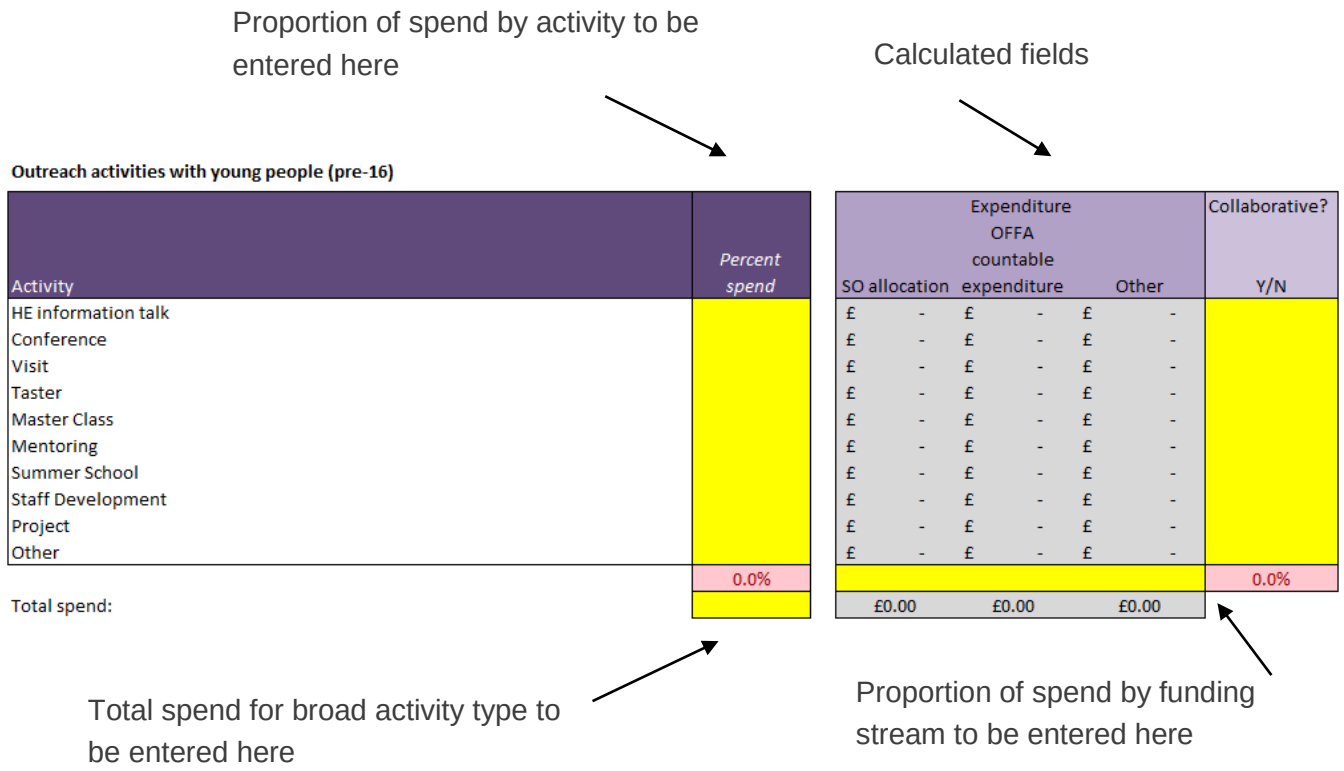
Expenditure return

ACTIVITIES (PERCENTAGE RETURN)

We first ask for the proportion of your total spend, as percentages, that is spent on specific activities across the following types of WP activity:

- Outreach activities with young people (pre-16)
- Outreach activities with young people (post-16)
- Outreach activities with adults, communities and employers
- Activities to improve student retention and success
- Activities to support disabled students.

We then ask you to provide information about your total spend as a monetary amount. Following this, please complete the proportion of the total spend which is sourced from the SO allocation, OFFA countable expenditure and other spend.



Having completed the funding information within a table, we then ask you to state if the activities you undertook were ran in collaboration with another institution. Please select yes or no (Y/N) within the column.

Finally we ask for the numbers of students that participated in the activities.

ACTIVITIES (ACTUALS RETURN)

We first ask for the amount that is spent on specific activities across the following types of WP activity:

- Outreach activities with young people (pre-16)
- Outreach activities with young people (post-16)
- Outreach activities with adults, communities and employers
- Activities to improve student retention and success
- Activities to support disabled students.

Having completed the funding information within a table, we then ask you to state if the activities you undertook were ran in collaboration with another institution. Please select yes or no (Y/N) within the column.

Finally we ask for the numbers of students that participated in the activities.

RESOURCES (PERCENTAGE RETURN)

The resources section collects data about the spend at your institution on resources to support the activities you undertake. Note that the split of activities into categories and types of activity shown matches the activity tab.

Outreach activities with young people (pre-16)

Activity	Dedicated staff or team	Buy out of staff time	Estates/ physical infrastructure	Payment for student mentors or ambassadors	Virtual, printed and other physical resources	External services e.g. consultancy or evaluation	Other	*Percent spend*	*Total spend*
HE information talk	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	0.0%	£ -
Conference	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	0.0%	£ -
Visit	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	0.0%	£ -
Taster	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	0.0%	£ -
Master Class	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	0.0%	£ -
Mentoring	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	0.0%	£ -
Summer School	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	0.0%	£ -
Staff Development	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	0.0%	£ -
Project	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	0.0%	£ -
Other	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ -	0.0%	£ -
Proportion of total spend spent on resources:									£ -
	0.0%								

Complete the fields to show the proportion of spend by resource

RESOURCES (ACTUALS RETURN)

The resources section collects data about the spend at your institution on resources to support the activities you undertake. Note that the split of activities into categories and types of activity shown matches the activity tab.

Please provide information about the amount spent on resources to match the totals provided on the activity tab.

Individualised return

The individualised return is designed to collect data about the individuals that benefitted from the activities that you provided. If you are able to provide individualised data for some activities but not all, please could you describe this in the open text box to the right of the return.