Understanding a whole institution approach to widening participation: Implementation and Evaluation Guidance and Toolkit

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Using the guidance and tools

1. The implementation and evaluation guidance and tools outlined in this document are designed to be quick references for those seeking to develop a structure and culture of widening participation (WP) within their institution. The tools should be read in conjunction with the Executive Summary. For those wishing to understand more about how they have been developed and gain more insight on the issues, the Full Report provides a detailed research and policy context.

Implementation Guidance and tools

2. The guidance and tools have been developed from the research to support Higher Education Providers (HEPs) to implement and embed WP across the whole institution. Here two approaches, one quick and the other more time intensive have been suggested to help HEPs assess where they are and agree future priorities.
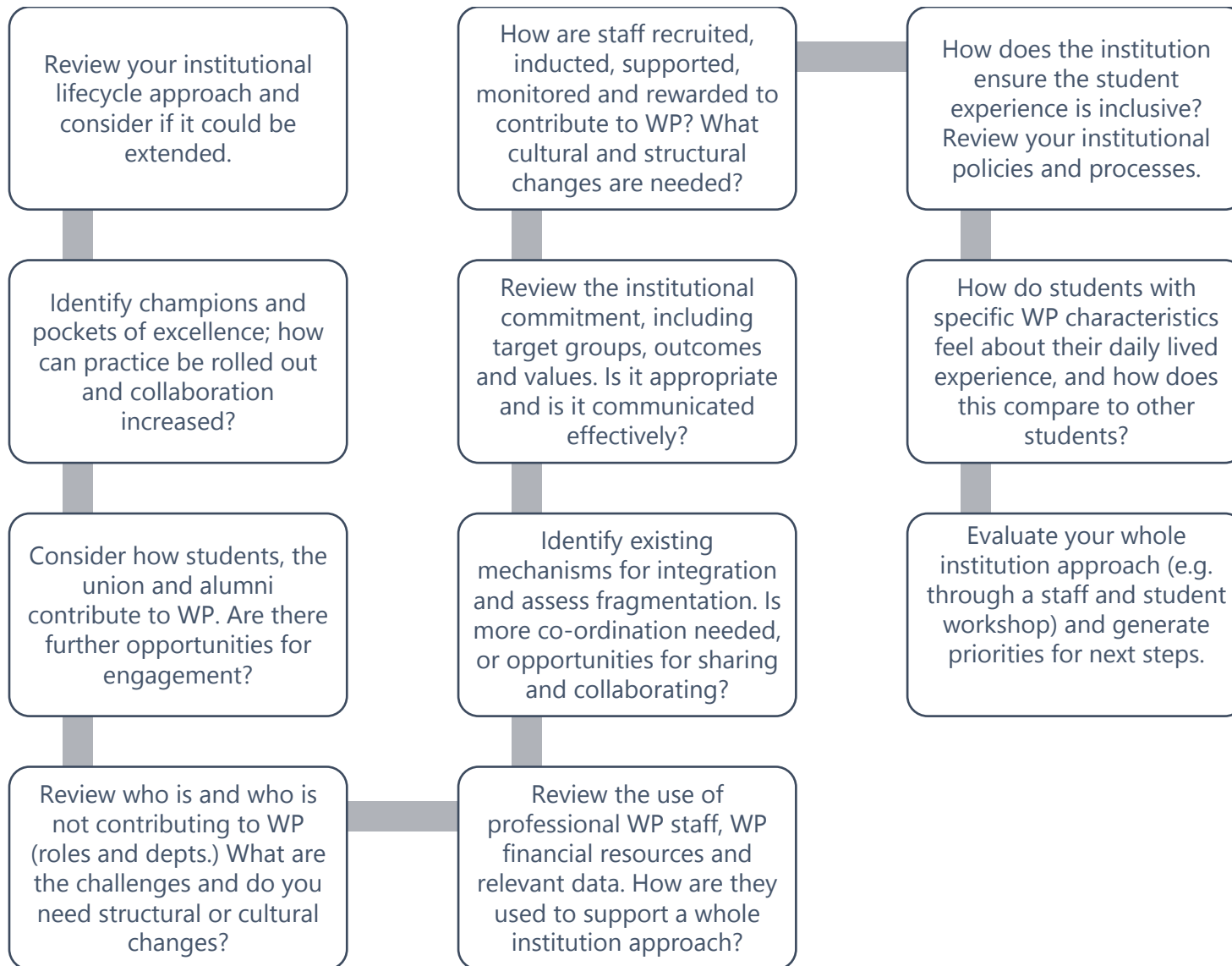
An initial activity: Reflective questions

3. For those short of a time, a useful starting point may be to consider the following reflective questions. These can be used to generate debate about an HEPs approach to WP, and to identify areas for further focus.
    i.   Does widening participation take place across the student lifecycle: recruitment, admissions, teaching and learning, employability and progression?
    ii.   Is WP an institutional priority, with clear target groups identified, and reflected in all policies, processes and leadership at all levels?
    iii. Is everyone involved in widening participation, sharing ownership of the agenda and being allocated resources?
    iv.   Are there opportunities for staff and students to learn from each other and experts, and to have their contribution to widening participation recognised?
    v.   Are data and evidence used to inform strategic planning, everyday practices and monitoring of students engagement and outcomes?

4. Those wishing to engage in a more in-depth approach might find the questions and tasks presented in Figure 6 below useful, which build on the findings from this report.

Figure 1: Step-by-step guide to implementing a whole institution approach

Review your institutional lifecycle approach and consider if it could be extended.

Identify champions and pockets of excellence; how can practice be rolled out and collaboration increased?

Consider how students, the union and alumni contribute to WP. Are there further opportunities for engagement?

Review who is and who is not contributing to WP (roles and depts.) What are the challenges and do you need structural or cultural changes?

How are staff recruited, inducted, supported, monitored and rewarded to contribute to WP? What cultural and structural changes are needed?

Review the institutional commitment, including target groups, outcomes and values. Is it appropriate and is it communicated effectively?

Identify existing mechanisms for integration and assess fragmentation. Is more co-ordination needed, or opportunities for sharing and collaborating?

Review the use of professional WP staff, WP financial resources and relevant data. How are they used to support a whole institution approach?

How does the institution ensure the student experience is inclusive? Review your institutional policies and processes.

How do students with specific WP characteristics feel about their daily lived experience, and how does this compare to other students?

Evaluate your whole institution approach (e.g. through a staff and student workshop) and generate priorities for next steps.

Guidance and tools for evaluating a whole institution approach to WP

5. This guidance and accompanying tools are designed to enable users to reflect on and evaluate the progress and impact of their work in this area.

<u>Clarifying the purpose of the evaluation</u>

6. Before developing an appropriate evaluation strategy, it is necessary to be explicit about the purpose of the evaluation. There are three primary reasons for undertaking an evaluation[1]. (In the following 'it' refers to the intervention, feature, process, strategy or change that is being evaluated):

    i.   **Accountability**: Has it been implemented as planned?
    ii.   **Improvement**: What has worked well? What has worked less well? Can it be improved?
    iii. **Impact**: What have been the short-term benefits, medium-term outcomes, and longer-term impact of it (on students, staff, the institution)?

7. The case studies indicated that overall rates of participation, retention, attainment and progression are indicators of an effective whole institution approach to WP – and indeed this is broadly borne out in their data. In the context of gender mainstreaming Rao and Stuart (1997)[2] expressed concern that gender planners tend to focus on outcomes, 'not recognising that process itself may be an outcome' (1997:16). Elsewhere it is argued that it is necessary to: ... establish appropriate monitoring and evaluation or other progress-reporting mechanisms to assess the impact of gender-equality policies and strategies (ECOSOC 2003). In other words, the aim should be to evaluate progress with respect to the process of establishing a whole institution approach (or an inclusive institution), rather than the outcome *per se*. Thus this section will focus on developing an approach to assess progress towards developing a whole institution approach, based on the conclusions to the previous sections. The findings and conclusions are combined to develop the evaluation model, illustrated in Figure 2.

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[1] http://tsep.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Student-Engagement-Evaluation-Framework-and-Report.pdf
[2] Rao, A. and Stuart, R. (1997) Rethinking Organizations: A Feminist Perspective, *Gender and Development*, Vol. 5, No. 1, February 1997.

Figure 2: Evaluation model
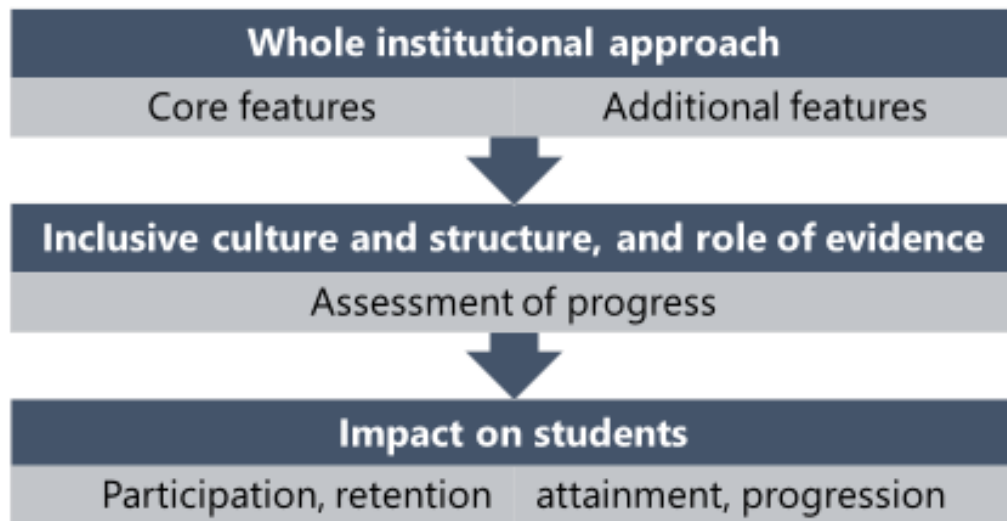
8. This evaluation model is informed by a broad theory of change:

    "If all parts of the institution are engaged in WP then diversity will be reflected in and inform the culture and structure of the organisation. If diversity informs the culture and structure of the organisation, then policies, processes, values, attitudes and practices will enable the successful participation of all students regardless of personal characteristics or disposition, educational background, current circumstances or cultural issues."

9. In this first stage of the evaluation model (evaluating the core and additional features of a whole institution approach) the focus is on accountability and improvement. In the second stage (evaluating the implementation and management of a top-down, bottom-up approach, underpinned by evidence and accountability) the focus is on accountability, improvement and impact (on staff, students and HEPs). In the third stage the focus in on the impact on WP students and graduates.

Evaluating the core and additional features of a whole institution approach

10. Here the purpose is to check which features of a whole institution approach exist, and to assess whether there is any scope for improvement. The existence of the features become the indicators. This research has identified core features and additional characteristics of a whole institution approach. Providing evidence may be seen as the dominant challenge here, and might be achieved by providing examples. (See table 1 below).

11. The second part of the evaluation task is to consider if there is room for improvement. This can be done in two ways, first by reviewing the list of additional characteristics beyond the minimum and reflecting on how these could be

incorporated into the current institutional approach. The second approach is to look for evidence to address questions such as:

- How have staff and teams engaged with and experienced this feature?
- How have students engaged with and experienced this feature?
- What has worked well and why?
- What has not been successful and why?
- What are other HEPs doing?
- What could be done differently in the future?

12. Evidence might be collected through:

- Self-evaluation workshop, inviting staff and students from across the institution to provide examples and reflection on improvement.
- Survey of staff and/or students' views and experiences.
- Focus groups with staff and students.
- A 'citizens' jury' inviting colleagues to share their views and experiences and allowing students to 'pass judgement' on the HEP's progress towards a whole institution approach.

Table 1 can be used to facilitate the collection of evidence, or it can be completed afterwards as a way of synthesising the evidence.

Table 1: Evaluating the core and additional features

Feature/indicator	In existence (yes/no/in progress)?	Evidence (examples)	How can it be improved? Ideas and next steps
Whole lifecycle approach*			
Staff from across the institution (not just WP professionals) are involved*			
Explicit institutional commitment*			
Extended range of WP target groups			
Expanded student lifecycle			
WP embedded into *all* roles and processes			

Student, alumni and union are involved			
Data, evidence and research inform all stages: • Understanding the issues • Staff accountability • Monitoring student participation • Inform decision-making • Evaluating impact			
WP resources are allocated across the institution.			
Co-ordinated approach to WP			

* Essential features.

<u>Evaluating the essential strategies for implementing and managing a whole institution approach</u>

13. The purpose of this stage of the evaluation model is three-fold: accountability, improvement and impact (of the essential strategies that are contributing to a whole institution approach or an inclusive institution, rather than on WP students, which is the focus of the third evaluation stage). The research identified the essential strategies for implementing and managing a whole institution approach. This is based on a top-down, bottom-up approach, which develops a culture and structure to promote and support inclusivity and consistency, and is underpinned by evidence. Thus the three essential elements are:
    (a) Staff capacity and engagement: The values, attitudes and practices of the staff and students within the HEP promote and support WP.
    (b) Institutional structures facilitate ownership and communication: The institutional policies, processes and organisation (e.g. of financial and human resources) of the HEP and its sub-units promote and support WP across the institution.
    (c) Evidence informed and accountability: Data and evidence is used to understand the issues, ensure staff accountability, monitor student experience and outcomes, inform strategic and operational decision-making, and evaluate the process and impact.

14. Indicators are needed in relation to each of these strategies, to assist institutions to gauge progress towards implementation. Culture refers to the values, attitudes and practices of the staff - and students - which promote and support engagement and capacity to be inclusive and deliver a whole institution approach. Structure refers to the institutional policies, processes and organisation (e.g. of financial and human

resources) of the HEP and its sub-units, which facilitate ownership and communication and promote bottom-up change, and also contribute to consistency of outcomes. Data and evidence is used to understand the issues, ensure staff accountability, monitor student experience and outcomes, inform strategic and operational decision-making, and evaluate the process and impact of change and make improvements.

15. The following cultural and structural issues – and indicators – were identified through the research.

    i. **Leadership**: Managers at all levels understand, promote and are informed by WP principles.
    ii. **Values, attitudes and practices** of academic, professional and support staff reflect the institutional commitment to WP.
    iii. **Students and alumni** understand, value and contribute to the institutional commitment to WP.
    iv. **People meet together** to discuss WP and diversity and develop their practice.
    v. Staff from across the institution feel confident to **initiate and implement WP** interventions and practices.
    vi. **Staff use the available data and evidence** to inform their decision-making and practices.
    vii. **Staff policies and processes** - recruitment, induction, annual review, professional development and promotion reflect WP commitment and priorities - including for senior managers.
    viii. **Staff development and training** is provided to all staff to support the development of awareness WP and capacity to contribute effectively.
    ix. **Student recruitment and admissions policies and processes** reflect WP.
    x. **Academic experience policies and processes** (e.g. learning, teaching and assessment, quality assurance and validation processes, annual monitoring) embrace WP.
    xi. **Student support policies and processes** relating to academic, personal, financial and professional development meet the needs of WP groups.
    xii. Policies and processes to enhance **employability and access to postgraduate** study meet the needs of WP target groups.
    xiii. **Structures facilitate dissemination** – sharing information and practices - and enable people to contribute.
    xiv. **Strategic** (not just operational) **leadership for WP** provides guidance and co-ordination.
    xv. **WP resources are allocated across the institution**, or are available to all staff, not retained centrally.
    xvi. Institutional processes make **data and evidence** accessible so that it can be used to inform strategic and operational decision-making and practice.
    xvii. Institutional **accountability** procedures, including key performance indicators, incorporate WP.
    xviii. Data, evidence and research inform all stages:

- Understanding the issues
- Staff accountability
- Monitoring student participation
- Inform strategic decision-making
- Inform operational decision-making
- Evaluating the impact of interventions and change

xix. There is a top-down, bottom-up approach, combining culture and structure to promote and support inclusivity and consistency, which is underpinned by evidence.

The aim is to evaluate for three inter-related purposes:

- **Accountability**: to what extent each strategy has been implemented?
- **Improvement**: how can each strategy be improved?
- **Impact:** what has happened as a result of each strategy being implemented?

Progress towards implementation (accountability) could be assessed using a simple scale, coupled with the presentation of evidence and examples. A simple scale might be:

- Not started/no evidence available
- In progress (early stages)
- In progress (advanced)
- Completed/exemplary

Considering improvement could be done by working with those roles or teams involved in or affected by particular strategies to collect evidence that addresses questions such as:

- How have people experienced the strategy?
- What has worked well and why?
- What has not been successful and why?
- What could be done differently in the future?
- What else could we do?

Examining the impact of a strategy could be combined with collecting evidence about improvement, and indeed, looking at impact may contribute insights about how the implementation of the strategy could be improved. It could involve collecting evidence in relation to the following types of question:

- What have people learnt?
- How have people changed their practice, what do they do differently now?
- How has this affected staff and students?
- Are there any unintended consequences?

Evidence could be collected from staff teams and students through a wide range of methods which aim to uncover practice and develop understanding about experiences and issues at a local level:

- Self-evaluation process completed by different teams/units within the HEP, perhaps including reflection on priorities for improvement.
- Self-evaluation workshop, inviting staff and students from across the institution to provide examples and reflection on improvement.
- Survey of staff and/or students' views and experiences.
- Interviews or focus groups with staff and students, or attending a team meeting.
- A 'citizens' jury' inviting colleagues to share their views and experiences and allowing students to 'pass judgement' on the HEP's progress towards a whole institution approach.

Table 2 (below) could be used to help collect evidence and make assessments, or could be completed once the evidence has been collected, analysed and synthesised. It may also be useful to assess the extent to which different roles and teams across the HEP have developed capacity and engaged with the WP agenda. This can be conceptualised as a staged process, that individuals and staff groups progress through, which involves:

- Raising people's **awareness and understanding** of the issues;
- Developing people's **skills and capacity** to deliver inclusive practice;
- People behave inclusively and deliver inclusive **practice**; and
- Demonstrating the **impact** of people's practice on the experiences or outcomes of students from target groups.

This could be applied to different groups across the institution, such as leaders and managers at all levels across the institution, staff in different roles contributing to students' experiences, staff without direct contact with students, students' union staff, officers, clubs and societies and so on to address cultural elements i, ii and iii listed above.

With regards to structure it could be useful to review which policies and process take account of the HEP's WP commitment and priorities. This can be conceptualised as a three-stage process:

- Ensuring policies and processes take account of WP and diversity (policy/process as **espoused**);
- Considering the extent to which policies and processes are **enacted** (i.e. they are implemented and move beyond paper-based aspirations or statements); and
- The impact or **effect** of the policy/process on WP/diverse students.

Table 2: Evaluating the essential strategies: Culture, structure and evidence

Strategy / Indicator	Accountability: To what extent has this been implemented?[3]	Improvement: How can it be improved? Ideas and next steps	Impact: What has happened as a result of this being implemented?
Leadership: Managers at all levels understand, promote and are informed by WP principles.			
Values, attitudes and practices of academic, professional and support staff reflect the institutional commitment to WP.			
Students and alumni understand, value and contribute to the institutional commitment to WP.			
People meet together to discuss WP and diversity and develop their practice.			
Staff from across the institution feel confident to **initiate and implement WP** interventions and practices.			
Staff use the available data and evidence to inform their decision-making and practices. **Staff policies and processes** - recruitment, induction, annual review, professional development			

[3] This way in which is progress is described may vary, but could include: not started/no evidence available; in progress (early stages); in progress (advanced); completed/exemplary.

and promotion reflect WP commitment and priorities - including for senior managers.			
Staff development and training is provided to all staff to support the development of awareness WP and capacity to contribute effectively.			
Student recruitment and admissions policies and processes reflect WP priorities.			
Academic experience policies and processes (e.g. learning, teaching and assessment, quality assurance and validation processes, annual monitoring) embrace WP.			
Student support policies and processes relating to academic, personal, financial and professional development meet the needs of WP groups.			
Policies and processes to enhance **employability and access to postgraduate** study meet the needs of WP target groups.			
Structures facilitate dissemination – sharing			

information and practices - and enable people to contribute.			
Strategic (not just operational) **leadership for WP** provides guidance and co-ordination.			
WP resources are allocated across the institution, or are available to all staff, not retained centrally.			
Institutional processes make **data and evidence** accessible so that it can be used to inform strategic and operational decision-making and practice.			
Institutional **accountability** procedures, including key performance indicators, incorporate WP.			
Data, evidence and research inform all stages: • Understanding the issues • Staff accountability • Monitoring student participation • Inform strategic decision-making • Inform operational decision-making • Evaluating the impact of interventions and change			

There is a **top-down, bottom-up approach**, combining culture and structure to promote and support inclusivity and consistency, which is underpinned by evidence.			

3.4 Evaluating the impact on students

The final stage of the evaluation model is to evaluate the impact of a whole institution approach on WP student outcomes, such as:

- Application
- Admission
- Continuation
- Completion
- Attainment
- Employment
- Progression to further study

There have been quite a few studies recently designed to consider how to evaluate the impact of WP on student outcomes, for example research commissioned by HEFCE to develop an evaluation framework for evaluating the impact of activities and to better demonstrate the impact of funding to widen participation in HE[4]. This study includes an evaluation framework for WP, and considers what can be done, now and in the future, to produce stronger evidence. More recently OFFA commissioned worked designed to improve the quality of evidence about the impact of outreach initiatives[5], which, as it says, could be applied to other phases of the student lifecycle and associated student outcomes. This is based on three levels of evaluation, culminating in approaches that seek not just to measure change, but to attribute this to the associated intervention (e.g. through comparison with similar students who have not experienced the intervention):

- Level 1: Narrative of change
- Level 2: Impact (not causal)
- Level 3: Impact (causal)

It is beyond the scope of this report to critique these approaches or to develop an alternative model. However, in designing an approach to evaluate the impact of a whole institution approach on student outcomes it would be prudent to draw on existing work within the institution, and this growing body of applied research and guidance to support institutions in achieving this goal.

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[4] CFE Research (2015) *Student Opportunity outcomes framework research: in-depth study*. Bristol: HEFCE http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2015/sodepth/, accessed 26/6/17

[5] Crawford, C., Dytham, S. and Naylor, R. (2017) *The Evaluation of the Impact of Outreach. Proposed Standards of Evaluation Practice and Associated Guidance*. Bristol: OFFA, https://www.offa.org.uk/egp/improving-evaluation-outreach/, accessed 26/6/17