SPICe Briefing

Widening Access to Higher Education: Admissions

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This paper describes the recruitment and selection processes of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and explains what is meant by 'contextualised admissions'. It summarises existing research, reports on the use of contextual data for the development of admissions processes and explains the roles of various bodies in developing good practice for HEIs admissions policies. Finally, it provides a brief overview of current Scottish Funding Council activity related to contextualised admissions and 'Widening access to the Professions'.

Three other SPICe briefings have examined the topic of widening access to Higher Education:

Barriers to Widening Access to Higher Education SPICe Briefing 10/07

Participation in Higher Education: Statistics SPICe Briefing 10/08

Widening Access to Higher Education: Policy in Scotland SPICe Briefing 10/09

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Statistical evidence on participation in Higher Education (HE) by institution type suggests that relative participation of students from deprived areas in HE is improving, albeit slowly. However, overall participation statistics mask underlying gaps in participation, by course and by institution type. Please see SPICe briefing SB 10/08: Participation in HE: Statistics

- Students from the lowest income backgrounds are still significantly under-represented for some of the most highly sought after courses, those which are linked to key professions, such as medicine, law or the arts. Many of these high demand courses tend to be concentrated in the older universities or specialist institutions. Graduates from these types of courses and institutions tend to go on to be some of the highest earners in the economy

- All potential students wishing to study an undergraduate full-time course at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the UK apply to the University and College Admissions Service (UCAS); the organisation responsible for managing applications to higher education courses in the UK. UCAS provides students with detailed information about courses, the universities and/or colleges offering each course, entry qualifications, selection criteria and the admissions policy in 'Entry Profiles' as part of the course search facility on the UCAS website. Entry profiles are compiled by university and college staff to aid the transparency of the admissions process and improve the information available to potential applicants. Entry profiles are available for about 90% of the HE courses on offer at UCAS member institutions

- As HEIs are autonomous institutions, they determine their own entry requirements and admissions policies. Admissions policies and entry requirements will differ between institutions and within institutions by course. There is no legal requirement for HEIs to publish their admissions policies

- The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) plays a role in developing and encouraging best practice in Admissions, through its 'UK Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education: Section 10 - Admissions to Higher Education. All Scottish publicly funded HEIs subscribe to the QAA

- The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions or SPA programme was set up in 2006 as a result of recommendations in the 'Admissions to Higher Education' Steering Group report Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice (the Schwartz Report, 2004). The SPA has a key role in encouraging good practice in admissions, working with stakeholders in the UK higher education sector to continually develop fair admissions and recruitment processes, in order to widen access to higher education. The programme is independent and is funded by all UK higher education funding bodies

- 'Contextualised admissions' is about using a range of factors and data, including comparative school and socio-economic data, to establish 'relative' achievement of potential applicants. The concept is that, If the academic achievement of an individual is put into context, relative to the overall attainment level of the school at which the individual attended, HEIs may be able to identify the individual's real potential to achieve

- The process of truly 'contextualising admissions' involves large scale collection and analysis of data that relates individual attainment to socio-economic background and overall school attainment, as well as the development of standard 'contextual indicators' that can be applied to HEIs admissions data to inform their admissions policies

- The SPA is currently working at a national level with the HE sector, UK administrations, UCAS and other relevant stakeholders, to develop good practice for the use of contextual data in HEI admissions procedures. In order for HEIs to progress contextual admissions policies, more consistent, reliable and accessible data is required. SPA, alongside HE partners, is examining how verified data from public sources (Government departments and other relevant sources including UCAS) can be used more effectively and how institution data can be used to monitor and evaluate the success of processes and policies. SPA has also developed a 'common basket of data' for the purposes of contextualising admissions

- The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) is currently undertaking several related strategic activities, supporting the development of contextualised admissions data and other interventions designed to increase access to the high demand professions. It is developing targeted outreach activity with highly selective institutions, to raise the aspirations and capacity of specific cohorts of pupils to enter a highly selective institution. It is planning to fund a research programme for the highly selective institutions to develop the use of contextualised admissions data. The intention is to fund a research post in each of these institutions specifically for the purpose of developing contextual data which can inform future admissions policies, as well as monitoring and tracking individual progress to provide evidence of the impact of this type of intervention to widen participation

BACKGROUND

At its away-day on 28 August 2009, the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee (the Committee) agreed to appoint two of its Members to undertake a reporters' inquiry on the subject of widening access to higher education. SPICe was subsequently asked to undertake initial research in to barriers to widening access to higher education, higher education participation statistics and widening access policies in Scotland. This research was considered by the Committee, as part of its deliberations on its work programme, at its meeting on 3 February 2010. Reporters then held a series of meetings with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Universities Scotland and the National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland between March and June 2010 to further inform the Inquiry. One of the issues raised at these meetings was the use of 'contextualised admissions' in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as a tool to widening access.

At its 23rd meeting on 22 September 2010, the Scottish Parliament Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee agreed to commission SPICe to produce a research paper on 'contextualised admissions' to further inform the reporter's inquiry into Widening Access to Higher Education. This paper therefore describes the recruitment and selection processes of HEIs and explains what is meant by 'contextualised admissions'. It summarises existing research, reports on the use of contextual data for admissions processes and explains the roles of various bodies in developing best practice for HEIs admissions policies. Finally, it provides a brief overview of current Scottish Funding Council policy related to contextualised admissions and 'widening access to the professions'.

Barriers to Widening Access: Admissions Practices

One of the factors identified in previous SPICe briefing SB10-07: Barriers to Widening Access to Higher Education that is believed to have an impact on participation in HE is the admissions processes of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The Scottish Funding Council's 'Learning for All' report states that admissions processes of HEIs are likely to have a fairly minor influence on widening participation, and that the HE system is mainly open to anyone who achieves a certain level of educational attainment (SFC, 2005). However, the very perception that admissions processes and recruitment practices for certain courses and institutions are not equitable, may be a disincentive to those from deprived areas to apply for these courses or to these institutions (Mullen, 2010a).

Statistical evidence on participation in HE by institution type suggests that relative participation of students from deprived areas in HE is improving, albeit slowly. However, overall participation statistics mask underlying gaps in participation, by course and by institution type. Further analysis shows that students from the lowest income backgrounds are still significantly under-represented for some of the most highly sought after courses i.e. those that are linked to key professions, such as medicine, law or the arts. Many of these high demand courses are concentrated in the older universities or specialist institutions, at which students from deprived areas are still under-represented (Mullen, 2010b). This is cause for concern in terms of equality of opportunity, as there is also evidence to show that graduates from these types of courses and institutions go on to become amongst the highest earners in the economy. Recent findings suggest that "7 in 10 of the top graduate recruiters target only 20 of the 169 UK HEIs" (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009a)

Thus, if students from the most deprived backgrounds are under-represented at these targeted institutions, their opportunities for graduate recruitment into high demand professions are also affected. Widening access to Higher Education courses that lead to employment in 'high demand professions' is important for improving social mobility, due to the prospective earnings associated with such professions.

'High demand professions' were loosely defined by the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (created by the UK Government in January 2009, in response to its 'New Opportunities' White Paper) as typically being:

- Traditional and vocationally trained professions, such as medicine and the law
- Management and Business Services professions, such as executive positions in accountancy, banking, consultancy, and business advice
- Creative industry professions: including the top levels of journalism, publishing, media and the arts
- Public service professions: such as the senior and managerial levels in the civil service, local government, armed forces, police and academia

Using analysis undertaken by the Department for Education and Skills (in 2002) that examined the difference between the earnings of graduates compared with those who stop their education at 'A' level, the recent Independent Review of Higher Education and Student Finance (the Browne Review) stated:

"Over the course of a working life, the average graduate earns comfortably over £100,000 more, in today's valuation and net of tax, than someone with A levels who does not go to university"

(Independent Review of Higher Education and Student Finance, 2010)

It is therefore important that, in the face of evidence which suggests that course and institution choices impact heavily on future career and earning prospects, admissions processes at HEIs, in particular for courses leading to high demand professions, are fair and provide equal chances to all.

It should, however, be noted that, as explained in SPICe Briefing SB10-07: Barriers to Widening Access to Higher Education, a particularly influential factor for widening access to 'the professions' and improving social mobility are the 'aspirations' of young people, which are influenced by the occupational and educational background of their household and peers. The admissions procedures of HEIs could help to widen access to these high demand courses, but not without improved careers information, advice and guidance for school pupils from more deprived backgrounds, in order to raise their career aspirations.

How do Higher Education Institutions Select and Recruit Students?

All potential students wishing to study an undergraduate full-time course at an HEI in the UK apply to the University and College Admissions Service (UCAS) which is the organisation responsible for managing applications to higher education courses in the UK. UCAS was formed in 1993 by the merger of UCCA (Universities Central Council on Admissions), PCAS (Polytechnics Central Admissions Service) and SCUE (Standing Conference on University Entrance). It is the world's largest central HE admissions service and processes more than two million applications for full-time undergraduate courses every year (UCAS, online).

UCAS outlines the steps to the application process for potential students as:

1. Choosing Courses – Potential students firstly need to decide what course they would like to study and where. Detailed information about courses, the universities and or colleges offering each course, entry qualifications, selection criteria and the admissions policy are contained in 'Entry Profiles' as part of the Course Search on the UCAS website. Entry profiles are compiled by university and college staff, and are available for about 90% of the HE courses on offer at UCAS member institutions (SPA, 2010)

2. Applying - All applications for the following full-time and sandwich courses at UCAS member institutions are made through the online UCAS application process (progress on applications can be checked, using the online system 'Track'):

First Degree
Diploma of Higher Education
Foundation degree
Certificate of Higher Education
Higher National Diploma
Higher National Certificate
Some University Diplomas
Postgraduate Social Work

UCAS then transfers the data and sends the application to the HEIs and colleges chosen by the student. Application deadlines can differ by course and institution choice. There are three main deadlines: 15 October, 15 January and 24 March. Most courses have a deadline date of 15 January.

3. Offers - HEIs and colleges receive applications from UCAS and decide whether to offer students a place. As they are autonomous institutions, this will depend on their own entry requirements and admissions policies. Admissions policies and entry requirements will differ between institutions and within institutions by course. There is no standard 'admissions policy' for HEIs. Admissions processes of HEIs are examined in the next section of this paper.

The HEI or college assesses its applications, and applies its own admissions requirements (such as admissions tests or applicant interviews). The institution will inform the applicant of its decision (which can be tracked online). Potential students will receive notification of one of the following:

A "conditional offer", which means that the university or college will offer the student a place, dependent on them meeting certain conditions, which is usually based on qualifications achieved. This could be specified as minimum grades in specific subjects, a minimum number of UCAS tariff points achieved, or a mix of both. "Joint conditional offers" can also be offered to students where, for example, an individual is considered for both an HND and a degree course

An "unconditional offer" which means that in practice, the student has already met the academic and any other requirements necessary to be offered a place by the university or college; or

An *"unsuccessful application".* Decisions by HEIs and colleges to turn down an application are not necessarily based on the application's content or quality. In the current climate, where demand for places at university is so high, unsuccessful applications could be the result of courses being full. Institutions do not have to provide detailed reasons why an individual has not been accepted on a course, but potential students are at liberty to contact the institution themselves to discuss their unsuccessful application (UCAS, online). HEIs can also use the 'reason for reject' via the UCAS system and many do. The Supporting Professionalism in

Admissions Programme (explained below) recommends that all HEIs have a feedback policy and offer feedback.

Potential students are also able to withdraw applications, and HEIs can withdraw offers during the process. This can happen if any of the admissions procedures are not completed, for instance if an applicant did not show for interview.

4. Exam Results – students then receive their exam results and can check 'Track' online to check whether they have been accepted onto their chosen course. UCAS write to each successful applicant to explain their next steps. If the applicant is not successful, they have the option to search for course vacancies on the UCAS website.

Admissions Policies and Procedures of HEIs

HEI admissions policies and procedures differ, depending on course and institution. HEIs are autonomous institutions and, as such, admissions processes are self regulated by the sector, following the QAA's code of practice on admissions, and guidance from the SPA Programme (see below for further explanation). There is no legal requirement for HEIs to publish their individual admissions policies.

"An Admissions Policy summarises the view an institution takes of admissions and the importance it attaches to it. It says what it is looking for in its students, how the process operates and where within the institution responsibility for Admissions Policy lies. An institution's Admissions Policy should be easy to find, transparent, and up-to-date."

(SPA, online)

Admissions procedures can involve:

Minimum entry requirements – each institution has its own minimum requirements that their students need to meet before they can enter a higher education course. This is usually based on specific grades achieved in exam results or UCAS Tariff points, but it can also involve non-academic requirements, such as criminal records or a health check (UCAS, online). However, attaining the minimum entry requirements will not necessarily guarantee a student an offer of a place. For example, degree courses have limited places available. If a course is in particular demand and the pool of applicants for that course have grades above the minimum entry requirements, applicants achieving the minimum entry grades will not automatically get a place. The majority of courses make offers at a higher level than the minimum requirements.

The UCAS tariff points system allocates points to different qualifications, to allow students to use a range of qualifications for entry into higher education, so that fair comparisons can be made between applicants with different qualifications. Tariff points can therefore be accumulated in a variety of ways, but not all of these will necessarily be acceptable for entry to a particular course. However, most institutions do not use UCAS tariff points for making offers, or certainly not in isolation, with other factors often taken into account. Some institutions (particularly the 'highly selective' universities) tend to place subject or 'qualification type' restrictions on their admissions policies. UCAS say:

"The Tariff helps universities and colleges when deciding on course entry requirements and making conditional offers. Entry requirements and conditional offers that use Tariff points will often require a minimum level of achievement in a specified subject (for example '300 points to include grade A at A level Chemistry', or '260 points including SQA Higher grade B in Mathematics'). Use of the Tariff may also vary from department to department within any one

university or college, and may in some cases be dependent on the programme being offered." (UCAS, online)

On 1 July 2010, UCAS announced plans to review the Tariff. This review will take between 18 months and two years. UCAS have stated that the review will have no impact on applications to HEIs during 2010 and 2011.

Entry Profiles

The 'Entry Profiles' HEIs produce, and UCAS make accessible from its website, are designed to inform students of exactly what course tutors are looking for in terms of entry requirements for that specific course or programme. Entry Profiles were introduced following recommendations in the Schwarz Review (2004). The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions programme (SPA) and UCAS have worked together to encourage institutions to produce and develop their entry profiles and they now exist for 90% of all course programmes (SPA, 2010). Entry Profiles are designed to help alleviate the widening access barrier of "lack of information, advice and guidance", supporting best practice of openness, consistency and fairness with admissions policies in HEIs. The SPA programme (detailed below) recommends that Entry Profiles include the following information:

> "Details of what is required for entry, such as qualifications, grades, admissions tests, interview, questionnaire, etc together with features about the course, details of the admissions process for decision-making, e.g. if a decision is made on the application plus test, or the application plus test plus interview. They should include any particular skills and competencies applicants needed for the course. Entry Profiles should also cover if any 'contextual factors' are considered in admissions decision-making, such as the performance of the school attended. The relative importance of the criteria contributing to the decision making process are also relevant, detailed weightings may be provided by those who use them but may not be necessary as it is acknowledged that these may change year on year" (SPA, 2008)

Courses in Scotland

In addition to Entry Profiles, UCAS produce a guide for students, parents and advisers looking for higher education courses in Scotland. It lists the degree and diploma courses available at most Scottish universities and higher education colleges together with entry requirements using Scottish qualifications. The guide for potential students entering HE in Scotland in 2011 is available here: http://www.ucas.ac.uk/documents/ucasguides/scottishguide2011.pdf (UCAS, 2010)

Admissions Tests – there are various admissions tests for specific courses or occupations. For more detail see http://www.spa.ac.uk/admission-tests/index.html and http://www.ucas.ac.uk/students/choosingcourses/admissions/

Applicant Interviews - as part of their admissions processes, Universities and colleges might ask applicants to attend an interview or audition, or to provide a portfolio of work, an essay or other piece of work.

The Role of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in Admissions Procedures

As HEIs are autonomous institutions, there are no legal requirements for institutions to publish their admissions policies and there is no standard admissions policy, even within an HEI. However, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) plays a role in developing and encouraging best practice in Admissions, through its 'UK Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education: Section 10 - Admissions to Higher Education [1]. The Code of Practice is part of the 'UK Academic Infrastructure', which is a set of UK agreed guidelines that cover all standards and quality in higher education (Mullen, 2010e). All Scottish publicly funded HEIs subscribe to the QAA. The guiding principles for admissions in Section 10 of the Code of Practice are summarised briefly below (QAA, 2006):

General principles

- Institutions have policies and procedures for the recruitment and admission of students to higher education that are fair, clear and explicit and are implemented consistently.
- Institutions' decisions regarding admissions to higher education are made by those equipped to make the required judgements and competent to undertake their roles and responsibilities.

Recruitment and selection

- Institutions' promotional materials and activities are accurate, relevant, current, and accessible and provide information that will enable applicants to make informed decisions about their options.
- Institutions' selection policies and procedures are clear and are followed fairly, courteously, consistently and expeditiously. Transparent entry requirements, both academic and non-academic, are used to underpin judgements made during the selection process for entry.
- Institutions conduct their admissions processes efficiently, effectively and courteously according to fully documented operational procedures that are readily accessible to all those involved in the admissions process, both within and without the institution, applicants and their advisers.

Information to applicants

- Institutions inform applicants of the obligations placed on prospective students at the time the offer of a place is made.
- Institutions inform prospective students, at the earliest opportunity, of any significant changes to a programme made between the time the offer of a place is made and registration is completed, and that they are advised of the options available in the circumstances.
- Institutions explain to applicants, who have accepted a place, arrangements for the enrolment, registration, induction and orientation of new students and ensure that these arrangements promote efficient and effective integration of entrants fully as students.
- Institutions consider the most effective and efficient arrangements for providing feedback to applicants who have not been offered a place.

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[1] This section of the code of practice was last updated in 2006

Complaints and appeals

- Institutions have policies and procedures in place for responding to applicants' complaints about the operation of their admissions process and ensure that all staff involved with admissions are familiar with the policies and procedures.
- Institutions have policies in place for responding to applicants' appeals against the outcome of a selection decision that make clear to all staff and applicants whether, and if so, on what grounds, any such appeals may be considered.

Monitoring and review of policies and procedures

- Institutions regularly review their policies and procedures related to student admissions to higher education to ensure that they continue to support the mission and strategic objectives of the institution, and that they remain current and valid in the light of changing circumstances.

For further information on the UK Academic Infrastructure and the role of the QAA in quality assurance in HE, please see SPICe Briefing SB10/61: Higher Education: Qualifications, Quality and Assessment (2010e)

What are 'Contextualised Admissions'?

As explained above, colleges and HEIs consider applications from potential students against their own admissions criteria. HEIs tend to rely heavily on prior educational attainment to select students, as it is seen as the best available indicator of potential to achieve in HE. However, this approach can fail to recognise the learning potential of some people, such as those from low attainment rated schools, or to recognise other crucial skills and characteristics necessary to become successful. This suggests that determining a learner's true potential could be improved by those delivering HE, to enable that potential to be tapped.

'Contextualised Admissions', as part of an informed access strategy, helps to alleviate this problem and is seen as a tool to widening access to HE. Contextualised admissions refer to the ability of HEIs admissions processes which take account of an individual's achievements and potential, with reference to the overall school performance at which that individual's compulsory education was undertaken (Mullen, 2010a).

Some confusion exists about what 'contextualised admissions' involves. This is not a policy where the admissions process of an HEI provides additional 'points' or weighting to individuals from a particular deprived area/school/income. 'Contextualised admissions' is actually about using a range of factors, including comparative school and socio-economic data, to establish 'relative' achievement of potential applicants. If the academic achievement of an individual is put into context, relative to the overall attainment level of the school at which the individual attended, this may allow HEIs to identify the individuals' real potential to achieve. Take two potential students for example, one from a very low attaining school and another from a relatively high attaining school. If these two individuals achieved the same exam results, it could be argued that the achievement of the individual from the very low attaining school has achieved relatively higher (in comparison to their peers).

The process of truly 'contextualising admissions' involves large scale collection and analysis of data that relates individual attainment to socio-economic backgrounds and overall school attainment, as well as the development of standard 'contextual indicators' that can be applied to HEIs admissions data to inform their admissions policies. Developments in this area are summarised below.

Existing Research and Related Reports on Contextualised Admissions and Access to the Professions

The Oxford Admissions Study

In 2002, researchers from Oxford University undertook data collection for an admissions study to investigate the factors that influence access to Oxford and subsequent academic attainment, in order to inform the institution's selection and admissions procedures. The aim of the project was to determine if students from certain backgrounds have greater chances of securing a place at Oxford University and attaining a first class degree than others (controlling for prior academic attainment). This project linked data from a questionnaire completed by candidates, their subsequent A-level results, which university they went on to attend; and their subsequent exam results at university. The findings demonstrated that candidates from state schools were more likely to get a first class degree than those candidates from independent schools with similar GCSE results. Detailed findings can be found in several publications by Anna Zimdars and colleagues, referenced in the sources section of this briefing.

University of Bristol, Widening Participation Research Cluster (2009)

As part of its revised Widening Participation Strategy, approved by its Senate in December 2004, the University of Bristol established a capacity to undertake 'widening participation' research to inform its own widening participation activities, and set up a Widening Participation Research Cluster. Using data from three years of entry, Dr Tony Hoare at the University has found that students from lower-performing schools do better than those from high-performing ones in final-year results by a margin that would justify admitting them with between one to two grades lower (for typical AAA offers) and three grades lower (for ABB offers). This reinforces the Zimdars 2007 study's conclusion, that current contextual offers don't go far enough (SPA). The research is not yet published, but links to the Widening Participation Research Cluster and the work of Bristol University are provided below:

http://www.bristol.ac.uk/academicregistry/raa/wpur-office/wprc/

http://www.ucasresearch.com/documents/hea_wideningparticipation.pdf

University of Manchester

In order to build up a full and rounded view of applicant achievement and potential, the Student Recruitment, Admissions and International Development Division are collating contextual information to supplement undergraduate applications for 2011 entry onwards. This will apply to UK applicants under the age of 21 only. Publicly available datasets from government and other agencies are used and disseminated to their academic Schools. This is additional information provided to admissions decision makers alongside applicants' UCAS applications Applicants must meet their standard academic criteria to be considered for entry. Four pieces of contextual information are supplemented to academic Schools where available:

http://www.manchester.ac.uk/undergraduate/howtoapply/generalentryrequirements/#contextual

- Principles and Processes of Contextual Data 36 KB
- The Role of the Contextual Data Flag in Admissions Decision-Making Processes 26 KB
- Educational Indicators (A list of schools and contextual flags) 580 KB
- Methodology Behind the Contextual Indicators 90 KB

University of Edinburgh

The University of Edinburgh recognises that applicants will have differing backgrounds and experience and that they will not all have had the same opportunities to demonstrate their potential. Consequently, in identifying those with the greatest capacity to benefit from the education that the University offers, they seek to set academic achievement in context through the consideration of a range of contextual factors.

These may include:

- Applications from schools where a relatively small proportion of students progress to higher education, or where the level of performance in examinations is below average
- Those whose parents or guardians have not previously attended university. In order to be able to take account of this factor, this information should normally be included in the UCAS application
- Applicants who have participated on a recognised access programme, including Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), Lothians Equal Access Programme for Schools (LEAPS) and Pathways to the Professions.

http://www.ed.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.50158!fileManager/University%20of%20Edinburgh%20Admissions%20Policy%202010.pdf

http://www.ed.ac.uk/studying/undergraduate/applications-admissions/selection/select

Panel on Fair Access to the Professions - The Milburn Report (2009)

In January 2009, the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, chaired by the Rt. Hon. Alan Milburn MP, was established to examine the processes and structures that govern recruitment into the key professions, and to identify actions that employers could take to widen access. This Panel was set up in response to the UK Government's 'New Opportunities White Paper' (January 2009) which put forward proposals to address social mobility at every stage of a person's life. The Panel concluded in its Final Report that there was no single definition of the Professions, but that common features of the professions include: recognisable entry points, a code of ethics, a system of self-regulation and a strong sense of vocation and professional development (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009b). Typical groups of professions include the following:

- Traditional and vocationally trained professions, such as medicine and the law
- Management and Business Services professions, such as executive positions in accountancy, banking, consultancy, and business advice
- Creative industry professions: including the top levels of journalism, publishing, media and the arts
- Public service professions: such as the senior and managerial levels in the civil service, local government, armed forces, police and academia

Some of the key findings from the Panel's Phase 1 Report (2009a) were:

"7 in 10 of the top graduate recruiters target only 20 of the 169 UK higher education institutions"

"Only 1 in 5 young people from average backgrounds, and 1 in 8 young people from poorer backgrounds, currently aspire to be a professional – three times fewer than young people from professional backgrounds"

"While the Professions have made some progress on diversity issues such as the gender pay gap, the data shows that: (i) professionals typically grew up in families with incomes well above the average family's income; and (ii) relatively fewer people who grew up in families with around average incomes got into the Professions from the generation born in 1970 (i.e. educated in the 1980s, entered the labour market in the early-to-mid 1990s) compared to one born in 1958 (i.e. educated in the 1970s, entered the labour market in the 1980s)"

"Although there is some recent evidence that the UK may have reached the bottom of a long-running decline in social mobility, access to society's top jobs and professions has become less, not more, socially representative over time. Although only 7% of the population attend independent schools, well over half the members of many professions have done so. For example, 75% of judges, 70% of finance directors, 45% of top civil servants, and 32% of MPs were independently schooled."

"Some professions are becoming less dominated by people from independent schools, but others– such as medicine – remain largely unchanged" (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009)

The Panel identified 5 key entry steps into the Professions:

1. Help for young people to better understand the Professions and raise their aspiration to join one
2. Support for young people through the education and talent development pathways to entering the Professions. For example, 7 in 10 young people are unhappy with the careers support they receive. In addition, while soft skills are increasingly valued by employers, not all young people have the opportunities to acquire these
3. Opportunities to gain practical experience of the Professions. Internships are becoming a more important entry route to the Professions, although many are unpaid, and more sourced through connections than advertisements. Currently, 4 in 5 employers recruit former interns, and over 9 in 10 young people say that an internship helped to raise their aspirations and improve their CV
4. Recruitment and selection processes that give everyone an equal chance of becoming a professional. For example, 7 in 10 of the top graduate recruiters target only 20 of the 167 UK universities
5. Flexible routes for aspiring professionals to enter and progress in the Professions – at different life stages, or with different qualifications and career experiences. For example, while vocational qualification routes have been expanded, only 0.2% of apprentices progress to further or higher education and few direct to the Professions.

It made the following recommendations on the use of contextualised data in the admissions process of HEIs:

"We do believe, however, that there is a strong case for universities to use data that takes account of the educational and social context of pupils' achievement. More universities are now taking these wider education and social factors into account in assessing pupils' academic achievements. The evidence from a number of universities which already take into account the social and educational context of pupil achievement is that this approach improves rather than lowers standards.

We believe that higher education institutions should be supported to take into account the social and educational context of pupils' achievement. We believe the evidence from data

on relative pupil performance and on predicted grades clearly supports a shift to more context-based admission procedures" (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009b)

Recommendation 41 of the Panel's final report stated:

"By law it is for universities to determine their admissions procedures but we hope that all universities will take into account the educational and social context of pupils' achievement in their admissions process"

The UK Government response to Alan Milburn's report on Fair Access to the Professions, Unleashing Aspirations was published on 18 January 2010. It states that the UK Government would look to SPA to share and disseminate good practice in this area (SPA, online)

The Sutton Trust "Widening Access to Selective Universities" (2010)

The Sutton Trust's submission to Sir Martin Harris's review of widening access into highly selective institutions reviewed a range of evidence spanning the last decade and found that while the number of young full-time first degree entrants to Russell Group universities (which includes the University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow) increased by 18% from 2002/03 to 2007/08, the number coming from the four lowest socio-economic groups increased by just 16%, with similar trends existing for other highly selective universities outside the Russell Group[2] (Sutton Trust, 2010).

Table 1 below shows the proportion of young full-time first degree entrants to the 'Sutton Trust 13' highly selective institutions (these are: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Imperial College, London School of Economics, Nottingham, Oxford, St Andrews, University College London, Warwick and York) over a ten year time period. The table shows that the proportions of young people entering these highly selective universities, from state schools, lower social classes and poor areas, has remained more or less static since 2002/03.

Table 1: Proportion of young full-time first degree entrants to the 'Sutton Trust 13', 1997/98 to 2007/08

Sutton Trust 13' Intake	1997/98	2001/2	2002/3	2005/6	2007/8
% from independent schools	39	35	32	33	33
% from state schools	61	65	68	67	67
% from lower social classes	13*	14*	16	17	16
% from low participation areas	6	7	8	8	4**

*not comparable with future years ** not comparable with previous years
(Sutton Trust, 2010)

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[2] The Russell Group represents 20 leading UK universities who are committed to research and teaching excellence. These institutions also have strong links with business and the public sector, and many could be described as 'highly selective institutions'.

The submission concludes:

> "The evidence suggests that, despite considerable efforts by schools, universities and the Government, the social background of those entering elite universities has not changed significantly over the last decade or so, and access is dominated by a small number of schools and colleges.
>
> The single most important factor contributing to the relatively low proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds attending these universities is the level and nature of qualifications obtained by these students. There are also substantial numbers of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who do attain the qualifications needed for access to elite universities but who go elsewhere. Our research suggests these students number around 3,000 in each cohort" (Sutton Trust, 2010)

Office for Fair Access (OFFA) "Widening Access to Selective Universities" (2010)

The Director of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), Sir Martin Harris, was commissioned by the UK Government in November 2009 to investigate 'access to selective universities' to inform the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance in England. The final report 'What more can be done to Widen Access to Selective Universities?" which focused on full-time UK domiciled undergraduates, specifically considered:

1. further action that could be taken to widen access to highly selective universities for those from under-privileged backgrounds

2. how universities can ensure that measures for wider access are prioritised most effectively and do not suffer in a time of greater fiscal constraints

3. how best individual universities can set and achieve targets for themselves

4. how best to promote the partnership of schools and universities to identify and mentor the most talented young people from an early age

5. Whether the money currently used by universities under access agreements, mainly spent on bursaries for their students, can be better targeted in order to give more effective support to fair access, and to offer advice on future options.

As part of the report, OFFA commissioned the HEFCE to undertake time trend analysis of participation statistics by background and type of institution (for English institutions). This analysis has shown that:

> "Although there has been a significant rise in participation among disadvantaged young people in HE as a whole since the mid-1990s, participation among the least advantaged 40 per cent of young people at the top third of selective institutions has not changed over the same period. The most advantaged 20 per cent of the young population are now around seven times more likely than the most disadvantaged 40% to attend the most selective institutions. This ratio has increased from six times more likely in the mid-1990s but has not increased further since the mid-2000s. Significantly, this ratio has not increased under the current fee and support arrangements introduced in 2006, supporting the argument that the efforts of the most selective universities have at least maintained participation from the least advantaged groups in recent years." (OFFA, 2010)

The report also highlighted the research undertaken by Bristol University (summarised above) on the use of contextual data for admissions procedures stating:

"Approaches to measuring success are being developed across the sector, some yielding interesting and exciting results that indicate the methodology and research that could be applied by other universities to their own data. For example, we have alluded earlier to the research undertaken by the University of Bristol. Much of the value of the analysis, and of the benchmarks that Bristol has set itself in response to that analysis, is that it uses the university's own data and takes account of the individual context of the university. This research would also appear to have the added value of helping to inform outreach activities, indicating the schools and areas where investment might have greatest effect." (OFFA, 2010)

It recommended that the SPA should continue to work on best practice in the field of admissions data, in particular their development of a centrally available contextual data.

Widening Participation in Higher Education: Analysis Using Linked Administrative Data (2010)

The Institute for the Study of Labour (IZA) in Bonn, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the University of London recently co-produced a discussion paper which tracked two cohorts of GCSE students in England, from age 11 to age 20. Examination of this contextual data has shown that, when examining participation in HE of individuals with similar prior school attainment, the gaps in participation in HE by those from disadvantaged backgrounds, including to highly selective institutions, are significantly reduced. The authors suggest that this means poor attainment in secondary schools is more important in explaining lower HE participation rates amongst students from disadvantaged backgrounds than barriers arising at the point of entry into HE. Detailed findings are available from the IZA Discussion Paper (June 2010)

Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA)

The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions or SPA programme was set up in 2006 as a result of recommendations in the 'Admissions to Higher Education' Steering Group report Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice (The Schwartz Report, 2004). The SPA is the UK's independent voice on HE admissions and is a central, shared source of expertise and advice for HE provider institutions on strategy, policy and practice for a wide range of admissions issues, which is free to institutions. SPA works with stakeholders in the UK HE sector to share good practice and develop fair admissions and recruitment processes, in order to widen access to higher education. The programme is funded jointly by the UK higher education funding bodies (SPA, online). A SPA Steering Group, consisting of a wide range of education sector representatives from across the UK, meets quarterly to take forward the work of the SPA. The stated objectives of the SPA (recently updated) are:

1. To develop strategic leadership in the HE sector by meeting and engaging with senior staff in HEIs via the national PVC/DVC network; the HE Academy; Universities UK and GuildHE, the Academic Registrars' Council, QAA, UCAS, senior staff within the HE mission groups; other HE sector bodies and stakeholder groups; the funding councils and education, lifelong learning and skills departments of the UK administrations

2. To continue to review current admissions practices, decision making and policies at HEIs to

3. develop the evidence base and raise issues with HEIs where they may need to do further work to improve good practice. The SPA will also work with practitioners and use professional networks to build consensus and identify and disseminate advice and guidance on fairness and good practice to enhance access to and participation in HE, including equality and diversity issues

4. To assess the principles and good practice surrounding the use of data from a range of sources to give a context to admissions decision-making, in order to support the HE fair access and admissions agenda. This is discussed in further detail in the next section of this briefing

5. To initiate development and analysis of an evidence base for the practice of part-time students applying to HE providers, examining the issues and linkages with changes in school/college curricula, vocational qualifications, work-based learning, skills and employer engagement

6. To raise awareness in HEIs of what makes a good 'applicant experience strategy' and its importance to the institution in enhancing retention and providing a good student experience. An applicant experience strategy covers Pre-application; Application; Post-application and Transition

7. To develop further the SPA website, SPA events and information and communication strategy to disseminate good practice, information and links with regard to the outcomes of the SPA Programme

8. To monitor the use and development of admissions tests; to review and consider issues and research relating to their rationale, purpose, validity, and HEIs' quality control and approval of tests. To disseminate advice on good practice and continue discussions on these topics with HEIs and the test bodies.

9. From 2011, to develop and promote good practice and professionalism in postgraduate admissions (taught courses)

10. To continue to work with the Delivery Partnership (DP) taking forward the changes to the HE applications process, with input into reviewing the impact of the changes on good practice and fairness. (completed with the last meeting in October 2010)

11. To examine the possibility of commissioning research relevant to its work in the HE sector

12. To continue to take cognizance of the different policies and strategies of the individual administrations in the UK. SPA team members meet regularly with senior staff across all the UK administrations (SPA, online)

To meet its remit over the last four years, the SPA programme has undertaken the following activities:

- Over 130 HEIs have been visited in the first four years of the SPA Programme.

- Meetings, events and research have been undertaken covering issues on admissions policies, interviews, feedback, admissions planning, offer making, applicant experience strategy map, part-time admissions, criminal conviction issues

- Held discussions with admissions networks, groups and organisations including UCAS, HE sector bodies such as UUK and GuildHE, Equality Challenge Unit and government departments

- Identified over 90 different admissions tests and carried out a survey to explore the underlying rationale for HEIs' use of tests. Tests are used by a very small proportion of courses (0.8% of 43,360 courses in UCAS for 2011 entry) and by a limited number of institutions (21% of 306 HEIs in UCAS for 2011 entry).

- Taking forward and adding detail to the precepts outlined in the QAA Code of Good Practice - Section 10 on Admissions to higher education (QAA, 2006)

- Consultations with the HE and pre HE (schools and colleges) sectors

- Development of the use of contextual admissions data in admissions processes, in conjunction with UCAS and other stakeholders (SPA, online)

The SPA's and UCAS' Role in Developing Contextualised Admissions Data

The SPA is currently working at a national level with the HE sector, UK administrations, UCAS and other relevant stakeholders, to develop good practice for the use of contextual data in HEI admissions procedures. In order for HEIs to progress contextual admissions policies, more consistent, reliable and accessible data is required. The SPA, alongside HE partners, is examining how verified data from public sources (Government departments and other relevant sources including UCAS) can be used more effectively and how institution data can be used to monitor and evaluate the success of processes and policies. The SPA outlines the following as possible uses for contextual data:

- for widening participation - to target aspiration raising and WP and fair access activities

- to inform the decision as to who to interview

- to inform admissions decision making to enable the "best students" to be admitted and retained (as defined by the HEI)

- to identify applicants who may need additional learner support or practical advice during their application process, transition or when registered as a student

- to help assess applicants eligible for bursaries or other financial support

- for statistical and qualitative monitoring and reporting purposes.

In March 2010, the SPA Steering Group agreed a set of 5 principles of the use of contextual data in admissions (updated in June 2010). These are:

1.   The use of contextual data within a course's entry criteria/ decision-making must be:

   o research based and justifiable to ensure the use of data adds value to the process and that HE providers adhere to good practice
   o relevant to the purpose for which it is being used e.g. to add context to the admissions decision-making process
   o valid and reliable (bearing in mind that much of the data, for example via UCAS, is self declared)
   o used to improve inclusivity, by recognising potential assessed using evidence based judgement (i.e. applicants may not be treated in exactly the same way as different factors maybe be considered, all applicants are individuals with different backgrounds)

○ transparent to applicants and their advisors in terms of what contextual data is used, if any, how it will be used, when it is used and how it was used in the previous cycle. This must be communicated to applicants in a transparent, clear and timely manner via Entry Profiles, Widening Participation activities; Higher Education websites, in feedback to unsuccessful applicants etc

2. Regular monitoring of the use of the data and related audit trails should be an integral part of the admissions process

3. Admissions staff using contextual data in decision-making should be aware of the issues surrounding contextual data. Professional development and training maybe appropriate to ensure staff understand, and can interpret and use the data. Contextual data should be used as part of the overall consideration of an applicant and not in isolation; a combination of various items of contextual data should be used in order to arrive at an holistic assessment of the applicant's potential for the course/programme. Contextual data informs the process of professional judgement which ultimately decides whether an offer is made

4. Applicants needing additional learner support or practical advice during their application, transition or when registered as a student, should receive appropriate transition and in-session learner support to ensure their potential continues to be developed

5. Whilst there may be shared principles in the use of contextual data, it is recognised that individual institutions are autonomous in the contextual data they use and how it is used within their admissions decision-making process (SPA, online)

Working with HEIs that are keen to explore this development further (mainly Russell Group and 1994 Group HEIs to date) SPA has also developed a set of key data requirements for the purposes of contextualising admissions. This data could be used by institutions to inform their understanding of the social and educational background of applicants. It needs to be available for all institutions across the UK, taking account of various different qualifications. The common basket of data proposed by SPA includes the following:

Educational Background

- Progression rates to higher education (percentage determined by cohort size) from school/college
- School performance - Average (mean) school GCSE performance for 5 A*-C GCSE (including English/Welsh and Mathematics)*
- Average (mean) school 'Best Eight' GCSE performance
- Progression from Year 11 to further education
- Average (mean) of QCA points per qualification (per entry and per student)

Socio-Economic Background

- In receipt of (or entitled to) free school meal (school rates and individual)
- In receipt of (or entitled to) an Educational Maintenance Allowance (including levels)
- Lives in a low progression to higher education neighbourhood
- Socio-economic class IIIM-VII
- Have been in care for greater than six months

It is understood that UCAS is working to deliver an initial consistent dataset, with as much of this data as is available, free of charge to all UK institutions by autumn 2011 for use in admissions processes for entry in academic year 2012/13.

The SPA will also shortly be undertaking a survey of all UK HEIs to establish whether they are using contextual data, what data they are using and how they use it.

Operational and academic research into the use of contextual data is being undertaken at many HEIs, normally internally within universities, but only a handful of institutions (approximately ten of the research intensive institutions) are currently regularly using contextual data to inform their admissions policies. SPA has explained that a much broader range of institutions would like to use contextual data. SPA also states that it would been keen to work with those in Scottish institutions working on contextual data, to support the development of transferable good practice across the HE sector (Mullen, 2010g)

Work of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) – Policy Relating to Widening Access to 'the Professions' and Contextualised Admissions

The SFC's strategy for widening access to further and higher education is set out in 'Learning for All: 4th Update Report on Measures of Success'. This report proposed that progress for widening participation would be monitored using a common set of themes and indicators. One of the key themes in the report is 'Recruitment and Selection' with an associated indicator of success being 'patterns of applications for university places by socio-economic background, deprivation zone, disability and gender' (SFC, 2010a). It is the responsibility of the SFC's Access and Inclusion Committee to advise the Council on access and inclusion matters and the implementation of 'Learning for All', including monitoring the progress made against the key themes from the strategy.

As explained in SPICe Briefing SB10/09: Widening Access to Higher Education: Policy in Scotland, at the end of 2009 the SFC also introduced a new "Framework for Equality, Access and Inclusion". This summarises the national, regional and local actions being taken forward for the 'widening access' agenda in Scotland, and is designed to be able to demonstrate the 'added value' from strategic interventions by the SFC, to improve access to HE (Mullen, 2010c).

The Framework includes six key aims or challenges as listed below:

1. **'Equality and Diversity'** – to ensure more even patterns of participation in further and higher education across different groups in society
2. **'Awareness Raising and Building Attainment'** – to raise awareness in schools and improve attainment by providing entitlement as part of the senior phase of Curriculum for Excellence (CFE) within a national schools programme.
3. **'Widening Access'** – to increase participation in further and higher education of people from deprived postcodes or from thematic communities. To ensure more even demand for learning across all groups in society.
4. **'Informed access, transitions and admissions'** - to achieve sustainable progression from schools and communities into further and higher education
5. **'Progression'** – to achieve sustainable progression from college to university. To increase the proportion of students from deprived postcodes in universities.
6. **'Retention'** – to ensure all learners achieve a good learning experience that enhances life chances.

SB10/09: Widening Access to Higher Education: Policy in Scotland examined a series of related policy interventions by the SFC designed to address the aims set out in the Framework above, namely: Wider Access Regional Forums (related to Aim 2) , supporting the Scottish Government's 'More Choices, More Chances' Strategy (related to Aim 3), incentivising the development of 'articulation' between college and university, in particular through regional articulation hubs (related to aim 5), supporting projects that will improve student 'retention' in colleges and universities (related to Aim 6).

Under aim 4 'Informed access, transitions and admissions', the SFC currently is undertaking several related strategic activities, supporting the development of contextualised admissions data and other interventions designed to increase access to the high demand professions.

SFC Targeted Programme Activity – Increasing Access to the High Demand Professions

Work undertaken by the SFC and other stakeholders has identified that there are certain courses at Scottish HEIs that are in particularly high demand, namely medicine, law and the arts. These courses are mainly provided by Scotland's 'highly selective universities': The University of Aberdeen, The University of Dundee, The University of Edinburgh, The University of Glasgow and the University of St Andrews; and 'selective arts institutions': Edinburgh College of Art (ECA), Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design (Dundee University), Gray's School of Art (Robert Gordon University) and Glasgow College of Art (GCA).

Evidence suggests that students from less privileged social backgrounds, or lower attaining schools are still under-represented on these highly demanded courses, and even if achieving the necessary qualifications to apply, choose to study elsewhere. Research undertaken by the Sutton Trust (2010, summarised above) suggest that the main reasons for this are: low pupil aspiration and lack of pupil consideration of their future earnings potential, lack of information and guidance; and subject choice restrictions applied to admissions processes of highly selective institutions (SFC, 2010d).

The SFC is currently developing specific programme activity, with the institutions listed above, to address this issue. The aim is to increase the number of pupils from low performing schools entering high demand professional degree programmes. This activity is summarised below.

Increasing Entrants from Low Progression Schools to Highly Selective Institutions

In addition to existing school engagement activity, the SFC will provide strategic funding to the selective institutions to undertake outreach work at specific schools and targeted cohorts of pupils. This is designed to raise not only aspirations of these pupils, but also to help build their capability to enter a highly selective institution and undertake courses in high demand subject areas.

This targeted outreach work will involve widening participation (WP) teams in selective institutions delivering the following activities for these groups of pupils:

- Awareness raising events to provide a realistic insight into careers in specific professions
- Institution visits and access to university facilities, lectures and events
- Specific events for advice and guidance to parents
- Support for and use of mentors
- One to one UCAS application advice for S6 pupils, interview preparation; and advice and contacts for work experience and volunteering
- Co-ordinated summer school activity
- Support for transitions

(SFC, 2010d)

Contextualised Admissions

Secondly, the SFC is planning to fund a research programme for these highly selective institutions to develop the use of contextualised admissions data. As part of the funding agreement for the targeted outreach activities listed above, the SFC expects these institutions to commit to the use of contextual applicant data in their admissions policies. The intention is to fund a research post in each of these institutions, at a cost of approximately £12,000 per year, specifically for the purpose of developing contextual data which can inform future admissions policies, as well as monitoring and tracking individual progress. It will help to provide evidence of the impact that the strategic intervention has had upon widening access to these institutions.

The SFC has therefore identified key indicators that will be used to monitor the impact of the targeted outreach activity (such as '% and number increase in applications from low performing schools') and expect the institutions to establish a baseline from which progress can be measured. Institutions will be expected to track the progress of students from applying to completing their course.

In June 2010, the SFC Executive put forward these proposals to its Access and Inclusion Committee, which were subsequently agreed (SFC, 2010e). The activities listed above will involve 3 years of funding from the HFU from academic year 2010-11, at around a total of £1 million to £2 million (SFC, 2010d).

The Widening Access Regional Forums (WARFs) will also cease from 2011 to be replaced by a more targeted and focussed national programme of school engagement targeted at school pupils from years S3 - S6. The new programme aligns with the subject choices offered through Skills Development Scotland at S2 and aims to ensure a consistent entitlement to pupils in low progression schools. All partner higher education institutions will be asked to provide agreements on progression opportunities for pupils taking part in school residential activity. All local authorities will be asked to sign up to the programme to support school participation.

The targeted work on access to the high demand professions will be aligned with this programme (SFC, 2010e); and profession specific funded initiatives, such as the Working in Health Access Network or (WHAN) which is a series of regional networks of universities and colleges working together to raise awareness in schools of a career in the health professions. SFC Funding for WHAN finished in 2009, but this activity is now going to be integrated into overall WP activities and related funding to institutions.

Future HFU Funding of Widening Access Activities

All funding related to equality, access and inclusion programmes for HEIs are now allocated via the newly created Horizon Fund for Universities (HFU) (£18.7 million of HFU allocated for 'access and progression' in 2009-10) SPICe Briefing SB10/68: Higher Education Institutions: Finance explains that

> "Currently, some of the activities funded by the HFU are fairly long-term, but the SFC states in its guidance that funding streams will be periodically reviewed to ensure that they are being spent on the highest priorities and are being used the most effectively. In the HFU guidance for universities 2010-11, the SFC states:

> "The SFC intends to continue commitments that have already been agreed. However, following the recent UK General Election there has been a revised budget for 2010-11, and budgets for financial year 2011-12 and beyond will be set out in a spending review expected to conclude in the autumn. In light of the uncertainties over budgets, universities should note that we reserve the right to make in-year adjustments to universities allocations as well as changes to future years' profiles".

All activities funded by the HFU are being reviewed by the SFC (including the Widening Access Retention Premium (WARP), articulation hubs and Part-time Incentive funding). Reviews are expected to be complete by the end of July 2011 (Mullen, 2010f). Therefore HFU funding for widening access activities in 2011/12 is still to be confirmed.

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