



# **Student Success in Higher Education**

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Action on Access is the national co-ordination team appointed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Learning and Skills Council to support their widening participation strategies by:

- consultation
- advice and guidance
- research
- dissemination of information and good practice

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# Student Success in Higher Education

This report represents a series of research-based activities by Action on Access for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) from December 2001 to December 2002. Broadly these have attempted to identify issues and consider factors that contribute to enhancing participation and student success, with an analysis of widening participation strategies and the approaches and response of HEIs in response to increased student diversity.

This research explores in depth HEI plans within their 2001 Widening Participation Strategies as well as looking at links to, and effects on, their existing Learning and Teaching Strategies and their new ones submitted in July 2002.

There are many examples of good practice and fifteen vignettes illustrating the diverse approaches of fifteen different HEIs.

This report is for information and guidance.



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## Introduction

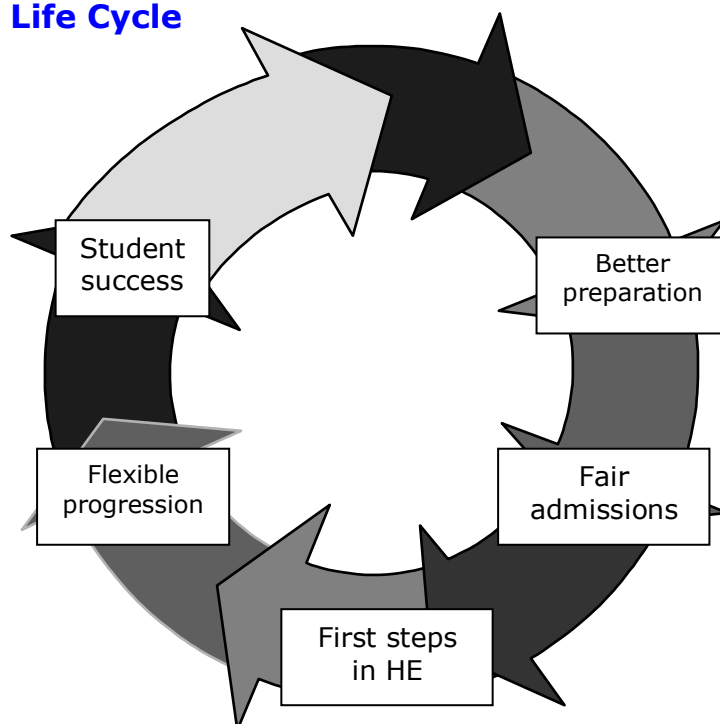
This report represents three related studies of plans, activities and changes introduced within Higher Education to support greater levels of student success on courses. The reports have been pulled together for ease of reference.

UK Higher Education has seen some significant changes over the years. There are higher levels of participation, the student population is increasingly diverse with generally more female students, part-time students, mature students over 21 and greater engagement with minority ethnic groups. Full-time students are increasingly taking up employment while studying, due to changes in funding arrangements, and the choice of discipline is becoming more vocational or vocationally related.

Students are faced with making complex choices based on their need to balance a range of factors including long term career goals and course choice, financial considerations, employability and family commitments. In response to students' changing needs Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have over the last 15 years developed more flexible approaches to learning and are offering greater choice and flexibility with respect to attendance, mode of study and levels of engagement. New awards have been developed and different aspirations and expectations have been expressed by both learners and employers.

As a consequence of these changes there are calls for a shift away from the traditional three year full-time degree programmes being the norm and assumptions can no longer be made which rely on the notion of consecutive years of study. This has meant that HEIs have had to change their planning approaches and more recently they have developed strategies that have adopted almost universally the Student Life Cycle model (Layer et al. 2002a, HEFCE Strategic Plan 2003). This model describes the student experience and covers a range of activities from aspiration raising, pre-entry activities, admission, first semester/term, moving through the course and employment.

## The Student Life Cycle



In an attempt to understand these changes in more detail and support HEIs in responding to the related issues the Higher Education Funding Council for England

(HEFCE) and Action on Access have undertaken a series of research based activities. Broadly these have attempted to identify issues and consider factors which contribute to enhancing participation and student success.

HEFCE has sought over the last four years to encourage the sector to widen and increase participation and ensure student success. The approach taken by the funding council has included:

- Requiring HEIs to submit Initial Widening Participation Statements in 1999
- Requiring HEIs to submit more developed Widening Participation Statements and Action Plans in 2001. HEIs were encouraged to utilise a student lifecycle approach and to include specific measures to enhance student success.
- Seeking revised Learning and Teaching Strategies which take account of Widening Participation and Student Success
- Producing two Good Practice Guides as a means of ensuring holistic thinking across HEIs; the Good Practice Guide to writing Widening Participation strategies (HEFCE 2001) and its sister Guide to Learning and Teaching Strategies (HEFCE 2001).
- Developing a guide linking Learning and Teaching with Widening Participation (HEFCE 2002)

The HEFCE has also supported institutions by disseminating good practice guidelines which encourage institutions to develop integrated, holistic approaches to strategic planning. It has published performance indicators so that institutions are aware of their performance against benchmarks and provided management data with respect to an institutions' student population.

Action on Access is the HEFCE's national coordination team for widening participation and is a key part of its strategy for tackling non-completion. Over the last three years the team has undertaken a number of projects which have considered aspects of student retention and student success. This report represent the following three significant pieces of work:

- Layer, G. Srivastava, A. Stuart, M. (2002a) Achieving Student Success: An Analysis of HEI Widening Participation Strategies and the Proposed Impact on Student Success

Case Study Reports:

- Thomas, L. Yorke, M. Woodrow, M. (2001) Access and Retention
- Layer, G. Srivastava, A. Thomas, L. Yorke, M. (2002b) Student Success: Building for Change

## **Background and Context**

In 2000 Action on Access produced a report entitled 'Implementation of the Widening Participation Strategies: An Initial Analysis by Action on Access'. This was in response to the HEFCE's first requirement for each HEI to submit an Initial Widening Participation Statement. The report found that one of the weakest areas of coverage in the Initial Strategic Statements was in the setting of targets for student retention for non-traditional students.

This report was followed in December 2001 by a pilot study from Action on Access, 'Access and Retention Final Report' undertaken by Thomas, Yorke and Woodrow, which is published in full. This case study research report looked at six institutions which had performed successfully in widening participation and retention with respect to their



expected benchmarks. It considered what factors had enabled those institutions to secure success and what aspects might be transferable. The report recommended a cross sector study of institutions with recognised good practice in widening participation and suggested that for some HEIs current retention figures did not accurately reflect their successes in student retention when taking into account significant and crucial factors such as their mission, student population background and modes of attendance.

In March 2002 after HEIs had submitted their revised three year Widening Participation Strategies and Action Plan, Action on Access produced a further report for HEFCE entitled 'Achieving Student Success' (Layer et al. 2002a). This reports on the plans from HEIs to achieve student success primarily from an analysis of these Strategies. The full report, published here, is a useful starting point as it presents an overall perspective taking the widening participation strategies as an initial reference point. The report covers context, target setting, student preparation, student support, Learning and Teaching and curriculum development and next steps. An Appendix to the report includes an analysis of Widening Participation Strategies.

The third report 'Student Success: Building for Change' case study research, in December 2002, followed up the first set of case studies in exploring how institutions have started to actively address many of the challenges highlighted in the Access and Retention Final Report. The focus of the study was on establishing how HEIs were seeking to increase the proportion of students who successfully complete their studies. It looked at eight institutions from a broader cross section of the sector than the first case study report and sought to achieve a clearer understanding of developments in the sector. Undertaken to explore what HEIs were doing in response to increased student diversity the report considered how this diversity had affected their approaches. The full report with details of major finding and emerging issues is published in this report.

As HEIs had already been through the process of writing and submitting their revised Widening Participation Strategies and had had the opportunity to reflect on their current strategies the research was able to explore in depth HEI plans within their 2001 Widening Participation strategies as well as looking at links to, and effects on, their existing Learning and Teaching Strategies and their new ones submitted in July 2002.

The two case study reports each include a short Executive Summary and include details of the methodology used and the main findings. All the vignettes are available in two sets of Appendices, one set at the end of each report.