Wales Centre for Public Policy
Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru

Widening participation in tertiary education

Evidence review and reflections for Wales

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Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru

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Summary

- Widening participation efforts seek to address the inequalities faced in access to, retention and attainment in tertiary education. Such inequalities can be related to socio-economic background, race and ethnicity, gender, disability and other 'protected' characteristics.
- Medr, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, responsible for funding, overseeing, and regulating tertiary education in Wales, a duty to promote equality of opportunity in access, retention, achievement, and onward progression of learners. Widening participation will be a core part of Medr's work.
- This review synthesises evidence on widening participation policies and approaches in tertiary education in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland, with a focus on informing Medr and providing lessons learned for Wales.
- The political and funding landscapes for each country differ. In the UK, while England has moved towards a more market-based approach to student enrolment based on competition between providers, Scotland has retained a fee-free higher education system which does not incentivise competition in the same way. These changes have influenced how their tertiary sector and widening participation agenda have evolved. The tertiary education landscape in Ireland is complex and significantly different to the UK nations.
- We consider the degree of integration of tertiary education sector components, the existence and role of regulatory mechanisms and bodies, how and where funding is targeted in relation to disadvantage and the learner journey, and which disadvantaged groups are a strategic policy priority.
- Widening participation policies target a range of barriers as well as different types of tertiary institution or stages of the learner lifecycle, including pre- and post-entry. We explore the evidence on broad categories of initiatives including widening participation plans; national level campaigns, toolkits, and guidance; learner financial support; contextualised admissions and outreach programmes, among others.
- Areas for potential lessons learned for Wales can be identified based on this evidence review. These include the need for widening participation strategies to be implemented with the Welsh context in mind, and to ensure that programmes are monitored and evaluated for success.

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that those from disadvantaged backgrounds face inequalities in tertiary education. Sometimes referred to as 'post-compulsory education', tertiary education includes higher education (HE), secondary education for those over compulsory school age, further education (FE), and training such as apprenticeships (Welsh Government, 2021a: 13).

These inequalities are associated with socioeconomic background, race and ethnicity, gender, care experience, and disability (UK Parliament, 2021) among other characteristics. Inequalities are experienced not only in terms of access to tertiary education, but also in retention, attainment, and outcomes. While there is currently no comprehensive dataset on participation by different groups in Wales[1], evidence shows that, for instance, learners in Wales with declared disabilities are currently under-represented in the apprenticeship system (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018), and in the UK, while racially-minoritised learners are more likely to attend university than those who are White, they are less likely to attend top universities or receive first-class degrees (Centre for Social Justice, 2020: 27).

Challenges faced by learners from disadvantaged groups can be attitudinal (such as negative perceptions from professionals about learners' ability), situational (for example, resulting from caring responsibilities and financial pressures), and institutional (inflexible or inaccessible provision) (Pember et al., 2021). Financial barriers, including increasing tuition fees and inadequate financial aid, may also discourage participation in tertiary education.[2] Addressing these and other barriers have long been the target of 'widening participation' policies. There is no formal definition of widening participation, and it is understood and operationalised differently across various institutions (Kaye, 2021) and country contexts. It broadly involves encouraging different patterns of access, experience, progress, achievement, and outcomes in tertiary education to address the inequalities faced by disadvantaged groups. In this review we will be using this definition of 'widening participation' to cover all these aspects of engagement in tertiary education, except where otherwise specified. Institutions (for example, colleges and universities), employers, and government bodies are often responsible for setting, implementing, monitoring, and regulating widening participation policies.

[1] Our report *Understanding inequity in tertiary education in Wales* address this gap in knowledge by exploring the data on participation of learners in Wales across protected characteristics.

[2] Financial barriers can be attitudinal (i.e. perceptual) or actual., There is some evidence that higher fee levels discouraged the aspiration to participate in HE in England among some groups (Anderberg et al., 2019). There is, however, evidence that the number of students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds has not reduced proportionally as a result of the 2012/13 tuition fee reforms, suggesting that this aspirational barrier may not necessarily translate into reduced enrolment (Pollard et al., 2019).

Tertiary Education in Wales

Tertiary education in Wales consists of HE (including research and innovation), FE (including colleges and sixth forms), adult education and adult community learning, and apprenticeships and training. FE is provided by thirteen colleges, as well as a range of public, private and voluntary providers. HE is provided by eight universities, the Open University, and some FE colleges. There has been an increase in learners enrolled in these institutions, with 145,175 learners enrolled in HE institutions in 2020-21 and 119,300 unique learners enrolled in FE institutions in 2021-22 (Stats Wales, 2022; 2023).[3]

Wales has seen a range of efforts to widen participation in tertiary education since devolution, starting with the Welsh Government's first strategic statement on education and lifelong learning in 2001, which established a vision for widening educational access and opportunities (National Assembly for Wales, 2001). The Wales-wide Reaching Wider programme (established in 2002-2003), funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), aims to widen access to HE through partnerships between HE institutions, local authorities, employers, schools, the voluntary sector, and Careers Wales (HEFCW, 2022). More recently, the Hazelkorn Review recommended a new body be created to oversee tertiary education in Wales (Hazelkorn, 2016). Following this, the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act (TER Act) Medr, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research responsible for funding, overseeing, and regulating post-16 education in Wales. The TER Act imposes various duties on Medr, including promoting equality of opportunity, by:

- Increasing participation in tertiary education, and retention to course end, by members of under-represented groups.
- Reducing attainment gaps.
- Support for students from under-represented groups to 'continue their tertiary education, find employment, or start a business' (Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022).

The definition of 'equality of opportunity' is (perhaps purposefully) vague in the Act. We have elsewhere interrogated how one might understand and deploy this concept in the context of tertiary education (Price, 2023).

'Under-represented groups' are defined as those 'under-represented in tertiary education in Wales as a result of social, cultural, economic or organisational factors' (Welsh Government, 2021b).

Efforts to widen participation in tertiary education in Wales already include flexible provision, different modes of study (including part-time) and different levels (including pre-degree levels), which all figure strongly within Welsh policy documents, such as For Our Future The 21st Century Higher Education Strategy and Plan for Wales and the Higher Education (Wales) Act 2015.

[3] At the time that this research was conducted, StatsWales data had not yet been updated to reflect 2021/22 figures; the 2020/21 figures cited were the most recent publicly available.

These are designed to adapt and align the HE system to a more diverse potential learner population, with diverse needs (Donnelly and Evans, 2019). All Welsh HE providers must also submit Fee and Access Plans if they wish to charge above the minimum, stating how they would invest in supporting equality of opportunity in access to HE. The TER Act will replace this duty with new conditions imposed by Medr on registered providers, aiming to ensure the 'delivery of measurable outcomes' relating to increasing participation and retention, reducing attainment gaps and providing ongoing support (Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022: s.33).

This research

Following recent Wales Centre for Public Policy research on raising the age of participation in education to 18 (Maguire and Dickson, 2021) and supporting the Welsh lifelong learning system (Pember et al., 2021), the Welsh Government asked WCPP to conduct research to form an evidence base in order to inform and facilitate Medr in discharging its duties to widen participation across the tertiary education sector in Wales. In particular, WCPP has been asked to provide evidence which can support Medr in realising the scope of ambition in the TER Act. The research draws on policies and evidence relating to initiatives beyond HE where possible, but in some policy areas, evidence is limited to (primarily undergraduate) HE; though this can still provide some useful learning when thinking about postgraduate education, FE, apprenticeships, adult learning or sixth forms. Additional research by ADR Wales presents data analysis exploring the nature and extent of participation rates of learners from different backgrounds in Wales, and to what extent certain groups are under-represented across the tertiary education system, as well as roundtables, and commissioned thinkpieces exploring potential solutions.

This evidence review addresses the following research question:

What lessons can be learned from the other nations of the UK and Ireland about how best to support and improve the recruitment, progression, and attainment of learners from a variety of backgrounds in the Welsh tertiary education system?

In addressing the research question, this review outlines the tertiary education context or 'landscape' for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and the Republic of Ireland (ROI), synthesises the various widening participation policy approaches taken in those nations, and concludes with some key lessons for Wales. These contexts are the most relevant for the implementation of widening participation initiatives in Wales due to their similar cultural, socioeconomic and education contexts.

This research was conducted in 2022-2023 and reflects the situation and evidence base at the time of writing. We recognise that there have been policy developments since then that we have been unable to include in this review.

The UK and ROI contexts

Widening participation policies and approaches are situated within and predominantly driven by the political and funding context of each country and its tertiary education sector. In this section, we provide an overview of these broader 'landscapes' for widening participation in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the ROI.

England

There is no overarching tertiary education system in England, as post-18 education is split into FE and HE. There are 200 FE colleges that provide education from basic skills to degree level, in addition to several training providers (Bolton and Hubble, 2019). In 2017-18, around 3.3 million adults took some form of funded FE courses or training (Bolton and Hubble, 2019). In 2019 there were 141 universities in England (Augur, 2019) and around 1.5 million English students studied at UK HE institutions in 2017-18 (Bolton and Hubble, 2019). The number of learners going to higher education from the country's lowest participation neighbourhoods increased by more than 50% between 2013 and 2021. However, with an even greater increase in enrolment from learners from the highest-participation neighbourhoods during this period, the participation gap has not diminished (Atherton, 2022).

Political context

Tertiary education policy in England is strongly set in a marketised educational field that is primarily driven by the labour market (McCaig, 2018). Education policy is underpinned by the 'view that economic prosperity in knowledge economies requires highly skilled workers, which will bring social returns to individuals and the wider society' (Bathmaker, 2016: 21). As labour markets have shifted since the 1990s, so too have policy approaches aimed at widening participation in tertiary education. The introduction of 'Modern Apprenticeships' in the early 1990s, a UK-wide initiative, was part of a 'British skills drive' that established a minimum qualification level and a minimum duration for apprenticeships (Steedman, 2011: 1-2), and also aimed to attract more women, who were under-represented in apprenticeships (Fuller and Unwin, 2013: 8). In England this model was carried forward under New Labour (1997-2010), but the minimum qualification level was dropped, with the priority being increasing the number of young people in apprenticeships. A similar approach was taken to HE, with the government setting a target of up to 50% of cohorts participating in HE by the age of 30, accompanied by a commitment to increase participation among under-represented and disadvantaged groups (Bathmaker, 2016).

In the wake of the recession and change in the UK government in the late 2000s, policy in England shifted. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government stated their intent to 'create more college and university places, as well as help to foster stronger links between universities, colleges, and industries' (Cabinet Office, 2010: 31). They also announced their goal to increase social mobility and increase the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in HE (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018; Cabinet Office, 2010: 32). However, this would not involve setting targets for levels of HE participation and would emphasise vocational education, on the basis that vocational education was a better option for many learners (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010). The approach to apprenticeships also changed under the Coalition and Conservative Governments. Pledges to increase the number of apprentices were made alongside a commitment to raise the quality and standard of apprenticeships such as through more 'advanced' apprenticeships (at HE level). This has been described as 'prioritising skills over social inclusion' (Steedman, 2011: 4), moving apprenticeships policy away from a focus on engaging those from disadvantaged backgrounds towards positioning apprenticeships as a means of enhancing business productivity (Crawford-Lee, 2016: 324).

In 2013, the Coalition Government also removed the cap on student numbers in England, meaning that HE institutions have since been free to recruit as many full-time undergraduate students as they can. This liberalisation of English HE has led to a greater expansion of tertiary education than elsewhere in the UK, which has increased institutional competition (John, 2015), as it is seen as a key mechanism in driving quality of educational provision (Connelly and Evans, 2019). This has had positive consequences for some selective universities, which have been able to recruit more undergraduate students in the context of a target to equalise the ratio of entrants from areas with high and low areas of participation in HE by 2039 (Office for Students, 2018). However, it has had negative consequences for mainly newer universities, which have lost approximately a quarter of their student population (Frank et al., 2019) and does not address the issue that potential learners do not have equality of opportunities (Boliver et al., 2022).

When the Conservative Government came to power in 2015, the policy strategy returned to both increasing and widening participation, with a particular focus on HE. The government set a goal of doubling the proportion of those from disadvantaged backgrounds progressing into HE and increasing by 20% the numbers of students from racially-minoritized backgrounds entering HE by 2020 (Bathmaker, 2016; Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018). In 2018, the government established the Office for Students (OFS) as the single market regulator of HE in England and with responsibility for increasing and promoting fair access to, progress and success in HE (Hubble et al., 2021). The OFS aims to promote and safeguard fair access to higher education for disadvantaged and under-represented groups in England by monitoring access agreements[4] and publishing guidance and works closely with UK Research and Innovation, as the strategic research investment body.

[4] Access and Participation agreements are discussed in more detail in the *Policy Approaches* section (see page 20).

Set within the context of English policy being oriented around equalising access to information and educational opportunities (Connelly and Evans, 2019), current approaches to widening participation look across the learner journey in HE. This is based on a recognition that disadvantaged students may face difficulties during HE and beyond and has led to a focus on improving progress within HE as well as raising graduate outcomes and employability; this is in addition to a focus on increased access (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018). Annual statistics on young peoples' participation in HE by student characteristics in England suggests that there was progress in 2020/21, insofar as the HE progression rate[5] by age 19 for learners eligible for Free School Meals was the highest recorded. However, the progression rate gap between those eligible for Free School Meals and those who are not also increased to the highest level recorded, indicating a more substantial increase in HE progression rates for those not eligible for Free School Meals. Data from 2020/21 also suggests that there is a spatial dimension to inequality in participation rates between those eligible for Free School Meals and those not in England. For example, the gap in participation rates is lower in London and the South East, compared to elsewhere in England (UK Government 2023). Similarly, the participation rate to high tariff HE between learner's eligible for Free School Meals in London is approximately four times higher than for the East Midlands (UK Government, 2023). One reason for this is likely to be that students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to attend universities in their local area, due to financial concerns (Russell Group, 2020). In some areas, this results in high-attaining disadvantaged students being less likely to attend a high-tariff Russell Group university, so that 'undermatching' exacerbates existing inequalities within HE choice and experience (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018).

Funding

Responsibility for tertiary education funding in England is divided between the taxpayer, students, graduates, and employers. Government funding for FE and apprenticeships is provided by the Education & Skills Funding Agency, and for HE by UK Research and Innovation and the Office for Students. In FE, 'disadvantage funding' is provided to institutions as one element of the funding formula, which accounts for students' socio-economic deprivation and low prior attainment in English and Maths. On apprenticeships, additional funding is provided to training providers and employers for apprentices who are care-experienced, from socio-economically deprived areas, or have a disability, recognising the 'additional costs needed to train individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds' (Powell, 2020: 23).

HE receives significantly more funding than FE, though both have experienced funding cuts in the last decade associated with the Coalition Government's austerity measures (Bolton and Hubble, 2019; Bolton, 2021). In HE, the government pays £21 billion to fund the education of each cohort of English-domiciled full-time undergraduate students studying anywhere in the UK, which includes payments to universities via tuition fees and teaching grants, and to students towards their living costs while at university (IFS, 2022). The increase in tuition fees

[5] Defined as the proportion of students that progressed to a sustained level 4 or HE destination.

to a maximum of £9,250 per year has shifted financial responsibility for tuition fees from the state to the learner (Bathmaker, 2016). These loans accrue interest at a rate between the rate of Retail Price Index (RPI) inflation and RPI inflation plus 3%, depending on a graduate's income and are repaid on an income-contingent basis and are written off after 30 years. There has been substantial changes to this system from the 2023 university entry cohort, with the repayment threshold being lower and the repayment period being 40 years. However, the maximum student loan interest rate will be lower.

The original increase in tuition fees and larger maintenance loan was estimated to result in the poorest students accruing debts of up to £57,000 on graduation (Belfield et al., 2017). As a consequence, many students – particularly those that do not receive parental transfers – rely on part-time work to fund their studies (IFS, 2022). However, research has tended to find that increases in tuition fees have been offset by increases in financial support with no discernible negative impact on participation rates, particularly for learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Crawford, 2012; Ghazala and Simion, 2018), although this requires a lack of debt aversion amongst learners and clear information about the likely costs of HE participation of the debt being written-off (Chowdry et al., 2012).

Northern Ireland

Tertiary education in Northern Ireland is provided by three universities, two university colleges, the Open University, six regional colleges, specialist colleges for teacher training and the Colleges of Agriculture Food and Rural Enterprise. All these institutions provide HE and FE; the regional colleges and the Open University enrol large numbers of adult learners. Of these students, 74% were from Northern Ireland, 5% were from Great Britain, 3% from the Republic of Ireland, 1% from other EU countries and 17% from non-EU countries (NISRA, 2022). The number of Northern Irish applicants to HE institutions in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK has increased substantially over the last 10 years and non-continuation rates have decreased for both full-time and part-time students. However, whilst participation gaps have decreased for mature learners and those self-reporting a disability, the gaps between males and females and Protestants and Catholics have widened (CFE research, 2022).

Political context

In Northern Ireland, widening participation in tertiary education, particularly for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with learning difficulties and disabilities, is considered an issue of social justice that benefits individual learners as well as society, through obtaining a highly skilled workforce. This links to the Northern Ireland Executive's objective of developing a growing and rebalanced economy. In relation to some aspects of widening participation, Northern Ireland's HE institutions outperform those in the rest of the UK, with a higher proportion of students accepted from lower socio-economic groups. In 2013-14, 39.5% of Northern Ireland-domiciled university entrants were from the four lowest socioeconomic classes, as compared to 32.6% for the UK overall

(Department for Employment and Learning, 2015a). Recent evidence from 2020-21 indicates that Northern Ireland had the highest proportion of full-time first degree HE entrants from state schools or colleges, at 99.8% compared to 84.4% in the South-East of England (HESA, 2022), although this may reflect differences in the population of Northern Ireland to the population elsewhere in the UK. Within Northern Ireland, analysis of 2021/22 entrants suggest a different picture. The highest proportion of enrolments from Northern Irish students in all UK HE institutions came from Northern Ireland's least deprived areas, as measured by the Multiple Deprivation Measure and the lowest was from the most deprived, although the proportion of the latter has increased over time (NISRA, 2023). Further, the proportion of learners in HE between the academic years 2015/16 to 2020/21 in receipt of Disabled Learners Allowance in Northern Ireland was 6.2%, compared to 8.2% and 7.2% in Wales and England, respectively (HESA, 2022).

The commitment to widening participation and ensuring accessibility in tertiary education is one of four guiding principles in the first HE strategy for Northern Ireland, *Graduating to Success*, its follow up *Access to Success*, and in the first FE strategy for Northern Ireland, *Further Education Means Success* and in the Apprenticeship strategy, *Securing Our Success*. These aim to ensure that talented individuals are given the opportunity to benefit from tertiary education, irrespective of their personal or social background and to improve partnerships between key stakeholders. These sit alongside and complement the *Success Through Skills – Transforming Futures* and the *Further Education Means Business* strategies, reinforcing the integrated approach to providing skills, supporting people and promoting jobs through tertiary education (Department for the Economy, n.d.a). However, the extent to which these strategies consider all under-represented groups is unclear, as Protestant males from areas of high deprivation are the only group to be identified as under-represented in HE in *Access to Success*. Whilst this combines disadvantages related to religion, gender and class, it does not realise the claim within the strategy that support should be 'tailored to individual needs and based on identified multiple disadvantages' nor recognise that potential barriers to HE are not homogenous (Department for Employment and Learning, 2015b:17, DeWitt, 2020).

To achieve the aims of widening participation legislation, the Department for the Economy has implemented a range of non-financial broad policy directions to support widening participation. A growing focus of these actions has been on the retention and completion of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. These actions include an increase in local HE and FE provision and the expansion of Foundation degrees (primarily delivered by FE colleges in conjunction with universities) and are overseen by the Higher Education Strategy Programme Management Office (Department for the Economy, n.d.a). A partnership approach is taken through Higher Education Strategy e-zines, which were designed to track progress and keep stakeholders up to date, though the latest edition was published back in May 2019. The introduction of higher-level apprenticeships to degree-level are also conceived as a way to develop skills and fill the skills gap in Northern Ireland; although the lack of these opportunities for people aged 25 and over has created a gap in work-based provision for those who are mid-career, have been made

redundant and have lost skills due to automation (Gunson et al., 2018). There is also a large number of apprentices who drop out during their training period (Smyth and Zimba, 2019).

Funding

Unlike the other UK nations, Northern Ireland has no HE funding council. Instead, the Department for the Economy provides funding to the universities and the six regional FE colleges. The Apprenticeship levy in Northern Ireland is centrally administered by the UK Government, which has meant that the funding is not ring-fenced for investment in Northern Ireland apprenticeships. This has created a disconnect between the employers who pay the levy and potential learning, as well as a lost opportunity for greater employment engagement in tertiary education (Gunson et al., 2018).

Spend on education and skills has fallen since 2010-11, and with further reductions expected in the Department for the Economy's budget and in EU funding, plans to cut university places, end Educational Maintenance Allowance for learners from low-income backgrounds, and increase tuition fees by almost 60% to £7,200 a year from September 2024, have been modelled (Committee for the Economy, 2022). Concerns surrounding this were raised under similar financial constraints in 2015-16. The existence of the formal Maximum Student Numbers cap for universities in Northern Ireland resulted in universities reporting reduced projected numbers below the cap to protect quality standards. Fears were raised that this would likely impact negatively on widening participation that is at odds with developing a growing and rebalanced economy (McKeena, 2016). It is argued that participation in HE only widens sustainably when HE places are allowed to grow (Watson, 2006).

Scotland

Scotland has an integrated tertiary education system, comprised of HE, FE, and lifelong learning. There are 19 HE institutions (15 autonomous universities, the Open University in Scotland, a college of higher education, an art school and a conservatoire) and 26 colleges, which provide all levels of tertiary education. In 2021-2022, there were a record number of people entering higher education and further education in Scotland, with 301,230 students enrolled HE institutions (Scottish Government, 2023) and 322,332 students enrolled in college (Colleges Scotland, 2023).

The principle of widening participation is embedded throughout tertiary education in Scotland, although predominantly focuses on HE, with socio-economic inequality and access for carers and care-leavers a priority, as inequalities in participation are more striking than they are in England and Wales (Ianelli, 2007). It is essentially considered a 'public' system, which has resulted in a distinctive system with a higher participation rate in tertiary education than other UK nations and no tuition fees in HE for Scottish domiciled and non-UK EU learners.

Political context

The Scottish Government's emphasis on and commitment to the principles of social justice has resulted in widening participation in tertiary education being a major priority (Scottish Government, 2013). Equal access is considered both a social and an economic good that is compatible with ideals of fairness and academic excellence and which resonates with the history of Scottish universities (Commission on Widening Access, 2016). HE, in particular, is considered a public good from which communities and societies can benefit, in much the same way that they benefit from school-level and FE (or other universally-provided public services).

In the context of UCAS figures estimating that 18-year-olds from Scotland's 20% least deprived communities were more than four times as likely to enter university as those from the 20% most deprived (Commission for Widening Access, 2016), Scotland's First Minister set a goal of ensuring that 20% of entrants to HE should come from the most deprived backgrounds by 2030. To achieve this, the Scottish Government recognises that widening participation requires a shift from 'individual' effort to system-wide changes that remove barriers and create support for those from deprived backgrounds to enter HE. Table 1 identifies these barriers and systemic issues within HE, and tertiary education in general, in Scotland. A distinct legislative framework aims to address these and to facilitate the Scottish Government's ambition for university education, irrespective of economic background.

Table 1: Barriers to access and systemic issues in tertiary education in Scotland (Commission for Widening Access, 2015:9)

Barriers to access	Systemic issues
Early years attainment gap	Alignment of pathways between schools, colleges and universities
School attainment gap	Lack of evidence on types of access programmes that have most impact
Low aspirations	Need for more coherence and collaboration on outreach
Lack of parental experience of HE	The need to expand and maximise the impact of contextual admissions
Lack of quality advice and guidance in schools and in the family home	The need to expand and maximise the impact of articulation pathways
Secondary school subject choice, including clear advice and guidance on the consequences of decisions	Admissions processes placing greater value on experiences more likely to be available to more affluent socioeconomic groups
Lack of quality advice and guidance on student finance	Inconsistent approach to using data to identify those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged
Cultural barriers, for example, the feeling of not fitting in	The need for better data to support targets and monitor progress.

The Scottish Government's commitment to widening access has resulted in structures that seek to promote change to existing processes and to increase the participation of economically-disadvantaged learners, including groups in university education. For instance, the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013 places a statutory duty on councils and institutions to promote wider access to tertiary education, and the Commission on Widening Access and its Commissioner for Fair Access aim to equalise access regardless of socio-economic position and reduce the gap between the least and most deprived. Their latest report emphasises the need to maintain the momentum towards fair access in the context of only 16% of entrants to HE coming from the most deprived 20% communities as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, the recovery from Covid-19, and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2022). Whilst the target of 16% was comfortably met nationally in 2020/21 and 2021/22, a number of institutions – particularly those in the north east – have less than 10% of entrants coming from the 20% most deprived communities. As this reflects the limited pool of potential deprived entrants in the surrounding areas, the reliance on the SIMD has been criticised by, among others, Universities Scotland, suggesting that SIMD should be complemented, or replaced by a measure of individual disadvantage, such as Free School Meals, which is already used by institutions as an indicator, combined with other information, to identify disadvantaged applicants (Commissioner for Fair Access,2022). Whilst national targets on fair access are recommended to continue to be defined in terms of SIMD, institutions should be able to have their own measures to better contribute to tackling multiple forms of deeply entrenched deprivation (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2022).

The relatively small number of providers in Scotland has resulted in widening participation initiatives that are more integrative across tertiary education. In addition to FE courses, colleges in Scotland provide HE courses at a higher rate than in England or Wales, which acknowledges the importance of multiple pathways through FE and HE and into employment (Scottish Government, 2018). In 2020-21, over 18% of students in college in Scotland were studying HE courses (Currie, 2021) and 17% of HE (generally in the form of sub-degree programmes) takes place in the college sector, compared with 6% in England and 1% in Wales (Hunter Blackburn et al. 2016).

Skills Development Scotland administer the three levels of apprenticeships in Scotland (foundation, modern and graduate). They are all underpinned by the Apprenticeship Equalities action plan, which aims to widen participation in apprenticeships among particularly under-represented groups (those with disabilities, from racially-minoritised backgrounds, care-experienced groups and women). Efforts have focussed on national and regional partnership to build capacity of learning providers, employers and apprentices and to break-down negative stereotypes of disadvantaged groups.

Funding

Tertiary education is primarily funded by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). The Scottish Government mainly embodies its principle of widening participation in tertiary education through its approach to the funding of colleges and universities. Scotland does not charge Scottish-domiciled students tuition fees, instead funding HE as part of general public expenditure, although students coming to Scotland from elsewhere in the UK are charged fees at a similar rate to England and Wales. There is substantial support for maintaining this arrangement which is perceived as rooted in Scotland's educational tradition (Scottish Government, 2013).

Aiming to widen participation in apprenticeships, specific funding is provided for employers who recruit apprentices from under-represented groups. This has resulted in approaches tending to focus on the abolition of tuition fees, with less attention paid to other aspects of student funding, such as the availability of maintenance grants, which have recently shifted away from being non-repayable to repayable maintenance loans. However, the funding system of tertiary education in Scotland has non-redistributive effects (Hunter Blackburn, 2016). This means that whilst the system results in lower levels of student debt compared to the rest of the UK, learners from poorer backgrounds end up with higher levels of debt than those from richer backgrounds. This has led some to ask for a targeted approach to financial support for those from less affluent backgrounds (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017). Furthermore, this funding system may displace learners of middling attainment and from middle-income backgrounds, who are likely to be squeezed by high-achieving applicants from socioeconomically privileged backgrounds (Chowdry et al., 2013) and by SIMD20[6] applicants when overall funded places for Scottish and non-UK EU students are capped, through the Government limiting the number of free places (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017). In effect, the fixed cap raises concerns that the drive to recruit SIMD20 students may reduce opportunities for other students, meaning the increase in participation by some groups must be balanced by comparative losses by other groups within the distributive justice Scottish framework (Audit Scotland, 2016; Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017).

[6] This refers to learners who come from the 20% most deprived communities in Scotland.

Republic of Ireland (ROI)

Tertiary education in Ireland encompasses HE (referred to as Third-Level education) in universities and colleges, FE through Post-Leaving Certificates and other courses, and adult education. HE in Ireland is provided by five publicly funded universities, which encompass recognised colleges in specialised fields, including colleges of education and art colleges, five technological universities, two institutes of technology and at least 15 other private HE institutions. The latter have over 15,000 students, although these are not included in official statistics, with information on the profile of their students not collected systematically (Smyth, 2018). FE and adult education in Ireland are provided by Education Training Boards in colleges, which offer technical and practical education, and are validated by Quality and Qualifications Ireland. Access to HE from FE is more limited in Ireland and occurs either through a quota-based system for universities or a points-based system for technical universities and institutes of technology (Annex 1). In 2020, 51% of working-age adults had completed HE, demonstrated by learners in HE increasing from less than 78,000 in 2000 to over 128,000 in 2019 (Irish Universities Association, n.d.).

Political context

Until the early 2000s, the focus of tertiary education policy in Ireland was on increasing participation, as graduates had relatively higher employment chances and job quality than other OECD countries (Flannery and O'Donoghue, 2011; OECD, 2016). Widening participation became a focus after the formation of the National Office of Equity of Access in 2003, which was designed to oversee access policies (Fleming et al., 2017), despite the concepts of equity and access remaining imprecisely defined (ibid., Smyth, 2018). The Office, now subsumed into the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, has since published four action plans, which detail under-represented groups and specified targets for their participation level. These have tended to be based on family background, measured in terms of socio-economic group, rather than social class, parental education or profile of the local area. However, in the most recent action plan (published August 2022), priority groups are named as learners:

- Who are **socio-economically disadvantaged**, such as those who have experienced homelessness, are survivors of domestic violence, have experience of the care system, are carers, or have experience of the criminal justice system. Priority is also continuing for students from low-income families and/or long-term social welfare dependent families, from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, who are mature, who are lone parents or teen parents, who are migrants or refugees or who have experience of the international protection process, or students from ethnic minorities;
- Who are **members of Irish Traveller and Roma communities** (in the 2020-2021 academic year, 33 traveller students started undergraduate degrees); and
- With **disabilities**, including intellectual disabilities (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022).

Widening participation initiatives are also underpinned by the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, which sets specific targets for broadening participation. This led to a reorganisation of the HE sector through the consolidation of three groups of Institutes of Technology to create Technological University status. These offer professionally-orientated undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes with a focus on science and technology, have regard for the needs of their local regions, and place strong emphasis on research excellence. In the context of relatively poor geographic accessibility to HE, these have significantly improved it (Walsh et al., 2015). However, widening participation policy has tended not to focus on the postgraduate level, resulting in concerns that there is still inequality in access to tertiary education in Ireland (Smyth, 2018). The Further Education and Training Strategy guides the approach taken to widening participation in the provision of FE, apprenticeships and training. It focuses on learners with disabilities and early school leavers and how this sector corresponds to the HE sector.

Owing to a centralised admission system to tertiary education in Ireland, widening participation initiatives tend to build on selection procedures, as the eligibility for entry to HE is relatively high in Ireland compared to the rest of Europe (Smyth, 2018).

Funding

The Department of Education and Skills funds public spending on tertiary education in Ireland, which, like England and Northern Ireland, has declined since the Global Financial Crisis. The Higher Education Authority channels this public funding to each HE institution through a block grant (which incorporates support for widening participation), direct top-sliced allocations, and a performance-based component (see Table 2).

Framed in terms of widening participation in HE and to meet the needs of the Irish economy, there have been no tuition fees for first-time undergraduate students at publicly funded HE institutions who fulfilled residence requirements (Breathnach, 2008). This is incorporated into funding through the Free Fees Grant (Table 2). However, to cover student services and exam fees, each HE institution charges a registration fee. This fee has progressively increased from €190 in 1996 to a maximum of €3,000 in 2021/22, although in the Budget 2023, this has been reduced to €2000 for the 2022/23 academic year, with more cuts to the cost of going to HE planned. This fee is paid upfront and is not covered by a student loan system (Smyth, 2018), but may be waivered for undergraduates from low-income families. These learners also receive a non-repayable maintenance grant, the size of which varies by distance from the institution. This may address the issue that Ireland has poorer geographic accessibility issues to HE compared to Northern Ireland (Walsh et al., 2015). Only students from welfare-dependent families receive a maintenance grant for postgraduate study (Smyth, 2018).

Table 2: Public funding for Higher Education Institutions (adapted from Smyth, 2018; Parliamentary Budget Office, 2019)

Funding Means	Components	Description
Block Grants (approximately 60% to universities and colleges and 40% to Institutes of Technology)	Recurrent Grant allocation	Based on the preceding year's student numbers, weighted by the costs entailed across different disciplines
	Free Fees Grant	Based on certified student numbers in each undergraduate programme, which are then multiplied by the fee associated with each programme. The student contribution is then deducted from the grant allocation.
	Research	Additional support for research
	Access	Funding to support access to higher education for underrepresented cohorts (such as lower income households or those with disabilities)
Direct top-sliced allocations	–	Ring-fenced funding for a specific purpose, by either the Department of Education and Skills or the Higher Education Authority, in order to steer rapidly required systemic change.
A performance-based component	–	Based on the three-year mission-based compact each institution makes with the Higher Education Authority. If an institution is found to have failed against these targets, up to 10% can be withheld

Some funding is also available through HE institutions to assist specific groups of undergraduates and postgraduates. The Student Assistance Fund is allocated to individual institutions based on overall student numbers and the number of students in targeted socio-economic groups. The Fund for Students with Disabilities targets full-time students with specific categories of disabilities, although a review by the Higher Education Authority suggested that a lack of awareness of support and the onerous nature of the application process on the HE institution were barriers to its effectiveness. The review also highlighted that the level of funding has remained stable despite increasing demand and the lack of support for part-time students (Higher Education Authority, 2017).

To widen participation in apprenticeships, employers receive a gender-based bursary of €2666, alongside the €2000 apprenticeship employer grant, if they employ apprentices on any national apprenticeship programme with greater than 80% representation of a single gender.

Policy approaches

The differences in the participation, retention, and achievement rates of learners in tertiary education from disadvantaged groups across the UK and the ROI have resulted in various widening participation policy approaches, particularly within the HE sector.

These are framed by the political and funding contexts of each country and target a range of barriers to participation as well as different types of tertiary institution or stages of the learner lifecycle, including pre- and post-entry interventions.

Whilst significant investments have been made in widening participation initiatives across the UK and ROI, there is limited evidence on their effectiveness (Younger et al., 2017; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). A review of widening participation strategies in England found only modest improvements in HE participation amongst economically-disadvantaged learners and increased participation was almost exclusively in non-Russell Group universities (Harrison, 2011). Despite this evidence being collected before the 2012 fee reform and the Office for Students regulation, recent reviews still only indicate moderate support for the efficacy of initiatives, although this is mainly due to a lack of rigorous evaluation (Baines, 2022, Younger et al., 2017). Nonetheless, there is an opportunity to apply lessons learned from the UK and ROI to the Welsh context.

This section discusses broad initiatives targeted by tertiary education policies to address inequalities in participation. Most of the evidence from these initiatives are limited to HE – particularly undergraduate courses – although where possible, the research seeks to draw on policies and evidence from beyond this sector and into postgraduate education. While some of these interventions will also be in place in Wales, we have not sought evidence on their implementation or effectiveness in a Welsh context as part of this evidence review.

In this section we explore the following policy approaches:

- Widening participation plans
- Financial incentives:
  - Learner financial support
  - Institution-level performance funding
- Promoting diverse pathways into tertiary education
  - Foundation years and access courses
  - Articulation
- Contextualised admissions
- Outreach
- National-awareness campaigns.

The discussion highlights these policies and their impact in the country contexts previously outlined.

Widening participation plans

Policy	Widening participation plans set out how tertiary education providers will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed and progress in tertiary education. They are underpinned by public funding through performance funding.
Location	England, Scotland, Northern Ireland
Sector	HE and FE+ - any institution that wants to charge more than the minimum
Barriers to access that this policy tackles	Institutional, Financial, Attitudinal
Strength of evidence	Generally weak evaluation
Effectiveness	Promising (clearly an important policy approach for widening participation in HE, but little evaluation)

The introduction of widening participation plans at institutional level is designed to help change the culture overall within tertiary education. These plans tend to set out and underpin the approach each tertiary education provider will take to widening participation in its institution. Each UK nation has its own version of these plans, although all require institutions to analyse systematically the characteristics of their learners and set annual and longer-term targets for widening participation in their own context. Meeting these targets is linked to public funding of institutions, with the aim that performance funding (discussed further below) encourages institutions to improve learner access to, retention and success in tertiary education.

In England, institutions that wish to charge tuition fees above the basic level are required to develop an Access and Participation Plan every five years in consultation with the OFS (all institutions will need to submit a new plan by Spring 2023 to cover 2024-25 to 2027-28). Like their precursors (Access Agreements), these plans 'lay out how institutions will spend a proportion of the fee income above the basic fee on financial support and outreach activities to maintain access for the poorest applicants and those from social groups under-represented in higher education' (McCaig, 2015:7). The plans outline how universities will use financial support, conduct outreach activities, set and monitor targets and milestones, and implement other interventions to evidence their commitment to promoting equal opportunities for potential and current students (Kaye, 2021; OFS, 2019a). The OFS annually monitors these plans to determine whether institutions are making sufficient progress in the delivery of their plans through an access and participation dashboard, expenditure information and any other relevant information. The OFS has identified two major breaches to

date, which resulted in an appropriate amount of funding being withheld (Office for Students, n.d.). Universities are also expected to continue to undertake internal monitoring of their plans.

FE providers in England are also expected to produce Access and Participation plans if their tuition fees are above the basic level. However, evidence suggests that because these institutions tend to be smaller, they have more difficulty producing these plans, especially as they already play a greater role in ensuring participation of under-represented groups in tertiary education. This is primarily because they offer more flexible learning routes (Baldwin et al., 2022; Gallacher, 2014).

The approach in Northern Ireland is similar, where all fee-charging institutions are required to submit annual Widening Access and Participation plans to the Department for the Economy if they wish to increase their tuition fees. As in England, these plans describe how the additional income would be invested in activities that promote widening participation in HE, but also summarise widening participation strategies and detail specific actions and targets for improving representation from under-represented groups for the coming year. The plans also refer to the institution's past achievements against regional benchmarks and describe a detailed programme of anticipated progress each year towards the institution's own targets. Dashboards have been developed by individual universities to allow them to bring together data to monitor the diversity of their learners and track their progress (O'Donnell and Murphy, 2021).

In Scotland, Outcome Agreements set every three years between the SFC and individual HE and FE institutions formalise the commitment to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds, as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). SFC guidance requires institutions to articulate their anticipated progress, ensuring there is potential for the SFC to impose financial penalties for non-compliance (Sosu et al., 2018). These agreements are designed for institutions to create a knowledge base for improving policy and practice, but there is a concern that they may not necessarily identify the richer evidence needed to understand how to widen participation (Raffe, 2013).

The specific impact of institutional widening participation plans is difficult to assess. Since they frame and underpin a raft of approaches undertaken by institutions to widen participation, it is a challenge to disaggregate their impact from these. In England, data show that more learners from deprived areas are entering university than before plans were introduced, and representatives from HE institutions attribute this in part to such plans (OFS, 2021a). Evidence suggests this is owing to universities 'modifi[ng] their outreach efforts in response to the demands of producing their Access Agreements', raising the profile and status of widening participation efforts, and emphasising them as a priority (Dougherty and Callender, 2017: 20-21). In an analysis of 246 Access and Participation Plans, the OFS shows that if all targets are met for the 2024-25 cohort, 6,000 more economically disadvantaged entrants would enter tertiary education compared to the 2019-20 cohort (OFS, 2022). There is, however, also a suggestion that agreements have not been as forceful as they could be (Dougherty and Callender, 2017).

Financial incentives

Within this section we explore how to levels of financial incentives have been applied to promote wider access and opportunities within tertiary education across the UK:

- Learner financial support
- Institution-level financial support

Learner financial support

Policy	Learner financial support are initiatives, in the form of loans, bursaries and scholarships, to support learners financially to pay for things associated to tertiary education study, such as tuition fees, rent and travel fees.
Location	England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, ROI
Sector	HE and FE+
Barriers to access that this policy tackles	Financial, Situational
Strength of evidence	Weak
Effectiveness	Mixed (The lack of availability of information for learners is a limiting factor)

Each nation of the UK and the Republic of Ireland puts emphasis on supporting students financially, in the form of scholarships, bursaries, or fee waivers to widen participation. These interventions are designed uniquely to support socio-economically disadvantaged students, although the financial arrangements depend on their wider policy and funding contexts, including the extent to which the tertiary education system relies on student tuition fees to finance operations (Robinson and Salvestrini, 2020; Dougherty and Callender, 2017).

In England, current financial aid emphasises student loans, putting less reliance on grants or scholarships, although these were historically used extensively to widen participation (Dougherty and Callender, 2017). Between 2011-2015, the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) allocated a fixed number of scholarships to learners meeting a raft of eligibility criteria to help those from low-income backgrounds enter HE, designed to complement rather than replace institutional bursaries (Callender and Wilkinson, 2013; Connel-Smith and Hubble, 2018). A four-year evaluation of the National Scholarship Programme found that institutions welcomed flexibility to design and tailor their financial support packages (Bowes et al., 2016). The UK government also administered a national programme of means-tested educational maintenance grants towards the living expenses of low-income learners in England. Both have since been eliminated, which has negatively impacted low-income learners in recent HE cohorts (Kaye 2021). This has reinforced institutional bursaries and grants as key strategies for widening participation in Access and Participation Plans by removing financial barriers (Kaye, 2021). FE learners studying certain courses may receive free tuition and

others may be eligible for Advanced Learner Loans, which cover fees and are repaid on an income-contingent basis, but they do not receive maintenance support. There is also the 16-19 Bursary Fund, which provides bursaries for those from certain disadvantaged backgrounds (those in care or care leavers or those in receipt of certain benefits) to help them stay in FE. Other financial schemes for FE students include free meals for those from low-income households, Care to Learn, designed to support young parents, and residential bursaries to assist low-income students with financial support for accommodation when they are unable to live at home to study.

Owing to the combination of low/no tuition fees and part of the student loan being a non-repayable grant, Scotland and Northern Ireland do not focus as much on student financial support as part of a widening participation policy approach. Research suggests this has resulted in learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds in Scotland appearing to be more debt-averse than their English counterparts. This means these students are more likely to choose a local HE institution on the basis of reducing living costs with the intention of avoiding student debt altogether (Minty, 2015). Furthermore, the diverging student finance regimes across the UK nations have resulted in a reduction in cross-border flows, particularly for potential students from Scotland going to England (HEFCE, 2013).

In Ireland, for the academic year 2013-2014, 46% of all HE entrants received some form of grant. This was higher in the Institute of Technologies (56%) than in universities (36%) and colleges (41%) (Higher Education Authority, 2015b), which reflects differences in the social profile of students by HE institution (Smyth, 2018). The proportion of students receiving grants was higher (by nearly half) in the academic year 2020-21, possibly because of the impact of the pandemic, although overall there had been a gradual fall in numbers up to the academic year 2019-20, owing to Ireland's improved economic situation (Indecon, 2022).

Two aspects of the grant system have been identified as having had particular implications for widening participation in Ireland (Smyth, 2018). First, the means test for maintenance grant eligibility has been controversial as it is based on income rather than capital assets. This means that the highest rates of receipt are among learners from working-class families, but also from farming or self-employed families, despite their wealth (McCoy et al., 2010). Secondly, the maintenance grant has not kept up with living costs, meaning living standards of learners reliant on maintenance grants have fallen behind the rest of the population. Evidence suggests this has had an impact on widening participation efforts, with those in receipt of maintenance grants having to take part-time employment to meet living costs (ibid.).

There is generally not enough evidence to understand the effectiveness and impact of student financial support to widen participation in the UK (Robinson and Salvestrini, 2020). However, an evaluation found that England's National Scholarship Programme (NSP) had a limited impact on widening participation. Learners did not know whether they would receive an award of funding through the programme until enrolment as supply of NSP awards was lower than demand and up-front guarantees by institutions were not possible (Bowes et al., 2016).

This highlights the importance of careful implementation for the effectiveness of this kind of policy. Evidence is inconclusive on the impact of the NSP on student retention. There is additional, limited evidence to suggest that financial support at point of entry in England cannot fully mitigate the impact of educational attainment in determining progression into tertiary education (Bowes et al., 2016), the choice of institution, or likelihood of retention (Harrison and Hatt, 2012; McCaig et al., 2016). Evidence also suggests that students entering university in England, particularly those from minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, appear ill-informed about the availability and level of financial support available (Kaye, 2021; McCaig et al., 2016), again highlighting the importance of policy implementation. While some studies found that they can improve retention of undergraduates and reduce levels of debt, other studies have found that, even where bursary systems are in place, students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to drop out or perform badly (Kaye, 2021). There is also a concern that loan indebtedness may be distorting the occupational choices of students, leading them to specialise in subjects and take jobs that may not interest them but make it more likely that they can pay off their loans.

Institution-level performance funding

Policy	Part of public funding for tertiary education institutions is linked to the targets within widening participation plans, to encourage institutions to improve learner access to, retention and success.
Location	England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, ROI
Sector	HE and FE+
Barriers to access that this policy tackles	Financial, Institutional
Strength of evidence	Weak evaluation
Effectiveness	Likely effective for older institutions and promising for newer institutions

A proportion of public funding for tertiary education institutions in all UK nations and the ROI is contingent on performance in regard to widening participation targets within institutional plans. For instance, in England some funding for HE is linked to widening participation, with a focus not just on access but also on retention of learners and completion of studies (Dougherty and Callender, 2017: 28). This has resulted in a 'compelling financial impetus for HE providers to strive to improve study success [defined as completing studies], especially as the performance of each institution is measured and compared to its "expected" rates of continuation and completion', as measured by the Higher Education Statistics Agency institutional benchmarks and published alongside institution's actual performance (Thomas, 2019: 179). The OFS determines whether providers are making sufficient progress in the delivery of their plans through a combination of the access and participation data dashboard, access and participation expenditure in providers' annual financial returns and any other relevant information they hold. This highlights the potential value of consistent

and widespread collection and publication of admission and completion data as a means of holding institutions to account. On FE, the Education and Skills Funding Agency funds FE through annual contracts based on the amount of learning delivered in the previous year (Bolton and Hubble, 2019), and colleges have previously been rewarded with funding for learner retention and attainment (Dougherty and Callender, 2017: 29).

Similarly, some funding for HE in Northern Ireland is also linked to widening participation. Whilst universities autonomously decide on the use of their funding, the allocations from the Department for the Economy are decided by their research capabilities, long-term sustainability, their role in the local economy and community, and their ability to increase participation and widen access to under-represented groups via, for instance, greater flexibility in delivery (Department for the Economy, n.d.b). This ties funding to the universities' continuing commitment to supporting widening participation. HE institutions also receive a widening participation premium for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and a widening access premium for learners with disabilities. Both are paid directly to the HE institution in recognition of the additional costs of recruiting, retaining and the need for specialist equipment and support for these learners. These premiums are calculated on the basis of the number of learners enrolled from disadvantaged backgrounds and the number of full-time undergraduate learners in receipt of disabled students' allowance (Department for the Economy, n.d.c).

Scotland also uses financial incentives to encourage widening participation. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) are active in the promotion of widening participation, following the requirement of funding bodies and universities to widen access to HE in the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act (2013). Prior to this, funding was not linked to widening participation, as there was a belief that the abolition of tuition fees for all Scottish and non-UK EU learners was sufficient. However, the Scottish Government's commitment to widening participation is now underpinned by funding.

For instance, the SFC is able to impose financial penalties for non-compliance with widening participation targets (Sosu et al., 2018). In 2013-14, the SFC introduced three new investment schemes providing universities with additional funded places to widen access, increase articulation (when learners gain entry into the second year of a degree with a Higher National Certificate achieved at college, or into third year with a Higher National Diploma achieved at colleges), and support key sectors of the economy with additional undergraduate and taught postgraduate skills places. These are summarised in Table 3, along with the allocated funding for the academic year 2021-2022 (SFC, 2021). Furthermore, the SFC funds the Widening Access and Retention Fund, which increased for the 2020-21 academic year. Data from 2013 suggested that this additional funding has had some impact but mainly only for the University of Edinburgh and University of St Andrews, which were starting from the lowest base (Hunter Blackburn et al., 2016).

Table 3: Barriers to access and systemic issues in tertiary education in Scotland (Commission for Widening Access, 2015:9)

Funding	Expectations	Budget
Funding for additional Widening Access places	Institutions must continue to meet the Commission on Widening Access targets.	No further allocations of additional places in 2021-22.
Additional articulation places 'Associate student' scheme	Institutions must satisfactorily meet outcome agreement targets. 75% of this additional funding for is expected to be transferred from universities to colleges, for those years in which activity is delivered in colleges.	No change from the Academic Year 2020-21.
Additional funded places for Skills	Institutions must satisfactorily meet industry collaboration measures as agreed in outcome measures	Funding for 1,195 full-time equivalent undergraduate skills. No funding for taught postgraduate places for skills, with the associated funding (£7 million) repurposed for an Upskilling fund to support new, shorter, more flexible courses aimed at upskilling people already in work and/or addressing skills shortages.
Widening Access and Retention Fund	Institutions to continue to implement Commission for Widening Access recommendations.	Increased by £0.3 million to £15.6 million.

In Ireland, the performance-based element of funding is based on the three-year mission-based compact (based on Ministerial objectives) each institution makes with the Higher Education Authority. If an institution has failed to perform against these targets, up to 10% of the block grant can be withheld or reduced. Whilst the full penalty is yet to be applied, €5 million was set aside from the 2019 recurrent grant allocation for the performance-based components (Parliamentary Budget Office, 2019).

The evidence on the effectiveness of linking public funding to widening participation targets is limited, but shows promise for both older and newer tertiary education institutions, as long as they encourage genuine improvements, rather than institutional game playing (Dougherty and Callendar, 2017). However, the relative level of this funding is important to consider, as universities that are particularly research-led (and therefore benefit from additional funding streams) do not have the same incentives to meet their institutional targets (Gallacher, 2006). Implementation and enforcement also matters, as the funding councils seem reluctant to impose these financial penalties, despite several tertiary education institutions not meeting their targets.

Promoting diverse pathways into tertiary education

Diversifying pathways into tertiary education recognises the range of knowledge, skills and capabilities of learners and adapts the system to cater for diverse learner needs. It challenges the traditional route where tertiary education is understood to mean higher education which is accessed from college/sixth-form. This has generally been difficult for disadvantaged groups to access. The UN Education Agenda 2030 calls for articulated education systems with multiple entry and exit pathways that recognise formal, non-formal, and informal learning to widen participation from these groups (UNESCO, 2022). This has particularly been the case in Scotland, where the Scottish Wider Access Programme is designed to assist adults without traditional qualifications to return to tertiary education, and Ireland, where the centralised national system is designed to recognise different pathways. Different policy approaches to diversify pathways into tertiary education, however, have been adopted throughout the UK and Republic of Ireland and shaped by their particular political and funding contexts. In this section we explore two key policy approaches to diversifying pathways into tertiary education:

- Foundation years and access courses
- Articulation

Institution-level performance funding

Foundation years and access courses	
Policy	Both types of courses offer learners without the required entry requirements for tertiary education a different pathway to tertiary education. Foundation year courses offer learners an extra year of study at the start of the course to give them the opportunity to learn more about the subject and develop the necessary skills for the course. Access courses are designed specifically for mature learners to enter tertiary education.
Location	England, Scotland, Northern Ireland
Sector	HE, but can be provided in partnership with FE+ institutions
Barriers to access that this policy tackles	Cultural, Institutional, Attitudinal, Situational
Strength of evidence	Weak (patchy and anecdotal)
Effectiveness	Likely effective (anecdotal evidence is overwhelmingly positive)

Foundation years and access courses are supplementary courses offered in upper secondary school or FE colleges for up to two years to support the transition to HE and supplement the attainment gap. Across the UK and the ROI, these courses are intended for those who do not meet the formal entry qualifications for their chosen degree and are designed to prepare students for degree level study (O'Sullivan et al., 2019). In 2017, there were over 700 foundation year programmes available through UCAS, which varied from those designed for international students, the general student population or for under-represented groups, including mature learners or learners from low socio-economic backgrounds (ibid.). Data from the academic year 2017-18 suggest that learners on these courses tend to be more diverse (in terms of gender, ethnicity, age and lower entry qualifications) than the direct entry graduates (OFS, 2019b). These can be pre-university entry courses provided in the FE sector or collaborative FE/HE projects (Sanders and Daly, 2013).

In Ireland, foundation year programmes are traditionally delivered in the university context and are designed to facilitate the development of academic skills and subject specific content, as well as social and cultural capital, recognising that the challenges facing under-represented groups in HE are complex (O'Sullivan et al., 2019). Foundation years represent the tight coupling of inter-institutional linkages in Ireland, as they require that applicants attend schools linked to selective university (ibid.). Their continued delivery is advocated for within widening participation policy, particularly orientated towards young adults and mature students, with a further remit to promote links between HE and FE providers (Higher Education Authority, 2015a).

Likewise, emphasis is also placed on Foundation Degrees in Northern Ireland to widen participation and align the system more closely to the diversity of potential learners and needs (Donnelly and Evans, 2019). These are more of a standalone qualification than elsewhere, as they in themselves can lead to varied employment opportunities (Donnelly and Evans, 2019). However, Foundation Degrees are outsourced from HE to FE institutions, representing the only partnership link between the two sectors. FE institutions develop the curriculum but are required to have it validated by HE institutions, by clear and formalised stipulations that require two further years of full-time study without a required placement year, owing to a work-based learning module in these Foundation degrees. Learners are also accorded the status of Associate Students, with limited associated benefits (Moreland et al., 2022).

In Scotland and England, foundation years are at the discretion of universities, with the majority not involving FE institutions or other outside providers (Leech et al., 2016). Their purpose is not necessarily to widen participation from mature learners or learners from particular socio-economic backgrounds, as they also cater for international learners, as well as the general student population (O'Sullivan et al., 2019). This may be a result of the 2019 Augar Review proposing to withdraw funding for university-based Foundation Year provision, as they were seemingly used to create four-year degrees to entice students who did not meet standard entry requirements. Instead, the review proposed to replace them with cheaper Access to HE diplomas provided by FE institutions (Augar, 2019).

It is difficult to demonstrate the impact of foundation years on widening participation, as the evidence is patchy and anecdotal (TASO, n.d.). The limited evidence suggests that foundation years have been effective in learners progressing to a degree programme (OFS, 2019b) and creating a sense of belonging for under-represented groups (Goldring et al., 2018). Evidence also suggests that learners who had undertaken a Foundation Year had no significant difference in course completion or academic attainment than their direct entry-peers (Sanders and Daly, 2013). In Ireland, evidence is more favourable in showing that foundation years are effective in encouraging under-represented students to access HE (Murphy, 2009), with evidence from Trinity College Dublin indicating that retention and graduation rates for these learners were in line with those of direct entry learners (Share and Carroll, 2013). Foundation years were found to work best when universities were committed to transforming access, education and opportunities for disadvantaged students, when knowledge was put into the academic and employability context (rather than considered generic study skills), and when they provided holistic student support (Kettley and Murphy, 2021).

Articulation

Policy	Articulation is defined as FE learners gaining entry into second/third year of HE with their FE awards
Location	Scotland, ROI
Sector	HE but relies on FE institutions to provide courses that meet the requirement of HE entry
Barriers to access that this policy tackles	Financial, Situational, Attitudinal
Strength of evidence	Weak evaluation
Effectiveness	Mixed, as it may reinforce socio-economic divisions if all HE institutions do not participate

Articulation is the process where FE learners directly transfer into the last two years of a university degree programme using credits obtained within FE. This requires recognition of the value of knowledge gained from the FE sector and widens the view about who counts as a learner in HE (Donnelly and Evans, 2019). Whilst it is not a formalised widening participation policy in England or Northern Ireland, it is a long-standing feature embedded in the Scottish approach.

Following recommendations to grow articulation pathways across a diverse range of HE courses and institutions, increased funding and the establishment of the National Articulation Forum, the number of learners transitioning from college into the last two years of a university programme in Scotland increased from 3,019 in 2011-12 to 3,469 in 2012-13, although only 22% of these were awarded full credit (Universities Scotland, 2014). Those who received partial or no credit were required to repeat one or more years, which led to five or six years of study to complete an honours degree. This increased cost (even in the absence of tuition fees) and delayed entry into the labour market is of particular significance to women who go on to start a family (Hunter Blackburn et al., 2016).

However, whilst articulation has increased HE participation for learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds in Scotland, there is a danger that it may create a socio-economic division. College courses tend to be based on developing practical and vocational skills, which means that learners from less advantaged backgrounds are diverted away from more selective universities and university degrees (Hunter Blackburn et al., 2016; Gallacher, 2014). This is exacerbated by post-1992 universities being the main providers of HE for these learners, with the older universities giving higher priorities to applicants with traditional academic qualifications (Ibid.). The lack of a national system for credit transfer was also identified as an institutional barrier for enabling learner's to cross educational boundaries flexibly. Other institutional barriers included reputational risk to institutions, loss of fee income when students transferred, mismatch of curricula and failure to meet professional body curriculum requirements (Brennan, 2021).

In Ireland, some former FE Advanced Certificates (level 6) can provide advanced entry into year two of HE programmes, where the awards are in similar disciplines. There is currently only one articulation award which enables learners from Donegal to progress into the second-year of two-degree programmes. There is also some practice of FE learners who complete their first year at an FE institution progressing to the second year of their award at a partner Institute of Technology (Department of Education and Skills, 2020). The Higher Education Links Scheme was also designed to link level 5 and level 6 awards to the first year of selected higher education courses, although not all HE institutions developed this pathway (O'Sullivan, 2021). There has been no evaluation of these articulation agreements, so there is no evidence of their effectiveness at widening participation.

It is nationally recognised in Ireland that the current tertiary education system and its associated pathways are disjointed, complex and lacking in transparency (Indecon, 2019). As this has resulted in learners with FE qualifications being under-represented in HE, creating pathways through the system is one of the three strategic priorities for the Further Education and Training Strategy. Despite, learners being able to enter HE through FE awards or Leaving Certificates from secondary education, the latter is seen as more valued and more advantageous (O'Sullivan, 2021). Due to this, the limited pathways from FE to HE occurs through a competitive, quota-based process to universities or an administrative process to institutes of technologies, which treat FE learners equally to Leaving Certificate learners (Annex 1, ibid.). The Irish Government has started a programme to simplify pathways through the system by comprehensively benchmarking awards and considering the progression of FE to HE (Department of Education and Skills, 2020). This has resulted in a proposal for a holistic and integrated Central Admissions Office, where FE awards and Leaving Certificates are aligned (Further Education and Training Colleges Ireland, 2021).

The evidence that articulation widens participation is weak and its current effectiveness is at best mixed. Evidence from Scotland suggests that it may have reinforced socio-economic divisions within HE, due to the types of courses learners articulate into. The National Articulation Forum in Scotland suggests that new and effective articulation needs to build on the evidence of student demand for articulation, the skills gap in the Scottish economy and the existing data on articulation pathways and activity across the sector. Evaluation of Ireland's simplified articulation scheme may also be used to model effective articulation.

Contextualised admissions

Policy	Contextualised admission is defined as information and data used by universities, to assess an applicant's prior attainment and potential in the context of their individual circumstances.
Location	England, Scotland, ROI
Sector	HE
Barriers to access that this policy tackles	Institutional, Attitudinal
Strength of evidence	Good evidence
Effectiveness	Modest, as only some HE institutions have adopted contextualised admissions

Widening participation policy approaches across the UK and the ROI encourage the use of positive action to proportionately eliminate or reduce discrimination and overcome disadvantage and/or low participation in HE. This includes an emphasis on contextualised admissions in England, Scotland and Ireland to consider a learner's attainment and potential with regards to their socio-economic background and the performance of their school, instead of relying solely on exams and coursework (Hubble et al., 2021). Tariff offers for course entry can then be modified or reduced to account for disadvantages faced by learners.

By addressing the persistent differences in educational opportunities and attainment between learners from different socio-economic groups, this can promote a more equitable entry to HE and produce more diversity in the population of learners (Kaye, 2021; Chowdry et al., 2013; Donnelly and Evans, 2019). Contextualised admissions were also identified as being important to widen participation in postgraduate education, with potential options including removing the need for references, and loosening up descriptors (Gormley, 2021). A survey of 68 universities in the UK in 2015 estimated that 84% were using some form of contextualised admissions, which had increased from 37% in 2012 (Sundorph et al., 2017).

Since 2011, the use of contextual data in HE admissions has been endorsed in England to become part of the fair admissions process and to encourage social mobility and recruit students with potential (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2019; O'Sullivan et al., 2019). 55 of the 201 Access and Participation plans referenced using contextual admissions to widen participation for the academic year 2020-21 (OFS, 2020). The responsibility, however, lies with the learner to some extent, as they are asked to declare contextual information as part of their application, although other data is accessed through UCAS (OFS, 2020; Patel, 2020). There is then no centralised, pre-defined way that universities and colleges use this information, although individual institutions typically apply them to contextual indicators (such as individual-level, area-level, school-level, and participation in outreach programmes) to assist with making conditional offers or calculating a reduced grade offer (Ibid.). Two-thirds of universities report that they take

previous participation in widening access programmes more into account than other indicators, although this lack of transparency has been highlighted as an issue in the system (Boliver et al., 2017).

Unlike England, the use of contextualised places is standardised across all universities and most Institutes of Technology in Ireland, through the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme. This scheme offers contextualised places on lower grades to socio-economically disadvantaged students, as measured by a household income indicator and a combination of individual-level, school-level or area-level indicator. Applicants who are deemed HEAR-eligible are found to be more likely to receive an offer of a place at an HE institution than other applicants and progress as well as non-HEAR applicants beyond their first year (Byrne et al., 2013). In 2017, 7.5% of all HE applicants applied to become HEAR eligible, which was down from 10.6% during the recession in 2012 (Byrne et al., 2013; O'Sullivan et al., 2019). Likewise, the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme was designed to offer contextualised places to upper secondary students with disabilities. The majority of these applicants have been male and have lower levels of achievement than other entrant groups, including those who enter through the HEAR scheme (Byrne et al., 2013).

In Scotland, the Commission on Widening Access has advocated for the use of contextualised admissions, so that institutions can address the inequalities in the education system (Commission on Widening Access, 2016). In Outcome Agreements, all Scottish universities have been mandated to put in place 'access thresholds', which are concrete, separate minimum entry requirements for contextually-disadvantaged applicants, including SIMD20 applicants. These are set at the minimum standards of achievement required to undertake a degree course (Donnelly and Evans, 2019). However, the 'access thresholds' tend to be used to widen participation in a conventional HE experience such as a full-time, undergraduate degree course, and do little to disrupt the hierarchical nature of HE provision in the Scottish system (Ibid.). There is also a suggestion that contextualised admissions by HE institutions in Scotland may have resulted in the decline in the proportion of learners entering FE. That is, it may represent a displacement effect, with students who would have previously entered FE now being offered places in HE institutions instead (Hunter-Blackburn et al., 2016).

Overall, evidence suggests that contextualised admissions have historically only had a small impact on increasing access for underrepresented groups, because 'selective universities remain wedded to the idea of pursuing only the best and the brightest and largely diversify only to the degree that the working class or non-white students they take in [are seen to] have high potential to join the best and brightest' (Dougherty and Callender, 2017: 26). However, more recent evidence suggests that more academically-selective universities are now moving towards 'a more structural understanding of social inequalities in school attainment' (Boliver and Powell, 2023: 51). Of the 25 most academically-selective universities in England, all are now operating some form of contextualised admissions policy (Boliver and Powell, 2023). Contextualised admissions policies have increased the proportion of students from areas with low-participation in HE in English universities, suggesting that they have had an impact on increasing access (Boliver and Jones, 2023).

Contextualised admissions do not, however, necessarily fully compensate for attitudinal or situational barriers that disadvantaged groups may be facing as part of the admissions process. In addition, students admitted through contextual admissions may need additional support and resourcing in order to allow them to achieve their academic potential while at university (Boliver and Jones, 2023). Universities, especially higher-tariff universities, may not currently be well-placed to provide this support (Boliver and Jones, 2023).Contextualised admissions may therefore be most effective when used to address the underlying fundamental, structural barriers of the tertiary education system that prevent disadvantaged groups from participating in HE.

Outreach

Policy	Outreach is defined as initiatives and activities undertaken (usually at the institutional level) to raise aspirations and encourage participation in tertiary education of potential learners
Location	England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, ROI
Sector	HE and FE – requires support from across educational institutions
Barriers to access that this policy tackles	Attitudinal, Situational
Strength of evidence	Good evidence on what good outreach looks like, but less on direct outcomes
Effectiveness	Inconclusive

Outreach refers to initiatives and activities undertaken to raise aspirations and encourage participation in tertiary education for students demonstrating potential to succeed, through breaking down contextual and structural barriers. It is particularly important in tackling spatial inequality and regional disadvantage, as it can raise attainment and encourage learner's to diversify the pool of potential universities they may apply for, as demonstrated by the University of Oxford's Oxplore programme (OFS, 2021b). These activities are on a continuum from the provision of information, advice, guidance; to support; and learner-centred teaching (Office for Fair Access, 2017). Outreach does this through three major interlocking mechanisms, which are that outreach is person-centred, raises aspirations and creates social capital (Heaslip et al., 2020). Outreach is considered a central tenet of widening participation approaches across the UK nations and the ROI, and it is often a central focus within institutional widening participation plans.

In HE in England, outreach programmes are generally delivered by individual institutions, with the aim of increasing young people's capacity to enter HE and gain graduate employment. Between 2005 and 2011, the AimHigher programme was a national initiative that was locally led and delivered that aimed to encourage primary and secondary school pupils from lower socio-economic groups, people from racially-minoritised backgrounds and people with disabilities to attend university. It encouraged visits to HE institutions, summer schools, providing information, and offering small grants for university expenses. The Office for Fair Access was restricted to monitoring institutions' spending money on outreach among under-represented groups in respect to institutional widening participation plans (McCaig, 2015). However, as this formed part of the competitive marketing and admissions process within the HE sector in England, sharing the impact of outreach activities was limited to enable HE providers to attract underrepresented groups and avoid reputational risk (Harrison and Waller, 2017; Heaslip et al., 2020).

In 2014, there was an emphasis on national approaches to outreach, promoting collaborative practice through the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach, superseded by the National Collaborative Outreach Programme. This provided coordinated outreach to schools and colleges, and has focused on widening participation in targeted areas and shifting outreach activities from raising aspirations towards an emphasis on increasing numbers (Heaslip et al., 2020). However, this collaborative programme receives less support and lower funding. This has resulted in a 'weakening of information and guidance' in English secondary schools, owing to the difficulty in relationship building between HE institutions and schools, and some institutional resistance from universities (Dougherty and Callender, 2017: 12-13). Other critiques challenge the focus of this programme on secondary education, as it ignores the impact of primary schooling on young people's aspirations to attend HE (Heaslip et al., 2020).

There have been recent national-level outreach to improve diversity in apprenticeships in England. The government-supported Apprenticeship Diversity Champions Network, an employer-led network to promote diversity in apprenticeships, involves employers pledging to improve diversity in their workforce with a particular focus on racially-minoritised groups, those with a disability, and those from lower-socio-economic backgrounds, as well as women in certain sectors. Outputs include producing employer toolkits, such as one to engage more women in STEM apprenticeships and conducting outreach in schools.

Apprenticeship outreach appears to be less well-funded than HE outreach activities, and there is little evidence about what is effective (Doherty and Holt-White, 2021). The complexity and diversity of apprenticeships means that showcasing the different options available to young people is very important, and consistent and accurate careers advice from schools as well as outreach by employers can help, although this is not currently fully realised (Doherty and Holt-White, 2021). In particular, some employers find it difficult to make contact with schools to deliver outreach. However, it is also important to bear in mind that apprenticeships often now attract older workers, with around half of Degree Apprenticeships and the majority of Higher Apprenticeships being undertaken by workers over the age of 25 (Cavaglia et al., 2022). Outreach activities will therefore need to include universities, employers and schools in order to be successful.

In Scotland, there is an overt emphasis on outreach programmes to identify those missing the most appropriate kinds of knowledge, attainment and aspirations that demonstrate potential for progression to tertiary education (ultimately HE) in both FE and HE institutions. Outreach activities tend to focus on schools in socially disadvantaged areas, as it is widely recognised that social inequalities in participating in tertiary education reflect societal inequalities that result in low aspirations of potential learners (Hunter-Blackburn et al., 2016). For instance, the National Reach outreach programme (funded by the SFC) raises aspirations through providing practical help for students (such as application support sessions and mentoring opportunities) entering high demand professions, such as Medicine, Law and Dentistry across the five oldest universities (Glasgow, Edinburgh, St Andrews, Dundee and Aberdeen) (Sartania et al., 2018).

Collaboration across institutional and sector boundaries are important features of outreach in Scotland. The four Wider Access Regional Forums, later Schools for Higher Education Programme, the national outreach programme, works across regions and schools to target additional support for secondary school students at risk of not progressing to tertiary education (Hunter-Blackburn et al., 2016). There is a suggestion that this has had a positive impact on entry to HE among learners in the targeted schools, although this is not yet reflected in aggregate national data (Riddell et al., 2013). However, limited resourcing and funding have potentially excluded disadvantaged students who would benefit from additional support but do not attend a school that has national outreach funding, or who are unable to demonstrate their potential to participate in HE in comparison to their classmates (Hunter-Blackburn et al., 2016; Sosu et al., 2018). Likewise, an evaluation of outreach activities to improve the gender balance within apprenticeships in Scotland highlighted collaboration and partnership working as important aspects, which addressed stereotypes and biases at an early stage in the education system (Skills Development Scotland, 2018).

In Scotland, the Scottish Framework for Fair Access is a toolkit for providers to assess the effectiveness of existing outreach initiatives, such as access course, summer schools, school engagement, individual and group mentoring and 'children's universities' to promote fair access in tertiary education. The toolkit is designed to strengthen and systematise existing networks to create a community of practice, called the Scottish Community of Access and Participation Practitioners and the Scottish Funding Council's Schools Engagement Framework.

In Northern Ireland and Ireland, tertiary education institutions design and deliver outreach, in the absence of overarching national programmes. In Northern Ireland, the aim of outreach is defined within the first HE strategy to raise aspirations, build confidence and forge links with local communities.

Despite outreach activities having multiplied, less attention has been paid to monitoring and evaluating them. The little research there has been finds that the impact of outreach on widening participation is inconclusive. This results from a confusion about what defines success, how to measure it, and how to establish causality, when the decision to participate in tertiary education is influenced by a number of factors and outreach forms only part of widening participation approaches (Harrison and Waller, 2017, Mullen, 2010). Despite this, early evidence

from the National Collaborative Outreach Programme in England suggested that several outreach initiatives had no significant impact on likelihood to apply to HE. Only summer schools/residential activities resulted in a small decrease in the proportion of potential learners perceiving university as 'not for me' and appeared to be most effective when they were tailored to the subject or career interest of learners. Targeted mentoring programmes were also found to be more likely to achieve positive outcomes compared to programme-wide initiatives, as these improved learners' awareness, knowledge, and intentions to progress to HE (OFS, 2019c). Likewise, evidence from the Sutton Trust to the National Council for Educational Excellence found summer schools and residential programmes to be the most effective outreach schemes, compared to one-off, less intensive schemes (Sutton Trust, 2008).

Alongside this evidence, the Office for Fair Access identified that outreach is most effective (for adult learners) when it is imaginative and flexible, is aligned with inclusive approaches to admissions, has a flexible curriculum design, and has inclusive and embedded pastoral support (Office for Fair Access, 2017). Evidence also suggests that outreach is more effective at widening participation when it is centred around broader social justice issues, so that it addresses inequalities (Harrison and Waller, 2017).

National awareness campaigns

Policy	National awareness campaigns provide information, advice and guidance to potential learners to help them make informed decisions. They sit alongside outreach activities, but are broader as they are often complemented by a range of careers guidance.
Location	England, Scotland
Sector	HE and FE+
Barriers to access that this policy tackles	Attitudinal
Strength of evidence	Strong (Randomised Control trials), but scarce UK studies
Effectiveness	Limited effectiveness

One approach governments have taken to widening participation has involved national-level campaigns to encourage learners from different backgrounds to participate. These have tended to focus on increasing aspirations among potential learners, through providing information, advice and guidance. These activities are often embedded into wider outreach activities (Moore et al., 2013), but the campaigns are usually aimed at filling a specific gap and often sit within a wider context of careers guidance. However, they have received some criticism for failing to address the more fundamental, structural barriers to engagement.

National awareness campaigns have been implemented across England and Scotland to help potential learners to make informed decisions about their future and breakdown informational barriers to participation. In Scotland, a partnership between Skills Development Scotland and the British Deaf Association Scotland aimed to raise awareness of apprenticeships to Deaf young people through an event which was attributed to an increased interest in apprenticeships from this group (Skills Development Scotland, 2019). In England, the government launched a communications campaign in early 2022, 'Get the Jump: Skills for Life', to 'tackle disparities by featuring a diverse range of young people in the campaign imagery, through case studies, influencers and through media targeting' (Badenoch, 2022). However, the campaign has been criticised for focusing on raising awareness among under-represented groups rather than dealing with the more systemic barriers and structural racism that results in these disparities (Camden, 2022). In addition, the Sutton Trust and the Robertson Trust are national charities that work in collaboration with universities to encourage them to widen participation to address informational barriers. In the absence of a nationally-led campaign, tertiary education institutions in Northern Ireland and the ROI have tended to implement them themselves.

Campaigns that address informational barriers to accessing HE have tended to be evaluated through randomised control trials, where only a randomly selected group of students are provided with information on costs and benefits of tertiary education, the application process and financial aid. In London, learners exposed to a campaign about wage and employment prospects post-tertiary education were found to have increased intentions to apply for HE, although this did not necessarily result in actual applications or increased admissions. The largest effects were found for learners who were male and those from low socio-economic backgrounds, although these were the learners least likely to access the information when given the option (McGuigan et al., 2016). This suggests that national-level campaigns may not be an effective widening participation strategy for learners who believe that tertiary education is too difficult or costly for them to internalise the information and act on it (ibid., Robinson and Salvestrini, 2020).

National-level campaigns are light-touch, low-cost interventions that have been found to have had limited effects on both aspirations and actual enrolment. This might be because they only impact learners at the margin of applying to university, while the process of widening participation to under-represented groups is more demanding and should address the fundamental, structural barriers facing disadvantaged groups.

Findings and reflections from our roundtable

To support and test the findings of our evidence review, we held a roundtable with invited experts and Welsh Government officials in June 2023. This section summarises some of the key findings and suggestions which we heard.

A change for Wales to lead the way

Experts were generally enthusiastic at the Welsh reforms and, in particular, the shift to an understanding of the interconnections between the tertiary sector as a whole rather than through a traditional HE-focussed framework. Some reflected that there was a chance for Wales to blaze a trail, both in terms of integrating the tertiary system and adopting well-evidenced interventions like contextualised admissions or using individual measures of disadvantage (see below).

Targets and definitions

We heard that Medr needs to be clear about the definitions it uses, and to set challenging and ambitious targets using these definitions. Using consistent definitions of key terms like 'equality of opportunity' across Medr will help collect the right metrics to achieve targets. These metrics could be used to assess progress, particularly if (as some argued) there should be a clear and unambiguous target for institutions to improve year-on-year. Experts also argued that the least diverse institutions should be set the most ambitious targets in order to widen access and participation.

Experts warned against a regulatory environment that was over-complicated or overly bureaucratic, with an emphasis instead on the desired outcomes and objectives of the system.

'Expanding' or 'redistributing' opportunity

An interesting distinction was drawn between 'expanding' and 'redistributing' opportunity through widening participation schemes. It was felt that previous attempts to widen participation relied on making the pool of students who access tertiary education (particularly HE) larger, and focusing widening participation efforts on additional recruits. However, while this has perhaps resulted in an absolute increase in numbers accessing HE from disadvantaged backgrounds, on more selective courses and institutions in particular the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds may not yet reflect the general population. Redistributing opportunity would mean increasing the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds across the HE and tertiary education landscape, perhaps to the detriment of those from less disadvantaged backgrounds. This is politically quite challenging, but some feel is the only way that widening participation programmes can take the necessary steps forward to improve outcomes for those who need it.

Making the most of apprenticeships

Only around a fifth of apprenticeships are currently taken up by young people, and ethnic minorities, disabled people, young people and people living in less affluent areas are underrepresented in level 4+ apprenticeships. Experts suggested that supporting small and medium enterprises to access and use apprenticeship levy funding, and progression routes from lower-level apprenticeships, could help to remedy these issues and ensure that apprenticeships are accessible to a wider group of young people.

Engaging with young people earlier in the system

Finally, important emphasis was placed on learner experience before they reach the tertiary education system, with experts emphasising the need to engage with pupils in compulsory education to help them to progress.

Reflections for Wales

This review has identified a number of policies and interventions used by other UK nations and the Republic of Ireland aiming to widen participation and diversity in tertiary education.

It has shown that effective implementation of tertiary education policies aiming to widen participation in Wales will require the leadership and coordination of Medr across several sectors including primary and secondary education, industry employers, the voluntary sector, local authorities and the Welsh Government. Furthermore, these policies require careful evaluation and monitoring of schemes for the best chance of success and should be mindful of Wales' specific challenges, the needs of and barriers faced by different groups of learners and at different stages of progression, and the strategic framework which Medr will implement.

This section discusses how lessons learnt from tertiary education policy approaches in the UK and ROI might be applied in the Welsh context and highlights several opportunities for widening participation strategies in Wales. This report and these initial reflections will be discussed and built upon at an expert roundtable to discuss application of these findings to the Welsh context. The various duties imposed on Medr within the Act recognise that low participation from various socio-economic groups is a result of the interplay of social and economic forces. This underscores the importance of fostering equality of opportunity within the educational landscape, although these duties should be thoroughly examined to harness their potential and widen participation in tertiary education. It would be beneficial for the concept of equality of opportunity to be articulated within a Welsh policy and legislative context, and to understand the implications of social redistribution implied within the Act in relation to all tertiary places, as well as in high demand and selective places.

Specific target groups are also needed to be systematically well-defined, through, for example, assessing the advancements made over the past two decades for these underrepresented groups. Such evaluations should encompass multiple facets, such as the growth of student placements and successful completions for each of the underrepresented groups, in relation to participation/completion rates in tertiary education and in high demand and selective places. This includes an understanding and emphasis on the difference between an absolute and proportionate increase for target groups. Work being taken forward by WCPP as part of this project will be helpful in clarifying where data suggest groups are underrepresented across the tertiary education system.

A uniquely Welsh approach to widening participation

It is important to acknowledge that the funding and governance of the tertiary sector, as well as (sub)national political contexts, affect the way in which interventions to widen participation are designed and delivered. Therefore, approaches that have been implemented elsewhere will need to be carefully adapted to ensure that they fit the Welsh tertiary context. This is in keeping with best practice principles for implementation: for instance, guidance from the Education Endowment Foundation recommends examining the 'fit and feasibility' of proposed interventions to individual schools (Sharples et al., 2019).

There are also opportunities to match interventions with values and priorities that could be considered 'uniquely Welsh'. In particular, Medr's strategic duties as established in law include promoting 'collaboration and coherence' across the tertiary sector (Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022). A collaborative approach between providers and trade unions also forms part of the Act. Working in the spirit of the Act, policies and approaches could be developed and implemented to foster this collaborative and co-operative culture across tertiary education in Wales, helped by the relatively small size of the sector in Wales.

Independent bodies for monitoring and ensuring progress in widening participation, such as Commissions/Commissioners and Offices

Both the Office for Students in England and the Commissioner for Fair Access in Scotland are independent bodies from the Government and the university sector that monitor and ensure progress in terms of widening participation. The Commission for Fair Access has been particularly successful in promoting and prioritising widening participation across institutions in the tertiary education, through producing annual reports and undertaking collaborative data analysis. This has resulted in Scotland leading the other UK nations in terms of university students' enrolment from deprived areas (Scottish Government, 2022). Medr could explore ways to collaboratively monitor and ensure progress with institutions and the Scottish Commission for Fair Access to build on their success and achievements.

Both bodies have also sought to build and support existing networks of institutional actors to create communities of practice and encourage collaboration and ensure that sector-agreed standards are met. Medr could adopt similar initiatives to share good practice among and across institutions.

Defining and applying contextual indicators and eligibility criteria for widening participation strategies

In England, different measures are used across universities and widening participation schemes (particularly bursaries) making eligibility inconsistent (Kaye, 2021). A consistent approach to eligibility, including the use of shared metrics to indicate need, is important, though to make this fully effective a shared approach across the UK would be necessary given how many students cross the border for tertiary education. Medr could adopt a favoured set of metrics and indicators for need which would allow for consistency in eligibility for widening participation schemes and/or financial aid.

Additional financial aid schemes

Currently, student financial aid is primarily routed through Student Finance Wales, with a combination of loans and grants depending on factors including household income. As discussed above, bursary schemes and other student financial aid have mixed evidence of effectiveness in widening participation, with some of this attributable to factors such as lack of clarity and knowledge around what support will be available. However, there is some evidence that the availability of financial aid does influence decisions made by students, and can support student engagement, wellbeing and success (Bowes et al., 2016). National programmes ensure that there is a baseline level of support which should continue as it currently is, in particular to embed the positive impact of changes following the Diamond review.

However, consideration could therefore be given as to whether institutions could be funded and permitted to 'design and deliver' additional financial aid schemes in a way which meets their needs and priorities (Bowes et al., 2016: 5). Research on previous financial aid schemes suggests that there are advantages to allowing institutions to design and implement their own supplemental package of benefits within guidelines. This could, for instance, allow for payments to be matched to cost-of-living concerns, or spread over longer time periods to give consistency in support. Additionally, this could allow for contextualised financial aid to better support students with additional financial need due to personal characteristics or family background. This should be supported by regulations to ensure that the funds are used for and achieve the aims for which they are intended.

Measuring disadvantage

Traditionally, schemes to widen participation have been targeted and measured according to geographical indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage – for instance, proportions of students from the most deprived areas on indices of multiple deprivation (as in Scotland), or local area participation rates in higher education (as in England). However, this approach could increase the risk of false positives, where a student is identified as disadvantaged when they are not, as well as false negatives, where students are wrongly assumed to not need support (Boliver et al., 2022). Due to these risks, Boliver et al. (2022) argue that geographical indicators or area-level metrics are unsuitable for measuring individual socioeconomic disadvantage and, as such, unsuitable for targeting

or measuring interventions to widen participation. Instead, the authors propose the use of individual-level indicators such as free school meal eligibility or low household income for these purposes, on the basis that these indicators would be much less likely to produce false positives. Consideration could be given as to whether Medr could support Welsh tertiary institutions to move towards individual-level measures of disadvantage for targeting and measuring widening access schemes, mindful that this would (at present) lead to discontinuities with schemes in place elsewhere in the UK. However, taking forward such an approach could provide a precedent for similar approaches being adopted elsewhere.

Evaluating policy approaches

There is limited evidence on the effectiveness of the various policy approaches discussed in this report, though this should not be interpreted as evidence of ineffectiveness. This is in part because of the difficulty in disaggregating the unique impact of different initiatives in any evaluation, many of which are implemented in combination with each other. Any efforts to widen participation in Wales through targeted interventions should consider ways of building robust evaluation in from the start, following best practice in implementation (Sharples et al., 2019). This is particularly important because the establishment of Medr presents an opportunity to build evaluation into policy interventions from the beginning of its remit, which would provide a high-quality evidence base that could support policymaking in Wales and further afield well into the future.

A stronger evidence base would help policymakers to understand what is working, and should be continued, as well as what is not working and could be stopped, enabling more effective use of resources. It would also allow Wales to contribute to and advance the knowledge base on widening participation, particularly in areas where there is less of an established evidence base (such as in FE).

In England, TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education), provide resources and evaluation to assess the success of measures to widen participation in higher education. As this is an ongoing programme, Medr could consider whether working with TASO to co-ordinate evaluation initiatives in a mutually-supportive way would be beneficial. Outside of HE, adopting existing best practice in programme evaluation will allow for the development of a strong evidence base for the broader tertiary education sector.

An integrated system with diverse pathways

The TER Act puts Wales in a strong position to integrate the tertiary education system. Some of the challenges with widening participation identified in this report can be attributed to the way different aspects of tertiary education are separate from one another, but also to the perceived hierarchy in different types of education, with HE seen as the pinnacle of tertiary education.

A joined-up approach to tertiary education, where secondary education, FE, apprenticeships and training, and HE are part of an integrated system and where types of education other than HE are seen as valuable in their own right, could allow widening participation strategies to take a whole-system approach and mean that learners' diverse pathways into and through tertiary education are better recognised and supported. This could have a positive impact on learners, since policies that target the learner lifecycle – from pre-entry, to on-course success, to post-graduate progression – help to 'move practices and policies aimed at promoting WP away from an over-reliance on bursaries and the potentially detrimental impact of the quasi-market in financial support provision' (Kaye, 2021: 790). Medr has a role to play in ensuring that widening participation strategies are mindful of all aspects of tertiary education and are designed and implemented with learners in mind.

Tailoring policies to different parts of the tertiary education system and to different learner needs

Given the particular impetus that has been placed on HE institutions to widen access and participation in recent years, it is unsurprising that most of the evidence reviewed in this report is based on practices in the HE sector. Careful consideration needs to be given to:

- The specific challenges faced by other tertiary education settings, such as school sixth forms, FE, and training, and whether they need to be further encouraged to widen access in similar or different ways to higher education institutions. If evidence shows that these institutions already enable diverse and wide access, encouraging or enforcing them to take further or extensive action in these areas may not represent an optimal use of resources. At the same time, if evidence suggests that there are other inequalities manifest in other parts of the tertiary education system (such as enrolment on lower level courses, or lack of progression), there may be a need for interventions that address these specific inequalities and barriers.
- How far any initiatives from the HE sector are suitable for application in the broader tertiary education system and/or what adaptations are needed. For example, secondary, further education and training institutions are likely to be smaller than HE institutions which will have implications for the kinds of policies they can be expected to adopt, implement and evaluate.
- Finally, it will be necessary to ensure that policies target the specific barriers faced by particular groups of learners. It should not be assumed that all disadvantaged groups face the same barriers: for instance, disabled students may require different forms of support (such as physical adaptations to study environments or support for additional learning needs) than other groups.

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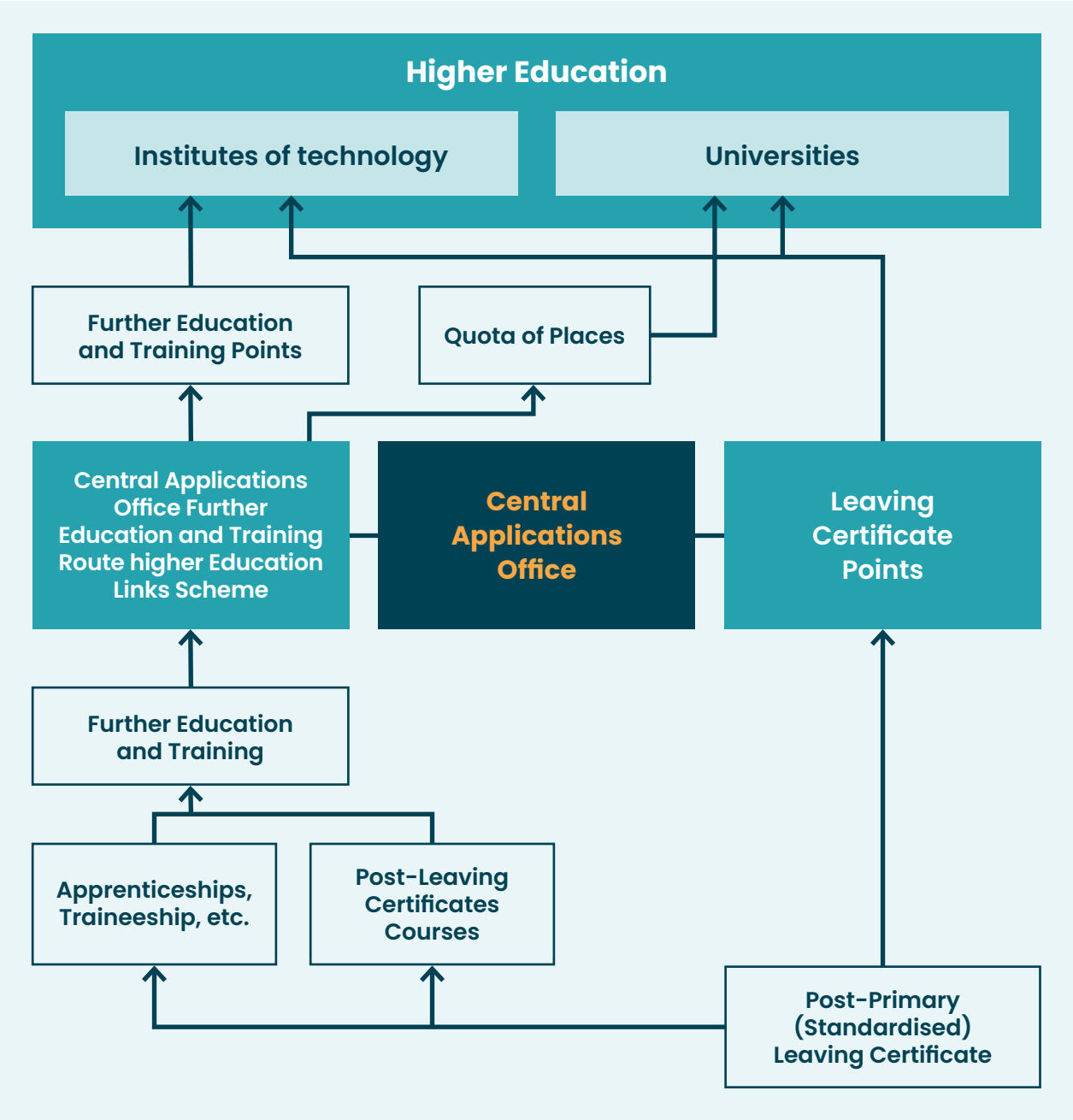
Annex 1: Progression to first year Higher Education in ROI



Source: Adapted from Further Education and Training Colleges Ireland (2021:27)

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