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Impact and Effectiveness of Widening Access to Higher Education in Wales. (0009)

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Access to higher education (HE) has become a key issue in debates on social equity within Wales, as in the rest of the UK, as its relationships with social mobility have been increasingly emphasised. Despite the major expansion – ‘massification’ - of HE over recent decades, individuals from socially disadvantaged backgrounds continue to face significant inequalities in access to HE. This is true of Wales, as well as the other countries of the UK (Rees and Taylor, 2006). Nevertheless, there is a surprising dearth of robust evidence in this area. The paper will discuss the early findings of a mixed-methods HEFCW funded research project which sought to explore, amongst a number of research objectives, the determinants of patterns of participation in HE for individuals domiciled in Wales, the methods used by HEIs to widen access to higher education and the extent to which these methods are warranted by statistical evidence.

Whilst detailed analysis of patterns of progression through post-compulsory education and HE has been carried out to identify the determinants of participation in HE in England (Chowdry *et al.*, 2010), this sort of analysis has not yet been carried out for Wales. The paper discusses the emerging findings of *detailed* secondary data analysis (SDA) of linked administrative data-sets – the National Pupil Database (NPD), the Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR) and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data which explored patterns of progression through the compulsory education system, to post-16 and into the HE system. Statistical modelling identified the factors which exert the key effects on these patterns, using individual-level data for both participants and non-participants in HE. The research project contributes to the scientific literature in this field, in replicating the earlier study, but also developing new analytical approaches.

This SDA produced a robust account of the nature and determinants of patterns of participation in HE for individuals domiciled in Wales. This, in turn, provided an empirical basis upon which to evaluate the impacts of the distinctive widening-access policies that have been adopted in Wales and their implementation by Welsh HEIs. Through the analysis of the official documents produced by successive Welsh administrations, the National Assembly for Wales and the HEFCW the nature and development of widening-access policies were addressed using qualitative content analysis (for example, Scott, 1990). Through documentary analysis of official texts, we have been able to identify, not only trends of policy change over time, but also the underpinning thematic rationales for the adoption of particular strategies.

Following from this analysis, we turned to HEIs themselves to consider their methods used to implement Welsh Government policy. The results of the SDA have enabled us to evaluate the

appropriateness of commonly-used widening-access approaches within the HEIs, such as contextualised, school-level GCSE and A-level results and neighbourhood/postcode indicators of disadvantage (for example, Communities First, POLAR 2). Here, a range of documents were analysed, from the official Fees Plans now produced for the HEFCW, to annual reports on widening-access initiatives and information supplied to (potential) applicants. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with key actors: policy-makers (Welsh ministers, other politicians, senior civil servants, senior staff within HEFCW); as well as those responsible for the implementation of widening-access strategies (senior managers within the HEIs, staff with specific responsibilities for widening access, admissions staff).

In this paper we discuss the ways in which this project has helped to develop a proper understanding of the policies adopted in Wales, and their implementation at institutional level. Specifically, we discuss the extent to which these strategies employed by HEIs embody *informal models* of the determinants of HE participation, which can be evaluated against the results of the SDA. This will enable us to make comparisons with other countries of the UK (and England, in particular, where the research literature is richest (for example, Gorard *et al.*, 2007)). The results of the study will feed directly into deliberations over national policy within the WG, which is committed to the more systematic use of social science research in its development of policy. In particular, the research will provide a demonstration of the potential of SDA to provide a robust evidential framework, against which to evaluate the impacts of Wales's policies and strategies on widening access to HE. Moreover, this project makes possible institutional capacity-building with the professionals within the HEIs, who have responsibility for the implementation of widening-access strategies. The interviews we have conducted not only aimed to identify the methods used by the institutions to widen access, but through our engagement with key actors across the HE sector we intend to develop relationships in which our work will support individual HEIs in their widening access activities. It is relatively rarely the case that research can exert impact at this level, directly on professional practices. In the longer term, then, this research has the potential to contribute towards increasing overall levels of participation in HE by individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. This would be congruent with the WG's ambition of 'reducing inequalities in education', as set out in the 2011 *Programme for Government*; as well as with the HEFCW's commitment to use widening access to HE to alleviate social and economic disadvantage (HEFCW, 2012).