



Association of Colleges

AoC Survey: Widening Access to College HE Provision

Executive Summary

1. The survey was designed to investigate some of the issues and aspirations around widening participation in College HE and whether a practitioner network would be welcomed.
2. The survey asked a range of questions about context, provision, definitions of widening participation, evaluation criteria, goals, challenges, training, and needs. These have been analysed with some discussion.
3. There was a consistency of response across all the questions even when divided into subgroups which suggests that despite sectoral heterogeneity and local provision very different colleges had very similar issues and requirements
4. There is clearly much good practice and innovative work in widening participation within HE provision. There is evidence of an independent approach and a strong sense that College HE is uniquely supportive of disadvantaged students.
5. Nevertheless, possibly because College HE has been to some extent developed out with the main national frameworks and criteria there were some issues around the robustness of measures and the consistency of strategy. These included the following:
 - some uncertainties in the use of criteria to define widening participation which could impact on colleges' claims in relation to national criteria;
 - some significant gaps in data around widening participation numbers;
 - a common strategy around increasing the widening participation cohort through internal recruitment rather than external engagement which raises issues about the role of IAG and financial support on the one hand and the recruitment of mature students on the other;
 - some colleges' concerns about the capacity to improve retention and to recruit mature students;
 - an underdeveloped sense of the role of evaluation as opposed to monitoring and a tendency to assume that the college's widening participation cohort is de facto evidence of the success of outreach;



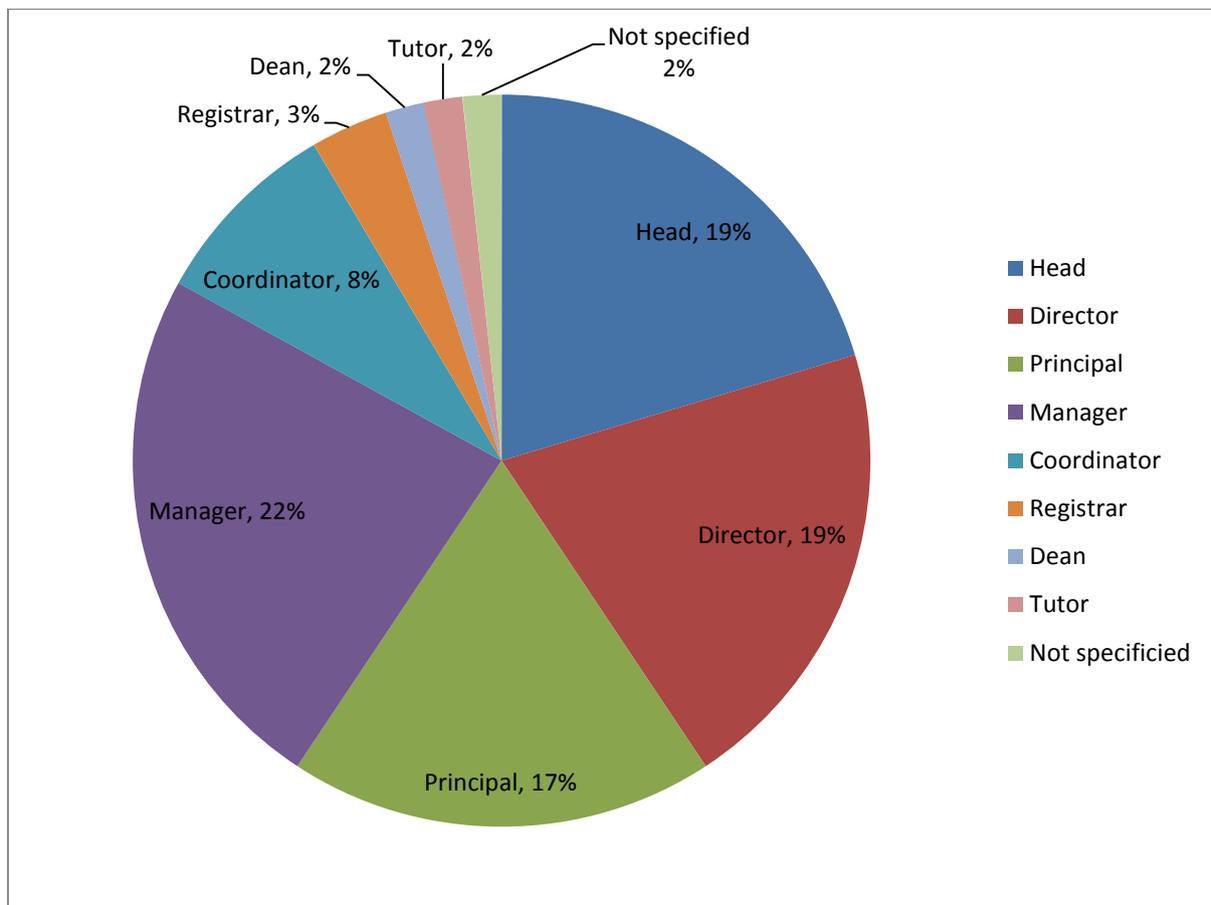
- a range of training but often at a more generic level of equality and diversity which does not address all the needs of widening participation practitioners and indeed was not available to 21% of respondents;
 - a need for a practitioner network which provides both practical and strategic support especially in respect of data and analysis and helps to raise the profile of College HE.
6. The conclusion considers two sets of issues around criteria and the definition of widening participation, and some of the possible implications of colleges' plans to increase widening participation through internal recruitment

Q1-5 Characteristics of Respondents

The survey was compiled in order to sample some of the issues and achievements around widening participation in College HE and to test the level of support for a practitioners' network. It was completed by 63 colleges, representing 25% of the 253 College HE providers. Most were general FE colleges, but four 6th form colleges and six specialist colleges also responded.

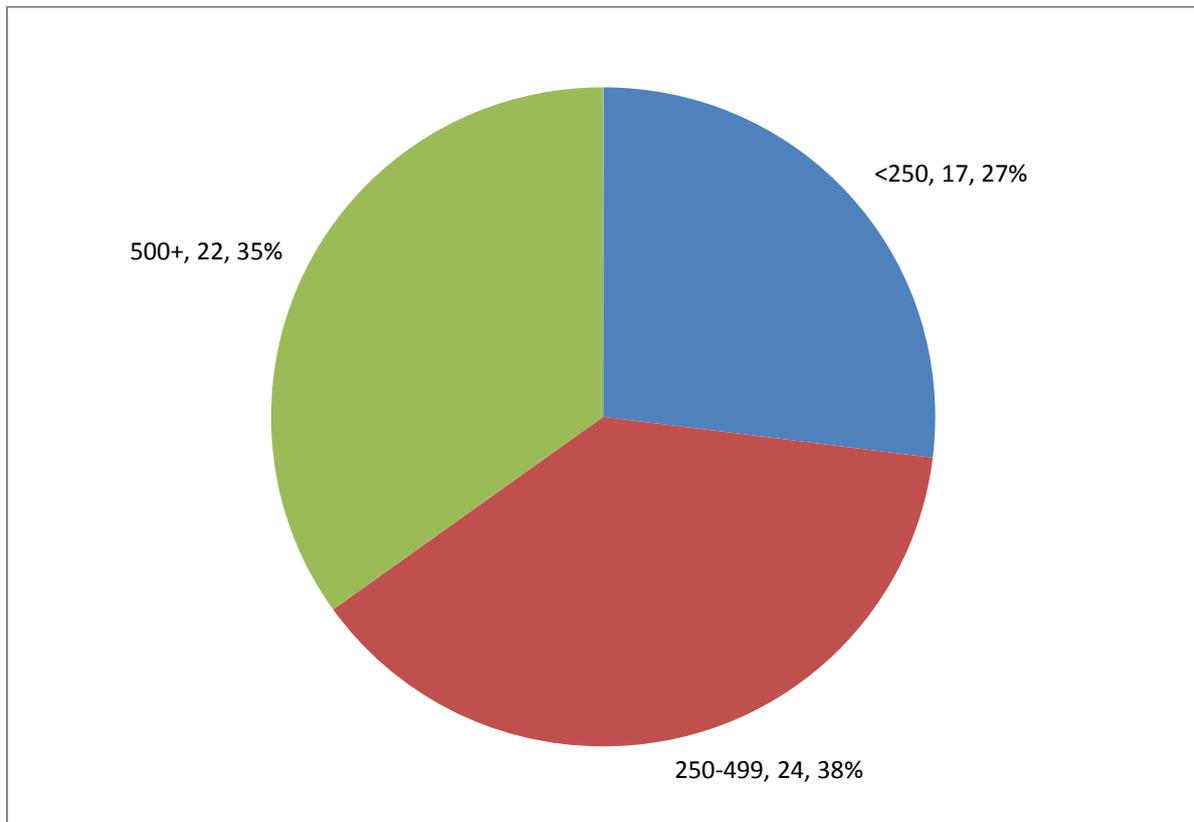
All regions were represented with a bias towards the south and the surveys were completed by a range of college staff from academic tutor to principal. 34 of the 62 respondents had HE in their title and one respondent's title referred to widening participation.

Figure 1 Respondents' roles within college



Classified by volume of provision the responses fell into three broadly equivalent groups – those with under 250 learners, between 250 and 500 learners and over 500 learners, the last being a more diversified group in terms of its subdivisions. (Responses from these 3 groups have been analysed to establish whether there are any underlying patterns of response which are different from the norm.

Figure 2 Subdivision of colleges by volume of provision



Three of the respondents, all of which had less than 500 students, had franchised provision only while 32 institutions had both directly funded and franchised programmes.

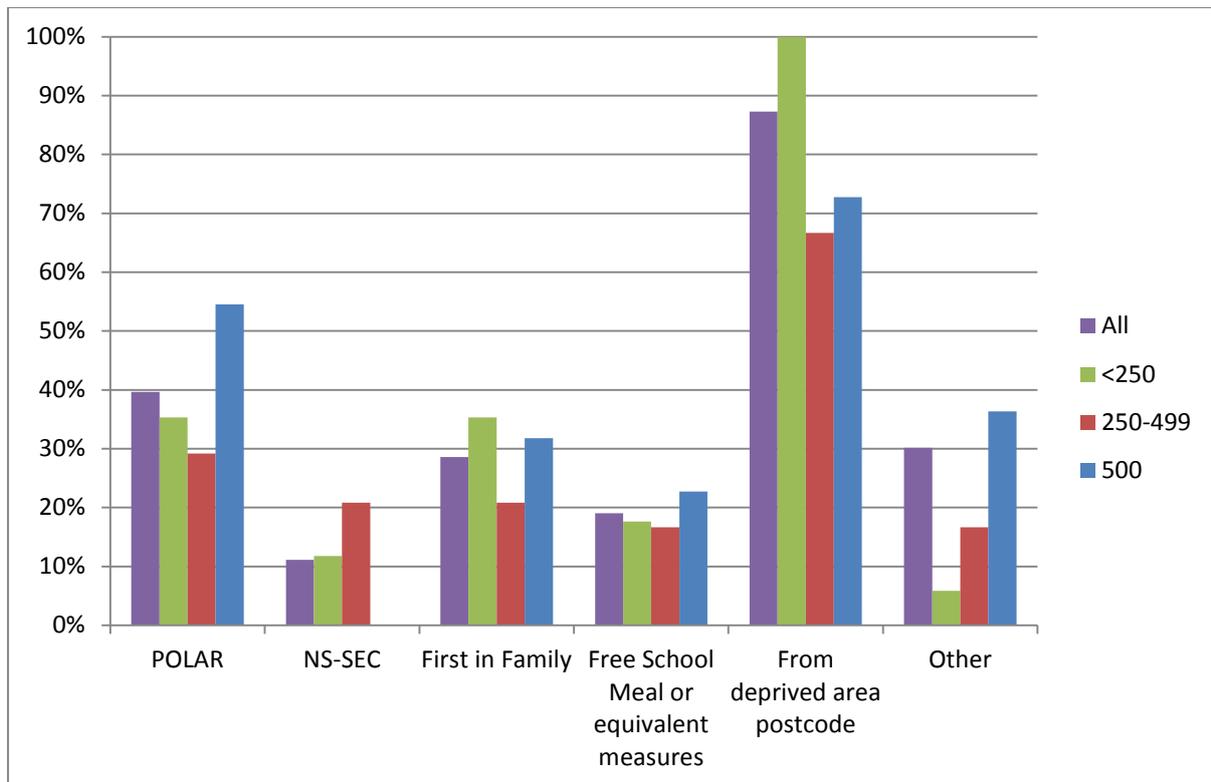
Q6. Which of the following indicators do you use to identify your HE widening participation student cohort?

The most favoured indicator for widening participation is the deprived area postcode, used by 79% of respondents, with POLAR in second place. (40%). NSSEC is the least favoured with only 11% of colleges using it. Colleges characteristically employ multiple indicators with some using three in combination. About 30% of those using deprived area postcodes also use POLAR which was the second most popular indicator. Other less favoured measures – First in Family, FSM and NSSEC - were also brigaded with other indicators. Most colleges applying a sole indicator use deprived area postcodes. However, two colleges used POLAR, two used FSM and two others used NSSEC and First in Family respectively as their sole indicator. The number of colleges using both FSM/NSSEC and IMD/POLAR which would deliver a balance of personal and domicile related characteristics was limited.

One college did not answer this question at all and three others only partly answered via “Other”- one said they were currently developing analytical tools, a second said they used a range of activities, and a third that they used self-declaration (though whether this was in relation to disability, economic disadvantage or a range of factors is unknown). A number of colleges used their own measures in addition to those in the question: four mentioned disability, two mentioned rurality, and access to transport and broadband, two referred to low income, two to carers, three to care leavers and one referred to Greater Manchester residency. No college mentioned ethnicity.

Group Analysis: Dividing respondents into three categories (below 250 students, 250-500 students and 500+ students) revealed firstly that the patterns of choice were consistent with the overall picture. Minor variations were that all colleges in the first category use deprived area post codes, that the second category was the main user of NSSEC, that the third category did not use NSSEC at all, and that the incidence of other measures which the colleges defined themselves rose through the 3 categories from 6% in Category 1 to 36% in category 3.

Figure 3 Choice of widening participation measures by subgroups and total



Discussion: Colleges use a variety of measures in a variety of combinations. This result should be explored further in the interests of determining how accurately and how consistently the widening participation cohort is defined in FE and how this definition conforms to national standards and measures. While IMD was the more popular tool

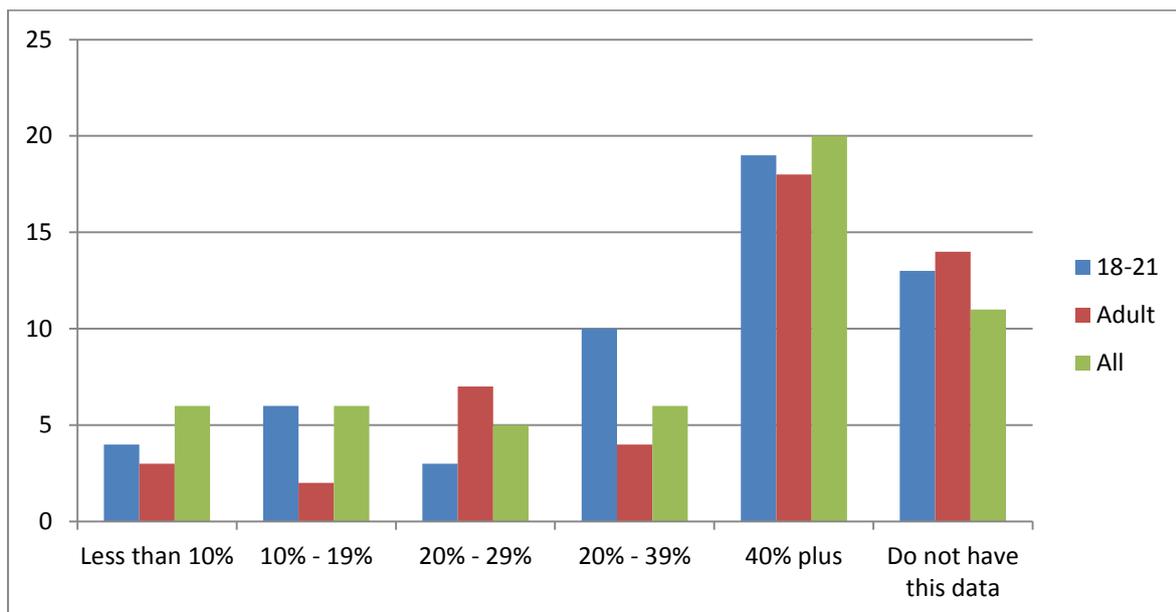


and frequently used on its own POLAR is more robust and has national currency. (Indeed the deprived area postcode is in itself subject to variation as FECs may be referring to the lowest or the two lowest quintiles.) Although the deprived area postcode, and indeed POLAR, are very useful measures for targeting partner schools for outreach work they are not in themselves sufficient for identifying whether individual students belong to the widening participation cohort and would best be used in conjunction with NSSEC or FSM.

Q7. What percentage of your higher education students are from a widening participation background?

The majority of colleges recorded widening participation populations in the 40% category in respect of adults, 18-21 year olds and All students. (12 respondents had less than 20% of widening participation students across the “All” category, while 20 recorded more than 40 %.) There were seven fewer responses for adults than for 18-21 year olds. Eight colleges did not differentiate between the two categories, one college did not respond at all and eleven said they did not have widening participation data on any of the categories. This number included the two colleges who did not return any data on widening participation indicators and nine who did. The highest number of don’t knows (6) was in the third group of colleges ie those with the largest provision.

Figure 4 Percentage of widening participation students within the HE cohort by 18-21 year olds, adults, and total



Discussion: While the performance of 40%+ is very pleasing and in line with the sector’s reputation for widening participation in its HE provision, the significant number

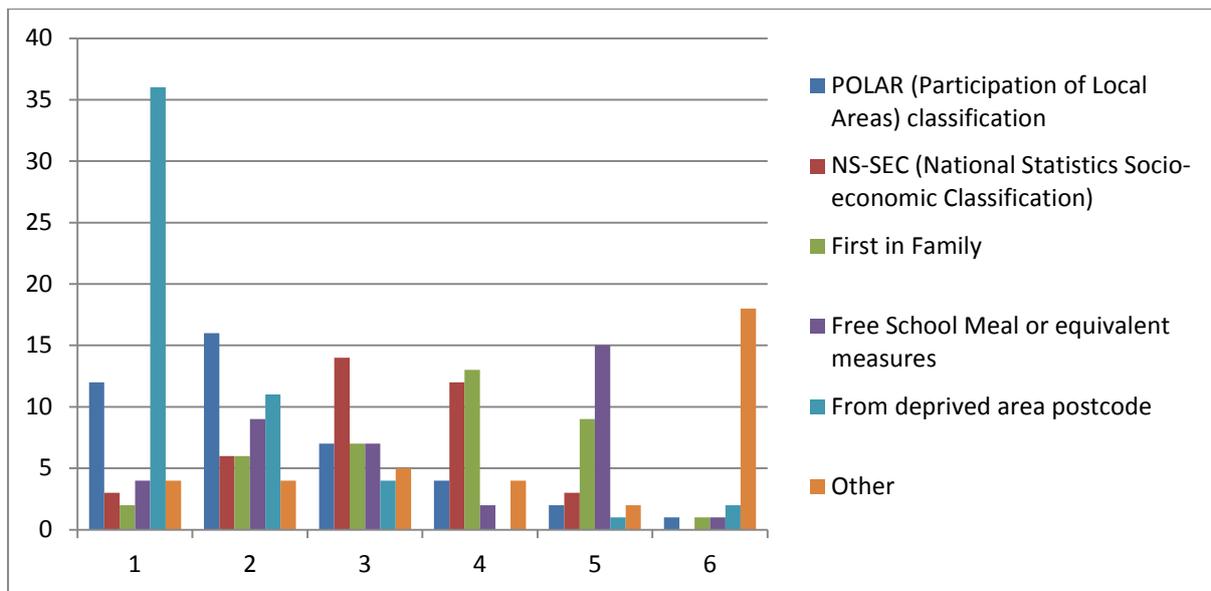
of colleges having no data despite using a variety of indicators, including those of their own devising, is worrying. It would be interesting to know whether size of provision had any effect on the capacity to measure the widening participation cohort.

Q8. Please rank the following indicators in terms of how they inform your outreach programmes for students from widening participation backgrounds
Q9 “Other”

Q10 Comments on the Indicators

The ranking of indicators for outreach was broadly in line with the ranking for defining indicators in Q6. Deprived area postcodes were by far the most popular measure, although here NSSEC came in ahead of FSM and FIF. (FSM had been the third most popular measure in Q6.)

Figure 5 Ranking of widening participation indicators



The individual indicators listed under “Other” largely reflect those listed for Q6. However, a landbased college did return the note “specialist sector” which may suggest different criteria are involved, and two identified internal college information.

Comments: 17 colleges commented including four specialist colleges. There was a preponderance of comments in favour of POLAR and deprived area postcodes and some linking of these with local populations and local knowledge. One respondent from a multicampus institution noted that the three campuses had different widening participation profiles and this was accounted for in access agreements by flexing indices of deprivation. Another commented that as “our students are very local to us” and tend to progress internally local postcode data is most helpful. Two colleges with both regional and national recruitment also favoured POLAR and postcode indicators. Two



other colleges favoured first in family, one of whom said it was useful in an affluent area with pockets of disadvantage.

Discussion: This is an important area since it involves targeting and therefore the effective use of widening participation resources. The frequently local nature of college outreach/recruitment may be a factor here in the choice of indicators. It would be worth exploring further how successful colleges feel they are in targeting and indeed recruiting widening participation students by these measures. It would also be useful to find out how colleges obtain NSSEC data about their outreach students and how they use it. Since NSSEC data is most easily acquired from UCAS its greater use in informing outreach rather than defining HE cohorts is counterintuitive.

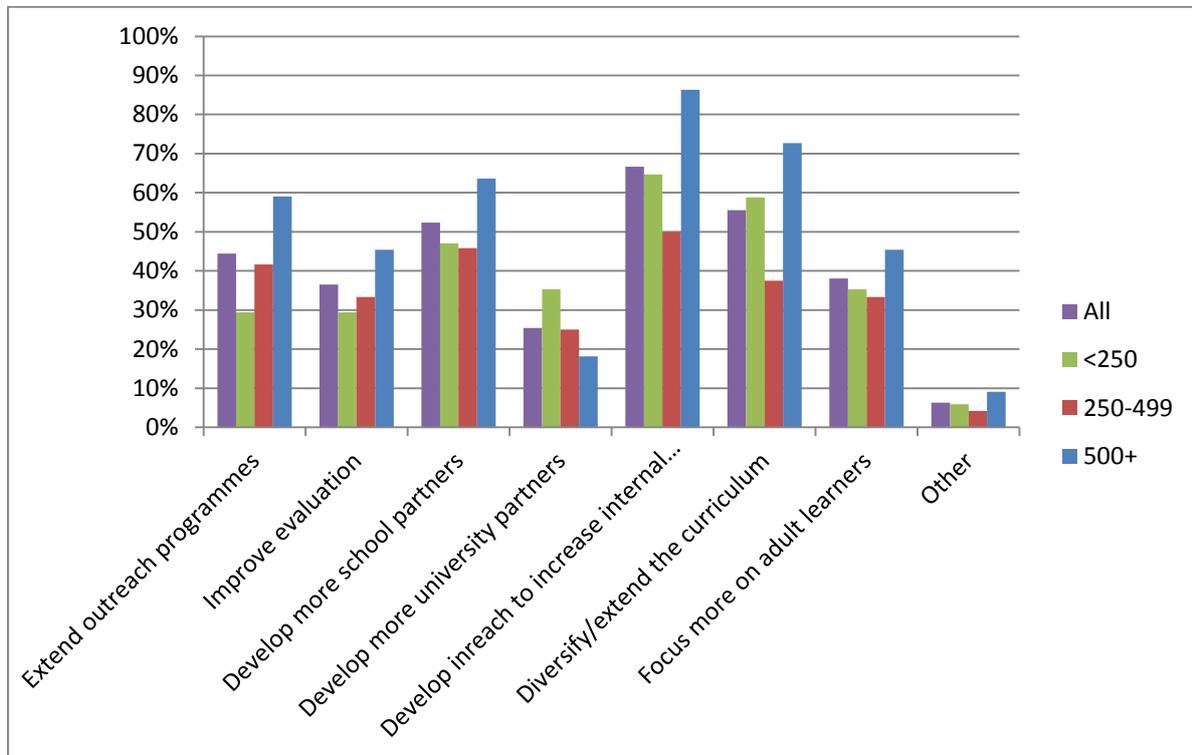
Q11. Are you planning to increase your widening participation intake to your HE programmes?

Q12. If 'Yes', how would you achieve this?

The majority of respondents indicated they were intending to increase their widening participation numbers with only eight colleges indicating that they would not. The preferred means of doing this is through enhancing internal progression (76%). Other favoured strategies included curriculum development and increasing the number partner schools though not, interestingly, increasing the number of HEI partnerships which was the least favoured strategy at 29%. Extending outreach provision was not especially favoured at 51%.

Group Analysis The overall pattern of priorities remained the same across all three groups (though much flatter in the second group) except for the position of curriculum development in Group 2. This came fourth behind extending school partnerships and outreach. Overall, however, the responses suggest the sector is consistent in its strategic goals for increasing widening participation.

Figure 6 Strategies for increasing widening participation by subgroups and total



Comments: There were eight comments, two from specialist colleges, addressing both target constituencies and strategies. Three said they would focus on part-time, others said they would develop curriculum with an HEI working in deprived postcode areas, focus on adults especially part-time, develop more progression pathways, more taster days and outreach, and one college, while not intending to increase overall, would improve targeting.

Discussion: The priority to optimize widening participation through internal recruitment is the clear favourite and it is an obvious strategy. However, it raises issues about objective IAG and the function of bursaries and other financial support, especially in the context of criticism about clarity surrounding progression to College HE.

It would be interesting to find out why increasing university partners was the least preferred option and whether or not this was a function of satisfaction with the current partnerships or whether colleges saw future development of the curriculum offer as being much more independent. It would also be interesting to ask why the development of the adult market was not seen more positively especially when that market has fallen off for HEIs but recruitment to Access courses has remained buoyant.

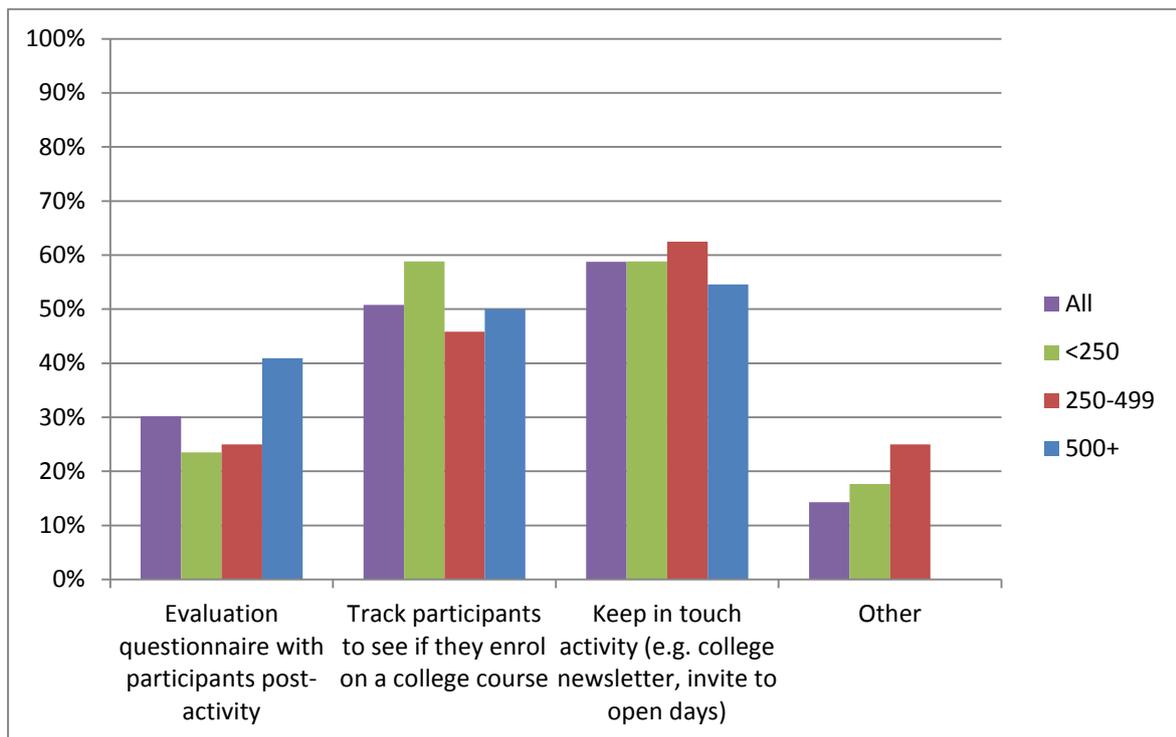
Q13. Please describe how you evaluate your widening participation activities

The majority of responses favoured “keep in touch” strategies as a means of evaluating outreach with tracking and event questionnaires in second and third place (33%). Five colleges did not reply to this question.

Comments: Of the eleven colleges (including one specialist college) who commented a number mentioned progression/destination data, returns to HEFCE and analysis of the HE cohort using POLAR, financial data, and equality and diversity evaluations as additional means of analysing the success of their widening participation activities. It appears to be generally assumed that the proportion of widening participation students in the college’s HE cohort can be used as evidence for the success of outreach.

Group Analysis: The same rankings obtain across all three groups, though “keep in touch” and tracking are equal favourites in Group 1 and the profile is flatter in Group3.

Figure 7 Evaluation methods for outreach



Discussion: This may be a weaker area given the number of colleges who did not respond. It is also surprising that routine evaluation of events is not more prevalent since this would give colleges a better understanding of what works rather than relying on the eventual widening participation profile of the HE cohort as evidence of success. The focus on tracking is positive especially if it includes progression to other HE providers since the success of outreach has to take account of students whose

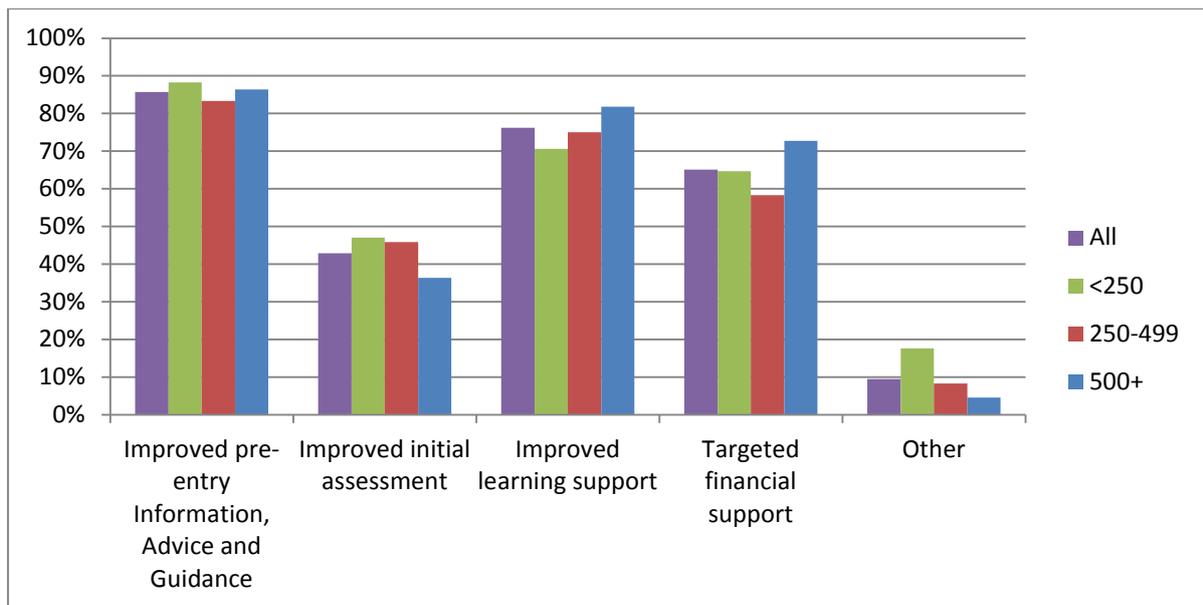
aspirations are raised but for various reasons decide to progress to HE elsewhere. As it is important to discriminate between outreach and marketing, this issue could be explored further.

Q14. What measures are you taking to improve the retention of your HE widening participation students?

The favoured strategy is improved pre-entry advice and guidance (89%). Enhanced study support and targeted financial support are also well represented. Initial assessment is least favoured (44%) but may be subsumed under pre-entry advice and guidance. Two colleges did not reply to this question.

Group Analysis: This pattern obtains across all three groups.

Figure 8 Measures to improve retention by subgroup and total



Comments: There were nine comments, including two from specialist colleges, mostly expanding on the kinds of support provided such as mentoring and one to one tutorials. Others mentioned NSP and other support funding, student voice, and closer working between academics and professional services to develop a referral system. One commented on the need for improved support in the context of funding challenges and another remarked that as their widening participation population was 70% all HE students had individualised plans and their progress was checked on Pro Monitor.

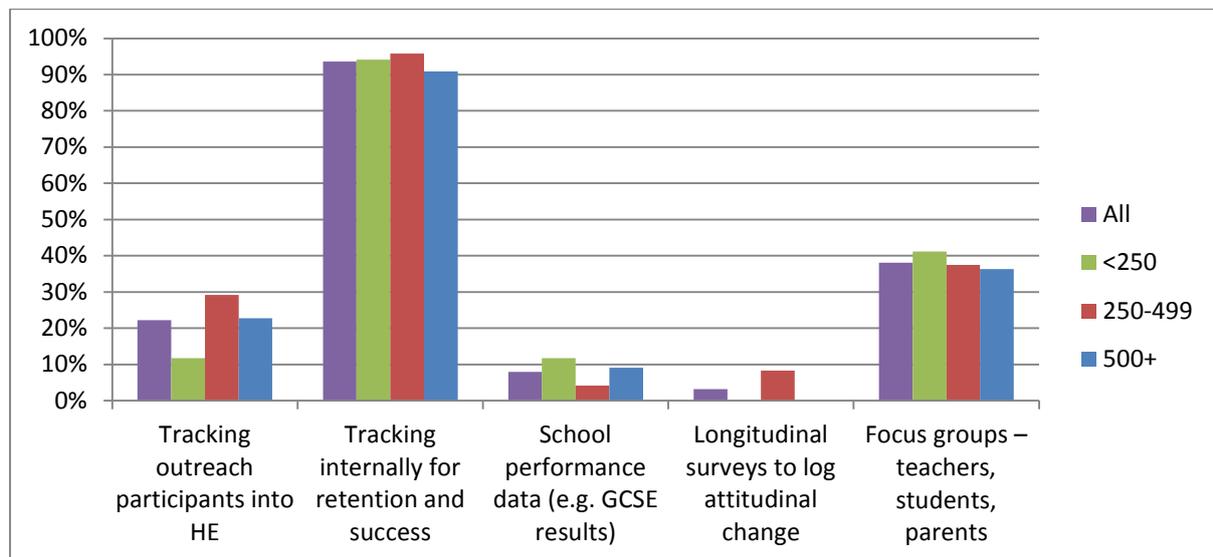
Discussion: The emphasis on pre entry IAG is very positive in the light of the majority intention to widen participation via internal progression. However, some colleges do see retention as a serious challenge. (see Q18)

Q.15. What techniques do you currently use to evaluate your retention measures?

Overwhelmingly the favoured strategy is internal tracking for retention and success (95%) with focus groups in second place (39%) and tracking outreach students into HE coming third (23%).

Group Analysis: This pattern is constant across all three groups.

Figure 8 Means of evaluating retention measures by subgroup and total



Comments: Six colleges, three of which were specialist, offered comments. One was comfortable with performance and used action planning to deal with issues, while one, with large provision, was not and offered no strategies successful or otherwise. Others referred to tracking against KPIs, surveys, destination data, and taking action as a result of programme meetings.

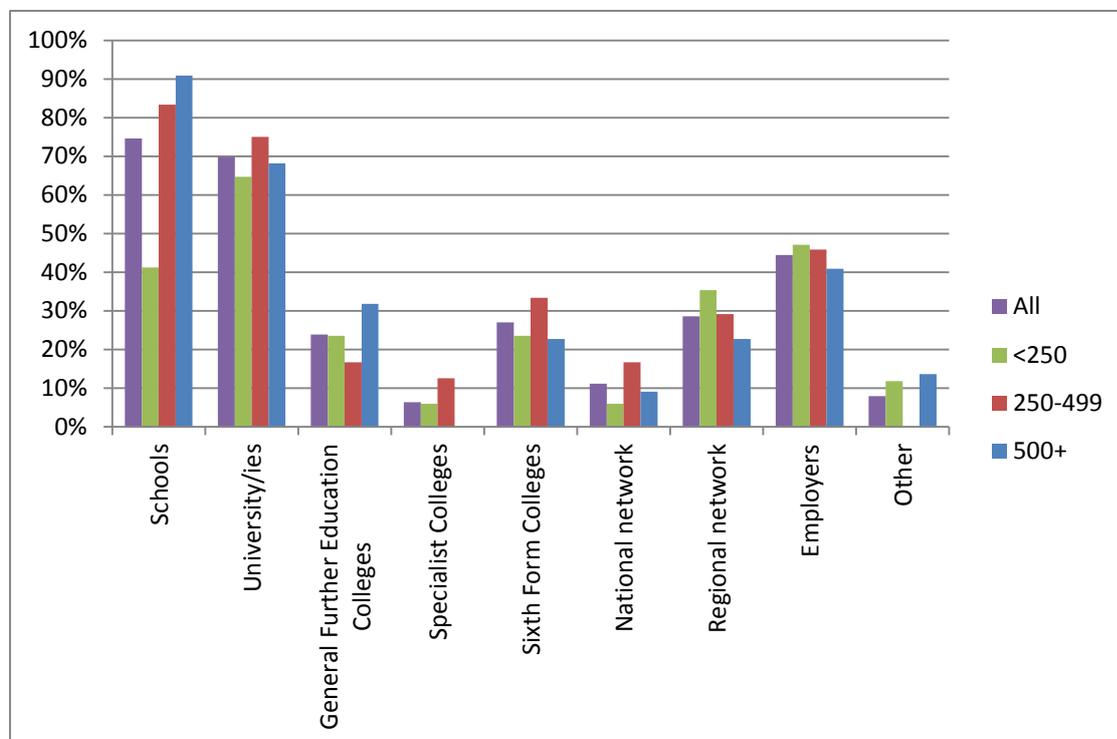
Discussion: The culture of monitoring retention in FE provision is very strong and is being extended into HE provision. Evaluation is possibly less developed. There is, however, some emerging diversification of activity around this issue and it would be worth looking at ways of exchanging good practice to accelerate progress.

Q16. Who are your partners in respect of your work on widening participation to your HE provision?

Schools and Universities were conclusively seen as the main partners in widening participation (76% and 71% respectively). Employers were also seen as important at 45% and Colleges, Sixth form colleges, and regional networks were closely placed together in the third tier.

Group Analysis: Group 1 places more emphasis on Universities than Schools (65%/41%) while Group 3 reverses this. (Schools 91%/ Universities 68%)

Figure 9 College partners by subgroup and total



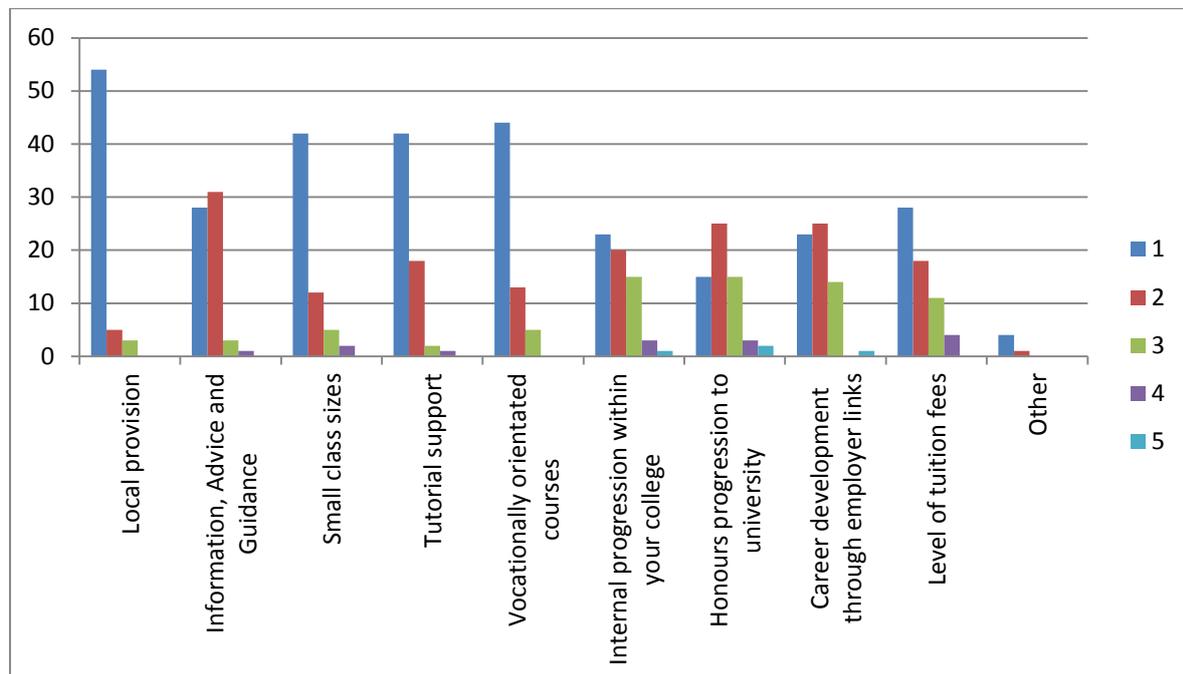
Comments: 6 colleges, including two specialist colleges, offered comments, three of which identified local community stakeholders and others identified HEART and the Kent and Medway Progression Forum as key partners.

Discussion: The group analysis shows an increasing independence from HEI partnerships in line with size of provision. While the primary relationships across the survey are still with schools and universities it is interesting to see colleges engaged with employers as partners in widening participation and, albeit to a lesser extent, with available networks and local stakeholders.

Q.17. On a scale of 1-5 (high-low) what do you think are the strengths of your HE provision for your widening participation cohort?

Again there was a clear hierarchy of responses with local provision, vocationally oriented courses, and tutorial provision/small class sizes coming out on top. IAG, fee levels and career progression were in the second rank while progression both internal and University related scored lowest.

Figure 11 Ranking of strengths of College HE provision for widening participation students



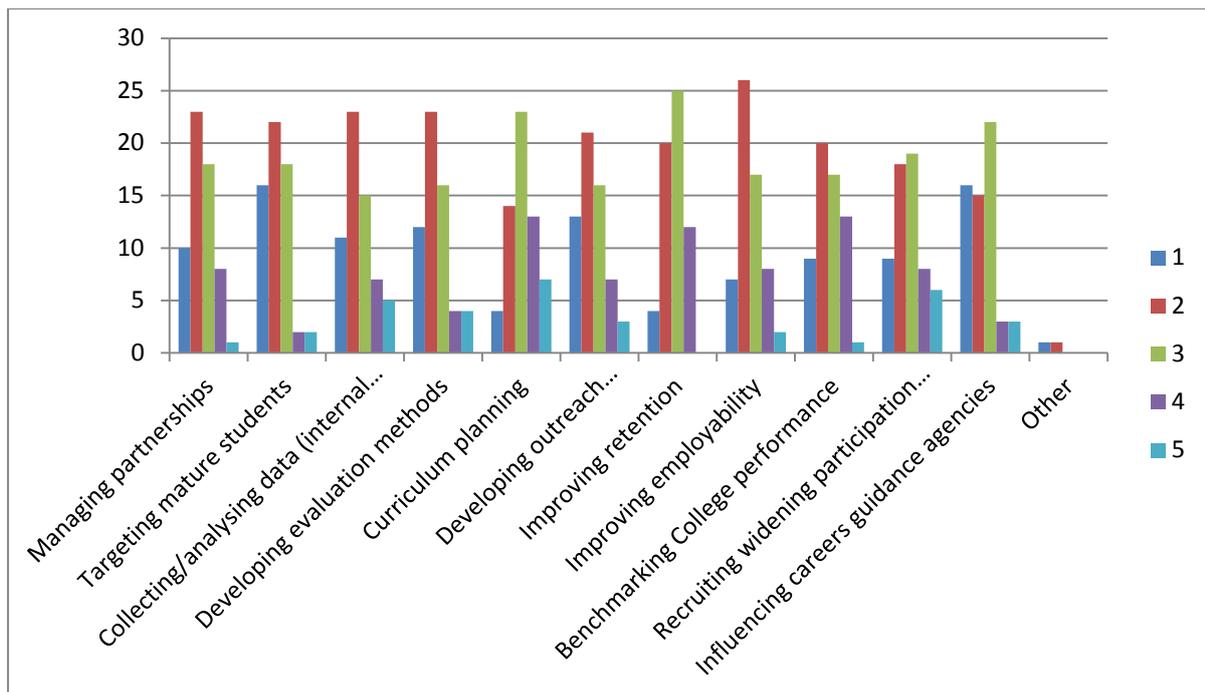
Comments: There were five comments, three from specialist colleges. These highlight dedicated staff, inspirational teaching, and student engagement. Other comments raised concerns about needing to focus on the local provider role and student finances. One college pointed out that provision to level 6 in the college meant that students were not faced with extensive travel or having to leave the area.

Discussion: These results mirror the acknowledged strengths of the sector though it would be interesting to know how far they are backed up by the student voice and whether the students might have different views on ranking. The place of progression at the bottom of the order seems contradictory given that internal progression is seen by colleges as the favoured means of generating higher widening participation populations.

Q18. On a scale of 1-5 (high-low) what do you think are the major challenges facing you in terms of developing and managing your widening participation HE provision?

The categories which scored most in terms of the highest classification were targeting mature students, influencing careers guidance agencies and developing outreach. But this was the closest set of responses, all of which were on average placed in category 2 between 2.20 and 2.74. The only outlier was curriculum planning which averaged 3.08 and may well indicate a relative confidence on the part of colleges. In consequence there was no one clear major challenge but rather a basket of concerns ranging across data, benchmarking and evaluation, improved performance in recruitment (especially mature students), retention and employability, managing partnerships(including careers guidance agencies), and developing outreach schemes.

Figure 12 Ranking of challenges in respect of widening participation by subgroup and total



Comments: There were six comments including two from specialist colleges. Three respondents identified further problems: the destination survey sometimes does not recognise landbased careers as being at graduate level, accessing school sixth forms to talk about college HE can be difficult as schools see colleges as competitors, and the reduction of student opportunity funding is unhelpful. Others talked about overcoming difficulties – working with HEPP on careers guidance agencies, managing retention and trying to build awareness of the HE offer more widely.



Discussion: In the context of a network the breadth of responses here would suggest that much positive work remains to be done in exchanging good practice across a range of activities and supporting practitioners on evaluation and data collection and analysis.

Q19. What was your most effective measure in recruiting widening participation students in the last twelve months?

Eleven colleges did not reply to this question. The remaining 52 identified a range of measures but the encouragement of internal progression, including curriculum development and marketing, was the clear frontrunner for most successful strategy. Links with schools (7) and outreach activities (9) were in the second rank, and IAG, vocational and employer related activities, and financial incentives were also mentioned. Four colleges referred to dedicated resources and a high profile at events as key factors in improving performance.

Discussion: There is no doubt that colleges prefer enhancing their widening participation profile through developing internal progression. However, it would be interesting to know how many colleges regard this as their only strategy and how many see it as a significant strategy within a range which includes outward facing activities. In addition to the problem of ensuring that internal progression is the right choice for learners, one problem which could be associated with too much reliance on internal progression is that participation by mature/second chance learners may not be adequately addressed. It would be worth unpacking practice and its implications around this issue.

Q20. Does the College provide training for staff involved in widening participation?

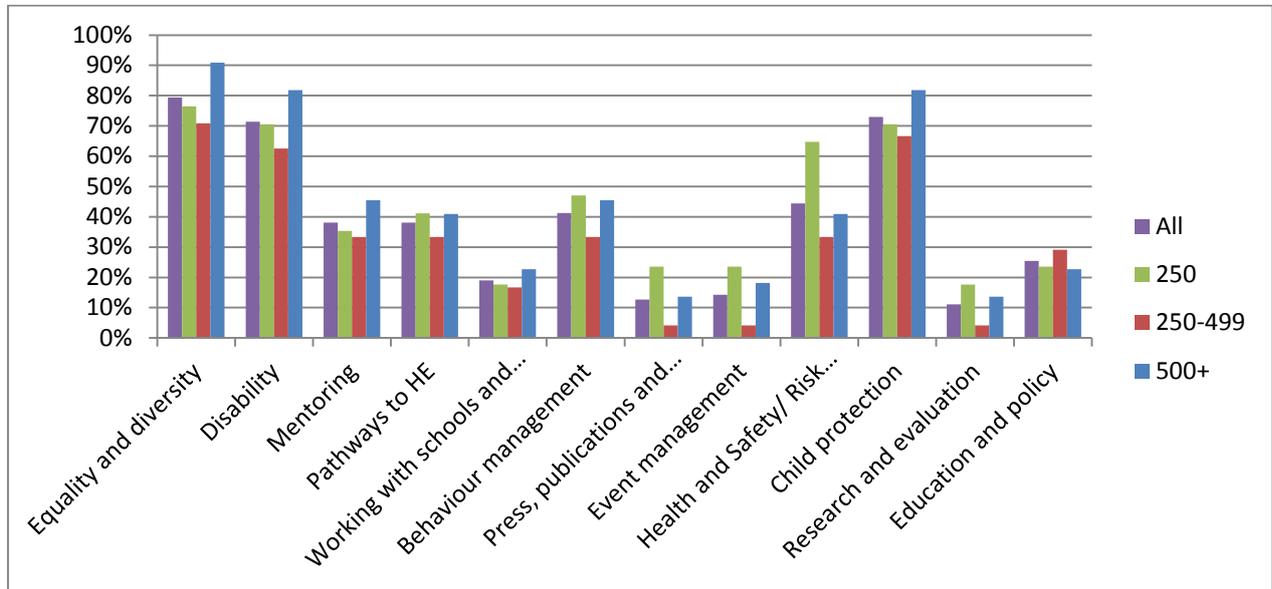
79% of respondents said their college provided training on aspects of widening participation. 21%, however, were not given any training.

Q21. If 'Yes', please indicate in which areas training has been provided

Much of the training was generic and not directly related to widening participation. It centred largely on areas covered by statutory responsibilities ie equality and diversity (98%), disability (88%), child protection (90%) and health and safety risk assessment (55%). Pathways to HE scored 47%. However, other issues which could be key to the understanding, practice and measurement of widening participation scored relatively low: event management (18%), education and policy (31%), research and evaluation (14%), and working with schools and communities (24%). This response indicates that around 50% of respondents do not have any training in these areas and that only 7 colleges have received any training in research and evaluation.

Group Analysis: The polarization of responses is constant across all three groups.

Figure 13 Types of training provided by subgroup and total



Discussion: It would appear that widening participation is subsumed under more generic, statutory requirements in terms of training. There are, however, specific competences involved in widening participation which call for more specialised CPD and support both in terms of practice and data collection, analysis and evaluation.

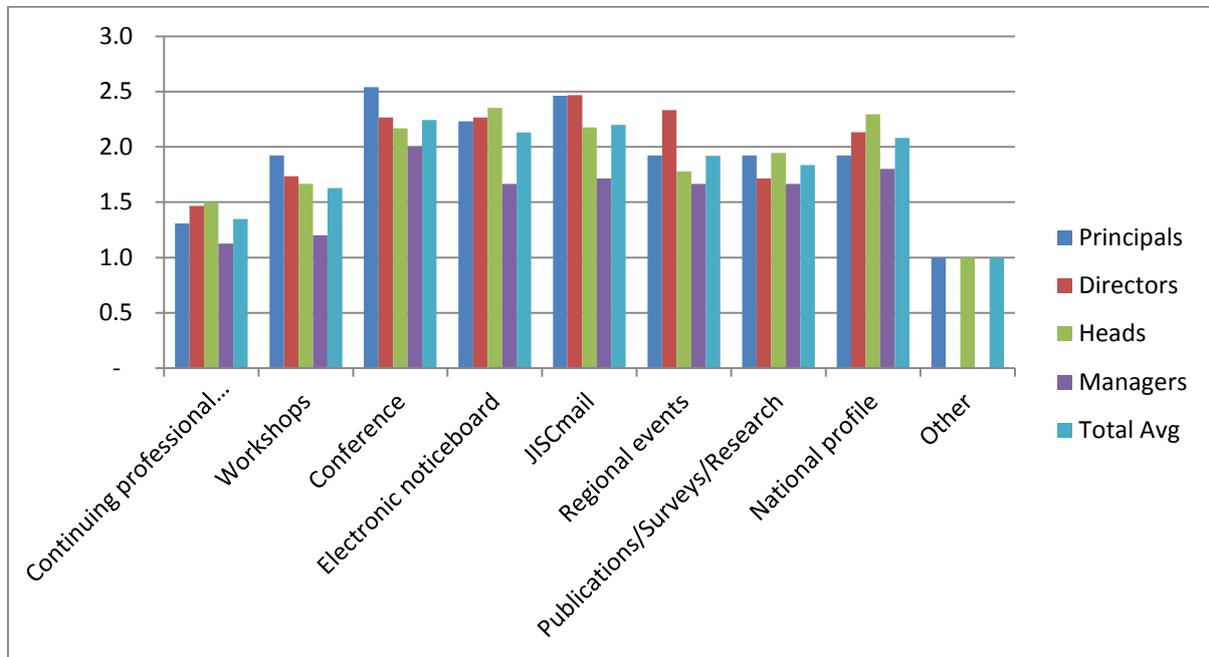
Q22. On a scale of 1-5 (high-low) what should a practitioner network provide?

This was a very close set of responses with CPD as the top priority with a rating of 1.35 followed by workshops, publications/surveys and research, and regional events. The lowest priority was conferences with a rating of 2.24.

Group Analysis: The rankings were largely consistent across all three groups though sufficiently more weight was given to national profile in Groups 2 and 3 to put it alongside publications/surveys and research.

Analysis by Role: The responses by role did not differ in any major way from the average pattern. Senior executives were the least enthusiastic about conferences and JISCmail. Managers and coordinators who are dealing with the practice of widening participation were the most enthusiastic group across all types of provision and consistently scored above the average.

Figure 14 Ranking of types of provision for a practitioner network by role of respondent (1=highest value)



Comments: Two colleges commented on additional support which could be provided. One suggested that a body such as the HEA could enhance the sector/discipline specific approach to the learning, teaching and assessment of vocational HE in order to create a better definition of the distinctiveness of College HE practice. The second comment asked that the network should provide a strategic approach informed by practitioner views.

Discussion: The responses to Q21 indicated a lack of specific professional support for widening participation. Clearly the possibility of a network which would provide support for specific skills and an opportunity for practitioners to share experience and knowledge with each other is welcomed.

The top four responses to this question indicate a need for more technical, practice based approach possibly delivered on a regional level. However, all suggested areas of provision scored high and the possibility of developing a national voice around widening participation and College HE indicates also the desire for a strategic approach.



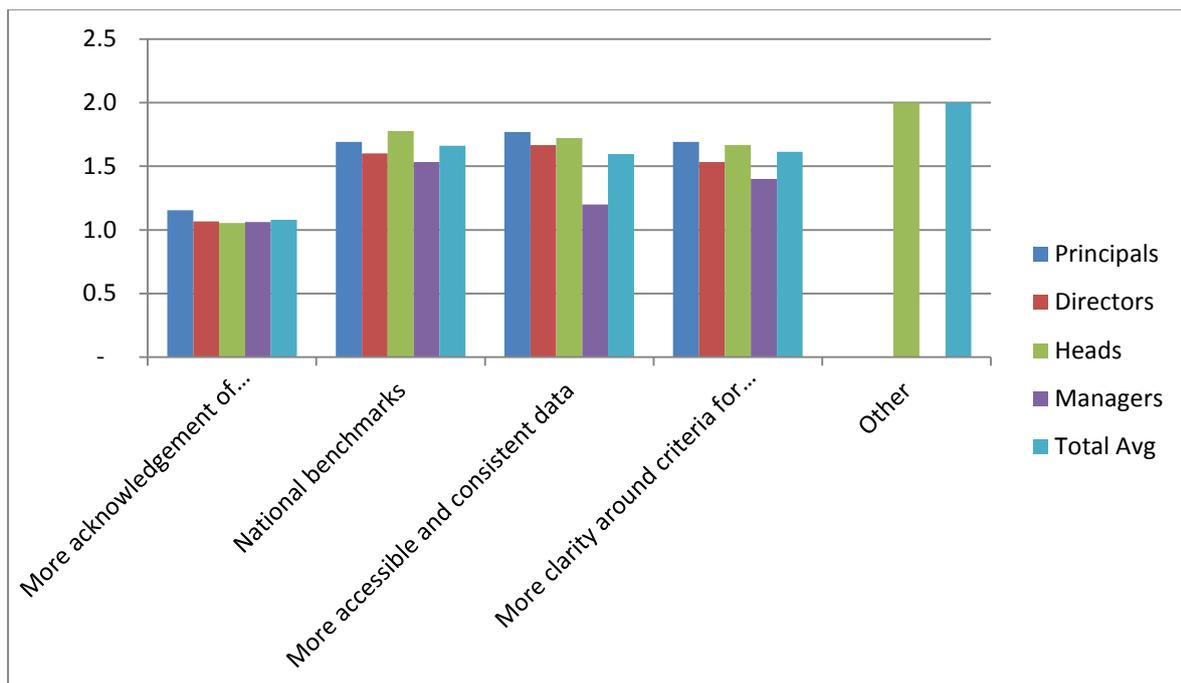
Q23. On a scale of 1-5 (high-low) what would be helpful at the level of national policy and support?

This was another close set of responses with “more acknowledgement of the strengths of College HE” as the top priority at 1.08 with the other three choices, all of which addressed aspects of definition and evaluation, evenly placed at 1.60, 1.61, and 1.66.

Group Analysis: The pattern of rankings obtains across all three groups.

Analysis by Role: The functional groupings showed considerable consistency with each other. The most significant variant is again the very positive response by managers to all options, especially their prioritising of more accessible and consistent data in contrast to lower scoring by the more senior groups.

Figure 15 Ranking of priorities around national support by role of respondent (1=highest value)



Comments: Two colleges offered comments. One emphasized the need for clarity of criteria and the other suggested some collaboration between HE and FE to prevent over-saturation of target groups and schools.



Q24. Please use this space for any other comments on the issues covered in this survey.

Two colleges did provide additional comments. The college which had suggested HEA could assist in relation vocational HE in Q22 reiterated the need for CPD around subject pedagogy especially in the context of the National Standards Framework for HE, welcoming networking opportunities between practitioners. The second comment concerned the ongoing need for meaningful benchmarks and best practice examples in measuring the direct impact of access and WP activities along with the additional point that financial support for adults returning to learning is still a barrier to entry and may be contributing to the downturn in part-time recruitment.

Conclusion

The colleges which responded to the survey were punctilious and thoughtful in completing the questions and offering comments. Despite the heterogeneity of the colleges and their provision there was a general correlation amongst all groups in terms of their responses whether they involved challenges or aspirations and it was not possible to discern a group which was either consistently or significantly out of line with the rest. It is therefore possible to conclude that the overall pattern of responses and their rankings are properly representative of most of the respondents and would probably resonate with majority views in the sector.

On the basis of this survey the sector would welcome the setting up of a network to support the continuing professional development of College HE staff working in widening participation and would recognise the need for the kind of networking, exchange of good practice, and skills enhancement which would strengthen the widening participation presence and profile within College HE. The responses to the question on challenges show a candid acknowledgement of that need. Such a network should also be able to bring influence to bear on the national agenda around widening participation particularly in respect of standardising measures, and facilitating data.

It is clear that within College HE there is much success to be celebrated and good practice to be exchanged. Many practitioner comments demonstrate high levels of expertise and intellectual engagement with the issues of widening participation. It is also clear, however, that colleges are sometimes dealing in contexts of uncertainty which are difficult for individual institutions with limited resources to address. There emerge from this survey two key sets of issues which a practitioner network could usefully work through.

The first is the somewhat confused use of criteria around widening participation, which could result in errors in defining the widening participation constituency. The use of deprived area postcodes is not necessarily a safe measure by itself, though it is



undeniably useful in targeting, and the combining of several criteria may or may not improve stability depending on how and how consistently they are used. The number of colleges unable to return data on the proportion of their widening participation cohort within the College HE population is of concern, especially in conjunction with the range of measures referred to. This is not an easy area and HEFCE has recognised the problems FECs have in mapping their widening participation data against national criteria.

Related to this issue of definition is the question of evaluation of outreach and colleges could extend the range of strategies used to evaluate their outreach provision. More qualitative evidence could be used to assess the impact of the provision on learners in terms of changed behaviours and improved academic performance rather than assuming that the profile of the entrants to HE validates the success of outreach. The issue of progression to a range of HE providers from outreach programmes also needs to be addressed as does the relationship between marketing and aspiration raising. The evaluation of retention is more robust but given the importance of the student voice more could perhaps be done in this respect.

The second set of issues arises from the intention to extend widening participation via internal progression. This implies a kind of inward looking uncharacteristic of FECs. Certainly it is important that colleges optimize widening participation through internal progression but not as the sole strategy. While there are concerns about ensuring that students make the best possible choice for their HE course there may be issues around outreach activity which are encouraging FECs to take this approach. The survey did not ask for details of outreach but it would be interesting to see whether the prevalence of the internal progression strategy is in any way related to a reduction of outreach and associated costs. The recruitment of mature students and engagement with local communities in the interests of developing learning ladders and robust local economies are clearly concerns here and the commitment to employer and community partnerships may offer some ways forward.

This survey is a useful means of understanding where colleges are currently with widening participation and associated issues. Inevitably it raises more questions than it answers. But it also constitutes the beginning of a broader conversation for the colleges themselves about widening participation in College HE and how a practitioner network might function to provide support for the development of professional skills and knowledge.

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