

# **Widening Participation Strategy 2009-2016**

## **'Realising Potential'**

### **Foreword**

The University of Bristol has been a pioneer in the field of widening participation for over a decade. Recognising the potential of applicants has always been at the heart of the University's mission to recruit the most able students from the most diverse backgrounds.

The University has developed an innovative and creative outreach culture while adopting an evidence-based approach to policy and procedure. We remain determined to achieve a more diverse student community, recognising the social, educational and cultural benefits this confers to the individual and institution. We acknowledge the barriers that persist for many and will continue to examine our admissions procedures, entry routes and curricula to ensure that all those with the potential to succeed at this University can do so. We will continue to do everything we can to make The University of Bristol as attractive to those from under represented groups as it is to people from backgrounds better represented in the sector.

We believe that widening participation has a moral as well as a pragmatic foundation. It is right that anyone with the necessary abilities should feel encouraged to aspire to Bristol, regardless of their background. We value the research into widening participation conducted by colleagues within the University, which provides evidence that many applicants experience some form of educational disadvantage. This may take a number of forms, including inadequate advice and guidance or access to resources, resulting in levels of attainment that do not reflect their potential to succeed. Where such disadvantage exists, the University will take measures to ensure that this is taken into consideration and that we recruit those with the potential to flourish at this institution.

This strategy builds on the success of our two previous documents, 'The Way Forward' (2001-04) and 'Quality through Diversity' (2004-09). We continue with those policies and initiatives which have proved successful in recent years, while responding to changing contexts and developing new ideas to ensure we remain a leader in the field. The 2009-16 strategy introduces student support as a key theme, articulates our commitment to the recently established Widening Participation Research Cluster and places new emphasis on monitoring, evaluation and developing links with employers. Whilst maintaining a commitment to collaborative, generic awareness raising activities the focus of this strategy will be on widening participation to the University of Bristol.

The strategy is intended to provide a framework for widening participation at all levels and across all academic departments and support service divisions of the University of Bristol. Responsibility for delivering the strategy lies with all staff but will be driven by the Widening Participation and Undergraduate Recruitment team in partnership with appointed Widening Participation Faculty Officers.

The principles on which this strategy is based are fundamental to the University and are as strongly held now as they ever were. The University's strategy for Widening Participation is underpinned by:

1. A **commitment** to the highest standards in teaching, learning and research and to making the University as attractive and accessible as possible to students from all walks of life.
2. A belief in the educational and social benefits, to the University and to our students, of a **diverse** student population, drawn from all sections of society.
3. A belief in an admissions procedure that assesses a candidate's **potential** to succeed.
4. A recognition of the importance of adopting a **flexible** approach to programme design and delivery.
5. A commitment to ensuring that every student is given the academic and pastoral **support** he or she needs to succeed at the University.
6. An acknowledgement of the importance of adopting an **evidence-based** approach to widening participation activity.
7. A recognition of the value of working in **partnership** with other education providers.

## Background

### University Context

The University of Bristol was one of the first institutions to develop a widening participation focus – ahead of Government policy on the issue – and was a founding member of the Russell Group Widening Participation Association. The University has produced three major strategies in relation to widening participation from 1999 to 2009.

Progress in diversifying the student body in this decade has however been slow. Despite the hard work and dedication of our staff in this area the University has not achieved the diversity it seeks.

In preparing for the creation of this strategy a major review of the University's widening participation categories and milestones was undertaken, including an institution-wide consultation on which groups the University should be targeting in its efforts to widen participation. Once these groups had been agreed, a committee was established to set the milestones towards which the University will strive over the five years of this strategy. A commentary on how these milestones were calculated is available on request.

It was agreed that the University would seek to attract applications from the following:

1. Mature students
2. Students from low performing schools and colleges
3. Students from low participation areas (LPAs)
4. Students from socio economic groups 4-8
5. Minority ethnic students
6. Disabled students
7. State school students
8. Local students

Milestones will be set for each of the categories listed above on an annual basis. Milestones will be calculated by benchmarking the University's position against its Russell Group comparators with the exception of the low performing schools and colleges category. This category will be calculated using the most up to date performance figures from the Department of Children Schools and Families and UCAS.

In light of this methodology the milestones will need to be reviewed on an annual basis to take account of relative changes in both the performance of comparator institutions and the performance of schools and colleges.

Whilst application milestones will be set for all of the categories listed, it was agreed that intake milestones would only be set for mature students and students from low performing schools and colleges. These were the only two categories which could be taken directly into account at the admissions stage.

**The University's Widening Participation Strategy has explicit links to a range of other institutional documents, notably the University Vision and Strategy 2009-2016. As part of the University's commitment to education and the student experience it is stated that a key priority is to:**

**"Attract and retain academically gifted and highly motivated students from a wide range of backgrounds, creating a diverse...community<sup>1</sup>."**

It goes on to assert that:

**"We will recruit our students solely on the basis of their ability and potential to succeed within the learning environment that we offer. To this end, we will ensure that our admissions processes are open, fair and transparent. We will encourage applicants from non traditional backgrounds and a variety of progression routes<sup>2</sup>".**

There are also strong links to the University's Education Strategy<sup>3</sup> and the forthcoming action plan for the Centre for Public Engagement. The Widening Participation Strategy is underpinned by the University's Admissions Principles and Procedures which set out fair, transparent and clear admissions guidelines<sup>4</sup>. All those involved in admissions to the University will receive annual training and regular briefings on developments in these areas.

## **Regional and national partners**

The University of Bristol has been an active partner with other higher education institutions in the South West of England for many years. Part of this collaboration is co-ordinated through the Aimhigher programme which was established in 2004 and is responsible for delivering regional summer schools, aspiration and attainment raising events and mentors and tutors for local school and college students. In addition the University plays a significant role within the Western Vocational Life Long Learning Network, VetNet, The Higher Education Regional Development Agency and the Higher Education Liaison Officers Association.

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<sup>1</sup> University Vision and Strategy Version 3.7

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Education Strategy 2004-2008 'Education through Excellence'

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/university/governance/policies/admissions-policy.html>

The University is also part of the Russell Group Widening Participation Association and has worked closely with colleagues in this group to share good practice and research over the last ten years.

A major feature of this new strategy will be to build on these existing relationships while also exploring new partners in the business community.

## **Strategic Aims**

The University has identified four main aims that will underpin the 2009-16 Widening Participation Strategy. These aims reflect the breadth of the University's ambition with regard to widening participation.

The four aims:

### **1. Monitoring and Research**

The University has been a pioneer in research into widening participation issues. This research has been used to inform our strategy, and our commitment to future research must focus on the success of widening participation activity and building a collaborative approach to research in this field.

### **2. Outstanding Outreach**

The University must continue to lead in the design and delivery of innovative and accessible outreach activities. This must include enhancing our relationships with key influencers such as parents and teachers. It must also involve collaboration with our regional and national partners.

### **3. Diversify Intake**

The University must be accessible to students from all backgrounds with the potential to succeed at the University of Bristol. In particular, efforts must be made to encourage students from under-represented groups to consider studying at Bristol and to develop admissions procedures that recognise an applicant's potential.

### **4. Student Support**

Pastoral support is vital for all students making the transition to higher education. It is particularly important that support measures are in place and accessible to those students who may be in most need of support – including those from under-represented groups in HE.

Each of the four aims has five clear objectives:

## **1: Monitoring & Research**

### **Objectives:**

- 1.1 Continue to develop and promote a research-based approach to widening participation policy and outreach.
- 1.2 Monitor the composition of the University's student body and review the widening participation milestones on an annual basis.
- 1.3 Evaluate the success of all University widening participation initiatives including outreach activities, admissions policies and procedures and student support measures.
- 1.4 Identify the needs of widening participation students and any barriers they may face in progressing to postgraduate study or accessing specific areas of employment.
- 1.5 Continue a collaborative approach to widening participation research, disseminating information and examples of good practice to regional and national partners.

## **2: Outstanding Outreach**

### **Objectives:**

- 2.1 Work within the University and with education partners (including social workers, careers advisers and Aimhigher) to improve the targeting of outreach activities in schools and colleges.
- 2.2 Develop engagement opportunities for other key stakeholders including parents / carers, teachers and HE advisers.
- 2.3 Develop a more expansive outreach programme for learners of all ages, raising awareness of progression opportunities at level two and level three.
- 2.4 Continue the University's commitment to a collaborative approach to outreach with partners such as Aimhigher, Sutton Trust, Open College Network, VetNet and the Western Vocational Life Long Learning Network, while developing new partners within the business community.
- 2.5 Acknowledge the important contribution of our academics to the University's outreach programme by ensuring this work is appropriately rewarded and recognised, for example through inclusion in promotion criteria.

### **3: Diversify Intake**

#### **Objectives:**

- 3.1 Improve internal awareness of the full range of level two and three qualifications available nationally, including the new 14-19 diplomas.
- 3.2 Develop and promote a broader and more flexible range of routes for entry to the University, both individually and by entering into strategic partnerships with other educational institutions. This may include the development of new foundation programmes, expanding part-time provision and reviewing curricula.
- 3.3 Develop admissions procedures that recognise an applicant's potential and that are informed by rigorous research on issues relating to widening participation.
- 3.4 Work on monitoring the University's culture and communication style internally and externally to ensure that it is appropriate and welcoming for all potential applicants.
- 3.5 Develop a range of support measures to improve the conversion of applicants from widening participation backgrounds.

### **Aim 4: Student Support**

#### **Objectives:**

- 4.1 Develop a comprehensive programme of transition support for all students including pre-application advice, guidance and skills development.
- 4.2 Monitor the University's financial support packages for all eligible students and improve the clarity of information, advice and guidance on financial matters pre-arrival.
- 4.3 Develop a programme of peer support across the University, including peer-to-peer mentoring schemes and peer-assisted learning.
- 4.4 Promote a professional and consistent approach to pastoral support

across the University, sharing existing models of excellence.

- 4.5 Implement an impartial method for allocating first year accommodation to promote balanced communities within the residences.

The objectives for each of the strategic aims are deliberately broad to allow faculties and support service divisions to interpret the objectives in the way that is most relevant to them. The specific focus of the widening participation work undertaken will be set out in annual action plans and this will ensure a more targeted approach to widening participation across the University.

A diagram showing the way in which the strategy is structured can be found in Annex A.

## **Action Planning and Reporting**

The Widening Participation and Undergraduate Recruitment team, as well as each of the six faculties will produce an annual action plan for each of the four aims. The actions for the forthcoming year will be linked to the five objectives within that aim. At the end of the academic year these actions will be evaluated and reported on, in preparation for the setting of new actions for the start of the next academic year. Blank pro-formas of the Action Plan and Annual Report sheets are available in Annex B.

## **Risk Factors**

In developing this strategy, we have identified a number of key risks with the potential to jeopardise achievement of the University's objectives. Several of these relate to changes in the external climate over which the University has little or no control, while others are specific to the University of Bristol and therefore offer more opportunity for local management.

### **External Risks**

1. A change of Government or Governmental policy in relation to higher education could jeopardise the high priority that widening participation has benefited from over the last ten years. In addition, withdrawal in investment in this area could have serious repercussions with regard to the University's ability to meet its objectives.
2. The 2009-2016 strategy is launched in a period of recession and the consequences of such economic turmoil should not be underestimated now or in the future. The University must remain financially committed to the area whilst recognising that a pragmatic and prudent approach to the allocation of funds will be necessary.
3. The University has experienced a high profile in the national media in relation to widening participation activity in the last decade. Success or failure in meeting the objectives set out in this strategy will ensure the continued interest of the media. Hostile coverage will, at the very least, undermine our widening participation strategy and, at worst, may impact on other areas of University life.

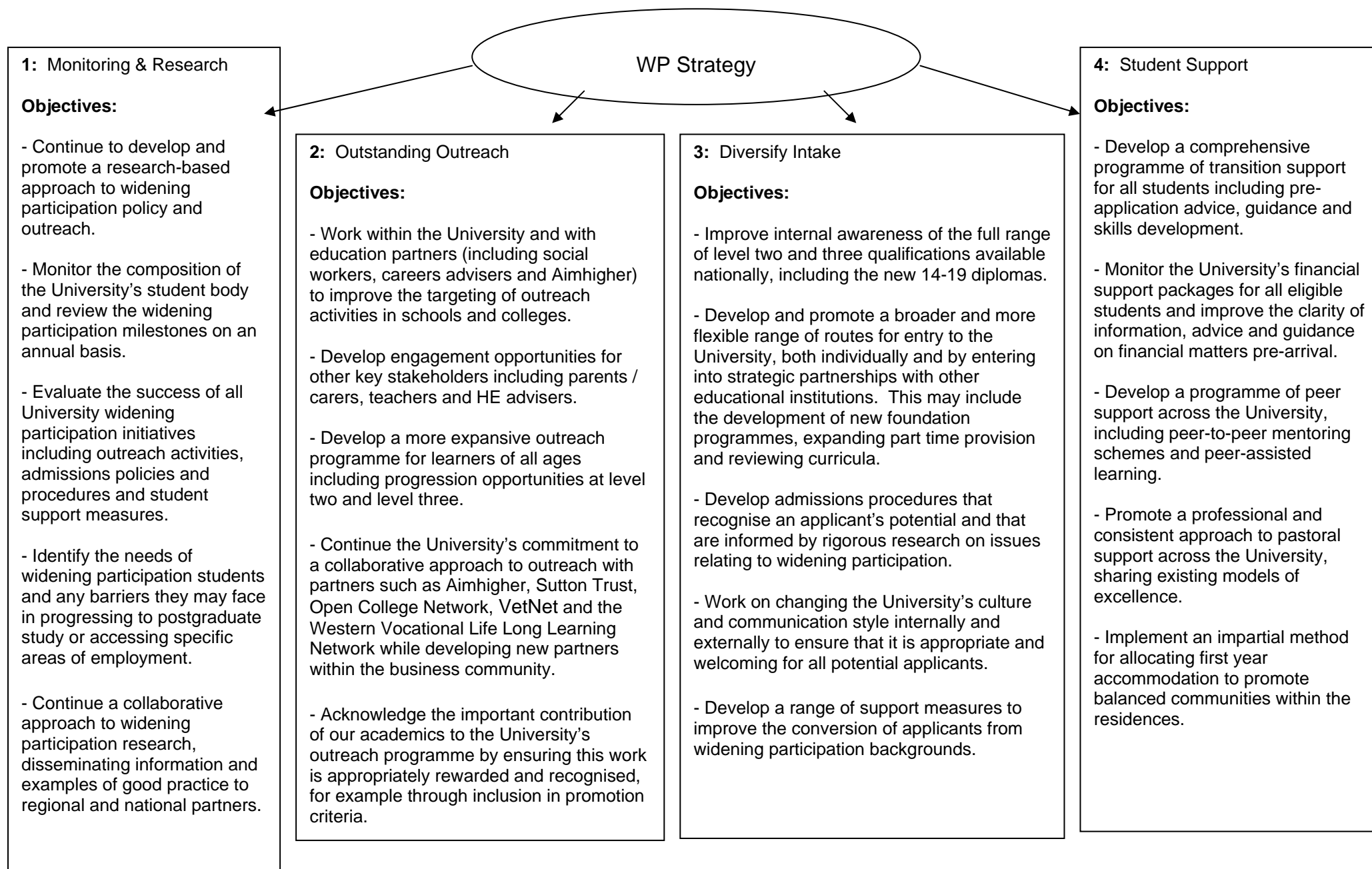
4. A change in the allocation of funds from tuition fees could also have a major impact on the financial capacity of the University to achieve its widening participation objectives. In addition, any rise in tuition fees could deter many of the under-represented groups the University is trying to attract.
5. The Widening Participation Strategy 2009-2016 coincides with a period of significant demographic change with a sharp decline in the 18 year old population. This will necessitate a more targeted recruitment strategy for undergraduates at the University and an increased emphasis on mature students (defined as those aged 21 or over).

### **Internal Risks**

1. There is a strong commitment to widening participation within the senior management team and as a concept, it has been successfully embedded across the institution over the last ten years. However, it should be recognised that a change of Vice-Chancellor or other members of the senior management team could challenge this.
2. Significant success in widening participation could impact upon our traditional sources of recruitment and our Undergraduate Recruitment team will be critical in delivering a continued high level of service for these markets.
3. Substantial changes to the profile of our student population may create a different set of needs in relation to retention and student support provision. This will have a more significant impact if efforts to attract a more diverse pool of students were to succeed before changes in other areas such as student support and curriculum development had taken effect.



## Annex A: Widening Participation Strategy 2009-16 Proposed Structure



## Annex B: Widening Participation Strategy 2009-16

### Proposed Action Plan Pro-Forma

Faculty: Arts

#### 1: Monitoring & Research

##### Objectives:

1. Continue to develop and promote a research-based approach to widening participation policy and outreach.
2. Monitor the composition of the University's student body and review the widening participation milestones on an annual basis.
3. Evaluate the success of all University widening participation initiatives including outreach activities, admissions policies and procedures and student support measures.
4. Identify the needs of widening participation students and any barriers they may face in progressing to postgraduate study or accessing specific areas of employment.
5. Continue a collaborative approach to widening participation research, disseminating information and examples of good practice to regional and national partners.

| Action  | Responsibility | Target date | Link to objectives |
|---|----------------|-------------|--------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•</li></ul> |                |             |                    |

**Annex B: Widening Participation Strategy 2009-16**  
**Proposed Reporting Form**

Actions from this year:

| Action  | Responsibility | Target date | Link to objectives |
|---|----------------|-------------|--------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•</li></ul> |                |             |                    |

**Progress to date**