



The role of higher education students in widening access, retention and success

A literature synthesis of the Widening Access, Student Retention and Success National Programmes Archive

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Contents

1. Foreword	3
2. Core definition of synthesis theme	4
3. Summary	4
4. Explanatory context	6
5. Methods	7
6. Key research reports	8
7. Synthesis of key findings	10
7.1. Introduction	10
7.2. Overview of the deployment of HE students	11
7.3. The roles that HE students play in widening access and success and retention	12
7.3.1. The role of HE students in widening access	12
7.3.2. The role of HE students in retention and success	14
7.4. Establishing a suitable infrastructure – issues of selection, training and support	17
7.4.1. Establishing a suitable infrastructure – widening access	17
7.4.2. Establishing a suitable infrastructure – retention and success	18
7.5. The impact of HE student involvement on widening access and retention and success	19
7.5.1. Impact on widening access	19
7.5.2. Impact on retention and success	21
Implications for policy and practice	22
Gaps and areas for further research	24
References	25



national union of students

I. Foreword

NUS welcomes the publication of this synthesis with its clear acknowledgment of the role of students in widening access and improving retention and success in higher education. In the current uncertain political climate, and in the absence of a national programme for widening participation, it is even more crucial that institutions and students' unions draw on the resource available to them in innovative ways.

It is evident from the work outlined here that students do and can make a substantial contribution to the work of widening access. They are often the key catalyst in changing young people's expectations and attitudes to higher education. It is equally clear that more could be done to understand the scope of this contribution and how it can best be supported.

A holistic account of the student lifecycle takes account of the multiple ways that students engage in their higher education experience. Although learning is at the heart of that experience students have much to gain from volunteering and peer support activities. Prospective students, especially those with limited social capital of their own, tend to benefit from interaction with, and support from, current students. This is often critical to fostering the sense of belonging so vital to retention and success in higher education.

This synthesis suggests that institutions that invest in developing their students to give something back to their communities in the form of mentoring or acting as an ambassador for higher education will see significant rewards. But that investment will have to take place, and the monitoring and evaluation undertaken, to ensure that meaningful student engagement in widening access continues to develop and grow. Students need to be at the heart of any future system that builds on the lessons of these national programmes.

Rachel Wenstone
Vice President
NUS

2. Core definition of synthesis theme

‘Widening access’ is an umbrella term that refers to policies, strategies and practices designed to increase opportunities for under-represented groups to benefit from higher education. It has strong links with notions of social mobility and fair access, particularly to universities and subject choices that are oversubscribed.

The more commonly and sometimes synonymously used term ‘widening participation’ refers to increasing the number of students in universities and colleges coming from targeted under-represented social groups; for example, looked-after children, people from families with no experience of higher education, from working-class backgrounds or from low-participation neighbourhoods. It is also capable of wider definition, taking in the full HE student life cycle, encompassing retention, success and onward progression as well as initial access (HEFCE, 2012).

According to Jones (2008), “Student retention refers to the extent to which learners remain within a higher education institution, and complete a programme of study in a pre-determined time-period” (p. 1). For the purposes of this synthesis ‘student success’ includes both institutionally determined and learner defined notions of successful completion of a programme of study or discrete parts thereof, and the personal, employment or further study benefits gained from the higher education experience. Such a broad definition recognises that students benefit from HE study in a wide range of ways and effectively cements ‘retention’ and ‘success’ within a single consolidated concept (Action on Access, 2011).

‘HE students’ in this context include both undergraduate and postgraduate students who fulfil a number of (outreach and ‘in-reach’) roles to support widening access or retention and success objectives. They are usually described as ambassadors, champions, associates, mentors, buddies, guides, peer tutors or by a host of similar titles.

3. Summary

HE students have been used extensively in implementing both widening access and retention and success policies. This synthesis focuses on the sizeable body of material in the Widening Access and Student Retention and Success (WASRS) archive that describes this work. It also draws on relevant evidence from the wider literature.

Key findings of the synthesis are as follows:

- The use of HE students has grown both in scale and breadth over recent years and is now a significant element of widening access programmes, with the student workforce adding to the delivery capacity of widening participation teams across the HE sector.
- HE students take on a variety of roles within widening access. They are also given various titles, with ‘student ambassador’ being the most commonly used term. The number, variety and interchangeability of the titles used means that a student’s precise role and function is not always clear from their title alone.
- HE students can feel uncertain about their role in widening access, particularly in relation to marketing their own institution, managing the behaviour of learners and advising learners on topics that they themselves are unfamiliar with.

- While HE students work with learners of varying ages, the majority of activity appears to be with Year 9/10 and Year 12 learners. However, there is no consensus about the most appropriate year group to benefit from HE student input or where the biggest difference can be made.
- HE students deliver a diverse range of activities, take on a variety of roles and employ different methods. There is no single unifying model of delivery in operation in HEIs.
- Rigorous selection methods, effective training and consistent ongoing support are all important prerequisites for effective delivery and preventing HE students feeling underprepared for the roles they play.
- The primary value of using HE students in the delivery of widening access programmes is the impact that they can have on target learners. The extent of this impact is influenced by the skills, abilities and commitment displayed by HE students and by their ability to form ongoing positive relationships. HE students, and the schools and colleges that they work with, also benefit from their involvement in student-led programmes.
- The bulk of the HE student-led interventions to support student retention and success focus either on orientation, socialisation, motivation and general support (the peer mentoring dimension) or on skills and academic learning (the peer tutoring dimension).
- HE students potentially link with mentees in four key phases of the student life cycle: pre-entry preparation for HE; transition/post-entry induction; experiences in HE; and exit and transition into employment, further study or the wider world.
- Peer mentoring aids student mentees socially, academically and personally in both the transition and post-transition periods. One overview describes it as “a true win-win-win situation” in which new students develop a vital sense of belonging, existing students build new skills and institutions benefit from enhanced student retention.
- HE students’ role as providers of formal structured activities and interventions is merely one strand in the complex web of connections between HE students and the goals of wider access and improved retention and success. More informal, transient or self-generated actions also play key roles.
- Friendships and informal peer support are critical to many students’ decisions to stay in higher education. They contribute significantly to nurturing the sense of belonging that is so important to student retention and success. Supportive peers and positive relationships in the academic sphere also impact significantly on engagement and retention.
- The student workforce is a substantial and undervalued ‘resource’, which can be nurtured in ways that can strengthen institutional commitments and sustain achievements in widening access and improving student retention and success. The synthesis recommends a number of actions for both senior leaders and practitioners within HEIs and also for wider stakeholders.
- This synthesis of the WASRS material, set alongside the wider literature about the deployment of HE students for widening access and enhancing student retention and success purposes, reveals some significant gaps in the evidence and suggests a number of research questions for further exploration.

4. Explanatory context

HE student numbers grew significantly in the first decade of the 21st century. This expansion was accompanied by concerted efforts to increase the proportion of students accessing higher education from under-represented groups and by growing concerns about improving student retention and success. Although in funding and policy terms ‘widening participation’ and ‘retention and success’ were separate entities, on the ground boundaries were often blurred (Dodgson and Bolam, 2002; Storey, 2005). Indeed the later ‘flagship’ iterations of both policy strands – Aimhigher and What Works? Student Retention and Success – prioritised work with learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds and equality groups (HEFCE, 2008; Thomas, 2011).

HE students have been used extensively in implementing both widening participation and retention and success policies. Their deployment increased significantly in the early years of the new century, partly as a result of the expansion of outreach work and the development of Aimhigher partnerships (Austin and Hatt, 2005; Storey, 2005). The 2007 HEFCE-commissioned Aimhigher Area Studies report (EKOS, 2007) and the 2008 *Guidance for Aimhigher Partnerships* (HEFCE, 2008) both highlighted HE students’ involvement in mentoring school and college students.

The scale of outreach activities delivered by HE students, however, increased significantly in 2009 with the implementation of a discrete new national strand of the Aimhigher programme. The large-scale Aimhigher Associates scheme, linked HE students with groups of Year 9 to Year 13 learners in target schools. During 2009-10 it was estimated that “roughly one in every 150 13 to 18 year-olds in English schools, and one in every 650 HE students at publicly funded English HEIs, were involved” (HEFCE, 2011, p. 2).

HE-based mentoring schemes involving selected students working with their peers predated the policy focus on retention and success, but expanded significantly with the strong promotion of this objective. An initial survey of UK universities conducted as part of the What Works? programme (2008-2011) found that 86% offered some form of mentoring programmes, the majority being peer mentoring or peer tutoring schemes (Clark and Andrews, 2011). Although not quantified the cumulative volume of HE student engagement was clearly substantial.

Widening access and student retention and success issues have continued to resonate despite the gradual shift in HE policy discourse from ‘widening participation’ towards issues of ‘fair access’ and ‘social mobility’ (HEFCE, 2008; Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009; BIS, 2010) and the emergence of a new ‘market’ concerns since the publication of the Browne Review (2010).

Aimhigher’s widening participation goals live on in various guises (Grove, 2012) and many HEIs are implementing their access agreement commitments through revised outreach programmes. New players like NUS and third-sector organisations, or existing bodies like the Brightside Trust and the Sutton Trust, have also taken up new roles. However, the future shape, size and scope of widening access activity in HE (including the deployment of the HE student workforce for this purpose) has yet to be adequately defined. The same is true of efforts to improve student retention and success. The increase in tuition fees is likely to lead to a greater emphasis on the quality of the student experience and the extent to which HEIs facilitate the success of their students (Action on Access, 2011). The introduction of Key Information Sets will also make data on retention, completion and employment outcomes more accessible and therefore important. Additionally, as the potential pivot of the new HE system, students may focus increasingly on the quality of their experience and the material and personal benefits that they gain from higher level study (NUS Connect, 2010).

It is anticipated that issues of student retention and success will retain a high institutional profile, alongside that accruing to widening access in an era of closer scrutiny of access agreements by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and continuing political concerns about the stalling of the engines of social mobility. In this

context it is likely that researchers and practitioners will welcome the insights and materials developed by the national programmes covered in the WASRS archive, and that policy makers and institutional leaders will seek out the clear lessons that the accumulated evidence provides.

5. Methods

This synthesis aims to distil the main findings from the WASRS archive about the role of HE students in widening access and improving student retention and success. In addition it seeks to draw on any relevant evidence from the wider literature to contextualise, support or contest those findings.

Identifying and selecting the literature

Potentially relevant practitioner research and evaluative reports in the archive were identified through the search facility on the WASRS landing page using a variety of key terms, singly or in combination. Examples include: ‘mentor’, ‘ambassador’, ‘associate’, ‘role model’, ‘student helper’, ‘champion’, ‘peer mentor’, ‘peer guide’, ‘buddy’, ‘peer tutor’. From this list, relevant material and reports were selected as worthy of further study by conducting full-text searches and/or through a systematic review of executive summary reports.

As a result of these initial searches 85 documents were identified as most relevant to exploring the role that HE students play within widening access and retention and success. Each of the documents was read and analysed against a number of headings, including: role of the HE students; nature of the project, programme or intervention; target groups/beneficiaries; delivery model; impact evidence; and other key findings or lessons to be shared. The nature, quality and quantity of explicit evidence presented about the role of HE students were also assessed in relation to scope, scale and wider relevance. The selection of key reports was a challenging process as the synthesis drew upon a large number of very diverse reports. The documents identified as key reports represent the breadth of material within the archive. They were chosen to illustrate both the key findings and the implications for policy and practice. For project evaluations priority was given to those commissioned externally.

Relevant parts of the wider literature relating to widening access and retention and success were identified by using one-stop search facilities utilising a variety of key academic search databases, such as Academic Search Complete and ERIC. More advanced searches were then undertaken in various combinations using four clusters of search terms relating to: the titles and roles of HE students; specific and generic activities to raise aspirations, inform learners and encourage progression to higher education; specific or generic interventions to improve student retention and success; and broad terms relating to impact, benefits and challenges. Priority was given to material that was cited within the WASRS archive literature or that was closely matched to one or more of these areas and originated in the time period covered in the WASRS archive. Non-UK material was included only when it related directly to the main themes of the synthesis.

Reviewing and analysing the material

The HEA’s investigation of “methodological approaches to reviewing literature” (Rickinson and May, 2009) emphasises that “simple classification” of methodological approaches is often difficult and that review methodologies “need to be adapted and developed for the specific features of individual review projects” (pp. 5-6).

The methodological approach adopted for this synthesis was determined by a couple of key considerations. First, the nature of the WASRS archive – its provenance mainly from specific time-limited national programmes, its varied material (ranging from practical local resources and tools for practitioners to large-scale national evaluative studies) and its largely ‘grey’ tone – suggested an interpretative approach to the material. Second, the likely targets and outputs for the review and the HEA’s intention that the synthesis

will make 'material accessible to a wider audience' and help them 'ground their policy and practice in research' further influenced the methodological perspectives chosen.

A 'literature synthesis' suggests a more active and interpretative approach than a literature review – an informed 'rough guide' to the material rather than a mere log of its content and worth. This chimes with the declared intention to establish and explore the central themes running through the WASRS archive. The relative paucity of directly relevant material also militates against using a 'systematic review' approach or a broadly 'positivist' methodology. For this reason the approach favoured is a more qualitative meta-ethnographical approach, which seeks to interpret and reveal connections between different accounts. It also incorporates some elements of a realist synthesis approach through its focus on particular interventions. Any mixed approach has dangers, but as Boaz *et al.* (2007) have encouragingly noted "there are many ways of doing research reviews successfully" (p. 16).

6. Key research reports

Andrews, J., Clark, R. and Thomas, L. (eds.) (2012) *Compendium of effective practice in higher education retention and success*. Birmingham and York: Aston University and the Higher Education Academy.

This digest is a key product of the What Works? Student Retention & Success national programme funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. It comprises a series of vignettes in the form of short papers describing effective practice and key interventions all focused on improving the student experience in UK universities. These examples are organised into six sections: pre-entry and induction; learning and teaching; friendship and peer support; participation and belonging; using data to enhance the student experience; and strategic change.

Andrews, J. and Clark, R. (2011) *Peer Mentoring Works! How peer mentoring enhances student success in higher education*. Birmingham: Engineering Education Research Group, Aston University.

This research report is "the most in-depth investigation of peer mentoring in higher education conducted within the UK to date" (p. 13). It provides a detailed investigation, using qualitative methodologies, of how peer mentoring works and what it achieves. Its multiple case study design captures the perspectives of around 800 students involved in pastoral peer mentoring and peer tutoring in five varied HEIs in the UK and one in Norway. The research findings provide evidence of the value of peer mentoring in providing support for new students during the transition to university phase and in both the academic and social spheres during the critical first year. The research posits a useful typology of peer mentoring and proposes a new approach to peer mentoring (Transition+) as part of its recommendations.

Carpenter, C. and Kerrigan, M. (2009) *What's the score? An evaluation of the Aimhigher Boys into Higher Education Using Football project*. Leicester: Aimhigher Leicester City & Leicestershire.

This is the first of two reports based on an evaluation of the Aimhigher Leicester City & Leicestershire's Boys into Higher Education using Football project, an initiative developed to increase the aspirations and awareness of higher education among young males in working class areas of Leicestershire. The project trained HE students with an interest in football coaching and placed them as additional coaches in local amateur football clubs. The aim was to build relationships with young players and use the coaching sessions as an informal opportunity to discuss HE. The report seeks to identify the short-term impact of the project and provides a thorough critique of the role that HE students played within it.

Continuum (2010) *Evaluation and sustainability study*. Bournemouth: Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight.

The Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight Area Partnership Committee (APC) commissioned this external evaluation. It focuses on partnership working and activities delivered through the partnership from a range of perspectives, including that of ambassadors, associates and mentors. The report identifies a number of proposals and recommendations in support of the partnership's emerging plan for sustainability. Fieldwork was based upon interviews, focus groups and informal conversations with both staff and students, and was supplemented by a review of documentary evidence. The views of HE students contribute significantly to the research findings.

Lewis, M. and Ritchie, L. (2010) *Evaluation of the South Yorkshire Aimhigher Associates programme 2009-2010*. Sheffield: Aimhigher South Yorkshire

Commissioned and published by Aimhigher South Yorkshire this report reviews how the Aimhigher Associates scheme was delivered in the South Yorkshire area during the first year of operation. The report seeks to identify the impact of the scheme on learners and to identify improvements that could be made to the project for subsequent years. The research took a qualitative approach using focus groups and semi-structured interviews with 46 pupils and eight staff.

Momin, R., Hewlett, K. and Mueller, S. (2010) *Sir John Cass's Foundation London Ambassador Scheme for Learners with Disabilities Evaluation Report*. London: London East Thames Gateway.

This report provides an evaluation of the London Ambassador Scheme, which was designed to recruit university students with disabilities to deliver outreach activities to disabled learners in inner London. It seeks to assess both the short- and long-term effectiveness of the scheme and to make recommendations in order to further develop and disseminate any identified good practice. The report is based on evaluation with 65 learners, 26 parents/guardians, 25 teaching staff and two ambassadors.

Porter, S. (2010) *A sporting chance: boys into higher education using football project. Report of the evaluation of the second phase*. Leicester: Aimhigher Leicester City & Leicestershire.

This is the second evaluation of the Aimhigher Leicestershire City & Leicestershire's Boys into Higher Education using Football project. It examines the impact of the project but also seeks to review the recommendations made in the first report. Drawing on research with learners, parents, HE student coaches and project co-ordination staff the report identifies a range of positive outcomes from the project, including the beneficial impact of the student coaches on the perceptions of the young footballers.

Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

This report provides a comprehensive synthesis of key messages, findings, implications and recommendations from the seven What Works? Student Retention & Success national programme projects (2008-2011). It also includes case studies of effective institutional practices and interventions and suggestions of how HEIs can reflect on and learn from the programme. The report places "a strong sense of belonging", nurtured through mainstream activities that foster student engagement, at the heart of successful retention and success strategies. It outlines the contributions of peer mentoring and other interventions (many situated in the academic sphere) that help to develop the supportive peer relations and friendships that often underpin a student's sense of belonging. However, the precise intervention or activity is less important than the way it is offered and its intended outcome.

Ylonen, A. (2010) The role of student ambassadors (SAs) in higher education: an uneasy association between autonomy and accountability. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 34 (3), 97-104.

This paper examines the findings from research into the views of student ambassadors and student ambassador co-ordinators in a student ambassador scheme delivered through an Aimhigher partnership in south-east London. It focuses in particular on why students wish to become ambassadors, the relationship between students and learners and what students perceive to be the impact of the scheme. The research draws on in-depth interviews with 11 ambassadors and two co-ordinators. Ylonen identifies many 'complexities and tensions' within the role, which it is argued need addressing primarily through improved selection and training.

7. Synthesis of key findings

7.1. Introduction

This synthesis draws upon a number of practice-based accounts and evaluative research reports from the WASRS archive that describe the significant contribution made by HE students to a range of major widening participation initiatives. It also trawls the substantial research produced by the What Works? national programme to draw out both the formal and informal roles that HE students play in different institutions' approaches to improving retention and success.

Significantly, the wider literature rarely touches explicitly upon the involvement of HE students in either domain: engaging with young people externally to raise aspirations, inform them about university life and support their attainment; or working with peers and fellow students internally to support their retention and eventual success. In relation to widening access, for example, Ylonen (2011) laments the "lack of research and literature on student ambassadors ... as a result relatively little is known about the work of SAs and impact of the scheme" (p. 97). While the body of evidence on the impact of HE students in widening participation is growing, most of it focuses specifically on mentoring relationships and therefore does not reflect the breadth of roles that HE students undertake.

Similarly, the "voluminous" and expanding literature on student retention and success, both in the UK and internationally (Jones, 2008; Troxel, 2010), contains little explicit discussion about the role of HE students. References to the topic are usually located at the intersection of three bodies of research relating to widening participation, retention and success, and mentoring.

The industrial scale of this research material and the paucity of explicit connections between some of these discrete bodies of work (Thomas, 2011) mean that the wider literature is dipped into only when it connects strongly to the synthesis theme and archive findings. The same applies to existing literature reviews such as those relating to: widening participation (Gorard *et al.*, 2006); the first-year experience (Harvey and Drew, 2006b); student retention and success (Jones, 2008; Troxel 2010); inclusive learning and teaching (Hocking, 2010); and mentoring and Aimhigher (Storey, 2005). These map out much relevant territory and offer some important general insights, but rarely address the synthesis theme directly.

The sub-sections below explore the two aspects of the theme separately. This approach reflects not just the demarcation lines between distinct bodies of research, but also the current reality of delivery in HEIs and the different sources of the WASRS archive material. However, the discussion examines HE students' roles in widening access and in improving retention and success by addressing common themes – deployment, roles, support infrastructure and impact – and highlights any connections between the two strands.

7.2. Overview of the deployment of HE students

Widening access

The WASRS archive is a rich source of descriptive and evaluative accounts of the use of HE students within widening access programmes. Much of this material is 'grey' and the vast majority presents the results of small-scale project evaluations. However, the archive does include a number of externally commissioned research reports and the occasional piece of academic literature. The archive material can be divided into two broad categories: that which focus entirely on the impact of the student-learner relationship (for example, evaluations of mentoring programmes); and that which examine and assess broader issues but refer to the use of HE students (for example, evaluations of the wider Aimhigher programme). Unsurprisingly the former provides a greater depth of analysis.

The wider literature charts how the use of HE students for widening access purposes has grown in scale and scope over recent years (Storey, 2005; Hatt and Baxter, 2003; Gartland *et al.*, 2010). Widening Participation (WP) teams across the HE sector have increasingly come to rely on the student workforce to deliver HEI visit days, summer schools and curriculum-based activities (Ylonen, 2011). The archive material confirms that HE students are now central to the delivery of a wide range of interventions and have become accepted as key "operational staff" (Continuum, 2010). Ylonen (2010) characterises this change as follows: "Originally SAs mainly helped with campus tours for prospective students – the current scope of the scheme is much extended from its more humble beginnings, however. SAs now undertake multiple complex tasks" (p. 97). The benefits of using HE students within widening access activities are clearly identified by archive literature. Aspire (n.d.) highlights the advantages HE students have over other WP staff, describing students as both innovative and cost effective.

The archive literature also supports the notion that the changes witnessed over the last decade are due largely to the development of Aimhigher partnerships and specifically to the National Mentoring Scheme and the National Aimhigher Associates scheme. The archive contains little analysis of the National Mentoring Scheme. However, some very detailed reviews of the Associates scheme are contained within evaluation reports commissioned or undertaken by a number of Aimhigher partnerships.

While the archive indicates that HE students work with learners of varying ages from primary school children upwards (Porter, 2011), the vast majority of activity appears to be with Year 9/10 and Year 12 learners. HE students are rarely used in activities aimed specifically at mature learners, although this support may be accessed through programmes delivered in the FE sector (Thompson, 2010) and there is some evidence of targeted work for mature students in the wider literature (Storey, 2005). The intended target group may also influence the selection of HE students, as for example in the case of disabled HE students working with learners with similar disabilities in school and colleges (Momin *et al.*, 2010). Similar practices can be seen with looked-after children (University of Liverpool, 2010b) and vocational learners (The Arts University College at Bournemouth, 2009).

In most cases HE students work with learners at their own HEI campus or at the learner's school or college. However, there are a few instances of work within community settings. A well-documented example is the Boys into Higher Education through Football project, which built on links with local amateur football clubs (Carpenter and Kerrigan, 2009). Here, and in the more usual HEI or school-based settings, HE students generally worked on their own. However, the archive literature also contains examples of HE students collaborating to deliver group mentoring sessions as part of the Aimhigher Associates programme. These appear to have been valued by recipients (Copley, 2010).

Although the material in the archive allows for a relatively comprehensive analysis of the role of HE students within widening access, much of it describes and evaluates individual projects. There is little evidence of a strategic approach by HEIs and other bodies involved in this area of work.

Retention and success

In contrast to the richness and variety suggested in the preceding section, explicit material in the WASRS archive on the size and nature of HE students' deployment in retention and success interventions is less common, but more sharply focused. The What Works? national programme reports, particularly those focusing on peer mentoring or on 'pre-entry information and preparation' activities, provide the main source of information. These analyse the activities of current HE students with their peers or with prospective (soon to be enrolled) students.

The ubiquity of peer mentoring is indicated by a Peer Mentoring Works! survey, which identified 340 broad programmes across 159 UK universities, with two-thirds being classified as peer mentoring or peer tutoring (Clark and Andrews, 2011). The survey also found that approximately a third of programmes were targeted at specific groups, including: "international students, disabled students, WP students, BME students, mature students, year zero/foundation year [students], females in technology, care leavers ... [and those with] vocational qualifications". Action on Access (2011) notes that "peer mentoring and other peer support schemes" are increasingly featuring in universities' widening participation strategic assessments (WPSAs) "as an alternative way of providing students with access to support and engagement" (p. 8). The extent of student involvement in peer mentoring interventions can be intimated from the 492 mentors operating within a single institution, albeit on a well-established university-wide scheme (Andrews *et al.*, 2012).

7.3. The roles that HE students play in widening access and success and retention

7.3.1. The role of HE students in widening access

An overview

Historically HE students have taken on a variety of roles within widening access. Most commonly they are referred to as 'student ambassadors', 'mentors' and (Aimhigher) 'Associates', but other titles are also noted in the archive material, including 'advocates' and 'student coaches'. Although not a title as such, the term 'role model' is consistently applied to HE students both within the archive material (Roberts and Weston, 2011; Kerrigan and Church, 2011; Thompson, 2010) and in the wider literature (Storey, 2005; Gartland *et al.*, 2010). Ylonen (2010) summarises the role of student ambassadors in relation to raising the aspirations and attainment of targeted young people as follows:

SAs undertake both short-term and longer-term work through one-off or sustained activities, which include helping out on Aimhigher events such as summer schools and going to schools to give talks or to mentor individuals or groups of children. (p. 97)

The work undertaken by HE students in support of widening access often focuses on achieving a wide range of objectives, with many projects and programmes attempting to deliver on multiple outcomes. For example, the *Handbook for Aimhigher Associates* lists an impressive nine benefits to learners arising from participating in the scheme, ranging from "help in combating underachievement" to "support and assistance in making successful educational transitions" (Aimhigher Associates, 2010). Much of the literature in the archive refers primarily to a desire to increase learners' aspirations, knowledge, skills and attitudes or a combination of these.

Terminology and role definition

Although the research identified a number of different titles, 'student ambassador' is frequently used as a catch-all term to describe HE students working on outreach activities. This and other titles are sometimes

used interchangeably within the same project, leading occasionally to a lack of clarity within the literature about students' precise purpose and function. Some HE students also take on a number of different roles within widening access, for example acting as an ambassador for HEI visit days while being employed as a mentor or Associate.

This use of varying terminology and the employment of students to work in a number of different roles at the same time are recurring themes in the WASRS archive and also in the wider literature (Gartland *et al.*, 2010). The archive material offers differing views about the extent of role clarity. For example, Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight's evaluation and sustainability report comments that: "Without exception, all of the respondents clearly articulated their role or multiple roles ... This clarity of purpose is in part due to the quality of training" (Continuum, 2010, p. 55). By contrast Ylonen (2010) explores the 'tensions' within the student ambassador role and concludes "that it became clear that at times SAs did not have a clear understanding about what a particular job that they had been called for entailed" (p. 100).

Defining role boundaries

Material in the archive identifies issues around a student's role in relation to the promotion of HE and specifically in the marketing of their own institution. The wider literature notes that student ambassador schemes are used both to widen access and to support marketing activities, such as general university open days (Gartland *et al.*, 2010). Given that HE students often take on multiple roles, it is perhaps not surprising that HE students are not always clear about what is being asked of them. This issue is explored in Ylonen's (2010) article in which some students describe a "marketing mentality" among other ambassadors (p. 102).

The *Handbook for Aimhigher Associates* (2010) advises that: "As an associate attending university you will be perceived by your learners as a good and impartial role model" (p. 38). However, a number of reports within the archive indicate that some Associates sought to promote rather than to inform. For example, feedback from one learner focus group "suggested [that] Associates were biased to their university and this should be stopped" (Copley, 2010, p. 23).

Equally evidence within the archive suggests that HE students are sometimes unclear about their role in relation to discipline and the behaviour of the young learners that they work with. Much of the literature refers to students as role models but, as noted in various places (Aimhigher Associates, 2010; Gartland *et al.*, 2010; Ylonen, 2011), they are frequently required to manage their learners' behaviour.

The nationally produced Aimhigher Associates scheme materials offer a comprehensive description of an Associate's role. This focuses largely on being a role model and motivating/supporting young people to realise their potential. There is no direct reference to the provision of IAG (information, advice and guidance). However, in the HEFCE-funded analysis of participation in the Associates scheme (HEFCE, 2011), the scheme is described as delivering "information, advice and guidance on the full range of HE available" (p. 3). This discrepancy may well reflect the difference between what the scheme first set out to achieve and what was actually delivered. However, it is apparent within the archive material and the wider literature that the role of HE students as an adviser to young people can be problematic. Ylonen (2010) notes 'tensions' and 'complexities' and reports some students' concerns that their own knowledge did not allow them to provide accurate advice to learners. Meanwhile Gartland *et al.* (2010) argue that using HE students as 'careers advisors' has clear implications for training.

Improved training is also a key recommendation of the two evaluations of the Aimhigher Leicester City & Leicestershire Boys into Higher Education using Football project (Carpenter and Kerrigan, 2009; Porter, 2010). The reports similarly emphasise the importance of a clearly defined role for the student coaches and point to some of the difficulties of operating within an unusual dispersed delivery structure.

Delivery models

The literature reveals the diverse nature of the activities that HE students can deliver as part of widening access programmes. This includes: the provision of campus tours during HEI visits (Porter, 2010); supervision at campus-based events and summer schools (University of Liverpool, 2010a); workshops/presentations/Q&A sessions at campus- and school-based events (Church, 2011); one-to-one/small group and e-mentoring sessions focused on attainment and/or progression (Thompson, 2010); academic support at subject-based activities (Kerrigan and Carpenter, 2008); and providing a story of their own progression as part of case studies and publications (Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight, 2010). There are also examples of HE students supporting young people through a joint interest in non-subject-based activities, such as debating (Hingston, 2010) and football (Carpenter and Kerrigan, 2009).

Archival evidence of the variety of roles that HE students play and the different methods employed confirms Ylonen's finding that "there is no one model of the SA scheme in place in UK HE institutions" (2011, p. 97). However, there are examples of national programmes that set out to deliver interventions using a single model across the sector, most notably the Aimhigher Associates scheme. The archive is a rich source of material evaluating its effectiveness, with detailed accounts of how the scheme was delivered and the impact on both learners and the Associates themselves. These reports indicate that despite the existence of a clear national model, there were considerable variations in the nature of the programmes delivered, particularly in relation to the content, number and length of sessions provided (Lewis and Ritchie, 2010; Thompson, 2010). Indeed, the literature occasionally suggests that the Aimhigher Associates delivery model was difficult to implement in practice (Copley, 2010).

7.3.2. The role of HE students in retention and success

Formal roles

Terminology and typology: peer mentors and peer tutors

The bulk of formal activities delivered by HE students focus on either the peer mentoring dimension (orientation, socialisation, motivation and general support) or the peer tutoring dimension (skills and academic learning) (Colvin and Ashman, 2010; Andrews *et al.*, 2012). In practice, however, the boundaries between the two are often blurred (Foster *et al.*, 2011; Andrews *et al.*, 2012). The Peer Mentoring Works! survey of UK HEIs (Clark and Andrews, 2011) logs the use of at least 15 different terms to describe peer mentoring and tutoring activities. The wider project report (Andrews and Clark, 2011) also comments on the confusion that unclear terminology can cause. Further complexity is added by the fact that various roles that can be encompassed within a single descriptive term (Colvin and Ashman, 2010). Not surprisingly, the 'Final Typology of Peer Mentoring' put forward as a key project output of the Peer Mentoring Works! main report (Andrews and Clark, 2011) seeks to locate much current practice within a comprehensive grid. Variables covered include: stage in the student life cycle; factors such as intensity, frequency and duration; the form and focus of interventions; the extent of volition and targeting; and the locus of responsibility and organisation.

Delivery

The archive material indicates that HE students are deployed at different phases of the student life cycle.

- *Pre-entry preparation for HE:* current students are mobilised here to help prepare new entrants for the academic demands, the social dimensions and the 'culture shock' of HE study. This may be via bridging or transition activities, such as summer programmes, orientation days, skills development workshops, e-mentoring (e.g. Andrews *et al.*, 2012; Thomas and Jamieson-Ball, 2011). The What Works? final report recommends that "pre-entry and induction activities should have a range of

functions, but in particular they should facilitate students to build social relationships with current and new students and members of staff” (Thomas, 2012b, p. 17). Gazeley and Aynsley (2012) cover this phase in more detail in their HEA synthesis.

- *Transition/post-entry induction*: Much of the wider retention literature affirms the importance of effective induction and transition support, particularly for first-generation HE students (McInnis *et al.*, 2000; Yorke and Thomas, 2003; Harvey and Drew, 2006a). The challenge of transition is recognised by many as being particularly acute for particular groups of new HE students. For instance Quinn *et al.* (2005) talk about the “academic culture shock” experienced by working-class early leavers. Particular challenges are also noted for part-time or commuting students (Hounsell and Hounsell, 2007) or those with qualifications other than A-levels (Hatt and Baxter, 2003).
- Induction is seen as being as a critical phase in developing the academic confidence and the cultural and social relationships that help create the ‘sense of belonging’ so critical to students’ continuation (NAO, 2007). The What Works? evidence consistently echoes this finding and highlights the impact on retention and success of induction activities and interventions that promote socialisation and the formation of friendship groups (Thomas, 2012b; Cashmore *et al.*, 2011). The *Compendium of effective practice in higher education retention and success* (Andrews *et al.*, 2012) also showcases a number of peer mentoring schemes that have transition as a prime focus. However, while there is plenty of incidental evidence of the substantial involvement of HE students in the delivery of induction activities and processes (e.g. Andrews *et al.*, 2012; Thomas, 2012b), their proactive role is not foregrounded in the archive or wider literature.
- *Experiences in HE*: The first year is seen as a key vulnerable time in the wider literature (Yorke and Thomas, 2003; Kuh *et al.*, 2005; Troxel and Cutright, 2008) and as the critical period for ‘doubting’ and non-continuation (Foster *et al.*, 2011). During this phase the focus of peer activity often shifts to the provision of academic support with more experienced students “helping fellow students ‘how to learn’ at a higher level” (Thomas, 2012b, p. 25) or offering distinct bespoke support and advice such as that provided by the writing mentors scheme (Andrews and Clark, 2011). As ever, though, the boundaries between mentoring and tutoring are fluid (Cashmore *et al.*, 2011). Indeed the ‘Transition+ model’, a key output of the Peer Mentoring Works! programme, brings these two strands and the different phases together within a holistic model (Andrews *et al.*, 2012).
- *Exit and ‘out-duction’: progression into employment, further study or the wider world*: Mentoring by alumni and recent graduates is referred to only briefly in one *Compendium* case study (Andrews *et al.*, 2012, p. 86). However, it has a potential role in the final stage of a learner’s journey – successful completion and progression beyond first degree to employment and/or further education and training, including postgraduate study.

Informal roles

HE students’ role as providers of formal structured activities and interventions is merely one strand in the complex web of connections between HE students and the goal of improved retention and success. More informal, incidental or self-generated actions are also acknowledged as playing a role (Foster *et al.*, 2011).

Evidence from the What Works? programme (Thomas and Jamieson-Ball, 2011) supports the findings from earlier research that indicated ‘friendship and peer support’ are critical to many students’ decisions to stay in higher education (Thomas, 2002; Wilcox *et al.*, 2005; Stuart, 2006). Indeed this theme features prominently in both the programme’s final report and the first edition of the *Compendium of Effective Practice* (Thomas, 2012b; Andrews *et al.*, 2012). The HERE project (Foster *et al.*, 2011) identifies ‘support from family and friends’ as the most frequently cited ‘reason to stay’ for ‘doubters’ (those considering leaving HE), easily outstripping institutional support, crucial though this is in individual cases. Friends made at university are

particularly important. The project found that students doubt for primarily academic reasons, but social factors are generally what cause them to remain. Other evidence, from What Works? projects (e.g. McCary *et al.*, 2011; Boyle *et al.*, 2011) and an Aimhigher-funded single HEI study of barriers to retention (Lane and Wilkinson, 2011), confirms the importance of friendship and social integration in helping students to remain.

Friends and peers also figure in accounts of informal interactions in the academic domain and in the creation of what Tinto (2003) calls “learning communities”. A What Works? study of different approaches to supporting students through study advice and personal development (Morey and Robbins, 2011) cites friends and peers as “an important informal source of support” and as an aid to transition. McCary *et al.*’s (2011) research into the impact of non-academic student advisers and ‘traditional’ academic personal tutors on retention reveals the unexpectedly significant role that friends and family (some feasibly former or fellow students) played in advising and supporting students on a range of academic and personal matters. Students also develop confidence as HE learners through friendship and peer support (Foster *et al.*, 2011; Andrews and Clark, 2011). Students’ relationships with their peers similarly figure prominently in a study of “dispositions to stay and to succeed” (Harding and Thompson, 2011). This identifies “guidance in learning from family and social networks” as a significant component. It also highlights the importance of supportive peers and notes that “when relationships are positive, students will consult each other rather than lecturers, pooling expertise, using each other to assess the standard of work required and teaching each other. Such relationships are associated with retention, enhanced experiences and success” (p. 41).

The importance of “interventions ... situated in the academic sphere” (Thomas, 2012a, p. 8) is likewise highlighted in the *Good practice in student retention* final report, which recommends “providing local and mature students with opportunities for group interaction in a context within which they are able to recognise academic benefits for themselves in investing academically and socially with their peers” (Boyle *et al.*, 2011, p. 94). The report emphasises the importance of “integrating social elements within an academic setting” (p. 42) as a means of building supportive peer relations. This echoes plans in one UK institution to develop a ‘non-formal’ mentoring scheme by piloting the use of ‘peer guides’ (peer mentors) to facilitate peer learning groups (Andrews *et al.*, 2012). It also suggests something of the fluidity of the boundaries between less and more formal interventions and the complex mix of intentional, incidental and ‘fostered’ interactions that can promote student engagement and success in HE.

Collective role

As well as the role taken by individuals in informal networks and activities and through acting as peer mentors or guides, the archive material also reveals glimpses of the involvement of the collective student body in retention and success initiatives. Students’ unions are noted as active partners and researchers in at least two of the What Works? programmes (Foster *et al.*, 2011; Cashmore *et al.*, 2011). Their longstanding work to support retention through their advice role is also acknowledged in another study (Morey and Robbins, 2011). Likewise the *Compendium* (Andrews *et al.*, 2012) showcases a jointly delivered induction week and the Student Academic Partners scheme – a university’s partnership with its students’ union that explicitly seeks to enhance student engagement and success through jointly devised mini-projects to develop specific aspects of learning and teaching practice. These are perhaps hints that this role will grow in the new HE environment.

Overlapping roles?

Material in the archive confirms commonplace anecdotal evidence that student ambassadors and peer mentors are often recruited from the same pool and are sometimes the same people. One *Compendium* report, for example, makes a passing reference to “super-engaged” peer mentors also working as ambassadors at internal and external events. Another account notes how ‘peer guides’ also help with open days (Andrews *et al.*, 2012). However, both the WASRS archive and the wider literature are largely silent

on possible connections between the two worlds of widening access (ambassadors/associates) and retention and success (peer mentors/tutors). This area of overlap is ripe for further investigation.

7.4. Establishing a suitable infrastructure – issues of selection, training and support

7.4.1. Establishing a suitable infrastructure – widening access

Recruitment and selection of HE students

The relatively sparse material in the archive on the recruitment and selection processes used by HEIs or Aimhigher partnerships emphasises the need for rigorous methods. Porter (2010), for example, in the second of two evaluations of the Aimhigher Boys into Higher Education using Football project, notes the importance of effective selection processes when discussing learners' negative feedback about individual student coaches. The fullest description of the recruitment process is provided by the Birmingham & Solihull Associates Scheme Evaluation (Thompson, 2010). This outlines the six stages that HE students must go through before starting their Associates training, but contains no discussion of how effective each of these stages was in selecting the student workforce. Aspire (n.d.) also provides a detailed guide and a range of resources to support practitioners in the selection of HE students working as ambassadors.

Although the need for rigorous selection methods is not contested in the archive, Ylonen (2010) raises some important questions about the skills and qualities needed by the HE students employed in the role of student ambassador. Following analysis of interview data with those already employed as student ambassadors he notes:

... a contradiction between what the interviewee SAs thought constitutes 'a good' student ambassador and the underlying reasons for many of the interviewees wanting to become part of the scheme. Therefore, while commonly qualities like outspokenness, confidence, enthusiasm and communication skills were emphasised as something that 'good' student ambassadors should possess, it also emerged that many of the SAs themselves had been attracted to the role in the hope that it would increase their self-confidence and communication skills. (p. 99)

The review concludes that "asking for a specific type of SA recruit can exclude people who might potentially have a lot to offer, but who fail to apply because they do not see themselves fitting in with the image of the ideal SA" (p. 99). Interestingly, the same qualities that the students used to describe a 'good' student ambassador are those cited by learners when asked what makes a good role model (Lewis and Ritchie, 2010).

Training of HE students

The archive literature frequently acknowledges the importance of effective training for HE students to deliver their role. The national materials developed in support of the Aimhigher Associates scheme provide a rigorous model for area-based Associate projects to follow. In particular the National Training Standard for the Aimhigher Associates scheme (Aimhigher Associates, n.d.(b)) details a core competencies framework, a set of national training standards and a national training programme. Evaluations of area-based Associate projects confirm the use of the national model and indicate that on the whole Associates felt well trained for their role (Thompson, 2010; Kerrigan and Church, 2011).

Other sections of the archive highlight concerns over the quality of training and make suggestions on how it might be improved. For example, Carpenter and Kerrigan (2009) emphasise the need for detailed and consistent training, as opposed to 'briefing' sessions. An evaluation of the same project one year on

indicates that, although improvements have been made, some student coaches felt that the training was not as effective as it could be (Porter, 2010 p. 21).

The archive literature suggests that HE students may on occasions feel underprepared for the roles they play and that their training “had not focused on the reality of being a student ambassador” (Ylonen, 2010 p. 100). They can also find themselves lacking the knowledge they need to deliver their role effectively (Copley, 2010). In the words of one HE student: “With a lot of the work you kind of get trained on the job because each event is different” (Ylonen, 2010 p. 100).

Ongoing support for HE students

If the view that HE students are “trained on the job” (Ylonen, 2010) is an accurate one then the need for continuing support is paramount to ensure that HE students are able to continue to improve their practice. Again the national Aimhigher Associates scheme materials emphasise the requirement for ongoing support. One Aimhigher partnership area developed a system in which experienced Associates were recruited and trained to act as ‘peer supporters’ to new Associates or those experiencing challenges in their role (Aimhigher Greater Manchester, 2011) and this is taken further in *Aspire* (n.d.) which provides examples of how existing student ambassadors can be used to train other ambassadors.)

7.4.2. Establishing a suitable infrastructure – retention and success

Recruitment, selection, training and support for HE students

Although the archive contains little explicit material that details processes for the recruitment, selection and support of HE students working to improve retention and success, the broad shape of existing, effective practice is discernible from the outlines in a few key publications.

Recruitment processes are alluded to in a number of peer mentoring vignettes in the *What Works? Compendium* (Andrews et al., 2012). These vary from open online application and initial vetting by departmental co-ordinators to large-scale central recruitment. A number of accounts highlight the recruitment of mentors from previous years’ mentees. This recruitment approach, potentially giving rise to the type of a self-renewing programme noted in the *Compendium*, is recommended in the *Peer Mentoring Works!* final report (Andrews and Clark, 2011).

A number of different but compatible models of training are alluded to in the *Compendium* case studies. One refers to standardised training provided by a central co-ordinator, another to compulsory and bespoke training, a third to mentors attending “an in-depth training session to equip them with relevant knowledge, skills and experience in the role of a mentor” (Andrews et al., 2012, p. 81). The content of training is not specified apart from a single reference to the importance of referral onto other sources of help where appropriate.

Additional support for mentors is provided by various means. Two case studies report that mentors receive a comprehensive guide to their role and other supporting information. Additional workshops and termly review meetings are scheduled in one well-established scheme. The support provided by a central co-ordinator is also mentioned in a number of accounts.

The *Peer Mentoring Works!* report’s overarching recommendations unsurprisingly highlight the importance of rigorous mentor selection and training and of the “availability of on-going support (if needed)” (Andrews and Clark, 2011, p. 13). The ‘ideal’ Transition+ Peer Mentoring model includes suggestions that peer mentors should be selected and trained in the previous term (term 3) to allow pre-entry as well as induction contact with potential mentees. Training should include in-depth discussion of ethics and confidentiality and mentors should have access to support via an identified member of staff. The materials produced by the

project include a range of practical resources about operating a peer mentor scheme, including an *Institutional Manual* with a recruitment toolkit and training pack (Clark *et al.*, 2011).

7.5. The impact of HE student involvement on widening access and retention and success

7.5.1. Impact on widening access

Impact on learners

The range of activities delivered by HE students can be viewed as falling into two distinct categories: those embedded into other widening access activities, for example delivery of question and answer sessions at campus visits; and those in which HE students deliver activities/projects in their own right, during which the learner-student interaction is the central focus, for example mentoring programmes. It is clear from archival material that both approaches can have a role to play within widening access programmes, but the clearest evidence of impact comes from material that describes and evaluates intensive activities based upon a sustained relationship between student and learner.

Literature from the archive indicates that relationships with HE students can provide learners with a role model from which to develop more accurate perceptions of students and challenge negative stereotypes (Porter, 2010). As Church and Kerrigan (2011) note:

Current higher education student ambassadors ... have an important role to play in raising target students' perceptions of HE students. Talking to undergraduates ... can help break down the negative connotations ('snobs' 'geeks', etc.) amongst peer groups that may be associated with university students. (p. 5)

In addition to developing more accurate perceptions of HE and its students, the archival evidence confirms the widely held view that HE students are a valuable source of 'hot' information for learners with no family background in HE (Gartland *et al.*, 2010). By working alongside HE students young learners develop a clearer understanding of HE (Church and Kerrigan, 2010). In particular there appear to be improvements in learners' understanding of entry processes and student life (Thompson, 2010). Intensive relationships with HE students also increase learners' focus on their future and improve their ability to make informed decisions (Church and Kerrigan, 2010).

A range of material indicates that a growth in confidence is a key outcome for learners from the student-learner relationship, albeit sometimes an unexpected outcome (Carpenter and Kerrigan, 2009). In particular, there are references to an increase in learners' belief that they can achieve their goals and study at higher levels (Church, 2011; The Arts University College at Bournemouth, 2009; Thompson, 2010). Improved motivation is also routinely reported, with evidence that learners are better geared to succeed in their current studies as a result of their relationship with HE students (Church and Kerrigan, 2010; The Arts University College at Bournemouth, 2009). Reports from both learners and staff suggest that increases in motivation lead to improvements in attainment, for example higher grades in coursework/homework (Roberts and Weston, 2011).

Although identifying cause and effect is notoriously complex and tracking the progression of learners is resource intensive, some evidence within the archive indicates that learners who had received support from HE students showed increased rates of retention and progression. For example, a study of national diploma arts students found that those who had been mentored during Year 1 had a much higher rate of progression to Year 2 than those who had not received mentoring (The Arts University College at Bournemouth, 2009). Likewise an evaluation of the Sir John Cass London Ambassador Scheme (Momin *et al.*, 2010), which looked at the proportion of learners who remained in education, indicated that the project had been a success. An evaluation of mentoring at the University of Hertfordshire similarly found a significantly higher HE

progression rate for learners mentored under the Aimhigher Hertfordshire scheme (Roberts and Weston, 2011). The evidence generally points towards a long-term impact on target learners.

The archive literature contains plenty of discussion but no consensus about the most appropriate year group to benefit from HE student input or where the biggest difference can be made. Thompson's analysis of the impact of the Aimhigher Associates scheme on learners in different year groups (2010) found a spike in Year 10 learners planning/considering going into HE, a lesser increase for Year 12 and a decrease for Year 11 and put forward plausible 'external' explanations for these inconsistencies. The broad thrust of much of the material is that learners benefit most from "flexible and personalised outreach programmes" (Momin *et al.*, 2010, p. 27) that are tailored to meet their needs, a finding confirmed elsewhere in the archive (Aimhigher Associates, 2010; Kerrigan and Church, 2010).

Factors affecting the likelihood of impact on learners

The skills, abilities and commitment of the HE students and their ability to form positive relationships with target learners emerge as key factors in explaining extent of the impact on learners. The archive is awash with positive comments about the crucial role that HE students play, the close relationships that they develop and the inspiring effect that they have on learners. The archive material emphasises the importance of similarities between HE students and the learners that they work with, both in relation to age and background; but staff in schools and colleges also highlight more general qualities such as the 'approachability' and the 'empathy' displayed by HE students (Lewis and Ritchie, 2010).

Matching of learners and HE students

Despite the seeming importance of the similarity in backgrounds and ages between HE students and the learners they support, general references to matching processes in the archive are brief (Lewis and Ritchie, 2010; The Arts University College at Bournemouth, 2009) and offer no analysis of whether processes used worked effectively. There are some suggestions within the archive material that matching processes may be based on logistics rather than agreed criteria (Lewis and Ritchie, 2010). The exception is often where HE students have been specifically selected to reflect the background of learners and to provide support for a specific target group rather than for a broader widening participation/Aimhigher cohort. Examples of this approach can be seen in relation to disability (Momin *et al.*, 2010), gender (Porter, 2010) and looked-after children (University of Liverpool, 2010b).

Learners' evaluations sometimes indicate that background and age make a difference as to whether they perceive a HE student to be a role model and reveal a desire on occasions for mentors to be seen as "a mini me ... an older version of me" (Lewis and Ritchie, 2010). The literature also suggests that learners would often like to be matched more effectively and that their preference is to be linked to a HE student with similar career/subject interests (Copley, 2010; Lewis and Ritchie, 2010).

The issue of selecting HE students on the basis of personal characteristics is particularly important, not least due to employment legislation. The *Manual of Guidance* for the Aimhigher Associates scheme (Aimhigher Associates, n.d(a)) lists ten criteria (including gender, racial or ethnic origins and social background) that can help inform matching. However, there is no explicit reference to age and no guidance as to which criteria are most important for which learners.

The issue of similarity between HE students and learners is highlighted within wider literature. Gartland *et al.* (2010), for example, argue that shared 'racial and gender identities' are important in establishing effective relationships, enabling student ambassadors "to quickly establish close working relationships with YSs [younger students] when conversations about YSs' future plans and dreams were held" (p. 6).

Although the literature generally points to instances where positive relationships have developed and learning has taken place, it also contains examples of unsuccessful connections where HE students have failed to meet learner or staff expectations. These include instances where students lacked the confidence to deliver (Copley, 2010; Lewis and Ritchie, 2010), failed to attend for sessions or attended late (Porter, 2010; Copley, 2010; Lewis and Ritchie, 2010) or were unprepared/unorganised (Lewis and Ritchie, 2010). However, other reasons external to the HE students are also cited for the failure of relationships, for example cultural differences and unfamiliar accents (Lewis and Ritchie, 2010).

Benefit to HE students

A substantial body of evidence both within the archive and the wider literature (Ylonen, 2011; Austin and Hatt, 2005) suggests that HE students gain significantly from their involvement in widening access programmes. HE students regularly report a range of benefits, which include: the development of transferable skills to enhance their employability (Continuum, 2010; Ylonen, 2010); the growth of personal confidence (Copley, 2010); the opportunity to explore and reinforce career choices (Kerrigan and Church, 2010); the gaining of a useful source of additional income (Porter, 2010; Ylonen, 2010; Continuum, 2010) and the positive feeling that they are doing something worthwhile (Thompson, 2010; Ylonen, 2010; Continuum, 2010).

Benefits to others

There are clear messages in the material that HEIs benefit significantly from the involvement of their students within widening access. As noted earlier, students augment the widening participation workforce and provide additional capacity to deliver events. They can also play a valuable role in evaluating widening participation activities by providing insights into the impact of a programme on learners and making recommendations for future improvements (Continuum, 2010; Porter, 2010; Thompson, 2010).

Schools and colleges benefit not just from increases in individual learners' attainment and aspirations but also more broadly. For example, those participating in mentoring/Aimhigher Associate schemes report enhanced staff knowledge and understanding of HE and related support mechanisms through the involvement of HE students (Momin *et al.*, 2010). In addition young learners are found to have shared their newly acquired enthusiasm and HE knowledge with their peers (Church and Kerrigan, 2010). The physical presence of HE students in the school also helps to raise the profile of widening access initiatives internally (Kerrigan and Church, 2011).

7.5.2. Impact on retention and success

Impact on student mentees

The substantial impact of the HE student 'workforce', in relation to improving student retention and success, informs much of the discussion of peer mentoring schemes in the archive. It is explicit in the very title of the Peer Mentoring Works! project, an in-depth analysis of students' perceptions of peer mentoring. The study found that peer mentoring aids student mentees socially, academically and personally in both the transition and post-transition phases. The findings back up the project's hypothesis that "peer support impacts positively on students' experiences by engendering a greater sense of belonging both socially and academically" (Andrews *et al.*, 2012, p. 74). The case studies in the *What Works? Compendium* (Andrews *et al.*, 2012) indicate something of the wealth of evidence (some of it provisional, and much of it 'grey') to support this conclusion. However, it is worth noting the word of caution in the report's final section relating to the difficulty of assessing the impact of single interventions, particularly when multiple factors and activities are potentially influencing rates of retention and success. It is a familiar refrain also for those seeking to assess the impact of widening access interventions.

Impact on student mentors

Peer mentoring is described in one overview as “a true win-win-win situation in which new students belong, existing students develop new skills and institutions experience minimal student attrition” (Andrews *et al.*, 2012, p. 71). The new skills that peer mentors accrue are characterised in similar ways in the relevant archive material. Firstly, they acquire transferable employability skills including self-management, leadership and communications skills (Andrews and Clark, 2011). In some cases this might include relevant professional experience (for example, for those aspiring to become teachers) or might simply involve an enhanced CV. Secondly, they benefit personally and socially through participation. This might mean increased confidence or self-esteem, wider cultural knowledge or simply the satisfaction of helping others and ‘putting something back’ (Clark and Andrews, n.d.). Beyond this mix of professional and personal benefits mentors gain (as students) in ways that are very similar to those of mentees: better access to university or departmental contacts, a wider circle of friends, and most importantly an increased sense of belonging. One scheme also reports improvements in degree attainment and graduate outcomes for its mentors (Andrews *et al.*, 2012, p. 91).

Only one of the peer mentoring schemes outlined in the What Works? material paid its mentors (Andrews and Clark, 2011), potentially raising questions about whether all students can afford to ‘spend’ some of their ‘free’ time on voluntary activity and thereby gain the personal and employability benefits on offer. The archive material, however, records that many schemes reward their peer mentors in a variety of non-monetary ways: certificates of achievement, awards and end-of-year celebrations, and formal recognition as part of an employability module or university certificate (Andrews *et al.*, 2012). One of the Peer Mentoring Works! report’s recommendations is for HEIs to consider academic credit or recognition for mentors (Andrews and Clark, 2011).

Implications for policy and practice

The contention that its students are “an institution’s key asset” (Andrews *et al.*, 2012, p. 71) has yet to be fully tested in the new HE environment. The foregoing discussion suggests a number of ways in which this substantial and undervalued ‘resource’ can be nurtured in ways which will strengthen institutional commitments and sustain achievements in widening access and improving student retention and success. It also has implications for wider groups of stakeholders.

HE students

Engagement: The What Works? *Compendium* provides a case study of a holistic student engagement strategy based on the model of ‘student as change agent’ (Andrews *et al.*, 2012, p. 91). Consideration should be given to finding ways in which experienced HE students can be engaged not just in the delivery but in the planning and evaluation of widening access and retention and success activities.

HEIs: senior leadership

Strategy: HEIs may wish to review and align from a ‘HE student as partner provider’ perspective the various strategies and policies that impact on the HE student ‘workforce’; for example: widening participation, student recruitment, student engagement, retention and success, employability, employment.

Operations: A number of practical steps are recommended:

- Data and nomenclature: Get accurate information about the size and scope of HE student-delivered widening access and retention and success activities and seek to develop greater clarity of nomenclature.

- **Co-ordination:** Understand the dynamics and the potential overlap between different departments and sections overseeing the delivery of widening access and retention and success activities.
- **Training:** Consider the implementation of common approaches to the training, deployment and development of HE student workforce.
- **Quality:** Explore the development of clear ethical and operational standards for the delivery of interventions and ensure that their outcomes are properly evaluated.
- **Recognition:** Consider the award of formal recognition/academic credit for HE students' work in this area.

HEIs: practitioners

Review: Staff involved in the delivery of new and existing schemes may want to review their practice against some of the key findings from the WASRS archive and the wider literature. Generic areas to consider include:

- **Connectivity:** Encourage stronger awareness of the connections between widening access and retention and success activities, and the implications of using the same students to deliver both.
- **Roles:** Identify and categorise the different roles and develop common names and clear specifications for each.
- **Training and briefing:** Ensure that effective training is in place for every role to which students are deployed and that HE students are effectively briefed on their remit for each assignment. Develop joint or shared training where appropriate.
- **Support and CPD:** Recognise the importance of structured, ongoing support and create relevant opportunities for continuous professional development.
- **Reflection:** Provide greater opportunities for students to reflect on their experiences. This would also assist HEIs in improving the effectiveness of their HE student-delivered widening access and retention and success schemes.

Quality standards: HEIs may wish to collaborate with appropriate partners, including internal colleagues working in recruitment and education liaison roles and external bodies (see below) to develop professional standards to inform the work that students deliver in support of this agenda. Such work could build on the *HELOA Good Practice Guidelines* (HELOA, 2012), on the model ethical code of practice developed in support of the Aimhigher Associates scheme (Aimhigher Associates 2010) and on the Approved Provider Standard from the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (Andrews *et al.*, 2012, p. 80).

Employability: The delivery of widening access and student retention and success interventions provides HE students with valuable transferable employability skills. Greater co-ordination between the departments/sections that deploy HE students and those that develop and implement employability strategies would benefit students.

Recognition: Where this does not already exist, develop mechanisms for formally recognising or providing academic credit for widening access and student retention and success 'work'.

Sharing practice: Across the archive and within wider literature there is a growing body of publicly available material that practitioners can draw upon when reviewing existing or devising new programmes. Develop forums and structures for sharing effective practice within and between institutions.

Other stakeholders

- **Policy makers**

Connectivity: Develop policies that make the connections between different aspects of widening access and student retention and success more explicit and recognise the potential contribution of the HE student 'workforce' to them.

- **Students' unions**

Strategic planning: Build on the well-established student welfare and student advice role in order to broker effective partnerships, within and beyond the university, which can deliver coherent widening access and student retention and success strategies.

Negotiation and rewards: Seek ways to ensure that student 'workforce' is appropriately involved in the planning and evaluation of the activities in which it is engaged and is adequately rewarded for its efforts (including the employability 'dividend').

- **Schools and colleges**

Co-ordination: Develop the role of staff leading on CEIAG in schools to take responsibility for establishing or maintaining the kinds of successful widening participation activities described in the archive material; thereby minimise the loss of Aimhigher and maximise the opportunities for tapping into what has been sustained by HEIs and other bodies.

Gaps and areas for further research

This synthesis of the WASRS material, set alongside the wider literature about the deployment of HE students for widening access and enhancing student retention and success purposes, reveals some significant gaps in the evidence. It also suggests a number of areas for further exploration and some related research questions:

Composition and deployment of the student workforce: what is the extent of the student workforce and how it is deployed internally and externally? What is the precise contribution of HE students to the delivery of widening access and retention and success activities? Are they the same people doing both roles (at different times or at the same time)? How do the roles overlap and complement each other? How are these organised structurally and strategically within HEIs? What is the composition of the student workforce in relation to educational background, socio-economic class, and subject, mode and year of study? How many are drawn from WP backgrounds?

Matching: what are the most important criteria when matching HE students to younger learners on widening access programmes? How significant are gender, age and ethnic origin in ensuring that positive relationships develop? Is there an alternative way of bringing the two parties together that relies more on identification of shared barriers rather than on the same background? Are matching issues the same or different for peer mentoring within HE?

Informal and formal roles: what are the relative contributions and links between informal ad hoc unstructured, 'naturally occurring' peer support and more formally structured interventions like peer mentoring in nurturing a sense of belonging and thereby improving motivation and success? The particular and relative contributions of family and friends to widening access and retention and success 'efforts' would also repay further study.

Delivery models: what are the strengths and weaknesses of different delivery models, particularly in relation to widening access activities where a range of different approaches were observed? Is there evidence to suggest a particular model is more effective and is the development of a single model across all HEIs desirable?

Benefits to students: what are the precise benefits to students in relation to employability and the softer skills gained through engagement as an ambassador, mentor, associate, peer guide, etc.? It would also be useful to map the extent of formal recognition or certification of these skills and of the overall experience.

Exit and 'out-duction': what is the current use and potential role of HE students (current and alumni) in aiding transition to employment, future study or the post-university world? How far are notions of 'success' changing in an increasingly market driven sector? This might include consideration of the extent to which employability and progression to postgraduate study are embedded into institutional monitoring of student success.

New players and programmes: what is the actual or potential role of formal student bodies particularly students' unions, and of new partnerships and third-sector organisations, in supporting widening access and retention and success efforts? To what extent are new programmes being built on the effective practice that has been developed over the past decade, much of which is logged in the WASRS archive?

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