



**Review of 2001  
Widening Participation Strategies**

March 2002

This article reviews progress on the development and aspiration of Institutional strategies designed to widen participation in HE in England. In particular it explores:

- The move from initial strategic statements to three year strategies and action plans
- Support to the HE sector to develop strategic planning for WP
- Assessment and comparisons between the 1999 statements and the 2001 strategies
- Some concluding comments

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were asked to provide revised Widening Participation strategies and 3 year Action Plans to the HEFCE in either July or October 2001, building, where possible, on their 1999 Initial Widening Participation Strategic Statements. Following the submission of the initial strategic Widening Participation statements in 1999, Action on Access undertook an analysis of the statements that focused predominantly on the extent to which HEIs had made use of the criteria provided in HEFCE 99/33, which provided guidance on the structure and content of WP strategic statements.

The review of the strategies, which forms a major part of this summary paper, is one of Action on Access's key tasks.

This paper begins by looking at the background to the development and application of a strategic approach to Widening Participation by HEIs. In reflecting on some of the issues that emerged from the initial Widening Participation strategic statements in 1999, the paper goes on to highlight both general areas of strength and weakness, and also aspects of the development process which led to the submission of the current Strategies and Action Plans in July and October 2001. In order to gauge developmental progress, where possible comparisons have been made between the position in relation to specific aspects of the strategies in 1999 and in the 2001 submissions.

The paper goes on to explore key areas that HEIs were asked to address in preparing their strategies. The paper concludes by highlighting particular issues and comments on the further development of the use of the Strategies and action plans for Widening Participation.

## **Background**

The completed analysis highlighted areas of both strength and weakness within the strategic statements at institutional, regional, and sector levels. The major weaknesses identified at sector level were:

- limited reference to the setting of targets for students from non-traditional groups
- little linkage to other institutional policies, particularly the Learning and Teaching Strategies, giving the impression that the statement may have been developed in isolation from other core activities
- limited reference to retention
- lack of clarity over monitoring arrangements

It was anticipated that there might be strong links between several of these factors. One explanation for the apparent limited links between these areas could be that requests for different strategies were made at different times. The explanation given by one HEI was the request for a teaching and learning strategy did not happen at the same time as the request for the Widening Participation strategy and therefore cross-referencing was not possible.

As well as weaknesses, the analysis also identified the following as being the strongest areas of coverage:

- aims and objectives for Widening Participation
- profile of student population, present / potential
- mechanisms for achieving aims and objectives

It should be noted that in inviting HEIs to prepare Widening Participation strategies, the HEFCE adopted a non-prescriptive approach. The extent therefore to which HEIs were both able and willing to include all the areas proposed is very difficult to determine without more detailed information on each HEI, which was not available.

The findings from this analysis provided the evidence base for a paper which was received by the HEFCE EQUALL committee at its September 2000 meeting. The findings were also fed into the HEFCE policy review and development cycle.

Detailed briefing sessions based on the regional data sets generated by the review, took place with each of the HEFCE Regional Consultants and their teams. Through this mechanism specific questions and issues were highlighted relating to the individual Widening Participation statements of HEIs. This approach provided the opportunity for feedback to be given by HEFCE officers to HEIs in their region, contributing to the further development of Widening Participation planning.

## Supporting development 1999 - 2001

The Action on Access dissemination strategy (see Action on Access Development Plan 2001) provided a multi-stranded framework for sharing the findings from the analysis both across the sector and contributing to the HEFCE further policy development. Conference inputs, a lead article appeared in the Action on Access produced 'Update on Inclusion'. HEFCE publications (add refs) included summaries of the analysis thereby further supporting the sharing of practice to the sector. The work undertaken by Action on Access which led to the HEFCE publication 'Strategies for Widening Participation in higher education: A guide to good practice', published by HEFCE in June 2001 incorporated a detailed breakdown of the findings from the analysis of the statements. The sector feedback from this guide was extremely positive and, as hoped, it became a major source of reference for HEIs as they prepared their revised strategies and action plans.

Through a wide range of dissemination activities, HEIs were provided with support and feedback in order to develop their strategies and plans for the 2001 submission. Support activities included the following:

### Breakdown of dissemination activities

Dissemination Action	Target Group	Completed
Strategy Briefing Sessions	Regional Consultants and HE Advisors	✓
Regional seminars	Institution managers	✓
Statement analysis published in 'Update on Inclusion' (No. 3)	Whole sector	✓
Action on Access conference	Whole sector	✓
Input to HEFCE HEI heads conference	Senior Management	✓
Feedback to widening participation project steering groups	Widening Participation project steering groups	✓

Full analysis on the Action on Access website	Website users	✓
Action on Access team member provided comments on draft 2001 strategies	Individual HEIs	✓

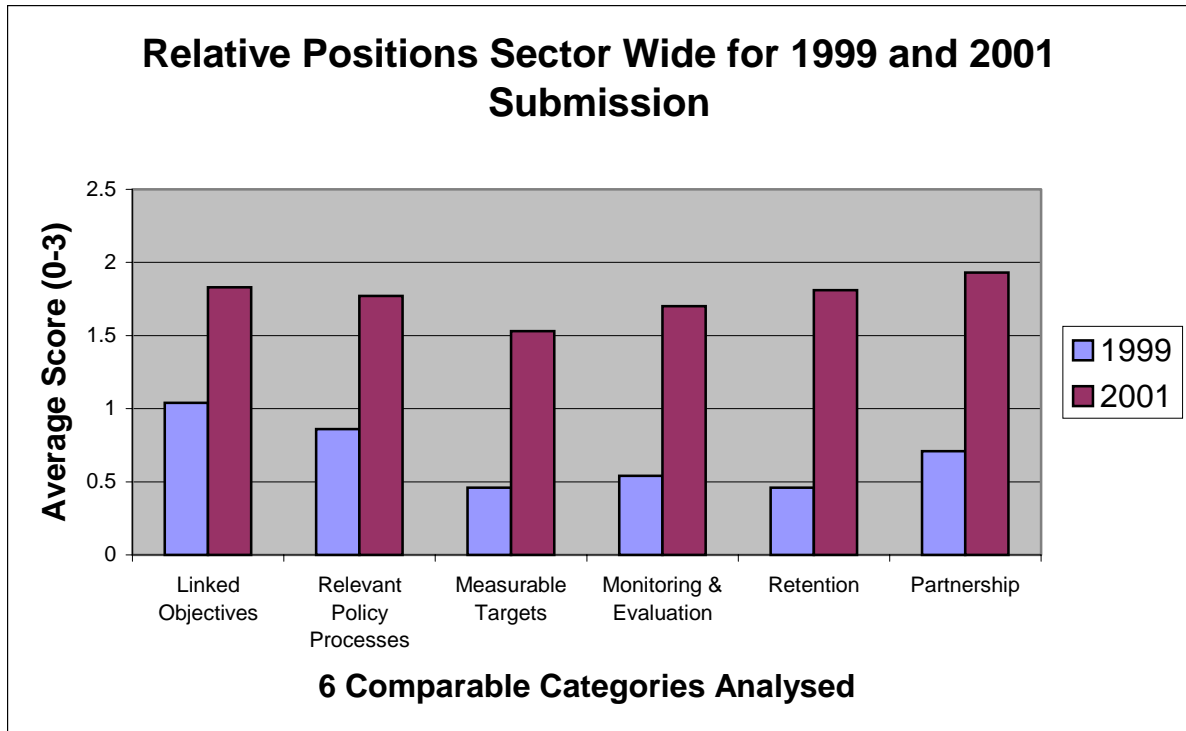
In May 2001 (Widening participation in higher education - Funding decisions for 2001-02 to 2003-04, HEFCE Circular 01/29) the Council asked HEIs to prepare Widening Participation strategies and three year Action Plans. Where appropriate it was expected that these much more detailed strategies and plans might build on the 1999 statements. To assist HEIs in this process, a series of seminars took place, which also made use of the 1999 analysis.

***Assessment and Comparison against 1999 Statements***

It is important to note that absolute comparisons between the Initial Strategic Statements on Widening Participation prepared in 1999 and the 2001 Strategies were not possible because of the differences between the guidelines for 1999 and 2001. HEIs were asked to provide more detailed strategies in 2001 which, although included some of the areas covered by the 1999 statements, also incorporated new ones. Action Plans which provide a breakdown and cross reference to the strategy were also added for the 2001 submissions. Expenditure details against funding allocations from HEFCE for Widening Participation were to be broken down in these plans on a yearly basis for a three-year period, and provide a way by which widening participation funding can be monitored in relation to strategic plans.

Despite the additional areas it is possible to make some comparisons between those areas which were part of the 1999 submissions.

The general approach used in reviewing the 2001 strategies was essentially the same as that adopted for the review of the 1999 Widening Participation Statements. Each strategy being reviewed against the extent to which it made use of the criteria given in HEFCE 01/29. An assessment sheet was completed for every strategy and a score from 0-3 allocated to each of the 11 key criterion (see Appendix). In addition to scoring individual strategies, comments and document cross-reference were also included on assessment sheets. Broad qualitative assessments were also made on the overall contribution that each strategy might make.



**TABLE 1**

Table 1 shows comparatively the main areas where further development has taken place since 1999. These include:

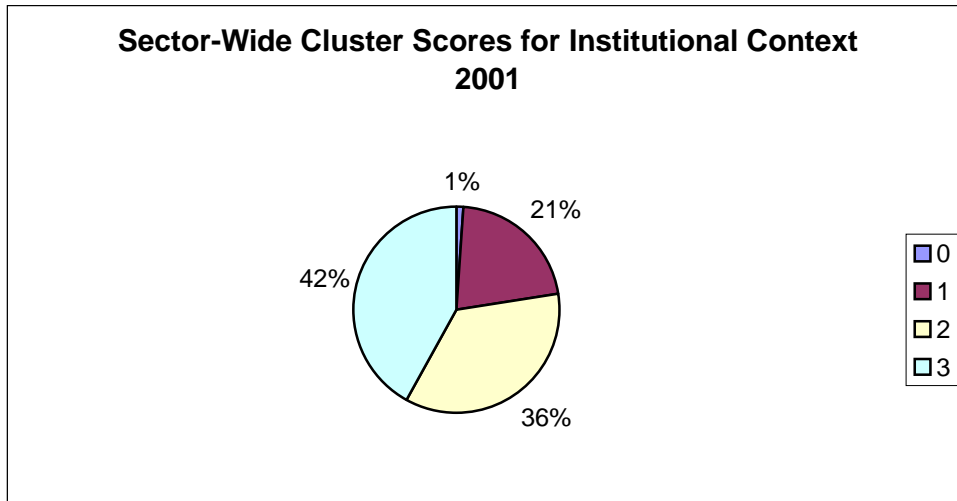
- increased evidence of linking objectives impact on related processes
- moves towards setting institutional and in some cases departmental targets or process to create departmental targets
- development of monitoring and evaluation arrangements
- greater focus on retention
- continuing development of partnership arrangement

There is evidence overall of both a quantitative and qualitative leap forward in the 2001 round of strategies compared to the position following the 1999 submission of initial statements. Developmental gains have been made against all 1999 comparitors. One of the major areas of weakness in the 1999 submissions was in relation to the use of targets and in particular the measurable variety. This has come through as an area where there has been solid improvement albeit largely in relation to qualitative targets.

Deployment of PI information and other data has increased and features to a much greater extent than previously. There is also evidence of a wider acceptance of targets and in some cases a more sophisticated approach with some examples of targets being used not just at institutional level but also at school or departmental level. It should be particularly noted that there has been considerable improvements against the three weakest areas of coverage in 1999 these are:

- targets for retention
- use of PIs
- targets for under-represented groups

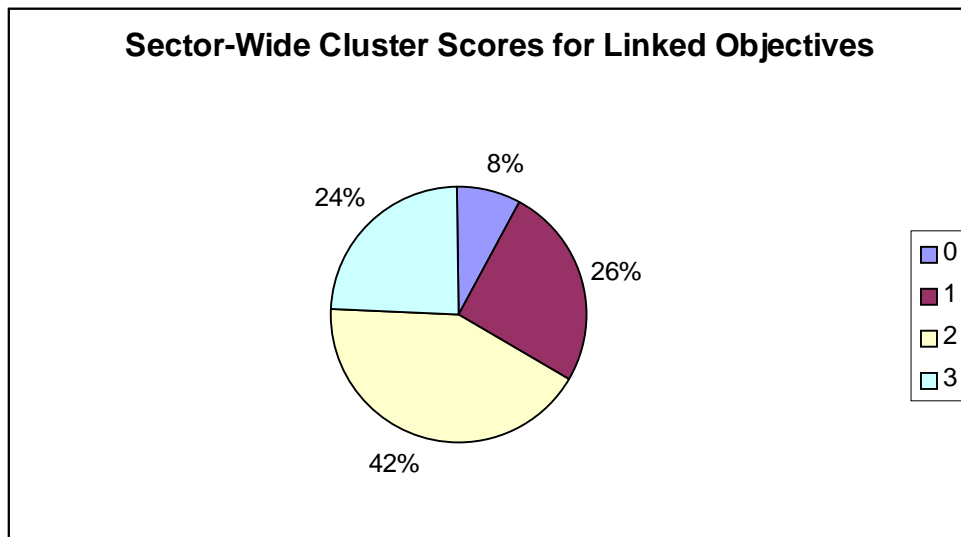
***Institutional Context***



**TABLE 2**

A difficult factor to review, as there is no direct comparison with the 1999 submissions. Mission statements and corporate plans featured strongly, as did awareness of the profile of student population, both present and potential. It was not always clear where connections were made between for example plans for student growth and fit with Widening Participation strategic plans for admissions. In general there seems to be a developing understanding of recognising the impact that the institutional context can have for Widening Participation. One question this then gives rise to is what organisational changes will need to take place in order to create an institutional context which will improve the participation rates of identified under-represented groups? Future strategies will need to address the new formatting of targets by HEFCE as Increased Participation, Widened Participation, Fairer Access.

***Linked Objectives***



**TABLE 3**

Table 3 illustrates something of the progress towards a more integrated strategic approach to Widening Participation is evident from the extent of linkage between other plans and strategies.

Most frequently mentioned were with the following:

Teaching and Learning	strong
Finance	intermittent
Human Resources	medium
IT	intermittent
Disability	medium (but strong if a project involved)

Links between the teaching and learning and the Widening Participation strategies as indicated by the extent to which the range of approaches to teaching is meeting the needs of learners being recruited as a result of Widening Participation developments is fairly limited. There was some evidence of T&L and Widening Participation being linked to improve the use of targets and PIs. The need to produce a Widening Participation strategy and action plan may have itself led to awareness in some HEIs which resulted in links being developed. The Widening Participation 'Good Practice Guide' also strongly encouraged synergy between the Widening Participation strategy and other institutional policies.

### Measurable Targets

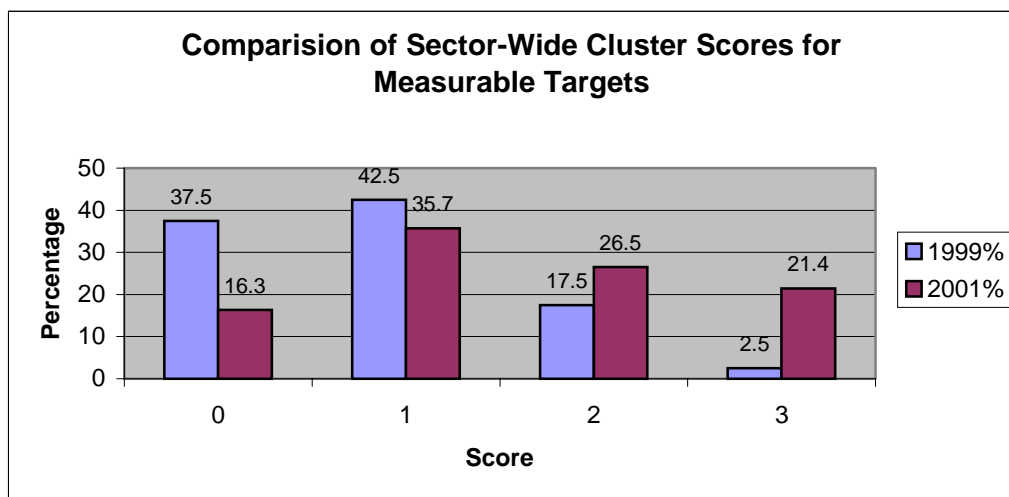


TABLE 4

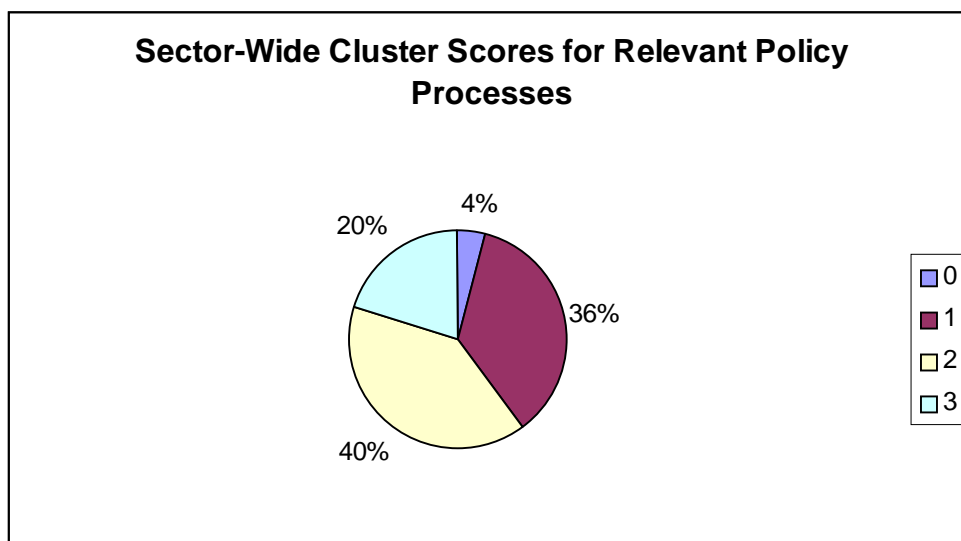
There has been a significant developmental gain in the use of targets in support of widening participation objectives.

There was also strong evidence of a much broader acceptance of the value of targets than was the case in 1999.

The extent to which targets for Widening Participation are being implemented at faculty/departmental level seems negligible, with some noteworthy exceptions. These included phased institutional targets which over time led to departmental targets.

There is a significant increase in the use of PIs as key referencing points and baselines from which to set targets against which improvements can be measured. The evidence would point to PIs as growing in importance as a major planning tool for Widening Participation. PI fixation whereby the strategy is predominantly driven with reference to one or more PI is not yet evident.

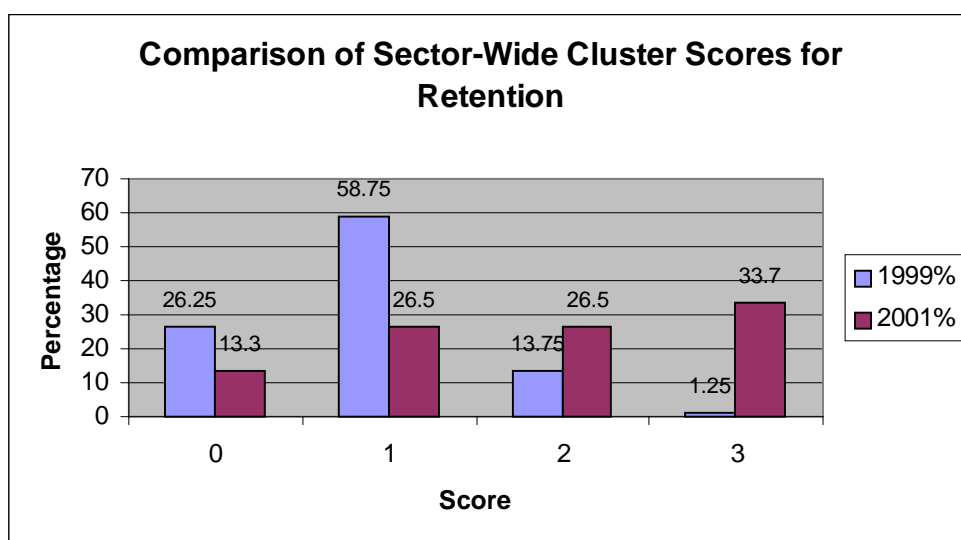
*Relevant Policy Processes*



**TABLE 5**

There is evidence of the Widening Participation strategies beginning to impact on other policy areas where Widening Participation concerns were crucial factors. Admissions policy and staff development policy were two areas. Strategies also referred to the need to review and consider the need for change in relation to equal opportunities policy particularly as this applies to learners with disabilities. We are therefore starting to see Widening Participation strategies and action plans becoming catalysts for review and change of other policy areas. This is an important change and is suggestive of a process of embedding.

*Student Success (retention)*



**TABLE 6**

There was a big improvement on the 1999 position in relation to student success as can be seen from table 6. Awareness of and use of retention data has noticeably strengthened with target setting for improving retention beginning to feature more strongly. There is also evidence of the need to develop a fuller understanding of what factors mostly contribute to non-completion and what preventative measures might be developed. Significant evidence of investment in supporting student success. Also recognition of the link between pre-entry work and student success with linked

improvements to induction and transition. The comparison between the 1999 baseline and the 2001 submissions suggests that at a sector level we can make the following concluding comments.

The review highlights important areas where significant gains have been made relative to the findings from the 1999 position

Areas that were identified as weak in 1999 had all improved by 2001. It is important to note that this general improvement does not particularly mean that all HEIs have improved at a similar rate, or that further development is not required.

Variations between HEIs continued to be significant.

Evidence in the 2001 strategies of a more integrated and coherent approach to strategic planning for WP

Broad policy impact in relation to social inclusion and student success seems good less so for student growth.

John Storan

*Widening Participation Assessment Sheet*

Region:	
Name of reviewer:	
Name of Institution:	
Date of review:	

(i) Total from postcode premium: £

(ii) Total from aspiration fund: £

Full or part documentation provided  F  P

Post/ Pre 92 Institution/ Specialist  post  pre  spec

General Specification for Strategies and Action Plans HEFCE 01/29

Paragraph 29/ 30

"An effective widening participation strategy will outline how an institution plans to recruit; retain and progress students from groups under-represented in HE, and how it will know when it has succeeded."

"The strategy may build on the initial strategic statement submitted in October 1999. It should reflect the institution's mission and link closely with the institution's overall corporate strategy. It should also relate closely to other documents and strategies, such as those for learning and teaching, estates and human resources. It should be informed by performance indicator data, and should demonstrate how the effectiveness of the strategy will be monitored and evaluated internally."

*Guidance Notes*

Although this assessment sheet has been designed taking into account the key areas for WP strategies to cover as given in 01/29 you may find that the strategies are not always structured in the same order as the assessment sheet. It is recommended therefore that you read through the whole strategy and then re-read it in order to complete the sheet. Please where appropriate make reference to the relevant part of the strategy by giving page number and paragraph in the document reference column of the sheets perhaps based on your knowledge of the HEI please include these at the end of the sheet in the space provided.

**Explanation of scoring scheme:**

0 = Not covered

1 = Covered

2 = Well covered

3 = Very well covered

## Assessment Sheet – Widening Participation Strategy

Criterion	Description from Request	Score (0 - 3)	Comments	Document Reference
<u>Institutional context</u>	a. Analysis of institutional context, including performance indicator data.			
<u>Linked objectives</u>	b. Objectives which are explicitly linked to the institutions corporate plan.			
<u>Relevant policy processes</u>	c. Reference to relevant policy processes and changes that are designed to enhance widening participation.			
<u>Measurable targets</u>	d. Targets whose achievements can be objectively demonstrated through milestones or other measurable outcomes.			
<u>Monitoring and evaluation</u>	e. Monitoring and evaluation procedures.			

Criterion	Description from Request	Score (0 - 3)	Comments	Document Reference
<b>Admissions</b>	<p>3. We would also suggest that institutions address the 'hard issues' of admissions, retention and culture change, as well as the 'softer issues' of awareness and aspiration raising, partnership and mentoring. Retention activities will be particularly important for institutions that have a good record in widening participation, but room for improvement in relation to their performance indicator for student retention.</p>			
<b>Retention</b>				
<b>Culture change</b>				
<b>Awareness and aspiration raising</b>				
<b>Partnership</b>				
<b>Mentoring</b>				
		Total score on all criteria (Maximum 33)		

*Assessment Sheet – Action Plan 2001/ 2002*

**Guidance Notes**

This sheet should be used to assess action plans. Further notes relating to each of the criterion included in this sheet are to be found in Annex E 01/29. Please note (\*) that the aspiration funding criterion only applies to some HEIs. The scoring for this should be given in the total aspiration funding box at the bottom of the sheet.

Criterion	Description from Request	Score (0 - 3)	Comments	Document Reference
Links between postcode premium spent and actions/ targets	Postcode Premium			
*Aspiration fund spend	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Own contribution from 2002-03</li> <li>- Embedding activities in and after funding period</li> </ul>			
Links with Strategy	Specify how activities link with accompanying strategy.			
Measurable targets and outcomes	Specify measurable targets and outcomes.			
Activity monitoring arrangements	Demonstrate that arrangements are being put in place to monitor activities effectively.			

	Total score on all criteria (Maximum 12)			
	Aspiration fund score (Maximum 3)			

Further Comments

Please comment on the extent to which you think the strategy will deliver improvements in relation to:

Student Growth:  Yes  No      Comments:

Social Inclusion:  Yes  No      Comments:

Student Success:  Yes  No      Comments:

Any other comments: