

Proposal to Charge Variable Fees from 2006 Academic Year Onwards to Full-Time UK/EU Undergraduate Students

1. Introduction

- 1.1** The City of Sunderland College has been committed to raising aspirations and widening participation both with local students and those throughout the North East. This outreach work is designed to encourage more applications to study at HE level from underrepresented groups and compliments the work of AimHigher within the region.
- 1.2** The College sees the introduction of variable fees as an opportunity to generate a small amount of additional income which can then be invested in further encouraging under represented groups to progress to HE study. However, the College is operating in a market where there is a significant aversion to debt and where progression to higher education is not seen as the norm. Over 2,400 College based 16 - 19 students are currently in receipt of an Educational Maintenance Allowance and this group provides a significant internal market for targeted widening participation activity.
- 1.3** The Centre for Public Policy (North East Assembly and Northumbria University, 2003) in their study of “Young Peoples Attitudes to Education” have shown that although 43.7% of those surveyed felt that they would definitely go to university, 63% did not know what they needed to do to achieve this and 72.7% were not sure they would be able to afford to go. This attitude is against a background where in 2003 only 24% of young people in the North East progressed to higher education compared with a national average of 40% and a Government aspiration of 50% of all 18 - 30 year olds experiencing higher education by 2010.
- 1.4** Working in such a culture of low aspirations and debt aversion the College has invested in working with under represented groups within the College, schools, colleges and other agencies in the region to increase participation in higher education. The College has only a small number of full time HE students (40 HND students in the current year out of a total funding allocation of 169 FTE) and all come from within a fifteen mile radius of the campus. All students have a state school background. Over 80% are recruited from social classes III, IV, V and over 50% from low participation neighbourhoods. The College has met its 169 fte contract for the last two years.

2. Proposed Variable Fees Scheme

- 2.1** The variable fees scheme has been devised taking into account the cultural aspects of the North East and the current financial circumstances of existing UK/EU full time undergraduate students. Analysis shows that for the 2003/04 academic year 48% of the full time UK/EU undergraduate students did not pay tuition fees personally, a further 15% only paid partial fees and the remainder ie 37% paid full fees.

Information relating to the College intake of full time students indicates that only 17% pay full fees with a further 21% paying partial fees and 62% paying no tuition fee personally.

The scheme is designed to maintain the current student intake to the College as well as increase it. To achieve this in the internal and external market in which the College operates will require a significant proportion of the additional fees income to be used to provide scholarships to students. Whether this aim will be achieved in practice will only be known from 2006 onwards. There is still the concern that in a fragile market, students will choose not to progress into higher education. Should this be the case the College will review the scholarship scheme.

2.2 The main elements of the College scholarship scheme are :

- The fee charged by the College to all UK/EU full time undergraduate students will be £ 3000 per annum.
- All full time UK/EU students in receipt of an educational maintenance grant will receive a scholarship from the College of £ 500 per annum. This information will be provided by the Student Loans Company.
- All full time UK/EU students progressing through their undergraduate programme will receive a progression scholarship of £ 750 per annum as they move through the various levels of their programme.
- The above scholarship scheme may be adjusted should the introduction of variable fees affect the intake levels of the College.

2.3 Clear and transparent policies and procedures will be created in respect of the above scheme and communicated both as part of the recruitment process and thereafter.

3. Widening Participation Strategy

3.1 The College has worked proactively with existing Excellence Challenge, P4P initiatives, single programme initiatives and EICs in the region to support a co-ordinated approach to aspiration building. Much work with under represented College based further education groups has taken place to promote the AimHigher initiative, to raise aspiration and to promote participation.

3.2 The College has adopted a partnership approach within the AimHigher initiative to develop long term working relationships with regional universities and colleges in order to offer a range of progression pathways and opportunities for under represented groups.

3.3 Widening Participation funding has been used to further develop the College's approach to raising levels of participation amongst those living in areas of the City of Sunderland where rates are particularly low. Targeted intervention to promote the AimHigher initiative with students of College outreach partners has also taken place.

- 3.4** The College works closely with the Connexions Service to ensure that young people are fully informed about the range of routes into HE available to them. In a period of relatively buoyant employment, for young people from backgrounds where HE is not a common aspiration available paid employment often appears to be the most attractive option. As well as seeking to counter this by promoting the longer-term returns of investment in Higher Education, the College also seeks to help students manage a combination of employment and education in a variety of patterns and models.
- 3.5** The College offers a range of pre-entry activities including : individual advice and guidance sessions, information days, promotional talks, subject based open days and evenings, student finance sessions, lectures, student shadowing opportunities.
- 3.6** Adult returners continue to be encouraged to enter HE and the range of support mechanisms in place to assist them in an integral part of the College's commitment to widening participation. For example : individual advice and guidance sessions, students shadowing and the PPP single programme project.
- 3.7** The College's commitment to this widening participation strategy will be maintained.

4. Provision of information in Respect of Variable Fees

The City of Sunderland College is committed to a transparent approach to its communications strategy relating relating to variable fees.

In a debt adverse region where participation in higher education is low, it is essential that the 'no fees up front' message is communicated to target groups.

The key elements of the College's communication strategy are as follows :

- Internal communication with staff to ensure that an accurate and consistent message on the new financial arrangements for students is widely disseminated and clearly understood.
- Communication with staff in an advisory capacity in schools, colleges, Connexions and other advice and guidance networks.
- Workshop events for students and parents/guardians.
- Production of clear, easy to understand guidance material outlining the key changes to student funding.

The College will publish it's fees stance and scholarship scheme in full in it's prospectus.

Information will also be available on the College's website, augmented with access to College advisers, and links to other recognised sources of information.

All promotional material and press/PR activity will be closely monitored to ensure the clear and consistent presentation of information.

5. Milestones and Objectives

As described previously in this scheme the cultural background of a significant proportion of the College's market may well result in the introduction of variable fees reducing intake levels. The scheme now proposed attempts to ensure that this is not the case. The College is therefore establishing the following targets/milestones against which it can judge the success of the scheme.

- Undertake focus group research in 2006/07 and thereafter to ensure that prospective students and/or parents fully understand the variable fees scheme.
- Maintain the level 1 intake level of full-time UK/EU undergraduates at 20 per annum or above.
- Maintain the current level of activity in aspiration building/widening participation.
- Maintain the current proportion of students coming from widening participation categories.

6. Compliance

Regular review of the scheme will be undertaken and form part of the annual operating statement monitoring process of the College. Responsibility for the monitoring report will rest with the Director of Higher Education. The report will include financial data summarising recruitment and scholarship payment, outreach activities undertaken throughout the year and progress made in meeting milestones.