

The Rt Hon Vince Cable MP
Secretary of State for Business Innovation & Skills

The Rt Hon David Willetts MP
Minister for Universities and Science

Sir Martin Harris
OFFA
Northavon House
Coldharbour Lane
Bristol
BS16 1QD

22 May 2012

Dear Martin,

A SHARED STRATEGY FOR WIDENING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

In this year's grant letter to HEFCE we asked you to work together to develop a shared strategy for promoting access to Higher Education and maximising the impact of the spending by Government, HEFCE and institutions.

This Government has made clear that access to higher education should be based on talent not background. Our school reforms, and additional investment in the most disadvantaged pupils through the Pupil Premium, are intended to raise standards, narrow the gaps in attainment and raise aspirations. In higher education a new framework places increased responsibility on institutions to widen participation and improve student success. The good news is that HE is the first stage of the education process where able students from disadvantaged backgrounds catch up with their peers. The higher education sector has already made progress and it is important to build on that progress, including through the activities delivered as part of their access agreements, agreed with OFFA, and their widening participation strategic assessments, agreed with HEFCE.

The new arrangements, which begin this year, will see significant new spending on widening access made by Government, the Council and institutions. There are three main elements to the available funding. Government funding for the NSP will reach £150 million a year in 2014/15; HEIs have estimated they will spend £620 million on access through their access agreements by 2015/16; and HEFCE have allocated £140 million in 2012/13 in the widening participation part of the teaching grant plus the wider teaching enhancement and student success allocation of £224 million. We estimate that the total expenditure available to support fair access and widening participation could be over £100m more in 2012-13 than in 2009-10. Taken alongside HEFCE's widening participation and retention allocations, overall expenditure in this area could reach record levels.

1 Victoria Street, London SW1H 0ET
www.bis.gov.uk

We want you to develop a shared strategy on Higher Education access and student success and we are asking you to consider how total investment might be best targeted to deliver impact. It is vital that all the relevant spending is based on the best possible evidence base and harnessed to drive systematic improvements. The latest available evidence both here and abroad will be helpful to see how practice can be improved across the whole sector and the whole range of potential activity which supports widening participation. So far as is practical, you will want to consider this work alongside the wider review and consultation that HEFCE is undertaking on its targeted funding streams.

Core to your strategy should be a clear evidence based assessment of what works in respect of widening access. The strategy should set out a plan for evaluating the new activities and arrangements which will be in place from autumn this year. This should take account of the evaluation HEFCE has already commissioned on the new National Scholarship Programme (NSP).

OFFA will want to systematically evaluate the impact of the considerable investment being made through Access Agreements. We would encourage you to consider commissioning further expert research and analysis where you assess this can support your wider strategy.

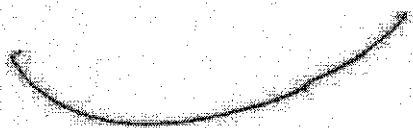
We recognise that HEFCE and OFFA already work closely together and have made significant contributions to co-ordinate the work in this area, particularly for those institutions that are required to work within both the HEFCE and OFFA regimes. The time is now right to look strategically across investment streams, to ensure we achieve synergy and maximise the outcomes for students. We would particularly ask you to consider what might be done to ensure the funding streams support the whole sector to meet the varying challenges, avoid duplication that might result in poor value for money and facilitate faster and more sustained progress in widening access. Your strategy could also look at what more might be done to integrate the monitoring and reporting in respect of Access Agreements and widening participation strategic assessments.

At the heart of the White Paper, we set out a vision for supporting greater choice for students, underpinned by a framework safeguarding student interests and providing access to the support and information they need to make informed decisions. Our reforms will see higher education delivered by a range of providers through traditional and more flexible routes that can offer greater choice in learning settings and options.

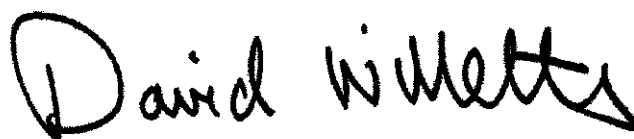
Your strategy needs to reflect the diversity of higher education providers. Further Education Colleges for example have traditionally played an important role in attracting those from non traditional backgrounds into all levels of learning, including an increasing role in the delivery of higher level skills.

The strategy, which should be developed within existing resources, should reflect the overall aims which Government has set for widening participation and fair access. As your thinking develops on the broad shape and content of your shared strategy, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you. We would also ask that you involve BIS officials in discussions so your strategy can reflect the direct Government funding streams as well as those from the Council and institutions' own investments. We would welcome an early assessment of the timetable against which we would expect to see an impact from the increased investment and your thoughts on evaluation and research. We would welcome more substantive feedback on your plans in the autumn.

We are writing in identical terms to Sir Alan Langlands at HEFCE.

A stylized, handwritten signature consisting of a single, continuous, sweeping line that forms a wide, shallow curve.

VINCE CABLE

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "David Willetts". The letters are connected and fluid, with a prominent loop at the start of the first letter.

DAVID WILLETTS