



## Strategic guidance: developing your 2018-19 access agreement

### Introduction

1. All higher education providers that need an access agreement for 2018-19 must submit one to OFFA by **noon on Wednesday 26 April 2017**.
2. If you are unsure whether you need an access agreement, you can find out on our [website](#).
3. This guidance outlines our strategic priorities for 2018-19 access agreements and our expectations around targets and milestones, and you should ensure your access agreement addresses these.
4. Our strategic priorities for 2018-19 access agreements build on our guidance from previous years, and reflect the [guidance](#) set out for us by Government in February 2016 and the direction set in the Government consultation [Schools that work for everyone](#) (2016). It also builds on and takes account of the developments, successes and challenges that institutions have reported to us, and the higher education sector's recommendations set out in the [final report of the Social Mobility Advisory Group](#).

### Summary of strategic priorities in 2018-19 access agreements

5. We want you to review and develop your access agreement so that it sets out clearly what you are doing and/or plan to do, to:
  - **increase your work to raise attainment in schools and colleges for those from disadvantaged and under-represented groups**, including through outreach and/or strategic relationships (see paragraphs 6 to 16)
  - **further increase your investment in access activity**, in order to accelerate progress in the participation of higher education entrants from under-represented and disadvantaged groups (see paragraph 17)
  - **ensure complementarity between your access agreement plans and the National Collaborative Outreach Programme and Opportunity Areas** (see paragraphs 18 to 23)
  - **ensure your expenditure is informed by evidence, supported by appropriate evaluation** and is targeted where you most need to improve (see paragraphs 24 to 31)
  - **evaluate your financial support** to determine its impact (see paragraphs 32 to 36)
  - **improve your understanding of the challenges faced by different groups of students** when accessing and studying at your institution, including multiple dimensions of disadvantage (see paragraphs 37 to 38)
  - **consider how you can enhance support for:**
    - **white males from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds** (see paragraphs 40 to 44)

- **black and minority ethnic (BME) students**, where you identify disparities in access, student success and/or progression at your institution (see paragraphs 45 to 48)
- **students with disabilities**, particularly those with mental health issues, specific learning difficulties and/or who are on the autistic spectrum (see paragraphs 49 to 53)
- **mature and part-time learners**, particularly through alternative and flexible modes of study (see paragraphs 54 to 56).

## 2018-19 strategic priorities in detail

### Raising attainment in schools and colleges, including sponsorship of schools and the establishment of new schools

6. We expect all institutions to set out in their 2018-19 access agreements how they will work with schools and colleges to raise attainment for those from disadvantaged and under-represented groups. This includes a strong expectation that we will see greater numbers of higher education providers sponsoring schools (either as main sponsor or co-sponsor) or with advanced plans to do so, with a view to improving attainment of disadvantaged and under-represented groups to enable them to apply to higher education if they wish to.

### Background

7. Prior educational attainment is a key predictor of participation in higher education and so there is a compelling argument that higher education providers should focus much more on work with schools to improve the attainment of pupils from disadvantaged and under-represented groups.
8. Last year, following a new letter of guidance from Ministers, we strengthened our guidance regarding the work that universities and colleges do with schools and colleges to raise aspiration and attainment. This included greater focus on long-term outreach, stronger long-term relationships with schools and colleges – including through greater involvement in governance (e.g. sitting on governing bodies and sponsoring academies) – and addressing challenges around prior educational attainment and subject/qualification choice.
9. Since then, the Government has further signalled its desire for the higher education sector and schools to work more closely together with the aim of raising attainment in schools, so that more pupils are qualified to progress to higher education. In particular, the Government would like higher education providers to sponsor or establish schools, including free schools, with a view to raising attainment and supporting progression to higher education ([Schools that work for everyone, September 2016](#)).
10. We welcome the increased focus that many institutions gave to supporting prior educational attainment in their 2017-18 access agreements. However, it is now imperative to progress and scale up work with schools and colleges to accelerate the sector's progress in widening access and participation.
11. We are therefore further strengthening our guidance by asking you to increase the pace and scope of your work with schools to raise attainment, so that the teaching and learning outcomes for schools that work with universities are enhanced. This includes:
  - the sponsorship of schools where there are issues around attainment and progression

- the establishment of new free schools (including mathematics free schools) to support disadvantaged and under-represented students
- other significant partnerships, support and activity with schools.

### How to tell us about this in your 2018-19 access agreement

12. In your access agreement you will need to set out the following:

- The breadth of your current work to raise attainment in schools and colleges where there are issues of under-representation and disadvantage, and how you intend to increase the pace and scope of this work through your access agreement. In particular, be explicit about:
  - the particular cohorts you are working with to raise attainment
  - the aims of this work
  - how it contributes to raised attainment.
- How this work has grown, and is planned to grow, over time.
- Your wider partnership and governance relationships with schools, including:
  - your current work to sponsor/co-sponsor academies or set up new free schools
  - how this contributes to your overall work to widen access and participation
  - any plans to sponsor/co-sponsor academies or set up new free schools that you are developing over the next year and in the longer term.
- Your success criteria, including at least one target in relation to this work.
- An outline of how you will monitor and evaluate this work, and your progress towards your target(s) in relation to attainment in schools and colleges: we will ask you to report on this in your future [monitoring](#) returns.
- How you will share good practice in delivering successful school sponsorship and/or partnership and attainment-raising work more generally. For example, this may include describing how you currently share your own experiences and learn from others and collaborate with other HE providers.

### Institutional context

13. We will have the greatest expectations of those institutions with the highest entry requirements and those that have the furthest to go in widening participation, because they require the highest prior educational attainment in their applicants.
14. We recognise that different institutions have different contexts and opportunities for innovative practice. Where you have no immediate plans to sponsor/co-sponsor an academy or set up a new free school, but already have extensive school partnerships and work in place to support attainment in schools and colleges which might be affected by a shift in resource or focus to school sponsorship, please explain your current strategy in your access agreement.

### Timing

15. Given the timing of the access agreement cycle, and the long term strategic nature of partnerships, sponsorship and work with schools, we recognise it is likely that much of your new work will be at scoping or development stage when 2018-19 access agreements are submitted. We will expect you to have developed these plans much more fully in your 2019-20 access agreements.

**Find out more**

16. Please see our online guidance for [further information on our expectations around working with schools](#), including details of what we mean by ‘attainment raising’ and ‘sponsorship of schools’.

**Further increase your investment in access activity**

17. We expect you to continue to scale up your access activity, particularly through more long-term outreach and stronger relationships with schools and colleges. We do not expect to see any institutions reducing their access spend, and we expect to see institutions increasing access activity funded through their access agreements in order to protect activity that was previously funded through your student opportunity allocation.

**Ensure complementarity between your access agreement plans and NCOP and Opportunity Areas****NCOP**

18. HEFCE has announced that from 2017-18, it will discontinue the widening access element of its funding previously identified as student opportunity funding, concentrating its investment in this area solely on the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP).
19. The NCOP is targeted specifically at students in years 9 to 13 in areas where higher education participation is low overall and lower than would be expected given GCSE attainment rates. It is important that you continue to support and grow activities and programmes through your access agreement that complement the NCOP according to your broader targeting criteria for under-represented groups, age groups and areas that do not fall within NCOP criteria, ensuring that access agreement spending on access activities is protected.
20. You should include information in your access agreement on:
- how the work delivered through the NCOP will complement the work being delivered through your access agreement
  - how you will ensure that under-represented groups in need of support are not missed, such as other geographical areas and age ranges not targeted through NCOP activities.
21. Funding that you receive from NCOP consortia must not be counted in your access agreement (our website has more information about [what is and is not OFFA-countable expenditure](#)).

**Opportunity Areas**

22. The Government has identified 12 new ‘[Opportunity Areas](#)’ that experience significant challenges when it comes to social mobility. These areas will have access to Government funding to address the biggest challenges they face, and three will also benefit from the National Collaborative Outreach Programme.
23. In your access agreement we want you to:
- consider how you might better target these areas
  - ensure that the work being done through your access agreement (locally, regionally or nationally) complements other work taking place
  - use these opportunities to broaden your range of collaborative partners to include different types of partnerships, for example with employers and third-sector organisations.

## Ensure your expenditure is informed by evidence

24. You should ensure that the expenditure committed through your access agreement reflects the areas where you most need to improve, and that your allocation of funds is supported by appropriately robust evaluation of how effective your activities are in delivering measurable, successful outcomes (see our website for details of [what we mean by 'outcomes'](#)).

## Background

25. Our [strategic plan 2015-2020](#) sets out the vital importance of institutions taking an evidence-led approach in order to maximise the impact of their work to support fair access and make further, faster progress in increasing the proportion of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, both in higher education generally and particularly at higher tariff institutions.
26. It is essential therefore to invest in activities that will have the greatest impact on the areas where you most require improvement, across the student lifecycle.
27. To do this, you will need to evaluate effectively and use this as a basis for strategic decisions on where to focus investment.
28. Our 2014-15 [access agreement monitoring outcomes](#) report shows that institutions are increasingly taking an evidence-led approach and, crucially, that higher education institutions with more developed and embedded evaluation activity generally report more progress against their high-level outcomes targets.
29. The challenge is now to improve and grow the use of that evaluation, for example, through reflective practice that demonstrates how you are using the lessons from previous activities and programmes to improve your future ones.

## How to tell us about this in your 2018-19 access agreement

30. Most institutions that will be submitting an access agreement for 2018-19 have had a number of years to establish and embed their evaluation strategy. In your access agreement, we want you to demonstrate how this strategy has informed your decisions on where to invest your access agreement expenditure leading to improved activities, and demonstrate how this is transferring into positive outcomes for your target groups.
31. We will be paying close attention to how you have reported your level of evaluation in your previous monitoring returns. We expect evaluation to be an area of continuous improvement, so you should demonstrate how your evaluation strategy is evolving.

## Set out how you evaluate your financial support and your evidence of its impact

32. Our monitoring of 2014-15 access agreements highlighted that a fifth of institutions did not evaluate their financial support in 2014-15. This equates to around £50 million of spending for which there was no evaluation.
33. If you have committed significant resource to financial support, we require you to provide strong evidence in your access agreement of how your financial support will help to improve outcomes for under-represented and disadvantaged students.
34. You must demonstrate that the methods by which you evaluate the impact of your financial support are appropriately robust and focused on impact in terms of demonstrable changes in behaviour (such as improved access, retention and attainment rates) rather than, for example, solely gathering reactions or opinions from students. We have published a [set of online resources](#) to help universities better evaluate the financial support they provide

through access agreements and we strongly encourage you to use these, although you may use other methods if you can provide evidence that these methods are robust.

35. Where you cannot present strong evidence for the impact of your financial support, we expect you to redirect this resource to other areas where its impact will be more demonstrable.

### Find out more

36. Please see our online guidance for further information on [evaluating activities](#), [evaluating financial support](#) and [investing strategically](#).

### Target groups

37. In our last [strategic guidance](#), we highlighted some under-represented and disadvantaged groups for which evidence indicates there is a need for greater focus, and encouraged you to consider these in your 2017-18 access agreement. We were encouraged to see more institutions providing specific, tailored support for these groups of students, and we want you to consider how you can develop this work further in your 2018-19 access agreement.
38. To more effectively target activities across the student lifecycle at the students with the most need, we encourage you to examine multiple dimensions of disadvantage in order to get a better understanding of under-representation and disadvantage and associated differential outcomes.
39. We strongly encourage institutions to consider how they might better support the following under-represented and disadvantaged groups in particular:

#### White males from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds

40. Our 2016 letter of guidance from Ministers highlighted that white males from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are particularly under-represented in higher education. There is evidence for this in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills research paper 186, [Socio-economic, ethnic and gender differences in HE participation](#) (2015), and from the UCAS [multiple equality measure \(MEM\)](#) which demonstrates that the group of young people least likely to enter higher education are predominately male, white, educated at schools in the state sector, from low income families and living in neighbourhoods with lower higher education entry rates.
41. In 2017-18 access agreements, around a third of institutions included information on activities relating to improving access for white males from disadvantaged groups. This year we want to see institutions providing further detail on activities and interventions to support these learners.
42. If you are already engaged in activity that encompasses this group, please tell us about how this work will meet the specific needs of this group.
43. We also encourage you to set specific, outcome-based targets around this work that will further demonstrate the progress being made, for example by committing to increase the proportion of these students participating in outreach schemes.
44. OFFA will shortly publish a topic briefing on white males from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which will be available on our [website](#).

#### Black and minority ethnic students

45. There are disparities in degree outcomes between black and minority ethnic (BME) students and white students who enter higher education with the same qualification (HEFCE, [Differences in degree outcomes: the effect of subject and student characteristics](#), 2015).

46. In 2017-18 access agreements we saw an increased focus on activity and support for students from BME backgrounds, including investigating issues around access and unexplained gaps in higher education attainment and progression. However, we believe there is still more institutions can do.
47. Therefore, we expect all institutions to investigate whether there are any disparities relating to access, student success and/or progression for different groups of students as part of an assessment of their performance, and to include information on these findings in their 2018-19 access agreements. To gain a fuller understanding of your performance in this area, you should consider using a basket of measures, for example analysing the performance of individual ethnic groups combined with other measures, such as POLAR3 classification and free school meals status.
48. Where disparities in access, student success and/or progression are identified, we expect to see you address these through your access agreement.

### Disabled students

49. In previous strategic guidance we highlighted the need to provide effective, tailored support for disabled students, and in particular those with mental health issues, specific learning difficulties and/or who are on the autistic spectrum. This was an area of focus in the letter of guidance from Ministers that OFFA received in spring 2016.
50. We saw increased focus in this area from some institutions, but we would like to see more activity and support being developed across the student lifecycle, taking into consideration the different needs of students with different disabilities.
51. We would also like to see more institutions setting specific targets relating to mental health issues, specific learning difficulties and/or students on the autistic spectrum.
52. In light of the recent changes to Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA), it is particularly important to build on the work universities and colleges are already doing to promote access, success and progression for disabled students, and to ensure students receive accurate information about the support they can expect to receive. For further details about this, please see our [guidance note on the changes to DSA](#).
53. In developing your plans to support disabled students, you may find it useful to refer to:
  - good practice guidance on [inclusive teaching and learning in higher education](#), published by the Disabled Student Sector Leadership Group
  - HEFCE's [review of provision and support for disabled students](#), published in 2015.

### Mature and part-time learners

54. We remain deeply concerned about falling rates of part-time study and about access for mature students, as these raise issues for inclusion, equality and diversity.
55. Given these concerns we believe that all institutions have a responsibility to consider how they might work to support part-time and mature learners, and we strongly encourage you to look at what more you might do to attract and support part-time and mature learners, across the whole student lifecycle. This might include offering alternative and flexible modes of study such as classes in the evening, intensive weekend modules, or online/distance learning.
56. We have commissioned further research into this area which will provide practical guidance later this year to institutions working with mature students on how to evaluate that work.

## Find out more

57. Please see our online guidance for further information on our expectations regarding these and other [target groups](#).

## Expectations around milestones and targets

58. We continue to expect you to set ambitious targets that focus on the outcomes and impact of your activities in related areas.
59. Most institutions updated their targets in their 2016-17 access agreements. Therefore we do not expect to see you making significant changes to your existing targets this year, but you should review your targets and, where appropriate, set new ones, to ensure they reflect the desired outcomes of the changes you are proposing in your access agreement.
60. We will expect you to have the following:
- At least one target to raise attainment in schools and colleges, rather than raising aspiration to participate in higher education, and be focused on outcomes.
  - Clearly defined targets that are closely aligned to your widening participation aims across the student lifecycle. This may involve higher resolution targets that combine multiple dimensions of disadvantage – for example, access for white males from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and outcomes for BME students.
  - At least one target for each stage of the student lifecycle where you have identified priorities that you want to address.
  - At least one target that covers the long-term outreach set out in your access agreement. Where this was not fully developed last year, we will expect you to provide more detail.
  - At least one collaborative target set in conjunction with partner organisations, where this work is undertaken.
61. The Director will not be minded to approve any reductions in the ambition of targets. Where you have made less progress than anticipated in previous years we expect you to examine, refine and improve your access, student success, and progression measures, including scaling-up where appropriate rather than reducing the ambition set out in your targets.
62. We recommend, therefore, that you discuss any new targets or significant changes to existing targets with OFFA ([contact details](#)) in advance of submitting your access agreement.
63. You may, if you wish, choose to extend existing targets up to academic year 2021-22. If so, we expect you to continue to demonstrate ambition, and would not expect to see the ambition of your targets plateau.
64. If any of your targets have become obsolete – for example, if the programme being measured has been discontinued – it may be appropriate to make changes. You should discuss any such changes of targets with OFFA ([contact details](#)) in advance of submitting your 2018-19 access agreement.

## How to prepare and submit your access agreement

65. To ensure you include everything necessary in your access agreement and submit it correctly, please refer to our [step by step instructions and checklist](#).

## Resource plan

66. As part of your access agreement you must submit a resource plan that will record your targets, fees, student number forecasts and planned level of spend on access, student

success, progression and financial support. This is in the form of an Excel template and will be similar to the one used for 2017-18 access agreements.

67. The template will be available shortly and we will contact you with details of how to access and download it.
68. The Government has not yet announced the student finance package (including fee caps) for the 2018-19 academic year. We will contact you once these have been announced with information on how to reflect changes to fee caps in your resource plan.

## Where to get support and further guidance on developing your 2018-19 access agreement

69. When developing your 2018-19 access agreement, especially if it is the first time you have worked on one, we encourage you to do the following:
  - Consult the '[Universities and colleges](#)' section of our website, which contains a wealth of detailed guidance and information for institutions, including:
    - a library of detailed guidance about our expectations, arranged by topic
    - links to other helpful resources
    - information about the submission, assessment and appeals processes
    - our topic briefings on various key policy areas.
  - Attend our [Developing your 2018-19 access agreement](#) conference on 21 February 2017, which we are running with Action on Access and Universities UK. The conference offers the chance to hear about our strategic priorities, attend workshops on key areas of policy, share good practice and experiences with other institutions, and discuss any queries you have with OFFA staff.
  - Understand current evidence and effective practice, both within your institution and across the sector.
  - Contact your institution's policy adviser at OFFA at an early stage to discuss your approach, and at any other time you need advice: [click here for key contact details](#).
70. OFFA may contact you to discuss your plans between now and the April submission deadline.

## What happens after submission?

71. We will assess your agreement between the submission deadline (26 April 2017) and mid-July. Please ensure that staff are available during this time in case discussions are required.
72. If you submit your agreement to us by **noon on Wednesday 26 April 2017** with all the required information, and there is no need for negotiation or discussion, we guarantee that you will have a decision no later than 31 July.
73. Please see our website for further information about [the process of submission and assessment](#), including what happens if the agreement you submit is not approvable.

## Provision of information to prospective students

74. We will be closely monitoring the provision of information to prospective students following the 2018-19 access agreement process.
75. All institutions have responsibilities under the Higher Education Act (2004), the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Part C, Indicator 2) and consumer protection law. This includes a requirement to publish (not just in your access agreement) clear and accessible information for applicants and continuing

students on the fees that you intend to charge and any financial support that you will offer, in time to inform potential students during the decision making process (i.e. as soon as access agreements are approved). You are also required to publish all currently active access agreements. There is more information about [these requirements](#) on our website.

76. We [wrote to all institutions](#) in December 2015 to remind them of their duty to publish this information. Following this, in winter 2016-17, we reviewed the information published on institutions' websites.
77. We found that many institutions are not complying with the requirements to publish information and we will contact these institutions directly in the near future.