

ASTON UNIVERSITY

ACCESS AGREEMENT

1. ACCESS AGREEMENT AND WIDENING PARTICIPATION

Widening access is central to the mission of Aston University. The University's Corporate Plan states "The strategic objectives and aims for the next five years, based on Aston's distinctive strengths, embody a continuing commitment to the 'twin-track' approach for its academic development: growth combined with widening access to undergraduate programmes, whilst maintaining high entry and academic standards and teaching excellence and the pursuit of focused research excellence and its application."

The University's Access Agreement sits within a now well-established institutional strategy for widening participation. The University is committed to excellence in teaching and has invested its core WP funding into student support to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student profile. Aston starts from a high baseline, meeting or exceeding its Access benchmarks, and builds upon many years of active development in this field. The University has invested an increasing proportion of WP core funding directly into enhancing the student learning experience, for example, the establishment of a Learning and Skills Centre in the Library. Practice is evidence-based, building upon the range of WP-funded research activity into the experiences and needs of under-represented students at Aston, which has been conducted at the University.

The publications 'Investing in Widening Participation 2003/04' and 'Widening Participation at Aston University, February 2006' outline how Aston is investing its WP funding to support its strategy for widening participation, including access (see <http://www.aston.ac.uk/prospective-students/wp/>).

2. ACCESS AGREEMENT: COMPONENT ELEMENTS

The main elements of Aston's Access agreement with OFFA are proposed to be as follows:

(a) Fee limits

- All full-time Home/EU undergraduate students are charged the full tuition fee (£3,070 pa in 2007), as this will provide revenue necessary to improve further our academic activities and facilities for students.
- Aston University runs highly successful four year sandwich degree programmes which enable our students to spend the third year outside the University on professional placement. Sandwich programmes increase the employability of our graduates and underpin our strong links with industry and the professions. Home/EU students on placement will be charged a tuition fee which is 50% of the full tuition fee (ie. £1535), as this will encourage students to continue to take the option of placements which are academically and vocationally beneficial.
- Home/EU students following full-time Foundation Degrees and Year Zero Foundation Programmes will be charged £1,225 pa.
- Aston University charges Home/EU students on part-time undergraduate programmes pro rata to the fee for full-time students.

(b) **Investment of additional income on access measures**

The University provides means-tested bursaries of up to £750 pa to students paying deferred variable tuition fees. Based on historical trends it is anticipated that about 50% of students paying deferred variable tuition fees will be entitled to a means-tested bursary, with about 40% of such students receiving a full bursary.

This table shows the projected additional income accruing from variable fees for the period 2006/07-2010/11 and the estimated amount allocated to bursaries.

*	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Total estimated additional fee income	£2,800,000	£5,350,000	£6,790,000	£8,390,000	£8,550,000
Estimated amount of additional fee income to be spent on bursaries	£570,000	£1,080,000	£1,380,000	£1,700,000	£1,730,000
Estimated amount of additional fee income to be spent on outreach	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0

* *Based on current student number projections. Planned student intake is subject to review annually, and to proposals for the development of student numbers to be incorporated into Aston University's revised 5 Year Plan for the period 2004/05 to 2008/09.*

The University will maintain its current outreach activity, which is extensive, well established and forms a key component of the University's WP strategy. Aston University currently invests about one-third of its WP core funding on outreach activity, both within academic Schools of Study and our Marketing Department. The University will maintain this comprehensive level of activity through WP funding or its own resources. The additional revenue from tuition fees will be re-invested directly into financial support for students in the form of bursaries and support for academic activities, including improvements to facilities. Given the extent and success of existing outreach activities, the University does not intend to allocate any of the additional fee income to outreach work.

(c) **Bursaries and other financial support for students**

The University provides means-dependent **Aston Bursaries** of up to £750 to students in receipt of the full Higher Education Maintenance Grant. Aston Bursaries will help to ensure that all students continue to benefit from high quality education and that no student is deterred from applying to Aston University for financial reasons. Students receiving partial state support are eligible for Aston Bursaries calculated on a sliding scale, up to a maximum of £750 pa., ie students receiving maximum Maintenance Grants receive a Bursary of £750 pa, and those on 50% of the maximum Maintenance Grant receive a Bursary of £375 pa, and so on. Students are assessed for eligibility through the Higher Education Bursary and Scholarship Scheme (HEBSS) which is administered by the Student Loans Company.

In addition to Aston Bursaries, the University offers **Subject Specific Awards** in a number of subject areas of regional or national importance which will also help support

students from WP backgrounds including Biology and Biomedical Sciences Programmes, Full Modern Language Programmes, Accredited Engineering and Science Programmes, Combined Honours Programmes in Chemistry, Maths and Biology. These Awards are made irrespective of family income and are not based on academic performance at A-level. A full listing of eligible programmes is available here: [Subject Specific Awards](#). It is intended that Subject-Specific Awards will be awarded annually to all students following eligible programmes provided that they meet the normal requirements for progression from one year of the programme to the next year of the programme.

Aston University is committed to the concept of integrated sandwich placement years and year abroad programmes, and has over 50 years experience of offering these degrees, giving our students valuable experience which increases their employability and confidence, enabling many of them to fast-track in their future Graduate careers. Accordingly, the University offers all UK/EU students paying deferred variable tuition fees a **Placement Allowance of £1000** if they decided to take a sandwich placement year.

UK/EU students paying deferred tuition fees, who undertake an unpaid sandwich work/study placement or a placement outside the United Kingdom for a whole academic year will receive an additional **Placement Bursary of £500**. This includes languages students on their Year Abroad. The Placement Allowance and the Placement Bursaries can be used to pay tuition fees or to help support students on their placement year/year abroad. Many Aston students are also paid a salary on their placement year.

(d) Provision of information to students

Information is available to prospective and existing students through the University's website and prospectus, and is reinforced through open day visits and outreach activities. The University also supports Aimhigher Information Advice and Guidance activities.

Finance talks feature as part of a programme of secondary school visits and HE guidance evenings for parents in schools and, in addition, the University provides pre-entry information and guidance on financial matters through open days and events for parents and teachers on campus. Pre-entry financial guidance is provided by the Students' Advice Centre and recruitment staff, and the Students' Advice Centre provides continuing advice and guidance once students have started their course. The University has also invested Widening Participation Funding to appoint a co-ordinator of the Students' JobShop and to research the level and impact of debt and part-time work upon Aston University students.

The Student Support unit manages financial assistance for students in the form of funds, trusts and bursaries, all of which are targeted and allocated on the basis of need. This is overseen by the Student Finance Committee, comprising senior academic staff, staff from the University's Finance Department, members of Student Support staff and representatives from the Students' Guild.

The University had developed a Guide for Parents which includes information on financial matters - refer to: <http://www.aston.ac.uk/prospective-students/parents/>.

(e) **Outreach work**

Through its Widening Participation Strategy the University provides a well-established programme of on and off-campus activities for schools and colleges, including:

- Extensive programme of visits to schools and colleges
- ‘Students in Schools’: student tutoring, student mentoring, and active community engagement
- University visit days for younger pupils and a series of Subject Taster Days for Year 12 students
- Residential experiences for school pupils, including a Year 11 Summer School
- Masterclasses for year 12 pupils in a range of subjects, supporting A level study
- Subject conferences
- Residential events for years 10 – 12, including NAGTY events
- Information for parents through Parents’ evenings in schools and on-campus events, eg. Parents’ Higher Education Evening, and Teachers’ and Careers Advisers’ Evening
- Proactive outreach campaign run by the School of Languages and Social Sciences, involving student ambassadors promoting language learning and career opportunities for language graduates. The Languages for Life website provides graduate profiles and information about studying abroad
- The development of an outreach programme for families, by Aston Business School

The School of Languages and Social Sciences and the Aston Business School are seeking to build upon their outreach programmes, run by WP funded members of staff, and to embed them within School activity. In addition to supporting open days, all University staff are engaged in other programmes organised by Schools and Colleges Liaison, for example teaching on Masterclasses, the Year 11 residential Summer School, and Year 9 subject taster days.

The University also actively engages in partnership activity through the Birmingham and Solihull Aimhigher programme. It contributes to the Aimhigher HE Mentoring project which places student mentors in secondary schools; and to the HEI Collaborative project which is about HEIs working in partnership with each other and schools.

The outreach programme continues to grow and initiatives such as the HEACF continue to generate a high demand for student volunteers in the local community. Also the success of Aston University’s Aimhigher programme, within Schools and Colleges Liaison, has been recognised and expanded, with a particular emphasis on national initiatives, including students returning to their old schools to share their experiences of Higher Education.

Progress on all WP-funded activity is reported internally to one of 3 Widening Participation Hub Steering Groups, and ultimately to the Widening Participation Task Group which reports to the Academic Planning and Resources Committee. Outreach activity is monitored by the Outreach and Widening Participation Steering Group.

Given its record of, and plans for outreach activity, the University commits to maintaining its Outreach programme without the need for extra expenditure from additional fee income.

(f) Milestones

Aston University is proud of its success in recruiting students from lower socio-economic groups and from areas where participation in Higher Education is low (Low Participation Neighbourhoods - LPNs), whilst maintaining very high retention rates and without sacrificing entry standards. As can be seen from the attached table, Aston University has consistently met or exceeded its Performance Indicators for Access. For example, in relation to the proportion from social classes 4, 5, 6 & 7, Aston University achieved 37.8% in 2004/05 against a benchmark of 28.7%. Aston also exceeds its benchmarks for students from state schools and for students from Low Participation Neighbourhoods. Aston University has set as its access milestones the HEFCE Performance Indicator benchmarks. The University will continue to aim to meet or exceed all its WP benchmarks, year on year as they are published, and will use bursaries to ensure that students are not deterred by the introduction of variable fees.

(g) Institutional Monitoring Arrangements

Aston University monitors the Access agreement and progress against the milestones, through the WPTG. This group, which has high level cross-University representation, is chaired by a Pro-Vice-Chancellor and reports to the Academic Planning and Resources Committee and thereby to the Senate. The WPTG is also responsible for monitoring the use of WP funding and the fulfilment of the University's Widening Participation Strategy. The University will report on performance in achieving the Access Performance Indicator benchmarks in the Annual Monitoring Statement to HEFCE.

3. CONCLUSION

Aston University's Access Agreement has been developed from a well-established Widening Participation Strategy, which in turn is embedded within the University's Strategic Plan. The additional tuition fee income from 2006/07, deriving from the introduction of deferred variable tuition fees, has enabled Aston University to enhance Maintenance Grants by the provision of Aston Bursaries, thus helping to ensure that no student considering enrolling upon a full-time undergraduate degree programme need be deterred from doing so for financial reasons. With the additional provision of Subject Specific Awards in some subjects, and Placement Allowances and Placement Bursaries, as well as a safety net of hardship funding for students who find themselves in unexpected financial difficulties during the course of their programmes, the University believes that it has put in place a range of financial support for students that has enabled the further implementation of its Widening Participation activities which Aston University is committed to continuing following the introduction of variable tuition fees.

Aston University looks forward to the endorsement of its revised Access Agreement by OFFA, so that it can provide early information to prospective undergraduate students about its plans for tuition fees and bursary support in 2007/08.

1 December 2006

% from State Schools or Colleges	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
Aston	87	84	89	89	90.6	91.9	90.7
Benchmark	85	84	85	86	88.3	87.9	86.5
Location adjusted-benchmark		83	84	86	87.9	88.0	85.7
% from Social Class IIIM, IV, V	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
Aston	29	33	31	33			
Benchmark	24	24	24	25			
Location adjusted-benchmark		25	25	27			
% from NS-SEC Classes 4, 5, 6 & 7	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
Aston					36.9	39.5	37.8
Benchmark					29.0	29.5	28.7
Location adjusted-benchmark					30.7	31.0	29.7
% from Low Participation Neighbourhoods	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
Aston	11	11	12	14	12.7	13.1	14.4
Benchmark	11	11	12	12	12.8	13.6	12.8
Location adjusted-benchmark		11	12	12	13.3	13.5	13.1
% With no previous HE and from Low Participation Neighbourhoods	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
Aston	14	20	12	11	17.0	17.5	16.0
Benchmark	14	17	14	15	12.3	15.8	16.6
Location adjusted-benchmark			16	17	14.4	20.0	20.0