

February 2009/01

Strategic Plan 2005 – 10



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Foreword

The end of the first two years of operation of the new student fees and support arrangements provides a good opportunity for us to update our strategic plan to take account of our experience to date.

My initial task as Director of Fair Access was to work in collaboration with institutions to ensure the emergence of as generous a set of student support arrangements as was reasonably possible. Since the initial approval of these bursary schemes we have worked hard to support institutions with practical issues arising from the implementation of their access agreements through guidance and good practice and we have also started to monitor how well institutions are meeting their commitments.

Our first monitoring exercise demonstrated that the implementation of the new system had been largely successful and the sector was meeting its obligations – but it also revealed some operational difficulties which needed improvement. In 2006-07 as many as 12,000 students failed to collect their bursaries suggesting a continued lack of awareness of bursary arrangements. A change to the student finance application form will see a dramatic improvement in take-up from 2008-09 but these initial problems have highlighted the importance of clear information about finance.

As we enter the third year under the new regime there is growing interest in the evidence of the impact of fees and bursaries. Although still early days, it is encouraging that application numbers have continued to rise, including proportional increases in those applying from the lower socio-economic groups. Our monitoring information will be an important source of evidence for the independent review into the first three years of variable fees.

From 2008-09 we will also be working with HEFCE on widening participation strategic assessments. These will allow institutions to demonstrate their full efforts in widening participation, so helping to provide a much broader picture of activity and commitment than is available at the moment. Institutions have been asked to append their access agreement to their strategic assessment.

In an ever-changing HE landscape, including two changes in the Government's student finance package since 2006-07, the challenge for the sector is to learn from our experience to date, understand more about student behaviour both pre and post-application and understand how funds can best be targeted to maximise their chances of widening participation. We will continue to work in collaboration with institutions, pursuing our joint aims for fair access.

Sir Martin Harris, Director of Fair Access





Introduction

The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was created under the Higher Education Act 2004 to work with institutions to promote and safeguard fair access to higher education following the introduction of variable fees in 2006. This is achieved through the approval and monitoring of institutions' access agreements, which set out the fees that an institution has chosen to charge and the measures it is taking to ensure fair access – primarily the provision of bursaries and, in some cases, additional outreach work.

Access agreements cover full-time undergraduate courses as well as Postgraduate Certificates in Education (PGCE) and other Initial Teacher Training (ITT) courses for full-time home and European Union (EU) students.

Our principal duty is to approve, monitor and maintain access agreements. Since approving the first round of access agreements early in 2005, we have continued to approve revisions to agreements and to support institutions through advice and guidance. We have also completed our first annual monitoring of access agreements.

We developed our 2005-10 strategic plan following internal discussion and consultation with sector bodies and have now updated it to reflect recent and future developments in our work. These include recommendations from an inquiry by the Innovation, Universities and Skills Select Committee and a National Audit Office (NAO) report on widening participation. Our future work will also begin to focus more heavily on the likely information requirements of the independent review of the first three years of variable fees and student support, as well as the development, together with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), of widening participation strategic assessments.

The development of widening participation strategic assessments and the outcome of the independent review of fees is likely to have a large influence on any future strategy and we will engage with institutions and our stakeholders in the development of a new plan for 2010-2015.

Due to the nature of our role as a regulator, most of our aims are achieved through collaboration with others. The delivery and implementation of our strategy therefore relies heavily on the agreements we have in place with institutions and the working relationships we have developed during the course of our business to date. We hope that this strategy can build on the positive results so far.

Mission, functions and principles

Mission

Working collaboratively we promote fair access to higher education in particular for low income and other under-represented groups



Functions

We deliver this mission by:

- Regulating the charging of variable tuition fees through the approval and monitoring of access agreements
- Where appropriate, identifying and disseminating good practice and advice connected with access to higher education, in particular in respect of financial support arrangements and the provision of financial information to students.

Principles

In performing our duties we aim to:

- Reassure the public that institutional student support arrangements are fair and as generous as is reasonably possible
- Work as collaboratively as possible with institutions to minimise the potential for access agreements to be refused
- Respect and support institutional autonomy
- Ensure that any administrative burden on institutions is kept to a minimum
- Operate with transparency and openness.

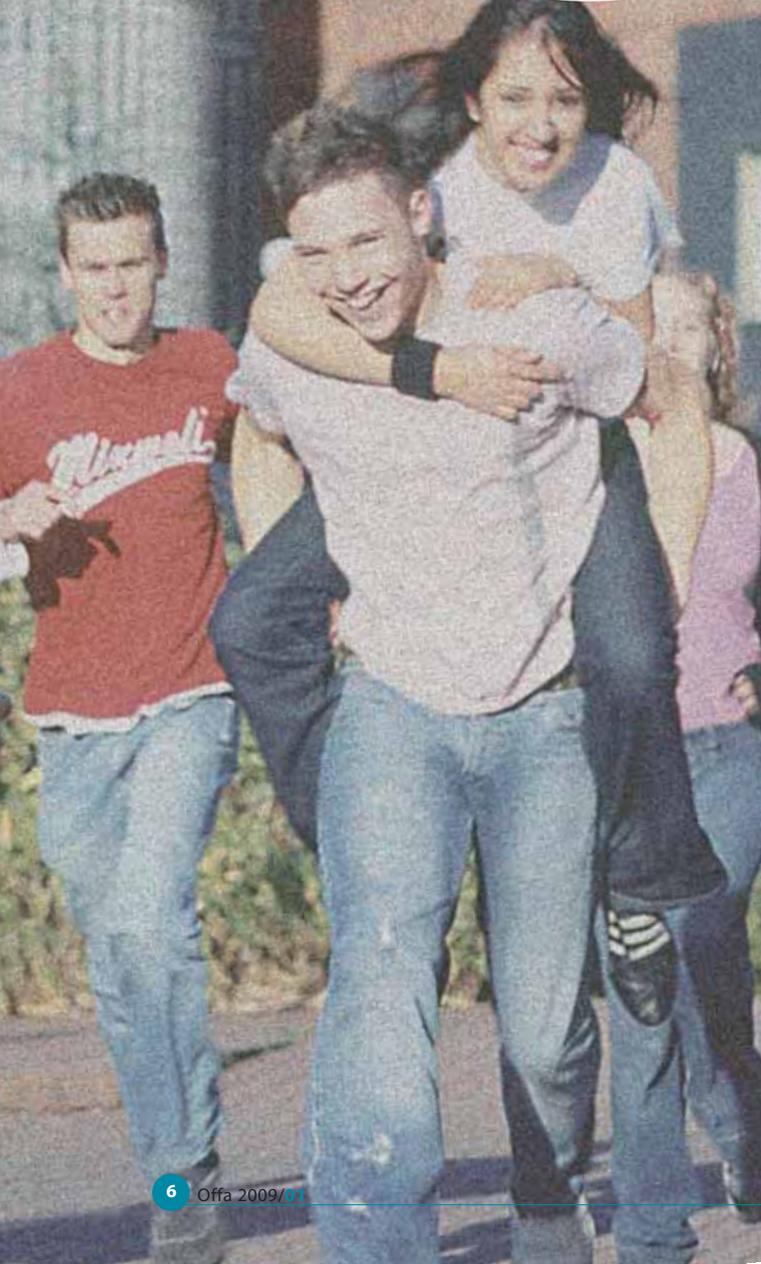
Achievements to date

Approval of access agreements

We have approved access agreements for all higher education institutions (HEIs) with undergraduate full-time provision. We have also approved a smaller number of agreements for further education colleges (FECs) and school centred initial teacher training providers (SCITTs). There is an ongoing need to keep access agreements current and up to date. Since we approved the first round of agreements in 2005, the Government has twice revised eligibility thresholds for state support. This has led to major revisions to access agreements. We have processed and issued decisions on significant numbers of revised access agreements as well as continuing to process minor revisions to help institutions clarify their arrangements. When assessing proposed revisions, we have aimed to be flexible in allowing institutions to react to the developing market, while ensuring that any changes made within the application cycle have not had an adverse effect on students.

Access agreement monitoring

As a regulator, we have a responsibility to ensure that institutions are meeting their financial commitments to individual students. We also monitor the progress that institutions are making towards the milestones set out in their access agreements. To achieve this we undertake an annual monitoring exercise and publish an outcomes report with an overview of our analysis. Our first round of monitoring for 2006-07 showed that although actual expenditure was less than predicted, institutions were meeting their obligations. Expenditure on financial support for lower income students was almost £96 million which was just over 21 per cent of additional income. Over £20 million was spent on additional outreach activity which was just under 5 per cent of additional fee income. More than 70,000 students from low income backgrounds received bursaries and every student who applied for a bursary through the correct channels received one.





Investment in bursaries and outreach

One of our initial strategic objectives was to ensure that, through the approval of access agreements, there was an increased amount of funding available for financial support for students and outreach work. When we had finished approving the first round of access agreements, analysis showed that by 2010-11, institutions would be investing an estimated £350 million a year of additional fee income in providing financial support for low income students and around £35 million in additional outreach work

Our first round of monitoring demonstrated that accurate forecasting had been difficult for institutions, in many cases resulting in a significant difference between predicted and actual expenditure. We therefore gave institutions the opportunity to revise their financial estimates based on firmer data on the number of eligible students in year one, and to reflect changes to bursary schemes for 2008-09 entrants (many institutions had extended the eligibility for their bursary schemes for 2008-09 entrants in line with more generous state support thresholds). New figures for the sector estimate that £347 million will be spent on bursaries and scholarships for lower income students by 2010-11, representing 23 per cent of additional fee income. An estimated £36 million will be invested in additional outreach work.

Guidance and good practice

We support institutions with the operational and practical considerations that emerge from implementing their access agreement by providing guidance and good practice as necessary. We have

issued guidance and promoted the issue of care leavers, a group hugely disadvantaged in society and chronically under-represented in HE. We have been pleased to see a growing number of access agreements specifically addressing the needs of care leavers, either through bursary schemes or targeted outreach work. We published good practice on the financial information on institutions' websites in December 2006 and have recently commissioned research to develop good practice in raising awareness of bursaries.



Financial information, structure and accountability

We are an independent, non-departmental public body consisting of a Director, Sir Martin Harris, three full-time and one part-time staff. We are sponsored and receive funding from the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. We have an average budget of slightly under £500,000 per annum to cover running costs and good practice work.

We report to the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills and are required to publish an annual report to Parliament on how we have performed our functions and on progress made within access agreements. This report also refers to our strategic plan and progress made against our aims and objectives.

OFFA's strategic aims

Our strategic aims are primarily delivered through institutions' access measures as set out in their access agreements and more generally. We have three core aims:

1. To support and encourage improvements in participation rates in higher education from low income and other under-represented groups
2. To reduce as far as practicable the barriers to higher education for students from low income and other under-represented groups by ensuring that institutions continue to invest in outreach and bursaries
3. To support and encourage equality of opportunity through the provision of clear and accessible financial information for students, their parents/carers and their advisers

In implementing our strategic plan we also want to ensure that we maintain an awareness of any issues that affect access more generally.

Our strategic aims were developed through an internal planning process including evaluation of our work to date, a stakeholder analysis, risk analysis and SWOT analysis to identify priorities. Each aim has a set of objectives and performance indicators. Our aims are primarily delivered through implementation of approved access agreements but are supported by our work in the areas of good practice, research and monitoring.

Good practice

Identifying good practice in bursary schemes, administration and policies, and the provision of financial information is a major priority for us. We aim to disseminate any good practice identified as widely as possible. We do not work on good practice in outreach as this area is more established and we do not want to duplicate work already well covered by others. We also feel that outreach, along with matters relating to retention and on-course student support, sit more appropriately within the remit of the Higher Education Funding Council for England and its widening participation national co-ordination team. We will, of course, be happy to collaborate on work and share any knowledge gained on widening participation with other



organisations, and our monitoring reports indicate the extent to which additional fee income is used to support outreach, but we do not propose to focus on this area.

While our remit is to regulate the charging of fees for full-time, home and EU undergraduate, PGCE and other ITT students only, we are aware that the introduction of the new full-time fee regime has implications for part-time provision. Part-time study is often an important route to widening participation in higher education and we believe it is important that we should be aware of the overall effects on access to higher education and the sector more generally. Where possible and appropriate we will be interested in including this area within our monitoring and our work with the sector on good practice and research. We will bring any issues to the attention of all concerned as they become apparent. This work will also form part of our contribution to the independent review of the first three years of variable fees.



Research priorities

The independent review will have overall responsibility for evaluating the impact of the variable fees policy and we will inevitably have a role in contributing to this review. Our research priorities will be determined by the issues that arise from the implementation of access agreements and will feed into good practice to support institutions and help them improve their policies. However we will also be interested in monitoring and investigating any differential impact of the variable fees policy on different types of under-represented groups. This



may include identifying changes in the patterns of applications and participation - including mode of study - in the sector as a whole.

Monitoring

We undertake annual monitoring of access agreements to support our aims – in particular we aim to ensure that institutions are meeting their commitments and are moving towards their milestones. This forms the core of our ongoing work and we produce a monitoring outcomes report with an overview of progress each year. We will look to use data from monitoring to inform our analysis of good practice and research priorities and to provide evidence for the review.



Aim 1

To support and encourage improvements in the number and/or proportions of students in higher education from low income and other under-represented groups



Objectives

- To support the sector in making measurable progress in the number and/or proportions of applications to higher education from students from lower socio-economic groups
- To work with other sector bodies to monitor and evaluate the effect of the new fee regime from 2006-07 on the pattern of student applications, the number of new entrants and subsequent participation rates (this includes contributing to the review of the first three years of variable fees)
- To monitor annually the objectives that institutions have set themselves
- To provide support to institutions on bursary scheme policy and administration.

Context

In introducing variable tuition fees the Government was determined that access to higher education should be broadened and not narrowed. This was in line with its commitment to increasing participation in higher education towards 50 per cent of those aged 18 to 30 by the end of 2010. We were set up to ensure that institutions that decided to introduce fees above the standard level did so without jeopardising the aim of widening participation. Our primary aim is therefore to ensure that institutions put in place measures through access agreements that we believe will, at the very least, help maintain current participation rates of students from low income and other under-represented groups.

Our concern is that future numbers of applicants and participation rates should not fall below current levels and that students from low income and other under-represented groups should not be put off applying to higher education because of the perceived cost.

The strategic priority for us, however, goes beyond this. We hope that, with the help of access agreements, the sector as a whole will see the number of students entering HE from low income and other under-represented groups actually increase.

We are also concerned that students, whatever their background, should not be put off applying to the institutions most appropriate to their talents, particularly on financial grounds. We will therefore be interested not only in overall numbers of students, but in the patterns of applications within the sector.

We have no remit to consider admissions criteria and fully respect the autonomy of institutions to set their own admissions policies. However, we hope that the range of financial measures that are in place will encourage a broader pool of suitably qualified applicants that will in due course result in increased participation rates from low income and under-represented groups.

Low income groups are defined as students who have an assessed household income of up to £49,305 at 2008-09 levels. Under-represented groups are defined as lower socio-economic groups, disabled people, under-represented ethnic minority groups and care leavers.

Key performance indicators

- The number and/or proportions of applications from lower socio-economic groups have increased across the planning period
- The number/proportions of students entering HE from low income groups have increased across the planning period
- Guidance, advice and good practice is provided to institutions where necessary.

Baseline data will be established in 2005-06 and 2006-07. At the very least the numbers/proportions referred to should not fall below 2006-07 levels. Progress will be recorded in our annual report to Parliament.



Aim 2

To reduce as far as practicable the barriers to higher education for students from low income and other under-represented groups by ensuring that institutions continue to invest in outreach and bursaries



Objectives

- To monitor the number of students from low income and other under-represented groups awarded institutional financial assistance and the amounts awarded to them
- To monitor the levels of investment committed to in access agreements
- To continue to work collaboratively with institutions and to provide guidance to ensure any changes to access agreements are acceptable
- To be aware as fully and as promptly as possible of the pattern of applications, and ultimately of admissions, to higher education in 2006 and thereafter.

Context

Although from 2006 no student has to pay tuition fees upfront, there is some concern that the perceived overall higher cost will discourage students from low income and other under-represented groups - who are often the most debt averse - from applying to higher education.

We are therefore concerned that institutions that choose to charge a fee above the standard level should ensure that some of the additional fee income they receive is used to provide bursary schemes to assist students with the least financial resources to accept and benefit from places on higher education courses.

Our initial aim was to increase the amount of institutional investment available for bursary schemes and outreach work. This has been achieved through the schemes proposed and approved in the access agreements. Our focus has now shifted to monitoring the implementation and outcomes of these arrangements. Our aim is to ensure that institutions continue to invest in bursaries and outreach at acceptable levels. In pursuing this aim, we recognise that investment levels set out in access agreements are estimates based on assumptions of student profiles. We will therefore be flexible, accepting that actual levels may vary from the estimates.

Despite the efforts of institutions and others to ensure both the clarity and accessibility of financial support, in 2006-07 (the first year of the new system) as many as 12,000 students still failed to collect the institutional bursary to which they were entitled. We expect all institutions to make increased efforts to increase take-up and want to see an ongoing improvement in the numbers of students accessing bursaries. From 2008-09 institutions subscribed to the Higher Education Bursary and Scholarship Scheme (HEBSS) will see a dramatic increase in take-up because of improvements to the student finance application form.

It is still early days and it is not clear whether the financial assistance provided by institutions, along with the changes to central student support mechanisms, is significantly affecting applicant behaviour. The major focus for our work going forward is to monitor developments and build knowledge and expertise in the financial support offered by institutions. We will use this knowledge to assist the sector wherever possible.

In a changing environment institutions may want, or need, to update their agreements from time to time. We will continue to offer advice on issues as they arise and will ensure a fast turnaround of any revisions.

Key performance indicators

- The annual returns from institutions demonstrate that the levels of investment are broadly maintained at the levels committed to in access agreements, recognising that the levels set out in access agreements are estimates
- Any revisions to access agreements are normally processed and communicated to institutions within a three-week period. No complaints are received from institutions regarding process and service
- High levels and improvements in bursary take-up rates.



Aim 3

To support and encourage equality of opportunity through the provision of clear and accessible financial information for students, their parents/carers and advisers



Objectives

- To support and contribute to the evaluation of the financial information that institutions provide to students and applicants
- To share data and contribute to the work being undertaken by other organisations to provide information on financial support for students
- To provide support to the sector on the provision of financial information.

Context

With the introduction of the new fee regime and diverse bursary schemes, there has been an additional need to ensure that potential students, their parents/carers and advisers understand the costs involved and the financial support available to them while they are studying. Providing clear and accessible information on the financial support available is key to an institution's ability to attract more applications from low income and other under-represented groups.

Institutions have set out within their access agreements how they intend to achieve this, but there is a public expectation that this information will be readily available and easy to understand. Although we do not produce information ourselves, it is important we ensure that the information available from institutions meets this expectation.



Key performance indicators

- No justified complaints are received from students and applicants regarding the clarity and accessibility of information provided by institutions on the bursaries available or the fees to be charged
- No justified complaints are received from students over eligibility for bursaries or the amounts awarded
- An annual exercise is undertaken with institutions to update fee, bursary and eligibility thresholds and access agreements more generally, allowing the correct information to be available to students early in the application cycle
- There is liaison and input into external information sources on bursary messages
- Guidance and good practice is provided to institutions where necessary.



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Edge Hill and the University of Central Lancashire for contributing photographs to this strategic plan.

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