Foreword:

Working together to solve complex problems

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Tapping into research talent

‘All those with the potential to benefit from higher education have equal opportunity to participate and succeed, on a course and in an institution that best fit their potential, needs and ambitions’ (BIS, 2014, p.7). This is the vision of the UK government’s national strategy for access and student success in higher education in England, and it describes, I think, what everyone working to improve access to English universities is striving for. But sadly, it is a long way from reality. Fair access continues to be a significant challenge, and the solutions often remain elusive: despite the progress that has been made in recent years, there are still wide gaps between participation, retention and outcomes for different groups of students at English universities.

Yet those very universities have the potential to play a much more powerful role than they have done to date in analysing the issues at stake and creating much-needed solutions. This is why the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), the independent public body that regulates, promotes and safeguards access to higher education in England, is seeking to encourage and facilitate discussion among the academic community, as well as practitioners working in university and college widening participation teams. We want to reach out to this community because we recognise that effective, sustainable solutions to complex problems are rarely found through a single route. It would be unrealistic, for example, to expect the outreach or financial support packages of an institution, in isolation, to ensure fair access; this requires collaboration and shared learning between schools, colleges, universities, employers, parents, learners … the list goes on. Similarly, it is a very big ask to expect practitioners alone to investigate, understand and provide effective solutions to the challenge of fair access for a diverse and ever-changing group of students in an equally diverse and ever-changing higher education sector. This is where academics from across disciplines can play a key role, working in partnership with practitioners, policy makers and third sector organisations.
They bring expertise and skills to the table that can only be beneficial to everyone.

**Building the evidence base**

Much valuable work to build the evidence base across the student life cycle has already been done – work that is contributing to a shared understanding of which approaches and activities have the greatest impact. For example, the many examples cited in Nursaw Associates’ recent review (2015) of the current evidence around the impact of financial support, and in the national strategy. Increasingly, such evidence demonstrates that different approaches are effective in different institutions, or for different groups of students. But there is still a long way to go to improve understanding of fair access in the context of the complex and evolving higher education landscape, and to achieve maximum impact from the increasing effort and investment that universities and colleges are putting into fair access – more than £700 million per year by 2018-19, more than half of which will be invested in financial support.

**OFFA’s work on financial support**

It is a key theme of OFFA’s strategic plan that we support the sector in growing this understanding. One way in which we are currently doing so is through our work on the impact of financial support. Universities and colleges plan to give £441 million in financial support through their access agreements in 2015–16. That is more than half of their total access agreement investment. Clearly, this makes it imperative to understand the impact of financial support. So, when the idea was mooted that the OFFA should host a conference to bring together academics, policymakers and practitioners to discuss this topic – which remains hotly debated – we were very pleased to work with Universities UK and Edge Hill University to do so.

The conference was a day of sharing knowledge, raising the profile of work being done and initiating new pieces of work (some of which OFFA is now taking forward). I’m very pleased that the issue of financial support and the impact it can have on access, student success and progression was the subject of our first conference aimed at the research community. Discussing this subject with such a mixed group of individuals proved a wonderful opportunity to influence each other’s practices. And I know I speak for other members of the conference organising team when I say I am honoured that this Journal has chosen to feature the content of the conference in this special issue.

But the conference did not happen in isolation. It was part of a wider project already underway to develop greater understanding of the impact of financial support. Before the conference, we made a call for evidence to the sector. The findings from this call for evidence were included in the literature review we commissioned from Nursaw Associates to look at the impact of financial
support on students’ experience. We then convened a task-and-finish group of sector experts who supported us in developing the scope for a large-scale research project to improve evaluation practice and develop understanding of the impact of financial support (the first phase of which will be published early in 2016). We also worked in partnership with other organisations to support their work in this area, for example, analysis of students’ use of online information by NetNatives.

Future opportunities

This is a new way of working for OFFA and we are only at the beginning of what we hope to achieve. Our work on understanding the impact of financial support will continue, and in addition, over the coming year, we will also be exploring where else we should support research. We have invited a group of experts from across the sector to work with us to identify where the key gaps in evidence lie and where OFFA’s support may have the greatest impact on outcomes for potential students.

Our evidence strategy aims to grow the depth and breadth of shared knowledge in the sector so that the evaluation, research and analysis being done have a measurable impact on the development of widening participation practice. One of the ways in which we can do this is by raising the profile of work that provides significant findings on, or that has the potential to change the way practitioners and policy makers approach, fair access. We want to work with partners to build on existing evidence so that important national, regional and local factors are understood, so influencing our policy development and the guidance we issue to institutions, and ultimately impacting on practice.

We hold a wealth of information about what institutions are doing to improve the participation, success and progression of disadvantaged students in higher education – information gathered through our approval and monitoring of access agreements (the mechanism by which universities and colleges tell us how they are working to sustain and improve access) and our relationships with institutions and other stakeholders. We analyse this information ourselves and plan to do so in greater depth in the future, carrying out further in-house research. But we are also keen to share this data with academics for their own use to benefit both academics and practitioners.

This new, open and collaborative way of working is, as outlined above, already having dividends and I am excited to see what it will yield in the future.
References

