

UNIVERSITY OF SUNDERLAND

Proposal to Charge Variable Fees from 2006 Academic Year Onwards to Full-Time UK/EU Undergraduate Students

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The University of Sunderland has for many years been committed to raising aspirations and widening participation both with local students and those throughout the North East. This outreach work is designed to encourage more applications to university from under-represented groups and compliments the work of AimHigher within the region.
- 1.2 The University sees the introduction of variable fees as both an opportunity and a challenge. The "opportunity" is that through the introduction of variable fees the University will be able to generate additional income which can then be invested in further encouraging under represented groups to progress to the University, where they will receive a quality educational experience, and where they are encouraged to succeed in a supportive and pro-active environment both academically and as an individual. The "challenge" for the University is that it is operating in a market where there is a significant aversion to debt and where progression to higher education is not seen as the norm.
- 1.3 Recent studies of "Young Peoples Attitudes to Education" (North East Assembly/Northumbria University, Centre for Public Policy 2003) however have shown that although 43.7% of those surveyed felt that they would definitely go to university, 63% did not know what they needed to do to achieve this and 72.7% were not sure they would be able to afford to go. This attitude is against a background where in 2003 only 24% of young people in the North East progressed to higher education compared with a national average of 40% and a Government aspiration of 50% of all 18-30 year olds experiencing higher education by 2010.
- 1.4 Working in such a culture of low aspirations and debt aversion the University has for many years invested heavily in working with under represented groups, schools, colleges and other agencies to increase participation in higher education. This has resulted in the University out performing its benchmark to become the leading institution in England for the past five years in respect of the number of students recruited from social classes III,IV,V. An overview of the University's Widening Participation Strategy and Outreach Programme is described briefly in section 3 and the further actions it intends to take from 2006 onwards in section 4.

2 Proposed Variable Fees Scheme

2.1 The variable fees scheme has been devised taking into account the cultural aspects of the North East (briefly described above) and the current financial circumstances of existing UK/EU full time undergraduate students. Analysis shows that for the 2003/04 academic year 48% of the full time UK/EU undergraduate students did not pay tuition fees personally, a further 15% only paid partial fees and the remainder ie 37% paid full fees. Information is not available to the University on the actual financial circumstances of those receiving full fees remission or those receiving no remission, nor is the income assessment scale relating to the new educational maintenance grant. The calculations of the cost to the University of the scholarship scheme it intends to introduce are therefore based upon best estimates. It is also a fundamental aspect of the scheme that it is designed to maintain the current student intake to the University rather than increase it and that to achieve this in the market in which the University operates will require a significant proportion of the additional fees income to be used to provide scholarships to students. Whether this aim will be achieved in practice will only be known from 2006 onwards. There is still the concern that in a fragile market, students will choose not to progress into higher education either with one of the University college partners or directly to the University. Should this be the case the University will review the scholarship scheme.

2.2 The main elements of the University scholarship scheme are:

- The fee charged by the University to all UK/EU full time undergraduate students will be £3000 per annum except in the case of sandwich year out students which are the subject of an internal review as to whether these can be increased above the current £550 per annum.
- All full time UK/EU students in receipt of a partial or full educational maintenance grant will receive a scholarship from the University (which embraces the mandatory bursary of £300) in the order of £500 per annum.
- All full time UK/EU students progressing through their degree programme will receive a total progression scholarship in the order of £1000 as they move through the various levels of their programme. Of this total student population we estimate that 85% could be classified as being from under represented groups including those from low income backgrounds and lower socio-economic groups. This is based upon the 63% of students who receive full or partial fees remission at present and the low higher education participation rate in the North East of 24%. As

information regarding assessable income becomes available after 2006 we will be able to re-assess the 85% percentage.

- Full time Foundation degree / HND students will receive a further scholarship in the order of £500.
- The above scholarship scheme is additional to any existing scheme and may be adjusted should the introduction of variable fees affect the intake levels of the University.

2.3 Clear and transparent policies and procedures will be created in respect of the above scheme and communicated both as part of the recruitment process and thereafter. This is described in more detail in section 5.

2.4 In addition to the cost of the scholarship scheme the University intends to invest a further £750000 of the additional fee income, over and above existing investment, into developing progression pathways from school and colleges to the University. (see section 4).

3 Overview of existing Widening Participation Strategy and Outreach programme

3.1 The University's approach is based upon development and participation in local, sub-regional and regional partnership working. The University has embraced the 'AimHigher' initiative and has worked proactively with existing Excellence Challenge and P4P initiatives, EICs in the North East region and two EAZ areas (Sunderland and East Durham) to fully implement a co-ordinated approach to aspiration building. Collaborative arrangements with FE and 6th Form Colleges exist or are being further developed to help achieve the aims of the University and Government to enable participation to be widened further.

3.2 The University recognises that raising levels of participation requires long-term strategic action based on changing underlying attitudes and aspirations. The partnership approach of the University includes developing long-term working relationships with regional Universities and strategic partner colleges in Sunderland, Durham, Gateshead, South Tyneside, North Tyneside & Northumberland in order to offer a range of progression pathways and educational opportunities for under represented groups.

3.3 Widening Participation funding has also been used to further develop and refine the university's approach to raising levels of participation amongst those living in areas of the City of Sunderland and the East Durham (Easington and Peterlee) where rates are particularly low. Using demographic and UCAS data, rates of participation at ward level have been identified and co-ordinated

activity plans developed to counteract the culture of low participation.

3.4 The building of links extends beyond those with providers. The University works closely with the Connexions Service to ensure that young people are fully informed about the range of routes into HE available to them. In a period of relatively buoyant employment, for young people from backgrounds where HE is not a common aspiration available paid employment often appears to be the most attractive option. Rather than seeking to counter this by promoting the longer-term returns of investment in Higher Education, the University and its partner colleges seek to help students manage a combination of employment and education in a variety of patterns and models.

3.5 The University continues to provide a range of aspiration raising and pre-entry activities including:

- Taster Days
- Student Ambassador Scheme
- Student Mentoring
- Student Associate Scheme
- Student Shadowing
- Celebrity and Community lectures and Road shows
- Schools Liaison 'Passport' scheme
- Schools Support & Liaison (mock interviews, careers and parents information evenings)
- Bright Sparks' Science and Technology Club
- Science Road show
- Master Classes (including vocational subjects)
- Residential Summer Schools
- Family Fun Days

Over 4000 young people benefited from the University's Aspiration Raising Activity programme in 2003/4.

3.6 Adult returners continue to be encouraged to enter HE and the range of support mechanisms in place to assist them is an integral part of the University's commitment to widening participation. For example: Personal Progression Plans, IAG Sessions and Student Shadowing Schemes

3.7 The University is fully committed to working in partnership at regional (North East), sub-regional (Tyne & Wear) and local (Sunderland) (East Durham etc) levels. This is seen as a major contribution to widening participation through the development of strategic approaches, for example - helping to develop the OneNE (RDA)'s Regional Skills Strategy; the Tyne and Wear Workforce Development Plan and, at local level, the Sunderland Learning Partnership's Lifelong Learning Plan and 14-19 Action Plan. The University plays a major role in the partnerships established at regional and sub-

regional level to develop strategies for the deployment of EU Structural Funds under Objectives 2 and 3 and for deployment of SRB, New deal for Communities and Neighbourhood Renewal Funding. All of these programmes are significant sources of support for widening participation which enable the University to:-

- provide programmes for the SMEs workforce without higher level skills
- enable those living in poorer communities to acquire employment related skills
- help people disadvantaged by ethnicity, gender or disability to gain employment related skills and
- to encourage and support within disadvantaged communities the capability to define learning needs and develop the means to meet them.

3.8 The University recognises that further progress in widening participation will not be easy to achieve. Most of the 'early wins' have been taken, and the whilst there is potential for extending participation to those in 'hard to reach' categories and living in wards with very high levels of deprivation this will require greater effort and investment over a longer time scale to achieve significant results. This can only be done in inclusive partnerships with others and drawing upon a variety of funding sources.

4 Additional Outreach Activity to be Provided through Variable Fees

4.1 Maintaining the University's high level of widening participation will be a challenge resultant from working within a culture of:

- low aspirations and attainment levels
- no family background or prior knowledge of higher education
- debt aversion
- complex messages on fees and funding

The University will use part of the additional income from the Variable Fees Scheme to build on existing outreach activity, work with Strategic Partner Colleges to develop subject based progression programmes, improve information advice and guidance to potential students and improve student support mechanisms to aid retention.

4.2 Generic aspiration building activity is at the core of the University's Widening Participation Strategy and will continue to be a key theme in outreach activity with some of the additional fees income used to further develop this work in respect of students studying vocational programmes (ages 14-19 and 19+). However the University recognises that in order to facilitate progression to higher education further work must be done to raise achievement and ensure that appropriate progression routes are accessible to those students whose aspirations have been raised. The University will

therefore invest funding to work with Strategic Partner Colleges and 6th Forms in the development of a subject based progression scheme which will be available to students 14-19 years and mature adult returners in order to provide appropriate advice and guidance for post 16 progression. This work will include progress files and on-line support, delivery of subject specific tuition and support (from school, FE and HE Staff & FE/HE students) and provide guaranteed progression for participating students who meet the agreed academic criteria.

4.3 It is recognised that retention is a key widening participation issue and an extensive research project has been conducted to identify essential components to aid student progression. This includes:

- Improved pre entry advice and guidance
- Comprehensive student induction and social inclusion programme
- Improved academic counselling and support
- Improved student support

The University recognises that academic related student support services and infrastructure have a vital role to play in improving retention therefore some of the additional fees income will be used to facilitate the implementation of the recommendations from the project. This will allow the University to support all learners, especially those from non traditional backgrounds via the development of a 24/7 student gateway service, continued improvements to the Virtual Learning Environment /Managed Learning Environment (VLE/MLE), fully integrated progress files /e-portfolios and “student marketing and retention tutors” based in academic schools.

5 **Communication Strategy in Respect of Variable Fees**

The University of Sunderland is committed to a transparent approach to its communication strategy relating to variable fees.

From the start of the 2006 recruitment cycle prospective students will be faced with a myriad of options and will need to make informed choices, balancing programme preference with what will inevitably be complex and varied financial and ‘added value’ incentives.

Widening access and raising aspirations is core to the University's mission and vision, and in a debt adverse region where participation in higher education is low, it is essential that the ‘no fees up front’ message is communicated to target groups.

The key elements of the University of Sunderland's communication strategy are as follows:

- Internal communication with staff to ensure that an accurate and consistent message on the new financial arrangements for students is widely disseminated and clearly understood.
- Communication with staff in an advisory capacity in schools, colleges and other advice and guidance networks. The university will work with AimHigher partners in an attempt to ensure clarity and consistency of the core message across the region.
- Regional workshop events for students and parents/guardians.
- Production of clear, easy to understand guidance material outlining the key changes to student funding.

The University is committed to publishing its fees stance and scholarship scheme in full in its full-time undergraduate prospectus published in March 2005 and it is hoped that OFFA will be able to approve the University "Scheme" in order to facilitate early publication.

Clear information will also be available on the university's website, providing a 'frequently asked questions' information service, augmented with direct access to university financial advisers, and links to other recognised sources of information.

All relevant supplementary promotional material and press/PR activity will be closely monitored to ensure the clear and consistent presentation of information.

6 Performance Management of Outreach Activity and Impact of Variable Fees

6.1 As described previously in this "scheme" the cultural background of a significant proportion of the University's market may well result in the introduction of variable fees reducing intake levels. The "scheme" now proposed attempts to ensure that this is not the case. The University is therefore establishing the following targets/milestones against which it can judge the success of the scheme.

- undertake focus group research in 2006/07 and thereafter to ensure that prospective students and/or parents fully understand the variable fees scheme;
- maintain the level 1 intake level of full-time UK/EU undergraduates at 2,400 per annum or above;
- maintain the current level of activity in aspiration building/widening participation;
- establish the base target for vocational progression scheme and future growth in participants;

- work with schools/colleges in order to establish a progression scheme to the University with prospective students “enrolled” on the pathways of 250 in 2006/07 rising to 1,000 in 2010/11;
- have fully operational by 2006/07 a 24/7 student gateway and “student marketing and retention tutors” in each academic school.

7 **Compliance**

In recent years the University has developed a transparent annual planning and monitoring process for its Corporate Plan, Operational Plan and Supporting Strategies. This process includes targets and milestones which are kept under regular review and revised as appropriate as part of the process. The annual financial planning process forms part of this overall process. The targets we are establishing as part of our OFFA agreement will be built into our Operational Plan and Supporting Strategies and progress against those targets can be reported to OFFA as appropriate.

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