

Access Agreement 2012/13

1 Background

1. The Open University is the UK's only university dedicated to open and distance learning. It is unique in operating across the whole of the UK. The University in England is funded by HEFCE. It operates as a statutorily recognised university in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, receiving funding from the devolved governments there. The University also operates more widely: teaching students either directly or in partnership, its teaching extends across Europe to Russia, to South Africa and to Singapore.

Mission and values

2. The mission of The Open University is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas.

We are inclusive, innovative and responsive.

Inclusive:

- We play a unique role in society, making Higher Education open to all
- We promote social justice through the development of knowledge and skills

Innovative:

- We lead the learning revolution, placing innovation at the heart of our teaching and research
- We continuously seek new and better ways to inspire and enable learning
- We create world class research and teaching

Responsive

- We respond to the needs of individuals and employers and the communities in which they live and work
- We are dedicated to supporting our students' learning success.

Student profile

3. The OU is the largest academic institution in the UK in terms of student numbers, with more than 250,000 students from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as from Europe and the rest of the world. In 2010/11 over 18,000 students studied directly with the University overseas. With the exception of postgraduate research students, all our directly taught students are part-time.
4. With the exception of a small number of professional qualifications, none of our undergraduate courses has any formal entry requirements, either prior qualifications or experience. We enable people who have missed out on education to fulfil their potential and achieve a university-level qualification. We believe that it is the qualifications with which our students leave, rather than those with which they enter, that count.

- 45% of our student population begin undergraduate study without the entry qualifications they would normally need at conventional universities;
- 20% of our students come from the 25% most deprived areas in the UK;
- 6.5% of our students declare a disability;
- 11% of our students come from black and minority ethnic backgrounds;
- Students range in age from under 18 to over 90, with an average age of 31;
- 70% of our students remain in work whilst studying with us.

Teaching and learning

5. The OU teaches using its own style of distance learning called 'supported open learning'. Open learning means our students work wherever they choose – in their own homes, workplace or at a library or study centre – and can plan their study around their other commitments. Supported open learning means our students have support from:
 - a tutor (Associate Lecturer) to help with module material, activities and assignments;
 - student advisers are available by email, online and by telephone;
 - other students at tutorials, day schools or through online conferencing, social networks, informal study groups, and events.

Information for students and potential students

6. In all sources, we aim to use knowledge of student behaviour and preference as a guide to create accessible and appropriate sources of information. The main online prospectus, Study at the OU, can be reached from the University's public home page and is designed to provide information that will enable an enquirer to make an informed decision about beginning study at The Open University. It also provides information that an enquirer can use to assess their motivation and understand the level and sources of support that will be available. We also provides a comprehensive range of print prospectuses, whose design and content is informed by market research, providing concise and usable information. Fees and payment methods are published on the online prospectus in an accessible and transparent manner.
7. A phone number is provided on all sources for those who wish to pursue their enquiries with an adviser rather than through the website or the printed prospectus. This provides a channel to a single point of contact, the Student Registration & Enquiry Service. This service works with enquirers and students to ensure access to information and advice to support registration on the course that is right for them.
8. Responsibility for ensuring that accurate information is presented to enquirers and students is taken directly by members of the Vice-Chancellor's Executive.

Widening Participation

9. The current Widening Participation Strategy covers the period 2009 – 2012. A new three year strategy is in preparation. Our widening participation targets for the period 2009 – 2012 focus on students from low socio-economic groups. HESA data demonstrates that we are close to the sector benchmark in relation to both participation of under-represented groups, and students in receipt of Disabled Student Allowances.

10. Widening participation strategy is the responsibility of the Director, Students, who is a member of the Vice Chancellor's Executive. Development and implementation of the strategy, and monitoring of progress towards targets and indicators, is overseen by a Widening Participation Management Group. Chaired by the Director, Students, this high level group includes representation from the central Widening Participation Team, Learner Support, Equality and Diversity, Marketing, Finance, the Centre for Inclusion and Curriculum, and each faculty.

Curriculum

11. The Open University has invested heavily in curriculum development to meet the needs of students entering the University without traditional entry qualifications. Over the past ten years we have delivered an entire suite of modules dedicated to helping those with low previous educational qualifications to build their confidence and study skills through a shorter, less expensive, more flexible and supportive introduction to open learning. The *Openings* Programme, offered in ten curriculum areas, and managed by the Centre for Inclusion and Curriculum, currently recruits 18,000 students annually and has been used as the basis for supporting both individual and groups of learners, many of whom have been recruited through partners in community and workplace settings. High levels of student support are also embedded in our key introductory Level 1 courses, and a broad range of Foundation Degrees extends the University's reach into specific sectors of the economy.

Financial Support

12. Currently 60% of students in our widening participation target group (those living in the 25% most disadvantaged areas as defined by the IMD and who have no previous HE qualification) receive financial support in the form of part time fee and study cost grants. Within the wider OU student population approximately 30% are in receipt of financial support. Part time fee and study cost grants will cease at the end of the 2011/12 financial year.

Outreach

13. The Community Partnerships Programme is a dedicated outreach programme which targets the 25% most disadvantaged areas in England as defined by IMD. The aims of the programme are to:

- enable more students from disadvantaged communities to be successful in studying at higher education level.
- work with a range of partners to help develop cultures of learning in families, communities and workplaces.
- create positive learning experiences for these students by raising self-esteem and building confidence.
- raise the visibility and profile of The Open University (OU) in these communities and create a reputation for the OU as local, accessible and keen to work with non-HE partners to foster change in disadvantaged communities.
- help the university understand and respond to the needs of these students.

14. The programme employs seven dedicated outreach staff who work in London, the West Midlands, the North West, Yorkshire and the North East. These locations were chosen as they have the highest proportions of disadvantaged areas in England. These outreach staff, or 'Community Partnerships Managers' work closely with community-based organisations to offer a range of OU courses to learners, encouraging those new to higher education to begin with a course from our *Openings*

programme. Our partners include organisations such as children’s centres, schools, voluntary and community sector organisations and regeneration organisations. In 2010/11 we had contact with over three hundred partners across England.

15. The Community Partnerships Programme represents the most targeted and intensive widening participation work of the Open University. The programme acknowledges the different starting points of these students and additional support, advice and guidance is provided to ensure they are prepared for higher education study. In 2010/11 the programme in England recruited and supported 490 students a 60% year on year increase – of which over 55% came from England’s most disadvantaged communities, compared with 16% from these communities in the new undergraduate population in England as a whole. Many of the students recruited through the programme would not have considered study at this level and many of the communities in which the programme works do not have established routes into higher education. Despite this, early evaluation has shown improved retention and achievement for those participating in the programme and feedback from students has been highly positive.

Retention measures

16. The Learner Support Framework provides a high quality, consistent and personalised support structure for Open University students and is designed to be a comprehensive model of support from the point of first enquiry to graduation. The Framework identifies a baseline of key activities which feature both reactive and proactive elements to provide generic support for successful study and to effectively assist vulnerable and disadvantaged students. Key to the support of disadvantaged students is pre-course support. New undergraduates who may struggle with study are identified using a “vulnerability model” and telephoned prior to the start of their studies to welcome them to the University and to give them advice on preparation for their programme of studies. The vulnerability model currently selects new students for pre-course support if they do not have a previous higher educational qualification and meet at least one additional criterion including living in one of the 25% most deprived areas by IMD or being from a black or ethnic minority background. Pre-course contact is consistently associated with a 5% improvement in student retention on the first module.

Disabled students

17. In 2010/11, 6.9% of students identified themselves as having a disability, health condition, mental health disability or specific learning difficulty (such as dyslexia). We offer a comprehensive set of services to identify and meet the support needs of these students to ensure that they can study successfully. Provision for disabled students is the responsibility of the Director, Students. Strategic direction for the service is managed through the Widening Participation Management Group, and through the University’s Equality Scheme.
18. Services for disabled students are extensively described and promoted through online and print resources for enquirers and students. Students identifying themselves as disabled carry out a self-assessment to identify their additional requirements on the basis of which a profile of their needs is maintained and used to drive adjustments to materials, services and support. Separate identification and assessment processes are used to identify special requirements in relation to examinations and residential schools.

19. The OU runs its own Access Centre which conducts assessments in respect of Disabled Student Allowances, both for OU students and on behalf of other providers. An Access Bus enables us to conduct assessments closer to students in England, Northern Ireland and Wales.
20. Learning materials are provided in a variety of formats to ensure their accessibility, and we have invested significantly in developing new systems to automate the production of a wider range of alternative formats for disabled students, including a major project to implement digital talking books.
21. Training and advice is provided to Associate Lecturers (part time tutors) as part of their general induction and training, and in respect of individual students who require specific adjustments.

Equality and diversity

22. We have explicitly considered each of the protected characteristics to ensure that our strategy does not inadvertently discriminate, and that the strategy advances equality of opportunity and fosters good relations to the greatest extent possible.
23. We have deliberately integrated our Equality Objectives for 2012-2016 with our Widening Access and Success commitments where this is feasible. The following equality objectives also contribute to widening access and success:
 - Access for disabled students
 - Satisfaction for disabled students
 - Reducing the ethnicity academic attainment gap
 - Improving monitoring of students as carers
 - Improving policy and guidance for students as carers

2 Strategic change

UK Market Strategy

24. The new fees and funding environment created by the government in response to the Browne Review and the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review marks a deep discontinuity in the Open University's financial and policy environment, and has occasioned a fundamental review of its UK market strategy, designed to ensure the economic sustainability of The OU and enable it to continue to deliver its mission.
25. The new UK Market Strategy was approved in July 2011. Under it, The Open University will:
 1. Retain its positioning as the high quality pan-UK provider of part-time, flexible study for adults.
 2. Maintain its commitment to those from disadvantaged backgrounds: the aim is to ensure that these groups are as represented in the future OU student population as they are today.
 3. Continue to welcome all types of student. The University will focus attention on groups which it is particularly well-placed to serve. These are in the traditional heartlands for The Open University:
 - a) adults, both employed and unemployed, without an undergraduate degree looking for a qualification;
 - b) adults, generally older, looking to enhance their knowledge by studying modules;

- c) employed graduates looking to study at postgraduate level.
4. Retain an open access policy whilst supporting students on pathways which maximise their chances of success.
 5. Orientate its marketing activities and messaging around the needs and preferences of these priority segments. As part of this the University will:
 - a) clearly express to students the distinctive value of the OU, the study options available and the price;
 - b) communicate effectively the funding options available to potential students to minimise the upfront cost for them and maximise affordability.
 6. Design its offer around the needs and preferences of these priority segments. This will not require a radical overhaul of the University's curriculum content in the short term, but it will include:
 - a) providing much clearer and easier routes to qualifications for the majority of students (this will build on, but accelerate, the work already underway) and improving the support to students to stay with the University to complete qualifications;
 - b) ensuring Open University qualifications help students meet their career aims;
 - c) continuously improving the quality of the student experience and enhancing the University's reputation for quality with potential students;
 - d) extending the University's own fee loan programme through Open University Student Budget Account (OUSBA) Limited.

Widening participation principles and priority groups

26. Alongside the UK Market Strategy, the OU has approved a set of principles that will underpin the development of our approach to widening participation:
 1. The Open University is committed to its social justice mission pro-actively to create opportunities for those who are socially disadvantaged and under-represented in higher education. We will do this by identifying and tackling barriers which can prevent students from studying successfully with us, where that is consistent with agreed priorities and budgets.
 2. We will make a distinctive contribution to the sector, building on our unique strengths and capabilities. Our open entry policy is at the heart of this.
 3. We will seek to maximise our contribution to widening access and success by ensuring that the priorities we set protect our UK Funding Council income.
 4. We will allocate an agreed annual sum to support widening access and success. This will be determined within the context of the University's financial strategy, will take into account any differing funding methodologies for WP across the home nations, and will be reviewed on an annual basis.
 5. Allocated resources will be targeted at priority student groups identified in line with principles 1-3. They will be used to support these students both in their entry into the OU, and in success in their studies.
 6. We will widen access and success for priority student groups using the learning and teaching technologies designed for the student population as a whole, and we will work actively to overcome barriers to curriculum access for priority groups.

7. Success measures will be put in place to demonstrate that expenditure is both enhancing life chances for priority students and benefiting the University.
8. We will identify and work in partnership with organisations which have complementary objectives, in order to reach and support students and encourage pathways into and on from the University.
9. These principles are common across the UK, but will be implemented in ways which take account of the policy and funding contexts in each of the home nations, and within agreed budgets.

27. Five priority student groups have been defined:

- Students who are socio-economically disadvantaged
- Disabled students
- Students in prison
- BME students who are socio-economically disadvantaged
- Carers

Strategic Plan

28. In response to the UK Market Strategy, The OU has adopted a new Strategic Plan, 2012-2015. The strategic intent is to secure the OU's mission, and thrive as a University by delivering a step change in how effectively we help students achieve their study goals. The new strategic plan entails fundamental change in the way the University manages the student journey from first contact with the University as an enquirer through to graduation. At the heart of this change is a shift in focus in the design of the curriculum and in the study experience from modules to qualifications. A rapid implementation project, *Ready for 12/13*, running from July 2011 to March 2012 introduced the first phase of change involving:

- a new undergraduate academic framework, involving the restructuring of all qualifications around pathways, providing greater structure to guide student study planning;
- a new academic year to ensure consistent study intensity for students;
- a new qualification registration process;
- a new Access to Success Route designed to secure access in the new fees environment for disadvantaged students;
- information, advice and guidance to support enquirers in taking study decisions in the new environment.

29. Two strategic priorities are now continuing to implement and embed the radical change demanded by the new environment:

30. *Enquirer experience*: developing an enquirer experience that provides prospective students efficiently and effectively with clear, informed and targeted support that leads them towards the right study choices for them, in the context of higher fees, and an open entry policy.

31. *Study experience*: ensuring a study experience that will be coherent, personal and targeted that will enable students to achieve their study goals and increase their opportunities to achieve personal and career development targets, equipping them to enhance their contribution to society and

ensuring that the OU meets its recruitment, retention and completion targets. As part of this priority, we will:

- implement the Access to Success Route (described below);
- redevelop the Learner Support Framework to align with the new qualification-focused academic framework, as a basis for future retention measures;
- restructure student support from its current geographical structure, based on Regional and National Centres, to a subject-based structure of Curriculum Support Teams which will be the locus for the management of student retention and success.

Consultation with the student body

32. Throughout the development of the UK Market Strategy and the Strategic Plan there has been regular informal consultation with the Open University Students Association (OUSA). Senior representations of the Association have participated through formal governance routes in the key decisions, including decisions on the development of new access measures for 2012/13.

3 Access Agreement

Fee Strategy

33. Our fee strategy has been set in the light of a range of factors:

- an extensive piece of market research, which focused on the likely reaction of potential students to the changes in the undergraduate fees and funding environment in England;
- eligibility, for the first time, of part time students for government loans with which to pay their fees;
- our commitment to maintaining our position as the high quality, pan-UK provider of part time flexible study for adults;
- our commitment to maintaining our open access policy whilst supporting students on pathways which maximise their chances of success;
- our aim to ensure that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are represented in the future OU student population as they were before the fees and funding changes came into effect.

Undergraduate

34. On the basis of these factors, fees in England from September 2012 will be £5,000 for a full-time equivalent academic year, or 120 credits. 60 credit modules (typically one year of OU study) will be charged at £2,500 and 30 credit modules at £1,250. These fees cover the cost of all course materials and tuition. The only study costs not covered by the fee relate to a small number of set books for a limited range of modules.

35. This fee structure sets a single fee for all undergraduate courses of the same credit value and provides a simple framework which is easy to communicate. The Open University believes this strategy creates the optimum balance of educational and financial considerations, whilst also ensuring the social justice mission of the University.

36. The Open University Students Association was consulted during the fee setting process, and is represented on the University's Council, where all strategic business decisions are taken.

37. Despite keeping our fees to the lowest level possible, the 2012/13 fees represent a very significant increase on current fees, and, combined with the ending of statutory fee grants, create an increased level of risk for potential students. We are particularly concerned that this may present a barrier to entry for students who are disadvantaged, have low levels of income, low levels of confidence in their ability to succeed in HE study, and who are averse to the risk of taking out loans. For these reasons, we are making a major investment in subsidising fees for the first phase of undergraduate study for targeted students through our Access to Success Route.

Initial teacher training

38. 182 students will be joining our part-time PGCE in 2012/13. Our PGCE is a two year flexible course at 50% intensity with 15% of registered students coming from target groups for widening participation (against a national target of 12%). The PGCE offers a route into teaching for many students who otherwise might find it difficult to undertake teacher training, such as those in low income groups who need to continue working while they train and those in geographically remote areas long distances from other institutions. PGCE students will be charged a maximum of £9,000 for the two year course with approximately 30% of students being entitled to a fee discount of £2,250 due to prior teaching experience.

Review

39. We will review these rates each year and if appropriate, will increase them in line with inflation and in accordance with the rates set by the Government.

Expenditure on additional access and retention measures

40. In the light of sector benchmarks, we assess ourselves as “average” in terms of proportion of students from under-represented groups, and therefore consider that we should commit at least 22.5% of additional undergraduate fee income above the basic fee to additional access measures, and 10% of additional ITT fee income.

Access measures from 2012/13

41. Our Community Partnerships Programme will continue. This programme was developed in the context of the “old” funding regime, and in the context of a modular curriculum. Over the coming months, we will review its effectiveness in the context of the new fees and funding arrangements, our enhanced focus on qualifications rather than on modules and in the light of our new Access to Success Route. Our aim will be to ensure that activity is most effectively aligned with the new environment. We will review our investment in the activity in the light of this analysis.

Access to Success Route

42. The Access to Success Route is our major new access provision. In the context of an institution with no entry qualifications, this is designed to enable students with low entry qualifications, household incomes below the £25,000, and who lack confidence in their ability to study at higher education level, to manage the financial and personal risks of engagement in higher education. The route will be jointly funded by the OU and NSP, and is designed to balance opportunity against cost and to provide positive outcomes from NSP funding.

43. The route will be made up of two ‘steps’. In 2012/13, Step 1 will consist of a short, 15 credit *Openings* modules designed to prepare students without normal university entry requirements to study with the OU. Offered in a range of subjects across the curriculum, these modules build

confidence and study skills, including ICT skills. Students will make a contribution of £25 towards the full fee cost of £625. The remainder of the fee will be met by the OU. Students who are successful at Step 1 will have the opportunity to move on to Step 2, a Level 1 60 credit module (or two 30 credit modules) and through this to gain credit which will count towards a qualification. Students will make a contribution of £50 towards a full fee of £2,500. The remainder of the fee will be met jointly by the OU and our NSP allocation. On completion of Step 2, students will have good reason to feel confident in their ability to be successful in their chosen qualification, and at this stage they will therefore pay full fees, usually supported through a tuition fee loan.

44. The Access to Success Route will incorporate enhanced levels of student support. At Step 1, students will benefit from individual tutorial support provided over the telephone at regular intervals. At Step 2, there will be face to face group tutorials at a location near where the student lives, together with tutor contact online or by phone. A proactive, outbound calling student support team is being set up to support Access to Success Route students from the point of registration, through to the end of Step 2, and to enable a seamless transition into the qualification programme. A range of web based resources are also available. Further details of the Access to Success route are available at www.open.ac.uk/study-access. In 2012/13 there will be 2,848 places available at Step 1, and 1,424 places available at Step 2. Numbers will rise in subsequent years as our NSP allocation increases through to 2014/15.
45. From 2013/14, our *Openings* curriculum at Step 1 of the Access to Success Route will be replaced with a small number of new access modules linked to qualifications, which will each bring 30 credits at Level 0. These modules will provide greater opportunity for preparing students for qualifications and will be loan eligible. Arrangements for use of National Scholarship Programme funding and match funding to support the Access to Success Route as from 2013/14 were formally agreed with HEFCE and with BIS in December 2011.
46. In addition to bringing benefits for access, the Access to Success Route will also bring two major benefits for retention:
 1. At enquiry stage, students will be given enhanced levels of advice and guidance, designed to ensure that they start their learning journey with the OU at the point which is most appropriate for them. This will mean that non-confident learners will be channelled into the Access to Success Route through which they will build their skills before entering the main qualification curriculum. This is expected to increase retention at Level 1.
 2. The enhanced levels of learner support, including the outbound calling team described above, will provide support both pre-study and between modules. Evidence from the Learner Support Teams and from pilot Curriculum Support Teams (see para 31), suggests that interventions in these two areas will be particularly effective in increasing rates of retention and success.

Student retention and success

47. Enhancing student retention and success in achieving qualifications for all students is a major focus for The Open University in the new fees and funding environment. The fact that loan eligibility is contingent upon studying towards a qualification has led to a major institutional change, from delivering individual modules which students build into qualifications, to delivering integrated and coherent pathways which lead through from entry level to qualification. It is planned that learner support will be radically reorganised from support offered on a modular basis and on the basis of

where a student lives, to subject based “curriculum support”. New Curriculum Support Teams will integrate academic, pastoral and administrative support, irrespective of geography. One of these teams will be a dedicated Access Curriculum Support Team. The new teams will draw on a great deal of evidence about what is effective in supporting students, including the learner support framework for disadvantaged students referred to above.

Countable expenditure

48. Our countable expenditure represents match funding for our NSP allocation, focused on students from low socio-economic groups.

Targets and milestones

49. Our target is driven by our commitment to maintain the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in the student population as it is currently. Our market research indicates a significant risk of a fall in the measure in 2012/13. This arises from the move from financial support based on fee grant to a loan-based student finance system. 60% of students in our widening participation target group currently receive a full fee waiver for their studies. All these students will need to take a government loan, except for those who gain a place on the Access to Success route, in respect of their first 75 credits. The milestone for 2012/13 is derived from our UK Market Strategy, including market research on student behaviour in response to the new fee level and student loans. At this stage we have no evidence on the basis of which to understand how rapidly we will be able to recover. We will review the milestones in the light of the composition of the 2012/13 intake.

Monitoring and evaluation

50. We will set in place a comprehensive system of monitoring and evaluation which will:
- measure progress towards the aims of the new Widening Access and Success Strategy, including tracking both academic achievement and the long term impact of OU study on the lives of students, their families and communities;
 - enable us to improve the way we deliver services to our students;
 - enable us to demonstrate that resources are being spent effectively.
51. A comprehensive cycle of evaluation will be established across units, with evaluation embedded in planning and delivery. We will seek to:
- effectively track performance against our target to maintain the proportion of disadvantaged students in the student body, and to enhance our understanding of the contribution and cost of different factors;
 - track a range of factors in 2012/13 which will enable us to set additional targets in subsequent years;
 - ensure that planning, resource allocation and service delivery are informed by and adjusted in the light of evaluation and enable us better to achieve our goals.
52. Evaluation will focus on a series of key themes which are critical to the success of the strategy, and which map onto HEFCE WP priorities:
- providing dedicated marketing and outreach;
 - providing tailored support to Widening Access and Success students;

- enhancing access to ICT hardware, resources and skills;
- increasing the accessibility and responsiveness of the curriculum;
- ensuring that the cost of HE is not prohibitive.

53. We will follow groups of students through their experience at the OU and beyond in order to identify their perceptions of the benefits of higher education study, and will track students after they leave the OU, to identify their progression into work, further education or training.

