

December 2005/03

Strategic Plan 2005 – 10

offa

office for fair access





Foreword

My role as Director of Fair Access is to work in collaboration with institutions to ensure the emergence of as generous a set of student support arrangements as is reasonably possible. I was delighted with the enthusiastic response of the sector to the requirements of the Office for Fair Access.

The access agreements I have approved show a clear commitment towards ensuring that all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have the opportunity to do so, regardless of their income, background or schooling. The positive outcome of the approval process has been a very encouraging start to our work and gives us a firm foundation from which to move forward.

The achievement of our aims will be determined largely by the implementation of individual access agreements. Fundamental to us in the delivery of this plan therefore is our ability to continue to build on the working relationships we have established so far, and to support universities and colleges wherever possible with the execution of their own plans.

From 2006 attention is likely to shift from the decisions made by institutions to the decisions that will be made by prospective students on their applications to higher education. A key issue for us moving forward will be to support the sector by building expertise in the area of bursaries and student support and ensuring the clarity and accessibility of financial information. We will wish to reassure the public that institutions' access measures are working, by carrying out appropriate monitoring, and to make a contribution to the evaluation of the variable fee policy, primarily through our contribution to the Independent Commission's review in 2009.

We will look to build on our achievements to date by continuing to work in collaboration with institutions, respecting their autonomy, and with as little bureaucracy as possible. I hope that institutions will find our strategic plan a useful framework which will support what I'm sure are 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 of institutions' access agreements, which set out the fees that an institution has chosen to charge and the measures it is taking to reinforce the fair access to which all are committed.

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 – to ensure that access agreements were assessed and approved – was successfully concluded early in 2005. Subsequently we have had the opportunity to reflect on and consider our role for the future.

The 2005-10 strategic plan has been developed following internal discussion and consultation with sector bodies. We have been conscious of the need to avoid duplication with the work of other organisations and to create a strategic direction that will be of use to the sector and will help to prepare ground for the next set of access agreements, if such are required. In the meantime, proposed changes to existing agreements will be considered speedily and with the minimum of bureaucracy.

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 in 2004-05

In devising our strategic plan we have undertaken an internal evaluation to consider what has been achieved so far and what we have learned from assessing the first round of access agreements.

Establishment of the Office for Fair Access

OFFA was established in October 2004 under the Higher Education Act 2004. Sir Martin Harris was appointed as the first Director of Fair Access, a service level agreement was put in place for the operation of the office, and draft guidance was prepared to help institutions produce their access agreements. At the same time a web-site was developed and made live on the day of OFFA's official launch.

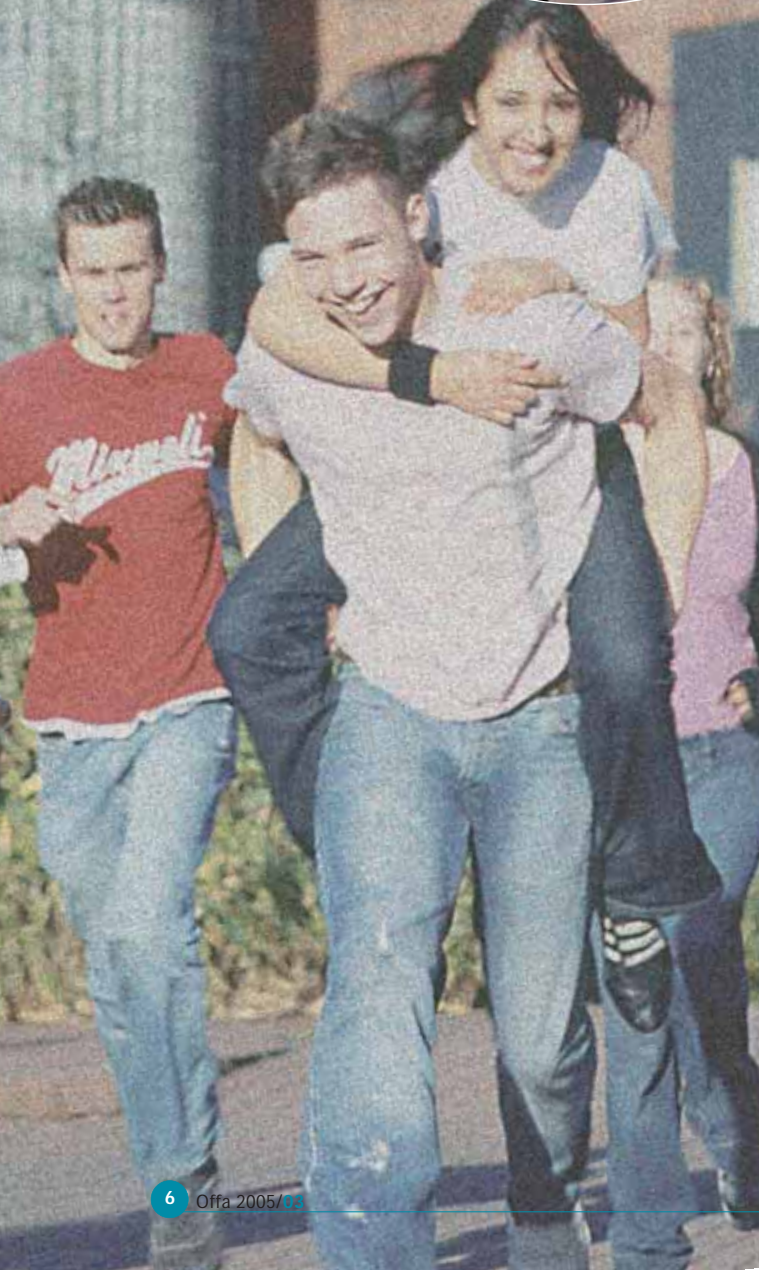
Guidance on access agreements

'Producing Access Agreements: OFFA guidance to institutions' (OFFA 2004/01) was published in November 2004 and provided the framework and timetable for institutions to produce their access agreements. Four seminars were held in autumn 2004 to brief the sector and answer any questions. These seminars helped to raise issues and questions that had not been covered in the guidance.

Any future revisions to the guidance will build on lessons learned from the first round of assessments, analysis of existing agreements, and the practicalities experienced in producing, maintaining and monitoring agreements. We will achieve this through a more widespread consultation than was possible during the first round due to the timing constraints. We will also be able to allow institutions a longer period to develop agreements.

Processing and assessment of agreements

A key objective in the implementation of our work was to ensure that no institution wishing to enter into an agreement would fail to secure approval by the end of the publicised assessment process. Approval of 118 access agreements was issued on 17 March 2005. All agreements that were submitted



by the 4 January 2005 deadline, and a significant number received afterwards, were assessed and approved by this date. At the time of going to print we had issued approval on 158 agreements. The sector responded very positively to our requirements and no draft agreement caused serious concern. We offered feedback on 60 draft agreements prior to their submission. We also provided feedback on agreements prior to formal decision making which helped ensure that the process was open and operated in a spirit of collaboration. The communication of decisions on a single date in March 2005 helped to maximise the news coverage for the sector and institutions.

We aimed to ensure that any burden to institutions caused as a result of our establishment, was minimised. Given the legislative requirements within which we have to work, we hope this was achieved through our dialogue with institutions and flexibility wherever possible. We continue to welcome any comments from institutions on this aspect of our work.



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 for outreach work. At the end of the process analysis shows that an estimated £350 million a year of additional fee income will be invested by institutions in providing financial support for low income students by 2010-11, and around £35 million above current levels will be invested in outreach work.



Summary

In summary the process has gone well given the time constraints in which we and institutions were operating. We will however learn from the process and will look to build on the knowledge we have gained so far, and any feedback from the sector, to inform our future work.

Financial information and accountability

We are a small, independent, non-departmental public body that receives funding from the Department for Education and Skills. We have a budget of £500,000 per annum to cover running costs.

We are required to publish an annual report to Parliament on how we have performed our functions and on progress made within access agreements. From 2006 this report will also refer 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 bursaries and outreach
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 have been 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. All aims will be primarily delivered through implementation of the approved access agreements but will be supported by our work in the areas of good practice, research and monitoring.

There will be an Independent Commission to look at the first three years of operation of the variable fees policy. We will want to ensure that the Commission has access to good information about how access agreements have operated in practice, and the general effectiveness of this area of the variable fees policy.

Good practice

A major priority will be to work with institutions, the sector and students to identify good practice in bursary schemes, administration and policies, and the provision of financial information. It will also be important to disseminate the good practice identified as widely as possible. We do not propose to 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 reports will indicate the extent to which 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 will inevitably have 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 Commission.

Research strategy

The Independent Commission 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. However we will also work with the sector to identify and address key areas and gaps in research into issues around fair access, bursaries and financial information. 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. Our research strategy will feed into our aim to help disseminate good practice.

Monitoring

We will look to use data from monitoring to inform both our analysis of good practice and our research strategies.





Aim 1

To support and encourage improvements in participation rates 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 for higher education from students from under-represented groups (disabled people, certain ethnic groups, 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 and subsequent participation rates (this includes contributing to the review by the Independent Commission in 2009)
- 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 is determined that access to higher education should be broadened and not narrowed. This is 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 decide to introduce fees above the standard level do 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, maintain current participation rates of students from low income and other under-represented groups.

Our concern is that future participation levels 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, through the plans we have agreed with institutions, that the sector as a whole will see participation rates from low income and other under-represented groups 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 participation rates, but 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 the groups in question.

Low income groups are defined as students who will qualify for any level of the Higher Education Maintenance Grant. Under-represented groups are defined as lower socio-economic groups, disabled people and ethnic minority groups. For minority ethnic groups it is for each institution to identify which groups are under-represented within their institution, rather than at a national level.

Key performance indicators

- The number and/or proportions of applications from under-represented groups have increased across the planning period
- The number and/or proportions of students eligible for the Higher Education Maintenance Grant across the planning period have increased
- The number/proportions of students from under-represented groups have increased across the planning period
- Good practice and research strategy on bursary scheme policy and administration in place by 2006-07, which will look to identify an ongoing programme of work.

Baseline data will be established in 2005-06. At the very least the numbers/proportions referred to should not fall below 2005-06 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 bursaries and outreach



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 will 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 that would be available for bursary schemes and outreach work. This has been achieved through the schemes proposed and approved in the access agreements. Our focus now shifts to monitoring the implementation and outcomes of these arrangements. Our aim is to ensure that institutions continue to invest in bursaries and outreach at similar levels for the foreseeable future. In pursuing this aim, there will be a need to recognise that investment levels set out in access agreements are estimates and based on assumptions of student profiles. We will therefore be flexible in recognising that these levels will vary.

At the moment there is no way of knowing how the financial assistance that is proposed in the access agreements, along with the changes to central student support mechanisms, will affect behaviour. We see the major focus for our work going forward to be to monitor developments and to build knowledge and expertise in student support. We will use this knowledge to assist the sector wherever possible. An accurate and prompt understanding of what actually happens in autumn 2006, together with as detailed an analysis as possible, is imperative.

In a changing environment institutions will want, or need, to update their agreements from time to time. We will continue to offer advice on issues as they arise and 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
- Comment and analysis is provided, where appropriate, to contribute to the inevitable debate on the actual pattern of applications/admissions in 2006 and thereafter.



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 is 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 will play an important part in an institution's plans 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 will be a public expectation that this information is readily available and easy to understand. Although we are not producing information ourselves, it is important that we ensure the information available from institutions meets this expectation.



Key performance indicators

- The financial information for students is judged to be easy to understand. Monitored through student, parent/carers, advisers and schools testing in 2005-06
- 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 from students over eligibility for bursaries or the amounts awarded
- Good practice and research strategy in place by 2006-07 focusing on the provision of financial information and which looks to identify an ongoing programme of work.



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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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