

## **The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) information note to School-Centred Initial Teacher Training Providers (SCITTs) – August 2005**

### **THIS INFORMATION IS OF IMPORTANCE TO ALL SCITTs**

**From September 2006 SCITTs, offering Initial Teacher Training (ITT) courses, may choose to charge higher than standard tuition fees, subject to approval of an access agreement by OFFA. SCITTs will need to determine their fees policies as soon as possible in order to meet a tight timetable.**

### **Background**

1. The 2004 Higher Education Act allows institutions offering full-time, undergraduate, higher education to charge variable tuition fees up to a maximum of £3,000, from 2006. OFFA has been established to ensure that higher fees do not have a detrimental effect on widening participation from students from lower income backgrounds. Institutions wishing to charge fees above the standard level (£1,200 in 2006-07), are required to have an access agreement approved by OFFA, setting out how they will safeguard fair access for low income groups through bursaries and other financial support and, if they choose, outreach work. It is up to institutions to determine the level of bursaries and other support that they feel is appropriate for them, but there is a minimum requirement that for those charging the full £3,000 fee, a bursary of at least £300 will be provided by the institution for the poorest students (i.e. those entitled to full state support).
2. SCITTs are covered under the Act so from September 2006, if they wish, they can charge variable fees up to a maximum of £3,000 for full-time ITT courses and up to £1,500 for part-time ITT courses. SCITTs that wish to charge higher than standard fees will need to have an access agreement approved by OFFA before they can do so. Please note that there is no requirement to enter into an access agreement if SCITTs only wish to charge standard fees; only institutions who plan to charge higher than standard fees need an approved agreement.
3. Whilst students on postgraduate ITT will receive generous state support through maintenance grants and Teacher Training Agency (TTA) bursaries, we do not wish to erode the incentives to graduates to apply for teacher training courses. We therefore consider it appropriate to require institutions to provide the minimum £300 bursary to the poorest postgraduate ITT students on those courses charging the full £3,000 fee.
4. Up until now OFFA's focus has been on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Further Education Colleges (FECs) as this is where the vast majority of affected students will be. However, we are now able to turn our attention to other areas of the sector and have been working with the National Association of School Based Teacher Trainers (NASBTT) with a view to providing bespoke guidance for SCITTs on producing access agreements, which we will issue as soon as possible. In the meantime the information in this note is designed to alert SCITTs to the option of charging higher tuition fees and to

provide background information to help them determine fees and bursaries policy, and to outline the preparatory steps that might need to be taken.

### **What are access agreements?**

5. In summary, an access agreement sets out the maximum fee an institution will charge for its courses and the minimum bursary support it commits to provide for poorer students. It also covers the provision of financial information to applicants and students and sets out how an institution will monitor progress against the milestones or objectives which it has set itself. It might also include, though there is no expectation to do so, investment in outreach work to encourage applications from under-represented groups. An access agreement can be simple document (as little as 2 - 4 sides of A4) and is intended to be of minimum burden to institutions. Access agreements can last for up to five years.

### **Guidance on producing agreements**

6. We will issue bespoke guidance for SCITTs as soon as possible (in September or early October 2005). This guidance will be based on our existing guidance document 'Producing access agreements – OFFA guidance to institutions' (OFFA 2004/01). It will take account of the different circumstances and practical issues faced by SCITTs (compared with HEIs and FECs), such as their small size, and possible difficulties around suitable data for benchmarking and monitoring. We will work with NASBTT to ensure that our guidance is fit for purpose and takes account of issues raised by SCITTs. In the meantime, institutions should refer to our existing guidance document which can be accessed online at <http://www.offa.org.uk/pubs/> (hard copies are available on request from [enquiries@offa.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@offa.org.uk) or tel. 0117 931 7171).

7. We will also provide, alongside our SCITTs guidance, an example agreement, which institutions might wish to refer to when producing their own agreements. This will not be a template, as it is up to individual institutions to determine the policy that is best for them, but will illustrate how a simple agreement, containing all of the mandatory elements, might look. In the meantime, institutions are encouraged to look at some of the agreements we have already approved. These can be found on the OFFA web site at the following link [http://www.offa.org.uk/acc\\_agr/](http://www.offa.org.uk/acc_agr/). Please note that some of the FECs at the bottom of the list provide good examples of simple, concise agreements (for example, Cornwall College, Lakes College – West Cumbria, and Wigan and Leigh College).

### **Timetable for agreements commencing in 2006-07**

8. The submission date for access agreements from HEIs and FECs has already passed. However, we understand that SCITTs may not have been aware that they are able to charge higher fees and so, following consultation with NASBTT, we have decided that SCITTs should have their own timetable, to allow time for us to issue bespoke guidance and for SCITTs to determine their policies and produce agreements. However, the timetable will be relatively tight as we are concerned that applicants should have

financial information about fees and bursaries as early as possible so that they can make key decisions about where to apply and what offers to accept. Therefore, SCITTs will need to start preparatory work as soon as possible. In particular, an initial decision will need to be made on whether or not to charge higher fees, so that preliminary work on preparing access agreements can take place.

9. We are aware that decisions on fees and bursaries will need to be ratified at Executive and Board level and that this might take some time. Consequently, we expect that most SCITTs will need to carry out preparatory work on draft access agreements prior to the ratification of their policies at Board level. In the meantime we are happy to advise SCITTs on access agreements and if required, provide feedback on drafts prior to the submission of official agreements.

10. We are setting a deadline of 3 January 2006 for the submission of agreements commencing in the 2006-07 academic year. This will allow enough time for Boards to approve fee and bursary policy before agreements are officially submitted to OFFA. We aim to make decisions on access agreements on a rolling basis, but by no later than 28 February 2006 (a draft timetable is attached at annex A).

#### **Timetable for agreements commencing in 2007-08 onwards**

11. OFFA will consider access agreements for future years on a rolling basis outside of this timetable, so if SCITTs do not wish to charge higher than standard fees in 2006-07, but want to wait and see what happens in the sector before coming to a decision (as many FECs have done), it will be possible for them to wait and submit an application at a later date (for example, agreements to run from 2007-08 should ordinarily be submitted by the end of March 2006, from 2008-09 by the end of March 2007 etc). Please note that, in exceptional circumstances, subject to agreement with OFFA, we will consider submissions after March.

#### **Holding information for potential students**

12. Institutions that think that they may wish to charge higher than standard fees should, as soon as possible, insert into the appropriate applicant information (for example website, prospectus, or additional leaflets), a holding statement, or an outline of their provisional intentions regarding fees and bursaries, so that applicants are aware of the possible financial implications when they make key decisions. Such statements can vary in detail but all should carry a suitable caveat (e.g. 'subject to the approval of our access agreement by OFFA'). This information can be updated as plans are developed and confirmed when the access agreement is approved (please refer to annex B).

#### **Contact details**

13. We will issue guidance on producing access agreements in due course but, in the meantime, if you have any queries about access agreements or fees and bursaries, please contact Jean Arnold, 0117 931 7053 or David Barrett, 0117 931 7018 or email

[enquiries@offa.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@offa.org.uk) If you would like to discuss any issues with NASBTT, please contact Martin Thompson (Chair of NASBTT) on 01234 408590 or email [nasbtt@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:nasbtt@yahoo.co.uk)

**DRAFT TIMETABLE**

**2005**

**August/September**

- SCITTs to initiate internal discussions around fees and bursaries policy with a view to making a final decision with Executive and Board by December
- SCITTs to include holding statements in student information literature where necessary
- SCITTs to refer to OFFA's existing guidance on producing access agreements

**September/October**

- OFFA to issue bespoke guidance to SCITTs on producing access agreements and to provide an example agreement for reference (following consultation with NASBTT)
- Those SCITTs who have submitted agreements or draft agreements will receive decisions or feedback from OFFA on a rolling basis from September onwards

**2006**

**January**

- Submission deadline for access agreements 3 January

**February**

- OFFA expects to issue all decisions by the end of February at the latest.

**HOLDING STATEMENTS**

These examples are not intended to be prescriptive but are to illustrate the approach to drafting a holding statement. It is acceptable to go much further and provide full details about fees and bursaries, provided the suitable caveat is included regarding OFFA approval:

'We are in the process of determining our fees and bursaries policy for 2006 and will keep applicants informed of fee levels and any bursary provision when these have been set. Our fee and bursaries provision is subject to the approval of our access agreement by OFFA.'

'We intend to charge fees of £3,000 and provide a bursary of at least £300 to those students eligible for full state support. We will keep applicants informed of precise bursary levels once these have been determined. Our fee and bursaries provision is subject to the approval of our access agreement by OFFA.'

'We intend to charge fees of £3,000 and provide a bursary of £1,000 to those students eligible for full state support and £500 to those eligible for partial state support. Our fee and bursaries provision is subject to the approval of our access agreement by OFFA.'