

Case studies - Bologna

The context for Widening Participation in England

In June 2011 the Coalition Government issued a White Paper '*Students at the Heart of the System*'. The White Paper marks a fundamental change in the way in which higher education will be funded in England.

Currently, the majority of teaching funding for HE is provided by the State and allocated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) using a 'block grant' model of funding. From 2012-13 HE providers will be able to charge between £6,000 and £9,000 per annum for their tuition fees, thereby securing much greater levels of funding through the student contribution. There will be a corresponding decrease in the funding delivered through the HEFCE core teaching grant so that by 2014-15 the majority of the funding for teaching in HE will be delivered through tuition fees. The new fees will be supported by State-funded loans¹.

The Government's vision is of a student led system whereby their greater contribution to the cost of their HE experience will promote greater competition between providers, enable new HE providers to enter the market more easily and so drive quality.

To ensure that students from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to be encouraged to enter HE and are supported once there, the Government has instructed that a proportion of the increased fee should be dedicated to outreach activities² or to retaining these students once they are in HE. The more that a HE provider intends to charge in fees, the greater should be the total that it spends on widening participation and retention. Although progress has been made to increase the number of people from disadvantaged backgrounds participating in HE, this increased participation has not been evenly spread across the sector. The Government is, therefore, particularly keen to increase the participation rate of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in those institutions with the most demanding entry requirements.

The process by which HE providers can establish the level of their fees and gain approval of their plans for WP is managed by the Office for Fair Access³ through access agreements. More information about access agreements is given below.

As more of the funding for teaching in HE is delivered through the student fee, the role of HEFCE will change. The Government is currently consulting on how the Council will fulfil its responsibilities in future. Widening participation will continue as an important objective for the Council as it embraces its role to support the collective student interest.

¹ For more information see:

http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/StudentFinance/DG_194804

² Outreach activities are events such as summer schools, mentoring and master classes which aim to raise the aspiration of pupils in schools and demonstrate the benefits of HE as well as inform them about the particular courses that an HEI can offer

³ See: <http://www.offa.org.uk/> for more information about the Office for Fair Access

Although we are unable to guarantee any particular funding streams beyond 2011-12, it remains our intention to continue to deliver specific funding for widening participation to HE providers.

In order that we understand how WP is supported by an institution's strategy and policies, HEFCE currently expects institutions to have submitted a WP strategic assessment. The WP funding allocation and requirements for the WP strategic assessment are described in greater detail below.

The HE sector has previously been supported in providing outreach to disadvantaged young people through the Aimhigher programme. Funding for this programme ceased on 31 July 2011 meaning that HE providers will become the main mechanism for delivering this activity. The objectives of the Aimhigher programme are described below. However, to ensure that people from disadvantaged backgrounds are supported in HE, the Government has established the National Scholarship Programme which is also described in more detail below.

Access agreements and the Office for Fair Access

The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) is an independent, non-departmental public body which aims to promote and safeguard fair access to higher education for under-represented groups in light of the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2006-07.

From 2006 universities and colleges have the option to charge variable tuition fees above the standard level (see table below). In order to do this, institutions are required to submit access agreements to OFFA for approval. These agreements show how they will invest some of their additional income from fees into access and widening participation measures.

Access measures cover a broad range of activities including outreach activities to raise aspirations and attainment, financial support such as fee waivers, bursaries and scholarships, and measures to improve student retention. By 2015-16 universities and colleges plan to invest £602 million on such measures. This investment increases to £738 million a year when the Government's contribution to the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) is included.

Access Agreements also set out the targets that institutions must set themselves to make progress in achieving a socially representative intake. All targets must be stretching but this will mean different things for different institutions depending on their access record.

OFFA monitors universities' and colleges' progress in meeting their access agreement commitments on an annual basis.

English fee levels	Standard fee – universities and colleges can charge up to this level without submitting	Variable fee – universities and colleges can charge up to this level after having an access
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	an access agreement to OFFA	agreement approved by OFFA
2006-07 to 2011-12	£1,200	£3,000
2012-13 onwards	£6,000	£9,000

The HEFCE Widening Participation allocation

HEFCE has delivered a WP allocation to institutions since 1999-2000 as part of the block teaching grant. Currently this has two main elements, widening access (WA), improving retention (IR), as well as a further stream for widening access and supporting provision for disabled students.

As the changes to the higher education funding system take shape from 2012-13, we are revising the way in which we will fund widening participation in future in order to achieve maximum value for the investment. Proposals will be included in the consultation on teaching funding from 2013-14, which will be published by HEFCE this winter.

Widening Access

This allocation is broadly intended to meet some of the additional costs incurred by institutions for activity to raise aspirations and attainment among potential students from under-represented groups. The funding method for widening access is based on the number of students from a disadvantaged background that a higher education institution enrolls. The method applies a weight to undergraduate new entrants according to:

- young HE participation by ward⁴ for full time undergraduate under 21 on entry
- or the proportion of 16-74 year olds with a HE qualification by ward for part-time and mature undergraduates.

The allocation for 2010-11 totals £61.6 million for full time students and £68.7 million for part-time students.

For further information see: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/fund/1011/postcode.htm>

Widening access and improving provision for disabled students

To calculate this allocation we take into account the number of students at each institution in receipt of the disabled students' allowance. The funding for students with disabilities for 2010-11 totals £13.2 million.

For further information see: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/slidd/funding.asp>

Improving Retention (IR) element of teaching enhancement and student success (TESS)

⁴ A ward is a division of a city, town or borough

For full time undergraduates, the allocations for 2010-11 are based on entry qualifications and age. This amounts to £175 million across the sector. For part time students the allocation amounts to £54.2 million across the sector for 2010-11.

For further information see:

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/funding/support/0910/retention.htm>

Widening participation strategic assessments

HEFCE requested widening participation strategic assessments (WPSAs) in 2009 from all English higher education institutions (HEIs), plus those further education colleges (FECs) which HEFCE directly funds and which have more than 100 FTE HE students. The WPSAs were designed to provide institutions with the opportunity to demonstrate and take credit for the work they do in respect of widening participation (WP), and show how it has become embedded in institutional missions and policies. Submitting a WPSA was made a condition of the continued receipt of funds from HEFCE for widening participation, demonstrating the importance placed on the process.

The WPSAs showed the place of WP in institutions' missions and the organisational and managerial responsibilities for WP. They set institutions' overall aims and objectives along with more detailed targets and milestones for the next three years. They also set out the full range of institutions' WP activity and the level of resource committed to WP.

In requesting a strategic assessment, we were inviting institutions to critically and strategically review their progress to-date to determine future priorities.

Although WPSAs are designed to last for three years, we also carry out an annual monitoring process, jointly with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA)'s monitoring of access agreements. This acts as a check on progress with targets and milestones, and also gives institutions the chance to report on any significant changes to WP commitments. We are working to further align WPSAs with existing mechanisms such as access agreements.