offa
office for fair access

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How to produce an access agreement for 2016-17

Introduction

1. All institutions wishing to charge home/EU students more than the basic fee in 2016-17 must submit an access agreement to OFFA by noon on Thursday 23 April 2015. This guidance outlines our strategic priorities for 2016-17 access agreements and you should ensure your access agreement addresses these.

2. The broad content and structure of access agreements, and the process you should follow, is similar to previous years, and so you should also refer to the much more detailed guidance given in OFFA publication 2013/01, *How to submit an access agreement for 2014-15*, which remains relevant. You do not need to consult the guidance note we issued in February 2014 on writing 2015-16 access agreements.

Our approach

3. We are keen to support institutions that have put in place long-term, whole institution plans for improving access, success and progression, and to avoid the burden of making unnecessary changes. So, if your 2015-16 access agreement already covers the strategic priorities set out in this guidance note, you may be able to submit a similar agreement for 2016-17. However, you will need to make some changes, for example, to:

   - review and set new targets, ensuring you have stretching targets in place up to 2019-20

   - set out your fees and the financial support you will provide for new entrants in 2016-17

   - provide updated financial predictions of your investment in access, student success and financial support.

4. You may find it useful to:

   - consult the general guidance and useful information for universities and colleges that is published on OFFA's website, particularly if this is the first time you have worked on developing an access agreement

   - attend the conference *Developing your 2016-17 access agreement* on 24 February 2015, which we are running with Action on Access and Universities UK. The conference offers the chance to discuss our expectations with us and share good practice and experiences with other institutions

- contact your institution's policy adviser at OFFA at an early stage to discuss your approach ([click here for contact details](#)).

5. OFFA may contact you to discuss your plans between now and the April deadline.

Strategic priorities

6. Our strategic priorities reflect those set out in the *national strategy for access and student success*, published in April 2014, and the *OFFA strategic plan 2015-2020*, which we will publish shortly[1]. The priorities are:

- a whole-institution approach

- a student lifecycle approach

- a greater emphasis on long-term outreach

- more effective collaboration

- smarter, evidence-based spend

- equality and diversity

- stretching targets that set out how you will make faster progress, both collectively across the sector, and in your institution.

Whole-institution approach

7. We encourage you to ensure that the development of your access agreement for 2016-17, and your longer-term access, student success and progression plans, is a whole-institution process. We encourage you to embed your core priorities for access, student success and progression at all levels across your institution.

8. In developing your access agreement, we would expect you to provide an overview of how you have integrated strategies across your institution, for example linking up teaching and learning with student success, or aligning your outreach work with your application and student recruitment policies.

Student lifecycle approach

9. The *national strategy for access and student success* emphasises that to maximise impact and effectiveness, it is essential that you take a broad view of widening participation encompassing a student's entire lifecycle – in other words that disadvantaged students are supported not only to prepare for and access higher education, but also on their journey through their course and in preparing to progress to employment or further study. So we encourage you, when developing your agreement, to consider any differences in outcomes for different groups of students at your institution.

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[1] A draft version of our strategic plan, which was issued for consultation, is available at: http://www.offa.org.uk/publications/consultations/consultation-on-the-offa-strategic-plan-2015-2020/.

10. Please note that OFFA's remit only covers students and courses that are fee-regulated. So, while we are supportive of schemes to encourage undergraduate students to progress to postgraduate study and we are happy for you to refer to these in your access agreements, only measures targeted at undergraduate students (or postgraduate initial teacher training students) from under-represented and disadvantaged groups may be included in your access agreement expenditure. You should not include spend on financial support for postgraduate students.

Greater emphasis on long-term outreach

11. The removal of student number controls from 2015-16 provides a greater opportunity for people to benefit from higher education, whatever their background. In order to maximise this opportunity, it is essential that all institutions engage in sustained, long-term outreach work to raise aspirations and attainment.

12. Widening participation is a collective responsibility, and growing the applicant pool further will be beneficial to all institutions. Evidence suggests that targeted, long-term outreach which boosts achievement and aspirations among disadvantaged people is a more effective way of widening access than institutional financial support.

13. Where appropriate, you should therefore consider how you can strengthen your work to raise the aspiration and attainment of potential students of all ages, from primary school pupils through to adults.

More effective collaboration

14. We encourage all institutions to build on and strengthen collaborative arrangements where beneficial and appropriate. There are many benefits to collaboration, including economies of scale, increased engagement with students and potential applicants, better co-ordination of work, and reduced duplication.

15. Collaboration between institutions providing outreach is not limited to alliances of higher education institutions (HEIs). We would normally expect collaborative outreach to include many stakeholders rather than to be between a single HEI and schools, colleges or other stakeholders receiving outreach. For example, collaboration may be between one HEI and further education colleges (FECs), other higher education providers, employers, third sector organisations, schools, colleges, training providers, local authorities and so on.

16. The National Networks for Collaborative Outreach represent a new opportunity to enable such stakeholders to align their efforts to raise aspirations and inform learners in schools and colleges across England about higher education. The Government is committing £22m to support the networks in 2014-15 and 2015-16. While you should not count this Government funding in your access agreement, we are happy for you to forecast some institutional expenditure for the continuation of the networks as OFFA-countable in your 2016-17 agreement, where this is appropriate.

Smarter, evidence-based spend

17. Our forthcoming strategic plan for 2015-2020 sets out that we would like institutions to make further, faster progress in meeting the challenges of fair access and widening participation. It is essential therefore that you should look to spend smarter and prioritise activities that will have the greatest impact on the areas where you most require improvement.

18. You should base your decisions on access agreement expenditure on appropriate levels of evaluation of your access activities and other institutions' evidence of what works best. Where possible, you should demonstrate the evidence you have used to determine the balance of spend between access, student success and progression activity.

19. If you have your own evidence on the impact of financial support, you should use it when making decisions on your support packages and include details of this in your access agreement. You should provide evidence to explain how your investment in financial support will help to improve access, student success and/or progression of under-represented and disadvantaged groups.

20. If you have relatively low proportions of undergraduate students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups, you will need to ensure that your access agreement includes sufficient focus and investment on access in order to make progress towards your targets. We would not expect to see your investment weighted towards student success and progression if you are already performing well in these areas.

21. Where your balance of spend does not appear to reflect your performance, or has not been explained in your access agreement, we will want to discuss this with you.

22. A strong evidence base is crucial to making further progress. We encourage you to review your evaluation plans alongside the development of your access agreement, so that you have a strong rationale to inform your activities and programmes to improve access, student success and progression.

Equality and diversity

23. You will need to demonstrate how you have taken equality issues into account when developing your access agreement. This should include any evidence you have on the possible equality implications of any proposed changes, and what steps you will take to remove or minimise any adverse effects.

24. Where institutions incur costs for subscriptions to networks or services that support their access agreements, we are happy for you to include these (or a proportion of these) as OFFA-countable expenditure. This may include, for example, a proportion of the cost of Equality Challenge Unit subscriptions from 2016, where these services support the development of inclusive cultures for your students.

Changes to milestones and targets

25. Since your 2012-13 access agreements, we have asked you not to make significant changes to your access agreement targets. This has given us a stable foundation for the measurement of trends in performance against targets over time. However, for many institutions, their targets only extend up to 2016-17 or 2017-18.

26. Most of the current targets were set in 2011, with a degree of caution about how the new fee and student support arrangements might affect access and student success. In addition, many institutions were setting targets around student success for the first time.

27. Since then, data from UCAS and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) show that the higher education sector has made excellent progress in widening participation, which is testament to the work of the sector to address inequalities in access. It is also encouraging that some of the fastest progress under the new fee arrangements has been made at the most selective institutions.

28. The ending of student number controls from 2015-16 provides a further opportunity to turn this progress into a long term reality, particularly as the previous increases in participation have helped make families, communities and schools from disadvantaged areas more familiar with higher education. In addition, institutions report they are spending more on activities and programmes that are having the greatest impact.

29. In this context, we now ask you to review and set new stretching targets which set out the desired outcomes of the work set out in your access agreement. When reviewing your targets, we expect all institutions, particularly those with relatively low proportions of students from under-represented groups, to demonstrate how they intend to make faster progress in improving access, success and/or progression for these students. This is in line with the aims expressed in our forthcoming strategic plan, which is informed by guidance from Ministers.

30. We also welcome the continued emphasis on partnership and collaboration in previous access agreements. As set out earlier, collaborative working is vital to ensure continued progress in access, student success and progression, and where you have developed collaborative activity, we would encourage you to include targets around this work. We may look at whether we introduce a requirement to include collaborative targets in access agreements in future years.

31. **Your targets in your 2016-17 access agreement must**:

    - be stretching, setting out the desired outcomes you are aiming to achieve

    - reflect your strategic priorities and performance across the student lifecycle (access, student success and progression)

    - include at least one target around entrants (rather than applications). As before, please note that while you may include state school indicators alongside other

measures of disadvantage, you should not use this as your only target on entrants

- be set up to 2019-20 and include annual milestones to help you monitor whether you are making progress.

32. Where we do not think your targets are sufficiently ambitious, we will want to discuss this with you. We recommend, therefore, that you discuss any new targets or significant changes to existing targets with OFFA in advance of submitting your access agreement.

33. When we monitor your performance against your targets we will take into consideration any material changes to the sector that may have affected your ability to meet targets. Within your monitoring return you will have an opportunity to provide a contextual narrative on your performance against your targets. There is more information about our approach to targets in the guidance *How to produce an access agreement for 2014-15*.

Our target groups

34. Access agreements set out how institutions will sustain or improve access, student success and progression among people from under-represented and disadvantaged groups. By this, we mean groups that are currently under-represented in higher education at a national level; however, you should also consider any local or regional challenges to access, student success and progression, and the role your institution can play in addressing these.

35. Examples of some of these groups are set out in paragraph 50 of *How to produce an access agreement for 2014-15*. However, there are some under-represented groups facing specific issues that we would encourage you to consider in your 2016-17 access agreement. We set out these groups in the following paragraphs.

Part-time and flexible learning

36. The latest HESA data shows that the number of part-time, first year enrolments at UK universities dropped by around 45 per cent between 2009-10 and 2013-14. We are concerned about this decrease and the issues it raises for inclusion, equality and diversity. For example, disadvantaged young students are twice as likely to study part-time compared to the most advantaged, so are more likely to have been affected by this reduction.

37. We strongly encourage you to consider what more you can do to attract and support part-time and flexible learners across the whole student lifecycle. As well as part-time study, we encourage you to think about how you might develop other flexible HE study options that meet the needs of students and employers.

38. It may help you to consider the recommendations about encouraging and supporting part-time study in Universities UK's report *The power of part-time* and the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE's) analysis in *Higher Education in England 2014*.

Mature students

39. In recent years, there has been a significant drop in the number of enrolments among mature students. Where this has been an issue for you, we would encourage you to think about how your institution can reach out to and support students of all ages.

40. The Office for National Statistics forecasts a decline in the number of 18- and 19-year-olds until around 2020, and attracting older students may help you make further progress on widening participation and fair access. This may include working with communities and employers.

Care leavers

41. Department for Education statistics show that only about 6 per cent of young people who are in care aged 16 continue into higher education by the age of 19. Care leavers are therefore a severely under-represented group and improving access for care leavers remains an important priority.

42. With the phasing out of the Buttle UK Quality Mark for Care Leavers from July 2014, we want institutions to continue to build on their work – both individually and collaboratively – to support care leavers through their access agreements.

43. The National Network for the Education of Care Leavers, which works with universities and colleges alongside organisations involved with care leavers, has produced a useful resource on working with care leavers.

Young carers

44. Research by Carers Trust and the University of Nottingham shows that young adult carers often struggle in higher education because of their caring responsibilities. The issues facing young carers include a lack of recognition of their support needs and problems accessing essential services.

45. We encourage you to consider the services you provide to support young carers and how these might align with or be strengthened through access agreements.

Disabled students

46. There are particular barriers to access, success and progression for disabled students, some of which vary depending on students' specific impairments or needs. In light of the Government's proposed changes to Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA), it is particularly important to ensure that students receive accurate information from institutions about the support they can expect to receive and that institutions build on the work they are already doing to promote access, success and progression for disabled students.

47. Our guidance note on the proposed changes to DSA, published in December, sets out what expenditure you can include in your access agreement in response to the DSA changes. If you need any further clarification about what may and may not be counted in your access agreement, please contact your institution's policy adviser at OFFA (click here for contact details).

Access to medicine

48. Recent reports from the Medical Schools Council conclude that while progress has been made on gender and ethnic diversity within medicine, there remains significant under-representation of students from some other groups, particularly lower socio-economic groups.

49. The Medical Schools Council, working in partnership with OFFA, recently published guidance on improving access to medicine courses and guidance on support for medical students. We urge all institutions with medical schools to consider this guidance when designing their access agreements.

Our requirements on expenditure

50. Our expectations of broad levels of expenditure are set out in *How to produce an access agreement for 2014-15* (paragraph 89 onwards). These expectations consider the outcomes of your efforts to recruit a diverse range of students, reflecting the variable performance of the sector.

51. If you have made significant, sustained progress on access, both improving your own performance and changing your position within the sector, you might make a case for reducing your levels of expenditure in your access agreement. In such a scenario you should have a conversation with OFFA prior to submission of your agreement to discuss your plans.

Resource plan

52. As with previous years, alongside your access agreement you must submit a resource plan which will record your targets, fees, student numbers along with predicted level of spend on access, student success, progression and financial support. This will be in the form of an Excel template and will be similar to the template used for 2015-16 access agreements.

53. The template will be available via the HEFCE extranet shortly. When the template becomes available we will contact you with details of how to access and download it. Until then, you may wish to use the 2015-16 resource plan to model your projections.

54. The Government has not yet announced the student finance package (including fee caps) for the 2016-17 academic year, and we anticipate that any decisions may not be taken until the formation of a new Government after May 2015. For the purposes of your access agreement and resource plan, we ask that you assume the current fee caps will remain the same as in 2015-16. In the event that there are changes to the fee caps for 2016-17, or the broader student finance package, we will ask you to confirm any changes to your fees and institutional financial support at that point.

Deadline and how to submit

55. The deadline to submit your 2016-17 access agreement is **noon on Thursday 23 April 2015**.

56. For detailed instructions on how to submit your agreement, and on our assessment and decision processes, see *How to produce an access agreement for 2014-15*.

What happens after submission?

57. We will assess your agreement between 23 April and mid-July 2015. Please ensure that staff are available during this time in case discussions are required.

58. If you submit your agreement to us by 23 April, with all the required information and there is no need for negotiation or discussion, we guarantee that you will have a decision no later than 31 July.