

**October 2014  
Draft for consultation**

# The OFFA Strategic Plan 2015-2020

## **About this document**

1. This new strategy sets out the Office for Fair Access' (OFFA's) vision for the period 2015 to 2020. It describes:

- our aims
- how our strategic plan relates to the national strategy for access and student success<sup>1</sup>
- the approach we are now taking
- the change that we expect to see in universities and colleges (which we will support through our new approach)
- how we will measure our progress in achieving our aims.

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<sup>1</sup> The national strategy for access and student success is available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-strategy-for-access-and-student-success>.

# About OFFA

2. OFFA is an independent, non-departmental public body. Our role as a regulator, set out in the Higher Education Act 2004 and in subsequent Ministerial guidance, is to promote and safeguard fair access to higher education. Fair access to higher education does not stop at enrolment; for fair access to be meaningful students must have the opportunity to fulfil their potential – successfully completing their studies and being prepared for what they choose to do next. We fulfil our role by: assessing, approving and monitoring access agreements and issuing clear guidance to support their development; identifying and disseminating good practice; and undertaking year-round dialogue with universities and colleges. We also raise issues relating to fair access with Government and the higher education sector as a whole, championing success and identifying those areas where progress needs to be made.

3. Through our work as the access regulator, we play a key role in increasing fair access to higher education. The greatest share of funding for fair access is delivered through access agreements which are a powerful lever for change and progress across the student lifecycle. Organisations across the sector are working towards shared objectives to improve access. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), for example, distributes the student opportunity allocation, as well as conducting research and analysis across the student lifecycle. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and UCAS produce a wealth of data and analysis that helps the sector to understand the challenge ahead. And many third sector organisations are working with universities, colleges and schools to deliver activities that raise aspirations and attainment. In drawing up this strategic plan, we have considered how we can work most effectively with organisations that share an interest in fair access as well as how we can maximise the impact of our regulatory role.

In their access agreements, institutions set out their tuition fee limits, their targets for making progress across the student lifecycle, and the measures they intend to put in place to meet those targets. Access agreements, and the outcomes from our monitoring of them, are published, to ensure transparency and public accountability.

Throughout this document we refer to under-represented and disadvantaged groups. These include, but are not limited to, learners from lower socio-economic groups or from neighbourhoods where higher education participation is low; disabled learners; learners from some ethnic groups; and care leavers.

# OFFA's aims

4. Our aims as an organisation are:

- to increase the proportion of learners from under-represented and disadvantaged groups who enter, succeed in and are well prepared to progress from higher education to employment or postgraduate study
- to make faster progress in improving access to the most selective higher education institutions by students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups.

5. In achieving these aims, we will contribute to the vision set out in the national strategy for access and student success, namely that:

**“...those with the potential to benefit from higher education have equal opportunity to participate and succeed, on a course and in an institution that best fit their potential, needs and ambitions for employment and further study.”**

# Progress to date

6. There has been welcome progress in the rates of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education in the last ten years<sup>2</sup>. This sustained improvement means that entry rates for young, full-time undergraduates from disadvantaged backgrounds are at their highest level ever. While the participation gap at highly selective institutions has been slow to change, data from UCAS<sup>3</sup> shows that recently, from 2012, there have been significant improvements at this group of institutions.

7. However, there is still much more to do. Despite these improvements, the gaps between the most advantaged and most disadvantaged people remain unacceptably large and so we need to see faster progress. OFFA's latest analysis of HESA data shows that, on average, the most advantaged 20 per cent of young people are 2.5 times more likely to go into higher education than the most disadvantaged 40 per cent<sup>4</sup>. At the most selective institutions, this ratio increases – with the most advantaged young people on average 6.3 times more likely to attend one of these institutions compared to the most disadvantaged young people<sup>5</sup>.

8. Although the majority of students enter university as full-time undergraduates immediately or shortly after leaving school, others enter later in life. It is therefore also important that universities reach out to potential mature and part-time students, and support them through their studies. The significant and sustained reduction that we have seen in the numbers of part-time students (the number of part-time students nearly halved between 2010-11 and

2013-14)<sup>6</sup> is especially concerning for fair access as part-time students are more likely to come from groups under-represented in higher education.

9. In addition, while progress is being made in the entry rates of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, this is not necessarily translating into improvements right across the student lifecycle. Evidence presented in the national strategy for access and student success shows differences in attainment and experience in higher education between different groups of students – for example between students with different backgrounds or ethnicities – which cannot be explained by their entry profiles.

10. In line with our developing policy and guidance, the access agreements that have been submitted to us for assessment in recent years have shown more consideration of the need to address disadvantage across the student lifecycle. Universities and colleges are also taking an increasingly evidence-based approach, focusing their resources on areas where they have furthest to go. Access agreements are becoming more strategic documents with institutions developing clearer plans of action that measure the outcomes, as well as the inputs, of the work they do to raise aspirations and attainment among talented people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and support these students throughout their studies and into employment or postgraduate study. By implementing the measures in this strategic plan, we aim to challenge and support universities to make faster progress.

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<sup>2</sup> See table 1c of the Higher Education Statistics Agency's performance indicators on widening participation of under-represented groups. These are available from <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/pis/urg>.

<sup>3</sup> UCAS 2013 *Application Cycle: End of Cycle Report*. Published December 2013. Available at <http://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/ucas-2013-end-of-cycle-report.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> OFFA publication 2014/01 *Trends in young participation by student background and selectivity of institution*. Available from [www.offa.org.uk/publications](http://www.offa.org.uk/publications).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Universities UK *Trends in undergraduate recruitment*. Published August 2014. Available at <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/TrendsInUndergraduateRecruitment.aspx>

# How our strategic plan supports the implementation of the national strategy

11. Following a request from Ministers, and drawing on the knowledge and expertise of the whole sector, OFFA and HEFCE jointly developed a national strategy for access and student success. The national strategy was published by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in April 2014, and sets out recommendations for how those with an interest in access and student success, including Government, universities and colleges and other national bodies, as well as OFFA and HEFCE, should work to meet its vision.

12. Our strategic plan sets out the approach that OFFA will take over the next five years to help deliver the vision set out in the national strategy. Central to our approach are the three ways of working identified by the national strategy as critical to driving change. These are:

## **A student lifecycle approach**

13. The student lifecycle is the entirety of the higher education experience for students. We look at three stages: access, student success and progression. The lifecycle approach to widening participation helps to ensure that approaches to widen access, improve retention, and support student success and progression are developed and delivered strategically.

14. Universities and colleges have increasingly been developing a student lifecycle approach to their fair access activities. They have been supported and challenged to take this approach by research from HEFCE and others, with the student opportunity allocation helping to underpin much of this work. We have always supported this approach, and – since 2012 – the scope of activities reported under access agreements has broadened to include retention and student success, as well as activities that prepare students to progress to work or further study.

15. The national strategy for access and student success states that to maximise impact and effectiveness it is crucial that all higher education

providers and stakeholders take a broad view of widening participation encompassing a student's entire lifecycle. OFFA's contribution to this approach is delivered through the guidance we provide to institutions and the work we do to support this – for example our research and our year-round engagement with universities and colleges.

## **Greater collaboration and partnership at every level**

16. We believe that higher education providers, schools, colleges, communities, employers and, where appropriate, the third sector need to collaborate effectively and strategically. We also take the view that national policymakers need to work together more effectively, taking a strategic overview and collaborating across the policy landscape to ensure better alignment of funding and policy across the education sectors. OFFA will seek to grow our existing collaborative work – and work in new ways – with the universities and colleges we regulate, HEFCE and other sector bodies, and Government. We will work with our partners to support faster progress collectively across the sector and at individual institutions.

## **Evidence-based practice**

17. Evidence about fair access over the lifecycle is generated by many partners across the sector, contributing to our shared understanding of which approaches and activities have greatest impact for students. Important research has been contributed by institutions (both academics and practitioners), HEFCE and other stakeholders, and OFFA.

18. It's important that we understand the evidence in the context of the complex and evolving higher education landscape, and a diverse sector with institutions with different characteristics and missions. This means that evidence may support different approaches in different institutions, or for different groups of students.

19. All of this work supports the Government's wider ambition for greater social mobility.

# Our new approach

## Maximising our impact as the access regulator

20. In developing this strategy, we have sought to maximise the impact that we have as an effective access regulator. We want to make best use of the primary and powerful lever through which we can effect change, namely access agreements. While OFFA's main focus will remain on access to higher education, we will work with partners to continue to seek equality of outcomes at all stages of the lifecycle – challenging institutions to focus on the areas where they most need to make progress.

21. In order to achieve our aims, we are growing our ability to:

- **Understand:** helping to contribute to a greater evidence base, learning from the research of others, and so improving the guidance that shapes and informs access agreements and the approaches institutions take to their work on access, student success and progression
- **Challenge:** using an evidence-based approach to more actively challenge and engage with universities and colleges to make sustained and faster progress towards their targets across the student lifecycle
- **Champion:** raising issues of fair access to a broad audience and sharing and championing evidence of success and best practice, so informing practice, policy and investment decisions.

22. We believe this three-pronged approach will deliver greater balance in our regulatory activities, enabling us to support and challenge institutions more effectively. We will maintain our focus on reducing unnecessary burden on institutions – including collaborating with others on regulatory processes where appropriate.

23. Below, we set out in greater detail how we intend to achieve this approach, both through the work we do on our own, and through our work with partners.

## Understand

24. In order to achieve our aims, we must help to foster a culture of enquiry and evidence-based policy development and practice among institutions. Access agreements need to promote good practice that is drawn from a sound evidence base, making use of national and institutional level evidence. Our focus, both in carrying out in-house research and commissioning research from others, will be on areas where there is a clear link or benefit to our regulatory practice.

## What we will do

25. We hold a wealth of information about what institutions are doing to improve the participation, success and progression of disadvantaged students in higher education. This includes information derived from our approval and monitoring of access agreements as well as intelligence gathered from our year-round communication and discussions with institutions and other stakeholders. We will further develop and focus our in-house research and analysis capacity to exploit this information more effectively, analysing it in greater detail to enable us to better support good practice, contribute to the understanding of the impact of institutions' approaches and help grow the evidence base.

26. As well as analysing access agreements more effectively, we will also use our increased analytical capacity to continue to carry out research in particular areas. For example, in 2014, we published a report on the effect of bursaries on retention<sup>7</sup>. A number of institutions have cited this research to explain why they are rebalancing their access

<sup>7</sup> OFFA publication 2014/03: *An interim report: do bursaries have an effect on retention rates?* Available at [www.offa.org.uk/publications](http://www.offa.org.uk/publications).

agreement spend – in line with our guidance – towards activities that raise attainment and aspirations at an early stage, or that support students throughout their studies.

27. Where we have a strong interest in an area but do not have the internal resources or expertise to carry out research ourselves, we will commission it from others who are better placed to do so.

### **How we will work with others to 'understand'**

28. As well as analysing the information that we hold in greater depth and carrying out in-house research, we will also work with partners to build the evidence base. This complements the approach set out in the national strategy for access and student success, which sets out how we will help others to grow and co-ordinate research activity in the sector. We will also contribute to the development of the evidence base through the evaluation framework presented in the national strategy. We will do this by:

- working in partnership with others who share our research aims – to collaboratively commission or produce research
- working with others to understand how to reap maximum benefit from the growing focus in the sector on data analysis and evaluation
- working with partners to ensure that national and local evidence of importance from across the sector is understood by OFFA and informs our policy development and the guidance we issue to institutions
- helping to co-ordinate the commissioning of national research to reduce duplication and fill gaps in the evidence base – we will explore how we might work with HEFCE and the sector to

ensure greater co-ordination of the research being done by many different organisations with an interest in access and student success.

## **Challenge**

29. Our approval and enforcement powers, set out in the Higher Education Act 2004, provide public and transparent challenge to institutions to make progress on fair access. We issue guidance to institutions to help them draw up their access agreements which, following negotiation and discussion, are subject to approval (or, if necessary, rejection) by the Director of Fair Access to Higher Education. At the end of each academic year, we ask institutions to assess the progress they have made against the targets they set themselves in agreement with OFFA, and we monitor how they have delivered on their commitments overall. These formal regulatory processes – which we will continue to review regularly – take place alongside a broader ongoing dialogue with institutions, the wider sector and other regulatory bodies.

30. We will continue to challenge by:

- further improving the links between the evidence base and our guidance, including:
  - using new and emerging evidence to refine our guidance to institutions
  - highlighting the areas where we expect institutions to focus
  - requiring institutions to monitor and evaluate their approach
  - ensuring institutions are making appropriate levels of investment in their access agreements related to their performance

- charging universities and colleges to use the flexibility we give them to develop and deliver access agreements that are tailored to their circumstances, focusing on the lifecycle stages where they most need to make progress
- requiring institutions to consider how they can best work collaboratively with schools, colleges and employers, with other institutions, and with their student bodies to drive improvement across the student lifecycle. This supports development of the national collaborative outreach network as set out in the national strategy
- increasing our focus on outcomes
- using the information we gather during the monitoring process to inform future discussions with, and support, individual institutions
- calling on universities and colleges to make progress across the student lifecycle, identifying groups of students – whether by disability, ethnicity, gender or other measures of under-representation – at risk of not succeeding in their studies and supporting them to achieve their potential.

## Champion

31. We want all those with an interest in fair access, student success and progression issues to act on the best available evidence, using it to inform their practice, policy and investment decisions. In order for this to happen, we need to share evidence and good practice effectively and celebrate successful outcomes. We also need to act as a high profile advocate for these issues – with policy makers, within the higher education sector and with the wider public.

## What we will do

32. Our role as the fair access regulator means that we are excellently placed to bring about change across the sector. We will:

- keep fair access issues high on the political agenda, regularly engaging with Ministers and other national policy makers
- continue to make the social and economic case for fair access and for the delivery of the national strategy for access and student success a national priority – at a strategic level in universities and colleges, with Government and MPs, and in the media. Where necessary, we will robustly challenge common misconceptions
- contribute to the debate on what constitutes effective, sustainable practice, championing success where it is evident
- advise and advocate as necessary on issues that affect fair access, student success and progression
- play a more active role in disseminating new, innovative and important research and reflecting this research in our guidance, thereby translating theory into practice
- champion success through the evidenced progress and good practice universities and colleges deliver, identified through our work with them.

## How we will work with others to ‘champion’

33. Making the case for fair access, and ensuring that the progress that continues to be made is celebrated, requires a sustained, collective effort. We will work collaboratively with partners to:

- stimulate change – identifying the most effective way of sharing information that has an impact on policy makers and practitioners

- raise the profile – working with institutions and sector bodies to help illustrate the importance of fair access, student success and progression issues
- celebrate success and good practice – working closely with those with an interest in fair access issues to pinpoint and investigate examples of effective practice, disseminating research and stimulating debate about findings.

# How we expect universities and colleges to work

34. By working with institutions in the three core ways outlined above, we aim to support and challenge them to deliver significant change in the way that they work. As described in the national strategy for access and student success, we want institutions to build on the progress they have already made to take a more strategic, whole lifecycle and whole institution approach. This will help institutions to make further, faster progress towards their own targets and within their own context, so contributing to sector-wide improvements. We will support universities and colleges to be:

## Strategic

- embedding core priorities for access, student success and progression at all levels across the institution
- balancing their focus and efforts according to where they need to make most progress and evidence of external need
- having clear plans in place to address gaps in participation and achievement, taking into account the wide range of factors that have an impact on the whole lifecycle.

## Learner-focused

- listening to and engaging with learners to understand and respond to their needs
- involving students' representatives in developing their access agreements
- focusing on improving outcomes for students across the lifecycle.

## Evidence-led

- identifying a strong rationale for plans and activities to improve access, student success and progression
- securing robust evidence of the impact of their work, including harnessing their own academic, research and evaluation expertise
- contributing to the evidence base through the sharing of findings.

## Collaborative

- sharing understanding and insights among all those with a professional interest to help inform effective practice
- establishing consultative relationships with other stakeholders to co-ordinate and inform approaches
- working flexibly with others to build shared infrastructure, delivery, monitoring and evaluation.

## Dynamic

- considering, developing and testing new approaches to improve impact and cost-effectiveness
- responding to changes in the evidence base and the HE landscape to improve practice.

# How we will measure our progress

35. Improving fair access is a sector wide responsibility. However, as the appointed access regulator we have a role to set expectations for the sector.

36. In order to measure our progress, we will use two sets of objectives – sector outcome objectives and OFFA output objectives:

- **Sector outcome objectives**

These will measure progress against our aims at a high level. The objectives reflect our primary focus to safeguard and promote fair access, recognising that fair access is only meaningful if students from disadvantaged backgrounds not only enter higher education but succeed in their studies and are well prepared to progress to employment or further study. Our reporting on the progress of the sector will include whether the sector has succeeded in increasing the rate of change.

- **OFFA output objectives**

These will measure OFFA's key outputs – what we are delivering and how we are working as a regulator.

## Sector outcome objectives

Please note that the objectives listed below are still in development. We will seek to finalise the objectives and how they will be measured during 2015, working in partnership with sector experts.

Key performance objectives	How it will be measured (Key performance indicator)
1. To make faster progress to increase the proportion of higher education entrants from under-represented and disadvantaged groups.	HEFCE – <i>Trends in young participation in higher education</i> . Source: as set out in HEFCE 2013/28 table 8. The proportion of young, full-time entrants from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN). Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Performance Indicator (PI) Table T1b.
2. To make faster progress to increase the proportion of under-represented and disadvantaged groups entering more selective institutions.	The proportion of entrants in higher education split by selectivity of institution. Source: OFFA analysis of HESA data.
3. To improve non-continuation rates for students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups and reduce the gap in non-continuation between advantaged and disadvantaged students.	Non-continuation rates for young, full-time, first degree entrants from LPNs. Source: HESA PI Table T3b.
4. To improve the proportion of students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups achieving a good degree outcome and reduce the gap in attainment between advantaged and disadvantaged students.	Proportion of students from LPNs achieving a first or upper second class degree. Source: OFFA analysis of HESA data (using qualifying cohort, benchmarked on age, subject and prior attainment).
5. To improve rates of progression into graduate-level employment or further study for students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups.	The proportion of full-time first degree leavers from LPNs progressing to graduate-level work or further study. Source: OFFA analysis of HESA <i>Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education</i> (DLHE) survey, Table 1.

## OFFA output objectives

What we want to deliver	How we will deliver this
<p>6. To rebalance access agreement spend so that it more closely reflects institutional priorities based on their performance in access, student success and progression.</p>	<p>Through our influence of institutions, the balance of estimated and reported access agreement expenditure reflects the evidence base around effective approaches and activities and the performance of institutions in different areas of the student lifecycle. OFFA will lead on this area of the national strategy.</p>
<p>7. To build OFFA's contribution to the evidence base through research.</p>	<p>Understanding the gaps in the research base; developing and publishing a research strategy. Delivering in-house research, commissioning external research, and using our understanding to influence policy and practice through effective dissemination.</p>
<p>8. To ensure that OFFA uses an evidence-based approach to support and challenge the sector, and OFFA regulates universities and colleges through ongoing engagement.</p>	<p>Guidance and advice to institutions, for example through topic briefings, publications, presentations and visits, which are informed by the evidence base and by ongoing engagement with the sector. This includes: access agreement development; access agreement approval and negotiation; access agreement guidance; engagement with the sector; monitoring; topic briefings; and stakeholder surveys. As set out in the national strategy, OFFA will work with HEFCE to improve information, advice and guidance provision in the sector and support the review of its WP targeting guidance. OFFA will lead on the promotion of effective outreach approaches and work towards the development of a national evaluation framework.</p>
<p>9. To produce robust and clear qualitative and quantitative data. This will support the regulation of access agreements, ensure transparency, and will be fit for use by institutions and other stakeholders.</p>	<p>Improving our processes to ensure that the data institutions provide is robust; publishing access agreement outcomes data, monitoring outcomes data, access agreement documents, and policy-focused analysis of OFFA data; enhancing the way we publish institutional data to allow for easier interpretation.</p>

<p>10. To develop higher levels of knowledge and understanding within OFFA and across the sector by dissemination of OFFA in-house and commissioned research.</p>	<p>Identifying and publishing OFFA research priorities to address the gaps in the evidence base, by (i) determining those areas that OFFA is best placed to address and (ii) influencing the focus of other researchers; delivering in-house research; commissioning external research; disseminating research findings and influencing policy, therefore changing sector behaviour; and evaluating the subsequent impact. Under the national strategy, OFFA will lead on research into the effectiveness of bursaries on access and student success, and support HEFCE's work on student success approaches and activities.</p> <p>Producing topic briefings around specific areas of interest; using these and other evidence to determine groups to prioritise; feeding these into our access agreement and other guidance so that institutions use the guidance to inform their approach. We will use qualitative data analysis software to measure OFFA's impact on institutions' approaches (both within and across institutions); and engage in and influence discussions about data collection and measuring impact. OFFA will support HEFCE's work on differential outcomes and part-time provision under the national strategy and promote the dissemination of its findings.</p>
<p>11. To demonstrate best practice under the Regulators' Code.</p>	<p>Ensure that our regulatory processes are well aligned to our strategic aims; seek to reduce burden on institutions; regular monitoring in line with the Regulators' Code; give institutions a minimum of ten weeks to develop their access agreements providing the HEFCE grant letter and/or ministerial guidance is published before 1 January; approve any access agreement, provided there are no major issues with it, within 12 weeks; approve any access agreement monitoring return, provided there are no major issues with it, within 12 weeks; respond promptly to enquiries.</p>
<p>12. To work continually to benchmark and improve OFFA's governance, management and operational performance.</p>	<p>Governance effectiveness assessment; performance milestones agreed with BIS; risk mitigation record; business processes improvements listed (including those already in the annual report); OFFA, alongside HEFCE, will report to BIS every three years on progress towards the national strategy.</p>
<p>13. To work continually to improve the professionalism, motivation, and capabilities of our staff.</p>	<p>Organisational development plan based on individual development reviews; spend against annual budget for learning and development; learning and development activities completed; staff survey results.</p>
<p>14. To deliver value for money in all of our activities.</p>	<p>Budget and business plan targets; 2014 value for money review targets; value for money activities listed; expenditure on front-line vs back-office/overhead costs.</p>

## **Alternative formats**

The publication can be downloaded from the OFFA web-site ([www.offa.org.uk/publications](http://www.offa.org.uk/publications)). For readers without access to the internet, we can also supply it on CD or in large print. Please call 0117 931 7171 for alternative format versions.

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