

20 February 2014

How to produce an access agreement for 2015-16

Introduction

1. Institutions wishing to charge home/EU students more than the basic fee in 2015-16 will need to submit an access agreement to OFFA by Thursday 1 May 2014. This guidance note explains how to write and submit an access agreement for 2015-16.
2. Our requirements for 2015-16 are similar to those for 2014-15 access agreements, and you should refer to our 2014-15 guidance alongside this guidance note when producing your access agreement (see OFFA publication 2013/01, *How to submit an access agreement for 2014-15*, available at www.offa.org.uk/publications).
3. However, we are allowing you the flexibility to manage the significant changes to the funding environment, such as the end of the National Scholarship Programme (NSP), and uncertainty around the level of reductions to student opportunity funding, while taking account of the broad strategic steers set out in this guidance note.
4. These strategic priorities reflect the strategic direction set out in the forthcoming national strategy for access and student success.
5. As long as you provide us with an understanding around the broad level inputs and outcomes committed to in your agreement, we accept that many institutions, especially those that have greater exposure to potential reductions to student opportunity funding, will be able to provide less definition than normal in their plans about aspects of their approach and activity.
6. Please contact your OFFA policy adviser at an early stage if you wish to discuss your approach, or if you have any other queries. Find contact details for your institution's key policy adviser at www.offa.org.uk/contact-us/institutional-contact-list/.

Overview

7. The Government's grant letter to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for 2014-15, published on 10 February 2014, confirms that there will be changes to student number controls (the grant letter confirms the Government's provision of a maximum of 30,000 additional student places in academic year 2014-15 for HEFCE-funded institutions and the student number control will be removed entirely from 2015-16) and reductions to Government funding for higher education in England in 2014-15 and 2015-16, and that HEFCE should determine how to deliver those reductions. At the time of writing, decisions relating to HEFCE funding are ongoing and HEFCE plans to publish institutional funding allocations for 2014-15 on 27 March 2014.

8. In such times, it is especially important to take a more strategic approach and to spend smarter, targeting resources where they will have the greatest impact. We recognise that you will need greater flexibility to manage any changes to your HEFCE funding proportionately to ensure you meet your long-term strategic goals to improve access and student success. We also recognise that any reductions to student opportunity funding will have a greater impact on those institutions that recruit larger proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
9. You should base your decisions on access agreement expenditure on evaluation of your access activities and other institutions' experience of what works best. We have encouraged institutions to move some spend from bursaries and scholarships to infrastructure and activity to support access and student success. The ending of the NSP for undergraduates from 2014-15 allows you to rebalance your spend towards activities that deliver the greatest impact.
10. If your 2014-15 access agreement already covers the strategic priorities set out in this note, you may only need to make minor amendments to your access agreement. These may include:
 - changes to your fees for 2015-16
 - updated information on the financial support you will provide for new entrants, in light of the end of the NSP for undergraduate students, and the mainstreaming of the funds formerly delivered through the Access to Learning Fund into the HEFCE student opportunity allocation
 - an understanding of how your institution will respond to any changes in funding, for example a broad understanding of how you will prioritise areas of infrastructure and activities.
 - updated financial predictions of your investment in access, student success and financial support.
11. If you submit an access agreement to us by Thursday 1 May 2014, with all the required information and there is no need for negotiation or discussion, we will guarantee a decision no later than 31 July.

Our strategic priorities for 2015-16 access agreements

12. This guidance note sets out our strategic priorities which reflect those set out in the forthcoming National strategy for access and student success. The priorities are:
 - **a strategic, whole-institution approach**
 - **a whole student lifecycle approach**
 - **smarter, evidence-based spend**
 - **strategically rebalancing access agreement spend to support access, student success and progression**
 - you should continue to build infrastructure and activity to deliver **long-term outreach** that grows the applicant pool

- **provision of support for mature and part-time students** across the student lifecycle
 - **effective collaboration**, where appropriate, across the student lifecycle.
13. In addition to these overarching priorities, we continue to emphasise our increased focus on outcomes - both at a sector and institutional level. In developing your access agreement, you should tell us how you have consulted with students in the development of your access agreement, including through student unions and associations.

A strategic, whole institution approach

14. When developing your access agreement for 2015-16, and your longer-term access and student success plans, we encourage you to ensure that it is a whole-institution process and a driver for positive change and internal collaboration.
15. We do understand that there is a degree of uncertainty around changes to HEFCE grant funding for 2015-16 and it may take time to develop your strategic approach to access, student success and progression, and that significant planning will take place following the submission of your 2015-16 access agreement. Given this, you may wish to focus more on setting out a broad understanding of your strategic approach to access, student success and progression and the outcomes you hope to achieve, rather than the detail of specific activities and programmes. It is for you to decide how much detail of these activities and programmes you wish to include.

A whole student lifecycle approach

16. A key challenge for OFFA and HEFCE is to ensure that widening participation encompasses the whole student lifecycle, where students are supported not only to prepare for and access higher education, but also on their journey through and beyond their course. We particularly encourage you to give consideration to any differences in outcomes for different groups of students at your institution.
17. As part of a joined-up whole-lifecycle approach, a growing area of interest for OFFA is focusing on supporting undergraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds to progress to employment or postgraduate study. Therefore, we invite you to include information on progression in your access agreement for 2015-16, including measures designed to help disadvantaged students progress to employment or postgraduate study.
18. However, while we are supportive of schemes to encourage undergraduate students to progress to postgraduate study and we are happy for you to make reference to these in your access agreements, you should note that OFFA's remit only extends to students and courses that are fee-regulated. This means that only measures targeted at undergraduate students (or postgraduate ITT students) from under-represented and disadvantaged groups should be included in your access agreement expenditure. You should not include spend on financial support for postgraduate students.

Smarter, evidence-based spend

19. Last year we asked you to describe how you intended to monitor and evaluate the measures set out in your agreement and your progress towards your targets. In some cases evaluation

plans were still being developed. In your 2015-16 access agreement we would like you to update us on the development of your approach to evaluation.

20. Our expectation is that you will work towards embedding evaluation and effective monitoring throughout your plans. Robust monitoring and evaluation will help you prioritise the delivery of programmes and activities that have the greatest impact.

Strategically rebalancing access agreement spend to support access, student success and progression activity

21. The Government's decision to end the NSP for undergraduate entrants after 2014-15 gives you the flexibility to refocus some of your previous NSP investment towards infrastructure and activity to support access, student success or progression activities or programmes, where appropriate.
22. Above all, we strongly encourage you to take a strategic approach, and to look to spend smarter and prioritise activities that will have the greatest impact on the areas where you most require improvements. Depending on decisions by HEFCE, this may include the backfilling of infrastructure and any activity previously supported by student opportunity funding. You should demonstrate the evidence and rationale you have used to determine the balance of spend between access, student success and progression.
23. Institutions that have relatively low proportions of undergraduate students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups will need to ensure that their access agreements include sufficient focus and investment on access in order to make the desired progress towards their targets.
24. Evidence suggests that targeted, long-term outreach which boosts achievement and aspirations among disadvantaged young people is a more effective way of widening access than through institutional financial support. We would therefore encourage you to support and strengthen your outreach where appropriate.
25. Spend on progression should be proportionate to your performance and across the student lifecycle. So, for example, where an institution's primary focus should be on access, we would not expect to see a significant proportion of access agreement investment in progression.
26. If you have your own evidence on the impact of bursaries, fee waivers or in-kind 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 progression of under-represented and disadvantaged groups. Where we believe your balance of spend does not reflect your performance, we will want to discuss this with you.

Long-term outreach

27. We recognise that, with the end of student number controls there may be increased competition for recruiting students from the existing applicant pool. However, this does not reduce the need for institutions to have long-term plans to grow the applicant pool. We believe that widening participation is a collective responsibility, and growing the applicant

pool further will be beneficial to all institutions. All universities and colleges should work to raise the aspiration and attainment of pupils from primary age upwards. It is also important to develop outreach aimed at potential mature learners.

28. Long-term outreach is a strategic priority and we expect all institutions to continue to invest in it. We recognise that it may take a number of years for these programmes to have an impact, and we will take this into consideration when looking at the progress you have made towards your targets.
29. The level at which you invest in long-term outreach will be influenced by the balance of your priorities. So, where you have furthest to go in student success and progression, we understand that you will want to continue to build infrastructure and activity to help your students achieve successful outcomes.

Measures to attract and support mature and part-time students

30. There has been a deeply concerning reduction in part-time applications and enrolment. The number of students recruited to undergraduate part-time courses in England has fallen by 40 per cent in two years (2010-11 to 2012-13) Source: HEFCE publication 2013/03, *Higher education in England: impact of the 2012 reforms*). This trend has had a more significant impact on women and mature learners as they are more likely to study part-time (Source: Universities UK, *The power of part-time*, 2013). Disadvantaged young students are twice as likely to study part-time compared to the most advantaged and two-thirds of part-time students have family commitments. Therefore, a reduction in part-time students raises significant equality and diversity issues which require further examination.
31. We strongly encourage you to consider what more you can do to increase the measures you take to attract and support mature and part-time students across the whole student lifecycle. The recent Universities UK report identified a number of issues which you may wish to consider, including that:
 - employers and potential students are not aware of the value of part-time study
 - information on part-time courses and financial support for part-time students is patchy
 - there are opportunities to develop more flexible learning approaches, and more employer focused provision
 - there are opportunities for part-time study to be supported through Local Enterprise Partnerships in England.

Effective collaboration

32. We would encourage all institutions to build on and strengthen collaborative arrangements where beneficial and appropriate. There are many benefits to the collaborative provision of outreach: economies of scale; increased engagement with students and potential applicants; better co-ordination of work; and avoidance of duplication.
33. 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 be between a single HEI and schools, colleges or other

stakeholders receiving outreach. We recognise that there may be circumstances where collaboration between more than one HEI is not possible: in those cases collaboration could be formed in a number of ways, for example between one HEI and further education colleges (FECs), other HE providers, employers, third sector organisations, schools, colleges, training providers, local authorities and so on.

34. HEFCE will be working with institutions to develop a country-wide collaborative outreach network and plan to issue further guidance in March 2014.

Managing the impact of funding changes to your previous access agreements

35. HEFCE's grant letter indicates there will be changes to grant funding for 2014-15 which may have an impact on the plans you set out in previous access agreements. We want to give you the flexibility to manage these changes as you see fit, and to enable you to prioritise activities that will help you to make the most effective progress towards your targets. Some elements of your previous access agreements (for example, financial support for students) are firm commitments. Other elements, such as the specific activities you deliver, can be managed more flexibly, while preserving the substance of your access agreement commitments.
36. This might include where the evidence base suggests that a certain programme should be expanded and another rolled back, or where changes to grants have an impact on the delivery of specific activities. You do not need to amend your previous access agreements to account for such changes unless it will materially affect the spirit of your agreement. Please contact OFFA if you wish to discuss your 2014-15 access agreement with a policy adviser.

Changes to milestones and targets

37. Your targets in your previous access agreement will generally cover a five year period to 2016-17 or 2017-18. In view of the uncertainties around HEFCE funding in 2014-15 and 2015-16, we do not expect you to extend the targets in your 2015-16 access agreements to cover additional years unless you wish to.
38. Where you do choose to extend targets we would expect you to continue to demonstrate ambition, and would not expect to see the ambition of your targets plateau. Where you have made less progress than anticipated in 2012-13 we would expect you to consider refining and improving your access and student success measures rather than reducing the ambition set out in your targets. We do not expect to see the ambition of targets reduced in your 2015-16 agreements.
39. We understand that your developing evidence base, and changes to HEFCE grant funding, may have an impact on the activities you plan to deliver over the coming years, which in turn may impact on the activity-related targets you have included in previous access agreements.
40. When we monitor your performance against 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 have an opportunity to provide a contextual narrative on your performance against your targets.

41. As in previous guidance, if the programme being measured has been discontinued or the target has otherwise become obsolete it may be appropriate to make changes. You should discuss any such changes of targets with OFFA in advance of submitting your 2015-16 access agreement. You will have an opportunity to revise your targets in future years.

Resource plan

42. As with previous years, alongside your access agreement you will be asked to submit a resource plan which will capture your fees, student numbers and predicted level of spend on access, student success and financial support. This will be in the form of an Excel template and will be similar to the template used for 2014-15 access agreements.
43. The template will be available via the HEFCE extranet once Government has announced the fee caps for 2015-16.

What do you need to do now?

February 2014 to April 2014	OFFA available for discussions with institutions
March 2014 (exact date TBC)	Extranet details sent to institutions Resource plan template available
1 May 2014	Deadline for submissions
May to mid-July 2014	Assessment for approval by OFFA Institutions should ensure that key members of staff are available during this time.
July 2014	Director of Fair Access announces decisions for 2015-16 access agreements

44. If you wish to discuss the details of your access agreement, or your general approach with OFFA, please email enquiries@offa.org.uk, or call the general enquiries line on 0117 931 7171, or contact your institution's key OFFA policy adviser (find contact details for your institution's key policy adviser at www.offa.org.uk/contact-us/institutional-contact-list/).