

July 2016/05

## **Outcomes**

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**This document presents outcomes of OFFA's monitoring of institutional evaluation and equality and diversity in 2014-15 access agreements**

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# **Access agreement monitoring for 2014-15: institutional evaluation, and equality and diversity**

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# Foreword

This report sets out the work universities and colleges are doing to evaluate the activities and financial support offered through their 2014-15 access agreements. This is the first time we have reported in detail on institutions' work in this area, and I am pleased to be able to report that nearly every institution is actively engaged in evaluation.



## **The importance of evaluation**

Universities and colleges spent £725 million on activities and programmes to support fair access through their access agreements in 2014-15, so it is hugely important that they have a considered approach to evaluation to ensure their investment is having the greatest impact. The report shows that institutions are taking heed of OFFA's guidance, recognising that evaluation is key to improved performance.

Of course, evaluation is not a tick box exercise to demonstrate that an activity has worked; institutions deliver a huge variety of activities through access agreements, and inevitably not all of them will be successful. While I want institutions to be investing in the activities which have the most impact, there is no magic formula which will always be successful. It's important that institutions have the space to try new things – to innovate, take risks and to reflect. Through this monitoring process, we have seen examples of institutions adapting or discontinuing activities through the evaluation process, and I am encouraged to see that there is a willingness to learn and adapt where activities have not had the impact originally intended.

## **Promoting equality and diversity through access agreements**

This report also looks at how institutions are embedding the promotion of equality and diversity in their work. I have asked institutions to look more closely at the impact of their activities on students with protected characteristics, and I am pleased to see that they are working hard to understand the challenges faced by these particular groups of students. For all students, but especially those with protected characteristics, it is important that work does not stop at enrolment. Research from HEFCE and others shows us starkly there is still work to do here – for example to close the unexplained gap in outcomes for students from some ethnic groups. It is therefore especially encouraging to see the number of examples of institutions offering targeted support across the student lifecycle. This means that institutions aren't just getting students with protected characteristics into higher education, they are also investing to help ensure these

students are successful through their studies and as they prepare for life after graduation.

### **Embedding evaluation into practice**

This is a retrospective report. The guidance on which these access agreements were based was issued in 2013, and much has moved on since then. The encouraging work highlighted here is a step on a longer journey towards evaluation becoming embedded in practice; we are starting to see through access agreements that institutional approaches to these issues are becoming more strategic, evidenced and reflective.

### **Growing the evidence around fair access**

An integral part of OFFA's role continues to be to undertake, commission and facilitate research to help grow evidence around fair access. So, for example, we have been working in partnership with universities to develop a set of common measures for assessing the impact of the bursaries institutions offer through their access agreements. As I write, we are seeking tenders for a joint project with The Sutton Trust which is aiming to develop similar measures for the evaluation of outreach activities. The tools developed through this research will help improve evaluation across the sector in the long-term, allowing institutions to demonstrate the impact of their work and increase their focus on those activities which are most successful.

This report gives real cause for optimism, but there is still more to be done. By their own assessment, only a small proportion of institutions in 2014-15 were at an advanced stage in evaluating their activities; a significant minority had only just started evaluative work. In future monitoring rounds, I expect to see every institution devoting appropriate energy and resources into effective evaluation. Ensuring that activities have impact is crucial as we seek to meet the Government's fair access goal to double the rate of disadvantaged students by 2020, compared to 2009 levels. OFFA will continue work with universities and colleges over the coming year in order to grow shared knowledge in the sector. Institutions have a key role here – to make full use the expertise of their academics and researches to deliver research on the most effective approaches which can be shared by the sector and then put to practical use.

### **A spotlight on financial support**

Financial support – which made up two-thirds of access agreement spend in 2014-15 – continues to find itself under a spotlight. There are good examples in the report of institutions reviewing their financial support packages as a result of new evidence. However, some financial support in 2014-15 was not evaluated, while a significant proportion of evaluation relied on surveys of students who – unsurprisingly – wanted to keep their bursaries.

While it's important that institutions listen to the views of their students, it is not sufficient to assume that financial support is effective because those students in receipt give positive feedback; we need to see a move to analysis which centres on demonstrable changes in behaviour, such as improved access, retention and attainment rates. In any event, institutions need to ensure they are getting the balance of spend right in their own contexts, and that financial support is directed to those students who will benefit the most from it.

### **The link between evaluation and progress**

We have seen through this monitoring process that those institutions with more developed and embedded evaluation activity generally report more progress against their high-level outcomes targets. This is not a coincidence. Good evaluation enables institutions to understand what works, adapt programmes which could work better, and move on from activities and support which are not effective. I am encouraged by the many examples of good practice in the sector, but it is clear that, collectively, we must continue to up our game. Nobody should be put off going to university because of their background; by investing in activities that have real impact in helping people from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter and succeed in higher education, we can ensure they are not.



Professor Les Ebdon CBE  
Director of Fair Access to Higher Education

# Access agreement monitoring for 2014-15: institutional evaluation, and equality and diversity

## Executive summary

1. This is the second of two reports published following OFFA's monitoring of 2014-15 access agreements (the first being OFFA publication 2016/04 [Outcomes of access agreement monitoring for 2014-15](#), published in May 2016). Together, these two reports provide insight into the progress made by institutions in 2014-15 and the mechanisms used to support this progress, and help to support the sector by identifying areas which require more attention and providing examples of good practice.
2. This report provides details of institutional evaluation, and equality and diversity, for those higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) with access agreements in 2014-15. Specifically the report analyses institutions':
  - approaches to evaluation of the activities counted in their access agreements. This includes each stage of the student lifecycle: access, student success, and progression to further study or employment
  - approaches to evaluation of financial support
  - work on equality and diversity activities and programmes, and the evaluation undertaken in this area.

## Evaluation of access agreement activities

3. Almost all (99 per cent) institutions with access agreements reported that they conducted evaluation of their access agreement activities in 2014-15.

4. The embedding of evaluation into practice is becoming increasingly widespread: the proportion of institutions reporting they were at an advanced stage of their evaluation has doubled since 2013-14, increasing from 7 per cent to 14 per cent in 2014-15.

5. Institutions with low proportions of students from under-represented groups are evaluating their activities and using these findings to inform future work. We would encourage these institutions to continue to assess the impact of their activities and adapt their programmes accordingly.

6. HEIs with more developed and embedded evaluation activity generally reported more progress against their high-level outcomes targets.

7. FECs are generally at an earlier stage of their evaluation strategy than HEIs, with 63 per cent reporting that their evaluation plans were at an early stage of development, compared with 20 per cent of HEIs.

8. A large proportion of institutions indicated that their evaluation had prompted a change in practice, the majority of which reported that they had used their findings to modify existing programmes.

### **Evaluation of financial support**

9. Around a fifth of institutions (21 per cent) reported that they did not evaluate financial support in 2014-15; this equates to around £50 million of spend for which there was no evaluation. A further 25 per cent of institutions reported that they had only evaluated their financial support by evaluating the reactions/opinions of participants, without evaluating the impact on behaviour.

10. Fewer than half of institutions (45 per cent) evaluated their financial support by analysing the impact on behaviour, such as access, retention and attainment figures.

11. A large majority (93 per cent) of HEIs that spent the highest proportions on financial support carried out some form of evaluation in 2014-15. However, these institutions were more likely to be evaluating the reactions/opinions of participants without assessing the impact on behaviour. Almost a third (32 per cent) of HEIs with higher proportions of spend on financial support were in this category, compared to

15 per cent and 21 per cent of institutions with lower and medium proportions of spend, respectively.

12. Evaluation supported institutions to make changes to their financial support in order to improve impact. A third of those that undertook evaluation reported that they would be redesigning an aspect of their financial support scheme in response to their evaluation.

### **Equality and diversity**

13. Over three-quarters of institutions are running specific, targeted activities that focus on supporting students with protected characteristics as set out in the [Equality Act 2010](#) and students from other target groups. The most commonly targeted groups were disabled learners, care leavers and mature learners; focus on the second and third of these groups was particularly encouraged in our 2014-15 access agreement guidance.

14. In their evaluation of equality and diversity activity, just over two-fifths (41 per cent) of institutions reported that they evaluated the impact of some of their activities and programmes by protected characteristics, with a further 10 per cent evaluating the impact of most or all of their activities.

## Content of this report

15. OFFA publication 2016/04 **Outcomes of access agreement monitoring for 2014-15** found that – overall – universities and colleges had made good progress against the milestones and targets they set themselves in their 2014-15 access agreements. It also set out how they used their higher fee income to improve access, student success, and progression to further study and employment, for students from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds.

16. This second report provides a more detailed analysis into the evaluation of their access, student success and progression measures, and equality and diversity work, that institutions reported on in their 2014-15 monitoring returns. This is the second year that institutions have provided this information, which has enabled us to carry out more in-depth analysis of how institutions evaluate their work. This report is intended to increase the sector's understanding of evaluation and equality and diversity work currently being carried out, support institutions in their development of future evaluation and equality and diversity activity, and provide insights into how institutions have made a difference.

17. In their monitoring returns for 2014-15, we asked institutions to provide an overview of their general approaches to evaluation. We also asked them to submit what they considered their best example of how they used evaluation of access agreement-supported activities or programmes to inform their approaches to widening participation across the student lifecycle. While these examples do not necessarily capture the full range of evaluative work being delivered across the sector, they provide a helpful picture of the types of evaluation activities carried out in 2014-15.

18. To enable us to carry out qualitative analysis of responses, we asked institutions structured questions around evaluation and equality and diversity. The nature of the information we requested often meant there was considerable variety in the way institutions responded.

19. In the sections of the return which allowed institutions to provide a narrative, it was generally the case that FECs provided less detailed information

than HEIs. Therefore, although we can make comparisons on the information provided to us, it should be noted that the limited information restricts our understanding of evaluation work conducted at FECs. We will work with FECs to further support them in the completion of their subsequent monitoring returns.

## Evaluation of activities and programmes across the student lifecycle

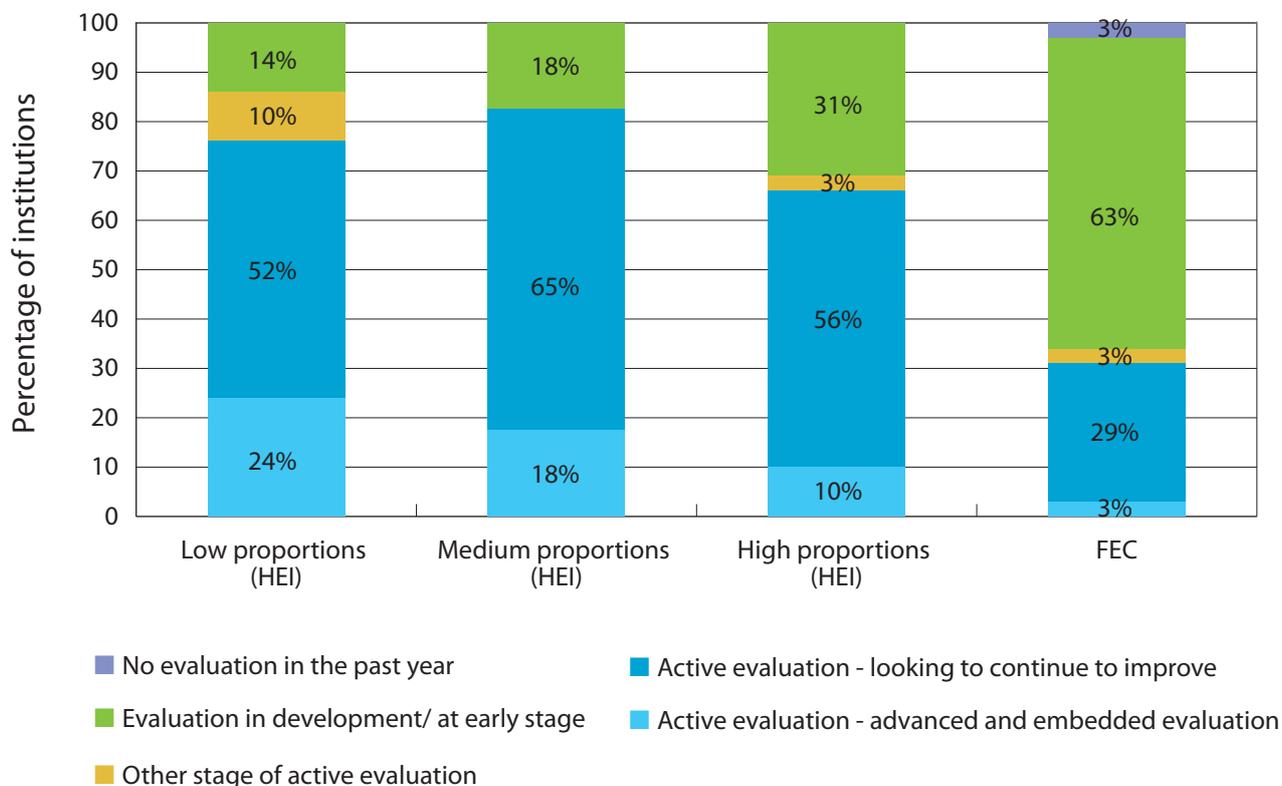
### Overall findings

20. For the activities and programmes delivered through their access agreements (excluding financial support), we asked institutions to select a statement that best described their approach to evaluation across the student lifecycle during 2014-15, from one of five options. The outcomes were:

- 14 per cent of institutions reported that they were actively evaluating their activities and programmes, that their approach was at an advanced stage and that evaluation was embedded into practice
- 51 per cent reported that they were actively evaluating their activities and programmes, and were looking to continue to improve how they evaluate
- 30 per cent reported they had begun work towards evaluating their activities and programmes and that their approach was in development or in the early stages of implementation
- 5 per cent reported they were at another stage of active evaluation
- 1 per cent reported they had not evaluated any of their activities and programmes over 2014-15.

21. We are pleased with how institutions have responded to our guidance which emphasises the importance of evaluation and evidence-based practice, with 99 per cent of institutions reporting that they conducted evaluation of their access agreement activities in 2014-15. We are particularly pleased that the embedding of evaluation into

**Figure 1** Evaluation of widening participation activity at HEIs with low, medium and high proportions of students from under-represented groups, and at FECs



**Note:** Please note that figures do not sum due to rounding.

practice is becoming increasingly widespread; the proportion of institutions reporting they were at an advanced stage of their evaluation has doubled since 2013-14, increasing from 7 per cent to 14 per cent in 2014-15. This is mirrored by a reduction in the proportion of institutions reporting that they were at the early stages of evaluating their activities.

22. We encourage all institutions to actively evaluate their widening participation programmes, with the ultimate aim of evaluation being embedded in practice. We will continue to work with institutions over the coming year to support the continued development of their evaluation, with the expectation that the proportion of institutions at the early stages of implementing their approach to evaluation will continue to decrease, and the proportion of those with active and embedded evaluation will increase.

### HEIs report a more advanced and embedded approach to evaluation than FECs

23. The approaches to evaluation of activity varied considerably between HEIs and FECs in 2014-15, with HEIs reporting a more advanced and embedded approach to evaluation. A large proportion (63 per cent) of FECs reported that they were at the early stages of implementing their evaluation activity, compared with 20 per cent of HEIs. Over a third of FECs (35 per cent) reported actively evaluating their activity compared with 80 per cent of HEIs (Figure 1).

24. Discussions with some smaller institutions have highlighted that they may encounter particular challenges with regards to evaluation of activities, including lack of staffing resource and lack of specialist evaluation expertise. We will continue to work with these institutions to better understand the challenges they face, and provide support on how they may continue to develop their evaluation work in the future.

### Case study: Moulton College

Moulton College wanted to identify the most influential factors that delivered a significant increase in progression from first to second year in 2014-15 for its BSc (Hons) programmes. The methodology was based on analysis of progression data and student feedback. The evaluation found that students benefited from intensified academic and pastoral support from the mid-point of their first year, which supported them in maintaining their focus on study and assessment towards the end of the year. The college intends to evaluate the longer term impact on progression rates as the scheme is extended and improved.

### Case study: Higher Education Progression Partnership – Heads Up

Sheffield Hallam University and The University of Sheffield, through the Higher Education Progression Partnership (HEPP), recently completed a longitudinal evaluation of their collaborative outreach scheme: Heads Up. This was a two year programme aimed at increasing the aspirations of students from disadvantaged backgrounds from Year 9 to Year 11. The universities wanted to establish the extent to which intensive, longer term outreach work impacts upon the aspiration and post-16 progression of such students.

The evaluation suggested some positive change to behaviour in participants, but there was some difficulty determining how much of this behaviour could be attributed to the scheme, and how much was related to existing knowledge and ambition to attend university. In addition, the cost per student was high and meant the scheme could not be scaled up.

Wanting to allocate resource as effectively as possible, and reach a larger number of students who would likely benefit from outreach, the findings of the evaluation have been used to support a decision to discontinue the Heads Up programme. The institutions have diverted the funds to a scheme they believe could reach up to six times as many disadvantaged students.

### HEIs with low proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds were the most likely to actively evaluate activity

25. There were differences in approaches to evaluation of activities and programmes between HEIs with low, medium and high proportions of students from under-represented backgrounds.

26. A large majority (86 per cent) of institutions with low proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds actively evaluated their widening participation activities in 2014-15. For institutions with medium and high proportions, this figure drops to 83 per cent and 69 per cent, respectively.

27. It is encouraging to see that institutions with low proportions of students from under-represented groups are evaluating their activities and using these findings to inform future work. We would encourage these institutions to continue to assess the impact of their activities and adapt their programmes accordingly. We would also encourage any institutions with evaluation of activities in the early stages of development to embed evaluation in their widening participation activities. Reflective practice should support the development of new activities and refine existing programmes to ensure that work is having the greatest impact in improving access, student success and progression.

### Institutions with more developed and embedded evaluation activity generally reported more progress against their high-level outcomes targets

28. In our previous report, [OFFA publication hyperlink 2016/04](#), we provided analysis on institutions' self-assessments of their targets. We were able to calculate average institutional progress by looking at the proportions of milestones and targets where positive progress has been made. While this analysis does not account for the wide differences between institutions' targets in terms of types, numbers and ambition, it can provide an indication of how HEIs and FECs performed against the targets they set themselves in their access agreements. Targets are divided into high-level outcomes targets and activity-based targets; see Tables 5 and 6 in Annex B of the first monitoring report for further details.

### Institutional self assessments

We asked institutions to self-assess their performance against each of their targets using the following descriptions:

- Overall target met/exceeded (5)
- Yearly milestones met – on course to reach overall target (4)
- Progress made – but less than anticipated (3)
- No progress made against baseline data to date (2)
- Long-term trend shows negative performance (1).

We then provided a 'score' (in brackets above) for performance against each target. An institution's final 'score' is the average of their combined targets. This is not a league table, as institutions' targets vary significantly, but it does give an indication of each institution's own assessment of their performance.

29. For the purposes of this report, we compared HEIs that, on average, had reported progress against their high-level outcomes targets (an average self-assessment of three or higher) with those that, on average, had not made progress against their high-level outcomes targets (with an average self-assessment of lower than three), to see if there was a correlation with institutions that actively evaluate their programmes. Due to the difference in evaluation levels between HEIs and FECs, we have only conducted this analysis on HEIs.

30. Institutions with more developed and embedded evaluation activity generally reported more progress against their high-level outcomes targets. Thirty HEIs that had made positive progress against their targets also reported that their approach to evaluation was at an advanced stage and embedded into practice, compared with just one HEI that had on average not made positive progress against its targets.

### Evaluating how participants feel about their experience was the preferred type of evaluation for both HEIs and FECs

31. In their monitoring returns, institutions submitted what they considered their best example of evaluation in 2014-15. These case studies give us a significant body of data on how institutions were evaluating their activities and programmes in 2014-15.

#### Kirkpatrick's evaluation model

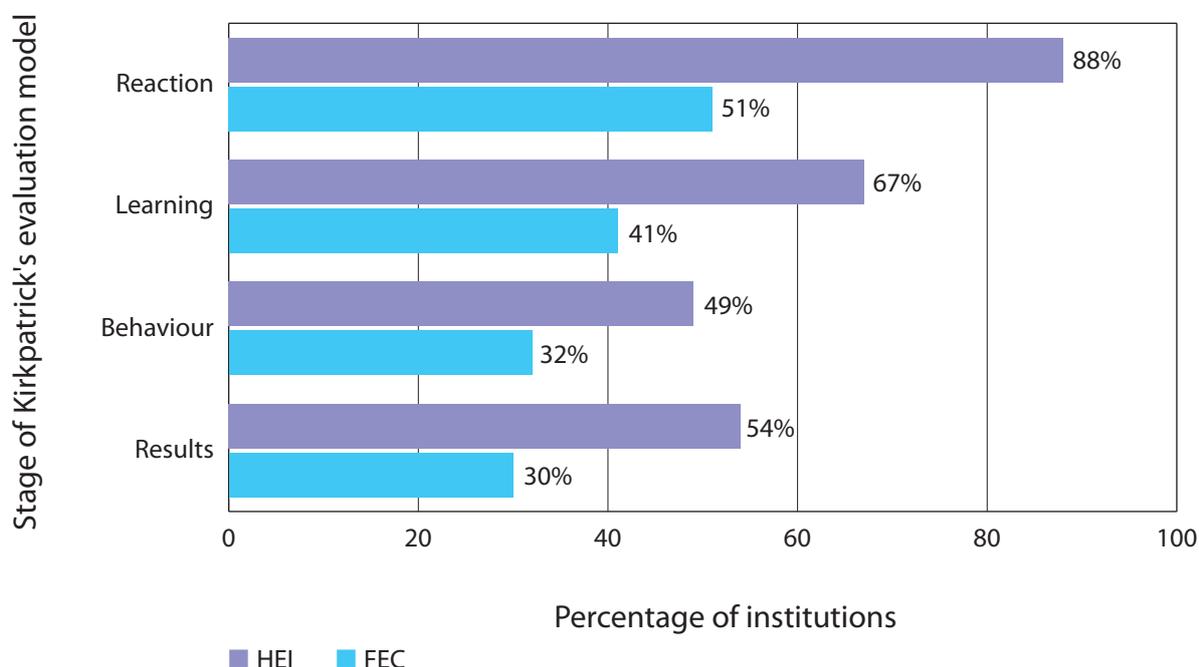
We understand that given the diversity of the sector, the activities carried out and complexities of different student characteristics, institutions will use different evaluation methodologies and theories of change. In order to gain a clearer picture of the levels of impact institutions are identifying from their evaluation work, we use Kirkpatrick's evaluation model as a framework. For more information on Kirkpatrick's model, and other useful information on evaluation, we recommend the series of toolkits available from the Higher Education Academy, developed by The Progression Trust and HEFCE.

32. Institutions were asked to describe their approach to evaluation in terms of Kirkpatrick's evaluation model:

- Reaction: how participants feel about their experience
- Learning: the increase in participants' knowledge and skills
- Behaviour: how far learning is applied and results in personal change
- Results: how far the programme impacts on organisational or societal factors.

Evaluating how participants feel about their experience was the preferred type of evaluation for both HEIs and FECs, with 88 per cent of HEIs and 51 per cent of FECs reporting moderate or heavy use of participants' reactions (Figure 2). We are pleased that around half of HEIs reported moderate or heavy analysis of participants' behaviour (49 per cent) and the results (54 per cent). A lower proportion of FECs reported use of this form of this analysis, with just

**Figure 2** Percentage of institutions reporting moderate or heavy use of the four stages of Kirkpatrick's evaluation model in their evaluation of activities



under a third of FECs reporting moderate or heavy analysis of participants' behaviour (32 per cent) and the results (30 per cent).

33. We will be encouraging other institutions to consider how the use of Kirkpatrick's evaluation model can inform and further develop their approaches and would urge all institutions to make use of internal expertise, such as academics and researchers, to develop and improve their evaluation methodologies.

34. While we recognise the importance of evaluation of participants' feedback, we would encourage institutions to continue to develop their evaluation of the impact of their activities, including an increased focus on how their programmes influence participants' behaviour and societal factors, for example participation and retention rates. Balancing qualitative data with quantitative data supports institutions in their understanding of the effectiveness of their widening participation activity.

### Evaluation of widening participation activities – institutional examples

35. Institutions reported the use of a wide range of research methods; the most popular method was feedback from participants, including questionnaires or surveys, focus groups and interviews.

36. Around three in every 10 institutions (29 per cent) discussed using student data in their evaluation. The choice of data was very wide ranging and included: analysis of attendance data; offers, conversions and enrolments; and GCSE attainment (for certain long-term outreach activities).

37. We were pleased to see examples of institutions using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data to inform their work. Where institutions are currently relying principally on feedback from participants, we will encourage them to go beyond this and, where appropriate, use local and national data sets to identify whether widening participation activities are shifting the nature of participation in higher education, both within an institution and nationally.

38. We were encouraged that a large proportion of institutions indicated that their evaluation had prompted a change in practice. The majority of institutions reported that they had used the evaluation to modify existing programmes; this included expanding the programme to reach more participants, reducing the programme to more effectively target participants, and altering the structure of the programme. A small proportion of institutions used their findings in the development of new schemes, and occasional examples indicated

that the programme or activity would be withdrawn due to findings of the evaluation. We would like to see institutions using the knowledge they have gained from evaluation activities as a basis to inform changes in practice more consistently, in order to achieve greater impact.

39. Institutions reported finding their evaluation work valuable, recognising where there are still gaps in their understanding, and continuing to develop their practice in this area. A number of institutions are looking to further advance their work, for example expanding evaluation to other aspects of widening participation activity, increasing focus on a specific aspect of work and carrying out longer term evaluation projects to look at the ongoing impact of the programme or activity.

40. In our [2017-18 access agreement guidance](#) and other publications, we have asked institutions to build in evaluation of their access measures from the start so they can ensure that their activity is effective and improve understanding of what works best in their context. While summative evaluation provides valuable data in looking back at the full duration of the programme, regular monitoring and formative evaluation during the programme can help institutions develop and refine their work to ensure the greatest impact.

## Evaluation of financial support

### Overall findings

41. We strongly encourage institutions to evaluate their financial support to better understand the impact their programmes have. In our [2017-18 access agreement guidance](#), we have emphasised the importance of robust evaluation plans and of demonstrating the impact of financial support. Almost four-fifths of institutions (79 per cent) evaluated their financial support in 2014-15.

42. [OFFA research](#) carried out under the pre-2012 system of fees and student support has indicated that financial support did not have a discernible impact on students' choices of institution, or on retention rates. However, we recognise the complexity of financial support and understand that individual institutions may have evidence to support the effectiveness of their own schemes for specific groups of students.

43. We are currently working with a number of institutions and groups to undertake a research project to further understand the impact of institutional financial support. This project aims to:

- improve the evidence around the impact of financial support
- inform the approaches that universities and colleges take in their work to improve access and student success
- support institutions in improving evaluation of the impact of their financial support schemes.

In February 2016, we [published a report](#) by Sheffield Hallam University which provides an update on the project. Phase 1 of the project successfully developed and implemented a working statistical model for assessing the impact of student bursaries. The researchers will now test the model with five more institutions, and present a findings report later in 2016.

### Case study: Birkbeck College

Birkbeck College conducted a statistical analysis of the impact of financial support on student retention. It compared the retention and success rates of students in receipt of a bursary to those not in receipt of financial support, alongside a range of other variables. The college also analysed national data on the impact of financial support on access, retention and success. Its analysis found that whether a student received a bursary did not have a significant link with whether they withdrew in their first year. Based on these findings, the college decided to reduce its spend on financial support and redirect resources to student success and progression activities which have been demonstrated to have an impact on retention and progression. The college hopes to undertake further research into the impact of financial support to support it in continuing to adapt its policies in this area.

### **A fifth of institutions did not evaluate their financial support in 2014-15 – this equates to around £50 million of spend for which there was no evaluation**

44. In 2014-15, £478.2 million of access agreement expenditure was committed to financial support, accounting for 66 per cent of the total access agreement expenditure in this academic year. With such significant investment, it is essential that institutions understand the effectiveness of their financial support on access, student success and progression, and adapt programmes of spend according to evidence of effectiveness.

45. In reporting their evaluation of financial support, we asked institutions to select a statement which best described their approach during 2014-15, from one of five options:

- a. We did not evaluate our financial support over the past year.
- b. We evaluated our financial support by evaluating the reactions/opinions of participants (e.g. student survey, focus groups, interviews with those that received bursaries).
- c. We evaluated our financial support by evaluating the impact on behaviour (e.g. impact on access rates, retention rates, attainment rates).
- d. We evaluated our financial support by evaluating a combination of reactions/opinions and impact on behaviour.
- e. We evaluated our financial support in a different way.

46. In total, 21 per cent of institutions reported that they did not evaluate financial support in 2014-15; this equates to around £50 million of spend for which there was no evaluation. The amount spent on financial support at institutions that did not carry out evaluation ranged from 13 per cent to 92 per cent of total spend within their access agreement. A further 25 per cent of institutions reported that they had evaluated their financial support by evaluating the reactions/opinions of participants, without evaluating the impact on behaviour.

47. Fewer than half of institutions (45 per cent) evaluated their financial support by analysing the

impact on behaviour, such as access, retention and attainment figures. To ensure that their investment is allocated to the most effective interventions, we would strongly encourage institutions to analyse the impact of their bursary and fee waiver schemes, and alter them accordingly. Financial support arrangements should be backed up by clear and robust evaluation plans and supporting evidence that demonstrates that the investment is proportionate to the contribution they make towards widening participation.

48. The reasons provided by institutions in their choice to evaluate financial support in a different way (that is, selecting option e) were varied, and included:

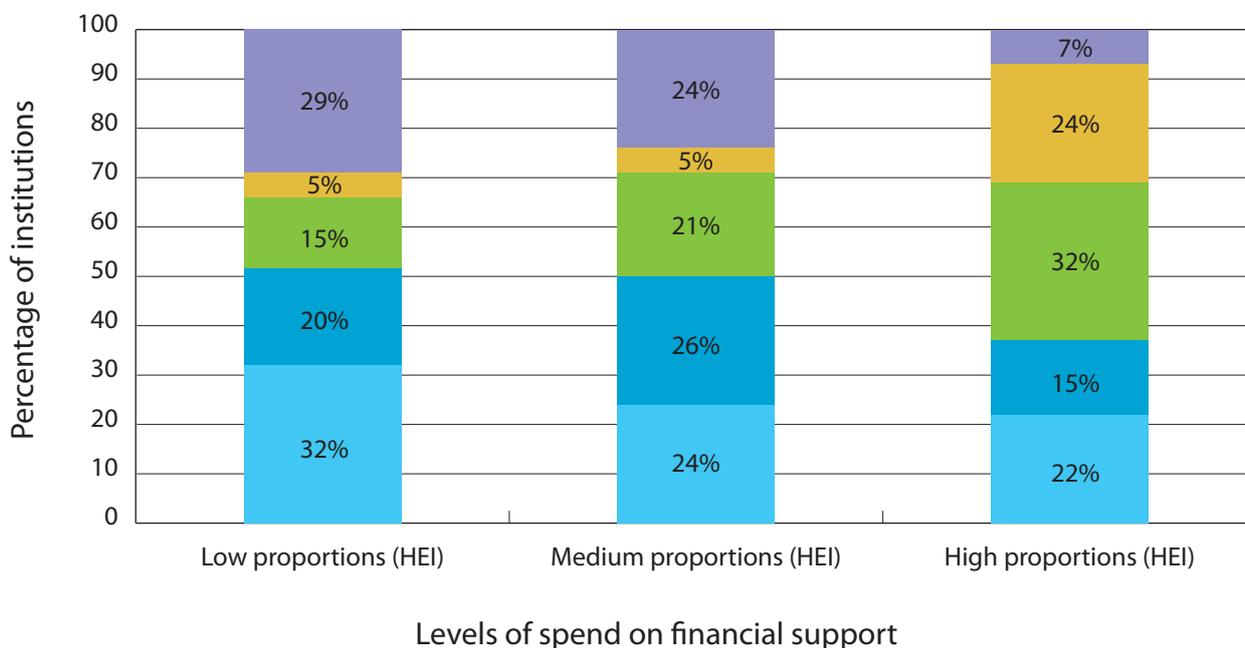
- desk research and ongoing conversations with students
- future plans that are yet to be implemented
- evaluation started but not yet completed
- informal feedback from students at small and specialist institutions
- contributing to a wider piece of research
- part of a long term, multiple stage evaluation or university-wide consultation.

### **Institutions that spend the highest levels on financial support carried out the most evaluation – but evaluation must be effective and measure impact**

49. In our analysis, we have looked at HEIs' approaches to evaluation of financial support during 2014-15 to see if they differ depending on the proportion of their access agreement spent on financial support. A large majority (93 per cent) of HEIs that spent the highest proportions on financial support carried out some form of evaluation in 2014-15 (Figure 3), compared to 71 per cent and 76 per cent of institutions with lower and medium proportions of spend, respectively.

50. It is important to ensure that evaluation is effective and measures impact. However, institutions with the highest proportions of expenditure in this area were more likely to be evaluating the reactions/opinions of participants without assessing the impact on behaviour. Almost a third (32 per cent) of HEIs with higher proportions of spend on financial

**Figure 3** Evaluation of financial support at HEIs by proportion of institutions' access agreement expenditure on financial support



- No evaluation in 2014-15
- Evaluated financial support in a different way
- Evaluated financial support by evaluating the reactions/opinions of participants
- Evaluated financial support by evaluating the impact on behaviour
- Evaluated financial support by evaluating a combination of reactions/opinions and impact on behaviour

**Note:** Please note that figures do not sum due to rounding.

support were in this category, compared with 15 per cent and 21 per cent of institutions with lower and medium proportions of spend, respectively.

51. In our latest access agreement guidance, we have asked institutions to provide evidence to explain how their investment in financial support will help to improve access, student success and/or progression of under-represented and disadvantaged groups. We will therefore want to see all institutions that offer financial support undertaking evaluation of this investment in future years.

### Evaluation of financial support – institutional examples

52. A significant number of the examples of financial support evaluation that institutions provided to us used surveys and internal data. Over two fifths of institutions reported the use of surveys, with the

#### Case study: Bath Spa University

Bath Spa University wanted to evaluate whether its targeted financial support for students from low income households and disadvantaged backgrounds had an impact on retention and success. The evaluation was carried out collaboratively and cross-departmentally, involving widening participation practitioners, finance staff, student support staff and representation from the student union. The evaluation was based on three cohorts of students who received cash awards or fee waivers from the National Scholarship Programme (NSP), and analysed this looking at demographic data, rates of withdrawal and a student questionnaire. Withdrawal rates were shown to be lower for

students in receipt of an NSP award than students who did not receive an award. Similarly, the majority of questionnaire responses indicated that students would have been unable to cover living costs without the additional financial support they received. Bath Spa used the findings from this evaluation in the design and implementation of its new bursary scheme, and has also reviewed and enhanced the methodology to create a new evaluation framework.

large majority (89 per cent) of these being targeted at current students, and 11 per cent at prospective students or offer holders. In a small number of cases, these were questions as part of a wider survey, rather than surveys with a dedicated focus on financial support. Other forms of qualitative analysis include group sessions and interviews. Where institutions used internal data, this was centred on recruitment figures, retention figures, award/outcomes and destination data.

53. However, there were a notable number of examples in which institutions discussed their findings from informal conversations with students. While we encourage good communication with students, we would like to see institutions employing more formalised and robust evaluation methods to enhance their understanding of the effectiveness of their financial support on improving widening participation in higher education.

54. We are pleased to see examples of institutions balancing qualitative data with quantitative data in their evaluation to measure impact, including external data sets (such as those collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency) to understand impact in the wider context of widening participation. This allows institutions to gain a greater understanding of the impact financial support can have on students.

55. Where institutions used data sets in their evaluation, there were a number of instances in which some positive impact on retention of students was reported, although there remains a significant proportion of institutions reporting that financial support had no impact. Institutions reported little positive impact of financial support on students'

decisions to apply or accept offers at specific institutions.

56. While for 2014-15 there were a number of institutions that did not evaluate their financial support and, in a number of instances, the evaluation work is in the development stage, we were pleased with the number of institutions reflecting on their evaluation and updating their schemes accordingly. A third of those that undertook evaluation reported that they would be redesigning their financial support scheme in response to their evaluation, with a particular focus on more effective targeting, reducing the level of financial support, changing the form of the award and improving payment systems.

57. We were encouraged by institutions' commitment to the ongoing evaluation of financial support; 28 per cent reported that their evaluation was continued or there was a need to conduct further research to fully understand the impact of their financial support. We will be interested in learning of the outcomes of this evaluation in the 2015-16 monitoring returns and through conversations with institutions.

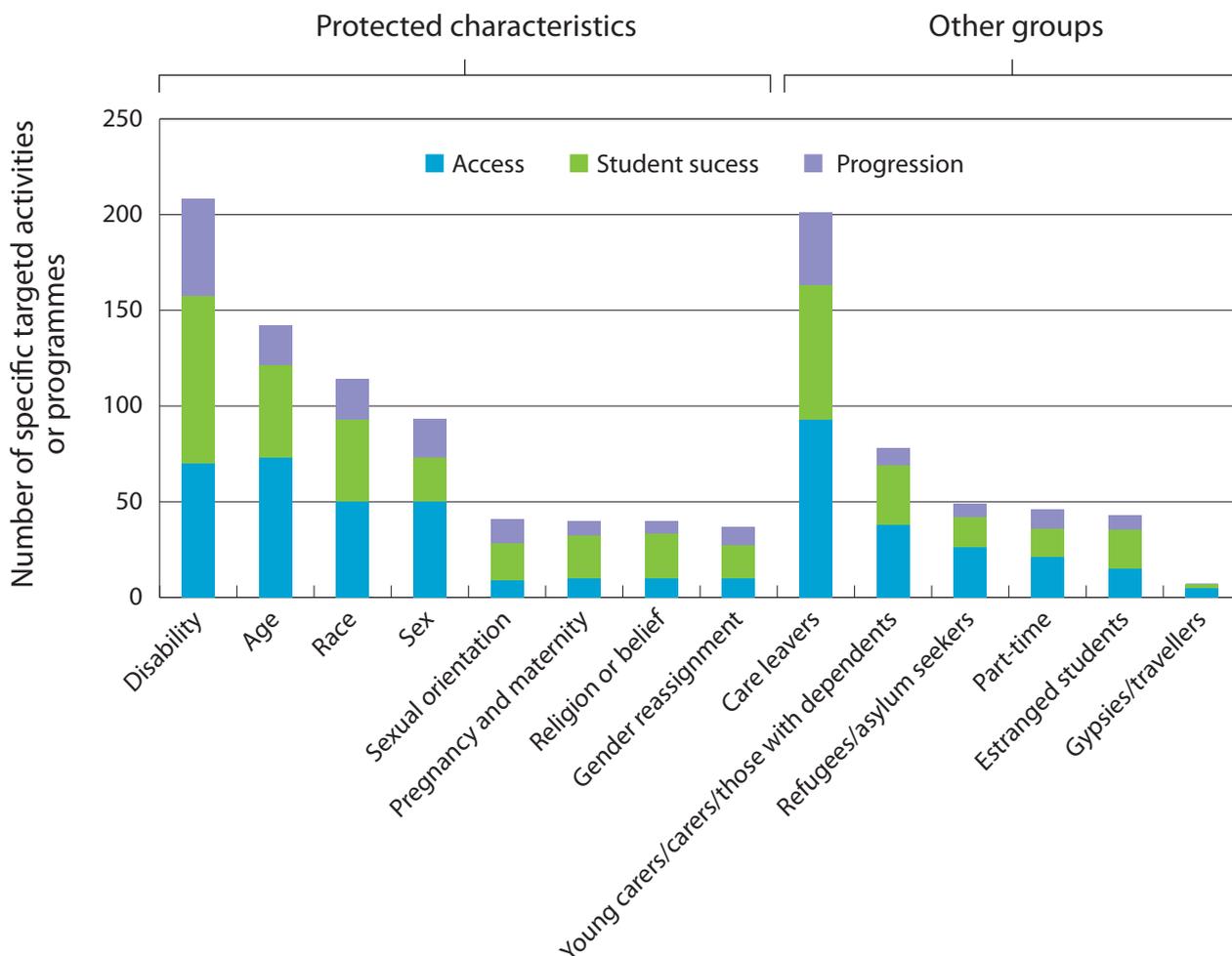
## Equality and diversity

### Overall findings

58. As part of their access agreements, institutions are required to demonstrate that they have executed their responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010. We consider it good practice for access agreements and equality and diversity work to be closely linked, although OFFA does not regulate institutions' commitment to the Act. It is important to maintain focus on this area due to the overlap between a number of equality characteristics and groups which are under-represented in higher education. We work with others in the sector, such as the [Equality Challenge Unit](#), to develop our understanding of equality and diversity in higher education and support institutions in their work.

59. The information provided in the monitoring returns supports us in our understanding of how institutions are investing in equality and diversity activity to address issues impacting on students with particular protected characteristics or from other target groups. We encourage institutions to work to understand the specific challenges these groups face,

**Figure 4** Number of specific, targeted activities or programmes aimed at students with protected characteristics or other groups, by lifecycle stage



and consider how they can best support and target these students.

60. In their monitoring returns, institutions were asked to indicate where they had specific activities and programmes targeted at students with specific protected characteristics and from other target groups. We understand that institutions may have broader programmes or embedded support for different groups which were not reported in this section. Institutions reported the most targeted activity focused on disability, care leavers and age (see Figure 4).

61. For the access stage of the student lifecycle, the most commonly targeted activities were aimed at:

- care leavers
- age

- race
- sex
- young carers/carers/those with dependents
- refugees and asylum seekers
- part-time students
- gypsies and travellers.

62. For the student success stage of the student lifecycle, the most commonly targeted activities were aimed at:

- disability
- religion or belief
- pregnancy and maternity
- estranged students

- sexual orientation
- gender reassignment.

63. For the progression stage of the student lifecycle, there were fewer targeted activities, the most common of which were aimed at disabled students and care leavers.

### **Over half of institutions reported evaluating the impact of at least some of their activities and programmes by characteristics**

64. We expect all institutions to use their own internal data to explore whether there are differences across the student lifecycle by ethnicity and other protected characteristics, and to identify how they will look to address any differences identified. We also encourage institutions to evaluate their access, student success and progression activities by protected characteristic to highlight any differences in how their work impacts on different groups of people.

65. In their monitoring returns, we asked institutions to indicate the extent to which they evaluated the impact of their activities and programmes in their access agreement by protected characteristics. Just over two fifths (41 per cent) of institutions reported that they evaluated the impact of some of their activities and programmes by characteristics, with a further 10 per cent evaluating the impact of most or all of their activities. We urge institutions to increase their focus on evaluation in this area and focus principally on the impact of their work.

#### **Case study: North East Raising Aspiration Partnership – Choices Together**

The North East Raising Aspiration Partnership (NE RAP) is a collaboration between five universities: Durham, Newcastle, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside. The universities are working together to deliver effective targeted work for identified groups of young people. Their Choices Together programme aims to introduce the concept of higher education to looked after young people in Years 10 and 11, and involves a range of events including campus visits, academic sessions, skills workshops, and

training sessions for foster carers to introduce them to the supported entry routes available at the universities involved.

The programme has been evaluated by both the project delivery team and external academics; evaluation focused on changes in attitude of the participants, both self-reported and reported by their carers. The findings were very positive, highlighting a significant increase in both knowledge and aspiration among participants, along with many carers reporting that they had now re-evaluated their role in supporting the education of young people in their carer.

These findings enabled NE RAP to open the programme up to young people from a wider range of local authorities, and also to further develop specific events to enhance the knowledge and expectations of foster carers.

#### **Case study: Leeds College of Art**

Leeds College of Art uses a systematic framework of support to detect and support students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD), disabilities or health problems. This includes bespoke pre-enrolment support and an induction buddy during enrolment for students with needs already identified. In addition, all new entrants are screened for SpLD including dyslexia and dyspraxia. Pastoral and financial support is provided to students who apply for a Disabled Students Allowance.

The college evaluates this framework of support through continuous monitoring of cohort feedback, individual student feedback and in-year surveys. These measures, taken with data from the National Student Survey and the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education survey, have demonstrated a positive impact on retention rates, good degree attainment, satisfaction levels and progression into employment for students with an identified disability or SpLD. As a result, the college is continuing to invest in this area, and in resources which will allow it to refine its evaluation.

## Institutional examples of equality and diversity activity

66. As with evaluation of activity and financial support in their monitoring, institutions were asked to provide us with the best example of their evaluation. Almost a fifth of institutions (19 per cent) included examples of their work on student success, with the vast majority of these focusing on retention activities. We were pleased with the number of examples that discussed continued and long-term support provided to students, for example pastoral support from the stage of offer acceptance, academic support throughout their studies and careers programmes to support progression to employment.

67. Where institutions focused on access to higher education, a number reported the aim of awareness and aspiration raising among groups with protected characteristics or from other target categories; these categories included Black and Minority Ethnic (BME), care leavers, gender and people with autism. In the examples provided, programmes relating to gender generally centred on areas of under-representation, for example females studying STEM subjects and males in performing arts. There were two instances in which institutions reported on multiple dimensions of disadvantage, for example BME students from state schools or mature students from low participation neighbourhoods. In our most recent [access agreement guidance](#), we have encouraged institutions to consider multiple equality characteristics in order to more effectively target access, student success and progression activities at students with the most need.

**Office for Fair Access**

Nicholson House

Lime Kiln Close

BRISTOL

BS34 8SR

tel 0117 931 7171

[www.offa.org.uk](http://www.offa.org.uk)