Outcomes report:

Variations to access and participation plans for 2023-24

Contents

Introduction

1. In February 2022, we said that we would ask all providers with an access and participation plan (APP) to submit a request for variations to their plan which responded to our new priorities (see Table 1). This allowed providers to address important national risks to equality of opportunity before their existing plans expired. The variations will take effect from 2023-24.

2. On 12 April 2022 we published guidance about how providers could do this.[1]

3. In this document we summarise the responses received, and where relevant we set out next steps.

4. In total, 90 per cent of providers with an approved access and participation plan (256 providers) submitted a variation request in response to the OfS's invitation (231 providers). This positive response from the sector across the strategic priorities shows that higher education providers with access and participation plans understand the importance of these priorities and that their plans will contribute towards addressing them.

5. We have set out our proposals for a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in English higher education in our recent consultation.[2]

6. No further steps or response are needed from providers.

Table 1: OfS priorities for variation requests to cover 2023-24 access and participation plans

Priority	
A	Accessible access and participation plans
B	Partnerships with schools to raise attainment
C	Access to higher education leads to successful participation
D	Develop more flexible and diverse provision
An underpinning increase in the volume and quality of evaluation	

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[1] See Advice on requests to vary access and participation plans to cover academic year 2023-24, at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/advice-on-requests-to-vary-access-and-participation-plans-2023-24/.

[2] See Consultation on a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in English higher education, at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-a-new-approach-to-regulating-equality-of-opportunity-in-english-higher-education/.

Background

7. In November 2021 ministers issued statutory guidance to the Office for Students (OfS) in respect of access and participation.

8. On 8 February 2022, the new Director for Fair Access and Participation (DFAP) set out his priorities for access and participation for the next four years and outlined how the OfS would work with higher education providers, students and other stakeholders to deliver them.

9. In April 2022, the OfS published guidance inviting providers to request variations to their APPs for the academic year 2023-24 to address the new national strategic priorities (see Table 1):

   - **Priority A:** Make access and participation plans more accessible in a way that prospective and current students, their parents and other stakeholders can easily understand.

   - **Priority B:** Develop, enhance and expand their partnerships with schools and other local and national organisations, to help raise the pre-16 attainment of young people from underrepresented groups across England.

   - **Priority C:** Set out how access to higher education for students from underrepresented groups leads to successful participation on high quality courses and good graduate outcomes.

   - **Priority D:** Seek to develop more diverse pathways into and through higher education through expansion of flexible Level 4 and 5 courses and degree apprenticeships.

10. Alongside this, providers were advised that 'underpinning these priorities is an expectation that providers will significantly increase the volume and quality of evaluation across their access and participation activity'.

11. Providers were asked to submit their responses by the 31 July 2022.

12. The OfS published guidance outlining how providers were expected to address the new priority areas, including additional guidance on producing a plan summary,[3] and an exemplar template. The advice explained that how providers were expected to respond to the advice would depend on their context and the existing content of their plans.

13. All providers were expected to address priority A by producing a summary of their plan that they will publish.

14. We recognised that capacity within individual providers to engage with schools in relation to priority B would differ across the sector. We therefore set higher expectations for those providers with more than 2,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) higher education student numbers, compared with smaller providers (see paragraph 21 below).

15. In total, 90 per cent of providers with an approved APP submitted a variation request in response to the OfS's request, including all providers with over 1,000 FTE students. As the variation requests were intended to be new or additional work that built on work already in an approved APP, we assessed them by looking for an expressed commitment to developing work in alignment with the national strategic priorities rather than fully developed initiatives. All

of the 231 variation requests have been approved, apart from a very small number where there is ongoing engagement at the time of publication of this report.

16. The majority of responses addressed all four national strategic priorities, with most pointing to either existing work (not previously mentioned in an APP) or an expansion of existing work.

17. The variations process demonstrated that most providers have carefully considered how they can contribute to these priorities, either independently or in collaboration with other higher education providers, Uni Connect partnerships, third sector organisations and other bodies. It is also clear that the sector was already undertaking a significant amount of work that aligns with the new national strategic priorities which it was able to commit to developing or extending.

18. The variations process has highlighted that to demonstrate meaningful impact in the national strategic priority areas, a sustained programme of development, design, delivery and evaluation will be required from providers. We will use the findings and outcomes of this exercise to inform and support the development of our guidance for future APPs.

Response to the variation request

Quantitative analysis of responses

19. Providers responded positively to the request to submit variations with 90 per cent of providers with an approved APP doing so. All providers with an FTE of greater than 1,000 students responded. 25 providers did not submit a variation, of which 12 recently had a 2022-23 plan approved. Of the remaining providers, none with greater than 500 FTEs did not make a submission. Providers that did not submit a variation request were more likely to be small and/or specialist providers.

20. All providers that responded submitted a plan summary (priority A), and over 75 per cent of respondents addressed each of the priorities. Providers with over 2,000 FTEs were more likely to respond to all priorities.

21. All approved APPs are expected to include aims and objectives to improve student outcomes for under-represented groups and have robust and credible evaluation strategies. This meant that the analysis of these two areas focused on responses from providers which had either expanded existing or developed new work in these areas.

22. Where providers responded to priority B: 'Partnerships with schools to raise attainment', 94 per cent stated that they are either already working to raise attainment in schools; expanding on this work or developing new activity. Providers were most likely to point to expansion of existing activity. For both large and small providers, a minority identified new work. Small providers were more likely to identify no raising attainment work than large providers.

23. Where providers responded to priority C: 'Access to higher education leads to successful participation', they were more likely to identify an expansion of existing provision rather than the development of new provision altogether.

24. Where providers responded to Priority D: 'Develop more flexible provision', 60 per cent stated that they were expanding or developing provision. A further 23 per cent of providers said that they already have this provision in place but have no immediate plans to develop it further.

25. Providers were made aware of our expectation that there would be a greater focus on the quality and volume of evaluation. Of providers that submitted a variation request, 37 per cent stated that they were either expanding or developing new evaluation activity. Our recent consultation on a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in English higher education includes a proposal that providers should significantly increase the volume and quality of evaluation in access and participation.

26. For 62 per cent of the submissions, we undertook further discussion with providers. This was most commonly due to issues of inconsistency between the summary of the APP and the contents of the full APP. Many providers also asked to update their existing APP plan in ways unrelated to the strategic priority areas, such as amending existing targets and strategic measures or implementing new ones.

Qualitative analysis of responses

Priority A: Summary

27. Providers were expected to produce a three-page summary of their APP, with the intention of making plans more accessible, 'in a way that prospective and current students, their parents and other stakeholders can easily understand'. This included, but was not limited to, concisely summarising each section of the approved APP, using clear and accessible language. The OfS produced a template that providers were encouraged to use, together with a fictional example.

28. All providers that responded to the variation request provided a summary. We are planning to publish these summaries on the OfS website in the same location as a provider's access and participation plan.

29. A majority of providers submitted summaries that reflected the OfS template, and which used clear and accessible language. A small minority of providers produced summaries that not only considered the accessibility of language, but also considered accommodations for people with disabilities, such as blindness and low vision by adapting text size, format and colour. Communication with providers during the variations process also suggested that some providers were considering multimedia adaptations such as audio files and videos alongside text versions: these innovative responses and suggestions foreground accessibility, and we will consider how best to encourage accessible responses in future guidance.

30. All submissions received by the OfS covered the required areas, but in a significant number of cases the OfS needed to resolve inconsistencies between some of the information contained within the summary and the information contained in the approved APP. These inconsistencies principally concerned information on fees and student funding, with providers either including information in the summary that was not in the existing APP, or including information in the summary that was different to the information contained in the approved APP.

31. Overall, the volume of summary submissions suggested that providers had understood and welcomed a document that made their APPs more accessible to students, although the amount of interaction between the OfS and individual providers to resolve issues with summaries was greater than we had expected.

32. We will use feedback from the variations exercise to inform the development of guidance for future APPs following our recent consultation. If summaries are to be adopted in future APP cycles, we will consider how best we can enable providers to produce accessible summaries in a manner that reflects the diverse needs of students, parents and their advisers while minimising regulatory burden throughout the APP cycle.

Priority B: Raising attainment in schools

33. All providers with more than 2,000 FTE higher education students were expected to submit a variation request that clearly set out how they intended to develop, enhance and expand their strategic relationships with schools in order to create and deliver raising attainment programmes for pre-16 students. Providers with fewer than 2,000 FTE higher education students were expected to carefully consider how they might contribute to raising attainment at

pre-16 in collaboration with partners such as Uni Connect, other higher education providers, third sector organisations or other bodies.

34. Of providers that responded to the variation request, over 80 per cent were already working to raise attainment in schools but stated that they would expand on this work. Including those with plans to develop new activities, 98 per cent of large (more than 2,000 FTE students) providers intend to support raising attainment in schools, with 90 per cent of smaller providers also doing the same. In total, only 6 per cent of providers stated that they do not have, nor plan to develop, work to raise attainment in schools. Of these, all but two were small providers. Overall this demonstrates that higher education providers with access and participation plans already understand the importance of this strategic priority and have the capacity and desire to address it.

35. Overall, the majority of providers that stated they would be working to raise attainment at pre-16 are doing so both in collaboration and through developing their own initiatives. Where providers are working in collaboration, 71 per cent said that they are working with their local Uni Connect partnerships. Many providers cited existing partnerships either with other providers, local schools or third sector organisations.

36. Initiatives aimed at raising attainment were wide-ranging in their approach, reaching out to a broad audience, including school pupils, teachers, parents, support staff and governors. They included, but were not limited to, academic mentoring programmes, continual professional development, and collaborations with third sector organisations. Wide-ranging methods and metrics of evaluation were cited.

37. A small number of providers said that they would be working with local schools to develop initiatives that complemented the needs of the school and students in question. This approach is to be commended, and we would expect all providers to ensure their activities to raise attainment contribute meaningfully to schools through taking a collaborative approach from development through to delivery.

Priority C: Successful outcomes

38. Providers were encouraged as part of the variation request to set how they ensure students from underrepresented groups are supported to successfully participate on courses and achieve good outcomes. 94 per cent of providers responded to this priority

39. Many providers have stated that they have considered how they can take a whole-lifecycle approach to student success, introducing programmes that support improved outcomes from pre-entry (i.e. transition courses) through to on-course support and into employment or further study. A significant proportion of providers stated that they have already introduced or are introducing the use of stronger data analytics to identify students at risk, and target and monitor the impact of interventions more effectively. Alongside interventions targeted at individual students, or groups of under-represented students, providers also identifed broader institutional changes aimed at enhancing student outcomes and experience.

Priority D: Flexible and diverse provision

40. Alongside the further development of degree apprenticeships, providers were encouraged to consider how they could develop technical routes at Levels 4 and 5 which could be offered

flexibly to students. We said that such provision should be standalone, offering high quality qualifications at those levels. Providers could also offer routes through to Level 6, full-degree programmes if students wish to progress to that level.

41. 84 per cent of providers responded to this priority. Of these, the majority stated that they have either recently introduced or are planning to introduce more flexible and diverse provision, and they are doing so through developing schemes such as:

   a. Apprenticeships (across all relevant levels).

   b. Foundation degrees.

   c. Higher national diplomas.

   d. Higher national certifications.

42. A number of respondents stated that they were developing diverse and flexible provision that sought to meet the needs of the local economy.

43. It is encouraging to see the types of course on offer diversifying, but there was much less consideration of how to improve flexibility of provision. Only a minority of providers said that they would introduce more flexible study, which might have included modular courses, micro credentials, or evening or part-time lessons.

44. A minority of providers had considered how their existing or planned provision of courses could affect equality of opportunity for under-represented groups. Examples of this include providers analysing their degree apprenticeship student cohort and seeking to understand how this is providing an attractive route into higher education for mature students, helping them achieve their mature student access targets.

Evaluation

45. Providers were expected to 'significantly increase the volume and quality of evaluation across their access and participation activity'. To that end, responses relating to evaluation varied from providers that set out new work, to those that chose to embed plans for improving evaluation within the priority areas, and those that did not address this.

46. Overall, the variations exercise showed providers' ambition to produce increasingly robust evidence that meets the OfS's expectations, and that they are using evaluation of existing programmes to inform the development of their new initiatives.

47. A significant number of providers also stated that they are working with other providers to evaluate and/or disseminate evaluation findings. Across the sector it is evident that there is a desire to share best practice through existing channels, such as TASO.

Conclusion

48. The variations exercise has enabled providers to address national strategic priorities quickly. The positive response shows that higher education providers with access and participation plans understand the importance of our strategic priorities and consider that, at least to some extent, their plans will help to address them. In future, we aim to build more

agility into plans so that they can address long-term strategic issues and respond to the current environment and student needs. We have said more about this in our recent consultation on a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in English higher education.