

Widening participation in higher education

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Widening participation in higher education

Introduction

What is widening participation?

1. The Government set out its commitment to widen participation in higher education,¹ and to achieve fair access, in its 2003 document *Widening participation in higher education*.²

- Widening participation means helping more people from under-represented groups, particularly low socio-economic groups, to participate successfully in higher education.
- Fair access means increasing opportunities for people from under-represented groups to attend higher education institutions³ and courses which offer the highest financial returns.

2. This booklet explains that gradual progress has been made in broadening the socio-economic make-up of the student population, but progress has been too slow and may be levelling off. It sets out some thoughts about how to widen participation further, and invites comments.

Why does widening participation matter?

3. There are powerful reasons to widen participation – both economic reasons and reasons of social justice.
4. Forecasts by the Institute for Employment Research show that, of the 12 million jobs expected to become vacant between 2004 and 2014, 6 million will be in occupations most likely to employ graduates. The arguments for growth in higher level skills are strongly supported by the Leitch Review of Skills in the UK. The Interim Report⁴ concludes that, even if the current ambitious Government targets for raising skills levels across the education system are met, the UK will continue to compare poorly with global competitors, with productivity trailing behind. It shows that a strategy of investing in high level skills, and increasing the proportion of adults with a degree, has the potential to deliver a high economic benefit. To achieve the growth in people with high level skills which will make this country world class, we will need to reach out to groups which have not traditionally benefited from higher education.
5. Higher education also offers significant benefits to individuals. Over their working life, we believe that the average graduate earns comfortably over £100,000 more than a similar individual with just A levels. Graduates experience better health, are less likely to commit crime and are more likely to engage in civil society.
6. Yet, despite 50 years of growth in the higher education system, these opportunities are still not available equally to all. Recent research⁵ shows that, during the 1990s, children whose parental incomes were in the highest 20 per cent were around five

¹ In this document higher education means all education at Level 4 and above in the National Qualifications Framework, for example Higher National Diplomas/Certificates, other diplomas of higher education, Foundation Degrees, ordinary degrees, honours degrees and certain professional qualifications.

² ISBN 1 84185 968 0.

³ Universities and higher education colleges.

⁴ Lord Leitch, *Skills in the UK: The Long Term Challenge; Interim Report* (2005).

⁵ Blanden, J. and Machin, S., 'Educational inequality and the expansion of UK higher education', *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, Special Issue on the Economics of Education, 51 (2) pp.230-249 (2004).

times more likely to acquire a degree by the age of 23 than children whose parental incomes were in the lowest 20 per cent.

7. Social divisions on this scale are unjust, and represent a waste of potential talent. Our vision is to narrow social class gaps in educational achievement, to create a society with equality of economic and social opportunity. This means ensuring that every child has equal life chances, no matter what their background.

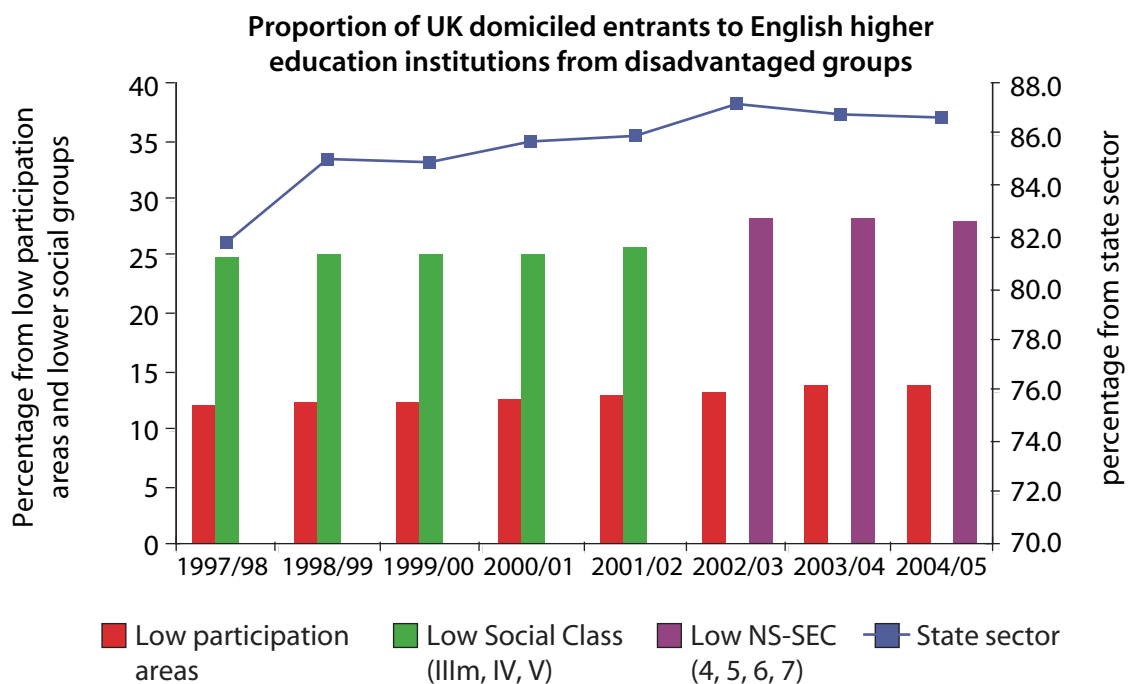
What progress is being made?

8. Since the late 1990s there have been some improvements in the social mix of higher education students. The graph at figure 1 illustrates this. However, progress has been made at too slow a rate and there are signs of levelling off in the past couple of years. It is clear that we must do more to reach out and extend opportunity to the talented and best from all backgrounds.

9. Our previous document *Widening participation in higher education* explained the actions being taken to widen participation under four main headings.

- a. It set out what was being done to improve educational **attainment** as the best long term route to widen participation.
- b. It provided information on policies and programmes to reach out to non-traditional entrants to higher education, to raise their **aspirations**, to encourage **applications**, and to help people to apply to institutions which best met their needs.
- c. It explained that there would be an independent review of higher education **admissions** to ensure that applicants were considered fairly on merit.

Figure 1: Recent trends in the higher education widening participation indicators⁶



⁶ Performance indicators are published annually by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) at www.hesa.ac.uk. The widening participation indicators measure the percentages of higher education students from state schools, lower socio-economic groups, and low participation areas. It is important to remember that these are measures of the proportion of students that fall into these various categories, and NOT measures of the proportion of all young people in these categories who are students.

10. The rest of this booklet sets out what we have achieved since we published *Widening participation in higher education*, under the headings used in that document. It also poses some challenges for the future.

Section One: Raising Educational Attainment

11. Raising educational achievement is the best long term way to widen participation in higher education. Around nine out of ten students who get two or more A levels go on to higher education. When A level point scores have been taken into account, the proportions going to higher education are similar whatever their social class or background. But only around a quarter of 18 to 19 year olds from lower socio-economic groups achieve 2 or more A levels, compared to around a half of those from higher socio-economic groups.⁷

12. The social class achievement gap opens up when a child is very young and widens as he or she moves through the education system. By age 7, children of low socio-economic status who were well *above* average on developmental scores at 22 months have been overtaken by children of high economic status who were well *below* average. In school, pupils in receipt of Free School Meals⁸ tend to progress more slowly than other pupils at every stage. It is vital that we take action to close achievement gaps from an early age.

What progress is being made in narrowing the social class achievement gap?

13. There is much of which we can be proud. The 2006 Key Stage 2⁹ results are the highest primary results ever. At Key Stage 1¹⁰ standards have remained high, in spite of a slight drop in results this year. At GCSE, the proportion of 15 year olds getting

5 or more A*-C grades is up from 52.9% in 2003 to 58.1% (provisional) this year.

14. As standards have risen, more pupils from all socio-economic groups are reaching higher thresholds of achievement. The performance gap between the most and least deprived schools has fallen on most indicators. For example, the proportion of pupils in the most deprived schools obtaining 5 or more A*-C GCSEs (and equivalents) has increased by 23 percentage points between 1999 and 2005 compared to an increase of 4 percentage points in the least deprived, thus narrowing the attainment gap by 19 percentage points.¹¹

15. These are major achievements – but there is a lot more still to do. If we look at the outcomes for individual pupils rather than schools, the social class gaps in achievement at both GCSE and Level 3¹² remain wide (figures 2 and 3). There is some evidence of recent narrowing although this should be treated with caution. We need to do more to ensure that our policies focus on the needs of individual pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, and to enable and encourage more young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to stay in learning and achieve after the age of 16.

What are we doing to narrow the social class achievement gap?

16. Parents' involvement in and support for their child's learning is critical.

- Our recent White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*¹³ set out a range of measures to

⁷ The equivalent rates of attainment for vocational Level 3 qualifications are about 1 in 10 for both higher and lower social classes. Roughly half of young people with vocational Level 3 qualifications progress to higher education. Source: Youth Cohort Study. The survey is conducted in Spring 2004 at age 18/19 (i.e. the third year since leaving compulsory education).

⁸ Free School Meals are available to children whose parents or carers receive Income Support (IS); Income-Based Job Seekers Allowance (IBJSA); support under part 6 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; the Guarantee element of State Pension Credit; or Child Tax Credit, provided they are not entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual income, as assessed by the Inland Revenue, that does not exceed £14,155 for 2006/07.

⁹ Key Stage 2 is a period of learning for children aged 7 – 11 years old.

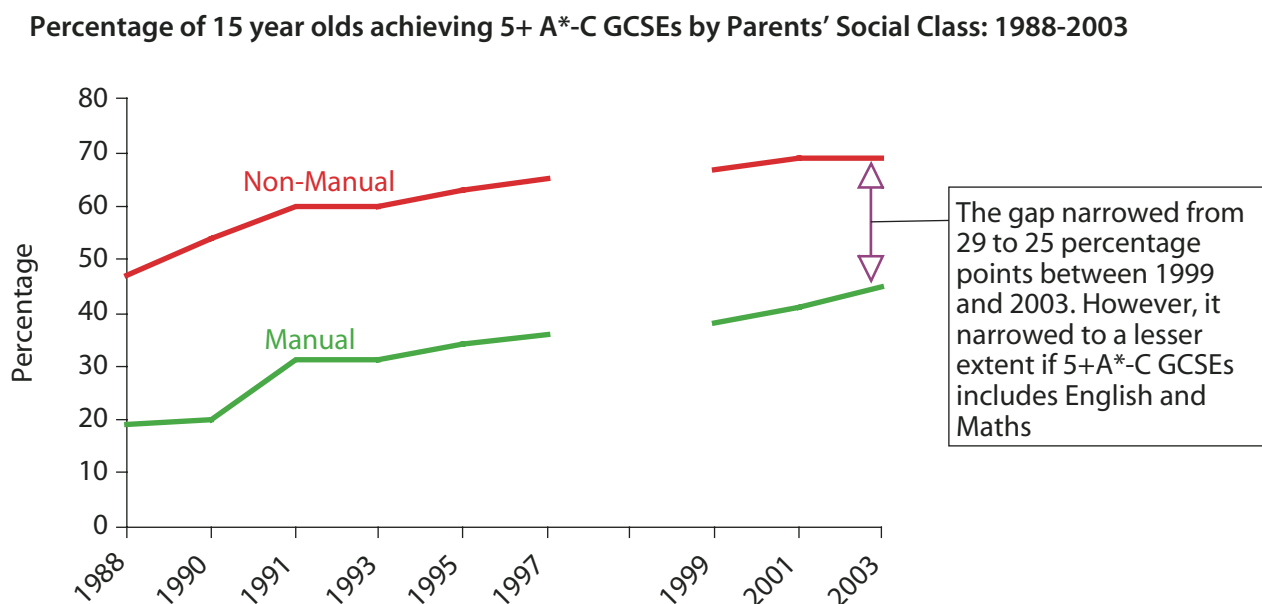
¹⁰ Key Stage 1 is a period of learning for children aged 5 – 7 years old.

¹¹ See DfES Statistics of Education: Trends in Attainment Gaps: 2005, National Statistics Bulletin (2006).

¹² Level 3 is part of the National Vocational Qualifications Framework. It includes A levels, Level 3 National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), Vocational A levels and Vocational Certificates of Education (VCE).

¹³ Cm 6677.

Figure 2: There is evidence of a persistent social class attainment gap at GCSE, though it has narrowed since 1999¹⁴



help parents – particularly the most disadvantaged – to support their children’s learning. It announced plans to strengthen guidance to schools on Home School Agreements, to ensure schools fully engage with parents. The agreements set out what parents can expect from their child’s school and also parents’ responsibilities in supporting the school.

- We are establishing Parent Support Advisers in 600 schools, to work with parents of more disadvantaged children. And we are funding new ‘Transition information sessions’ to help parents when their child is starting primary school, or moving on to secondary school. These sessions aim to increase parents’ confidence and willingness to engage with their child’s school and learning.

17. Good quality **childcare and early years education** have been shown to benefit children from lower socio-economic groups, with a lasting effect into early schooling. They can help to prevent gaps from widening.

- New Sure Start Children’s Centres, bringing high quality integrated early years services for all children under five and their families, are being rolled out. 1,035 such centres have been established so far. The network of Children’s Centres will expand to 3,500 nationwide by 2010 – one for every community, but with a more intensive range of services available in the most disadvantaged areas.

¹⁴ Source: DfES Internal analysis, Youth Cohort Study cohorts 4-12, sweep 1. Note: Discontinuity exists between 1997 and 1999 because of a change in the classification of social class from SEG to NS-SEC. Manual and non manual categories have been constructed by grouping more detailed breakdown of social class groups. The ‘other’ group has been excluded from the analysis.

Figure 3: Percentage attaining Level 3 by age 18/19 by socio-economic group/classification 1994 to 2004^{15, 16, 17}

England and Wales		Year					
		1994	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006
SEG ¹⁸	Non Manual (%)	49	52	52			
	Manual (%)	28	28	28			
	Gap (percentage points)	21	24	24			
NS-SEC ¹⁹	Professional (%)				57	59	59
	Non-professional (%)				31	32	37
	Gap (percentage points)				26	28 ²⁰	22

- In 2004, for the first time every three and four year old was guaranteed a free part-time early education place. By 2010 all three and four year olds will be entitled to 15 hours per week.

18. All pupils need a good, early foundation in **reading, writing and numeracy** to enable them to learn and prevent them falling behind their peers.

- To build on success to date and continue our drive to raise standards in mathematics and literacy for all children, the Primary National Strategy has renewed its two key guidance documents – the frameworks for teaching mathematics and literacy – and developed the overarching Primary Framework for Literacy and Mathematics which was made available to schools in October 2006.
- Following an independent review,²¹ we will revise the statutory national curriculum so that phonics is the prime approach used in teaching

children to read. Systematic phonic work is the best route to becoming a skilled reader for the majority of children.

19. We are transforming **primary and secondary schools** to raise standards and tackle underperformance. We want all schools to be strong and self-confident with a distinct ethos, working with parents and their local communities to deliver excellent and diverse education that meets the needs of every child in every school in the country. Socio-economic deprivation is no excuse for poor school performance.

- We are improving choice of, and diversity in, schools. There are currently 46 Academies which are challenging the culture of educational under-achievement, predominantly in deprived areas. Over 75% of all secondary schools are now designated as specialist schools. And the new Trust schools²² will draw upon the expertise of external partners to raise standards.

¹⁵ Survey carried out during the Spring of the third academic year since completing compulsory education.

¹⁶ Source: Youth Cohort Study cohorts 6, 8, 9, 10 and 11. Changes from any one set of figures to the next should be treated with caution.

¹⁷ Between 2000 and 2002 the classification system was changed. The professional/non-professional categories under NS-SEC (National Statistics Socio-economic Classification) are not directly analogous to the non-manual/manual categories of SEG (Socio-economic Group).

¹⁸ Socio-economic Group: Manual and non-manual categories have been constructed by grouping more detailed breakdowns. The 'other/miscellaneous' group has been excluded.

¹⁹ National Statistics Socio-economic Classification. Professional and non-professional categories have been constructed by grouping more detailed breakdowns. The 'other' group has been excluded.

²⁰ Owing to independent rounding, figures do not sum the total.

²¹ DfES, Rose Review of the Teaching of Early Reading (2006.)

²² Trust schools forge a long term relationship with external partners to raise standards.

- We are committing £900 million to fund personalised learning²³ between 2005-06 and 2007-08 including support for small group and one-to-one tuition for those who have fallen behind.
 - We have asked the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to carry out a review of the Key Stage 3²⁴ curriculum. This will define the essential elements of National Curriculum subjects to which all young people are entitled and, in so doing, create space in the school timetable. It will give schools flexibility to personalise their teaching by offering catch-up provision for those who are struggling in English and mathematics and to provide stretching opportunities for all children including those who have particular gifts and talents. The new curriculum will become statutory in schools from 2008.
 - The Office for Standards in Education reports that behaviour is satisfactory or better in over 98% of primary and secondary schools.²⁵ Nonetheless, poor behaviour in the classroom makes it harder for children to learn. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 includes powers for schools to set and implement policies for positive behaviour by pupils so schools can create a good climate for learning.
- 20.** If we are to widen participation in higher education, it is also vital to encourage more young people to **stay on and achieve in post-16 learning:**
- In September 2004 we launched Education Maintenance Allowances²⁶ nationally to help more young people from low income families stay in post-16 full-time education. In 2006, Education Maintenance Allowance was extended to young people on some work-based learning programmes²⁷. Evidence from the evaluation²⁸ shows a positive and significant effect on post-16 participation among eligible young people in pilot areas. It was particularly effective in raising participation amongst young people from lower socio-economic groups;²⁹ For example, the proportion of socio-economic groups 4 and 5 in education increased by 9.1 percentage points. From 2003/04 to 2004/05, the national participation rate for 16 year olds in full-time education increased by 4.5 percentage points, exceeding expectations.
 - Our White Paper on 14-19 Education and Skills³⁰ set out plans to introduce new Diplomas. These will provide an aspirational and stretching programme of learning for all young people, appealing to the most capable as well as those who are currently not well engaged with school. Diplomas will help more young people achieve

²³ Personalised learning is about providing a more tailored education for every child, which understands their needs, provides relevant opportunities and supports them to flourish and progress in their learning, and offers the opportunity for small group and one-to-one teaching where appropriate.

²⁴ Key Stage 3 is a period of learning for children aged 11–14.

²⁵ The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools 2004/05.

²⁶ Students receive a weekly payment of £10, £20 or £30 per week depending on their household income to help with day to day costs such as travel, books and equipment for their course. An Education Maintenance Allowance is payable, subject to certain criteria, if the young person is participating on a course of at least ten weeks' duration at up to Level 3; and is undertaking at least 12 hours of guided learning provided by a recognised provider. As at 23 October 2006, 389,656 learners had received or were in receipt of Education Maintenance Allowance.

²⁷ Eligibility was extended to trainees on Learning and Skills Council funded Entry to Employment programmes and Programme Led Apprentices from April 2006.

²⁸ Middleton et al. Evaluation of Education Maintenance Allowance Pilots: Young People Aged 16-19 Years: Final Report of the Quantitative Evaluation: DfES Research Report 678.

²⁹ Socio-economic groups are: Group 1: Professional and Managers. Group 2: Other non-manual workers. Group 3: Skilled Manual workers. Group 4: Semi- and unskilled manual workers. Group 5: Not in work.

³⁰ Cm 6476.

at Level 2,³¹ and will encourage more young people to stay in education after age 16 and achieve Level 3. There will be an entitlement from 2013 for everyone aged 14-19 to take one of fourteen Diplomas. We are developing ways to further engage higher education institutions with these reforms so that young people obtaining Diplomas have good opportunities for progression to higher education. The first five Diplomas³² will be piloted from September 2008.

- Considerable reform and improvement has taken place in further education in the past few years. The proportion of further education students who achieve their qualifications rose from 59 per cent in 2000/01 to 75 per cent in 2004/05. More specifically, the percentage of 16-18 year old A level learners achieving 2 or more A levels rose 6.8 percentage points from 83.6 per cent in 2002/03 to 90.4 per cent in 2004/05.

21. We are also improving opportunities for **adults** who have not yet achieved Level 3, to provide second chance routes into higher education:

- We have already announced our intention to introduce a new entitlement to free tuition for 19 to 25 year olds studying for a first full Level 3 qualification. This will be available from 2007/08.
- 'Access to higher education' courses prepare mature students who have few, if any, qualifications and equip them to study successfully in higher education. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is taking forward a range of proposals to modernise Access courses.

³¹ Level 2 is part of the National Qualifications Framework. It includes GCSEs at grades A*-C, Level 2 Diplomas and Level 2 NVQs

³² The five Diplomas will cover Construction and the Built Environment, Creative and Media, Engineering, Society Health and Development, and Information Technology.

Section Two: Raising Aspirations

22. Raising educational achievement is the main driver for widening participation. However, aspirations are also important. Recent research suggests that non-educational factors such as pupils' aspirations account for about 25% of the difference in the likelihood of high and low socio-economic groups staying on to do A levels, the traditional entry route to higher education. The size of this effect increases to as much as 50% if we also consider the difference aspirations make to pupils' achievement at GCSE.³³

Reaching out further

23. Most higher education institutions have a well-developed programme of activities to raise the aspirations of pupils in schools and colleges. Activities vary considerably but often include summer schools, mentoring schemes and campus visits.

Summer Schools Programme in the East of England

Summer Schools are available to pupils in Years 10, 11 and 12.³⁴ They aim to increase pupils' understanding of the range of subjects and courses on offer in higher education. Pupils experience student life first hand by meeting current students and staff and by participating in group work, subject taster sessions, careers activities and a variety of social events. Both residential and non-residential Summer Schools are offered, ranging from 2 – 5 days.

Provision is a mix of generic and subject-specific courses. In 2005, the generic programme at the University of East Anglia for Year 12 students involved living on a budget; choosing a course; careers; and how to take notes in a lecture.

Participants in a 'Murder Mystery' Summer School at Anglia Ruskin University solved a crime using a range of subjects from forensics through to law and journalism.

Aimhigher

24. Aimhigher is a national programme working most intensively in disadvantaged areas. The programme brings together universities, colleges and schools in partnerships to raise the attainment levels of young people, their aspirations towards higher education and improve progression for learners undertaking vocational courses. Activities such as class visits to university, mentoring of young people by undergraduates, Summer Schools and masterclasses help young people to gain a first hand account of university life and to see that higher education is an achievable and realistic goal. Local activities are complemented by a national Roadshow, which gives clear information about the benefits of higher education and student finance. It is staffed with the help of recently qualified graduates. In 2005, we announced that the programme would be extended until at least 2008.

25. Aimhigher is designed to achieve results in the medium to long term, but evidence suggests that it is already starting to make a difference. Research finds that young people who take part in Aimhigher activities are more likely to feel positive about higher education. One young person commented that:

'now, when I think about me going to university, I can imagine it, and it seems real because I have been there and seen it.'

26. Evaluation³⁵ showed that, even after just 18 months:

³³ Goldthorpe et al, Primary and Secondary Effects in Class Differentials in Educational Attainment: The Transition to A level Courses in England and Wales (2005). This study only considered transition to A levels and did not look at transition to, for example, vocational courses.

³⁴ Pupils who are in Years 10 and 11 are usually between the ages of 14 and 16. They are now in Key Stage 4 and, at the end of this stage, they will normally sit national examinations, often GCSEs. Pupils in Year 12 are aged 16-17.

³⁵ M. Morris and S. Golden, Evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge – Interim Report: DfES Research Report 648; and C. Emerson et al, Evaluation of Excellence Challenge – The Early Impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on Pre-16 Outcomes: An Economic Evaluation: DfES Research Report 652. All data given here is after controlling for other factors.

- The proportion of pupils in year 11 saying that they intended to participate in higher education was 3.9 percentage points higher in schools with Aimhigher than in similar schools without.
- On average pupils in Aimhigher schools achieved 0.3 more grades at GCSE A*-C than those in other, similar, schools.
- Aimhigher led to a 4.6 percentage points increase in Maths attainment at Key Stage 3.

Science Olympics

The annual Aimhigher Science Olympics at the University of Liverpool aims to get more pupils interested in science. It involves around two hundred 13 to 14 year olds. Many participants are from families with no previous background of higher education. Simon Lee of the University of Liverpool, one of the organisers, said:

'The Olympics are a way of making science more palatable to school children. When in Year 10, most of them have not yet made any major decisions about further education, so we still have a chance to spark up interest.'

Schools are invited to send a group of four pupils along with a member of staff. The teams participate in a series of fun, competitive, games in order to win prizes, while developing their skills. In 2006, activities included creating an electromagnet that can attract paperclips; building a spaghetti tower that can support an egg; and constructing a bridge out of wooden blocks.

Of 2005's winners from Bootle High School in Sefton, none of whom had family experience of higher education, three pupils are going on to a sixth form college to study science A levels and two will study mechanics at an institute of higher learning.

27. In a recent survey,³⁶ a third of higher education institutions claimed that Aimhigher had increased applications to their institutions, though half said it was still too early to say. A third of further education colleges also claimed that Aimhigher had increased applications to their institutions, suggesting that Aimhigher is having an impact on aspirations and progression to further education as well as higher education.

28. It is clear that Aimhigher is doing much good work. However, a recent review by the Higher Education Funding Council for England³⁷ suggests that it could make an even greater impact by targeting activities more effectively, particularly on those from low socio-economic groups, and by providing coherent programmes of activities for individuals which build up over time. We will be taking immediate steps to implement these recommendations.

Gifted and Talented Education

29. As well as the work done by Aimhigher to raise aspirations and attainment, we shall be supporting the development of ten partnerships of schools, higher education institutions and other providers. They will work with gifted and talented young people aged 11-19 who are members of the National Academy of Gifted and Talented Youth,³⁸ especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The partnerships will provide a range of outreach activities such as Summer Schools. This forms part of our wider strategy to help gifted and talented young people strive for entry to universities with the most demanding entry qualifications.

³⁶ EKOS Consulting, Aimhigher Area Studies: Interim Report (2006).

³⁷ HEFCE, Widening Participation: A review (2006).

³⁸ The National Academy of Gifted and Talented Youth provides access to learning opportunities and support for the top 5% by ability of 11-19 year-olds in England.

Communicating the benefits of higher education

30. An important part of our strategy is to promote the benefits of higher education. We will increase the communications activity aimed at young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, so that they have a better understanding of the costs and benefits of higher education.

Aimhigher in Tees Valley: Lads into Languages

Year 8 boys from eight schools across Redcar and Cleveland accepted an invitation to attend the first ever 'Lads into Languages' conference held at Eston City Learning Centre in June 2006. The event provided the pupils with an opportunity to improve their language skills through a variety of workshops in their taught languages, as well as new ones including Russian, Japanese, Shona and Italian.

Eighty students participated in the event which opened with an interactive voting quiz and an acrobatic presentation from local gymnasts. They demonstrated how learning a language makes a vital difference in some occupations and how it can open up many new career opportunities. The students also heard from sixth-form students currently studying languages, and attended employment-related workshops delivered by the Army and local businesses.

Supporting Young People

31. To develop their aspirations, young people first need to build their self-esteem. Engaging in new activities can be a way to achieve this. One of the key challenges in our *Youth Matters* Green Paper³⁹ was to improve the provision of activities for young people,

particularly those who are disadvantaged. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 places new responsibilities on local authorities to secure access to 'positive activities', and the new Youth Opportunity and Youth Capital Funds (with a combined budget of £115m over 2006-08) will give young people more influence over local provision and facilities.

32. We want all young people to have access to good quality information, advice and guidance to help them make better career and life choices. To achieve this, we will set clear minimum expectations of the type and quality of information, advice and guidance that each young person and their parents should receive. Information, advice and guidance will be an integral part of each young person's learning and personal development. Parents will be better supported in the help and advice they give their teenagers. And we have established new pathfinders to provide swift and targeted support for young people facing serious challenges, who are most at risk of a downward spiral of anti-social behaviour, crime and drug-taking.

Looked After Children

33. Only 11% of young people in care attained five GCSEs at grades A*-C in 2005, compared with 56% of all children. The Green Paper *Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care*⁴⁰ makes a range of proposals to help young people in care achieve better at school, raise their aspirations and help the transition to adult life. For example, we plan to pilot allowing young people to continue to live with foster carers up to the age of 21 and are introducing a £2,000 national bursary for young people in care going to university.

³⁹ Cm6629.

⁴⁰ Cm6932.

Section Three: Improving Applications and Admissions

34. This chapter is about applying for higher education and the process of admission. Even when they have similar qualifications, people from lower socio-economic groups are slightly less likely to apply for higher education; and they are less likely to apply to those institutions and courses with the most demanding entry qualifications (see figure 4). It is important, therefore, to take steps to encourage applications to institutions of all types.

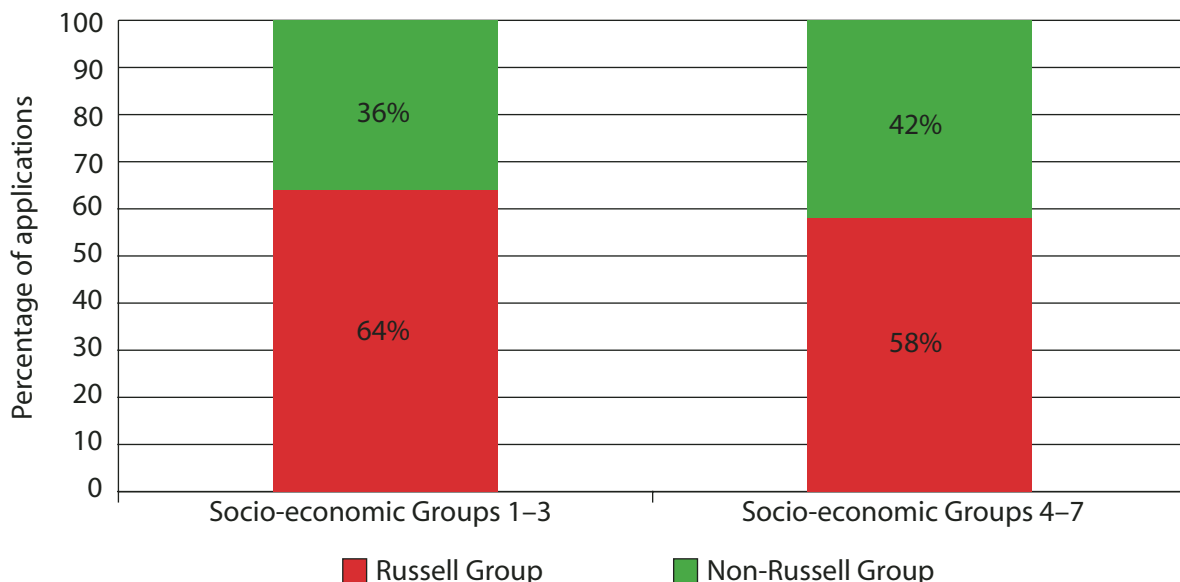
35. The way in which universities and colleges handle admissions is also relevant, to ensure fairness for everyone. The evidence suggests that admissions to higher education are generally fair,⁴¹ although there may be scope to make further improvements.

Financial support for students

36. From 2006/07, universities and colleges are able to ask students to make a higher contribution to their education, up to a maximum of £3,000 per year.⁴² On *Widening participation in higher education*, we recognised the risk that concerns about affordability might deter some students from disadvantaged backgrounds from applying to higher education. We set out plans to reform student financial support and create a better, fairer, system in which access is broadened, not narrowed. Those proposals were subsequently extended so that:

- From 1st September 2006 around half of all full-time students qualify for all or part of the new maintenance grant of £2,700 per year. Those who receive the full grant also get a bursary

Figure 4: Applications through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) from those with 3 grade As at A level, 2005 entry.⁴³



⁴¹ See, for example, Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice, para 3.1 (2004).

⁴² For full-time undergraduates: Part-time fees are not regulated.

⁴³ This chart shows that the proportion of young people from higher socio-economic groups (groups 1-3) with 3 grade As at A level applying to Russell Group institutions is higher than the proportion from lower socio-economic groups with the same A level grades. The Russell Group is an association of 19 major research-intensive universities in the United Kingdom.

from their higher education institution of at least £300 and typically £1,000.⁴⁴

- No one has to pay a contribution to their higher education up front. All students now have the opportunity to defer their fees, and repay them through the tax system after graduation.
- Students will not be charged a real rate of interest on any contribution they decide to defer – the amount will only be uprated to take account of inflation.
- The amount students can borrow from Government to meet their living costs ('maintenance loans') has been increased significantly to reflect what they need for their essential expenditure.⁴⁵
- The income threshold at which students start to repay their loans was raised from £10,000 to £15,000 in April 2005.
- Repayments will be affordable. For example, a student earning £18,000 per year upon graduation will only be required to repay £5.19 per week.

37. The new package of financial support for full-time students represents an excellent deal. Those from poorer households will get significantly more support from the state.

Support for students studying part-time

38. A new package of statutory support for part-time students was introduced in academic year 2004/05. Part-time students on low incomes, studying at an intensity of at least 50% of a full-time course, may apply for grants for tuition fees and help

with course costs. In 2006/07 this package of support will be the most generous ever provided in England. The maximum grant for fees⁴⁶ has increased by 27% to £1,125. There is a grant of up to £250 towards course costs. And more money from the Access to Learning Fund is now available for part-time students – up from £3m in 2005/06 to £12m in 2006/07. This means that for 2006/07 discretionary support towards the cost of fees for part-time students is available for the first time.

The Office for Fair Access

39. To further reduce the risk that students might be put off from applying to higher education due to concerns about affordability, in 2004 we established the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and appointed Sir Martin Harris as its Director. All higher education institutions that wish to charge fees in excess of the standard fee (£1,200 in 2006/07 rising to £1,225 in 2007/08) must enter into an "access agreement" with OFFA. Access agreements cover up to a 5 year period and set out:

- The level of the fees the institution wishes to charge.
- The bursaries and other financial help that will be available to students from poorer backgrounds. All institutions charging the full fee must offer bursaries of at least £300⁴⁷ a year to students who qualify for the full statutory higher education grant.
- Plans for additional outreach activities.
- Milestones for assessing progress in widening participation.

⁴⁴ A minimum of £305 from 2007/08. Bursaries are available where the institution charges more than the standard fee – see paragraph 39.

⁴⁵ The median of essential expenditure indicated by the Student Income and Expenditure Survey 2002/03.

⁴⁶ For students studying at an intensity of 75% or more of a full-time course.

⁴⁷ £305 from 2007/08.

For 2006/07:

- Access agreements have been approved for 124 higher education institutions and 40 further education colleges.
- 94% of higher education institutions are charging the full £3,000 higher level fee.
- Investment in financial support for students from low income and other under-represented groups is estimated to reach nearly £350m by 2010, which is over 25% of the additional income raised by higher level fees.
- In 2006/07, investment in outreach is estimated to be over £37m.

41. Institutions receive the widening participation allocation as part of their block grant from HEFCE. There are no restrictions on how it is spent. However, there is evidence that it has influenced the development of institutional strategies to widen participation and improve retention.

One higher education institution used part of its allocation to fund a researcher to investigate the factors which may have been influencing the relatively high drop-out rates amongst students in one of its departments. The researcher was able to identify particular issues with mature students and establish the most likely reasons for withdrawal. Based on the evidence collected during the research, the department put a number of measures in place and reduced the non-continuation rate from 24% in 2002-03 to 10.2% in 2003-04. The post has since become an integral part of the faculty's student support service.

The widening participation allocation

40. The widening participation allocation is distributed to higher education institutions by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). It recognises the additional costs involved in encouraging applications by students from non-traditional backgrounds, and the extra support such students may need during their course. The allocation is shared out between institutions according to a formula which, amongst other things, takes account of the number of their students who have come from low participation areas, and the number with lower levels of prior attainment.⁴⁸

The changing nature of HE provision

42. The higher education curriculum, qualifications and modes of delivery are continuing to develop, and play a role in shaping the number and pattern of applications. The number of undergraduate students who are studying part-time has grown rapidly over the past ten years, from 204,000 in 1994/95 to 281,000 in 2004/05.⁴⁹ Fourteen per cent of higher education is taught in further education colleges,

Figure 5: HEFCE's widening participation allocation in 2006-07

Funding element (£ million)	Full time	Part time	Total
Funding for widening access	38.7	53.6	92.3
Funding for improving retention	184.2	55.7	239.9
Funding for students with disabilities			12.9
Total			345.1

⁴⁸ See, for example, HEFCE, Undergraduate non-completion in higher education in England: (1997). The available evidence shows there is a higher risk of students who are older, or who have lower levels of prior attainment, leaving higher education before they complete their programme of study. There is no direct link between social class and drop-out, although students from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to have lower levels of prior attainment.

⁴⁹ This figure is for UK-domiciled students studying in English higher and further education institutions.

which have a good record in reaching and supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds. New forms of provision are encouraging applications from people who would not have considered the traditional model of a three-year, full-time honours degree.

Ultraversity, the distance learning subsidiary of Anglia Ruskin University, runs a B.A. (Hons) in Learning, Technology and Research that is delivered entirely through the internet. The students can use their day-to-day work as the focus for their studies.

Says Professor Stephen Heppell, who inspired the idea:

"The principles behind the degree are that all students are in jobs, content is negotiated between student and facilitator, and assignments can be submitted in various online formats such as Powerpoint, digital video and audio to create an e-portfolio."

Charity Administrator Vivien O'Dunne is one of the students at Ultraversity. She says:

"Initially I enrolled onto the course just to prove to myself that I could get a degree. A mum at 17 and now a mum of two teenagers the conventional education route for me wasn't an option. When I started, I had an average job with average prospects: nearly into year three now and my profile has risen substantially. I've had a promotion and the management team really value my opinions and work, so much so that they are already asking if I will continue my study at Masters level to undertake research projects in the workplace."

43. For this country to meet the challenges of the global economy, higher education needs to reach out into the workplace to offer opportunities to people in work. Foundation Degrees are innovative degrees designed and delivered in partnerships with employers, to equip individuals with relevant knowledge and skills to meet the needs of business. They are a relatively new higher education qualification. Nearly 47,000 students are studying a range of Foundation Degrees, and we expect that 50,000 students will be enrolled by the end of 2006. They are available in both full-time and flexible modes of study to suit employers and learners. There are around 1,800 courses and a further 900 are planned in a wide range of subject areas.

44. We also recognise the need for more flexible approaches to help meet the higher level skills needs of employers and employees. We are testing a higher education element to the Train to Gain initiative in three regions⁵⁰ from September 2006. Employees with Level 3 qualifications will be able to study part time towards a Level 4 or 5 certificate, diploma, Foundation Degree or other higher education qualification over a period of 1-3 years. Employers will be expected to contribute substantially to the costs. We are exploring further how these Pathfinder projects might create demand for higher education from those in groups that are under-represented currently through, for example, working with specific sectors or companies.

⁵⁰ Train to Gain is a new service to help businesses get the training they need to succeed. It offers employers impartial advice and easy access to quality training, matching training needs with training providers and ensuring that training is delivered to meet employers needs. The three regions are the North East, North West and South West.

In 2002, Sarah was a 36 year old working mother with four children who wanted more out of life. Says Sarah:

"I did not have the resources to move on... and then I found a leaflet for the Public Service (Foundation) Degree in a Cambridgeshire Library. Plucking up all my courage I boldly took the step of phoning the course tutor... I explained that I have an overwhelming need to challenge my mind and improve my employment prospects."

Sarah was interviewed later on, and accepted. She completed the Foundation Degree in two years, stayed on to complete a third year to obtain her B.A. Honours in Public Service, and is now about to start an M.A.

"Not bad for a mum of four whose previous call to fame had been working part time in a fish and chip shop."

Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Learning and Skills Council to investigate the need to improve the supply of higher education in some areas of the country, where access is currently limited.

Over the past couple of years, Leeds Metropolitan University has built up a substantial network of partner colleges around the UK. The network comprises formal partnerships with fourteen further education institutions, who are now able to offer qualifications awarded by the University. Member colleges are developing ways to help students on vocational courses progress from Levels 2 and 3 through to Foundation or Higher Degrees.⁵² The network enables students to study in a more flexible way with significant control over the pace and location of study. Over 30,000 students are linked to the University through the network.

45. We will also encourage Sector Skills Councils,⁵¹ higher education institutions and employers to explore new "Earn to Learn" models whereby employees' higher level skills needs can be met through combinations of earning and learning.

46. We are supporting the wider development of more flexible higher education provision, to offer more choice and meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. The Higher Education Funding Council for England is funding a variety of pathfinder projects from September 2006 to explore different ways of delivery, for example by varying the pace, intensity and mode of study (e.g. accelerated two year honours degrees). We shall also ask the

47. Clearer and more consistent use of credit across further and higher education could help many more learners to progress into and through higher education, facilitate transfer between programmes and enable learners to re-start their learning more easily after a break.⁵³ The higher education sector will soon publish its proposals for a national framework for the use of credit by English higher education institutions.

48. The new 'Lifelong Learning Networks' are partnerships of higher education institutions and further education colleges. They will help students on vocational and work-based courses to progress to higher education more easily. The networks will ensure that there are no 'gaps' in the curriculum for such learners, and make clear the local higher

⁵¹ Sector Skills Councils are strategic employer-led bodies, established to drive forward competitiveness and productivity in industry and business sectors across the UK. In October 2006 there were 25 Sector Skills Councils.

⁵² Levels 2 and 3 are part of the National Qualifications Framework. Level 2 includes GCSEs at Grades A*-C, Level 2 Diplomas and Level 2 NVQs; Level 3 includes A levels and Level 3 NVQs.

⁵³ Credit is a way to measure learners' achievement consistently. It is a term used to summarise and describe an amount of learning. It can help to identify how much learning was involved and how hard it was.

education opportunities to which they can expect to progress. Currently, 27 Lifelong Learning Networks are being funded by the Higher Education and Funding Council for England.

Admissions

49. It is important to ensure that the higher education admissions process is transparent and equitable, to achieve fairness to everyone. Admission must be on merit, based on a student's achievements and potential. Once someone has applied for a place in higher education, the process of admissions is generally fair,⁵⁴ and the developments set out in this chapter should help to improve it further.

50. Whilst universities and colleges are responsible for their own admissions policies and procedures, the Government has a legitimate interest in ensuring that policies are clear and command the prospective support of students, parents and teachers. In *Widening participation in higher education*, we announced an independent review of admissions, to develop clear principles for good practice. The review was led by Professor Steven Schwartz, formerly Vice-Chancellor of Brunel University.

51. The Steering Group published its final report in September 2004.⁵⁵ The report included a set of 5 principles that form the basis of fair admissions. Alongside those principles, the Group also made a number of recommendations for the education sector and for Government.

52. The underpinning principles of fair admissions are:

Principle 1	A fair admissions system should be transparent.
Principle 2	A fair admissions system should enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and their potential.
Principle 3	A fair admissions system should strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid.
Principle 4	A fair admissions system should seek to minimise barriers for applicants.
Principle 5	A fair admissions system should be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes.

53. Since 2004, we have acted upon two recommendations in the report. The report stated that the current applications system *'relying on predicted grades... cannot be fair. It does not meet the Steering Group's recommended principles of fair admissions, since it is based on data which are not reliable, is not transparent for applicants or institutions, and may present barriers to applicants who lack self-confidence.'*

54. The report therefore asked the Secretary of State to achieve a system of post-qualification applications (PQA) where students apply for a higher education place after they get their exam results. Following widespread consultation, the Government announced a number of reforms to be implemented by 2008/09, with a view to moving to a system of

⁵⁴ Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations and good practice (2004).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

post-qualification applications by 2012. By 2008/09 these reforms will mean that:

- Higher education institutions publish clear and comparable information on the qualities and qualifications sought in candidates.
- More and better information will be available to higher education institutions when taking their admissions decisions.
- Students will submit five initial applications rather than six, and those who do not receive an initial offer from their applications will be able to continue applying in search of a place. This will have the added benefit that fewer students will need to enter Clearing.⁵⁶
- Final decisions on applications will only be made after the closing date, thereby creating a more equal chance for all students.
- Students will get better feedback on their applications.
- Students who achieved higher grades than expected will be able to re-apply and seek an alternative place.

55. The reforms are now being taken forward by a 'Delivery Partnership', established under the leadership of Universities UK and GuildHE.⁵⁷

56. The report also expressed concern about the proliferation of university admissions tests, noting that multiple tests could present a barrier to applicants from under-represented groups. It recommended work to evaluate the use of existing tests, and to consider the scope to develop a single national test of aptitude and potential. We are currently supporting a major, long-term trial of the SAT®.⁵⁸ Together with other research, this will help to inform the debate about aptitude tests in higher education.

57. The Steering Group also asked the Secretary of State for Education and Skills to commission a review of the admissions system after three years to assess progress in implementing its recommendations. The Department is currently considering how best to undertake that review.

⁵⁶ 'Clearing' is the service offered by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service that helps people without a place to find a suitable higher education course.

⁵⁷ Universities UK promotes and supports the work of all UK universities. GuildHE is the representative body for the UK's colleges of higher education. Its membership also includes specialist institutions and some universities.

⁵⁸ The SAT is a scholastic aptitude test of US origin. The trial is designed to show whether the SAT can help to identify students with the potential to benefit from higher education whose ability is not adequately reflected in A level results because of their disadvantaged circumstances.

Section 4: Measuring Performance

58. At present there is a lack of robust data which enables us to compare the make-up of the student population with the general population, and so measure progress in widening participation reliably.

59. The “Higher Education Performance Indicators” are the main source of published information. Amongst other things, these measure the proportion of students from state schools and colleges, lower socio-economic groups and areas with low rates of participation in higher education. The main purpose of the indicators is to enable institutions to assess their own performance against a ‘benchmark’ which estimates what might be expected of institutions in similar circumstances.

60. For each of the performance indicators, a national figure is available. A key drawback of the indicators, however, is that they only tell us the proportions of higher education students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They cannot tell us about the percentages of people from disadvantaged groups who are students.

61. The Performance Indicators Steering Group, which oversees their publication, launched a consultation on the future development of the indicators in August 2006. Comments were sought by 10 November. The results will be published in spring 2007.

62. Following a report by Professor Brian Ramsden⁵⁹ last year, we have been undertaking research on how we might better measure progress in widening participation. We are exploring the feasibility of a new measure of young people’s participation rates in full time higher education by socio-economic group. We will publish the results of this research early in 2007.

⁵⁹ Professor Brian Ramsden, Participation in Higher Education: A Study to Determine Whether the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate Should Be Disaggregated, DfES Research Report 676.

Conclusions

63. Widening participation in higher education is a social and economic necessity. It is a waste of talent if people with the ability to benefit from higher education are not given the opportunity to do so. Concerted action from the early years, throughout compulsory education and into adult life, is needed to unlock the full potential of our population.

64. Much is being done already, as this document sets out. We are confident that this action will produce results. But the scale of the challenge is considerable.

Through this document, we have announced that we will take the following action.

- Develop ways to further engage higher education institutions with our 14-19 education reforms so that young people obtaining Diplomas have good opportunities for progression to higher education (paragraph 20).
- Take immediate steps to improve the targeting of the Aimhigher programme, to maximise the impact on low socio-economic groups (paragraph 28).
- Support the development of ten partnerships of schools, higher education institutions and other providers. The partnerships will work with gifted and talented young people aged 11-19 from disadvantaged backgrounds who are members of the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth and help them to strive for entry to universities with the most demanding entry requirements (paragraph 29).
- Increase the communications activity aimed at young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, so that they have a better understanding of the costs and benefits of higher education (paragraph 30).

- Explore further how the three Train to Gain Pathfinder projects might encourage take-up of higher education from people in under-represented groups by engaging employers in key sectors (paragraph 44).
- Encourage Sector Skills Councils, higher education institutions and employers to explore new “Earn to Learn” models whereby employees’ higher level skills needs can be met through combinations of earning and learning (paragraph 45).
- Ask the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Learning and Skills Council to investigate the need to improve the supply of higher education in some areas of the country, where access is currently limited (paragraph 46).

65. And we want to go further still. As we made clear in the recent update to our Five Year Strategy,⁶⁰ closing the gap in educational attainment will be a priority as we further develop our policies for children, young people and adults. This is not only with a view to widening participation in higher education, but to help achieve a socially mobile society with equality of economic and social opportunity.

66. We would welcome your views on this document, and on what more we should be doing.

- In higher education to attract more people from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- To help individual pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds within schools and colleges.
- To help those disadvantaged backgrounds to raise their aspirations and understand that higher education is achievable and worthwhile.

⁶⁰ DfES, Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners: Maintaining the Excellent Progress (2006).

Please send your comments and suggestions to:

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Please quote the ref: 04271-2006BKT-EN

PPFM.D16.6820/1106/23

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Education and Skills

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