

The Excellence Challenge

The Government's proposals for
widening the participation of young
people in Higher Education.

Executive Summary

On 14 September 2000 the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, announced that an extra £150 million¹ is to be spent over the next three years to improve access to Higher Education (HE) for bright young students from poorer backgrounds whilst maintaining entry standards. This document sets out the Government's plans in detail as the basis for consultation.

The Excellence Challenge has four main strands. It:

- brings universities and other HE Institutions (HEIs) and Further Education Institutions (FEIs) into the Excellence in Cities (EIC) initiative to provide additional support for young people who have the ability to enter HE;
- increases funding to HEIs to reach out to more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This will enable them to recruit more admissions staff, send ambassadors to schools and colleges and to run more open days and summer schools for young people and their teachers;
- provides clearer information and better marketing of the route to HE for young people, with a particular focus on reaching families and communities who do not have a tradition of entering HE, raising expectations of students and teachers alike; and
- pilots new forms of extra financial help for bright young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Government plans to provide £33m for the Excellence Challenge in 2001–02; £56m in 2002–03; and £62m in 2003–04.

¹ £20 million of this £150 million was announced in July 2000.

The Context for the Government's Proposals

In his speech at Greenwich in February 2000 the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, said that as we expand access, and participation in HE becomes the norm rather than the exception, so the HE system will increasingly underpin social justice. The document "Modernising Higher Education: Facing the Global Challenge" of 15 February 2000 gives details of the Government's views on access to HE which provide the background to the proposals set out in this document.

These proposals to improve access to HE are a further contribution to the broader thrust of Government policy in terms of the importance of HE for economic competitiveness and productivity, social cohesion, equality of opportunity, personal fulfillment and the development of scholarship and world-class teaching and learning.

This document contains the Government's proposals for addressing the under-representation of certain groups in HE. It proposes 4 strands of activity and provides outline details of each as the basis for consultation.

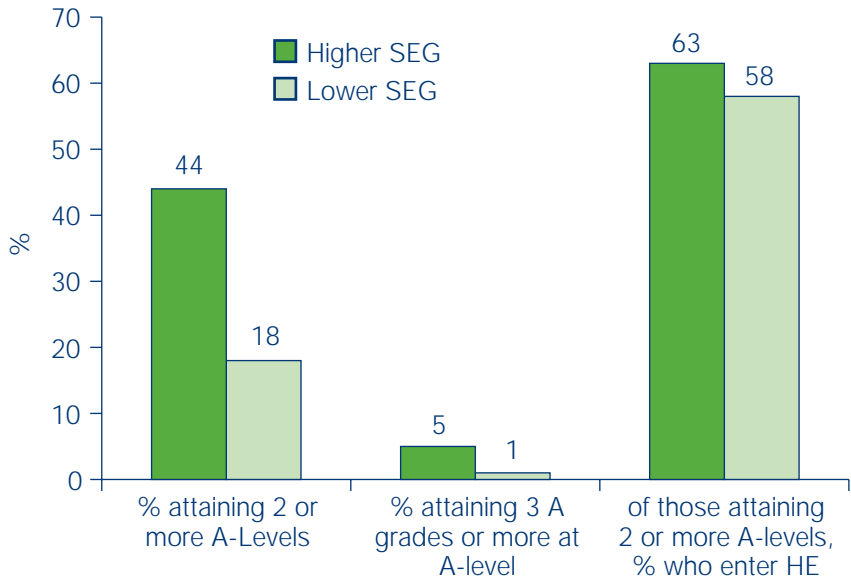
A key purpose is to improve links between universities, colleges and schools so that they understand each other better. Previous misconceptions were twofold in that some teachers misunderstood the requirements of universities or the potential of their best students, and some universities assumed that pupils from inner city comprehensives would not make the grade. These attitudes are changing on both sides, and the Excellence Challenge package

is an opportunity to foster further change. Expectations are rising, aspirations are being met and, with the success of the standards agenda in schools and colleges, the potential is there for an increased demand for HE.

The Government's aim is that, by 2010, 50% of young people should have the opportunity of benefiting from HE by the time they are 30. If this is to happen, it is critical that more of our young people who come from families with no HE in their backgrounds are able to enter universities and other HEIs, not necessarily straight from school, but some time in their twenties, if that suits them better.

At present, only 28% of entrants to HE are from disadvantaged backgrounds (*social classes III-manual, IV and V*), a figure which has changed little during the 1990s. Only one in six of all young people from disadvantaged backgrounds enter HE compared with approaching half of those in the middle and upper groups. As Chart 1 illustrates, this is because those from better-off backgrounds have higher rates of attainment at A level, and are slightly more likely to enter HE than their similarly qualified counterparts.

Chart 1: A-Level achievement and rates of entry to HE of 18 year olds by SEG⁽¹⁾

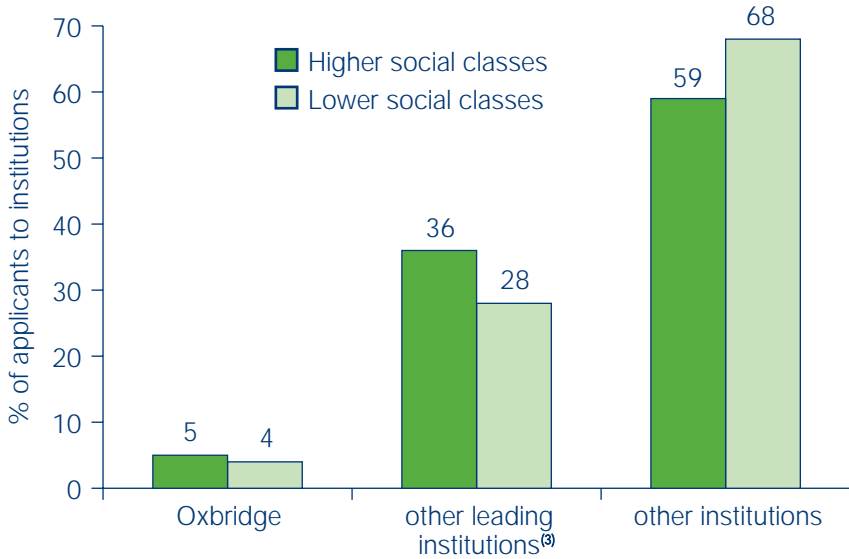


⁽¹⁾ Higher SEG = Groups I, II, III non manual; lower SEG = Groups III manual, IV, V

Source: Youth Cohort Study – Cohort 8, Sweep 2 (18 year old cohort who took their A levels in 1997)

There is also a problem around access to courses at those HEIs with the most demanding entry requirements. As Chart 2 illustrates, high achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to apply to the leading universities than similarly qualified students from better-off families.

Chart 2: Institutions applied to by top applicants⁽¹⁾ to full-time HE by social class⁽²⁾



⁽¹⁾ Applicants through UCAS (full-time first degree, HND and DipHE courses) with 26 or more A-level points

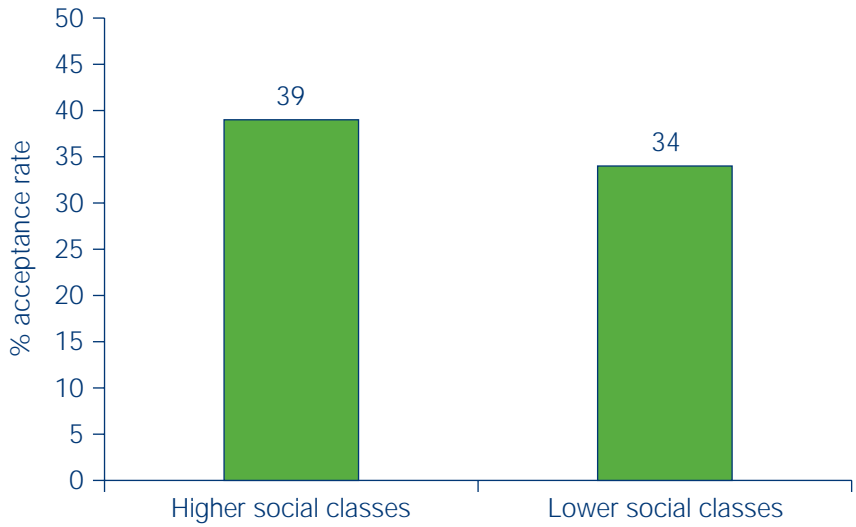
⁽²⁾ Higher social class = Groups I, II, III non-manual; lower social class = Groups III manual, IV, V

⁽³⁾ As defined by the Sutton Trust from newspaper league tables

Source: UCAS

In addition, as Chart 3 shows, those who do apply to Oxbridge with very good A-levels are less likely to be accepted if they are from less well-off families. This is further illustrated by the fact that 65% of those with 3 As at A-level are state-educated but only 52% of Oxbridge entrants are state-educated.

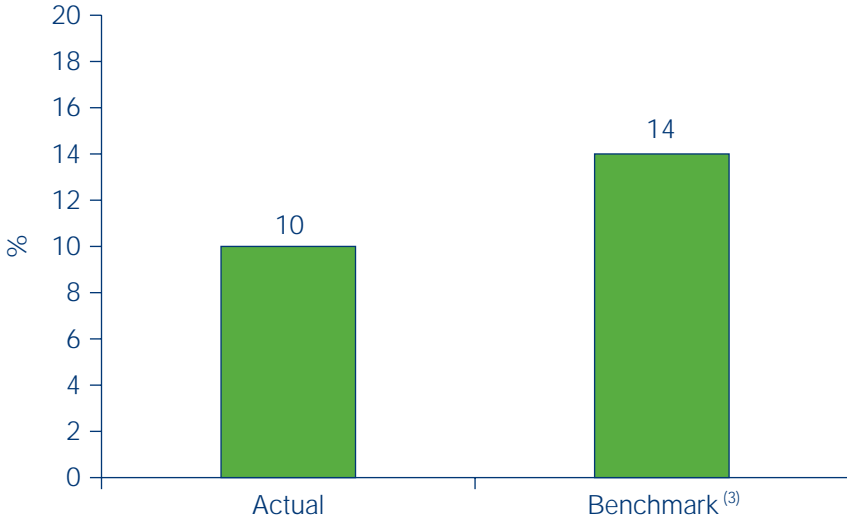
Chart 3: Acceptance rates of top applicants⁽¹⁾ to Oxbridge by social class 1999



⁽¹⁾ Applicants through UCAS (full-time first degree, HND and DipHE courses) with 26 or more A-level points

Source: UCAS

Chart 4: Percentage of entrants to leading 5 universities⁽¹⁾ in 1997/98 from lower social classes⁽²⁾



⁽¹⁾ Oxford, Imperial College London, Cambridge, London School of Economics, University College London

Source: The Sutton Trust.

⁽²⁾ Groups III manual, IV, V

⁽³⁾ Expected value allowing for subject mix and entry qualifications

Source: HEFCE Performance Indicators 1999

We are working together with the Sutton Trust and have asked Peter Lampl to act as an adviser to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on substantially improving entry to high demand universities. The Government recognizes many universities as being high demand and high quality, with some having world-class status. We are endeavouring both to underpin the work being undertaken by the Sutton Trust and the university sector on access to those institutions with an imbalance in their intake, and to support the

broader thrust of raising aspiration and therefore entry to HE in general.

The HEFCE publishes annual benchmarks for widening participation. These show the proportion of young entrants from state versus independent school, socio-economic group and HE participation in the entrants' neighbourhood. The benchmarks show the difference between the proportion of entrants which each institution takes from each group, and the proportion which they should be taking given the entry requirements to the institution and the proportion of each population which is qualified to enter. In 1997 there were 80 institutions below the benchmark which is based on low participation neighbourhood. It is this issue which has been highlighted by the work of the Sutton Trust which found that the leading 5 universities took fewer entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds than would be expected given the entry requirements and subject mix of their courses (see Chart 4). Latest figures on offers to applicants at Oxford do, however, show some improvement with the proportion of offers which are made to students from state schools going up from 50% last year to 53% this year.

What Is Already Being Done?

The Government is already working to raise standards in all schools for all pupils, through (for example) teaching reforms, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies which are transforming achievement in primary schools, our measures to improve weak and failing schools and through the significant extra resources we are investing in education.

Alongside those measures, the EiC programme is working to raise levels of achievement in our most challenging city schools. It aims to transform secondary education in these areas by: increasing the diversity of school provision through expanding the numbers of beacon and specialist schools and introducing City Learning Centres; promoting co-operation between schools; providing targeted support for pupils who need it through Learning Mentors and Learning Support Units; and providing new learning opportunities for individuals for example through programmes for gifted and talented pupils. These measures are already helping to raise standards and, crucially, expectations for 11 to 16 year olds in city areas.

We have already introduced reforms designed to improve both participation and attainment in post-compulsory learning. Our Qualifying for Success reforms will lead to a significant broadening of the post-16 curriculum in schools and colleges from this month, alongside the introduction of the new key skills qualification. New inspections of all provision for 16 to 19 year olds, our Standards agenda in colleges and on the work-based route will improve the quality of provision. This will be enhanced by the introduction of the Learning and Skills Council from next year. Pilot Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) are already improving the participation of this age group. From September 2000 the number of pilot areas will have been extended to about one third of the country. The introduction of the Connexions Service from next April will provide support and guidance for all young people aged 13–19 to help them to identify their best learning route and to prepare them for a successful adult and working life.

Universities and other HEIs have also been active in reaching out to young people from backgrounds which have not traditionally seen HE

as an option. In addition to using their own resources, they have been assisted by a number of Government grants, funded by HEFCE. In return for agreeing action to widen participation as part of its corporate planning, each HEI is eligible this year to share in:

- £24m, an extra 4m of which was announced by the Secretary of State in May, to support the extra costs of recruiting and retaining young people from these backgrounds through a funding premium;
- £5m to support partnership work between HEIs and other organisations to widen participation, and on disseminating and embedding good practice;
- £4m from a joint programme for action by HEIs, FEIs and schools to build pathways for disadvantaged groups, working together through the new Lifelong Learning Partnerships; and
- £4m for university summer schools. The pilot involved young people from EiC areas. It aimed to give them an early taste of university life and to breakdown common misconceptions. 5,000 young people were able to take part at 54 universities and colleges. Initial evaluation suggests they were highly successful.

Case Study

Tutors from the University of Oxford's Hertford College have established links with 55 schools in East London which are part of the EiC initiative. In June 2000, they led a "teach-in" at New College, Newham for 15-year olds on geography and classics. This is one of over 30 access initiatives at Oxford which are being supported by HEFCE.

Case Study

The University of Warwick ran a summer school this year which introduced 60 young people from the West Midlands and London to university life. Over 5 days, the young people were taught to develop their presentation and communication skills and their problem solving abilities. They also took part in a marketing exercise organised and delivered by Boots plc.

Quote from one young person: "I enjoyed everything and everything was useful, either by making me realise I enjoyed certain things, or finding out something I never knew."

Case Study

Representative bodies are also taking initiatives: The Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals and the Joint Associations Curriculum Group have just announced a Concordat. Through this agreement it is hoped that schools, colleges and universities will work together and explore new ways to encourage young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in higher education. David Blunkett said, "I am particularly pleased to see the sector aiming to build young people's confidence to aspire to HE."

Our system of financial support for HE students is designed to target help at those most in need. From next September, we are raising the income threshold above which parents are expected to contribute to their children's HE to £20,000 which means that around 50 per cent of students will be exempt from paying fees and will also be eligible for the maximum loan. We are ensuring that only those who can afford to do so contribute towards the cost of HE. Recent improvements also mean that students now receive their loans at the start of term when they face many of their main expenses e.g. accommodation.

Specific financial help is also available to certain students. Those with disabilities can get extra help through Disabled Students' Allowances which have been extended to part-time and post-graduate students from September 2000. Students who have been in care can get help with their accommodation costs. Bursaries of up to £1,000 for mature students over 25 with dependent children are available in 2000/01 as well as a school meals grant, and a new Childcare grant for students

with children will be introduced from September 2001. For students who face financial difficulty whilst studying, hardship funds including hardship loans are also available from universities and colleges.

Case Study

At age 14, Joanne took part in the University of Lincolnshire & Humberside's "Access to HE Project" (now funded by Hull CityVision through the Government's Single Regeneration Budget). Although she aimed to leave school at 16 and start work, her school (which serves a severely deprived area) identified her as having HE potential. She took part in a number of visits to the University, and also received an "Early Conditional Offer" of a place.

She did well at GCSE, and stayed on to take "A" levels. As the University of Lincolnshire & Humberside did not offer science degrees, she started a BSc programme at another University. She did so well in her second year exams that she was promoted onto an MChem, and is now carrying out research for a PhD.

What Will The New Programme Do?

The new programme will build on the action already in place. It will provide an extra £150m over 3 years from April 2001 to:

Strand 1 bring HEIs and FEIs into the EIC initiative to provide additional support for young people with the potential for HE so that they apply and enter;

Strand 2 increase the funding going directly to HEIs, through HEFCE, to support their own outreach work;

Strand 3 provide new, clearer information and better marketing of the route to HE for young people; and

Strand 4 pilot new forms of extra financial help for young people in challenging circumstances.

How The New Programme Will Work

Strand 1 – New EIC partnerships

Strand 1 will build on the gifted and talented strand of EIC by:

- extending the gifted and talented strand to students aged 16–19 in state schools and FEIs; and
- introducing a complementary and overlapping programme for all students aged 13–19 in state schools and FEIs from a disadvantaged background who have the potential to enter HE.

Together, this will help to ensure a seamless route through to HE for those capable of achieving it.

EiC partnerships will be asked to prepare and submit a single plan covering both these elements. Each plan will set out how the partnership will address local needs and priorities within a common framework, which includes:

- a robust mechanism for identifying those pupils and students aged 13–19 who will participate in the programme;
- teaching and learning goals focused on achieving entry to HE for all participating pupils and students;
- an in-school/college teaching and learning programme to help pupils and students acquire the knowledge, skills, qualifications and motivation needed to enter HE and meet their teaching and learning goals. This might involve new curricular provision as well as better differentiation of existing provision;
- a complementary out-of-school/college study support programme, typically provided through existing cluster arrangements or at partnership level that includes extra classes, summer schools and the extension of the National Mentoring Scheme to cover all EiC areas;
- other opportunities to experience an HE environment and meet and work with students and staff;
- a transition programme, typically provided through existing cluster arrangements or at partnership level to ensure that those who move to post-16 institutions and then on to HE continue to receive support;
- a programme to develop positive attitudes to HE on the part of pupils, their families, their teachers and the wider community;

- mechanisms to provide the information, advice and support that pupils and their families need about HE, including selection of school and FE courses, application procedures, choice of institutions and study support;
- professional development for all co-ordinators, including participation in a national training programme; and
- strong links to other strands of the EiC programme, such that those strands make a significant contribution to the programme; and strong links to Connexions service provision.

Within this framework, there will be special help for those young people with the talent to access universities with the most demanding entry requirements. This will include masterclasses, linked to the new Advanced Extension Award examinations, provided in partnership with EiC schools, FEIs, HEIs and, where appropriate, independent schools. Success in these examinations will enable students to demonstrate their suitability for admission to oversubscribed courses at leading universities.

Case Study

Manchester's Targeted Access Scheme gives pupils and FE students the opportunity to undertake enrichment and taster sessions at Manchester University, including residential courses. University student volunteers work with schools to provide sessions for pupils, including study skills. Parents are also invited to participate in events and activities, to increase their knowledge and understanding of HE.

From the outset we want to encourage close working between the Connexions Service and EiC partnerships. Personal advisers will be trained to advise and support gifted and talented young people in EiC areas and to ensure effective links with the Connexions Service as it is implemented. Connexions Local Management Committees will be fully involved, for example by being represented on the EiC Partnerships. This will help to promote close working on all aspects of the EiC/Connexions interface.

In time we expect Strand 1 to inform the development and implementation of the national Connexions Service from April 2001, helping to ensure that help, support and guidance for gifted and talented young people becomes a seamless part of Connexions Service provision across England.

We expect the sub-regional arm of the Learning and Skills and Council to work closely with other partners including Local Education Authorities (LEAs), all developing the appropriate strands of the access initiative and by drawing on the work of Local Learning Partnerships to stimulate, and where appropriate, fund further supplementary work in this area.

Cost of Strand 1: £13m will be distributed to Partnership areas in 2001–02. A further £32m will be available in 2002–03; and £35m in 2003–04.

Do you agree that the elements of the common framework set out above will achieve the objectives of Excellence Challenge? Are there elements you would prefer to see excluded? What other elements would you would like to see included, if any?

How can we best build on existing EiC partnerships to extend the focus of EiC to post-16 institutions? Which key partners need to be involved?

How can work in developing pre- and post-16 initiatives dovetail in with the access initiatives outlined below in Strand 2 which covers HE?

Strand 2 – Action by HEIs

In addition to the extra funds which will be available to HEIs and FEIs through Strand 1, the Government – through additional grant to HEFCE – will make more funds available to all HEIs to improve their capacity to attract and retain young students with a state education and also from disadvantaged backgrounds. This will be of direct benefit to HEIs and will better enable them to enhance their own fund-raising activities in this area.

The Government believes that each HEI should reflect on its current strengths and weaknesses and use the extra funding in ways which will make a real difference. These should be set out in an institutional action plan agreed with HEFCE. The plan should include targets for progress.

The rich diversity of the HE sector means that there cannot be a “one-size-fits-all” approach to the measures which need to be taken.

However, the Government is particularly keen to see more widespread use of the following approaches which have been shown to work:

- appointment of recruitment staff, including “ambassadors” to reach out to talented young people and to encourage applications;
- better training and development opportunities for staff engaged in selecting students to ensure a uniformly high quality of selection;
- action to ensure that admission and selection arrangements are free of any inadvertent bias;
- enhanced contact between HEIs and local schools and FEIs, including more mentoring and assistance by staff and students;
- expansion of summer schools and other opportunities for young people and their teachers/lecturers to come into contact with HEIs, their staff and students;
- better support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to seek to ensure that they are retained once they enrol in HE; and
- appointment of a person who will co-ordinate all the outreach work to ensure maximum impact and a clear focus across the institution.

Case Study

The “Four Counties” initiative brings together a wide range of HEIs in the East of England including the University of Cambridge. Working together, they have mapped student participation in their region and worked with schools and colleges in “cold spots” of low participation to encourage higher standards and more applications. They have also worked collaboratively on finding better ways of retaining students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

HEFCE will shortly publish a consultation paper which will set out its plans in more detail, including the arrangements for distributing funds.

In addition, Mr Peter Lampl, Chairman of the Sutton Trust, will be working with HEFCE on issues relating to widening participation. Mr Lampl has accepted an invitation from HEFCE to join the Council's EQUALL committee. He will be particularly interested in measures to increase the proportion of students from state schools and FEIs going to universities with the highest entry requirements. In addition, the Sutton Trust will jointly fund a number of projects designed to test out new approaches to widening participation and disseminate the findings.

Cost of Strand 2: £18m will be provided by the Government to HEFCE for distribution to HEIs in 2001–02. A further £19m will be available in 2002–03 and £20m in 2003–04. The figures exclude £29m previously set aside for initiatives to widen participation which will continue.

Strand 3 – Extra information for young people

The Government already provides detailed information to the public about the costs of HE. From next year, the Connexions Service will provide integrated help for teenagers to progress through education in schools and FEIs and into HE. Information and guidance will be a cornerstone of the Service. It will adapt materials and use different media to raise the aspirations of anyone who could achieve at higher level.

But there is evidence that information is reaching young people at too late an age to affect their attitudes to HE. There is also evidence that some young people, and their parents, do not have the full facts about HE including the facts on who pays tuition fees and who does not.

We will therefore provide clear information for young people aged 13 and above and their parents about the costs and benefits of HE so that they have all the facts at an early age.

This information, to be supported by a marketing campaign, will also include answers to the questions young people most frequently ask about HE – what is it like, how do I apply, where can I find out more information etc. Those young people who do not have family backgrounds which include an HE experience need this information the most.

Information about HE must be available to young people in easily accessible forms and places. We want to make particular use of technology, especially the Internet, to support decision-making by young people and their parents. Careers services and others are already active in this field. In future, the Connexions Service will develop a call-centre and web-based approaches to giving information and advice. These will allow many people to access help away from traditional settings, in ways which would best suit them.

In developing this strand, we will involve young people and their parents to ensure that the information contains facts and not jargon, and is in a form which is easily accessible.

Cost of Strand 3: £1m will be spent in 2001–02. £2m a year will be spent in each of the following 2 years.

What is the best way to provide information to young people so that they are confident they are making an informed choice about the costs of studying in HE?

Should this inspire by emphasising the benefits or be more factual?

How can we encourage people to seek out, and even demand, better information about future choices?

What might young people and parents need to make best use of the information that will increasingly be available through the Internet?

What are the key messages to put across to young people and those who advise them about course choice, employer demands and patterns of graduate employment?

How can we better develop the skills of young people to explore choices, including HE, and make decisions?

How can parents/carers be fully involved in supporting the ambitions and decisions of young people, especially in households with no experience of HE?

Strand 4 – Individual Financial Support

The student support system now ensures that the cost of HE is shared between students, parents and the taxpayer. Only those families who can afford to do so are expected to contribute towards tuition fees. Our funding arrangements provide students with the

income they need to cover their living costs. Loans are repayable at a time and at a level when their future income makes this affordable and appropriate. Collection is through the Inland Revenue and is geared to their future income in a way which ensures repayments reflect the growth in earnings consequent on the attainment of the HE qualification.

In spite of this, we recognise that for families on low incomes who have no connection with or experience of HE, worries over the cost can be a major obstacle to young people fulfilling their potential. We believe an additional financial incentive may be needed for students from the lowest income backgrounds to encourage more of them to apply for HE.

The Government now plans to pilot two further sources of financial help for those young people who need help the most in order to encourage them to apply for HE.

Some HEIs have begun to use financial incentives as a way of increasing entrance to HE from schools and colleges in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. COMPACT students at Sheffield University for example receive a Bursary from funds provided through the Access Fund.

Case Study

Ansar started medicine at Sheffield University in 1995 and receives a bursary under their COMPACT scheme. He always had aspirations to go into HE but coming from a large family was worried about the financial implications which would result. He is one of 6 children and his parents are also supporting his sister who is studying in London. He was unsure whether university was 'beyond' him because of his background. His college principal put Ansar's name forward for one of Sheffield's COMPACT bursaries.

Ansar believes the bursary has been the key to helping him see his studies through to his final year. In particular it has enabled him to give up paid work during exam times to concentrate on his studies.

Scholarship programmes such as that run by Robert Ogden are also now providing extra financial support for bright pupils from low income families who want to enter HE.

We will pilot two new forms of financial support.

Opportunity Bursaries

Opportunity Bursaries of £2,000 each over 3 years will be available, for up to 6,000 students entering HE in 2001 paid through universities and colleges access funds. These will be in addition to the normal student support package of help towards tuition fees and maintenance loans. Payments will be made in each year because we believe it will be important for the students to have continuing

financial confidence to complete their course. But a larger instalment of £1,000 will be paid in the first year to help meet the initial costs of starting a course of HE, which can involve buying books and equipment, as well as deposits for accommodation and travel, if they decide to study away from home.

Opportunity Bursaries will eventually be available at all HEIs and a number of FEIs which offer HE courses. Priority for the Bursaries will go to pupils from EIC areas depending on family income, and who come from a family background with little or no history of participation in HE. By 2003/04, we expect up to 10,000 new students each year will be able to apply for an Opportunity Bursary.

Bonus payments for those applying for HE

The EMA pilot scheme already aims to test whether a financial incentive will encourage young people from low income backgrounds to stay on post-16 and achieve in full-time education. Payments are made for attendance and also for attainment by way of bonuses. Early evidence has indicated that the 'something for something' nature of the scheme has had a significant impact upon students' behaviour. Schools and colleges have reported unprecedented improvements in attendance and coursework completion.

We will extend the EMA scheme further in September 2001 by launching bonus payments for those applying to HE. Depending on their family income, we will make an award of £100 each to those young people who gain an offer of a full-time place in HE. We will pilot this in around 4 or 5 EIC areas and link the payment of the bonus to the award of an Opportunity Bursary.

We will evaluate the effects of offering both the Opportunity Bursaries and the £100 bonus payments to see whether they increase the numbers applying for HE, and whether the Bursary in particular was a key factor in influencing young people's decisions. This, along with the available funding, will determine whether and how we take these initiatives forward after 2003–04.

Questions for Consultation

Is extra financial help the best way of encouraging greater participation among the target group?

Is a guarantee of funding needed for this group to encourage them to apply for HE?

Is a financial incentive in year 13 as important as extra support once in HE? If so, is a £100 bonus a sufficient incentive?

Are there other measures we should consider?

Costs of Strand 4

The total to be spent on Strand 4 is £37m over 3 years. Of this, £30m for Opportunity Bursaries has already been announced.

6,000 Opportunity Bursaries will be available in 2001–02 costing £6m. In year 2, it is planned to offer 8,000 new Opportunity Bursaries costing £11m for new and continuing students. In year 3, another 10,000 new Bursaries will be available requiring £17m to be spent on new and continuing students. We estimate that up to 10,000

young people will be eligible for the £100 bonus, which will receive funding of up to £1m in each of the 3 years.

Conclusion

As David Blunkett set out in his speech in Greenwich, this Government is committed to making access to HE a real option for all who can benefit from it. The Government has set out its proposals in this document and wants to hear your views about its plans.

The Excellence Challenge

	FY 2001-02	FY 2002-03	FY 2003-04	Total
Strand				
1 EiC schools/FEIs	13	32	35	80
2 To HEIs	18	19	20	57
3 Extra Information	1	2	2	5
4 EMA bonus	1	1	1	3
New to Opportunity Bursaries	0	1	3	4
Total	1	2	4	7
Evaluation	0	1	1	2
Total (new)*	33	56	62	151
Already announced Opportunity Bursaries	6	10	14	30

* Of which £20 million was announced in July 2000.



**Department for
Education and Employment**



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