

Widening participation in higher education



department for

education and skills

creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

Following on from the publication of the White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* in January 2003, this document puts forward the Government's proposals for the creation and remit of the Office for Fair Access. Some of these proposals will require Parliamentary approval before coming into force, so legislation will be introduced to bring this about. Until Parliamentary approval is obtained, these remain proposals, which may be subject to amendment before they are introduced.



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Executive summary



The Government's White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, included a clear commitment to widen participation in higher education. This paper describes the action the Government is proposing under four headings – Attainment, Aspiration, Applications and Admissions – and the plans for establishing an Office for Fair Access (OFFA).

Attainment – raising standards of education and attainment is the best long term route to widening participation in higher education. Around nine out of ten students – whatever their class or background – who get two or more A levels go on to university. This reinforces the Government's strategy of focusing on improving education standards and achievement at all points of a child's life – from the early years onwards.

Aspiration – improving levels of attainment need to be matched by raising young people's aspirations. One in four working class young people who achieve eight good GCSE passes do not end up in higher education. The work which schools, colleges and universities are doing – and which the Government is supporting through its *Aimhigher* campaign – with summer schools, master classes and roadshows is encouraging more students to apply to university. The reintroduction of grants for poorer students will also encourage more students to apply.

Application – every year over 400,000 young people apply to universities. The Department's research shows that many young people with top A level results are not applying to universities that are necessarily the best match for their talents. Some universities need to do more to reach out to students and schools to encourage a broader range of applications.

Admissions – admissions to universities are a matter for universities themselves and generally they operate in a way that is fair. Admissions should always be on merit – irrespective of class, background or school attended – and based on an applicant's achievements and potential. A levels are the chief indicator for assessing merit but universities are increasingly using a range of other ways to help them make admissions decisions. The Government has asked Professor Steven Schwartz, Vice-Chancellor of Brunel University, to lead a team to identify good practice in admissions. We expect one of the results of this work to be a statement of principles about admissions which we hope all universities will adopt. Those wishing to charge a higher tuition fee will wish to demonstrate to OFFA that they subscribe to these principles.

As universities gain the freedom from September 2006 to vary the level of tuition fee, the Government is determined to ensure that access to higher education is broadened not narrowed. The measures outlined in the White Paper to improve on what is already one of the most generous student support systems in the world will help to ensure that this is the case:

- The Government will continue to pay up to the first £1,100 of tuition fees, depending on the income of the student's family.
- A new higher education grant of up to £1,000 for those from low income families will be introduced in October 2004.
- The requirement to pay tuition fees upfront will be abolished – no student will have to start paying their contribution to the cost of their course until after graduation.
- Students who choose to defer their fees will repay them through the tax system, related to their income after graduation.
- Students will not be charged a real rate of interest on any fee contribution they decide to defer – the amount will only be uprated to take account of inflation.
- The income threshold at which students start to repay their loans will be raised from £10,000 to £15,000 in April 2005.

However, it is also important that universities which wish to increase their fees play their full part in maintaining and widening access. The Government is, therefore, setting up a statutory framework to underpin universities' own efforts.

Universities which wish to increase their fees above the current (£1,100) level will need to draw up an access agreement. An agreement, which will last for 5 years, will need to set out:

- the fee levels the institution wishes to charge (up to a maximum of £3,000);
- the courses to which the higher fees will apply;
- the outreach work to be undertaken by the institution with schools and colleges to help raise the level of attainment, aspirations and applications;
- the bursaries and other financial support the university will make available along with advice on financial issues; and
- the milestones and indicators which a university will decide itself and against which it can measure progress towards its own ambitions of widening participation.

An individual university's admission policies and procedures will be outside the remit of the access agreement and OFFA.

The access agreements will be approved by a new Office for Fair Access (OFFA) which will be an independent body. It will be separate from but supported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Its role will be to:

- consider and approve universities' access agreements;
- receive and, where necessary, comment on the brief annual report which universities will submit;
- consider whether any changes are needed to an access agreement if a university wants to change significantly its levels of tuition fees or the number and range of courses to which higher fees will apply; and
- review a university's overall effort and progress in implementing its access agreement as it comes up for renewal.

We expect the overwhelming majority of universities to implement this framework positively and imaginatively. There may, however, be a few cases where a university has not implemented the agreement in the way OFFA expected. It might be, for example, that the institution has not offered the number or value of bursaries which it undertook to do. OFFA will have powers to direct HEFCE to impose a financial penalty and, ultimately, to decide not to renew an access agreement.

The head of OFFA will be appointed by the Secretary of State but will exercise his or her independent judgement in applying this framework. The head of OFFA will make an annual report to Parliament. After reviewing the first round of access agreements as they come up for renewal, he or she will also report to the Secretary of State and Parliament summarising the effect of access agreements on widening participation as variable tuition fees have been introduced.

Taken together, these measures will help to ensure that, in future, everyone who has the ability to participate in Higher Education is able to do so.

Introduction



1. In *The Future of Higher Education*, we made clear our commitment to increase and to widen participation in higher education. Considerations of economic and social justice both argue for ensuring that the opportunity to enter higher education should be open to anyone who has the potential to benefit from it, regardless of background. Universities¹ need to identify, encourage, admit and support to graduation all those who have the potential to succeed. Fair access to university is integral to the Government's programme of expansion of higher education, and to its commitment to high standards of university research and teaching.

2. There are four conditions which need to be met if a capable student is to embark on an appropriate higher education course:

- attainment – gaining qualifications, either academic or vocational, that demonstrate achievement and give a guide to potential;
- aspiration – having the desire to enter higher education and realise personal potential through gaining a higher education qualification, and being encouraged by parents, friends and teachers, as well as universities themselves, to do so;
- application – knowing enough about the alternative universities and courses to put in an application to an institution which can satisfy the potential student's aspirations, and for which the student has the appropriate qualifications and qualities;
- admission – having achievement, potential and personal qualities recognised through prior attainment and in a number of other ways, and beginning a course which the student is capable of completing.

3. The evidence suggests that the principal barriers to access are attainment, aspiration and application. The evidence also suggests that the admissions processes are generally fair. To ensure good practice we shall ask representatives from the sector to establish general principles to which universities wanting to charge variable tuition fees will wish to demonstrate that they subscribe. But the general focus of our activity will be on the other three areas.

1 The term "university" is used throughout this document to include all higher education institutions. The term "colleges" is used to refer to sixth form and further education colleges.

4. This paper discusses three broad issues that are central to meeting the challenge of expanding higher education and widening participation:

- how to ensure fair access and equality of opportunity for all those who have the potential to benefit from higher education, irrespective of their background, schooling or income;
- how to ensure that no student is put off from studying by graduates being asked to contribute, after graduation, up to £3,000 per annum towards their tuition fees; and
- the need for long term investment to address the historic problem of low participation in higher education by people from less advantaged backgrounds.

5. Section One of this paper summarises the range of policies the Government has put in place to raise attainment which will enable a wider range of people to benefit from higher education. Section Two focuses on the importance of raising aspirations and encouraging more applicants from less advantaged groups. Section Three looks at the principles of good admissions practice, and Section Four focuses on the role of the Office for Fair Access.

6. The arrangements described in this paper are intended to apply only to universities in England. The position with regard to Wales is, as we have previously announced, under discussion with the Secretary of State for Wales and the Welsh Assembly. The Scottish Parliament is responsible for higher education in Scotland, and the Northern Ireland Assembly (whose functions are currently exercised by Ministers in the Northern Ireland Office) is responsible for higher education in Northern Ireland.

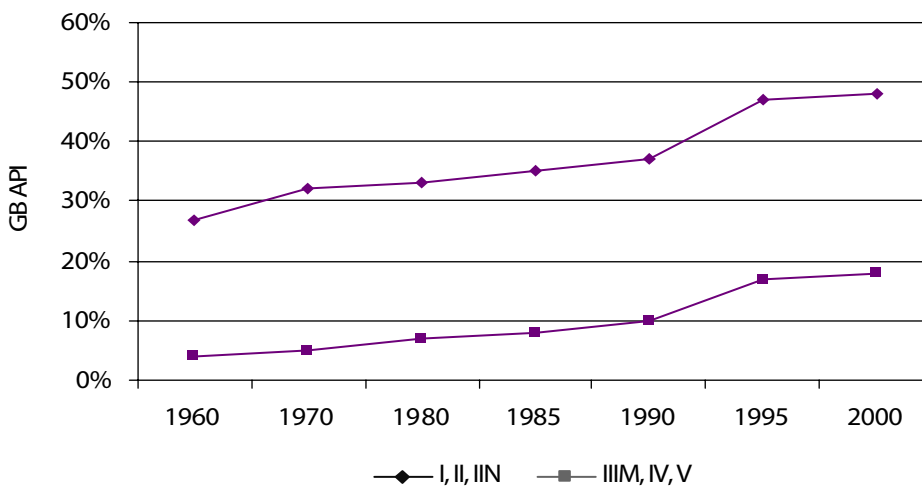
Section One – Attainment



1. We face an historic problem in our society: the under-achievement of many people who come from less advantaged backgrounds. The problem is not new. It cannot be resolved overnight. Nor is it the sole responsibility of any one player or service alone. This section sets out the Government's analysis of the problem along with the actions in education which we are taking now and will be taking in the future.

2. Around half of the population describe themselves as working in occupations which are classified as skilled (manual), partly skilled or unskilled. Yet, in 2000, just 18 per cent of young people from these backgrounds were benefiting from higher education. While this was an increase of 8 percentage points on the position in 1990, the increase in participation by people from families with professional and non-manual occupations was 11 percentage points (from 37 per cent to 48 per cent). In other words, the gap in participation between those in higher and lower social classes has grown. Indeed, if one turned the clock back to 1960 when there were just 200,000 full-time students, the gap between the two groups was actually less than it is now. (See graph below)

Higher Education participation rates by social class groups (1960-2000)



4. The principal cause is the big discrepancy in attainment. For example, only 19 per cent of those from manual backgrounds gain two or more A-levels by the age of 18 compared to 43 per cent from non-manual backgrounds.

5. But the problem does not begin at age 16. Recent research suggests that a significant difference appears even before children have reached the age of two years. The attainment gap continues to widen through the phases of education, although the pace of increase slows down once children reach 7 years of age. Analysis suggests that at least three quarters of the 30

percentage point social gap in higher education participation can be attributed to differences in the level of attainment by the age of 16. Thirty per cent of children whose parents are in unskilled occupations achieve five or more good GCSEs, compared to 69 per cent of children whose parents are professional or managerial.

6. The cost of this under-achievement is high. It affects people's chances of steady employment and good health. It also leaves the country with lower skills and lower productivity.

How are we addressing the attainment gap?

7. We need to address the attainment gap at every stage in the education system if we are to give every individual the opportunity to fulfil his or her full potential. We need to improve standards and widen opportunities throughout a child's life. A range of initiatives, from the very earliest years onwards, is now being driven forward and many are already having effect:

SUPPORT FOR VERY YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

- High quality early years education and childcare is an essential building block. Over 550,000 new childcare places have been created. The **Sure Start** programme aims to improve the health and well-being of families and children from the very beginning. It is targeted on deprived areas. Currently 437 Sure Start programmes are working with 300,000 pre-school children. The Government is also aiming to establish 100 Early Excellence Centres by 2004. 91 of these one-stop facilities where families can access high quality, integrated care and education services have been established.
- We have also made progress on the **early years**. There are now many more nursery places and a much higher take-up by parents from less advantaged homes. Free part-time nursery education for all three and four year olds will support our aim – currently 70 per cent of 3 year olds have access to a free early education place. By September 2004, every 3 year old will be guaranteed this entitlement.

RAISING ATTAINMENT IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- At primary school, the **National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies** have led to significant advances in achievement for all groups at primary school level since 1997 but more so for children from disadvantaged homes who have made above-average gains in English and Maths. By 2000, even the lowest ranked local education authorities (LEAs) in English and Maths achieved better than the national average of five years ago. Many of the fastest improving areas were previously the worst performing LEAs.
- The **Key Stage 3 Strategy** aims to raise standards for all pupils. It supports extra targeted programmes for those who are at risk of underachieving, including an extensive summer

school programme for 11 year olds about to start secondary education. The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) have reported improvements in teaching and pupil attainment in schools piloting the strategy. The **Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances (SFCC)** programme provides additional funding to secondary schools which need extra help.

- The **Excellence in Cities** programme, launched in 1999, provides additional support to schools in our urban areas. Learning Mentors, Learning Support Units and the Gifted & Talented scheme have benefited all pupils in these schools and have contributed to better results.
- Study support programmes, such as **Playing for Success** – an initiative which provides out of hours study facilities at top football and other sports clubs – have also made a significant impact on the attainment of participating pupils, particularly those from less advantaged backgrounds.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES IN 14–19 EDUCATION

- Over half of pupils are now achieving **five good GCSEs**. We are committed to improving on that record each year and to ensuring that schools in every education authority achieve a minimum level of performance.
 - Our planned **14–19** reforms will improve standards and choices for all young people so that more are able to succeed in their education and progress into skilled employment. A long term strategic review of all qualifications for 14–19 year olds is underway, chaired by Mike Tomlinson.
 - **Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs)** have helped to keep young people in full-time education after age 16. We are rolling out EMAs to all young people who need financial help.
 - Our **Success for All** programme for the reform of further education will focus on raising standards of teaching and learning and improving student achievements. This will help widen participation to higher education as 27 per cent of students come from the 15 per cent most deprived wards in the country, and 40 per cent of higher education students progress from further education.
- 8.** We are also introducing measures specifically to boost access to higher education (see Section Two).
- 9.** This ambitious programme of reform will help to ensure that standards for everyone will improve and, as a result, will spread opportunity to more people than ever before.



Section Two – Aspiration and Application

1. Improving prior attainment is the main driver for widening participation to higher education in the long term. The fact that around nine out of ten students who get 2 or more A levels currently enter higher education, and that this progression rate is fairly even over all social classes, demonstrates the importance of prior attainment. We also know that of those who obtain 25 or more UCAS points, 97% from the three higher social classes go on to higher education and 94% from the three lower social classes. The gap is only one per cent more – 92% as compared to 88% – for those who get between 13 – 24 UCAS points.

A MORE COMPLEX PICTURE

2. However, these figures disguise a more complex picture as information produced by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) shows. HEFCE publishes data, which indicate the proportion of students from particular backgrounds at each institution and compares them with figures for other institutions (having adjusted the data for subject mix and entry qualifications). From this it is possible to compare what is happening with applications and admissions at different groups of universities.

3. There are a number of ways of grouping universities. The institutions themselves have formed three groups:

- The Russell Group¹ which is made up largely of the older more established universities. Over half of the top research departments – those rated 5 or 5* in the Research Assessment Exercise – are located in Russell Group universities.
- The 94 group, mainly universities established before 1992 and including a number created after the Robbins Report in the 1960s.
- The Coalition of Modern Universities, a group of universities created in 1992 when the polytechnics joined the university sector.

In addition the Sutton Trust, founded in 1997 by Peter Lampl to provide educational opportunities for able young people from non-privileged backgrounds, has grouped together

1 The Russell Group of universities comprises: Birmingham; Bristol; Cambridge; Cardiff; Edinburgh; Glasgow; Leeds; Liverpool; Manchester; Newcastle upon Tyne; Nottingham; Oxford; Sheffield; Southampton; Warwick; Imperial College, London; King's College, London; London School of Economics and Political Science and University College, London

a set of universities drawn from the Russell and 94 groups in order to analyse the pattern of admissions and applications.

4. Comparing applications and admissions data (and the most recent figures published are for 2000/01) from these different groupings helps to show what is happening across the higher education sector. For example, 16 per cent of those admitted by the 19 Russell Group universities – a group of universities that is heavily oversubscribed in terms of applications – were from the three social classes covering the most disadvantaged groups, compared with the HEFCE’s benchmark² figure of 19 per cent. Because the benchmark already factors in the prior attainment levels of these disadvantaged groups, these figures show that prior attainment cannot be the sole factor in patterns of entry to higher education. Even where young people from disadvantaged groups have obtained the appropriate qualifications for these universities, they are less likely to go there.

5. However, the evidence shows that it is differential rates of application rather than any bias in admissions procedures that is the main cause of this under-representation. Of those who achieve very good A levels, a significant number is choosing not to apply to those universities for which there is strong competition for places, but which may provide a good match to their talents. Around 35 per cent of students with three grade A passes at A level apply to universities outside the Russell Group, despite the fact Russell Group universities offer the same, and in some cases lower, entry requirements.

6. Table 1 illustrates the issue from another perspective. It shows that for students who obtain A level passes corresponding to 30 UCAS points, those from the three higher social classes are significantly more likely to apply for places at Russell Group institutions than those from the lower social classes. However, Table 2 shows that, of those who make an application, the acceptance rates are very nearly the same.

Table 1 – Applications to higher education institutions from students with 30 A level points

Type of institution	Social classes I, II and IIIN	Social classes IIIM, IV and V
Russell Group institutions	66%	58%
Other institutions	34%	42%

2 HEFCE publishes annual sets of Performance Indicators, which include indicators reflecting the proportion of students from disadvantaged groups. Each institution has a ‘benchmark’ figure against these indicators which compares the institution with the sector as a whole but is adjusted for the subject mix and entry qualifications of the students at the institution.

Table 2 – Acceptances as a percentage of applications to higher education institutions from students with 30 A level points.

Type of institution	Social classes I, II and IIIIN	Social classes IIIIM, IV and V
Russell Group institutions	20%	19%
Other institutions	13%	14%

7. A similar picture emerges when educational background is considered. Analysis by the Department, based on thirteen universities identified by the Sutton Trust,³ shows that well-qualified students from the state sector are less likely to apply than those from independent schools (Table 3). But when it comes to acceptances as a proportion of applications, the gap is narrower (Table 4).

Table 3 – Applications to higher education institutions from students with 25 or more level points

Type of institution	State	Independent
Sutton Trust institutions	35%	55%
Other institutions	65%	45%

Table 4 – Acceptances as a percentage of applications from students with 25 or more A level points

Type of institution	State school pupils	Independent school pupils
Sutton Trust institutions	19%	19%
Other institutions	16%	14%

8. These tables seem to show that the very significant differences in patterns of application are the main cause of differential access to universities, while admission procedures appear to be far less significant. The conclusion is that the main challenge lies in finding better ways to reach out to potential students from a wider range of backgrounds and encourage them to apply. This is where some universities need to review their performance.

9. Another study looked at those who achieve level 3 vocational qualifications (the equivalent of A levels). In contrast to the high proportion going on from A level, only around half of those who achieve vocational level 3 qualifications by age 18 go on to higher education by age 21. Institutions are tending to overlook this pool of talented students.

10. There is also a very strong case for universities and others doing more to raise aspirations among those who achieve good GCSEs. For example, of those 16 year olds who achieve 8 or more good passes at GCSE, 87 per cent of those from the higher social classes enter higher education by the age of 21, but only 73 per cent of those from the lower social classes do so.

³ The universities chosen by the Sutton Trust are: Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial College, London School of Economics, University College London, Warwick, Bristol, Nottingham, St Andrew's, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Durham, York.

A significant number of young people who would seem to have the potential to benefit from going to university are missing this opportunity.

11. Taken together, this evidence shows that universities could do more to:

- raise aspirations among students who come from backgrounds where studying at university is not part of the family or community tradition;
- encourage a broader range of applications; and
- understand why it is that students may be put off from applying to their institution.

REACHING OUT FURTHER

12. Many universities are already taking imaginative actions to address these issues. For example, the University of Liverpool, Liverpool John Moores and Liverpool Hope have combined forces to provide a student mentoring scheme for Year 12 students in local schools. The University of Bradford offers a Junior University with access to academic staff and university facilities on Saturday afternoons; and the Guy's, St Thomas's and King's College medical school encourages young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in south London secondary schools to aspire to study medicine. There are many other examples contained in the UUK publication *Social Class and Participation*.⁴

13. The Government is reinforcing these efforts in a number of ways:

- since 2001, as part of the **Excellence Challenge** (now called **Aimhigher**) programme, the Government has provided schools and colleges with extra money to work with universities to give young people a taste of university life and to enable them to benefit from master classes, student mentors and summer schools. The programme also includes a roadshow⁵, which gives clear information about the benefits of higher education. Aimhigher has already had a strong positive effect on aspirations.
- HEFCE and the Learning and Skills Council have launched the new **Partnerships for Progression** programme which creates a regional network of partnerships, building on *Excellence Challenge* and funding imaginative projects to widen participation. From 2004, it will form part of the *Aimhigher* programme.

4 Published in 2002

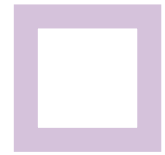
5 Sponsored by Royal Bank of Scotland/NatWest

- to encourage the very brightest young people to study at the highest level, we have established the national **Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth**, based at the University of Warwick. The Academy is initially providing for the most academically able young people aged 11–16, but will gradually expand to cater for a wider population, including 16–19 year olds from 2003/04.
- we have completely reformed the information, advice and guidance services for young people through the establishment of the **Connexions Service** providing tailored, one-to-one help for young people to make the right choices.
- We are investing heavily in new **Foundation Degrees**, high quality vocational courses for people to study full-time, or part-time while they are at work. This will provide new choices for students with a clear route to a high quality job.
- We are reviewing the feasibility of moving to a system whereby **applications to university are made after, rather than before, examination results are known.**
- We are reviewing the way in which people can **build up qualifications** from schools, further education and higher education to encourage people to improve their skills throughout their lives.
- We are introducing a range of measures to help poor students financially including a **Higher Education Grant** of up to £1,000 a year for students from lower income families. Further details of these measures are in Section Four.

14. In these ways universities will be helped in working with teachers, young people and their parents to raise aspirations so that more people with real talent apply to higher education.

15. In addition to these changes we will, as set out in the Higher Education White Paper, ask HEFCE to refine their data and performance indicators to give universities a more complete picture of their student population. However, none of the data that are specially collected to help compile the performance indicators will be passed on or available to universities to inform individual admissions.

Section Three – Admissions



1. The evidence indicates that reducing the differences in rates of admission to higher education resides in raising achievement and in stimulating and supporting work to widen the range of applications. However, as set out in *The Future of Higher Education*, there are also developments in the way universities handle admissions that need to be considered. Every year over 400,000 people apply to universities and higher education colleges. Each of them wants to know that their application will be considered fairly.
2. The Government is clear that admissions policies are the responsibility of the universities – not of the Government. We are also quite clear that admission to a university must be on merit – irrespective of class, or school attended, based on a student's achievements and potential. However, the Government does have a legitimate interest in ensuring that universities' admissions processes are clear and command the confidence of prospective students, parents and teachers.

THE ADMISSIONS CONTEXT

3. At the heart of admissions for most students is the A level system. For some time to come, A levels and their equivalents will remain the chief indicator of academic achievement and potential. But A levels have never been the only criterion used by universities in deciding whether a student should be accepted, especially for those courses where there are many more well-qualified students than places. Therefore, in addition, universities typically consider:
 - personal statements from applicants;
 - reports from schools and colleges; and
 - interviews – though these are used far less than 20 years ago because of the volume of students now going into higher education.
4. Increasingly, electronic portfolios will provide a new source of assessing achievement and potential. A further change in train is the introduction by the Government of an advanced education award to help universities distinguish between very good candidates with top A level grades. In 2002, the first year for which the award was available, one per cent of the student cohort achieved the award. We expect the number to grow significantly by the time additional subjects are offered for examination.

5. We are also reviewing the feasibility of making applications of students applying to university after they know their examination results.
6. In addition, a number of universities have taken account of growing research that prior attainment, as measured by examination and assessment results, does not necessarily provide a complete guide to the potential of a student to succeed in higher education. For example, mature students are often accepted without having A level passes at the required grades so long as they can demonstrate – perhaps through written work or through successfully completing a recognised access course – their ability to benefit from higher education. Universities are also exploring ways of testing the potential of younger applicants through setting additional work or admissions tests.
7. The result is that there is now a range of admissions procedures and arrangements being practised by universities. In addition, there is a wide variety of developments and changes being brought forward, some of which have not yet borne fruit, that need to be considered as they become a firm part of the process.

IDENTIFYING AND DISSEMINATING GOOD PRACTICE

8. We believe it would be in the interest of universities, students, parents and teachers for there to be a greater shared understanding of the options for assessing the merit of applicants and their achievement and potential for different types of courses. Professor Steven Schwartz, Vice Chancellor of Brunel University, has been asked to lead a project to examine this issue.
9. Professor Schwartz's team will draw on recent work from Universities UK in the report *Fair Enough*. The report suggested a range of factors which should be taken into account by universities in selecting students. These factors were closely related to success on courses. In addition to prior attainment, it suggested considering the extent to which applicants were self-organised, worked well independently, were motivated to learn and interested in the subject area.
10. We do not expect this project to result in a blueprint for admissions. That would be neither feasible nor desirable. Universities need different admissions systems to reflect the different demands of their courses and their different missions. Rather, the aim would be to help universities ensure that their admissions systems – which are and will continue to be the responsibility of individual institutions – are informed by the latest research and good practice. In addition, we believe the debate engendered by this work will help to increase greater public understanding of university admission arrangements.

PRINCIPLES OF GOOD ADMISSIONS

11. We expect one of the outcomes of Professor Schwartz's work to be a statement of high level principles about admissions which we would hope all universities would adopt. Those institutions which want to charge a higher variable tuition fee will wish to demonstrate to the Office for Fair Access that they subscribe to these principles. The principles might, for example, cover the following:

Merit – confirming that admissions criteria should be based on merit reflecting both attainment and potential, although universities would employ a range of means of assessing these matters.

Transparency – admissions processes inevitably involve a degree of judgement on the part of the university, but it is only fair that applicants understand in advance the broad criteria which will be applied and how and to what timetable their application will be considered. These should be published; and

Professional decision-making – such a principle might propose that those who make admissions decisions should have appropriate professional development to ensure that they understand the qualifications and evidence that applicants may offer, how to ensure fairness and equal opportunities regardless of class or background and the implications of equal opportunity legislation.

12. It will be for Professor Schwartz and his team, following extensive consultation and debate with universities and the wider public, to decide what principles are appropriate.



Section Four – The Office for Fair Access

1. As higher education institutions gain the freedom to introduce variable tuition fees of up to £3,000 per year from 2006, the Government is determined to ensure that access to higher education is broadened not narrowed. We acknowledge that students from low income backgrounds, and their families, will be concerned about the affordability of studying for a degree. For this reason, the White Paper included further improvement to what is already one of the most generous student support systems in the world:

- The Government will continue to pay up to the first £1,100 of tuition fees, depending on the income of the student's family.
- A new higher education grant of up to £1,000 for those from low income families will be introduced in October 2004.
- The requirement to pay tuition fees upfront will be abolished – no student will have to start paying their contribution to the cost of their course until after graduation.
- Students who choose to defer their fees will repay them through the tax system, related to their income after graduation.
- Students will not be charged a real rate of interest on any fee contribution they decide to defer – the amount will only be uprated to take account of inflation.
- The income threshold at which students start to repay their loans will be raised from £10,000 to £15,000 in April 2005.

All this is against the background that those with a higher education qualification on average earn around half as much again as non-graduates; and graduate unemployment remains about half the rate in the workforce as a whole.

2. However, despite these benefits and the measures we have taken, there is a risk that potential students may be concerned about the level of debt they may incur and perceive that higher education is not affordable. For this reason, the Government proposes that higher education institutions should enter into an access agreement before being allowed to charge variable tuition fees.

Access agreements

3. Institutions that wish to charge variable fees in excess of the standard fee (currently £1,100) for any of their courses will be required to enter into an access agreement with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). The agreement will cover a 5-year period, though there will be some flexibility for the institution to modify its arrangements during the period.

4. The access agreement will apply to the institution as a whole irrespective of how it is organised. The agreement will set out the level of the fee the institution wishes to charge and courses to which variable fees apply, as universities will be free to set different levels of fees for different courses. Where those differ across the institution, the agreement will set out how the arrangements apply to each of the areas. When the OFFA has approved an agreement, it will be published by the institution.

5. The Secretary of State for Education and Skills will send the head of OFFA an initial letter, together with revisions from time to time, setting out OFFA's statutory duties and how they are to be met. Within that letter, the Secretary of State will set out guidance on applying the statutory framework for access agreements, which will cover an institution's plans for outreach, financial and other support for students and its own milestones for assessing progress in widening participation. An individual university's admissions policies and procedures will be outside the remit of the access agreement and OFFA.

6. The agreements will subsume the current strategies on widening participation which universities already provide to HEFCE and so will not impose additional bureaucratic demands on them. Before the head of OFFA issues guidance to universities on access agreements we will ask him or her to ensure that administrative requirements are kept to a minimum, while ensuring that HEFCE has the information it requires to allocate funds for widening participation.

ARRANGEMENTS FOR OUTREACH

7. The widening participation strategies prepared for HEFCE include the plans that a university commits to implementing for attracting, retaining and promoting the progress of students from under-represented groups. Access agreements would therefore include the efforts universities are committed to making to reach out to schools and colleges with low participation rates in higher education, for example running summer schools, and master classes.

ARRANGEMENT FOR BURSARIES AND OTHER FINANCIAL SUPPORT

8. A number of institutions already offer their students financial support from their own resources over and above the loans and opportunity bursaries provided by the Government. By introducing variable tuition fees, institutions will generate additional income. In order to

ensure that no additional financial barriers to entry are created, institutions will be asked to state how they propose to extend the bursaries and other financial arrangements they will offer. Other financial arrangements might take the form of subsidised accommodation, travel, books, study aids etc.

The University of Oxford offers bursaries worth £2,000 over three years (or £2,500 over four years) to students receiving the full tuition fee remission. The University of Warwick uses donations from its alumnae to offer 30 Warwick Graduate Association Scholarships per year, each worth £2,000 a year to students whose household income does not exceed £15,000. The University of Cambridge's Isaac Newton Trust provides bursaries of up to £1,000 to all of its UK first year undergraduates who qualify for full fee remission from their LEA. Several Cambridge colleges also provide bursaries for their own students. The University of Nottingham offers first-in-the-family scholarships to suitably qualified entrants from the Nottingham region who come from a family without a tradition of university study and have all their tuition fees paid by their LEA. The scholarships are worth £1,000 per year and are valid for the whole of a student's first full-time undergraduate degree, including one optional year out for related additional study or unpaid relevant work experience. Provided students meet all the scholarship criteria, they are automatically awarded a first-in-the-family scholarship.

9. Institutions will also be asked to show they provide financial advice to prospective students and explain to them the financial support they can expect to receive from the institution and from the Government (as indicated on the Student Loans Company website) and elsewhere. They will also need to set out the costs a student is likely to incur over the whole period of their course.

INSTITUTIONS' OWN MILESTONES

10. An institution will include in its access agreement milestones and indicators which it will select and against which it can measure progress towards its own ambitions of widening participation. No single indicator can give a rounded view of progress towards widening participation. The institution will be able to draw on a range of data. For example, HEFCE has a set of performance indicators and benchmarks; and, as described in Section Two, we have asked it to develop new indicators which will enable institutions to have a richer picture of their students and some of their characteristics. Aggregate data from UCAS on applications and admissions will also be useful. And the institution may want to include other data or indicators that are relevant to its own position. It will be for each university to decide on the milestones that are appropriate to its circumstances and that it wishes to include in the access agreement.

11. The institutions' own ambitions for improvement will, when taken together, lead to improvements across the sector.

The role of OFFA

12. The main role of OFFA is to exercise judgements in ensuring that universities are taking the actions they see as necessary to achieve their widening participation ambitions if they introduce variable tuition fees.

APPROVING THE ACCESS AGREEMENT

13. The head of OFFA will examine draft agreements submitted by institutions against its guidance. OFFA will look for clear strategies for widening participation and will want to be satisfied that the institution's plans for reaching out to schools and colleges, encouraging a greater number of applications, and providing bursaries and other financial support are sufficient to support their strategy. Institutions themselves will set their own ambitions and milestones. But OFFA will be able to comment where it considers they are not stretching enough. OFFA will also want to be satisfied that the institution has arrangements for providing the data necessary for monitoring progress towards the commitments in its access agreement.

14. In cases where OFFA is not satisfied or has doubts about the draft agreement, it will inform the institution. There will be an opportunity for the institution to address the concerns before OFFA comes to a decision about whether or not to approve the agreement.

CHANGES TO THE LEVEL OF FEES

15. The access agreement will already set out how the institution plans to evolve its variable tuition fee policies over the duration of the agreement. If an institution wants to make changes beyond those already noted in the access agreement, it will notify OFFA which, depending on the scale or extent of the change proposed, will decide whether to call in the proposal for reconsideration.

MONITORING THE APPLICATION OF THE ACCESS AGREEMENT

16. We propose that a brief annual statistical return, described in the access agreement, and primarily drawn from the institution's annual operating statement, will be submitted to the head of OFFA to demonstrate progress towards an institution's ambitions together with any further commentary that the institution may choose to provide. OFFA will review the returns and – where necessary – call for further information if that is needed for OFFA to understand how the agreement is being implemented.

17. Following the receipt of further information, OFFA will exercise its judgement in deciding whether there are concerns to be raised formally with the institution. Where the concerns have been addressed there will be no further action. If, however, the concerns are not addressed to the satisfaction of OFFA, it will ask the institution to say what further actions it proposes to address the issues.

RENEWING THE AGREEMENT

18. We expect most agreements to work satisfactorily. Before the 5-year term expires, the institution will propose a new agreement for the next 5 years, and OFFA will review it as described above. However, in some instances the institution may be carrying out all its commitments and obligations in relation to outreach and bursaries and any other aspects of the agreement, but progress towards its ambitions is either slow or below that expected. In these circumstances OFFA would, before approving the agreement for the next 5 years, want to be satisfied that the institution had identified any underlying causes for failure to achieve progress through the financial support that it offers, such as bursaries, or through its partnership work with schools and colleges, and that the institution had set out the actions it will take to make improvements. But OFFA may also conclude that some factors were beyond a university's control and failure to progress towards its milestones would not of itself be grounds for refusing to allow a university to charge a higher variable fee for a further period.

BREACH OF THE AGREEMENT

19. We expect the overwhelming majority of institutions to implement this framework positively and imaginatively. There may, however, be a few cases in which the monitoring described above shows that the institution has not implemented the agreement in the way OFFA expected. It might be, for example, that the institution has not offered the number or value of bursaries which it undertook to do. Under those circumstances, and after the exchange of correspondence set out in paragraph 17, there will be two sanctions available to OFFA:

- where urgent action is needed, to impose a financial penalty by directing HEFCE to reduce the institutional grant by a proportionate sum. This sanction would be preceded by OFFA telling the institution what it intended to do, and allowing time for representations; or
- when the access agreement comes up for renewal, to withhold approval to charge variable fees.

REPORTS TO PARLIAMENT

20. The head of OFFA will make an annual report to Parliament giving a survey of access agreements, the methods institutions are using to improve outreach, typical practice on

bursaries, and bringing together the institutional ambitions to assess the picture for the sector as a whole.

REVIEWING THE IMPACT OF ACCESS AGREEMENTS

21. After reviewing the first round of access agreements as they come up for renewal, OFFA will be asked to make a formal report to the Secretary of State and to Parliament summarising the effect of access agreements on widening participation as variable tuition fees have been introduced. Part of that report will cover whether OFFA is being effective in its aims and remit.

Structure and organisation of OFFA

22. The head of OFFA will be appointed by the Secretary of State, who will also have the power to dismiss for good cause. OFFA will be separate from but supported by HEFCE. OFFA will operate within a legal and policy framework established by the Government but will exercise its independent judgement in applying this framework.

Non-completion

23. In the higher education White Paper, we suggested OFFA also having a role in relation to non-completion of courses. The UK has one of the lowest rates on non-completion in the OECD but it is still important to improve on the position in some universities. However, on reflection the Government believes that the job of promoting action to bear down on non-completion is best undertaken by HEFCE. Moreover, HEFCE will retain responsibility for the institutional funding formula, including any premia to compensate for the additional costs of recruiting and retaining students, as well as funding for *Aimhigher*.

The future

24. The government is firmly of the view that institutions need the capacity to charge variable fees if high quality teaching, research and knowledge transfer in our higher education institutions is to be sustained. The measures proposed here will ensure that as we move towards variable tuition fees coupled to Graduate Contribution Scheme and improved student support, it is not at the expense of the Government's parallel ambitions to widen access.

Conclusion



The measures we have described in this document will provide a range of incentives for institutions to increase their efforts to widen participation in higher education. Everything in this document is about giving more help and opportunities to all our people to achieve of their best. It is clear from the evidence that many more people have the talent to benefit from Higher Education than currently do so.

This Government is not the first to recognise the access challenge in Higher Education. Back in 1963, the Robbins Report¹ on higher education identified the need to do more. It rightly focused on improving links between schools and universities and the need to raise aspirations. But we now recognise that without a transformation of the attainment levels of under-represented groups, progress will be faltering.

This document has set out a new way forward which links attainment, aspiration, applications and admissions. We need everyone who has the ability to participate if we are to expand to meet our future economic needs without sacrificing quality. There will be no targets or quotas set by the Government. But all those engaged in higher education will recognise that there is more to be done to realise this ambition.

¹ The Robbins Report (Cmnd 2154) was published in October 1963.

Your opportunity to tell us what you think

1. After the launch of the document there will be a period for comment, which will run until 2 June 2003.

2. If you would like to send comments:

Written responses should be sent to:

Consultation Unit

Department for Education & Skills

Area 1B

Castle View House

East Lane

Runcorn

Cheshire WA7 2GJ

You can also respond by email to:

he.access@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

3. Please ensure the comments reach us by 2 June 2003.

Confidentiality

4. All replies will be considered, providing they reach us by the deadline. We may want to use your comments publicly and to attribute them to you or the organisation you represent.

5. If you would prefer your comments to be kept confidential, please make that clear in your response.

Information



The classifications used below are for the benefit of staff working in schools

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