

Widening Participation and the Social mobility Agenda in England

Higher Education and Research Bill (HERB), Department for Education

contact: Kath Jakubiak, Kath.JAKUBIAK@education.gov.uk

Summary

1. Widening participation in higher education has been a priority for this government. Higher education can act as an agent for social mobility and graduates earn, on average, at least £100,000 extra lifetime earnings after tax.
2. The previous Prime Minister committed the Government to achieve two ambitious goals on widening participation. The targets remain in place:
 - Doubling the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education by 2020; and
 - Increasing the number of BME students going to university by 20% by 2020.

Measures on Widening Participation through the Higher Education and Research Bill (currently progressing through Parliament with a view to being passed)

3. The creation of the OfS brings together the responsibilities of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA)¹ including the powers of the Director of Fair Access and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)² This will bring together our levers for widening participation. Currently the Director of Fair Access agrees access agreements with universities before they can charge students fees of more than £6,000.³ Separately HEFCE separately administer the Student Opportunity Fund aimed at ensuring students from under-represented groups can successfully participate in higher.
4. The Bill introduces a statutory duty on the Office for Students (OfS) to promote equality of opportunity across the whole lifecycle for disadvantaged students, not just access. As a result, widening access and participation for students from disadvantaged backgrounds will be at the core of OfS functions. .
5. It also creates a “Director for Fair Access and Participation” (DfAP). The DfAP will be appointed by the Secretary of State and will be responsible for agreeing Access and Participation Plans (previously referred to as Access Agreements).
6. Clauses 28-36 of the Bill set out the process for agreeing access and participation plans. These replicate current arrangements which have been in place since 2004.

¹ OFFA is an independent public body in the United Kingdom that supports the Director of Fair Access to Higher Education in his or her work that is intended to safeguard and promote fair access to higher education in England.

² HEFCE is a non-departmental public body of BIS which has been responsible for the distribution of funding to universities and Colleges of Higher and Further Education in England since 1992.

³ Any university or college that wants to charge higher tuition fees for home/EU undergraduates, and/or postgraduates on PGCE or initial teacher training courses, must have an access agreement approved by the Director of Fair Access. An access agreement sets out a university or college's fee limits and the access measures it intends to put in place e.g. outreach work and financial support.

7. The Bill also confirms that access and participation plans should be broader than just entry to higher education. They ensure that universities are doing all they can to support the participation of students throughout their courses, tackling drop-out rates and support disadvantaged students into employment. This is also in line with existing practice.
8. Higher Education providers will be required to publish their respective student application, offer and progression rates by gender, ethnic background and socio-economic background through a Transparency Duty. This Duty will shine a spotlight on those institutions which need to go further in widening access and improving outcomes for all of their students.
9. In addition admissions bodies (in practice UCAS) will be required to provide “application-to-acceptance” data to DfE for purposes of qualifying research largely to research into what drives social mobility. This is data on students’ applications for admission to English Higher Education Providers, including predicted grades, course offers and rejections and the acceptance of these offers by students.
10. The data will be used to conduct research by both internal and external researchers into equality of opportunity and into research topics approved by the SofS. There are safeguards on the use of the data including that it may only be used for qualifying research, only approved bodies and researchers will be granted access and there are controls on what may be published. Importantly, and while not on the face of the Bill, students’ data will be de-identified before being shared with researchers ie. information identifying the individual will be removed.
11. To ensure participation and choice are open to everyone, The Bill allows there to be an alternative student finance product for the first time. This will be open to everyone and will not result in any advantage or disadvantage relative to a student loan, but will avoid the payment of interest, which is inconsistent with the principles of Islamic finance. This may remove the barrier to higher education for some potential Muslim students.

Key messages and facts:

- Widening participation in higher education is a priority for this Government. But we want to do more. The Government has set challenging targets - doubling the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education by the end of this Parliament from 2009 levels and to increasing the number of BME students going to university by 20% by 2020.
- For entry in 2015 we abolished the Student Number Cap which had previously limited the number of students Universities could accept. This removed a barrier to social mobility and aspiration. Publicly funded universities can now choose to recruit as many students as have the ability and wish to apply.
- The proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds going into higher education is up from 13.6% in 2009/10 to 18.5% in 2015/16. Entry rates for all ethnic groups increased in 2015, reaching the highest recorded values for each ethnic group.

- The latest data for entry in 2016 shows entries at a record high and the application rate for 18 year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds at a record level
- The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) has agreed 198 Access Agreements for 2017/18 with plans for Universities to spend more than £833 million on measures to improve access and student success for students from disadvantaged backgrounds - up significantly from £404 million in 2009. Any higher education provider wanting to charge over £6k has to have an access agreements agreed with the independent Director of Fair Access.