

Widening Participation and the Social mobility Agenda in England

Office for Fair Access (OFFA)

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www.offa.org.uk/about

The Office for Fair Access is the independent regulator of fair access to higher education in England. Our role, which is set out in the Higher Education Act 2004 and in subsequent Ministerial guidance, is to promote and safeguard fair access to higher education for disadvantaged and under-represented groups.

We believe that everyone with the potential and ambition to succeed in higher education should have equal opportunity to do so, whatever their income or background.

The main way we encourage change is by approving and monitoring access agreements – annually submitted documents in which universities and colleges set out their tuition fees and how they plan to improve or sustain access, student success and progression to employment and/or further study for people from disadvantaged and under-represented groups. All publicly-funded universities and colleges in England must have an access agreement approved by the independent Director of Fair Access to Higher Education (who is the head of OFFA) in order to be allowed to charge tuition fees above a certain level (over £6,000 per year, up to the maximum fee cap of £9,000 per year). Access agreements set out institutions' tuition fee limits, their targets for making progress across the student lifecycle, and the measures they intend to put in place to meet those targets. Access agreements, and the outcomes from our monitoring of them, are published to ensure transparency and public accountability.

Through our work as the access regulator, we play a key role in increasing fair access to higher education. Access agreements are a powerful lever for change across the student lifecycle, with the greatest share of investment in fair access delivered through them. Institutions and other organisations share or contribute to our objectives and we work closely with a wide range of organisations across the sector.

In many cases, we discuss and negotiate over the content of access agreements before approving them, often achieving increased investment and commitment by universities and colleges. For more information about the latest set of access agreements and the process of negotiation and approval please refer to our annual Access agreements: Key statistics and analysis publications at www.offa.org.uk/publications/analysis-data-and-progress-reports.

We also help to improve and share understanding about what approaches are most effective by carrying out our own research and analysis and working collaboratively with the sector to identify gaps in evidence and support research to fill those gaps.

And we work to keep fair access issues high on the Government and public agenda, by raising issues with Government and the higher education sector as a whole, championing success and identifying those areas where progress needs to be made, so that policy-makers and the general public understand why fair access is in all our interests and how it contributes to social mobility.

In carrying out these activities, we take a student lifecycle approach. In short, this approach recognises that access does not stop at enrolment, and that for fair access to be meaningful

students must have the opportunity to fulfil their potential – successfully completing their studies and being prepared for what they choose to do next.

OFFA's strategy has two key aims.

- Firstly, we want to increase the proportion of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education. This has already increased substantially over the past ten years: the participation rate for 18 year olds from low participation neighbourhoods entering higher education was 19.5 per cent in 2016, up from 11.3 per cent in 2006. However, large gaps remain between the most advantaged and the most disadvantaged.
- Secondly, we want to specifically address the large participation gap between the most advantaged and the most disadvantaged at our universities with the highest entry tariffs. Despite recent improvements, the most disadvantaged 20 per cent of young people are still around 6 times less likely to attend these universities than the most advantaged 20 per cent.

These are not just dry statistics – they represent thousands of talented people who are not achieving their potential because of their background

Access agreements, and thus OFFA's remit, concern students from 'under-represented and disadvantaged groups'. These groups can include (but are not limited to):

- people from low income backgrounds (the definition of 'low income' varies from year to year: [more details](#))
- people from lower socio-economic groups or from neighbourhoods where higher education participation is low, including White males from economically disadvantaged backgrounds ([more details](#))
- [Black and minority ethnic groups](#)
- [disabled people](#)
- [mature](#) and [part-time](#) learners
- [care leavers](#)
- [carers](#)
- [people estranged from their families](#)
- people from gypsy and Traveller communities.
- refugees
- people with mental health problems, Specific Learning Difficulties, and/or who are on the autism spectrum.

Some of these students will face particular issues in relation to particular stages of the student lifecycle (access – student success – progression to employment or further study). Our guidance does not provide an exhaustive list. In our guidance, we require institutions to make use of their own data and research to understand the issues that affect their student population.

2015 marked ten years since OFFA approved the first access agreements for English higher education. In those ten years access agreements have supported and encouraged numerous improvements in fair access and widening participation. On our website, we celebrate ten of those successes. www.offa.org.uk/uncategorized/celebrating-ten-years-of-access-agreements

In 2014, Offa produced a joint report with the Higher Education Funding Council for England setting out a shared strategy for higher education access and student success. The report, plus supporting evidence, are available on our website at www.offa.org.uk/publications/national-strategy-for-access-and-student-success/