Access agreements for 2014

NUS guidance to students’ unions in England on how to work effectively with your institution to improve access to higher education

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Introduction: growing partnership on access work

Championing wider and fairer access to higher education is one of the most important things that we can do as student leaders and representatives. At a time when we are seeing increased marketisation of education and falling student numbers it is crucial that we take up opportunities to work with our institutions to ensure that the progress made on widening participation in the past five years does not go to waste.

The annual access agreement that all institutions charging over £6,000 for undergraduate courses must complete and submit to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) creates one such opportunity. In the past two years OFFA has become more and more supportive of the need for students’ unions and guilds to be consulted in the creation of the access agreement, a position that I welcome wholeheartedly.

This year, your institution has to state, with examples, how it has engaged with students and students’ unions. More than this, OFFA’s guidance to institutions recommends engaging students and unions in the delivery and monitoring of access work and suggests that institutions may wish to annex commentary from the students’ union on the content of the access agreement.

But rather than merely consulting students’ unions in creating a statutory piece of paper, I would like to see real and meaningful partnership on access work across the UK. In England, this means not just engaging in the creation of the access agreement, but students’ unions working with institutions to deliver and support outreach activities and initiatives that contribute to disadvantaged or underrepresented students’ retention, progression and success.

This guidance offers support on how you can work most effectively with your institution to make your arguments, defend students’ interests and engage with access practice through the creation of the access agreement. Institutions have said that they have found our previous guidance helpful, and you are welcome to share this document with interested institutional staff.

In addition to this guidance you will be most effective at engaging if you read the following:

Your institution’s access agreement for 2013 (this is a public document available through OFFA’s website)  
http://www.offa.org.uk/access-agreements/

OFFA’s guidance to institutions on the 2014 access agreements  

HEFCE’s guidance to institutions on the 2014 National Scholarship allocations  
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2013/201302/HEFCE%202013-02.pdf

Students’ unions vary widely in their resource and capacity to engage, and it would be unreasonable to expect every union to engage in the same way or on the same issues. I encourage you to think about what you want from the agreement, be prepared to work constructively with your institution where possible, and contact NUS for help and advice at any time.

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1. NUS analysis of access agreements

In August 2012 we asked staff and officers in students’ unions to volunteer their time to help us conduct an analysis of all the access agreements in England working from a template that we provided. NUS resources alone could not have accomplished this task and we try wherever possible to work with our members in creating guidance and resources.

Our volunteers worked hard to be accurate and we have done random checks to verify the data they inputted, but readers should be aware that we were unable to verify every detail. As such we have not identified individual institutions except where the data was published by OFFA.

In the end we were able to analyse all university and small and specialist institutions of higher education, except for one institution whose 2013 access agreement is not yet published. We were unable to extend our analysis to colleges delivering higher education courses.

We are also aware that in matters such as, for example, ‘provision of element of student choice in how financial support is received’ or ‘criteria for allocation of national scholarships’ is sometimes subjective and always a matter of understanding the context. We have been able to give a picture of the scale of what we consider best practice which we hope will support our members to campaign for improvements, but we also urge careful attention to context, detail and the evidence available of what works in supporting access to, and success in, higher education for disadvantaged students.

Increasingly, rather than using the very blunt and exclusive category of mission groups to undertake our analysis, we are using the HEFCE peer groups that compare institutions with similar missions and funding levels. To identify which peer group your institution falls into, consult our charts of access expenditure per head.

NUS incredibly grateful to the staff and officers who volunteered their time so that we could analyse the content of 2013 access agreements and ensure our guidance this year is up to date and informed by the views of our membership.

The big picture: institutional access expenditure per disadvantaged student

Comparing one institution’s expenditure on access to another’s is difficult because institutions are of different sizes and levels of wealth so overall expenditure does not help us compare accurately.

We have constructed our comparative chart of access expenditure on a per-head basis, taking the projected institutional access expenditure for 2013-14 and dividing it by the latest available number of OFFA-countable (ie disadvantaged) students at each institution (from 2010-11) to give a rough estimate of access ‘spend’ per disadvantaged student.¹

Obviously as these two numbers are taken from different years they are not directly comparable and so should be taken as indicative only. We have also plotted the total numbers of OFFA-countable students at each institution to show the context of the spend-per-head figure.

It is important to note that the proportion of disadvantaged students at any given institution is not necessarily in proportion to overall student numbers, because institutions have different levels of success in recruiting disadvantaged students. This is why it is important to compare within peer groups rather than overall. Also note that access expenditure includes student financial support as well as expenditure on outreach and retention activities.

¹ This data was taken from OFFA’s two publications ‘2013-14 access agreements including institutional expenditure and fee levels (data tables)’ and ‘Access agreement and widening participation strategic assessment monitoring: outcomes for 2010-11 (Annex C)’, both published in July 2012 and available to download from http://www.offa.org.uk/publications/
2. Financial support for students

Key messages
- We know from Pound in Your Pocket that cash bursaries are the way that students prefer to receive their financial support, more than fee waivers or university service or accommodation discounts so we need to keep making the arguments for bursaries.
- The maximum cash bursary for the National Scholarship Programme is still £1,000 out of a £3,000 scholarship so there is still a need to find alternatives to fee waivers so that students get an immediate benefit of being awarded a scholarship.
- Some institutions are not offering the maximum £1,000 cash bursary to national scholarship holders.
- Our researchers indicate that it is the impact of student union engagement that often convinces institutions to seek alternatives to fee waivers.
- Only 6 per cent of access spend is currently allocated on the basis of student choice of how financial support is received.
- There is some controversy about whether more money should be spent on student financial support or on outreach and retention work and you should expect to have this discussion with your institution.

The value of cash bursaries – making the arguments

Our Pound in Your Pocket research demonstrates that given the choice between a cash bursary, fee waiver or university services discounts 64 per cent of non-NHS undergraduate students expressed a preference for cash.²

Fee waivers are a problem because they offer no immediate benefit to students. Graduates pay back their student loan in proportion to their income for 30 years after they start earning £21,000. The amount repaid is determined by future income, not the size of your fee debt. The only benefit of a fee waiver would be years down the road, when students are struggling to make ends meet now.

It is widely acknowledged that the size of the bursary available is unlikely to have a great deal of impact on which institution prospective students choose. This was demonstrated by OFFA research in 2010 which analysed application patterns and showed that disadvantaged young people were not choosing institutions that offered higher bursaries in greater numbers than they had been before bursaries were introduced.³ This research is often cited to suggest that bursaries ‘don’t work’ – which is quite a leap from what this research actually shows.

Specific institutional bursaries cannot be effective in influencing student choice of institution when there is no clear entitlement to a bursary at the point of application. The general availability of financial support may be effective in convincing students who are afraid they cannot afford to attend higher education that support will be available whatever institution they choose, but this assumption has never been tested. Neither has research been done (that we know of) into whether the choice between a bursary or no bursary would have an impact.

It is important to be clear what you think bursaries are for and be ready to present your evidence of their value to your student body. 39 per cent of undergraduate Pound in Your Pocket survey respondents say they have seriously considered leaving their course, and over 40 per cent of these cite financial difficulty as a reason. Half of undergraduate respondents say they regularly worry about meeting basic living costs.

Students from low participation neighbourhoods are more likely to work for more than 16 hours per week, and more likely to report that they struggle to concentrate on their studies without worrying about finance. Moreover, the amount of hours worked outside the course of study correlated positively with worries about ability to meet basic living expenses and negatively with ability to concentrate on studies.

² All Pound in Your Pocket data cited is available from www.poundinyourpocket.org.uk
The *Pound in Your Pocket* evidence suggests that the real value of cash bursaries may be in supporting lower-income students to work fewer hours, meet basic living expenses, stay on course and concentrate on their studies. Any supporting evidence you can offer in defence of this view derived from your own work with your students or through your advice centre will be helpful in making the arguments.

**Student choice**

NUS has repeatedly said that where there is debate about the merits of fee waivers versus bursaries or accommodation/services discounts institutions should do their utmost to provide a choice to students in how their financial support is received. OFFA estimates that only 6 per cent of access spend in England is determined by students’ choices, and this could be higher.

Our research shows that student choice is a feature of student financial support throughout all kinds of higher education institutions. Our researchers indicate in many cases that the choice is limited, so there may be a case for extending student choice as far as possible rather than, for example, offering the choice only between an accommodation discount and a fee waiver.

There is also some evidence, demonstrated in the chart below, that the more wealthy institutions are in a better position to offer choice to their students.

![Number of institutions with some element of student choice in their financial support system by peer group](image)

**Bursaries versus outreach and retention expenditure**

OFFA has observed in its guidance that the bulk of access expenditure is currently on student financial support with 45 per cent of expenditure on bursaries, 24 per cent on fee waivers. OFFA hopes to direct further expenditure towards outreach and retention expenditure, which is currently only 25 per cent of all access expenditure in England, and for which there is strong evidence of a positive effect on access and retention.

These choices are complex and there is probably no right answer, but it is important to acknowledge the importance of outreach and retention work rather than taking a narrow focus on student financial support. Activities delivered in collaboration with other higher and further education institutions, with schools and the local community, are of particular value in supporting progression into higher education for disadvantaged groups. There is a continuing need for these activities to be supported, particularly after the loss of Aimhigher.

On the other hand, volume of expenditure is an input measure, and does not necessarily accurately represent the impact or outcomes of this spend.

Whatever the terms of the discussion around the appropriate balance of expenditure, be sure to seek an evidence-based approach from your institution.
The National Scholarship Programme

In the past institutions were allocated National Scholarship funding from the government in proportion to their undergraduate student numbers. For 2014 this is changing to reflect the proportion of disadvantaged students at each institution, which is a much more sensible way of allocating the cash. Both the fee and maintenance elements of national scholarships will also be available to part-time students on a pro-rata basis.

Other aspects of the National Scholarship Programme remain the same:
- The government funding must be matched by institutions on the basis of provisional allocations set out in HEFCE’s NSP guidance.
- Institutions will be awarded a fixed number of £3,000 scholarships which must be spent on students with a family income of under £25,000 for their first year of study.
- Only £1,000 of the £3,000 scholarship can be a cash bursary; the rest must be either university services or fee waivers.
- Institutions can use their match funding either to create extra scholarships or to top up government scholarships for the second and third years of study.

This year’s guidance emphasises the importance of making prospective students aware of the availability of national scholarships and sets out some good practice in how to do this.

All institutions should be offering the maximum possible cash bursary to the holders of national scholarships. However, this is clearly not the case across the board, as the chart below shows. If your institution is one of those that does not offer the full cash bursary this is a clear area for intervention.

\[...\]

**Institutions allocating national scholarships**

Although the allocation method is improving, meaning that institutions with more disadvantaged students will probably have slightly more scholarships available than in the past, it is unlikely that institutions with the highest numbers of disadvantaged students will be able to offer an entitlement to a national scholarship.

Our analysis of access agreements suggests that all kinds of institutions set selection criteria for their national scholarship allocation. However, this is much more likely to occur in peer groups E and F. You should ensure you are happy with the allocation criteria. It is good practice to try to target disadvantaged groups such as students who have been in care, disabled students or those with the very lowest incomes.

It is not absolutely wrong, but it is certainly less ideal, to allocate scholarships on the basis of academic achievement or UCAS tariff points, because this is not on the basis of financial need.

Some institutions have chosen to create an entitlement to a national scholarship for all eligible students by more than match funding their national scholarship allocation. If your institution has chosen to do this you should applaud their spirit, but look closely at how they are ensuring that benefits go to students – if all their expenditure is going on fee waivers then they would...
be best advised to use the extra money to pay for different financial support systems, outreach or retention.

Alternatives to fee waivers for the National Scholarship Programme

The £1,000 cash bursary maximum presents a problem for institutions seeking to avoid fee waivers. Several institutions have successfully instituted alternatives to fee waivers through provision of discounts on accommodation and credit systems that can be exchanged for university services such as print credits, catering and book purchase.

Offering alternatives to fee waivers is definitely good practice, but can be problematic if the only alternative available is an accommodation discount – this is not appropriate for mature students or students who do not live in institutional accommodation.

Institutions matching funding for the National Scholarship Programme

In 2014 there will be £150 million distributed to institutions to support the National Scholarship Programme. Institutions are expected to match fund their allocation based on published provisional allocations.

Our members have told us that in some cases the demands of match funding have sucked up all the available access funding leaving little or nothing to spare for institutional bursaries, outreach or retention expenditure. If this is the case, OFFA has said that institutions may appeal to OFFA for permission to less than match fund NSP so that they are able to reserve money for other activities.

Some institutions have chosen to more than match fund the National Scholarship Programme. While the intent may be to create an entitlement to funding for all eligible students, we would argue that the restrictions of the programme and its incentivising of fee waivers make it a poor investment of funds that could be spent on cash bursaries and/or outreach and retention activities.

Fees for placement years

A few institutions have chosen to charge fees for placement years on a pro-rata basis of 0.5 – in other words charging students up to £4,500 for their placement year or year abroad.

OFFA says in its guidance that government has indicated that it intends to reduce this fee to 15 per cent of the maximum fee, though this has not been passed in law as yet. Although it is technically legal for institutions to charge in excess for the placement year, it is obviously bad practice in discouraging students from taking up courses with placement opportunities, and may be something you wish to raise.
3. Outreach, retention and student success activities

Key messages

- Nobody expects students’ unions to be access experts, so we are just flagging up some good practice you may wish to raise with your institution (or think about yourselves).
- In outreach it’s all about collaborative activity, honing the targets and working with a variety of student groups. Some unions will want to continue or extend their work here.
- For retention it’s all about developing student engagement, attainment and potential to progress to employment or postgraduate study. All unions have an important role to play here.
- For all activities, there needs to be a strong evidence base and/or a clear intention to monitor the success of the activity from the very beginning, to ensure it is having an impact.
- We’d also encourage you to think about how the students’ union can shape, contribute to, support or otherwise be a partner in the access activities your institution intends to deliver.

A ‘student lifecycle’ approach

A student lifecycle approach thinks about the entirety of the student journey from application to leaving higher education, and considers the barriers for different student groups at each stage and what interventions might break down those barriers. ‘Interventions’ are things that a university or SU does that are intended to make a difference in some way.

Students’ unions are in a great position to articulate the different stages of students’ lifecycles or aspects of students’ experiences. You could start by creating a matrix of different student groups (like part-time, mature, low income, no family background of HE, disabled) against different stages of the HE journey, such as application/admissions, induction, financial support, welfare support needs, student academic engagement and representation, academic success, employability and progression. Specific student experiences like placements, years abroad or independent study modules/dissertations might also be relevant.

For each student group consideration needs to be given to the barriers those students might face to full and successful participation in every stage of the student lifecycle, and what interventions or changes might break down those barriers. Some examples of effective interventions include provision of clear, useful information; academic support and advice; peer mentoring; provision of bursaries and emergency financial support; arranging work placements and on-campus employment programmes; summer schools; student mentors; HE taster programmes; compact or progression arrangements with local colleges; use of contextual data in admissions.

Interventions can be projects and activities targeted at a specific student group, or they can be investment in core services and activities that are known to have particular benefit for a disadvantaged or underrepresented group. Developing the evidence base for the value of different kinds of interventions is really important otherwise you risk wasting money and effort on interventions that don’t work – so your institution should be working from the existing evidence base and monitoring the impact of its interventions.

Institutional incentives

The effect of higher fees and changes to student number controls has been to introduce greater volatility in the market for higher education. Some institutions have been able to expand their student numbers – and hence their income from fees – while others have struggled to recruit the students they need.

Access agreements tend to encourage institutions to set targets for their own recruitment rather than do work on supporting progression into higher education in general. This means that there is a risk of institutions competing to recruit a limited number of available ‘access’ students at age 17 or 18 rather than working together to diversify the student body in higher education across the board. OFFA has recognised the challenges here and is encouraging institutions to start to fix the problem through targeting primary schools and working in collaboration with each other.
Targeting primary schools

OFFA is encouraging universities to target at least some of their outreach on primary school children. The most effective way of supporting young people who are least likely to progress into higher education is to start developing their understanding of university at an early age and throughout their educational journey. If universities wait until young people are in secondary school they may already be turned off to the idea of higher education, or have not developed the habits of study that will enable them to demonstrate their ability to progress into higher education.

Collaboration

Many institutions have already set up collaborative activity with other institutions in their region – institutions also work with schools, colleges, local authorities and community groups. OFFA is encouraging more of this kind of activity. The big difference is that OFFA has said that institutions should be looking at developing collaborative targets that link to their collaborative activity. This means that if an institution puts a lot of effort into outreach and developing young people's understanding of HE, but those students end up going to the university up the road, the efforts of the first institution can be recognised and taken into account.

Contextual data

Using contextual data in admissions means taking factors other than grades into account when making decisions about admissions. It can be a way of assessing someone's potential for success in higher education, rather than only going on prior attainment, which is always shaped by context and schools attended (private school students tend to do better in A-levels than state school students for example, but this is not reflected in performance while at university). Some institutions are suspicious of contextual data, as they associate it with lowering standards and/or unfair admissions practice.

Find out more about contextual data

Retention and student success

Traditionally institutions have set targets around retention, measured as the drop-out rate during the first year of study. Increasingly institutions are being encouraged to look at student success as well as retention – just staying on course is no good if you are not able to reach your potential and progress into either employment or further study.

Rather than just looking at retention figures, institutions should look at where students progress into, levels of student engagement, and academic attainment – and determine whether some groups are suffering some kind of structural disadvantage. For example, in some institutions it is possible to demonstrate different attainment outcomes between men and women, younger and mature students or BME and White students. This can be evidence of structural disadvantage that requires investigation.

Likewise some groups may find it easier to engage academically than others, which may mean that academic support needs to be increased. Students who have to work as well as study may find their academic engagement is affected, or that there is less time for taking up opportunities that develop employability skills. Where institutions work with employers they should work to tackle practices like unpaid internships that advantage the middle classes.

The What Works? report on student retention and success

Student union engagement

Students’ unions can support the delivery of institution-led interventions in many ways – for example, some students' unions channel schools outreach through their volunteering programmes. But engagement in the union can itself support retention and success, and it is worth examining how the union can make itself as accessible as possible, as a core part of the student experience.
Target groups

There are many types of student that might require an ‘access’ approach to be taken – higher education in Britain evolved to suit the needs of young, white, middle class 18 year olds intending to study full-time, and while this is not the demographic of most students nowadays patterns of higher education provision tend still to be geared around these students.

In most cases, social or economic disadvantage will interact with having specific needs due to being outside the mainstream in some respect. It is worth asking detailed questions about which student groups are being served by your access agreement and why.

Social and economic disadvantage can be measured through the national social class classification (NS-SEC), GCSE performance of your secondary school, whether you live in an area that has low participation in HE (POLAR data), whether you were eligible for free school meals, family income below a certain threshold, or whether you are the first of your family to go to higher education.

Institutions will choose which combination of these proxies for disadvantage best helps them support fair access, but a lot of this choice is shaped by national reporting requirements eg to the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

Mature students are not necessarily economically disadvantaged but may qualify as an access group because of their specific needs and because on balance they are more likely to come from a lower social class, and have non-traditional pre-HE qualifications. Mature students need support to balance life with study and are more likely to drop out of HE than younger students. They are also harder to recruit into higher education, as they are not always captured through the school/college networks. The million+ and NUS report, *Never too Late to Learn* explores these issues in more detail.

Disabled students are underrepresented in higher education compared to the general population. They have very specific needs that must be met to maximise their chance of success in a higher education environment, but may also have encountered past struggles with education that can lower prior attainment eg due to illness or undiagnosed learning difficulties.

Students that have come from care are deeply underrepresented in higher education and face enormous barriers to educational success. Institutions that have the Buttle UK Quality Mark are committed to enhanced support for care leavers, such as guaranteed accommodation all year round, and the cost of the Quality Mark can be included in the access agreement. Buttle UK also suggest that excellent support for care leavers is very transferable to other vulnerable groups in higher education.

Students with caring responsibilities are rarely considered in access agreements but will have specific support needs that, if not met, endanger their successful participation in HE. Caring responsibilities includes caring for an adult (eg because of disability) as well as being a parent or guardian. NUS has produced a *briefing on student carers*.

Black and minority ethnic students also tend to be underrepresented in higher education and may in some cases experience differential outcomes from white students. The attainment of BME students is something that institutions should investigate and take measures to address; *the Higher Education Academy has work in this area* that is an essential resource for those looking to tackle issues around BME student success.

Subject- or course-level differential participation patterns should also be addressed – a number of institutions have adopted targets around recruiting men into education and teacher training, or women into science subjects. Professional courses such as Law and Medicine tend to be more accessible to those with prior advantage. Access agreements can and should take a holistic approach to progressing towards a time when no aspect of higher education is inaccessible or unrepresentative.
4. Student consultation on access agreements

Key messages

- OFFA is more positive than it has ever been about student engagement in access. That’s down to our hard work so far, so we should build on our successes
- You have told us that institutions could do more to take a partnership approach and consult with you – but that timing was a major issue last year
- There is some evidence of students’ unions developing partnerships with their institutions in delivering the activities described in access agreements. This is good practice and we should hope to grow it this year where possible.

What OFFA is saying

This year’s OFFA guidance goes further than it ever has in encouraging institutions not just to consult with students about the contents of the access agreement through the students’ union, but in promoting students’ unions as prospective partners in delivering access activities and in decision-making around student financial support.

As before, institutions must describe how they have consulted with students in creating their access agreements in the body of the agreement.

OFFA has also said that it welcomes feedback from students’ unions about their access agreement – this can be submitted either as an annex to the access agreement, or in a separate communication directly with OFFA.

Consultation in 2012

We conducted a survey in August 2012 to get the views of students’ unions on their experiences of being consulted for their access agreements. We had 57 responses, spread very evenly across the different types of institution.

Of these, there was no standard way of working with their institution and no consensus on which method of engagement was the most useful. In the vast majority of cases respondents found all the engagement methods useful at least to some extent.

23 had met with the head of their institution
28 worked with specific institutional staff
24 engaged in a cross-institutional committee or working group
12 received briefings from their institution

When asked what should change about how their institution engaged with the students’ union time was a common issue. Many students’ unions still feel that they should be engaged at an earlier stage in the process. This should be taken in the context of tight timescales in 2012.

Unions felt that their engagement should be:

- Timely – to allow opportunities to engage before decisions have been made
- Formalised – creating a space for the union to have a say rather than dependent on casual conversations with senior management
- On multiple levels – as many university staff as possible who have input into the agreement, as well as all the formal groups or committees that have oversight or input, should be engaged in conversations with the relevant students’ union officers (and, where appropriate, staff).
NUS recommendation for student engagement in access

We believe that engagement should take into account the full range of activities involved in creating the access agreement.

To create a great access agreement, institutions need to examine their access record and decide where their priorities lie.

They need to look at the evidence of what is working and what is not and where students are struggling. They may need to gather evidence in some cases.

They need to decide who needs to be involved to develop the programme of financial support and activities for the year ahead.

They need to work out how these activities can best be delivered and they need to make sure they are monitoring their activities.

Students’ unions can and should be involved in all of these activities, to the extent that they are able.

Institutions should not be able to set the terms of the engagement – this should be the basis of a discussion and agreement between whoever has oversight of the access agreement and the responsible student officer.

Our ambition is for institutions and students’ unions to work towards a partnership approach on access.

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