

Supporting social mobility through higher education access, success and progression

This paper is exempt from publication until the publication of the OfS's regulatory framework and access and participation guidance. Review date: 28 February, 2018.

- 1 This paper seeks the views of the OfS board on the priorities and approach to delivering its access and participation functions in support of social mobility. It seeks to define the challenge for English higher education with regard to social mobility and the current position, then sets out broad proposals for OfS work in this area. The board's advice will inform the specification of guidance for the first round of access and participation plans, which will be issued alongside the Regulatory Framework at the end of February, and the development of more detailed and measurable activities through the OfS strategy and business plan. It will also inform the approach to OfS communications in this area during the coming months.
- 2 The OfS board is invited to advise on :
 - a. The alignment between higher education access and participation and social mobility in paragraphs 3 and 4.
 - b. The analysis that higher education is improving opportunity, but not achieving equality of opportunity, and the imperative to address gaps in access, success and progression, as set out in paragraph 11.
 - c. The proposals for how OfS should support access and participation as a market regulator in paragraphs 13-17.
 - d. The proposals for OfS priorities with regard to access and participation in paragraphs 18 and 19.
 - e. The approach proposed for the first round of access and participation plans for 2019-20 and their reform for 2020-21, as set out in paragraphs 23-25.
 - f. The analysis of other levers that OfS can use to support access and participation, as set out in paragraph 26.

What is the social mobility challenge for English higher education?

- 3 As the government identifies in its social mobility action plan¹, every individual in England should have the opportunity to build a good life for themselves and to reach their potential, regardless of their background. This is important for individuals and for a cohesive, just and prosperous society. But for many people and in many places in

¹ DfE 2017, Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential -

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-social-mobility-through-education>

England, where you start from profoundly affects your life chances and changes we can expect to the economy and to jobs could compound this².

- 4 Higher education can be a good life in itself and a gateway to it in the future. It provides knowledge, experiences and friendships that are valuable in their own terms, and skills, credentials and contacts that are important for the next stage. It can improve and indeed transform lives for those who gain access and succeed in it, whilst entrenching disadvantage for those who do not. As it develops into the future, higher education could compound the social mobility problem or contribute to its solution. This will be influenced by who gains access to higher education, where and what they study, whether they succeed when they are in higher education and what they do afterwards. For some people, higher education can achieve social mobility through a transformational experience, involving residential study away from home and entry to elite professions. But it is just as important for higher education to improve the lives of people who want to study at home, to live and work in the community where they grew up, and to up-skill later in life. This is crucial if improvements to higher education access are to be consistent with social inclusion.
- 5 Policy and research in areas like social mobility necessarily use broad categories to identify background and outcomes. This paper is no different, using rates of access to higher education to identify students from disadvantaged backgrounds and characteristics such as ethnicity and disability that are protected in law. Within these categories, there are many different circumstances and intersecting characteristics. We need in all of our work to be evidence-based, considering inter-sections of characteristics and local circumstances, and never losing sight of the individuality of each student. Our objective should be to support access, success and progression for every individual student, whatever their background and wherever they study.
- 6 Through inter-sectional analysis - combining area-based measures of higher education participation with factors such as ethnicity, sex and free school meal status - we can now identify more forensically those students who are most under-represented in higher education and their subsequent performance, both within individual providers and across the sector as a whole. We can use this data and our analysis of patterns in different places³ - to focus our efforts to support students at each stage. The government has set its access ambitions using a measure based on full-time participation by 18 year olds, but we propose in this paper to develop a new measure that will embrace both young and adult higher education participation, reflecting our objective to support all students.

What is the current position with regard to higher education access, success and progression?

- 7 Universities and colleges have been successful in improving access to higher education during the last decade and this has continued despite successive increases to tuition

² IPPR 2017, Managing Automation: Employment, Inequality and Ethics in the Digital Age - <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/managing-automation>

³ HEFCE 2015, Gaps in Young Participation in Higher Education - <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/gaps/>

fees, which do not appear to have deterred most young people from higher education to date. You are, though, still substantially less likely to achieve the qualifications needed to study in higher education if you are from a disadvantaged background and these gaps in educational attainment are apparent from early years⁴. This particularly restricts access to the most selective universities, which provide credentials and connections that are influential in the labour market. Among young entrants, the entry rate for the most disadvantaged group increased by 82% between 2006 and 2017. You are still, however, 2.3 times less likely to enter higher education if you are from the least advantaged group relative to the most advantaged group and 5.5 times less likely in the higher tariff institutions. These figures rise to 3.9 and 9.8 once inter-sections of student characteristics are taken into account; the higher education participation rate for white males on free school meals in the lowest participation areas is 6.5%⁵. The government has established ambitions to improve the rate of entry of young BME students, which is likely to be achieved, and young students from disadvantaged groups, which is not. Alongside this, fewer people are improving their capabilities and credentials by entering higher education whilst they are in work and later in life. Part-time study has more than halved since 2011-12, with most of this due to the decline in study by people older than 25 and studying at less than 50% intensity⁶.

- 8 In order for individuals to unlock their potential, they need not just to gain access to higher education, but also to have a successful experience during their studies. Students from the lowest income backgrounds often incur the highest debts whilst they are in higher education as they have few other sources of support. So there is a particular imperative to support positive experiences and outcomes for these students.
- 9 Non-continuation rates are low in English higher education compared with many other countries and they have been sustained despite the expansion and diversification of the student body. Notwithstanding this, the data shows that they are affected by student background, reaching 9% for the most disadvantaged group within the young student population and more than 10% for black students. This represents a 4 percentage point gap between the rates for the most and least advantaged groups, and between white and black students⁷. There is also long-standing evidence that your background affects your likelihood of being satisfied with your academic experience and achieving the best grades. Black Caribbean and Asian Bangladeshi students respectively report 4.1% and 2.1% lower satisfaction with their experience than white students, even once their characteristics other than ethnicity are taken into account. Disabled students are 2.7% less satisfied using the same analysis and there is a broad correlation between these patterns and the degree outcomes for these groups⁸. Students from the most disadvantaged groups are only marginally less likely overall to gain a 1st or 2:1 given the same entry qualifications as others, and indeed state school students perform well relative to those from the independent sector within the same analysis⁹. There is,

⁴ OFFA 2017, Raising Attainment in Schools and Colleges to Widen Participation - <https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/>

⁵ UCAS 2017, End of Cycle Report: Patterns by Applicant Characteristics - <https://www.ucas.com/file/140396/download?token=ekh0PW6p>

⁶ HEFCE 2017 analysis from HESA 2015-16 student record

⁷ HEFCE 2017 analysis from HESA student record

⁸ HEFCE 2018 tbc, National Student Survey 11 Year Review: Results and Trends Analysis

⁹ HEFCE 2015, Differences in Degree Outcomes - <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2015/201521/>

however, a profound gap based on ethnicity; black students, for example, are 15% less likely to gain a 1st or 2:1 than white students and there are gaps across all entry grades. These patterns influence progression to postgraduate study, but the availability of finance has until recently been a greater concern. Even among students who say they intend to progress to postgraduate study, the proportion who ultimately progress is 9 percentage points lower for the least than the most advantaged group¹⁰. The introduction of master's loans from 2016-17 has supported an upturn in postgraduate demand, but we have not yet been able to draw conclusions about their take-up by different groups of students.

- 10 Higher education can enhance wellbeing and resilience¹¹, enabling insights and friendships that can last throughout life. It also serves as the recognised route to many high skilled and professional jobs. Graduates from most courses continue to be more likely to gain employment and earn a premium beyond those who do not enter higher education¹². Employers also continue to report high demand for graduates with higher level skills¹³. Your employment prospects after graduation can, however, be affected your social and economic capital, which can influence the experience, connections and attributes that help in many areas of the jobs market. The proportion of graduates entering professional jobs within 40 months of their studies is 5 percentage points lower for students from the most disadvantaged group than would be expected given their qualifications and 5 percentage points lower than the level for the most advantaged group¹⁴. For Black Caribbean students, the figures are 17 and 9 percentage points using the same analysis. If you are from a lower income family your career earnings are likely to be lower, even given the same characteristics¹⁵. The earnings for students from higher income families are reported to be 25% higher at the median than lower income families and 10% higher once entry characteristics and the institution attended are taken into account. This represents a lower return on the investment in higher education, but also a failure to unlock potential, both for individuals and for society as a whole.
- 11 Based on these patterns, we can conclude that higher education has enabled absolute, but not relative social mobility during the last two decades. It has increased opportunity, but not secured equality of opportunity, and this extends through all stages of the student lifecycle, including transition into work. In this context, the imperative as we move into a new regulatory regime is to address the sustained gaps in access between disadvantaged and other groups, whilst giving more focus to addressing gaps in attainment within and progression from higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, students from ethnic minority groups and disabled

¹⁰ HEFCE 2016, Intentions After Graduation Survey Analysis -

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/iags2016/>

¹¹ HEFCE 2017, The Wellbeing of Graduates - <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2017/201731/>

¹² IFS and Nuffield Foundation 2016, Family Background and University Success -

<https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/Presentations/Family%20Background%20and%20University%20Success.pdf>

¹³ CBI / Pearson 2017, Education and Skills Survey 2017 -

<http://www.cbi.org.uk/index.cfm/?api/render/file/?method=inline&fileID=DB1A9FE5-5459-4AA2-8B44798DD5B15E7>

¹⁴ HEFCE 2016, Differences in Employment Outcomes -

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/employment/201011/>

¹⁵ IFS 2016, How English Domiciled Graduate Earnings Vary With Gender, Institution Attended, Subject and Socio-economic Category - <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/8233>

students. This needs to be addressed both within individual providers and across the sector as a whole.

How does HERA and the Regulatory Framework consultation position OfS in relation to social mobility?

- 12 These patterns arise from two decades of policy and practice to widen access to higher education, during which successive governments' ambitions to increase higher education participation have been accompanied by successive reforms to tuition fees and student finance. Activity in this area was initially funded by HEFCE grant to support collaborative outreach and share the risk of recruiting and supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds, which continues at a lower level today¹⁶. Access agreements, administered by OFFA, were introduced as a regulatory requirement to charge the higher tuition fee from 2006-07. The focus was initially on re-distributing a proportion of tuition fee income as bursaries to students from low income backgrounds to minimise the financial barriers to participation, but this has increasingly been balanced by investment in outreach and support for student success. Through management-based regulation, providers have established their own targets and been expected to deliver a credible plan of activities and investment to meet them¹⁷. In many cases, negotiation with the Director for Fair Access has yielded more challenging targets and higher levels of expenditure than initially proposed, with those providers performing worst on access committing the highest expenditure. No plan has ultimately been refused and no penalty applied for failure to deliver a plan. As tuition fees have increased and student demand has been sustained, so has the financial commitment through access agreements, reaching more than £800m. OFFA and HEFCE have also taken steps to develop effective practice across the sector, particularly to support priority groups of students and to improve evaluation, which has itself informed the negotiation of access agreements.
- 13 As a market regulator, we propose that OfS should work differently from HEFCE and OFFA. We need to identify more clearly where market forces will drive progress, and to be more forensic about where and how we intervene to make the market work in the interests of students and society. We still know too little about the effectiveness of different forms of investment in relation to the outcomes achieved at different points of the educational cycle. Money spent in this area could otherwise be devoted to teaching and every student successfully supported to access higher education makes a substantial personal and financial commitment. So, we need smarter progress on access, not just faster progress. This requires a stronger focus on outcomes and better use of evidence to target regulatory pressure so we can be more confident that investment has the intended effect. It also requires more focus to be given to unlocking the social mobility potential of increasing access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds by improving their success in and beyond higher education.
- 14 The Higher Education and Research Act establishes a general duty for the Office for Students to have regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity with regard to

¹⁶ HEFCE 2017, How We Fund Access and Student Success - <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/sas/sasfunding/changes2017-18/>

¹⁷ OFFA 2017, Annual Access Agreement and Monitoring Guidance - <https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/annual-guidance/>

access and participation in higher education. By focusing on participation, as well as access, the Act recognises that social mobility requires equality of opportunity beyond the point of entry to higher education. The Act requires every higher education provider intending to charge the higher fee level for undergraduate courses to agree an access and participation plan with OfS, which can delegate this responsibility to the Director of Fair Access and Participation. The expected content of a plan is set out in the Act, in regulations and through guidance to be provided by OfS through the Director. The requirement is enforceable through a more nuanced set of regulatory interventions than those previously available to the Director for Fair Access. It is supported by a mandatory ongoing condition of registration for providers in both of the approved categories to provide and to publish transparency information on the admission and attainment of students from different backgrounds. There is a specific duty for OfS to protect academic freedom in its assessment of plans, with reference to admissions, staff and courses of study, and a general duty to have regard to the principles of best regulatory practice, including that activity should be proportionate and action targeted only where it is needed. Alongside this, the general duties for OfS to have regard to the need to promote quality, choice and value for money, and to encourage competition, all have the potential to be delivered in a manner that supports the access and participation duty.

- 15 The Regulatory Framework consultation identifies access, success and progression as the first primary regulatory objective for OfS. An approved access and participation plan is the first initial and ongoing condition of registration (A1) for those providers in the approved (fee cap) category intending to charge the higher fee level for undergraduate courses. A published access and participation statement is the first initial and ongoing condition of registration (A2) for those in this or the approved category charging up to the basic amount. The consultation also, though, makes clear that OfS will promote access and participation through other conditions, such as those on quality (B1), support for students (B2) and successful outcomes (B3), and its broader sector-level activities.
- 16 Removing barriers to competition provides strong incentives for higher education providers to sustain and grow their activity by reaching out to students who are currently under-represented in HE. These incentives are, however, least powerful for the higher tariff providers and courses, which are an important concern for social mobility given the outcomes arising for students. The cost of supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds, coupled with the way in which many league tables weight entry qualifications, can actively discourage their recruitment. In addition, given that the effort to improve access to higher education begins from early years and students need dispassionate advice on the options available to them at each stage, there are benefits from providers conducting activity that may not lead to recruitment to their own courses.
- 17 These factors, coupled with the persistence of the gaps we have identified with regard to student outcomes, influence the position taken within the Regulatory Framework consultation with regard to access and participation. The consultation identifies that market forces alone will not achieve the OfS' ambitions for access and participation. It proposes that, unlike in other areas, OfS should regulate through the access and participation plans to secure continuous improvement by all providers charging the higher fee. It also suggests that OfS should serve as a champion in this area, for example by sharing effective practice and improving evaluation. Notwithstanding the expectation

for continuous improvement by all providers, the consultation makes clear that greater ambition and commitment – in terms of investment, activity and progress – will be expected from those providers with the greatest distance to travel at different points of the student lifecycle.

What should be the priorities for OfS work to support social mobility?

- 18 We propose that our aim should be to support equality of opportunity by narrowing the gaps in access between disadvantaged and other groups, whilst giving more focus to addressing gaps in attainment within and progression from higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, students from ethnic minority groups and disabled students. This will make higher education more representative of wider society and ensure that the benefits of higher education are more evenly spread, improving the prospects and capabilities of people who could otherwise be left behind. We should focus on the inter-sections of student characteristics and the stages of the student lifecycle where the evidence indicates there is the greatest inequality, within individual providers, between different places and across the sector as a whole.
- 19 We should be particularly concerned to: improve access for white male students from disadvantaged backgrounds, given their low entry rates; diversify access to the higher tariff higher education providers, given the lifetime benefits to students from this; and give greater attention to reversing the decline in mature students, given the importance of this route for students who do not attain the qualifications or have the ambition to enter higher education when they are young, together with its potential to support the industrial strategy. We should also, however, balance our work on access with an increased focus on improving retention, attainment, postgraduate progression and employment outcomes, particularly for those ethnic minority groups and disabled students experiencing lower than expected outcomes.
- 20 With regard to access, universities have long argued that attainment levels earlier in the education system are the key factor influencing access to higher education. There is, therefore, a need for the higher tariff providers in particular to continue to develop more in-depth relationships with schools and colleges to raise attainment and support progression, and to take account of their engagement with students and students' backgrounds within their entrance requirements.
- 21 We know that improving access requires sustained support for children to progress at each stage from early years onwards, so higher education providers should continue to conduct outreach from this point, working with the third sector and agencies in their local areas as well as schools, colleges and each other. There are then key points at which students need advice on their educational and career options. Students with the least family contact with higher education are less likely to be aware of the different pathways available to them, yet these choices are crucial for their subsequent success. So there is a need to improve the guidance they receive on different pathways at key transition points. There is also a need for flexible, technical and work-based routes, including accelerated, intermediate-level and degree apprenticeship provision, which respond to different circumstances and stages of life, as well as employer skills needs in different parts of the country.

- 22 Making the right choice of course and provider is crucial to student success and progression. So the effort to improve outcomes starts from before you enter HE. For some students, the people, curricula and environment in higher education can be unfamiliar and there can be particular financial pressures. This can diminish the experience of higher education and influence retention and attainment. It can also be associated with mental health concerns. This is particularly the case for students who are from lower income backgrounds and from schools with lower rates of progression to HE, those with non-traditional qualifications and those from ethnic groups that are under-represented among the higher education workforce. Targeted academic, pastoral and financial support is important, but it is most effective in the context of inclusive learning cultures and environments, which enable students from all backgrounds to unlock their potential. Employability is influenced by what you learn through your course and your broader experience of HE; how you develop your subject knowledge and credentials alongside the broader attributes that are often important to employers. So successful progression for students from disadvantaged backgrounds requires not just high quality teaching, but also measures to develop core skills and social capital, including through experience in the work-place.

How should OfS deliver these priorities?

- 23 All of these activities can be supported by the access and participation plans. Through the negotiation of plans, we propose to agree priorities, targets and trajectories with every provider intending to charge the higher undergraduate fee level, and the activity and investment needed to deliver this. More stretching targets, activity and investment should be sought from those providers, to support those student groups and at those stages of the student lifecycle where the evidence identifies that the gaps are widest. This should be determined on the basis of local and national data and other forms of evidence. We may identify some that require conditions to be applied to their registration or more intensive monitoring to ensure they improve. We should deploy these powers and ultimately our ability to refuse or to renew plans if our risk-assessment and monitoring indicates that a provider is not making sufficient progress or it is not taking reasonable steps to implement its plan.
- 24 In order to meet the access and participation plan condition (A1), providers should be required to demonstrate continuous improvement by a credible plan for: narrowing the gaps in student access, success and progression among the provider's own students; enhancing their practice, including through better use of evidence and evaluation, and through sustained engagement with schools and students. This should be supported by our regulation of the conditions relating to quality (B1), support for students (B2) and successful outcomes (B3), which should consider each provider's position with regard to students from different backgrounds to secure baseline assurance for all students.
- 25 We have identified a number of improvements that could be made to the access and participation plans to support this approach. There is a particular need to reform the approach to targets and trajectories, with the aim of agreeing more focused and outcomes-based targets with each provider, which can more meaningfully inform providers' activity and expenditure, together with our own risk-assessment and risk-based engagement with them. There is also a need to review the nature and frequency of plans, with a view to reducing their complexity, focusing effort where it is most needed and enabling providers to develop more sustained strategies. Given the timing

and nature of the Regulatory Framework consultation, it will not be possible to implement these changes for the first cycle of plans to be considered by OfS in 2018. We propose, however, to consult with students, providers and other stakeholders during the second half of 2018, potentially alongside our approach to transparency information and our future approach to funding in this area, and to implement changes from 2019.

- 26 As is clear from the link we have identified between the access and participation conditions and those covering a broader range of student interests, the access and participation plans are just one of the levers OfS can use to improve access, success and progression. The entry of new providers and forms of provision can enhance choice for students from a wide range of backgrounds, particularly those needing to study whilst in work or alongside caring responsibilities. Through our provision of information for students, we can account for the particular needs of students with no family experience of higher education and considering higher education later in life. Our assessment of teaching excellence can improve the incentives for providers to narrow the gaps in outcomes for students from different backgrounds. Our approach to understanding governance and the objectives we establish to deliver our obligations under the public sector equality duty can consider the diversity of governing bodies and the higher education workforce relative to the student body. Our work on student well-being can consider the particular mental health concerns for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and with protected characteristics. We can also deploy our funding to address gaps in activity where the evidence suggests market forces may not be sufficient, for example because they are particularly innovative, high risk or collaborative, and to leverage investment by other parties.
- 27 At the national level, we are developing a Working Age Participation Index, which will enable OfS to identify its ambitions for all students, not just young people. It would be desirable for all providers to include a target within their access and participation plans that is derived from this national data to support our national goals. We are also developing an Evidence and Impact Exchange, which will gather expertise and resources to improve the conduct, dissemination and use of analytical and evaluative work throughout the sector. In support of these developments, we will engage with DfE and others in government to improve the availability and use of data and indicators, and to consider the incentives across schools, technical education and HE.
- 28 In addition to higher education providers, key partners for our work can be expected to include: the Careers Enterprise Company, Opportunity Area leads, the National Collaborative Outreach Partnerships, third sector and local agencies with regard to schools collaboration, outreach and guidance for students; the Institute for Apprenticeships, UK Research & Innovation, Health Education England and professional and statutory bodies with regard to technical and professional pathways, including to postgraduate study, the research base and higher education itself; Public Health England with regard to disabled students and student mental health; and the Race Disparity Audit team in the Cabinet Office with regard to BME attainment and outcomes.