

## **Equality of opportunity: Commentary from John Blake, Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students**

### **Introduction**

When I took on the role of Director for Fair Access and Participation I knew we still faced a huge challenge in ensuring equality of opportunity for all students in higher education. Inequalities permeate through all phases of our education system, and higher education is no exception: pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds fall behind their peers throughout their journey in education, many before they've even set foot in a school. And, while sustained progress had been made in the rates of students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education, too many people who need and deserve the right to shape their own life through higher education cannot find the course they need, or even if they do, they find they cannot complete that course as they had hoped.

I was the first in my family to attend university, and I continue to benefit every day from the transformational impact of higher education. But too many still miss out. People who have the potential to thrive at university or college, but don't apply, or don't get in. And – just as importantly – are those who start a course but drop out, or find themselves trapped on low quality courses which do little to improve their life chances. The brutal reality is that – on a minority of courses – students enter higher education and receive no discernible benefit. Addressing these issues in tandem is key to making progress on access and participation which doesn't just shift lines on a chart, but changes lives for the better.

### **Where are we now?**

More people go to university than ever before. Higher education is now a realistic prospect for students from all backgrounds, with all the life-enhancing potential we know education can offer. We know that the success of our economy relies on a steady stream of highly qualified graduates, and universities and colleges are doing increasingly more to equip students with the skills they need to thrive after graduation. Our universities and colleges have teams of dedicated staff engaged in outreach and attainment raising work. Equally committed teams are on hand to provide support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds when they arrive on campus. Many vice-chancellors and college principals speak with passion about making their student populations more representative of the communities they serve. Large employers are increasingly shunning exploitative unpaid internships and investing time, effort and money in casting their nets as wide as possible in their search for graduates.

And yet. Despite the very many good things being said and done, and the thousands of individual success stories, we still have so much further to go. Where you come from remains a key factor in where you'll end up in life. If you come from a disadvantaged background, we all know that you're much less likely to get good GCSEs and A-levels than your more advantaged peers. And those who do get into university are more likely to drop out, less likely to get a first or 2:1, and less likely

to find professional level employment. At every stage of their education, the window of opportunity closes a little. That cannot be fair, and has to change.

The OfS has a crucial role to play. The power to refuse an access and participation plan is a large stick, and not one we would expect to use frequently. But the both the legislation and the wider public discussion about higher education is clear that universities and colleges must be ambitious in their strategies for opening up higher education to all, and as the regulator we must challenge the sector to do all it can. Those universities with the furthest to go need to pick up some of the heavy lifting and they should expect to be challenged where they lack ambition.

It is not all about hard-edged regulation. Universities and colleges can do a lot more to work together to drive change, in partnership with one another, with schools, charities and others. I want a sector which is ambitious and impatient for change, and which capitalises on its unique role in creating, curating and communication knowledge. Ensuring every student can make meaningful choices over the direction of their life, with the confidence they will be appropriately supported whatever decision they make, is essential to building equality of opportunity. I want to work collaboratively and constructively with the universities and colleges the OfS regulates to make this happen, and ensure knowledge about the most effective and efficient way to overcome the challenges students face is expanded, shared and used practically across the sector.

## **Five priorities for access and participation**

On my appointment, I set out five priorities. They continue to guide the way we will regulate equality of opportunity, so bear repeating:

First was the need for universities and colleges to work much more closely with schools to drive attainment raising work. Closing attainment gaps – which begin before formal schooling and widen into adulthood – is the single most important thing we can do to improve fair access and wider social mobility in this country.

Second, I wanted to ensure that access and participation plans were accessible and understandable. Too often documents of these types are stuck on a website with little thought or understanding about who, if anyone, might want to read them. Access and participation plans are too important to live in the internet's most obscure corners, away from curious eyes.

Third was a renewed focus on student outcomes. I write in greater detail later in this commentary about the link between quality and fair access. But fundamentally universities and colleges cannot sit back and think 'job done' when students from disadvantaged backgrounds get into higher education.

Fourth is ensuring more flexible provision for students. Higher education has never been restricted to a three or four year course, for 18-year-old students living away from home for the first time. There is much more to higher education than that. Offers like short courses and degree apprenticeships widen the scope of higher education, making it a practical opportunity for those wishing to re-train, or needing to juggle study with caring or work commitments. We've seen in recent years an alarming drop in part-time student numbers, and it's crucial that universities and colleges see the value in flexible provision.

And finally – and underpinning all of these priorities – was a need to get better at evaluation. And in saying this, I recognise that evaluation in fair access work is tough. Measuring the impact of a

single intervention which may have happened years before a student decided to apply to go to university is a demanding ask – but the OfS regulates a sector dedicated to knowledge creation, curation and communication. Demanding evaluation is a task higher education performs all the time in academic work, and it must become central to its own equality practices too. We must understand the impact of the many and varied interactions universities, schools and third sector organisations have on a student’s decision-making, or we risk the vast energy and effort poured into this work by all the dedicated equality professionals in the sector going to waste. The education of any person is a vast collaborative endeavour over time, and whilst the results of evaluations may sometimes disappoint us – it is hard to learn that something we really believed should work does not do so – it is better to know that and move on to build better tools than dwell in ignorance. The sector has looked with pride at the reduction in the black-white attainment gap in recent years, but ultimately, cannot really explain why that happened – nor why it has recently increased again. If we don’t know why something has happened, we cannot replicate the positive progress and eliminate the setbacks.

## **Variations to existing plans**

In line with these priorities, we invited universities and colleges to amend their existing access and participation plan. This was a voluntary process, but more than 90 per cent of universities and colleges responded, including all larger providers. An analysis of the responses found encouraging signs, with 94 per cent of providers either already engaged in work with schools to raise attainment, or planning to do so. It was welcome to see universities and colleges making their access and participation plans accessible, as well as a serious focus on supporting students through their studies and as they prepare for life after graduation. We also saw universities and colleges thinking about how they can expand flexible provision, and more than four in five are either already offering – or planning to offer – things like degree apprenticeships and foundation degrees. There’s more that universities and colleges can do here, and it will be important for them to harness the opportunities that come from the government’s reforms to lifelong learning and the creation of a lifelong learning entitlement.

## **Equality of Opportunity Risk Register**

Today, following the variations we agreed and a substantive consultation on our new plans, we set out how we plan to regulate access and participation work in the future. The Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR), which we publish on our website today, forms an important element of our plans. The register is designed to help all universities and colleges as they draw up their access and participation plans. It sets out the many and varied risks to students’ capacity to be authors of their own lives, and highlights the sort of challenges providers might see if a risk has not been sufficiently mitigated. Some of these will be familiar – risks relating to the perception of higher education for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, or concerns about academic and personal support. But we cannot, for example, consider the risks to access without recognising the impact of the pandemic on education, or recognising that providers need to consider how students’ mental health might affect their likelihood of success in their studies.

We have drawn evidence from various sources in the creation of the risk register. It is designed to be a dynamic document, which changes as the risks change. It should be helpful for all providers as they draw up their access and participation plans as it will allow them to consider which risks apply in their context, and so what they should focus on. We’ve looked at various sources of data – including from our access and participation data dashboard. We also wanted to consider other

provider and sector-level data and evidence related to equality of opportunity. I am grateful to colleagues at TASO who have worked at pace to produce an evidence review to support the risk register.

The data which underpins the risk register is necessary for providers to understand performance and risk in their own contexts. This year, for the first time, we have added completion data to our access and participation data dashboards. What the data reveals should concern us all. Higher education in England has historically high completion rates, but this data shows that students from disadvantaged backgrounds and underrepresented groups have been much more likely to drop out than their more advantaged peers. These gaps are significant and in some cases are growing. For students eligible for free school meals, in the latest year of data available, 82.5 per cent of students went on to complete their studies, compared with 90.8 per cent of students not eligible. Just 81.6 per cent of students from the most deprived backgrounds completed their course, compared with 92.2 per cent of students from the most advantaged group. For too long, too many commentators have considered these gaps inevitable. This is profoundly unfair. Students who have overcome obstacles to get into higher education should not find further barriers in their way through their studies. By understanding this data, and the risks to equality of opportunity it represents, universities and colleges will be able to see where they stand and how they can best make progress.

## **Cost of living**

We have also identified pressures on the cost of living as a risk, and we remain acutely aware of how these pressures are affecting students. The OfS has distributed more than £250 million to universities and colleges to assist students. We have hosted roundtable events to understand some of the innovative work universities and colleges are doing to support students struggling with high energy and food prices. And we have published an Insight brief, including data from polling, to gain a greater understanding of students' perspectives. We remain concerned that the pressures are felt most by those students who already face the greatest risks to equality of opportunity, which is why we are factoring cost of living concerns into our risk register.

## **The link between quality and equality**

The OfS's strategy sets out two areas of focus – quality and standards; and equality of opportunity. Some believe these areas are in conflict. When we consulted on our new quality conditions we heard, time and again, that we should be cautious about implementing expectations for student outcomes because those universities and colleges with weaker outcomes often had high proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This may be a well-meaning argument, but it is wrong-headed. It is condescending to suggest that students from disadvantaged backgrounds should be prepared to accept poor quality courses where too many students drop out and do not find graduate level work. The implication is that they should be grateful for any form of higher education. That is a dangerous and patronising idea. People work hard to get into higher education. Where their course lets them down, it can have a profound impact on their confidence, their finances and their plans for the future. That is why the OfS's work on fair access and participation needs to go in lock-step with our work on quality. That is the only way to ensure true equality of opportunity.

## The future of access and participation regulation

Finally, we also set out today our response to our consultation on the future of access and participation regulation. We are grateful to everyone who took the time to respond to our proposals. We have made a set of decisions which preserve our policy intent, and recognise and respond to some of the comments and concerns we heard during the consultation. Before setting these out I should say that, despite our efforts in this area, not as many students and student representatives responded to the consultation as we had hoped. Student engagement in this area is essential. As we implement our reforms, we will work to increase and evolve our approach to student engagement, to ensure that students' needs and expectations are central to our own and providers' thinking in this area.

We have made a number of changes to our proposals directly as a result of feedback we have received. As we signalled recently, one of those changes relate to timescales. We recognise that providers want more time to get to grips with the risk register, and to understand how changes in our guidance should apply in the context of their particular mission, student population and capacity for action. That is why most providers will not need to submit a new access and participation plan until the spring or summer of 2024. A first wave of universities and colleges will be encouraged to submit plans this summer. These pioneers will be from all corners of the sector, and will have the opportunity to set the bar for others to exceed. They will receive tailored support on evaluation as they draw up their plans.

I am also conscious of the points made by small and specialist providers, which is one of the reasons we have moved the timetable back for a year for most providers. Our regulation in this area needs to be appropriate for all providers. We want to support all of them, not just to meet the threshold of getting a plan approved, but to be leaders in this work. Around half of the first tranche of providers are further education colleges and smaller providers, so there will also be continuing opportunities for these providers to feed those particular perspectives into our work.

I recognise that what we are asking universities and colleges to do is challenging. I want them to be ambitious in their interventions, to set targets which are stretching, and to commit to making a profound difference to the next generation of students. But in doing so I want the OfS to be supportive, collaborative and in tune to the challenges of implementing these ambitious reforms. This is a shared mission, and successfully delivering it will transform lives.