Access and Participation: Analysis of responses to the consultation

Final Report
November 2018

Dr Abigail Diamond, Managing Director
Lindsey Bowes, Research Director
Dr Sarah Tazzyman, Senior Research Manager
Dr Rebecca Steer, Research Manager
Dr Guy Birkin, Senior Research Executive
Andrew Corley, Senior Research Executive
Nariah Francis, Senior Research Executive

CFE research

For more information about this report please contact
Abigail Diamond:

CFE Research, Phoenix Yard, Upper Brown Street, Leicester,
LE1 5TE

T: 0116 229 3300   Abigail.Diamond@cfe.org.uk
www.cfe.org.uk

Established since 1997, CFE is an independent not-for-profit
company specialising in the provision of research and
evaluation services across a broad field of education,
wellbeing and the economy.

Contents

Abbreviations

A&P	Access and participation
APPs	Access and Participation Plans
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
HEP	Higher Education Provider
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OfS	Office for Students
NCOP	National Collaborative Outreach Programme
NUS	National Union of Students
SU	Student's Union

Summary

In September 2018, the Office for Students (OfS) consulted on a new approach to regulating access and participation in English higher education. The key findings are summarised below.

Context

In April 2018, the Office for Students (OfS) assumed responsibility for ensuring that higher education providers reduce gaps in access, success and progression in order to improve equality of opportunity in higher education (HE) for under-represented groups. A new outcomes-focused, risk-based approach to regulation and funding is being designed to drive transformational change. From the academic year 2019-20, access and participation plans (APPs) replace access agreements. An APP includes details of higher education providers' ambitions for change, delivery plans, targets and investment. Fees and commitments in APPs will be regulated by the OfS.

The OfS is undertaking a review of how it regulates access and participation and the ways in which it funds and support related activities. To inform this review, the OfS commissioned CFE Research in June 2018 to undertake a survey of students, higher education providers and other experts. The OfS also held discussions with the OfS student panel and hosted a number of consultation events throughout September 2018.

The findings from these exercises informed the development of a consultation on a new approach to the regulation of access and participation in English higher education. The consultation was launched by the OfS on the 7th September and ran until 12th October, 2018. The consultation document outlined proposed changes to access and participation regulation and funding, focusing on the following priority areas:

— the cycles of approval and monitoring of access and participation plans;
— annual monitoring and planning;
— access and participation plan targets;
— funding and investment in access and participation;
— evaluation of access and participation activities; and
— approaches to data, including the transparency information condition and an access and participation dataset.

The OfS encouraged responses to the consultation from anyone with an interest in higher education access and participation.

Method

The OfS received **189** responses to the consultation: 180 submitted online using the questionnaire designed and administered by the OfS and nine submitted via email as Word

or PDF documents. The majority of responses to the consultation are collective, representing the views of an organisation rather than a particular individual.

The consultation generated quantitative data from a series of Likert-scale questions which asked for levels of agreement with a series of statements relating to the seven proposals and perceptions of their likely effectiveness. None of the email submissions included responses to these questions and so are not included in the quantitative analysis. The consultation also generated a high volume of qualitative data as respondents were asked to provide a brief explanation of their responses in no more than 300 words.

The quantitative data was imported into SPSS for cleaning, manipulation and analysis. The qualitative data was coded thematically in Excel. Themes were quantified to give a sense of the scale of the issues and to identify those that are particularly pertinent to respondent sub-groups. The quantitative data is presented for the sample as a whole. However, in order to facilitate a comparison between the perceptions of different types of responding organisation, responses have also been categorised by 'organisation type'. Higher education providers were categorised as 'high' tariff and 'medium/low' tariff using a classification system developed by DfE.[1] Where respondents did not give the name of their provider, they were classified as HE - uncategorised. The majority of responses are from higher education providers and there is good representation from the different provider types, with the exception of privately-funded providers of higher education. Representation from the further education sector, including further education colleges and sector bodies, has been achieved, along with representation from the third sector, wider (predominantly higher education) sector bodies and student unions, including NUS.

Key findings

There is broad, overall support for all seven of the proposals put forward by the OfS in the consultation. There is a widespread perception that, together, the proposals will form the basis of an approach that will support the sector to take a more strategic, long-term view which meets the needs of current and potential students at each stage of the lifecycle. Most consultees are of the view that it will support improvements in the volume and quality of evaluation, which will, in turn, help to ensure planning and investment in access and participation is evidence-led, good practice is shared, and improvements are made to service delivery. The shift to an outcomes-focused approach based on risk is also widely welcomed, as most perceive it will reduce burden on providers and offer the flexibility to respond to changes in local and national policy, as well as evidence of effective practice.

---

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/584161/SFR01_2017_Technical_note.pdf

01. Introduction

In September 2018, the Office for Students (OfS) consulted on a new approach to regulating access and participation in English higher education. This report summarises the key findings in order to inform the work of the OfS as it refines and implements its proposals.

Over the past 20 years, there has been significant investment in programmes and interventions to increase the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds attending higher education (HE). As a consequence, there are now more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds progressing to higher education than ever before. However, the gap in participation between the most and least disadvantaged students remains, and there has been a significant decline in the number of part-time and mature students since 2010-11. Closing this gap in order to ensure equality of opportunity for under-represented groups in higher education is a key policy priority set out in the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA)[2], because of the significant contribution higher education makes to social mobility and economic growth.

In April 2018, the Office for Students (OfS) assumed responsibility for ensuring that higher education providers reduce gaps in access, success and progression, in order to improve equality of opportunity in higher education for under-represented groups. The ambition is to ensure that access and participation regulation and funding drives transformational change through an outcomes-focused, risk-based approach. From the academic year 2019-20, access and participation plans (APPs) will replace access agreements which were approved by the Director for Fair Access to Higher Education and published by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). APPs set out how higher education providers will improve equality of opportunity for under-represented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education. An APP includes details of the provider's ambition for change, what it plans to do to achieve that change, the targets it has set and the investment it will make to deliver the plan. Fees and commitments in APPs will be regulated by the OfS.

1.1 Project background

The OfS is currently undertaking a review of how it regulates access and participation and the ways in which it funds and supports related activities. To inform this review, the OfS commissioned CFE Research in June 2018 to undertake a survey of students, higher

---

[2] See http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/pdfs/ukpga_20170029_en.pdf

education providers and other experts. The OfS also held discussions with the OfS student panel and hosted a number of consultation events throughout September 2018.

The findings from these exercises informed the development of a consultation on access and participation which was launched by the OfS on the 7th September and ran until 12th October, 2018. The consultation document outlined proposed changes to access and participation regulation and funding in higher education in England. It focused on the OfS's approach to APPs and transparency information, and covered the following priority areas:

— the cycles of approval and monitoring of APPs;
— annual monitoring and planning;
— access and participation plan targets;
— funding and investment in access and participation;
— evaluation of access and participation activities; and
— approaches to data, including the transparency information condition and an access and participation dataset.

The OfS encouraged responses to the consultation from anyone with an interest in higher education access and participation. In particular, the OfS was seeking to gauge the views of students, staff, academics and leaders at higher education providers that will be affected by the new funding and regulation arrangements. The OfS welcomed the views of all types of provider, including alternative providers and further education (FE) colleges that offer higher education, as well as schools, employers, third sector organisations, policy bodies, and others with an interest in equality of opportunity in education.

1.2   This report

The remainder of this report is presented in three chapters. **Chapter 2** details the methodology, including a summary of the sample characteristics and the approach taken to data analysis. The consultation asked for levels of agreement with seven proposals and invited comments on each. **Chapter 3** details the responses to each of the proposals in turn, outlining the benefits as well as the potential risks identified by respondents. As CFE Research also conducted the access and participation review survey on behalf of the OfS, broad comparisons between the consultation and survey findings are made as appropriate. **Chapter 4** summarises the perceived benefits as well as the challenges and risks associated with the proposals, identified by consultees.

02. Method

The consultation measured levels of agreement with seven proposals and invited comments on the benefits and risks of each. Here we set out our approach to analysing the quantitative and qualitative data.

2.1 Consultation responses

In total, 191 responses to the consultation were received: 182 responses were submitted online using a questionnaire designed and administered by the OfS. A further nine were submitted via email in Word or PDF documents. While two of the email submissions were structured according to the online survey, the remaining seven were narrative responses which addressed the questions more holistically in the form of a letter or discussion paper. None of the email submissions included responses to quantitative survey questions and so are not included in the quantitative analysis.
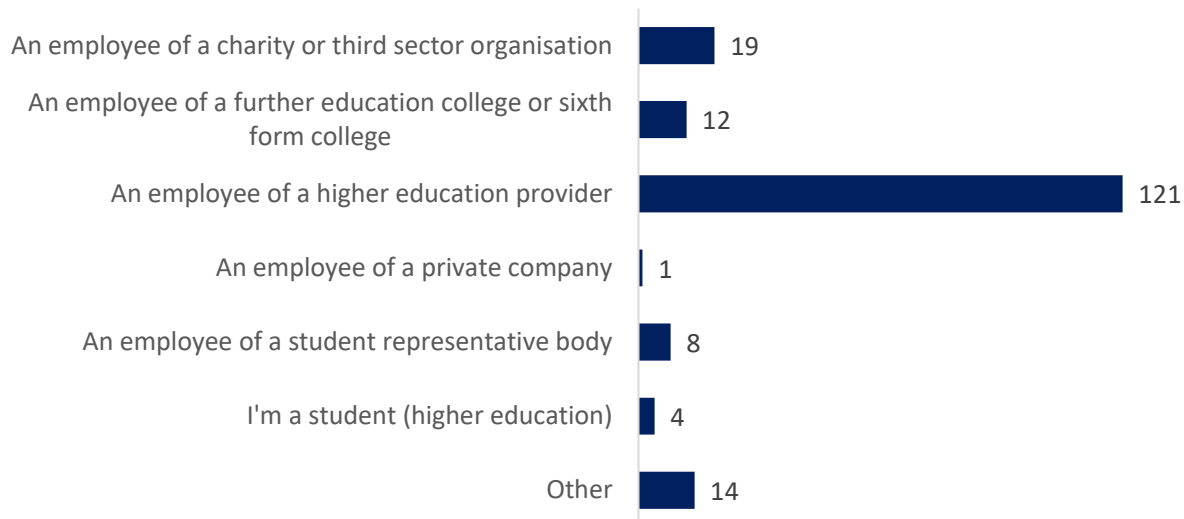
The consultation responses were sent to CFE in an Excel spreadsheet via secure data transfer. The dataset was first checked for duplicates which resulted in two responses being removed from the sample. The final sample comprised a total of **189** responses, consisting of 180 online and nine email responses. Figure 1 demonstrates that the majority of responses are collective, representing the views of an organisation rather than a particular individual.

Figure 1: Number of individual and collective responses. (Base = 189)
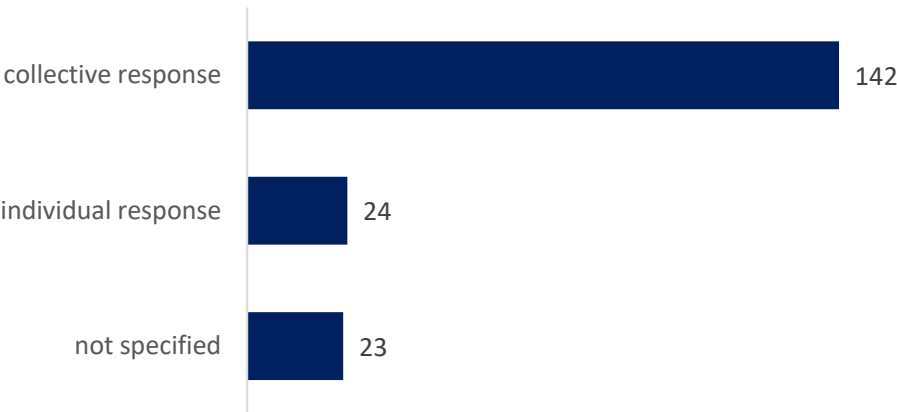
Responses were submitted by staff in a variety of roles, although the majority were submitted by employees of a higher education provider (n=121) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Job role of representative who submitted the response. (Base = 179)

Job role	Count
An employee of a charity or third sector organisation	19
An employee of a further education college or sixth form college	12
An employee of a higher education provider	121
An employee of a private company	1
An employee of a student representative body	8
I'm a student (higher education)	4
Other	14

2.2 Data analysis

The consultation generated quantitative data from a series of Likert scale questions which asked for levels of agreement with a series of statements relating to the seven proposals and perceptions of their likely effectiveness. It also generated a high volume of qualitative data as respondents were asked to provide a brief explanation of their responses in no more than 300 words (see consultation questions in Appendix 1). The quantitative data was imported into SPSS for cleaning, manipulation and analysis. The qualitative data was coded thematically in Excel. Themes were quantified to give a sense of the scale of the issues and to identify issues that were particularly pertinent to respondent sub-groups.
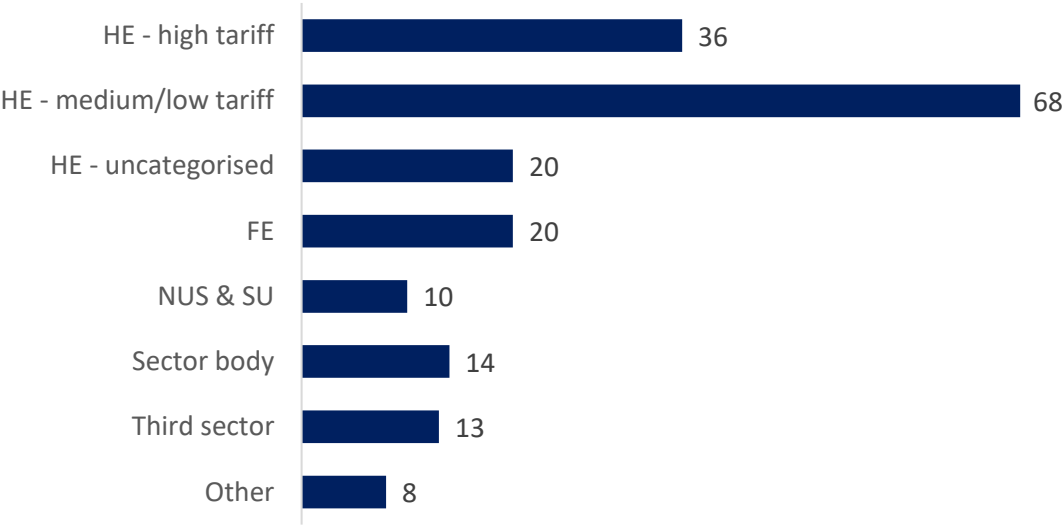
2.2.1 Quantitative data analysis

The quantitative data was analysed and presented for the sample as a whole, indicating the overall proportional degree of agreement or disagreement with each of the consultation proposals/statements. As noted above, the response submitted to the consultation in most instances was a collective rather than an individual view. As a result, it was not appropriate to undertake analysis by job role. However, in order to facilitate a comparison between the perceptions of different types of responding organisation, responses were categorised by 'organisation type' based on information provided in the consultation response. Higher education providers were classified as 'high tariff' and 'medium/low tariff' using a classification system developed by DfE.[3] Where respondents did not give the name of their

---

[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/584161/SFR01_2017_Technical_note.pdf

provider, they were classified as 'HE - uncategorised'. In all instances, percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Figure 3 demonstrates that the majority of responses are from higher education providers. There is good representation from the different provider types within the sector, with the exception of alternative providers. Representation from the further education sector, including further education colleges and further education sector bodies, has been achieved, along with representation from the third sector, wider (predominantly higher education) sector bodies and student unions.

Figure 3: Sample characteristics – number of respondents by 'organisation type'. (Base = 189)

Organisation type	Number
HE - high tariff	36
HE - medium/low tariff	68
HE - uncategorised	20
FE	20
NUS & SU	10
Sector body	14
Third sector	13
Other	8

Cross-tabulations by 'organisation type' have been run to identify any patterns or differences between these sub-groups. However, when data is categorised by organisation type, some sub-groups contain small samples (less than 10 in some instances). Therefore, where responses are presented by organisation type, levels of agreement ('strongly agree', 'agree') and disagreement ('strongly disagree', 'disagree') have been combined.

2.2.2 Qualitative data analysis

The qualitative data has been analysed using a coding method that extracts the key messages from responses and groups them into thematic categories. Our approach involved a two-stage coding system based on established methods.[4] The first stage of *structural* coding categorised the responses by their relevance to the question, which helped to focus the second stage of coding; *thematic* analysis, which captured what was being said by splitting responses and grouping them into thematic categories. This was an

---

[4] Saldana, J. (2009) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. London: Sage.

iterative procedure, whereby codes were developed and refined throughout the process to ensure clarity and consistency across each of the consultation questions. Codes were grouped or split as necessary until a stable set of codes had been created that represented all the different types of response to the consultation questions.

Coding the responses in this way also allows for basic statistical analysis to identify the number and type of respondent identifying a particular issue. Therefore, we calculated the frequency of coded responses and summarised these in a series of tables in the interim report. These tables were subsequently refined and provide the basis for the analyses presented in the next chapter.

03. Findings

Here we set out the findings from our analysis of the responses to each of the seven proposals set out in the consultation document, drawing on the quantitative and qualitative data provided.

3.1 Introduction

For each of the seven proposals set out by the OfS in the consultation document, we indicate the level of agreement with the proposal overall and identify any disparities in the views of different respondent sub-groups. Where appropriate, perceptions of the likely effectiveness of proposed activities in achieving the stated aims are also summarised. The benefits and potential risks as identified by respondents in relation to each proposal are then explored, drawing on the qualitative data provided. We indicate the scale of the issues (determined by the number of respondents that identified it in their open response) and whether it appears to be a particular issue or concern for specific sub-groups.

3.2 Proposal 1

The OfS will place the approval of access and participation plans (APPs) onto a more strategic timescale, with the **number of years during which a plan may be in force to be based on risk**. Plans should continue to demonstrate clear, long-term ambitions for how providers will achieve significant reductions in the gaps in access, success and progression over the next five years. We will review progress against plans each year. Providers at increased risk of a future breach of condition A1[5] will normally be expected to submit plans every three years. Providers considered not at increased risk of a future breach of condition A1 will be expected to submit their plans every five years. Where we have serious concerns about a future breach, we may expect more frequent resubmission.

Access and participation plans (APPs), and access agreements before them, are an important mechanism for the improvement of access and participation to higher education for under-represented groups. Though there has been scope in legislation for access agreements and APPs to run for up to five years, providers were previously expected to submit a new agreement or plan every year, as approving or rejecting them was the main regulatory tool. The new regulatory framework gives the OfS a broader range of powers to improve access and participation beyond the approval or rejection of a plan, though rejecting a plan with consequences for a provider's registration status remains an option

---

[5] Condition A1 states that an approved (fee cap) provider intending to charge fees above the basic amount to qualifying persons on qualifying courses must (a) have in force an APP approved by the OfS in accordance with Higher Education Role Analysis; (b) take all reasonable steps to comply with the provisions of the plan.

available to the OfS. These additional powers mean that APPs are now more strategic documents which will be combined with more rigorous and tailored monitoring.

The OfS will monitor providers' progress annually and will expect individual providers to submit a new plan earlier than three years, where they are at increased risk of a future breach of condition A1 and not making sufficient progress. For providers not at increased risk of a future breach of condition A1, the OfS may allow these providers to roll forward their plans up to a maximum period of five years.

The OfS believes that a risk-based approach to the approval of plans, with annual monitoring, will:

— enable providers to be more ambitious as they will have longer to plan and embed their delivery of targets;

— allow providers to take more strategic approaches to access and participation;

— allow greater flexibility to adapt activities as a result of evaluation, encourage innovation, and promote longer-term strategic relationships with schools, colleges and the community;

— enable it to focus more on those providers where risk or gaps are greatest, and where their strategy does not appear to be making progress; and

— reduce the frequency of written submissions for providers who are not at increased risk of a future breach of condition A1, so that they can focus more on implementation.
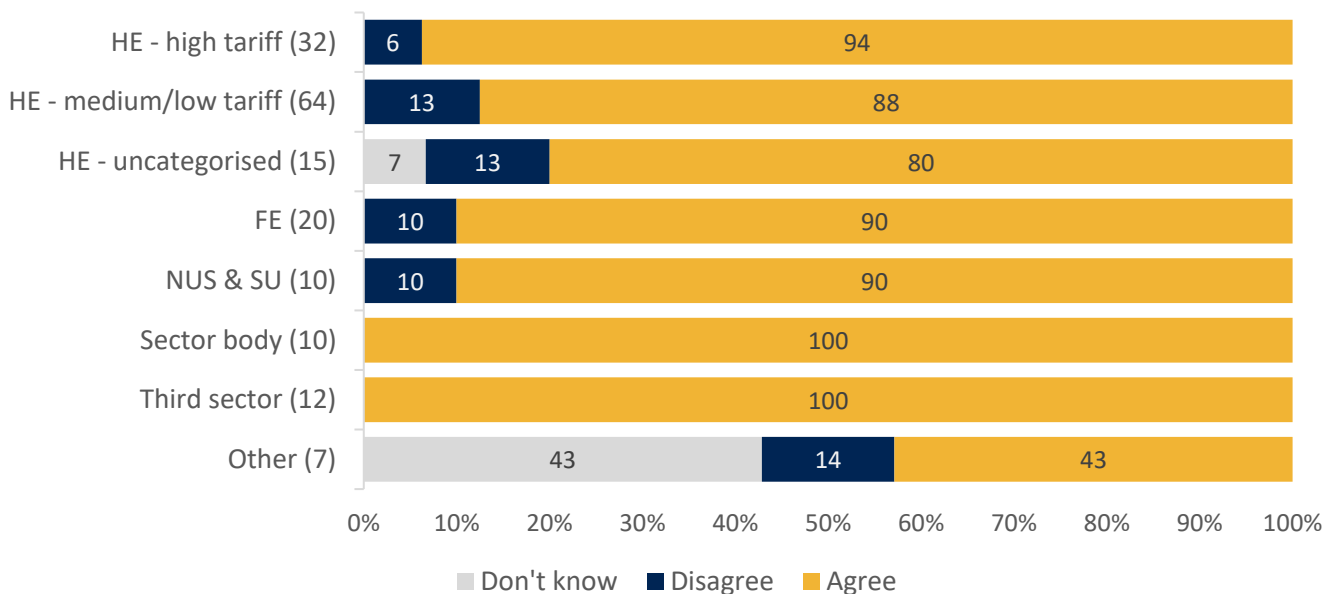
There was widespread support for a longer APP cycle in June 2018 when the sector was first consulted on this issue, with only 15 per cent of respondents to the OfS access and participation review survey reporting that APPs should be submitted annually compared with 57 per cent who felt APPs should be submitted every three years or more. The consultation asked respondents to indicate it they agreed or disagreed with the proposal that plans should normally remain in place for a period of at least three years, rather than annually as at present. The findings suggests that support for a longer cycle is growing. Over three-fifths of consultees (61 per cent) strongly agree with the proposal compared with only 7 per cent who strongly disagree (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Level of agreement with the proposal that plans should normally remain in place for a period of at least three years, rather than annually as at present. (Base = 170)
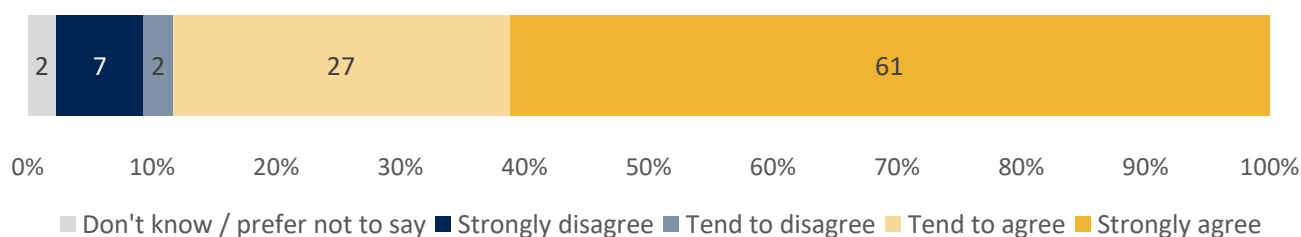
There is widespread support for the proposal across the sector and among those organisations that have a stake or interest in improving access and participation in higher education. Only HE – uncategorised and other respondents report lower levels of agreement than the sample overall (88 per cent). However, this is largely explained by the higher proportion of respondents within these groups who were unable to, or preferred not to, give a rating (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Level of agreement with the proposal that plans should normally remain in place for a period of at least three years, rather than annually as at present, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)

Organisation type	Don't know	Disagree	Agree
HE - high tariff (32)		6	94
HE - medium/low tariff (64)		13	88
HE - uncategorised (15)	7	13	80
FE (20)		10	90
NUS & SU (10)		10	90
Sector body (10)			100
Third sector (12)			100
Other (7)	43	14	43

Respondents provide a number of reasons to explain why they are in agreement with the plans for a longer APP cycle which largely reflect the sentiments expressed in the OfS access and participation review survey. The majority of consultees (n=133) report that the longer cycle would enable them to take a more **strategic approach** to access and participation, allowing them to put plans in place to deliver more targeted and/or sustained programmes of activity. The opportunity to **develop and test interventions** and **demonstrate impact** are also perceived to be key benefits of the longer cycle.

Many providers work with young people for a number of years before their potential transition to higher education, including in primary schools. Given the longevity of this outreach work, it is not possible to fully demonstrate impact (in terms of progression to higher education) within short (12 month) reporting periods. Two-fifths of respondents (n=76) perceive that a longer cycle would be more conducive to **tracking and measuring progress** towards intended outcomes as well as **evaluating impact**. However, for some (n=10), three years is not regarded as sufficient time. This group argue that a minimum of five years, with milestones at key intervals, would be required to demonstrate impact effectively.

The annual cycle gives little time to see the impact of initiatives before the next cycle, in particular where strategies are not working or need refining or where cohort-specific issues have impacted and we need to look at the longer trend. This will be true in larger or smaller HEIs. A longer cycle gives more opportunity to determine impact and adjust actions accordingly.

— **HE - medium/low tariff**

We strongly agree with the proposal that plans should normally remain in place for a period of at least three years. This timescale better reflects the strategic aim and scope of access and participation plans, the sustained, long-term nature of work required to widen access and participation, and provides greater opportunity for in-depth evaluation of this work.

— **HE - high tariff**

A total of 53 consultees felt that the longer cycle would enable them to develop a broader range of interventions, including new and innovative approaches, which could be tested and refined over the life of the plan. The longer cycle also provides the opportunity to **develop relationships with schools and colleges** (individually and also building on those established through collaborative programmes such as NCOP) and work in partnership to **embed activities** that meet the needs of the school/college and their learners (n=10).

It gives us the opportunity to embed projects within schools and communities, to see which ones are genuinely effective and provide meaningful evaluation when the next APP needs to be written. At the moment we struggle to seem like we are continuously improving and being "ambitious" when projects take a while to figure out and show results.

— **HE - uncategorised**

A minority of respondents (n=10) also felt that a more strategic approach would help to improve their resource planning and expenditure on access and participation which, in turn, would help to ensure resources were directed towards activities that are most effective.

We welcome the proposal to move to multi-year access and participation plans. This will allow providers to invest more strategically in effective interventions and allow time to engage in evaluation to improve ongoing programmes.

— **HE - high tariff**

It allows for continuity and the ability to plan and test access provision in the locality to ascertain what works best for local schools and students. It would hopefully mean that access budgets could be better ring-fenced and would be less affected by annual changes in income due to student numbers etc.

— **HE - medium/low tariff**

The OfS has proposed that providers may choose to submit a new plan earlier than required if they implement a new strategy or in the event that evaluation findings suggest a fundamental change in approach is required. Some providers recognise the importance of being **responsive to change** (n=24) and value the proposed **flexibility to refine and re-submit plans** (n=8). Although a small minority (n=7) perceive that the proposed cycle is too long given the dynamic nature of the higher education policy environment, most perceive that the flexibility accorded to providers to refine and re-submit plans will **mitigate the risk that they will become outdated,** a concern that was also raised in the OfS access and participation review survey.

> *We do agree that institutions should be able to re-submit more frequently if they needed to do so, for example if there was a change in senior management and strategic direction, or to meet a change to national policy.*
>
> —   **HE - high tariff**

> *It will be important for providers to be able to have flexibility in adapting and changing access and participation plans within the three-year period, if necessary. This may be because of government policy changes, or changes in the HE environment, or changes to student demographics that require a different or adapted approach to access and participation.*
>
> —   **HE - medium/low tariff**

Although reducing the burden placed on providers was not a primary driver for increasing the length of the APP cycle, a number of respondents to the consultation perceive that this change (along with the change in financial monitoring) could result in a **reduction in workload** for those staff engaged in their development (n=35), which would be welcome and beneficial for providers. Some consultees explained that this could allow providers to re-deploy their resources in other activity areas, such as in delivery and improving their services.

> *We strongly agree that having a plan in place for at least 3 years, and possibly 5, will reduce the administrative burden and allow institutions to focus on delivery, evaluation and test new approaches.*
>
> —   **HE - medium/low tariff**

> *The annual cycle of planning can lead to much of the resource of the year focused on the planning rather than the 'doing'. So a redirection of resource away from planning, allowing for more focus on making progress against the plan, would be welcome.*
>
> —   **NUS/Student Union**

However, a small minority (n=5) express concern that workload would not be reduced, or could even increase, in the context of greater requirements for evaluation, annual monitoring and action planning, particularly for those providers judged as being at 'high risk' of a breach of condition A1.

> *We do not believe that this will result in a corresponding reduction in burden for institutions, who will still be subject to external, as well as internal, annual monitoring, review and planning.*
>
> — **HE - high tariff**

> *There is a risk that the requirements for annual impact reports, action plans and extensive data submission would undermine the stated aim of reducing the regulatory burden on institutions.*
>
> — **HE - high tariff**

Bigger concerns in relation to Proposal 1 for respondents to the consultation are ensuring there is clarity in terms of **how 'risk' will be assessed** and that the **assessment process is rigorous**. A total of 43 consultees indicate that further detail on how the OfS will judge providers to determine whether they are at 'high risk' of a breach of condition A1 is required. These providers feel strongly that any assessment of risk should take account of providers' mission, geographical context and student demographic profile.

> *We would ask that detailed information is provided on how and why a provider might be classified as 'high risk' or 'low risk'. It would be helpful if this guidance included clear examples alongside details of the timeframe and process as to how the decision for any change in risk category would be reached. We would also want clear assurances that risk assessment takes account of a provider's geographic, demographic and other institution-specific context.*
>
> — **HE - high tariff**

> *There is, however, a lack of clarity in the proposal about how the OfS will determine the classification of institutions being 'high risk' and 'low risk' and how institutions may predict, mitigate and respond to this. This condition needs to be transparent and proportionate and be reflective of the whole student lifecycle.*
>
> — **HE - high tariff**

Given the wide spread support for the proposal, very few alternatives have been suggested. However, 2 consultees suggest that it would be beneficial if the APP cycle was as aligned as possible with other reporting cycles, such as the teaching excellence framework (TEF).

3.3 Summary

— There is broad support for the proposal that APPs should normally remain in place for a period of at least three years and up to five years, rather than annually as at present.

— The majority of respondents support proposals for a longer APP cycle because it will enable higher education providers to think and plan more strategically.

— Respondents perceive that longer-term plans would encourage providers to be more innovative in their approaches, develop a wider range of activities and embed sustained interventions in partner schools and colleges.

— Providers report that a three to five year cycle, with milestones at key intervals, will better enable them to track and monitor progress and demonstrate the impact of their access and participation work.

— Consultees highlight that it will be important to maintain the flexibility to refine and re-submit plans in response to changes in policy, local circumstances and/or evaluation evidence, even for those who are not at risk of breaching condition A1.

— The main concern identified with this proposal is how the OfS will ensure there is clarity and rigour in how they identify and monitor 'high risk' providers.

3.4   Proposal 2

> Providers will be required to **publish and submit to the OfS an impact report each year**. Financial information previously collected in our annual access and participation monitoring process will be submitted as part of wider OfS financial reporting processes.

Impact reports are an effective way to measure progress made towards achieving access and participation targets. Providers were required to submit an annual monitoring return to OFFA to understand the extent to which they had met their access agreement commitments, the progress made against targets and milestones, expenditure on access and participation, student numbers and fees charged, and examples and evidence of effective practice.

The proposal to move to a longer cycle of APPs (Proposal 1) would introduce an increased need for regular and ongoing monitoring to provide the OfS with assurance that the sector is delivering the transformational change they wish to achieve in access and participation. In addition, the OfS wants to build its own and the sector's understanding of effective practice, and allow this information to be more accessible and purposeful. The OfS believe that the proposed approach to monitoring will achieve:

— a reduced burden on providers at least risk of a future breach of condition A1 by reducing financial reporting, and by linking reporting with publications that many providers produce outside the regulatory process;

— consistency with the wider OfS approach, such as proportionate, outcome-focused and risk-based regulation;

— greater visibility of the impact reports enabling providers a more public opportunity to affirm their ambition and commitment to access and participation. It will also enable students, and the public, to hold providers to greater account;

— the impact reports will be accessible to other providers and can be used to share best practice. The outputs from monitoring will be more clearly communicable and comparable, giving a clearer focus where it is needed;

— provide the OfS with greater ability to intervene where progress is insufficient. Monitoring will anticipate and articulate issues at an earlier stage;

— support innovation, and allow providers to explain the context of their progress, encouraging ambition; and

— the published action plans that will accompany the impact report will outline the action providers will take to make improvements, increasing accountability.

When the sector was consulted in June 2018, 60 per cent of survey respondents agreed that the current monitoring process was overly burdensome. The current monitoring arrangements were viewed as ineffective for monitoring progress, with less than one-tenth of survey respondents reporting strong agreement that the current arrangements were

effective for assessing providers' progress compared with the sector as a whole (6 per cent) or to other providers (3 per cent). However, there remained a strong call from the sector to retain an annual monitoring process in order to ensure that access and participation work remained high on higher education providers' and the public's agenda.

3.4.1. Effectiveness of annual impact reports and action plans

Analysis of the consultation responses indicates that support for the proposed approach, in terms of its effectiveness for monitoring progress and allowing comparisons across the sector, is growing. Almost two-thirds of respondents indicated that the proposed approach will be fairly or very effective in enabling providers' progress to be assessed compared with other providers (64 per cent) and the sector as a whole (63 per cent), and in engaging students in the monitoring of access and participation (63 per cent), compared with only 4 per cent, 5 per cent and 5 per cent respectively, who think that it will be 'not at all' effective (Figure 6).

Figure 6: How effective, if at all, would the proposed approach of annual impact reports and action plans be for… (Bases in parentheses)
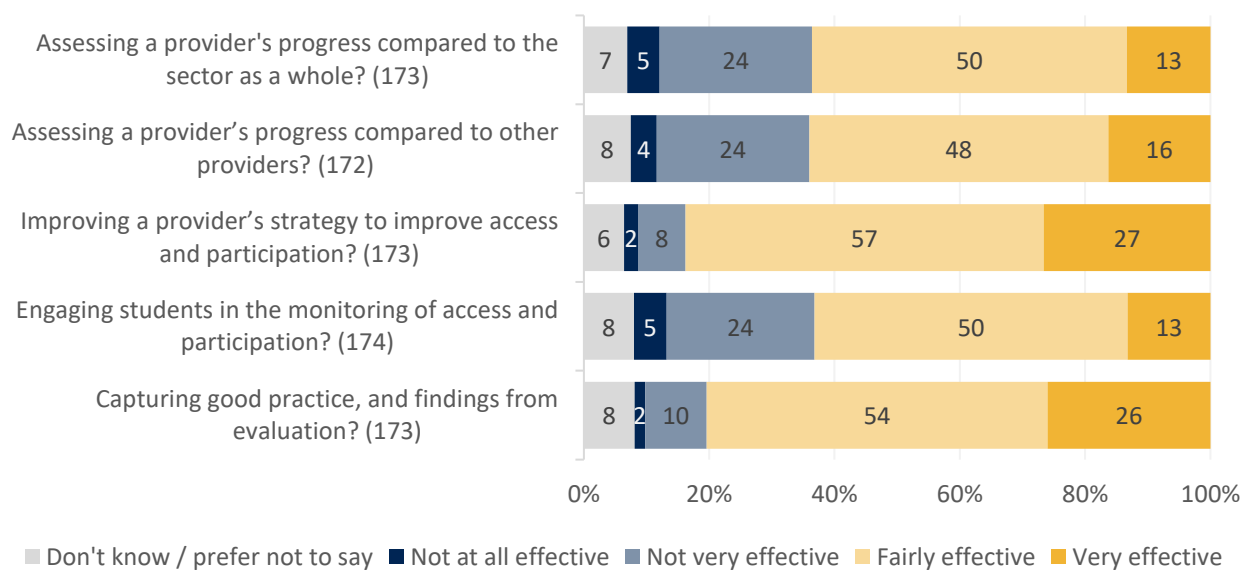
Respondents are particularly supportive of the statements that the proposed approach will be effective in improving providers' strategy to improve access and participation, and in capturing good practice and evaluation findings, with 84 per cent and 80 per cent of respondents, respectively, reporting that the proposed approach will be fairly or very effective, compared with 2 per cent who report it will be 'not at all' effective. As reflected in responses to Proposal 1, this move to a longer-term planning cycle is welcomed by providers as it will enable more strategic, long-term planning and allow a focus on the delivery and evaluation of APPs, and this appears to be echoed here.
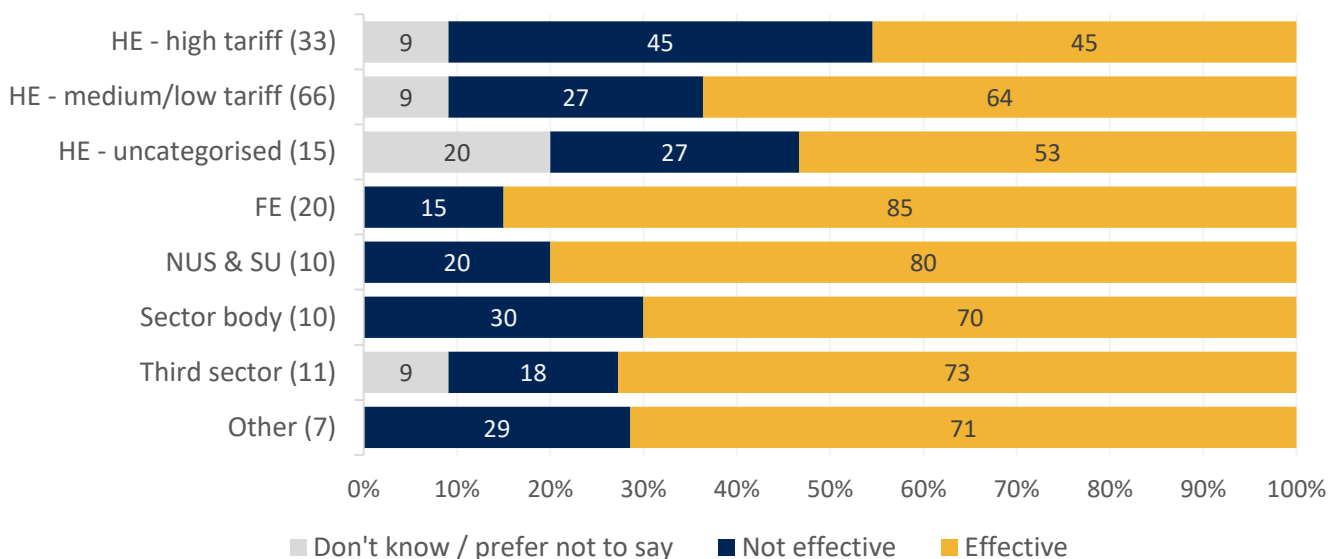
When examined by organisation type, some variations in agreement emerge. In relation to the effectiveness of the proposed approach in assessing a provider's progress compared with the sector as a whole, only HE - uncategorised respondents report lower levels of effectiveness (53 per cent) compared with the sample overall (64 per cent), although, this is largely explained by the higher proportion of respondents within this group who were unable or chose not to give a rating (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Perceived effectiveness of annual impact reports and action plans for assessing a provider's progress compared with the *sector as a whole*, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)
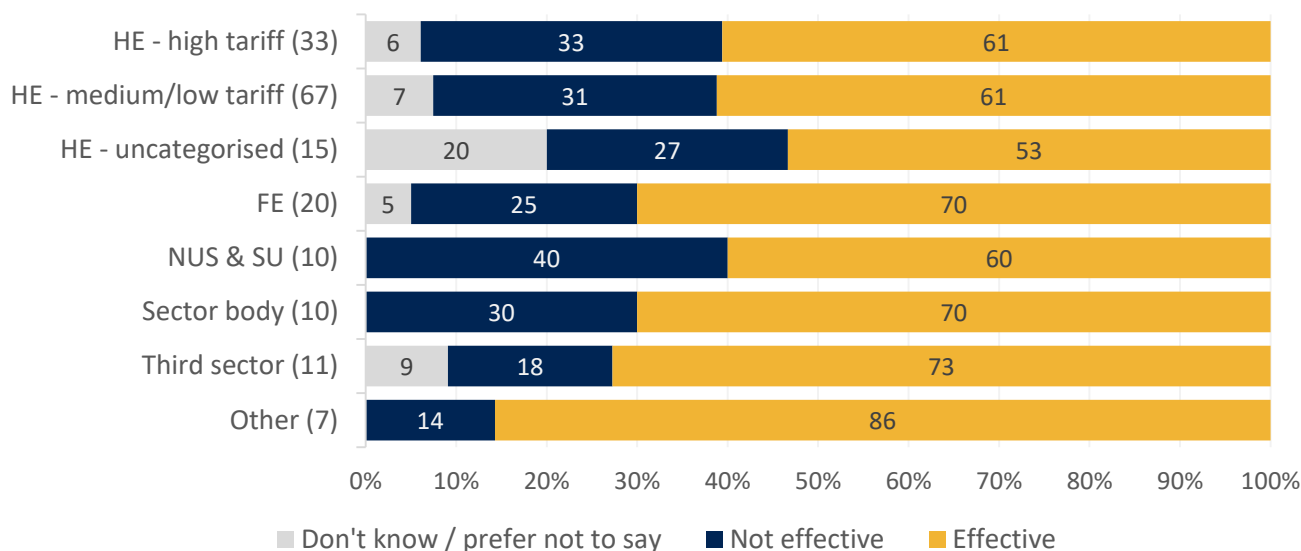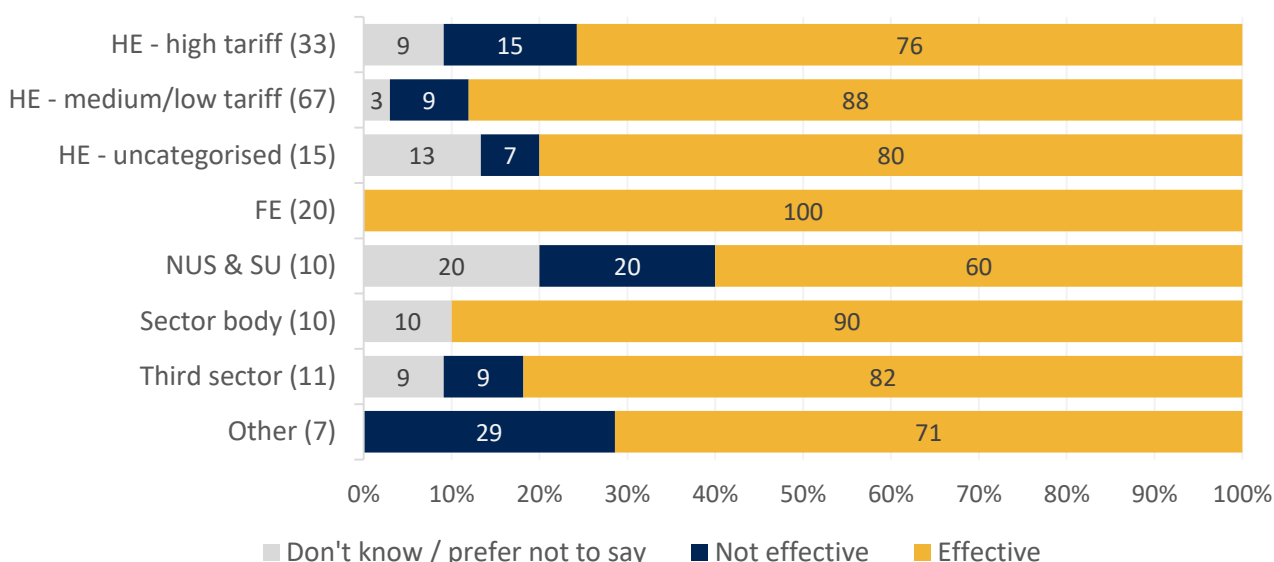

Almost half (45 per cent) of HE - high tariff providers indicated that the proposed approach would not be effective for assessing progress compared with other providers (Figure 8). Respondents to the consultation were not invited to provide a qualitative response to the five statements presented in Q2a, although, responses to Q2b and Q2c indicate that this response may be driven by providers' concern that individual provider context poses a significant challenge when attempting to make comparisons between providers. Respondents highlight that this context must be carefully considered and accounted for, in order to draw meaningful comparisons between providers.

Figure 8: Perceived effectiveness of annual impact reports and action plans for assessing a provider's progress compared with *other providers*, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)

Legend: Don't know / prefer not to say | Not effective | Effective

Organisation type	Don't know / prefer not to say	Not effective	Effective
HE - high tariff (33)	9	45	45
HE - medium/low tariff (66)	9	27	64
HE - uncategorised (15)	20	27	53
FE (20)		15	85
NUS & SU (10)		20	80
Sector body (10)		30	70
Third sector (11)	9	18	73
Other (7)		29	71

As noted above, the majority of respondents agree that the proposed approach will be effective in improving providers' strategy to improve access and participation. A smaller proportion of NUS/Student Union respondents indicated that this would be effective, although, this may be explained by a larger proportion of respondents within this group who felt unable to or preferred not to give a response.
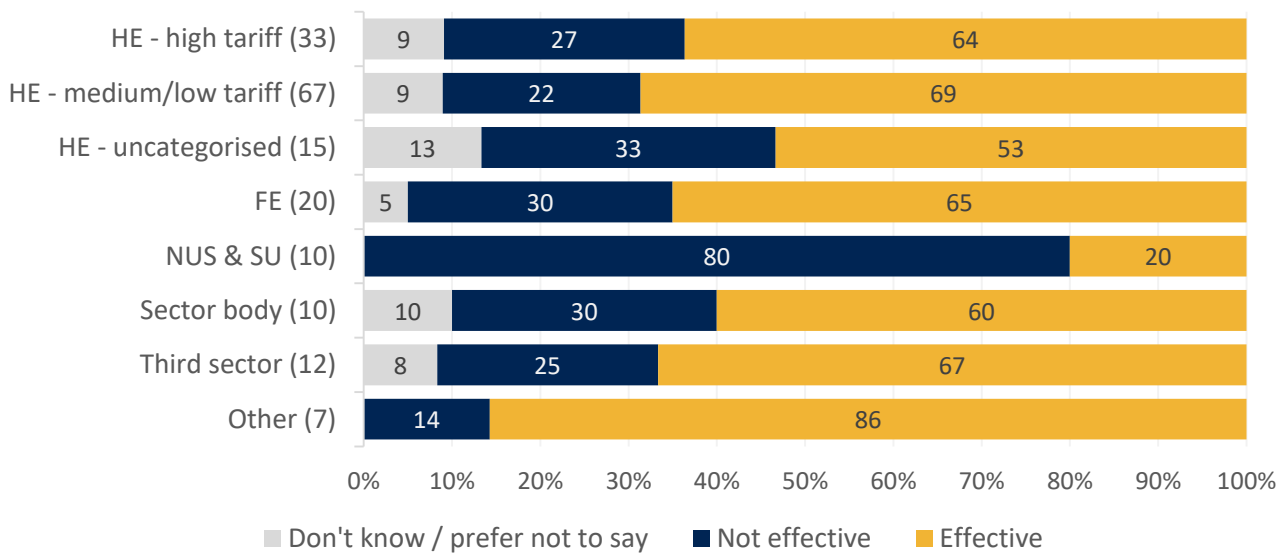
Figure 9: Perceived effectiveness of annual impact reports and action plans *for improving a provider's strategy* to improve access and participation, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)

Legend: Don't know / prefer not to say | Not effective | Effective

Organisation type	Don't know / prefer not to say	Not effective	Effective
HE - high tariff (33)	9	15	76
HE - medium/low tariff (67)	3	9	88
HE - uncategorised (15)	13	7	80
FE (20)			100
NUS & SU (10)	20	20	60
Sector body (10)	10		90
Third sector (11)	9	9	82
Other (7)		29	71

The greatest disparity in responses to the statements presented in Q2a was in relation to the statement that the proposed approach would be effective in engaging students in the

monitoring of access and participation. The majority (80 per cent) of NUS/Student Union responses indicated that the approach would not be effective in engaging students.

Organisation type	Don't know / prefer not to say	Not effective	Effective
HE - high tariff (33)	9	27	64
HE - medium/low tariff (67)	9	22	69
HE - uncategorised (15)	13	33	53
FE (20)	5	30	65
NUS & SU (10)		80	20
Sector body (10)	10	30	60
Third sector (12)	8	25	67
Other (7)		14	86

Legend: ■ Don't know / prefer not to say ■ Not effective ■ Effective

Qualitative responses to Q2b offer some insight into this finding. Respondents state that submitting action plans provides an opportunity for providers to **engage with students** to a greater extent in their access and participation activity (n=16) and, overall, welcome this opportunity. However, student engagement was also raised as a potential challenge by a similar number of respondents (n=19).

> *Student engagement is a significant challenge across the sector and [we] would like mechanisms put in place by the OfS to allow students, alumni and the public to understand the topic and make informed engagement in discourse regarding widening participation and access.*
>
> — **HE – medium/low tariff**

In particular, respondents from within the NUS/Student Union group state that students are unlikely to access impact reports and action plans of their own volition and, where they do, the content of these documents is unlikely to be accessible either in terms of students' knowledge and understanding of the material, or in its format. One respondent suggests that '*a creative approach to communicating these plans to students is important*' (NUS/Student Union).

> *We believe the annual submission of an action plan will help us increase engagement with the APP with the wider student body, and develop a greater understanding of the plan, its aims and the wider picture of the university's WP efforts.*
>
> — **NUS/Student Union**

In addition, NUS/Student Union respondents highlight that in the current proposals there is no requirement for providers to **demonstrate** that they have engaged students in the development, implementation or evaluation of access and participation planning or activity, and suggest that this requirement be included.

> *In order for action plans to be effective in engaging students in the process, the OfS would also need to be monitoring the involvement of Student Unions and students in the creation of these plans to ensure that they accurately reflected the student voice. It should be made a requirement for institutions to report on student involvement in the development of their action plans.*
>
> — **NUS/Student Union**

The majority of respondents across providers agree that the proposed approach will be effective for **capturing good practice and findings from evaluation**. Responses to Q2b indicate that respondents welcome this approach as they believe it will support the development of the evidence base and allow providers to capture and share good practice across the sector (n=21).

> *The impact reports have the potential to provide a wealth of good practice and make a significant contribution to growing the evidence base for the sector.*
>
> — **HE – medium/low tariff**

Figure 11: Perceived effectiveness of annual impact reports and action plans for *capturing good practice* **and findings from evaluation, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)**

Organisation type	Don't know / prefer not to say	Not effective	Effective
HE - high tariff (33)	9	21	70
HE - medium/low tariff (67)	7	9	84
HE - uncategorised (14)	14	7	79
FE (20)	5		95
NUS & SU (10)	10	20	70
Sector body (10)	10	10	80
Third sector (12)	8	17	75
Other (7)		14	86
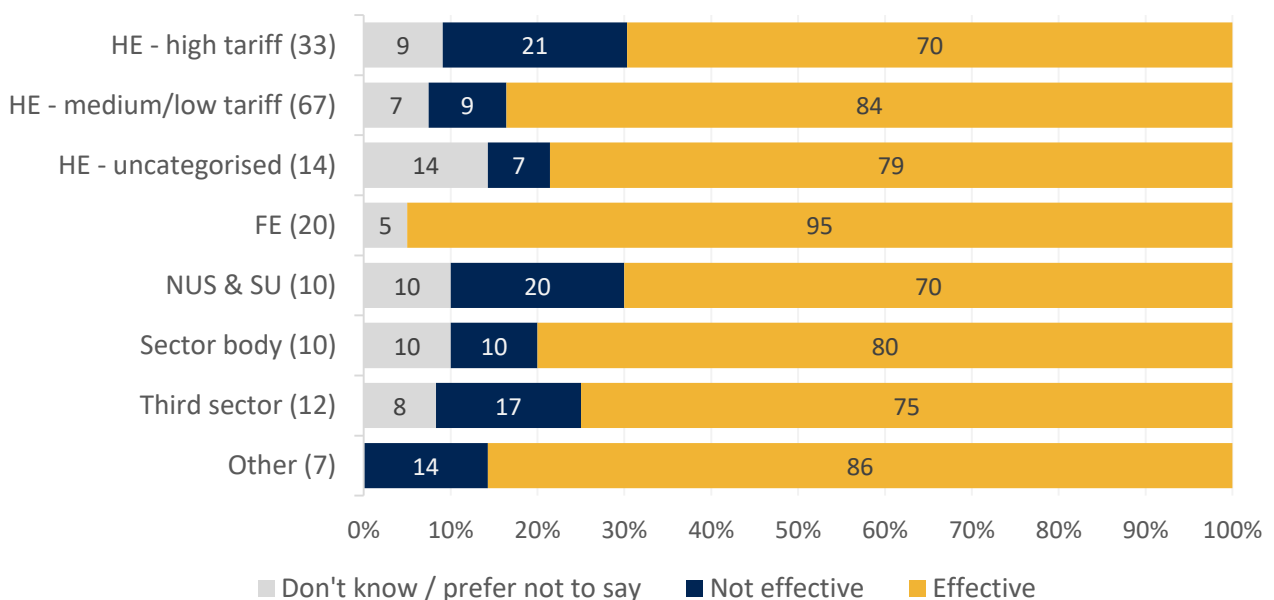
3.4.2 Accountability

Overall, there is broad agreement with the statement that the submission of an action plan will make providers more accountable to their students, the OfS and the public for their performance in access and participation, with 73 per cent of respondents tending to agree, or strongly agreeing with this statement compared with only 3 per cent who strongly disagree (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Level of agreement that the submission of an action plan would make providers more accountable to their students, the OfS, and the public for their performance in A&P. (Base = 169)
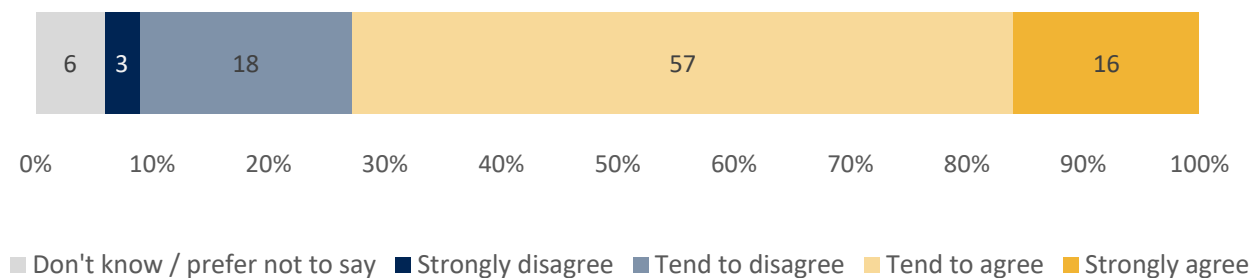
Respondents welcome the increase in **accountability and transparency** (n=57) that the submission of action plans would provide and state that publicly-available action plans will '*provide an opportunity for a firm public statement of intention and commitment*' (HE – high tariff) and '*create a more transparent process which supports the sharing of ideas across the sector*' (sector body).

> *The submission of an action plan has the potential to make providers more accountable to students and other stakeholders, and publishing these will improve transparency, and clarity of purpose.*
>
> — **HE – medium/low tariff**

Respondents (n=36) welcome this approach as they perceive it will encourage providers to remain focused on access and participation as a **strategic priority** and believe that it has the potential to drive the transformational change and improvements in access and participation that the OfS is seeking to achieve.

> *Yearly action plans developed to address institutional gaps or areas where progress is less than expected would ensure that institutions focused on priority areas year on year.*
>
> — **HE - high tariff**
>
> *A published action plan is a key aspect of ensuring accountability. It is also useful at an institutional level for strategic planning, identifying under-represented groups, and for reinforcing a culture of equality and diversity among academic teams, support teams and student representatives.*
>
> — **Further education**

Respondents emphasise that this proposal is likely to be most effective in achieving accountability if providers are able to present information in a **format** that is easily understood and digested by the range of audiences that may access them, including students and the general public (n=24).

> *Action plans have the potential to be a helpful tool for providers in communicating how they intend to drive improvements in their access and participation activity to internal and external audiences. Action plans will be most effective in achieving accountability if they are able to present information in ways that are easily understood by the wide range of audiences that might consult them.*
>
> — **Sector body**

When examined by provider type, analysis indicates that further education providers express the greatest level of agreement with this statement. In contrast, a larger proportion of respondents within NUS/Student Union, and other groups to a lesser extent, express disagreement with this statement (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Agreement that the submission of an action plan would make providers more accountable to their students, the OfS, and the public for their performance in A&P, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)
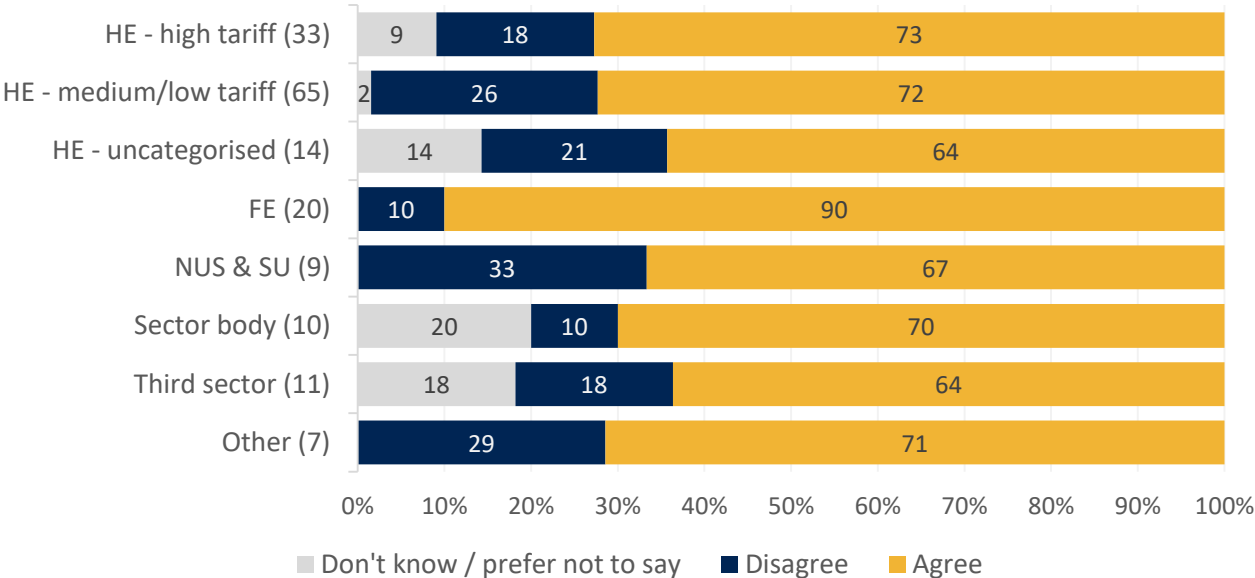
As noted previously, the importance of including **provider context** was emphasised by respondents (n=40) as critical to ensure that action plans are appropriately interpreted and so that providers are encouraged to set challenging targets and feel confident to trial new and **innovative strategies** to improve access and participation.

> *The allowance of longer-term, more innovative approaches to access and participation (the very thing this new approach is designed to encourage) should not be stifled or undercut by short-termism, and allowed the space and support to flourish.*

> — **Further education**

A condition for successful implementation will be ensuring that, on the one hand, annual impact reports and action plans provide a consistent, widely-understood basis for identifying and sharing best practice between institutions while, on the other hand, allowing institutions to adopt approaches to access that are innovative and tailored to their context.

> — **Third sector**

Where respondents do not agree that accountability will be increased, reasons given include: the existing framework already ensures accountability; the submission of action plans in isolation would be insufficient to increase accountability; and that accountability will be determined by the extent to which action plans are monitored and appropriately enforced by the OfS (n=34).

> *Whilst we generally agree with the approach proposed, we do not feel that the action plan would necessarily make institutions any more accountable than the existing annual plans for which providers already have to be accountable.*
>
> — **HE - medium/low tariff**
>
> *Action plans could be effective in making providers more accountable but only if they are appropriately monitored and acted upon positively by providers and the OfS to secure future improvements.*
>
> — **HE - medium/low tariff**

Approximately one-tenth (n=27) of respondents indicated that they needed more **guidance and information** from the OfS in order to determine whether accountability would be increased.

> *We feel unable to provide a substantive view on this proposal as the detail of the requirements of the action plan is still unclear, so it is difficult to judge its impact on the accountability of the provider to each of the groups mentioned above. If a standard template is to be used, we would urge the OfS to provide guidance on this as soon as possible so as to avoid duplication of effort and activity within internal processes. We are concerned about the increased burden that a very detailed action planning process could place on smaller institutions, especially if it is duplication of a provider's own internal operational planning processes.*
>
> — **HE – high tariff**
>
> *The OfS should provide clear guidelines on what action plans should include, and how they are to be produced. It should be mandatory that action plans are developed in consultation with students, the OfS and other stakeholders, as this would increase both their effectiveness and also the provider's accountability.*
>
> — **Third sector**

A small proportion of respondents indicate that while increased accountability and transparency is positive, it could potentially result in higher education providers setting less challenging targets or becoming less comfortable with trying new, untested or innovative approaches, in order to avoid appearing to under-perform or not meet access and participation targets (n=10).
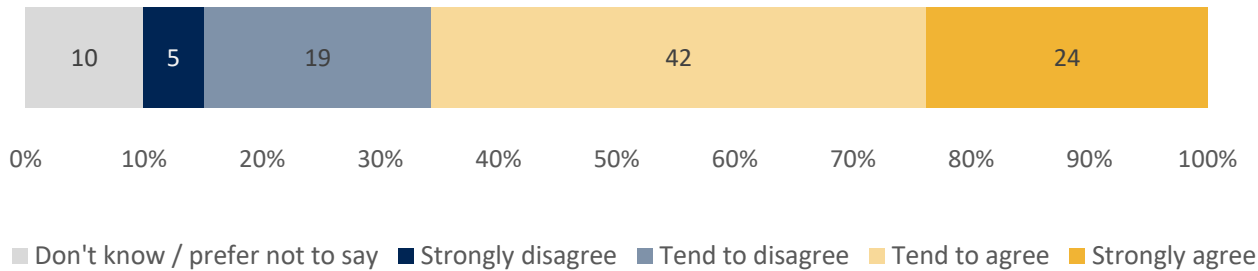
> *It should achieve greater accountability, but it could also discourage ambition and stifle inclusion/pursuit of innovative ideas/projects into the public plans. It could also lead to a degree of 'sanitising' to avoid plans that may serve to highlight poor performance or reveal sensitive statistics.*
>
> — **HE - medium/low tariff**

3.4.3 Burden and scrutiny

Overall, respondents express support for a longer-cycle plan with annual impact reporting, and ongoing OfS monitoring, with 66 per cent agreeing that this is likely to reduce the level of burden for low risk providers compared with 5 per cent who strongly disagree (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Level of agreement that a longer-cycle plan with annual impact reporting and ongoing monitoring will reduce burden for low risk providers and apply greater scrutiny for providers at increased risk of breaching one or more conditions. (Base = 172)

10	5	19	42	24

Don't know / prefer not to say ■ Strongly disagree ■ Tend to disagree ■ Tend to agree ■ Strongly agree

Respondents express the view that this shift in focus would improve providers' ability to **strategically plan and prioritise**, allowing them to focus more on the delivery, evaluation and outcomes of their access and participation activities, ultimately improving the evidence available (n=56).

> *Risk-based regulation is to be welcomed and supported. The move from annual plans and monitoring to a more strategic timescale with impact reporting and additional OfS monitoring will allow us to focus more on the delivery and evaluation of our access and participation interventions. There may be some period of adjustment, creating*

additional workload, but once the new APP approach beds in, we expect the burden to be reduced overall and this is welcome.

— **HE - high tariff**

Strategic planning for widening engagement is essential if any progress towards that step change in access and participation, referred to by the OfS is to happen. Annual impact reporting is equally essential in order to monitor progress towards the strategic goals. Those HEIs not at increased risk should welcome this approach as one which supports their commitment and makes it easier to demonstrate real, tangible progress.

— **Other**

Overall, respondents express support for the **risk-based approach** because they perceive that increased scrutiny on high-risk providers is appropriate in order to address under-performance (n=19). There was broad agreement that the proposed approach is likely to reduce the overall **burden** for low-risk providers (n=33). Some also perceive that it would support the OfS by enabling it to focus resources where they needed most, that is, on at-risk or high-risk providers (n=15).

Reducing the annual burden for institutions (and the OfS) will enable the OfS to focus on areas of greatest concern. It will also help institutions to know whether they are making appropriate progress and in this case to focus on the work itself and being effective, rather than focusing on the completion of monitoring documents. Where there is a greater risk the greater scrutiny feels appropriate.

— **HE - medium/low tariff**

However, as noted in responses to Proposal 1, some respondents express concern that small or specialist providers will be disproportionately affected by this risk-based approach, and are keen to receive further **guidance and support** from the OfS as to how level of risk will be determined (n=75). Approximately one-third (n=61) of respondents express uncertainty over whether burden would increase, decrease or remain static, particularly for small or specialist providers who may lack expertise and capacity to conduct evaluation, and are unable to determine this until further guidance is provided from the OfS.

It will be important that the OfS provides detailed and specific guidance about how the process of identifying or triggering risk will work. Specifically, how the OfS will view the severity of risk in terms of a spectrum e.g. individual missed milestones versus fundamental institutional weaknesses, especially where this reporting will be made public. We would also urge context and national level data to play an important part in ascertaining risk and performance… We would want the OfS to plainly set out how such a process will work so that a formulation of risk takes into account the entire student lifecycle as well as provider context.

— **HE - high tariff**

When examining responses by organisation type, analysis indicates that respondents within the 'other' group, that is, students and consultancy organisations, are least likely to express agreement, followed by sector bodies (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Agreement that a longer-cycle plan with annual impact reporting and ongoing monitoring will reduce burden for low risk providers and apply greater scrutiny for providers at increased risk of breaching one or more conditions, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)
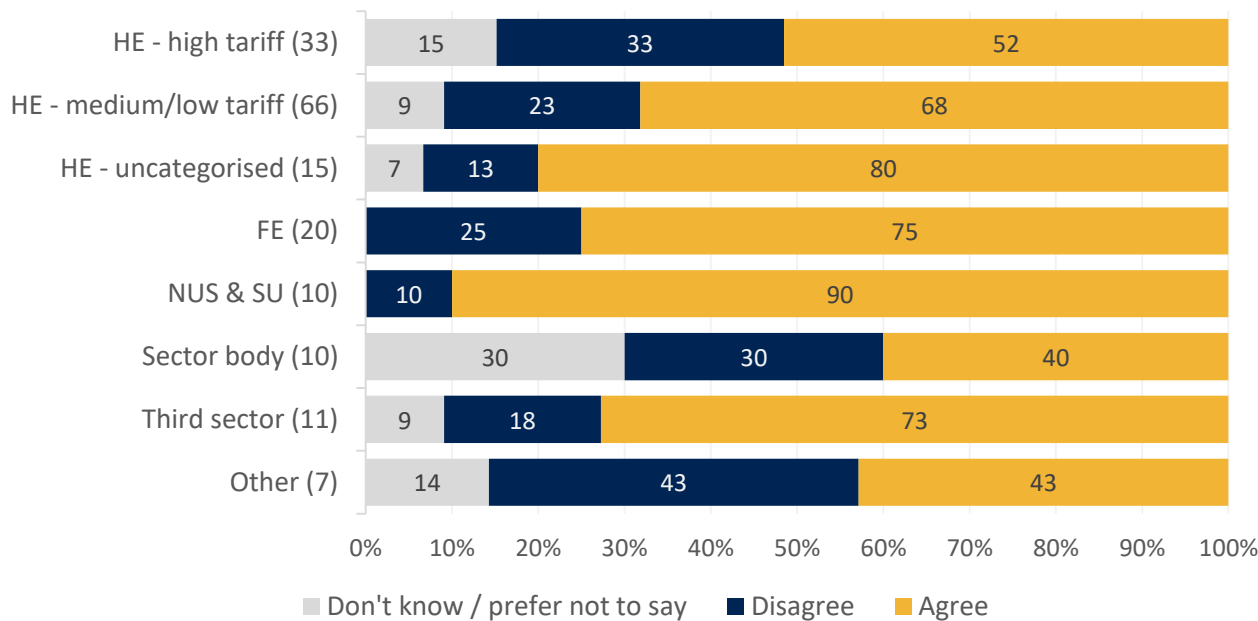
Consultees who disagreed with this statement raise two main concerns. Firstly, as noted above, they express concern that small providers in particular would not realise any reduction in burden overall; and secondly, that while longer-term action plans for low-risk providers *may* reduce burden, the increase in focus on and resource needed in order to conduct evaluation and impact assessment for the annual impact report would negate this reduction.

> *In theory, having a well thought through 3-5 year strategy will be less burdensome on providers as they will have a clear sense of their aims and objectives, and are able to plan more long term. However, the increased expectation on monitoring and impact assessment will be more burdensome to smaller providers than at present, and the OfS should be mindful of the resources available to small providers in being able to undertake in depth evaluations. In this sense, there will not be less burden for a small provider not deemed at risk.*
>
> — **Sector body**

3.5   Summary

— There is broad support for the proposal that providers will be required to publish and submit to the OfS an impact report each year.

— Three-quarters of respondents agree that the submission of an action plan will make providers more accountable to their students, the OfS and the public for their performance in access and participation.

— Representatives from the further education sector agree most strongly that an action plan will make providers more accountable. NUS/Student Union representatives are more likely to disagree.

— Respondents are particularly supportive of the statements that the proposed approach will be effective in improving providers' strategies to improve access and participation, and in capturing good practice and evaluation findings.

— As noted in Proposal 1, the main concern with this proposal is in relation to how the OfS will ensure there is clarity and rigour in how they identify and monitor high-risk providers.

— A small proportion of respondents express uncertainty about the overall impact of the proposed approach on burden for higher education providers, particularly for smaller or specialist providers.

3.6 Proposal 3

Providers will be expected to **include in their access and participation plans a set of strategic, outcomes-focused targets**. A small number of these will be recommended by the OfS for use across all providers, and providers will also continue to be able to set outcomes-focused targets related to their own contexts.

In their APPs for the academic year 2019-20, the OfS has required providers to set stretching, clearly-defined targets that reflect their ambitions and strategy and that also focus on the desired outcomes and impact of their programmes. In the past, providers have been responsible for setting their own targets and milestones, including the data and measures used and, as a result, these varied considerably across different providers. The OfS proposes that clear, consistent outcomes-focused targets that are comparable across the sector will allow for greater rigour in their assessment of performance and also improve accountability.

There was widespread support for common targets when the sector was consulted in June 2018 through the OfS access and participation review survey. Nearly half of respondents (49 per cent) felt that the current approach was not effective at allowing comparability of performance in access and participation across the sector. Over three-quarters of respondents feel that a common approach to targets would be effective in allowing comparability of performance (83 per cent), setting ambitious targets (75 per cent), helping to measure progress (83 per cent) and supporting sustained and progressive outreach (78 per cent).

The analysis of the consultation responses suggests that although majority support remains, the level of support for common, outcomes-focused targets is less than previously indicated. Almost three-quarters of consultees (71 per cent) tend to agree or strongly agree that the proposal allows for comparability of performance across the sector, compared with 6 per cent who strongly disagree (Figure 16). The majority of respondents (81 per cent) strongly agree that providers should be able to set additional targets relative to their context, compared with just 2 per cent who strongly disagree.

The majority of respondents also agree that the OfS-specified aims are the national priority areas for access and participation (88 per cent), that the proposal allows for progress in improving access and participation to be measured (82 per cent) and that the OfS should specify measures for providers to use when setting targets related to the OfS-specified aims (78 per cent).
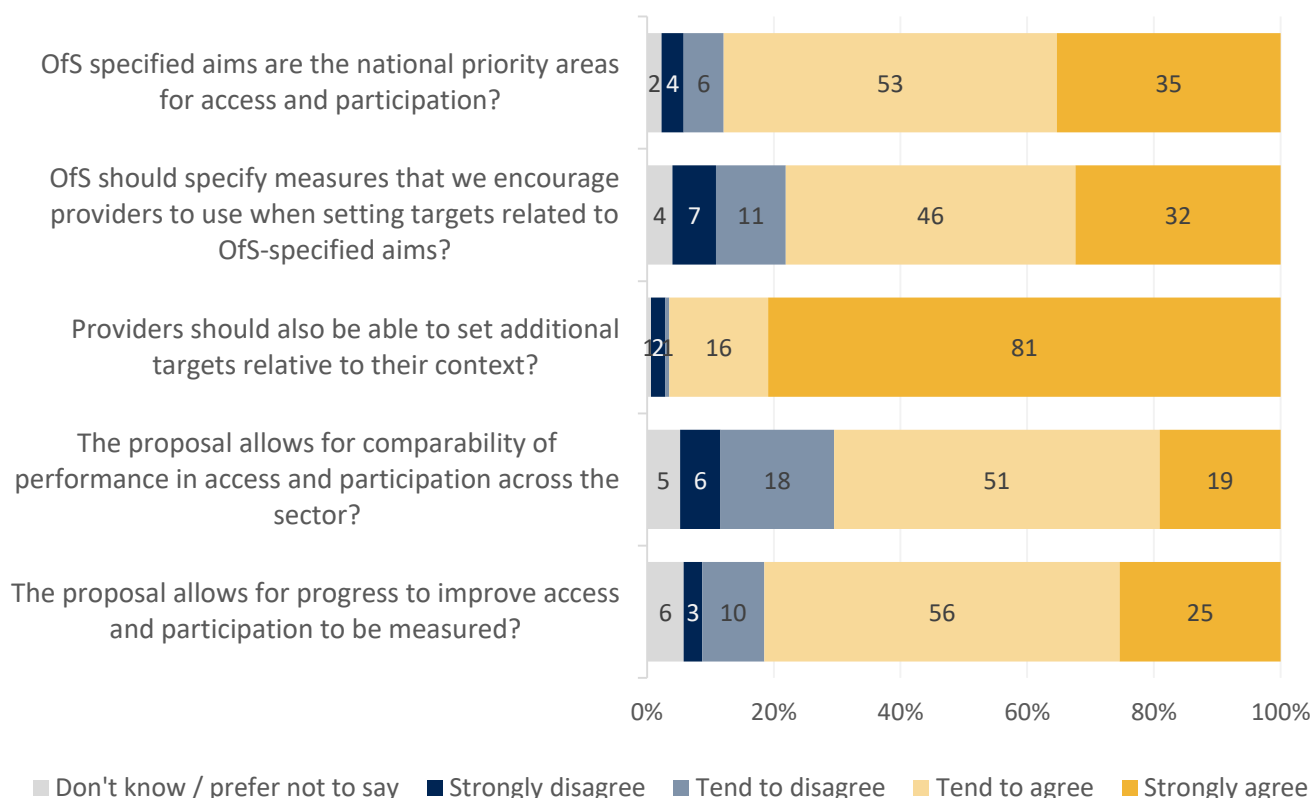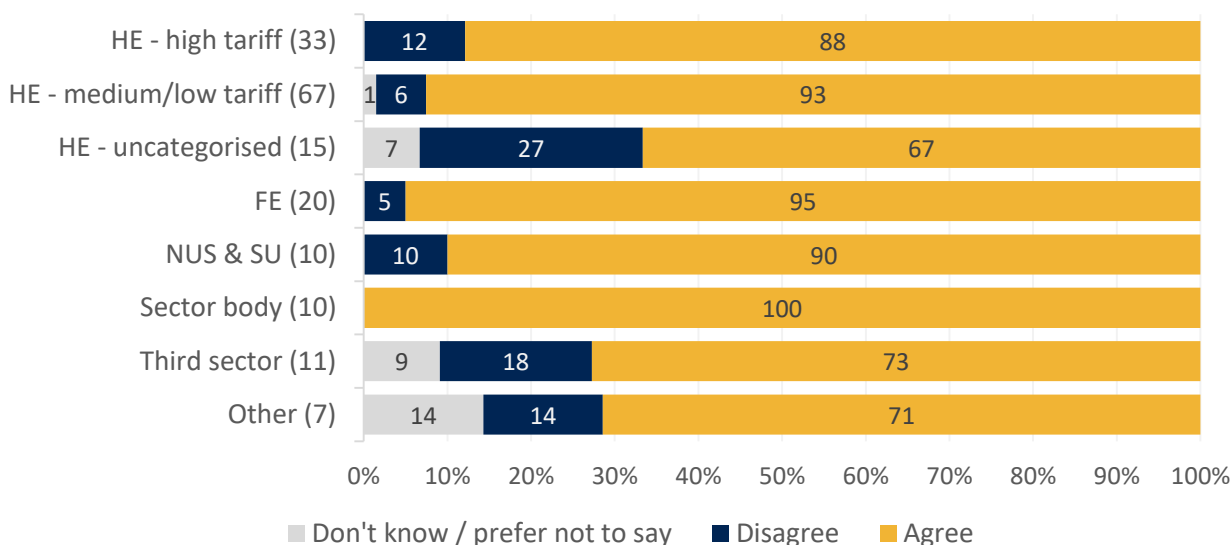
3.6.1 National priority areas for access and participation

When examined by type of organisation, the analysis indicates that a greater proportion of respondents within the HE - uncategorised sub-group express disagreement (27 per cent) with this statement. Sector bodies and further education organisations express the greatest levels of agreement with this statement.
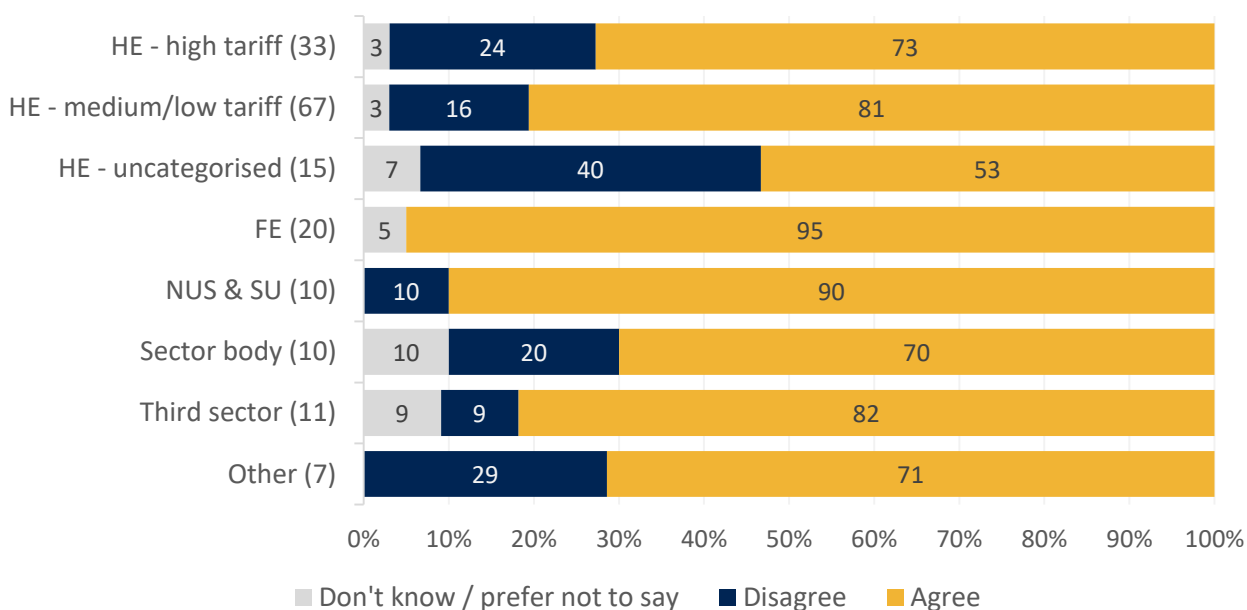
Figure 17: Agreement with the stated OfS specified-aims are the national priority areas for access and participation, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)

Organisation type	Don't know / prefer not to say	Disagree	Agree
HE - high tariff (33)		12	88
HE - medium/low tariff (67)	1	6	93
HE - uncategorised (15)	7	27	67
FE (20)		5	95
NUS & SU (10)		10	90
Sector body (10)			100
Third sector (11)	9	18	73
Other (7)	14	14	71

■ Don't know / prefer not to say   ■ Disagree   ■ Agree

3.6.2 OfS-specified measures

Respondents within the HE - uncategorised group were least likely to agree (53 per cent) with the proposal that the OfS should specify measures that it recommends for providers to use when setting targets related to the OfS's aims. Respondents within the further education group expressed the greatest level of agreement with this proposal (95 per cent).

Figure 18: Agreement that the OfS should specify measures that they encourage providers to use when setting targets related to OfS-specified aims, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)

Organisation type	Don't know / prefer not to say	Disagree	Agree
HE - high tariff (33)	3	24	73
HE - medium/low tariff (67)	3	16	81
HE - uncategorised (15)	7	40	53
FE (20)	5		95
NUS & SU (10)		10	90
Sector body (10)	10	20	70
Third sector (11)	9	9	82
Other (7)		29	71

■ Don't know / prefer not to say   ■ Disagree   ■ Agree

3.6.3 Provider-specified targets

There is overwhelming agreement from all groups with the proposal that in addition to OfS targets, providers should be able to set their own targets relative to their context. Only a minority of respondents within the HE - uncategorised, NUS/Student Union and other sub-groups express disagreement with this statement.
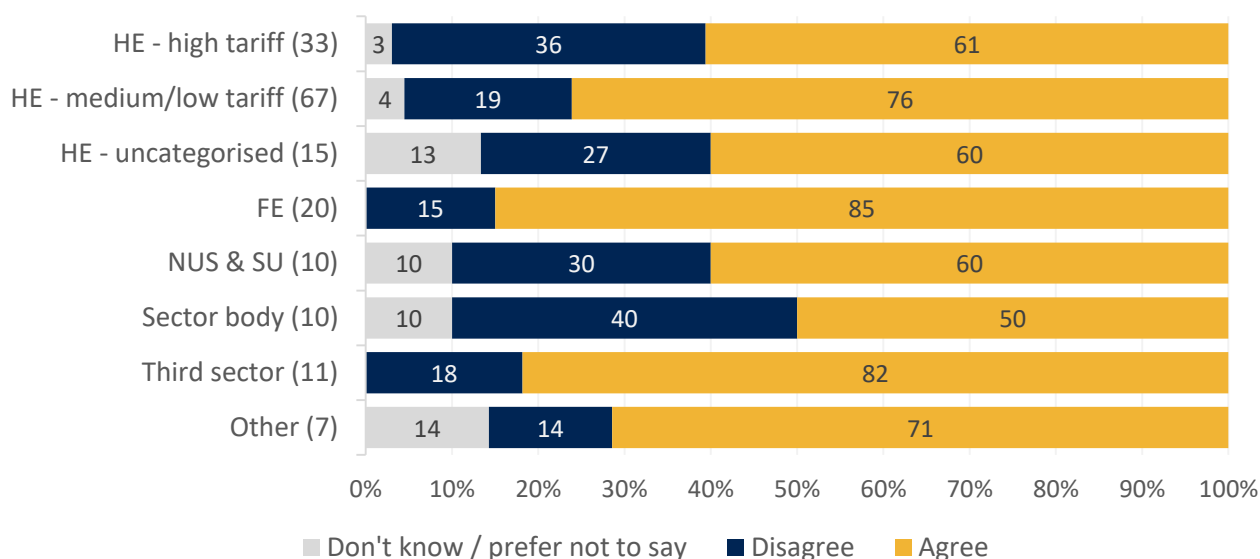
Figure 19: Agreement with the proposal that the OfS should specify measures that providers should be able to set additional targets relative to their context, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)
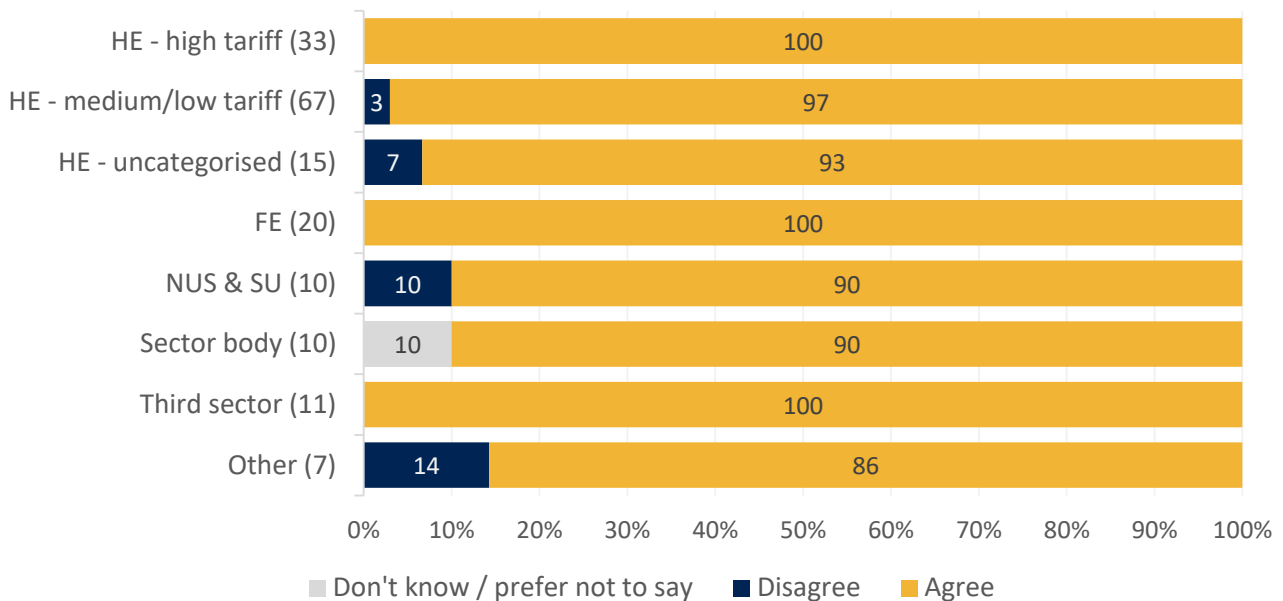
3.6.4 Comparability of performance across the sector

A larger proportion of respondents across all types of organisation express disagreement with the statement that Proposal 3 will allow for comparability of performance across the sector. In particular, HE - high tariff providers, NUS/Student Union and sector bodies are most likely to disagree with this statement. As previously highlighted, the majority of respondents emphasise the importance of provider context in one or more of their consultation responses, and this is strongly reflected in responses to this and the previous statement that providers should be able to set additional targets relative to their context.
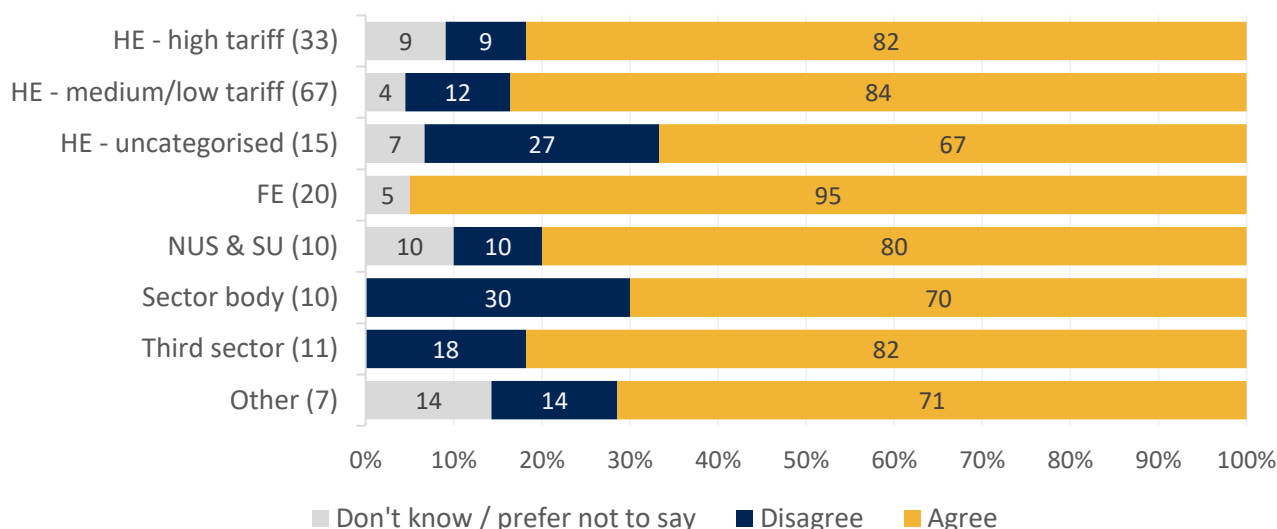
Figure 20: Agreement that the proposal allows for comparability of performance in access and participation across the sector by agreement, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)

	Don't know / prefer not to say	Disagree	Agree
HE - high tariff (33)	3	36	61
HE - medium/low tariff (67)	4	19	76
HE - uncategorised (15)	13	27	60
FE (20)		15	85
NUS & SU (10)	10	30	60
Sector body (10)	10	40	50
Third sector (11)		18	82
Other (7)	14	14	71

3.6.5 Measuring progress

Organisations within HE - uncategorised and sector bodies express the lowest levels of agreement (67 per cent and 70 per cent) with the statement that Proposal 3 will allow for progress in improving access and participation to be measured.

Figure 21: Agreement with the proposal allows for progress to improve access and participation to be measured, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)

	Don't know / prefer not to say	Disagree	Agree
HE - high tariff (33)	9	9	82
HE - medium/low tariff (67)	4	12	84
HE - uncategorised (15)	7	27	67
FE (20)	5		95
NUS & SU (10)	10	10	80
Sector body (10)		30	70
Third sector (11)		18	82
Other (7)	14	14	71

The consultation respondents outline a number of reasons to explain why they are in agreement with the plans to include a set of strategic, outcome-focused targets within providers' access and participation plans. Some consultees (n=16) suggest that greater parity in aims and targets would allow for **comparisons across the sector** and enable

providers to benchmark their performances against similar organisations. However, a fifth agreed (n=34) that any recommended targets imposed by the OfS would need to take into **account contextual and regional differences** to ensure that accurate comparisons could be made between providers.

Given the diversity within the sector, it is not always possible to assess individual provider's contributions towards the national priority areas for access and participation. Many providers have their own organisational aims; therefore, some consultees (n=10) felt that providing the sector with specified aims would encouraged a **more focused and strategic approach** for providers to follow. A small number of respondents (n=5) support the move to a standardised measure of success and suggest that this would incentivise providers to adopt a **consistent approach** to monitoring and evaluating their access and participation plans.

> *"A consistent national set of aims and measures will provide a sound basis for the sector as a whole to address national-level priorities, will enable more effective comparison of performance between providers and groups of providers, and should assist in more effective use of best practice approaches*
>
> — **HE – medium/low tariff**

However, some respondents (n=11) feel the OfS-specified aims would come at the expense of their own organisational priorities. There are some concerns that a national approach to access and participation would be based on the assumption that there is a one-size-fits-all solution for the sector and would reduce providers' **overall autonomy**. A small number of respondents (n=7) suggest that providers should have the **flexibility** to review and revise the proposed OfS recommended targets to accommodate for the diversity of provision/providers within the sector.

> *"Mandated targets are fundamentally opposed to the principle of institutional autonomy. The ethos, strategy and ambition of institutions must be recognised in setting and agreeing targets especially when the challenges we seek to redress are those that occur years before students apply to HE. The implication of the proposal is that institutions will be forced to compromise on principles governing its recruitment strategy. This would be a concerning precedent."*
>
> — **HE - high tariff**

Nevertheless, a minority of respondents (n=5) felt that the proposed outcome-focused targets would encourage providers **to broaden their access provision** for under-represented groups, with the perceived benefit impacting most on pre-16 provision as providers are incentivised to develop a more strategic, long-term approach to their access plans.

"An emphasis on long-term sustained engagement with under-represented groups, as evidence suggests that this is much more effective than short standalone interventions. In addition, engagement needs to begin earlier than at present, with an increased focus on outreach for pre-16 pupils to increase awareness of higher education as they are considering their post-16 choices."

— **Third sector**

To support providers in setting targets, the consultation outlined that the OfS would maintain a dataset of access, student success and progression data for under-represented groups which would be disaggregated to provider level. The proposed dataset would include POLAR data to measure the participation of higher education across the UK. However, some (n=9) respondents express concern about an **over-reliance on POLAR** as a proxy for identifying disadvantaged students. Respondents question the accuracy of the data, particularly for being able to identify students from deprived background in London and other large urban areas. A minority of respondents (n=4) also suggest that the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) would provide a more holistic and reliable measure of the socio-economic background of students. Some respondents (n=7) perceive that the **wider choice of metrics and data sources** would increase the accuracy of the proposed dataset.

"We are concerned that there seems to be a focus in the consultation on the continued use of POLAR3/4 as a proxy for disadvantage and we would urge the OfS to consider other freely-available datasets. It well documented that the use of POLAR classifications in London and other large urban areas is particularly problematic"

— **HE - high tariff**

3.7   Summary

— There is broad support for the proposal that providers will be expected to include strategic, challenging and outcome-focused targets for access and participation, and that the proposal allows for comparability of performance across the sector and measurement of progress to improve access and participation.

— Providers broadly support the proposal that the OfS should specify measures it will encourage providers to use when setting targets related to the OfS's aims.

— Providers overwhelmingly support the proposal that providers should be able to set additional targets relative to their context.

— Providers highlight that context and flexibility in approach will afford providers the ability to demonstrate progress relative to their organisation.

— Providers welcome the setting of sector-wide aims and perceive that this will encourage a more focused and strategic approach for providers to follow.

— Respondents support the move to a standardised measure of success and suggest that this will incentivise providers to adopt a consistent approach to monitoring and evaluating their APPs.

3.8   Proposal 4

The OfS will **collect predicted access spend disaggregated by pre-16 activity, post-16 activity and work with adults and communities in access and participation plans.** We will also continue to **collect information on the financial support that providers give to students, and set expectations that this financial support is robustly evaluated, and communicated clearly to students**. We will no longer require providers to report on student success and progression spend.
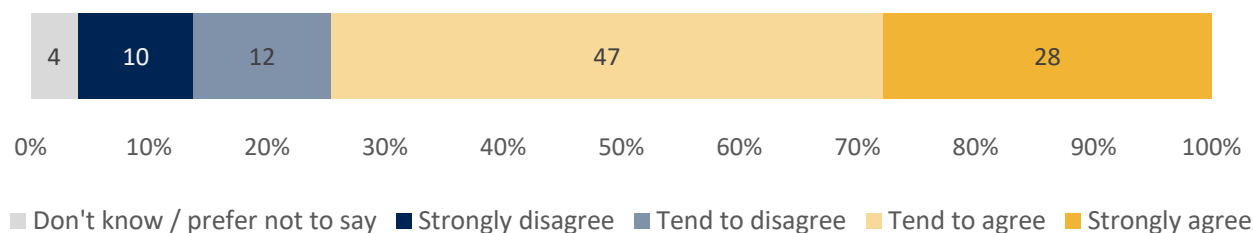
Previously, providers were required to submit predicted expenditure on access, student success, progression and financial support over a five-year period as part of their access agreement. The OfS sets an expected level of total spend for higher education providers and balance of spend based on the providers' performance. The actual amount spent was then reported as part of the annual monitoring process. Under the new regulatory framework, the aim is to ensure greater transparency and accuracy in the data collected while also minimising the burden on providers. The new framework presents opportunities to join up the processes of financial reporting for access and participation with those required for other regulatory purposes, revisit the information required by the OfS on expenditure on the different student lifecycle stages, and re-consider whether expectations on level of spend need to be set in the context of an outcomes-focused approach.

The OfS is proposing to remove the requirement on providers to report their expenditure on student success and progression. However, the regulator will consider whether the level of spend submitted is appropriate to deliver a credible plan. Furthermore, it is anticipated that targets and pressures exerted through TEF and longitudinal education outcomes (LEO) will help to ensure these activities are sufficiently resourced. The OfS recognises the importance of continuing to collect information on expenditure on financial support because students have an interest in understanding the level of financial support providers offer. Furthermore, the OfS has a role to play in ensuring providers deliver and sustain long-term outreach programmes. It will, therefore, also continue to collect information about expenditure on access. Providers will be required to submit a forecast of their expenditure on access (broken down by pre-16, post-16 and work with adults and communities) and financial support, as well as research and evaluation, as part of their APP. Actual spend will be monitored through financial returns.

3.8.1 Access investment

There was wide spread support for the proposal to collect and publish, in a transparent way, access investment. Three-quarters of respondents to the consultation (75 per cent) agree with this proposal compared with just over a fifth (21 per cent) who disagree (Figure 22).

Figure 22: Level of agreement with the proposal to collect and publish, in a transparent way, access investment. (Base = 173)

4	10	12	47	28

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ Don't know / prefer not to say ■ Strongly disagree ■ Tend to disagree ■ Tend to agree ■ Strongly agree

Those in support of the proposal most commonly perceive that the main benefit would be to ensure higher education providers were **publicly-accountable** for the achievement of the aims and objectives outlined in their APPs (n=45). Interestingly, the strongest support for this proposal appears to come from wider stakeholders, such as sector bodies and third sector organisations (Figure 23). The comments suggest that this is because it also ensures **stakeholder access to information** needed to gauge providers' relative commitment to social mobility and widening participation (n=11).

> *Access investment comes from student fees so it is only right that students, and taxpayers, have timely and transparent information on how their money is being spent.*
>
> — **Third sector**

A similar proportion of respondents (n=11) were of the view that greater transparency in terms of levels of expenditure on access (and the proportion of spend on different groups – see next section) could lead to **greater efficiency and increased value for money** for students, as providers are incentivised to make use of evaluation evidence to identify the most effective and impactful activities in order to determine and then justify their level of investment. Furthermore, providers could be encouraged to **maintain, or even increase, their investment in access** (n=9), as any decrease would be apparent over time in the published data. The opportunity to **benchmark levels of expenditure** with other similar providers may also drive increased spending, as lower levels of investment relative to providers' closest competitors would also be evident from the data.

> *Access investment is already collected and published and we would support this continuing including maintaining the expectation for a minimum level of spend. The publication of spend is helpful to allow benchmarking analysis between peers and prompt investigation e.g. where an institution is out of the benchmark range. It is also useful for helping students, and the public, understand where fee income is spent, why a proportion of income is used for assisting widening participation students and the wider benefits of this*
>
> — **HE - high tariff**

While it is recognised that the proposed changes could have a positive impact on the level of resource invested in access, some respondents (n=22) express concern that the proposal could, conversely, result in an increased risk of providers **diverting resources from success and progression** to access in order to improve their position relative to their competitors.

> *We are concerned that by only monitoring access investment, institutions will be less likely to invest in success and progression. Whilst there are other targets for these areas, we do not feel there will be sufficient pressure to ensure success and progression are funded appropriately if emphasis is put only on access.*
>
> — **NUS/Student Union**

The OfS stated in the consultation document that it will consider whether the level of spend submitted in providers' APPs is appropriate to deliver a credible plan in their assessment of risk and this, along with other drivers such as the TEF and LEO, should mitigate this risk. However, providers state it will be important to monitor this to ensure expenditure on these lifecycle stages is maintained at an appropriated level once the change has been implemented.

Some consultees welcome the proposal because they perceive it would **simplify the reporting process** and **reduce burden** (n=19). However, a minority of respondents (n=10) remain concerned about the administrative burden of the reporting requirements and the disproportionate impact collating and publishing data has on smaller providers.

Although the majority of responses are supportive, there is a substantial minority (21 per cent) who tend to disagree or strongly disagree with the proposition to collect and publish access investment. Respondents from NUS/Student Union (40 per cent) along with those from HE - medium/low tariff providers (27 per cent) and HE - uncategorised providers (27 per cent) are more likely to disagree with this proposal than respondents from the other sub-groups (Figure 23).

Figure 23: Agreement with the proposal to collect and publish, in a transparent way, access investment, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)
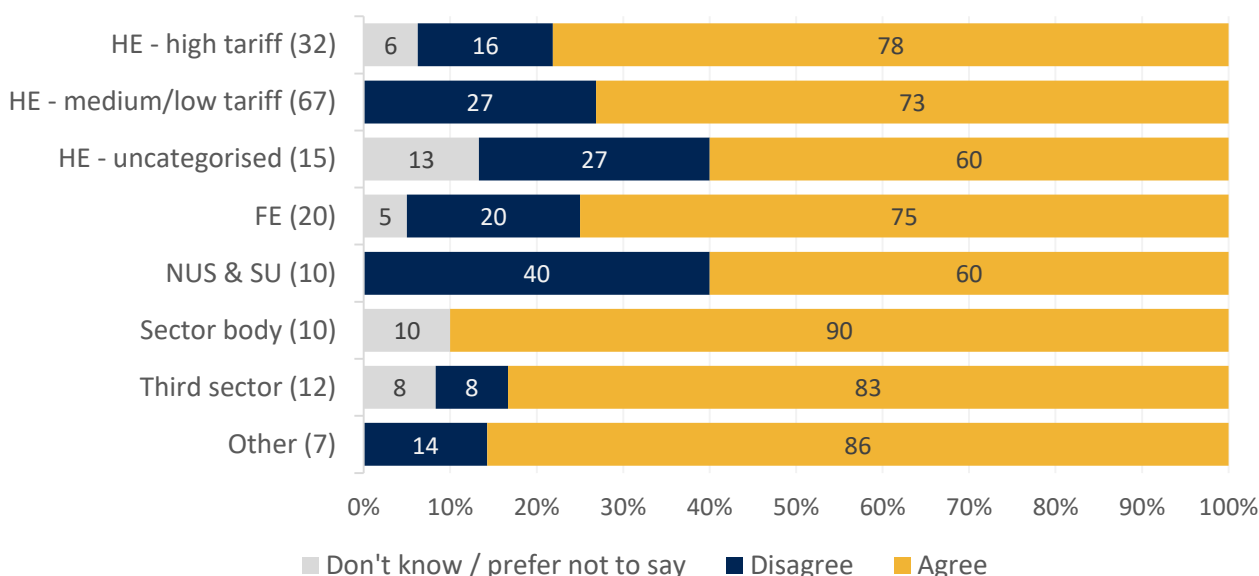
Those that disagree with the proposal most commonly express a concern that making information publicly-available could increase the risk of **data being misinterpreted or misused**, resulting in an informal league table of expenditure on access (n=21). The **level of spend on access is dependent upon a range of contextual factors**, including a provider's mission, strategic priorities for access and participation, geographical context and student demographic profile. Respondents report that any published **data should be appropriately contextualised** (n=16).

> *We feel it is important that the sector continues to demonstrate their expenditure in ensuring fair access given the concerns over transparency in a period of increased marketisation of HE level study, in order to ensure fair access in an increasingly competitive market. However, care must be taken to ensure that parents, learners and other stakeholders do not simply compare providers on the basis of raw investment figures divorced from providers' rationale and evidence of impact. Therefore, care must be taken not to encourage the ranking of providers by total spend.''*
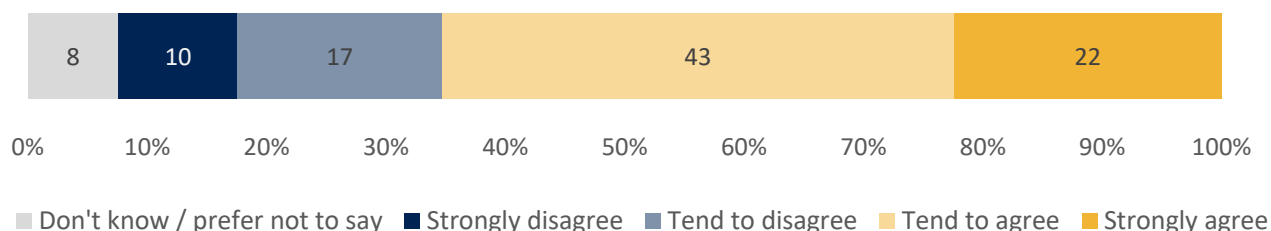
— **HE – medium/low tariff)**

3.8.2 Disaggregation of access spend

The decision to only require providers to report their spend on access and not on success and progression was, in part, informed by feedback from the sector that disaggregating spend on success and progression presents a significant challenge and results in an administrative burden. Conversely, total investment in access is perceived to be more straightforward to disaggregate by the OfS and the majority of providers. Further

disaggregating access spend by post-16, pre-16 and work with adults and communities does not appear to present an issue for most consultees and the majority agree with this proposal (43 per cent tend to agree and 22 per cent strongly agree) (Figure 24).

Figure 24: Level of agreement with the proposal to disaggregate access spend by post-16, pre-16 and work with adults and communities. (Base = 170)

8	10	17	43	22

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%

■ Don't know / prefer not to say ■ Strongly disagree ■ Tend to disagree ■ Tend to agree ■ Strongly agree

Respondents perceive that disaggregating access spend could help to **broaden provision** by encouraging providers to invest in activities for each of the beneficiary groups (n=29) and ensure that **resources are apportioned** appropriately as part of a **long-term strategy** (n=11). Disaggregating and presenting data in a consistent way across the sector could also facilitate **benchmarking** (n=5) and **greater transparency**, which are perceived to be beneficial for a number reasons. Respondents indicate that greater transparency would help to ensure **public accountability** as well as provide useful insights for providers and wider stakeholders into the **volume of spend** on activities for different groups. This, in turn, would help to identify potential **gaps in provision** (n=21).

In the context of the dramatic decline in part-time and mature students (and the implications for skills, productivity and growth in the wider economy) and in view of the influential role that parents/carers fulfil in relation to student decision-making about higher education[6], ring-fencing resources for work with adults and communities is increasingly important. Evidence from the first 18 months of the national formative and impact evaluation of NCOP[7] suggests that work with adults and communities presents some challenges but that this is a focus for consortia's outreach and good practice is starting to emerge.

---

[6] See for example, CFE (2018) Student Information use and behaviour. An update to the 2014 Advisory Study. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-information-use-and-behaviour/; CFE (2017) User insight research into post-16 choices: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664227/User_insight_research_into_post-16_choices.pdf

[7] CFE and associates (2017) NCOP: Year 1 report of the national formative and impact evaluation including capacity building with NCOP consortia. http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405115436/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2018/ncopyear1/

There are higher levels of disagreement with Proposal 4b within higher education providers compared with wider stakeholders such as NUS/Student Union, sector bodies and third sector organisations (Figure 25).

Figure 25: Agreement with the proposal to disaggregate access spend by post-16, pre-16 and work with adults and communities, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)
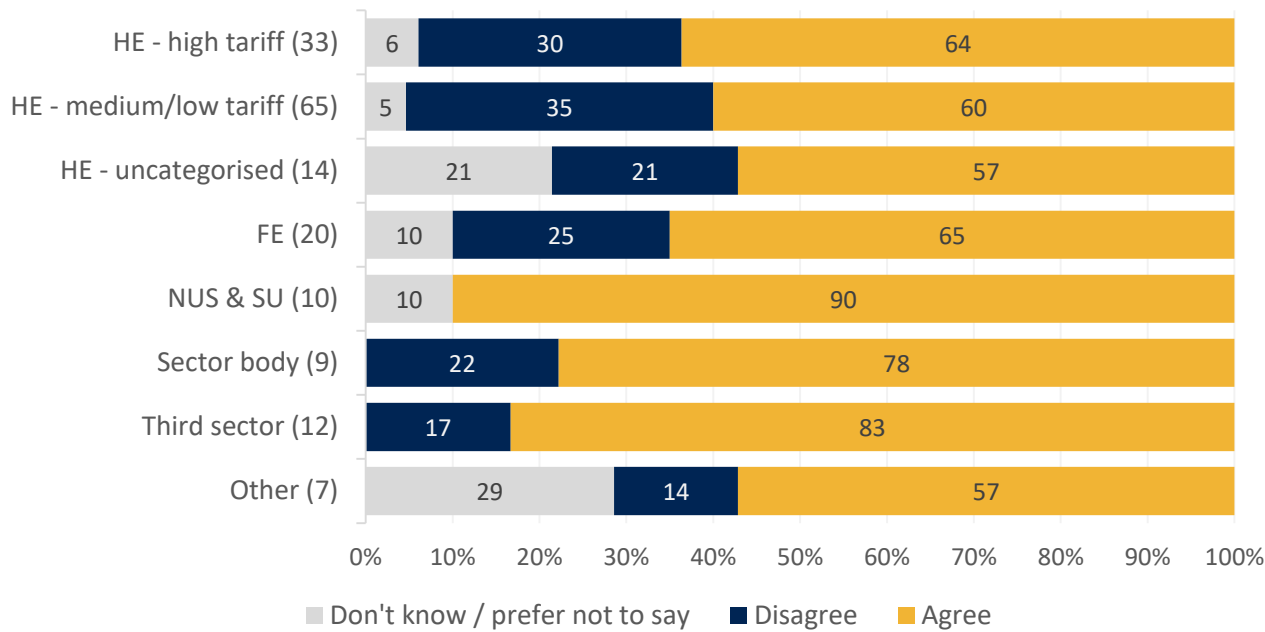
There is a minority of respondents who suggest that **access spend should be further disaggregated**, for example, the pre-16 group could be split by primary and secondary school (n=15). The wider results of the consultation, however, suggest that this may not be universally welcomed by the sector. Among those who disagree with the proposal, a common concern is organisational **capability to disaggregate spend** in the proposed way (n=24) and/or the **administrative burden** that the process of collecting, analysing and reporting the data will place on their staff (n=13).

> *It is incredibly difficult to disaggregate pre-16, post-16 and adult access spend within a further education college. Any such disaggregation methodology would not be robust and would significantly add to the administrative burden for the provider. Additionally, this is not an outcome focused monitoring activity so appears to be out of line with the OfS aims on both accounts.*
>
> — **Further education**

Other respondents perceive there is a risk that, as a result of the proposed measure, some providers will feel under **pressure to balance spend** across the groups (n=13). This could result in resources being diverted from a group that has been identified as a strategic priority for fear of being penalised for not investing enough across each of the groups.

Some respondents suggest that **guidance on an appropriate split** from the OfS would be useful (n=5).

> *"Disaggregating spend by these beneficiary groups may be more straightforward for providers. It is important to note, however, that depending on the provider's offer and mission, it may be the case that spend on pre- and post-16 learners noticeably outweighs access spend on adults and communities. We could not support this proposal if it meant providers faced pressure to balance funding equally across all beneficiary groups, or divert resource away from one particular group. This could slow down progress on access and participation significantly."*
>
> — **HE - high tariff**

However, there is widespread recognition that the way in which spend is distributed is largely determined by local contextual factors; as such, guidance at a national level may not be appropriate. Consultees, therefore, reiterate the **importance of ensuring that published data is appropriately contextualised** so it is clear why providers apportioned spend in certain ways and their rationale for prioritising a particular group or groups (n=24).

3.8.3 Focus on targets and outcomes rather than inputs (spend)

Respondents are more equivocal in their perceptions of whether a strong focus on targets and outcomes would create enough pressure to secure sufficient funding for access and participation to achieve change, without an expectation of spend. Although more than half of respondents are in agreement with this proposition (57 per cent), over a third disagree (36 per cent) (Figure 26).

Figure 26: Level of agreement that a strong focus on targets and outcomes will creates enough pressure to secure sufficient funding in A&P without an expectation of spend, by organisation type. (Base = 169)
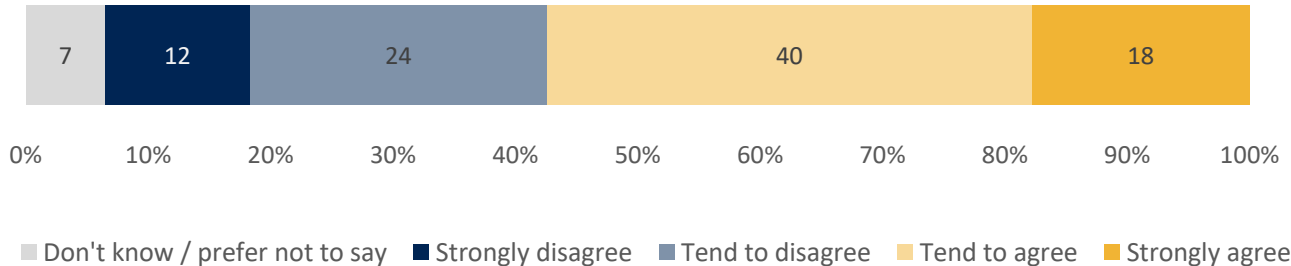
Among those who support the proposition, there is a general feeling that **an emphasis on targets and outcomes is preferable** to a focus on investment or spending thresholds (n=29). Respondents observe that a high or minimum **volume of spend does not necessarily correlate with successful outcomes** (n=10) and that the outcomes achieved as a result of their investment is a better indicator than the level of spend.

However, as the following respondent highlights, the outcomes achieved are not necessarily attributable to one provider, which is problematic when judging performance:

> *This assumes that spend is directly linked with our own outcomes. It isn't. There are also a myriad of other influential factors unrelated to how much is spent on access and student success and one institution could benefit from the work of other institutions.*
>
> — **HE – medium/low tariff**

Some respondents perceive that **expectations on spending can detract from the development of strategic approaches** focused on outcomes (rather than outputs, such as the number of students engaged in an activity) and can provide **perverse incentives** to reduce activity in order to lower expenditure and meet the minimum threshold required (n=17). However, a minority question whether the proposals represent a shift towards an outcomes-focused approach, given the emphasis placed on reporting predicted spend by each provider. As previously mentioned, some respondents express concern that this could dis-incentivise providers to invest in success and progression activities (n=7).

> *We agree that a focus on targets and outcomes, rather than minimum spend, will drive providers to focus on achieving meaningful change, rather than inputs. This approach should allow providers to set appropriate expenditure forecasts based on their targets and ambition, and the tools at the OfS's disposal will allow it to take appropriate action where concerns may arise.*
>
> — **Sector body**

Some respondents perceive that a more target-driven approach would encourage providers to **maintain or even increase spend** on access and focus their delivery on activities that have been shown to be most effective at engaging target groups, helping to ensure best use is made of scarce resources and give **value for money** (n=9). In addition, targets are perceived by some to provide a useful **benchmark** for providers, enabling them to measure their own progress and their progress relative to other similar providers (n=7).

Analysis by organisation type reveals some variation in levels of agreement with the proposition that a strong focus on targets and outcomes would create enough pressure to secure sufficient funding for access and participation to achieve change, without an expectation of spend. More than a quarter (26 per cent) of respondents from the further education sector were unable to, or preferred not to, provide a rating. Over half of respondents from HE - high tariff providers (52 per cent) disagree with the statement, along with three-fifths of respondents from NUS/Student Union (60 per cent) (Figure 27). Perhaps borne out of concerns about the level of resource ring-fenced for access and participation within their own organisations, a substantial minority suggest that the OfS should produce guidance for providers on an appropriate or minimum expected level of spend which takes account of the contextual differences between providers (n=31).

Whilst we welcome proposals to change the financial monitoring of expenditure, we do strongly feel that a minimum expectation of the overall level of investment in access and participation should still be given to providers. In today's competitive HE market, we do not feel the transformation change the OfS is seeking will be achieved solely through a strong focus on outcomes and targets. Expectations around inputs are fundamental for some providers in achieving the necessary resources required to deliver plans and meet the OfS's expectations.

— **HE - high tariff**

The OfS could consider **producing guidelines on spend** to address this need, without setting hard targets. However, the risk here is that the guidelines are not adhered to and, as a consequence, do not drive the desired change.

Figure 27: Agreement that a strong focus on targets and outcomes will creates enough pressure to secure sufficient funding in A&P without an expectation of spend, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)
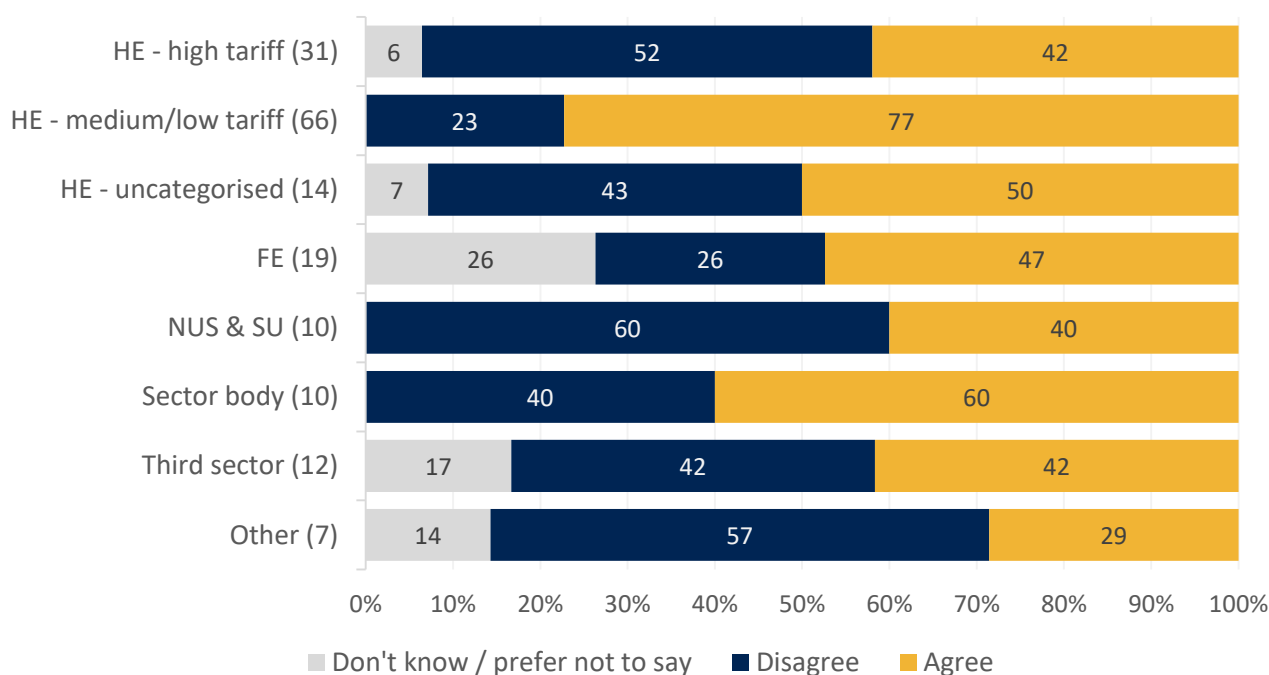
3.8.4 Underpinning principles

The OfS's future funding approach is contingent on the outcomes of the government's review of post-18 education and funding[8] and the spending review. As such, expectations of APP investment and funding provided by the OfS through programmes such as NCOP are outside the scope of the consultation and will not be reviewed until the outcomes of the
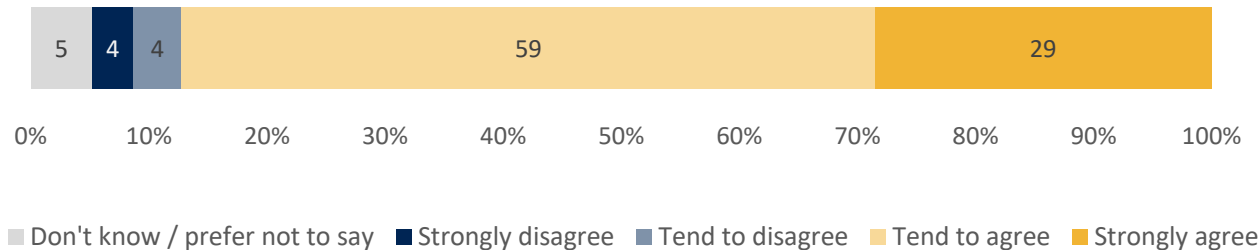
---

[8] For terms of reference see https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-post-18-education-and-funding-terms-of-reference

post-18 review are published. However, the OfS did consult on the principles that will underpin their approach to funding and investment in access and participation, which are:

a) The funding we deliver should link directly to the outcomes we wish to achieve.

b) Our decisions in respect of how we use our funding are made by having regard to our general duties.

c) Our funding should be focused and targeted.

d) Our funding should add value to the investment that providers make to support successful outcomes for students from under-represented groups, and should support activity that otherwise would not take place.

e) Our funding should support activity that delivers sector-wide benefits for students and addresses access and participation objectives which might not be delivered by the market alone.

f) Our deployment of funds should be evidence-led.

g) The impact and effectiveness of our funds should be evidenced to a level consistent with HM Treasury guidance[9].

There is overwhelming agreement with the principles that the OfS is proposing should underpin their approach to funding and investment in access and participation; just 8 per cent of consultees disagree (Figure 28).

Figure 28: Level of agreement with the principles proposed to underpin the OfS's approach to funding and investment in access and participation. (Base = 172)

| 5 | 4 | 4 | 59 | 29 |

■ Don't know / prefer not to say ■ Strongly disagree ■ Tend to disagree ■ Tend to agree ■ Strongly agree

Although the principles do not make explicit reference to collaboration, a small number of respondents highlight the importance of funding that encourages providers to **collaborate** and **work in partnership** with other providers and organisations within and outside of the higher education sector (n=9). Five NCOP consortia responded to the consultation and NCOP is cited as an example of how **investment in collaboration** can help to support access and participation in higher education for under-represented groups. This chimes with 'Principle d', particularly as emerging evidence from the national evaluation suggests that NCOP is 'supporting activity that otherwise would not take

---

[9] See: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-green-book-appraisal-and-evaluation-in-centralgovernent
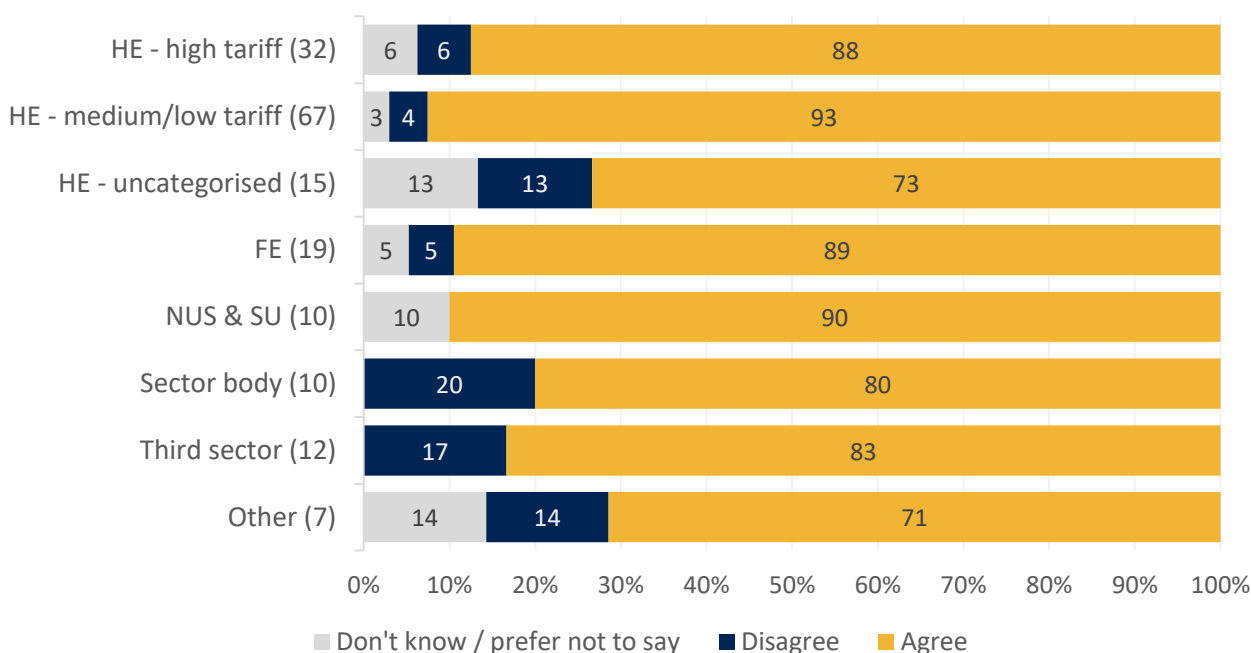
place'[10]. However, the OfS may wish to consider whether it is appropriate to add a principle focused on funding in support of collaboration. A minority of respondents (n=7) suggest that providers would benefit from guidance on how they embed the principles in their local APPs.

Some respondents are particularly supportive of 'Principles f and g', as they recognise the role that **evaluation and research evidence** fulfils in ensuring funding is allocated appropriately (n=7) and the importance of ensuring the **impact and effectiveness** of activities supported through the funding are captured to inform future policy and funding decisions (n=5). Interestingly, a similar proportion (n=4) identify that an increased focus on evaluation, and enhanced expectations of evaluation at the local level in particular, could have a negative impact on some areas of work where it is more challenging to measure impact (e.g. work with pupil referral units). Perceptions of the OfS's proposals in relation to evaluation at the level of the provider are explored in the following section (see Proposal 5).

Analysis by organisation type demonstrates there is wide spread support for the principles across the sector, although there appears to be slightly higher levels of disagreement among sector bodies and third sector organisations (Figure 29). Some respondents identified some possible challenges and risks associated with the principles. A reduction in higher education providers' autonomy is the most commonly reported risk (n=9).

---

[10] See CFE and associates (2017) NCOP: Year 1 report of the national formative and impact evaluation including capacity building with NCOP consortia.
http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405115436/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2018/ncopyear1/

Organisation type	Don't know / prefer not to say	Disagree	Agree
HE - high tariff (32)	6	6	88
HE - medium/low tariff (67)	3	4	93
HE - uncategorised (15)	13	13	73
FE (19)	5	5	89
NUS & SU (10)	10		90
Sector body (10)		20	80
Third sector (12)		17	83
Other (7)	14	14	71

3.9 Summary

— Although support for the collection and transparent publishing of access investment is widespread, a higher-than-average proportion of respondents from HE - medium/low tariff providers and NUS/Student Union disagree with this proposal. There are concerns that unless the published data is appropriately contextualised, it could be misunderstood and potentially misused, resulting in an 'unofficial league table'.

— Disaggregating access spend by post-16 activities, pre-16 activities and work with adults and communities does not appear to present an issue for most consultees and two-thirds agree with this proposal. Consultees perceive that disaggregating access spend could help to broaden provision and ensure resources are apportioned appropriately as part of long-term strategies. Respondents suggest that publishing information would help to facilitate benchmarking and increase transparency which, in addition to public accountability, would provide insights into the volume of spend on activities for different groups and potential gaps in provision.

— While it is recognised that the proposed changes could have a positive impact on the level of resource invested in *access*, some express concern that the proposal could result in an increased risk of providers *diverting resources from success and progression*; this, in turn, could have a detrimental impact on outcomes for these stages of the student lifecycle.

— There are higher levels of disagreement with the proposal to disaggregate access spend among higher education providers compared with other sub-groups. Providers are concerned that it will increase pressure to balance spend across the groups, even if one is a lower strategic priority.

— There are calls to further disaggregate pre-16 activity spend by primary and secondary phase. However, this is unlikely to be universally welcomed by the sector because of lack of organisational capacity and the administrative burden it would place on staff, particularly in smaller providers.

— Respondents are more equivocal in their perceptions of whether a strong focus on targets and outcomes would create enough pressure to secure sufficient funding for access and participation to achieve change, without an expectation of spend.

— Supporters argue that high or minimum spend thresholds do not necessarily correlate with successful outcomes. Expectations on spend are felt to detract from the development of strategic approaches and even provide perverse incentives to reduce activity in order to lower expenditure.

— Those that disagree with the proposal suggest that the OfS should produce guidance on an appropriate or minimum expected level of spend which takes account of the contextual differences between providers and that the OfS could consider producing guidelines without setting hard targets.

— There is overwhelming agreement with the principles that the OfS is proposing should underpin their approach to funding and investment in access and participation. The importance of funding that encourages collaboration and partnership working is highlighted. In this context, respondents suggest that the OfS may wish to consider whether it is appropriate to add a principle focused on funding in support of collaboration.

— While most recognise the role that evidence fulfils in informing policy and funding decisions, a minority of consultees express concern that an increased focus on evaluation, and enhanced expectations of evaluation at the local level in particular, could present challenges and have a negative impact on areas of work where it is difficult to measure impact.

3.10 Proposal 5

> Providers will need to complete a **self-assessment of their evaluation activities against a set of criteria** as part of their APP. The core purpose of the tool will be to identify and support continuous improvement in evaluation.

It is vital to ensure that the large sums being invested through APPs achieve the maximum benefit possible. Evidence of 'what works, in what context and why' is needed to inform strategic investment decisions and the development of effective approaches to delivery at the local and national level. Some providers already use rigorous evidence to understand the impact of their interventions, but many others are currently not evaluating as effectively as the OfS would like. The principal aims of the evidence and impact strategy for access and participation currently being developed by the OfS are to raise expectations, enhance capabilities and nurture innovation in relation to evaluation. The OfS is creating an independent Evidence and Impact Exchange to facilitate greater understanding about how higher education contributes to social justice and mobility. It is also working with academics at the University of Exeter to develop a suite of resources to help build capacity to evaluate the impact of access and participation, including standards for evaluation practice, standards for evaluation evidence, good practice case studies and a self-assessment tool.

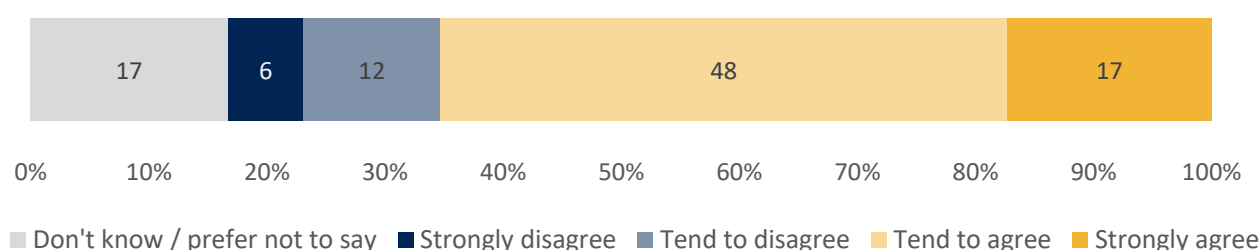### 3.10.1 Improvements in evaluation practice

The self-assessment tool has been designed to help all types of providers review whether their evaluation plans are sufficient to generate high-quality evidence about the impact of their activities in APPs, taking account of contextual factors such as size and capacity. The main objectives for introducing a self-assessment tool are to:

— enable providers to identify areas for improvement and benchmark their performance against an approved framework over time;

— consider the types of standards of evidence generated as well as the extent to which providers represent stronger or weaker practices of evaluation design, implementation and learning;

— reflect the different expectations of some types of providers, such as small specialist institutions and further education colleges;

— enable APP assessors to identify where and how to target and support providers through interventions, for example, by offering further guidance and training or implementing enhanced monitoring; and;

— contribute to a new OfS key performance measure relating to the quality level of providers' evaluation strategies.

The OfS proposes that the evaluation self-assessment becomes a requirement in the APP guidance and that all providers should complete the assessment as part of their submitted plan.

The OfS consulted the sector and wider stakeholders to capture their views as to whether a self-assessment tool, as described above, would contribute to improvements in evaluation practice. Consultees most commonly 'tend to agree' that the tool will achieve the stated objective (48 per cent). However, almost a fifth (18 per cent) disagree that a tool of this nature will lead to improvements in evaluation, and a further 17 per cent are unsure or prefer not to say (Figure 30). Respondents did not have sight of the proposed tool and a substantial number report that they require **more information** on what the OfS is proposing before they can make a judgement on whether it will have an impact on evaluation practice or not (n=43).

Figure 30: Level of agreement that an evaluation self-assessment tool will contribute to improvements in evaluation practice. (Base = 173)

Don't know / prefer not to say	Strongly disagree	Tend to disagree	Tend to agree	Strongly agree

A substantial number of respondents who felt able to express a view perceived that an evaluation self-assessment tool will help to improve current evaluation practice by supporting and encouraging higher education providers to **capture impact** (n=73)**, highlight what works** and develop the evidence needed to inform **improvements in activities and approaches to delivery** (n=19). However, it is apparent from the wider comments that, without having had sight of the tool, some respondents have misunderstood its purpose and the information required. The comments suggest that respondents have interpreted a tool to mean a 'template', 'toolkit' or 'how to guide' that will be designed to ensure consistency in terms of the measures and research instruments used and the data captured across the sector (n=20). As such, many questioned the appropriateness of a 'one-size-fits-all' tool, given the diversity of the higher education sector; and its suitability for some types of provider (n=36). As such, further consultation on the tool is required in order to capture a more detailed view from the sector about the benefits that such a tool is likely to have on evaluation practice, and also to identify any potential issues in relation to its implementation, particularly in smaller providers, including further education colleges.

Some respondents, including those that 'tended to agree' that, in principle, a tool could contribute to improvements in evaluation practice, identified a number of potential risks as well as preconditions to its successful implementation. For example, 23 respondents felt strongly that the OfS should work closely with providers to **develop and pilot** the tool to ensure it is flexible and fit for use in a range of different types of provider. Respondents

recognised there are a number of 'tools' (or 'toolkits') in existence and report that it is important to take these into consideration before developing another instrument. A similar number of respondents highlight the importance of producing a high-quality, user-friendly tool (n=23), along with associated guidance (n=20) to ensure providers understand how to use and embed it within their organisations. Several respondents also highlight that it is important for the tool to be **aligned with the strategic focus of providers**, which can help higher education providers to develop their services and activities in support of the broad access agenda (n=3).

> *Self-assessment of our approach to evaluation should be an effective way to facilitate dialogue on strengths, gaps and weaknesses. It should help prioritise actions and develop recommendations for change.*
>
> — **HE - high tariff**
>
> *An evaluation self-assessment tool has the potential to drive institutional improvements. The OfS will need to keep the sector informed of the outcomes of the piloting of the tool to ensure potential issues related to its practical implementation have been fully considered.*
>
> — **Sector body**

Further education colleges and further education sector bodies, along with NUS/Student Union, were more likely to disagree with the view that a self-assessment tool will help to improve evaluation practice than other sub-groups (Figure 31).

Figure 31: Agreement with that an evaluation self-assessment tool will contribute to improvements in evaluation practice, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)
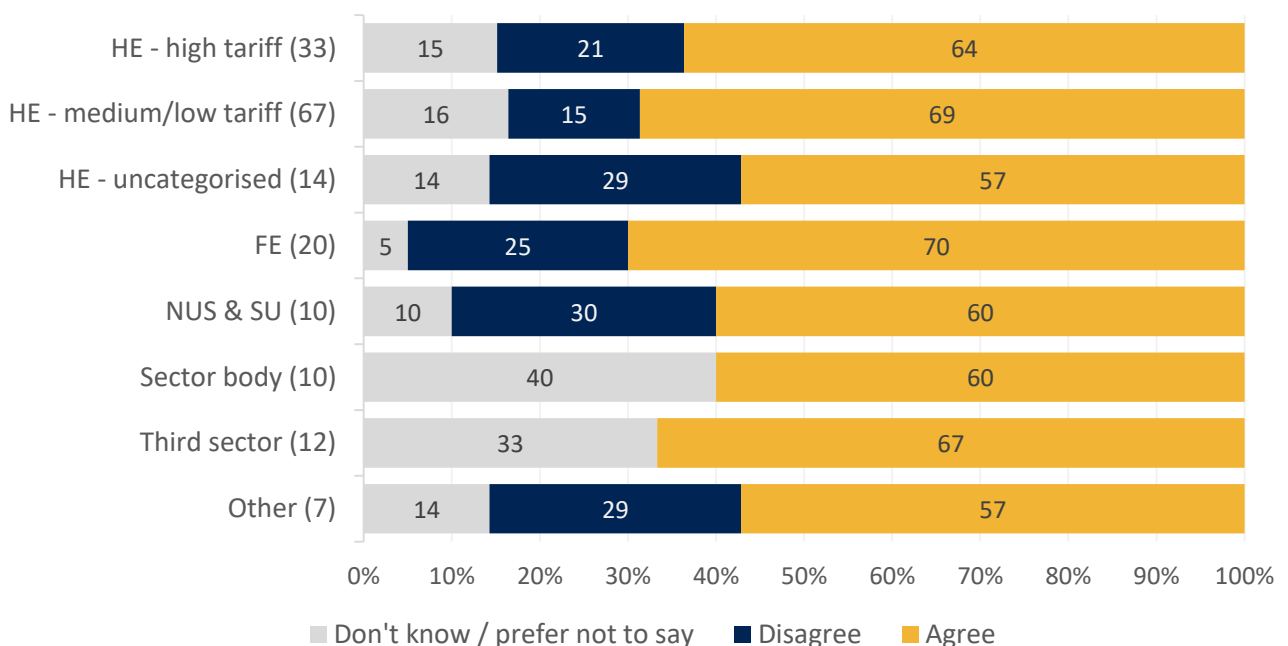
A number of concerns were raised in relation to the implementation of the tool, in particular, the level of **resource** required and the additional burden that it could place on provider staff. These respondents highlight that some, especially small providers, may not have the skills, expertise, capacity and/or resources to implement the process effectively (n=31).

> *As a small provider we need to ensure that the tool-kit is not too burdensome requiring data collection, analysis and presentation that requires larger data teams. The evaluation should reflect the effectiveness of the provider's access and participation strategy rather than simply reflect the level of funding and resources the provider can deploy.*
>
> — **HE - medium/low tariff**

Some respondents question whether a tool is required (n=23) and if other (existing) approaches would be more appropriate. Others went a step further and questioned whether it was the role of the regulator to get involved in the development of evaluation practice, suggesting that this is a role for an independent body (n=23). Suggested alternatives to a tool include a peer review network; external assessors; and judgements made by the new Evidence and Impact Exchange. It is also suggested that the scope to align work with other 'What Works Centres', or existing evaluation approaches such as NCOP, should be explored.

> *The OfS should use this as an opportunity to signal a deliberate break from historical approaches and to explicitly innovate in this area, developing something closely aligned with the national movement of What Works Centres.*
>
> — **HE - medium/low tariff**
>
> *Many universities, including those in the Russell Group, have developed evaluative frameworks and are collaborating with each other and leading academics in the field, to build and apply evidence of "what works" within their institutions. The proposed evaluation self-assessment tool should seek to build on, rather than disrupt, this practice.*
>
> — **Sector body**

3.10.2 Tracking services

Higher education tracking services help higher education providers in England to track students who have taken part in outreach activities in schools and colleges through to their achievements in higher education. They have a vital role to play in supporting the evaluation of access and participation activities, as tracking data has the potential to facilitate the creation of statistical control groups and enable researchers to control for the volume and type of intervention engaged with in their analysis of impact. Several different services are currently available which operate on a subscription basis at a regional and

national level. The OfS plans to undertake research to better understand tracking services in order to support improvements in the services provided and support the ways in which they are being used to support robust evaluation.

The OfS consultation explored providers' and wider stakeholders' views on the support the OfS could provide to enable providers to make more effective use of tracking services. Respondents made a number of general comments about the value of tracking services and the types of service that should be provided in addition to areas where there could be a role for the OfS:

3.10.2.1   Data linking

Respondents most commonly report (n=74) that the OfS should review existing datasets (administrative and commercial, if possible) to identify what data is available to complement the data captured through tracking services. Providers would like support to link tracking information with these wider data sources, including National Pupil Database (NPD), HESA, UCAS and HMRC, as those that have sought the data have encountered a number of challenges. Of these challenges, there were two that stood out. The first is with those datasets that are publicly held, such as by central government departments, but are not accessible to higher education providers. There are known datasets that would be useful to providers in their evaluations of what they do, but are not available to them. Higher education providers are keen for the OfS to explore ways in which these publicly-held datasets could be made available for their evaluations. The second challenge relates to costs of accessing commercially-held data. Some providers, especially smaller providers, would like the OfS to explore ways in which these datasets could be linked in with the data gathered for access and participation.

3.10.2.2   Capacity and guidance

A substantial number of respondents (n=53) report that they would like the OfS to help build the capacity within the sector to engage with the tracking services, and provide support and guidance to enable providers to use the tracking data for the purposes of evaluation, as a number of providers have skill gaps in this area.

3.10.2.3   Cost and funding

Currently, tracking systems are funded through subscription and paid-for services. A number of respondents (n=40) emphasised the importance of keeping these costs down to ensure providers are able to access tracking services and benefit from the data. This would benefit smaller providers with tight budgets in particular. A small number of respondents (n=9) suggest that the OfS could make funding available to smaller providers to enable them to access the services and two respondents suggest that the OfS registration fee should include a subscription to a tracking service.

> *Expensive tools, such as HEAT, are an unaffordable tool for smaller institutions. It would be helpful to explore whether the OfS could negotiate joint accounts to spread the costs for such HEIs, or for inclusion in a tracking service to be part of the OfS registration fee. A universal and affordable tracking mechanism would support greater understanding of the impact of the work of institutions and of the sector.*
>
> — **HE – medium/low tariff**

3.10.2.3 Data collection

A number of respondents (n=40) highlight the importance of ensuring the tracking systems capture appropriate data to support providers in their evaluations. Some would welcome more granular data on activities delivered by individual departments. Others would like the facility to conduct analysis of target groups by geography and to track spend.

3.10.2.4 A joined-up system

A number of respondents suggest that the OfS could facilitate the development of a common system and tracking procedures for all providers to ensure a more joined-up approach centred on a core set of measures. A total of 31 respondents call for a centralised tracking service to be established, compared with just three who advocate the continuation of multiple tracking organisations.

> *The current situation whereby different providers use different tracking systems is incoherent and inefficient. All providers should be using the same tracking service, hosted in the EIX. We would press the OfS to create this service from existing tracking service data, and also take a lead in collecting and opening up data from other sources.*
>
> — **Third sector**

> *We would not support the imposition of one tracking system across the sector as we believe this would lead to loss of flexibility and approach.*
>
> — **HE – uncategorised**

In the event that multiple tracking systems are maintained, it is suggested that it will be important to ensure that the services work collaboratively, and are consistent in the way they define key terms, such as intervention types, levels of intensity and cost.

> *Data gathering on learners, their destinations and outcomes is currently fragmented across a variety of organisations…with a variety of systems used to collect, track and store this information. This fragmentation is limiting for universities when trying to set or evidence longitudinal outcomes relating to widening participation activity. A move to greater joining-up of these systems, or a unified system, would allow for greater longitudinal analysis with a much larger data-set.*
>
> — **HE – high tariff**

3.11 Summary

— Consultees 'tend to agree' that the evaluation self-assessment tool will lead to improvements in evaluation practice; however, almost a fifth disagree that it will achieve this objective.

— Those in support of a self-assessment tool perceive that it will help to improve evaluation practice by supporting and encouraging higher education providers to capture evidence of what works and to use this evidence to improve activities and approaches to delivery. Those who disagree with the proposal raise concerns about the level of resource required to implement the tool and the burden it could place on staff who may not have the skills to undertake the process effectively.

— It is currently understood by many to be a 'template', 'toolkit' or 'how to guide' to support the evaluation of access and participation, rather than as a tool to assess the strength of providers' evaluation practice. Further consultation would capture an accurate view on the impact it is likely to have and any potential issues in relation to its implementation. A substantial proportion would like more information before they make a judgement.

— Some respondents questioned whether a tool is required and if other (existing) approaches would be more appropriate. Suggested alternatives include a peer review network; external assessors; and judgements made by the new Evidence and Impact Exchange. Others questioned whether it was the role of the regulator to get involved in the development of evaluation practice.

— Respondents would like to work closely with the OfS to develop and pilot the tool to ensure it is flexible, user-friendly and fit for use in a range of different providers. They emphasise the importance of guidance to support providers to use and embed the tool within their organisations.

— Respondents identify five areas where there could be a role for the OfS in developing tracking services. These include: (i) identify administrative data to complement what is captured through the trackers, and provide support to link data; (ii) build capacity to engage with tracking services and produce guidance on the use of tracking data for evaluation; (iii) minimise and/or meet the cost to providers of accessing tracking data; (iv) influence the type of data captured, to include geographical markers and spend; and (v) in the absence of a single national system, ensure existing services work collaboratively and use consistent definitions.

3.12 Proposal 6

> The OfS will undertake further work to explore whether it should require providers to **submit and publish transparency data by age and disability.** This is in addition to data split by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background which is part of the transparency information condition (F1) in the OfS's regulatory framework.

In its present form, the transparency information condition requires providers to split their applicant, offer, acceptance, completion and attainment data by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background. In order to address the decline in mature students entering higher education and improve outcomes for all ages and disabilities, the OfS aims to include this data within the transparency information condition to establish a clearer picture of how applications, offers, acceptances, completions and attainment differ across different age ranges and by disability.

3.12.1 Data split by age

There is broad agreement with the proposal that the OfS should undertake further work to explore whether age split data could be included within the transparency information condition. Over three-quarters of respondents tend to agree or strongly agree (78 per cent) with this proposal (Figure 32) compared with only 6 per cent who strongly disagree.

Figure 32: Level of agreement that the OfS should undertake work to explore whether data split by age could be included within the transparency information condition. (Base = 172)

	Value
Don't know / prefer not to say	7
Strongly disagree	6
Tend to disagree	9
Tend to agree	36
Strongly agree	42
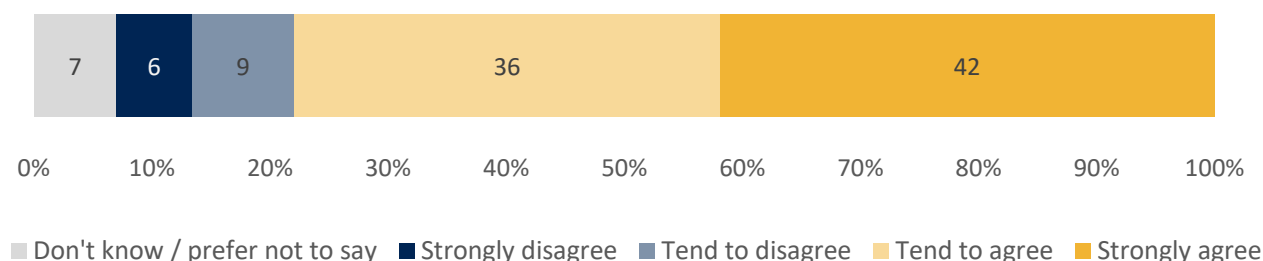
The majority of respondents who provide a qualitative response to Q6a express general support for this proposal (n=77), indicating that age data is important to collect and understand.

> *If the OfS is to meet its stated ambition to address the decline in mature student numbers in the coming years, any steps that can be taken to help identify and better understand this phenomenon should be taken. Transparency of this kind of data at an institutional level is also vital as much of the reporting and debate on numbers is overwhelmingly focused on national or sector trends and misses the nuance of individual institution's efforts.*
>
> — **Sector body**

Respondents felt that to include this within the transparency condition would contribute to an **improved evidence** base (n=32) and, in particular, could support the OfS and higher education providers to understand and strategically plan in order to address the decline in numbers of mature students.

> *In principle, this could help improve understanding of, and inform the wider debate around, mature and part-time students accessing higher education and their outcomes.*
>
> — **Sector body**

> *We feel that in further splitting the data by age, the sector would have a better oversight to address the decline in mature students entering HE. This should be done in a way that encourages and facilitates the analysis of intersecting categories of exclusion, e.g. mature learners from deprived neighbourhoods.*
>
> — **HE - medium/low tariff**

When examined by organisation type, approximately one-quarter of respondents within HE - high tariff (24 per cent) and HE - uncategorised providers (27 per cent) express disagreement with the proposal to explore the inclusion of age data (Figure 33). These respondents express concern that age data in isolation is insufficient to understand the decline in the numbers of mature students (n=14). They highlight that in the absence of **supplementary data** regarding the wide range of factors relevant to the barriers and needs of mature students, there would be insufficient data from which to draw reliable conclusions and could be **potentially misleading** (n=31).

> *We tend to disagree that it is useful to split transparency data by demographic factors without further analysis relating these splits to appropriate benchmarks. In our own data we see significant effects of interaction between demographic factors, and also between these and levels of prior attainment. There is a danger that a simplistic presentation of data split by demographic factors alone will mislead students, applicants, and the public at large. This may lead to unintended consequences – for example, where students of a particular background decide not to apply to an institution under the mistaken belief that they would not be well supported. We believe the OfS has an important role to play in helping stakeholders, policy makers, and wider society, understand that the effects of demographic factors are rarely simple and typically interact in complex ways.*
>
> — **HE - medium/low tariff**
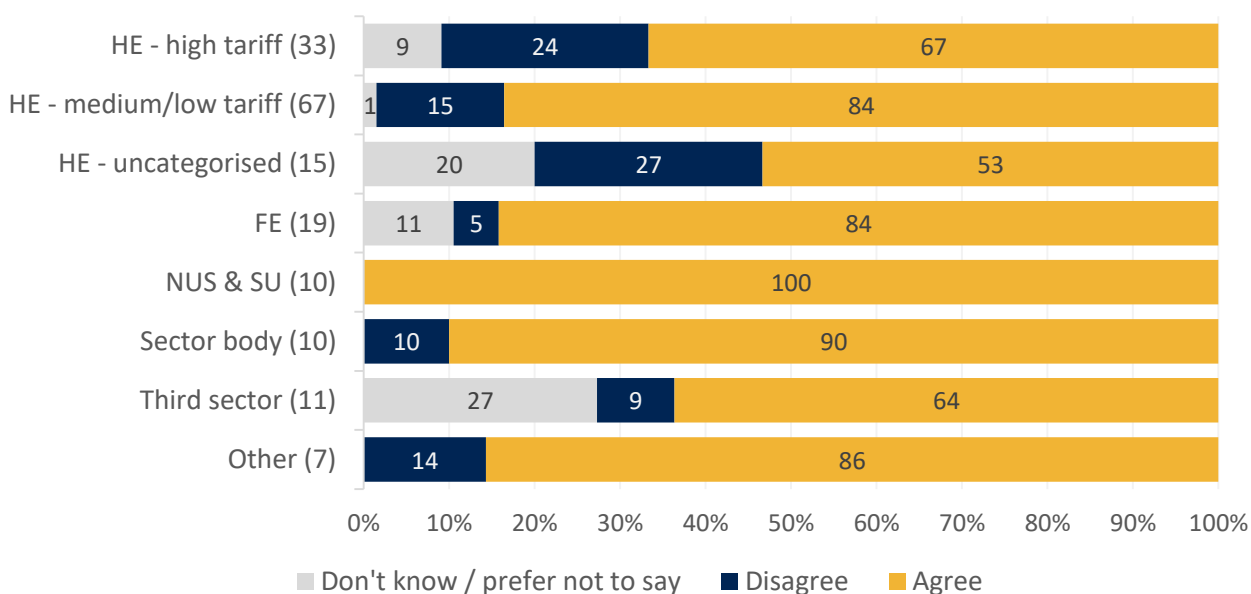
Some respondents also express confusion and uncertainty over the rationale behind the proposed **age splits** (n=27) and suggest that the OfS reconsider these proposed splits and ensure consistency with other sources; alternatively, the OfS could consider utilising data from existing sources such as HESA returns (n=12).

We would suggest that the three categories in paragraph 154 might be too broad, in particular the 'over 30' category. The OfS should consider splitting this is to more categories to understand mature student participation and success better. It is also arguable that there are significant differences in the type of student who may fall into the 21-25 category, because they took a couple of years out, and the student who is, for example, 29 years old and engaging with HE as a parent with work commitments. Two distinct age categories would be useful here.

— **Sector body**

We welcome a split by age but would recommend a more nuanced approach. There are very different recruitment strategies and student support needed for different age groups of mature student and the complexity of this would get lost with the proposed split.

— **HE - high tariff**

We would like to know the rationale for disaggregating mature students by proposed bands. We would prefer to see alignment with other metrics, such as HESA.

— **HE - high tariff**

3.12.2 Data split by disability status

As in Q6a in relation to age data, there is overwhelming support for this proposal with over three-quarters (81 per cent) of respondents who either tend to agree or strongly agree that the OfS should explore the inclusion of disability data within the transparency information condition (Figure 34).

Figure 34: Level of agreement that the OfS should undertake work to explore whether data split by disability status should be included within the transparency information condition. (Base = 171)
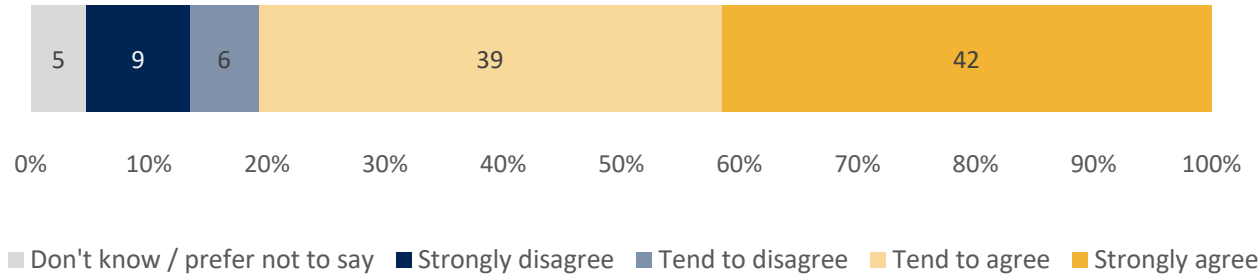

The majority of respondents who provided a qualitative response express general **support** (n=65) for the need to include disability data and consider this both important to improving the **evidence base** and understanding the needs of disabled students (n=30).

> *Providers need to be encouraged to provide more consistent support for students with disabilities and mental health issues. Requiring providers to publish information on disability status should highlight those with a good track record for supporting disabled students in both access and participation, whose practices can serve as an example to other providers… More data transparency would also allow providers to design more proactive long-term strategies to support students with disabilities. However, providers must be aware many mental health issues that may have a significant effect on access and participation will not be captured by disability status data, and take this into account when developing their strategies and allocating resources.*
>
> — **Third sector**

When examined by type of organisation, it is evident that of the minority of consultees who disagree with this proposal, most are within HE settings (Figure 35).
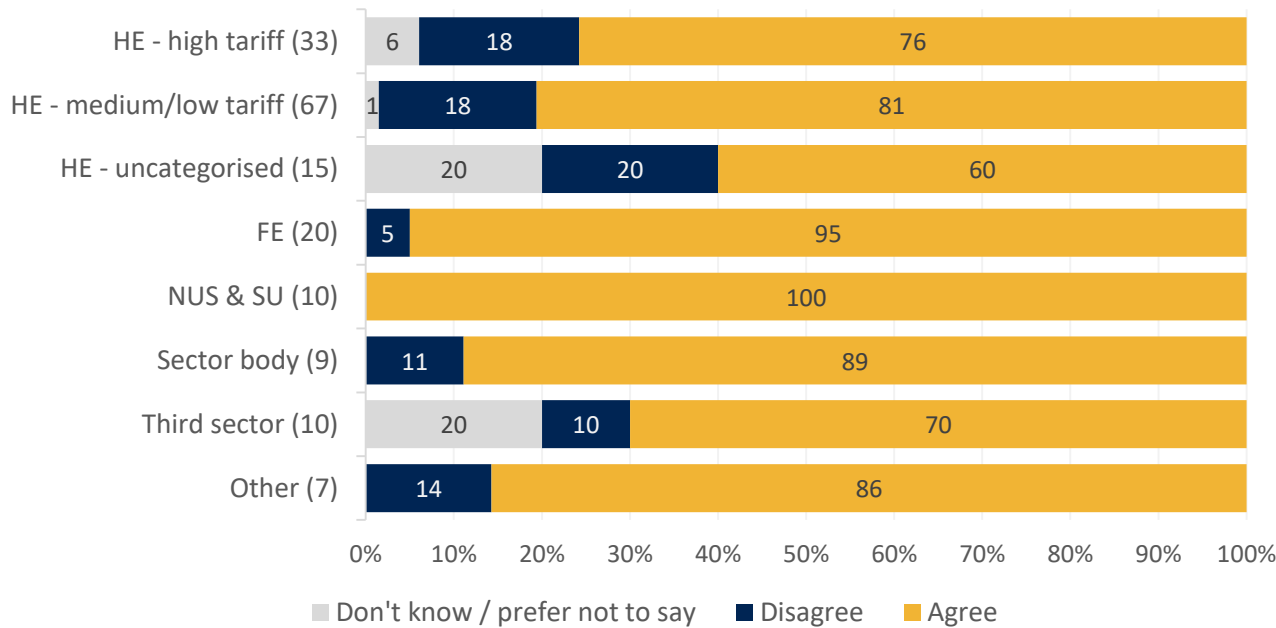
Respondents express concern over how the inclusion of disability data will be operationalised in a meaningful way. Respondents question the **accuracy** (n=28) of disability data given that this relies on self-disclosure from students.

> *In principle we are in favour of this proposal however the timing of this request would need to be considered. Details of receipt of a DSA are only available with the applicants consent and the DSA cannot be applied for until the student is in their first year of study, so data gathering would be limited to registered students rather than applicants. Students can disclose disabilities at any point in the student cycle therefore does the year the student discloses need to be considered and how long they have been in receipt of a DSA also? Is there worth in considering other related indicators such as students who access disability support at the University or those who require reasonable adjustments?*
>
> — **HE - high tariff**

Also, respondents highlight the importance of accounting for the varied nature of disability and, in particular, the need to include and address the growing number of students experiencing problems with their **mental health** (n=36), and consider this highly important to consider in any dataset.

> *It would be more useful if data could be analysed by disability type and/or the level of disability. For example: mental health is an increasing problem nationally, and it would be extremely beneficial to be able to share data and good practice around this particular cohort. The level of disability for students with dyslexia varies considerably*

and impacts on the level of support they need to progress in HE. The data needs to be gathered in a meaningful way so good practice and gaps in provision can be identified and improvements made accordingly.

— **HE - high tariff**

3.13 Summary

— The majority of consultees support the proposal that the OfS should undertake further work to explore if it should require providers to submit and publish transparency data by age and disability.

— The majority of consultees perceive that collecting and understanding age and disability data would improve the evidence base surrounding the needs of mature and disabled students.

— Consultees' concerns with this proposal are centred on the availability and accuracy of data. There is a risk where insufficient data is available, that it will be difficult to draw reliable conclusions surrounding performance and impact of access and participation activities on these groups.

— Consultees highlight the necessity to distinguish between physical and mental health and disability in order to gain an accurate understanding of the needs of these students.

3.14 Proposal 7

The OfS will create, publish and maintain an **access and participation dataset** that provides a picture of access and participation across the higher education sector and at individual providers.
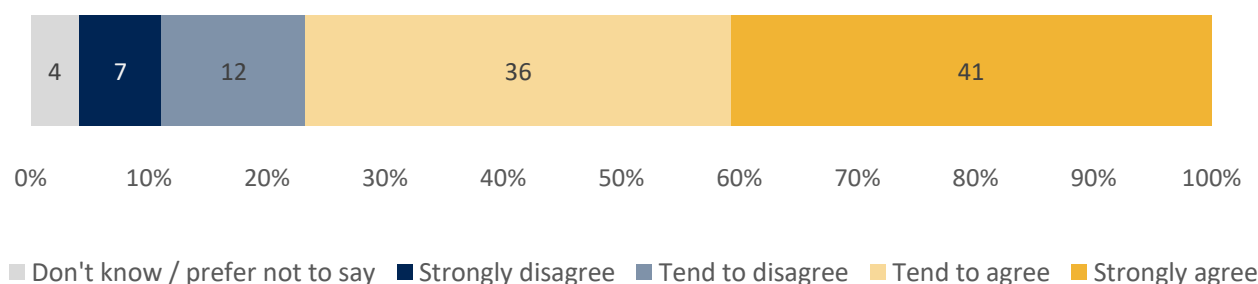
Across the sector there exists a wide range of data which provides insight into the challenges of improving access and participation in higher education. This data can be difficult to navigate, in particular for providers who do not have the capacity or expertise to interrogate data, students and members of the public. The OfS is proposing to create, publish and maintain an access and participation dataset that pulls together data from a number of different sources and displays this in a format that is accessible and transparent for anyone with an interest in this field. In doing so, the OfS aims to provide a clearer, sector-level picture of the challenges associated with access and participation across the student lifecycle, and at the level of the individual provider, that will support providers in producing meaningful targets, and help the OfS to regulate providers more effectively. The OfS believes that the creation of an access and participation dataset will:

— drive up outcomes by enabling greater comparability and therefore accountability, both for students and the taxpayer;

— reduce burden by collating measures of access and participation in one place, in an accessible format; and;

— ensure the OfS and providers are using the same data for assessing performance.

3.14.1 Access and participation dataset

There is overall support for the proposal to create and maintain an access and participation dataset, with over three-quarters (77 per cent) of consultees tending to agree or strongly agreeing with this proposal, compared with just 7 per cent who strongly disagree (Figure 36).

Figure 36: Level of agreement that the OfS should create and maintain an access and participation dataset. (Base = 172)

Legend: Don't know / prefer not to say | Strongly disagree | Tend to disagree | Tend to agree | Strongly agree

Values shown in bar: 4, 7, 12, 36, 41

Several respondents (n=28) made general comments in support of the proposal to create a central dataset that draws together data from different sources. They perceive the main benefit to be that it will offer a more **comprehensive, consistent** and **high-quality source of data** that will aid providers in their monitoring and data analysis as well as in the development of their access and participation strategies (n=56).

> *This dataset will also be important as a tool for critical engagement by providers with the development of access and participation plans and subsequent evaluation of activities. This would also provide a common understanding of performance and impact across the sector, for different student groups and across different provider types.*
>
> — **HE - medium/low tariff**

Respondents in support of this proposal also report that the dataset will allow providers and the OfS to **compare performance** across the sector which will, in turn, increase **transparency** and help to **drive improvements** in performance in the future (n=34).

> *The creation and maintenance of the proposed data set by the OfS will be beneficial for providers, and the public, to enable greater comparability between institutions. For providers, the alignment (where possible) with TEF and transparency data will mean a greater return on their data input, and possibly an overall reduction in burden as the OfS will hold the responsibility for collating and maintaining the data.*
>
> — **HE - medium/low tariff**

Interestingly, analysis by type of organisation reveals that higher education providers are less supportive of the proposal than other sub-groups, with approximately one-quarter of respondents disagreeing that the OfS should create and maintain a dataset (Figure 37).

Figure 37: Agreement that the OfS should create and maintain an access and participation dataset, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)
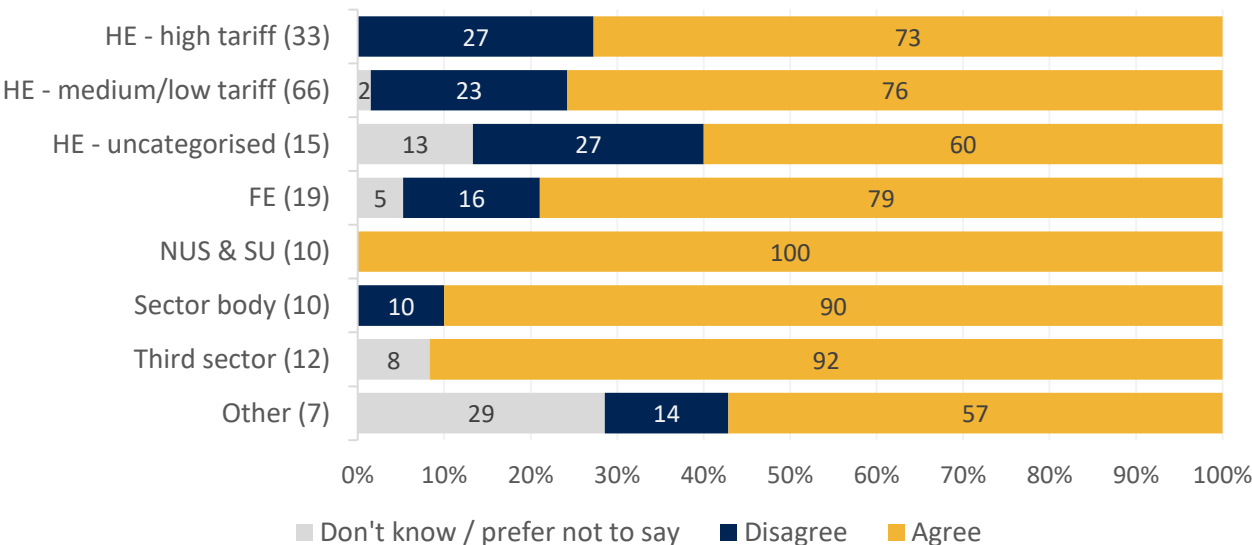
Consultees' primary concern is that any data made publicly-available could be subject to **misuse or misinterpretation** (n=38). Careful consideration should, therefore, be given to the **format of the data** and how it is presented. In line with consultees' views on the proposal to publish data on access investment, providers feel strongly that the dataset should be **user-friendly**, **clearly explained** and **appropriately contextualised** (n=36). A number agree that the data should be presented in a dashboard, which includes core metrics, but suggest that it should also include qualitative data which provides context and meaning to the numbers (n=32).

> *We agree in principle with the creation and publication of an access and participation dataset. It will be very helpful for tracking and assessing activity to determine impact assessment information and return on investment metrics. It will be crucial, however, to contextualise the data that is provided, as it otherwise assumes that all institutions are at the same place in their development, which they are not. Other contextual considerations such include the market reach of the institution (e.g. local, regional, national), regional variation and specific demographic challenges*
>
> — **HE - medium/low tariff**

A proportion of respondents (n=20) emphasise the importance of **incorporating existing metrics** into the dataset to ensure consistency and comparability and to facilitate links to other relevant data sources, such as TEF, to minimise duplication.

> *"We very much welcome the proposal to provide a dataset that will both allow for sector-wide comparability and accountability and support individual institutions in the achievement of their ambitions for access and participation. Alignment with TEF metrics and B3 indicators is also a welcome contribution to a more holistic, integrated approach to institutional accountability.*
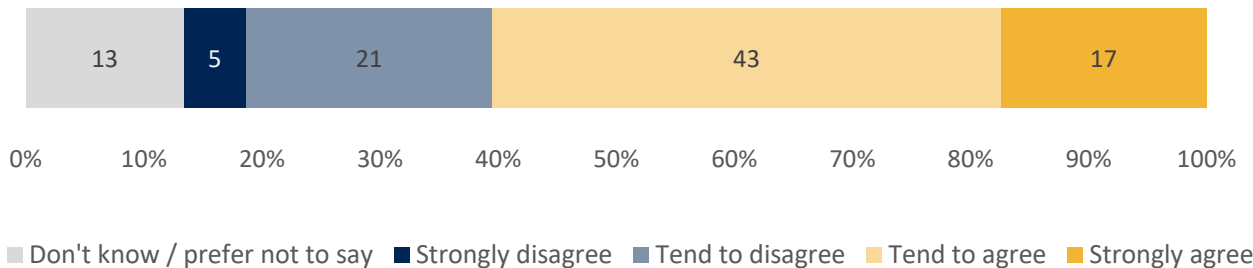>
> — **HE - medium/low tariff**

Some respondents report that they would like to be further **consulted** on the development of the dataset (alongside the self-assessment tool) (n=14) to ensure it is fit for purpose and serves the needs of all types of provider within the sector. The same number highlight the importance of clarity from the OfS on the rationale for the dataset and how it relates to other sources of data as well as **guidance and support** on how to make use of it (n=15). There is demand from some providers for access to the individualised data that sits behind the dataset to enable them to undertake their own analysis (n=12). However, this is unlikely to be feasible in view of current data protection regulations.

3.14.2 Using data to hold providers to account

Consultees most commonly 'tend to agree' (43 per cent) that the proposed datasets would help to hold providers to account on their performance against their targets (Figure 38). A key benefit of this approach identified by respondents is that it will enable providers to
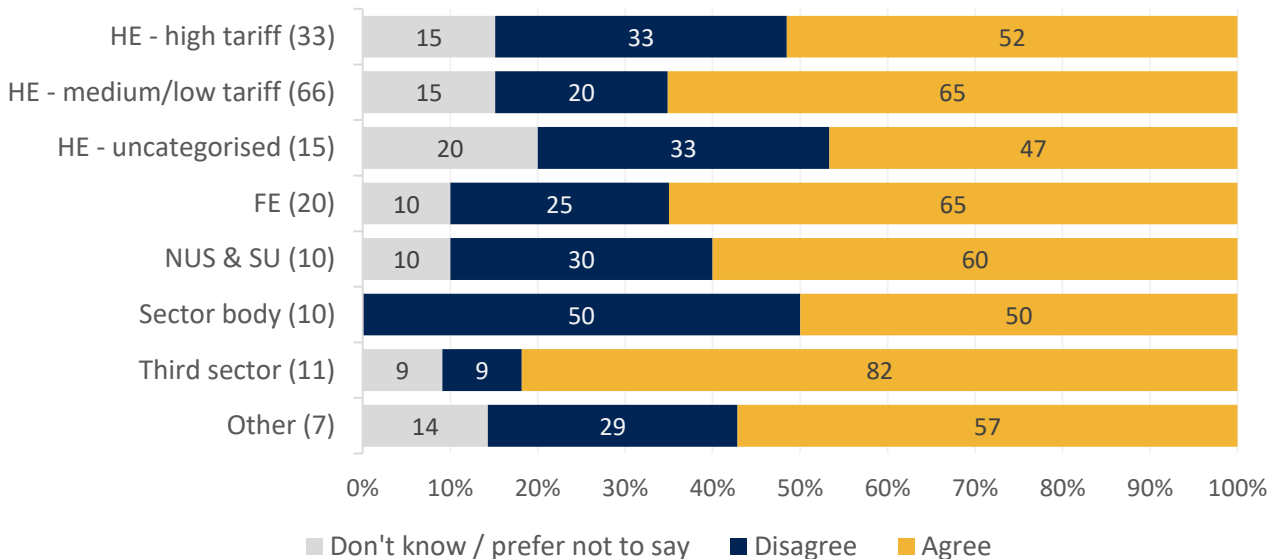
identify areas of strength, as well as weaknesses, relative to other providers so that they can focus their efforts on those areas identified as a priority in order to improve standards (n=32). Respondents also perceive that dataset will **increase transparency**, which will help further in holding providers to account and drive improvement (n=15).

Figure 38: Level of agreement that the proposed datasets would support you to hold providers to account on their performance against targets. (Base = 172)

13	5	21	43	17

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ Don't know / prefer not to say ■ Strongly disagree ■ Tend to disagree ■ Tend to agree ■ Strongly agree

Just over a quarter of consultees (26 per cent) disagreed that the proposed datasets will help to hold providers to account on their performance against their targets. HE -high tariff and HE - uncategorised providers, along with NUS/Student Union and sector bodies are more likely to disagree with this proposition (Figure 39).

Figure 39: Agreement that the proposed datasets would support you to hold providers to account on their performance against targets, by organisation type. (Bases in parentheses)

	Don't know / prefer not to say	Disagree	Agree
HE - high tariff (33)	15	33	52
HE - medium/low tariff (66)	15	20	65
HE - uncategorised (15)	20	33	47
FE (20)	10	25	65
NUS & SU (10)	10	30	60
Sector body (10)		50	50
Third sector (11)	9	9	82
Other (7)	14	29	57

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ Don't know / prefer not to say ■ Disagree ■ Agree

Some consultees are unclear who will have access to the data and who will be using it in order to hold providers to account. The principal concern of those who are not in agreement with the proposition is related to who will use the data and for what purpose. They perceive a risk that the data will not be accurately interpreted and reported, particularly by the media, and will be used in conjunction with other data sources, such as

league tables, to compare providers (n=23). As a result, there is a further risk that prospective students and other stakeholders are misinformed as to the performance of individual providers, particularly if the data is taken out of context.

> *We are concerned that the datasets would be subject to misrepresentation by the press and league table compilers, who would be keen to compare absolute results between institutions and not take into account the different circumstances and student profile for each institution, which had been relevant in setting the targets for each institution"*
>
> — **HE - medium/low tariff**

Consultees reiterate the importance of **context** when making judgements and holding providers to account, and the need to draw on qualitative, as well as quantitative measures, to help explain why a provider may be under-performing. Apparent 'under-performance' can result from trialling new and innovative approaches that subsequently do not work. It is important to differentiate between this and poor performance resulting from sub-standard practice (n=45).

3.14.3 Additional measures

The OfS appended a list of potential measures for the access and participation dataset to the consultation (see Appendix 2). Respondents were asked to state any measures they felt were missing. A number of additional measures were identified. These are summarised in Table 1 along with the number of respondents that identified each one.

Table 1: Additonal measures proposed

Measure	No of respondents
Pre-entry qualification route	15
Region / geographic metric	9
Mode of study	7
Care-leaver	6
Outreach progression	5
Value added / learning gain	4
Provider context	5
Young carer status	3
Refugee/asylum seeker	3
Subject of study	2
Parental background	3

The potential measures include gaps in participation by gender and socio-economic status. A number of respondents (n=22) reiterate the importance of different measures of socio-economic status, including Free School Meals, Indices of Multiple Deprivation and Pupil Premium eligibility, recognising that each of these, along with POLAR4 have their limitations as a proxy for disadvantage.

3.15 Summary

— There is widespread support for the proposal to create, publish and maintain an access and participation dataset. Respondents recognise the value that a comprehensive, consistent and high-quality source of data would add to the sector, aiding monitoring and evaluation as well as the development of access and participation strategies.

— Some consultees' primary concern is that publicly-available data could be subject to misuse or misinterpretation. They suggest that careful consideration should be given to the format of the data, including how it is presented, to ensure it is appropriately contextualised.

— A proportion of respondents emphasise the importance of incorporating existing metrics into the dataset to ensure consistency and comparability and to facilitate links to other relevant data sources, such as TEF, to minimise duplication.

— Consultees most commonly 'tend to agree' that the proposed datasets would help to hold providers to account on their performance against their targets. Providers perceive that the dataset will help them to identify areas of strength, as well as weaknesses, relative to other providers and identify priorities for improvement.

— Some consultees are unclear who will have access to the data and who will be using it in order to hold providers to account. They perceive a risk that data will be misinterpreted and reported inaccurately, particularly by the media. A further perceived risk is that prospective students are misinformed as to the performance of individual providers, particularly if the data is taken out of context.

— Other measures of socio-economic status (beyond POLAR), and additional measures such as pre-entry qualification route, mode of study, care-leaver, young carer status, refugee/asylum seeker status and parental background are suggested for inclusion in the dataset.

04. Conclusions

Here we draw on key findings in order to identify the overarching benefits, as well as the challenges and risks associated with the seven proposals, as identified by consultees.

The importance of provider context, the suitability of the new approach for small and specialist providers, the rigour of the process for assessing risk and the risk that information placed into the public domain could be misunderstood, misinterpreted and/or misused are the most common concerns. These are cross-cutting issues which are highlighted in relation to a number of the proposals by a range of respondents, including those who are broadly in support of the OfS's proposals. In addition, striking a balance between OfS-specified and provider-determined targets and maintaining provider autonomy, integrating the 'student voice' in to the design, delivery and evaluation of access and participation, and demonstrating impact are also identified as particular challenges.

However, overall, there is broad support for all seven of the proposals put forward by the OfS in the consultation. There is a widespread perception that, together, the proposals will form the basis of an approach that will support the sector to take a more strategic, long-term view which meets the needs of current and prospective students at each stage of the lifecycle. Most consultees are of the view that it will support improvements in the volume and quality of evaluation which will, in turn, help to ensure planning and investment in access and participation is evidence-led, good practice is shared and improvements are made to service delivery. The shift to an outcomes-focused approach based on risk is also widely welcomed, as most perceive it will reduce burden on providers and offer the flexibility to respond to changes in local and national policy, as well as evidence of effective practice.

Appendix 1: Consultation questions

Office for Students: Consultation on Access and Participation

The Office for Students is consulting on its approach to access and participation;
We are developing a new strategy to improve equality of opportunity in access, student success and progression for groups of students that are currently underrepresented in English higher education. Your input will help us decide how we can most effectively do that.

The questions we are asking relate to proposals described in full in "A new approach to regulating access and participation in English higher education: Consultation". This can be found in full on our website.

There are six proposals in total:
1. The cycle of access and participation plans
2. Monitoring of plans
3. Targets
4. Evaluation
5. Transparency information
6. Our approach to data

If you would like to respond to this consultation, please do so by noon on Friday 12 October 2018.

Use of your personal information

We require you to provide some personal information (contact name and email address) so that we may contact you for any queries in relation to your submission. Below is a short summary of how the personal information you submit will be held and used. Your personal information will be used to communicate with you about your consultation submission if required.

- the Data Controller of the personal information you submit will be the Office for Students

- the legal basis for processing your personal information is that processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest

- it will be stored on secure servers within the UK

- it will not be routinely shared with any other organisations

- it will be retained for four months after the end of the consultation then securely disposed of

- you have certain rights in relation to your personal information, set out at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/privacy/individual-rights-under-the-general-data-protection-regulation/

- you may contact our Data Protection Officer with any queries or concerns you have about the use of your personal information, at dp@officeforstudents.org.uk

you can find further information about how we use your personal information on our website: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/privacy/

2. About you

Which of the following best describes you? *

An employee of a higher education provider

An employee of a further education college or sixth form college

An employee at a school or sixth form

An employee of a local or unitary government authority

An employee of a charity or third sector organisation

An employee of a student representative body

An employee of a private company

An employee of a national government department or agency

I'm a student (school or further education)

I'm a student (higher education)

Other

Prefer not to say

Are you submitting: *

☐ a collective response?

☐ an individual response?

Your name

☐

Your organisation

☐

3. About you

Which of the following best describes your role? *

☐ Chief Executive, Vice Chancellor, Principal, headteacher or equivalent

☐ Senior Director, widening participation manager, human resources manager, operational manager, marketing manager, financial manager, business manager, IT director, or equivalent

☐ Member of academic staff with responsibility for widening access or participation to higher education

☐ Member of non-academic business support staff with responsibility for widening access or participation to higher education

☐ Other

☐ Prefer not to say

Please indicate which, if any, of the following responsibilities you have? (Please select all that apply)

☐ I have the lead responsibility for internal sign off of our access and participation plan

☐ I have the lead responsibility for writing our access and participation plan

☐ I provide some input into creating our access and participation plan

☐ I have some level of responsibility for monitoring our access and participation plan

☐ I have responsibility for delivering widening participation activities

☐ I have none of the responsibilities listed above

☐ Prefer not to say

4. Proposal 1: Cycle of plans (paragraphs 48 - 67)

The OfS will place the approval of access and participation plans onto a more strategic timescale, with the number of years during which a plan may be in force to be based on risk. Plans should continue to demonstrate clear long-term ambitions for how providers will achieve significant reductions in the gaps in access, success and progression over the next five years. We will review progress against plans each year. Providers at increased risk of a future breach of condition A1 will normally be expected to submit plans every three years. Providers considered not at increased risk of a future breach of condition A1 will be expected to submit their plans every five years. Where we have serious concerns about a future breach, we may expect more frequent resubmission.

1a. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal that plans should normally remain in place for a period of at least three years, rather than being submitted annually as at present?

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ Tend to disagree

☐ Tend to agree

☐ Strongly agree

☐   Don't Know

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (Max 300 words):

5. Proposal 2: Monitoring of access and participation plans (paragraphs 68 - 90)

Providers will be required to publish and submit to the OfS an impact report each year. Financial information previously collected in our annual access and participation monitoring process will be submitted as part of wider OfS financial reporting processes.

2a. How effective, if at all, would the proposed approach of annual impact reports and action plans be for...

	Not at all effective	Not very effective	Fairly effective	Very effective	Don't know / prefer not to say
... Assessing a provider's progress compared to the sector as a whole?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
... Assessing a provider's progress compared to other providers?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
...Improving a provider's strategy to improve access and participation?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
... Engaging students in the monitoring of access and participation?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Not at all effective	Not very effective	Fairly effective	Very effective	Don't know / prefer not to say
... Capturing good practice, and findings from evaluation?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2b. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the submission of an action plan would make providers more accountable to their students, the OfS, and the public for their performance in access and participation?

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ Tend to disagree

☐ Tend to agree

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Don't know

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (max 300 words):

☐

2c. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the approach of a longer-cycle plan with annual impact reporting, and ongoing OfS monitoring, will reduce the level of burden for providers not at increased risk and apply greater scrutiny for providers at increased risk of a future breach of one or more conditions?

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ Tend to disagree

☐   Tend to agree

☐   Strongly agree

☐   Don't know

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (max 300 words):

6. Proposal 3: Targets (paragraphs 91 - 114)

Providers will be expected to include in their access and participation plans a set of strategic, outcomes-focused targets. A small number of these will be recommended by the OfS for use across all providers, and providers will also continue to be able to set outcomes-focused targets related to their own contexts.

3a. To what extent do you agree or disagree, that....

	Strongly disagree	Tend to disagree	Tend to agree	Strongly agree	Don't know / prefer not to say
... the OfS specified aims (see paragraph 102) are the national priority areas for access and participation?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
...the OfS should specify measures that we encourage providers to use when setting targets related to OfS-specified aims?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
... providers should also be able to set	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Strongly disagree	Tend to disagree	Tend to agree	Strongly agree	Don't know / prefer not to say
additional targets relative to their context?					
... the proposal allows for comparability of performance in access and participation across the sector?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
... the proposal allows for progress to improve access and participation to be measured?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (max 300 words):

7. Proposal 4: Funding access and participation (paragraphs 115 - 140)

The OfS will collect predicted access spend disaggregated by pre-16 activity, post-16 activity and work with adults and communities in access and participation plans. We will also continue to collect information on the financial support that providers give to students, and set expectations that this financial support is robustly evaluated, and communicated clearly to students. We will no longer require providers to report on student success and progression spend.

4a. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to collect and publish, in a transparent way, access investment?

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ Tend to disagree

☐ Tend to agree

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Don't know

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (Max 300 words):

4b.To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to disaggregate access spend by post-16, pre-16 and work with adults and communities?

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ Tend to disagree

☐ Tend to agree

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Don't know

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (Max 300 words):

4c.To what extent do you agree or disagree that a strong focus on targets and outcomes alone, creates enough pressure to secure sufficient funding in access and participation to achieve change, without an expectation of spend?

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ Tend to disagree

☐ Tend to agree

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Don't know

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (Max 300 words):

8. Proposal 4: Funding access and participation (continued)

We propose that our approach to funding and investment in access and participation will be underpinned by the following principles:

  a. The funding we deliver should link directly to the outcomes we wish to achieve.
  b. Our decisions in respect of how we use our funding are made by having regard to our general duties.
  c. Our funding should be focused and targeted.
  d. Our funding should add value to the investment that providers make to support successful outcomes for students from underrepresented groups, and should support activity that otherwise would not take place.
  e. Our funding should support activity that delivers sector-wide benefits for students and addresses access and participation objectives which might not be delivered by the market alone.
  f. Our deployment of funds should be evidence-led.
  g. The impact and effectiveness of our funds should be evidenced to a level consistent with HM Treasury guidance.

(See paragraph 140)

4d. To what extent do you agree or disagree that these principles should underpin our approach to funding and investment in access and participation?

- [ ] Strongly disagree
- [ ] Tend to disagree
- [ ] Tend to agree
- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Don't know

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (max 300 words):

9. Proposal 5: Evaluation (paragraphs 141 - 150)

Providers will need to complete a self-assessment of their evaluation activities against a set of criteria, as part of their access and participation plan. The core purpose of the tool will be to identify and support continuous improvement in evaluation.

5a. To what extent do you agree or disagree that an evaluation self-assessment tool will contribute to improvements in evaluation practice?

- [ ] Strongly disagree
- [ ] Tend to disagree
- [ ] Tend to agree

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Don't know

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (max 300 words):

Tracking services are used for evaluation to track participants who have taken part in access and participation activity.5b. What support do you think the OfS could provide to enable the more effective use of tracking services? (max 300 words)

10. Proposal 6: Transparency (paragraphs 151 - 157)

The OfS will undertake further work to explore whether it should require providers to submit and publish transparency data by age and disability. This is in addition to data split by gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background which is part of the transparency information condition (F1) in the OfS's regulatory framework.

6a. To what extent do you agree or disagree that OfS should undertake further work to explore whether data split by age could be included within the transparency information condition?

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ Tend to disagree

☐ Tend to agree

☐ Strongly agree

☐   Don't know

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (Max 300 words):

6b. To what extent do you agree or disagree that OfS should undertake further work to explore whether data split by disability status should be included within the transparency information condition?

☐   Strongly disagree

☐   Tend to disagree

☐   Tend to agree

☐   Strongly agree

☐   Don't know

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (Max 300 words):

11. Proposal 7: The OfS will publish and maintain an access and participation dataset (paragraphs 158 - 169)

The OfS will create, publish and maintain an access and participation dataset that provides a picture of access and participation across the higher education sector and at individual providers.

7a. To what extent do you agree or disagree that OfS should create and maintain an access and participation dataset as proposed in paragraphs 158 - 169?

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ Tend to disagree

☐ Tend to agree

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Don't know

Comments:

7b. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed datasets would hold providers to account on their performance against targets?

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ Tend to disagree

☐ Tend to agree

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Don't know

Comments:

7c. Are there any measures you feel are missing from the dataset? (max 300 words)

12. Further comments

Do you have any further comments?

Appendix 2: Measures for A&P dataset

For each stage of the student lifecycle, the main dashboard will show the gaps in access and participation for the following groups:

— POLAR4 – gap between quintile 1 and quintile 5 students

— Ethnicity – gap between white and black, Asian and minority ethnicity students

— Age – gap between young and mature students

— Disability – gap between disabled and non-disabled students.

In addition to the main access and participation dashboard, there will be a larger dataset that users can explore. This may include the gaps related to:

— POLAR4 quintiles
  - gap between quintile 1 and quintile 5 students
  - gaps between all quintiles
  - gap between quintiles 1 and 2 and quintiles 3, 4 and 5
— Ethnicity
  - gap between white and black students
  - gaps between all individual groups
  - gap between white and black, Asian and minority ethnicity students
— Disability
— Age
  - gap between mature and young students
— Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility
— Indices of multiple deprivation
  - gaps between all quintiles
  - gap between quintiles 1 and 2 and quintiles 3, 4 and 5
— Indices of multiple deprivation interacted with ethnicity
— Gender interacted with POLAR4
— Multiple Equalities Measure (MEM) (when available).