

Will access agreements make higher education fairer?

Description

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English educational institutions will be required to invest a part of the increased tuition fees they receive from next year in helping those from less privileged backgrounds to attend university. This applies to 139 institutions—123 higher education institutions and 16 further education colleges—which have had their access agreements approved by Ofpa.

Ofpa recently announced that English universities and colleges charging above £6,000 for their courses will be contributing £602 million every year by 2015-2016 to support poorer students as part of their access agreements. This figure rises to £738 million annually if the government's contribution to the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) is included as well.

The 2011-12 figure is estimated to be £407 million, rising to the aforementioned £602 million a year by 2015-2016. This amount represents 27% of fee income above the basic level of £6,000.

The money will be spent on summer schools, after-school tuition, fee waivers, outreach programs, scholarships and in encouraging activities to improve student retention and success. The annual tuition fee average for 2012-13 currently stands at £8,161 after fee waivers are taken into account; the figure drops to £7,793 if financial assistance from education providers as well as the NSP is taken into account.

The access agreements will be annually reviewed in order to respond quickly to any changes in student behaviour. Any university which fails to honour the benchmarks agreed upon in its access agreement risks being fined and may even lose its right to charge the maximum tuition fee.

While access agreements are being hailed as a vital step to widen the student participation and allow fair access to higher education, the penalties attached for failing to comply with the agreement are perceived to be unfair by many universities.

Higher education providers are worried what the future may hold for them, since much depends on student recruitment and it remains to be seen how enrolment figures will be affected by next year's changes.

GuildHE CEO, Andy Westwood, said in a media release: "Access agreements show how institutions will provide support for access, participation and good outcomes for students from under-represented groups and are not simply about the tuition fee they want to charge."

However, the Government has radically reformed the higher education funding system and it remains to be seen what impact those reforms will have on student demand and aspiration. The new fees regime is untested and further adjustments to fee levels, access agreements and the broader regulatory framework may well be required beyond 2012/13.

Dr Wendy Piatt, Director General of the Russell Group of universities, said in a media release: "Financial penalties for not meeting these targets would not only be unfair but they would also reduce money available for programs to help poorer students win a place at all our universities. Finally it is important to emphasise that admission to university is and should be based on merit and high academic standards must be maintained."

The brouhaha caused by the announcement of raised fees suggests that many are unconvinced by the new arrangements, and continue to fear that the changes will render higher education the preserve of the affluent.

The first challenge that faces the government and higher education providers alike is to make parents and prospective students aware of the measures being taken to improve access, and of the options available to them. Even more challenging will be then convincing them the provisions are adequate.

The new fees will apply to EU students, while students from elsewhere are not directly affected – a knock-on effect is quite possible though. The tests facing the higher education sector, therefore, are both domestic and international. There is an understandable fear that international students will be driven away, with other Anglophone destinations and European nations the main beneficiaries.