

New OFFA Access Agreements and the National Scholarship Programme: Ramifications for Access to English Higher education

Colin McCaig

Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom

*Presenting Author: **McCaig, Colin***

The paper critically analyses the impact of reforms to the student financial support system in English higher education through a comparative analysis of institutional access support policies (contained in Access Agreements). The paper identifies a shifting focus from generic widening access through aspiration raising activities to the targeting of specific cohorts, to the detriment of many under-represented groups in higher education (those from poorer backgrounds, some BME groups, the disabled and those from the social care system) and thus can be seen as harmful to the notion of social justice and social mobility for the many. The findings are located in a context of stagnation in overall student numbers and state promotion of market mechanisms in higher education (BIS 2011a), and thus are likely to be of relevance to delegates from any state where public spending restrictions are felt in the HE sector.

Since 2006 English Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been obliged to make an Access Agreement with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) if they wish to charge the maximum tuition fee. Access Agreements declare how institutions will use a proportion of the additional fee income to support access to HE for applicants from under-represented groups. Since 2011 (BIS 2011a) new funding arrangements have been introduced including a significant rise in maximum tuition fees (to £9,000) and a removal of the obligation on institutions to provide means tested financial compensation (bursaries) to all students that qualify. Instead, HEIs have to sign-up to the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) which offers significant financial support (in the form of fee waivers or cash bursaries) but to far fewer recipients (BIS 2011b). This shifts the emphasis of support from supporting all who enrol to targeting of support at only the most deserving of cases, and leaves considerable room for institutions to target specific cohorts or to incentivise applicants to specific programmes of study.

The paper builds on previous analyses of Access Agreements by the author and others (Callender and Jackson 2008; McCaig 2008; McCaig and Adnett 2008; 2009) that show how the access and outreach priorities of different types of English HEI vary. Selective institutions are more likely to target support on the basis of merit and offered larger financial support to a small number of students. In contrast, recruiting institutions have been more likely to engage with a wider range of social groups, and offer financial support to a larger number of beneficiaries. Due to the uneven distribution of students from under-represented backgrounds within the English HE sector, many institutions fear that the NSP will distort their overall access and outreach spending with potentially negative effects on applicants from under-represented backgrounds who overwhelmingly attend recruiting institutions. Comparative content analysis of new and original agreements will show the extent to which institutions are adapting to the new landscape in which widening access to all is seen as less important than targeting support only at the most able.

Method

The paper consists of findings from two thematic content analyses of a representative sample of 20 OFFA Access Agreements. The first analysis is of new agreements for the

academic year 2012/13 (the first year of the new access agreements). The sample consists of 10 selective institutions all members of the Russell Group of institutions, and 10 large post-1992 institutions which are in the main recruiting institutions. The second analysis consists of a comparative content analysis of 2012/13 and original 2006/07 agreements (same sample, using Nvivo).

The content analyses are augmented by a small number of interviews with key policymakers within institutions to explore rationale for changes to financial and outreach support priorities. The interviews explore: the level of input into access agreement (i.e. who contributes to and signs off agreements); the development of institution's access agreements over time (i.e. in relation to market positioning or recruitment needs of institution); relationship between access agreements and other institutional documentation (WPSAs, admissions procedures, mission/corporate statements etc); outreach priority setting (e.g. by age group or social group targeted); changes in transitional support offered to underrepresented groups (e.g. by age group or social group targeted); the nature and value of targeted additional financial support (over and above NSP allocations and mandatory bursaries in previous system); and further detail of the rationale for NSP allocations.

Conclusions

Previous research into the impact of Access Agreements on widening access policies of institutions has revealed a wide divergence of mission between selective institutions concerned with maintaining excellence and those concerned with widening access to underrepresented groups. New Access Agreements - written in response to new guidance notes and in the context of the requirement to target funding through the National Scholarship Programme- reflect the pre-existing interests of selective institutions and confirm the trend towards institutional targeting to meet recruitment and other institutional priority needs (for example graduate employability, quality enhancement) to the potential detriment of underrepresented groups who overwhelmingly attend recruiting institutions which can no longer afford the same level of financial support. This trend could if generalised across the sector reverse the impact of a decade of widening access policies which have resulted in a closing of the participation gap between the richest and poorest social classes in recent years (HEFCE 2010, OFFA 2010) and have potentially damaging outcomes for widening access as social justice.

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