

Access Agreements 2016/17

**How to work effectively with your
institution to improve access to HE**

February 2015

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Introduction

Over the past five years, NUS and students' unions, working together, have raised the bar on widening participation and access. Whether its leading on community outreach projects, shaping inclusive curricula, or putting money into students' pockets – such as the 52 unions who worked with NUS last year to transfer £29 million from unhelpful fee waivers into cash bursaries – unions have a powerful role to play in the widening participation landscape, and a crucial part of this process is engaging as a union in your institution's Access Agreement.

From now until April 2015, institutions that charge over £6000 for undergraduate qualifications in England will be working on their Access Agreements for 2016/17. These are strategic documents that lay out your institution's commitment to access and widening participation and are submitted to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) for approval, and they provide an opportunity for unions to shape and influence their institution's work on access and widening participation. We've won on the principle that students should be consulted and engaged at every stage in the production of their access agreements, and for the past few years OFFA have expressly stated that they expect institutions to be working in partnership and consulting their students' union on the content of their access agreements.

Each institution has a diverse range of students with a different set of circumstances and needs, and we do not advocate a one size fits all approach. Some students' unions are building an agenda of their own on widening access, creating innovative, authentic encounters between current and prospective students and working in partnership with their institution on this – this is fantastic and I salute those unions that are taking such a proactive and advanced approach to democratising education. But let's not assume that all students' unions need to be involved in the delivery of specific widening participation activity, especially where there is no resource to support it, or where the student body is already very diverse and the needs are very different.

What is important is to approach engagement with the access process with the values we share in common as a student movement; challenging privilege and elitism, championing equality of access throughout the entire student lifecycle, and recognising that higher education must be made suitable for a diverse range of learners, instead of the current system that seeks to shape students to fit its narrow moulds. Liberation is central to access and widening participation, and I am proud to be part of a movement that has this at the heart of its work. We must ensure that we're placing it at the centre of our access initiatives too, and I hope unions will look at how you can work with your liberation campaigns to influence the access agenda in your institution.

We are aware that for FE students' unions, where degrees are often accredited by a different HE institution and where the FE institution itself does not have its own access agreement, participation is particularly difficult and you find yourselves frequently left out of engagement and consultation. I encourage those of you in that situation to get in contact for guidance and support.

Your Access Agreement is more than a statutory piece of paper that you should be consulted on – it is a strategic opportunity to transform your educational environment. The next few months offer an important opportunity for students' unions to engage with the creation of these agreements, shape their institution's approach to access and widening participation, and embed the work their unions are doing on creating a democratic, inclusive and transformative education for students into the institutional agenda.

In Unity,



Megan Dunn

Vice President (Higher Education)
NUS

Working on your Access Agreement

What is access and widening participation?

Our current education system is built on the same unequal structures as society. This means that some people are more likely to access and excel in higher education by virtue of the advantages they have in society alone. Widening participation work recognises that education functions on structural disadvantages, and that in order to make education more inclusive - institutions must change to fit learners, rather than learners being shaped to fit institutions.

The main measure used for whether someone is considered to be disadvantaged within higher education is socio-economic class. If you are the first in your family to go to university, or you come from a neighbourhood of low participation in higher education and go to a state school, you are less likely to proceed and succeed in HE. This is due to a number of complex interrelated factors, including not achieving the exam grades necessary to secure a place, lacking the cultural and social advantages that mean HE seems like an inevitable pathway, and not knowing people currently in higher education. Other categories used to measure educational disadvantage include disability, being care experienced, race, and part time and mature learners. In recognising the role that societal oppression plays in educational disadvantage, we also think it's important that you consider how liberation intersects with access, and more guidance can be found within this document.

What is an access agreement?

The Access Agreement is a document which sets out how an institution intends to safeguard and promote fair access to higher education. They are compulsory for any institution in England charging over £6000 for HE undergraduate courses, and are approved and monitored by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). They cover both Home/EU UG students studying from 25% to full-time. They also apply to postgraduate teaching but NO other PGs. Access agreements are produced in annual

cycles, with institutions delivering their 2015/16 agreement to OFFA in May 2014. This year, institutions will be working on the 2016/17 access agreement.

Whilst the Access Agreement for this year will apply to the 2016/17 academic year, that does not mean that during the course of your engagement with your institution that you cannot make changes or suggest programs of work to begin in the immediate future. Many unions have been successful as part of their access agreement process in securing funding, support and changes to the institution's current practice.

Access agreements are public documents. You can find your institution's latest access agreement [here](#).

Case Study: King's College SU

King's College London fund a full time Widening Participation Coordinator split between the Students' Union (KCLSU) and the University as part of their access agreement process, as well as ongoing project funding.

The Widening Participation Coordinator supports outreach and access volunteering in the union. KCLSU currently run 9 distinct outreach projects across Greater London through union societies, from academic mentoring to union open days and society taster workshops.

Getting involved in the access agreement process

The simplest way to get involved with the development of your institutional Access Agreement is to identify who is responsible for drafting the agreement and requesting to meet with them. This person will likely be named in your institution's latest access agreement. Except in the case of large policy changes, access agreements rarely change drastically. As such, it is a good idea to take a look at your institution's most recent Access Agreement beforehand, and identify areas of interest to the union.

Whilst for most institutions, the process of drafting and delivering the access agreement happens between January – April of each year, your institution is likely to have at least two layers of oversight around access and widening participation. Firstly, a departmental level group, such as a Widening Participation Working Group, that consists of key widening participation staff, faculty-level access leads and other key practitioners, will meet 3-4 times a year to discuss the practical implications of access and widening participation, and programs of work that feature in the Access Agreement. There will also be some form of senior management level board, featuring the institutional lead for widening participation and senior management such as the staff responsible for student services and teaching and learning. This group will sign off the Access Agreement. Your students' union should feature on both of these groups, and have representation at all levels of access and widening participation within the institution.

Institutions tend to think of their work on access and widening participation in terms of a lifecycle model, such a

Time Before HE

- Could be school, college, in work, combination of these

Application and Admissions

- Everything from beginning your UCAS application, choosing your institution to confirmed offer letter

Induction and Welcome

- From when you are offered a place to until you are 'in place'

Retention and Success

- How you thrive and survive at your institution, and how successful you are, including your next steps after UG

Case Study: Manchester SU

Manchester SU worked with their institution to make elections more accessible to access students. Using the institution's bursary data, the union offered bursaries to students who took part in union elections, to enable them to access campaign resources and purchase materials. The University also promoted this opportunity to students in receipt of funding, leading to an increase in WP students running for office.

What role can my union play?

To create a great Access Agreement, institutions need to examine their access record and decide where their priorities lie. They need to look at the evidence of what is working and what is not and where students are struggling. They may need to gather evidence in some cases. They need to decide who needs to be involved to develop the programme of financial support and activities for the year ahead. They need to work out how these activities can best be delivered and they need to make sure they are monitoring their activities.

Students' unions can and should be involved in all of these activities, to the extent that they are able. Institutions should not be able to set the terms of the engagement – this should be the basis of a discussion and agreement between whoever has oversight of the access agreement and the responsible student officer. Our ambition is for institutions and students' unions to work towards a partnership approach on access.

Unsure how to move forward with your Access Agreement?

Get in touch with Sarah Kerton, Policy Consultant at sarah.kerton@nus.org.uk for specific advice and guidance.

Winning the Arguments

Access Agreement briefings

Winning the Arguments: Financial Support for Students

Key Messages

- Bursaries are changing. OFFA is currently researching into the impact of bursaries and we are likely to see new guidance following this research. In the absence of evidence, we would recommend that institutions hold off on making any drastic changes.
- We know from Pound in Your Pocket¹ research that cash bursaries are the way that students prefer to receive their financial support, more so than fee waivers, university service or accommodation discounts. Following guidance changes in 2013, few institutions offer fee waivers, but where they do we recommend challenging this and seeking full cash/cash-in-kind provision for students.
- There is some controversy about whether more money should be spent on student financial support or on outreach and retention work and you should expect to have this discussion with your institution.
- When bursaries are offered, they should be on the basis of financial need and not academic achievement.

What are the issues?

In 2010, OFFA analysed application patterns and showed that disadvantaged young people were not choosing institutions that offered higher bursaries in greater numbers². This research is often cited to suggest that bursaries 'don't work' – which is quite a leap. The general availability of financial support may be effective in convincing students who are afraid they cannot afford to attend HE that support will be available whatever institution they choose, but this assumption has never been tested. Neither has research been done (that we know of) into whether the choice between a bursary or no bursary would have an impact.

In March 2014, OFFA released the interim report 'Do bursaries have an effect on retention rates?'³ that found no evidence that bursaries had any impact. Key to this research is that no correlation was able to be made out of the current data, rather than any clear evidence

either way. The report looked at data from the initial round of the National Scholarship Programme (NSP), which limited cash support to £1000 per student, and offered the rest of the bursary in non-cash equivalents, such as fee waivers. Fee waivers are a problem because they offer no immediate benefit to students. Graduates pay back their student loan in proportion to their income for 30 years after they start earning £21,000. The amount repaid is determined by future income, not the size of your fee debt. The only benefit of a fee waiver would be years down the road, yet students are struggling to make ends meet now.

OFFA has now commissioned additional research into the impact of financial support on access and the student experience which is being undertaken currently. Whilst there is no clear evidence available on the impact of bursaries, we would recommend asking your institution to hold off making any radical changes to their current bursary provision. Still, it is important to be clear what you think bursaries are for and be ready to present evidence of their value to your student body.

Some useful evidence

- 39% undergraduate Pound in Your Pocket survey respondents say they have seriously considered leaving their course, and over 40% of these cite financial difficulty as a reason.
- Half of undergraduate respondents say they regularly worry about meeting basic living costs.
- Students from low participation neighbourhoods are more likely to work for more than 16 hours per week, and more likely to report that they struggle to concentrate on their studies without worrying about finance.
- Moreover, the amount of hours worked outside the course of study correlated with worries about ability to meet basic living expenses and with an inability to concentrate on studies.

Winning the Arguments: Outreach, retention and student success activities

Key Messages

- Nobody expects students' unions to be access experts, so we are just flagging up some good practice you may wish to raise with your institution (or think about yourselves).
- In outreach it's all about collaborative activity, honing the targets and working with a variety of student groups. Some unions will want to continue or extend their work here.
- For retention it's all about developing student engagement, attainment and potential to progress to employment or postgraduate study. All unions have an important role to play here.
- For all activities, there needs to be a strong evidence base and/or a clear intention to monitor the success of the activity from the very beginning, to ensure it is having an impact.
- We'd also encourage you to think about how the students' union can shape, contribute to, support or otherwise be a partner in the access activities your institution intends to deliver.

What are the issues?

There is not a one size fits all approach that will work for your union. You could start by creating a matrix of different student groups (like part-time, mature, low income, no family background of HE, disabled) against different stages of the HE lifecycle journey. What matters is identifying areas that are of interest to your students and as a union. If you are from an institution with a large number of students from widening participation background, then you are much more likely to focus on retention and success than outreach,

for example. For each student group consideration needs to be given to the barriers those students might face to full and successful participation in every stage of the student lifecycle, and what interventions or changes might break down those barriers.

The Higher Education Academy's What Works? Report⁴, released in 2012, evidences that the key factor impacting on a students' education experience and success is a sense of 'fitting in', primarily in the academic and course environment, but also in the wider academic community. You can access the report [here](#).

Examples

Some outcomes unions have had from working on the access process with their institution include:

- Building a union-led outreach program, with institutional funding for full time staff support and project funding for student groups to deliver outreach initiatives.
- Securing funding through the Access Agreement for a full time youth worker to lead youth engagement provision within the local community.
- Funding from the institution to make elections more accessible to students in receipt of bursaries, including bursaries to replace lost wages and childcare costs.
- Leading on research through the union on access funding and its impact on the student experience, to provide evidence for the best use of bursary funds.

Winning the Arguments: Widening Participation and Black Students

Key Messages

- The black attainment gap, or BME attainment gap as it is referred to by some institutions, refers to the stubborn gap between black and white students' final degree attainment in higher education.
- Research shows that the black attainment gap is not due to students' academic ability, but because of exclusionary cultures in HEIs⁵.
- The best interventions are ones that seek to address these cultures, including unconscious bias training and staff development.
- Access work for black students is not just about tackling the attainment gap, but can encompass a whole range of interventions throughout the student lifecycle that students' unions are uniquely placed to deliver on.

What are the issues?

The black attainment gap refers to the difference in degree attainment between white and black students. The latest Equality in Higher Education Statistical Report from the Equality Challenge Unit report (2013)⁶ shows that 72% of UK-domiciled white students achieved a first or a 2:1 in 2011-12, compared with 54% of black students. This is a long standing national disparity, and whilst attainment and participation gaps for other disadvantaged groups are closing, the black attainment gap remains fixed at around 18% year in and out.

As evidenced in HEA's What Works? Report⁷, the core narrative that black students report impacts on their academic engagement is a sense of not fitting in, and students' unions are well placed to both lobby their institution for institutional interventions as well as providing a welcoming and empowering space within the union itself.

Engaging in your Access Agreement offers a key opportunity to encourage your institution to invest in holistic and structural measures that can tackle the attainment gap. NUS' own [Race](#)

[for Equality](#) research (2011)⁸ has a number of recommendations that could be implemented through the Access Agreement process.

72% of UK-domiciled white students achieved a first or a 2:1 in 2011-12, compared with 54% of black students
Equality Challenge Unit, 2013

Where unions have been particularly successful to date is in facilitating discussions between students and with the institution, producing and disseminate information and helping to develop inclusive practices for all students.

Recommendations

- Training staff to better support the needs of a diverse range of learners, including tackling unconscious bias and racism in the classroom
- Developing outreach programs in schools targeted at black learners
- Providing funding to increase the number of black academics to speak at institutions
- Developing student-led academic support systems
- Creating a system of pastoral advisors, drawn from black academics and postgraduate students
- An increase in funding and support for black students' societies and committees to engage in challenging their educational process, such as support to liberate the curriculum

Winning the Arguments: Widening Participation and Women

Key Messages

- UCAS data shows that the number of women accessing HE is increasing yearly, with women making up 55% of HE entry in 2014
- Access to higher education is gendered, but it is not just about who steps through the door. Men are more likely to study STEM subjects, earn higher wages on graduation compared to women who have undertaken the same course of study, and progress into postgraduate study
- Whilst statistics are useful ways in which to explore and highlight potential areas of disadvantage, they cannot be taken out of the context of how educational and societal privilege functions
- The increase of women students in HE is in part due to a lack of other post-compulsory study options for women to develop a career, but also as a result of feminist interventions in education
- Women's success in HE is not at the expense of working class men; we must build intersectional approaches to educational disadvantage

What are the issues?

In the past 3 years, we have seen an increase in calls within the higher education sector for white working class boys to be treated as a disadvantaged group when it comes to widening participation initiatives in universities. This has come from government ministers and leading sector voices. Some institutions are looking to include 'men' as a category within its access agreement, in which case this guidance may produce useful.

Education institutions continue to be places where gendered, racial and classed privileges are reinforced and maintained. Socio-economic class is the single biggest determinant in your ability to access HE, yet it is essential we recognise complex intersections between class,

race and gender. We also need to explore how these produce multiple formations of inequality, exclusion and disadvantage. Discussions around men's under-representation in HE create a "battle of the sexes" that undermines women's educational achievements and casts women's success as a threat to men's status, with women's increased access to HE constructed in terms of men's 'disadvantage'. This is of some concern to NUS, and NUS Women's Campaign has policy to address this.

This is not to say that young men do not face educational barriers. However, research shows that this disadvantage is complicated, and a result of their race, their class, and other structural oppressions, rather than their gender⁹. As a result, we would suggest encouraging more work that looks at the role that racial and class bias plays in discouraging progression into HE, rather than focussing on programs specifically addressing men due to their gender.

Some useful evidence

- While women make up 55% of students in HE, they comprise only half of students in the top ten institutions in the 2008 Good University Guide, compared with 65% in the bottom ten (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2009)¹⁰.
- Women make up just 24% of engineering students worldwide (Thompson & Bekhradnia, 2011)¹¹, less than half of the UK research student population and under 40% globally.
- Over her working life, a woman graduate can expect to earn 12% less than her male counterpart (Dyhouse, 2005)¹².
- Even taking into account differing subject profiles, men's salaries are inexplicably 5% higher than women's (Thompson & Bekhradnia, 2011)¹³.

Winning the Arguments: Widening Participation and LGBT Students

Key Messages

- LGBT school pupils are disadvantaged, due to homophobic and transphobic bullying, in their engagement with secondary education, which impacts on their ability to progress into FE and HE.
- NUS research shows that LGBT students face issues of safety on campus, a lack of inclusion in the classroom and a feeling of not fitting in, all of which impact on their ability to survive and thrive in HE.
- These impacts are felt markedly by trans students and significant work needs to be undertaken at a union and institutional level to improve the experience of trans students in HE.

What are the issues?

LGBT students have a number of barriers to success throughout the lifecycle model, including before HE. LGBT youth are disproportionately represented in figures for truancy, underachievement and premature exit from secondary education, all of which have a detrimental impact on the ability to progress into FE and HE. Some LGBT societies undertake outreach work in local schools, working to tackle homophobic and transphobic bullying. This is relevant access work in that it seeks to tackle the structural issues that impact on LGBT young people's ability to succeed in their education, and as such should be recognised within your union's program of access work, if relevant.

In 2014, NUS released [Education Beyond the Straight and Narrow](#)¹⁴, the first piece of research of its kind to explore LGBT students' experiences during their time in HE. This research will prove useful in making the arguments for specific support aimed at LGBT learners within your access agreement. The report details five main areas – safety and well-being, campus culture, LGBT activism and representation, teaching and learning and

coming out as a trans student – that impact on LGBT students' experiences in their institution.

Some useful evidence

This evidence is drawn from Education Beyond the Straight and Narrow:

- 51% of trans respondents have seriously considered dropping out of their course.
- Of those who had considered dropping out, around two thirds of trans students mentioned the feeling of not fitting in.
- Just 20% trans students feel completely safe on campus, compared to 36.7% and 43% of non-trans LGB and heterosexual students respectively.
- One in five LGB and one in three trans respondents have experienced at least one form of bullying or harassment on their campus.
- LGBT students are also more likely to consider dropping out than heterosexual students. More than half of LGBT respondents (56%) cited the feeling of not fitting in as the main reason for considering dropping out.
- LGBT students who have experienced a form of homophobic or transphobic harassment are 2–3 times more likely to consider leaving their course.

What can unions do?

Unions can undertake important interventions, working in conjunction with their LGBT societies and their institution, to improve the experience of HE for LGBT students, particularly in providing a far better experience for trans students. Interventions that could be placed within the Access Agreement include:

- resources for staff training
- funding for gender-neutral facilities on campus
- improved access to information and services
- funding for LGBT societies to undertake retention, success and outreach activities

Endnotes

- ¹ NUS (2012) *Pound in Your Pocket*. London: NUS.
- ² CORVER, M. (2010) *Have bursaries influenced choices between universities?* London: OFFA.
- ³ OFFA (2014) *Do bursaries have an impact on retention rates?* London: OFFA.
- ⁴ THOMAS, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.
- ⁵ BERRY, J. & LOKE, G. (2011) *Improving the degree attainment of BME students*. London: Equality Challenge Unit & Higher Education Academy.
- ⁶ EQUALITY CHALLENGE UNIT (2013) *Equality in higher education: statistical report 2013*. London: Equality Challenge Unit.
- ⁷ THOMAS, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.
- ⁸ NUS (2011) *Race for Equality*. London: NUS.
- ⁹ BURKE, P. et al (2013) *Formations of Gender and Higher Education Pedagogies (GaP)*. London: National Teaching Fellowship Scheme
- ¹⁰ HIGHER EDUCATION STATISTICS AGENCY (2009) *Students in Higher Education Institutions*. London: Higher Education Statistics Agency.
- ¹¹ THOMPSON, J. & BEKHRADNIA, B. (2011) *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System. An Analysis of the Higher Education White Paper*. London: Higher Education Policy Institute.
- ¹² DYHOUSE, C. (2005) *Students: A Gendered History*. London & New York: Routledge.
- ¹³ THOMPSON, J. & BEKHRADNIA, B. (2011) *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System. An Analysis of the Higher Education White Paper*. London: Higher Education Policy Institute.
- ¹⁴ NUS (2014) *Education Beyond the Straight and Narrow*. London: NUS

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