



Producing access agreements: OFFA guidance to institutions

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SCOP today welcomed the publication of OFFA's guidance to the sector and the timetable for submission of access agreements to be operational from 2006/07. OFFA's guidance will now enable higher education colleges to complete and seek approval of their access agreements to demonstrate how they will safeguard and support fair access to higher education and to provide prospective students with the range of information they will need prior for the introduction of variable fees.

Patricia Ambrose, Executive Secretary, SCOP said:

'Higher education colleges have a long and proud record of widening participation and are committed to creating opportunities for all able to benefit from higher education. Higher education colleges support and promote fair access to higher education and will continue to demonstrate this commitment through their progressive outreach work and provision of appropriate bursaries and other financial assistance to students who most need their support.'

SCOP welcomes OFFA's recognition that many institutions already attract a socially diverse range of students and that widening participation is a central part of their mission. OFFA's expectations on the level of additional resources from variable tuition fees an institution provides to support fair access will be reasonable and take these and other factors, such as AimHigher funding, into context.

We are also pleased to note that OFFA recognises the work SCOP has undertaken with UUK and the Student Loans Company to develop a model bursary scheme. This will help to ensure that potential students benefit from clear and accessible information.

We are concerned, however, about OFFA's expectations of institutions in providing detailed and accurate information to prospective students in their prospectuses and other publicity for 2006 entry on the level of fees or fee limits an institution intends to charge for the lifetime of the agreement. Many prospectuses will be published before access agreements are approved and it is unreasonable to expect institutions to be able to predict the impact of variable fees over the next five years. SCOP would welcome some further discussions with OFFA as to how best to take this forward.

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