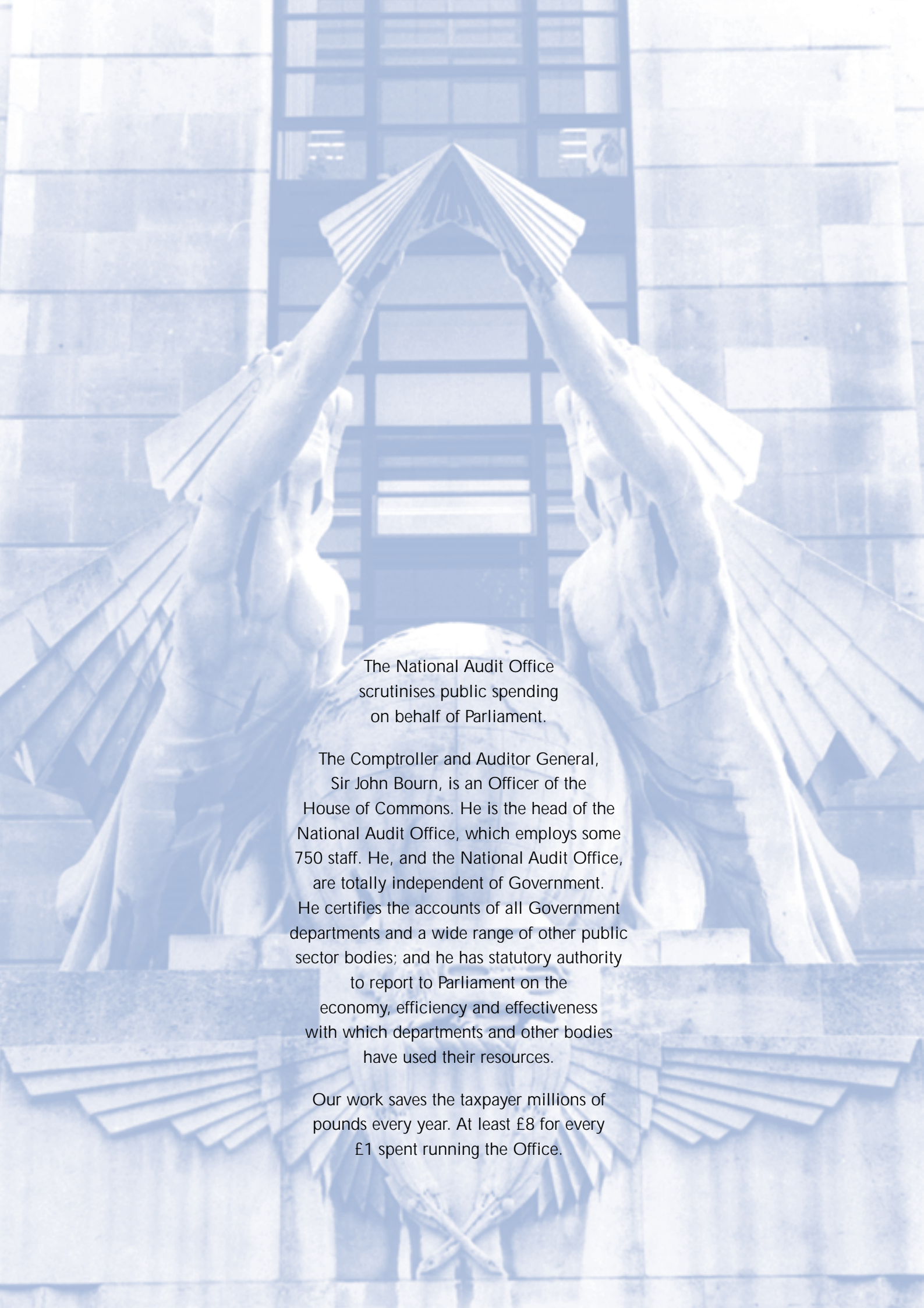


# Widening participation in higher education in England

REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL  
HC 485 Session 2001-2002: 18 January 2002







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# Widening participation in higher education in England



REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL  
HC 485 Session 2001-2002: 18 January 2002



# Contents

This report has been prepared under Section 6 of the National Audit Act 1983 for presentation to the House of Commons in accordance with Section 9 of the Act.

*John Bourn* National Audit Office  
Comptroller and Auditor General 10 January 2002

For further information about the National Audit Office please contact:

National Audit Office  
Press Office  
157-197 Buckingham Palace Road  
Victoria  
London  
SW1W 9SP

Tel: 020 7798 7400

Email: [enquiries@nao.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@nao.gsi.gov.uk)

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The National Audit Office study team comprised Jeff Jones, Raymond Fawcett and Chris Brady.

## Summary and recommendations 1

### Part 1 5

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#### Participation in higher education 5

Higher education in England	5
The Government's widening participation priority	5
The improving participation of groups with historically low representation	6
High representation of women and ethnic minorities	6
Low representation of people with disabilities	7
Low representation of people from poorer social classes	8
Comparisons with other countries	10
Funds for widening participation	10
Performance monitoring	10
Methodology	10

### Part 2 11

---

#### Obstacles to participation 11

Early disengagement from education	11
Differing educational opportunities prior to higher education	12
Concerns about completing and benefiting from higher education	12
Problems in securing financial support	12
Issues about funding for higher education providers	13

## Part 3 17

### Action to remove obstacles 17

General action to widen participation	17
Addressing early disengagement from education	17
Addressing differing educational opportunities prior to higher education	19
Addressing concerns about completing and benefiting from higher education	20
Addressing problems in securing financial support	22
Arrangements to identify and spread best practice	23

## Appendices

1. Methodology	25
2. Key developments in widening participation	29
3. Performance monitoring	30
4. Social class	32
5. Statement by the Higher Education Funding Council for England on recurrent funding	33

## Bibliography 34

### Photographs are kindly provided by:-

Canterbury Christ Church University College - pages 1 and facing, 16, and 24

University of Salford - pages 2 and 10

College of St Mark and St John - page 18

University of Plymouth - page 4

# summary & recommendations

- 1 The Department for Education and Skills (the Department) is committed to working towards wider participation in higher education while continuing to improve standards. It aims to ensure that the country has higher education institutions that can compete with the best in the world in teaching, research and technology transfer and that link closely with business to generate jobs and wealth.
- 2 Working with others, the Department intends to deliver:
  - increased numbers of young people aged 14-19 in schools, colleges and work-based learning aspiring to progress to higher education;
  - expanded provision to create opportunities for more people to enter higher education;
  - funding arrangements that balance different needs and are targeted to those most in need; and
  - further development of e-learning building on the e-universities project.
- 3 The Department, through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (the Funding Council), spends almost £5 billion a year on higher education. Over £3 billion of this is for teaching. Nearly half a million students began undergraduate courses in 1999-00, including almost a tenth at further education colleges.



We found that:

- women and ethnic minorities have high participation levels in higher education;
- the Department, the Funding Council and higher education providers are taking positive action to remove obstacles to participation by people from groups with low representation, comprising people with disabilities and from poorer social classes; and
- there is scope to widen participation further by developing existing good practice.

- 4 Widening participation by groups with low representation is important, although universities and colleges also need to help students from these groups to complete their studies and achieve their qualification aims. Our parallel report on *Improving student achievement in English higher education* concludes that overall achievement rates are very impressive and compare well with other countries, although it highlights lower success rates amongst students with lower A level results. It describes measures that universities and colleges take to recruit students with the potential to succeed and support them through to successful graduation.



- 5 An 18 year old with a disability or a health problem is 40 per cent as likely to enter higher education as an 18 year old without a disability or a health problem. Some young people with disabilities may delay entry to higher education, while learning difficulties may make higher education impractical for others. The proportion of students reported as declaring disabilities has increased by 50 per cent in five years. The most common disability among students is dyslexia. Others relate to mobility, hearing and sight.
- 6 The participation of young people from social class V is significantly lower than from social class I<sup>1</sup>. The social class V participation rate has more than doubled since 1991-92, but increases in participation by all have left poorer classes filling the same share of the student population.
- 7 Applicants from poorer social classes are less likely than average to succeed in converting their applications to accepted offers, whereas applicants declaring disabilities are as likely as others to do so. Both groups have particularly low success rates in applications to study medicine, dentistry and veterinary science, and their participation rates in these subjects are also low. There are large variations among institutions in the relative success rates of applications from groups with low overall representation in higher education. Some institutions have low participation by these groups because they do not attract many applications from them, while the problem for other institutions is a high failure rate of applications from these groups.
- 8 Patterns of low representation in other countries are similar to those in England. The most active countries in relation to students with disabilities have anti-discrimination legislation and good publicly available data that show increasing participation. England now has anti-discrimination legislation with the passage of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 but does not yet have good data on participation.
- 9 People with disabilities and from poorer social classes face similar obstacles to participation, with different emphases between the two groups. The main obstacles, identified from cohort studies and focus groups, are:
  - early disengagement from education, making these groups less likely than others to obtain the entry qualifications for higher education;
  - poorer educational opportunities prior to higher education, making these groups less likely to obtain high grades in entry qualifications or demonstrate other qualities that higher education providers seek;
  - concerns about completing and benefiting from higher education, making these groups less confident that higher education would be the right choice for them; and
  - difficulties in securing financial support, where groups with low representation face greater uncertainty and complexity than others, including limited entitlement to loans or help with fees if they study part time.
- 10 The Department and the Funding Council have increased the element of overall funding allocated to recognise additional costs of widening participation progressively from just over £50 million in 1997-98 to just over £200 million in 2001-02. A further distribution of over £50 million will help with physical adjustments required under the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001.



<sup>1</sup> Some annual fluctuations in data result from variations in the completeness of information collected, the descriptions of occupations and uncertainty as to how they should be coded, the lack of accurate population data and the uncertainty in comparing social class assignments for student data and population data.



- 11 Our study has identified the following issues on funding:
- providers believe that widening participation premiums do not cover the costs of activities but the Funding Council's current research may help to provide more systematic information on costs than is currently available;
  - over 20,000 part time entrants each year (a quarter of those with known qualifications on entry<sup>2</sup>), for whom higher education providers receive extra funding<sup>3</sup>, already have degrees or higher qualifications before starting their courses;
  - bidding for funds for individual projects makes long term planning difficult for providers and the bidding process carries a cost overhead;
  - there has been criticism of the fund to help providers currently recruiting few students from the state sector because it goes to those with poor outcomes in widening participation, in contrast to the main funds that reflect success; and
  - in some circumstances there is an absence of specific funding for students taking part time modules and spreading their studies over longer periods than initially planned.
- 12 The Funding Council points out that the part time premium is largely designed to cover the extra fixed 'per head' administrative costs involved in handling the greater numbers of part time students compared to those attending full time for a given full time equivalent. It is not entirely focused on widening participation costs. The Funding Council also considers its grant allocations as providing funding for all students, including those who leave part way through the year. To complicate the algorithm by taking into account those part time students who do not complete their studies within the year, but do finish short modules, would greatly complicate the process and increase the burden of ensuring accountability without significantly altering the allocations institutions receive.
- 13 Higher education providers are taking action to tackle obstacles to participation. There is widespread activity to raise aspirations and awareness but much less to ensure that applications from people in groups with low representation have a fair chance of succeeding. Key activities related to the application and selection process include:
- written selection strategies;
  - specialist training for admissions staff; and
  - taking applicants' backgrounds and circumstances into account in assessing likelihood of succeeding in higher education.
- 14 The Department has put in place a wide range of funds, in addition to the student loan, to help students facing specific difficulties or hardship. They are helpful sources of support to those who receive them but they are also:
- relatively low in value (Opportunity Bursaries are £2,000 spread over three years and hardship payments have average values of just over £500);
  - mainly discretionary, creating uncertainty for students' financial planning;
  - available to few students (under 7,000 Opportunity Bursaries in 2001-02); and
  - complex (over 20 potential sources of funds).
- 15 Students with disabilities face special difficulties. Most higher education providers help students to apply for Disabled Students' Allowances. Some providers manage the employment of assistants, relieving students of employers' tasks that they would otherwise have to undertake. The Disability Rights Commission has indicated in a draft Code of Practice under the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 that help of this nature may be appropriate to prevent students being placed at substantial disadvantage.

<sup>2</sup> *Thirty per cent of part time entrants have unknown qualifications on entry.*

<sup>3</sup> *The Funding Council's document 00/50 "Funding for widening participation in higher education" includes this funding with other funding under the heading of "supporting activities to improve access and widen participation".*





# Recommendations

## On targeting funding

- i) To ensure that funding covers the costs of widening participation activities, higher education providers should monitor costs more systematically and the Funding Council should review how it distributes the total available financial support in the light of its research into widening participation funding.
- ii) The Funding Council should review the funding for teaching mature and part time students to ensure that it makes adequate allowance for cost variations resulting from wide differences in entry qualifications.
- iii) The Department should look again at financial support for part time students as they have limited entitlement to loans or help with fees.
- iv) To ensure that groups with low representation are not deterred by difficulties in securing funding, the Department should streamline the sources of financial support and give prospective students more certainty about what they will receive.

## On selecting students

- v) Higher education providers should monitor information on applications, offers and acceptances to ensure that they treat all groups fairly and to determine whether they need to attract more applications from groups with low representation.
- vi) In order to help identify candidates who are able to succeed, higher education providers should emulate best practice by taking account of applicants' backgrounds and circumstances when making offers.
- vii) The Department should ask the working party on admissions to develop principles of good practice that higher education providers can apply to their selection strategies and staff training in order to avoid creating unnecessary obstacles for applicants with disabilities and from poorer social classes.
- viii) The Funding Council should establish a method to measure and monitor fairness in admissions in order to ensure that applicants from groups with low representation receive equal treatment to others.

# Part 1

## Participation in higher education

### Higher education in England

- 1.1 Higher education is all study above A levels and their equivalents. It includes Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, foundation degrees, degrees and postgraduate courses. This report concerns all higher education except postgraduate.
- 1.2 The Higher Education Funding Council for England (the Funding Council) funds most higher education in England, overseen by the Department for Education and Skills (the Department). Other bodies, including the Learning and Skills Council, the Teacher Training Agency, the National Health Service and private organisations, also provide funding. Our report primarily concerns courses funded by the Funding Council, but we include other publicly funded courses in our statistical analyses.
- 1.3 Higher education courses funded by the Funding Council in 2001-02 take place in 90 universities, 41 higher education colleges or institutes and 229 further education colleges (including 27 in funding consortia). In addition, some further education colleges deliver higher education courses on behalf of universities or higher education colleges under franchise. Universities and higher education colleges are known collectively as higher education institutions, forming the higher education sector. Our report covers higher education institutions and further education colleges.
- 1.4 The Funding Council is spending £4.8 billion on higher education in the current academic year (2001-02)<sup>4</sup>. Teaching accounts for £3.2 billion, of which 5 per cent is direct funding to further education colleges. Although in recent years the funding for each student has been maintained in real terms, over the last decade it has declined by over a third.
- 1.5 There were 437,000 students beginning courses in higher education institutions in 1999-00, the latest year for which confirmed data are available and on which we have based our analyses. There were 41,000 students

beginning higher education courses in further education colleges in the same year.

### The Government's widening participation priority

- 1.6 The Department is committed to working towards wider participation in higher education while continuing to improve standards<sup>5</sup>. It aims to ensure that the country has higher education institutions that can compete with the best in the world in teaching, research and technology transfer and that link closely with business to generate jobs and wealth.
- 1.7 Working with others, the Department intends to deliver:
  - increased numbers of young people aged 14-19 in schools, colleges and work-based learning aspiring to progress to higher education;
  - expanded provision to create opportunities for more people to enter higher education;
  - funding arrangements that balance different needs and are targeted to those most in need; and
  - further development of e-learning building on the e-universities project.
- 1.8 The Department has said that widening participation is the main priority in higher education<sup>6</sup>. We set out a brief history of key events in Appendix 2. Three published targets, listed in [Figure 1](#), are relevant. None directly requires greater inclusion of groups with low representation, but they all imply it to varying extents.
  - Greater participation of young people in higher education by the end of the decade implies substantially increased participation by groups with lowest representation.
  - Fair access implies the removal of any hindrance to the participation of groups with low representation caused by explicit or implicit discrimination.
  - The Department indicates in its reported figures that it has almost hit the target for level 4 qualifications.

<sup>4</sup> "Funding higher education in England", Higher Education Funding Council for England, HEFCE 01/14, March 2001 - Appendix 5 of this report provides more detail on funding

<sup>5</sup> "Education and Skills: Delivering Results - A Strategy to 2006", Department for Education and Skills, October 2001

<sup>6</sup> Department's letter on higher education funding, 29 November 2000

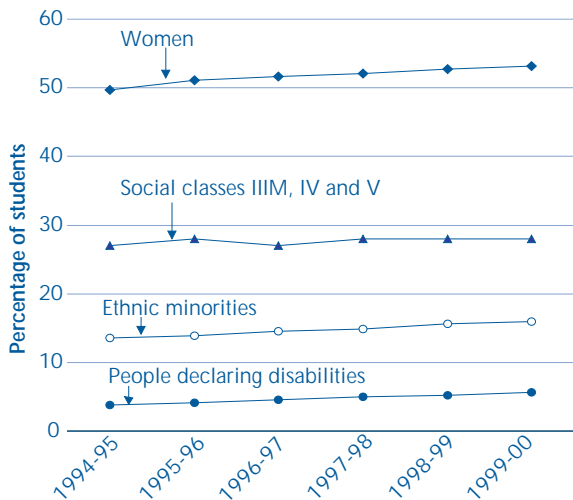


**1 Performance targets relating to widening participation**

Target	Progress
Increase participation towards 50 per cent of those aged 18-30 by the end of the decade while maintaining standards	To be reported in 2002
Make significant year on year progress towards fair access as measured by Funding Council benchmarks	To be reported in 2002
Twenty eight per cent of adults to gain level 4 (higher education) qualifications by 2002	27.5% in 2000

Source: *Delivering Results - A Strategy to 2006, National Learning Targets and Departmental Report 2001-02 to 2003-04*

**2 Groups with historically low representation within the student population**



**NOTE**

Percentages by gender, ethnicity and disability are for English domiciled undergraduates at higher education institutions funded by the Funding Council on 1 December of each year. They exclude nursing, visiting and incoming exchange, writing up and sabbatical students and those for whom relevant information was not known. The percentages of records with unknown ethnicity and disability were 27% and 32% respectively in 1994-95 and reduced through the period to 9% and 6% by 1990-00. This change may in part account for the observed trends. Percentages by social class are for UK domiciled undergraduates accepted through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service to UK institutions, including further education colleges, with occupation descriptions that could be coded. The constituency of the group changed during the period. Social class is based for young entrants on the occupation of a parent and for mature entrants on their own occupation or that of another person in their household. Mature entrants were defined as 21 and over from 1996-97 and 30 and over previously.

Source: *Higher Education Funding Council for England and Universities and Colleges Admissions Service*

The improving participation of groups with historically low representation

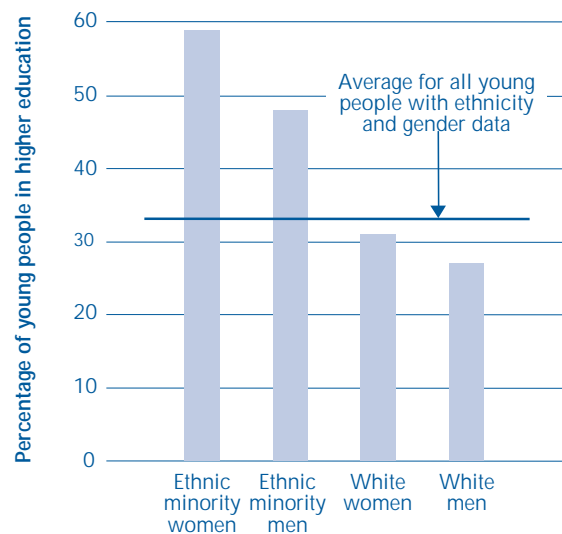
1.9 **Figure 2** shows the recent proportions in the student population of four main groups with historically low representation in higher education in England.

High representation of women and ethnic minorities

1.10 Women and ethnic minorities now have high levels of representation in higher education. Women comprise 57 per cent of all students (including nursing students), compared to just under 50 per cent of the working age population. Ethnic minorities make up 15 per cent of all students, compared to 6 per cent of the working age population. **Figure 3** shows that white men have relatively low representation at age 21. Analysis of the representation levels of individual ethnic minority groups is complicated by differing age profiles and classification difficulties.

1.11 **Figure 4** shows that wide variations exist across subjects in relation to gender. Women have low representation in engineering, technology, architectural studies, mathematical and computer sciences. Men have low representation in subjects allied to medicine, education, languages and humanities. Some higher education providers are acting to address such pockets of low representation.

**3 Participation rates of young people by ethnicity and gender**

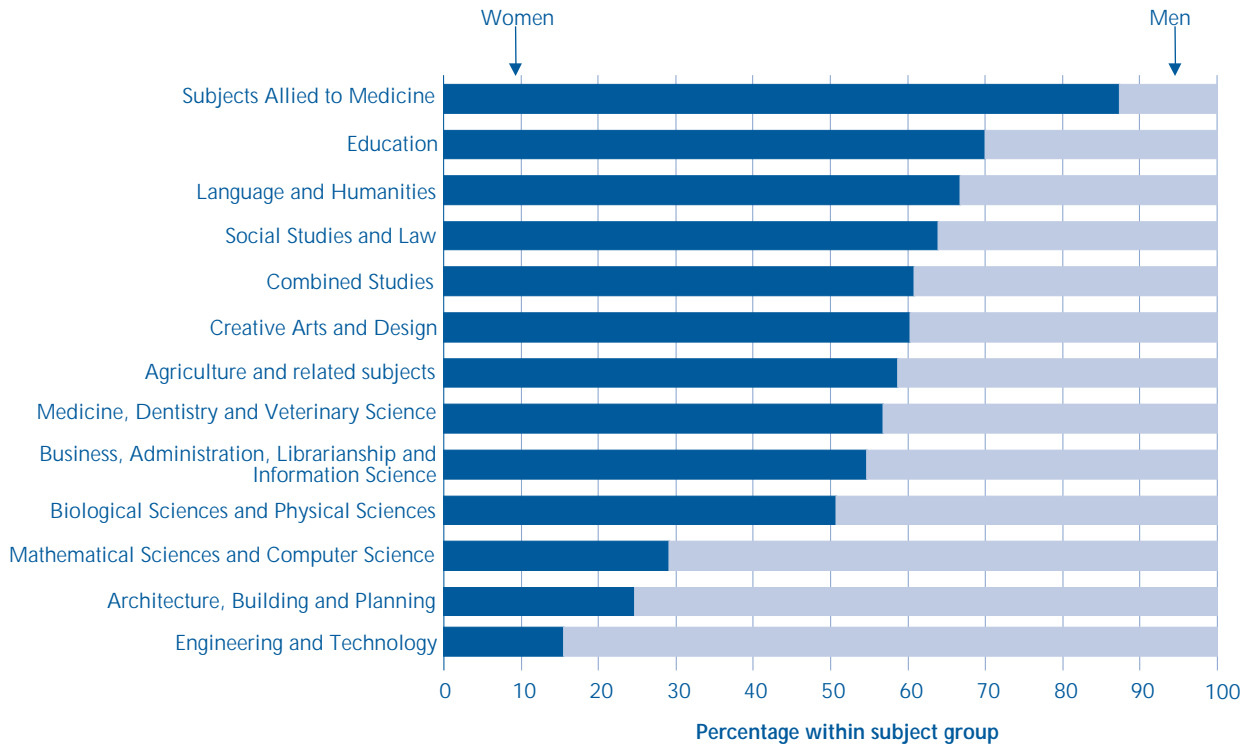


**NOTE**

Number of England domiciled entrants aged under 21 to full time undergraduate higher education courses expressed as a proportion of the average 18 to 19 year old population.

Source: *National Audit Office analysis of data provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Office for National Statistics*

#### 4 Proportions of women and men studying different subject groups



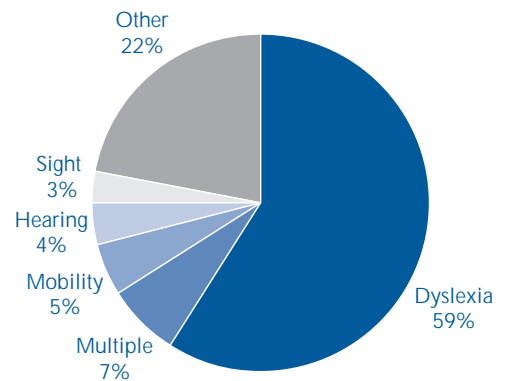
Source: National Audit Office analysis of data provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England

## Low representation of people with disabilities

1.12 The 1999-00 intake of full time higher education students included 5 per cent who had declared a disability and 1 per cent who received Disabled Students' Allowances. These figures cannot be compared directly with the 18 per cent of the working age population who declared a disability in the summer 2000 Labour Force Survey. The student population is younger than the working age population and therefore likely to have a lower prevalence of disability. In addition, students may under-declare disabilities if they fear discrimination. Cohort studies by the Department, which remove these two problems but deal with smaller populations, suggest that an 18 year old with a disability or a health problem is 40 per cent as likely to enter higher education as an 18 year old without a disability or a health problem. Young people with disabilities may be more likely than others to delay entry, so their eventual representation in higher education may be higher than results at age 18 imply. Some disabilities included in the cohort involve learning difficulties that make higher education impractical.

1.13 The most common disability among students is dyslexia, applying to over half of those receiving Disabled Students' Allowances (Figure 5). The disability declared is not necessarily the disability for which the allowance is received.

#### 5 Disabilities reported by students receiving Disabled Students' Allowances



Source: National Audit Office analysis of data provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England

1.14 The right hand chart in Figure 6 shows that students receiving Disabled Students' Allowances have particularly low representation in medicine, dentistry, veterinary science and subjects allied to medicine. They have higher representation in creative arts, design, engineering, technology and agricultural subjects. There may be reasons why students with disabilities are less able to take certain subjects, but some subjects with a strong practical element have the highest participation rates.



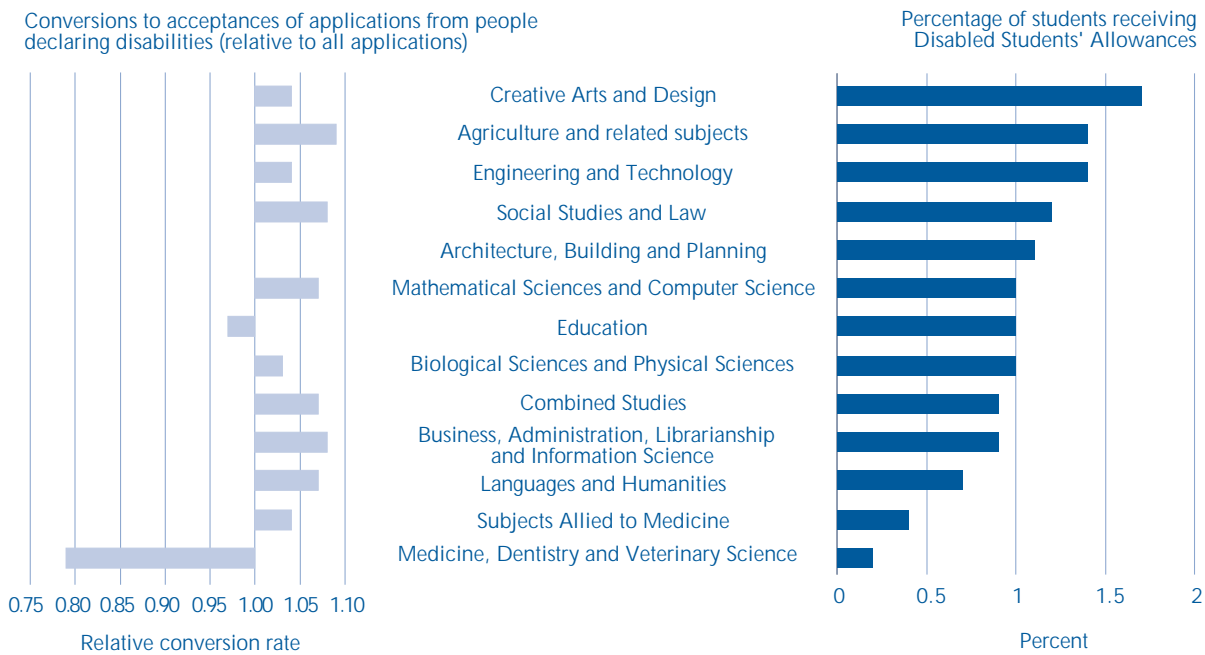
- 1.15 We examined the success in securing higher education places of applicants declaring disabilities compared to all applicants. We calculated the relative conversion rate, which is the proportion of applications from people declaring disabilities that result in accepted offers compared to the same ratio for all applications. A value above one means that applications from people declaring disabilities are more likely than average to convert to accepted places while a value below one means they are less likely to do so. The left hand chart of **Figure 6** shows that, in all but three subject groups, applications from people declaring disabilities are more likely than average to convert to accepted places. Applications to medicine, dentistry and veterinary science are, however, much less likely than others to convert to places.
- 1.16 The relative conversion rate across all subjects for applications from people declaring disabilities is 1.07, but these applicants make fewer applications on average than others and in consequence their individual success rates are virtually the same as for other applicants. These results are consistent with there being no overall selection bias for or against applicants declaring disabilities, but a complete analysis would require systematic data on offers made and grades predicted, specified and achieved. Such data are not currently collected.

1.17 The proportion of full time entrants reported as receiving Disabled Students' Allowances in 1999-00 varies among higher education institutions from 0 per cent to 8 per cent. There are 34 higher education institutions recorded as having none. The Funding Council told us that there have been some problems with the quality of these data.

## Low representation of people from poorer social classes

- 1.18 The participation of young people from social class V is significantly lower than from social class I<sup>7</sup>. The social class V participation rate has more than doubled since 1991-92, but participation by all classes has increased and poorer classes have maintained a fixed share of the whole student population.
- 1.19 The right hand chart of **Figure 7** shows that students from poorer social classes have particularly low representation in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science and higher representation in education, mathematical and computer sciences. The left hand chart employs the same relative conversion rate measure developed for applicants declaring disabilities but applied to applicants from poorer social classes. It shows that, in all but two subject groups, their

### 6 Proportions of students receiving Disabled Students' Allowances and relative conversion rates of applications from people declaring disabilities by subject group (higher education institutions only)



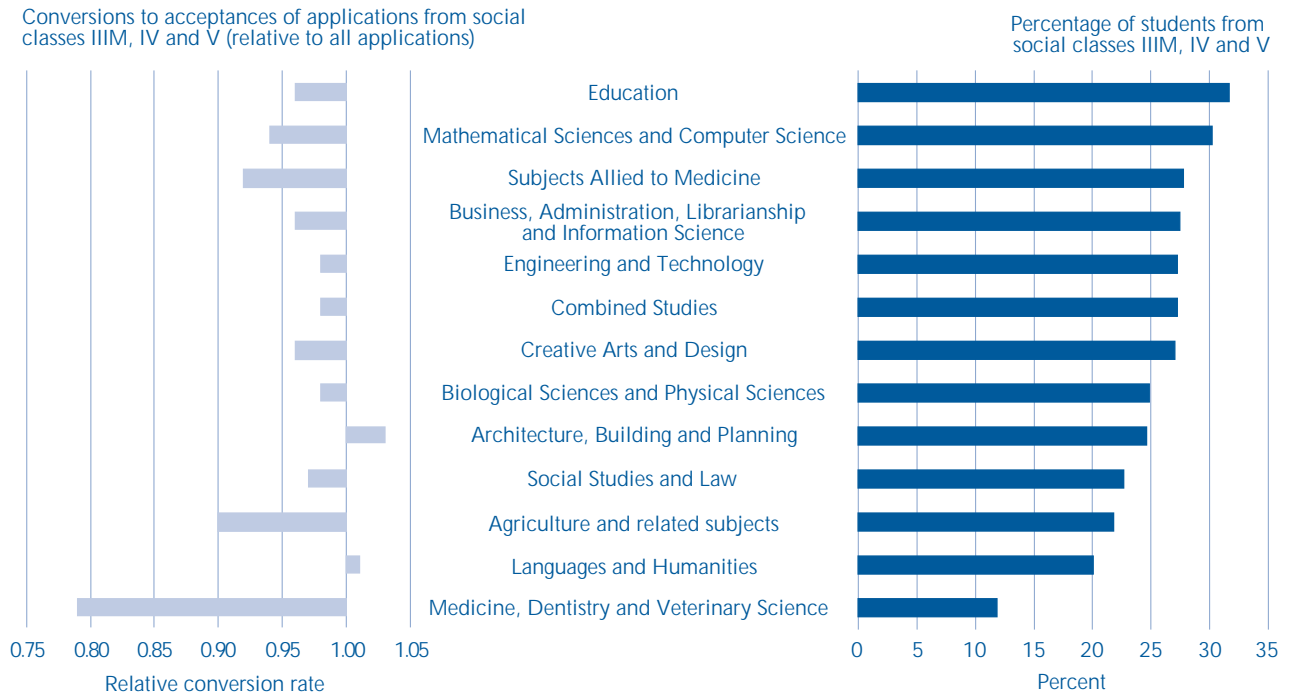
**NOTE**

A relative conversion rate above one means that applications from people declaring disabilities are more likely than average to convert to accepted places while a value below one means they are less likely to do so.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of data provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

<sup>7</sup> Some annual fluctuations in the data, published by the Office for National Statistics, result from variations in the completeness of information collected, the descriptions of occupations and uncertainty as to how they should be coded, the lack of accurate population data and the uncertainty in comparing social class assignments for student data and population data.

**7 Proportions of students from social classes IIIM, IV and V and relative conversion rates of their applications by subject group (higher education institutions only)**



**NOTE**

A relative conversion rate above one means that applications from people in poorer social classes are more likely than average to convert to accepted places while a value below one means they are less likely to do so.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of data provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

applications are less likely than average to convert to accepted places. The discrepancy in conversion rates is particularly marked in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science. The overall figure across all subjects is 0.97, consistent with an absence of bias against applicants from poorer social classes. However, lack of systematic data on offers and grades prevents a complete analysis. In addition, people from poorer social classes make fewer applications than average, so their overall relative level of success is lower than that of their individual applications.

applicants are less likely to accept offers or achieve the grades specified in them. It is not currently possible to determine which is the case because of the lack of systematic data on offers and grades.

1.20 **Figure 8** shows that the proportion of students accepted from poorer social classes varies substantially among higher education institutions. We applied the relative conversion rate to examine the success of people from poorer social classes in applying to institutions where their participation rates are lowest. We found that institutions with the lowest participation rates do not have the lowest relative conversion rates, indicating that some institutions perform badly in widening participation more through failure to attract applications than through not accepting them. The relative conversion rate varies greatly between institutions, from 0.64 to 1.29. A rate below one may indicate that an institution is less likely to make offers to applicants from poorer social classes or that such

**8 Higher education institutions with highest and lowest percentages of students from social classes IIIM, IV and V**

**Highest**

University of Wolverhampton	47
University of Teesside	45
Newman College	45
University of North London	42
Bolton Institute of Higher Education	41

**Lowest**

University of Oxford	9
University of Cambridge	9
Royal Veterinary College	10
University of Bristol	11
London School of Economics and Political Science	13

**NOTES**

Different mixes of students' ages, subjects and entry qualifications account for part of the variation between highest and lowest figures; the Funding Council uses these variables to calculate benchmarks that we discuss in Appendix 3.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of data published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England



## Comparisons with other countries

- 1.21 Other countries facing widening participation issues include Australia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United States.
- 1.22 The nine other countries fall into two distinct groups in relation to participation by people with disabilities. Australia, Germany, Ireland and the United States all have anti-discrimination legislation and good data publicly available on participation levels. The earliest legislation is Germany's Federal Law for Higher Education 1976 and the latest is Ireland's Equal Status Act 2000. Participation rates by people with disabilities appear to be increasing in the four countries. In contrast, other countries do not have relevant legislation and have poorer data or no data on participation levels. England is in line with the first group of countries with respect to anti-discrimination legislation, following the passage of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001, but good data are not yet available.
- 1.23 The nine countries all show broadly the same picture as England in relation to participation by poorer social classes. Expansion of higher education has led to increased participation by poorer groups but also by richer groups, with the result that the participation gap has persisted. Differences in categories of socio-economic groups and in systems of higher education make it impossible to draw firm statistical conclusions about where England lies in the spectrum of international performance.
- 1.24 Provisions for students' financial support vary among the nine countries. Most have recently increased levels of support in response to persisting low participation by poorer groups, but it is too early to assess the effect of these changes. England differs from all of the nine in having no mandatory element of grant for students' own living expenses, although there are grants for child-related costs.

## Funds for widening participation

- 1.25 The Funding Council provides funds to help higher education providers meet the costs of widening participation activities. It also provides access funding for providers to pass on to students facing hardship. Students with disabilities can apply to their local education authorities for Disabled Students' Allowances overseen by the Department. The total funding allocation under these categories is over £200 million for 2001-02. We discuss aspects of funding in Part 2 and in Part 3.

## Performance monitoring

- 1.26 The Funding Council uses performance indicators to measure progress in widening participation. Associated benchmarks assess each institution's performance relative to that of the sector as a whole after allowing for the impact of students' age, subject mix and entry grades. We discuss performance indicators in detail in Appendix 3.

## Methodology

- 1.27 We focused our examination on participation by people from poorer social classes and with disabilities, since general concerns about women and ethnic minorities have been successfully tackled. We considered obstacles to participation (Part 2) and we looked at what the Department, Funding Council and higher education providers are doing to remove these obstacles (Part 3). We combined research for this report and one on *Improving student achievement in English higher education (HC 486 2001-2002)*. Our work included qualitative research for which we selected higher education providers combining reasonably high results in widening participation and in student achievement. We describe our methodology in Appendix 1.



# Part 2

## Obstacles to participation

- 2.1 This part of our report describes the similar obstacles to participation that affect people with disabilities and from poorer social classes, with different emphases in the two groups. It describes aspects of the funding structure that may hinder widening participation.
- 2.2 People with disabilities or from poorer social classes face particular difficulties in relation to:
- early disengagement from education;
  - differing educational opportunities prior to higher education;
  - concerns about completing and benefiting from higher education; and
  - problems in securing financial support.

### Early disengagement from education

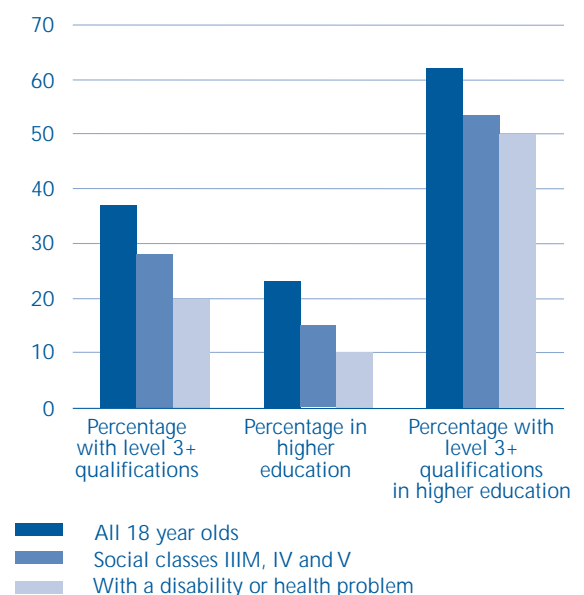
- 2.3 People with disabilities or from poorer social classes are less likely than others to stay engaged in education until the age when they could apply to enter higher education. This is reflected in poorer examination results at level 2 (GCSE), a lower likelihood of still being in education at age 16, and a lower likelihood of gaining level 3 qualifications (A levels and their vocational equivalents), as **Figure 9** illustrates.
- 2.4 **Figure 10** shows that lower academic attainment at age 18 accounts for most of the lower participation in higher education by 18 year olds from poorer social classes or with disabilities. However, even with A levels or their equivalents, people with disabilities or health problems are 20 per cent less likely to participate and people from poorer social classes are 14 per cent less likely. Different rates of converting applications into accepted offers, discussed in Part 1, explain less than half of the discrepancy for people from poorer social classes and none of the discrepancy for people with disabilities. Remaining differences may in part be explained by the nature and strength of the differing level 3 qualifications. The main cause of low participation by qualified people from groups with low representation is that smaller proportions apply.

#### 9 Academic attainment and continuation in education at ages 16 and 18

	5+ GCSE passes A*-C at age 16	In full time education at age 16	Level 3+ qualifications at age 18
All young people aged 16 or 18	49%	72%	37%
Has no disability or health problem	51%	73%	39%
Has a disability or health problem	28%	62%	20%
Social classes I and II	69%	82%	56%
Social class V	30%	59%	13%

Source: Department for Education and Skills

#### 10 Impact of academic attainment on participation in higher education



Source: National Audit Office analysis of data published by the Department for Education and Skills



### Leaving school early

A student in his late twenties told our consultants that throughout his childhood his parents had not expected him to do well academically. He left school after O levels and went into a machine operative job in a local factory. He began to think about higher education as a means to help him secure a better job and finally developed the courage to apply. He is now enjoying his studies and looking forward to better prospects.

## Differing educational opportunities prior to higher education

- 2.5 People have very different educational opportunities prior to applying for higher education. There is variation not just in formal provision in schools and colleges but also in experiences that build confidence and credibility, such as participating in travel, sport and music. We reported in March 2001 (*Improving Student Performance: How English further education colleges can improve student retention and achievement - HC 276 2000-2001*) on wide variations in student performance at further education colleges, with some seeing only a third of their students achieve qualification aims. Further education colleges provide half of all places for young people in full time education at age 16 and an even larger proportion for those from poorer social classes.

### Differing educational opportunities prior to higher education

A student in her early thirties told our consultants that, as a result of a disability, she had been sent to a special school where higher education was not considered to be a subsequent possibility. On leaving school, pupils were expected to move into employment with Remploy or some form of manual work from home. She was not keen to follow these routes and, after a series of jobs in the voluntary sector, someone suggested an Access course. She feels that taking this was the first step in helping her to break free of expectations that parents and teachers imposed on her.

## Concerns about completing and benefiting from higher education

- 2.6 People who know relatively little about higher education have greater concerns about their ability to complete courses. People with disabilities can also face practical obstacles to successful study, for example in travelling for field work or completing laboratory assignments.
- 2.7 Future benefits may seem uncertain to those who are less familiar with higher education, and one of the commonest reasons cited for not participating is that higher education brings no guarantee of a better job. There are some grounds for doubts among groups with low representation because, three years after graduating, people from social class V earn on average 7 per cent less than people from social class I<sup>8</sup>. This difference is apparent after allowing for the effects of degree class, subject and earlier qualifications. However, a degree enhances overall earnings for graduates from all social classes, including those from social class V. Estimates vary greatly but one large survey indicated an average increase of 28 per cent for men and 25 per cent for women<sup>9</sup>, although there are large differences between subjects.
- 2.8 Young people not currently in higher education told our consultants in focus groups and in individual interviews of their concerns about completing and benefiting from higher education. Some were worried about entering and failing, with these worries exacerbated by concerns over costs. Others thought that they would receive much less personal support than at school and might struggle in consequence. Many considered that entering employment immediately would provide a better start to a career, believing that a degree was inadequate without experience.

## Problems in securing financial support

- 2.9 Arrangements for students' financial support have undergone substantial change over the last decade. Full time higher education students received a mandatory means tested grant until the academic year 1989-90. A combination of loan and grant replaced it from 1990-91, and the grant element became steadily smaller until it disappeared for new entrants in 1999-00. Some part time students became entitled to a small student loan from 2000-01. Loan repayment methods altered during the period from a mortgage approach to one based on graduates' individual incomes. Interim arrangements applied to existing students at times of changeover.

<sup>8</sup> "Moving on: graduate careers three years after graduation", Higher Education Careers Service Unit et al., 1999

<sup>9</sup> "The returns to academic, vocational and basic skills in Britain", Department for Education and Employment research report 192, 2000

2.10 Research commissioned by the Department on students in the 1998-99 academic year, coupled with our quantitative and qualitative analyses, shows that:

- median expenditure of £5,464 exceeded the maximum loan and grant support of £3,619 for students outside London living away from home (although some expenditure included shortfalls in parental contributions to fees that the loan and grant were not intended to cover);
- median support from family sources was £1,375 for students in social classes I and II, compared with £160 for those in classes IV and V;
- median support from paid work was £220 for students in social classes I and II, compared with £435 for those in classes IV and V;
- median net debt at the end of the academic year was £2,645 for students in social classes I and II, compared with £3,000 for those in classes IV and V (these figures are substantially lower than final year debts currently reported because students in 1998-99 still had some grant support and because the figures include first and second years when debts are lower); and
- nearly half of students from social class V live with their parents while studying, four times the proportion of those from social class I, and our focus groups identified cost reduction as the most common reason.

2.11 Since 1998-99, the year from which the findings were drawn, final removal of the means tested grant is likely to have widened the gap between social classes. Over the whole period of change, support for the poorest students has switched from a non-repayable grant to an income contingent loan. In the same time, the richest full time students have moved from no grant to three quarters of the maximum subsidised loan, although their parents have to pay tuition fees.

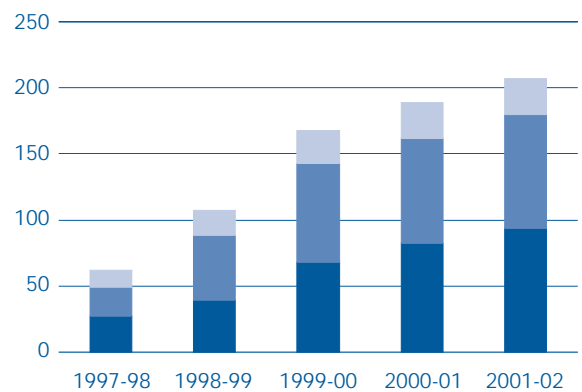
2.12 Young people not currently in higher education told our consultants in focus groups and in individual interviews of their concerns about financing studies. Many had heard about debts after studying, which they felt were too large to contemplate. They considered that the salary triggering repayment of the student loan was so low that a person earning at that level would be in difficulty even without a debt. Others were conscious of family finances and wanted to start putting money back into their families rather than take more out. Some had found that higher education institutions provided information about additional financial help too late and only after they had decided against further study.

## Issues about funding for higher education providers

2.13 **Figure 11** shows how the element of overall funding allocated to recognise additional costs of widening participation has grown since 1997-98. The funds cover student financial support, which we discuss in Part 3, and providers' costs, which we discuss here.

2.14 Funds for providers' costs consist mainly of four premiums (**Figure 12**), paid with overall teaching funds. They are designed to recognise extra fixed 'per head' costs for part time students and extra recruitment and support costs for mature students and students from low participation postcodes or with disabilities. Further funds comprise £8 million for partnership projects with schools and colleges, £4 million for summer schools to raise the aspirations of young people and £6 million to increase participation by students from the state education sector at providers currently recruiting below 80 per cent. There will be a distribution of £56 million to help with costs of physical adjustments required under the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001.

### 11 Widening participation funds



- Disabled students' allowances
- Other student financial support
- Providers' costs

#### NOTE

Disabled Students' Allowances were extended to part time and postgraduate students from September 2000; in the absence of firmer data they are projected unchanged from 2000-01 to 2001-02.

Source: Higher Education Funding Council for England and Department for Education and Skills

**12 Main funds to cover providers' widening participation costs**

Fund	Coverage	Started	2001-02 (Emillion)
Part time	Part time students (young and mature)	1998-99	26
Mature	Mature full time students	1998-99	12
Postcode	Young full time and part time students from postcodes with below average youth participation	1999-00	31
Disability	All students with disabilities, based on the number receiving Disabled Students' Allowances	2000-01	8

**NOTE**

Part time students are defined as those studying for less than 21 hours a week or less than 24 weeks a year; young students are defined for funding purposes as those under 25 at course commencement

Source: Higher Education Funding Council for England

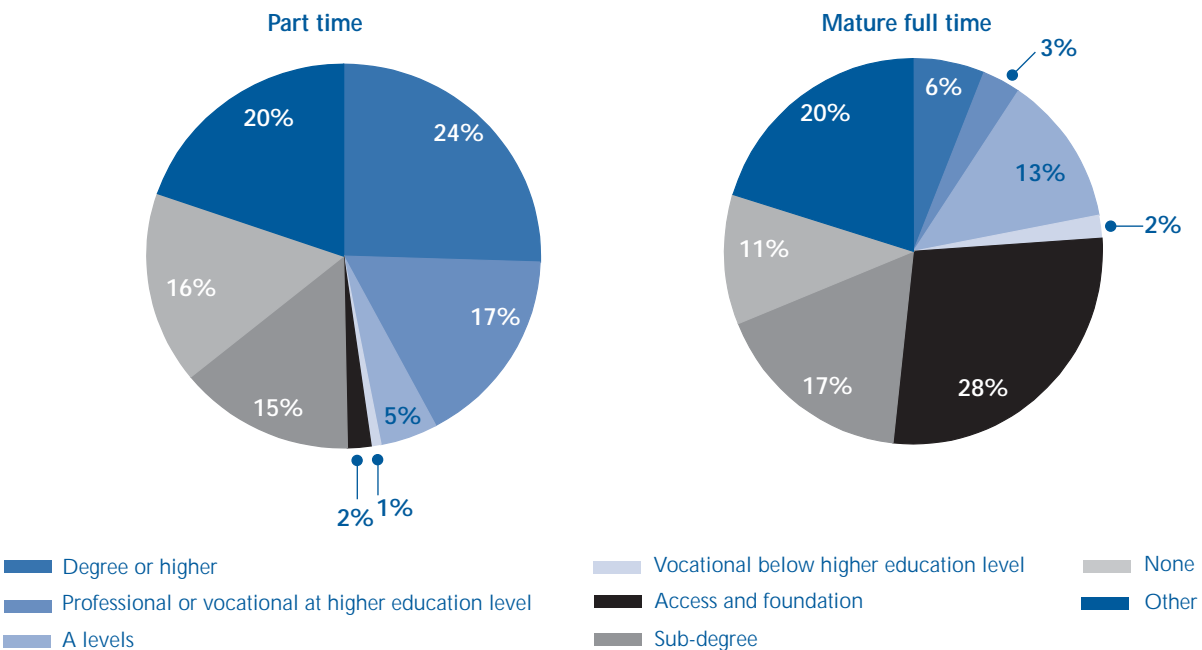
2.15 The student populations attracting part time and mature premiums include many from groups with low representation (Figure 13). However, the premiums also cover the extra costs of lifelong learning so are not entirely focused on widening participation.

- A quarter of part time entrants, over 20,000 every year, have prior qualifications at degree level or above. Examples are graduates studying for professional qualifications as part of their employment. A further 14,000 have professional or vocational qualifications at higher education level. The Funding Council pays for their courses,

including the part time premiums, but attracting these students does not contribute to widening participation objectives. The remaining students fit widening participation objectives well. Many are building up their learning through sub-degree qualifications or have no prior qualifications.

- A much smaller proportion of mature full time entrants have prior qualifications at degree level or above, although a higher proportion have A levels. The other mature full time entrants fit widening participation objectives well, including many entering through access and foundation courses.

**13 Prior qualifications of part time and mature full time students entering higher education institutions**



**NOTE**

Figures are for English domiciled entrants with known entry qualifications to higher education institutions in England, excluding the Open University, qualifying for the part time and mature student premiums. Records with unknown entry qualifications account for 30 per cent of the part time total and 15 per cent of the mature total.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of data provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England

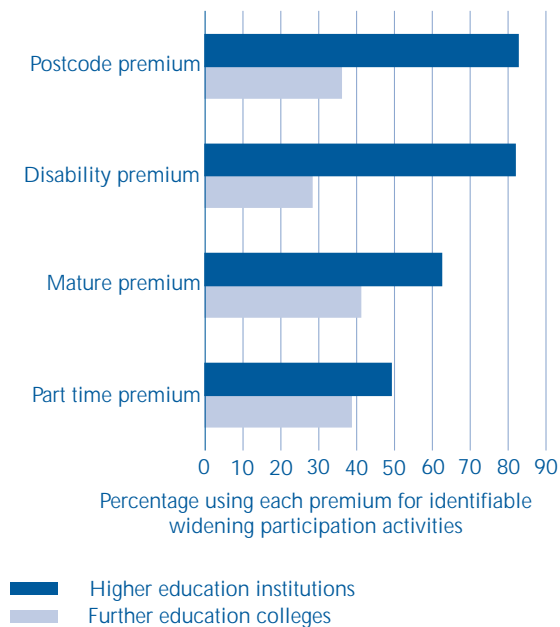


- 2.16 The Funding Council allocates the postcode premium on the basis of a classification of postcodes into clusters that have broadly homogeneous population characteristics. Appendix 3 discusses the methodology, which also applies to the postcode performance indicator. The approach does not take deprivation into account directly and it relies on an assumption that each cluster is homogeneous in terms of participation levels.
- 2.17 Although the Funding Council distributes substantial funds in respect of students from low participation postcodes, higher education providers cannot tell easily whether applicants are from those postcodes because the Funding Council does not publish them. Providers can obtain information about current students, eighteen months after their admission, by examining Funding Council data showing the postcode cluster to which it has assigned each student, requesting further data on participation levels in each cluster and matching the two sets of information. Some purchase the commercial classification so they can look up low participation postcodes directly. The Funding Council does not regard the postcode premium as specifically covering students

from low participation postcodes but rather as a means of allocating funds broadly in line with widening participation costs. The Funding Council discourages providers from taking account of students' postcodes when processing applications.

- 2.18 Higher education providers use the four main premiums (part time, mature, postcode and disability) for a range of purposes, illustrated in Figure 14 and Figure 15. Many providers, particularly further education colleges, find it hard to identify specific activities for which they use the premiums, and this is especially so for the part time and mature premiums. This may be partly because they are using them to fund existing activity. The disability premium is used much less than the postcode premium for focused outreach. Reflecting this difference, our survey also showed that fewer providers direct activities to encourage applications at people with disabilities than at people in social classes III, IV and V. However all higher education institutions have published statements providing information for potential applicants with disabilities.

**14** Proportions of higher education providers using the postcode, disability, mature and part time premiums for identifiable widening participation activities

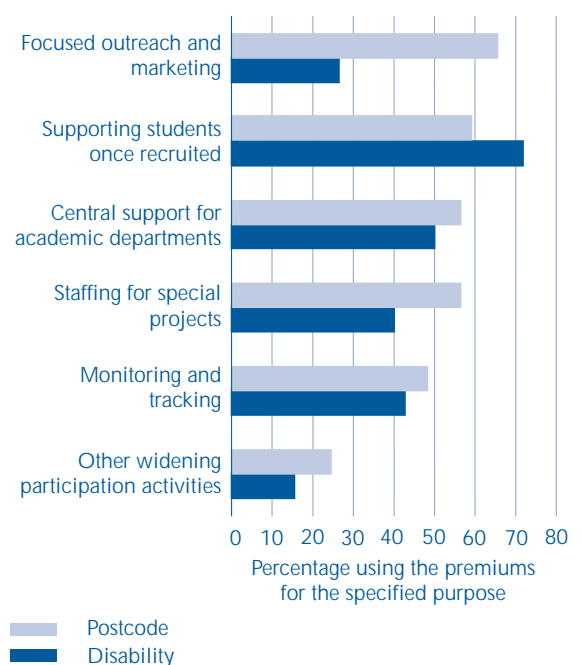


**NOTE**

The Funding Council told us that providers might not find it easy to identify all the activities for which they use premiums.

Source: National Audit Office survey

**15** Proportions of higher education institutions using the postcode and disability premiums for specific widening participation activities



**NOTE**

The Funding Council told us that institutions might not find it easy to identify all the activities for which they use premiums.

Source: National Audit Office survey



2.19 Higher education providers believe that the costs of their widening participation activities exceed the funds they receive for them. Six of the seven that we visited were unable to identify relevant costs because they did not use their management information systems to produce appropriate information. One provider showed us calculations indicating that the main premium funds covered about half of relevant costs. The Funding Council was unable to identify information on widening participation costs across higher education providers but is undertaking research on costing that will help to provide these data.

2.20 A fifth of higher education institutions volunteered concerns to us about project driven funds. The funds represent a small proportion of total funding but their short term nature make planning difficult and the bidding process carries a cost overhead. A similar number of institutions told us they were unhappy with the fund for higher education institutions currently recruiting below 80 per cent from the state education sector. This fund is designed to raise aspirations and encourage more applications from state school pupils but it goes to institutions with poor widening participation outcomes in contrast to the main funds that reflect success. It has caused widespread resentment among the majority of institutions that are not entitled to it, including those with the highest performance indicator results for widening participation.

2.21 Some higher education providers told us that they receive no funding for part time students who spread their studies over longer periods than they initially planned. Providers believe this flexibility is a valuable contribution to widening participation but the funding system does not support it. In response, the Funding Council told us that it considers its grant allocations as providing funding for all students, including those who leave part way through the year. To complicate the algorithm by taking into account those part time students who do not complete their studies within the year, but do finish short modules, would greatly complicate the process and increase the burden of ensuring accountability without significantly altering the allocations institutions receive.

# Part 3

## Action to remove obstacles

3.1 This part of our report describes what the Department, the Funding Council and higher education providers are doing to widen participation and to remove the obstacles discussed in Part 2. This part also considers the Funding Council's actions to identify and spread best practice.

### General action to widen participation

3.2 Higher education providers undertake a diverse range of widening participation activities to raise the awareness and aspirations of people who might not otherwise consider studying. **Figure 16** shows the most widespread. Activities take place at higher education providers, schools, colleges and in the community. Individual activities last from an evening to a week and series of activities may extend over longer periods (**Example 1**).

3.3 A common feature of many widening participation activities is the involvement of current higher education students (**Example 2**). They provide credible role models and can communicate to young people a clear picture of what it is like to be a student. The students themselves benefit from their involvement by developing experience and skills and, in many cases, receiving payment for their input.

### Addressing early disengagement from education

3.4 The **Department** has instituted a range of measures to improve the educational experiences of young people up to the age of 18 in schools and colleges. The Department considers the most important of these initiatives, which are outside the scope of this report, to be:

- Excellence in Cities and Excellence Clusters, covering a third of all secondary school pupils and designed to tackle under-achievement in some of the country's most challenging areas;

- Education Action Zones, promoting innovation and higher standards in small urban and rural pockets of deprivation (we reported in January 2001 on *Education Action Zones: Meeting the Challenge - the lessons identified from auditing the first 25 zones - HC 238 2000-2001*);

- new learning pathways for 14 to 18 year olds, giving greater scope to mix academic and vocational qualifications and designed to end the culture of leaving school at age 16;

- the Connexions Service, providing teenagers with help and support in preparing for the transition to work and adult life; and

- Education Maintenance Allowances for 16 to 18 year olds in education, currently covering about a third of the youth population in pilot projects.

3.5 **Higher education providers** are helping to address the problem of early disengagement from education with measures set out in **Figure 17** that aim to:

- encourage young pupils to stay in education for longer, either directly or through those who influence them; and

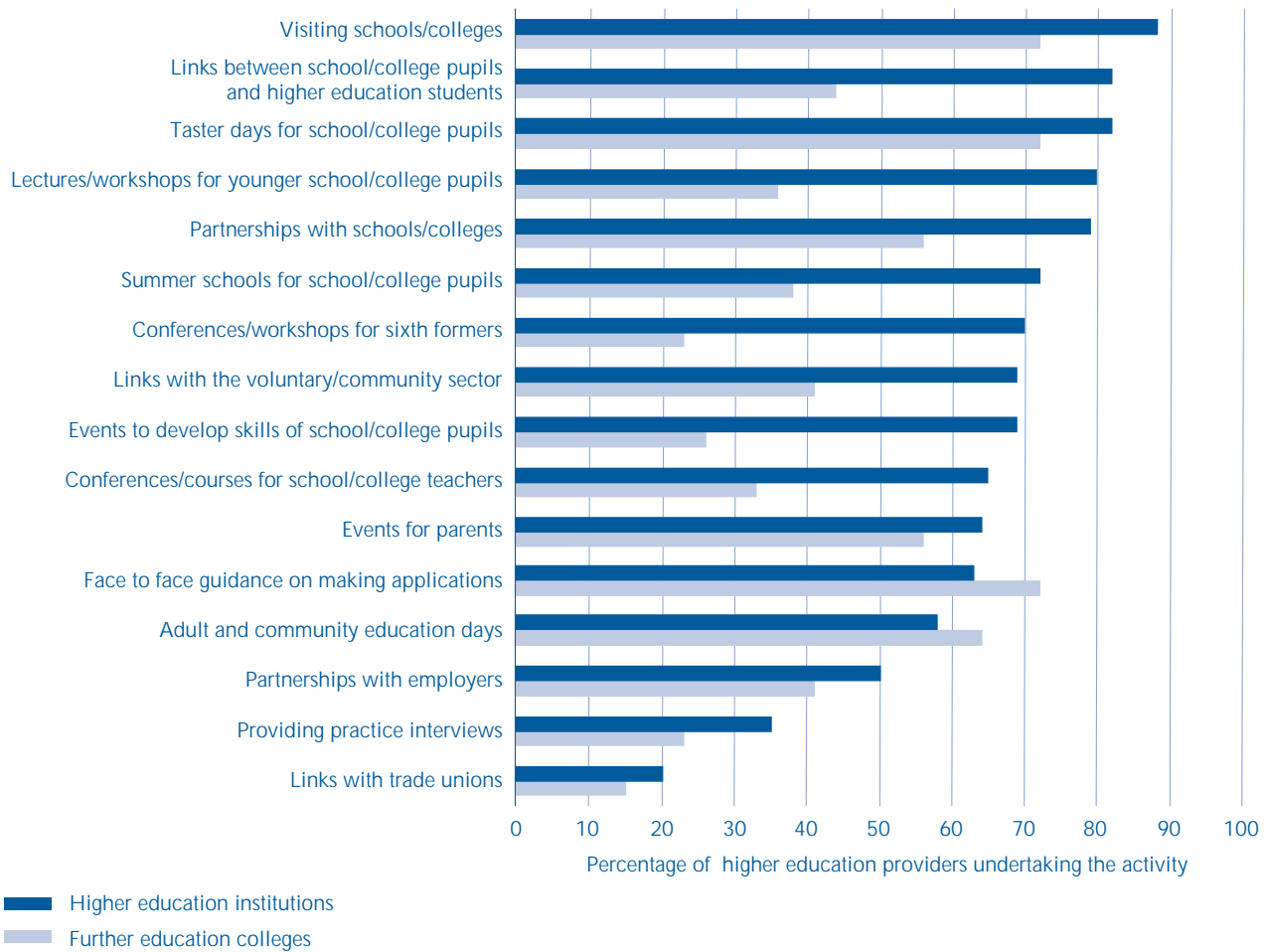
- meet the needs of adults who left education early.

3.6 Events for **parents** and **teachers** recognise that they exert key influence on the lives of young people and the decisions they take. Activities for **pupils as young as 10 or less** aim to instil in them an early enthusiasm for progressing to higher education and set their current studies in the context of this longer term goal.

3.7 **Access courses and foundation years** provide opportunities for adults to demonstrate ability for higher education and prepare for it. Access courses are not part of higher education and usually take place at further education colleges. They generally lead to nationally recognised qualifications. Foundation years are higher education below undergraduate level and are designed to lead directly into the first year of undergraduate courses. Some higher education providers have modified these approaches locally (**Example 3**).



16 Proportions of higher education providers undertaking different widening participation activities



Source: National Audit Office survey

Example 1

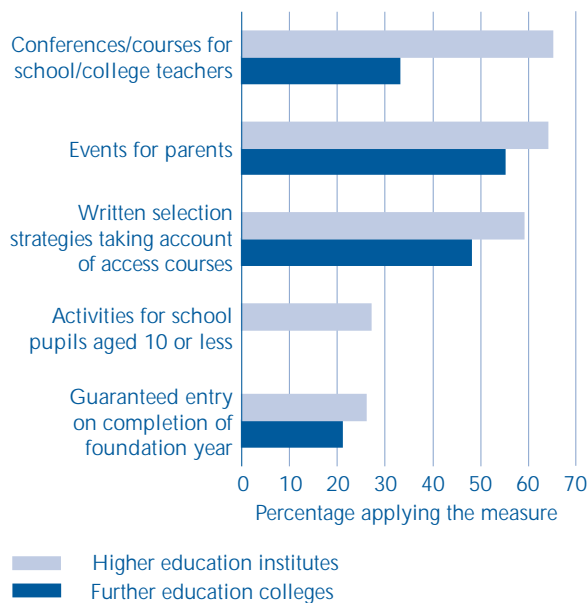
As part of the collaborative activity of the Peninsula Project on Widening Participation, the College of St Mark and St John hosted a Saturday School to encourage pupils aged 11 to 12 to learn through information technology, sport, media and art. The course lasted 8 weeks with 29 participants. Seven current higher education students, with similar backgrounds to the pupils, assisted as workshop tutors and student ambassadors. They received payment and some obtained credit towards their work placement modules. Managers from the local education authority and the Education Action Zone, teachers from the participating school and parents attended the graduation ceremony. One of the participating pupils spoke on behalf of the group about the benefits of the programme. Pupils have asked for the scheme to be repeated.



Example 2

London Guildhall University has a well-established student ambassador scheme co-ordinated by third year students. Trained students introduce higher education to able pupils who currently seem unlikely to continue studying. The scheme contacts over 1300 pupils every year and has received positive comments.

### 17 Proportions of higher education providers applying different measures to address the problem of early disengagement from education



Source: National Audit Office survey

#### Example 3

Edge Hill College of Higher Education runs a 6 week intensive preparation course over the summer for adults who display the enthusiasm, commitment and motivation to enable them to benefit from higher education. Successful completion guarantees a place on a degree course. The intensive approach reduces financial problems by not requiring students to fund a full extra year before embarking on degree study. It ensures skills and knowledge remain fresh when students start their studies. Students' subsequent success rates in degrees exceed the college's overall rates.

## Addressing differing educational opportunities prior to higher education

3.8 Some higher education providers take positive steps to allow for applicants' different prior educational experiences, using measures set out in **Figure 18**.

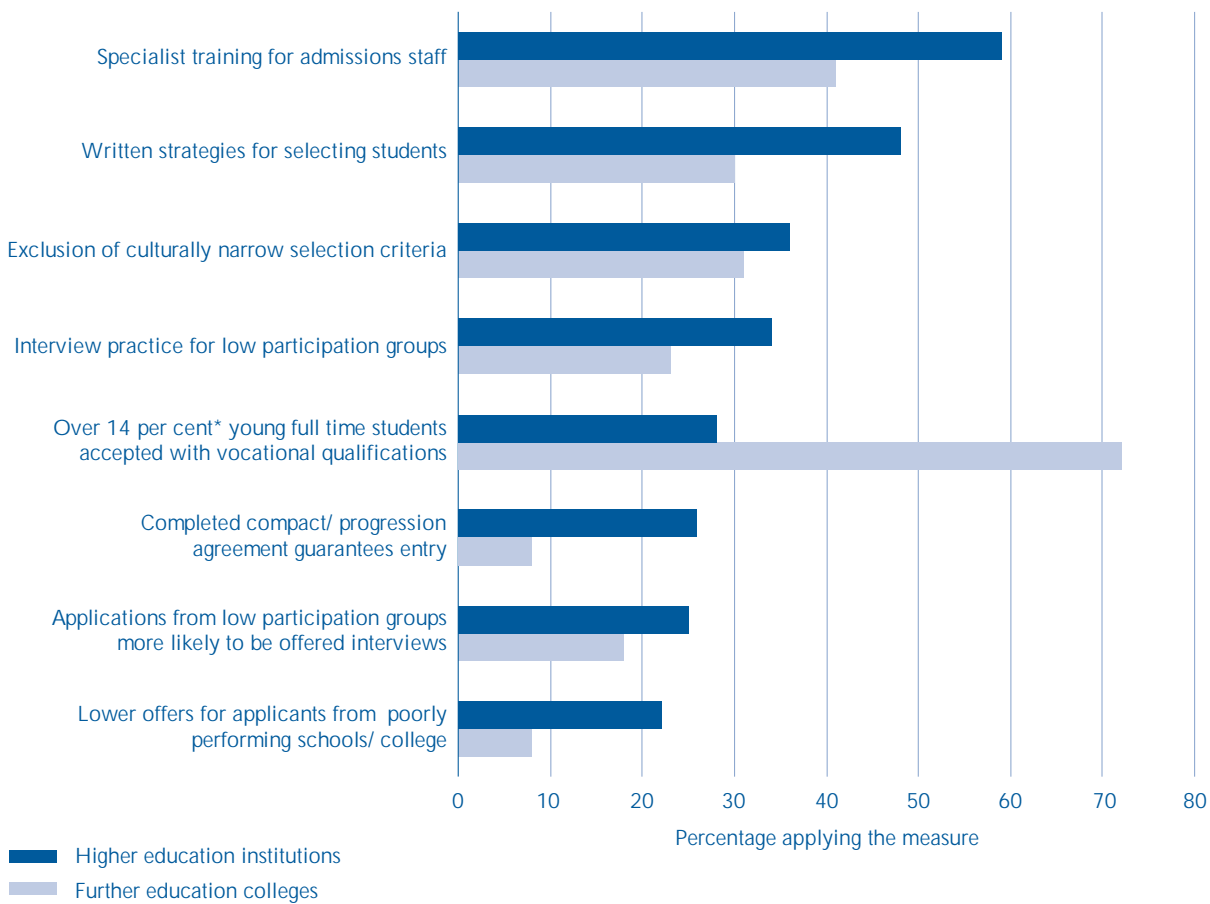
3.9 Written strategies for selecting students enable higher education providers to document what qualities students need to succeed in their courses. Along with specialist training, they help members of staff apply selection criteria consistently, including in **interviews**. Expert opinions differ on whether interviews help or hinder applicants from groups with low representation, but offering **practice interviews** to applicants is one way to address any disadvantage. Steps to identify and **exclude culturally narrow selection criteria** include avoiding an emphasis on activities like playing a musical instrument, being a prefect or participating in county sport. Opportunities may not have been equally available to all applicants and there are other ways of seeking evidence for the underlying attributes that these activities demonstrate. Universities UK has set up an expert working group, which includes the Department and the Funding Council, to review admissions practice and training for admissions staff.

3.10 **Compacts or progression agreements (Example 4)** help pupils and students at local schools and colleges to succeed in gaining entry to specific higher education providers. They frequently include additional tuition and the opportunity to gain extra entry points through undertaking assessed assignments.

3.11 **Vocational qualifications** provide a more common entry route for poorer students and those with disabilities.<sup>10</sup> The proportion of students entering by this route varies greatly among higher education providers. Some make extra efforts to cater for the needs of such entrants. Others define entry requirements tightly in terms of A level grades, including for courses where professional bodies control entry routes as a condition of allowing graduates to gain automatic entitlement to membership. The appropriateness of a vocational entry route varies for different higher education courses but more flexibility would be likely to widen participation further.

3.12 Taking applicants' backgrounds and circumstances into account, for example by making **lower offers** on a systematic basis to applicants from relatively poorly performing schools or colleges, can help higher education providers recruit students on the basis of ability and potential to succeed regardless of prior opportunities (**Example 5**).

## 18 Proportions of higher education providers applying different measures to address differences in prior educational opportunities



### NOTE

The threshold figure of 14 per cent\* is the average overall proportion of students from social class V entering higher education institutions with vocational qualifications

Source: National Audit Office survey and analyses of data provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England

## Addressing concerns about completing and benefiting from higher education

- 3.13 Higher education providers have taken various steps to address potential applicants' concerns about completing higher education courses.
- 3.14 Many higher education providers give students opportunities to build qualifications through **credits**, making the initial commitment less daunting. Some have taken the additional step of developing **ladders** (Example 6) and **alternative exit routes**. Ladders enable students to embark on relatively short higher education courses, aiming for qualifications below honours degree level, and subsequently to progress to more advanced qualifications. Alternative exit routes enable students to begin more demanding courses but leave early with qualifications at lower levels than originally intended.

3.15 Further education colleges can offer seamless progression from lower qualifications to degrees in familiar local environments (Example 7 and Example 8). Students may move subsequently to partner higher education institutions to take the final parts of honours degree courses. This eases the initial transition to higher education study and allows students to develop their confidence and learning skills further before moving to a new institution.

3.16 **Teaching and assessment methods** can sometimes present unnecessary obstacles to students with disabilities. Careful analysis of course requirements can identify alternative approaches that remove such obstacles (Example 9).



#### Example 4

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Staffordshire University has a compact with five local colleges guaranteeing places to students who achieve specific qualifications or alternative agreed targets. The university also offers these students support in career planning and in study skills development, and gives them the opportunity to apply early and receive feedback from admissions tutors to assist them in the admissions process.

#### Example 5

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The University of Bristol examined the relationships between the A level scores of all its 1998 graduates, the average scores of the schools they had attended and their final degree results. The research showed that graduates with lower A level scores from lower scoring schools performed as well in their degrees as graduates with higher scores from higher scoring schools. The university makes its admissions tutors aware of school scores so that they can take more informed decisions, including the possibility of making lower offers to applicants from lower scoring schools, in order to recruit the best students regardless of background.

#### Example 6

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Staffordshire University has developed ladders of progression in its computer and information technology courses. Local colleges run a foundation year for people without formal qualifications who demonstrate ability and commitment to study. Successful completion guarantees entry into level 1 of a degree at the university. First year students can transfer easily between degree and Higher National Diploma programmes. Exceptional first year students from the diploma course can enter level 2 of the degree course directly. Those who gain the diploma are eligible to transfer to a semester of bridging studies and a work experience period before joining the final year of a related degree. Students who leave before completing their studies receive the University Learning Award.

#### Example 7

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Bradford College has a progression route from further education to higher education in all departments. Students can start with a Higher National Certificate, move on to a conversion to a Higher National Diploma, and follow this with a degree. The approach is particularly useful for students who want to progress to a degree without leaving the area.

#### Example 8

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The University of Salford has a variety of mechanisms to facilitate progression from further education colleges to degree programmes. These include 2+2 schemes that allow students to study for a degree over four years, taking the first two years of study at a further education college. The programmes are particularly suitable for students with extensive practical experience but less familiarity with more formal academic study. The university's links with its nine associate colleges have allowed detailed discussions about curriculum issues and progression links from college programmes to university degrees. Discussions with associate colleges and consortium partners have encompassed staff development, curriculum development and student support.

#### Example 9

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A student on a surveying course at Plymouth University had epilepsy, preventing her from driving a vehicle. This made it impossible for her to undertake the rural work placement that was a standard feature of the course. The university analysed the required content of the placement and developed an alternative within Plymouth where public transport could meet the student's travel needs. The student has since qualified and is now working as a surveyor in a metropolitan practice.

## Addressing problems in securing financial support

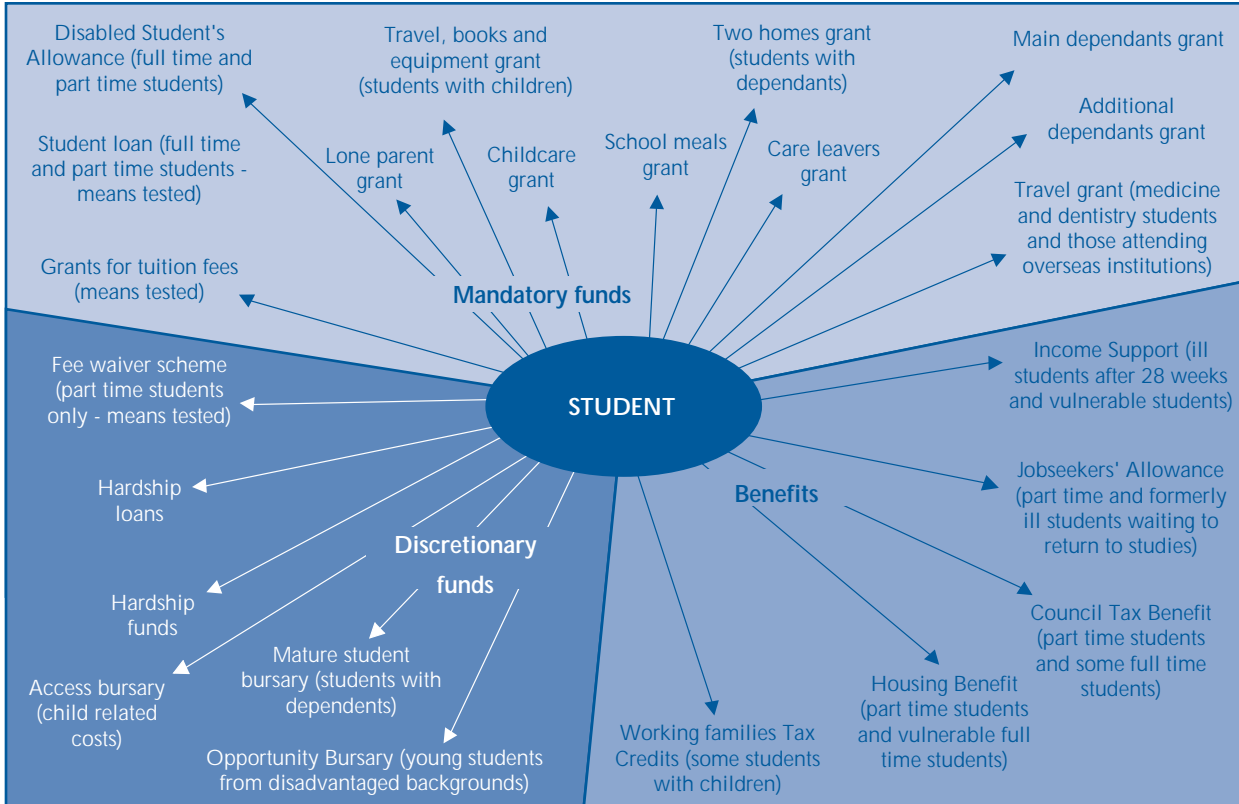
3.17 Additional sources of public funding, illustrated in **Figure 19**, are available to some students. Sources other than the main student loan are intended largely to provide a safety net for existing students in severe financial difficulties rather than core funding on which someone contemplating higher education could rely for financial planning.

3.18 **Higher education providers administer a range of funds** established by the Department and allocated by the Funding Council. Each provider has discretion about how to distribute its funds among its students, subject to general guidance from the Department and Funding Council. In most cases, students apply for support on the basis of financial need during their courses. Some providers create more certainty by telling accepted applicants what support they will be able to receive. A few are also able to offer additional support from their own resources. The main elements of publicly funded support are:

- Opportunity Bursaries, for 6,370 students (2001-02 allocation) from Excellence in Cities areas, Education Action Zones, or previously in receipt of Education Maintenance Allowances, and worth £2,000 over a three year course;
- grants or loans from hardship and related funds, with an average value of £550 across 103,000 successful undergraduate applicants in 1999-00; and
- fee waivers for part time students who lose their jobs or are on social security benefits or low income, with an average value of £510 across 17,000 successful applicants in 1999-00.

3.19 **Social security benefits** may be available to some part time students but most students become ineligible if they enter full time higher education. Students who have certain disabilities or are lone parents may remain eligible for some benefits but student loan entitlement and some other elements of student support, whether or not taken up, reduce benefits. **Skill**, the National Bureau for Disabled Students, told us that some people with disabilities are concerned that studying with extended work placements or overseas visits breaks their entitlement to long term disability benefits. Other

### 19 Sources of public funding from which students can seek support



**NOTE**

Funding is for full time students except where stated otherwise; some sources have been available only since September 2001.

Source: National Audit Office and National Union of Students

problems include ineligibility for benefit support if a student stops studying temporarily because of illness or disability and no support for disability related adaptations on unpaid work placements. The Department has a joint working group with the Department for Work and Pensions, Her Majesty's Treasury and the Department of Health to resolve problems in interactions between the student support and benefits systems.

- 3.20 Prospective students with disabilities may apply to their local education authorities for **Disabled Students' Allowances**. Needs assessments, which prospective students must arrange, can take place only after acceptance on to a course if students are to be sure of having the costs covered. Skill told us that this arrangement can lead to delays in payments. Most higher education providers help their students to apply for the allowances (**Example 10**). The largest element of the allowance is to enable students to employ assistants to help overcome specific difficulties that they face in studying as a consequence of disability. Skill told us that this still leaves students who have disabilities with the additional burden of having to take on the role of employer. Some higher education providers remove this problem by managing the employment of assistants (**Example 11**). The Disability Rights Commission has indicated in a draft Code of Practice under the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 that help of this nature may be appropriate to prevent students being placed at substantial disadvantage in relation to access to student services. Skill told us that a few students find the allowances insufficient to cover all their disability related study costs.

- 3.21 Most higher education providers tell potential applicants about sources of financial support available and about costs of higher education. A few give advice on their websites about budgeting to meet the cost of higher education (**Example 12**).

## Arrangements to identify and spread best practice

- 3.22 The Funding Council has set up two central teams to support institutions' widening participation activities and to disseminate good practice.
- Action on Access is a team of six members spread across England, with a central secretariat at the University of Bradford. It supports individual widening participation projects, helps higher education providers to develop their widening participation strategies and collects and disseminates good practice.
  - The National Disability Team has four members and a secretariat, all based at Coventry University. It supports individual projects and disseminates good practice.
- 3.23 The Funding Council commissioned evaluations of its 1996-99 disability programme and its summer schools. It also commissioned with Universities UK and others reports providing examples of widening participation activities, including in areas and subjects that have proved particularly challenging. The Funding Council has an extensive evaluation of all its widening participation activities currently under way, due to report in March 2002.

### Example 10

University College London pays for students to be assessed for dyslexia. The college applies for Disabled Students' Allowances on behalf of those diagnosed as dyslexic.

### Example 11

Edge Hill College of Higher Education employs learning facilitators for students with disabilities using a generic job specification that can be tailored to individual needs. Human resource staff recruit suitable candidates through the usual procedures. Students make the final decisions on who supports them, paying the college for services. The college issues yearly employment contracts, allowing learning facilitators access to sickness and holiday pay, four weeks notice and the right to join the pension scheme. The college oversees the induction and training of facilitators and the quality of their work, provides insurance cover for them and gives them a structured career and greater security.

### Example 12

University College Northampton gives detailed guidance about financial issues and money management on its website. There is a list of potential expenses that need to be considered by new entrants to higher education. There are examples of weekly budgets based on university and private accommodation. A proforma helps students to calculate personal budgets and costs.





3.24 The Funding Council's evaluations to date have provided useful insights into how to improve effectiveness, in particular identifying the need to focus activity on people with no family experience of higher education. Our qualitative research also identified the challenge of achieving the right focus. We found that:

- grammar and independent schools are often the first to volunteer to participate in activities organised by higher education providers;
- schools and colleges put forward pupils who are already very likely to continue to higher education, because they give good impressions of their current places of education; and
- some higher education providers charge as much as £200 for a two to three day taster course, deterring people from groups with low representation.

3.25 Staff at higher education providers stressed the need, in the light of these points, to build the trust of partner schools and colleges over several years so that they are happy to put forward the type of candidates for whom widening participation activities are designed.

3.26 Action on Access has been active in collecting many examples of widening participation activities across England and disseminating them through workshops and publications. The workshops have proved popular with practitioners, promoting the exchange of ideas. Action on Access has identified little evaluation by higher education providers to assess the effectiveness of their widening participation activities.



# Appendix 1

## Methodology

- 1 We combined research for this report and for one on *Improving student achievement in English higher education (HC 486 2001-2002)* in order to minimise disruption for the Department, the Funding Council and higher education providers. We covered undergraduate study delivered in higher education institutions and in further education colleges.
- 2 We examined:
  - the scope to improve the effectiveness of widening participation activities and how to achieve it;
  - the reasons for variation between institutions and how to improve performance by sharing best practice; and
  - the extent to which activities are serving stakeholders and how they could serve them better.
- 3 Our report is based on:
  - quantitative analysis of statistics provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service and the Office for National Statistics;
  - qualitative research undertaken on our behalf by IFF Research;
  - a postal survey of higher education institutions and further education colleges;
  - a desk survey of the websites of higher education institutions and further education colleges;
  - our own visits to higher education institutions and a further education college;
  - analysis of existing research;
  - consultation with an expert panel; and
  - consultation with the Department, the Funding Council and other parties.
- 4 We analysed the Funding Council's published performance indicators for 1999-00 and its database of information on students entering higher education in 1999-00 (the most recent year for which complete data are available). We excluded Open University students from our analysis and we included only students domiciled in England. We looked for relationships, by means of cross-tabulation and regression, among the following variables:
  - age;
  - declared disability;
  - highest qualification on entry;
  - mode of study (full time or part time);
  - receipt of the Disabled Student's Allowance;
  - region of study;
  - social class;
  - subject of study;
  - term time accommodation; and
  - low participation postcode indicator.
- 5 We analysed data on applications and acceptances, which the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service kindly provided for 1999-00 entry, the same year as the Funding Council's data on students. We examined differences between groups with low representation and others in the rate at which applications converted to acceptances. We looked for variations in these differences between subjects and between institutions.
- 6 Our consultants, IFF Research, conducted qualitative research for us during May and June 2001 at higher education providers and at schools and colleges preparing pupils to enter higher education.
- 7 Eight focus groups of higher education students discussed decisions to enter higher education, choices of institution and course and levels of satisfaction with the student experience. We selected higher education providers that combined reasonably high performance indicator results across widening participation and student achievement measurements. At each provider, IFF Research selected groups of traditional students and widening participation students, taking advice from the provider about how to identify students in the latter category.

### Quantitative analysis

- 4 We analysed the Funding Council's published performance indicators for 1999-00 and its database of information on students entering higher education in 1999-00 (the most recent year for which complete data are available). We excluded Open University students from our analysis and we included only students

### Qualitative research

- 6 Our consultants, IFF Research, conducted qualitative research for us during May and June 2001 at higher education providers and at schools and colleges preparing pupils to enter higher education.
- 7 Eight focus groups of higher education students discussed decisions to enter higher education, choices of institution and course and levels of satisfaction with the student experience. We selected higher education providers that combined reasonably high performance indicator results across widening participation and student achievement measurements. At each provider, IFF Research selected groups of traditional students and widening participation students, taking advice from the provider about how to identify students in the latter category.

Higher education provider	Type of student	Composition
Bradford College (a further education college)	Traditional	6 in total - 3 female and 3 male; 3 ethnic minority; 5 full time and 1 part time; 2 mature
Bradford College	Widening participation	6 in total - 2 female and 4 male; all white; 3 full time and 3 part time; all mature
Edge Hill College of Higher Education	Traditional	10 in total - 6 female and 4 male; 1 ethnic minority; all full time; 1 mature
Edge Hill College of Higher Education	Widening participation	7 in total - 5 female and 2 male; all white; all full time; all mature; 2 with disabilities
University of Plymouth	Traditional	6 in total - 4 female and 2 male; all white; all full time; all young
University of Plymouth	Widening participation	9 in total - 4 female and 5 male; 1 ethnic minority; all full time; 6 mature; 7 with dyslexia
University of Salford	Traditional	8 in total - 5 female and 3 male; 4 ethnic minority; all full time; 5 mature
University of Salford	Widening participation	8 in total - 3 female and 5 male; 2 ethnic minority; 1 full time and 7 part time; 7 mature

School or college	Composition of focus group
Greenford High School	7 in total - 5 female and 2 male; all white; 2 final year and 5 in pre-final year; all aged 16-18; 5 studying A level, 1 GNVQ and 1 mixed; 6 expecting to enter higher education and 1 unsure
Liverpool Community College	8 in total - 4 female and 4 male; all white; all late teens to early twenties; one with young child; 7 studying A level and 1 mixed A level/ GNVQ; 7 expect/ hope to enter higher education and 1 probably not
Malmesbury School	6 in total - 5 female and 1 male; all white; all pre-final year; all aged 16-18; all studying A levels; all planning to enter higher education; 5 planning to take a gap year
Newham 6th Form College	9 in total - 6 female and 3 male; all ethnic minorities; all pre-final year; all studying A levels; all late teens; 6 planning to enter higher education, 2 unsure and 1 probably not (aiming to obtain professional qualifications by day release)
South Birmingham College	5 in total - 2 female and 3 male; all ethnic minorities; 4 studying A levels and 1 combined AVCE and A/S; all late teens; all hoping to enter higher education

- 8 Three focus groups of staff at the higher education institutions, and a paired interview with staff at Bradford College, discussed why people apply to enter higher education, what helps them, what deters them and the effectiveness of widening participation activities.
- 9 Five focus groups of pupils currently studying for level 3 qualifications (A levels and equivalents) at schools and colleges discussed attitudes to higher education, its attractions and what might deter potential applicants. We selected schools and colleges that successfully prepare pupils from relatively unprivileged backgrounds to enter higher education. IFF Research selected groups of pupils in agreement with the schools and colleges.
- 10 Structured interviews with people who had recently left one of the schools and one of the colleges, and who had chosen not to continue to higher education despite having the ability, covered reasons for deciding against higher education.
- 11 A focus group of seven sixth form heads from schools and colleges in the Leicester area discussed how pupils and students set about applying to enter higher education and how the process, higher education providers' actions and other considerations help or hinder them. We prepared a list of schools and colleges that were willing to assist us. IFF Research selected the group from those heads who were able to meet on the same day.
- 12 We are grateful to all who took part in this qualitative research and to the Secondary Heads Association for help in securing the assistance of schools.



## Postal survey of higher education institutions and further education colleges

- 13 We undertook a postal survey of the 123 higher education institutions in England that were not specialist or solely postgraduate. This was a combined survey for our two reports. In addition, for this report, we sent a reduced version of the survey to a sample of 60 further education colleges. We sampled on a stratified basis from large, medium, small and very small providers of higher education. The aim of the survey was to identify the extent to which different higher education providers undertake activities to encourage groups with low representation to participate.
- 14 We conducted the survey during June and July 2001. We received responses from 111 higher education institutions in time for analysis (90 per cent) and 3 late returns. We received responses from 40 further education colleges (72 per cent of large, medium and small providers but only 40 per cent of the smallest) and 3 late returns. We commissioned IDA Limited to convert the hand written responses to electronic form and to prepare a summary of the results.
- 15 We analysed proportions of higher education providers undertaking different activities and we used analysis of variance and multiple regression to examine the effects of these activities on success in attracting groups with low representation.

## Desk survey of the websites of higher education institutions and further education colleges

- 16 We examined information presented to prospective applicants on the websites of the higher education institutions and further education colleges that we included in our postal survey. We used a checklist of specific items and recorded what we were able to find after spending fifteen minutes on each site.

## Visits to higher education providers

- 17 We visited seven higher education providers, conducting over fifty interviews with senior management, admissions staff, tutors, support staff and those with pastoral responsibilities. We selected providers that combined reasonably high results in widening participation and student achievement:

- Bradford College;
- University of East Anglia;
- Edge Hill College of Higher Education;
- London Guildhall University;
- University of Plymouth;
- University of Salford; and
- Staffordshire University.

- 18 We made shorter visits to other higher education providers at an early stage of our examination to gain initial insights:

- University of Bristol;
- University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne; and
- Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication.

- 19 We drew on information from other visits made primarily for our parallel study on *Improving student achievement in English higher education*:

- Christchurch College Canterbury University College; and
- University College London.

## Analysis of existing research

- 20 We list in the bibliography the most pertinent elements of the research and related material that we analysed in our examination and used in preparing this report.
- 21 We commissioned Professor Maggie Woodrow to prepare a paper for us on international comparisons of participation by groups with low representation. Professor Woodrow was also a member of our expert panel (see over).

## Expert panel

22 We convened an expert panel to comment on our methodology and our emerging findings. The panel met twice during the course of the study and members also offered individual comments. The members of the panel are listed below.

Marie Ashton (from 1 July 2001)	National Co-ordinator, Partnerships for Progression, National Union of Students
Louise Aslett (until 30 June 2001)	National Co-ordinator, Partnerships for Progression, National Union of Students
David Clarke	Director, Defence Studies, National Audit Office
David Croll	Principal, Derby College Wilmorton
Richard Fawcett	President, Secondary Heads Association
Amalia Holman (from 1 April 2001)	Policy Adviser, Universities UK
William Locke (until 31 March 2001)	Policy Adviser, Universities UK
Maggie Woodrow	Executive Director, European Access Network

## Consultation with other parties

23 We held meetings with key staff at the Department and the Funding Council, and we consulted the organisations listed below.

Action on Access

Association of Colleges

British Youth Council

Commission for Racial Equality

Council for Industry and Higher Education

Disability Rights Commission

Equal Opportunities Commission

Gingerbread

Learning and Skills Council

National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

National Youth Agency

Office for National Statistics

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Russell Group of Universities

Russell Group Association for Widening Participation

Standing Conference of Principals

Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities

Sutton Trust

Universities Association for Continuing Education

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

# Appendix 2

## Key developments in widening participation

September 1996	The Funding Council launches a three year Disability Special Initiative building on previous disability initiatives dating from the early 1990s
April 1997	The Funding Council publishes research entitled <i>The influence of neighbourhood type on participation in higher education</i>
September 1997	The Department begins substantially to increase discretionary funds for students facing hardship and to add new categories of funding
February 1998	The Green Paper <i>The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain</i> includes the proposal to widen participation in higher education
September 1998	Disabled Students' Allowances (available to full time undergraduates) cease to be means tested
September 1998	The Funding Council initiates funds to higher education providers dependent on numbers of part time and mature students
September 1998	The Funding Council initiates funds to higher education providers for partnership projects with schools and colleges
November 1998	The Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (now Universities UK) and others (including the Higher Education Funding Council for England) publish <i>From elitism to inclusion - good practice in widening access to higher education</i>
September 1999	Part time students on low incomes become entitled to small student loans (previously only full time students were entitled)
September 1999	The Funding Council initiates funds to higher education providers dependent on numbers of young students from postcodes with below average participation
September 1999	The Funding Council initiates funds to higher education providers to run summer schools to raise aspirations and awareness among young people
December 1999	The Funding Council publishes the first annual performance indicator report showing progress by institutions in widening participation
January 2000	The Funding Council establishes the Action on Access team
May 2000	The Funding Council establishes the National Disability Team replacing the previous national disability team EQUIP
September 2000	Part time students with disabilities become entitled to Disabled Students' Allowances (previously only full time students were entitled)
September 2000	The Department launches Opportunity Bursaries for students from poorer backgrounds
September 2000	The Funding Council initiates funding to higher education providers dependent on numbers of students with Disabled Students' Allowances
May 2001	Parliament passes the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 and the Department announces funding to help with the costs of physical adjustments required under the legislation
September 2001	The Department launches a three year fund to increase the participation of state educated students at institutions recruiting them at low levels



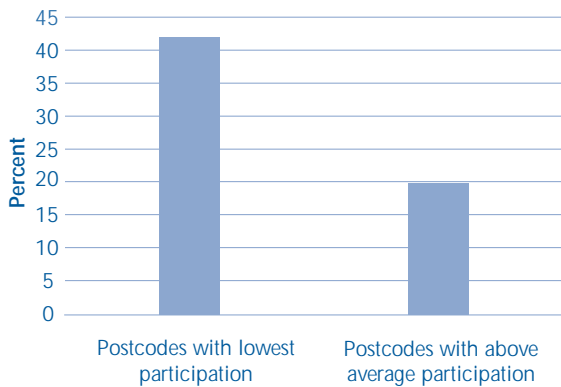
# Appendix 3

## Performance monitoring

- 1 The Funding Council uses performance indicators to measure progress in widening participation by students from poorer social classes. Annual reports show the achievements of every higher education institution against benchmarks, presenting students in four groups: young full time, young part time, mature full time and mature part time. The split between young and mature students is at age 21, in contrast to the age of 25 used for funding. The Funding Council has decided to develop an indicator for students with disabilities, having previously delayed because of data quality problems, but it is likely that it will cover initially only those institutions providing data of sufficient quality. There are no indicators for higher education provision in further education colleges.
- 2 There are three widening participation performance indicators to give a rounded picture. The complete set applies only to young full time students because relevant data are not available systematically for other groups and because some definitions are less relevant to them. The indicators show for each higher education institution and for the sector as a whole:
  - the percentage of students who attended a state school or college immediately prior to entering higher education;
  - the percentage of students from social classes IIIM, IV and V; and
  - the percentage of students who are from postcodes where participation levels of young people are below two thirds of the national average and, in the case of part time and mature students, who have no prior higher education qualifications.
- 3 The **state sector indicator** provides a picture based broadly on the wealth of students' backgrounds, subject to the observations that:
  - some young people from poor backgrounds obtain scholarships to study at private schools;
  - many richer parents use wealth to secure good education for their children by buying homes near high performing state schools; and
  - the indicator differentiates at the top end of the wealth spectrum, whereas low representation is concentrated at the poor end.
- 4 The **social class indicator** measures improvements in the relative participation of classes with low representation among institutions. The Funding Council considers it to be inadequate on its own because of underlying data problems:
  - social class depends on the interpretation of young students' statements of what they understand their parents' or guardians' jobs to be;
  - social class derived from older students' own recent employment is likely to reflect career progression and therefore age; and
  - social class is routinely collected only for entrants through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service.
- 5 The **postcode indicator** is the only one to be applied to all students. The methodology for the indicator also applies to the postcode premium discussed under funding in Part 2. The premium and the indicator derive from a classification of postcodes into clusters with broadly homogeneous population characteristics. One cluster can comprise non-contiguous postcodes spread throughout the country, although some are more geographically limited. The Funding Council examined the numbers of young people in higher education from each cluster and identified clusters with low participation rates. The relationship between social class and the postcode measure of low participation neighbourhoods is shown in the graph opposite. The postcode indicator meets the problem of low participation directly and is based on readily collected data about the location of students' homes, but it has some limitations:
  - the methodology relies on an assumption that clusters of postcodes are homogeneous in terms of participation in higher education;
  - the model does not take direct account of deprivation;
  - the Funding Council has had difficulty until recently in obtaining accurate population figures to estimate the participation rate in each cluster;
  - the methodology assesses widening participation among mature students on the basis of proportions coming from clusters with low youth participation, which may not be clusters with low older participation; and

- the indicator applies where youth participation is below two thirds of average, in contrast to the threshold of average participation (with higher funding for areas of lowest participation) used for the postcode fund, which has confused some higher education providers.

**Percentages of students from social classes IIIM, IV and V in low participation postcodes and other postcodes**



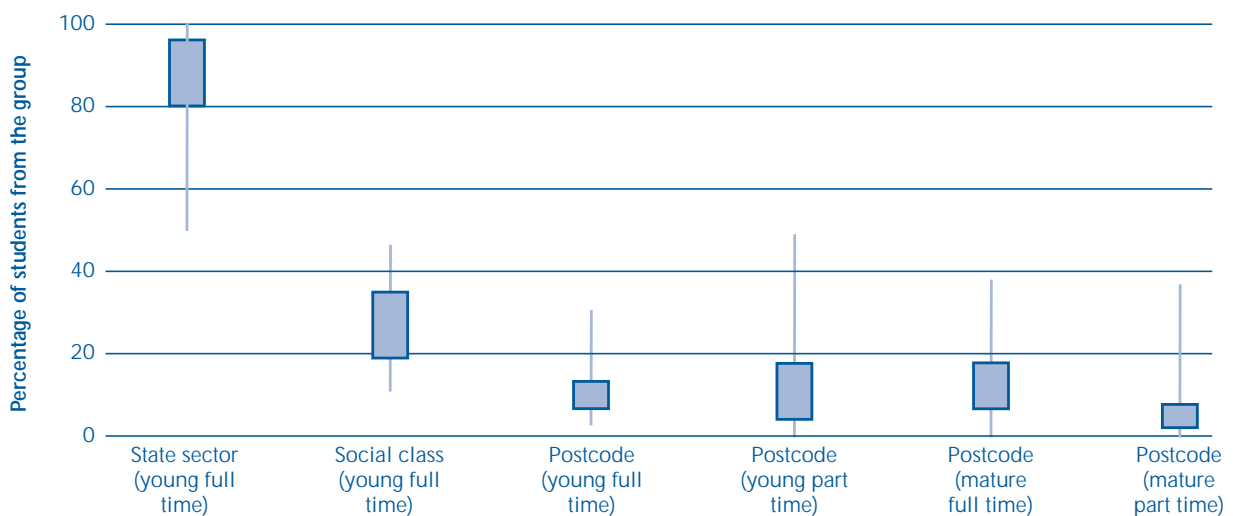
**NOTE**

The graph shows the overall correspondence across England between social class and low participation postcodes for young full time entrants in 1999-00; there is no significant regional variation in this pattern.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of data provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England

- The graph below shows the range of achievement against performance indicators. It illustrates how the state sector indicator compares institutions' performance at a different part of the wealth spectrum from the other indicators.
- Benchmarks compare each institution's performance with that of the sector as a whole after allowing for the impact of students' age, subject mix and entry grades. The Funding Council recognises that these data do not form a complete set of factors to explain variation in performance. In particular, current benchmarks do not adjust for location. Widening participation students are more likely to study close to home so it is easier for institutions in areas with low participation neighbourhoods, high proportions of poorer social classes or high proportions of students from state schools to recruit them. The Funding Council is developing a benchmark that will take location into account.
- Benchmarks are comparisons of performance against average. They are not targets. As a consequence, if every higher institution currently below its benchmark were to reach it, there would be an improvement in overall performance but the effect would be small. On current reported levels of achievement and benchmarks, overall performance would rise by around 2 to 3 percentage points on each indicator.

**Variations of performance across the sector (1999-00)**



**NOTE**

Each box shows the two middle quartiles of the range across higher education institutions while the lines show the full extent of the range.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of data published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England

# Appendix 4

## Social class

- 1 The social classes discussed in this report derive from the 1991 census. The Office for National Statistics updates figures from that census annually to reflect estimates of subsequent population change. The 2001 census introduced a new definition of social class. Figures from that census are not yet available.

### Social classes in the 1991 census

Class	Definition
I	Professional
II	Managerial
IIIN	Skilled non-manual
IIIM	Skilled manual
IV	Semi-skilled manual
V	Unskilled manual

Source: Office for National Statistics

# Appendix 5

## Statement by the Higher Education Funding Council for England on recurrent funding

- 1 The Funding Council distributes funding on behalf of the Government to institutions in England offering higher education. The Department determines the Funding Council's total budget (approximately £4.76 billion for 2001-02) and issues broad guidance on Government policies and plans. The Funding Council distributes most of the funding as recurrent funding for teaching and research. Funding for teaching (£3.16 billion) is allocated with reference to each institution's profile of students, reflecting their total numbers, and their mix between different subjects and other student-related and institutional characteristics. The principle underlying the funding method is that institutions should receive similar resources for similar activities. Funding for increases in student numbers is allocated through an annual bidding exercise. Funding for research (£0.89 billion) is distributed according to the quality and volume of research in different subjects at each institution. The quality of research is assessed every four to five years through a Research Assessment Exercise. The research councils also provide funding for specific research projects.
- 2 In addition to Funding Council grant, institutions also receive funding through student tuition fees. For full time undergraduate students, the fee level is £1,075 and represents about one quarter of the average cost of tuition. Students apply to their local education authority to be means-tested for student support. The Student Loans Company may pay some or all of the fee according to the outcome of the means test, with the student paying the balance. For part time and postgraduate students, institutions are free to set their own fee levels. However, the research councils pay some postgraduate fees at a level of £2,805.
- 3 The Department is responsible for determining the regulations governing student support that is not part of the Funding Council block grant for teaching and research. As well as covering the tuition fees payable to institutions, these also cover maintenance support for students while they study. For full time undergraduate students, such maintenance is provided through loans, which are repayable after graduation once the student passes a certain income threshold. Some part time undergraduate students are also eligible for smaller loans. Some postgraduate students may receive maintenance support through research council scholarships. Further student support entitlements are available for childcare and for those with disabilities. Finally, the Department also makes available hardship and bursary funding for those in particular financial need. This funding is allocated to the Funding Council for distribution to higher education institutions but is not part of the Funding Council's block grant for teaching and research. The Funding Council allocates these funds on behalf of the Department according to their instructions and, similarly, institutions distribute it to their students according to the criteria set by the Department.



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1998	Department for Education and Employment (now Department for Education and Skills)	The Learning Age - a renaissance for a new Britain (Cm 3790)
1999	Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (now Universities UK), Higher Education Funding Council for England, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service	Making the right choice - how students choose universities and colleges
1999	House of Commons Education and Employment (now Education and Skills) Select Committee	Opportunities for Disabled People (HC111-I)
1999	Higher Education Careers Services Unit, Careers Services Trust, Institute for Employment Research	Moving on: graduate careers three years after graduation
1999	K Purcell and T Hogarth, with J Pitcher and C Jacobs (published by Institute for Employment Research and Council for Industry and Higher Education)	Graduate opportunities, social class and age: employers' recruitment strategies in the new graduate labour market
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2000	Higher Education Funding Council for England	Additional student places and funds 2000-01: outcome of bids (00/26)

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2000	Higher Education Funding Council for England	Funding higher education in England - how the HEFCE allocates it funds (00/07)
2000	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service	Applicant survey 2000
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2001	Higher Education Funding Council for England	Supply and demand in higher education (01/62)
2001	House of Commons Education and Employment Select Committee	Higher Education: Access (HC 205 2000-01)
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2001	National Audit Office	Education Action Zones: Meeting the Challenge - the lessons identified from auditing the first 25 zones (HC 130 2000-01)
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2001	UNITE / MORI	Student Living Report
2002	National Audit Office	Improving student achievement in English higher education (HC 486 2001-2002)