



National Audit Office

Widening participation in higher education

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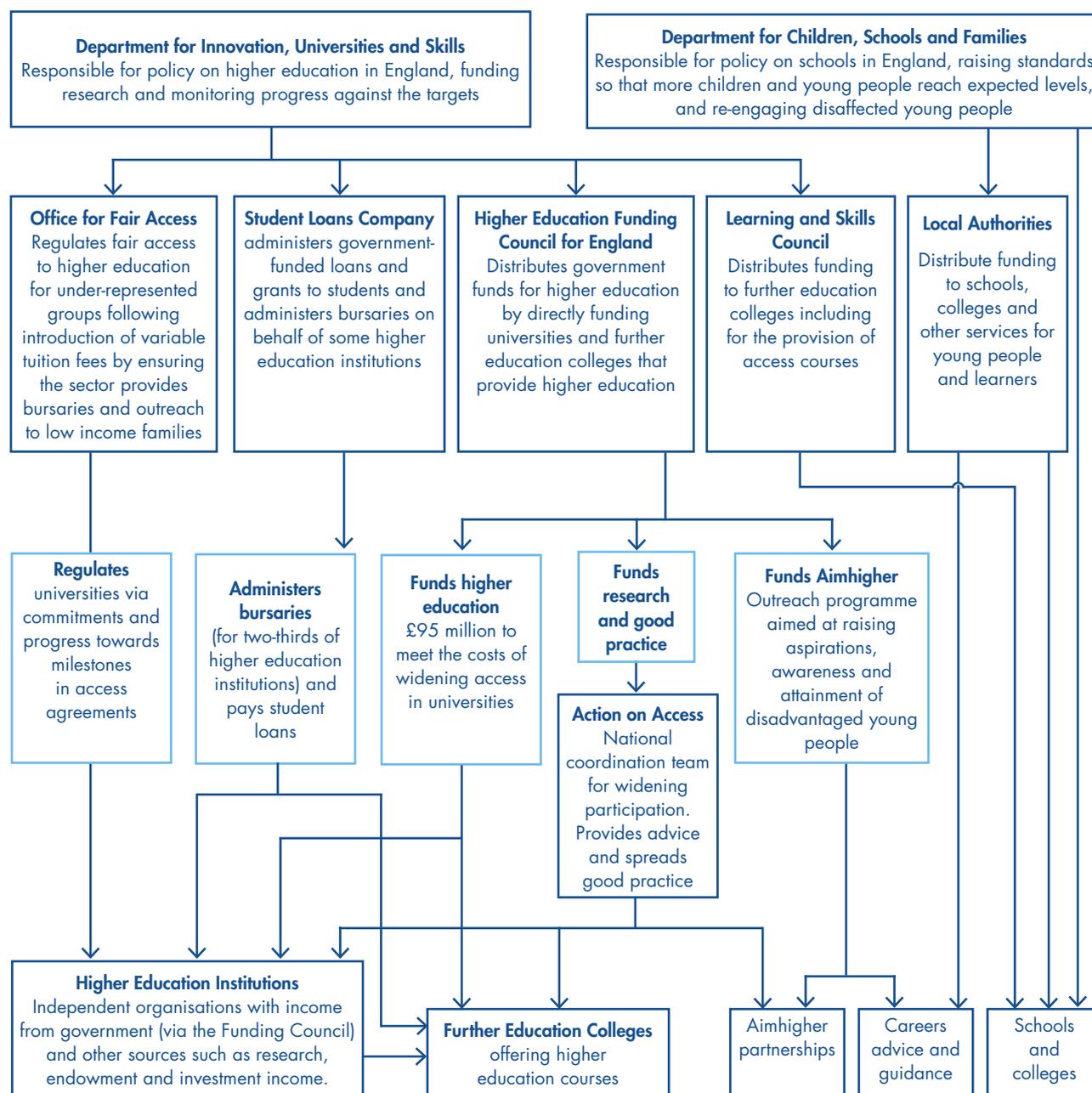
SUMMARY

1 This report examines the progress made by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (the Department), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (the Funding Council), the Office for Fair Access and higher education institutions in England in widening participation in higher education. The Government's 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* included a commitment to widen participation in higher education, by helping more people from under-represented groups, particularly lower socio-economic backgrounds, to participate successfully in higher education. This commitment sits alongside a policy to increase participation of those aged 18 to 30 towards 50 per cent by 2010. **Figure 1** presents an overview of the organisations that play a role in widening participation. The Funding Council has given institutions delivering higher education £392 million in

recurrent funding between 2001-02 and 2007-08 for widening participation. **Figure 2 on page 6** shows the range of sources and amounts of funding for widening participation for 2006-07.

- 2** We assessed progress against the following criteria:
- whether participation of under-represented groups in higher education is increasing (Part 1);
 - whether initiatives taken by the Department, the Funding Council, the Office for Fair Access and higher education institutions to widen participation are effective (Parts 2 and 3); and
 - whether higher education provision is delivered in a way that addresses the barriers to widening participation (Part 4).

1 A range of organisations play a role in widening participation

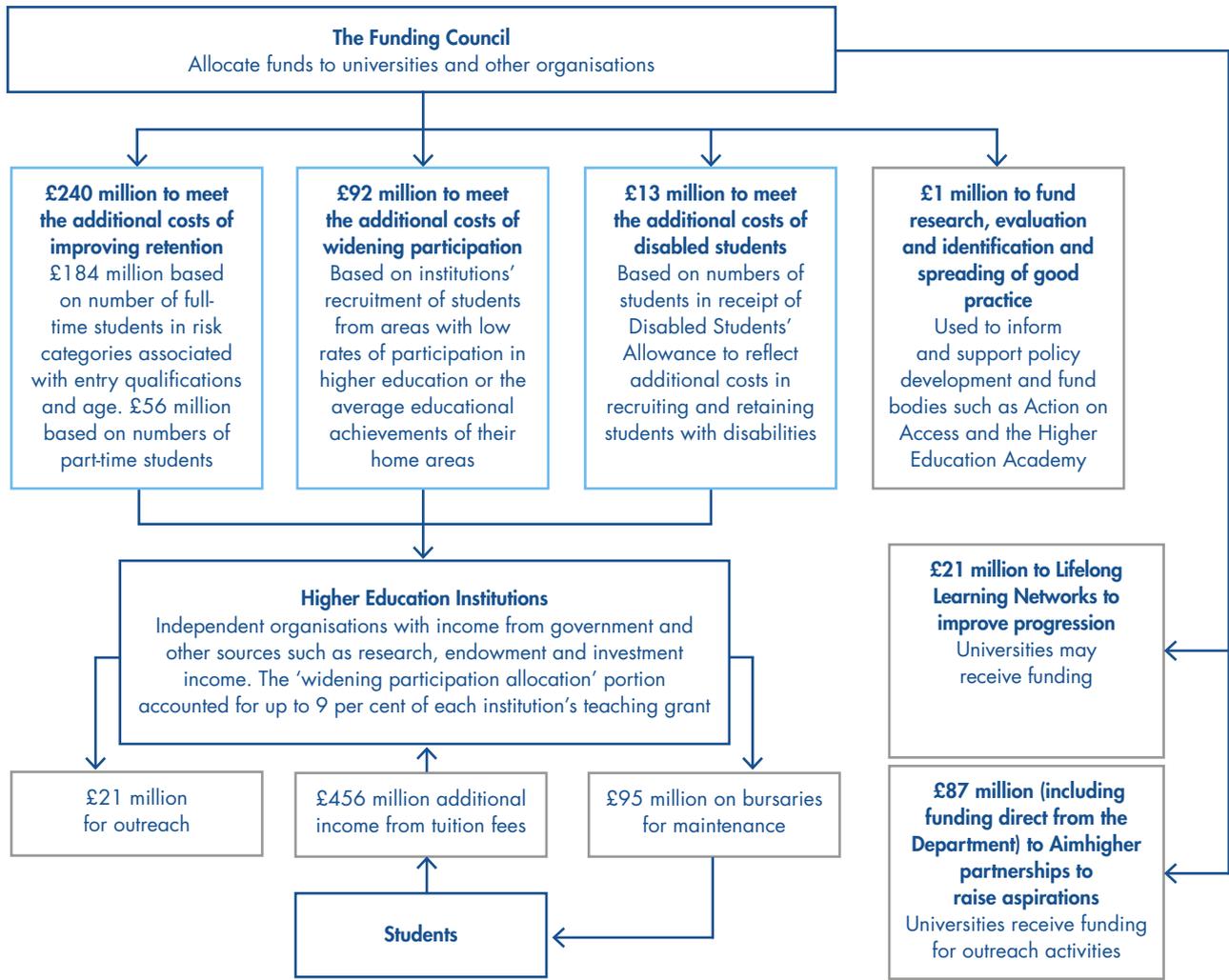


Source: National Audit Office collation of 2007-08 funding data and literature.

3 To assess progress in increasing participation of under-represented groups we undertook a detailed analysis of data held by the Higher Education Statistics Agency. To determine the effectiveness of the widening participation initiatives and explore what barriers remain to participation, we carried out surveys of 2,900 unsuccessful applicants for higher education places and of 1,000 teachers in primary and secondary schools, visited seven institutions and met with representatives of key organisations.

4 This report focuses on what higher education institutions can do through outreach and other widening participation activities to raise the aspirations and attainment of people. It does not examine in detail other factors that influence propensity to enter higher education, particularly prior attainment, which have been covered in our earlier reports on *Improving poorly performing schools in England* (January 2006)¹ and *The Academies Programme* (February 2007)².

2 2006-07 funding for widening participation comes from a range of sources



Source: National Audit Office analysis of 2006-07 funding data

What we found

Progress in widening participation

5 Over the past five years there have been improvements in the participation of some groups in higher education, but not for all groups and some remain significantly under-represented in higher education.

The participation rate for men is currently 10 percentage points below that for women. Those from non-white ethnic groups are better represented than white people. Socio-economic background remains a strong determinant of higher education participation with the participation of young, full-time students from lower socio-economic backgrounds having improved by two percentage points over the past four years. People from lower socio-economic backgrounds make up around one half of the population of England, but represent just 29 per cent of young, full-

time, first-time entrants to higher education. Young people living in deprived areas have experienced an increase in participation of 4.5 percentage points since 1998 compared with an increase of 1.8 percentage points in the least deprived areas. White people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, both men and women, are the most under-represented group. There are other groups for whom it is difficult to assess participation because of incomplete data.

6 The attainment of qualifications by students at secondary school or college plays a critical role in gaining access to higher education. Low achievement by some pupils in secondary schools is the principal reason for the difference between rates of participation in higher education for different groups. Notably, all applicants with the necessary qualifications are equally likely to accept a higher education place as others with the same level of attainment, regardless of their family background.

7 Performance indicators show that there is variation across higher education institutions in recruiting students from under-represented groups. For example in 2006-07, around one fifth of institutions performed significantly better than expected in recruiting young people from areas with low participation, whilst a similar proportion performed significantly worse than expected. The Higher Education Statistics Agency publishes performance indicators annually on the composition of students in individual institutions for three under-represented groups: individuals from state schools, from lower socio-economic backgrounds and from areas with low participation in higher education. Each institution has individual benchmarks representing the expected participation for each group, given particular characteristics (such as subject of study, age and entry qualifications) of the students it recruits. Post-1992 institutions generally perform at or significantly above their benchmarks while the English Russell Group institutions (16 of the most research intensive institutions) generally perform at or significantly below their benchmarks. However, the majority of institutions recognise widening participation objectives in their high-level strategies. We found strong senior management support for widening participation, with responsibility usually vested in a pro-Vice Chancellor supported by specialist staff.

8 Incomplete data on student characteristics hinders accurate assessment of participation. Significant gaps in the data provided by students to institutions and programmes reduce the reliance that can be placed on some measures of participation, particularly in relation to socio-economic background and for part-time students. The Department has developed a new measure of participation of young people by social class and is now linking pupil data with higher education student records and admissions data. Both will assist in tracking individuals through widening participation activities and into higher education. The Funding Council is providing more comprehensive data on local participation rates of young people and we found this has been well received by institutions. In general, the long-term nature of widening participation activities makes evaluating their effectiveness difficult.

Impact of the actions of the Department, Funding Council and Office for Fair Access to widen participation

9 The Funding Council contributes to meeting the costs of recruiting students from under-represented groups. It allocates recurrent funding for widening participation to institutions in proportion to the number of existing students from under-represented groups, contributing to the additional costs incurred, and gave £392 million to institutions between 2001-02 and 2007-08. The Funding Council has a broad estimate of the additional costs of recruiting and retaining students from under-represented groups and takes this into account in distributing its grant to institutions, but generally does not directly fund widening participation activities in institutions.

10 Since 2006 the Office for Fair Access has approved an 'access agreement' for each institution wishing to charge variable tuition fees, setting out what actions the institution will take to promote and safeguard access for low income groups. The agreements include milestones. If there is a serious and wilful breach of an access agreement, the Office for Fair Access can impose financial sanctions. This may include refusing to renew an institution's access agreement, thus denying it permission to charge tuition fees above the basic level, or instructing the Funding Council to suspend part of an institution's grant. Access agreements have only been in place for two years and the Office for Fair Access has not identified any breaches of access agreements to date.

11 There is insufficient information about institutions' activities to widen participation. The Funding Council no longer requires institutions to report on their widening participation strategies. In the interests of reducing bureaucracy, the access agreements approved by the Office for Fair Access have superseded the requirement to report directly to the Funding Council. The Department, the Funding Council and the Office for Fair Access are considering how institutions might bring together their widening participation, fair access and admissions policies into a single strategic document which would be made public.

12 The Funding Council is assessing the effectiveness of the two national programmes with widening participation aims, and our surveys suggest that both programmes are well received by participants, schools and institutions. The Department and the Funding Council fund the Aimhigher programmes of outreach activities broadly aimed at increasing young people's aspirations to study in higher education. The Funding Council has recently introduced measures to improve evaluation and all Aimhigher partnerships are required to submit an evaluation plan for 2008-11. The Funding Council also funds the Lifelong Learning Networks which were set up from 2004 to improve progression for vocational learners. It is too early to determine if they are meeting their objectives but interim evaluations and our review indicate progress is being made. The Funding Council plans a full evaluation in 2009-10 or 2010-11.

13 There are geographical areas with little or no local provision of higher education, whereas increasing numbers of students want to study locally or live at home whilst attending higher education. There has been some progress in increasing provision in such areas, for example through satellite campuses or joint working with further education colleges. Between 2003 and 2007, the Funding Council provided a total of £130 million towards 32 capital projects providing places for an additional 9,000 students. The Funding Council has responded positively to local demand and has recently begun to map provision across England. The Department has announced a new policy, the 'new university challenge' recognising that more needs to be done to expand local and regional higher education.

What higher education institutions are doing to widen participation

14 Institutions received a total of £456 million in additional tuition fee income from students in 2006-07 but the proportion that individual institutions redistributed as bursaries varied considerably, ranging from three per cent to 48 per cent. Bursaries are financial assistance provided to students by institutions. Additionally, 103 out of 123 institutions chose to use part of their tuition fee income to support additional outreach activities in schools or communities, with the aim of encouraging participants to consider higher education. These activities cost an average of £200,000 per institution and amounted to £21 million in total. There is no requirement for institutions to use tuition fee income to fund outreach activities and the Office for Fair Access regards such use as an indication of institutions' commitment to widening participation.

15 Institutions over-estimated the amount of their tuition fee income they would need to cover their student bursary commitments. In 2006-07, the first year of the new tuition fee and student financial support regime, students claimed bursaries totalling £96 million, £19 million less than the £115 million predicted by institutions. Institutions made their predictions cautiously, based on estimates of demand. Limited data on the financial background of students also made forecasting difficult.

16 As many as 12,000 students entering higher education in 2006-07 on full state support did not apply for a bursary although many were likely to have met the necessary criteria. The Office for Fair Access believes students either were not aware of bursaries or did not fully understand if they were eligible. Information on financial assistance is available from a range of diverse sources: individual institutions are responsible for marketing bursaries and various organisations are involved in publicising loans and grants. From 2009-10 the Student Loans Company will take over responsibility for administering all student financial information and plans to introduce an integrated on-line calculator to enable students to determine their eligibility for financial support.

17 Institutions are working with schools to improve pupil progression. The Government recognises the importance of higher education institutions working with schools. In 2007 the Funding Council issued guidance on how institutions and programmes can target activities at low participation areas and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

18 People from lower socio-economic backgrounds and older applicants who are not in school or college are less likely to have access to advice and assistance when applying to higher education. Higher education institutions have recently moved the deadline for applications back by a month, allowing teaching staff more time to advise and produce references for students that they may have taught for a relatively short period. This development in the admissions process is of particular benefit to applicants from under-represented groups who attend further education and sixth-form colleges.

19 A range of new qualifications, modes of delivery and entry support are enabling students from under-represented groups to achieve success in higher education. Some institutions are making use of new practices in learning and teaching, such as foundation degrees and part-time provision, to diversify the way higher education is delivered and widen opportunity. Institutions are working with further education colleges to offer a greater range of higher education opportunities.

Addressing the barriers to widening participation

20 Information, advice and guidance on career options and pathways through education are of variable quality and lack one-to-one engagement. Poor advice and guidance can lead to individuals making poor choices of qualifications to study at school and college, making unrealistic applications to higher education or not applying at all. Young people and their parents need access to people with good knowledge of all the options from age 14. In 2007, the Department for Children, Schools and Families published new quality standards for young people's information, advice and guidance.

21 Family expectation or tradition of higher education involvement is particularly significant in encouraging young people to undertake higher education. Some families have inaccurate perceptions of higher education and its benefits and may not support young people's aspirations to higher education. We found some examples of institutions working with communities, parents and children of primary school age to address attitudes towards higher education.

22 The relationship between the higher education financial system and the number of applications is a complex one, but the introduction of variable tuition fees and more generous financial support for students does not appear to have reduced the number of applications to higher education. There is no early evidence of a correlation between the level of an institution's bursaries and applications. There has been little research on the impact of tuition fees on those who may have considered but not applied to higher education and some students continue to have a poor understanding of the financial support available.

23 Widening participation activities are embedded in some programmes aimed at older learners, such as Lifelong Learning Networks and employer engagement programmes. The Department estimates that there are about five million adults of working age who have a level three qualification but no experience of higher education, some of whom may benefit from widening participation activities. Part-time students in higher education (who are more likely to be mature) have access to more limited student support, must pay their tuition fees upfront and are often not eligible for bursaries.

Conclusion on Value for Money

The Department's and the Funding Council's expenditure on widening participation cannot be directly related to changes in participation rates as there are other factors affecting participation, in particular the prior attainment of students. Existing analyses suggest that there has been some improvement in participation of some under-represented groups, but progress has not been uniform across the sector. Limited, often qualitative evaluations suggest specific activities are effective at widening participation. There is scope for improving the achievement of value for money through directing activities towards those individuals who would benefit the most and building in evaluation measures when setting up widening participation initiatives.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Many factors influence participation in higher education. The actions of higher education institutions, the Department, the Funding Council and the Office for Fair Access cannot widen participation alone. The scope of our report is restricted to what they are able to achieve, and our recommendations are aimed at improving the value for money achieved from their widening participation activities.

a Data on student characteristics is not sufficiently complete or unambiguous to identify accurately the extent to which certain groups are under-represented in higher education. Whilst recognising the steps already being taken to improve the data on student characteristics, the Funding Council and the Department should refine, where practicable, the information needed, such as data on social class, to fully and accurately assess the participation of under-represented groups. They should research the participation of groups about which little is known, such as people with various types of disability and people who have been in care. They should further develop and promote the use of measures which best capture participation rates, such as participation rates in local areas and pupil data linked with higher education student records.

b Survey evidence has indicated which widening participation activities may be most effective but more rigorous evaluation of individual activities is required. The Funding Council and the Department should build on the existing approaches used to evaluate widening participation by adopting more robust approaches to evaluation when setting up activities which aim to widen participation, and use the results to promote and direct those activities which the evidence indicates are the most effective.

c Too little is known about the widening participation activities and expenditure of institutions.

The Department should take forward the introduction of single strategic documents bringing together each institution's widening participation, fair access and admissions policies. Institutions should use the documents to report on their widening participation activities, expenditure and achievements, including an assessment of performance as indicated by the Higher Education Statistics Agency's performance indicators, institutions' own information on these and other under-represented groups not reported on by performance indicators and progress against the objectives set out in the institutions' access agreements. The Funding Council should set standards for reporting of the assessments.

The Office for Fair Access should investigate institutions which do not meet their access agreement commitments and require a plan for improvement if appropriate. Where institutions cannot demonstrate that they are taking reasonable action to improve, the Office for Fair Access should impose appropriate sanctions.

d The availability of higher education is limited in some locations, which may restrict opportunities for individuals from under-represented groups to participate.

Following the Government's 'new university challenge' initiative the Funding Council, in partnership with institutions, should determine how resources should be distributed appropriately to enhance capacity and provision in areas where needed, encouraging institutions to provide more opportunities in those areas where demand remains unmet.

e Some individuals from under-represented groups can have limited access to higher education delivered in traditional ways. The Funding Council should assess demand for further diversification of higher education delivery, for example through foundation degrees, part-time study and schemes that allow transfer of credit between institutions. The Funding Council should use this assessment to inform the direction of funding to support such developments.

f Some students and potential students have limited understanding of the different types of financial support available to them.

The Department should support and promote the development of a single source of comprehensive information for potential applicants, students, parents and teachers on the sources of, and application processes, for all Government grants, loans and bursaries. The information provided should allow individuals to determine their eligibility for financial support according to their personal circumstances.