

# Widening participation in higher education in England



REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL  
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# 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.