

GuildHE Response

OfS Consultation: A new approach to regulating access and participation in English higher education
October 2018



Consultation Questions

- 1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal that plans should normally remain in place for a period of at least three years, rather than being submitted annually as at present?.**

Strongly agree

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (max 300 words)

GuildHE welcomes the opportunity for providers to develop more meaningful and strategic plans to improve access and participation to HE. Our members' programmes often require prerequisite skills to be accepted onto courses. We need to work with children at an early age to encourage them to develop these skills and work within our local communities to better understand the skills needs of our regions (which are often rural and coastal). The previous approach was restrictive to how we could improve access and measure the impact of our work. Longer timescale will enable us to undertake more meaningful engagements and enable us to collect appropriate data.

Good project management requires goals and interim targets. It is unclear how this can be achieved through a 'rolling' over approach of APPs. We would rather initially plan for 5 years and provide annual key milestone targets to provide a clear and holistic plan, than be granted extensions to plans with initial shorter timescales. This will mitigate against provider complacency and slippage and will be more transparent to the public. We hope the formulation of the EIX will support the sector in developing approaches to impact and outcome measuring, and OfS will be mindful of the resources in place at individual providers in how it is able to monitor the effectiveness of its activities. The current access tracking software is prohibitively expensive for small providers, and they have limited staff expertise within their institution in project management, evaluation and social justice theory to draw from.

Many of the diversity issues that our members face are ingrained social inequalities or cultural normative behaviours. Interventions to combat these takes time, and providers must start at primary school level to have real impact. Lengthening APPs will help us develop more long term solutions to systemic access problems.

- 2a. How effective, if at all, would the proposed approach of annual impact reports and action plans be for:**
 - a. Assessing a provider's progress compared to the sector as a whole?**

Fairly effective

b. **Assessing a provider's progress compared to other institutions?**

Fairly effective

c. **Improving a provider's strategy to improve access and participation?**

Very effective

d. **Engaging students in the monitoring of access and participation?**

Very effective

e. **Capturing good practice, and findings from evaluation?**

Very effective

2b. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the submission of an action plan would make providers more accountable to their students, the OfS, and the public for their performance in access and participation?

Strongly agree

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (max 300 words)

A publically accessible action plan, and a student commentary would create a more transparent process which supports the sharing of ideas across the sector. However these would need to be clearly worded to ensure that if an innovative trial fails - it is not seen as a negative, or the publication of the action plan in of itself does not prohibit or stifle innovation. Providers need to take more risks in finding the right answers to some fundamental societal inequalities, and circumstances are often sensitive for the students and communities involved. We believe it is vital for providers to share with each other their experiences of specific outreach interventions but would not necessarily endorse a full public disclosure of all activities and outcomes to be scrutinised by the press. The new EIX has a key role in supporting the sector to share and communicate with each other as to what works, and what may work in specific contexts. We would prefer the 'nuts and bolts' of the year end evaluation/action plan to be considered here, rather than a completely public facing document. This is an area where the OfS needs to give clear guidance to providers on how it will balance its duties to promote both competition and collaboration as some successful interventions may very well be commercially sensitive. It must also be mindful of the resources available to providers, and must not make annual reporting overburdensome.

2c. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the approach of a longer-cycle plan with annual impact reporting, and ongoing OfS monitoring, will reduce the level of burden for providers not at increased risk and apply greater scrutiny for providers at increased risk of a future breach of one or more conditions?

Tend to disagree

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (max 300 words)

In theory, having a well thought through 3-5 year strategy will be less burdensome on providers as they will have a clear sense of their aims and objectives, and are able to plan more long term. However, the increased expectation on monitoring and impact assessment will be more burdensome to smaller providers than at present, and OfS should be mindful of the resources available to small providers in being able to undertake in depth evaluations. In this sense there will not be less burden for a small provider not deemed at risk.

We hope that the new approach to APP coupled with the support of the EIX will help providers of all shapes and sizes to share experiences and support the training and development of WP staff. However there will always be a resources issue for smaller institutions because the spend on activities will be so much less with money being focused on staff and activities, rather than expensive reporting tools. Our specialist members also have to work harder on UK wide initiatives in order to develop more impact, which is more costly and harder to track. Just focusing on local regions does not always produce the outcomes required.

- 3. To what extent do you agree or disagree, that:**
- a) the stated OfS specified-aims are the national priority areas for access and participation?**
Tend to agree
 - b) the OfS should specify measures that we encourage providers to use when setting targets related to OfS-specified aims? ...**
Strongly disagree
 - c) providers should also be able to set additional targets relative to their context?**
Strongly agree
 - d) the proposal allows for comparability of performance in access and participation across the sector?**
Tend to agree
 - e) the proposal allows for progress to improve access and participation to be measured?**
Tend to agree
- 4a. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to collect and publish, in a transparent way, access investment?**
Tend to agree

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (max 300 words)

We think it is absolutely right for providers to give details on how public money has been used to improve access and participation. However, OfS has already recognised that spend in relation to participation and outcomes is often hard to disaggregate from general Teaching and Learning spend. We therefore think it may be particularly burdensome to report exact spending figures for the student premium funding. It is recognised that these students are more expensive to teach and historically this funding has been used to enhance the capacity of a provider in terms of staffing and resources rather than specific interventions. It would therefore be challenging to develop a 'project plan' and impact assessment over and above the current requirements for this money, especially in our member institutions who often have higher number of disabled students than average.

4b. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to disaggregate access spend by post-16, pre-16 and work with adults and communities?

Tend to Agree

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (max 300 words)

Different providers will have different priorities and intervention requirements to improve the access and outcomes of its students. It is therefore sensible to show these priorities through specific streams of work. However, it would not be fair to compare providers against each other in how much they spend in each area. For example, it may be more beneficial for a rural specialist university to spend less on their post 16 work than a large multi faculty university in the same region. Equally it may be appropriate for a region with less cultural diversity to spend less on local community engagement to solve a specific access gap than an inner city university.

4c. To what extent do you agree or disagree that a strong focus on targets and outcomes alone, creates enough pressure to secure sufficient funding in access and participation to achieve change, without an expectation of spend?

Tend to agree

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (max 300 words)

Our members have shown that it is more important to develop targeted interventions, than spend lots of money less strategically on access and participation. Arbitrary financial targets do nothing other than stretch the resources of smaller institutions, and make larger institutions less efficient. If we achieve the required outcome, it shouldn't matter how much the intervention itself cost.

However we are still concerned that there are interventions which have no easy to measure outcome. For example our arts universities run a national CPD Teacher training programme to support the professionalisation of arts education. Arts skills are an important prerequisite to many of our members and funding cuts to schools coupled with Progress/Attainment 8 have led to significant cuts to arts education. But whilst we are able to monitor who attends these workshops, we are unable to collect data about specifically how the CPD training has impacted on students directly in most cases. We wouldn't want to stop doing these sorts of interventions, because teachers tell us of their value, but as arts performance is not monitored in schools we have no evidence to draw from.

There needs to be a much better coordination of schools and universities data sets within DfE, and a bringing together of evidence that is easily accessible for universities to access and analyse. It is unhelpful that measures of social deprivation are different in the schools system to universities, and schools often do not have the capacity to provide universities with impact data after targeted interventions.

4d. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the principles in paragraph 140 which we propose should underpin our approach to funding and investment in access and participation?

Tend to agree

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (max 300 words)

As previously stated we have no issue with providers in receipt of ring fenced public money being held accountable for that spend, however not all national priorities will be a 'problem' for all providers, nor the most important access issue in every institution, for example sponsoring schools. We wish to see a national financial support package for WP that understand the nuances of the different types of providers in the sector. For example, specialist arts universities would benefit from a national subject specific NCOP, where they are able to work towards shared aims at improving the accessibility of art courses to those from non-traditional backgrounds. At present they do not have the internal resources to make a huge impact in this area individually, as there are systemic societal inequalities that inhibits widening access to these courses and professions. A national network would really enhance the WP activities in this area, and there will be other examples where this would also be the case.

Working locally is fine, when there is a diverse local community to interact with. But rural and coastal universities often struggle to recruit non-white students. Their outreach interventions also need to be cast wider, which costs more, and is more resource intensive.

We also hope that the pulling together of evidence through the new EIX will help the OfS to shape its national priorities and for national aims and objectives to also be evidence led.

5a. To what extent do you agree or disagree that an evaluation self-assessment tool will contribute to improvements in evaluation practice?

Tend to agree

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (max 300 words)

A self- assessment toolkit will be a useful addition in supporting providers to undertake meaningful evaluations of their activities. However, as previously stated we are concerned that these are often over-burdensome for small providers who do not have the expertise and experience in areas of evaluation and impact assessment to complete these forms in a meaningful way. Our members often have only 1-2 people working on planning, delivery and evaluation of outreach activities. We agree that the sector must professionalise its approach to evaluation in order to better share experiences, but OfS must be mindful of the level of resource required for smaller institutions. Any self assessment tool must understand the nuances of different provider resources, and the toolkit should focus more on how effective the provider's WP strategy is, rather than comment on resources and funding levels of providers work.

5b. What support do you think the OfS could provide to enable more effective use of tracking services? (max 300 words)

Fundamentally tracking services need to be cheaper in order for smaller providers to be able to use them. Upwards of a £7k yearly subscription is a large proportion of the outreach budgets of some smaller institutions, and being forced to sign up to one for the purposes of regulation would put an enormous strain on resources for a provider with less than 5,000 students (and many of our members have less than 2,000).

Our smaller members who are members of these trackers also report to us that they often do not have the resources to use them effectively even when they can afford the software. WP teams in small institutions have traditionally prioritised the planning and delivery of activities, over the tracking primarily because they need to continue to show progress in the current annual cycle. We hope that a 3-5 year APP process will allow provider more time to plan in evaluation points as a core part of the project plan but this does not solve the problem that tracking software is prohibitively expensive. Members also report that the success of the tracking software is also often down to the level of engagement schools are able to have in completing records. With school budgets stretched this is becoming increasingly difficult. We are also conscious that schools work in different parameters of

deprivation and so it is often challenging to share information even when collaboration is agreed.

We would hope that the OfS would be able to offer financial support to smaller providers to use these services if they become a more vital part of the APP process and the EIX will be able to provide support to the sector in the best methods of monitoring outcomes of interventions.

6a. To what extent do you agree or disagree that OfS should undertake further work to explore whether data split by age could be included within the transparency information condition?

Strongly agree

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (Max 300 words)

We believe it is sensible to collect data on age in the proposed way to ensure that we have a better understanding of the experiences of mature students. However, this will inevitably cause data validity and threshold issues for smaller providers as is the case with other breakdowns by student characteristics.

There are also often some significant differences in the home life of a 21 year old student compared to a 29 year old students. We therefore think there should be some narrowing of age bands to reflect this.

6b. To what extent do you agree or disagree that OfS should undertake further work to explore whether data split by disability status should be included within the transparency information condition?

Strongly agree

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (Max 300 words)

We also think it is sensible to look at the experience of disabled students. However there are a few additional barriers for providers in the admission of students with certain disabilities. This is especially the case for providers with very old buildings, highly specialised courses and small providers where it is less easy to provide reasonable adjustments. GuildHE takes their duty to ensure an inclusive learning environment very seriously, but due to the non traditional learning environments it is not always possible to provide a safe environment for everybody.

We would also like to continue to see a split between students who have learning and physical disabilities, rather than just those in receipt of DSA as per the current public information requirements.

7a. To what extent do you agree or disagree that OfS should create and maintain an access and participation dataset, as proposed above?

Strongly disagree

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (max 300 words)

Our members already struggle to meet the current aggregation thresholds due to our small numbers and we would be at risk of not being able to provide any publishable data. The OfS will know from years of user testing that this will be seen as a negative mark on our providers which would be an unfair outcome of publishing this data. Breaking down student data by specific characteristics will further compound this problem, as was seen in the latest UCAS release, and even at an aggregated level many of our providers were unable to produce enough data split by student characteristics.

Small student numbers also provide less stable data and so we would be concerned about the impact this would have on the perception of our work on a year to year basis. The OfS recognises that providers have their own individual circumstances, and will be regulating providers on an individual basis. Making the data you use to support your judgements publically available puts both providers and the OfS under the spotlight. We are more than happy for APPs and yearly action plans/evaluations to be published, but the raw data goes too far in our view and will have negative consequences for small providers.

We are also concerned that OfS will be continuing to use POLAR data for London providers, where it is well documented that this not a reliable measure in the city.

It may be useful for the OfS and providers to see this data internally to support the actions plans and evaluations, but this data should not be for further public consumption outside of the TEF process.

7b. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed datasets would hold providers to account on their performance against targets?

Tend to disagree

Please provide a brief explanation for your response (max 300 words)

For all the reasons outlined above we do not believe that all providers would be able to be held to account using this data alone. Small providers will not have enough robust data to have judgements made, and London HEPs find POLAR an insufficient measure.

Also it is worth asking who would be holding providers to account by publishing this data. The OfS is responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of access, and have the expertise and additional data to underpin their judgements. This is not true of the general public or the press who will just see the raw numbers. It is important to be transparent to the public, but allowing full access to the data goes too far, and will stifle innovation. We hope instead a public statement by provider derived from the annual report would be a more appropriate method of accountability.

We are also concerned that not all interventions will have 'meaningful' data available for a period of years or even indefinitely, and many providers undertake outreach work that benefit other providers in the sector and do not get credit for this.

7c. Are there any measures you feel are missing from the dataset? (max 300 words)

It would be helpful for DfE and the OfS to work together on aligning the data sets used for categorising disadvantage and to support HEIs in accessing data which can support them to better evaluate their work.