

E-BULLETIN

FORUM FOR ACCESS AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

FACE

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Speakers' Corner

As a member-oriented organisation FACE would like to invite individual colleagues to have their say on any issue of concern in UK education policy and practice. This is a purely personal point of view and should not be thought to represent any institution, organisation, or official body. To have your say, email James.Tate@uwe.ac.uk

This month's speaker is Dr. Tony Acland, a member of the FACE Executive, who offers a personal view on the introduction of Fair Access Agreements and asks the question:

Has the introduction of Fair Access Agreements heralded a new era in promoting widening participation in England? Or should FACE members be encouraging policy makers to do much more?



Fair Access Agenda

The introduction of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), established by the last government and sustained by the Coalition, seemed to demonstrate a cross-party commitment to the promotion of fair access to higher education for all. Together with

the continuation of the Widening Participation Strategic Assessments (WPSA), it was widely hoped that enhanced fair access measures would make an important contribution to increasing upward social mobility in England.

But what has been achieved to date and what more needs to be done if OFFA and WPSAs are to be effective in realizing their widening participation objectives? The following commentary briefly assesses progress so far.

What has been achieved?

The recent report from the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) claimed that progress has been made, with three quarters of universities and colleges meeting their self identified and assessed access targets and many of the remainder making considerable progress.

Sir Graeme Davies, Director of Fair Access, stated that:

“Our assessment of the Access Agreements submitted to us has been a thoroughly rigorous and robust process . . . These Agreements represent a considerable commitment by universities and colleges to improving access for students (and) . . . I am particularly pleased by the planned additional annual investment of £50 million in outreach activities to raise aspirations and attainment among potential applicants from under-represented groups.” (OFFA Press Statement, 12th July 2011)

However, whilst acknowledging the widening participation achievements of universities and colleges to date, Sir Martin Harris (outgoing Director of OFFA) cautioned against complacency, observing that progress in terms of admissions amongst the most selective universities had been “flat” during the last five years.

OFFA and HEFCE should be commended, not only for their reports that give a succinct overview of progress, but also for publishing all university and college OFFA Agreements and WPSAs on their easily accessible websites. This has provided policy makers and practitioners with the opportunity to identify successful and innovative practice as well as pointing to gaps in plans and where improvements need to be made.

What more needs to be done?

It is clear from the reports and reading a number of institutional OFFA Agreements that OFFA had understandably prioritized HEI expenditure on Outreach and student support in order to meet key government requirements.

There are clearly other aspects of the Agreements that HEIs should be strongly encouraged to develop in their preparation for the next annual reports. OFFA have already indicated several priorities for each university and college for their future Agreements, including:

1. Developing more ambitious targets and the resources to ensure these are achieved.
2. Setting themselves at least one target around broadening the entrant pool (rather than simply focusing on applicant targets)

These improvements can be strongly endorsed by all concerned with promoting access. However, OFFA and HEFCE also should be encouraged to insist on further improvements:

Monitoring and Evaluation: OFFA Agreements and WPSAs differ considerably on the attention given to developing robust monitoring and, in particular, evaluation strategies.

Experienced practitioners counsel the importance of building such strategies in at the initial development stage, rather than later as an after thought. Many institutional agreements provide little or no detail on the way in which monitoring and evaluation will be conducted, and yet getting this right is so crucial for assessing the overall impact of the access strategy and gauging what improvements are needed.

Fortunately, there are exemplary exceptions to this and institutional leaders would do well to draw on these examples of good practice amongst the published Access Agreements and WPSAs. Most important, OFFA and HEFCE should be strongly encouraged to prioritise this area for improvement.

Collaboration between HEIs and listening to Schools: Although OFFA and HEFCE have encouraged institutions to collaborate in order to avoid duplication and wasting resources, there is currently no requirement for HEIs to collaborate.

In some regions schools have petitioned HEIs to continue Aimhigher-type partnerships for Outreach activities and to maintain collaborative Outreach and targeting systems. As one Headteacher in the South of England explained, "Collaboration is vital to avoid the chaos of each university trying to independently establish links with schools". Other Heads have emphasized the importance of universities listening to schools and not risking alienating them by dictating Outreach strategies. In addition, some Access practitioners fear that little or no collaboration brings with it the danger of patchy provision for schools and for some learners, particularly disabled pupils and children in care.

Whilst, understandably, OFFA and HEFCE are keen to respect each HEI's corporate status and differing reporting lines, particularly regarding admissions policy, they could insist that Agreements and Strategies incorporate an appropriate collaborative component.

OFFA statements should be required for ALL universities and colleges: The Coalition Government decided to waive the need for OFFA Agreements for those institutions that limit the annual student fee to £6,000. The main motivation for this decision was to constrain the Government's student loan commitment. Whilst this is understandable in the current difficult financial situation, it means that an opportunity has been lost for ensuring that a comprehensive fair admissions strategy is promoted throughout England.

One solution to this inconsistent approach would be to merge the currently separate OFFA and WPSAs in the near future, requiring all HEIs to submit integrated and comprehensive plans covering the full admissions life cycle, from pre-application, through to admissions, retention, achievement and suitable graduate employability. Currently, the guidance for both strategies overlap, with, for example, raising student retention appearing in both documents.

Government policy seems to preclude integrating the strategies as a way forward, and, if a change is considered, it is vital to ensure that current levels of funding for Widening Participation in HEIs should be maintained or much more would be lost from merging the OFFA and WPSAs than would be gained.

Key role for the Access community and FACE

At this critical time for the Access movement, it is so important that FACE members play a full and active role in discussion and petitioning policy makers. So if you are not a FACE member [join today](#) and work collectively to support Access to and participation in HE. Of course, opinions will differ and it is important that as many FACE members as possible engage in debate at FACE seminars, events, the annual conference and through the monthly eBulletin and member publications.

FACE is a lead partner in the first Access to HE Summit, which will take place at the Bloomsbury hotel in London on 28th November 2011. For further details and booking information for this important event please see the next item.

Access to HE Summit

28 November 2011, Bloomsbury Hotel, Great Russell Street, London

Action on Access, together with key partners, is organising this first annual one day Access to HE Summit which will explore the links between Higher Education and social mobility - which is at the heart of the Coalition Government's agenda. The agenda for access to HE has been undergoing enormous changes over recent months and the need to take stock and look forward at the same time to the emerging new agenda of social mobility, fair access and widening participation has perhaps never been greater.

In addition to summit keynote speakers offering a variety of perspectives on policy developments, institutions and learners, there will also be a "Question Time" style panel discussion to provide delegates with an opportunity to ask questions from the floor as well as questions arising from the workshop sessions. The workshops will consider a range of themes including:

- Induction
- Admissions
- Retention and success of students
- HEI relationship with schools
- Emergent collaborative partnerships Post- Aimhigher
- Disability and widening participation
- Working in Partnerships
- Fair Access
- Access agreement

Download the [Summit Programme](#) and the [Summit Booking Form](#)

Launch of the Practice Transfer Partnership

Practice Transfer Partnership Strategic Regional Working with Schools and Colleges

[Download a flyer for this conference](#)

The Practice Transfer Partnership will be launched at a conference on Tuesday 15th November 2011 at the Glamorgan Conference Centre, University of Glamorgan Treforest campus, South Wales.

This innovative Conference is funded through the HE STEM Wider initiative. The conference's target audience is HEIs across England and Wales who would like to work in STEM Outreach and would benefit from advice and guidance. The Conference will also provide a poster session where HEIs, FE Colleges and other providers will have the opportunity to promote and share information about the work that they do with schools and colleges on STEM subjects.

There is no charge for the conference and places are allocated on a first come basis. We are able to reimburse any reasonable transport costs. For further information or to book a place contact Melanie Aitchison, First Campus, University of Glamorgan Tel: 01443 482325 email: mjaitchi@glam.ac.uk

FACE Chair visits the venue for the 2012 Annual FACE Conference

Recently I had the opportunity to visit Derry/Londonderry and see for myself the venue for [next years annual conference](#). As well as the pleasure of meeting with FACE Executive member Dr Damien O'Kane and his team to discuss the arrangements, I also had a chance to tour the facilities that the conference will be using at the University of Ulster's Magee campus and was most impressed. Moreover, visits to three of the city's hotels confirmed that delegates will enjoy excellent accommodation options. Derry/Londonderry will, I am sure, be a great host city.

By the way, you could take advantage of taking a few days break either before or after the conference in what is one of the most beautiful parts of the UK, and the head of the tourist office is working closely with the conference team to provide a civic reception and special social programme for all delegates to enjoy.

The early bird booking scheme means that the conference is filling up quickly so I strongly recommend booking as soon as you can through the [2012 conference website](#).

John Storan

P.S.

Our [FACE Executive committee meetings](#) are getting a new home. As from the next meeting on the 12th December 2011 FACE Executive meetings will take place at the

Institute of Education which is part of the University of London. So a big thank you to the University of Westminster for being such very good hosts in recent years and an equally big thank you to the Institute of Education for the new venue.

What else is in the News?

For the latest UK Education headlines and stories [go to the FACE News Feeds page](#) where you'll find the online news feeds of several of the sources listed below gathered together on one page for easy access.

The Department of Education news page <http://www.education.gov.uk/news>

The Guardian <http://education.guardian.co.uk>

The Independent <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education>

The BBC http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/default.stm

The Times Higher Education <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk>

This is the **October 2011** eBulletin from FACE (the Forum for Access and Continuing Education), offered to practitioners, policy-makers, researchers and others with an interest in access, widening participation and lifelong learning. The eBulletin is sent to colleagues in the sector, members and non-members alike. If you would prefer not to receive it, please contact James.Tate@uwe.ac.uk and your details will be removed from the circulation list.

If you wish to respond to anything in this eBulletin or contribute to the November 2011 issue, please email Jim at James.Tate@uwe.ac.uk