



Briefing Note: Widening Participation in Higher Education

- 1 On 25 June 2008, the National Audit Office published a report, *Widening Participation in Higher Education*. The report examines the progress made by the government, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), and higher education institutions in England in widening participation in higher education.
- 2 The principal findings are:
 - (a) 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.
 - (b) The attainment of qualifications by students at secondary school or college plays a critical role in gaining access to higher education.
 - (c) Performance indicators show that there is variation across higher education institutions in recruiting students from under-represented groups.
 - (d) Incomplete data on student characteristics hinder accurate assessment of data.
 - (e) Redistribution of fee income as bursaries varies widely between institutions.
 - (f) 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 in applying to higher education.
 - (g) Different types of qualification, modes of delivery, and entry support enable students from under-represented groups to achieve success in higher education.
 - (h) 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.
- 3 On value for money, the report concludes that the "Department and the Funding Council's expenditure on widening participation cannot be directly related to changes in participation rates ... 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.”

- 4 The report makes recommendations to the government and HEFCE in respect of:
 - (a) the refinement and capture of data to assess fully and accurately the participation of under-represented groups;
 - (b) adopting robust approaches to evaluation when setting up widening participation activities;
 - (c) bringing together institutions’ widening participation, fair access, and admissions policies in a single document and requiring institutions to report on widening participation activities and expenditure;
 - (d) developing capacity and provision of higher education in geographical areas where it is currently limited;
 - (e) further diversification of higher education delivery;
 - (f) providing better information to applicants regarding the financial support available to them.

- 5 The full report is available online at:

www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/07-08/0708725.pdf

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