

England

National Higher Education Equity Policy

Governance

The main responsibility for defining national policies in higher education is with the Department of Education through its higher education department.

For decades, England had a buffer body (HEFCE - Higher Education Funding Council for England), which was in charge of allocating public resources to universities and other tertiary education institutions. HEFCE was abolished in 2017 and replaced with the Office for Students, which is the new higher education regulator.

Higher Education Policy Documents

- The principal official document defining England's national higher education strategy is the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.
- The United Kingdom 2010 Equality Act sets the parameters for expectations for equal treatment and equal opportunities across sectors. Chapter 2 outlines expectations and duties in Further and Higher Education. In England, this applies to universities, institutions in the higher education sector, institutions in the further education sector and 16-19 Academies.

Equity Policy Documents

What broad and specific equity objectives do the policy documents identify?

- The broad objectives of equality of opportunity in higher education are expressed via all higher education providers who charge a fee above £6000 or who wish to be registered via the Office for Students providing what is called an Access and Participation Plan (more details on such plans are available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/access-and-participation-plans/>)
- In 2017, the Department of Education (UK) published a guidance note for higher education providers that focuses on creating an inclusive learning and teaching environment for students with disabilities: *Inclusive teaching and learning in higher education as a route to excellence*.

Which equity target groups are identified in the policy documents?

- Low-income students
- Gender groups
- Minority groups: based on ethnicity, religion,
- Students with disability

Protected statuses under the UK 2010 Equality Act are: age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; sexual orientation.

Does the country have concrete targets for the participation of specific equity groups?

- England plans to double the number of students entering HE from low participation areas from 2011 to 2020.

England does not have a standalone policy document dedicated to equity promotion in higher education.

What specific interventions and/or instruments of equity promotion are included in the official strategy and policy documents (monetary and non-monetary)?

Monetary Policy Instruments

The main financial instrument to promote equity is the income-contingent student loan scheme set up by the government.

As part of Access and Participation Plans, HE providers are obliged to invest a proportion of their tuition fee income on scholarships/bursaries and the kind of non-monetary work described below.

Non-Monetary Policy Instruments

What are the main non-monetary instruments to promote equity?

- Outreach and bridge programs
- Academic and career guidance and counseling
- Flexible pathways and transfers / Recognition of prior learning
- Reformed admission procedures / Affirmative action programs
- Retention programs

The government invests funds itself to support the non-monetary work described below, e.g. the National Collaborative Outreach Project (NCOP)

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/national-collaborative-outreach-programme-ncop/>

Financial Resources

What financial resources does the country devote to equity promotion measures?

In 2015-16, the total investment in equity through access agreements was £752.2 million with expenditure predicted to increase in future years.

Quality Assurance

Do the quality assurance criteria take equity elements into consideration?

- The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education expects higher education institutions to: “operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.”
- The UK Quality Code states in all of its different sections that the overall code promotes and considers equality of opportunity and inclusive learning in Higher Education institutions: “An inclusive environment for learning anticipates the varied requirements of learners, for example, because of a declared disability, specific cultural background, location or age, and aims to ensure that all students have equal access to educational opportunities. Higher education providers, staff and students all have a role in and responsibility for promoting equality.”

Monitoring and Evaluation

The Office for Students above has overall responsibility to monitor the impact of equity promotion measures on behalf of the Department of Education. The Office for Students replaced the Office for Fair Access. OFFA closed in March 2018.

- What instruments, methods and data are in place to carry out the monitoring and evaluation activities?

HE providers themselves lead on this work via their Access and Participation Plans – see above. They use the usual range of evaluation tools including the tracking of learners who have undertaken outreach activities led by HEIs into HE.

Dedicated Equity Promotion Agency

England does not have an agency dedicated to equity promotion in higher education. Equity promotion is one of the responsibilities of the Office for Students. The central budget devoted to the work is low, but that is because in England the cost of learning and teaching in HE is met in the main by student fees. Via fee income it is estimated that over £800m per year is spent on financial support and activities such as outreach work, to support widening access to HE.

Sources

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