UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER ACCESS AGREEMENT (2012/13)

INTRODUCTION

1. Variable fees were introduced in September 2006 to ensure that the Northern Ireland (NI) Higher Education (HE) sector was not progressively disadvantaged against the English sector, where variable fees applied (they were introduced in Wales in September 2007). Local institutions needed to have the same opportunity to secure the additional funding variable fees would bring, to help meet medium and longer term challenges to maintain and improve standards, widen access, enhance the student experience, strengthen links with employers and become more internationally competitive.

2. In the budget for 2011/12, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) advised the University of a 6% reduction in block grant funding. At that time DEL had instigated a consultation on tuition fees for 2012/13 onwards. The outcome of the consultation resulted is an agreement that the fee for 2012/13 in NI would be £3,465. For those students who will avail of a placement/intercalary year the fee for 2012/13 is £1725.

3. Ulster’s original Access Agreement was in operation during the academic years 2006/07 to 2008/09. A second version of the Agreement came into force in September 2009 and a revised version was introduced in January 2010, both of which were intended to cover the three year period 2009/10 to 2011/12. A fourth transitional Agreement was prepared for the 2011/12 academic year only. The University has reviewed its Access Agreement for 2012/2013 in light of the outcomes of the NI Assembly’s consideration of the review of student fees, the impact of major Government reforms on student finance in NI, and the Executive’s budgetary allocations.

4. Eligible students can finance their fees through a fee loan and repayment is income contingent, currently commencing when earnings exceed £15,000 per annum. The repayment percentage is 9% of earnings above this limit.

5. Ulster introduced variable fees in 2006 and has an obligation to DEL, as outlined in the Access letter to provide financial and other support to students deemed to come from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds or communities. These support mechanisms are in addition to and in enhancement of the widening access and participation activities currently undertaken by the University and are articulated in this document entitled the University of Ulster Access Agreement.

6. The University will monitor the implementation and operation of the Agreement and review its relevance on an ongoing basis, and reserves the right to alter the Agreement to respond to changes to NI or United Kingdom (UK) Government policy. The Bursary and Outreach commitments referred to in subsequent sections of this Agreement are valid for 2012/13 only.
BACKGROUND

7. The University operates across four campuses in NI (Belfast, Coleraine, Jordanstown and Magee) with a student community of some 20,784 undergraduates, 4162 taught postgraduates and 606 research students.

8. In delivering the University’s Vision to lead in the provision of professional education for professional life a key goal is to maintain our position as a sector leader in widening access to higher education. Our objectives include a commitment to extend our successful outreach activities, to raise educational attainment levels and widen participation for all those who have the capacity to benefit from higher education to the advantage of society and the economy.

9. In fulfilment of its Vision the University aims to enhance accessibility to and inclusivity of its course provision by developing mechanisms that create pathways into HE for those sections of the community that are currently under-represented or otherwise disadvantaged.

10. Strategic Aim 2 of the University’s Teaching and Learning Strategy 2008/09 - 2012/13 is ‘to target, recruit, support and retain a diverse range of students’ and the key objectives to support this aim form the framework on which the revised Access Agreement is based, to include:

- promote outreach activities to raise aspirations of potential applicants and improve the number of applications from traditionally disadvantaged and excluded communities;
- create a seamless transition between different forms of learning;
- promote the development of students’ key skills, including numeracy and literacy, to enhance their overall performance, their continuation and aid their progression into labour market employment and/or further study;
- support inclusivity and diversity to underpin all aspects of the student experience, from pre-arrival to graduation;
- facilitate transition and progression between Further Education (FE) and HE by continuing the promotion and development of progression pathways and agreements with collaborative partner institutions, in particular regional area-based Colleges.

11. The University performs well when measured against HEFCE widening participation benchmarks. In 2010/11 the UK HE sector as a whole recorded 30.6% of full-time undergraduates from SEC 4-7 while Ulster’s figure was 46.5% (HESA 2012). The institutional benchmark of 35.6% was significantly exceeded. However, the University, as with other institutions in NI, does relatively less well in terms of entrants from ‘low participation neighbourhoods’. Ulster has maintained its position in the top five Institutions in the UK for the third year for widening participation, omitting small and specialist institutions.

12. It is important to recognise that a number of external factors also shape the University’s participation profile. For example, the migration of students to
study elsewhere in the UK has been a significant part of participation in HE in NI for the last three decades. In most recent times the proportion of total full-time undergraduate entrants migrating has fallen from its height in the 1970s of 40% to around 25%. In part this reduction is a result of the increase of places in NI of about 20% since 2000. As a result, recent research suggests that most of those who leave ‘want to leave’ and are more likely to be from better-off backgrounds and to have higher ‘A’ level scores. To a degree, therefore, this migration removes some of those who might be best placed to secure places locally and provides an opportunity for institutions to offer wider opportunities to those from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, with the significant increase in fees in 2012/13 in other UK jurisdictions this trend could be reversed with many more students choosing to study at home thus potentially significantly reducing the number of places for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**FEE LIMITS**

13. For 2012/13, Ulster will set its variable fee level at £3,465 on all undergraduate degree programmes of study and this will be chargeable to all full-time UK and European Union (EU) undergraduate students. This reflects only an inflationary increase on the fee charged for 2011/12 which was £3375. Students who undertake a one year placement will be charged a fee of £1725. Tuition fees for students from GB (England, Scotland and Wales) will be £6000 per annum.

14. The same level of fees will be chargeable to all honours programmes franchised to or in collaboration with the FE sector.

**BURSARIES**

15. The University will offer Bursaries, as direct financial support, to help students with course related costs. Bursaries will be paid in addition to any government grants that students may receive and do not have to be paid back.

16. Students who meet the following criteria will be eligible for Bursaries:
   • are permanently resident in the UK or EU;
   • are enrolled on a full-time undergraduate degree or PGCE course and pay the maximum variable fee* (except for students on Social Work courses in receipt of an additional government bursary);
   • normally have applied for support by 31 May in the relevant academic year.

   * Students undertaking less than the full-time study load and therefore not paying the full fee will be eligible for a pro rata Bursary, provided they are undertaking at least 100 credits (i.e. are exempt from no more than 20 credits based on previous study). The pro rata Bursary will be five-sixths of the full Bursary on the basis that they will be paying five-sixths of the full fee.

17. The value of Bursaries offered by the University is linked to students’ residual household income. For UK students, residual household income will be determined by the relevant Education and Library Board or Local Authority. For EU students, residual household income will be determined by the Student
Loan Company (SLC).

18. The University has agreed that Bursaries for 2012/13 will be as follows:

**Existing Students ¹ (pre 2011/12)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bursary</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Household Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Band 1</td>
<td>£1,095</td>
<td>£18,820 or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band 2</td>
<td>£640</td>
<td>between £18,821 and £21,525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band 3</td>
<td>£320</td>
<td>between £21,526 and £40,238</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Existing Students ² 2011/12**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bursary</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Household Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Band 1</td>
<td>£800</td>
<td>£19,203 or less</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Bursary commitments made to existing students in their year of admission will be honored.

**New Students³ (from 2012/13 year of entry only)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bursary</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Household Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Band 1</td>
<td>£350</td>
<td>£19,203 or less</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

For new students starting in 2012/13 there is only one bursary band available which will be in place for the duration of the student's course.

19. Bursaries will not carry over into a second year but will be awarded on an annual basis. The University will make retrospective Bursary payments to eligible students during the subsequent academic year, where the financial assessment has been approved by the appropriate authority, but no further into the future.

20. The University has subscribed to the Student Loan Company’s Full Administration Service and Bursaries will be paid directly into a student's UK bank account in March of the relevant academic year. In order to receive payment a student must normally have applied to an Education and Library Board, Local Authority or, in the case of EU students, to the SLC EU Team at Darlington, and given consent for their details to be shared with the University.

21. Bursaries will only be paid where a student is in attendance at the University on 1 December in the relevant academic year. Bursaries will not be paid to students who leave before that date.

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¹ An existing student is a student who entered the University between the 2006/07 and 2011/12 academic years and who is continuing without a break of study on the same or a different course at undergraduate level.

² An existing student is a student who entered the University in 2011/12.

³ A new student is defined as a student who applied to, and was admitted to, a course starting in 2012/13. A student who commenced study between 2007/08 and 2011/12 but who withdrew from the University and started a new course in 2012/13 will be classed as a new student. A student starting a PGCE course in 2012/13 will be classed as a new student.
22. Where a student leaves on or after 1 December, the University will determine what proportion, if any, of the Bursary to pay to the student. The University reserves the right to reclaim from students any Bursary amounts overpaid where students have not informed the University of their withdrawal from the course.

CARE LEAVER BURSARY

23. The University has made a firm commitment to providing support for students that enter HE as care leavers. The support package offered includes a Scholarship of £500 per annum, access to year-round accommodation and assistance with the HE application process.

24. Students will be eligible for a Care Leaver Bursary when they have had experience of living away from the family home, or close family members, for a minimum of three months, because of having been looked after in public care as a result of exceptional family circumstances.

25. Such students will usually have recorded this information on their UCAS application, where C, D or E will be the relevant values for duration. Where this is the case, an automatic communication will be sent on receipt of the application detailing the support available. However, as this information is not compulsory, some applicants may not see a reason to disclose it at the pre-entry stage. The information can be disclosed at any stage during the academic year.

26. In order to receive a Bursary, students must be able to produce documentation from the relevant public authority confirming the dates of the arrangement. No personal details, including information about past or current family circumstances, will be required.

27. Once eligibility has been verified, a student will not need to re-apply for each subsequent year of full-time undergraduate study.

28. The regulations detailed in paragraphs 25 to 27 also govern the allocation and payment of the Care Leaver Bursary, with the exception that the payment will be made in December of the relevant academic year.

ULSTER EXCELLENCE SCHOLARSHIPS

29. Ulster Excellence Scholarships will provide financial support to acknowledge excellence and achievement in academic, sporting or outreach endeavours.

30. Scholarships, normally limited in value to between £500 and £2,000 per annum, will be paid in addition to any government grants or University Bursaries that students may receive and do not have to be paid back.

31. Ulster Excellence Scholarships (Academic Achievement) awarded in 2010/11 were targeted at STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and mathematics) and economically relevant skills shortage subject areas, to meet the University’s
goal of making a major contribution to the economic, social and cultural advancement of NI as a region. These Scholarships, which were awarded for the normal duration of the students’ programmes, will be continued but no additional (Academic Achievement) Scholarships will be awarded in 2012/13.

32. The University has subscribed to the Student Loans Company’s Full Administration Service and Scholarships will be paid direct into a student’s UK bank account. In order to receive payment a student must normally have applied to an Education and Library Board, Local Authority or, in the case of EU students, to the SLC EU Team at Darlington and given consent for their details to be shared with the University. A student who does not wish to take out a tuition fees loan or maintenance loan may apply for a “non-means tested award” to enable the Scholarship to be paid.

33. Payment of Scholarships will only be made when a student is in attendance at the University on the date on which the Scholarship is due to be paid. Scholarships will not be paid to students who leave before that date. If a student withdraws from the course subsequent instalments of the Scholarship will be stopped.

34. The University reserves the right to reclaim from students any Scholarship amounts overpaid as a result of students not having informed the University of their withdrawal from the course.

OUTREACH

35. The focus for Outreach activities during the period covered by the Agreement includes a combination of funded projects addressing targeted needs/audiences and general issues of concern that require exploration to identify future development potential.

36. The Widening Access and Participation Sub-Committee will consider project proposals and make recommendations for funding support, as appropriate. Projects will be assessed on the basis of how they will contribute to meeting the University’s Widening Access agenda, sustainability and value for money.

37. The University will maintain the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark, which recognises institutions that go the extra mile to support students who have been in public care. The purpose of the Trust is to safeguard the opportunities for looked after children to access HE and to succeed once enrolled. In order to meet the criteria, the University is utilising new UCAS data to be proactive in making contact with students coming from a background of care and advising them on opportunities for financial and social support. Funding support for the Student Support Officer allows for further development of the programme to include aspiration raising activities, pre-entry advice and support and access to social and academic mentoring.

38. Considerable Sports Outreach activities have been developed by the Sports Academy at Ulster. These activities are cross-community, encompass girls and boys and include primary and post-primary age groups. It is intended to
orientate this programme of activities to include a more deliberate focus on the Widening Access agenda, in the identification of schools, and to link these activities to ‘taster’ activities in relation to the academic study of sports and other disciplines.

39. Statistical monitoring of Ulster’s full-time undergraduate intakes has indicated that **black and ethnic minorities** in NI are under-represented amongst entrants. The black and ethnic minority population in NI is very small (probably no more than 1-2% of the population), whilst the largest single group is made up of the longstanding **Chinese community**. The University will continue to work with the organisations representing this group, to identify how greater demand for HE can be stimulated. While initiating these activities with the Chinese community, the University will also seek to identify and work with other minority groupings, as feasible.

40. Experience of equality monitoring at Ulster has shown substantial variations from one year’s entry cohort to the next in the numbers and representation of **students with disabilities**. The University will continue to work with organisations concerned with disability (e.g. Disability Action) to ensure that Ulster’s positive and supportive policy towards facilitating students with a range of disabilities is widely disseminated and understood.

41. The University takes **gender equality** seriously. Participation by women in the University’s undergraduate courses is high. In part, this is as a result of the programmes offered by the University being popular with females. However, it is apparent that traditional discipline areas of male/female domination continue. This is not an issue confined to Ulster or NI. However, in engaging in our Widening Access activities we will seek to ensure that we encourage both males and females to progress to all disciplines. The DEL Report on Widening Access (2005) pinpointed a particular gender related issue in NI. Specifically, it drew attention to the under-representation of males from lower socio-economic communities in Protestant areas. The University will seek to see how this issue can be specifically incorporated into the overall activities within the context of the progressive equality framework that exists in NI.

OUTREACH INFRASTRUCTURE

42. The Access and Distributed Learning Division leads and coordinates a range of Widening Access activities. In order to ensure coherence in the Widening Access activities delivered across the Institution and that strategic objectives are achieved, a number of infrastructural roles have been created to support the proposed additional communication, administration and Outreach activity associated with the delivery of the Access Agreement.

43. The University has invested heavily in the infrastructure necessary to deliver the objectives associated with the Access Agreement. The Department of Access and Educational Partnerships (AEP), which has responsibility for the development and delivery of the Access Agreement and widening access activity across the institution, has been restructured and four Access Coordinators, three Outreach Officers and one Information Officer have been
appointed.

44. Faculties and Departments will continue to be supported in the formulation of realistic widening participation strategies and annual operational plans, with associated targets, thus providing a coherent approach to measuring progress and recording achievements within an overall annual reporting process.

ADMINISTRATION AND MONITORING

45. The University's Access Agreement will be the responsibility of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Educational Partnerships and International Affairs.

46. Progress against targets will be reported to the Senate through the Widening Access and Participation Sub-Committee and the Educational Partnerships and International Affairs Committee.

47. The Access and Distributed Learning Division will, in consultation with Faculties and Departments, agree annual targets for widening access.

48. The University will make use of its Appeals procedures to deal with complaints regarding allocations of the Access Agreement Fund.

COMMUNICATION OF INFORMATION

49. The University deploys a mix of marketing and promotional tools to promote awareness of the Access Agreement. For the broader school and college population and the wider public (teachers, parents/guardians, etc.), promotional activity makes each segment aware that Ulster offers financial support and provide details on how to access further information and how to apply.

50. As prospective students begin to harvest information on their university choices, Ulster provides clear information in its student recruitment publications and on the website. This includes detailed information in the University's undergraduate prospectus, with further supplementary information on the University's online assets, in the form of a FAQ. Additional material on the Access Agreement and guidelines for students and parents is provided in downloadable format, outlining the procedure for application and criteria for eligibility. Note that as part of the University's commitment to access, material published on its website is already available in formats appropriate for sight and hearing impaired people.

51. Additional mechanisms for promoting the Access Agreement are through information provided in schools visits by University staff, at Open Days and Faculty information days conducted during the conversion process, in materials sent to UCAS applicants during the conversion process and as part of the joining instructions for successful applicants.

52. Due to the recurrent nature of funding support, and the need to reapply year on year, there are mechanisms to promote the scheme using internal communications facilities, such as the Students' Union website and newsletter,
and through course directors and other academic and administrative staff in Faculties and central Departments. In addition, direct communication with existing recipients advises them of the requirement to reapply.

STATISTICAL MILESTONES

53. The table below provides a breakdown of key under-represented groups in full-time undergraduate entrants to Ulster, with indicative milestones for 2012/13. Actual performance for the 2011/12 academic year shows that the University has exceeded its Disability target by 1.2% and achieved its SEC target. However, it has fallen somewhat short on Ethnicity by 0.1% and SEC and Religion by 3%. Two recently established initiatives should help to address this. Firstly, the development of a Schools and Colleges Engagement Strategy alongside establishing a Community Engagement Committee within the Educational Partnerships portfolio. The former provides a framework for coordinating, integrating and further developing our collaborative activities and engagement with Schools and Colleges. The latter aims to improve and enhance the impact and effectiveness of the University within the community and to develop a revised Community Engagement Strategy based on the theme Your University and Your Community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actual %</th>
<th>Milestones %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEC</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEC and Religion</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All figures are based upon NI domiciled new entrants to full time undergraduate courses (students who are enrolled on DHSSPS funded courses and Social Work courses have been excluded from the calculations, as they attract alternative financial support).

54. The University continues to perform significantly better than HESA benchmark performance indicators in respect of Social Class. However, the current changing and challenging Higher Education environment is likely to result in some institutional milestones not being met. The Widening Access and Participation Sub-Committee will review both performance and targets taking into account recent announcements about the way in which HE is to be funded in the future and make recommendations to the University in relation to realistic targets and milestones for future years. Furthermore, the University has been involved with the Department in the development of a Regional Widening Participation Strategy. Going forward, revised targets will align with this

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4 The Ethnicity figures indicate the percentage of student entrants from a non-white background.
5 The Socio-economic classification (SEC) figures indicate the percentage of student entrants from the 4 lower SEC groups.
6 The Religion and SEC figures indicate the proportion of the students from the 4 lower groups who are Protestants (e.g. in 07/08 the 46.6% from the lower groups is split into 15.9% Protestants, 29.5% Roman Catholics and 1.2% others/unknowns). The identification of the under-representation of this group was identified in the report of the NIHEC/DEL Widening Access Experts Report (2005).
Regional Strategy.

55. It should be noted that while the 2010/11 Disability figures compare unfavourably with historical levels and previous projected milestones, which likely stem from the introduction of the new student record system and online enrolment platform, this is largely due to under-reporting by students since they are no longer required to declare a disability at the application stage. There is evidence to suggest that Disabilities are currently being underreported by enrolling students and the indicative milestones for 2010/11 and 2011/12 have been adjusted accordingly. The Department of Student Support has reported a significant increase in the numbers of students they are currently supporting.

56. In the 2010/11 academic year the target (1.1%) for increasing the percentage representation for the Ethnicity category was exceeded (1.3%). As such the targets for future years have been uplifted accordingly.

57. Future widening participation activity will be informed by the Department for Employment and Learning’s Regional Strategy and the outcome of the University’s Review of Widening Access and Participation. Future funding and the changing policy context are likely to mitigate against the University’s excellent record in widening participation. Overall, however, the University is seeking to continue to widen access although that does not necessarily mean a ‘steady-state’ in terms of the representation of disadvantaged groups.