Unprecedented support for disadvantaged students

Birkbeck’s commitment to widening participation in higher education is opening doors for many non-traditional students

Innovative outreach activities and generous bursaries at Birkbeck are transforming lives. The support that Birkbeck offers is recognised as being among the best in the university sector.

In keeping with the founding principles of the College from 1823, Birkbeck continues to provide opportunities for busy people who would otherwise be unable to access higher education.

In 2012–2013, a total of 40% of Birkbeck’s undergraduate students – from households earning less than £25,000 per year – were eligible for financial support from the College.

For 2014–2015, the College expects to provide a record-breaking total financial support package of £3.6m, including 1,300 cash bursaries of £1,000 and 600 fee waivers worth £3,000 each.

Students have praised Birkbeck for its clear explanation of the College’s financial support, the straightforward bursary application process, and the benefits of this financial assistance. Bursary recipient and part-time History student Robin Snowdon said: “Receiving the bursary has been vital. I decided to come to Birkbeck because I wanted a practical education, wanted to be taught by the world’s leading historians, and study with mature students. It has transformed my life.”

The verdict on Birkbeck’s activities, which include inspirational outreach activities, pre-entry support and retention projects, is also positive from the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) – the independent watchdog that helps to safeguard and promote fair access to higher education.

OFFA assesses and monitors the access agreements submitted by all English universities and colleges to describe their efforts to ensure fair access, support students and improve retention. An approved access agreement means that institutions can charge more than £6,000 per year in tuition fees.

Birkbeck’s access agreement for 2014–2015, which was approved without amendments by OFFA, compared very favourably with those of other institutions. Birkbeck is projected to spend 53% of the higher fee income (above £6,000 per year) on improving access – above the 30% recommended by OFFA.

Birkbeck’s spend, in percentage terms, places it second when compared with all universities in England, and first in London when compared with all higher education institutions in the capital.

Birkbeck’s innovative outreach activities were also highlighted in the access agreement, including:

- Learning cafés: informal taster sessions in community settings, including Sure Start children’s centres and primary schools – more than 60% of attendees progressed to higher learning
- ‘Get Talking’: a scheme for prospective students to meet recent graduates to discuss their experiences of studying at Birkbeck – nearly 70% of the prospective students involved went on to enrol on courses.

Caroline McDonald, Head of Widening Access and Retention at Birkbeck, said: “We are delighted that more and more students are able to study at Birkbeck thanks to our unprecedented pre-entry activities and financial support. Our wide-ranging efforts to encourage non-traditional students to progress to higher education are working very effectively.”