# Open College of the Arts Access and Participation Plan

The Open College of the Arts is a charitable trust and part of the University for the Creative Arts (UCA) Group. The charitable mission of the Open College of the Arts is to provide opportunity for all to study creative arts. Prior qualifications are not required for entry to OCA courses; entry criteria do not apply. As a result, OCA is the first destination for many students who do not feel able to engage with Higher Education in a conventional setting.

The academic year 2018/19 represents a first for the Open College of the Arts; we have made a commitment to ensure that at least a third of our students come from a Widening Participation background. This is to maintain the College focus as a charity, and to reinforce the name *Open*, enabling access to all to creative arts education.

OCA has a strong focus on widening participation and really lives up to its name of being open; in the current academic year 93% are over the age of 21, and 79% over the age of 30. In addition, 20% of our current student body has a declared disability (compared to a UK average of 12%) of which one third have a mental health condition. The majority of OCA students are therefore categorised as mature students, i.e. over the age of 21, this is a contrast to the UK Higher Education sector as a whole which averages 38% mature students (HESA 2015/16 student enrolments and qualifications obtained at higher education providers in the United Kingdom) with the number of mature learners in Higher Education having fallen by 49% in the past decade and the number of part time learners has dropped by 67% over the same period. Within this group, the proportion of female students is higher than the average, at 68% compared to an overall 57% of the national average.

The College recognises the value of a diverse student body in creative arts environments; as such OCA will make a concerted effort to enhance the proportion of students from a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) background HESA data from 2016/17 indicates that 20% of OCA students currently from BME background.

To address these imbalances, OCA is working to revise the current Equality & Diversity policies in effect at the College, to ensure that these are creating genuinely open opportunities for all students. In addition, the College is committing itself to the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) along with its requirement to publish yearly Equality & Diversity Action Plans, alongside a four-yearly Equality & Diversity Strategy. Through this strategy we are aiming to increase BAME representation in OCA mature learners by the end of the four year period and to maintain the percentage of students with declared disabilities.

In addition, the College has and will continue to invest in schemes to improve engagement into creative arts from those from low socio-economic backgrounds. We have run successfully since 2011/12 a Bursary Fund for students with low household income and no previous academic qualifications and since then have successfully supported 88 students into creative arts Higher Education. There is also a Widening Participation fund at the College through which we seek to fund new offerings to widen participation in higher education such as a range of foundations and short courses, staff training, and access to relevant software for students for example. The staff training includes supporting tutors to provide the best service possible, including a new approach towards students identified with Asperger’s or similar conditions.

Last year the Open College of the Arts launched a Learner Support Initiative using the HEFCE Widening Participation funding to support the attainment and retention of students from low socio-economic backgrounds as defined by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) POLAR classification quintiles 1-3. A dedicated Learner Support team was established to provide proactive support at early levels of study. As a consequence of this additional support we are anticipating an increase in the retention rate of students and as a result, greater attainment. In addition to the Learner Support team we have also created a Learner Support bursary to subsidise aspects of study and the assist those in most need. OCA recognises that mature learners are more likely to suffer financial hardship whilst studying (Source MillionPlus research [Forgotten Learners: building a system that works for mature students](http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/policy/reports/forgotten-learners-building-a-system-that-works-for-mature-students), 2018) and are less likely to be able to access student finance, the College therefore provides additional financial support to mature learners through the learner support fund and bursaries and has increased the hardship funding to provide additional support to learners from POLAR one and two quintiles. We will be monitoring and evaluating this Learner Support function regularly through engagement rates and attainment outcomes among others, to identify techniques which can be applied to all students at the college.

OCA also plans to work within the local area to where it is based in order to provide opportunities to low-participation students. In 2016, [a report by LKMco](https://www.lkmco.org/white-working-class-boys-higher-education-widening-participation/), demonstrated that white working class males were the least represented group of students in UK higher education. The local area to where OCA is based, north Barnsley, is predominantly classified as POLAR one and two quintiles, where the highest rate of youth participation in Higher Education is 35.9%. OCA will seek to work with local schools to encourage young working class males in particular to open their horizons to Higher Education. We will undertake a learn and apply approach to use what we discover through local community engagement to encourage national uptake amongst the least represented groups.

The College will continue to work closely with the University for the Creative Arts, and the providers of Widening Participation funding to enhance and improve opportunities for the most disadvantaged. This academic year we have revised our academic strategy and College mission statement to reflect an evolving society and that we as an organisation are open to all.

In developing the work that we do, OCA listens to and engages with our student body and takes their suggestions seriously. We have done this through regular surveys, notably the National Student Survey, and our range of internal surveys; furthermore our students have an opportunity to get in touch with us directly through our open discussion forums and respond more broadly via WeAreOCA posts. It is through these media that our focus on Equality & Diversity has been revitalised through engaging student and tutor discussions into the diversity of the OCA tutor base. This has led to a new approach to Equality & Diversity for the 18/19 academic year with a revamped Equality & Diversity Policy (and newly developed subsidiary policies) and Equality & Diversity Action Plan to fall in line with the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED); the Action Plan will be published every year and note the actions taken in relation to equality & diversity.