



> Helen Tones pictured after completing the 202-mile charity challenge. She was the first woman to do so, alongside nine men Tim McGuinness

First woman completes heart unit challenge

AN exercise instructor yesterday became the first woman to complete a gruelling 202-mile charity challenge for the Children's Heart Unit at Newcastle's Freeman Hospital.

Helen Tones, from Gilesgate in Durham, joined nine men from the North East in

Whitehaven, Cumbria, on Sunday morning to kick off the Seb4CHUF Coast to Coast four-day challenge.

She crossed the finishing line at Tyne-mouth yesterday afternoon and said touching her toes in the North Sea was the best

relief she could have hoped for.

Helen, a Durham Council exercise instructor, said: "After the first day, for a millisecond, I thought 'I can't do this' but my will power took over. It's been a huge challenge."

North unis aiming for a broader social mix

Ruth Lognonne

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NORTH universities are making access to higher education more fair after figures showed that pupils from wealthy areas were more likely to be admitted to sought-after institutions than their poorer peers.

Newcastle University is sending its students into schools across the city to search out academic potential and create a better social mix on campus.

This initiative, where undergraduate students essentially work as tutors in the region's schools, has been highlighted by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) as a shining example of how universities can help to raise aspirations and attainment among those with the talent to benefit from higher education.

The move comes after figures published in OFFA's annual report showed that the most "advantaged" students - those from the 20% of postcodes with the largest numbers of educated parents - were eight times more likely to be admitted to a top university than those from the bottom fifth.

When comparing access to all universities, the most advantaged were still 2.5 times more

> **Lucy Backhurst, Newcastle University's head of undergraduate recruitment and admissions**

likely to be admitted than the poorest.

Lucy Backhurst, Newcastle University's head of undergraduate recruitment and admissions, said: "This is great news for the university. Our focus is not just about getting the students in, but supporting them throughout their course, and developing the skills they need to succeed in work or further study.

"In all the outreach work we do, we're making best use of our greatest assets; our own students and alumni. It was really encouraging that OFFA recognised the Students into Schools programme in their report where current students work in schools across the region for academic credit.

"It's a simple idea that's a win-win for the pupils, the teachers and our own students."

Newcastle College is also offering a cash bursary of £1,000 for new full-time undergraduate students that start their studies from September. All new undergraduates will receive £1,000 cash support which is paid throughout the academic year

for each year of their course.

This bursary will help students with the cost of accommodation, travel, text books, equipment or anything else they need along the way.

Under rules, all universities seeking to charge up to £9,000 in tuition fees must draw up an "access agreement" setting out a range of policies and targets designed to ensure poor students are not put off by higher fees.

OFFA can fine universities £500,000 or refuse to allow them to charge more than £6,000 in fees for failing to adhere to the agreement.

Professor Les Ebdon, the Government's fair access tsar, said: "These new access agreements commit the whole sector to significant and sustained work that should make a lasting impact.

"Higher education offers life-changing opportunities and it's important that people from all backgrounds are able to access these opportunities. This new set of access agreements will help to ensure that access to higher education is based on talent, not background."



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