HE Access and Participation Task and Finish Group: Terms of Reference

Purpose

The benefits of higher education to individuals, society, and the economy are substantial. To deliver on the government's Growth and Opportunity Missions, it is essential that these benefits are available equally to people from all backgrounds and opportunity is available to all.

Access to higher education should be based on ability, not background, and all students should be supported to succeed. Many higher education providers, supported by income from fees and the government's Strategic Priorities Grant, already deliver significant support across the student journey to help people access and participate in higher education. However, despite sustained efforts and investment over the past two decades, there remain wide and stubborn gaps in access and outcomes between disadvantaged groups – including those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, care leavers, mature students (age 21+), those with special education needs and disability (SEND) and certain minority ethnic groups - and their peers. This has also led to significant regional disparities. The problem is multi-faceted and complex; shaped by structural, social, and economic barriers. Addressing these will require bold ideas and collaborative action across government and the education and skills sector.

Higher education access is to a large extent constrained by inequalities in prior attainment, with the GCSE disadvantage gap index similar to 2011/12 levels. The schools white paper will set out our vision for a school system that drives educational excellence for every child and young person, no matter their background. High and rising standards across education are the key to unlocking stronger outcomes and a better future for children and young people. In schools we will deliver these improvements through excellent teaching and leadership, a high-quality curriculum, robust accountability and school improvement and a system which removes barriers to learning. The Post 16 Skills white paper sets out our proposed reforms to the higher education system, including our vision for transforming access and outcomes for disadvantaged students.

The Higher Education Access and Participation Task and Finish Group aims to build on this by pursuing ambitious sector-led initiatives. It will develop practical, evidence-based proposals to promote fairer and wider access for students from disadvantaged groups and underserved areas, to support them to succeed and progress onto positive outcomes.

Scope of outputs

The Task and Finish Group will develop proposals across two strands to improve access with the ultimate goal of widening successful participation across level 4+ study (including apprenticeships). Recognising the autonomy of the higher education sector, the group should focus on initiatives which can be sector-led, with the support and involvement of students, government, the third sector and wider stakeholders. Within each strand, it should identify options which could have the greatest positive impact on disadvantaged students, whilst recognising the financial pressures on the sector and making best use of existing funding.

1. **Regional disparities:** addressing cold spots in access in regions with the biggest disadvantage gap.

   Despite national efforts to widen participation in education, significant regional disparities in access persist, particularly in areas with entrenched socio-economic disadvantage. Within this strand the group should take a strategic, place-based approach to tackling these disparities, considering ways to break down barriers to joint working across the HE sector and with local partners, including further education providers, strategic authorities and designated employer representative bodies (through their work on Local Skills Improvement Plans).

   The group **should**:
   - Identify and prioritise regions with the largest disadvantage gaps, using the latest data
   - Develop place-based proposals to facilitate innovative and accessible delivery models that meet the needs of local areas not well served by higher education, including by providing flexible provision and level 4 and 5 skills that employers need. The group should explore the viability of existing initiatives and consider models with potential for long-term economic sustainability
   - Explore solutions to strengthen collaboration between higher education and schools and further education providers to support access and smoother transitions to higher education for disadvantaged students

2. **Barriers to access across the student journey:** identifying and addressing the most significant systemic barriers to access across the student journey, which require the sector and wider stakeholders to come together to address.

    Within this strand the group is asked to consider specific factors blocking access at different stages of the student journey, in particular by looking closely at admissions practices, which do not always recognise the additional barriers disadvantaged students face. The sector has already made strides to begin developing a consistent approach to contextual admissions, where applicants' backgrounds are considered as part of the admissions process. There is a need to bring together work on admissions practices and see through wide adoption of improvements.

    The journey to higher education does not start at the point of applying for a particular institution. Students' aspirations, perceptions and decisions about higher education are shaped by the information and experiences they encounter both earlier in their lives and as they consider their options in post-16 and beyond. This includes including understanding of the costs and benefits of HE and awareness of pathways into HE, such as non-traditional routes at level 4/5. The group is asked to consider where there is the greatest potential to address these wider barriers, including where these persist for mature students in both undergraduate and postgraduate study.

    The group **should**:
    - Look at improvements to admissions practices to benefit disadvantaged students, building on the work of Universities UK, UCAS and Sutton Trust to establish a transparent and consistent sector-wide approach to contextual admissions
    - Consider ways to address wider systemic barriers to access, including by working with schools, colleges and careers advisors on how to improve awareness of non-traditional routes into higher education and provide clearer messaging around the costs and benefits of higher education

While the group will not have formal powers for awarding funding, it should remain mindful of the broader reform landscape and seek to advance initiatives which will, when brought together, make a significant impact for disadvantaged students.

By January 2027, the group should:

- Review previous work and proposals on regional access gaps and factors blocking access for disadvantaged groups

- Analyse data on regional access gaps, identifying regions with the largest gaps to develop placed-based interventions for
- Identify and further examine a small number of persistent barriers to access faced by disadvantaged groups
- Develop proposals for innovative and accessible delivery models in the identified regions and to address factors blocking access
- Confirm a sector-wide approach to contextual admissions
- Produce and publish a report setting out the proposals and implementation plans

In concluding its work, the group should identify who will be responsible for taking forward next steps and consider what background documents and considerations should be passed on to those who will take the work forward.

The outputs of the group will report directly to Baroness Smith of Malvern, Minister for Skills and she will be invited as appropriate to be updated on its progress.

Membership

The group will bring together individuals with an interest and expertise in widening access and successful participation in higher education. Members will include representatives from sector bodies, think tanks, charities and relevant government agencies.

The group should engage, where appropriate, with relevant stakeholders beyond its membership to ensure outputs reflect a range of perspectives. This may include student representative bodies and regional partners such as schools, FE providers, Careers Hubs and Strategic Authorities.

The expectation is that members will:

- Deploy their substantial expertise and networks to ensure important stakeholders are engaged and that the group has insightful evidence available reflecting views of a wide range of interested parties, and is able to develop proposals that will be widely embraced by the sector
- Commit time to not only attend all group meetings but to actively shape the group's direction and outputs, including by leading and participating in work strands, and producing and contributing to papers
- Ensure the final report is robust evidence based and delivered on time by contributing high-quality content and timely, constructive feedback

Ways of working

The group will meet formally every two months for one year. Sub-groups may be convened to take forward specific work strands and these will meet more frequently as required.

The first meeting will take place in **November 2025**.

Papers and materials may be provided by appropriate members of the group, as well as by external bodies and individuals who are supporting its work.

The secretariat will be provided by DfE and will aim to:

- circulate papers a minimum of five working days before meetings
- issues minutes no longer than five working days after meetings

The terms of reference and membership for the group will be published on GOV.UK. We will thereafter publish quarterly updates and the final report.

The secretariat will manage a dedicated mailbox for the group to receive enquiries.

Confidentiality

The group may on occasion be exposed to unpublished and confidential data analysis and policy and strategy development to support its work. Such information is strictly confidential and should not be shared beyond the group without permission from the relevant persons.

Conflicts of interest

Members should aim to avoid conflicts of interest likely to prejudice their independence and objectivity in performing their roles in the group. Where any such possible conflict of interest does arise (either before or during the term of the group) members will declare it. Members will not use their position on the group or information obtained in the course of that work to benefit their employer, particularly in gaining advantage in competition to provide services to the Department for Education.