



Professor Kathryn Mitchell CBE DL
University of Derby
Kedleston Road
Derby
DE22 1GB
18 May 2026

Minister Smith
House of Lords
London
SW1A 0PW

Dear Minister Smith,

I am writing to provide a further update on the progress of the Access and Participation Task and Finish Group, and to begin to set out the emerging shape of our thinking as the work develops.

Engagement across the sector has continued to be strong, constructive, and forward-looking. There is a clear appetite among higher education, further education, and wider partners, not simply to improve outcomes within the current system, but to consider how we might collectively deliver a more coherent and effective approach to progression into, and through, higher-level study, with the aim being to significantly improve access for disadvantaged groups and close gaps. While the scale of the challenge is significant, there is a real sense that this is also a moment of opportunity.

As the group has moved from initial scoping into deeper analytical work, a consistent picture is emerging. The barriers to progression for under-represented learners into Level 4+ study are not confined to a single stage or group but are cumulative and embedded across the learner journey. These findings are consistent with evidence emerging from our wider engagement programme, including roundtables, stakeholder interviews and rapid evidence reviews, indicating that the most significant challenges are structural and national in nature, and that solutions will need to operate at a similar scale to deliver meaningful impact.

Emerging themes

As the group's work has progressed, a clearer and more coherent set of themes has begun to emerge. Taken together, these suggest that the barriers to progression reflect deeper structural challenges across the system, rather than isolated challenges. They also point towards a more integrated approach that links

Vice-Chancellor's Executive, Kedleston Road, Derby, DE22 1GB, UK
01332 590500

improvements throughout the student journey with a broader rebalancing of the system.

At the centre of this emerging picture is a recognition that expanding participation will require substantive action across multiple fronts simultaneously, rather than at a single point of intervention.

A three-track model for expanding participation

Within this, the group is increasingly framing its thinking around three complementary routes through which participation could be expanded.

First, there is a need to increase the overall number of entrants to higher education, particularly through the expansion and normalisation of Level 4 and 5 pathways as credible, high-quality options to attract learners who may not consider HE today.

Second, there is a clear requirement to strengthen the existing pipeline, including both raising attainment and addressing the persistent ‘conversion gap’ among learners who are already qualified but do not progress to reduce leakage and increase flow through the pipeline.

Third, there is a growing focus on transforming opportunities for re-entry later in life, recognising that non-progression at 18 is often a delay rather than an endpoint, and that mature and flexible routes are a critical component of overall participation.

Taken together, this reflects a shift towards a system that supports participation across the life course, meeting learners where they are and recognising the need for both diversity and parity of routes into higher-level study.

A coherent set of system levers

Alongside this framework, the group’s work is taking shape around a set of interdependent levers through which change could be delivered at scale.

These include:

- stronger national and regional leadership and governance;
- clearer shared ambition and targets for participation;
- a step change in place-based collaboration;
- a rebalancing of provision towards more flexible and locally accessible pathways;
- more active pipeline management supported by improved information and guidance;



- a more systematic approach to recognising potential within the admissions process, with the aim to reduce inequalities in the type of institution accessed as well as expanding participation;
- targeted action to reduce barriers for those learners at greatest risk across the progression journey.

While many of these elements already exist within the system in partial or localised form, their impact is currently constrained by fragmentation. The emerging insight is that meaningful progress will depend on how far these levers can be brought together within a more coherent and mutually reinforcing framework, rather than delivered as isolated interventions.

A stronger national–local model for delivery

A final, and increasingly central, theme is the need to bring together national ambition and local delivery more effectively.

There is a clear case for stronger national framing, whether through strategy, targets or funding alignment, to provide direction and collective momentum. At the same time, many of the barriers to participation are experienced locally, shaped by differences in provision, labour markets and community context.

This points towards a model in which national priorities are delivered through empowered regional and local partnerships, capable of coordinating, leading and driving activity across schools, further and higher education, employers and communities. There is a clear opportunity to align this approach with the Office for Students' developing work on regional access partnerships, using these as a practical vehicle to support more coherent local delivery and to enable the kind of systemic change government is seeking to achieve.

Within this, there is an important balance to strike. Strengthening local access and participation must not come at the expense of opportunity; rather, local delivery should both support participation where learners are, and enable mobility when that is their aspiration, ensuring that geography expands rather than constrains choice.

Emerging shape of the response

At its core, the emerging response points towards a shift from a largely fragmented and institution-led approach to one that is more coordinated, progression and success focused, and explicitly designed around the learner journey end-to-end. This includes clearer alignment between schools, further education, higher education and employers, and a stronger emphasis on shared responsibility for outcomes.



A central element will be the development of stronger place-based partnerships, with a broader remit than has traditionally been the case. Rather than focusing primarily on outreach, these partnerships would support coordination across attainment, progression, provision and re-entry, enabling a more coherent local response to entrenched inequalities.

Alongside this, there is a growing emphasis on expanding and rebalancing the range of pathways into higher-level learning, particularly through more flexible, local and lower-risk provision at Levels 4 and 5, clearer routes for mature learners, and a stronger focus on outcomes within these pathways. This includes addressing non-continuation and reframing perceptions of success, recognising the value of completing Level 4 and 5 qualifications in their own right, as well as improving their visibility and recognition among learners, employers, and the wider system.

Delivering change at this scale will require alignment across different parts of the system, including across government. Whilst higher education is clearly held to account through the Office for Students, and schools and further education through the Department for Education and Ofsted, there remains a question as to how these responsibilities align in practice, and how other parts of the system, including employers, are effectively engaged in supporting skills development, with clear expectations of their role in investing in the workforce.

Finally, we are beginning to consider how some of these ideas might be tested in practice. There may be value in a small number of targeted trailblazer areas or partnerships, where different elements of this approach can be brought together and piloted, allowing us to understand more fully what it takes to translate policy intent into impact on the ground.

A challenging but important opportunity

The scale and complexity of the change required is considerable. Many of the emerging solutions will entail working differently across institutional and sectoral boundaries, aligning incentives more closely, and in some cases rethinking how provision is organised and delivered.

However, there is also a strong sense that the current moment presents a unique opportunity. The direction of wider post-16 and OfS reform, including the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, alongside a growing focus on skills and productivity, provides a context in which a more coherent and ambitious approach to access and participation can be taken forward.



There is also clear evidence of a willingness across the sector to engage constructively with this agenda and a recognition that to close access gaps which have persisted for decades will require new thinking and significant change.

Our focus in the next phase of work will be to refine these emerging solutions, including stress-testing with key stakeholders, and develop a set of recommendations that are both ambitious and deliverable.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss these themes in person as the group moves towards shaping final recommendations.

Yours sincerely

Professor Kathryn Mitchell CBE DL
Vice-Chancellor & Chief Executive