



**The Rt Hon Baroness Jacqui Smith
Minister for Skills**

Department for Education Sanctuary Buildings 20 Great Smith Street London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/contactus/dfe

[By email](#)

9 March 2026

Dear Kathryn,

Re: Higher Education Access and Participation Task and Finish Group

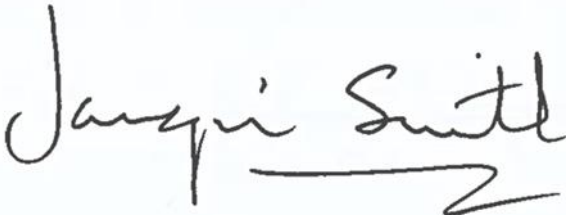
Thank you very much for your letter of 5 February updating me on the Access and Participation Task and Finish Group. I was delighted to be able to join the inaugural meeting in November and felt assured that we had the expertise and passion around the table to deliver the transformative change needed to truly widen opportunity. I would like to thank you for your enthusiastic leadership and all members of the Group for their engagement so far. In particular, I know those leading the sub groups have dedicated themselves to driving forward progress: Tom Sperlinger and Graeme Atherton (looking at regional disparities) and Nick Harrison, supported by Krisha Bainham (focused on barriers on journey to higher education).

I warmly welcome the Task and Finish Group's alignment with the objectives of the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper, which includes the government's vision for transforming higher education access and outcomes for disadvantaged students. The place-based approach being taken by this Group is vital so we can start breaking the link between where people grow up and their prospects of grasping the opportunity presented by higher-level study. I also welcome the focus on widening participation through progression routes to levels 4 and 5. You will be well aware that we have set a target for two thirds of young people to participate in higher-level learning, with a sub-target of at least 10% of young people going into level 4 or 5 study, to drive up opportunity and meet the country's economic growth needs.

I appreciate the Group's focus in its analysis on barriers to accessing higher education that are unique to certain groups. I had the pleasure of meeting with some inspiring young adult carers earlier this year where I heard about the particular challenges they face accessing education. In addition, Minister MacAlister and I recently wrote to all HE Vice Chancellors, setting out our ambitions for the sector to go further in supporting care leavers. I hope your approach helps us find ways to break down barriers not just for the groups you set out but for all of those who face disadvantage.

I look forward to the next stage of the work as you seek to turn to solutions that are sector-led, with support and involvement from students, government, the third sector and wider stakeholders. I have asked my officials to do what they can to support your Group as it develops its recommendations so that we can continue to align with the vision of the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper. To launch that engagement, the responsible Director will reach out to you for a meeting in the coming weeks. I would then welcome a discussion around your emerging thinking by the summer, ahead of the Group concluding its work by January 2027.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light blue background. The signature reads "Jacqui Smith" in a cursive script. Below the name, there is a horizontal line that ends in a small flourish.

**The Rt Hon Baroness Jacqui Smith
Minister for Skills**