



Department
for Education

Meeting Notes - Higher Education (HE) Access and Participation Task and Finish Group

Date: Wednesday 4 March 2026

Time: 12.30 – 14.00

Location: Virtual

Chair

Professor Kathryn Mitchell, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, University of Derby; Chair of the Higher Education (HE) Access and Participation Task and Finish Group

Members Present

- Dr Nick Harrison, Chief Executive, The Sutton Trust
- Professor Tom Sperlinger, Academic Director for Civic Spaces, University of Bristol
- Professor Graeme Atherton, Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Regional Engagement, University of West London
- Dr Brooke Storer-Church, Chief Executive Officer, GuildHE
- Professor Jane Harrington, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, University of Greenwich
- Professor Anthony Moss, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Education and Student Experience, London South Bank University
- Professor Lisa Roberts, Vice-President (England and Northern Ireland), Universities UK; and President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Exeter
- Dr Shaid Mahmood, Chair, Association of Colleges; Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Durham University
- David Morgan, Chief Executive, Career Development Institute
- Professor Chris Millward, Interim Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students
- Dr Hollie Chandler, Director of Policy, Russell Group
- Dr Stephanie Harris, Director of Policy, Universities UK

- Rachel Hewitt, Chief Executive, MillionPlus
- Alex Proudfoot, Chief Executive, Independent Higher Education
- Fiona Ellison, Co-Director, Unite Foundation
- Amira Campbell, President, National Union of Students (NUS) UK
- Ben Jordan, Director of Strategy, UCAS
- Dani Payne, Chief Executive, Social Market Foundation

Apologies

- Professor Liz Mossop, Vice-Chancellor, Sheffield Hallam University
- Suzannah Reeves, Principal, Oldham Sixth Form College

In Attendance

- Krisha Bainham, Head of Access and Participation Policy and Engagement, University of Derby
- Naomi Abayasekara, Universities UK (item 4)
- Department for Education officials

Welcome and Introduction

The Chair welcomed members to the meeting and thanked both sub-groups for the substantial work undertaken since the previous session. She emphasised the importance of developing recommendations that are collaborative, evidence-led and capable of delivery across a diverse HE system.

Update from Regional Disparities Sub-Group

Members received an update on the development of a framework to think about place and cold spots. This would be inspired by the Arizona State University vision for a new era in which HE is defined by who it includes – in an expansive way. There would be a distributed model of provision commissioned by different actors in a “we work for you” approach. The framework would need to reflect the ecosystem in each place as well as enablers and supporting infrastructure. Importantly, a position would be needed on who “does the doing”.

Members were told that in order to ensure solutions met the lived reality of people a small set of student personas had been produced. These might be developed into a shared set of personas across the sub-groups with a wide range of stakeholders with particular expertise helping refine them. There would also be industry personas – reflecting some of the critical sectors for Level 4 and above skills.

It was noted by a member that the people in the current personas all lacked Level 3 attainment and it was stated that the wider set of personas would be more varied. A

number of members argued for the importance of building student voices into personas, with students paid for their experience.

It was suggested that recommendations could inform upcoming OfS work on funding and quality and that the OfS could play a role in governance through accountability and funding incentives. It was argued a common understanding of risks within each region would be helpful, feeding into the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register. Members noted the importance of aligning any place-based recommendations with existing skills and civic infrastructure (such as Local Skills Improvement Plans).

The sub-group is also looking at Level 4 – including ideas around entitlement to a certain number of credits and provision that might have the kudos of the associate's degree in the US, as well as a new form of flexible or part-time learning that could complement apprenticeships. There was comment from a member about the need for greater status for Level 4 and 5, looking again at branding and naming of “Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs)”. It was flagged that there are sustainability and resilience challenges for smaller providers participating in micro-campus and partnerships with industries and communities.

A member questioned whether barriers were driven by finances or socio-cultural issues and whether that might differ across groups. It was argued that relatively low-cost interventions could make a big difference, and an example was provided of a simple intervention involving paying for childminders to prevent dropouts from teenage parents in further education (FE).

Discussion concluded with next steps set out, including a roundtable with a range of different stakeholders not represented on the Task and Finish Group to seek views on solutions, as well as testing of the emerging model with stakeholders in a small number of places to reflect different types of place across the country.

Update from Barriers Across the Student Journey Sub-Group

An update was provided on the sub-group's progress. Stakeholder interviews showed a clear consensus around the core barriers and the priority groups. Key interview themes included systemic complexity, fragmented pathways, uneven access to careers information and guidance, and mismatches around supply and demand for HE. There were some tensions coming through around the relative importance of financial and socio-cultural barriers. A rapid evidence review would help fill in gaps emerging from the interviews as a next step.

Plans were set out for student journey mapping, which would start with students on free school meals (FSM) and could be replicated across care experienced and young carers groups, with disadvantaged mature students reflected within those three categories. Sub-group members have been providing intelligence on the

drivers of barriers and the intention is to map existing interventions before including new solutions. Combined alongside the pipeline data analysis, this would allow for a visualisation of data leakages at different stages. Members welcomed the intention to combine qualitative and quantitative evidence to identify key transition points where learners disproportionately disengage. The group emphasised the importance of focusing on progression and successful outcomes, not solely access.

There was discussion about the need for a campaign and messaging about the benefits of HE, and a suggestion of challenging the “HE marketisation” narrative towards a discussion of its wider public benefits. It was suggested some barriers should be flagged in the context of the industrial strategy, as students seeing a lack of jobs would be outside the control of the HE sector.

There was a consensus that recommendations should avoid restating previous approaches that have not demonstrated impact at scale. It was clarified that solutions from this sub-group would be tested with stakeholders from early summer onwards.

Contextual Admissions – UUK update

Members received an update on joint work led by Universities UK (UUK), the Sutton Trust and UCAS on contextual admissions. The work aims to support greater transparency, consistency and effective communication, while respecting institutional autonomy. The main planned output is a guidance document that would be connected to the UUK and Guild HE Fair Admissions Code of Practise, with principles and behaviours for implementing contextual admissions - with the aim being to publish in summer 2026. This guidance would support an evidence-based approach to eligibility and clear accessible communication on contextual admission policies. There would also be applicant and advisor facing guidance. There was good engagement with the call for evidence that was launched, particularly from admissions practitioners.

Several members asked if the work could go further and look at a commitment from all universities to implement contextual admissions and also explore the concept of guaranteed admissions. The language around contextual admissions and its application to mature students was also questioned. It was noted that universities are coming from different starting places but that communication from the Task and Finish Group and government around the legitimacy of contextual admissions would be welcome.

A number of members also raised the question of preparedness to study, and it was stated that appropriate transition support would be considered.

Chair's Summary

The Chair thanked members and sub-group leads for their progress and constructive challenge. She emphasised the importance of testing proposals with stakeholders and learners and ensuring that emerging recommendations are both ambitious and deliverable.

Next Steps

Sub-groups will continue evidence-gathering and begin structured testing of emerging proposals. Further details of engagement activity will be circulated ahead of the next meeting.

Actions / Decisions

- Members to share relevant evidence and case studies to inform emerging recommendations.