



Department  
for Education

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

Date: Thursday 12 February 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 CEO, University of Greenwich
- Professor Anthony Moss, Pro Vice Chancellor Education and Student Experience, London South Bank University (LSBU)
- Professor Lisa Roberts, Vice-President (England and Northern Ireland), Universities UK (UUK); and President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Exeter
- Dr Shaid Mahmood, Chair, Association of Colleges; Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), Durham University
- David Morgan, Chief Executive, Career Development Institute (CDI)
- Professor Liz Mossop, Vice-Chancellor, Sheffield Hallam University
- Professor Chris Millward, Interim Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students (OfS)
- Suzannah Reeves, Pinnacle Learning Trust; Principal, Oldham Sixth Form College
- Dr Hollie Chandler, Director of Policy, Russell Group
- Dr Stephanie Harris, Director of Policy, Universities UK (UUK)
- Rachel Hewitt, Chief Executive, Million Plus
- 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, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)

## **In attendance**

- Krisha Bainham, Head of Access and Participation Policy & Engagement, University of Derby
- Department for Education (DfE) Officials.

## **Welcome and Introduction**

The Chair welcomed members to the second meeting of the Task and Finish Group. She noted that she had sent a letter to Minister Smith to update on the group's progress and will update the group when she receives a response.

## **Update from Sub-Group 1: Systemic Barriers Across the Student Journey**

It was confirmed that the sub-group's composition was now largely complete, with representation from student voices, further education (FE), HE, sector bodies and additional practitioners.

The group's approach to developing its problem analysis was outlined: first, agreeing the specific disadvantaged groups to focus on; second, estimating the size of participation gaps and setting indicative targets for closing part of those gaps; and third, constructing a pipeline model that maps progression from Level 2 through to HE participation and successful outcomes, identifying the points at which learners fall out of the system. The sub-group lead noted that the pipeline for mature learners would necessarily differ given their varied entry routes, and that personas and case studies would be used to bring individual journeys to life and test emerging proposals.

Support with the quantitative work the sub-group is planning was offered from the wider Task and Finish Group.

The Task and Finish Group proposed to focus on learners from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, care-experienced learners (with the group leaning towards a broad definition that covers those who have experienced care at any point), young carers, and mature learners. Provisional estimates suggest that if the system were to close half of the current access gap for these groups, around 45,000 additional HE places would be required nationally to avoid displacement.

Members noted that the implications of these additional students must be understood not only in terms of access but also continuation and completion, with several stressing that increasing entry rates without ensuring progression would risk worsening outcomes for the very learners the group seeks to support. It was noted that equality of opportunity is established in legislation as the relevant duty, whereas equality of outcomes is not. It was

agreed that it would be important to consider successful participation as well as access and that the sub-group would take this away.

Members commented that providers would need to adapt provision, including through more flexible delivery models, including online delivery, and improved support structures. Others noted that the growing complexity of the system - due to the increasing diversity of routes, qualifications and delivery modes - can also create confusion for prospective learners. It was noted there needs to be parity to and clarity of alternative pathways to ensure learners are equipped and supported to navigate the route which is best suited to them. Members also stressed the importance of recognising Level 4 and Level 5 qualifications as meaningful and valuable outcomes in and of themselves, rather than solely as stepping stones to Level 6, noting the need for greater understanding of Level 4 and 5 completion and progression patterns.

Emerging themes from interviews with sub-group members and other experts included the importance of learner perceptions of HE, confidence, role models and sustained exposure to HE rather than one-off interactions. Members noted that attainment remains a fundamental barrier and discussed the importance of second-chance routes, particularly for mature learners. Several members highlighted the importance of understanding the reasons learners choose not to go to HE even when they have the attainment to do so, noting that decision-making is often shaped by perceived risk, particularly financial risk.

It was noted that further evidence on risk perception would be valuable, given the limited research currently available. Members should send any relevant papers to the leads of this sub-group.

Cost was raised repeatedly as a major barrier, including both headline affordability issues and smaller day-to-day barriers such as travel costs. Members observed that perceptions of the value of higher education had deteriorated, with some noting that confidence in the returns to HE study had declined among disadvantaged groups in particular.

It was noted that the group is focusing on sector-led solutions but wouldn't shy away from identifying wider issues such as financial barriers too. DfE officials confirmed they would be organising engagement between the Chair and sub-group leads and various DfE policy teams, which would include student finance leads.

There was broad agreement that the group needs to consider both supply and demand in HE, and members discussed how demand often focused on skills demand rather than student demand - which might not always align. One member shared an example where a fashion academy in London developed a bespoke module on data science, in response to demand from employers they work, but there was no interest or uptake from learners.

Members noted that demand for degree apprenticeships is high, but supply is constrained because opportunities depend on employers creating roles, and they suggested there is little evidence that employers are looking to expand opportunities at the scale required to meet this demand.

The importance of collaboration between HE and FE providers was noted by several members, with members noting that where FE and HE work together effectively, this tends to reduce drop-off at key transition points. Members also reflected that career guidance before age 16 has weakened substantially, placing pressure on FE and sixth form providers to compensate, which not all providers are equipped to manage.

The Chair welcomed the update and reiterated the importance of addressing both access and progression. She emphasised that interventions designed to increase participation must be accompanied by improvements in continuation and completion, and she underlined the importance of sophisticated, flexible models of provision that recognise the diversity of learner pathways and life circumstances.

## **Update from Sub-Group 2: Regional Disparities**

An update was provided on the work of the sub-group. It was noted that historically most investment and attention in widening participation has focused on stimulating demand, and that significantly less emphasis has been placed on shaping the supply of HE or adapting provision to local needs. The sub-group therefore is aiming to examine the interaction between supply and demand, recognising that one cannot be addressed effectively without the other.

Recent stakeholder engagement for the sub-group included a meeting with Association of Colleges (AoC) colleges, a visit to a local FE consortium and local government partners in Somerset and a visit to Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) Peterborough. ARU Peterborough is an outlier in its success among similar institutions established in the same era to address local cold spots, with strong leadership and effective partnership-building cited as important factors in this. The importance of learning from both the successes and the failures of previous attempts to address regional disparities was emphasised.

Further upcoming engagements would include a visit to Blackpool and a roundtable planned for March in Oxford. The importance of fieldwork to better understand the unique circumstances impacting local areas, including local political structures and cultural factors, was noted.

The sub-group is working on further analysis, looking not just at access rates by area but mapping where providers are across England and what type of provision is available to different areas. Members noted that data on regional disparities can mask highly localised patterns, and that cold spots often exist within regions that otherwise have high levels of participation. It was also noted that proximity to HE is not always the issue and some areas, such as Cornwall, have two universities but persistently low Level 4+ education rates. Members commented that such hyper-local disparities can be driven by factors such as long-standing cultural attitudes towards education, limited exposure to HE, poor transport networks, and intergenerational unemployment.

It was emphasised that the sub-group recognises the interplay between geographic barriers and barriers faced by different student groups and that the two sub-groups will work closely together to ensure their work aligns and compliments each other's. The sub-groups will

develop a set of shared student personas to draw out some of the unique and intersectional barriers different student groups face.

Key themes coming out of the sub-groups conversations so far include the need for a greater focus on Level 4, including the status attached to Level 4 qualifications and opportunities for greater regional collaboration in Level 4 provision which meets local skills needs. The need for greater flexibility in provision was also seen as crucial, including online and blended options, shorter or staggered qualifications, and the need to address the long-term erosion and inconsistency of part-time provision. It was highlighted that there is an opportunity here for more reciprocal relationships between HE and FE. It was argued that FE should not be seen only as a feeder route into HE and there are examples where universities and FE colleges are working in both directions, particularly around short Level 4 provision, to meet shared regional needs.

The sub-group's work highlights importance of the broader civic role HE institutions play within local areas - by attracting investment, supporting local economic development and engaging communities in wider societal issues such as technology and climate. This broader contribution should form part of how the group thinks about the role of HE in place.

The next stage of the sub-group's work is to begin developing a model to support regions in understanding the interplay between supply, demand, industry needs, learner pathways and available provision in their locality. This will incorporate student personas, industry personas, local ecosystem mapping, and identification of both national and regional enablers such as funding, regulation, and collaboration structures. The model will be developed using a fictional region, then later tested and refined by applying it to different areas to inform the group's recommendations and potential development of a toolkit.

Several members commented on the need to involve employers more actively, noting that employers play a dual role in shaping both supply and demand. Employer engagement was described as particularly important for mature learners and for pathways at Levels 4 and 5. Members encouraged the sub-group to consider the role of training providers and apprenticeships alongside traditional HE and FE provision.

There was discussion about the role of combined authorities, with members noting their potential influence in areas such as transport, local skills planning and convening local partnerships. Members also highlighted that trust between institutions is essential for effective regional collaboration, and that national and local incentives may need to be aligned more effectively to support this.

The Chair reiterated that the group's task is to consider how to ensure equity of opportunity, acknowledging that while place is an important determinant of access, learners should not be restricted to their local area where moving elsewhere would better support their ambitions. She asked the sub-group to continue developing coherent recommendations that balance the local, regional and national dimensions of the equity of opportunity agenda.

## Chair's Summary

The Chair thanked both sub-groups for their substantial progress and their close collaboration. She highlighted the strong alignment emerging across the two strands of work, particularly around the need for flexible, adaptive provision and better support for learners at key transition points. She emphasised that recommendations must reflect a holistic system perspective, consider both access and successful outcomes, and be grounded in an understanding of the evolving nature of HE, FE and the labour market. She encouraged members to continue sharing evidence, reflections and examples between meetings.

## Next Steps

The sub-groups will continue work ahead of their next joint session later in February. The next meeting of the full Task and Finish Group will take place on 4 March. An in-person meeting is scheduled for 8 May in London. DfE officials will continue supporting coordination across the workstreams.

## Actions / Decisions

- Student Journey sub-group lead to follow up on offer to support the sub-group's quantitative analysis
- Members to share any relevant evidence on learner risk perception with Student Journey sub-group lead
- Sub-groups to incorporate continuation and completion into their analysis and modelling

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