



Department
for Education

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

Date: Tuesday 18 November 2025

Time: 15:00 – 17:00

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

- Amira Campbell, President, National Union of Students (NUS) UK
- Professor Anthony Moss, Pro Vice Chancellor Education and Student Experience, London South Bank University (LSBU)
- Suzannah Reeves, Pinnacle Learning Trust; Principal, Oldham Sixth Form College
- Dr Shaid Mahmood, Chair, Association of Colleges; Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), Durham University
- Christopher Millward, Interim Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students (OfS)
- Dr Nick Harrison, Chief Executive, The Sutton Trust
- Alex Proudfoot, Chief Executive, Independent Higher Education

- Professor Tom Sperlinger, Academic Director for Civic Spaces, University of Bristol
- Dani Payne, Head of Education and Social Mobility, Social Market Foundation
- Professor Graeme Atherton, Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Regional Engagement, University of West London
- Ben Jordan, Director of Strategy, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)
- Dr Hollie Chandler, Director of Policy, Russell Group
- Fiona Ellison, Co-Director, Unite Foundation
- Professor Lisa Roberts, Vice-President (England and Northern Ireland), Universities UK (UUK); and President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Exeter
- Professor Jane Harrington, Vice-Chancellor and CEO, University of Greenwich
- David Morgan, Chief Executive, Career Development Institute (CDI)
- Rachel Hewitt, Chief Executive, Million Plus
- Professor Liz Mossop, Vice-Chancellor, Sheffield Hallam University
- Dr Brooke Storer-Church, Chief Executive Officer, GuildHE

In Attendance

- The Rt Hon Baroness Smith of Malvern, Minister for Skills
- Dr Stephanie Harris, Director of Policy, Universities UK (UUK) (deputizing on behalf of Vivianne Stern)
- Hannah Hallam, Head of Executive Services & Adviser to the Vice-Chancellor, University of Derby
- Department for Education (DfE) Officials.

Apologies

- Vivianne Stern, Chief Executive, Universities UK (UUK)

Welcome and Introduction

The Chair welcomed members and thanked Minister Smith for joining the group for its inaugural meeting.

The meeting will operate under the Chatham House Rule, i.e., points made during meetings can be shared but without attribution to named individuals.

Opening Remarks by Minister Smith

Minister Smith thanked members for accepting her invitation to join the group and acknowledged the complexity and long-standing nature of the issues being addressed.

- She expressed confidence in the group's expertise and commitment to delivering impactful change, describing the group as critical to shaping a fairer, more inclusive higher education system.
- She emphasised the importance of collaboration with external voices, including students, employers, further education (FE), schools, and local partners, and called for practical, deliverable recommendations that galvanise sector-wide change.
- She also set out the key initiatives the government has announced in the Skills White Paper to support access and participation: including targeted maintenance grants, inflation-indexed maintenance loans, Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), Alternative Student Finance and reforms to Access and Participation Plans.
- She outlined her vision for the group: that it should develop innovative, evidence-driven proposals that work alongside the steps government is taking to tackle regional disparities and systemic barriers across the student journey.
- She shared that she looks forward to receiving updates on the group's work.

Terms of Reference

The Chair introduced the Terms of Reference, which members were sent in advance of the meeting.

The Terms of Reference set out the two work strands for the group: regional disparities and systemic barriers across the student journey. The group will work towards publishing a report in January 2027, with recommendations finalised by December 2026.

A member commented that it would be useful to define what we mean by “higher education” in the Terms of Reference – for example, whether this includes participation in higher apprenticeships.

The Chair emphasised that this is a task and finish group working to a set timetable to deliver tangible outcomes. She stressed the importance of establishing sub-groups to progress work between meetings and to bring in wider stakeholders.

The group will play an important role in driving forward progress in the sector, while respecting sector autonomy and OfS regulation. It will focus on new, sector-led initiatives that complement existing work and involve students.

Department for Education officials will support the group with secretariat functions and listen to any barriers the sector is facing.

Regional Disparities Papers

The first paper set out evidence on regions with the largest disadvantage gaps in entry to HE. Participation is highest in London overall, especially for those from Free School Meals (FSM) backgrounds, while the North East shows more relative progress despite lower overall rates. Rural and coastal areas have significantly lower access rates.

It was noted that gaps between FSM and non-FSM learners haven’t reduced much in the last 10 years. Whilst proximity to HE provision is important, it was noted that there is also a strong correlation between regional access rates and other factors, such as GCSE attainment.

Limitations to the data on regional access were noted, including that FSM as the measure for disadvantage does not capture older learners.

The second paper considered place-based solutions to address regional disparities in access to HE. It noted the localised effects of global challenges – including demographic change, economic shifts and technological advancements – and that widening access to HE is crucial to address these challenges.

The group was asked to consider where and what a university is and what a place-based approach to HE might look like. One example given was new types of institutions in cold spots, such as Anglia Ruskin University Peterborough, where the institution is being used to drive the local economy, taking a strategic approach to local partnerships and course design and delivery which meets local needs.

Another was new partnerships which introduce novel structures and programs to reach people who traditional university outreach programmes often can't reach, citing the partnership between The Place and University of York as an example.

Finally, the group was asked to consider innovative delivery models - such as micro-campuses, partnerships, and flexible provision – such as the University of Bristol's Hartcliffe and Withywood micro campus.

Discussion

Members broadly welcomed the focus on place but questioned how much regional disparities are to do with place-based barriers, rather than place being a proxy for other groups with low access rates, such as white working-class males. Members also commented that FSM is a very wide category and it may be useful to focus on more specific groups with much lower access rates, such as care experienced and estranged students. It was suggested that addressing the barriers for these groups, such as attainment, may significantly impact regional disparities.

It was noted that regional participation gaps cannot be viewed in isolation from other regional trends, including labour market pressures. Members emphasised that transport networks and housing are critical barriers, particularly in rural and coastal areas. Young people in “cold spots” often move to areas with HE provision and stay there due to better career prospects, which has a compounding effect on the communities they come from.

One member highlighted that proximity to a city, and therefore a range of Russell Group universities which students can attend whilst still living at home, is an obvious but often overlooked factor. They cited 70% of students at one sixth form college who progressed to university living at home, with finances being the biggest driver for this.

A member questioned whether there is evidence showing initiatives looking to improve proximity to HE providers supported access. Previous analysis found some increase in participation rates among white working-class males where initiatives to improve proximity to HE were introduced – particularly where these initiatives were focused on a limited range of courses relevant to the local labour market. Some members felt it was important that a focus on proximity to HE didn't send a message to disadvantaged students that they should or could only study somewhere close to home.

Members noted the importance of choice and the need for a diverse range of qualifications (Levels 4–6), delivery models (including modular and online), and partnerships to meet local contexts, student needs and future skills demands. There was a call for better alignment of HE provision with economic opportunities with alignment of funding and removal of regulatory barriers to enable innovation in this space. It was suggested that a sub-group should focus on both diversity of choice and innovation in models, partnerships, and types of institutions.

A member shared that despite higher participation rates in London, recent analysis by London Uni Connect showed a 40% reduction in access targets across London, with care-experienced, disabled, and mature students most affected. The same analysis found a slight decline in the number of collaborative partnerships cited in these plans. It was suggested the methodology of this analysis could be replicated in other regions. **The Chair requested sharing of this analysis for wider use.**

Student Journey Paper

The paper highlighted systemic barriers across the student journey, including significant access gaps for certain groups such as lower socioeconomic backgrounds, some ethnic groups, care leavers, mature students, and those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

Barriers were grouped under themes: prior attainment; awareness and perceptions of HE; pre-18 course choices; and admissions processes. The paper set out recent and planned work to address some of these barriers, including UCAS reforms, UUK, UCAS and Sutton Trust's Contextual Admissions Advisory Group, and reforms set out in the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper.

The group was asked to consider interventions which would work alongside and compliment the existing work in train.

Discussion

Members broadly agreed with the barriers set out in the paper but felt further data and analytical work was needed to understand which barriers are affecting which group, as well as geographical trends.

A number of members commented that the scope of the group and the issues presented in the two papers focused on access, rather than participation. There was broad agreement that the group should also focus on successful

participation and outcomes, as focusing only on access risks “setting students up to fail”. The Chair agreed, though noted the scope of the group should not be too wide and therefore assessment processes, for example, should not be within its scope.

The focus on mature students was welcomed, and it was suggested the group should engage with Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Job Centres to reach (prospective) mature students. **The Chair supported this and suggested exploring ways to engage these partners.**

It was noted that a lot of the barriers start as early as primary school and some barriers are about perceptions more than realities – including perceptions around affordability of HE and potential lack of understanding about the available support. The reasons people don’t apply are important but not well understood as the people who don’t apply are harder to find and reach. It was suggested the group should look to the FE sector, which successfully engages a lot of hard-to-reach groups, and consider better use of articulation agreements.

One member felt regional approaches risked certain groups falling through the gaps. The Chair agreed the group will need to look at the issue both nationally and regionally. There was discussion about national access targets, as implemented in Scotland and Ireland, with some members feeling these would support greater accountability and others raising uncertainty about feasibility and potential unintended consequences.

There was broad agreement that financial constraints are still a significant barrier. Members noted that financial constraints are a major driver for students living at home. The recent introduction of targeted maintenance grants was welcomed but members raised concerns about the ringfencing of these grants for priority courses which some felt could create a disparity in access to “non-priority” subject areas. Members also noted that the lack of access to maintenance support for online provision could impact the success of innovative delivery models.

There was broad support for the need for a transparent, consistent sector-wide approach to contextual admissions, including for students without conventional qualifications. However, there was debate about whether contextual admissions significantly increased overall participation or mainly influenced institutional choice. Members argued that awareness of contextual admissions policies among disadvantaged students is low and needs improvement.

Members raised unintended consequences of post-16 curriculum reforms, including the increasing the academic rigour of qualifications in previous reforms

which has impacted the enjoyment of education for certain groups. Members were also concerned about the impact the removal of funding of BTECs (existing vocational Level 3 qualifications) may have on disadvantaged students and felt ensuring V Levels and T Levels will be as accessible as BTECs will be critically important.

Members questioned whether postgraduate access was in scope for the group and suggested amplifying existing work such as NEON's Postgraduate Study Group. The Chair responded that postgraduate barriers may be quite distinct and require separate work, therefore did not commit to including this in scope.

It was felt there needs to be consideration of how HE looks and feels to individuals from underrepresented backgrounds and how the sector presents itself, including the language it uses. It was agreed that it would be important to bring student voices into the group, in particular engaging with students from underrepresented groups who have overcome barriers.

Next Steps and Close

The Chair summarised key themes from the meeting:

- She emphasised the importance of language and the framing of access and participation, pointing to previous work carried out by London Higher around this.
- She reiterated the need to focus on the groups who are not currently accessing HE, in particular thinking about mature students.
- She was keen the group considers perceptions of HE and how the sector presents itself.
- She highlighted the need for collaborative, innovative approaches and strategic use of existing funding, and that place-based approaches will be central to the group's work.

The Chair confirmed that DfE will circulate propositions for sub-groups and next steps ahead of the next meeting.

Actions / Decisions

- To explore ways to engage DWP and Job Centres.
- To consider what sub-groups should be convened, including how to bring student voices into these.

- For the London Uni Connect analysis to be shared.
- To include successful participation in the group's scope.
- To review the Terms of Reference in light of points raised in the meeting.

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