



Department
for Education

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

Date: Friday 8 May 2026

Time: 13:00 – 14:30

Location: Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT and 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

- Professor Graeme Atherton, Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Regional Engagement, University of West London; Vice-Principal, Ruskin College, Oxford
- Dr Shaid Mahmood MBE, Chair, Association of Colleges; Pro-Vice Chancellor for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Durham University
- Amira Campbell, President, National Union of Students (NUS)
- Joanna Burton, Head of Policy (HE), The Russell Group
- Fiona Ellison, Co-Director, Unite Foundation
- Dr Nick Harrison, Chief Executive, The Sutton Trust
- Ben Jordan, Director of Strategy, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)
- Dr Steph Harris, Director of Policy, Universities UK (UUK)
- Rachel Hewitt, Chief Executive, MillionPlus
- Professor Chris Millward, Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students (OfS)
- David Morgan, Chief Executive, Career Development Institute (CDI)
- Professor Antony C. Moss, Pro Vice-Chancellor Education and Student Experience, London South Bank University (LSBU)
- Dani Payne, Head of Education and Social Mobility, Social Market Foundation
- Alex Proudfoot, Chief Executive, Independent Higher Education
- Professor Tom Sperlinger, Academic Director for Civic Spaces, University of Bristol
- Dr Brooke Storer-Church, Chief Executive Officer, GuildHE

In Attendance

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

Apologies

- Professor Jane Harrington, Vice-Chancellor and CEO, University of Greenwich
- Professor Lisa Roberts, Vice-President (England and Northern Ireland), Universities UK (UUK); and President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Exeter
- Professor Liz Mossop, Vice-Chancellor, Sheffield Hallam University
- Suzannah Reeves, Pinnacle Learning Trust; Principal, Oldham Sixth Form College
- Dr Hollie Chandler, Director of Policy, Russell Group

Welcome and Introduction

The Chair welcomed members to the fourth Task and Finish Group meeting. She said that following the meeting there would be an update to Minister Smith which should indicate the direction of its recommendations, rather than consisting of definitive statements, as further testing is needed. She noted that the current spending on access and participation has not delivered the desired impact, and that there was a need for repurposing of funds as well as exploring piloting new approaches. She also flagged the need to review the structure of the work going forward, with sub-group leads taking forward a new structure to support the next phase of work.

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

An update was provided on work with DfE analysts which considers how disadvantaged students flow through the pipeline to HE and where they disproportionately drop out. Good progress is being made with this work although it is not yet ready for presentation.

The findings of the Rapid Evidence Review (RER) were presented, acknowledging the contribution of those who had picked up individual reviews. The overall RER comprises of eight rapid evidence reviews covering adult progression into HE, care experience progression into HE, Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) at primary and secondary levels, outreach with socio-economically disadvantaged groups, learner perceptions, raising attainment, and young carers. It was noted that the review

meets RER standards but not full systematic review standards and will be for group information only.

The strongest evidence in the RER relates to prior attainment as a progression indicator, with additional findings on the impact of sustained activity and intersectional disadvantage. Gaps were identified in evidence for adults returning to education, further education (FE), vocational activity, and decision-making processes. There was consensus within the RER that progression gaps are driven by feasibility, risk, and system design rather than low aspiration, and that intervention timing matters. Divergence exists about the scale of barriers and the impact of HE on disadvantage. Significant for the Task and Finish Group is that constraints in progression should be understood as resulting from structural features and not individual deficits.

Discussion

The group discussed the value of HE, noting that outcomes vary by subject and region. Evidence was cited, including from the Sutton Trust which shows that HE remains the strongest route for disadvantaged learners, and the Social Mobility Commission which demonstrates that mobility has stalled across much of the country. Members noted the need to consider international evidence, although there are features of the English HE system (such as marketisation) that increase numbers without reducing inequality. Ideas included reforming student premium funding and engaging with the Post-16 Pupil Premium Campaign.

Student mobility was seen as a key barrier, with many disadvantaged and London students choosing to live at home, suggesting local provision strongly shapes participation. Staying local to study and remaining local to work afterwards will be included in the pipeline analysis. Understanding why some people apply to HE and others from similar backgrounds do not is essential, alongside improving both access and outcomes.

There was discussion about the need for structural interventions in schools, particularly at primary and secondary levels, to address barriers before HE and the limitations of focusing solely on university-level widening participation. Members were of the view that the final report should be clear about which barriers it was able to address and which structural limitations would be outside of scope. It would need to include a pathway back into HE for those individuals who had left education, considering how to reverse the reduction in numbers of part-time students. The Group would need to look at how to make the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) a success – including by providing insights on the student journey – but would also need to look beyond LLE. There was concern about a reduction in CEIAG. Learner perspectives would need to inform the final recommendations and work on personas was ongoing.

Update from Sub-Group 2: Regional Disparities

An update was provided on roundtables that had taken place. A nationally focused roundtable had taken place in Oxford with a range of voices and the first regional roundtable had been hosted in Stoke, with stakeholders providing intelligence about barriers, the value of collaborative vehicles, and the influence of local factors on HE access such as transport. Participants emphasised the need for regional and place-based collaboration, with examples like Uni Connect, and discussed the importance of aligning HE with local skills agendas and economic needs as well as the role of V levels as a replacement for BTECs. They agreed on the importance of creating a compelling narrative that addresses the current pressures on the sector, the economic context, and the societal impact of widening participation. Three more regional roundtables are planned in the North East, Somerset and Blackpool.

Discussion

A question was raised about the involvement of care experience teams and virtual school heads in consultations, with commitments to facilitate the inclusion of care experience stakeholders in future discussions.

The need for clear governance structures to manage any available DfE funding and ensure consistency across regions, while allowing for local adaptation and accountability was stressed.

Emerging Narrative and Solutions Draft Paper

Discussion moved to the draft Emerging Narratives and Solutions paper which had been shared ahead of the meeting and garnered strong support from the group. The draft paper outlines a system-wide approach with three main tracks: improving the standard pipeline, creating flexible routes for non-traditional applicants, and enabling re-entry for mature students, all underpinned by place-based strategies. A headline growth target of 40,000–50,000 additional disadvantaged and mature learners per year entering HE was suggested. There was an acknowledgement of the need to shift to equitable access rather than equality of opportunity, coordination rather than marketisation and place rather than national focus—it was argued that being place-based and aligning with regional growth could also support international recruitment.

Members questioned whether current funding models could support the necessary expansion and flexibility, noting that current curriculum and pedagogy are not always suited to modular delivery, and that part-time numbers have contracted significantly. They stressed the need to engage local communities in the design and delivery of local HE based systems as well as for greater employer engagement, particularly in creating degree apprenticeships, to ensure pathways are viable and attractive. Smaller or specialist

institutions were viewed as having the potential to deliver flexible provision, subject to regulatory barriers being addressed and partnerships with larger institutions fostered.

Members noted the need to reference the broader policy environment, including the Schools White Paper, maintenance funding and changes to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), to ensure recommendations are realistic and not undermined by other initiatives. An offer to share examples of effective FE and HE collaboration was made, with the suggestion to highlight UK-based models rather than relying solely on international comparisons.

It was argued future employment prospects strongly shape course choice and that UCAS publishing course-level cost and earnings data could reinforce this effect. However, there was concern about the reliability of such data, especially for newer qualifications, and how this could affect student decisions and influence how institutions design and fund courses. More clearly recognised awards at Level 4 and Level 5 were considered key.

The group discussed the importance of tracking progression and completion rates, especially for care-experienced and young carer students, and the need for relationship-based support. Suggestions were made to utilise existing data systems, such as Local Authority toolkits, to set and monitor local and national targets for specific groups, ensuring measurable progress. Earlier UCAS registration and improved data sharing (e.g., verified and linked data from the National Pupil Data Base) would enable timely and more targeted interventions for disadvantaged students.

There was discussion about the importance of support on-course to promote continuation of disadvantaged students with measures to do this having the potential to aid recruitment.

Chair's Summary

The Chair thanked group members for their contributions. She was of the view that the paper addressed key areas, although current recommendations would need refinement. She outlined the next phase of work which would focus on developing targeted solutions through a more integrated, expertise-led approach, with details to follow. She reminded the group that while solutions would likely be challenging, the group's aim remains clear: to improve access to HE for those currently underserved.

Next Steps, Actions and Decisions

- **Ministerial update on recommendations:** Draft and send an update to Minister Smith outlining current thinking on recommendations, including areas requiring further testing before finalising intentions.
- **Restructure sub-groups for solution refinement:** Develop a proposal for merging the two sub-groups to optimise solution development and decision-making.

- **Contact with Post-16 Pupil Premium Campaign:** Seek alignment and learn lessons from this campaign.
- **Involve Care Experience stakeholders in consultations:** Facilitate the involvement of leaving care teams and virtual school heads in regional consultation sessions to ensure care-experienced perspectives are represented.