



BRIEFING PAPER

Number 8204, 24 January 2018

Widening participation strategy in higher education in England

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Summary

The widening participation agenda in higher education has been in place for decades. Widening participation aims to address discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different under-represented groups of students.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, lower income households and other under-represented groups may face barriers to entry to higher education. Widen participation schemes attempt to remove these barriers and improve access to education, progress within higher education and to improve graduate outcomes and employability.

Widening participation in higher education is currently delivered:

- by institutions through their widening participation activities and strategies;
- through the work of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) which approves and monitors HEIs' access agreements and disseminates best practice across the sector; and
- through the work of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) which funds activity and administers the National Collaborative Outreach Programme.

The numbers of disadvantaged young people going into higher education have risen significantly in the past decade and are now at a record high despite the increase in tuition fees in 2012.

However progress against targets has been slow.

In 2015 the Government set two targets for widening participation in higher education by 2020:

- To double the proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds going into higher education;
- To increase by 20% the numbers of students from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds entering HE.

Past widening participation strategies have focused on the provision of financial support and outreach activities. Current widening participation strategies aim to be 'smarter' and to support activities which have demonstrable impact in improving access and participation, progress in higher education and employment outcomes.

This briefing paper aims to provide an overview of policy on widening participation and widening participation activity, to give sources of statistics on access to higher education in England, to evaluate progress in widening participation and to flag up current issues.

1. Widening participation in higher education

The widening participation agenda in higher education aims to address differences in access and progress in higher education between students from different social groups.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, low income households, care-leavers, mature students, disabled students and students from some ethnic groups have a much lower participation rate in higher education than students from other groups.

Widen participation schemes have been in place for many years, these schemes attempt to remove barriers, raise aspiration and improve access to education.

Current widening participation schemes recognise that disadvantaged students may face difficulties during their higher education and beyond. The new approach to widening participation strategies is therefore to look across the whole '**student lifecycle**' in higher education and to improve progress within higher education and to raise graduate outcomes and employability as well as increasing access to higher education.

Widening participation in higher education is delivered in several ways

- by institutions through their widening participation activities and strategies;
- through the work of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) which approves and monitors HEIs' access agreements and disseminates best practice across the sector; and
- through HEFCE's National Collaborative Outreach Programme and allocation of funding.

The numbers of disadvantaged young people going into higher education have risen significantly in the past decade and are now at a record high despite the increase in tuition fees in 2012. Entry rates for some groups have seen particularly significant increases. Young people from black ethnic backgrounds have seen the largest increase in entry rates with an increase of 42% between 2009 and 2015.¹ Disabled student numbers have also risen from 7.4 per cent in 2009/10 to 10.7 per cent in 2014/15.²

However there has been a marked decline in applications from older students, and young white males from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds have been identified as having especially low participation.³ Current widening participation strategies therefore focus more on addressing participation among these groups.

¹ BIS, [Equality Analysis: Higher Education and Research Bill](#), May 2016, p11.

² *Ibid* p 13

³ *Ibid* p 37

2. Government policy on widening participation since 2010

2.1 The Coalition Government 2010-15

The Coalition Government set out its policies in an agreement issued in May 2010, [The Coalition: our programme for government](#). The document stated that the Government wanted to **unlock social mobility** and towards this end they would aim to “attract a higher proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds” into higher education.⁴

In October 2011 the Government set up an independent review of higher education funding and student finance – the **Browne Review**. One of the Review’s recommendations was removing the cap on higher education tuition fees.⁵ It also called for extra support for students from families with an income below £60,000. The Review Report said:

There has been less progress in widening access to the most selective institutions for students from lower income backgrounds despite efforts by these institutions to improve the situation.⁶

In 2011 the Government published a **White Paper**, [Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System](#), which outlined plans for the future of higher education funding and access.⁷ Chapter 5 of the paper ‘Improved social mobility through fairer access’ outlined a new framework for widening participation and fair access. The paper announced the introduction of the **National Scholarship Programme** (NSP) to help individual students from low-income backgrounds as they entered higher education. The NSP provided financial bursaries for students from 2012 – the programme closed in 2015. The White Paper also strengthened the role of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA).

In 2014 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and OFFA published a shared strategy on higher education access and student success called the **National strategy for access and student success in higher education**.⁸

The vision of this national strategy for access and student success in higher education is: that all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have equal opportunity to participate and succeed, on a course and in an institution that best fit their potential, needs and ambitions for employment or further study.⁹

⁴ [The Coalition: our programme for government](#), May 2010

⁵ Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, [Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance](#) (The Browne Review), October 2010

⁶ [The Browne Report](#), p 22

⁷ Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, [Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System](#), June 2011

⁸ Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, [National strategy for access and student success in higher education](#), April 2014

⁹ [National strategy for access and student success in higher education](#) p 7

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The strategy emphasised the importance of the whole 'student lifecycle' and the need for providers to support students throughout their time at university or college. It particularly focused on employability and helping students from disadvantaged backgrounds progress into employment or further study.

2.2 Conservative Government 2015-17

In November 2015 the Government published a **Green Paper**, [Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#) Chapter 4 of the paper contained proposals on social mobility and widening participation.¹⁰

The paper set out the Prime Minister's targets for widening participation in higher education by 2020:

- To double the proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds going into higher education by the end of this Parliament from 2009 levels;
- To increase by 20% the numbers of students from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds entering HE.

The subsequent **White Paper** published in May 2016, [Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#), confirmed the Government's widening participation targets for 2020 and set out the following actions to improve widening participation:¹¹

Access agreements should focus on key challenges such as increasing participation among young white males from lower socio-economic groups and supporting participation by students with disabilities (para 31);

To ensure that the new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) supports widening participation (para 32);

To introduce a transparency duty, requiring regulated higher education providers to publish data on the backgrounds of their applicants (para 33);

To link higher education and tax data together to chart the transition of graduates from higher education into the workplace better (para 34).

In September 2016 the Department for Education published a **Green Paper**, [Schools that work for Everyone](#). The paper suggested that universities could widening participation further by being more directly involved with schools. The paper therefore proposed that all universities should either sponsor existing schools or set up new schools to help raise standards and attainment:

We believe that universities' activity should focus more on where they can make the most difference: raising standards and attainment in the schools system.¹²

¹⁰ Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, [Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#), November 2015

¹¹ Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, [Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#), May 2016 p14

¹² Department for Education, [Schools that work for Everyone](#), September 2016 p 17

The paper proposed that as a condition of charging higher tuition fees higher education institutions should:

Establish a new school in the state system, of which the capital and revenue costs will be met by the government, or sponsor an academy in the state system.

Around 60 universities currently sponsor or support state schools.

The Green Paper's proposals received a mixed reaction from the university sector.¹³ Maddalaine Ansell, Chief Executive of University Alliance, said that diverting resources to opening and running schools could lead to other widening access schemes losing funding and attention:

It would be much better to empower the Director of Fair Access and Participation to have a challenging discussion with universities about what they are doing with the flexibility to approve any activities that the university can demonstrate are making a real difference.¹⁴

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017

Provisions in the [Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#) will allow the establishment of a new non departmental public body the **Office for Students** (OfS). From the beginning of the 2018/19 academic year the OfS will be the higher education market regulator and will also take over the functions of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA).

The OfS will promote competition between universities and improve student choice, it will also oversee widening participation in higher education:

the OfS will have a duty to promote equality of opportunity this will mean looking beyond getting students from disadvantaged backgrounds into university - they will also be charged with making sure that providers are doing all they can to support the students throughout their course, helping to tackle drop-out rates and support disadvantaged students into employment.¹⁵

It is hoped that merging OFFA into the OfS will create a more effective oversight of widening participation and improve outcomes for students. Chris Millward will be the new Director for Fair Access and Participation at the OfS.

The *Higher Education and Research Act 2017* will also require registered HEIs to comply with a transparency condition and to publish their admissions, attainment, and retention data broken down by gender, ethnicity and socio- economic background.

¹³ [University sponsors may dump deprived schools](#), *The Guardian*, 24 January 2017

¹³ BBC online, [Oxford head rejects sponsoring schools](#), 22 September 2016

¹⁴ WonkHE, [Compulsory schools sponsorship must not distract from effective widening access efforts](#), 20 January 2017

¹⁵ Department for Education press release "[Chief Executive of new Office for Students announced](#)", July 2017

2.3 The Conservative Party Manifesto 2017

The manifesto included a commitment on tuition fee rises and school sponsorship:

We will make it a condition for universities hoping to charge maximum tuition fees to become involved in academy sponsorship or the founding of free schools.¹⁶

No further commitments or announcements have been made on this since the election.

2.4 Social Mobility Action Plan

In December 2017 the Department for Education published the social mobility action plan [Unlocking Talent Fulfilling Potential](#).¹⁷ The document set out the Government's aim to transform equality of opportunity and to improve social mobility through education.

With regard to higher education the plan said that the Department would encourage more effective targeting of spending on widening participation and greater transparency by universities on their expectations of applicants. The plan said that the Government would:

- **Ensure higher education providers spend their access and participation funding effectively, targeting low participation areas.** The Director of Fair Access, whose functions will move to the OfS, has written to higher education institutions asking them to target outreach and widening participation activities on low participation areas. This will be supported by an innovative Evidence and Impact Exchange for Widening Participation, recommended by Universities UK's Social Mobility Advisory Group, which will be linked to the OfS. The Exchange will provide evidence on the impact of outreach activity to ensure it is spent as effectively as possible. A £120 million National Collaborative Outreach Programme is already targeting those areas of the country with low levels of higher education participation and lower than expected levels given typical attainment.
- **Improve transparency of widening participation practices to encourage applications to the most selective higher education institutions.** We will use the transparency duty in the Higher Education and Research Act to shine a stronger light on the universities who need to go further in improving equality of opportunity for students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups. We expect the most selective universities to be more transparent about the use of contextual data to inform undergraduate admissions decisions, after the Sutton Trust found that one in five students from higher participation areas are being admitted with reduced grade offers.⁶⁵ We will also commission new behavioural insights trials to identify how to encourage applications to the

¹⁶ [2017 Conservative Party Manifesto: Forward Together, Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future](#), May 2017 p 50

¹⁷ Department for Education, [Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential](#), December 2017 Cm9541

highest quality institutions and courses, including the most selective universities.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Ibid* p28

3. Widening participation activity

The widening participation agenda is set by the Government and driven forward by the work of HEIs and other interested bodies such as the Sutton Trust. Widening participation activity is carried out in different ways by these various bodies.

3.1 Government support for widening participation

The Government supports widening participation in higher education through the work of the Office for Fair Access and HEFCE.

The Office for Fair Access

[OFFA](#) was created by the *Higher Education Act 2004* and will become part of the OfS under the *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*. OFFA promotes and safeguards fair access to higher education for disadvantaged and under-represented groups in England. The role of the body is to approve and monitor access agreements and publish reports and guidance on widening participation.

Access agreements

In order to charge the highest level of tuition fees (£9,250 in 2017/18 for full-time undergraduate courses) an institution must have an access agreement in place which has been approved by OFFA. Without an access agreement an institution can only charge the basic annual fee (£6,165 in 2017/18 for full-time undergraduate courses). In 2017-18 198 universities and colleges have approved access agreements in place.¹⁹

Access agreements are submitted annually by universities and colleges. These documents set out how HEIs will improve access and support progression for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. OFFA publishes [guidance](#)²⁰ for HEIs on compiling their access agreements.

Widening participation activities included in access agreements cover areas such as: outreach activities, financial support, partnership arrangements with schools and colleges and progression activities to support students leaving higher education.

In 2015-16 296,000 students from lower-income families and under-represented groups received a bursary, fee waiver or scholarship through an access agreement. The average bursary amount for first-year students from the lowest income backgrounds was £1,550, which was £200 lower than in 2014-15.

Access and Participation Plans

The [Higher Education \(Access and Participation Plans\) \(England\) Regulations 2018](#) which are currently before Parliament will replace access agreements with **access and participations plans** which will

¹⁹ OFFA, 'Quick facts'

²⁰ OFFA 2017/01 [Strategic guidance: developing your 2018-19 access agreement](#)

largely replicate the current system and extend plans to cover participation activities and outcomes during higher education. The regulations provide the detail on the content of plans and the arrangements for approving and varying access and participation plans.

Information these regulations is set out in the [Explanatory Memoranda](#)²¹ to the regulations. A debate on the regulations took place in the House of Lords on [22 January 2018](#).²²

HEFCE's National Collaborative Outreach Programme

Up until 2017-18 HEFCE supported widening participation through the **Student Opportunity Fund** (SOF). The SOF distributed funds to HEIs according to the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds that they had. This Fund was gradually reduced and stopped altogether in 2017-18 to be replaced by a new scheme the [National Collaborative Outreach Programme](#) (NCOP).

The NCOP supports the Government's targets to:

- double the proportion of disadvantaged young people into higher education by 2020,
- increase by 20% the number of students in higher education from ethnic minority groups and
- address the under-representation of young men from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education.²³

The programme focuses on areas where "the HE participation of young people is both low and much lower than expected based on GCSE-level attainment".

The programme was launched in January 2017 and 29 local consortia "will deliver collaborative outreach" working with schools, colleges, universities and local agencies and charities.

Funding will initially be provided for two years, with further funding subject to the consortia making satisfactory progress towards meeting the Government's goals. HEFCE has given £30 million to the setting up of the programme and further funding has been set at £60 million per annum.

3.2 Higher education institutions widening participation activity

All universities are committed to widening participation. In 2017/18 HEIs spent more than £833.5 million, or around **a quarter of their fee income** above the basic fee, on widening participation activities.²⁴ This funding is spent on financial support for disadvantaged students and

²¹ [Higher Education \(Access and Participation Plans\) \(England\) Regulations 2018](#) Explanatory Memoranda

²² [HL Deb 22 January 2018 c841](#)

²³ HEFCE, '[National Collaborative Outreach Programme](#)'

²⁴ Interview with Professor Les Ebdon "The press painted me as an ogre and that always helps a regulator" *Times Higher Education* 4-10 January 2018

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activities to widen access to higher education through outreach and other programmes.

The details of individual HEIs widening participation activity and spending is set out in HEIs' **Widening Participation Strategies** which are published on the OFFA website.

An analysis of HEIs 2018-19 access agreements by OFFA, [Access agreements for 2018-19: key statistics and analysis](#),²⁵ showed the current approach taken by HEIs to widening participation activity:

- a significantly increased focus on work to **raise attainment in schools**
- an increased commitment to **robust evaluation** of financial support
- increased activity to improve access for **White males from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds**
- greater effort to address the issue of **Black and minority ethnic (BME) students achieving lower degree and employment outcomes** than White students despite similar prior attainment
- more support for students with **mental health difficulties, specific learning difficulties and/or who are on the autism spectrum**
- increased activity to improve access among **mature and part-time learners**
- a more **evidence-led approach** to developing activities and targeting expenditure
- access activities that support and complement the Government Opportunity Areas and the National Collaborative Outreach Programme

3.3 Other organisations involved in widening participation

The widening participation agenda is moved forward by the work of a number of organisations such as the [Sutton Trust](#), [Brightside](#) and the [Bridge Group](#).

In 2015 Universities UK (UUK) at the request of Jo Johnson MP, Minister of State for Universities and Science, established a **Social Mobility Advisory Group** to provide advice to the government and support for universities on improving access and long-term success for under-represented groups in higher education. The final report from the group, [Working in Partnership: Enabling Social Mobility in Higher Education](#), was published in October 2017.

²⁵ OFFA October 2017/08, [Access agreements for 2018-19: key statistics and analysis](#)

4. Sources of statistics on higher education participation

General statistics on widening participation are published by various bodies. The Department for Education publishes data in their annual statistical release on widening participation in higher education. UCAS publishes data on university admissions which includes an analysis of widening participation information. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) also publishes data on Performance Indicators in higher education which gives details of universities progress against widening participation benchmarks. Individual universities also publish data in their widening participation strategy documents which are found on the OFFA website.

4.1 Department for Education statistical release

The Department for Education's latest statistical release on widening participation in higher education was released in August 2017.²⁶ It provided information for 2014/15.

The data showed that **more students on free school meals (FSM) at the age of 15 are progressing to higher education**. The Government estimates that 24% of students in receipt of FSM entered higher education by age 19, compared to 41% of non-FSM students. In 2013/14 22% of FSM students progressed to higher education by 19.

The **gap in progression between non-FSM and FSM students increased** in 2014/15 to 18 percentage points, from 17 points in 2013/14.

Despite the widening gap, the percentage of FSM students progressing to higher education is at its highest ever level. The smallest gap is in inner London, at just 8 percentage points. In the North-East and South-East the gap is 24 percentage points.

The gap in progression rates by school type to the most selective higher education providers has also increased.

The Government estimated that 23% of those from state-funded schools and colleges progressed to higher education by 19 in 2014/15, compared to 65% of students who attended independent schools and colleges.

This means that in 2014/15 the **gap in progression rates between the state and independent sector rose** to 43 percentage points, from 42 in 2013/14.

²⁶ Department for Education, [Widening Participation in Higher Education, England, 2014/15 age cohort SFR 39/2017](#), August 2017

4.2 University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) data

The UCAS [2017 End of Cycle Report](#) released in December 2017²⁷ included statistical analysis of widening participation in higher education.

The UCAS analysis showed that although the entry rates into higher education for 18 year olds from the most disadvantaged group had increased to a record level, the difference between entry rates for this group and for more advantaged students had also increased. This analysis showed **that young people from the most advantaged group were still 3.8% more likely to enter higher education than students from the most disadvantaged group:**

Reporting of entry rates using UCAS' multiple equality measure (MEM) shows how, despite 18 year olds from all backgrounds being more likely to enter HE in 2017 than ever before, an increase of 78 per cent for the most disadvantaged group since 2006, **little progress has been made in narrowing the gap between those most and least likely to enter HE since 2014.**

In 2017, 13.8 per cent of 18 year olds from the most disadvantaged MEM group entered HE, the highest proportion on record, an increase of 0.2 percentage points on 2016. However, entry rates for the other (more advantaged) MEM groups increased by more this year. The entry rate of 18 year olds from the most advantaged MEM group was 53.1 per cent this year, an increase of 1 percentage point, meaning they were 3.8 times more likely to enter HE than those from the most disadvantaged areas. This ratio has now remained unchanged for three successive cycles.

Similar patterns are also seen for several of the single equality dimensions that comprised the MEM. For example, the **gap in participation between state school pupils from richer and poorer households (measured through receipt of free school meals) remains unchanged from 2016**, with those who do not claim free school meals twice as likely to enter HE compared to those who claim them. Elsewhere, 18 year old women were more than a third more likely to enter than 18 year old men. And, although entry rates increased for all ethnic groups this year, the increase for the White ethnic group was smaller than for the other ethnic groups. This means **the gap between the White ethnic group and all other ethnic groups continues to widen**, and that those from the White ethnic group remain the least likely to enter HE.

However, the **gap between those living in the most and least disadvantaged POLAR3 areas did narrow slightly** this year, as the longer term upward trend in entry rates since 2006 continued.

Gaps in equality of representation are largest at those providers which have historically accepted applicants who achieve the highest A level grades. In 2017, 18 year olds from the most advantaged MEM group were 9.8 times more likely to be accepted to one of these higher tariff providers than 18 year olds from the most disadvantaged MEM group. Since 2009, the

²⁷ UCAS, [End of Cycle Report 2016](#), December 2016

gap between these groups has narrowed every year, and, for higher tariff providers, is smaller than ever before.

The report highlights that **'little progress has been made in narrowing the gap between those most and least likely to enter higher education since 2014'**.

4.3 Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) data

HESA publishes an annual report – *UK Performance Indicators in Higher Education*. The latest was published in February 2017 and gives statistics for 2015-16.²⁸

The statistics show that the proportion of **part-time students has fallen** significantly, from 31% in 2011/12 to 24% in 2015/16. There has also been a **fall in students over the age of 30**, from 26% to 21%.

The proportions of **ethnic minority (UK domicile) and disabled students have each increased** by 2 percentage points over the same time period.

²⁸ HESA, [UK Performance Indicators 2015/16: Widening participation](#), February 2017

5. Evaluating progress in widening participation

Increasing the numbers of students from under-represented groups in higher education has proved to be stubbornly difficult to achieve. Improvements have been made but large differences still remain between access rates for disadvantaged groups and non-disadvantaged groups.

Professor Les Ebdon the Director for Fair Access has said that widening participation directors need to evaluate the effectiveness of widening participation activity and to consider 'smarter' spending.²⁹

5.1 OFFA guidance

OFFA has published proposed guidance for HEIs on measuring the effectiveness of widening participation activities in a document, [The Evaluation of the Impact of Outreach](#), June 2017. The document states that **'evaluation is an intrinsic part of the strategic, evidence-led approach' and should be embodied in access agreements.**

5.2 Sutton Trust

A report by the Sutton Trust in December 2015, [Evaluating Access](#) analysed the effectiveness of university outreach strategies and found that certain types of activities worked better than others. The report stated that the best outreach strategies were: mentoring, multi-year combined interventions, personalised application information and assistance, residential programmes and tutoring. The report further recommended that **HEIs should spend 'at least 10% of their outreach budget on evaluation'** of the effectiveness of outreach work.

5.3 The Social Market Foundation report

The Social Market Foundation (SMF) released a report in March 2016, [Widening participation](#), which said that the Government would miss its targets for increasing participation from disadvantaged and BME backgrounds by 2020:

Continuing the present trend in widening participation will not be sufficient to meet the ambition. By 2020, the participation rate would fall 5 percentage points short of what the ambition requires.³⁰

The SMF found significant differences between institutions in terms of their intake of disadvantaged students. Nine institutions decreased their numbers of disadvantaged students, 12 saw no change and 24 achieved an increase, but of 25 students or fewer.

²⁹ "Les Ebdon: 'nuclear option' fears kept universities in line", *Times Higher Education*, 3 January 2018

³⁰ Social Market Foundation, [Widening participation](#), March 2016 p 4

The report contained the following recommendations:

- Looking at progress so far, and in particular the wide variation between institutions, there is a dilemma to be resolved: **whether to focus on improving the performance of institutions which have made little progress; or to rely even more on those who have contributed the largest share of widening participation.**
- Improving the performance of those who have made little progress **may require institutions themselves to get much more involved in raising prior attainment.** Outreach alone may be insufficient.
- The wider market environment in the sector will also have a major impact on progress. Many institutions are exposed to **new competitive pressures.** On the other hand, some new providers may provide a boost to widening participation.
- Focusing on young, full-time students alone in terms of improving social mobility creates the risk that there may comparatively be **much less progress on widening participation among part-time or mature students.**
- The second ambition on widening participation – focusing on young people from BME backgrounds – may run at odds with the first one, especially given the **lowest prior attainment and HE participation rates currently are among young people from white backgrounds.**

5.4 Social Mobility Commission annual State of the Nation Reports

The Social Mobility Commission's annual [State of the Nation report 2016](#) said that the UK had a "**deep social mobility problem which is getting worse**".³¹ It highlighted an "unfair education system" as one of the "fundamental barriers" to social mobility.

The Commission highlighted report inequalities in participation in higher education:

It is estimated that nearly half of young people today will have accessed some HE by the time that they are 30, with the majority achieving a full degree. But the benefits of this expansion have not been distributed equally. Among families in the bottom two income quintiles, for every child who goes to university, seven do not. **A steep socioeconomic gradient in access means that being born into a wealthy family is still a high predictor of accessing the most prestigious universities, gatekeepers to the highest paying jobs.** While a private school student has a 1 in 20 chance of entering Oxbridge, a student from a poor background still has odds closer to 1 in 1,500.³²

The report was critical of the level of commitment from universities in terms of their efforts to widen access. It particularly it highlighted areas of the country where access to higher education is limited – so called

"universities have a key role to play in improving social mobility, and that while many institutions have done good work, the sector as a whole needs to raise the scale of its ambition."

Social Mobility Commission's 2016 *State of the Nation Report* p121

³¹ Social Mobility Commission, [State of the Nation 2016: Social Mobility in Great Britain](#), November 2016

³² *Ibid* p102

higher education 'cold spots'. The Commission report also stated that of the 23 Russell Group Institutions, 16 did not meet the HESA benchmarks on accepting disadvantaged students.

The Commission recommended:

The Government should **create a single, UCAS-style portal that includes vocational training alongside HE options** and shows the outcomes associated with different qualifications;

The Government should make social mobility reputational for universities, by publishing an **annual social mobility league table**.

The Government should work with universities to ensure HE can be **accessed locally in all parts of the country**. The 90 areas with no HE provision should be assessed and there should be locally accessible provision everywhere by 2025.³³

The Social Mobility Commission's [State of the Nation](#) report in November 2017 repeated concerns about higher education provision and highlighted the lack of information about educational options:

The evidence on what enables social mobility for the young is clear: access to a range of high-quality education institutions; good careers advice; frequent interactions with universities and employers; and labour market preparation during school, college or university. Unfortunately, these opportunities are not consistent across the country. Many isolated areas have no school sixth forms and fewer specialist teachers, meaning disadvantaged young people can miss out on the opportunity to study specific facilitating A-levels or science, technology, engineering and maths subjects. A number of isolated areas also have limited higher education options, and limited outreach from employers. (p 56)³⁴

The report made the following recommendation:

Universities should play a more active role in their local community by encouraging local employers to hire graduates and organising student volunteering in isolated areas nearby (p55).

³³ Social Mobility Commission [State of the Nation 2016: Social Mobility in Great Britain](#) p xvi

³⁴ Social Mobility Commission, [State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain](#), November 2017

6. Issues

6.1 Effectiveness and impact of widening participation strategies

In recent years inequalities in participation in higher education have reduced and improvements have been seen in participation rates of many traditionally under-represented groups. However progress is slow.

Research by OFFA has shown that bursaries had little impact on students' choice of where to study, or their likelihood of continuing with their studies.

It has been suggested that widening participation strategies should focus more on the effectiveness and impact of activities rather than on spending on activities.

6.2 Access to elite universities

Analysis has shown that disadvantaged students are less likely to enter very selective high tariff HEIs than more advantaged students. HESA data published in 2017 showed that seven Russell Group universities admitted fewer disadvantaged students proportionally than a decade ago³⁵.

The Social Mobility Commission's 2016 State of the Nation Report highlighted issues with access to elite universities:

Some prestigious universities have made great efforts to become more accessible to poorer young people, but not all have done equally well.

At Oxford and Cambridge, there were increases in the proportion of state school students, but each university accepted a slightly smaller proportion of less advantaged students in 2014 compared to 2010. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) monitors the proportion of less advantaged students attending university and provides benchmarks, showing the proportion that each institution should be reaching, given the tariffs of the courses they offer. Last year, 16 out of the 23 Russell Group universities underperformed these benchmarks, as shown in Figure 3.10. Only King's College London and the London School of Economics (LSE) were over performing their benchmarks for these students – so there is a long way to go.

Professor Les Ebdon commented on the UCAS End of Cycle 2017 report and said that improvements had been made on access to the most selective HEIs by students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups, but he added that progress needed to be faster.³⁶

"There are especially pleasing signs of progress at those universities with the highest entrance requirements. There has been a 10.4 per cent proportional increase in entry to these

³⁵ "[How can widening participation best be achieved?](#)", *Times Higher Education*, 7 December 2017

³⁶ OFFA, [Strategic Plan](#) 2015-20 p7

universities from students from the most disadvantaged areas. This marks the highest increase on record.

“While encouraging, we must not let today’s figures mask the challenges which remain in this area. Young people from the most advantaged backgrounds are still 5.5 times more likely to enter universities with the highest entrance requirements than their disadvantaged peers. As a result, people with the potential to excel are missing out on opportunities. This is an unforgivable waste of talent, and universities must continue to press for transformational progress.”³⁷

A report by the National Audit Office, [Higher Education Market](#), 8 December 2017 discussed widening participation in higher education and said that ‘increased participation among disadvantaged students is weighted towards lower-ranked providers, which risks creating a two-tier system’.

Investigation by David Lammy MP

In October 2017 David Lammy MP published on his website the responses to several FOI requests from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge about the profile of their students. The information obtained showed that: 82 per cent of offers by Oxford and Cambridge went to applicants from the top two social classes, that students from the south of England and London were more successful in gaining entry than students from other regions and that on average in each year between 2010 and 2015 a quarter of Cambridge colleges failed to make any offers to black British applicants.³⁸

Mr Lammy commented that some Oxford colleges, were doing “fantastic work”, and suggested that colleges should work together and develop a more systemic approach to access.³⁹

6.3 Impact of alternative providers

The [Equality Analysis](#) of the *Higher Education and Research Bill 2016* showed that alternative providers performed well on widening participation measures. The analysis stated that students at alternative providers were more likely to be from low income backgrounds (71% of students at alternative providers receive a full maintenance grant compared to 41% at public providers), to be older than their counterparts at public providers and were more likely to be from BME backgrounds.⁴⁰

³⁷ OFFA, [UCAS End of Cycle Report shows “pleasing signs of progress” – OFFA](#), 14 December 2017

³⁸ “[David Lammy: Oxford and Cambridge ‘shoot the messenger’ on access](#)”, *Times Higher Education*, 15 November 2017

³⁹ *ibid*

⁴⁰ BIS, [Equality Analysis: Higher Education and Research Bill](#), May 2016, p42.

7. Further reading

House of Commons library:

- [Participation to higher education in England and UK](#), November 2017
- [Higher education student numbers](#), 19 June 2017
- [Oxbridge 'elitism'](#), 19 June 2017
- [Part-time undergraduate students in England](#), 13 June 2017

Higher Education Policy Institute, Report 98, [Where next for widening participation and fair access?](#) August 2017

["How can widening participation best be achieved?"](#) *Times Higher Education*, 7 December 2017

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