

Social Mobility Advisory Group

Progress report number 1

Introduction

Social mobility has been on the agenda for universities, on Universities UK's agenda, and on the national agenda for decades.

In December 2015, at the request of Jo Johnson MP, the Minister of State for Universities and Science, Nicola Dandridge, Chief Executive of Universities UK was invited to lead a Social Mobility Advisory Group to explore what more could be done to improve access to higher education and the long-term success of underrepresented groups in higher education. Specifically the advisory group was asked to identify how to achieve the following goals:

- Meeting the prime minister's 2020 goals of doubling the proportion of students from the most disadvantaged areas and increasing the number of black and minority ethnic (BME) students by 20%
- Improving the outcomes of higher education for BME students so that their degree attainment and progression after university are closer to those of their white counterparts
- Improving the progression of white working class boys to higher education
- Supporting students with disabilities to enable them to participate fully in higher education and achieve strong outcomes

The group has also been asked to look at:

- How to work with organisations such as schools and employers in developing an action plan
- How progress against the action plan will be monitored and evaluated
- The accessibility and relevance of the data currently available in supporting social mobility objectives

The advisory group met for the first time on Friday 5 February 2016. It brings together higher education leaders, sector experts in widening participation admissions and equality and diversity, and the NUS with representatives from government, schools, colleges and employers. Having such a broad range of members around the table means that the advisory group is in a unique position to work collaboratively to identify ways of improving social mobility. This is important as no one sector can deliver social mobility alone: universities, schools, university technical colleges, vocational training and further education colleges, charities and

employers – together with students – are all part of an ecosystem and all have a part to play in promoting social mobility. A full list of [advisory group members](#) is available on the Universities UK website.

The meeting

In opening the meeting, it was noted that although the government's goals for the sector focused on young participation, Universities UK had proposed that the group should take a broad view of widening participation encompassing a student's entire lifecycle. In other words, the group should go beyond addressing issues of access to higher education by supporting students on their journey through their course and on to employment or further study. Consideration should also be given to all underrepresented groups in higher education, including mature and part-time students.

The advisory group agreed to broaden the scope, and that wider stakeholder engagement would be crucial to fulfilling the group's objectives. To this end two reference groups had already been established, the first of widening participation practitioners and the second of academics working on social mobility and higher education more broadly. It was agreed that further roundtables would be conducted with representatives from schools, private higher education providers and employers. A [full list of both groups](#) is available on the Universities UK website.

The practitioners' reference group is jointly chaired by Anne-Marie Canning, Director of Widening Participation (Student Lifecycle) at King's College London, and Mike Nicholson, Chair of the Higher Education Liaison Officers Association and Director of Student Recruitment and Admissions at the University of Bath. The academics' reference group is chaired by Professor Mary Stuart, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lincoln. The chairs reported back from their initial meetings, with helpful recommendations of areas on which to focus.

Much of the advisory group meeting was dedicated to considering the current evidence on the nature and scale of the problem. Representatives from the Higher Education Funding Council for England gave a presentation on the current data and evidence on underrepresented groups across the student lifecycle, highlighting where gaps remained between different student groups. Peter Horrocks, Vice-Chancellor of The Open University provided further context on mature and part-time learners.

In terms of the prime minister's goals the group noted that the current annual rate of increase from 2014 for entrants from POLAR2 Quintile1 (Q1) was 1,000. To meet the target this needed to increase to 1,400¹.

In taking forward the prime minister's goal for increasing the number of black and minority ethnic full-time undergraduates by 20% between 2014–15 and 2020–21, the group agreed that priority should be given to assessing the ways forward for removing differences in retention and outcomes for students from identified minority ethnic groups.

Key themes

Some key themes emerged from the group's discussion of these issues, including:

- The importance of taking a lifecycle approach
- Encouraging institutions to take whole institutional approaches and universal interventions to reduce inequality
- The need to create inclusive and supportive environments and increase the sense of belonging for underrepresented groups
- The impact of place, and importance of engagement with Local Enterprise Partnerships
- The need for improved evaluation of current practice and better ways of sharing successful interventions
- The importance of engagement between schools, colleges, universities and employers to support social mobility at a time of change and competition
- The need to review systems, funding and structures for addressing social mobility in higher education, given the changes in the funding environment and reforms to structures and systems

Next steps

Stage 2: March 2016:

- Development of specific, realistic and practical recommendations on all four areas of the student lifecycle
- Delivery of interim report to the minister of state for universities and science

Stage 3: May 2016:

- Finalising the recommendations and report
- Development of an action plan for delivering the recommendations
- Delivery of final report to the minister

¹ It was noted that there were a number of ways in which the government's goals could be interpreted; this measure looked at 18-year-old Q1 UCAS entrants.

Stage 4: July 2017:

- Progress report on the implementation and impact of the recommendations

The second meeting of the advisory group will take place on Tuesday 10 May 2016.