

Research Briefing

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# Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England



## Summary

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## Summary

This briefing paper looks at equality in undergraduate education in England. It summarises the latest data from the Department for Education (DfE), the Office for Students (OfS), and UCAS on access and outcomes before looking at government policy, the role of the OfS, and the actions and responsibilities of universities.

The classification of groups based on ethnicity, gender, disability, and socio-economic status here are based on the categories used by the DfE, the OfS, and UCAS.

## Patterns in access and educational outcomes

### Gender

Women are much more likely to go to university than men and have been for many years. They are also more likely to complete their studies and gain a first or upper second-class degree. However, after graduation, men are more likely to be in 'highly skilled' employment or further study just after graduation. Male graduate average earnings are around 6% higher than female earnings one year after graduation. This earnings gap grows substantially over their early careers and reaches 30% ten years after graduation.

### Ethnicity

White pupils are less likely than any other broad ethnic group to go to higher education. Pupils from Chinese, Indian, and Black African backgrounds have the highest entry rates. Black Caribbean pupils have particularly low entry rates to more prestigious universities.

Black students are more likely to drop out from higher education than other ethnic groups and least likely to achieve a first or upper second-class degree. In contrast, White students are least likely to drop out and most likely to achieve a first or upper second-class degree.

White graduates have the highest employment rates of any ethnic group. Those from mixed/multiple and 'Other' ethnic groups have the lowest. Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean graduates earn the least, whereas Indian, Chinese and 'Other Asian' graduates earn the most.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has said subject choice is important when looking at differences in graduate earnings by ethnic group. It said Asian students tend to choose “higher-return subjects than their Black and White peers.”

## Disability

Students with reported disabilities have in the past been more likely to drop out from higher education and less likely to achieve a first or upper second-class degree than other students. However, the latest data shows this situation has reversed, although the differences are relatively small and there is variation by type of disability. Those who reported a mental health disability have the highest drop-out rates.

Disabled students are less likely to be in highly skilled employment or further study soon after completing their first degree. Students who reported a ‘social and communication’ disability (such as Autistic Spectrum Disorder) have particularly low rates on this measure.

## Socio-economic status

Pupils eligible for free school meals are much less likely than other pupils to go into higher education, particularly to more prestigious universities. They are also much more likely to drop out before the start of their second year in higher education. Graduates who were eligible for free school meals are somewhat less likely to be in employment or further study and they earn around 10% less than other graduates.

There is a very clear pattern showing students from areas with higher levels of deprivation are more likely to drop out of university. There are also clear links between deprivation and achievement of first or upper second-class degrees and progression to highly skilled employment or higher study. Students from areas with higher deprivation levels have poorer outcomes than those from areas with low deprivation.

Analysis of entry rates shows a clear link between current and past levels of higher education in the area the pupil comes from. The entry rate in the top POLAR group (‘Participation of Local Areas’ group – the areas with the highest levels of participation in the past) is almost twice that in the lowest one. There are also higher levels of drop out and poorer attainment among those from the lower POLAR areas. These students, however, have slightly higher levels of employment and/or further study, than those from higher POLAR areas. However, this does not continue to average salaries, which are 15% higher in the top POLAR group than in the lowest one at one year after graduation, increasing to 29% higher ten years after graduation.

IFS research highlights the advantages those from a particularly privileged social group have and its impact on their earnings: “...elite social networks are likely to be important in explaining the exceptional returns of some men who went to private schools.”

## Intersectional data

Intersectional analysis shows that White males eligible for free school meals are less likely to go to higher education than any other groups when analysed by gender, free school meal eligibility, and broad ethnic groups. White males who were **not** eligible for free meals (and hence from more advantaged backgrounds) are also less likely than average to go to higher education.

Drop-out rates are higher among minority ethnic groups (combined) than for White students and this does not change based on the level of deprivation in the local areas they come from. The gap in drop-out rates between male and female students was greater for those from more deprived areas, with male students from more deprived areas more likely to drop out.

White students from the lowest POLAR groups have a higher level of attainment at university than students from minority ethnic groups. This is true even for those from the top three POLAR groups (combined). The gap between male and female students was greater for those from less deprived areas.

IFS analysis of earnings data concluded:

...among students from different socio-economic or ethnic groups but with the same prior attainment and other background characteristics, university education can help level the playing field in the labour market. However, substantial unexplained differences remain even for graduates. In particular, graduate men from all ethnic minority groups have lower earnings than male White British graduates even after controlling for prior attainment and a host of other background characteristics.

## Barriers to equal access, participation, and outcomes

Several factors have been identified as barriers to greater equality in higher education for students from different backgrounds. These include:

- The prior attainment of students.
- Insufficient advice and support both before and during university.
- Financial concerns, which deter young people from applying and can have a detrimental impact on experiences of higher education.
- The prevalence of harassment on campus.

The first of these is particularly important, with [research published in 2016](#) suggesting that the gap in university access between the richest and poorest students can be explained entirely by prior attainment at Key Stage 4 (the end of secondary school).

## Policy approaches

The government, the OfS, and individual higher education providers (HEPs) all play a role in improving access, participation, and outcomes for students.

### The government

In 2018, the then-Conservative government created the [Office for Students](#) (OfS) as the regulator for higher education in England, under provisions in [the Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#). As part of the reforms, the OfS took over the responsibility for promoting fair access to higher education that had been undertaken by the now defunct [Office for Fair Access](#) (OFFA).

The [government's post-16 education and skills white paper](#), which was published in October 2025, described higher education as having the potential to be one of the biggest contributors to closing the gap between people from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers. The white paper included a number of measures intended to improve access and participation in higher education, including [reintroducing maintenance grants](#), reforming the regulation of access and participation plans, and [establishing a new "task and finish" group](#).

The government sets out its priorities for the OfS in guidance letters. These inform the levels of funding for the student premiums and the Uni Connect programme, which aim to support student access and success.

Total funding for access and student success is £273 million in 2025/26 and has fallen by 50% in real terms since 2015/16.

### The Office for Students

The Office for Students (OfS) is responsible for ensuring that students, whatever their background, are supported to succeed in and progress from higher education. Its [strategy for 2025 to 2030](#) includes a commitment to be “ambitious for all students from all backgrounds.”

The [OfS' priorities for equality of opportunity](#) involve expecting and supporting universities and colleges to:

- ensure access leads to participation on high quality courses and secures good graduate outcomes
- partner with schools and other local organisations to raise the attainment of young people
- develop more diverse pathways into and through higher education through more flexible courses

- make their plans to improve equality more accessible, in a way that prospective students, their parents and other stakeholders can easily understand
- improve the quality and volume of evaluation of interventions around equality of opportunity.

The OfS' approach to supporting the sector in improving access and participation primarily involves approving [access and participation plans](#), which set out how providers will address risks to equality of opportunity, publishing an [access and participation data dashboard](#) for each registered provider, and overseeing an [Equality of Opportunity Risk Register](#), which identifies sector-level risks in higher education and the student groups most likely to be affected by each one.

## Higher education providers

Access and Participation Plans show higher education providers undertake a range of activities to increase university participation among under-represented groups, including creating partnerships with local schools and colleges, running mentoring and ambassador schemes, and facilitating summer schools.

Planned spending on access and participation plans from 2020/21 to 2024/25 is to increase from just over £550 million to around £565 million. Around 60% of this is for financial support (mainly bursaries and scholarships), and the remainder is for outreach activity aimed at increasing access among disadvantaged groups.

In 2023/24 higher education providers in England spent £731 million on access and participation. This was down 10% in real terms on 2022/23 and below real spending levels from the two previous years.

Many providers use contextual admissions data when making offers to applicants in an attempt to widen participation among disadvantaged groups. This process involves considering an individual's socioeconomic background and their school performance data, among other things, rather than relying solely on their results in exams and coursework. Contextual admissions were included as a key part of Universities UK's 2025 [action plan for addressing barriers to opportunity for students](#).

Providers have also looked to improve the attainment and future success of disadvantaged students. Measures include making reasonable adjustments to ensure disabled students can fully participate in higher education and using careers services to reduce differential employment outcomes for individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds and those with low-socio-economic status.

# 1 Background

For many decades there have been wide variations in the take-up of higher education (HE) among different groups of students depending on their ethnic groups, gender, disability, and socio-economic status.

The HE sector has tried to reduce these discrepancies and to widen access and participation through strategies that aim to address the imbalance in student numbers between groups.

Students from under-represented groups might face barriers to entry to higher education and difficulties in progression through higher education. 'Widening participation' schemes attempt to remove these barriers and to improve access to education, progress within higher education, and to improve graduate outcomes, such as degree classification, employment, and further study.

Widening participation in higher education is currently delivered by institutions and the Office for Students (OfS) which approves and monitors HE institutions' plans for widening access and participation and disseminates best practice.

This briefing analyses available data to assess the current situation with regard to access, progression and outcomes for specific under-represented groups. It considers some barriers to greater equality and also looks at the actions taken by the Government, the Office for Students (OfS), which regulates higher education in England, and higher education providers to promote equality.

The briefing also looks at the intersection of some groups (such as gender and ethnicity) where the data are available. It does not look at geographical variations, but it does include analysis of local areas based on their past levels of participation in higher education.

There are many reasons for the difference in participation between areas and this should be viewed as a 'cross-cutting' issue, covering different aspects of educational disadvantage. Similarly, the paper includes some data on part-time and mature students who are more likely to have characteristics linked to disadvantage and under-representation in higher education.

## Further reading and resources

### House of Commons Library briefing papers

- [Part-time undergraduate students in England](#)
- [Higher education student numbers](#)
- [Mature students in England](#)
- [Support for disabled students in higher education in England](#)
- [Race and Ethnic Disparities](#)
- [Student mental health in England: Statistics, policy, and guidance](#)

### Publications and data from the Office for Students:

- [Annual report 2024-25](#)
- [Annual review 2023](#)
- [Access and participation dashboard](#)
- [Exploring student outcomes data dashboard](#)
- [Young participation by area](#)
- [Student characteristics data](#)

### UCAS undergraduate end of cycle data resources 2024:

- [Sector level](#)
- [Provider level](#)

### Department for Education data

- [Widening participation in higher education](#)
- [LEO Graduate and Postgraduate Outcomes](#)
- [Participation measures in higher education](#)

### Higher Education Statistics Agency data:

- [Student numbers, personal characteristics and widening participation](#)

### AdvanceHE: Equality in higher education statistical reports:

- [2024 student equality dashboards](#)
- [Equality in higher education statistical reports](#)

## 2

# Differences in access and outcomes between groups

This section introduces some of the main indicators of differences in access, continuation, and outcomes between different groups. It is not an exhaustive analysis of all the data related to the issues. There are a very large number of groups and sub-groups and intersection of different characteristics, indicators, geographical variations, trends over time, or groups of higher education providers which could be included.

This paper summarises some of the main data and highlights the most important patterns in these. It includes links to more detailed data and other indicators for further information.

## Groups included in this analysis

### Sex

- Male
- Female

### Ethnicity

- White - where available broken down into: British, Irish, Gypsy/Roma, Traveller of Irish heritage, and other.
- Mixed - where available broken down into: White and Asian, White and Black African, White and Black Caribbean and other
- Asian - where available broken down into: Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese and other
- Black - where available broken down into: African, Caribbean and other
- Other

Note that the charts in this paper display broad ethnic groups sorted from smallest to largest on the value of the indicator in question. This is to help view patterns in the underlying data. Similarly detailed ethnic groups are sorted within their broad heading where this data is available.

### Disability

- Disability reported - where available broken down into type of disability reported

- No disability reported

Special Educational Needs Status is used as a proxy for data on pupils as disability is not recorded

### **Age**

- Young students - age under 21 when they start their undergraduate course
- Mature students - age 21 or older when they start their undergraduate course

### **Socio-economic disadvantage**

- Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) - Quintile (20%) groups based on the deprivation of the area the student comes from. Group 1 is the most deprived, group 5 the least deprived.
- Participation of local area (POLAR4) - Quintile (20%) groups based on past levels of young participation in higher education in the area the student comes from. Group 1 had the lowest levels of participation, group 5 the highest. Includes entrants aged under 21 only.
- Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility – Pupils broken down by FSM eligibility at school when aged 15. Includes pupils at state-funded schools in England only.

## 2.1

### Access to higher education

Equality in access to higher education is important as the financial returns to higher education are high on average. There are also many non-financial benefits to higher education and graduates report: better general health, better mental health, longer life expectancy and greater life satisfaction than non-graduates, Graduates are also more likely participate in society through voting and volunteering.<sup>1</sup> Higher education is arguably a key way to improve social mobility and fair access to higher education is important for ensuring social equality.

The charts below breakdown higher education entry (progression) rates for different groups. These data only cover English state school pupils and look at whether they had started higher education by age 19.

Access to higher education was:

- Higher among women than men
- Lowest among the White population, highest among those from Chinese and other Asian backgrounds.
- Much lower in those who had identified Special Educational Needs at school, especially those with the most severe needs (who had a statement/EHCP)
- Lowest in the lowest POLAR group (areas with the lowest historical levels of participation) and higher at each subsequent higher group
- Much lower among those who were eligible for free school meals.

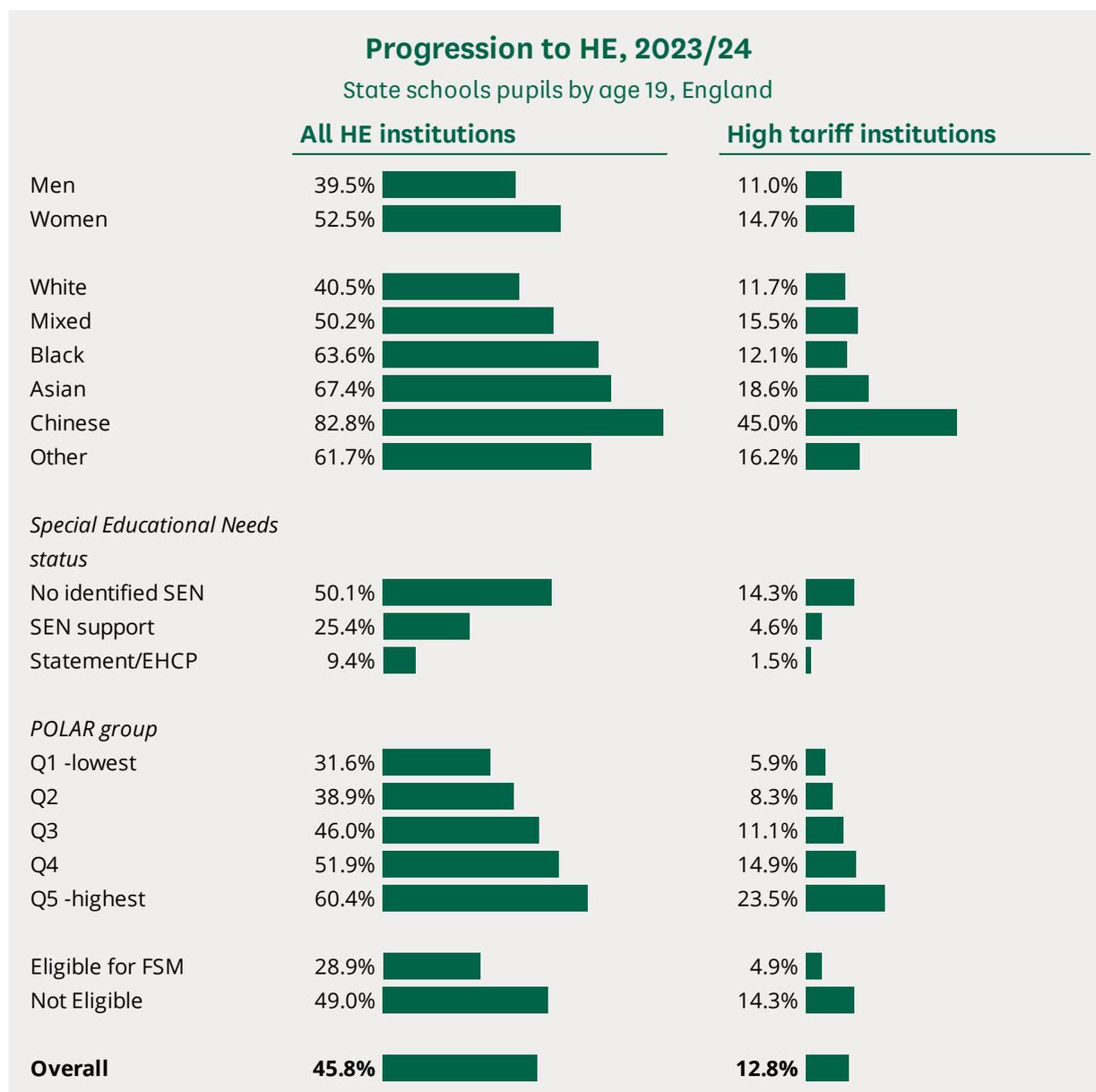
The right-hand side of the graphic looks at access to ‘high tariff’ higher education institutions – these are the third of institutions with the highest entry qualifications among its students. These institutions are the hardest to get into and generally viewed as the most prestigious.

Compared to the overall entry rates the patterns for high tariff institutions are similar, but more extreme with larger gaps between groups. This is particularly true for the breakdown by SEN status, POLAR group, and FSM eligibility.

Chinese students stand out from other ethnic groups with a much higher entry rate for high tariff institutions. In contrast, Black students had below average entry rates for high tariff institutions, despite being well above average on the overall rate. Only 19% of Black young people going to higher education by age 19 went to a high tariff institution, compared to 54% of Chinese students and 28% of all students.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on this subject see the briefing paper [returns to a degree](#).

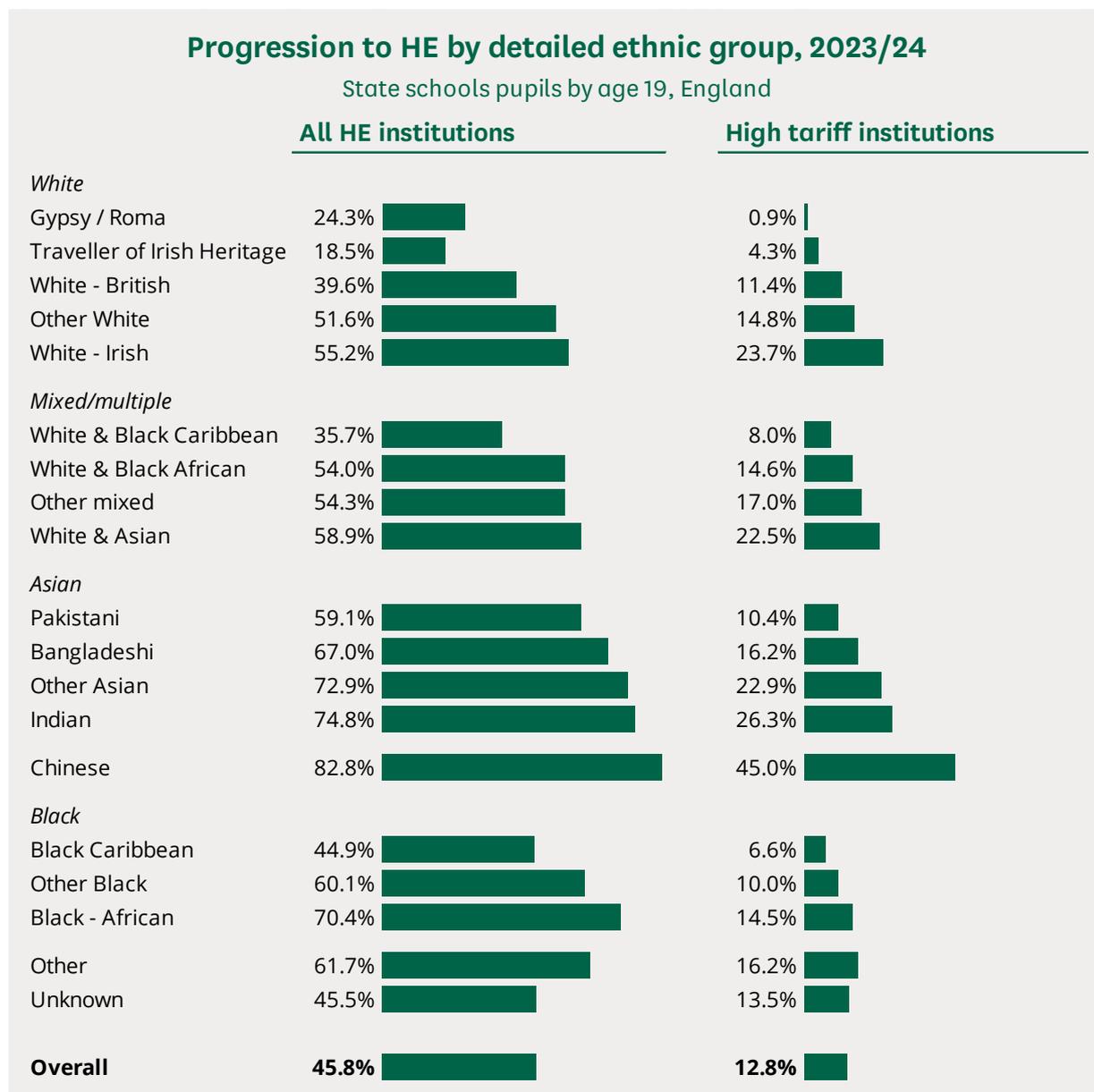


Source: DfE, [Widening participation in higher education: 2023/24](#)

**White British and Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils were less likely to go to HE than any other major ethnic group**

The next chart gives progression rates for more detailed ethnic groups. This highlights the extremely low progression rates among pupils from Gypsy/Roma or Traveller backgrounds. 40% of White British young people went to higher education by age 19. This was lower than any other (non-White) ethnic group shown here other than those from a ‘Mixed White and Black Caribbean’ background. Indian and Chinese young people had the highest progression rates within the Asian group (and overall) and Pakistani pupils the lowest. Black African young people had a much higher progression rate than average and higher those from Black Caribbean pupils or other Black backgrounds.

Just under 15% of Black Caribbean young people who progressed to higher education went to a high tariff institution. This was around half the average across all ethnic groups.



Source: DfE, [Widening participation in higher education: 2023/24](#)

White males eligible for free school meals -so-called ‘White working class boys’ had lower HE participation rates than any other group when analysed by sex, ethnicity and FSM.

The following table looks at progression rates for the intersection of sex, free school meal eligibility (FSM) and broad ethnic group. It is shaded to highlight patterns in the data. Taken overall it shows information we might expect given the earlier results, however it also reveals some interesting patterns:

- Gaps by FSM eligibility are much bigger for White and Mixed ethnicity pupils than those for pupils from other ethnic groups.<sup>2</sup>
- More female pupils than male pupils go to higher education in all ethnic groups, but the gap was largest among Black, White, and Mixed ethnicity pupils. The gap by gender is somewhat larger among pupils who were eligible for FSM.
- Only 14.9% of White male pupils who were eligible for FSM went to higher education. This is the lowest figure of any group in this table and two thirds less than the overall average across all young people.
- Pupils eligible for FSM (and hence from more economically disadvantaged backgrounds) from Asian, Black, Chinese, and Other ethnic groups were all more likely to go to higher education than White pupils who were not eligible for FSM.

### Progression to HE by ethnic group, gender and free school meal eligibility

Percentage of pupils from state-funded schools starting HE by age 19, England, 2023/24

	Eligible for FSM			Not eligible for FSM			All pupils		
	Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All
White	23.4%	14.9%	19.1%	50.9%	37.5%	44.1%	46.9%	34.3%	40.5%
Mixed	40.5%	26.9%	33.6%	61.6%	47.9%	54.8%	57.1%	43.4%	50.2%
Asian	62.6%	46.5%	54.6%	76.0%	64.3%	70.0%	73.7%	61.4%	67.4%
Chinese	80.3%	67.1%	73.2%	86.6%	80.3%	83.5%	86.2%	79.2%	82.8%
Black	63.4%	44.6%	54.0%	74.7%	58.1%	66.5%	71.9%	54.7%	63.3%
Other	62.3%	47.8%	54.6%	72.0%	57.0%	64.3%	69.5%	54.5%	61.7%
Total	34.6%	23.4%	28.9%	55.9%	42.5%	49.0%	52.5%	39.5%	45.8%

Source: DfE, [Widening participation in higher education: 2023/24](#)

A version of this table with detailed ethnic groups is included in the [appendix](#) to this paper.

The next table gives higher tariff progression rates for the same groups. It shows that the gap by FSM eligibility was much higher among White pupils and lowest among Chinese, other Asian and Black students. Black males had the lowest progression rate to high tariff institutions among pupils not eligible for FSM.

<sup>2</sup> This section looks at relative or proportionate gaps in progression rates, not the absolute gaps.

## Progression to high tariff HE by ethnic group, gender and free school meal eligibility

Percentage of pupils from state-funded schools starting HE by age 19, England, 2023/24

	Eligible for FSM			Not eligible for FSM			All pupils		
	Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All
White	3.4%	2.4%	2.9%	15.1%	11.2%	13.1%	13.5%	10.0%	11.7%
Mixed	7.5%	5.0%	6.2%	20.8%	15.3%	18.0%	18.0%	13.1%	15.5%
Asian	12.0%	8.6%	10.3%	21.8%	18.7%	20.2%	20.1%	17.1%	18.6%
Chinese	34.8%	31.6%	33.1%	46.6%	45.2%	45.9%	45.8%	44.1%	45.0%
Black	11.1%	5.6%	8.3%	16.8%	10.0%	13.4%	15.4%	8.8%	12.1%
Other	14.4%	9.8%	11.9%	19.6%	16.1%	17.8%	18.3%	14.4%	16.2%
Total	5.9%	3.9%	4.9%	16.3%	12.3%	14.3%	14.7%	11.0%	12.8%

Source: DfE, [Widening participation in higher education: 2023/24](#)

### Subject choice

The UCAS [End of cycle data resources 2024](#) includes a breakdown of subject choices of new full-time undergraduates. This is broken down to detailed subject level. Some key patterns at a broad subject level are summarised below.

This analysis looks at the proportion of each groups studying each broad subject compared to the proportion of all students studying it. The result is an ‘odds ratio’ which shows how much more or less likely each group is to choose each subject than average. The table below lists the subjects with the highest/lowest ‘odds ratio’ in order of importance. Only a few subjects are listed for each group of students. These are the most important variations from the overall pattern of subject choice, not all that are slightly different. This data covers all home (UK) entrants. The IMD data uses equivalent indices for all the home countries.

## What subjects were different groups of students more or less likely to study?

Full-time home students starting undergraduate courses in 2024

Group	More likely to study	Less likely to study
Women	Vet. sciences, Education, Subjects allied to medicine, Psychology	Computing, Engineering/technology, Maths, Architecture/planning
Men	Engineering/technology, Computing, Architecture/planning, Maths	Education, Vet. sciences, Psychology, Subjects allied to medicine
Young	Maths, Physical sciences, Engineering/technology, Law	Physical sciences, Engineering/technology, Law, Subjects allied to medicine
Mature	Subjects allied to medicine, Architecture/planning, Business/management, Education	Architecture/planning, Business/management, Education, Geography/environment
Asian	Medicine & dentistry, Computing, Law, Engineering/technology	Agriculture/food studies, Creative art & design, Geography/environment, Vet. sciences
Black	Subjects allied to medicine, Computing, Architecture/planning, Business/management	Vet. sciences, Agriculture/food studies, Geography/environment, Languages
Mixed	Combined studies, Law, Languages, Media, journalism & communications	Education, Agriculture/food studies, Subjects allied to medicine, Business/management
White	Vet. sciences, Agriculture/food studies, Geography/environment, History/philosophy/religion	Medicine & dentistry, Subjects allied to medicine, Computing, Business/management
<i>Disability</i>		
Autistic disorder	Computing, Creative art & design, Agriculture/food studies, Physical sciences	Business/management, Medicine & dentistry, Subjects allied to medicine, Architecture/planning
Blind/partial sight	Computing, Law, Media, journalism & communications, History/philosophy/religion	Vet. sciences, Medicine & dentistry, Languages, Subjects allied to medicine
Deaf/partial hearing	Education, Vet. sciences, Combined studies, Media, journalism & communications	Business/management, Medicine & dentistry, Maths, Architecture/planning
Learning difficulty	Creative art & design, Agriculture/food studies, Combined studies, Geography/environment	Law, Maths, Medicine & dentistry, Business/management
Long standing illness	Vet. sciences, Law, Subjects allied to medicine, Psychology	Business/management, Architecture/planning, Maths, Engineering/technology
Mental health	Languages, Psychology, Creative art & design, Media, journalism & communications	Business/management, Engineering/technology, Medicine & dentistry, Architecture/planning
Multiple disabilities	Agriculture/food studies, Creative art & design, Languages, History/philosophy/religion	Business/management, Architecture/planning, Medicine & dentistry, Law
Wheelchair/mobility	Languages, History/philosophy/religion, Media, journalism & communications, Law	Vet. sciences, Business/management, Engineering/technology, Geography/environment
Other	Agriculture/food studies, Creative art & design, Media, journalism & communications, History/philosophy/religion	Medicine & dentistry, Business/management, Maths, Biological and sport sciences
<i>IMD quintile</i>		
1 Most deprived areas	Subjects allied to medicine, Business/management, Architecture/planning, Computing	Geography/environment, History/philosophy/religion, Vet. sciences,
5 least deprived areas	Geography/environment, Maths, Vet. sciences, History/philosophy/religion	Subjects allied to medicine, Business/management, Computing, Architecture/planning

Source: [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2024](#)

It is important to realise the qualifications needed for entry can vary considerably between subjects and school exams results play an important role in subject choice. Graduate earnings vary considerably by degree subject,<sup>3</sup> so the choice of course is an important factor in social mobility and wider equality.

## Further information

- [Widening participation in higher education: 2023/24](#) includes additional analysis by other categories of pupils, region and gives trends over time.
- [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2024](#) has data on 18-year-old entry rates for various groups of young people back to 2014.
- [Who's studying in HE?](#) From HESA gives recent trends in the overall number of students with different characteristics.

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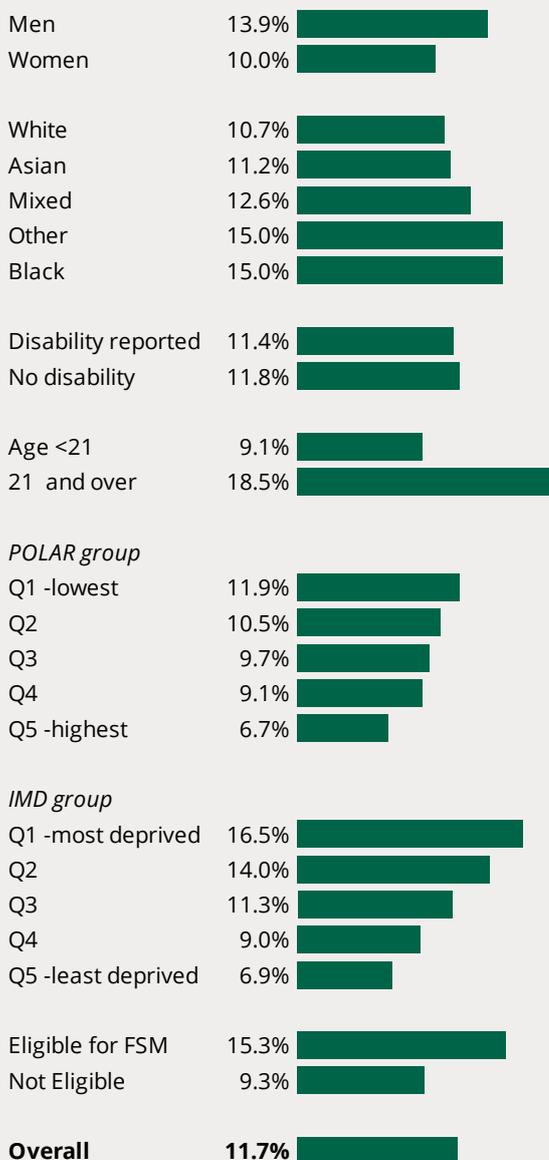
<sup>3</sup> For instance, in 2022-23 median earnings for those who graduated five years earlier varied from around £24,500 a year for performing arts and £25,600 a year for creative arts and design to £53,300 for medicine and dentistry and £50,400 for economics. See [LEO Graduate and Postgraduate Outcomes](#), DfE.

## 2.2

## Continuation at university

**Non-continuation rates 2022-23**

## Full-time undergraduates in England



Source: OfS, [Access and participation dashboard](#)

The latest data on non-continuation rates are given opposite.<sup>4</sup> Non-continuation is defined as full-time first year students who are not continuing their studies 12 months later (24 months for part-time students). The average non-continuation rate across all groups was 11.7%.

The groups of students with the highest non-continuation rates were:

- Mature (18.5%)
- Black (15.0%)
- Other ethnic groups (15.0%)
- From the lowest IMD groups (16.5-14.0%)
- Men (13.9%)
- Formerly eligible for free school meals (15.3%)

There was a substantial drop in non-continuation rates in 2019-20, most likely linked to the impact of the pandemic on potential employment for those considering dropping out. Many gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students (on different indicators) fell in 2019-20 as did the gap between White and minority ethnic students.

Non continuation rates increased in 2020-21 and 2021-22, before falling in 2022-23. The latest figure is above pre-pandemic levels

Within the group who reported a disability, those with a mental health disability had the highest non-continuation rate at 13.5%.

Non-continuation rates were substantially higher for part-time students at 39% in 2022-23.<sup>5</sup>

**Further information**

The OfS [Access and participation dashboard](#) gives this information over the previous five years and includes more detail on gaps between groups and intersection of some groups. It also gives data for individual institutions.

The [OfS Exploring student outcomes data dashboard](#) looks at the extent to which variations in continuation between groups can be accounted for by other factors such as entry qualifications or other characteristics.

<sup>4</sup> The populations for free school meal data are those matched to National Pupil Database records, for IMG groups is English-domiciled students and for POLAR data those aged <21.

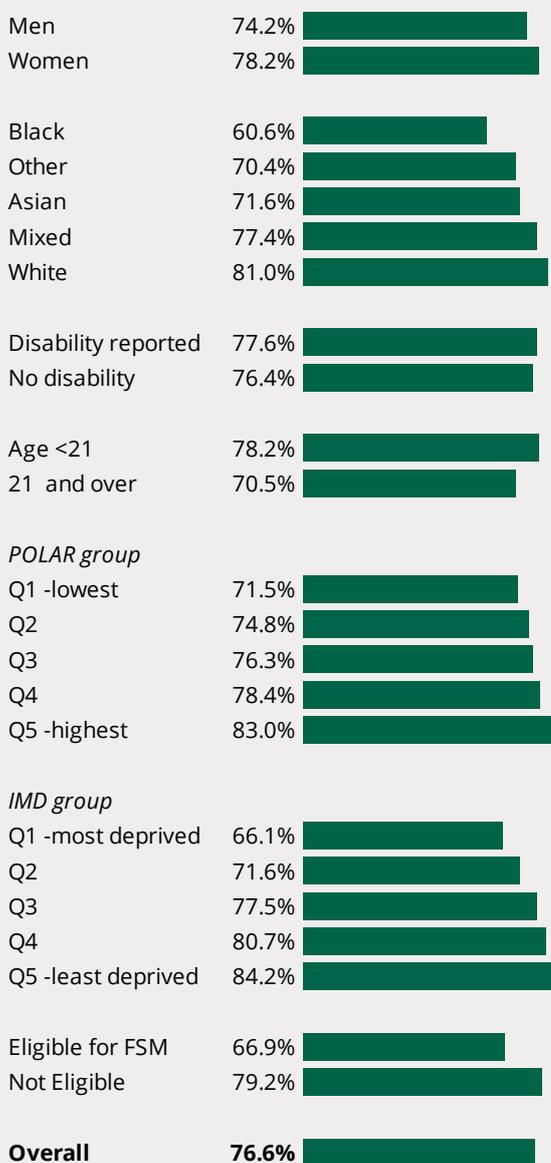
<sup>5</sup> Part-time students not continuing their studies 24 months after starting.

## 2.3

## Attainment

**Students achieving a first or upper second class degree, 2023-24**

Full-time students in England



The latest data on attainment is given opposite and shows the proportion achieving a first or upper second-class degree. These rates increased substantially for all groups of students in 2019-20 and 2020-21 which is thought to be due to the ‘no detriment’ approach to assessment<sup>6</sup> adopted by many universities in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Attainment have since fallen back and were similar to pre-pandemic levels in 2022-23 and 2023-24.

The proportion of students achieving a first or upper second class degree across all groups was 76.6%.

The groups of students with the highest proportion achieving a first or upper second class degree were:

- Women (78.2%)
- White (81.0%)
- Young (78.2%)
- Not eligible for free school meals (79.2%)
- From the highest POLAR (83.0%) and IMD (84.2%) groups

The large increase in attainment rates in 2019-20 meant that the gaps between groups generally fell, with those in the groups with lower levels ‘catching up’ somewhat. This has been partially reversed in subsequent years.

A slightly lower proportion (74.2%) of part-time students achieved a first or upper second-class degree in 2023-24. This rate has increased since 2019-20, unlike the rate for full-time students. Attainment among minority ethnic part-time students was well below average at 63% (overall) in 2023-24.

**Further information**

The OFS [Access and participation dashboard](#) gives this information over the previous five years and includes more detail on gaps between groups and intersection of some groups. It also allows users to look at these data for individual institutions.

Source: OfS, [Access and participation dashboard](#)

<sup>6</sup> According to HESA “This typically ensured that students would be awarded a final grade no lower than the most recent provider assessment of their attainment. The impact can be seen in the increase in the proportion of first class degrees awarded in 2019/20 compared with 2018/19.”

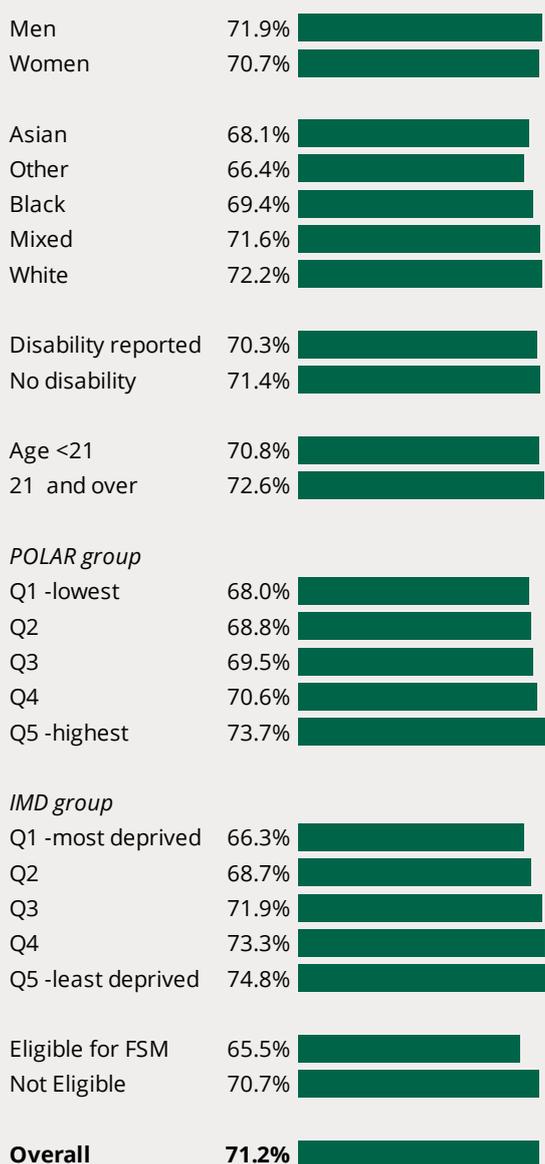
## 2.4

## Outcomes after graduation

## Activity after finishing study

OfS progression measure, 2022-23  
graduates

Former full-time first degree students in England

Source: OfS, [Outcomes data dashboard](#)

The latest OfS data on its progression measure are given opposite. This is the proportion of qualifiers that identify managerial or professional employment, further study, or other positive outcomes<sup>7</sup> among the activities that they were undertaking 15 months after they left higher education. The average across all groups of graduates was 71.2%.

The groups of students with the highest progression rates on this measure were:

- Men (71.9%)
- White (72.2%)
- Not disabled (71.4%)
- Mature (72.6%)
- From the highest POLAR (73.7.3%) and IMD (74.8%) groups

While the gap between men and women is relatively small, it contrasts with the indicators on access, continuation and attainment where women all have higher rates. Asian had the lowest progression scores of any major ethnic group. All minority ethnic groups had lower progression rates than White students.

Within the group who reported a disability, those with a 'social and communication' disability had substantially lower progression rates at 60.7%. Those with cognitive or learning difficulties had higher progression rates than non-disabled students at 73.9%.

The progression rates for part-time first-degree students was substantially higher at 82.5% in 2022-23.

## Further information

The OfS [Access and participation dashboard](#) gives this information over the previous five years and includes more detail on gaps between groups and intersection of some groups. It also gives data for individual institutions.

The [OfS Exploring student outcomes data dashboard](#) allows users to control for underlying factors (such as personal characteristics, qualifications and

<sup>7</sup> Travel, caring or retirement.

geography) when looking at progression rates for different groups of students.

The Department for Education's Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset links administrative datasets from the higher education sector with those from further education, schools, HMRC earnings and employment records and the Department for Work and Pensions' National Benefit Database and Labour Market System. It allows detailed information on graduate outcomes (employment and earnings) to be analysed by a wide range of different student/graduate characteristics. It does not include information by disability.

The latest LEO data is for the 2022-23 tax year and looks at the following first-degree graduates from English higher or further education institutions:

- 2020/21 graduating cohort one year after graduation
- 2018/19 graduating cohort three years after graduation
- 2016/17 graduating cohort five years after graduation
- 2011/12 graduating cohort ten years after graduation

The LEO data presented in this paper looks at home students who studied a first degree in England. The following table gives the proportion of graduates in sustained employment<sup>8</sup> and/or further study.<sup>9</sup> It shows relatively little difference between groups on most measures. This is in contrast to analysis by prior attainment where there were large gaps. Some of the more important patterns in the groups covered in this paper were:

- New female graduates were more likely to be in employment or further study than men, but this gap falls over time.
- Young graduates were more likely to be in employment or further study than mature graduates. This gap increases over time from around two percentage point among those one year after graduation to around four points ten years after graduation.
- White graduates had higher employment/study rates than all other ethnic groups and this gap increased with time since graduation.
- There was relatively little difference in employment/study rates by POLAR group.

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<sup>8</sup> Defined as employed for at least one day for five out of the six months between October and March or have a self-employment record

<sup>9</sup> A graduate is defined as being in further study if they have a valid higher education study record at any UK HE institution. This does not have to be at postgraduate level

- Graduates who were eligible for free school meals at school had lower employment/study rates than other graduates by 4 to 5 percentage points.

### What do different groups of graduates do after leaving university?

% in sustained employment and/or further study 2022/23

	Years after graduation...			
	One	Three	Five	Ten
Male	88.0%	87.3%	87.6%	85.2%
Female	90.7%	89.9%	89.2%	86.3%
Young	90.0%	89.6%	89.6%	87.0%
Mature	88.3%	86.6%	85.6%	82.9%
White	90.8%	90.1%	89.9%	87.1%
Black	87.0%	87.0%	86.3%	82.7%
Mixed	86.6%	85.0%	83.9%	80.9%
Asian	87.1%	86.2%	85.4%	82.5%
Other	82.3%	80.5%	79.8%	77.8%
POLAR group				
Q1 -lowest	90.7%	90.2%	90.4%	88.0%
Q2	90.6%	90.5%	90.3%	88.0%
Q3	90.4%	89.8%	90.0%	87.4%
Q4	89.6%	89.5%	89.3%	86.7%
Q5 -highest	89.6%	89.1%	89.1%	86.4%
Eligible for FSM	87.1%	86.4%	85.9%	n/a
Not Eligible	90.7%	90.5%	90.7%	n/a
<b>Overall</b>	<b>89.6%</b>	<b>88.9%</b>	<b>88.6%</b>	<b>85.8%</b>

Source: DfE, [LEO Graduate and Postgraduate Outcomes 2022-23](#)

## Earnings

LEO data on median earnings among graduates in sustained employment is given in the following table and charts.

Median earnings for men were 6% higher than for women one year after graduation, but this gap increases substantially over time and was 30% ten years after graduation. Young graduates start their career earning less than mature graduates but were earning more five years after graduation and 17% more ten years after graduation.

Black graduates earn the same as other graduates soon after graduation. Their earnings fall behind at five, and ten years since graduation.

Asian graduates earned more than any other ethnic group. Black graduates earn above average one year after graduation but fall back over time and were earning 2% below average ten years after graduation.

There was a very clear earnings pattern by POLAR group with those from areas with higher levels of past participation earning more. This pattern was sustained over the ten years following graduation. Graduates who were eligible for free school meals earned less than other graduates. This gap was 7% at one year after graduation, increasing to 10% five years after graduation.

The differences between these groups are much smaller than differences between graduate earnings by subject of study or prior attainment.

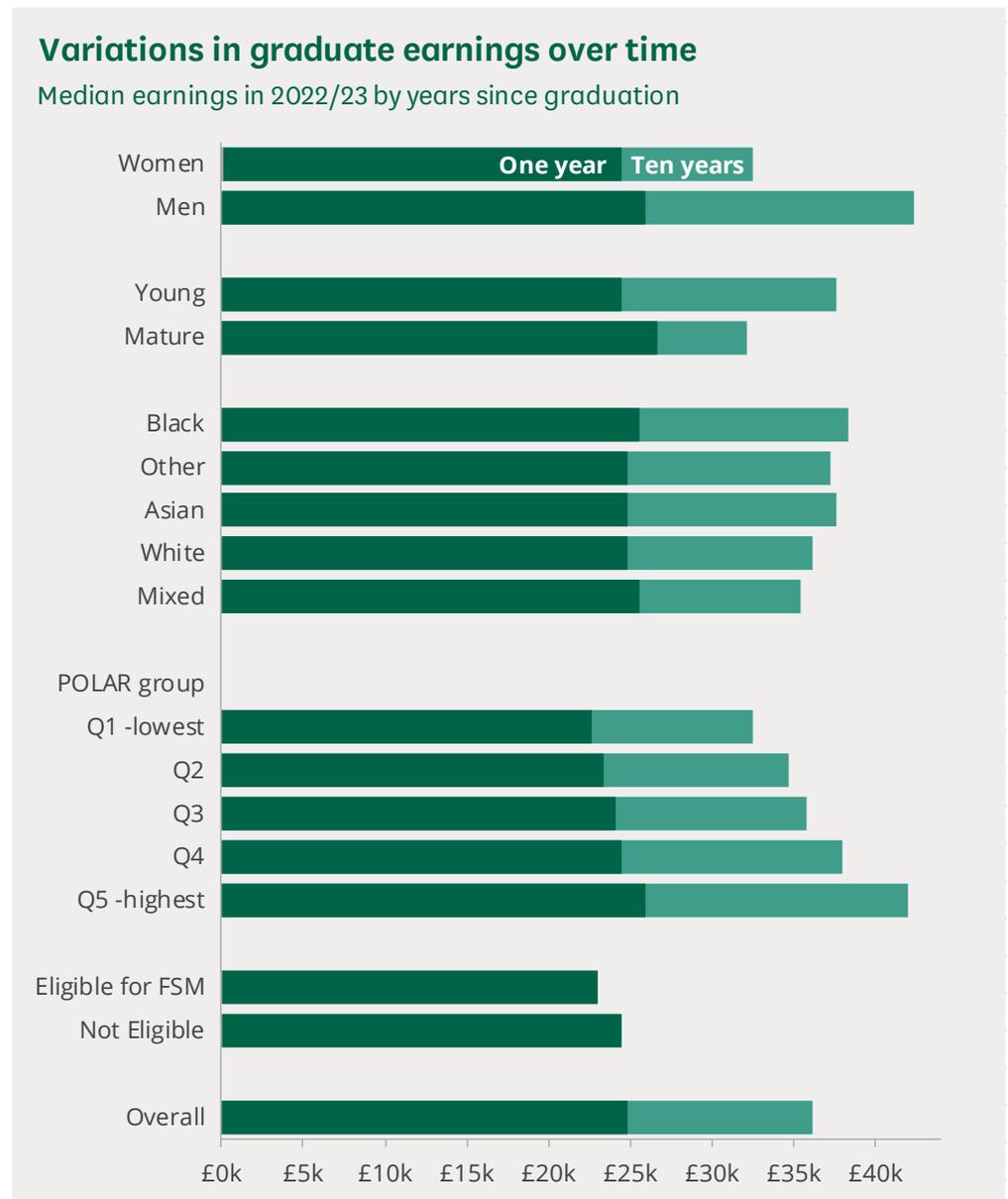
### What do different groups of graduates earn after leaving university?

Median earnings 2022/23

	Years after graduation...			
	One	Three	Five	Ten
Male	£25,900	£29,600	£34,300	£42,300
Female	£24,500	£27,400	£29,900	£32,500
Young	£24,500	£28,100	£32,100	£37,600
Mature	£26,600	£28,100	£29,900	£32,100
White	£24,800	£27,700	£31,400	£36,100
Black	£25,600	£28,100	£31,000	£35,400
Mixed	£24,800	£28,500	£31,800	£37,600
Asian	£25,600	£28,800	£32,800	£38,300
Other	£24,800	£28,500	£31,800	£37,200
POLAR group				
Q1 -lowest	£22,600	£25,600	£28,500	£32,500
Q2	£23,400	£26,300	£29,600	£34,700
Q3	£24,100	£27,400	£31,000	£35,800
Q4	£24,500	£28,100	£32,100	£38,000
Q5 -highest	£25,900	£30,300	£35,400	£42,000
Eligible for FSM	£23,000	£25,900	£29,200	n/a
Not Eligible	£24,500	£28,100	£32,100	n/a
<b>Overall</b>	<b>£24,800</b>	<b>£28,100</b>	<b>£31,400</b>	<b>£36,100</b>

Source: DfE, [LEO Graduate and Postgraduate Outcomes 2022-23](#)

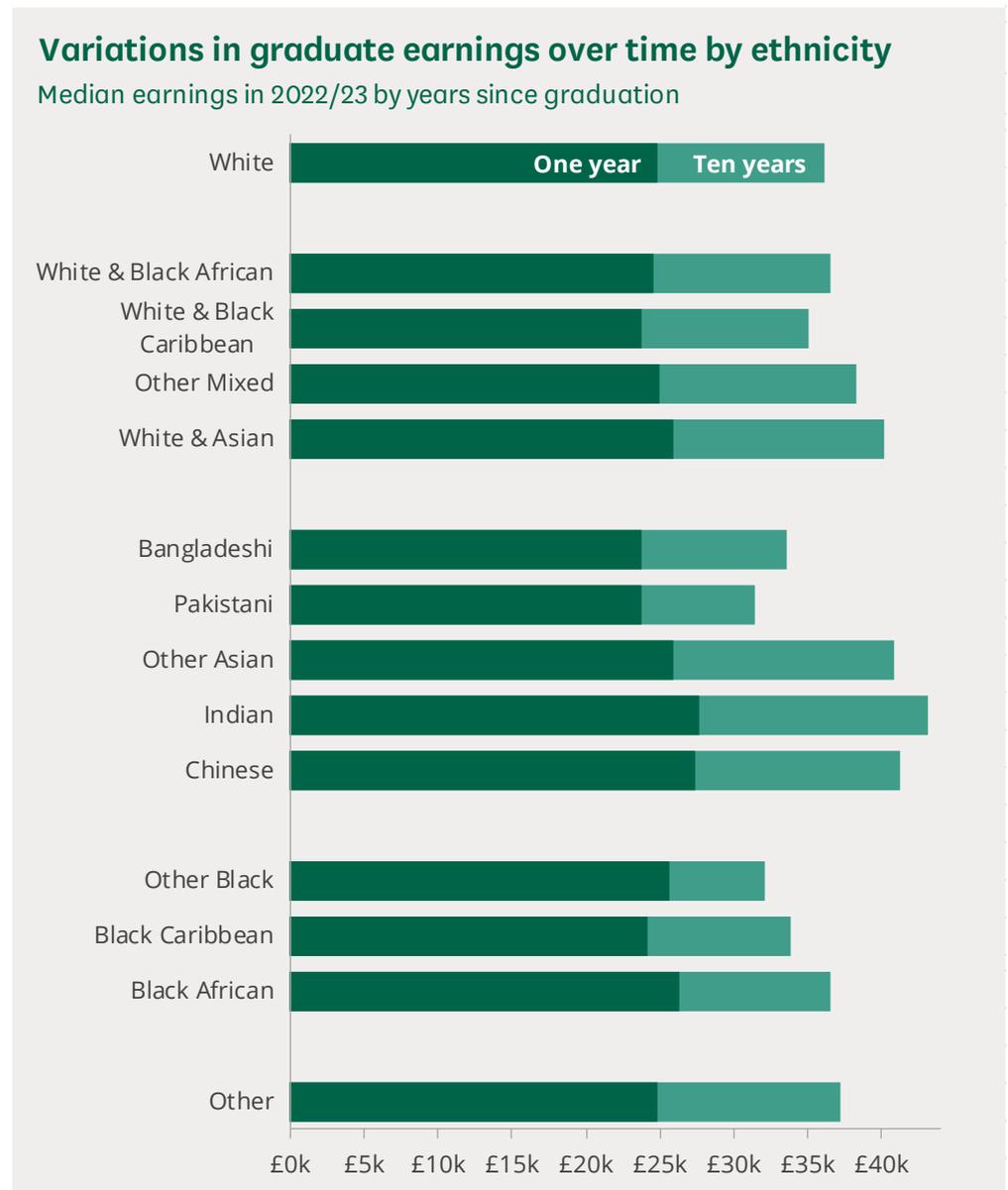
The earnings gap between men and women grows substantially in the ten years after graduation



Source: DfE, [LEO Graduate and Postgraduate Outcomes 2022-23](#)

The final chart below looks at detailed ethnic groups and shows that graduates with an Indian or Chinese background earned the most one year after graduation and retained this advantage ten years after graduation.

Graduates with a Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Black Caribbean background earned the least one year after graduation. Earnings growth over time was particularly small for Pakistani graduates. Their median earnings 10 years after graduation were £31,400, which was 13% below the average across all graduates.



Source: DfE, [LEO Graduate and Postgraduate Outcomes 2022-23](#)

These data show variations in employment and earnings for different groups of graduates - some of these observed differences may be ‘explained’ by factors linked to outcomes, such as prior attainment, degree subject, or where they live in the country. Any remaining ‘unexplained’ differences are, as far as we can tell, down to being part of that group alone.

## 2021 IFS report on returns to an undergraduate degree

An [IFS report from 2021](#) attempted to answer questions around employment and earnings using LEO data to estimate financial returns to a degree up to age 30.<sup>10</sup>

It looked at the earnings premium in percentage terms broken down by gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity. Its focus was therefore on the financial returns to a degree for members of each group compared to not going to higher education, rather than absolute differences in earnings.

The socio-economic status measure used a combination of free school meal eligibility and local area deprivation and had a separate category for privately-educated graduates. Their modelling took prior attainment, home region, selectivity of university, and degree subject into account.

The key findings of [The returns to undergraduate degrees by socio-economic group and ethnicity](#) were:

**Average returns to undergraduate degrees at age 30 are positive for people from all socioeconomic and ethnic groups we study, but there is substantial heterogeneity across groups. Returns are especially high for privately-educated graduates, whose median earnings at age 30 are the highest of all groups.** However, we find that the groups with the lowest graduate earnings, such as Pakistani students or state-educated students from the poorest families, also have relatively high returns from going to university. The reason is that the earnings prospects of these groups are very low on average if they do not attend university.

**Besides high returns for privately educated students, returns vary relatively little by socio-economic status.** At age 30, we find gross earnings returns of around 6% for state-educated men and around 27% for state-educated women. If anything, returns are somewhat higher for state-educated students from the poorest 20% of families, with returns at around 7% for men and 31% for women. Returns for privately educated students are much higher at around 29% for men and 36% for women.

**By ethnicity, we see especially high returns for South Asian students.** In particular, we find returns of 27% for Indian women, 40% for Pakistani women and 30% for Bangladeshi women, as well as 16% for Indian men, 36% for Pakistani men and 14% for Bangladeshi men. Strikingly, Pakistani graduates have the highest returns of all ethnic groups, even though they have the lowest median age-30 earnings at £23,000 for men and £19,000 for women.

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<sup>10</sup> IFS, [The returns to undergraduate degrees by socio-economic group and ethnicity](#), March 2021

According to the IFS “...differences in the returns to higher education ‘even out’ some of the earnings differences between non-graduates that cannot be explained by other factors”.

**Returns for Black women are somewhat lower than for White British women.** Estimated returns are 9% for Black Caribbean women, 20% for Black African women and 23% for Other Black women, compared with 28% for White British women. For Black men, estimated returns differ widely between different subgroups: returns for Black African men are large at 15%, but returns for Black Caribbean men are similar to returns for White British men at 7%, and returns for Other Black men are low at 4%.

**Some but not all of the differences in returns can be explained by variation in subjects chosen and institutions attended.** Subject choice explains little of the variation in returns by socio-economic status, but a substantial amount of the variation in returns by ethnicity: Asian students systematically choose more lucrative subjects than White British students. Conversely, institution choices can partly explain why private school students get higher returns from university than those who attended state schools; however, institution choices do not explain much of the variation in returns by ethnicity.

**Unexplained differences in earnings between groups are mostly smaller among graduates than among non-graduates.** This implies that differences in the returns to higher education ‘even out’ some of the earnings differences between non-graduates that cannot be explained by other factors. However, large unexplained earnings gaps between socio-economic and ethnic groups remain. In particular, controlling for background conditions, prior attainment, and university and subject choice, graduate men from all non-White ethnic groups earn significantly less than White British graduates.

The report also estimated the present value of the lifetime earnings premiums of a degree, after tax and student loan repayments, for these groups. These results are subject to a greater degree of uncertainty. The authors found that:

**Lifetime returns by socio-economic status follow a U shape.** For women, the average return varies between £140,000 for the bottom quintile and £70,000 for the top state quintile. For men, the returns are similar to the estimates for women for the bottom four SES quintiles, but higher at around £110,000 for the top state SES quintile, while for the privately educated the returns are much higher at around £250,000.

**Lifetime returns by ethnicity follow a similar pattern to gross returns at age 30.** Returns for South Asian students are relatively high at around £200,000 for men and around £170,000 for women. Estimated returns for Black students are relatively low at around £50,000; an exception is Black African women, for whom we estimate a lifetime return of £175,000 on average. White British, White Other, and Other students have middling returns of roughly £100,000 for both men and women.

The report concluded:

These differences are partly driven by university and subject choices. There is a clear socioeconomic gradient in university choices, with privately educated students and students from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds studying at higher-return institutions. In explaining differences between ethnic groups, subject choice plays a larger role: ethnic Asian students tend to choose higher-return subjects than their Black and White peers.

“...elite social networks are likely to be important in explaining the exceptional returns of some men who went to private schools” (IFS)

Remaining differences in estimated returns between groups stem from differences between graduates and non-graduates of different groups that are not explained by their institution and subject choices, prior attainment, or other observable background conditions. These will include the access to social networks, rates of part-time work, unobserved non-cognitive skills, and the effects of labour market discrimination. For instance, elite social networks are likely to be important in explaining the exceptional returns of some men who went to private schools. Differential rates of part-time work by socio-economic status may be an important factor behind the high estimated returns of women from poorer families.

Notably, unexplained differences in estimated returns between groups are, to some extent, the mirror image of unexplained differences in non-graduate earnings conditional on prior attainment and other background conditions. This suggests that, among students from different socio-economic or ethnic groups but with the same prior attainment and other background characteristics, university education can help level the playing field in the labour market. However, substantial unexplained differences remain even for graduates. In particular, graduate men from all ethnic minority groups have lower earnings than male White British graduates even after controlling for prior attainment and a host of other background characteristics

## Further information

The OfS [Access and participation dashboard](#) gives the highly skilled employment/higher study information over the previous five years and includes more detail on gaps between groups and intersection of some groups. It also allows users to look at these data for individual institutions.

The [OfS Exploring student outcomes data dashboard](#) allows users to control for underlying factors (such as personal characteristics, qualifications and geography) when looking at progression rates for different groups of students.

[LEO Graduate and Postgraduate Outcomes](#) from the DfE gives the employment/further study and other destinations and earnings data for other groups including by prior attainment, subject studied, mode of study, and home region. It also includes more detail on the groups covered here, including more detailed ethnic and age groups. It also gives data for earlier tax years.

HESA's [HE Graduate Outcomes Data](#) provides data from a survey of graduates 15 months after completing their course. It looks at graduate activities and salary bands by personal characteristics as well as data for the whole graduate population on graduates' thoughts about the activities they are doing and their subjective wellbeing.

Advance HE's [Student Equality data dashboards](#) cover the student population, protected characteristics, continuation, degree awards. They allow the user to look at data broken down by country of institution, institution mission group and combinations of student protected characteristics.

## 3 Barriers to equal access, participation, and outcomes

Several factors have been identified as important social, cultural, and financial barriers to greater equality in access, participation, and outcomes across higher education for students from different backgrounds.

### 3.1 Prior attainment

Research published in 2016 showed prior attainment at Key Stage 4 can explain all of the gap in university access between the richest and poorest students.<sup>11</sup> Students from the poorest 20% of families are almost equally as likely to go to university as their peers from the wealthiest 20% of families, when they achieve comparable GCSE grades.<sup>12</sup>

A Russell Group report published in May 2020, [Pathways for Potential, identified gaps in prior attainment as a significant barrier to university access](#) for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>13</sup> The report found teacher shortages, a lack of extracurricular support structures, and differences in parental expectations can hinder the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and reduce their ability to progress to higher education. A 2023 report by the Sutton Trust, which aims to address educational disadvantage, highlighted similar issues for the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, particularly with regards to a lack of teachers and poor-quality teaching, as well as the impact that limited access to technology had for accessing education during the covid-19 pandemic.<sup>14</sup>

The government's [post-16 education and skills white paper](#), published in October 2025, said "higher education access is, to a large extent, constrained

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<sup>11</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies, [Raising GCSE attainment crucial to get more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds into university, but work to promote social mobility cannot end when they arrive on campus](#), 5 December 2016; C. Crawford and others, Family background and university success: differences in Higher Education access and outcomes in England, 2016

<sup>12</sup> Office for Fair Access, [Topic briefing: Raising attainment in schools and colleges to widen participation](#), December 2017

<sup>13</sup> Russell Group, [Pathways For Potential: How universities, regulators and Government can tackle educational inequality](#), May 2020, p12

<sup>14</sup> Sutton Trust, [Stories from the Class of 2023](#), 9 August 2023

by inequalities in prior attainment”, and noted that the GCSE disadvantage gap was back to the levels of the 2011 to 2012 academic year.<sup>15</sup>

## 3.2 Insufficient advice and support

A report published by the [Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities](#), which was established in 2021 by the then-Conservative government, cited data that showed although White students were the least likely aggregated ethnic group to go to university, they were [far more likely to attend high-tariff universities compared to their Black peers](#).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, once at university, students from minority ethnic backgrounds were generally more likely to drop out before completing their course, have lower levels of attainment, and lower earnings after graduating.<sup>17</sup> The Commission’s report suggested this data might reflect the fact such students did not have access to sufficient advice when applying to university and thinking about their career options, and this had long term consequences for their subsequent level of employment. The report said:

Ethnic minority students, and especially Black students, from lower social status backgrounds are not being well advised on which courses to take at university. About 40% of Black African people and 39% of people from the Bangladeshi ethnic group are overqualified for their roles, compared with 25% of White workers.<sup>18</sup>

“Low participation rates (or absence of a tradition of going to certain institutions) can mean there is a lack of tacit knowledge and role models to draw on.”

Russell Group, [Pathways for Potential](#), p12.

The Russell Group has also highlighted insufficient advice and support as a barrier to access and participation, particularly for students who were the first in their family to attend university.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, UCAS has said three in five students with experience of being in care receive no guidance when applying to higher education.<sup>20</sup>

The Russell Group’s 2020 [Pathways for Potential](#) report said:

Lack of knowledge about higher education and a lack of practical support in decision-making can impact negatively on the confidence of under-represented students and undermine their expectations that they can fulfil their ambitions. Without good quality careers advice and guidance, students

<sup>15</sup> Department for Education (DfE), Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology (DSIT), [Post-16 education and skills white paper](#), 20 October 2025, p55

<sup>16</sup> The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, [The Report](#), March 2021, p95

<sup>17</sup> The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, [The Report](#), March 2021, pp96-7

<sup>18</sup> The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, [The Report](#), March 2021, pp97-8

<sup>19</sup> Russell Group, [Pathways For Potential: How universities, regulators and Government can tackle educational inequality](#), May 2020

<sup>20</sup> UCAS, [Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education?](#), November 2022

who are the first in their family to go to university can find it difficult to navigate the choices available to them.<sup>21</sup>

Two other reports published in March 2021 by UCAS and the Social Mobility Commission came to similar conclusions about the need to ensure young people had access to careers advice.<sup>22</sup>

The UCAS report noted “disadvantaged students are more likely to consider HE [higher education] later, which can limit their choices, especially for more selective subjects and higher tariff providers.”<sup>23</sup> The report said advantaged students were 1.4 times more likely to think about higher education at primary school than their disadvantaged peers.<sup>24</sup> It recommended the government should introduce statutory requirements for careers information and guidance in primary school education.

Furthermore, the Social Mobility Commission found there was an ‘earnings penalty’ for disadvantaged women of four to five percentage points as a result of their choices about post-16 courses.<sup>25</sup>

### 3.3 Financial concerns

As noted above, prior attainment is a crucial factor in explaining the participation gap between more and less advantaged students, but research has also shown financial concerns can deter young people from disadvantaged backgrounds from applying to university. These concerns can also be detrimental to their experiences of higher education.

The Centre for Learning and Life Chances published a report in 2017 that showed debt aversion among young people from working-class backgrounds was far more likely to deter them from applying to university than students from other backgrounds.<sup>26</sup> The report also showed the reluctance of this group to enter higher education had increased since 2002 because of the associated costs.<sup>27</sup>

In May 2019, a literature review was carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies on behalf of the Department for Education to consider

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<sup>21</sup> Russell Group, [Pathways For Potential: How universities, regulators and Government can tackle educational inequality](#), May 2020, p12

<sup>22</sup> UCAS, [Where next? What influences the choices school leavers make?](#), March 2021; The Social Mobility Commission, [The road not taken: The drivers of course selection](#), March 2021

<sup>23</sup> UCAS, [Where next?](#), p4

<sup>24</sup> UCAS, [Where next? What influences the choices school leavers make?](#), March 2021

<sup>25</sup> Social Mobility Commission, [The road not taken](#), pp26-28

<sup>26</sup> Centre for Research on Learning and Life Chances, [Does student loan debt deter Higher Education participation? New evidence from England](#), research paper 58, June 2017

<sup>27</sup> Centre for Research on Learning and Life Chances, [Does student loan debt deter Higher Education participation? New evidence from England](#), research paper 58, June 2017

the effect of the student finance system on young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. It found the following:

- Concerns about whether the benefits of higher education outweigh the costs are more common among individuals who have no parental experience of higher education and/or have low prior attainment.
- The limited research on the decision-making of those not planning to go to higher education, or considering not applying, suggests financial issues are a key factor in this process.
- For students at university, concerns about living costs and the day-to-day management of finances can affect retention and the student experience, and can lead students to consider dropping out.<sup>28</sup>

Analysis of survey results by the Sutton Trust, published in August 2023, found that more than one-fifth of A Level students who did not intend to apply to university said this was because they could not afford to go.<sup>29</sup> Those from families who had used a food bank in the that time were 20 percentage points more likely to report not being able to afford to go as a barrier to applying.

In October 2024, Universities UK published research showing that for graduates who were the first in their family to attend university, financial assistance was vital.<sup>30</sup> When non-graduates from across the UK were asked what made them choose not to go to university, the research found over a third (36%) were put off by concerns about their financial commitments, and a quarter (26%) cited financial barriers to attending university. Almost half (48%) said more financial support might have persuaded them to attend university.

## The rising cost of living

As UK household costs and bills rose in recent years, university leaders warned students were at risk of becoming “[the forgotten group in the cost of living crisis](#)”.<sup>31</sup> Black students, students aged over 25, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were likely to be hardest hit by rising costs of food, transport, rent, and energy.<sup>32</sup>

90% of students surveyed by the National Union of Students (NUS) for its September 2022 Cost of Living report said the rising [cost of living had](#)

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<sup>28</sup> DfE, [Impact of the student finance system on participation, experience and outcomes of disadvantaged young people](#), May 2019

<sup>29</sup> Sutton Trust, [The Class of 2023: Opportunities and University Plans](#), 10 August 2023

<sup>30</sup> Universities UK, [University helps three quarters \(73%\) of 'first-in-the-family' graduates get over their imposter syndrome but, without financial support, over 4 in 10 couldn't have afforded to go at all](#), April 2024

<sup>31</sup> Universities UK, [Don't overlook students in cost of living crisis, say university leaders](#), 20 December 2022

<sup>32</sup> Million Plus, [Learning with the lights off: students and the cost-of-living crisis](#), October 2022

[negatively impacted their mental health](#) (PDF).<sup>33</sup> Students said they were worried about being able to eat, feed their family, and pay bills, with concerns about cost-of-living pressures greater among [older students, postgraduates, and those who work or have caring responsibilities](#).<sup>34</sup>

These financial pressures can negatively affect student outcomes. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), over three-quarters of students in 2022 were “concerned” rising costs may affect how well they do in their studies.<sup>35</sup> Survey results published by the Sutton Trust in March 2023 found nearly half (49%) of undergraduate students had missed classes to do paid work.<sup>36</sup> A concern about finances is one of the most common reasons students give for thinking about dropping out of their studies.<sup>37</sup>

The Library briefing [Students and the rising cost of living](#) has more detailed information on how financial pressures have affected higher education students in the UK.<sup>38</sup>

## Regional mobility

The 2020 Russell Group report [Pathways for Potential](#) found students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to attend universities in their local area and to live at home because of financial concerns. The report said:

Financial concerns can cause disadvantaged students to restrict their higher education choices to institutions in their local area, with many choosing to live at home rather than move away to study. This can also be exacerbated by a lack of understanding of the student loans system.<sup>39</sup>

The issue of constrained choice has been exacerbated by the rising cost of living in recent years. A report by London Higher and Access HE, published in 2024, found students in London felt like they had to study locally because the current economic climate meant living away from the family home simply was not financially viable.<sup>40</sup>

The Sutton Trust has argued student mobility is a major dimension of inequality within higher education choice and experience.<sup>41</sup> A report it published in 2018 said:

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<sup>33</sup> NUS, [Cost of Living Report](#) (PDF), September 2022

<sup>34</sup> Savanta ComRes, [Student's Cost of Living Poll](#), 3 September 2022

<sup>35</sup> ONS, [Cost of living and higher education students, England: 24 October to 7 November 2022](#), 23 November 2022

<sup>36</sup> Sutton Trust, [New polling on the impact of the cost of living crisis on students](#), March 2023

<sup>37</sup> Save the Student, [Student Money Survey 2022](#), 20 September 2022

<sup>38</sup> Commons Library briefing CBP-9886, [Students and the rising cost of living](#)

<sup>39</sup> Russell Group, [Pathways For Potential](#), p12

<sup>40</sup> London Higher and Access HE, [Opportunity Cost: Access to HE and the cost of living crisis in London](#), June 2024

<sup>41</sup> The Sutton Trust, [Home and Away. Social, ethnic, and spatial inequalities in student mobility](#), February 2018

Social class is a key factor which drives the mobility choices of young people... leaving home and attending a distant university is too often the preserve of white, middle class, privately educated young people.<sup>42</sup>

Comparisons between high-attaining advantaged students and high-attaining disadvantaged students who choose to study close to home, show that high-attaining disadvantaged students are less likely to attend a high-tariff Russell Group university, and are more likely to attend a less prestigious post-1992 institution; a phenomenon known as ‘undermatching’.<sup>43</sup>

A 2024 report by the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON), which is an organisation that supports widening participation professionals, found the chances of young people eligible for free school meals in England progressing to higher education were low, and in many areas of the country little progress has been made in improving them over the last decade.<sup>44</sup>

## 3.4 Mental health issues

Mental health conditions can be clinically diagnosed. Mental health issues or poor mental health are broader terms used to describe mental distress that may or may not be related to a diagnosable mental health condition.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency collects data from students on any disability that they have, including mental health conditions. In 2023/24, 469,000 UK students said they had a disability of some kind; this was 21.6% of all home students.<sup>45</sup> Within this, 122,500 students said they had a mental health condition; 5.6% of all home students. The number of students with a mental health condition has almost quadrupled in the decade to 2023/24.

A number of other surveys – of variable quality and often self-selecting – have shown significant numbers of students suffer with mental health issues. For example, a [2023 survey of 4,000 UK students](#) by the Tab, a student news site, and [Campaign Against Living Miserably \(CALM\)](#), a suicide prevention charity, found 69% of students had suffered with a mental health issue at some point during their studies. Anxiety was the most prevalent mental health issue, with 61% saying they had suffered from it. 54% had suffered from depression, 39% had experienced suicidal thoughts, 28% eating disorders, 10% OCD, and 3% bipolar disorder.<sup>46</sup>

The consequences of mental health issues for students can be serious and range from poor academic performance and dropping out of university, to self-harm and suicide. Data on students in England from the Office for

<sup>42</sup> The Sutton Trust, [Home and Away. Social, ethnic, and spatial inequalities in student mobility](#), February 2018, p4

<sup>43</sup> Nuffield Foundation, [Mismatch in higher education: prevalence, drivers and outcomes](#), December 2019

<sup>44</sup> NEON, [Universities not for everyone: levelling up and who is missing out on higher education in England](#), February 2024

<sup>45</sup> HESA, [UK permanent address student enrolments by disability and sex 2014/15 to 2023/24](#)

<sup>46</sup> [“‘They made me feel invalid’: Shocking new figures show scale of student mental health crisis”](#), The Tab, May 2023

Students shows students with a declared mental health condition were less likely than average to:

- continue in higher education after their first year
- achieve a first or upper second degree
- secure higher-level employment or go on to study as a postgraduate.<sup>47</sup>

Certain groups of students have been identified as being more likely to experience mental health issues or being at higher risk of suicide:

- People from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience mental health issues, and students from such backgrounds can face particular financial challenges.
- International students can face unique challenges relating to isolation, integration, cultural expectations, and concerns about funding.
- Mature students may feel more isolated because they are unable to engage socially. They may also have childcare responsibilities and face greater financial pressures.
- Neurodiverse students, including those with autism and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) can experience mental health issues at times of transition and change.

Other groups of students at particular risk include those who have experienced bereavement or trauma, asylum seekers and refugees, students with underlying health conditions, and LGBTQ+ students.

The 2023 edition of Unite Students' annual Applicant Index, which surveys UK university applicants, found 30% of university applicants had been absent from school or college in the past two years because of their mental health. Female, LGBTQ+ students, and care experienced applicants were more likely than their peers to have missed school for this reason.<sup>48</sup> School attendance has been shown to be associated with higher average academic performance across all pupils from all backgrounds.<sup>49</sup>

## 3.5 Harassment on campus

There is evidence to show harassment suffered by students during their time at university can have a detrimental effect on their participation, attainment, and outcomes. In addition to some of the harassment and its impact detailed

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<sup>47</sup> OfS, [Innovation, partnership and data can help improve student mental health in new £14m drive](#), June 2019

<sup>48</sup> Unite Students, [Applicant Index Report 2023](#), 2023

<sup>49</sup> Department for Education, [Link between attendance and attainment](#), March 2025

below, recent research has also highlighted the challenges faced by trans and non-binary students.<sup>50</sup>

## Sexual harassment

Numerous studies have shown that female students are disproportionately affected by sexual harassment and misconduct during their time at university. A 2018 survey carried out by the campaign group Revolt Sexual Assault and the Student Room [found that while 26% of male respondents had experienced sexual violence](#) during their time in higher education, this figure rose to 70% for female respondents.<sup>51</sup>

Students reported experiences of sexual harassment significantly affected their studies, self-confidence, mental health, and social life. 25% of respondents to the Revolt Sexual Assault survey said they had skipped lectures and tutorials and changed modules to avoid perpetrators, or considered doing so, while 16% said they had suspended their studies or dropped out of their degree, or considered doing so.<sup>52</sup>

The Library briefing [Sexual harassment and violence in further and higher education](#) provides a detailed overview of the prevalence and consequences of sexual harassment, misconduct, and violence on university campuses, and the responses of the Government, regulators, and universities to the issue.<sup>53</sup>

## Racial harassment

In 2019, an [inquiry into racial harassment](#) in publicly funded universities in England, Scotland, and Wales by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) found racial harassment was a common experience for many students. The EHRC's 2019 polling was repeated by Universities UK in 2022/23, giving similar results.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Higher Education Policy Institute, [Trans and non-binary student experiences in higher education](#), May 2024

<sup>51</sup> Revolt Against Assault, [Students' Experience of Sexual Violence](#), 2018

<sup>52</sup> Revolt Against Assault, [Students' Experience of Sexual Violence](#), 2018

<sup>53</sup> Commons Library briefing CBP-9438, [Sexual harassment and violence in further and higher education](#).

<sup>54</sup> Universities UK, [Tackling racial harassment in higher education: progress since 2020](#), July 2023

“Racial harassment of students doesn’t just take place online. It is most likely to happen in teaching settings and on campus and is most commonly from fellow students or academics.”

EHRC, *Tackling racial harassment*, p26.

The EHRC survey revealed 24% of students from minority ethnic backgrounds had experienced racial harassment since starting their course, which is 13% of all current students in British universities.<sup>55</sup> The figures were highest for Black students (29%) and Asian students (27%).<sup>56</sup> Universities UK’s polling in 2022/23 similarly found 24% of students from minority ethnic backgrounds had experienced some form of racial harassment since starting their course, but for Black students the figure had risen to 45%.<sup>57</sup>

The EHRC found verbal abuse, including racist name-calling, insults, and jokes, was the most common form of harassment experienced at universities. A portion of students also experienced physical attacks and regular microaggressions, which are characterised as behaviours “based on stereotypical assumptions made about students and staff because of their race or appearance.”<sup>58</sup>

The EHRC’s report noted experiences of harassment “can seriously affect an individual’s mental health, sense of belonging and progress, as well as their decision to remain in education.”<sup>59</sup> Reports published by Universities UK in November 2020 and July 2023 also found students who experienced racial harassment during their time at university suffered significant negative impacts on their mental health, including feeling upset, vulnerable, depressed, angry, anxious, and suicidal.<sup>60</sup> 5% of students surveyed for the November 2020 report had left their studies as a result of their experiences of racial harassment.<sup>61</sup>

## Antisemitism

According to the Department for Education, the number of incidents of antisemitic abuse on university campuses grew by 465% in the first five months of 2024, compared to the same period a year earlier.<sup>62</sup> Community Security Trust (CST), a charity that provides security to the Jewish community in the UK, recorded a total of 325 university-related antisemitic incidents in 2022/23 (53) and 2023/24 (272).<sup>63</sup> The 272 incidents in 2023/24 was the highest number recorded for an academic year.<sup>64</sup> There were 35 incidents in the first six months of 2025.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>55</sup> EHRC, [Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged](#), October 2019, p26.

<sup>56</sup> EHRC, [Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged](#), October 2019, p26.

<sup>57</sup> Universities UK, [Tackling racial harassment in higher education: progress since 2020](#), July 2023

<sup>58</sup> EHRC, [Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged](#), October 2019, p29.

<sup>59</sup> EHRC, [Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged](#), October 2019, p26

<sup>60</sup> Universities UK, [Tackling racial harassment in higher education](#), November 2020, p25; Universities UK, [Tackling racial harassment in higher education: progress since 2020](#), July 2023, p12

<sup>61</sup> Universities UK, [Tackling racial harassment in higher education](#), November 2020

<sup>62</sup> Department for Education, [£7 million to tackle antisemitism in education confirmed](#), 7 October 2024

<sup>63</sup> Community Security Trust, [Campus Antisemitism in Britain 2022-2024](#) (PDF), 2024

<sup>64</sup> Community Security Trust, [Campus Antisemitism in Britain 2022-2024](#) (PDF), 2024

<sup>65</sup> Times Higher Education, [“Antisemitic incidents on UK campuses drop from record high”](#), 6 August 2025

In May 2025, a debate on antisemitism on university campuses in the House of Lords saw peers recounting testimony from Jewish students feeling unable to attend lectures and seminars due to threats and intimidation.<sup>66</sup>

The Office for Students wrote to universities in November 2025 to remind them of the steps they can take to protect Jewish students and staff on campus.<sup>67</sup>

## Islamophobia

Universities UK published guidance on tackling Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred in 2021 that said: “Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred is present at UK universities, and affects large numbers of Muslim students”.<sup>68</sup> This included students being subject to abuse, harassment, suspicion, and microaggressions, with female students in particular worried about experiencing abuse when wearing traditional religious garments.

The guidance also noted that Muslim students are less likely to receive the highest degree classifications, and more likely to experience higher dropout rates and lower satisfaction with their university experience, suggesting that experiences of Islamophobia may affect Muslim students’ attainment and sense of belonging.<sup>69</sup>

A report published in 2025 by the University of Bradford and the Aziz Foundation, which supports Muslim students, explored the perceptions and experiences of Muslim students (and staff) at the university.<sup>70</sup> It found that some students reported problematic encounters and experiences, which were rooted in how they were perceived as Muslims and which had consequences for their studies and broader student experience.

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<sup>66</sup> [HL Deb \[Antisemitism on University Campuses\] 7 May 2025](#)

<sup>67</sup> Office for Students, [Harassment and intimidation of Jewish students and staff](#), 12 November 2025

<sup>68</sup> Universities UK, [Tackling Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred: practical guidance for universities](#), December 2021, p8

<sup>69</sup> Universities UK, [Tackling Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred: practical guidance for universities](#), December 2021, p8

<sup>70</sup> University of Bradford and Aziz Foundation, [Countering Islamophobia on Campus](#), April 2025

## 4

# Government policy and actions

In 2018, the then-Conservative government created the [Office for Students](#) (OfS) as the regulator for higher education in England, under provisions in [the Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#). As part of the reforms, the OfS took over the responsibility for promoting fair access to higher education that had been undertaken by the now defunct [Office for Fair Access](#) (OFFA).

The government provides guidance and funding to the OfS so it can improve student access and participation. The government also provides financial support to students through the student finance system, funds initiatives to help particular groups of students, and convenes taskforces and working groups to develop policy and best practice for providers in conjunction with the higher education sector.

### 4.1

## Post-16 education and skills white paper

The government's post-16 education and skills white paper, which was published in October 2025, described higher education as having the potential to be one of the biggest contributors to closing the gap between people from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers, saying it "should be a gateway open to all who have the ability and desire to pursue it".<sup>71</sup>

Section 3.4 of the white paper was dedicated to access and participation. It argued that while progress is being made, there remained significant gaps between disadvantaged students and their peers in accessing education, completing courses, and achieving successful labour market outcomes. The white paper went on to highlight a number of other issues facing students, including:

- a lack of accommodation in some places, and significantly increased prices elsewhere, especially in London
- increasing numbers of mental health issues
- an increase in antisemitic incidents
- an increased chance of experiencing sexual harassment.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Department for Education (DfE), Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology (DSIT), [Post-16 education and skills white paper](#), 20 October 2025, p55

<sup>72</sup> DfE, DWP, and DSIT, [Post-16 education and skills white paper](#), 20 October 2025, pp55-56

To address these issues, the white paper set out a number of policy interventions, some of which were already announced by the previous Conservative government.<sup>73</sup> These included:

- Measures relating to the student finance system, such as:
  - increasing maintenance loans in line with forecast inflation every academic year and making care leavers automatically eligible to receive the maximum rate of maintenance loan.
  - continuing the policy started by the previous government of replacing the higher education student finance system with the [Lifelong Learning Entitlement](#) (LLE).<sup>74</sup> This will provide all new learners with a tuition fee loan entitlement to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education to be used for courses and modules over the course of their working lives. A residual entitlement will also be available to returning eligible learners who have already received publicly funded student finance.

The white paper said that modular funding would initially be focussed on key subjects for the economy, as informed by the Industrial Strategy, but the government would look to expand this following the launch of the LLE.

- launching an [Alternative Student Finance](#) product – something first proposed by the UK Government in 2013 – which will be consistent with Muslim beliefs about interest-bearing loans.<sup>75</sup>
- Introducing new targeted means-tested maintenance grants by the end of the parliament, funded by a new levy on international student fees. These grants will be for students from the lowest income households studying priority courses that support the government’s Industrial Strategy.<sup>76</sup>
- Measures to improve university access and participation for disadvantaged groups by:
  - Reforming the regulation of access and participation plans, which set out how higher education providers will improve equality of opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education. The white paper said the new approach will be more risk-based and less uniform, meaning greater accountability for those providers not adequately addressing inequalities, and reduced bureaucracy and

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<sup>73</sup> DfE, DWP, and DSIT, [Post-16 education and skills white paper](#), 20 October 2025, pp56-59

<sup>74</sup> House of Commons Library, [The Lifelong Learning Entitlement](#)

<sup>75</sup> House of Commons Library, [Sharia-compliant alternative student finance](#)

<sup>76</sup> DfE, [Targeted maintenance grants for students to be reintroduced](#), 29 September 2025; [Maintenance grant amounts and eligibility criteria](#), 26 November 2025; [International student levy technical detail](#), 26 November 2025

more of a focus on continuous improvement for those providers doing well.

- bringing together an Access and Participation Task and Finish group of sector experts, charities, UCAS, and the Office for Students (OfS), which regulates higher education in England, to focus on how the system can best widen access for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- exploring the challenges that lead to disparities in access to PhD programmes for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This will be supported by reforms to how the OfS oversees equality of opportunity, including addressing the barriers faced by disadvantaged students in participating at postgraduate level for the first time. The government will also fund the [UK Council for Graduate Education](#) to create an online resources hub for universities seeking to improve access and participation for postgraduate students.
- changing the terms and conditions of UK Research and Innovation's postgraduate grants to better support students, including by increasing medical leave, improving leave for new parents, and requiring all partner organisations to have a policy on providing reasonable adjustments to disabled students.
- Measures to improve the student experience by:
  - working with the sector and others so that the supply of student accommodation meets demand and affordability needs.
  - extending the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce for a further year and expanding the membership to include greater student representation.
  - supporting the OfS' new registration requirement that all registered providers must take steps to prevent and tackle harassment of all kinds.
  - enabling universities to prevent, identify, and tackle antisemitic abuse on campus. This has included committing £7 million in funding through the Tackling Antisemitism in Education Programme, and, as part of this programme, launching a 'Tackling Antisemitism in Education Innovation Fund' to test approaches to tackling mis- and dis-information and to promote interfaith relationships on campus, with delivery commencing in April 2026.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Department for Education press release, [£7 million to tackle antisemitism in education confirmed](#), 7 October 2024

## Maintenance support

The government has increased the maximum maintenance loan in line with forecast inflation for more than a decade. However, differences between forecast and actual inflation, especially in 2022/23 and 2023/24, meant the real value of the maximum loan fell in real terms by around 10% over these years and has not recovered since. More details can be found in the Library briefing [The value of student maintenance support](#). In addition, the household income threshold below which a student qualifies for the maximum loan has been frozen at £25,000 since 2008. This means fewer students qualify for the maximum loan than if the threshold had maintained its real value.

The white paper said that a new targeted maintenance grant will be introduced before the end of the Parliament and be funded by the new international student levy.<sup>78</sup> [More detail on the new grant](#) was published at the end of November stating that the grant will be introduced in academic year 2028/29 and have a maximum value of £1,000.<sup>79</sup> The last time new students in England were eligible for maintenance grants was in 2025/16 when the maximum was £3,387. The new grant available from 2028/29 will be worth around 80% less than this level in real terms.<sup>80</sup>

The Library briefing paper [Student support for undergraduates across the UK](#) looks at differences in student support, its total level, balance between loans and grants and how it varies with household income, in the different parts of the UK.

## Access and participation task and finish group

The government has convened a Higher Education Access and Participation Task and Finish Group, which will meet between November 2025 and January 2027 to create “practical, evidence-based proposals to help more students from disadvantaged backgrounds and under-served areas access higher education (level 4 and above) and progress on to positive destinations”.<sup>81</sup>

The group will focus on two main areas to improve access, with the aim being to widen successful participation:

- Regional gaps: addressing lack of access to higher education in regions with the biggest disadvantage gaps (‘cold spots’)
- Barriers along the student journey: identifying and addressing the biggest barriers to higher education that those from disadvantaged backgrounds face across their lifetime

<sup>78</sup> DfE, DWP, and DSIT, [Post-16 education and skills white paper](#), 20 October 2025, p57

<sup>79</sup> DfE, [Maintenance grant amounts and eligibility criteria](#), 26 November 2025

<sup>80</sup> Prices adjusted using the all-items CPI index for Q1 of calendar years 2016 and (forecast) 2029, taken from OBR, [Economic and Fiscal Outlook November 2025](#), detailed economy table 1.7

<sup>81</sup> Gov.uk, [Higher Education Access and Participation Task and Finish Group](#)

More information, including the group’s membership, is [available on gov.uk](#).

## Approach of the previous Conservative government

In November 2021, Boris Johnson’s Conservative government announced the appointment of John Blake as the new Director for Fair Access and Participation at the OfS.<sup>82</sup> This was accompanied by a [“new approach” to access and participation](#) (PDF), which the government said would include a focus on outcomes for students, universities working with schools and colleges to raise educational standards, universities increasing the proportion of students taking apprenticeships and higher technical qualifications, and a simplification of [access and participation plans](#).

As part of its “reset” of access and participation, the government said it wanted the OfS to renegotiate current access and participation plans with higher education providers, so they align with the government’s new priorities and give due consideration to:

regional inequalities, prior attainment in schools and a focus on the findings of the [white working-class boys report](#), which identified that they are one of the groups least likely to attend university.<sup>83</sup>

The Johnson Government said it wanted a new approach for two reasons:

- It believed the current approach to access and participation may “bake inequality into the system”, with too much focus on ensuring people can get into university, but not enough focus on ensuring courses are high quality.
- The then-government also said the pandemic had highlighted gaps in opportunity and advantage in society, and “genuine equality of opportunity for all, regardless of background, is fundamental to our ambition to level up skills, growth and economic opportunity across the country.”<sup>84</sup>

## 4.2

## Guidance and funding

The government sets out its priorities for the OfS in guidance letters. In May 2025, the government wrote to the Office for Students with guidance on the

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<sup>82</sup> Letter from the DfE to the OfS, [The future of access and participation](#) (PDF), November 2021

<sup>83</sup> Letter from the DfE to the OfS, [The future of access and participation](#) (PDF), November 2021

<sup>84</sup> Letter from the DfE to the OfS, [The future of access and participation](#) (PDF), November 2021

Strategic Priorities Grant funding for the 2025-26 financial year.<sup>85</sup> It asked the OfS to focus on funding that supports student access and success and said:

Our commitment that opportunity is available for all remains unwavering, and we will achieve this by addressing gaps in access and outcomes faced by underrepresented groups. To ensure we achieve this shared goal we will need an even more determined focus on high impact, evidence-based interventions, as well as innovative approaches to make higher education more accessible. This includes by learning from the initiatives and lessons shared by the HE Mental Health Implementation taskforce and the forthcoming National Review of HE Student Suicides.

OfS should consider how Uni Connect supports actions taken by individual providers on access, playing a strengthened role in providing co-ordinated outreach, offering prospective students an unbiased view of options. This includes considering how Uni Connect best focuses and prioritises its resources to deliver for underrepresented groups, demonstrating the lessons of the recent review of collaborative support for improving equality of opportunity in access to higher education.<sup>86</sup>

## Student access and success grant funding

The government does not directly allocate funding to higher education providers for widening participation and improving student outcomes. Instead, it determines the total funding available for teaching, which the OfS then allocates between different priority areas, as set out by government in letters.

Most of the funding allocated by the OfS goes towards the cost of teaching high-cost subjects. The next most important area of funding is to support “student access and student success”. This funding currently consists of:

- student premiums for full-time, part-time, and disabled students
- a premium for student transitions and mental health
- Uni Connect, which is a widening participation programme.

In the 2015 Spending Review, the then-Conservative government announced that what was then known as the student opportunity fund would be reduced by “up to half” by 2019-20, and the funding would be focused on institutions with the most effective outcomes.<sup>87</sup> Real terms trends in this funding are shown below.

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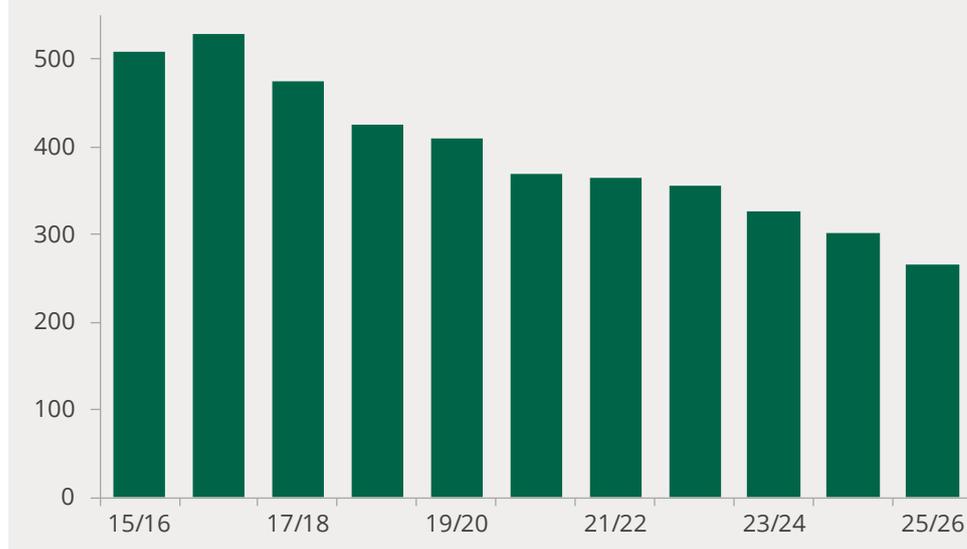
<sup>85</sup> Department for Education, [Guidance to the Office for Students from the Secretary of State for Education on Strategic Priorities Grant funding for the 2025-26 Financial Year and associated terms and conditions](#) (PDF), 19 May 2025

<sup>86</sup> Department for Education, [Guidance to the Office for Students from the Secretary of State for Education on Strategic Priorities Grant funding for the 2025-26 Financial Year and associated terms and conditions](#) (PDF), 19 May 2025

<sup>87</sup> Gov.UK press release, [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills' settlement at the Spending Review](#) 2015, 25 November 2015

## Real level of funding for access and student success cut by half between 2016/17 and 2025/26

£ million (budgets) 2024/25 prices, England



Sources: OfS, [Funding for 2025-26: Decisions and allocations](#) (and earlier editions), 24 July 2025; HM Treasury, [September 2025 GDP deflators](#)

In the 2015/16 academic year, the funding council distributed a total of £380 million (cash terms) in student opportunity funding to providers in England. This increased to £403 million in 2016/17 as cuts in some allocations were outweighed by the increase in funding for disabled students from £20 million to £40 million, and £30 million for the new National Collaborative Outreach Program (now Uni Connect).

Since then, the cash total was cut in each year to 2021/22, despite new elements to support student mental health and Ukrainian students. It was originally planned to fall further to £310 million in 2022/23, before an additional £15 million was reallocated to the student premium.<sup>88</sup> The cash total has fallen in each year since 2022/23, due to the ending of earlier one-off funding for student hardship and Ukrainian students in 2023/24, the cut in Uni Connect funding in 2024/25 and a cut in the premium for full-time students in 2025/26. These figures exclude the £85 million one-off allocation in 2020/21 for student hardship arising from the pandemic.

The real cut in total funding for access and student success between 2016/17 and 2025/26 was 50%.<sup>89</sup> This funding has also had to provide support for an increased number of students over this period.

<sup>88</sup> Written statement HCWS491, [Higher Education Student Support](#) (11 January 2023). Calculations in this briefing assume this funding was found from outside the access and student success budget.

<sup>89</sup> Academic year figures adjusted using financial year GDP deflators. The 2020-21 deflator is derived from the 2020-21 and 2021-22 values averaged across the two years to smooth the distortions caused by pandemic-related factors. OfS, [Funding for 2025-26: Decisions and allocations](#) (and earlier editions)

Within the overall total, the allocation for disabled students (now the ‘Disabled Student Premium’) has been kept at £40 million or higher in each year from 2016/17. Funding for Uni Connect was increased to £60 million in 2017/18, but cut to £40 million in 2021/22, £30 million in 2022/23, and £20 million in 2023/24. Other elements of funding for access and success were cut.

In 2025/26 the ‘mainstream’ student premium for full-time and part-time students is £197 million,<sup>90</sup> compared with £347 million in 2015/16,<sup>91</sup> on access and retention for these students.

### **Covid-19 pandemic flexibilities**

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the government gave universities flexibility over how they could spend Student Premium and Disabled Student Premium funding in 2020/21.<sup>92</sup> Under the new flexibilities, higher education providers were able to divert the £256 million funding to other areas such as student hardship funding and mental health services.<sup>93</sup>

£276 million in Student Premium and Disabled Student Premium funding was made available for the 2022/23 academic year, including a “one-off reallocation” of £15 million in funding.<sup>94</sup> The Covid-19 flexibilities remained in place and universities could use this money to supplement their own hardship funds in response to the rising cost of living.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> OfS, [Funding for 2025-26: Decisions and allocations](#), 24 July 2025

<sup>91</sup> HEFCE, [Guide to funding 2015-16: How HEFCE allocates its funds](#) (Table 3)

<sup>92</sup> This is the total funding for student and access excluding Uni Connect

<sup>93</sup> OfS, [Provider guide to coronavirus -Provider FAQ](#).

<sup>94</sup> [HCWS491 \[Higher Education Student Support\] 11 January 2023](#)

<sup>95</sup> [HCWS491 \[Higher Education Student Support\] 11 January 2023](#)

## 5

## Role of the Office for Students

Since 1 January 2018, the [Office for Students](#) (OfS) has been responsible for promoting fair access to higher education and ensuring students are supported to succeed in and progress from higher education, whatever their background.

The [OfS' strategy for 2025 to 2030](#) includes a commitment to be “ambitious for all students from all backgrounds.” It states:

Every student - regardless of their background, circumstances or pathway - should have the opportunity to benefit from high quality education that meets their needs and equips them to succeed. We will be relentlessly focused on securing positive higher education experiences for all students, informed by a sharper understanding of students' priorities and concerns. We will help drive improvement across the sector, recognising that while much provision is already excellent, there is room to improve further. And we will hold institutions to account when they fall short.<sup>96</sup>

## 5.1

### Priorities and approach

On 8 February 2022, the Director for Fair Access and Participation, John Blake, set out the OfS' priorities for the next four years, and outlined how the OfS would work with higher education providers, students, and other stakeholders to deliver them.<sup>97</sup> John Blake stood down from his role in November 2025,<sup>98</sup> and Professor Chris Millward, who was the OfS' first Director for Fair Access and Participation from 2018 to 2021, was appointed as interim director ahead of a recruitment campaign for a longer-term appointment.<sup>99</sup>

The OfS' priorities for equality of opportunity involve expecting and supporting universities and colleges to:

- ensure access leads to participation on high quality courses and secures good graduate outcomes

<sup>96</sup> OfS, [The OfS strategy 2025 to 2030](#), November 2025

<sup>97</sup> OfS, [Next steps in access and participation. Speech given by John Blake, the Office for Students' Director for Fair Access and Participation](#), 8 February 2022

<sup>98</sup> OfS, [Director for Fair Access and Participation steps down from regulator](#), 7 November 2025

<sup>99</sup> OfS, [OfS welcomes Chris Millward as interim Director for Fair Access and Participation](#), 10 November 2025

- partner with schools and other local organisations to raise the attainment of young people
- develop more diverse pathways into and through higher education through more flexible courses
- make their plans to improve equality more accessible, in a way that prospective students, their parents and other stakeholders can easily understand
- improve the quality and volume of evaluation of interventions around equality of opportunity.<sup>100</sup>

The OfS’ approach to supporting the sector in improving access and participation primarily includes approving [access and participation plans](#), which set out how providers will address risks to equality of opportunity, publishing an [access and participation data dashboard](#) for each registered provider, and overseeing an [Equality of Opportunity Risk Register](#), which identifies sector-level risks in higher education and which student groups are most likely to be affected by each one.

This approach was informed by a [consultation on regulating equality of opportunity](#) the OfS ran in October 2022.<sup>101</sup>

## 5.2

## Regulatory framework

The OfS is required under [section 75 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 \(HERA\)](#) to publish a regulatory framework. The framework describes how the OfS intends to perform its various functions, and to meet its primary objectives.<sup>102</sup> It also sets out the registration conditions for higher education providers).

These objectives are underpinned by the OfS’ general duties under [section 2 of HERA](#), which include “the need to promote equality of opportunity in connection with access to and participation in higher education provided by English higher education providers.”<sup>103</sup>

### The four primary regulatory objectives of the OfS

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<sup>100</sup> OfS, [Our approach to equality of opportunity](#), updated December 2023

<sup>101</sup> OfS, [Consultation on a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in English higher education](#), October 2022

<sup>102</sup> OfS, [Securing student success: Regulatory framework for higher education in England](#), updated November 2022

<sup>103</sup> [Higher Education and Research Act 2017, section 2\(1\)\(e\)](#)

The OfS seeks to ensure “all students, from all backgrounds, and with the ability and desire to undertake higher education:

- are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, higher education,
- receive a high-quality academic experience, and their interests are protected while they study or in the event of provider, campus or course closure,
- are able to progress into employment or further study, and their qualifications hold their value over time,
- receive value for money.”<sup>104</sup>

The OfS has regulatory levers to ensure it meets its access and participation targets, these include targeting funding towards supporting activities institutions have committed to through their Access and Participation Plans and ensuring sector data is transparent.

## Consultations on access and participation

### 2018

In 2018, the OfS [undertook a consultation to determine how best to meet the access and participation duties](#) set out in HERA. The review focussed on how the OfS could:

- Achieve significant reductions in the gaps in access, success, and progression over the next five years.
- Ensure that access and participation regulation and funding are outcome-based, risk-based, underpinned by evidence and joined up with other OfS regulatory activities.<sup>105</sup>

The consultation revealed levels of inequality across the student lifecycle, and the OfS set itself and the higher education sector four long-term targets to address this:

- To eliminate the gap in entry rates at higher-tariff providers between the most and least represented groups by 2038-39.
- To eliminate the unexplained gap in non-continuation between most and least represented groups by 2024-25, and to eliminate the absolute gap (the gap caused by both structural and unexplained factors) by 2030-31.

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<sup>104</sup> OfS, [Securing student success: Regulatory framework for higher education in England](#), November 2022, p13.

<sup>105</sup> OfS, [A new approach to regulating access and participation in English higher education: Consultation outcomes](#), December 2018, p3.

- To eliminate the unexplained gap in degree outcomes (the number of Firsts or 2:1s) between White students and Black students by 2024-25, and to eliminate the absolute gap by 2030-31.
- To eliminate the gap in degree outcomes (the number of Firsts or 2:1s) between disabled students and non-disabled students by 2024-25.<sup>106</sup>

## 2022

In October and November 2022, the OfS launched a consultation on a new approach to the regulation of equality of opportunity in English higher education, including [Access and Participation Plans](#). This followed the government setting out its priorities in this area in November 2021.<sup>107</sup>

In his foreword to the consultation document, the then-Director for Fair Access and Participation, John Blake, said he hoped for a greater division of responsibility when it came to identifying and mitigating the challenges to equality of opportunity in higher education. He said:

[W]e propose to move away from a model in which the OfS cascades through the higher education system a set of national targets on equality, pressing providers to adopt their own targets in imitation of our own, to one in which providers themselves will undertake serious and sustained analysis of their own context and mission, and identify the most serious risks to equality of opportunity they face, and outline measures to mitigate these.<sup>108</sup>

The consultation proposals included:

- The creation of an ‘[equality of opportunity risk register](#)’
- Reducing Access and Participation Plans (APPs) to a four-year timescale.
- Publishing information about whether a provider has delivered the commitments in its APP.
- Proposals relating to the format and content of APP.
- Expecting providers to increase the volume and quality of evaluation of their access and participation activity “significantly”.
- Expecting providers to address in their APPs how they will work to raise pre-16 attainment in schools through strategic partnerships.<sup>109</sup>

The OfS’ Plans were broadly welcomed by the sector, particularly because of the proposed risk-based, provider-led approach to improving access and

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<sup>106</sup> OfS, [A new approach to regulating access and participation in English higher education: Consultation outcomes](#), December 2018, p4.

<sup>107</sup> DfE press release, [New levelling up plans to improve student outcomes](#), 24 November 2021.

<sup>108</sup> OfS, [Consultation on a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in English higher education](#), 6 October 2022, p4.

<sup>109</sup> OfS, [Consultation on a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in English higher education](#), 6 October 2022

participation. However, there were concerns about the short window given to engage with the proposals and how much time would be available to produce new APPs. Responses to the consultation from sector bodies, including from [Universities UK](#), the [Russell Group](#), and [London Higher](#), are available on their websites.<sup>110</sup>

The consultation closed on 10 November 2022 and the OfS responded in March 2023.<sup>111</sup> The equality of opportunity risk register was also launched in March 2023. It identifies 12 sector-wide risks that may affect a student's opportunity to access and succeed in higher education, asking providers to consider which, if any, of their prospective or current students are likely to be affected by the risks, and how these might be mitigated.<sup>112</sup>

## Quality and standards work

In his speech on 8 February 2022 setting out the OfS' priorities for the next four years, the then Director for Fair Access and Participation, John Blake, said one of his aspirations was that the OfS' access and participation work will "align with, and be seen as a crucial part of, the OfS' quality and standards work."<sup>113</sup>

Since November 2020, the OfS has conducted three consultations on developing its approach to regulating quality and standards.<sup>114</sup> In January 2022, this focussed on regulating student outcomes through condition B3 of the OfS' [quality and standards conditions](#), which states "a provider must deliver positive outcomes for students on its higher education courses"<sup>115</sup>

New thresholds are now in place that set minimum expectations for the proportion of students on higher education courses who continue on their course, graduate, and go on to further study or find a professional job. For full-time students studying for a first degree, the thresholds are for:

- 80% of students to continue their studies
- 75% of students to complete their course

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<sup>110</sup> Universities UK, [Our response to the Office for Student's proposals on regulating access and participation plans](#), 20 December 2022; Russell Group, [Russell Group response to OfS access and participation consultation](#), 14 November 2022; London Higher, [Office for Students Consultation on a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in English higher education: London Higher's response](#), 10 November 2022

<sup>111</sup> OfS, [Consultation on a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity: Analysis of responses and decisions](#), 29 March 2023

<sup>112</sup> OfS, [Equality of Opportunity Risk Register](#)

<sup>113</sup> OfS, [Next steps in access and participation. Speech given by John Blake, the Office for Students' Director for Fair Access and Participation](#), 8 February 2022.

<sup>114</sup> OfS, [Quality and standards: Changes to our approach](#).

<sup>115</sup> OfS, [Condition B3: Student outcomes](#) (PDF), November 2022, p5.

- 60% of students to go on to further study, professional work, or other positive outcomes, within 15 months of graduating.<sup>116</sup>

In January 2023, the OfS published a briefing note explaining the statutory framework for quality and standards, and how it performs its quality and standards assessment functions.<sup>117</sup>

## 5.3

### Access and Participation Plans

[Access and Participation Plans](#) (APPs) set out the actions that providers are taking to increase access to, success in, and progression from higher education by students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups. In 2018, the OfS made APPs a condition of registration for higher education providers in England wanting to charge higher level tuition fees.<sup>118</sup>

APPs replaced the annual access agreements that had previously been required by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). Following the dissolution of OFFA, a new regulatory approach for access and participation was adopted, which took account of the findings from the 2018 consultation. It entailed more ambitious targets for APPs and a move from one to five-year timescales.

The 2022 consultation on a new approach to access and participation proposed a new four-year time scale for APPs.<sup>119</sup> It also called for a greater focus on ‘risks to equality of opportunity’ and proposed several changes to their format and content.

APPs must be approved by the OfS’ Director for Fair Access and Participation and should contain:

- the provider’s ambition for change
- what it Plans to do to achieve that change
- the targets it has set
- the investment it will make to deliver the plan.

The OfS publishes regulatory guidance to support providers in creating their APPs and then monitors progress to ensure they honour their commitments. The OfS can also intervene if necessary. The APPs for individual providers are [available on the OfS website](#).

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<sup>116</sup> OfS, [OfS sets new expectations for student outcomes](#), 30 September 2022.

<sup>117</sup> OfS, [Briefing note: The statutory framework for quality and standards and the role of the OfS and any designated body](#), 26 January 2023.

<sup>118</sup> The [Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#), section 12.

<sup>119</sup> OfS, [Consultation on a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in English higher education](#), 6 October 2022.

## Evaluation of reforms

Since 2023, the OfS has been evaluating the implementation and emerging impact of the reforms to regulating equality of opportunity it consulted on in 2022.<sup>120</sup> This evaluation is primarily concerned with how well the OfS has implemented the new approach to APPs and how the OfS' new approach has changed provider behaviour. According to the findings:

- The new approach is viewed as more strategic, specific, and context-relevant.
- Providers praised the increased focus on evaluation.
- The Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR) has generally been seen as a valuable tool, supporting risk identification, data interrogation, organisational buy-in, targeted activity development, and collaboration. However, there were some concerns about its complexity and practical usability.
- While the overall approach is widely regarded as important and worthwhile, providers have raised concerns about certain aspects including the high workload and expressed a preference for longer timelines to develop the APPs, more consistent communication, and shorter guidance.
- Financing and resourcing were highlighted by many providers as a limiting factor in responding to the reforms.

## Spending and outcomes

Up to 2019-20, institutions had to provide annual returns to the OfS which reported on progress against their APP targets and their expenditure on widening participation. The financial data was broken down into spending funded by the OfS through the Student Premium and that set out in their Access Agreements. The data was also broken down by type:

- access to higher education
- student success (that is to say, continuation at university and qualifications)
- progression (after graduation).

In 2019/20, providers made the 'expected progress' on 59% of access targets, 57% of student success, 59% of progression and 72% of multiple (stages of the higher education 'lifecycle') targets.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> OfS, [Evaluation of 2023 reforms to regulating equality of opportunity](#), October 2025

<sup>121</sup> OfS, [Access and participation plan data, Monitoring data and outcomes 2019-20](#)

In 2022 the OfS said that institutions would no longer be required to submit monitoring returns for 2020/21. This was said to be to reduce burdens on providers.<sup>122</sup>

In 2023/24 institutions in England spent £731 million on access and participation, down from £769 million in 2022/23. This was a fall of 10% in real terms. It was also below real spending levels from 2020/21 and 2021/22.<sup>123 124</sup> The latest figure was 22% lower in real terms than the £770 million reported (under different arrangements) in 2018/19.<sup>125</sup> In 2023/24 the largest overall type of expenditure was on financial support (including hardship), which accounted for around 49% of total spending, followed by spending on access at 30%, disabled students 17% and research/evaluation at 4%.<sup>126</sup>

More detail up to 2020/21, including spending by individual institutions, can be found on the OfS [Access and Participation plan data](#) pages.

## 5.4 Uni Connect

[Uni Connect](#), formerly known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), is one of the programmes funded by the OfS to help meet its access and participation targets. The programme brings together 29 partnerships of universities, colleges, and other local partners to offer activities, advice, and information on the benefits and realities of going to university or college.

The Uni Connect programme is targeted at young people in years 9 to 13 who live in one of 997 geographic areas where higher education participation is lower than might be expected given local GCSE results. During 2018/19, over 180,000 young people and 1,613 schools and colleges took part in higher education outreach through Uni Connect.

More information is available on the [OfS](#) and [Uni Connect](#) websites.

### Funding

The OfS provided £60 million per year for the Uni Connect programme from 2017/18 to 2020/21. The January 2021 guidance letter from the Secretary of State for Education directed the OfS to [reduce the funding allocation by a third to £40 million](#) in 2021/22.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>122</sup> OfS, [Monitoring of access and participation plans for 2020-21](#), 15 March 2022

<sup>123</sup> HESA, [Access and participation investment 2020/21 to 2023/24](#)

<sup>124</sup> Adjusted using [September 2025 GDP deflators](#) for financial years

<sup>125</sup> OfS, [Access and participation plan data. Monitoring data and outcomes 2018-19](#)

<sup>126</sup> HESA, [Access and participation investment 2020/21 to 2023/24](#)

<sup>127</sup> DfE, [Guidance to the Office for Students — Allocation of the Higher Education Teaching Grant funding in the 2021-22 Financial Year](#), 19 January 2021.

The [March 2022 guidance letter](#) said the OfS should continue to implement ‘efficiency savings’ for the programme and cut its funding to £30 million in 2022/23.<sup>128</sup> This was [maintained in 2023/24](#),<sup>129</sup> but [cut further to £20 million in 2024/25](#).<sup>130</sup>

## Evaluations

Following a consultation in December 2020 and January 2021 on a new approach to the Uni Connect programme, the OfS said it would:

- support the programme until the end of the academic year 2024-25, subject to annual funding allocations;
- help teachers and advisers to access the higher education outreach in their area by signposting to local provision and filling gaps in provision;
- give a stronger role to further education colleges within the partnerships and more focus to adult learners.<sup>131</sup>

Independent evaluations of Uni Connect by Ipsos Mori and CFE Research, published in March 2021, found participants were positive about their experiences with the programme, and there was evidence Uni Connect’s activities and mentoring had led to improved knowledge about higher education among participants.<sup>132</sup>

In February 2024, an independent review and economic analysis of Uni Connect, commissioned by the OfS and conducted by the consultancy Public First, found every £1 spent by the programme in 2020-21 led to between £5 to £9 of economic benefit.<sup>133</sup> The review also called for improvements in the Uni Connect programme, but acknowledged the concerns of stakeholders around uncertainty of funding year to year.

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<sup>128</sup> DfE, [Guidance to the Office for Students on the Higher Education Strategic Priorities Grant for the 2022-23 Financial Year](#) (PDF), 31 March 2022.

<sup>129</sup> DfE, [Guidance to the OfS on the Higher Education Strategic Priorities Grant for the 2023-24 financial year](#) (PDF), 30 March 2023.

<sup>130</sup> DfE, [Guidance to the Office for Students on the allocation of Strategic Priorities Grant funding for the 2024-25 financial year and associated terms and conditions](#) (PDF), 4 April 2024.

<sup>131</sup> OfS, [A new approach to the Uni Connect programme from 2021-22 to 2024-25](#), 26 March 2021.

<sup>132</sup> Ipsos MORI survey for the OfS, [Formative evaluation of Uni Connect phase two: survey of school and college staff](#), March 2021; CFE research for the OfS, [An independent evaluation of Uni Connect’s impact on intermediate outcomes for learners](#), March 2021.

<sup>133</sup> Public first for the Office for Students, [A review of collaborative support for improving equality of opportunity in access to higher education: Uni Connect](#), 29 February 2024. See also, OfS, [Uni Connect target areas national analysis 2024](#), May 2024

## 6 Responsibilities and actions of higher education providers

In April 2025, Universities UK, the representative body for 141 universities, presented an action plan for addressing barriers to opportunity for students.<sup>134</sup> This set out four actions that universities and the UK Government can take to support all students to access and succeed at university:

- “Unlock potential with contextual admissions”: Develop a more transparent and consistent approach to contextual admissions across the sector.
- “Collaborate in local cold spots to raise aspirations”: Support students to make the right choice for them through local partnerships of schools, further education colleges, and universities working together to guide young people in their next steps after school with improved information, advice, and guidance.
- “Set all students up for success with an adequate maintenance package”: Work with government to develop a student maintenance package that more effectively supports the living costs of students while at university, and better communicate available financial support to eligible students.
- “Create career-ready graduates with targeted careers services”: Provide students with the necessary skills identified by employers and local communities, and level the playing field for disadvantaged students.

The Russell Group, a group of 24 research-intensive universities, published a briefing, [‘Building opportunity for all’](#) (PDF), that set out its own access and participation commitments, as well as detailing some of the work its members do already in this area.<sup>135</sup> Some of these commitments reflected the Universities UK action plan, such as convening regional collaborations and partnerships and working on more consistent contextual admissions policies, while others were new, including offering a support package for care leavers and working towards extending this offer to care-experienced and estranged students.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>134</sup> Universities UK, [Our action plan for opportunity: making the difference for students](#), April 2025

<sup>135</sup> Russell Group, [Russell Group universities pledge more support for care leavers among new access commitments](#), June 2025

<sup>136</sup> Russell Group, [Russell Group universities pledge more support for care leavers among new access commitments](#), June 2025

## 6.1

## Equality Act 2010

Higher education providers are bound by requirements in the [Equality Act 2010](#) to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, and victimisation;
- advance equality of opportunity between people who do and do not share a protected characteristic;
- foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not share a protected characteristic.

The duty to comply with the Act is referred to as the ‘public sector equality duty’ (PSED). Providers are expected to publish information showing how they comply with the PSED on its website.

The [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) (EHRC) monitors providers and can enforce the PSED through judicial review. It has published guidance for providers on how to comply with the Equality Act 2010.<sup>137</sup>

### Disability support

Publicly funded higher education providers have a duty under the [Equality Act 2010](#) not to discriminate against potential or current students if they have a disability. A disability is defined as:

a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.<sup>138</sup>

Under the [Equality Act 2010](#):

- [Section 91](#) states providers must not discriminate against a student in the way they provide access to education, services, and facilities.
- [Section 20](#) and [schedule 13](#) set out a duty for providers to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to ensure disabled students are not put at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with students who are not disabled in the provision of education.
- [Section 149](#) sets out the Public Sector Equality Duty, which requires public authorities, including higher education providers (see [schedule 19, ‘Other educational bodies’](#)), to comply with general duties to eliminate discrimination and advance equality of opportunity between those who

<sup>137</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Technical guidance on further and higher education](#), April 2014

<sup>138</sup> Disability Rights UK, [Understanding the Equality Act: Information for disabled students](#), June 2020

share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not. Disability is a relevant protected characteristic.

### Reasonable adjustments

The Equality Act 2010 requires public authorities, including higher education providers, to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people. The duty aims to ensure disabled people do not face 'substantial disadvantage' in comparison to non-disabled people.

Section 20 of the Act defines what is meant by the duty to make reasonable adjustments.

- The first requirement of the duty covers changing the way things are done (such as changing a practice)
- the second covers making changes to the built environment (such as providing access to a building)
- the third covers providing auxiliary aids and services (such as providing special computer software or providing a different service).

The aim is to prevent disabled people being from disadvantaged and to encourage greater equality in participation and outcomes among all students.

Disability Rights UK has a [factsheet on some common adjustments for disabled students](#).<sup>139</sup> Many universities also have disability advisers who can discuss with students what reasonable adjustments might be available to them depending on their personal situation.

## Imperial College London Disability Advisory Service

The [Disability Advisory Service at Imperial College London](#) supports students “who have an impairment or disability, specific learning difficulties and other short and long-term conditions.” It provides confidential and impartial advice and support to students to help identify disability-related needs and organise appropriate support. It also provides study skills support sessions and workshops for small groups of students.

### Adjustments

Once students have met with a disability advisor at the university, a Suggested Reasonable Adjustments Document (SRAD) is created. This lists what support the student is eligible to receive. Common adjustments include the provision of specialist equipment, extra time or rest breaks in exams,

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<sup>139</sup> Disability Rights UK, [Factsheet F11. Adjustments for disabled students](#), April 2020

inclusive technology training, peer support groups, and library support services.

Further information is available on Imperial's [Disability Advisory Service](#) website.

## 6.2 Access and participation work

Information set out in Access and Participation Plans show that providers undertake a wide range of activities to increase representation such as arranging summer schools for post-16 students, creating partnerships with local schools, running mentoring and ambassador schemes, and creating outreach programmes.

The Russell Group's 2025 [Building Opportunity For All](#) (PDF) briefing said that its members were investing over £250 million a year on access and widening participation-related activities:

- 23% of this investment supports access activities
- 64% goes towards financial support
- 11% on support for disabled students
- 2% on research and evaluation.<sup>140</sup>

Russell Group universities work with organisations to support tutoring, provide information, advice and guidance, and help with university applications. They also form partnerships with schools and colleges, developing programmes to create more flexible learning pathways.

Sector organisations, such as the [National Education Opportunities Network \(NEON\)](#), work with providers to enhance their widening access and outreach work.

## 6.3 Contextual admissions

When assessing students for admission, many higher education providers use additional information alongside an individual's prior attainment to gauge their potential. Information may include the socioeconomic background of an applicant and their school performance data. This practice is known as

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<sup>140</sup> Russell Group, [Russell Group universities pledge more support for care leavers among new access commitments](#), June 2025

contextual admissions. Using contextualised information aims to widen participation among disadvantaged groups by admitting them on their potential and mitigating the effect that factors beyond an applicant's control can have on their performance in exams and coursework.

Contextual admissions have been seen as controversial, but the practice was endorsed in the 2004 [Schwartz Report Fair Admissions to Higher Education \(PDF\)](#).<sup>141</sup> A report by the Fair Education Alliance in 2018 argued the issue is no longer whether contextualised data should be used in admissions but [how to do it most effectively](#).<sup>142</sup>

In 2020, the then-Conservative government said it [supported the adoption of contextual admissions practices](#),<sup>143</sup> while the current government has said universities are autonomous bodies, but it works closely with them and sector representative bodies to ensure the system works well for students.<sup>144</sup>

Universities UK has published an explainer on contextual admissions,<sup>145</sup> and, as part of its action plan for addressing barriers to opportunity for students, has said it will be working with the [Sutton Trust](#) and [UCAS](#) to review the criteria for contextual admissions, in order to bring greater consistency to how universities approach them and to encourage more universities to adopt them.<sup>146</sup>

## How do contextual admissions work?

Research published by the University of Exeter in 2018 showed [different providers take different approaches](#) to the use of contextual data and that these approaches are not always clear to applicants.<sup>147</sup> Some of the things that universities might consider include:

- the school an applicant attended
- where they live
- family income
- if they are the first to go to university in their family
- if they have done an access programme
- if they have been in care or are/have been a carer themselves.

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<sup>141</sup> Schwartz review, [Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice](#), 2004

<sup>142</sup> Fair Education Alliance, [Putting fairness in context: Using data to widen access to higher education](#), July 2018

<sup>143</sup> [PQ HL1177](#) [Universities: Admissions] 30 January 2020

<sup>144</sup> [PQ 59602](#) [Higher education: Admissions] 26 June 2025

<sup>145</sup> Universities UK, [Placing contextual admissions in context](#), April 2025

<sup>146</sup> Universities UK, [Unlock potential with contextual admissions](#), April 2025

<sup>147</sup> University of Exeter Centre for Social Mobility, [Research into use of contextual data in admissions](#), June 2018

Most universities automatically receive the information they need for awarding contextual offers directly from UCAS. An individual's specific circumstances might also be flagged on their reference form.

Universities that use contextualised data might have an admissions policy that permits making lower offers to some students based on their personal circumstances. These offers may be one or more grades lower than the standard offer for a particular course.

### Fair admissions code of practice

The Universities UK and Guild HE voluntary [Fair admissions code of practice](#), which over 100 higher education providers have signed up to, states admissions processes should minimise barriers for applicants and address inequalities.<sup>148</sup>

The code says where contextual offers are used, they should be used in situations which also maintain standards.<sup>149</sup> Universities and colleges should clearly explain their use of contextual offers, including why contextual offers are made, what evidence is used, how context is taken into consideration, and the benefits of disclosing contextual information.<sup>150</sup>

The code also highlights [Universities UK's 2019/20 Fair admissions review](#), which recommended the data used to inform contextual admissions should be used consistently and come from available data sources, such as free school meals status, index of multiple deprivation data, and care experienced status.<sup>151</sup>

## Durham University policy on contextual offers

Durham university use information from UCAS applications to take account of the [individual backgrounds and experiences of applicants](#) for all their undergraduate courses.

To be eligible for a contextual offer, applicants must meet at least two of the following criteria:

- Their home address postcode is classified as Quintile 1 or 2 of [POLAR4 LPN](#);
- Their home address postcode is classified as [ACORN](#) 4 or 5;
- Their current or most recently attended school is classified as a UK state school;
- They are in receipt of free school meals;

<sup>148</sup> Universities UK, [Fair admissions code of practice](#), October 2025, pp12-13

<sup>149</sup> Universities UK, [Fair admissions code of practice](#), March 2022, p13

<sup>150</sup> Universities UK, [Fair admissions code of practice](#), March 2022, p13

<sup>151</sup> Universities UK, [Fair admissions review](#), November 2020, p13

- They are care experienced;
- They are an estranged student.

The university also considers the information included in applicants' personal statements and references, and applicants must meet any other admission requirements needed by the course to be considered.

## The use of area level data

The most commonly used contextual measure by higher education providers is 'POLAR' (Participation of Local Areas) data, which quantifies how likely young people are to participate in higher education according to where they live. POLAR classifies local areas into five groups – or quintiles – based on the proportion of young people who enter higher education aged 18 or 19-years-old.

An article published by researchers at the University of Durham, however, has argued that the use of area level measures, including POLAR, to identify disadvantaged learners [risks not reaching the intended beneficiaries](#) of contextualised admissions policies:

The use of area-level measures to identify contextually disadvantaged individuals carries a high risk of error due to what is known as the ecological fallacy; the average characteristics of individuals living in a given area do not necessarily reflect the characteristics of specific individuals.<sup>152</sup>

In order to avoid missing disadvantaged students who do not live in disadvantaged areas, or making contextual offers to students who live in an area of disadvantage but who are not themselves disadvantaged, the researchers argued that individual level metrics should be used to identify contextually disadvantaged learners.

These would be “officially verifiable individual-level measures of contextual disadvantage, such as free school meal status as confirmed by the applicant’s school, or lower household income as verified by DWP or HMRC records.”<sup>153</sup>

## 6.4

## Improving graduate outcomes

Historically, attempts by universities to improve equality for disadvantaged students in higher education have focussed on access and admission.

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<sup>152</sup> V. Boliver, S. Gorard, and N Siddiqui, “[Using contextual data to widen access to higher education](#)”, Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education 25.1, 2021, pp7-13

<sup>153</sup> V. Boliver, S. Gorard, and N Siddiqui, “[Using contextual data to widen access to higher education](#)”, Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education 25.1, 2021, p12

Emphasis has now shifted towards also improving students' participation and attainment. In 2019, Universities UK published a report arguing insufficient attention has been paid to the "third phase" of higher education's impact on social mobility, namely graduate outcomes and success.<sup>154</sup>

The report called for a greater focus on the specific challenges faced by disadvantaged students in progressing to postgraduate education, or building the skills valued by employers:

[U]niversities should contemplate the value of implementing programmes to develop individuals' specific skills in communications, networking and cross-disciplinary thinking, which are inclusive, intra-curricular and personalised. Further, the measurement of the impact of initiatives, and the judgement of their success, should also emphasise their consistency with academic skills, and look at benefits beyond 'employability' and earning power. Evaluation of initiatives must also be built in from the start.<sup>155</sup>

## Current initiatives

To address the disparity for some social groups between academic attainment and graduate success, the Universities UK report argues providers have the opportunity to:

- raise the ambitions of graduates
- improve skills of graduates in areas such as communication, cross-disciplinary thinking, and networking that optimise career opportunities
- engage with employers to encourage them to contextualise academic achievements.<sup>156</sup>

Many higher education providers have programmes that enable students to develop supplementary skills – sometimes referred to as 'soft' skills – to enhance their employability. These programmes are often delivered through a university's careers services, which might also facilitate professional mentoring opportunities, placements and internships, industry partnerships, and careers fairs.

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<sup>154</sup> Universities UK, [Widening opportunity in higher education - The third phase: beyond graduation](#), November 2019

<sup>155</sup> Universities UK, [Widening opportunity in higher education - The third phase: beyond graduation](#), November 2019, p3

<sup>156</sup> Universities UK, [Widening opportunity in higher education - The third phase: beyond graduation](#), November 2019, p23

# Appendix

## Progression to HE by ethnic group, gender and free school meal eligibility, England

Percentage of pupils from state-funded schools starting HE by age 19, 2023/24

		Eligible for FSM			Not eligible for FSM			All pupils		
		Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All
White	White - British	22.1	13.8	17.8	50.1	36.8	43.3	46.1	33.4	39.6
	White - Irish	25.5	18.5	21.7	68.3	52.7	60.5	62.9	47.7	55.2
	Gypsy / Roma	12.2	10.0	11.0	34.1	18.5	28.2	23.5	13.0	18.5
	Traveller of Irish Heritage	20.3	18.1	19.2	28.6	26.0	27.3	25.5	23.2	24.3
	Any Other White Background	48.3	35.1	41.5	59.4	46.4	52.8	58.3	45.2	51.6
Mixed	White and Asian	29.4	17.8	23.7	46.9	33.2	40.3	42.1	28.8	35.7
	White and Black African	50.8	33.8	42.4	65.4	49.0	57.3	62.2	45.6	54.0
	White and Black Caribbean	41.0	29.6	35.0	69.7	57.5	63.4	65.2	52.9	58.9
	Any Other Mixed Background	47.9	32.0	39.7	65.4	50.7	57.9	62.0	46.9	54.3
Asian	Indian	65.6	50.9	58.0	81.1	71.3	76.0	80.0	69.8	74.8
	Pakistani	58.8	42.1	50.6	68.7	54.4	61.4	66.5	51.9	59.1
	Bangladeshi	66.5	50.9	59.1	76.3	63.5	69.8	73.6	60.3	67.0
	Any Other Asian Background	64.7	48.5	56.2	80.9	70.9	75.6	78.6	67.8	72.9
Chinese		80.3	67.1	73.2	86.6	80.3	83.5	86.2	79.2	82.8
Black	Black - African	44.4	27.1	35.5	59.4	37.4	48.4	55.3	34.5	44.9
	Black Caribbean	70.8	52.9	62.0	80.2	65.7	73.0	77.9	62.6	70.4
	Any Other Black Background	62.6	39.9	50.5	72.5	54.8	63.3	70.0	50.9	60.1
Other	Any Other Ethnic Group	62.3	47.8	54.6	72.0	57.0	64.3	69.5	54.5	61.7
	Unknown	35.3	25.1	29.9	55.1	43.7	49.1	51.5	40.3	45.5
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>34.6</b>	<b>23.4</b>	<b>28.9</b>	<b>55.9</b>	<b>42.5</b>	<b>49.0</b>	<b>52.5</b>	<b>39.5</b>	<b>45.8</b>



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