



Advancing Access

A response to the Office for Students
consultation on access and participation plans



Policy Briefing 6
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Widening participation (WP) policy and funding aims to address discrepancies in the take-up of higher education (HE) opportunities between different under-represented groups of students.

The most recent Widening Participation statistics issued by the Department of Education show that disadvantaged young people (defined here as those eligible for Free School Meals) are 17.7%pts less likely to go to university than their better off peers (reference: [Widening Participation stats 2018](#)). This gap is unchanged since 2015.

The proportion of disadvantaged young people accessing HE is slowly increasing, up by 0.5%pts in the last year to 25.6%. There hasn't been a smaller increase in over a decade. **Compared to 2006, the gap between disadvantaged young people and their better off peers is down only 1.5%pts. If this rate of progress continues, the gap will eventually be closed in the year 2148.**

Although the reality of disadvantaged young people having fewer opportunities than their better off peers is barely changing, the architecture of the HE system is in a state of flux.

2018 started with the launch of the Office for Students (OfS), the new HE regulator, which has taken over responsibility for WP from the Office for Fair Access.

2018 ended with the OfS consulting on the future of access and participation plans, which universities must agree with the regulator before they are allowed to charge fees of above £6,165 per year. These plans are vital – the main tool by which universities set out how they intend to address the challenges faced by disadvantaged young people.

This is an important area of public policy, with a significant level of investment currently under scrutiny, as the government's post-18 education funding review comes to a conclusion.

The new approach to regulating access and participation the OfS outlines, and the new Evidence and Impact Exchange (EIX) it is commissioning, represent a significant step in the right direction.

The experiences of organisations like The Access Project, IntoUniversity, charities working to support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to access university demonstrates that we can reduce, and with the right support, eliminate the access gaps.

We need adequate funding, transparent and accessible data, and the right incentives structure to do so. We urge the OfS to maintain a focus on all three.

Executive summary:

In response to the OfS's consultation about its proposed new regulatory framework for access and participation plans, we believe that:

1. Addressing the university access gap costs money. A welcome focus on outcomes must not detract from the fact that success requires funding
2. Longer term planning cycles are a good way to incentivise interventions that aim to expand the pool of university applicants, rather than aiding competition among HE providers for a static pool of high achievers
3. Setting targets and measuring progress in widening participation requires better data, including data on young people eligible for free school meals
4. Consistent use of common metrics would enable better collaboration and comparison between different institutions, and over time

1. Addressing the university access gap costs money. A welcome focus on outcomes must not detract from the fact that success requires funding

We strongly welcome the OfS's focus on outcomes. But this doesn't mean that attention should be shifted away from inputs, like money. Without considered and appropriate inputs, we cannot achieve good outcomes. We think it sends the wrong message to the sector to set targets for outcomes without universities committing to a certain amount of spending on WP.

Setting a minimum expectation of spend is an important tool in the OfS's arsenal and this enhances rather than detracts from its ability to apply pressure with respect to targets and outcomes.

There are many and competing pressures on university budgets and universities have to make spending choices in the context of multiple stakeholders and objectives, including attracting the best staff and publishing world leading research. Without a minimum expectation of spend on WP, improving access has to compete with all these other objectives for share of spend and in that context, there is a danger that spend on WP will decline.

We think that spend on WP should decline once improvements in access are documented. As we have not seen significant improvements yet, we urge the OfS to let the proposed new regulatory regime take effect before making any changes to expectations of spend.

A disproportionate amount of WP funds are currently spent on bursaries, which have little documented effect on expanding the pool of young people able to access university. However, we would like to see some of these funds *reapportioned* (to interventions which are effective at expanding the pool), rather than *reduced*. A reduction in overall spend cannot be justified while there is still so much unmet need in the system.

One unmet need is addressing the attainment gap. One of the biggest barriers to university access for under-represented groups is GCSE attainment. Students who do well in their GCSEs are more likely to progress to Level 3 study and are well placed to access university. However, only a third of young people eligible for free school meals achieve English and maths GCSEs at 16. Only by addressing this fundamental inequality can we begin to make a real dent in the university access gap. This is neither cheap nor quick to address, and the OfS must design the access and participation system to incentivise programmes which address this barrier.

Should the OfS decide to remove the minimum expectation of spend on WP, we strongly urge them to set an explicit review point in three years' time which allows them to reintroduce it if overall spend has declined and access has not improved.

2. Longer term planning cycles are a good way to incentivise interventions that aim to expand the pool of university applicants, rather than aiding competition among HE providers for a static pool of high achievers

Short term cycles and spending priorities currently see universities compete for a fairly static pool of high-performing students from underrepresented groups to improve their own access figures.

There is less incentive for the higher cost, longer term outreach work needed to achieve the OfS specified sector-wide aims (which universities don't get credit for). For example, offers of bursaries for those qualified and applying to university does nothing to increase the number of young people qualified and applying in the first place.

To close the access gap, we need to tackle low levels of university participation among some social groups and in some parts of the country where there isn't sufficient social capital driving young people to consider university as an option, or the education infrastructure enabling them to get the grades. Universities are not necessarily individually best-placed to deliver this kind of outreach in a strategic way. We want to see incentives for sector partnerships and collaboration with third sector providers with expertise in this area.

This entails working with underrepresented groups at school age and staying the course with them. IntoUniversity start working with young people in primary school, so they develop aspirations to go to university at a young age, stay on track academically, and make subject choices that do not constrain their educational options at a later stage.

The Access Project runs a four year programme, providing 14-18 year olds with free personalised tuition, in-school support, mentoring, and university admissions guidance, to increase the proportion of young people from poorer families accessing top third universities. In The Access Project's experience, students need at least 10 hours of intensive tuition support to move up a grade at GCSE and 20 hours at A level.

It is essential that university WP plans and funding arrangements support longer term, harder interventions like these, and a three year planning cycle at a minimum is a welcome development.

While multi-year planning is sensible, we should retain the benefits of annual reporting, so that we can track progress and keep the issue high on the agenda.

3. Setting targets and measuring progress in widening participation requires better data, including data on young people eligible for free school meals

Data is essential to successfully addressing the access gap. We need better data:
To define the groups with lower access and set targets for improvement
To allow universities to measure their progress on an ongoing basis

Targets

The OfS is right to introduce specified targets across all higher education providers, but targets should be set with the aim of eliminating (rather than reducing) the access gap. We are particularly keen for every HE provider to have a target around entry rates for students who are from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This is a very large group of young people with a very large access gap.

The best measures of socio-economic disadvantage are individual measures, such as prior eligibility for free school meals (FSM), rather than geographic measures, like POLAR. This is because it is possible to demonstrate an improvement of access based on POLAR while making no improvement in access based on FSM, which would indicate progress for non-disadvantaged people in disadvantaged areas.

Free school meals eligibility is a commonly accepted measure in the education sector and HE should be using the same metrics as schools.

We welcome the proposal for separate targets for pre-16 and post-16 work. Low attainment at GCSE level by underrepresented groups is one of the main barriers to university access and we are pleased to see pre-16 and post-16 WP activities separated out in this way. It makes sense to disaggregate spend in this way too. With better use of data, the OfS could form a view about where the balance of spend between the different areas should lie, to help the sector target interventions and allocate spend more effectively.

Progress

Those delivering WP interventions should be collecting data regularly to assess their progress and make any necessary adjustments to ensure that they're on track. This data collection effectively involves tracking participants, which is crucial to high quality evaluation of WP activities.

The OfS should play a role in strongly encouraging all HE providers, through the access and participation plan framework, to subscribe to a tracking service and use it consistently to evaluate the outcomes of their participants.

At the same time, the OfS will need to ensure that these tracking services can provide timely and accurate data to providers, at a programme participant level. If providers don't have access to pupil-level data (e.g. via the National Pupil Database) it is very difficult for them to draw conclusions about which specific activities are effective and which groups of students respond to their intervention.

Alongside encouraging providers to subscribe, the OfS should also play a role in:

- a) ensuring the tracking services themselves are fit for purpose (they provide the right granularity of data, they give tools for providers to both measure and manage impact)
- b) ensuring practitioners have the skills/knowledge to use these tracking services well

The OfS should also use the data aggregated by tracking services to build up the sector-wide evidence base of what works for improving access and participation outcomes.

This progress and tracking data will also enable better self-assessment. To create improvement in evaluation practice, it is important to identify areas of underperformance and actionable steps for improvement. We believe the sector needs more support to develop the capability needed to make effective use of self assessment, and improvements to its approach to evaluation and performance management of programmes.

Impetus-PEF knows from its experience supporting IntoUniversity and The Access Project (and previously the Brilliant Club) to assess and improve their impact, that instilling effective performance management systems and behaviours takes time and motivation. We're keen to share our expertise to support providers to do this.

4. Consistent use of common metrics would enable better collaboration and comparison between different institutions, and over time

We strongly support the move towards clear, consistent and comparable outcomes focused targets for institutions themselves and institutions in collaboration with others to achieve sector-wide targets. We therefore welcome the OfS's proposal to maintain a dataset of access data for underrepresented groups, disaggregated to provider level.

Timely access to disaggregated data (by institution and by pupil characteristics) is essential. Poor access to data makes it hard for providers to target their funding effectively, and to benchmark.

It is essential that socio-economic disadvantage, ideally as measured by prior eligibility for free school meals, is one of the gaps which will be shown on the main dashboard. One of the most significant gaps in access is between FSM students (25% of whom go to university) and all other pupils (42% of whom go to university), an access gap of 17%pts.

It looks like this access gap and this group of students, already under-served by the education system, are being de-prioritised if they do not appear on the main dashboard. As previously stated, POLAR is not an adequate metric for assessing the disadvantage gap at a student level, nor is it intended to be. Both FSM and Pupil Premium are recognised metrics for assessing outcomes at school level and there is no reason they can't be applied to higher education.

The Access Project and IntoUniversity identify students who need targeted support through a combination of factors, including FSM, POLAR, ACORN, Pupil Premium, in care, low attaining. We believe that the sector's ability to target support at the students who most need it would be significantly improved if universities were incentivised to look beyond POLAR, for this they had better access to the NPD and other individual level datasets.

The National Collaborative Outreach Programme is a clear area where OfS can incentivise more collaborative outreach work. The initial evaluation suggests value has been created in building links with schools and investing in local resources and infrastructure. The impact of this initiative could be improved if OfS harnesses these collaborative networks to expand the programme to include attainment raising measures, to improve the performance of students from underrepresented groups at GCSE level.

Conclusion

We welcome the urgency from OfS around improving access and participation. Given the level of investment in this important area of public policy and the scrutiny placed on this by the government's post-18 education funding review, this is timely.

We believe that the measures around increased accountability, better collecting and sharing of evidence and evaluation, and more effective long-term planning proposed by OfS will contribute to improved practice across the sector, driving up outcomes for young people. Funding for WP activities at current levels needs to be maintained until we see improved practice and greater impact across the sector.

About Impetus-PEF

Impetus – The Private Equity Foundation (Impetus-PEF) transforms the lives of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds by ensuring they get the right support to succeed in school, in work and in life. We do this by finding, funding and building the most promising charities working with these young people and by influencing policy and resources.

About Into University

IntoUniversity runs centres embedded in local communities, where disadvantaged young people receive support to raise their attainment and aspiration, and get the necessary information, advice and guidance to get in to university.

About The Access Project

The Access Project works with high-potential students from disadvantaged backgrounds, providing tutoring and intensive support including mentoring, practice interviews and networking, to help them get into top universities.

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