



# The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

## University APPG meeting- The Office for Students

18:00-19:30, Tuesday 6 March, Committee Room 4, House of Lords

Chair:

**Roberta Blackman-Woods MP**, Chair of the APPUG

Speakers:

**Rt Hon Alan Milburn**, Former Chair, Social Mobility Commission

**Professor Les Ebdon**, Director of Fair Access, OFFA

**Chris Millward**, Director of Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students

**Professor Liz Barnes**, Vice-Chancellor, Staffordshire University

**Alan Milburn** opened his remarks by saying that universities were instrumental in solving the current social crisis, stressing that social mobility was a priority for many institutions in civil society. Part of the country's DNA was that everyone should have a fair chance at life, yet disadvantage tended to cascade down generations, he added.

There was an expectation that each generation would do better than the last, and the fact this was not currently the case was overwhelming the progress that had been made in higher education.

In terms of advantage gaps, he explained that the "great benefits of globalisation" had bypassed many communities in a lot of areas. Having whole sections of society believing they are not being given proper opportunities to succeed was corrosive to cohesion he thought, adding this was not a tenable position for the country going forward. He thought the main question universities should ask themselves was whether they were genuinely contributing to greater equality or less.

There were now more working-class youngsters in higher education than ever before, which emerged from the combined efforts of public policy (often accidentally), a progressive fees system and the efforts of individual universities. Although progress had been made, it would take at least 80 years for the gap between the areas of highest HE participation and the lowest to narrow let alone close he thought, stressing that the relationship between social class and educational success was entrenched across the education system.

He said he was pessimistic about whether public policy was helping social mobility, especially given that Brexit was taking a huge amount of focus, leaving the government with little bandwidth to tackle social injustice. He urged universities to step into the vacuum.

Alan Milburn then suggested for areas in which universities could increase the progress that had been made.

- 1) Focusing on school leavers who are likely to succeed, and putting resources into tried and tested mechanisms such as foundation degrees and summer schools
- 2) Shifting the focus from simply admission to retention of disadvantaged students
- 3) Tackling the UK's place-based divide, both in terms of using further/higher education partnerships to attract local students, and preventing the exodus of the aspirant middle class from smaller towns and regions to big cities
- 4) Universities taking more of a leadership role, especially given that Government and therefore public policy attention is elsewhere at present

Finally, he told members that he would be setting up a new Social Mobility Institute.

**Professor Les Ebdon** opened his comments by saying that access to full time higher education for young people from disadvantaged groups had been a national success story, whilst acknowledging there was still more to be done to achieve truly fair access.

He gave a number of statistics which highlighted the progress that had been made, including the fact that since 2006 there has been an increase in the number of young full-time students from disadvantaged background of 82%. The number of black students entering higher education had also gone up by 79.4% during this time frame. In terms of future progress, he thought entry to the "highest tariff" universities remained a significant issue as entry rates for disadvantaged and BME groups, although rising, was lower; this was important for social mobility given that employers still tended to favour such institutions when recruiting.

Although retention rates for English universities were the best in Europe, 9 percent of fifth quintile students failed to complete their first year, compared with 5 percent of the student population overall. He thought it was disgraceful that only 49% of black students achieved a first or 2.1, compared to 76% of white students.

In terms of other underrepresented groups, he lamented the decline in the numbers of mature and part-time students enrolling at university. The number of disabled people entering higher education had increased by 140% since the introduction of access agreements he said, adding there was no sign of this higher rate decreasing despite changes to the disabled student allowance.

Professor Ebdon believed the success that had been seen could be attributed to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) issuing a strong challenge to universities, setting stretching targets that could not be deferred. There had also been an improved evidence base, for example it was now known that outreach programmes were more effective than bursary schemes. For future progress, he thought it was positive that higher education had been moved back to the Department for Education, given the importance of working with schools on the attainment gap. In terms of the Office for Students (OfS), he said he had left Chris Millward with a firm foundation on which to build, and advised him to be evidence-led and outcomes focused.

**Chris Millward** paid tribute to Professor Ebdon and the progress he had overseen during his time at OFFA. He then spoke about the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 which had established the Office for Students, and the recent regulations which highlighted the importance of continuation, attainment and progression. His role as director of access involved the setting of best practice, and the OfS had a duty of proportionate regulation, he then explained.

Debate on fair access tended to focus on residential students, he thought, stressing that it was just as important to support students who studied at home; students who lived, studied and worked in the communities in which they grew up were often forgotten about. Other areas that needed more focus were increasing the number of white working-class males going to university, and providing second chances and opportunities to re-enter higher education.

Guidance from the OfS served to provide both pressure on, and support for, universities in terms of widening participation. A high regulatory bar had been set via the assessment of institutions' access agreements he thought, then told members that universities should not only be equipping students for the labour market, but also forming a dialogue with employers on how to capitalise on the skills of graduates.

In terms of future arrangements, he stressed that the OfS had the power to apply conditions on institutions if they felt insufficient progress had been made; this nuanced set of levers was not available before. As well as applying pressure, he said the OfS would improve its evidence-base and data, support collaborative working between universities and employers and share what was working across the sector. Although HEFCE and OFFA staff were moving into the OfS, there were new imperatives in the form of more focus on outcomes and progression, better tools and powers and more support on data

Widening participation objectives related to other OfS duties such as those on quality, value for money and choice, he said. Work needed to be done on how to diversify the sector to meet the needs of mature students, how to capitalise on the apprenticeship levy and on the effectiveness of investment in widening participation programmes.

**Professor Liz Barnes** explained that her university was in an area of significant disadvantage, with the student population covering all the difficult demographics. Giving statistics, she explained only 28% of people in Stoke-on-Trent went to university, and that 20% of Staffordshire University's students were BME. She stressed that the richness of the higher education sector was in its diversity and not its selectivity; different institutions suited different individuals.

She disagreed with the focus on success being measured by incomes; at Staffordshire University there were a lot of students that went into nursing, teaching and early years care that were all positive for society but were not earning high salaries, therefore the broader contribution of graduates to society needed to be considered. Those from difficult backgrounds had done well to even get into university and so communication which measured their success in purely financial terms was not helpful.

Professor Barnes then spoke about the higher number of students at her institution that travelled very short distances. In terms of graduate employment, 80% of Staffordshire graduates from 2015/16 were now in graduate level jobs, but the majority of those were unfortunately outside Stoke-on-Trent, she added. Encouraging students to undertake part of their studies overseas improved future prospects, as did thinking creatively about ways to support students transition into higher education. This could be done by creating different kinds of spaces that allowed families to come onto campus, and having the facilities to house students for a couple of nights a week.

Finally, she explained that Staffordshire University had offered fast track degrees for over 10 years, and that the institution had nearly 400 higher or degree apprentices, of which 44% were from POLAR 1 and 2. She stressed that linking fees to earnings would not help the social mobility agenda.