



The All-Party Parliamentary  
**University Group**

**6 March 2018**



## Agenda

### The subject of the meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary University Group is widening participation and access

- 6:00pm**      **Roberta Blackman-Woods MP**, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary University Group, welcome and introductions
- c6:05pm**      **Rt Hon Alan Milburn**, former Chair, Social Mobility Commission
- c6:15pm**      **Professor Les Ebdon CBE**, outgoing Director of Fair Access, Office for Fair Access (OFFA)
- c6:25pm**      **Chris Millward**, incoming Director of Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students
- c6:35pm**      **Professor Liz Barnes**, Vice-Chancellor, Staffordshire University
- c6:45pm**      Questions, comments, and discussion with university leaders, MPs and peers
- 7:30pm**      Speaker meeting concludes.

## Speaker biographies

### **Rt Hon Alan Milburn**

Alan Milburn was previously the MP for Darlington from between 1992 and 2010, and served in a number of Cabinet roles under the last Labour government, most significantly as Health Secretary from 1999 to 2003. Coming from a disadvantaged background, he has prioritised social mobility throughout his career and has held a number of roles in this area, including as Chair of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions under Gordon Brown.



Alan served as Chair of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission between 2012 and 2017. In December, he resigned from this position, criticising the government for lacking the 'necessary bandwidth' to make Britain a fairer, more open society. He currently serves as Chancellor of Lancaster University.

### **Professor Liz Barnes**

Professor Liz Barnes has been Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive at Staffordshire since April 2016, having previously been Deputy Vice Chancellor at Sheffield Hallam University and Derby University after a long career at Teesside University.



As a leading provider of Higher and Degree Apprenticeships, Staffordshire University has a strong connection with businesses across the region. Throughout her career, Liz has built connections with employers and industry working in partnership to provide vocationally relevant courses and upskill the workforce. With an academic background in physiology she worked closely with the NHS developing new ways of working and qualification frameworks.

Liz's career has been built around leading learning and teaching and the student experience, with a passion for creative and innovative approaches to enhance the student journey and their achievements. Committed to education and young people, Liz is a member of four Multi-Academy Trusts in the Region and having recently been appointed Co-Chair of the Opportunity Area Partnership Board, Liz also believes it is important that education and employers are seen to be working jointly in endeavours to improve the life chances of young people in Stoke on Trent.

## **Chris Millward**

Chris Millward, the first Director for Fair Access and Participation in the Office for Students (OfS), joins OfS from HEFCE.

As Director (Policy) he led HEFCE's work on access and student success, learning and teaching, and higher level skills. This included delivery of the Teaching Excellence Framework, the National Student Survey and the National Collaborative Outreach Partnerships, as well as programmes to remove barriers to student success, to improve postgraduate progression and to develop degree apprenticeships.



Chris worked at the universities of Warwick, Edinburgh and Durham before joining the Arts and Humanities Research Council as Head of Research Programmes in 2002 and HEFCE in 2006.

## **Professor Les Ebdon CBE**

Professor Ebdon has been Director of Fair Access to Higher Education since 1 September 2012. He was previously Vice Chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire.

That followed an illustrious career in analytical chemistry, including more than 250 publications and several awards. Professor Ebdon obtained his PhD at Imperial College, London, then lectured at Makerere University in Uganda and Sheffield Hallam University, before becoming Reader in Analytical Chemistry at what is now the University of Plymouth. He was promoted to a personal chair in 1986, became Head of Environmental Sciences in 1989 and then, in the same year, Deputy Director. He was promoted to Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) in 1992. He remained in that position until 2003, when he was appointed Vice Chancellor at the University of Luton and became Vice Chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire on its creation in 2006.



Professor Ebdon was awarded a CBE in 2009 for services to local and national higher education and was appointed Deputy Lieutenant of Bedfordshire in 2011.

# **Briefing: Widening participation and access**

**Prepared for members of the All-Party Parliamentary University Group**

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either house or its committees. All-Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of members of both houses with a common interest in particular issues.

This briefing document has been produced by Universities UK which provides the secretariat for the University APPG

## Introduction

Universities transform lives. Going to university leads to new ways of seeing the world, to new horizons and networks, and to significantly enhanced job opportunities. But not everyone benefits in the same way. Fewer students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds go to university, and when they do they tend not to do as well as their more privileged peers. The influence of background continues long after graduation.

Over the last few decades, universities have placed an increasing focus on enabling access and promoting success for as diverse a body of students as possible, and this has had clear successes. In 2017, 18 year olds from the most disadvantaged areas in England were 83% more likely to enter higher education than they were in 2006. The number of full-time BME undergraduates at English universities has increased from nearly 200,000 in 2007–08 to nearly 300,000 in 2016–17, and black teenagers from England have never been more likely to go to university.

But a number of challenges remain. Prospective students do not get the same access to information, advice and guidance about which universities will be the best for them, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to attain the grades needed to attend the most selective universities. While at university, BME students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to drop out. The proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds leaving university in their first year has risen recently to 8.1%, and is now higher than it was in 2008-09.

Students from non-traditional backgrounds are also less likely to get a first or 2.1 degree classification, regardless of their pre-university attainment, with the biggest gaps for black graduates. In fact, in 2015-16 just 51% of black graduates studying in the UK got a first or 2.1, compared to 74% of white graduates. And once they graduate, non-traditional students are less likely to be in a professional-level job and likely to be paid less than their advantaged peers.

Universities are doing work to improve in these areas, but it will take time to achieve real difference, and it will require collaboration with other universities, schools, colleges and employers.

Due to the devolved nature of education, different bodies encourage, fund and monitor improvements in widening participation and access in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. While universities in all nations take their duty to support social mobility seriously, this delegate guide focuses on the current situation in England.

## Political background and landscape

Increasing the number of young people into higher education from a range of backgrounds has long been recognised by politicians as a key way to increase social mobility in the UK. Despite the mixed response it was met with, Tony Blair's goal almost two decades ago of having 50% of young adults progressing to higher education by 2010 set a benchmark for future political ambitions in this space.

The establishment of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the requirement on universities wishing to charge higher fees to have approved access agreements came about through the Higher Education Act 2004, the piece of legislation which also enabled universities to increase tuition fees to £3,000 a year.

The political emphasis on universities prioritising social mobility became even more topical under the Coalition government, which saw tuition fee levels increase to £9,000 from 2012-13. Working with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), former Universities Minister Lord Willetts championed the widening participation agenda, and asked the two bodies to develop a shared strategy on higher education access and student success, which was published in March 2014.

A few months before the launch of the green paper *'Higher education: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice'* in November 2015, previous Universities Minister Jo Johnson gave a speech in which he reiterated the government's commitment to doubling the entry rate from disadvantaged backgrounds by 2020. He also spoke of his ambition to see a 20% increase in the number of BME students going to university. In 2015, Jo Johnson took action by asking Universities UK to set up a Social Mobility Advisory Group to identify practical ways to address inequality in higher education.

It has been increasingly important for the government to promote their widening participation agenda in the face of criticisms about the perceived marketisation of the higher education system. This was reflected during the Higher Education and Research Act's passage through parliament, which will lead to different registration conditions placed on English higher education providers to promote social mobility and provide statistics on their progress. Under this legislation, the functions of OFFA will now sit within the new Office for Students (OfS).

The government has also come up against criticism for its decision to abolish maintenance grants in favour of loans as announced in the Summer Budget 2015, and in response has used admissions data to counter arguments that students from

disadvantaged backgrounds have been put off from applying to university by this policy.

The recent appointments of Damian Hinds MP and Sam Gyimah MP as Education Secretary and Minister for Universities and Science respectively has been seen by many as positive for the widening participation agenda. Damian Hinds was formerly chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility and once said “university is the top determinant of later opportunities”. Sam Gyimah has also spoken about prioritising this agenda, and has previously recounted his own personal experiences of being a disadvantaged student with financial difficulties at the University of Oxford.

### **The role of the Office for Fair Access and the Office for Students**

Currently, all universities and colleges in England which are directly funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) or the Department for Education (DfE) and which charge home or EU students above the basic fee (£6,165 for full-time provision, £4,625 for part-time provision) are required to agree an access agreement with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). This agreement outlines what each university is doing to widen participation and improve access to higher education for disadvantaged groups, and includes institutional targets and milestones which the university must report back on in April of each year. Institutions are encouraged to focus on the areas which are most challenging for them and in which they require most improvement. Alongside this, OFFA produces annual guidance, often related to current political priorities, and institutions are also required to respond to this in their agreements.

OFFA generally operates through negotiation: encouraging institutions to adopt more ‘stretching’ targets before approving an agreement, and encouraging appropriate responses to potential breaches rather than applying sanctions. This has prompted criticism by some that OFFA has failed to achieve adequate progress on improving access.

OFFA has also been criticised for not having a set structure for access agreements. It has been argued that this has made understanding what institutions are doing and what interventions are working more difficult. There has also been criticism of access agreements’ annual targets. It is argued that they have been too politically driven and that requiring institutions to set separate targets for recruitment of disadvantaged students has made outreach work part of competitive recruitment practices, rather than encouraging collaboration to create a step-change in access and pre-higher education attainment.

In April 2018, OFFA will be replaced by the Office for Students (OfS), a new higher education regulator created by the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. The OfS has a duty to promote equality of opportunity in access and participation at English higher education providers, and a new Director for Fair Access and Participation to support this. The Director for Fair Access and Participation is a ministerial appointment, and replaces the Director of Fair Access.

The recent DfE consultation on the set-up of the OfS stated that the OfS's first objective will be that 'all students, from all backgrounds, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, higher education'. The new regulator has said that widening participation will be central to its remit, with a focus across the whole student lifecycle. In order to be on the OfS register, higher education providers will have to provide an access and participation statement; those providers which wish to charge higher fees (above £6,165 for full time undergraduate study) will have to negotiate an access and participation plan with the Director for Fair Access and Participation.

The regulator has said that it will require access and participation plans to be sufficiently bold and ambitious, evidence-led and appropriately resourced. Approval for the plans will be risk-based. Providers at greater risk of not supporting all students to access, succeed in and progress from higher education will be required to spend more money, undertake more activity, and make more progress.

In addition to access and participation plans, the OfS is emphasising the importance of student information in promoting wider participation in higher education. Part of this will be the transparency duty, which requires higher education providers to publish the following data, broken down by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background:

- The number of applications for admissions received
- The number of offers made in relation to those applications
- The number of those offers which were accepted
- The number of students who completed their course
- The number of students who attained a particular degree or academic award, or particular level of award, on completion of their course

The OfS is also interested in using the combined powers of HEFCE and OFFA to facilitate improved access and participation. This could be through increasing student choice by providing different models of higher education, and/or by improving the links between higher education providers and schools and colleges. The OfS plans to intervene at a provider level to facilitate this.

## **Sector-wide work of Universities UK**

Universities UK (UUK) has an extensive social mobility programme, designed to support the work which universities are doing to address the gaps in participation and outcomes for students from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. This work is focused across the student lifecycle, with projects designed to support access, retention, degree attainment and employability, and an overarching project to examine what works in this area so the sector body can support meaningful change.

To support improving access to higher education, UUK is carrying out research to understand what information prospective students would like to see on the benefits and costs of going to university. This body is also developing a basket of data measures which admissions teams can use to contextualise applicant achievement; is working to understand the impact which league tables have on university admissions decisions; and is supporting universities to partner with schools by developing the evidence base so institutions can better understand what works to raise pupil attainment.

To support improving degree attainment for all students, UUK is carrying out research with the National Union of Students (NUS) to examine the factors behind the gap in attainment for black students. This project aims to understand the barriers to BME student success and what universities are doing to address this; to understand and share experiences about what does and does not work in narrowing the attainment gap; and to arm practitioners and students' unions with evidence to support work to address the attainment gap.

UUK is currently working with the North East Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and four universities in the LEP area to identify how career guidance and support can be enhanced and better targeted to improve employment outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. UUK is exploring the potential to adapt and use the Gatsby Benchmarks of good career guidance, which are widely recognised as representing good practice in the schools and colleges sectors. The intention is for this to build on the new AGCAS career guidance standards currently under development, ensuring that any benchmarks are appropriate for the university context.

As part of its commitment to evidence based policy making, underpinning all of the above, UUK is also developing a new 'what works' centre for widening access and participation in higher education. The purpose of this Evidence & Impact Exchange will be to improve the way researchers, policy-makers and practitioners create, share and use high quality evidence for decision-making in relation to widening access,

participation and progression in UK higher education. In turn, this better access to information on what works will allow universities to target their access and participation spend as effectively as possible by supporting interventions with a successful track record.

The creation of an Evidence & Impact Exchange was a key recommendation of the Social Mobility Advisory Group when it considered how to overcome barriers and achieve a step change in social mobility. The initiative has support from the DfE as outlined in the 2017 Social Mobility Action Plan. We are also working to support the development of access and participation Plans in the new regulatory environment, so the OfS is able to best support widening participation at all universities and across the whole student lifecycle.

### **Universities in the wider context of social mobility**

Although universities make a substantial contribution to driving social mobility, any step change in improving equality of opportunity and life chances requires collective effort and collaboration between universities, schools, colleges and employers. This was one of the key issues identified by the Social Mobility Advisory Group in 2016 when considering the barriers to disadvantaged students' success.

In illustrating the complexities of this wider ecosystem, the Social Mobility Commission adopted a 'life stage overview' of social mobility and opportunity, which included comparing three stages of education – early years, school and youth. They found that few areas of England demonstrate consistently high performance across all three. The Commission noted that many areas with high-quality early education have very poor primary and secondary schooling for disadvantaged pupils. This can make it hard for high-attaining children to sustain academic successes as they move through school and has implications for opportunities post-16.

#### **Work with schools and school pupils to raise aspiration and attainment**

One of the most talked about barriers to widening access to higher education centres on the attainment gaps that exist at primary and secondary school. On average, students from the least affluent backgrounds do not achieve the same levels of attainment as their more affluent peers by the end of Key Stage 4. This has implications for students' future paths post-16. Evidence shows that disadvantaged school pupils (defined here as those eligible for the Pupil Premium) fall increasingly behind their more affluent peers in terms of attainment at each stage of their compulsory education. Research by the Education Policy Institute shows that, in 2016, the attainment gap by the end of secondary school was 19.3 months

nationally, with significant variation by region and local area – ranging from 29 months in the Isle of Wight, but no identifiable gap in Newham.

In working to address this issue, universities across the country partner with schools in a variety of ways, ranging from sponsoring a school to offering teaching provision in A-level subjects, curriculum co-design or offering summer/residential school placements, all of which have a common objective of raising standards and attainment between different groups of students in the school system. Every university with an approved access agreement for 2018-19 has committed to upscale existing or develop new initiatives in this area.

Information, advice and guidance (IAG) also play a central role in shaping students' choices. Students from more privileged backgrounds benefit from effective IAG from their schools, their parents and broader networks. The Social Mobility Advisory Group recognised that this is often absent, or less effective, for students from more disadvantaged backgrounds who may not have the same cultural capital at home and through their networks. The quality of IAG in state schools is also often patchy, reinforcing disadvantage for state school pupils.

In 2015-16, universities' and colleges' expenditure on outreach activities reached £119.5 million and, looking at those who started a degree the following academic year, it was the rate of participation among the most disadvantaged 18-year olds that grew the fastest compared to the year before. In fact, by 2016-17, young English students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds were 74% more likely to enter university than they were ten years earlier.

#### Work with businesses to boost employability

At the other end of the student lifecycle, an area of increasing focus for universities is helping to address disparities in graduate employment outcomes between students of different backgrounds. For example, for graduates of 2010-11 from the most disadvantaged areas, the professional employment rate 40 months after graduation was 69.9%, compared to 80.7% of the most advantaged.

Universities' career service functions operate to ensure their services are student-centred, and this includes ensuring that they meet the needs of a diverse range of students. This is also a core part of the code of practice set out by the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), which has more than 2,800 members, and 130 UUK member institutions represented within its membership. However, the responsibility within universities for supporting employability for harder-to-reach groups of students also lies within faculties, who raise awareness of employment options, illustrate what particular jobs involve, encourage engagement in

social action and volunteering (which evidence suggests can help increase wellbeing), and provide opportunities for work experience or outward mobility via study/work abroad programmes, where evidence suggests employment outcomes are particularly pronounced for disadvantaged and BME students.

The recent growth of degree apprenticeships, which universities co-design with employers, can be attractive to some students from non-traditional backgrounds, thus providing a further opportunity to support widening participation goals.

## **Supporting social mobility: university case studies**

### ***Case study 1: Brunel University, London***

Brunel University London oversees the Urban Scholars Saturday-school, which focuses specifically on interventions with gifted and talented students in receipt of free school meals from the London area. Around 1,500 pupils have passed through the programme since 2013.

It is based upon proven techniques in raising aspirations and channelling talent through improving core subjects and critical thinking skills and is supported by a body of evaluative evidence from parallel research undertaken by Brunel University's Education Department in previous years. Available destination data shows that 85% of the 2012-13 cohort are now studying in university, of which 22.8% are at Russell Group universities.

Inspire is the Brunel STEM Learning Centre, a multi-million-pound construction project on campus. Launching in Autumn 2017, Inspire will deliver age-relevant, curriculum-linked science education for children from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 4. Once operating at full capacity, the centre will cater for 30,000 pupils each year. The intention is to encourage pupils to study STEM subjects and to increase the number of women studying and working in engineering.

### ***Case study 2: University of Essex***

The university plays an 'anchor' role in the region for existing schools. The Schools Membership Plus (SMP) programme involves relationships with 32 schools, which benefit from 25 different types of support methods. This includes: specialist A-level plans, dedicated teacher CPD, annual teachers' conference, free access to university library online resources, twilight subject sessions in schools, access to an online learning platform for students, and fee discounts for teachers studying at postgraduate level. PhD students deliver research methods training to support Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) as well as deliver subject sessions. The

university also provides SMP schools with travel grants to enable engagement with activities on-campus and bursaries to support school engagement activities.

### VI6 programme

As part of SMP, the university also runs the VI6 (six-six) partnership scheme, which brings together six schools in the local area. This involves jointly teaching eight A-level subjects which the schools would not be able to deliver themselves, and providing teaching facilities for this at no charge. Around 170 students study on the university site each week for two years across a range of subjects: further maths, French, law, economics, geography, sociology, art history, philosophy and ethics. The partnership is developing annually with more subjects being included. There are plans to expand the provision past A-levels and include BTEC's as well as engaging with parents and carers to break down barriers to university.

### ***Case study 3: Swansea University***

While this delegate guide is focused on social mobility in England, universities in the devolved nations also work hard to increase access and outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

For instance, the Department of Adult Continuing Education (DACE) at Swansea University, established in 1990, operates a community-based part-time degree programme in thirteen community venues across South West Wales and on a university and a college campus. The programme prioritises disadvantaged and isolated communities, including eight Communities First areas in the region.

A ten-week BA Preparation Programme for learners without a tradition of higher education underpins the part-time degree and supports progression to part-time study. Free, impartial educational and careers advice is available on an ongoing basis. Support for students on the part-time degree is flexible and encourages student involvement and active participation and provides extensive study skill support to ensure retention and success. Support is available by telephone, email or face-to-face at community venues and students have access to a dedicated library at the South Wales Miners' Library. Video conference facilities enable courses to be delivered at Pembrokeshire College from Swansea University.

Hundreds of students have taken part in the part-time degree scheme, which has in recent years scored very highly in the National Student Survey. Retention rates have averaged 87% over recent years, with 73% of students achieving a first or 2:1 degree qualification.











# The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

## **Future meetings**

### **Wednesday 9 May 2018**

Devolution

08:30-10:00, Terrace Dining Room B

- Professor Elizabeth Treasure, Vice-Chancellor, Aberystwyth University
- Professor Paddy Nixon, Vice-Chancellor and President, Ulster University
- Professor Gerry McCormac, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, University of Stirling

### **Tuesday 26 June 2018**

The government's review of tertiary education funding

18:00-19:30, Committee Room 4, followed by dinner

For more information about the group please email [appug@universitiesuk.ac.uk](mailto:appug@universitiesuk.ac.uk) or visit [www.universityappg.co.uk](http://www.universityappg.co.uk).