

# PATHWAYS FOR POTENTIAL

How universities, regulators  
and Government can tackle  
educational inequality



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# FOREWORD

**The UK’s leading universities deliver a world-class education few other countries can compete with. Yet, for too many, this national asset can feel out of reach. We have made important progress in opening our campuses to students from all walks of life, including the most disadvantaged. But the rate of change has often been too slow.**

Continuing educational inequality comes at a cost to both the individual and the country. Now is the time to address this challenge by removing all physical and perceived obstacles to equal opportunities.

The start of a new parliamentary term offers the opportunity to look forward. The Government has a chance to create pathways for people and communities who have too often felt left behind. The Prime Minister has said “talent, skill and genius are distributed uniformly across the UK, but opportunity is not”. We want all students to have genuinely equal opportunities to access the benefits of higher education, regardless of their background, ethnicity or income-level. This report sets out a challenge for universities, Government and regulators through a three-pronged action plan to deliver transformational change over a ten-year period with a view to achieving this ambition.

First, universities have a clear responsibility to diversify their campuses and support all their students to reach their full potential. Russell Group universities and others have sought to meet this challenge with a series of bold action plans. In addition, through this report our universities are committing to five principles of good practice – on evaluation, collaboration, leadership, transparency and co-development with users – to maximise the impact of their efforts.

Second, we need to ensure the right regulatory incentives are in place to support further progress. While the increased regulatory focus on evidence and evaluation is welcome, there is a

real risk the desire to see immediate and dramatic improvements in recruitment of students from narrow target groups could make it harder for universities to pursue collaborative and long-term work to widen the pool of applicants. Without this work, universities will be constrained in their ability to move the dial on widening access to the extent we would all wish to see.

Third, all of this should be underpinned by a wider drive to tackle inequality throughout the education system, beginning right from the early years. A national strategy is needed to join up efforts to address inequality and barriers to social mobility. This should be a cross-government strategy and should include all those with a stake in this work: universities, schools and colleges, local authorities, employers, charities and more. A new Office for Tackling Inequality should be tasked with ensuring all government policy is underpinned by this aim. Without a strong government commitment, embedded inequalities across the UK will remain.

I would like to thank all of those who have helped develop the thinking set out in the pages which follow, including many social mobility experts and practitioners. I hope that politicians and policy makers from all camps will now get behind the approach we are proposing and work with us and others. We all want the same thing: a higher education system open to all with the potential and desire to participate. Now the job is to work together to deliver it.

**Dr Tim Bradshaw**  
Chief Executive, The Russell Group



# METHODOLOGY

This report is based on research conducted by the Russell Group using a range of methods including:

- in-depth interviews with social mobility think tanks, practitioners, schools' representatives and academics
- a survey of Russell Group members and an assessment of their most recent access and participation plans
- existing external research and data on higher education, social mobility and widening participation, and
- a survey of social mobility charities.

In addition, Russell Group members were asked to contribute case studies which demonstrate the impact of their work in improving access to their universities and in supporting retention, attainment, and progression for under-represented students. Full details of the case studies can be found in a separate short report.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While important progress has been made in opening up our campuses to all students regardless of their background, ethnicity or where they come from, we recognise the rate of change has often been too slow. We want to ensure students have genuinely equal opportunities to access the benefits of higher education, but recognise that significant obstacles remain.

Gaps in attainment at school mean disadvantaged pupils fall behind early on, impacting on their life chances for years to come. Lack of knowledge about higher education can impact negatively on the confidence of under-represented students. Financial concerns restrict some students' higher education choices, and people from certain places face greater barriers in accessing university when they live at a distance from a university campus, have poor transport links, or suffer a lack of subject choice and advice at school.

This report draws on the expertise of academics and charity and school leaders - as well as the lessons learnt by practitioners through years of working with students, families and teachers.

Based on this analysis, we propose a series of recommendations and commitments for our universities, the Office for Students (OfS) and Government to achieve truly transformational change in the life chances of under-represented and disadvantaged people.

Dismantling all the obstacles faced by students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups requires a three-pronged action plan:

- **Universities to deliver on their responsibility to diversify their campuses** and support their students to reach their full potential by embedding good practice across their access and participation efforts.
- **The right regulatory incentives to be in place to support further progress** and ensure universities can pursue collaborative and long-term work to widen the pool of applicants from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds.
- **A wider drive to tackle inequality throughout the education system**, beginning right from the early years, with a new national strategy to join up efforts across government departments and all relevant stakeholders.

**Diagram 1:**  
**Our proposed three-pronged action plan**



### Universities embedding good practice

Russell Group universities – along with many others in the sector – have set ambitious objectives to boost access and support successful participation for disadvantaged and under-represented students over the next five years. To ensure good practice is embedded across the board, Russell Group universities have committed to:

1. Embed **evaluation** across all their access and participation activities.
2. Build on their **collaborative work** to reach more students and teachers in under-represented areas.
3. Ensure **ownership** of, and accountability for, efforts to widen access and support student success sits with Presidents and Vice-Chancellors and their senior teams.
4. Provide **transparent information** on admissions policies to all applicants.
5. **Co-develop effective access and participation initiatives** with students, teachers and/or parents as appropriate.

### Introducing the right regulatory incentives

The regulation of access and participation by the OfS in England needs to support institutions in delivering transformational change. A greater focus on longer-term strategy setting and taking an evidence-based approach has been welcome, but some aspects of the regulatory framework could produce unintended consequences for institutions' access and participation efforts.

We recommend the OfS should do more to encourage collaborative working between universities and support longer-term interventions (such as work with pre-16 students) which can address the root-causes of under-representation. We also recommend

that universities should be able to set targets for improving access and participation using indicators of disadvantage which they judge to be appropriate to their location, student demography and institutional mission. Along with better access to the available data (including on prospective students eligible for free school meals), this would enable them to identify and target the students most in need of their support.

While the regulatory environment for higher education varies across the UK, the challenges the sector is facing in levelling up widening participation work are universal. These recommendations would benefit students in every part of the country. In addition to the OfS, regulators in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland should engage with their universities to consider how to apply them in their own contexts.

### A joined-up approach to tackling inequality throughout the education system

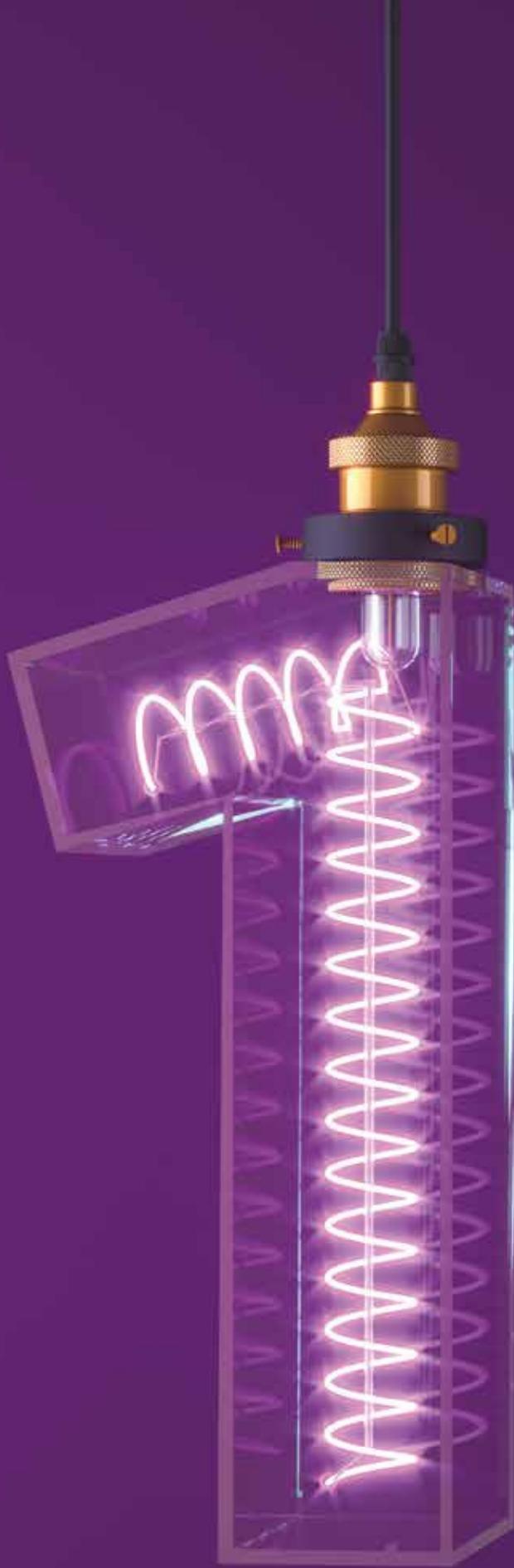
The OfS has set stretching long-term targets to eliminate gaps in access to selective universities over the next two decades. But without sustained efforts to address the social, cultural and economic issues which underpin these gaps, as well as embedded inequalities across the education system, these targets will not be met. To reach the targets, selective universities would have to recruit large numbers of students with very low grades and many with no academic qualifications at all, and places for students from groups who are already highly represented would need to be capped.

Alongside the work that universities are doing to widen access to their campuses and support disadvantaged students to succeed, we need a coherent national strategy which enables sustained, multi-sectoral investment and joined-up working to support families from the early years onwards and, ultimately, to widen the pool of applicants to higher education.

Our analysis of interventions which have successfully tackled entrenched social problems shows a national strategy for eradicating educational inequality needs to be cross-departmental with sustained political support over the long-term. To achieve this, we recommend the creation of a new Government Office for Tackling Inequality which would be tasked with ensuring all government policy is underpinned by this aim.

We recognise that tackling educational inequality is a shared endeavour in which universities, schools and colleges, employers, charities and local authorities all have a role to play - along with a range of government departments and services - and any national strategy should empower all these stakeholders to collaborate in their regions.





# **Chapter 1: What is the problem?**

## What is the problem?

The number of disadvantaged and under-represented students progressing to university, including the most selective institutions, has steadily increased over a period of years. The most under-represented students are 61% more likely to enter university now than they were ten years ago, and 30% more likely to enter Russell Group universities than they were five years ago.<sup>1</sup>

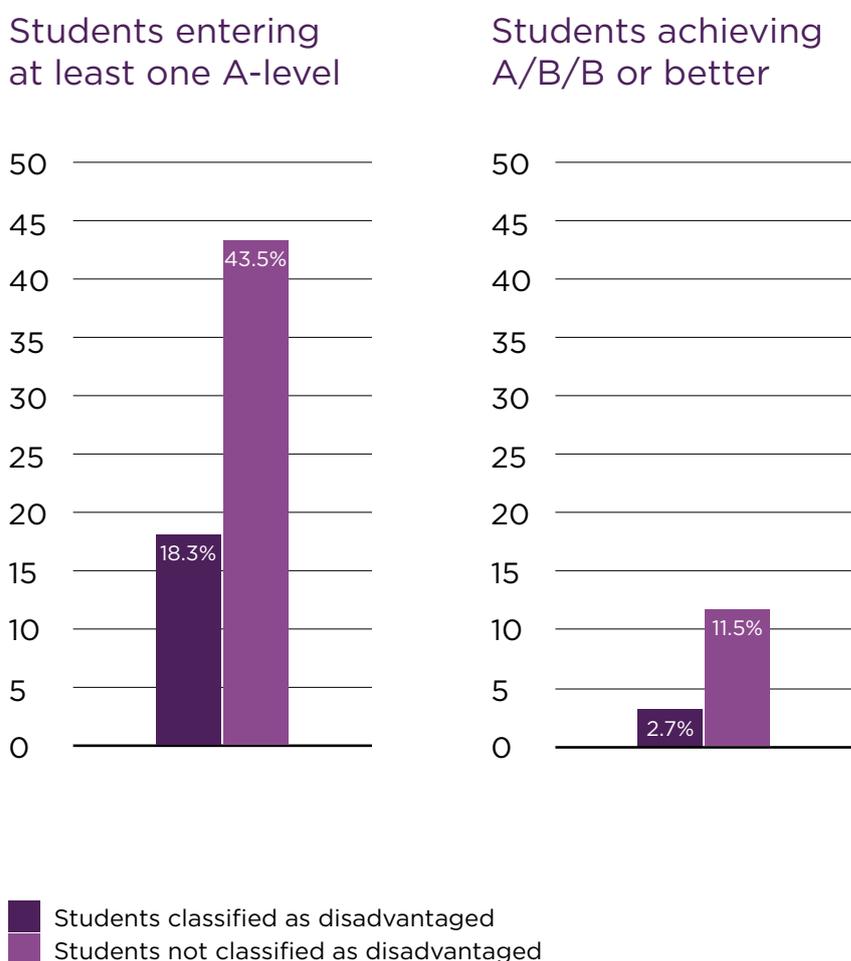
However, gaps by social and geographical background and by ethnicity and disability persist in access to university, especially at selective institutions, and universities across the sector have further to go in supporting student success and progression to employment:

- Young people from the most highly represented neighbourhoods are around five times more likely to be placed at a higher tariff institution than those from the least represented neighbourhoods.<sup>2</sup>
- Looking across the whole sector, the proportion of students with a disability in higher education is 6% lower than the proportion of working-age adults with a disability, and the number of mature students at UK universities has decreased by 46% over the past decade.<sup>3</sup>
- There are also significant differences in access to higher education by region: for example, 18-year-olds from London are 35% more likely than those from elsewhere in England to progress into higher education.<sup>4</sup>
- Once at university, there is a five-percentage point gap in continuation rates between students from the most under-represented areas and their peers from the most highly represented areas.<sup>5</sup>
- There is a 13% gap at sector-level between the likelihood of white students and students from black, asian or minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds getting a first or upper second-class degree classification.<sup>6</sup>

Through a series of in-depth interviews we conducted with academics, practitioners and charity and school leaders, the following factors arose as key social, cultural and financial barriers to access and participation for under-represented students:

- Gaps in prior attainment in school (and even differences in cognitive development in the early years, with disadvantaged pupils falling behind their peers early on) shape people's life chances for years to come. The causes of these gaps are complex and include differences in the challenges faced by schools, their curricula, and extracurricular support structures, parental expectations and whether students are care experienced. Teacher shortages, lack of teacher retention and less qualified or experienced teachers are key factors which can affect schools in more deprived areas.
- 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 who are the first in their family to go to university can find it difficult to navigate the choices available to them.
- 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.
- People from certain places face greater barriers than others in accessing university as a result of geographical distance from a university campus, poor transport links, and subject choice at school or college. 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.

**Graph 1: Differences in attainment at A-level at state-funded schools and colleges by disadvantaged status, England**



Source: Department of Education data provided in response to a Parliamentary Question on 7 May 2019. Estimates for the proportion of the 2016 key stage 4 cohort who entered and attained A-levels by 2018, by disadvantaged status at key stage 4.

Interviewees emphasised the importance of prior attainment as one of the most significant obstacles to widening access. New data obtained from the Department for Education shows differences in attainment at A-level for students classified as disadvantaged (those eligible for pupil premium in year 11) and their peers. Graph 1 on the previous page shows that **students not classified as disadvantaged are over four times more likely to achieve grades ABB or better at A-level than those who are disadvantaged.**

In turn, these students have a wider choice of options available if they wish to continue their studies at a higher level. These figures only relate to students attending state-funded schools and colleges but the attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students is likely to be much larger when including independent schools as well.

Universities have a key role to play in intervening to remove these obstacles and more work is clearly required to ensure disadvantaged and under-represented students are supported to succeed at university and beyond. For our economy and society to thrive in future, we need to draw on all the diverse talent available to the UK – not just talented people from more affluent backgrounds.

Over the course of their working lives, graduates earn on average significantly more than non-graduates. But the value of a degree is not restricted to purely economic advantages. The knowledge, skills and personal qualities – such as confidence, self-motivation, creativity, problem-solving and teamwork – which students acquire over the course of their degrees mean they enjoy a range of benefits including better health, higher levels of civic engagement, and increased likelihood of a fulfilling career. All students, regardless of social background, ethnicity, geographical location or disability, should have an equal opportunity to access these benefits. This report considers the

actions that are needed to accelerate progress in widening access to university for students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds, and how they can be supported to succeed on their degrees and beyond.

**Chapter 2** asks what universities have learnt in recent years about the types of intervention that are effective in supporting disadvantaged students onto a degree and throughout their studies. By combining our members' experiences with views and studies from experts, we identify approaches that have worked well and can be applied broadly. These are collected in a series of lessons learnt. We also show how these lessons are being applied through the ambitious new five-year access and participation plans universities in England have recently published.

In **Chapter 3** we make the case that underpinning this rich and varied activity should be a set of core principles that are embedded in everything universities do to widen access and support student success. These include evaluating all initiatives, enhancing collaboration, ensuring senior leadership accountability, greater transparency on admissions policies, and developing schemes and materials with students, parents and/or teachers. We also ask the OfS to ensure the right regulatory incentives are in place to support universities to make further progress.

In **Chapter 4** we explore what a national strategy could look like to tackle inequality across the education lifecycle. Our analysis shows the target the OfS has set to eradicate gaps in access to higher tariff universities, such as those in the Russell Group, won't be met without sustained efforts to address the social, cultural and financial barriers which disadvantaged people face – not all of which universities are equipped to fix. Comprehensive and long-term interventions to tackle entrenched social problems are far from easy to address quickly, but evidence from other sectors and other countries shows they are possible.

By introducing a new ten year joined-up strategy to support stakeholders to work together – including universities, schools, colleges, local authorities, charities, employers, social care and health services, and government departments – we believe it is possible to enact transformational change in the life chances of disadvantaged

people and those under-represented in higher education.

**Chapter 5** summarises our recommendations to the regulator and the Government as well as the commitments our universities are making to tackle educational inequality.





# **Chapter 2: What have we learnt?**

## Five lessons learnt

Across the sector, universities are investing considerable resources and efforts in a wide range of schemes for getting disadvantaged and under-represented students into university and helping them to succeed once there. While universities offer support for students from pre-entry through to graduation (and beyond), the way this support is targeted and delivered will necessarily vary from institution to institution. This is because initiatives are rightly targeted to the geographical location, student demographics, subject mix and access challenges specific to the institution.

Because of this variation in practice, it can be difficult to assess the impact of the sector's efforts at scale. But by combining our members' experiences with views and studies from experts, it is possible to identify approaches which have worked well and can be applied broadly. These are collected in a series of lessons learnt.

### 1. Working with current students, parents and schools is fundamental to good outreach and participation initiatives

**Evidence shows that engaging users in designing services or schemes has a positive impact on the outcomes. The NHS lists development with users as a key tenet of good service design<sup>7</sup>, and local government has written about the benefit of communities helping to design and test end-to-end services. For universities, working with prospective and current students as well as their teachers, advisers and/or parents in developing and assessing the impact of access and participation initiatives can significantly improve their effectiveness.**

Research demonstrates the importance of family in a young person's approach to further study. Parents are key influencers in young people's higher education decisions, and parents from a higher social grade group are far more likely to want their child to go to a highly selective university.<sup>8</sup> Financial concerns, future employment opportunities and available support for students, have all been cited as common worries for parents from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>9</sup> Universities can help through early and sustained engagement with parents and guardians. [King's College London has created the Parent Power scheme, working alongside Citizens UK to engage parents to become advocates for university study. The scheme has engaged more than 200 parents so far. Feedback shows all parents who have taken part in Parent Power now feel more confident about their child accessing university.](#)

Collaborating with schools is also fundamental to successful outreach. However, there are specific challenges in areas with low levels of HE provision; a report by The Brilliant Club found schools serving less affluent communities are more than two-and-a-half times as likely to encounter barriers in working with universities.<sup>10</sup>

The full potential of people from these areas has too often, and unfairly, been left untapped. By working with pupils, teachers and schools, universities can design and develop outreach activities that factor in key considerations including financial barriers to engagement, resource availability, optimum timing for activities to take place, and so on. **Through the Advancing Access<sup>11</sup> platform, the 24 Russell Group universities are supporting teachers in schools and colleges with a high number of disadvantaged students and low progression to university. Information and advice about how to support students to progress to a competitive university or course has been developed in partnership with teachers and advisers in target schools and all the resources are accredited by the CPD Certification Service, meaning engagement with the platform can count towards continuing professional development expectations within schools. There are currently over 2,000 teachers and advisers registered on the platform, and those in Opportunity Areas – areas the Government has identified as facing the biggest challenges to social mobility – are twice as likely to be using the resources as teachers in other parts of the country.**

Working with current students and through students' unions to develop, assess and monitor initiatives to support success on campus can also be a powerful way of ensuring students who are at risk of dropping out thrive within the university environment. **The University of Birmingham is working with its students to co-design a New Academic Teaching Year structure from 2020/21 with the aim of improving the learning experience for all students, but especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The new structure will enable the university to offer more flexible programmes to widen access as well as shorter, accredited mobility options to reduce cost. Assessment will be closer to teaching to facilitate earlier feedback on progress so problems can be identified at the earliest**

**opportunity, and a new model for personal academic tutoring will ensure that the system is less daunting for first generation students. The university is also introducing three new assessment support weeks and an enrichment week as an additional opportunity for students to build a wide range of skills.**

## 2. Different cohorts of students need targeted support

**Under-represented and disadvantaged students are not a homogenous group. Different groups have different needs and a person's background and identity – including their gender, socio-economic background, disability and/or ethnicity – often intersect in complex ways. Developing activities to support specific groups – and individuals within these groups – is therefore critical in enabling them to progress to university and to succeed in their studies.**

Many Russell Group universities are working to improve the educational experience of white working-class boys, where economic disadvantage, gender and other identities intersect to create barriers to accessing university. **Queen's University Belfast uses sport to foster early engagement with male pupils, primarily from white working-class backgrounds, in years 8 to 10. The university works with a total of 110 young males every year from non-selective secondary schools across Northern Ireland; participants are identified based on a range of factors including having a low household income, care experience or a disability, and/or parents who have not attended university. The programme aims to foster a sense of pride and self-confidence, as well as the aspiration to progress to university in later years.**

Care leavers also face multiple disadvantages in progressing to, and reaching their full potential at, university. A recent report

found care leavers experience instability in their journey through care, accompanied by feelings of isolation. Participants frequently reported feeling unsupported and adrift from local authority services by the time they were considering applying to university.<sup>12</sup> Evidence from AdvanceHE demonstrates that early engagement in the academic sphere can develop peer networks and friendships, create links with academic members of staff, provide key information, inform realistic expectations, improve academic skills, develop student confidence and nurture a sense of belonging<sup>13</sup> – and this is even more important for students without family networks to support them. **The University of Nottingham provides wrap-around support for care leavers to attempt to mitigate these challenges: extensive pre-entry support, contextual offers, transition support including practical help with moving to university as well as 365-day university accommodation. As a result, the number of care experienced students at Nottingham greatly increased in 2017/18 and these students are now more likely to continue their studies than the average UK student.**

Universities are also well-placed to work with smaller cohorts in their cities and regions, which may not yield large volumes of prospective students but can have a profound impact on the progression of individual groups of learners within the local community. **The University of Liverpool works with a local Somali and Yemeni community group to build successful relationships with prospective students through their Fast Trackers initiative. Due to the longevity of the programme, previous participants entering the university are now working as mentors for the next generation of students, acting as positive role models and embedding the project further within the community.**

Where communities are at a distance from a university or college, institutions have developed innovative online resources to provide them with information, advice and guidance. For example, Russell Group universities have developed the interactive *Informed Choices* website<sup>14</sup> to help students across the country

make decisions about their post-16 qualifications. Providing outreach, information and advice online enables universities and charities to reach a larger cohort of under-represented people as well as their teachers and advisers, including those who live in 'cold spots'.



### 3. Supporting students into a university can be as valuable as supporting them into *your* university

Universities undertake a range of outreach activities which can have a fundamental impact on people's life chances, but not all of this work will lead to gains in an individual university's institutional recruitment. Universities fulfil a civic role through sustained outreach work – from engaging with younger as well as mature learners, to sponsoring schools and running intensive summer schools. This activity can improve attainment, raise expectations and open up access to higher education. It is highly valuable whether or not it leads to more disadvantaged students progressing to the particular university in question.

Measuring the outcomes of outreach work primarily based on institutional recruitment of students from target groups underestimates the broader impact of this work. It risks limiting that impact in the long run as institutions are encouraged to focus on activities which result in direct recruitment gains, rather than the wider impact on the life chances of young people and the enrichment of the communities in which the universities are based.

Research shows that universities can play a fundamental role in shaping and developing a child's understanding of the value of education, and their own potential, from an early age. Differences in attainment between advantaged and disadvantaged children start in the early years and grow throughout their school journey: disadvantaged primary school children are on average around nine months behind their peers and this gap increases to 18 months in secondary school.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, many universities start engaging young people and their teachers from primary school onwards. [The University of York's Shine programme works with young people from the final year of primary school right through to year 11, providing a range of activities to inspire and motivate participants to succeed at school and to consider applying to university. In 2017/18, 89% of pupils said that as a result of taking part in Shine, they are now more likely to apply to higher education.](#)

Many universities work with state schools in order to improve overall attainment in their local area, even when this is unlikely to have an impact on their own recruitment figures. [Queen Mary University of London is involved in several innovative partnerships with state schools in east London, helping to improve standards of education and inspiring young people to fulfil their potential. The university co-sponsors the Drapers' Multi-Academy Trust \(MAT\) in the London Borough of Havering and supports the MAT's specialisms in mathematics and science through close collaboration with academic departments to enrich the curriculum and support improvements in pupil attainment. In addition to the academic curriculum, Queen Mary delivers a comprehensive progression curriculum from year 7 through to year 13, which is designed to increase students'](#)

knowledge and capacity to navigate towards higher education. Queen Mary is also a partner in the St Paul's Way Trust School in Tower Hamlets along with King's College London, the Institute of Education (at University College London) and the University of Warwick. St Paul's Way Trust School has noticeably improved its GCSE results in recent years, and currently holds an 'Outstanding' Ofsted rating. The latest Ofsted report references the positive impact the universities have in extending the experiences of students within and beyond the school day. Queen Mary also supports the involvement of student volunteers (primarily in offering mathematics tuition) across state schools, many of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds, thereby providing role models for school pupils.

Activities which seek to help raise attainment and provide support for students at post-16 level can have a profound impact on recruitment at an individual university, but the effect can be even greater in widening access to other selective institutions.

The UNIQ residential programme, hosted by the University of Oxford, supports access to a range of highly selective universities, now taking over 1,000 students per year. Between 2010 and 2015, 25% (1,100) of the 4,423 UNIQ participants progressed to the University of Oxford but a further 58% (2,546) went on to study at other selective institutions. Overall, 83% of participants studied at a highly selective university. Similarly, the University of Glasgow's Top-Up programme has been running since 1999 and has so far worked with over 20,000 pupils across 90 Scottish schools. In 2017/18, 282 participants progressed to Glasgow, and at least 1,000 more have gone on to other universities.

Universities also work with social mobility charities such as The Brilliant Club, The Sutton Trust, IntoUniversity, The Access Project and Brightside to support access to selective institutions. The success of these collaborative activities is not measured exclusively by recruitment at any particular institution. Instead the aim is to level up the progression of disadvantaged and under-represented groups across the board.

## 4. Successful access and participation work is owned by the whole university

While all universities have individuals and teams dedicated to delivering work to widen access and support disadvantaged students to succeed on campus, sustained support for these activities from senior managers means clear priorities can be set and embedded across the institution and the right resources can be made available.

A recent NUS/Universities UK report concluded that efforts to reduce the degree attainment gap between black and white students must be underpinned by strong leadership to ensure the provision of appropriate resources, to drive institutional change and lead by example to embed an institutional commitment to removing racial inequities.<sup>16</sup> **The University of Sheffield has taken this approach by implementing a cross-institutional action plan led by the Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor. The university's Race Equality Action Plan is the result of partnership work between students, staff and the university with the intention to engender an environment where inclusion is everyone's responsibility. The plan sets out a multi-pronged approach based on a detailed evidence review, including embedding inclusivity into the curriculum and campus culture, training staff and students to recognise implicit bias, and supporting black and other BAME students to succeed at university and beyond.**

This approach has also been impactful in creating initiatives which not only support outreach in schools but also facilitate the learning and development of university staff and alumni who may not have otherwise accessed those skills. **The University of Manchester has adopted a whole-university approach to supporting schools in the most disadvantaged areas. The university has developed a long-term programme overseen by its Access and Participation Strategy Group, which is chaired by the Vice-President for Teaching, Learning and Students. This includes a seven-year initiative to recruit and place academic and professional staff and alumni from the university as school governors, and the scheme has now trained over 1,000 people. Of the schools where staff are governors, 142 schools (92% of the schools with a current Ofsted judgement) were rated good or outstanding in 2019. The scheme has also improved relationships with the schools themselves. The links created with senior leaders in schools support the promotion of widening access activities and events, leading to an improvement in attendance and take up of widening participation programmes.**

By introducing a joined-up institutional strategy for widening access and inclusion, universities are bringing together everyone with responsibility for supporting students from pre-entry through to graduation. This is particularly important given the various teams, faculties, departments or colleges with a stake in this work. Data from Russell Group universities demonstrates that this approach improves continuation rates, degree attainment and progression into further study or careers. **The University of Leeds offers end-to-end support in the form of Access to Leeds and the**

**Plus Programme.** Access to Leeds is an outreach scheme which works with students through the application process and gives them eligibility to enter the subsequent Plus Programme which provides students with transitional and ongoing support to boost retention, student success and graduate outcomes. In 2018/19, 880 students registered at the university through Access to Leeds whilst the Plus Programme supported 3,000 students across all levels of their degrees. 81% of 2018 Plus Programme graduates achieved a 2:1 or first-class degree, compared with 66% of students from a deprived background at all English universities, and 76% of all deprived students at the University of Leeds. The non-continuation rate for Plus Programme students from low participation neighbourhoods (LPNs) was 5%, compared with 12% for all students at the university from LPNs.

Similarly, the Career Insights Programme at Newcastle University, overseen by the Careers and Widening Participation departments, enables over 100 disadvantaged students to explore a range of career opportunities and build strong networks with employers on a local, national and global level. Graduates have had work experience at multinational companies such as P&G and ExxonMobil, and in the civil service, and have secured jobs in the NHS and graduate training schemes such as TeachFirst. Those who went onto postgraduate study chose degrees primarily in STEM subjects, teacher training and law.



## 5. Evaluation is crucial for understanding what works, but there is no one-size-fits-all approach

Significant challenges remain in evaluating initiatives to widen access and support participation. Difficulties in accessing and linking up data to track the outcomes of participants can hinder evaluation efforts, and there is often a significant time-lag involved in demonstrating impact, particularly for schemes targeted at younger learners. Notwithstanding these obstacles, universities are now embedding evaluation into the design of their access and participation initiatives using a range of different techniques.

Financial pressures are often cited as barriers to widening access and can prevent students from participating fully in university life, as transport, accommodation, student resources, and extracurricular activities can be inaccessible. Universities provide financial support to those who need it (including students from deprived backgrounds, care leavers and estranged students) in the form of scholarships and bursaries, which are often supported by alumni donations. Universities are increasingly undertaking comprehensive evaluations of the impact of their financial support and, if necessary, amending their offer in line with the evidence. [The University of Cambridge recently evaluated the impact of its bursary provision and found, despite the national trend of students from low-income households achieving less well relative to their peers, Cambridge students in](#)

[receipt of a bursary had the same outcomes as those who did not. This shows that bursaries had a positive effect on outcomes for disadvantaged students. Following the evaluation, the university is considering how to make its financial support offering more visible and easier to understand but is also exploring refining the criteria for eligibility and level of support to produce the best outcomes.](#)

Evaluations can also show that different approaches to the same problem can be effective. Selective universities have used contextual information about applicants in their admissions processes for many years in order to take account of the social and educational background of prospective students. This information is used in several ways including to decide whether to make an offer, what that offer should be, and whether to reduce the entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants who have overcome barriers that their peers have not. Recent research suggests students are supportive of contextual admissions approaches, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>18</sup> [The University of Bristol has developed innovative contextual admissions policies over many years. In 2017/18 and 2018/19, the university increased its grade reduction for disadvantaged students from a one to two grade drop compared to standard entry requirements. This resulted in a 112% increase in the number of students from areas with low progression to university \(POLAR Quintiles 1 and 2\) applying annually, and a 66% increase in enrolments. The London School of Economics \(LSE\) has taken a different approach. Rather than offering grade reductions for eligible students, LSE introduced a 'flagging system' for widening participation indicators to ensure academic selectors have](#)

**all relevant contextual information to consider when making an offer. LSE's performance on widening access improved significantly in the admissions cycle which followed the introduction of the flagging system. The latest UCAS data shows that applicants from under-represented groups are now more than twice as likely to receive an offer than they were five years ago.**

There have been recent calls for universities to take a more radical approach to contextual admissions by dropping grade requirements much more significantly. Research has found, however, that this is not without consequences. Students entering higher-tariff providers with AAB at A-level have a 76% chance of graduating with a first or upper second-class degree, the figure for those entering with BCC is only 46%.<sup>19</sup> Students accepted with a radically reduced contextual

offer will need significant academic and pastoral support in order to thrive at university and ensure that they are not set up to fail, but even this may not prove sufficient. Further research is definitely needed on this issue and on the potential impact on motivation for A-level students at school.

Alongside evaluations of specific schemes, universities are also contributing significantly to the evidence base by undertaking research on educational inequality and social mobility and applying this research in a real-world context. **The Centre for Social Mobility at the University of Exeter, set up in 2018, brings researchers and practitioners together to achieve a common impact agenda. The centre has already developed an evaluation toolkit for the OfS which will help practitioners nationwide in developing effective interventions.**

**Diagram 2:  
Five lessons learnt**

**Supporting students into a  
university as well as your own**

**Different cohorts need  
targeted support**

**Working with current  
students, parents  
and schools**

**Successful access and  
participation work is owned  
by the whole university**

**Evaluation is crucial  
for understanding  
what works**



## What do the access and participation plans say?

Following guidance from the OfS in 2019, English universities agreed plans to boost access and support successful participation for disadvantaged and under-represented students over a five-year period.<sup>20</sup> Russell Group universities' plans build on the five lessons set out above. The plans set a range of ambitious objectives and targets underpinned by a rigorous approach to evidence and evaluation.

Illustrative examples taken from English Russell Group universities' plans include:

- **Ambitious targets to reduce the gap in access to university for under-represented students.** The Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, for example, have set targets to halve the gaps in their intake between the most and least represented students by 2024/25. Meanwhile, the University of Durham is aiming to reduce the ratio of the most to least represented students from 10:1 to 3:1 over the same timeframe.
- Queen Mary University of London has made significant progress in **supporting BAME students to access, and succeed at, university:** 70% of their student body are from BAME groups and the university has succeeded in almost halving its BAME attainment gap between 2012/13 and 2017/18. Other Russell Group universities are setting stretching targets to increase access for specific BAME groups: Imperial College London, for example, has set a target to double the entry rates for black students by 2024/25.
- By striving to ensure an inclusive learning environment, several other Russell Group universities are seeking to reduce significantly, or even eradicate, gaps in attainment by ethnic background. The University of Warwick, for example, is aiming to eliminate entirely the gap in degree attainment between black and white students by 2024/25 from a baseline gap of 13.8% currently (compared to a sector gap of 23.1%).
- Fourteen English Russell Group universities have set specific **targets to improve access, continuation, attainment and/or progression for students with a disability**, and where targets have not been set this is often because gaps in outcomes for students with a disability have already been eliminated. Supporting **student mental health** is a particular focus for universities. The University of Liverpool, for example, has set this as a priority and is working with the local NHS Trust to provide additional staffing, training and support for students.
- **Activity is ramping up to tap into the potential of under-represented groups including care leavers and estranged students, students from military families, and Roma communities.** For example:
  - Many Russell Group universities are supporting care leavers to access and succeed in higher education. The Universities of Exeter and Nottingham, for instance, are building on their expertise in supporting care leavers by participating in a pilot run by the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) to create a national accreditation scheme for institutions across the sector working with care leavers. The University of Manchester collaborates with other local universities and colleges to provide information, advice and guidance to care leavers, young carers and estranged students.
  - Fourteen English Russell Group universities – as well as Cardiff, Edinburgh and Glasgow universities – have signed the Stand-Alone Pledge, agreeing to take significant steps to support students who have become estranged from their families.



- Nine English Russell Group universities will support children from military families to progress to their institutions – a three-fold increase compared to last year’s plans, with a focus on improving data collection around this cohort as a first step. Newcastle University delivers an outreach programme in Cyprus specifically for these children.
- Newcastle University has been working with primary school children to support integration of Roma families in the North East. Similarly, King’s College London is pioneering new work seeking to engage the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community targeted at year 6 students.
- Some Russell Group universities are sector-leading in their support for **mature learners**. The 2+2 programme at the University of Warwick has engaged with four local colleges for over 25 years and given 2,000 adult learners with few or no traditional qualifications a route into university education. Other Russell Group universities are developing new provision and support, especially those located outside London where there are fewer specialist providers catering for mature learners. For example:
  - The University of Leeds is trialing ways of raising attainment including pre-HE work in the community to support attainment in maths for mature learners.
  - The University of Bristol is developing a structured programme of tasters and bridging courses across a wide range of disciplines for mature learners.
  - The University of York has recently created a ‘Returning to Education as a Mature Student’ MOOC and is exploring the development of further resources.
  - Russell Group universities in the devolved administrations have also created programmes which support mature students. Cardiff University runs the Live Local Learn Local (LLLL) scheme to support adult learners looking to study flexibly at qualification level three, with progression routes to levels four and five. Similarly, the University of Edinburgh has introduced a new Access Programme for mature students through its Centre for Open Learning. Students take a range of skills-based courses equivalent to higher qualifications over two semesters, and those who complete their course successfully receive conditional offers from the university.
- Russell Group universities are using **foundation years** to offer extended support for students from widening participation backgrounds. The University of Southampton has been running its BM6 programme, which uses foundation years to provide an alternative entry route to a degree in medicine, since 2002. 322 BM6 graduates are currently practicing medicine in a range of specialisms. In the latest round of plans a number of English Russell Group universities are launching new foundation years, including:
  - University College London is developing foundation programmes as part of their new UCL East campus in east London with a commitment to ensure at least half of UK entrants to these programmes are from their target backgrounds for widening participation.
  - The University of Birmingham is piloting a fully-funded STEM foundation year for students from the least represented backgrounds whose predicted A-level grades would not have secured them a conditional offer.
  - The University of Oxford will launch Foundation Oxford in 2022, a fully-funded intensive foundation year programme for state school candidates from under-represented backgrounds.

- **A step-change is underway in embedding evaluation** into access and participation activity, with every Russell Group university presenting in-depth approaches to evaluating activities at every level of the student journey. Eighteen English Russell Group universities, for example, employ a “theory of change” approach – providing a comprehensive illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a specific context

– compared with five from last year’s round of plans. Universities are also developing widening participation evaluation units and strategies, as well as their capacity to improve data collection and analytics to ensure that their work is robust and effective. They continue to invest in educational tracking services such as the Higher Education Access Tracker.





# **Chapter 3: What more can be done?**

## Committing to key principles of good practice

**Picking up on the lessons learnt in the previous chapter, Russell Group universities are committing to five principles of good practice which can be applied across all activities, now and in the future. Although many universities are applying these already, they should be embedded across the board in order to maximise the impact of access and participation efforts. For universities outside of England, these principles can be applied in their regional contexts recognising the different regulatory and political frameworks to which they are subject.**

### Principle one: evaluation

In Chapter 2, we explored the challenges universities face in evaluating access and participation activities. Despite these challenges, **Russell Group universities are committed to embedding evaluation across the full range of their access and participation activities.** This will ensure all initiatives are credible and contribute to the wider evidence base. Evaluation needs to be proportionate and appropriate to the activity in question to ensure smaller-scale initiatives and those where impact is difficult to prove (for example in the provision of information, advice and guidance) continue to be viable.

### Principle two: collaboration

Universities across the sector participate in collaborative partnerships that pool resources, ensure good coverage for under-represented students, avoid duplication and share evidence and effective practice. Russell Group universities are working together through partnerships like Realising Opportunities, led by Newcastle University, which has helped hundreds of students from disadvantaged backgrounds to progress to leading universities, as well as initiatives such as Advancing Access (see Chapter 2) which supports teachers and advisers. Our universities are also working with others in their regions in consortia comprising universities, colleges and schools through Uni Connect (formerly known as the National

Collaborative Outreach Programme).<sup>22</sup>

To continue this, **Russell Group universities commit to building on their collaborative work, with each other and other institutions, to share information and reach more people and teachers in areas with lower levels of higher education provision or where fewer students progress to higher education.**

We are also interested in exploring opportunities to collaborate further with further education colleges. A number of Russell Group universities already have articulation agreements with colleges, enabling students with limited formal qualifications to study courses delivered in partnership. Building on these arrangements would improve opportunities for students from under-represented backgrounds to progress between further and higher education.

### Principle three: senior accountability

Universities are already required to ensure their governing bodies uphold equality of opportunity and diversity. But buy-in from university executive management for efforts to make campuses more diverse and inclusive is crucial in driving institutional change too. This kind of senior management accountability is essential in ensuring clear priorities can be set and embedded across the institution, the right resources can be made available, and a joined-up strategy can be developed

and actioned bringing together all those with responsibility for supporting students from pre-entry through to graduation and beyond.

Ensuring senior teams retain ownership of, and accountability for, access and participation efforts happens in a variety of different ways. This can include, for example:

- Having at least one member of the senior management team – or indeed a network of individuals – who champion access and participation efforts across the institution and at the executive level.
- Efforts to widen access and support student success and inclusion forming a core part of wider institutional strategies, above and beyond provisions in access and participation plans.
- Setting ambitious Key Performance Indicators on access and participation beyond what is written in access and participation plans.

**Russell Group universities commit to ensuring ownership of, and accountability for, efforts to widen access and support student success sits with Presidents, Vice-Chancellors and their senior teams.** This should ensure these efforts are embedded across their institutions and that appropriate resources are in place.

## **Principle four: transparency in admissions**

Universities have the lead role in ensuring prospective and current students have access to appropriate information, including about admissions and student success at their institutions. Several Russell Group universities have published very detailed admissions data, as has UCAS, over a number of years.<sup>23</sup> This, as well as the information published as part of the Transparency Condition and the OfS access and participation dataset, means that there is now a wealth of data and analysis available about trends in widening access and participation.

All Russell Group universities use contextual admissions to support disadvantaged and under-represented students to progress to their institutions. However, there is a perception that prospective applicants and others do not understand how contextual data and admissions policies are being applied. The Government's social mobility plan published in December 2017 set out an expectation that selective universities should be "more transparent about the use of contextual data to inform undergraduate admissions decisions."<sup>24</sup>

**In order to ensure all applicants to Russell Group universities benefit from access to transparent information about contextual admissions, our universities commit to providing this information prominently on their websites, and embedding it across their outreach activities.**

This should enable applicants to understand whether they are eligible for consideration or not, and how their applications will be treated within the admissions process.

The Russell Group is also considering how information about contextual admissions could be brought together in one place to make it easier for applicants to compare the way in which contextual admissions and contextual data are used at different institutions. Our universities have already collated their contextual admissions policies through the Advancing Access platform – providing a one-stop-shop for teachers to access information on the contextual admissions offer at each Russell Group institution. We have also begun discussions with UCAS to explore options for how information on contextual admissions could feature in their course search tool, making the information easier for applicants to access.

### Principle five: developing initiatives with students, parents, teachers and other education experts

Universities are already engaging with prospective and current students, parents, teachers and advisers in developing approaches to widening access and supporting student success on campus and beyond. This engagement can take many forms, but some illustrative examples gathered from our members include the following:

- Advisory panels, steering groups and focus groups to harness the views and needs of teachers and parents, and design and pilot initiatives accordingly.
- Work with prospective and current students from specific backgrounds to gather views and inform the creation of bespoke materials and programmes,

for example in supporting students from certain ethnic minority backgrounds.

- Using feedback from current students and participants to inform future development and reviews of access and participation programmes, and involving students and participants in evaluations.
- Working with students' union sabbatical officers to develop strategy as well as individual initiatives.
- Designing materials and programmes in collaboration with education and teacher training experts in universities' own education departments.

In order to underpin an evidence-based approach, **Russell Group universities commit to further building on their work with prospective and current students from under-represented backgrounds as well as their teachers, advisers and/or parents, as appropriate, to help develop effective access and participation initiatives.**

Diagram 3:  
Key principles of  
good practice



## Building in the right regulatory incentives

The greater focus on evidence and evaluation should enable universities to gain a fuller understanding of what works. **The OfS should continue to support the new Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO)**, which has been established as a consortium from King's College London, Nottingham Trent University, and the Behavioural Insights Team. With this support, TASO should focus on building expertise in evaluation and identifying and addressing gaps in the evidence base. The latter could be done through a series of funded research projects – although delivering this at scale might require a higher budget for TASO than that which has currently been allocated.

The welcome move by the OfS to enable institutions to set longer-term strategies has also been instrumental in enabling universities to develop bold and ambitious outcomes-based access and participation plans for the next five years. However, some aspects of the regulatory framework for access and participation are likely to produce unintended consequences and could actually hamper efforts to deliver the transformational change we are all looking for.

### Narrow target groups

The ability to identify the right target groups of students in efforts to widen access and support student success is crucial. The OfS has strongly encouraged institutions to use the POLAR classification when setting targets, an indicator which measures the proportion of the young population that participates in higher education in any given area.

While POLAR can be useful in conjunction with other measures, a 2016 report from the Social Mobility Advisory Group recommended it should not be used in isolation. Arguments about the limitations of POLAR are well-rehearsed. For example, in London only 1.3% of neighbourhoods are classified as amongst the least represented (i.e. Quintile 1) according

to POLAR despite London having a greater proportion of income-deprived children than anywhere else in the country.<sup>26</sup> This is not just a London issue. Research from the University of Durham showed that only 13% of students who were eligible for free school meals lived within POLAR Quintile 1 areas across the country.<sup>27</sup>

The focus on Quintile 1 compared to Quintile 5 students is also a concern as performance in supporting entry for Quintile 2 students will be excluded from targets and reporting. Many students in Quintile 2 areas are arguably significantly under-represented and educationally disadvantaged, but institutions are incentivised only to concentrate efforts on the recruitment of students from Quintile 1 neighbourhoods.

The OfS has acknowledged some of the limitations of POLAR, and advocated for the need to have individual measures that can be used alongside area-based measures such as POLAR.<sup>28</sup> While we agree with this analysis, if institutions are still encouraged to use POLAR as the key, or even sole, measure to identify and target under-represented students, they will be missing many of those from the most socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds until pupil-level data becomes available. **The OfS should ensure universities can set targets using indicators which are appropriate to their location, student demography and institutional mission. Institutions should not be put under undue pressure to use POLAR as an indicator.**

### Access to pupil-level data

Even with greater flexibility on the use of indicators for disadvantage and under-representation, identifying, targeting and tracking outcomes for these students remains problematic. Pupil-level data represents the gold-standard in accurately targeting support for students compared to area-based measures like POLAR which do not provide any information on the individual circumstances of students. But universities cannot access pupil-level

data contained in the National Pupil Database (NPD) directly. There are also restrictions on whether and how this can be shared with third parties such as educational tracking services.

While it is right that people's personal data is protected, further efforts are needed to ensure institutions can access the data they need to identify and target under-represented and disadvantaged students, especially through the admissions process. Work the OfS and UCAS are doing to improve access to existing pupil-level datasets, including data on students eligible for free school meals which is not currently available to universities, is particularly welcome, especially at the point where they are looking to support a disadvantaged applicant with a contextual offer. This data should be provided urgently to ensure these deprived young people do not miss out.

In the longer term, developing new pupil-level measures to enable universities to ensure they are reaching a range of disadvantaged students would also help to maximise the impact of their work to widen participation. Others, including Access HE, have already proposed the creation of a new metric based on household income.<sup>29</sup> This would align with student finance policy where applicants with a lower household income can draw down a larger maintenance loan, recognising they are less likely to be able to rely on parents for financial support. It would also enable universities to ensure they are working with prospective applicants from the most deprived households beyond those eligible for free school meals.<sup>30</sup>

Although this data could be made available through the Student Loans Company, students tend to apply for financial support once they have already received an offer. This means that the data is not available at the point of application, when it is most useful to admissions teams. Alternatively, a household income measure could be developed by linking the NPD to HMRC data on household earnings and creating an experimental dataset.

While there would be limitations to such an approach (including difficulty obtaining data for those who are self-employed<sup>31</sup>), initially producing an experimental dataset could help iron out any problems or inaccuracies such as false positives and false negatives. Linking NPD to HMRC data could also yield more accurate results than relying on parents sharing information about their household income through a self-reporting mechanism.

**The OfS should work with universities, relevant government departments, UCAS and the Higher Education Statistics Agency, to unify, and make available, pupil-level datasets used to indicate disadvantage and enable more precise educational tracking of students. Data on free school meals eligibility should be provided urgently to ensure these deprived young people do not miss out.**

**We also ask the Government to consider how the NPD (or other regional data systems) could be made more accessible and user-friendly for universities to access directly, or through trusted third parties, so that they can identify, target and track prospective applicants from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds. The creation of a new household income dataset would enable universities to ensure they are reaching the most disadvantaged students beyond those eligible for free school meals.**

### Encouraging collaboration

If universities are to commit to expanding collaborative efforts, they need the right regulatory incentives. Encouraging universities to compete for students from under-represented backgrounds is generally considered to be a good thing, at least to ensure there are as many opportunities for these students to progress to university as possible. However, encouraging competition to the near exclusion of opportunities to collaborate will limit the effectiveness of efforts to widen access across the UK.

Competition alone is unlikely to help when too few students from under-represented backgrounds apply in the first place: English students in POLAR Quintile 5 areas are still 2.8 times more likely to apply to university than those in Quintile 1 areas. Under pressure from the OfS to recruit as many students from target groups as possible, institutions may be deterred from pooling resources in the same region to maximise the impact of their work as they do now. We are already hearing anecdotally that the new target set for higher tariff providers to recruit more Quintile 1 students<sup>32</sup> is seen as a barrier to establishing new regional collaborations through the Uni Connect programme by some medium and lower tariff institutions.

**The OfS needs to go much further in encouraging collaboration between universities by recognising and rewarding institutional contributions to widening participation sector-wide for the benefit of the UK. This could include agreeing more regional approaches and targets with groups of institutions to complement ongoing work through Uni Connect.**

## **Growing the pool of applicants**

Universities should be accountable for their role in supporting people of all backgrounds to succeed in higher education. But there is a real risk the desire to see immediate and dramatic improvements in recruitment of students from narrow target groups could make it harder for universities to pursue longer-term work to widen the pool of applicants.

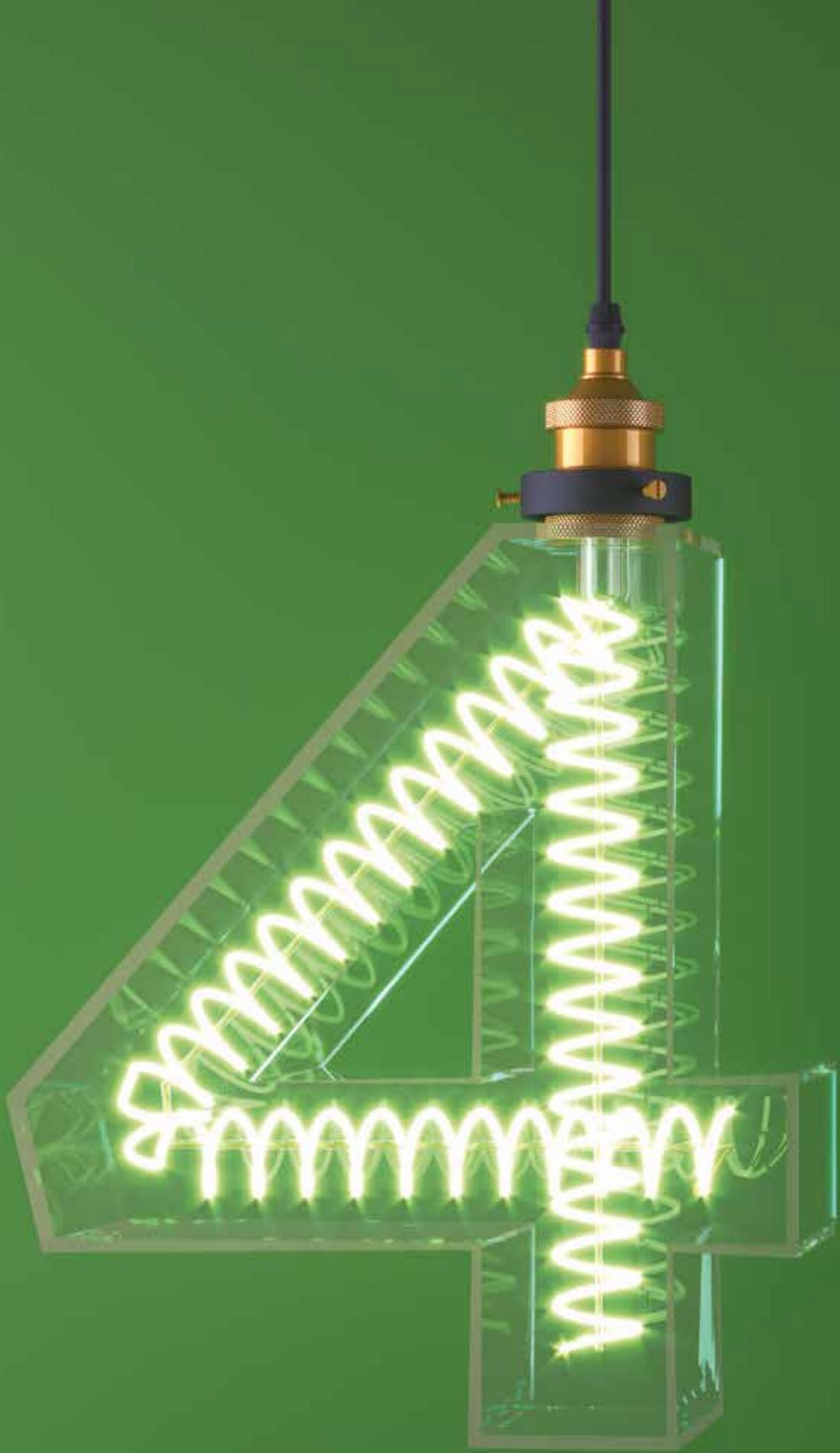
While universities routinely work with students and teachers from pre-16 onwards, and many even engage with primary schools, research has found that pre-16 outreach is considerably harder to evaluate due to the long time-lag between activities and desired outcomes (i.e. application to higher education).<sup>33</sup> Even proving impact on attainment at school pre-16 is highly

problematic due to the absence of metrics to measure learning gains and to attribute these unambiguously to specific activities.

While the outcomes-focused approach taken by the OfS is welcome, it may introduce the unintended consequence of discouraging universities from working with students and teachers from an early age as the impact of this work can be difficult to prove and takes a long time to become known. If universities are under pressure to meet recruitment targets agreed with the regulator, important work with pre-16 students and their teachers could fall by the wayside.

**The OfS should ensure the desire to see immediate outcomes does not discourage universities from early and long-term interventions with pre-16 students and their teachers which address the root causes of under-representation.**

While the regulatory environment for higher education varies across the UK, the challenges the sector is facing in widening participation and supporting student success are universal. The recommendations outlined above would benefit students in every part of the country. In addition to the OfS, regulators in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland should engage with their universities to consider how to apply these proposals in their own contexts.



# **Chapter 4: Why do we need a joined-up approach?**

## Why we need a joined-up approach

**With universities embedding good practice across all their access and participation efforts, supported by the right regulatory incentives, we believe great progress can be made. But all of this must be situated in a wider drive to tackle inequality throughout the education system, beginning right from the early years.**

The OfS has set stretching long-term targets to eliminate gaps in access to selective universities (those termed “higher tariff”) completely over the next two decades, but our analysis shows these targets won’t be met without sustained efforts to address the social, cultural and financial barriers which disadvantaged people face – not all of which universities are equipped to fix.

For example, the OfS has set a target to eliminate the gap in access to higher tariff universities between students from the most under-represented areas and those from the most highly represented areas (POLAR Quintiles 1 and 5, respectively) by 2039/40. Based on our modelling, this target can only be met if:

- The number of Quintile 5 students (those from the most highly represented areas) entering higher tariff universities remains effectively frozen, increasing only at 0.7% per annum (the average growth rate in the 18-year-old population) rather than taking account of growing demand, and,
- The number of Quintile 1 students (those from the most under-represented areas) entering higher tariff universities increases by 10% year-on-year, from around 7,170 students in 2019 to 53,100 in 2040 (an overall proportional increase of 640%).

While the recently published five-year access and participation plans agreed by higher tariff institutions demonstrate their ambitions to grow Quintile 1 student numbers significantly over the coming years, continuing to increase numbers year-on-year over the next two decades will become more and more challenging. This is

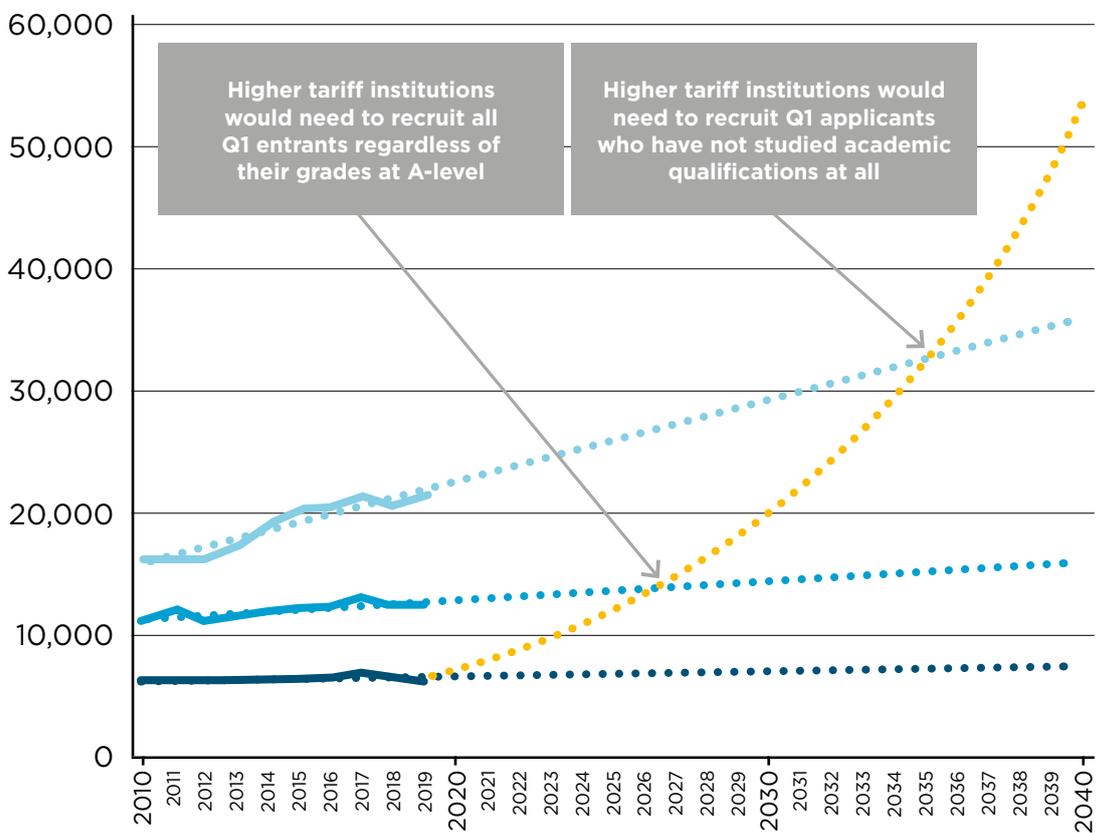
because students from POLAR Quintile 1 areas tend to have lower prior attainment at school.

In 2019 only 2,500 Quintile 1 students accepted to study at university achieved grades AAB or better, compared to 20,995 Quintile 5 students. Proportionally, only 20% of Quintile 1 students accepted to study attained grades AAB or better, whilst double that number (39%) of Quintile 5 students did so.<sup>34</sup>

If these attainment patterns continue, then higher tariff institutions will be required to do the following to meet the target set by the OfS – as set out in Graph 2 opposite:

- By 2026, higher tariff institutions would need to recruit all current Quintile 1 higher education entrants with 3 A-levels regardless of the grades they have achieved.
- By 2035, higher tariff institutions would need to recruit all Quintile 1 entrants to the whole higher education system including those currently going to medium and lower tariff institutions, regardless of whether they have studied academic qualifications or not.
- By 2036 and onwards, higher tariff institutions would need to recruit Quintile 1 applicants who do not currently get placed at all in the higher education system.

**Graph 2: Required growth in under-represented student numbers (Q1) at English higher tariff universities if highly represented student numbers (Q5) were capped**



- Placed Q1 applicants
- Placed Q1 applicants holding 3 A-levels
- Placed Q1 applicants with BBC or better
- 10% year-on-year growth in Q1 student numbers required to meet target

Source: UCAS end of cycle and equalities data (for 18-year olds who applied before the June deadline and are UK domiciled - excluding Scotland), ONS population predictions, and OfS data.<sup>35</sup>

In order to eliminate gaps in access to university, work needs to start much earlier in the education lifecycle to address the underlying causes of lower attainment and expectations which present barriers to students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds. What universities can do is only part of the picture and a focus solely on university admissions will not address the current embedded inequalities within the UK.

Research on enhancing life chances for disadvantaged children shows a holistic approach is needed, involving sustained, multi-sectoral investment and joined-up working to support families from early years onwards.<sup>36</sup> Achieving truly transformational change will therefore require a joined-up approach with partnership working between universities and a range of other stakeholders including schools, colleges, local authorities, charities, employers and relevant public services. Such an approach could help ensure that all actors have a better understanding of the causes of under-representation and gaps in participation and student success, and how, when and by whom these can be most effectively addressed during the student journey starting from the early years onwards.

A national strategy is needed to achieve this. But it will require a step-change in government policy with new structures,

funding and policies to enable and encourage partnerships across agencies, government departments and all relevant stakeholders.

There is currently no overarching national strategy to tackle inequality across the educational lifecycle and beyond. The Department for Education has two separate strategies for careers and social mobility, but it is unclear how this links up to work being done in other government departments. Meanwhile the OfS has its own strategy with ambitious targets for universities as outlined earlier in this chapter.

Any strategy which aims to transform people's life chances needs to be cross-governmental rather than being owned solely by the Department for Education or individual agencies. Government should use its unrivalled convening power to bring together the many players who hold the key to future success and to provide investment and support reform where this is needed. Rather than setting targets which apply only to universities, a joined-up approach should be backed by targets which apply to all these stakeholders and, ultimately, to the Government itself. Without an overarching strategy, there is a risk that government departments, agencies and stakeholders will be operating in silos with limited impact.

## Some examples of how a joined-up approach would better support key groups of students

**Young people with care experience are nearly four times less likely to participate in higher education than average.** Once on campus, a high proportion of care leavers do not complete their courses.<sup>38</sup> While Chapter 2 set out some of the ways universities are supporting care leavers, more work is needed to transform their educational outcomes.

Children in care often suffer from periods of disruption during their education and only around 19% of children with care experience achieve a 5+ at GCSE level in English and maths.<sup>39</sup> For those who gain GCSEs, continuing their education to A-levels and then applying to university can be particularly difficult as it often coincides with leaving care and living independently for the first time at the age of 18.<sup>40</sup> Many care leavers face the prospect of severe financial challenges, and even homelessness. Moving to a new city or town to start a degree can seem an impossible task. While universities have a clear role to play in reaching out to care leavers and supporting them to access higher education, it is clear that efforts are needed across all agencies to improve their educational outcomes.

This kind of joined-up working across the educational pathway of young people in care requires buy-in from schools and local authorities. Action is needed from Government to make necessary reforms to social care and local authority systems to ensure the joining up of services. Such an approach would make important steps towards improving outcomes for children in care and address the very significant barriers that these young people face.

The same principle can be applied for **students with a disability**. As well as supporting individual adjustments for students with a disability, universities are working to improve accessibility, increase the use of, and access, to assistive technologies, and to make teaching and learning more inclusive for all students.<sup>41</sup> However, while the proportion of university entrants with a disability has been increasing over time, people

with a disability remain under-represented and there are variations in the degree and employment outcomes of students with a disability compared with others.

As universities work to create a more inclusive model of education and to support the growing number of students reporting disabilities and mental health problems, they face an uphill battle to redress the inequalities faced by pupils with a disability at school.

**Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can face significantly greater challenges in learning at school compared to the majority of their peers.** Many have disabilities which hinder their access to the teaching and facilities typically found in mainstream educational settings. The Education Endowment Foundation found there is a very large attainment gap between pupils in England with SEND and their peers: while 62% of non-SEND pupils reached the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics in 2016, only 14% of SEND pupils did. Reductions in SEND funding resulting in lower per pupil financial support are likely to exacerbate these issues.<sup>42</sup>

Changes to the Disabled Students Allowance in England in 2016 have also introduced barriers for students with a disability to access the support they need on campus. Charities believe new regulation including conditions, registration and compulsory fees for freelance support workers used by students with a disability has led to a shortage of people working in these professions. A recent survey by the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) found D/deaf students<sup>43</sup> were being impacted by difficulties with shortfalls in the provision of specialist or electronic notetakers, British Sign Language interpreters and language support tutors.<sup>44</sup> The NDCS has urged the Government to subsidise training to attract new support workers as well as reforming the process for registration to make it easier for freelancing sole traders.



Student organisations such as NUS also have significant concerns about the imposition of a £200 contribution towards IT equipment costs and its impact on poorer students with a disability. While some universities are covering this as part of their access or hardship funds, NUS is also concerned that universities who do well in recruiting disabled students are, in effect, penalised for doing so if costs are not covered from a central source, and that this may hamper efforts to increase access at a time of wider funding constraints.

As with care leavers, it is clear that transforming the life chances of people with a disability will require efforts by a range of actors, not just universities. There is a key role for Government in particular, in reforming SEND funding at school and amending regulations around the Disabled Students Allowance to remove barriers to disabled student access. We therefore welcome the Government's intention to publish a National Strategy for Disabled People this year and to address cuts which have previously been made to SEND funding.

## How would a joined-up approach work?

Comprehensive and long-term interventions to tackle entrenched social problems are far from easy, but evidence from other sectors and from overseas shows they are possible.

The ten-year Teenage Pregnancy Strategy resulted in the under-18 conception rate falling by half as a result of “joined-up action” at the national and local level, for example.<sup>45</sup> This was achieved through a combination of:

- A whole-government approach to administration with a cross-departmental ministerial task force spanning the departments of health, education, and employment.
- An implementation unit in central government with access to accurate and streamlined datasets to monitor success.
- Empowering local stakeholders – local authorities, schools, social care, youth services and the NHS – to work together to meet individual targets for local areas.

An independent evaluation of the strategy confirmed its impact, with the greatest effect in areas of high deprivation that received larger levels of investment. One of the key factors in the success of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy was patience. Despite slow progress at the beginning, its evidence-based approach convinced policymakers that change in complex social phenomena takes time and encouraged them not to withdraw support on the basis of early results.<sup>46</sup>

While high rates of teenage pregnancy are a materially different problem from educational inequality and its impact on life chances, it is possible to apply the lessons learned from the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy more broadly. The success of the strategy was achieved through efforts and investment from multiple partners over a sustained period, and, crucially, with consistent political buy-in.

Experiments overseas have also shown how complex social problems can be tackled effectively. The widely praised Children’s Zone in Harlem, New York, has taken a holistic approach to addressing a wide range of issues faced by children and families including housing problems, failing schools, gun crime, drug use and health issues.<sup>47</sup>

By targeting parents and children from early years and providing support through to college admission, schools, communities, health and social services stakeholders have improved life chances for young people growing up in Harlem. The Children’s Zone reported a 96% college acceptance rate for participating young people in 2016.<sup>48</sup> Evaluation of the initiative has shown the importance of joined-up support across education and community: children attending academies supported by the Children’s Zone performed significantly better in maths than those benefiting only from community interventions.<sup>49</sup>

Successive governments in England have introduced initiatives to bring universities, colleges and schools together to tackle the barriers to diversifying the student population in higher education. Partnerships for Progression and Excellence Challenge initiatives became Aimhigher in 2004, with the latter programme scrapped in 2010. National Networks for Collaborative Outreach were introduced by the Coalition Government in 2014 and operated until 2016. Now we have the Uni Connect programme, funded up until 2021, running alongside the Opportunity Areas programme.

An important feature of these schemes is the way they have leveraged strong regional partnerships. Region-specific approaches are key in addressing what the Social Mobility Commission terms “a stark social mobility postcode lottery...where the chances of being successful if you come from a disadvantaged background are linked to where you live”.<sup>50</sup> The focus on coordinated regional interventions in national policy has therefore been welcome.

However, it is difficult to assess the cumulative impact of these initiatives as some have lacked clear objectives and others have not been running long enough to demonstrate impact. The high degree of policy churn and a lack of join up between different initiatives could be constraining our ability to accelerate progress. Establishing the partnerships needed for each new initiative, with appropriate staff, expertise, processes and structures, takes time. Every change in policy leads to wastage with potential loss of expertise and connections as staff move on.<sup>51</sup> Constant churn risks meaning that the activities these partnerships are undertaking could be too short-lived to produce tangible results.

Lessons can also be learned from elsewhere in the UK. In Scotland, the First Minister has set out an ambition to eradicate gaps in access to university between people from deprived communities and their more affluent peers. The Commission for Widening Access has been tasked with coordinating efforts to achieve this and has emphasised the need for system-wide effort spanning the whole education system and beyond into wider social policy.<sup>52</sup> Universities in Scotland have made great strides so far: the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, for example, met their targets for 2021 three years early to increase their intake from the 20% most deprived areas in the country.<sup>53</sup> Continuing this progress into the future at a sector-level will depend on the ability to deliver system-wide change, otherwise universities will increasingly be competing with each other for a narrow pool of applicants from the 20% most deprived areas who meet threshold requirements to study.

Collaborative approaches have also been employed in Wales, through the Seren (Welsh for 'star') Network, bringing together state schools in Wales, universities across the UK, the Welsh Government and third sector organisations through 11 regional hubs. While the initiative has made a positive contribution to boosting confidence and encouraging students to think more ambitiously about their university choices, it is still in the early stages and judgements cannot yet be made about its long-term success.<sup>54</sup>

## Three key lessons for a joined-up approach

In considering the examples discussed above, three key lessons emerge which can be applied to any future attempts to take a joined-up approach to complex social problems including addressing educational inequality:

- Initiatives must be sustained over a period of years to deliver meaningful results. This will require a good deal of political buy-in to avoid budgets being cut when put under pressure during spending review rounds, and, ideally, cross-party support to sustain the same approach across successive parliaments – although this may be difficult to achieve.
- Enabling stakeholders to collaborate in their regions and developing region-specific strategies and programmes of work is critical to ensuring partnerships work and to maximise the use of expertise and knowledge within key players including universities, schools, colleges, local authorities, employers and others.
- A national strategy will require clear objectives at the national and regional/local level with access to appropriate data so these can be monitored and evaluated – but objectives must be informed by a robust and independent evidence base.

## Implementing a successful joined-up approach

In summary, a coherent national strategy is needed to address educational inequality, and in so doing, transform the life chances of people from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds. This represents a chance for the new Government to build on its ambition to address the challenges faced by people and places which have been left behind and ensure everyone has an equal opportunity to access the benefits of higher education.

We believe the following principles are required to underpin such an approach:

1. Central co-ordination through a national strategy covering the next ten years, with clear objectives informed by a robust evidence base which can be monitored, evaluated and adapted for different contexts.
2. Sustained political support over the long-term to ensure programmes can run long enough to deliver impact.
3. Cross-departmental accountability to address the causes of educational inequality including departmental agencies responsible for health and social care, work, business and education with support through funding and regulatory reform where necessary.
4. A framework to enable and support stakeholders (including universities, local authorities, schools, colleges, charities, employers, social care and health services, etc.) to collaborate in their regions, empowered to develop region-specific strategies and targets.
5. Alongside the targets which already apply to universities and schools, national targets should be introduced which apply to other relevant stakeholders including the Government itself.



## Chapter 4: Why do we need a joined-up approach?

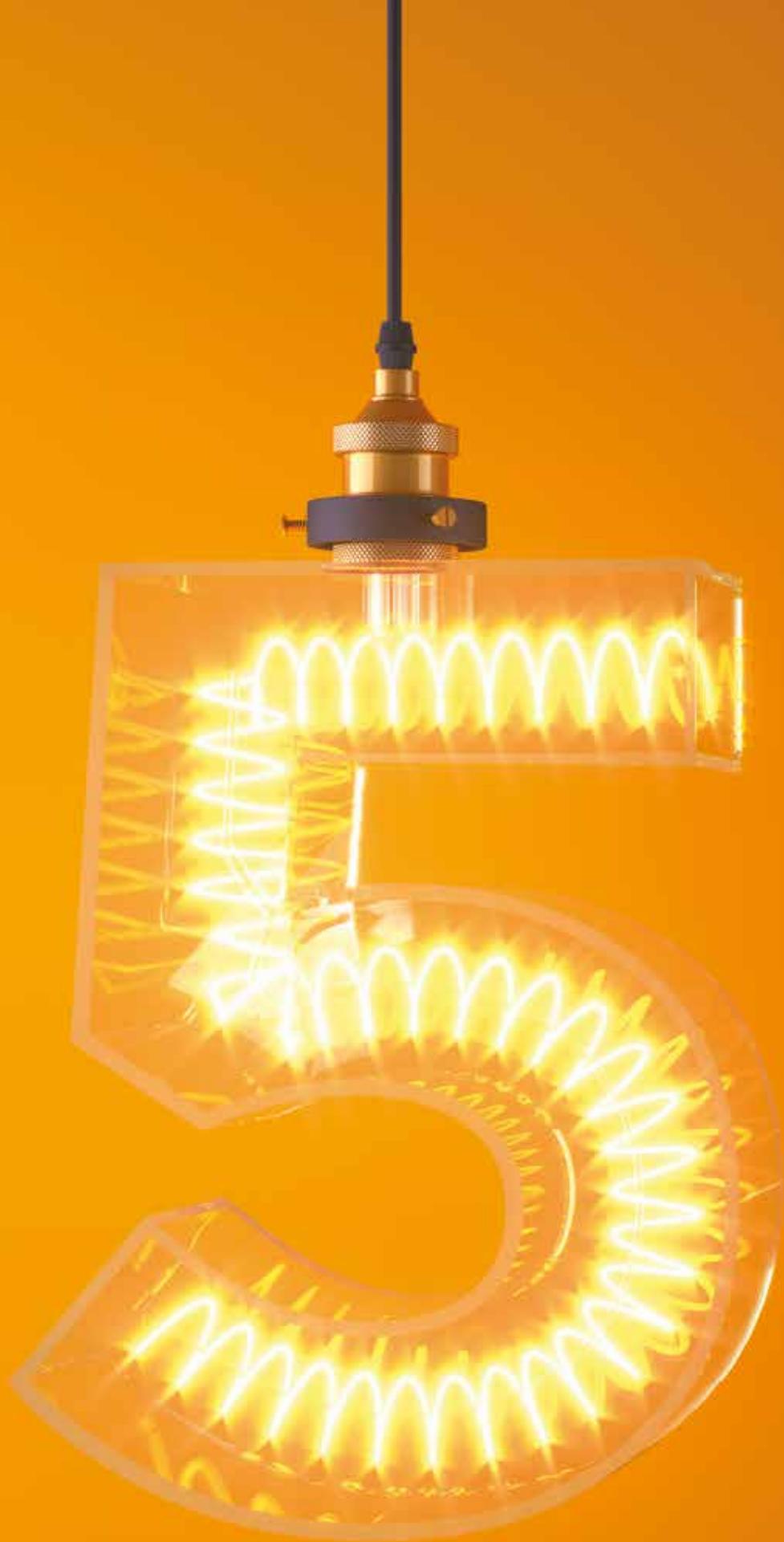
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To make this a reality, new structures will be needed to ensure buy-in and coordination across government departments and all relevant stakeholders, to set objectives and improve the evidence base and the data available, and to monitor and evaluate the work being done. Rather than creating additional bureaucracy, this approach should draw on the learnings and relationships created as a result of all past and present initiatives.

**To achieve this, we propose that the Government should create a new Office for Tackling Inequality with the aim of ensuring buy-in, engagement and coordination across departments.** This could be modelled along the lines of the Government Office for Science which advises the Prime Minister and members of the Cabinet to ensure that government policies and decisions are informed by the best scientific evidence and strategic long-term thinking. A new Government Office for Tackling Inequality could ensure all government policy is underpinned by a commitment to tackle inequality in British society and draws on the best available evidence about how to achieve this aim. Implementing such an approach would not only improve the life chances of disadvantaged people and the prosperity of communities, it could provide lasting benefits to the country as a whole.







# **Chapter 5: Recommendations and commitments**

## Commitments from Russell Group universities

Through this report, Russell Group universities have committed to:

1. Embedding evaluation across the full range of all their access and participation activities, as proportionate and appropriate to each individual activity.
2. Building on their collaborative work, with each other and other institutions, to share information and reach more people and teachers in areas with lower levels of higher education provision or where fewer students progress to higher education.
3. Ensuring ownership of, and accountability for, efforts to widen access and support student success sits with Presidents, Vice-Chancellors and their senior teams.
4. Providing transparent information on admissions policies to all applicants by ensuring this information features prominently on institutional websites and embedding it across outreach activities.
5. Building on their work with prospective and current students from under-represented backgrounds as well as their teachers, advisers and/or parents to help develop effective access and participation initiatives.

## Recommendations for the OfS

In order to support universities to continue making progress, the OfS should:

1. Ensure universities can set targets using indicators which are appropriate to their location, student demography and institutional mission, so that they can identify and target the most under-represented and disadvantaged students. Institutions should not be put under undue pressure to use POLAR as an indicator.
2. Work with universities, relevant government departments, UCAS and the Higher Education Statistics Agency, to unify, and make available, pupil-level datasets used to indicate disadvantage and enable more precise educational tracking of students. Data on free school meals eligibility should be provided urgently.
3. Go much further in encouraging collaboration between universities by recognising and rewarding institutional contributions to widening participation sector-wide. This could include agreeing more regional approaches and targets with groups of institutions to complement ongoing work through Uni Connect.
4. Ensure the desire to see immediate outcomes does not discourage universities from early and long-term interventions to address the root-causes of under-representation.
5. Continue to build expertise in evaluation and identifying and addressing gaps in the evidence base including through the development of the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO).

In addition to the OfS, regulators in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland should engage with their universities to consider how to apply these recommendations in their own contexts.

## Recommendations for Government

In order to address the wider social, cultural and financial barriers faced by under-represented and disadvantaged students in accessing and succeeding in higher education, the Government should:

1. Commit to a new national strategy to tackle inequality across the educational lifecycle and beyond. This should be based on the following principles:
  - Central co-ordination through a national strategy (lasting ten years) with clear objectives informed by a robust evidence base which can be monitored, evaluated and adapted for different contexts.
  - Sustained political support over the long-term to ensure programmes can run long enough to deliver impact.
  - Cross-departmental accountability to address the causes of educational inequality including departmental agencies responsible for health and social care, work, business and education with support through funding and regulatory reform where necessary.
  - A framework to enable and support stakeholders (including universities, local authorities, schools, colleges, charities, employers, social care and health services, etc.) to collaborate in their regions, empowered to develop region-specific strategies and targets.
  - Alongside the targets which already apply to universities and schools, national targets should be introduced which apply to other relevant stakeholders including the Government itself.
2. Create a new Government Office for Tackling Inequality to achieve buy-in, engagement and coordination across departments.
3. Consider how the National Pupil Database (or other regional data systems) could be made more accessible and user-friendly for universities to access directly, or through trusted third parties, so that they can identify, target and track prospective applicants from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds. The creation of a new household income dataset would enable universities to ensure they are reaching the most disadvantaged students beyond those eligible for free school meals.

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Access and participation plans** – These plans set out how higher education providers in England will improve equality of opportunity for disadvantaged and under-represented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education. The plans look forward over five years and are regularly monitored by the OfS.

**Attainment** – Grades achieved at school and university.

**Care experienced** – Anyone who has experienced the care system at any point in their lives.

**Care leaver** – A young person who has been in the care of, or has been given accommodation by, their local authority (LA) for a period of at least 13 weeks before the age of 16.

**Cold spots** – Areas with lower levels of higher education provision or where fewer students progress to higher education.

**Contextual admissions** – Admissions processes which take into context the social and/or educational background of the applicant.

**Continuation** – Refers to students staying in higher education after their first year of study.

**D/deaf** – This term is used to differentiate between deaf (which refers to individuals who have a hearing loss) and Deaf (which refers to deaf individuals who use sign language and identify as being part of a cultural and linguistic minority group, the Deaf community).

**Disadvantaged** – Applicants, students and graduates who have experienced barriers to accessing higher education. These can include different circumstances, such as family income, geographical location, or different characteristics and identities such as ethnic background or whether the individual is care experienced.

**Foundation year** – An alternative route into higher education through an additional year of study prior to starting a degree course which supports students to achieve the academic requirements needed.

**Free school meals (FSM) data** – This dataset identifies children who are entitled to receive free school meals because their parent(s) or guardian(s) fall into a certain income bracket. There is a marked difference in the number of students who are eligible for this benefit and those who actually receive free school meals. This report refers to students who are eligible to receive FSM.

**Mature students** – Students entering higher education over the age of 21.

**MOOC** – Abbreviation of Massive Open Online Course, a free resource accessed online to support distance learning.

**National Pupil Database** – An English database, overseen by the Department for Education, which contains information about pupils aged 2-21 based on multiple data collections.

**Office for Students (OfS)** – The English regulator for higher education providers.

**POLAR** – This dataset measures the participation of students in higher education by local area. These areas are classified into five groups or quintiles, ranging from Quintile 1 (the least represented) to Quintile 5 (most represented) in higher education. POLAR is an area-based measure rather than a measure of individual disadvantage.

**Progression** – refers to what happens to students once they graduate (i.e. if they continue into further study or skilled employment).

**SEND** – Abbreviation of Special Educational Needs and Disability. This refers to people who have a learning difficulty and/or a disability that means they need special health and education support.

**Success** – This generally refers to students continuing and completing their degree, attaining well and progressing into further study or highly skilled graduate employment. However, individual students and universities will have their own measures of success (as this is a highly complex concept to define).

**Tariff** – Higher education providers in England are divided into three tariff groups: 'higher', 'medium' and 'lower'. Providers are sorted into these groups based on the average UCAS points that are required to take a course at their institutions. However, some providers do not use the UCAS Tariff system in setting their entry requirements.

**Under-represented** – Refers to students with identities or characteristics which are not well-represented in the higher education system or in parts of the system, such as within selective universities.

**Widening participation** – Refers to efforts to increase the rate of access to higher education for those who are currently not well represented in the sector.

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- <sup>2</sup> UCAS End of cycle report (2020)
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- <sup>7</sup> One of the NHS design principles is to ‘Put people at the heart of everything you do’. More information is available here: <https://beta.nhs.uk/service-manual/design-principles>
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- <sup>16</sup> UUK/NUS, BAME Student Attainment at UK Universities: #Closingthegap (2019)
- <sup>17</sup> Other Russell Group universities have researched the impact of their bursary schemes, including Queen Mary University of London and The University of Oxford. This research has been used to inform the provision they offer to their students.
- <sup>18</sup> A recent paper from the Higher Education Policy Institute found 69% of students from the least educationally advantaged areas agreed that growing up in a disadvantaged area makes it harder to achieve good A-Levels.
- <sup>19</sup> Boliver, Gorard, Siddiqi, Using contextualised admissions to widen access to higher education: a guide to the evidence base (2019)
- <sup>20</sup> The access and participation plans apply to students starting in academic year(s) 2020/21 to 2024/25 and are available here: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/the-register/search-for-access-and-participation-plans/#/AccessPlans/>
- <sup>21</sup> For example, the University of Birmingham reported in their latest access and participation plan that students with a reported disability are more likely than the average English student to achieve good honours, and the gap in continuation between students with and without a disability is 1.3% and not statistically significant.
- <sup>22</sup> Uni Connect, formerly known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) brings together 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners to deliver outreach programmes to young people in years 9 to 13. During 2017/18 over 120,000 young people took part in higher education outreach programmes through the initiative.
- <sup>23</sup> UCAS publish data relating to application, offer rates and acceptances, and show differences by country, region, equalities data, and tariff, as well as institutional level data. Universities also publish information on their admissions. For example, the University of Oxford publishes an Annual Admissions Statistical Report which breaks down admissions data by characteristic and nation/region.
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- <sup>35</sup> Our modelling is based on a number of assumptions including that: participation at higher tariff universities will be driven largely by the recruitment of 18-year-olds; Q1 and Q5 distribution of 18-year-olds will remain at around 18% and 23% respectively (based on the OfS data); growth in Q5 recruitment at higher tariff universities remains at around 0.7% (the average growth rate in the 18-year-old population) - effectively frozen; and higher tariff universities are able to grow Q1 new entrants by 10% per year (e.g. 700 more Q1s in 2020).
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- <sup>37</sup> DfE, Careers strategy: making the most of everyone's skills and talents (2017); DfE, Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: A plan for improving social mobility through education (2017)
- <sup>38</sup> Harrison, Moving on up: Pathways of care leavers and care-experienced students into and through higher education' research for the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (2017)
- <sup>39</sup> GCSE: Children in Care: Parliamentary written question - 230718 (2019)
- <sup>40</sup> To note, some care leavers are able to take advantage of 'Staying Put' arrangements to remain with their former foster carers after the age of 18 but this only applies where the funding and Local Authority policies are in place and where young people are not in residential care.
- <sup>41</sup> Williams, Pollard, Langley, Houghton, Zozimo, Models of support for students with disabilities: Report to HEFCE (2017)
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- <sup>50</sup> Social Mobility Commission, State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain (2017)
- <sup>51</sup> For example, whilst the Opportunity Areas programme was first announced in October 2016, the first year of its operation was spent setting up partnership boards and only by spring 2018 had Opportunity Areas started to deliver against some of their priorities. Similarly, the length of time it takes to recruit and establish a new team was reported to have a major impact on the ability of some National Collaborative Outreach Programme consortia to deliver a coordinated package of activity quickly.
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- <sup>53</sup> In 2018, the University of Edinburgh's intake of Scottish-domiciled students from SIMD20 areas - the 20% most deprived areas in the country - totalled 11%. The institution-level target set by the Commission on Widening Access is to ensure at least 10% of intake at every institution come from SIMD20 areas by 2021. The University of Glasgow is cited by the Commission on Widening Access as "the most successful 'ancient' university in terms of SIMD20 recruitment", having comfortably exceeded its 2021 target.
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# ABOUT THE RUSSELL GROUP

The Russell Group represents 24 leading universities based across every region and nation of the UK. We are helping to create a dynamic economy, stronger communities, and a more positive future for our country. Our universities are continually working to make our world class education more accessible to students of all backgrounds, opening up opportunities and unlocking potential.

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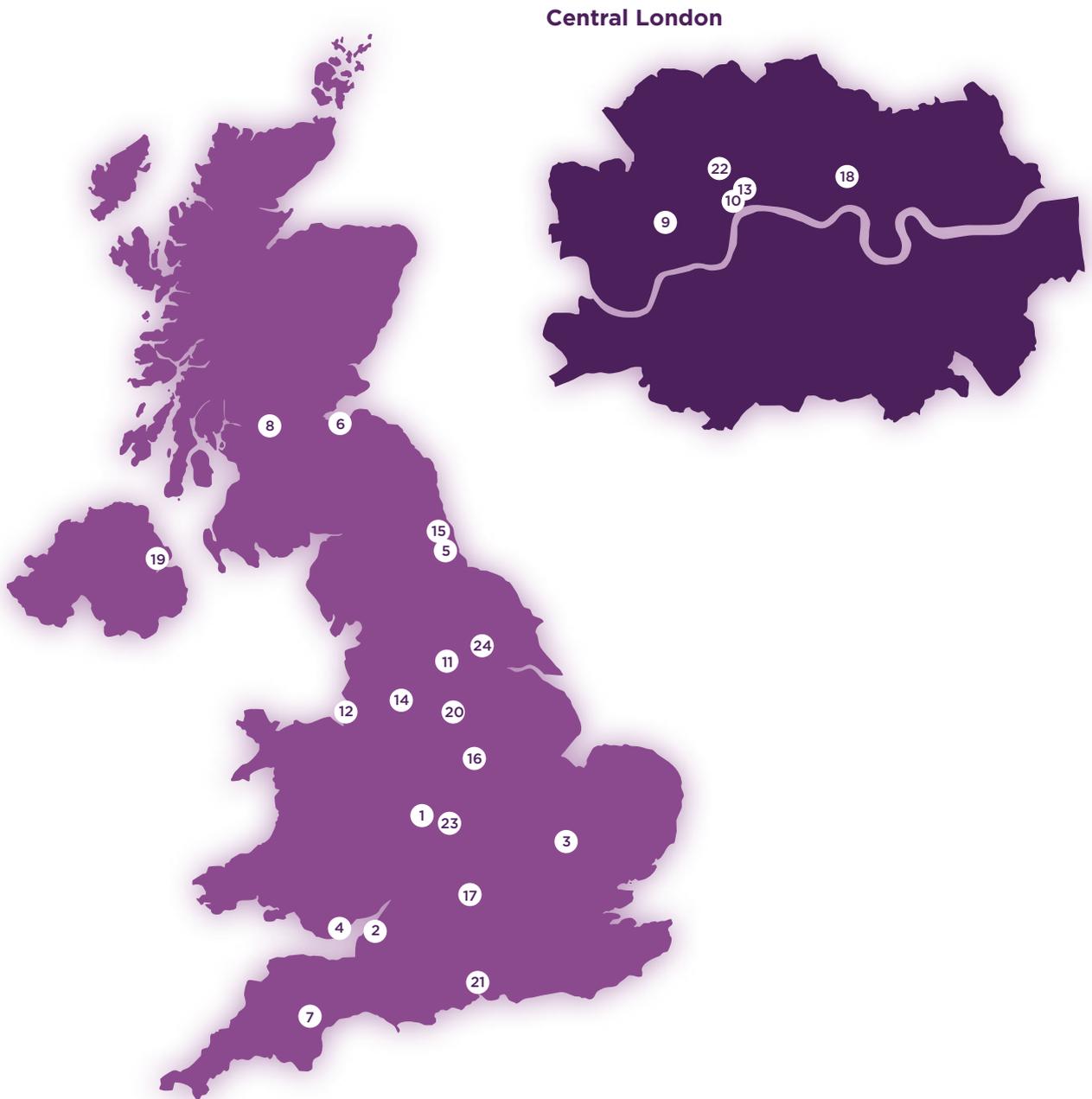
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