

The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

22 February 2022

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

Table of Contents

Agenda	3
Speaker biographies.....	3
Professor Colin Bailey, President and Principal, Queen Mary University of London	3
James Turner, Chief Executive, Sutton Trust	3
Susie Whigham, Interim Chief Executive, The Brilliant Club.....	4
John Blake, Director of Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students	4
Data on disadvantaged students entering higher education	5
POLAR4	5
Free school meals (FSM).....	5
Access and participation plans	5
John Blake's first speech as Director for Fair Access and Participation	5
Secretary of State for Education letter to Office for Students	6
Working in partnership with schools.....	6
Growing enrolment onto courses that are linked to skills and flexible learning	6
Addressing low completion rates and low rates of entry to high-skilled employment	6
Universities UK's approach to access and participation.....	7
Post-pandemic recovery	7
Case Studies	7

Agenda

5:30pm	Rt Hon Chris Skidmore MP, Co-Chair, APPUG
c5:35pm	Professor Colin Bailey, President and Principal, Queen Mary University of London
c5:45pm	James Turner, Chief Executive, The Sutton Trust
c5:55pm	Susie Whigham, Interim Chief Executive, The Brilliant Club
c6:05pm	John Blake, Director of Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students
c6:15pm	Questions, comments, and discussion with university leaders, MPs and peers
7:00pm	Meeting concludes.

Speaker biographies

Professor Colin Bailey, President and Principal, Queen Mary University of London



Professor Colin Bailey began his career as an apprentice draughtsman after leaving school at 16. He worked for construction and consultant companies Lovell Construction, Cameron Taylor Partners and Clarke Nicholls and Marcel. As an apprentice he gained, through day release and night school, an Ordinary National Certificate (ONC) and Higher National Certificate (HNC-BTEC) from Slough and Richmond College respectively.

He was then accepted, through their widening participation programme, to study for a degree in Civil and Structural Engineering at Sheffield University, where he finished first in his year and offered a scholarship to study for a PhD.

He joined the University of Manchester in 2002 as Professor of Structural Engineering, and became Head of the School in 2007. He was then appointed Vice-President of the Faculty of Science and Engineering, before becoming Deputy President and Deputy Vice-Chancellor in 2014.

He is a Chartered Structural, Civil and Fire Engineer and is a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering. He joined Queen Mary as President and Principal in September 2017. Colin was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for services to Engineering in the 2020 New Year Honours.

James Turner, Chief Executive, Sutton Trust



James is the Chief Executive of the Sutton Trust and has been in post since February 2019.

Prior to that, James was Deputy CEO of the Education Endowment Foundation, the What Works Centre for Education in England, overseeing a period of considerable growth. James led the successful bid for the £135m Education Endowment Foundation back in 2011, and undertook the role of interim CEO, setting up the new charity's infrastructure and grant-making processes.

James has developed a number of partnerships with UK foundations, universities and corporate partners, leveraging hundreds of thousands of pounds, and developing a range of new educational access programmes reaching thousands of young people each year.

James is also a trustee of the Centre for Homelessness Impact and a governor of a comprehensive school in the East Midlands, where he lives.

Susie Whigham, Interim Chief Executive, The Brilliant Club

As Chief Programmes and Communities Officer at The Brilliant Club, Susie leads the development and implementation of the charity's programmes which support under-represented students to progress to highly-selective universities and develop the key academic skills to succeed when they get there. Susie has been committed to tackling educational disadvantage throughout her career.

As part of Teach First, Susie taught English in a London secondary school and set up a charity to support pupils to run fundraising campaigns. She subsequently worked as a Literacy Consultant for the DfE's National Strategies programme.

As Executive Director of Services at School-Home Support, Susie oversaw a range of programmes tackling the barriers to learning within the home, including the Troubled Families initiative. Susie is currently interim CEO at The Brilliant Club while Anne-Marie is on maternity leave.



John Blake, Director of Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students

John is the Director for Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students, the regulator for higher education in England. His role is to ensure universities and colleges are doing all they can to support learners from all backgrounds, especially the most disadvantaged, to access and succeed in higher education. John is an executive member of the Office for Students board.

Prior to joining the Office for Students, John led on policy and political issues related to schools, education, and wider social impact for Ark, an education charity that works to make sure that all children, regardless of background, have access to a great education and real choices in life.

John worked for the centre-right think tank Policy Exchange from 2017 to 2018, where he was head of education and social reform. Blake was also a founding governor of the Oak National Academy, which produced online learning resources during the pandemic.

He started his career as a history and politics teacher after completing an undergraduate degree at the University of Oxford. More recently, Blake has acted as an advisor to the Department for Education (DfE) on initial teacher training (ITT) and a volunteer [panellist on the controversial ITT market review](#).



Data on disadvantaged students entering higher education

One of the most common ways of measuring disadvantage, used by the Office for Students, is the 'POLAR4' system which classifies local areas across the UK according to the young participation rate in higher education. Those from the lowest participation neighbourhoods are deemed to be the most disadvantaged. They break these into quintiles (i.e. the most disadvantaged 20% are called Q1, through to the most advantaged called Q5).

POLAR4

- In 2021 record numbers of the most disadvantaged (Q1) were accepted onto a university course– a total of 64,175. However there were also higher numbers of the most advantaged (Q5) accepted- 142,615.
- Looking at the proportion of all 18-year-olds in each quintile who get a place at university, there were record entry rates for every quintile – 24% of UK 18-year-olds from Q1 were accepted, and 53% of 18 year olds from Q5 were accepted. If you chose a random 18-year-old from a high participation neighbourhood, and one from a lower neighbourhood, the most advantaged would be 2.2 times more likely to be going to university.
- Although more disadvantaged students entering higher education, the gaps between Q1 and Q5 are persistent.
- The same holds true for Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) which is another way of measuring disadvantage.

Free school meals (FSM)

- In 2021, 20.9% of students who received free school meals were accepted to university, compared to 39.5% of those not on FSM.
- The proportion of students on free school meals who get accepted onto a course at university, has been steadily climbing (in 2016 it was 16.6%, in 2012 it was 13%) but so have those not receiving free school meal. Therefore the gaps in entry are persistent.

Access and participation plans

[Access and participation plans](#) set out how higher education providers will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education.

They include:

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

The Office for Students monitors access and participation plans to make sure that the providers honour the commitments they make to students in these plans, and take action if they do not. If providers want to charge higher level tuition fees (up to the maximum of £9,250 per year), their plans must be approved by the Director for Fair Access and Participation.

John Blake's first speech as Director for Fair Access and Participation

On Tuesday 8 February, John Blake gave his [first speech](#) in his new role as Director for Fair Access and Participation (DFAP) and set out regulatory requirements for 2022. John took over from Chris Millward who had held the role of DFAP since the Office for Students was created in 2018.

John Blake explained the issues that had emerged and the evolving challenges since the access and participation plan regulation was set up. This included evidence showing the need to improve attainment much earlier in life, the increased focus on quality at the Office for Students, and the impact of the pandemic that had highlighted and exacerbated existing problems in education.

He outlined three key aspirations for his time in the role:

- greater alignment in the Office for Students' approaches to access and standards
- a greater focus on evaluation
- more impactful school-university engagement to raise attainment.

He went on to highlight the importance of removing the burden associated with access and participation plans (APPs), resulting in the Office for Students taking a risk-based approach to 2020/21 APP monitoring with providers only required to submit a short impact report. Rather than scrap and replace existing APPs, the Office for Students will strongly encourage providers to submit variations to current plans for 2023 to work towards the new aspirations.

Looking longer-term, later this year Office for Students will be consulting on bringing the APP cycle forward by one year, to begin from 2024 for four years (to align with the DFAP term).

Secretary of State for Education letter to Office for Students

On 23 November, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP, and Universities Minister, Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP, sent a [letter](#) to the Office for Students Chief Executive, Nicola Dandridge CBE, and the Chair, James Wharton, on priorities and the new direction of travel for access and participation.

The letter stated that the Director for Access and Participation will be required to set new, national targets for the Office for Students and universities are required to 'renegotiate' Access and participation plans to meet new priorities, to be in place by September 2023:

Acknowledging the progress that had been made, the Secretary of State highlighted particular access, attainment and participation gaps that still exist, including the fact white British boys eligible for free school meals are the least likely group to enter higher education, and the persistent degree awarding gaps between ethnic groups.

Working in partnership with schools

The Secretary of State encouraged the Office for Students, in the renegotiated plans, to require providers to promote equality of opportunity before entry to higher education, and support schools to drive up academic standards. This includes working with schools to encourage and support those from disadvantaged backgrounds, including a greater focus on activities including summer schools, programmes of intervention in schools and targeted bursaries to assist with living costs.

Growing enrolment onto courses that are linked to skills and flexible learning

The Office for Students is to strongly encourage providers to grow enrolment onto courses that are linked to skills and flexible learning such as higher and degree apprenticeships, Level 4 and 5 courses, including Higher Technical Qualifications, and utilising greater flexibility of access such as part time courses.

Addressing low completion rates and low rates of entry to high-skilled employment

The Secretary of State expressed concerns that too many students are currently recruited to low quality courses with low completion rates and poor graduate outcomes. As set out in guidance earlier this year, the expectation is that the Office for Students will ensure that an enhanced regulatory regime is in place, supported by effective and meaningful enforcement action. They welcomed the Office for Students' new focus on outcomes for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups.

It outlined that the Office for Students should expect providers with low completion rates and low rates of entry to high-skilled employment to set clear, measurable targets to improve outcomes and hold them to account for meeting those targets.

Universities UK's approach to access and participation

To mark the appointment of the new Director of Fair Access and Participation, Universities UK published a briefing '[Delivering a fresh approach to access and participation](#)'

Universities UK believe that:

Taking a longer-term, strategic approach is key to delivering on priorities

- The five-year focus of APPs has led to a more strategic approach to social mobility in universities. It has helped unlock longer-term commitments to addressing structural barriers to opportunity and student success, ensuring that access and participation priorities are not going to shift when work has only just got underway.

The APP process could be improved in several ways

- For example, the process could be improved by reducing bureaucracy (particularly around annual impact reporting) and making the process more student-focused and place-focused, with targets that are most appropriate to a university's local challenges.

A fresh approach should be shaped by lessons learned during the first round of APPs

- Although it will take some time for current APPs to show results, positive developments in recent years should be incorporated. This includes the shift towards judging success based on outcomes rather than inputs or activities, and the increased investment in evaluation.

Post-pandemic recovery

Universities' commitment to driving equality of opportunity has only increased as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This will be achieved through:

- Extending universities' support for the state school sector to accelerate education recovery
- Putting 'place' at the heart of a future approach
- Giving more weight to further promoting student success
- Stepping up efforts to identify what works

Case Studies

A collection of case studies showing the ways universities supported the 2021 intake of students to overcome the challenges of the pandemic can be [read here](#). A few examples are copied below:

The **University of Sheffield** has developed an interactive study skills resource 'Level Up Your Skills' for all new undergraduate students to support their transition into undergraduate level study. The resource supports students to:

- o develop the skills and confidence to make a positive start on their course
- o reflect on their personal strengths, gaps and challenges
- o set skills-related goals for the academic year and work towards them
- o apply their academic skills to learning and assessment on their course

Students can access this before they arrive at university up until week 12 of their course. Students can choose to record their progress and work towards an Academic Skills Certificate for recognition of their skills development.

The **University of Cambridge** has developed a STEM Start course to support students' preparedness for higher education. It reassures students and supports confidence building by revising school materials. Before the course starts, students are also provided with GCSE and A level revision materials via the Isaac Physics platform. The online course lasts for four weeks, with nine hours of learning per week. A 16-month programme is being planned to support Year 12 widening participation students from January 2022 through to examination results in 2023. This will be a pilot for physical science and engineering students, supported by the School of Physical Sciences and delivered through Isaac Physics (Funded by the Department for Education England and The Ogden Trust).

The **University of Leicester** has been supporting new students through its HeadStart campaign since February 2021. The campaign includes a digital readiness module, live and on demand sessions with student created content such as cooking demonstrations, Netflix "watch-alongs" and quiz nights. There are also sessions for parents to help them understand how they can support their child in the run up to starting university.

Students receive weekly emails confirming the live activity taking place during that week. A supportive letter from the vice-chancellor has also been sent to provide additional reassurances to students and their parents.

The **University of Sussex** has developed new workshops with their first-year students to explore the challenges that they faced at Sussex and in local colleges early on in the transition to university and how to deal with those challenges. The Situate workshops will run for the second time in September 2021 for new students, focusing on topics including:

- health and wellbeing
- social pressure
- financial pressure
- academic pressure

The workshops will be delivered by second- and third-year student Mental Health Ambassadors and will provide time, space and peer support in looking after mental health at university, as well as supporting students in finding help and extra support should they need it.

Wrexham Glyndwr University has created a free 'Confident Learner' online course for anyone considering undergraduate study. The course is designed to increase confidence in studying for those who are starting university for the first time, those returning to study after a period away, or considering a professional or part-time course. The course is four weeks long, with five hours of learning per week and an assessment on the sixth week. There are multiple start dates up to 5 July 2021. The course will enable learners to:

- research and find information from a range of sources
- improve their presentation skills
- prepare for a higher level of study
- improve and enhance their digital skills
- build their confidence to achieve their potential