



# The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

All-Party Parliamentary University Group Meeting  
Access and Participation  
Tuesday 22 February

## Speakers

- Professor Colin Bailey, President and Principal, Queen Mary University of London
- James Turner, Chief Executive, The Sutton Trust
- Susie Whigham, Interim Chief Executive, The Brilliant Club
- John Blake, Director of Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students
- Questions, comments, and discussion with university leaders, MPs and peers

**Professor Colin Bailey** began the speaker presentations by giving attendees an overview of Queen Mary, University of London. He said the institution's founding partners had the aim of supporting the less privileged and this remained the university's passion, across its five campuses, to this day. He gave attendees some statistics about students who join Queen Mary; 91% are from state schools, 51% are the first in the family to go to university, and 25% are from families where taxable income is less than £10,000. The report produced by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Department for Education and the Sutton Trust all found Queen Mary to be number one for access and participation.

Working in partnership with Newham College and the City of London, Queen Mary was opening an Institute of Technology in September, and looking at technical qualifications at all levels. Professor Bailey said that partnership was important to this work and that he was supportive of the direction of the government in terms of partnership work with schools in cold spots around the UK.

He did, however, give his view that it was not solely the responsibility of universities to raise school attainment; they should play a role but not be held accountable. Queen Mary, University of London sponsored two multi-academy trusts, engaged with 113 schools in London engaged with 60 schools outside of London in known cold spots to support white 'working-class' boys who are under-represented in terms of higher education access, and visited over 150 schools.

Professor Bailey discussed the variety of ways his university and others are engaged with schools and pupils to raise attainment, including summer schools, a digital offer, which allowed pupils to chat to existing students about what university is like, a tutoring scheme, and CPD courses for teachers.

On contextual offers, Professor Bailey suggested that until the inequalities embedded in schools are addressed, they will continue to be an important part of the admissions process. He explained that contextual offers effectively flagged students who, for example, come from schools performing below average, had spent time in the care system, were refugees, or had participated in an access scheme. In these cases, the university would only drop the grade requirements by one or two points.

Professor Bailey felt that postcode and proxy measures were not helpful, but free school meals data and other individual indicators are needed. He told the group the POLAR metric is not an accurate measure of disadvantage, and misleading in East London. He also said that the 'bums on seats' rhetoric often seen in the media was totally incorrect and there is nothing more demoralising for vice chancellors than seeing students fail to succeed.

Finally, he spoke about the soft skills that students from the university developed across all disciplines, and the work they did with employers on inclusivity and diversity.

The next speaker, **James Turner**, said the Sutton Trust covered early years upwards and had supported over 50,000 young people into apprenticeships, higher education and employment.

James agreed that overall universities have been good for social mobility, young people from poorer homes that go to university have much better outcomes than those who do not on average. He said that it was the newer universities that had done a lot of heavy lifting when it comes to social mobility. He felt that it was a critical time for fair access, with questions over whether outcomes from higher education represent good value for money.

James then focused his remarks on two areas related to universities and social mobility. Firstly, he felt that more needs to be done to widen fair access to the most selective universities given they were still the surest route into influential and highly selective careers.

He said there are still big inequalities in who had the chance to go to university and that the biggest driver of this was attainment. To make significant further progress, James suggested there needed to be more ambitious use of contextual admissions – which was something that could be done now and was in the gift of universities - and for the attainment gap in schools to be addressed, which is a complex and long-term issue. So while it is right that universities are asked to engage with this agenda, there are limits on what is possible and how long it might take to see change.

Secondly, James said that there should be an increasing supply of degree level apprenticeships given the evidence showed employment outcomes on par with top undergraduate degrees. Universities that are running degree apprenticeships should foster a similar culture of widening participation in their recruitment and outreach, to make sure they reach those who stand to benefit most.

James relayed that there were c2,000 degree apprenticeships compared to 250,000 undergraduate course starts and that only 5 percent of degree apprenticeship starts had been taken up by under 19s.

Finally, James concluded his remarks by asking the group to make sure changes to access and participation activities were evidence based to avoid wasting energy and money, and letting down young people.

**Susie Whigham**, Interim CEO of the Brilliant Club, focused her presentation on the theme of collaboration. She felt it was important that third sector organisations, schools and parents worked together to support students to get into university and to succeed while they are there.

Susie told the group about the Brilliant Club's 'Scholars Programme' that enabled PhD researchers to deliver programmes of university-style learning based on their research to young people, bookended by a visit to universities to build confidence. Students on the Scholars Programme were twice as likely to progress to a selective university compared to peers with similar backgrounds and attainment, she confirmed. The experience provided an opportunity to gain exposure to learning beyond the curriculum and the opportunity to develop cultural capital.

Susie told the group that attainment at key stage 4 is a strong predictor of whether a student progresses to university and that this was particularly the case for white working-class boys. She felt that universities had an amazing resource of undergraduates and PhD researchers that should be mass mobilised into attainment raising. In her experience, Susie said schools were looking forward to working more with universities but wanted genuine co-production which needed buy-in from senior leaders in both schools and universities.

Susie agreed with the other speakers that the effect of disadvantage persists at an undergraduate level too, that it is not just about getting into university.

Susie then went on to talk about the Brilliant Club's 'Join the Dots' programme, a collaboration between universities, schools and the third sector. She said that the programme provided one-to-one and peer group coaching, led by PhD students, and positioned schools as partners in transitions.

Finally, she spoke about a collaboration between the Brilliant Club and Citizens UK to roll out 'Parent Power', which developed networks of parents in underrepresented areas facilitated by the Brilliant Club and anchor universities. Susie relayed that parents were empowered to make changes to help navigate the journey for their children. They receive training on university finances and how to secure bursary places, for example. She told the group that a number of parents have also progressed to university themselves and they are fantastic role models for their community.

The final speaker, **John Blake**, Director for Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students, paid tribute to his predecessor Chris Millward for his work reconceptualising Access and Participation Plans. This led to really substantial levels of investment in access policies, and stretching providers into ambitious and strategic approaches to access and participation, he said.

John highlighted the conclusions of the review he conducted into access and participation plans (APPs), including:

- a) The need to link access and participation together, to ensure disadvantaged young people got value from their degrees once they had got into university
- b) The need to make APPs more accessible to students, parents and carers, clearly stating universities' commitments and evaluation
- c) Greater inclusion of degree apprenticeships and non-traditional modes of study in APPs
- d) The disproportionate burden of the APP process on smaller providers.

John then turned his attention to the Office for Students' quality regime that is being reviewed and reformed. He spoke about the live consultations that will reframe the way providers think about quality and standards. He also lamented that the attainment gap was growing again, having shown signs of reducing prior to the pandemic, despite huge improvements in quality within schools, showing the need for further action.

John then gave an overview of his aspirations for the role:

- 1) Firstly, he wanted to see a significant expansion in the evaluation of what works across the whole sector, seeing providers generate more high quality and more public evidence, with the help of TASO and the Office for Students' own work on this.
- 2) Secondly, greater alignment between the access and quality processes.
- 3) Finally, the significant role of school and university partnerships in raising attainment, and evolution (rather than revolution) of the APP system.

To conclude, John confirmed there would be a change to the immediate round of monitoring in the next few months that would be risk based, not universal. He also said that the Office for Students would provide guidelines for the whole sector on variations to the access and participation plans to capture and expand the role of school engagement work and evaluative work, plus provide an executive summary that is clear and meaningful.