

# Widening Participation in Practice





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# Coming up

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## Social Mobility in HE:

A Potted History of  
Widening Participation

## WP in Numbers:

Previous successes and  
challenges for the future

## Practical Strategies:

Supporting students in  
navigating HE

# A (potted) history of Widening Participation

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# History of WP

## 1960s – 1990s:

“working-class consciousness”

Expansion brings more working-class students into HE, reflecting wider social change

## 1990s:

Participation expands and diversifies, prompting major policy reform (Dearing Report, introduction of tuition fees in 1998)

*St John's College, Oxford (1925)*



*University of Portsmouth SU (1993)*



# History of WP

## 1999/00:

### The Laura Spence Affair

Access to elite universities comes under scrutiny and first national programmes are born (Excellent Challenge & Partnerships for Progression)

## 2000s:

### WP National Policy is Born

Creation of AimHigher in 2004 and 'Raising Aspirations' & regulator Office for Fair Access created in 2006



Aimhigher...

[www.aimhigher.ac.uk](http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk)

offa  
office for fair access

# History of WP

## Early 2010s:

**AimHigher discontinued**  
National scheme is abruptly cut under new government. Under fee trebling, outreach goes 'in-house' under fair access agreements

## 2015 - Present:

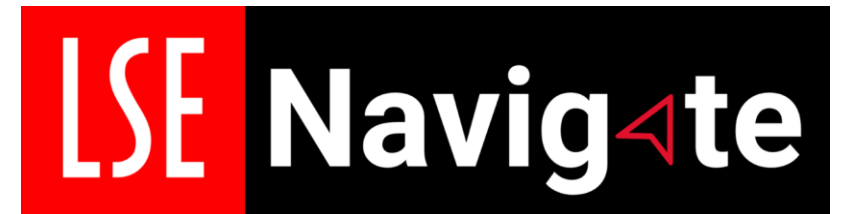
**APPs & Regional Outreach**  
Regional outreach introduced via NCOP and latterly uniconnect. APPs introduced and lifecycle work begins.

### Anger as £78m Aimhigher support scheme for students is axed

Vice-chancellor attacks 'poorly timed' government closure of scheme as steep rise in tuition fees looms



Students read their A-Level results at Loughborough Grammar School in Leicestershire. Photograph: Rui Vieira/PA



# Policy Churn

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Frequent policy change has limited long-term impact

No clear national access targets in England (contrast with Scotland)

Met the symbolic 50% participation target in 2021/22

Perception challenge: HE seen as unclear in purpose / disconnected

# The Current & Future Landscape

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# Access Successes

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- Full-time undergraduates jumped from roughly 150,000 in 1960 to over one million by early 1990s, with female students moving from under **20% to over 40% of entrants.**
- **FSM** progression to HE by age 19 has increased from **14% to 29%** since 2005, while rates for **non-FSM** students have risen from **34% to nearly 50%**
- In 2015-16, around **9% of POLAR Q1** students entered HE for the first time. This increased to around **12% in recent years (unicconnect).**

## Independent vs State Schools

What is the % of  
independent school A-level  
students who progress on to  
HE?

57%

87%

80%

26%

## Independent vs State Schools

What is the % of state school  
A-level students who  
progress on to HE

57%

87%

80%

26%

## Independent vs State Schools

**% of independent school A-level students who progress onto a high tariff HEI**

65%

80%

70%

30%

## Independent vs State Schools

**% of state school A-level students who progress onto a high tariff HEI**

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# Office for Students



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# We aim to ensure that...

every student,  
whatever their  
background,

has a fulfilling  
experience of  
higher education

that enriches  
their lives and  
careers.

## Participation

## Experience

## Outcomes

### Objective 1

All students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education.

### Objective 2

All students, from all backgrounds, receive a high quality academic experience, and their interests are protected while they study or in the event of provider, campus or course closure.

### Objective 3

All students, from all backgrounds, are able to progress into employment, further study, and fulfilling lives, and their qualifications hold their value over time.

## Value for money

### Objective 4

All students, from all backgrounds, receive value for money.

# We will be:

## Ambitious

for all students  
from all  
backgrounds.



## Collaborative

in pursuit of our priorities  
and in our stewardship of  
the sector.



## Vigilant

about safeguarding  
public money and  
student fees.



## Vocal

that higher education  
is a force for good,  
for individuals,  
communities and for  
the country.



# Value for Money...

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## 'DAVID BECKHAM STUDIES' - STAFFORDSHIRE UNIVERSITY



# Activity - Discussion



## Perceptions of HE

What are your students telling you about the prospect of Higher Education.

Have you seen a change in attitude/trend towards HE?

Do you feel that students are scrutinising 'value for money' more than before?

In your opinion, how should universities react to these challenges?



## Access

### WHO GETS IN

- **Increasing the number of individuals from underrepresented groups** entering higher education
- **Fair and inclusive application process** and providing support to make higher education attainable for all.

## Success

### WHO THRIVES

- Creating a **supportive and inclusive learning environment** that promotes student engagement and achievement.
- Many HEIs are introducing **structured programmes** that tackle **sense of belonging** and provide mentoring and skills initiatives.

## Progression

### WHERE THEY GO TO NEXT

- **Structured careers support** helps underrepresented students access **competitive opportunities**
- Partnerships with employers open pathways into professional careers and **postgraduate study**

# Success & Progression

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ADVANCING  
ACCESS

From the  
**RUSSELL  
GROUP**

## HOW TO CRACK THE CLASS CEILING



# Contributing factors

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## Projected Birth Rates & Falling Numbers

- Total enrolments have fallen slightly for two consecutive years (2023/24 and 2024/25), driven largely by a decline in international postgraduate students
- Home undergraduate provision is widely understood to be loss-making, with courses increasingly cross-subsidised by international fee income
- Demographic projections warn that a shrinking population of 18-year-olds could trigger a 7% decline in demand between 2030–35.

## Male Participation

- In 2024/25, about 44,000 fewer UK-domiciled young men than women accepted HE places
- To match female participation rates would require a 37% boost in male enrolment—equivalent to some 55,000 “missing men” each year over the past decade.

## Internationalisation

- International students totalled 732,285 in 2023/24 (23% of the cohort), up from 679,970 in 2021/22
- They generated £12.1bn in fee income (around 23% of sector revenue), helping to subsidise domestic teaching
- EU student numbers have fallen by ~40%, while non-EU recruitment has risen sharply

# Challenges

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## A Crowded Market

- Greater provision – growth in post-92, FE and alternative providers has increased competition for an increasingly segmented student market

## Student Finances Under Strain

- The threshold below which families qualify for the full maintenance loan has been stuck at £25,000 since 2008 **\*with inflation, it should be upwards of £35,000\***.
- Research by Russell Group Students' Unions found that 1 in 4 students regularly missed meals or went without other necessities because they simply couldn't afford them.

## Institutional Funding Pressures

- Fees were frozen at £9,250 from 2017 to 2025, rising modestly to £9,535—well below inflation, with the real value closer to ~£12,000 if fees had kept pace since 2012.

# The HE Premium

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- High demand – ~760k applicants each year
- Strong earnings returns – e.g. ~22% of disadvantaged graduates reach top earnings vs ~6% of non-graduates
- Where you study matters – financial outcomes vary significantly by institution (£11k gap, 16 years post-KS4)
- Higher education remains a key driver of upward mobility

# Upwards Social Mobility

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*‘Graduates earn more, are healthier, and are more civically engaged than nongraduates. Studies have found that attending a higher education institution as a student from a lower socioeconomic background is the best mechanism we have for promoting absolute upwards social mobility’*  
Sutton Trust - ‘Social mobility and higher education’

- **Skills that transfer across any career**
- **Flexibility to retrain and adapt over time (introduction of LLE)**
- **Higher civic participation and engagement**
- **Better long-term life outcomes**

# Turning Widening Participation into practical strategies

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# What does WP look like in schools?

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- Bridge the gap to hard-to-reach students by raising aspirations and challenging misconceptions
- Confidence, subject choices, and expectations are shaped early
- Early intervention and consistent messaging is important
  - Link subjects to careers and university courses
  - Use former student stories/near-peer role models
  - Celebrate a wide range of HE pathways and destinations
  - Break down the misconception that selective universities are “elite”
- Utilise university partnerships at key intervention points

# Making University Partnerships Meaningful

ADVANCING  
ACCESS

From the  
**RUSSELL  
GROUP**

- Embed sustained engagement with a university within school culture
- Target students strategically
- Prepare students and set expectations
- Encourage active participation
- Follow up after events

Let's discuss...



What events/activities in school can universities support with?

What follow up conversations or activity is beneficial?

What questions should students ask?

# Key intervention points

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## KS3 - Aspiration, exposure, belonging

- Campus visits, discovery days
- Masterclasses, interactive workshops

## KS4 - Subject choices, pathways, motivation

- Mentoring programmes
- Summer schools
- HE or careers fairs
- Subject tasters/masterclasses

## KS5 - Applications, finance, transition support

- UCAS and personal statement support
- Student finance workshops
- Summer schools
- Mock interviews
- Access programmes & transitional support

# What are Access programmes?

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Application support

Reduced offers

Campus visits

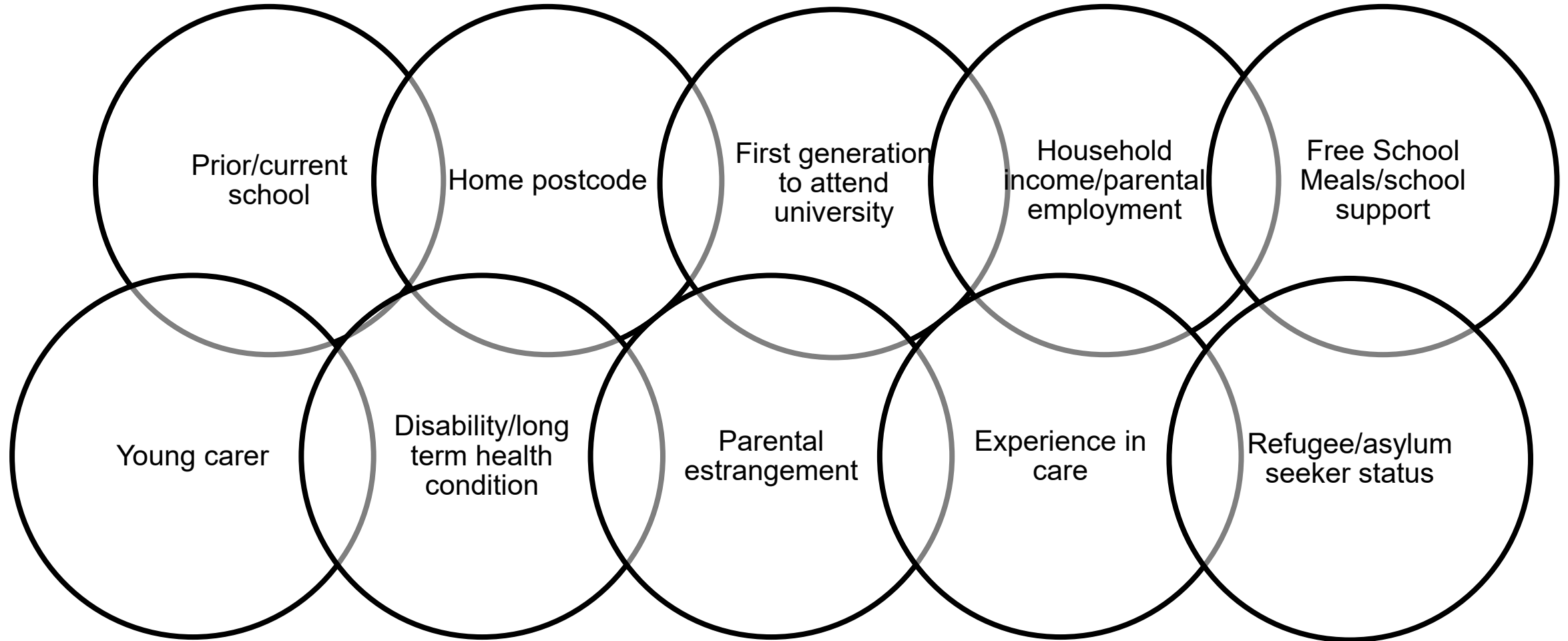
Mentoring

Academic and transitional support

Financial support

# Eligibility criteria

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# What to look out for

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Access  
Manchester

Apply  
Cambridge

LSE  
Springboard

Pathways to  
the  
Professions

Warwick  
Scholars

Newcastle  
Partners  
Programme

Access to  
Southampton

Realising  
Opportunities

Access to  
Bath

Access  
Edinburgh

Access to  
Bristol

Liverpool  
Scholars

Access UCL

Access at  
Oxford

# Contextual admissions

- Reduced offer and additional consideration
- Not applied to separately, assessed through UCAS application
- Based on personal circumstances and WP criteria such as:
  - Free school meals
  - Care experienced
  - Young carer
  - Refugee status
  - Postcode data
  - First in family
  - Disability
- Read offer letter carefully



2026 Contextual Offers Tool for UK Universities

## 2026 Contextual Offers Tool for UK Universities

Your go-to guide on contextual offers for some of the UK's leading universities.

[Use the tool](#)

# Any questions?

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