

Widening Participation in Practice





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Coming up

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



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)



Robbins Report, 1963

"should be available to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment"

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

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

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

Access Successes

- 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 (uniconnect)**.

The Current & Future Landscape



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%

Access - National Progression

Independent vs State Schools

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

65%

80%

70%

30%

Office for Students



OfS

We aim to ensure that...



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.



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

ADVANCING
ACCESS

From the
**RUSSELL
GROUP**

HOW TO CRACK THE CLASS CEILING



Contributing factors

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

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

- **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

“Graduates earn more, are healthier, and are more civically engaged than non-graduates. 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”

Social Market Foundation Report (2025) - Leave to Achieve: How universities can contribute to social mobility in their regions

- **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



What does WP look like in schools?

- 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

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?

Application support

Reduced offers

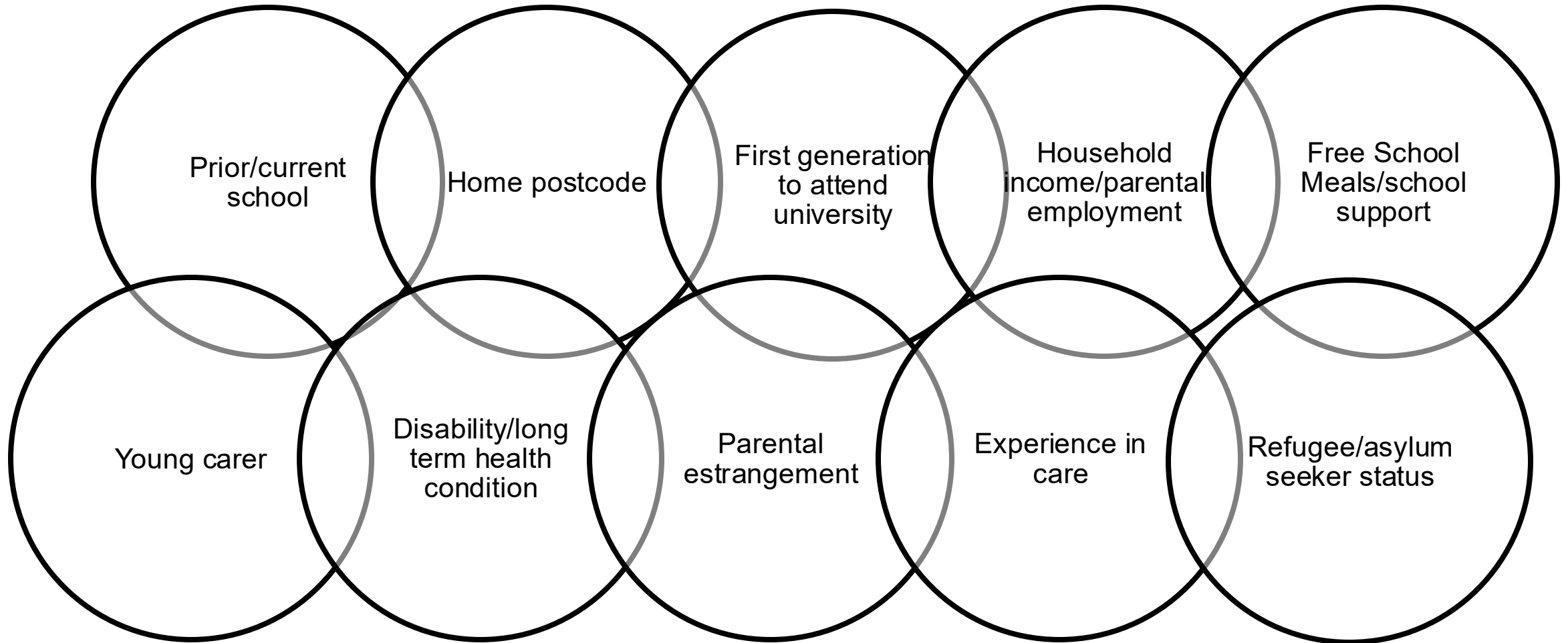
Campus visits

Mentoring

Academic and transitional support

Financial support

Eligibility criteria



What to look out for

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?

