THE SUTTON TRUST

Advancing Social Mobility

A best practice guide for universities

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About the Sutton Trust

The Sutton Trust is the UK's leading social mobility charity. Our programmes empower young people to access life-changing opportunities, and our research influences national change to deliver a fairer future.

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Foreword



by **Nick Harrison**

Universities enrich our society and strengthen our economy, advancing knowledge and driving innovation. For individual students, they broaden horizons, build confidence and open doors. And for young people from low-income backgrounds, they remain by far the strongest route to social mobility, which is why the Sutton Trust has championed fair access for almost 30 years.

Our research shows UK graduates whose parents did not go to university are almost three times as likely to reach the top fifth of earners as non-graduates from the same background. Yet while higher education transforms individual lives, it is not delivering social mobility at a national level: far more young people go to university than a generation ago, but access gaps have not closed.

In England, pupils eligible for free school meals are around 20 percentage points less likely than their peers to enter higher education by 19 – a gap that has not narrowed in two decades. At high-tariff universities, where the rewards are greatest, under 5% attend, compared with around 14% of their peers.

The ambition and determination of the young people we work with are a constant inspiration, and a reminder of how much is at stake when talent goes unrecognised. I see the difference widening participation teams make, and how passionate and committed they are in doing so. But amid stretched university budgets, stubborn attainment gaps in schools, meagre student finance and mounting media pressure, we are too often running to stand still.

We will not close these gaps by carrying on as we are. Universities must challenge established practice and be bolder in how they identify, admit and support talent. This guide sets out practical steps, drawn from institutions who are leading the way. I urge leaders to benchmark their own practice, learn from one another and act.

This is about recognising potential, not lowering standards. Wider access makes institutions stronger: a more diverse student body, a deeper talent pool and closer ties to local communities and economies. Getting in is only the start. Students also need support to complete their degrees and move into rewarding work.

Government must match that ambition with stronger support for disadvantaged pupils in schools and student finance that makes university affordable. Together, universities and government can change many more young lives and do far more to accelerate social mobility across the country.

Key recommendations

Widening participation and outreach:

Start with the problem, not the activity. Define the barrier, who experiences it and the intended outcome before selecting or commissioning an intervention, then evaluate delivery and outcomes.

Build sustained outreach pathways that are targeted fairly. Start early where appropriate; combine individual, school and area data; remove participation barriers; and continue support through subject choice, application and transition.

Admissions:

Be ambitious with contextual admissions, including reduced entry requirements where evidence supports them.

Make admissions transparent and navigable. Explain how every selection method is used and monitor who applies, receives an offer, enrols and succeeds.

Supporting transition:

Treat transition as a process that begins before arrival. Help students prepare for the financial, practical, academic and social realities of university and continue support through the first term.

Make financial support timely, predictable and easy to access. Award it automatically where reliable eligibility data exist and provide rapid help when circumstances change.

Supporting success:

Build student success into the core university experience. Review curriculum, assessment, timetabling, course costs and support processes, rather than expecting students to navigate avoidable barriers themselves.

Widen access to careers, networks and wider opportunities. Embed careers support and paid experience within courses; monitor participation and reduce reliance on unpaid work, personal contacts or spare time.

Postgraduate study:

Extend your widening access work to postgraduate level. Make courses, costs and funding easy to understand and simplify application processes.

These actions will be most impactful when they are embedded into a **whole-provider approach** to social mobility. Success also relies on collaboration. You should work with schools, colleges, other universities, employers and third-sector organisations where collective action can improve reach, coordination, evidence or student support.

Introduction

Universities have a powerful role in addressing the fact that social mobility across the country has been low for a long time.[1] Indeed, the Office for Students requires providers to produce an access and participation plan (APP) for students from under-represented backgrounds, including socio-economically disadvantaged students.[2] Even beyond this commitment, there are notable benefits of having a diverse student body for an institution, from a broader range of voices in debates to a wider pool of innovative talent.[3]

Students who attend the most selective institutions have a greater chance of becoming higher earners, even after prior characteristics are taken into account. However, there is significant variation within this picture. Selective providers admit students with stronger prior attainment while many less selective universities make a substantial contribution to social mobility by educating far larger numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many institutions that perform strongly on social mobility measures are in London where high access rates sit alongside strong earnings outcomes.[4] The financial return to a degree varies substantially by subject, institution, prior attainment and personal characteristics. It is also true that earnings are not a complete measure of the individual or social value of higher education.

As shown by the chart below, university participation has expanded rapidly over the past 30 years but large socio-economic gaps remain.[5]

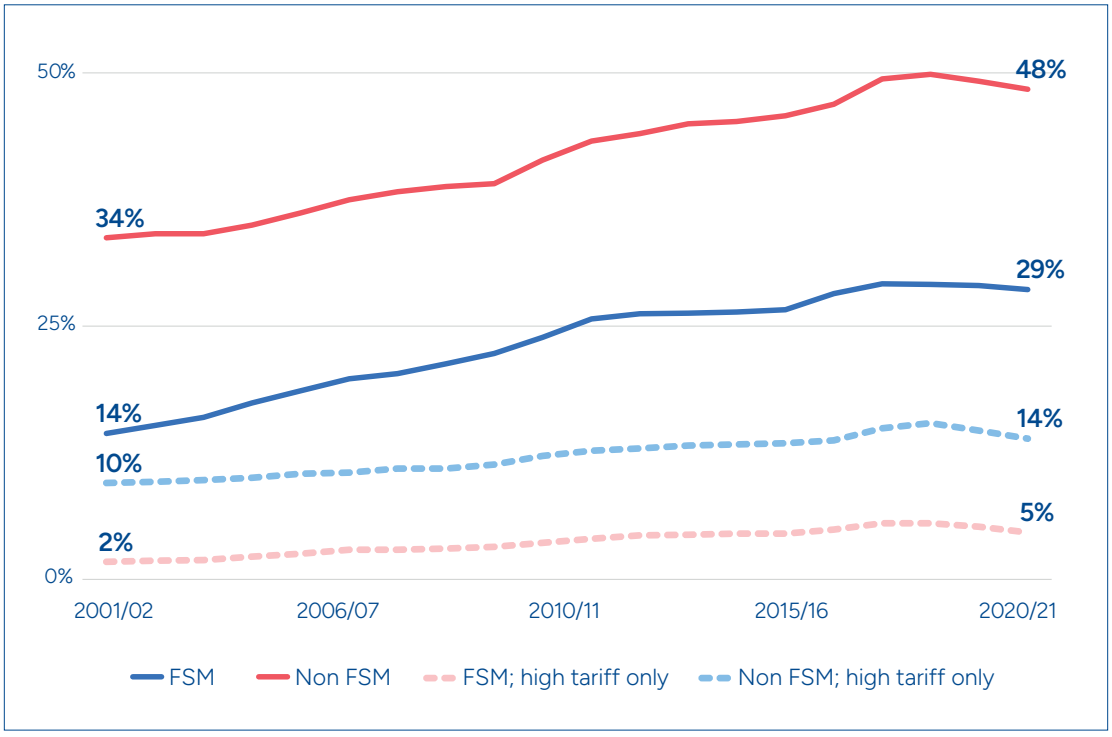


Figure 1: Higher education entry by age 19 over time (Note: years apply to when students were 15)[6]

Long-standing challenges in access are now compounded with rising living costs for students and financial support offerings that have not kept pace. Such issues are at the front of applicants' minds, particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, who are increasingly considering employment or apprenticeship prospects when making their post-18 choices.[7]

This guide is for people who can influence how universities recruit, admit, teach and support students: senior leaders and governors, widening participation specialists, academic staff, and colleagues working across admissions, student services, finance, careers, data and evaluation. Its primary lens is socio-economic disadvantage, including how it intersects with ethnicity, disability, care experience, caring responsibilities and place.

Guidance draws on Sutton Trust research and programme delivery, published evidence, and case studies submitted by more than 40 institutions. It is an evidence-informed practice guide, not a systematic review, and it does not prescribe a single model for every provider. The evidence is more robust in some areas than in others. We therefore aim to distinguish between established findings, promising practice and proposals that still need testing. Case studies illustrate what delivery can look like; their inclusion is not proof of causal impact or endorsement of every element.

A low-income student is 4x more likely to be socially mobile if they attend university

The principles are intended for universities across the UK and for students entering through different routes including further education, Access to HE courses, employment and later life study. References to access and participation plans (APPs) or the Office for Students apply to England; institutions elsewhere should interpret the recommendations within their own funding and regulatory arrangements.

Universities are of course working under severe financial pressure, with costs continuing to rise and income not keeping pace across much of the sector, with changes to international recruitment adding further uncertainty. These pressures make careful prioritisation more important, but they do not reduce the need to address unequal access, experience and outcomes.

1. Widening participation and outreach

While many more socio-economically disadvantaged young people are attending university, gaps in applications remain between them and their more affluent peers. To ensure all young people are informed about the higher education options available to them, you should:

- **Review your existing portfolio of interventions and identify a clearly defined barrier** to participation, target group and intended outcome before choosing an activity.
- **Combine individual, school and area level information when targeting activity**, recognising where socio-economic disadvantage intersects with other circumstances.
- **Start early and build age-appropriate pathways** that develop knowledge, attainment and informed choice over time.
- **Give students first-hand experience of higher education.** Use academic tasters, campus visits and contact with current students to build academic confidence and a sense that university could be for them.
- **Work with schools and colleges on attainment** where universities have a credible contribution to make, for example through student tutoring.
- **Address financial, digital and practical barriers to outreach participation** and make support clear before a student commits to taking part.
- **Invest in the skills and development of those designing and delivering outreach**, with appropriate induction, ongoing professional development and time to reflect on and improve practice.
- **Evaluate interventions and collaborate with other institutions.** Track delivery and outcomes; share evidence; and work through regional partnerships where collective action can improve coverage, reduce duplication or address common gaps.

Those from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to receive the guidance they need to understand the university application process and the options available to them.[8] This relates not only to the school they went to but also to support from friends or family who have been to university.[9] Indeed, socio-economically disadvantaged young people are more likely to expect that university does not feature in their future – and so are their parents.[10]

When it comes to outreach, universities should consider who needs to be reached, when engagement should begin, what sequence of support is likely to help, how it can be delivered accessibly and how the institution will learn from the work. The right mix will depend on local need, the age and prior experience of participants and the purpose of the intervention.

Who to target

You should consider the following steps when designing outreach activity:

Use data to target the right students

Targeting should combine individual, school and area level information rather than rely on a single proxy for disadvantage. Free school meal eligibility, parental occupation and education, school context and local deprivation measures each capture something different and each has limits. Area averages can miss disadvantaged students living in affluent places, and incorrectly identify well-off students living in deprived places, while school type alone should not be treated as a measure of educational quality.

Low overall free school meal rates should not automatically remove a school from consideration. A small number of disadvantaged pupils in an affluent area may have access to fewer targeted opportunities because their needs are less visible. Smaller or geographically dispersed groups can also be missed when institutions target only the largest statistical gaps.

Socio-economic disadvantage interacts with ethnicity, disability, care experience, caring responsibilities, geography and other circumstances. Analysis should test where barriers overlap without treating these groups as interchangeable or assuming that every student within a category has the same experience.

Local authorities, schools, colleges, Uni Connect or successor partnerships, and third-sector organisations can help you interpret the data and identify gaps in local coverage.

You should also look beyond the immediate area around your campus and consider gaps in provision elsewhere. This is important as access to university for socio-economically disadvantaged young people is highly geographically variable: free school meal pupils at one end of the country (East Ham) are over 3 times more likely to have a degree by age 22 compared to those at the other (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West).[11]

The Sutton Trust's Opportunity Index map can be a helpful starting point to identify areas where higher education participation is low and find other area-level information, such as GCSE attainment and rate of FSM eligibility. Further school-level data can be found from the Department for Education and the Careers and Enterprise Company.

Set transparent and proportionate eligibility criteria

Eligibility decisions should follow the purpose of the activity and be clear to applicants, schools and advisers. A small set of mandatory criteria, supplemented by further indicators where needed, is

often easier to explain than a long list of interchangeable proxies.

Relevant information may include:

- **Current or previous free school meal eligibility** as an indicator of low household income during school.
- **Parental occupation, parental education or household income**, where these data can be collected reliably.
- **School or college context** including prior attainment, progression patterns and access to guidance.
- **Area level deprivation or participation measures** used alongside rather than instead of individual information.
- **Circumstances** such as care experience, estrangement, disability, caring responsibilities or disrupted education.

You should publish how criteria are applied, explain any prioritisation and review who is excluded as well as who is selected.

Case Study

Access UNEE: a shared evidence base for regional targeting

IntoUniversity developed a regional data report for Access UNEE (formerly the North East Raising Aspiration Partnership), which brings together the five North East universities. The report covers all 153 state secondary schools in the region. Its targeting model combines eight indicators covering socio-economic disadvantage, post-16 participation, higher education progression, attainment and pupil progress. Schools are grouped into three levels of need, giving the universities a shared picture to inform decisions about where collaborative outreach and resources should be focused. The analysis shows how patterns of need vary between and within local authority areas.

Starting early and sustaining engagement

There is clear value in viewing access programmes as 'ecosystems' with sequences of interventions across age ranges. This recognises the disadvantage gap that continues to widen after primary school – promising primary school pupils from disadvantaged households fall one grade per subject behind equally talented affluent peers at GCSE.[12]

Where you offer outreach activities to children at primary school and/or during Key Stage 3, it is important to continue supporting participants throughout their education. Some activities such as residential summer schools are more appropriate for older children approaching the time they would apply for a university. But it remains key to engage with prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds at younger

ages to ensure they have the foundation of knowledge required to apply to a programme like a summer school.

Many outreach activities are targeted towards those in year 10 and above, as they approach the time to decide their post-16 options and where to apply to university. But activities can also have a large impact at a younger age; for example, efforts to improve attainment or impact subject choices.

Information, advice and guidance activities regarding university are also impactful for younger children. Education and Employers have found that nearly 2 in 5 primary school children (36%) under the age of 7 are already considering their future and tend to base their aspirations on people they know, with 45% of the remaining children influenced by the media. Less than 1% of children said that visitors to their school had told them about a career.[13] Employers also have a role to play here, but there is an opportunity for universities to engage with young children and help shape their future choices. Indeed, UCAS found that 1 in 3 students begin to think about higher education in primary school, with disadvantaged students 1.4 times less likely to do so compared to more affluent peers.[14]

As we know that disadvantaged young people are less likely to have these forms of guidance from social connections,[15] you can work with schools to fill this guidance gap. Being equipped with information about university from a young age can help to shape pupils' decision making as they choose their GCSE, A Level and further study subjects. Working with younger age groups can also help to identify those who have the ability and initial interest in university but, without finding out more, may veer away from the university pathway. This group would be harder to reach with outreach activities in later key stages.

Furthermore, offering one or more forms of the programmes mentioned in this guide ('multi-intervention outreach') can support young people across their life. There is positive evidence, albeit limited, that engagement in multiple outreach activities, such as a summer school and a mentoring scheme, can increase likelihood of entering higher education and improve labour market outcomes for participants compared with peers from similar backgrounds who do not take part.[16]

Early activity can build knowledge, confidence and a sense that higher education is attainable. As pupils approach subject and post-16 choices, support should become more specific, covering attainment, course choice, applications and transition.

Choosing the right activities

You should select activities to fit the barrier, target group and intended outcome; the number offered matters less than their timing, intensity and coherence. Your provisions should acknowledge different entry routes, including school or college, access to HE, employment and return to education.

Key types of outreach activities include:

Summer schools

Summer schools give socio-economically disadvantaged young people an insight into university life that they otherwise might not have had, as they are more likely to be the first in their family to complete higher education.[17] Engaging with activities and staff from a subject students are thinking of studying can help a student to make a more informed decision when firming up their university choices. This is important as applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to apply to courses or institutions that are less selective than their attainment would make realistic, even if

they have the grades to get into high-tariff institutions. This is sometimes described as 'undermatching'.

Residential programmes offer more than subject tasters. They allow participants to experience university learning, social life and living away from home, sometimes for the first time. Staff and current students should help them reflect on these experiences, explain expectations and practices that might otherwise remain implicit, and develop relationships and a sense of belonging. Where delivery is non-residential or online, providers should consider how these aims will still be met. Evaluation should assess progress against them rather than rely on satisfaction alone, alongside longer-term tracking of applications, enrolment and continuation where possible.

Evaluations of Aimhigher summer schools found that participants reported feeling more socially and academically comfortable in the higher education environment,[18] while research on multi-intervention outreach found that combinations of campus visits, subject masterclasses, information and guidance were among the approaches most strongly linked to higher education progression.[19]

Depending on the programme's purpose, useful elements may include:

- Guidance on the university application process including key deadlines, the UCAS application and any course-specific selection requirements.
- Sample teaching, discussion and project work that allow students to explore a subject and practise relevant ways of learning. This might include supervised laboratory work, studio activity or archival research.
- Insights into the financial costs of being a student and the available support packages on top of student loans.
- Campus tours, including lecture halls, social spaces and halls of residence.
- Exploring how degree subjects connect to the world of work, including the range of careers they can support and opportunities to gain experience through placements, projects or a year in industry. Social activities to give students a chance to connect and have a taster of student societies and sports clubs.

Sutton Trust programmes: Sutton Trust supports high achieving young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds through a range of free programmes.

We partner with universities on our summer schools and pathways programmes, providing financial and operational support alongside common approaches to targeting, recruitment and evaluation. Students on Sutton Trust programmes are twice as likely to accept a place at a high tariff university as a demographically matched UCAS comparison group.

- **UK Summer Schools** provide fully funded, subject-specific residential experiences for Year 12 students at leading universities.
- **Pathways** offer sustained academic, application, mentoring and employer support linked to professions including law, medicine, finance, engineering and other growth sectors.

Sutton Trust Online provides national digital support to help students explore post-18 options, prepare strong applications and move into their chosen pathway.

The Trust also runs **Access Apprenticeships** and the **Sutton Trust US Programme** with the US-UK Fulbright Commission.

Open days, taster sessions and campus visits

Open days, subject tasters and campus visits help applicants understand a course and picture the practical reality of studying at an institution. Short visits should have a defined purpose and should not be treated as a substitute for sustained outreach. Travel support and accessible online information should be available for students who would otherwise be unable to attend. Where possible, you should offer a sequence of contacts rather than rely on a single visit, allowing students to build knowledge, confidence and relationships over time.

Mentoring and role models

Mentoring works best when its purpose, duration and expectations are clear; mentors are trained and supported; and mentees understand how to use the relationship. Students may value a mentor who understands relevant experiences but matching alone does not create an effective relationship. Reliability, trust and appropriate boundaries are also important.

Mentees should receive a short introduction covering what the mentor can and cannot do, how often they will meet, how to prepare for conversations and what to do if the relationship is not working. Online delivery can help geographically dispersed students take part provided that access and safeguarding arrangements are sound.

Universities should not rely on students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to provide this work unpaid. Mentors and ambassadors ideally should be remunerated, particularly if there is a time commitment attached to their role, or receive recognised course credit with the time commitment made clear in advance.

For those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, assistance from someone from a similar background is not only helpful for the decision-making and applications processes, but also to see that university life is an achievable option. This is something they may not have seen in their own social circle.[20]

Working with schools and colleges

While programmes like summer schools can open the door to the university experience, attainment remains a crucial barrier to accessing university. Tackling the attainment gap between those from the most disadvantaged and most affluent socio-economic backgrounds is of course the responsibility of those working at every stage of the education system; within this, there is a key role for universities to play.[21] This has been emphasised by the Office for Students in recent years, particularly through Uni Connect partnerships (as explored at the end of this chapter), with guidance brought together in available toolkits.

Evidence that directly links attainment-raising activities to widening participation is limited, as it is difficult to isolate their impact when delivered as part of a package of activities. Available evidence indicates that it is best to offer these activities alongside others in the form of multi-intervention outreach.

Case Study

Higher Horizons

Higher Horizons Uni Connect Partnership in Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, Shropshire and Cheshire (which started in 2017) incorporates attainment-raising activities alongside other interventions, including mentoring programmes and guidance sessions. While their evaluations have not seen a direct impact on attainment, those who complete at least 5 hours of their wider offering of activities (which can cover attainment, but has to include a campus visit) are more likely to go to university than their peers from a similar background. Their evidence suggests it is best to engage with students with attainment-raising activities from a young age, so that the foundations can be set rather than coming in too close to when students sit their exams.

The following section sets out examples of outreach activities and widening participation efforts that can be delivered through partnering with education providers. These do not necessarily have to be delivered in a classroom – they could also take place on a university campus or online. But they are all examples of where universities can partner with education providers to achieve the strongest impact.

These programmes can be targeted at those who show high academic potential and are from a socio-economically disadvantaged background.[22] At school level, targeting decisions should also consider areas that are harder to reach and are not near to a university, which may be left out of interventions.

Forming school partnerships

School partnerships should begin with needs and priorities identified by the school or college. In England, Gatsby Benchmarks 4 and 7 provide useful points of connection for curriculum learning and encounters with higher education. You should work with a school to understand their needs and expertise rather than begin with a pre-designed activity that the school must accommodate.

Providers and outreach organisations should coordinate their approaches where possible, so that some schools are not repeatedly asked to host similar activity while others receive little or none. Partnerships can also include teacher development, curriculum support, access to facilities and help with sustained guidance where schools judge these useful.

This can be through several avenues, such as offering teacher training opportunities and university staff sitting on a school's governing board.[23]

Working with teachers can allow you to reach students who may not actively seek out outreach activities themselves, or those who have not even considered going to university.

The Sutton Trust Progression Series is a national CPD network for state school teachers and advisers, designed to build capacity for student guidance. This includes training, access to tools and support to champion high-potential disadvantaged students.

For strong partnerships, you may need to work with several colleagues within a school. This could include the senior leader responsible for outcomes or post-16 provision; the senior leader overseeing careers education; or a specific subject lead.

Initially, you may look to contact the school headteacher who will be able

to articulate the school's needs and connect you with the right member of staff. If the school is part of a multi-academy trust, there may be a central team or staff member who oversees partnership work or outreach. When reaching out, you should be mindful that school staff will need flexibility and communication is typically easier outside of the school timetable.

Tutoring

You can work with schools and colleges to provide tutors for their students looking for support with their studies. The Sutton Trust has found that there are large gaps in access to private tutoring by socio-economic background, with 39% of pupils in the best-off homes having ever received private tutoring compared to just 22% in the worst-off homes.[24] Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) identified that tutoring pre-university entry has a large, positive impact on student outcomes and behaviours.[25] This can be one-to-one or offered in a small group (no larger than 7). Their evidence suggests that tutoring is most impactful when delivered consistently by the same person who has received training and can engage well with children, for example by clearly explaining feedback. Offering opportunities outside of school hours, rather than taking time away from their lessons, is usually more suitable.

You can work with external organisations and charities who have existing partnerships with schools, offering opportunities for your students to be tutors. For example, The Brilliant Club's Scholars Programme trains PhD students to deliver tutoring in their partner schools and colleges.

University-led tutoring schemes are also an emerging outreach activity with institutions like the University of Exeter already leading schemes. Students from university can be trained to deliver tutoring in local schools which is not only beneficial to prospective students but also the university students leading the tutoring, helping to develop essential life skills. Student tutors need appropriate subject preparation, training, supervision and safeguarding support. Their work should be paid or recognised through course credit.

Subject-specific workshops

University staff can visit schools to deliver workshops and activities linked to elements of the curriculum. This not only contributes to raising attainment but also connects pupils to university lecturers and allows them to deepen their subject knowledge, helping them decide what to pursue in further studies. Going into a school to deliver activities reduces the administrative burden for schools, which is particularly helpful for the most disadvantaged schools where resources are stretched.

You can contribute subject specific activity where the school has identified need, and it draws on genuine disciplinary expertise. The intended learning should be clear. Claims about effectiveness should reflect evidence for the particular model rather than assume that every workshop raises attainment.

You should identify where entry depends on subjects that are not offered consistently across schools and colleges, such as Further Mathematics for some mathematics courses, and develop preparation or alternative routes where this restricts access. There are notable participation gaps in arts and languages by disadvantage at both GCSE and A Level, and additional gaps for Further Mathematics and Economics at A Level, which are caused by lower prior attainment and teacher shortages in the most deprived schools.[26]

Case Study

Imperial College London: mA*ths Online

Developed with Mathematics in Education and Industry and supported by The Hg Foundation, mA*ths Online provides sustained support for Year 12 and 13 A-level Maths and Further Maths students from groups underrepresented in higher education. It combines tailored online learning and mentoring with in-person masterclasses. Participants completing A-level Maths in 2020 and 2021 achieved around half a grade more than matched comparison students and were more likely to achieve an A or A*.[27]

Essential life skills training

These sessions can cover revision techniques, study strategies, metacognition and wider transferable skills. These are skills that disadvantaged children are less likely to have support with outside of the classroom. Those working in state schools say that there are more barriers to delivering such activities than in a private school. Indeed, the Sutton Trust reported that 1 in 5 teachers in the country's state schools with the most disadvantaged intakes felt their school did not offer good opportunities to develop non-academic life skills, compared to 1 in 10 in private schools.[28]

Helping young people to develop these skills supports success in revision, exams and other assessments,[29] and students can take these skills into their undergraduate studies and adult lives. Metacognitive skills support students to plan, monitor and evaluate their work. The Education Endowment Foundation estimates that well-designed approaches to developing these skills can produce around 8 months' additional progress.[30]

Transferable skills activity should also have a defined learning aim and avoid implying that pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds lack aspiration, character or motivation. You should be clear about whether an activity addresses study skills, metacognition, digital access or another identified need, and evaluate that outcome directly. Working with SkillsBuilder can help you to develop the strongest activities in this area. They also offer a framework which can inform your programmes.

Engaging parents, carers and other supporters

Young people often draw on parents, carers, teachers, social workers, wider family or trusted friends when making post-18 decisions. You should provide supporters with clear, accessible information about course choice, applications, finance, accommodation and the transition into university.

Supporters who have not experienced higher education themselves may have less access to current information about courses, costs and student support. You should help them understand the value of higher education, the range of routes available and the financial and practical support a student can access without making participation dependent on family involvement.[31]

Supporter engagement can include webinars, written guidance and opportunities to ask questions, but it should not make a young person's participation in an outreach activity dependent on parental involvement.

Case Study

Parent Power: parents as partners in widening participation

Developed by King's College London and Citizens UK and now delivered by The Brilliant Club, Parent Power brings parents, universities, schools and community organisations together through 16 local chapters. Trained community organisers help families understand post-16 and higher education routes and act collectively on barriers they identify. Universities provide access to campuses, expertise and opportunities while parents set local priorities. A UKRI-funded evaluation found reported gains in parents' confidence, knowledge, networks and civic engagement.

In-person or virtual delivery?

Online delivery can extend reach to students in rural areas and those unable to travel. But it can also reproduce exclusion where students lack a suitable device, reliable connectivity, private space or confidence using the platform. You should offer practical support where these barriers would prevent participation.

Delivery mode should follow the intended outcome. Online activity may suit information, preparation and sustained contact; in-person delivery may be more useful where the purpose depends on facilities, campus familiarity or informal relationships. Hybrid provision should not assume that recording a live event creates an equivalent experience. Again, offering students flexibility to complete activities in their own time can help.

You should distinguish evidence of reach and engagement from evidence of impact. Flexibility can help students participate but it should be balanced with opportunities for meaningful contact and timely support. Existing evidence on online impact includes an unpublished, external evaluation of Sutton Trust Online, which found that 53% of highly engaged students accepted places at high tariff universities compared with 28% of a UCAS comparison group matched on background and attainment.[32]

Address financial barriers to participation

Whatever the activity, there should not be any financial barriers that stop socio-economically disadvantaged young people from engaging with outreach activities. Travel, food and accommodation should be covered for any residential activities or day visits. This should also cover expenses for a parent or guardian that may need to accompany a student.

Activities delivered in schools and colleges can reduce travel and participation costs. But you should still provide opportunities to visit a campus with the necessary costs covered where they would otherwise prevent participation.

Delivering interventions well

To be successful, interventions depend on the people delivering them understanding the barriers being addressed, the needs of participants and how each activity is expected to help. They also need the skills, support and freedom to adapt delivery without losing the core features that make the intervention effective.

How an intervention works in practice depends on the people delivering it. Research with widening participation staff found that day-to-day decisions were shaped by practitioners' experience and knowledge as well as by their institution's priorities and constraints.[33] Professional networks and time to reflect helped staff improve their practice and keep students' needs in view. Training was less useful when

workloads and delivery targets left little room to put learning into practice.

You should therefore:

- Provide role specific induction and development for practitioners, student ambassadors, mentors, tutors and other delivery staff.
- Cover the structural causes of disadvantage alongside practical skills such as inclusive delivery, information and guidance, safeguarding and evaluation.
- Give staff time to review delivery, discuss challenges, learn from participants and colleagues and make evidence informed changes.
- Support engagement with research, professional networks and practice outside the institution.
- Record significant changes or delivery problems so these can inform evaluation.

You should treat practitioner capability and continuity as part of intervention design. Staff turnover, short-term contracts and repeated changes in responsibility can weaken relationships with schools, colleges, community organisations and participants. They can also lead to the loss of institutional knowledge and make it harder to sustain or evaluate programmes over time.

Professional development and best practice sharing

Universities remain responsible for the induction, support and development of their own outreach and widening participation staff. However, a range of external organisations can complement this work:

NEON Professional provides structured professional courses for widening access practitioners. The **NEON Access and Success Academy** also offers workshops, masterclasses and opportunities for peer learning across the student lifecycle.

The Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE) connects practitioners, researchers and policymakers through special interest groups, events, publications and the sharing of research and practice.

HELOA provides training and professional-development opportunities for new and experienced staff working across widening participation, outreach, education liaison, admissions and student recruitment.

The University of Wolverhampton PGCert in Access, Outreach and Social Mobility, developed with Causeway Education, provides a formal postgraduate qualification focused on professional practice, inclusion, organisational change and leadership.

TASO provides tools and guidance on theories of change, evidence use and implementation and process evaluation.

Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP) provides a professional standards framework and the Development of Access and Participation Professionals accreditation scheme. Accreditation is available at Affiliate, Practitioner and Leadership levels and is based on an evidence portfolio, reflective practice and peer review.

These opportunities complement rather than replace development and support within practitioners' own institutions.

Evidence and evaluation

All of the initiatives discussed in this chapter should be evidence informed, with data collected to evaluate your programmes and gather further information for the evidence base. A theory of change should name the barrier being addressed, the intended participants, the activity, the expected short and longer-term outcomes and the assumptions that connect them. The method should be proportionate to

the intervention and to the decision the evaluation is expected to inform.

Evaluation should examine how an intervention was delivered as well as what outcomes followed. This includes whether it reached the intended participants, whether they received the planned level of support, how consistently it was delivered and what helped or hindered implementation. Without this evidence, it can be difficult to distinguish an ineffective intervention from a promising approach that was not delivered as intended. Participant experience and short-term changes in knowledge, confidence or behaviour may also be useful where they match the programme's purpose.

Stronger causal designs are needed before an institution claims that an activity changed participation, continuation or later outcomes. Matched comparison groups, randomised designs and linked administrative data can be valuable but they are not suitable or feasible for every intervention. Qualitative, participatory and theory-based approaches can explain how delivery worked, why outcomes differed and how institutional context shaped the result.

Evaluation plans should address consent, privacy, data sharing and ethical review early enough that these requirements support rather than delay delivery. Where data are linked through the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT), UCAS, Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) or another source, reports should explain the population, matching process, missing data and limits of the comparison.

Findings should be published in enough detail for others to understand the intervention, context, method and limitations, including null or negative findings. Independent evaluation is valuable where proportionate but should not be a requirement for every activity.

Across the outreach activities in this chapter, there is valuable work happening across many universities and third sector organisations. But as shown by university access data, there is still work to be done. A key element of heightening efforts is improving the evaluation of the range of initiatives already happening to show what works best.

When it comes to programme evaluation, you can utilise the research expertise within your own institution to undertake evaluations using comparison and control groups. Collaboration across institutions is also vital to build programmes that can be replicated across the sector.[34]

It is important that evaluations are published fully and independently as the evidence base continues to grow, so that institutions can continue to learn from each other and use evidence to inform the design and delivery of widening participation programmes. The Higher Education Evidence Library (HEEL) led by TASO has the potential to be a rich resource where universities can upload such evaluations. This will add to the organisation's own student access, success and progression evidence toolkit, which rates interventions according to cost, impact and strength of evidence.

As the rest of this guide will discuss, widening participation success does not end once a prospective student applies or enrols. Access to higher education is one step; social mobility depends on whether students can succeed, complete and progress into work or further study. Widening participation students should therefore be supported by their prospective institution before they arrive, during their studies and with their next steps after graduation. Using data from sources like HEAT can allow you to track students from a programme through their higher education journey into employment. This approach is used by the Sutton Trust to evaluate its

programmes and the team behind the resource is involved in the development of HEEL.

Further guidance on evaluation can be found in Chapter 6.

Collaboration to maximise impact

This chapter has set out a range of key activities to deliver to reach a wide pool of socio-economically disadvantaged young people – such efforts should not be happening in isolation. Regional collaboration has evolved through Aimhigher, the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach and the current Uni Connect partnerships. These models demonstrate the value of shared infrastructure and regional intelligence.[35] The OfS has proposed 17 Regional Access Partnerships to replace Uni Connect from 2027/28. Institutions should plan for that transition while checking the final arrangements before implementation.

Collaboration is most useful when it addresses a problem that no single institution can solve alone: gaps in local coverage, repeated approaches to the same schools, fragmented data or limited evaluation capacity. Regional partnerships should agree the purpose of collaboration, clarify responsibilities and use shared information to identify who is being missed. Working together, instead of in isolation, can help to narrow regional disadvantage gaps and deliver a larger contribution to social mobility across the country.[36]

Reviews of Uni Connect, for example, have shown that collaborative partnerships can be an effective way of maintaining relationships and reacting to local issues both more quickly and effectively. Collaboration has also facilitated the tailoring of these activities to specific local needs. But such models are not always free from issues; difficulties can arise when partners' contributions are uneven and when partners do not adapt the aims of a collaboration to their institution's own specific needs.[37]

To be successful, collaboration models should have a clear purpose and measurable aims. Furthermore, central funding and leadership should be provided to manage and maintain partnerships across institutions. This should be part of a multi-year commitment that senior stakeholders at each institution involved buy into.[38] Short and uncertain funding cycles can undermine long-term relationships and evaluation so institutions should make multi-year commitments where possible even when national funding is confirmed annually. This should be backed by institutions themselves committing senior leadership to roles involved in leading collaborative partnerships, such as those through Uni Connect.

Schools, colleges, local authorities, employers and third-sector organisations should be involved where they bring relevant knowledge or delivery capacity. National charities and delivery organisations may also provide evidence, specialist expertise or reach that local partners do not have.

When evaluating your work with other institutions, you should share your administrative data and ensure that all institutions do the same.[39]

Universities should aim to offer a package of outreach that covers attainment-raising and on-campus experiences. Working with schools and colleges is key to reach the correct target groups. While not an exhaustive list, Appendix A of this guide highlights several organisations working in the widening participation space to potentially partner with. The 'next steps' section also sets out further pointers for collaborating with the Sutton Trust.

2. Admissions

While most undergraduate applications are made through UCAS, which provides standardised application guidance, universities and colleges remain responsible for setting entry requirements and deciding how applications are assessed. To ensure your admissions processes are as fair as possible, you should:

- **Publish clearly how contextual information is used** and review whether it improves fairness across each stage of selection.
- **Work with other institutions to bring better consistency and transparency to contextual admissions practices**, helping students and teachers supporting applicants who are navigating the currently complex landscape.
- **Where personal statements are used, explain what assessors are looking for and consider them alongside attainment and contextual information.**
- **Remove avoidable costs** from tests, auditions and interviews and provide subject-specific guidance.
- **Design interviews that allow applicants to draw on a range of experiences**, with information easily available to guide applicants on what to expect and how best to prepare.
- **Offer tailored guidance on subject-specific admissions activities** such as auditions for creative courses and the UCAT for medicine. Financial support should be available to cover the costs of auditions and interviews.
- **Use foundation years carefully**: they can support widening participation but they should have a clear educational purpose, strong progression routes, and robust evaluation rather than being seen as a default solution to admitting more socio-economically disadvantaged students or purely as a recruitment tool.

Differences in admissions policies and course-level requirements across institutions can be difficult to navigate for students, in particular for applicants without access to informed advice. A lack of knowledge of the many elements involved in applying to university (including dates and deadlines, and the entry requirements of a course) leads many disadvantaged students to make decisions with incomplete or uneven information when choosing their universities.

When reviewing entry requirements, students have to compare them to their predicted grades. But for socio-economically disadvantaged applicants, this means they are using a set of grades that are more likely to under-predict their ability. This can result in them applying to less selective institutions that do not reflect their actual ability.[40]

The recommendations below focus on making selection transparent and fair while giving applicants enough information to make an informed choice.

Adopting contextual admissions

Contextual admissions should be a priority wherever entry is selective and especially on oversubscribed courses. They recognise that grades and other achievements are shaped by the opportunities and barriers an applicant has experienced. Providers should explain which information is used, at what stage and with what effect.

In practice, you should:

- **Publish one accessible contextual admissions policy** covering the indicators used and their limitations.
- **Explain at which stage each indicator is considered** and whether it affects eligibility, an offer, interview selection or holistic assessment.
- **Explain how missing or disputed information is handled.**
- **Include information on the policy on UCAS course pages** and keep course-level information current.
- **Review application, offer, conversion, entry and subsequent student outcomes by relevant disadvantage measures.**
- **Connect analysis of your admissions data** with outreach, transition and student-success activity.

As highlighted by a Sutton Trust evidence review, a range of contextual indicators are used across universities in the UK.[41] But there is not yet a coherent approach across the sector.

This is demonstrated by data presented in the Sutton Trust Contextual Offers Tool, which uses data from 55 institutions with publicly available information. The tool shows that contextual admissions are typically multi-indicator models: universities use a median of seven indicators, most commonly between five and eight. However, policy design is not consistent. Sixteen institutions require applicants to meet multiple criteria, which can substantially narrow eligibility, and the frequent use of outreach participation as a requirement means some applicants' eligibility depends on access to institution-specific programmes, which adds a barrier to many applicants. There is also evidence of more constrained use for highly selective courses.

What emerges from the Contextual Offers Tool is not a lack of activity, but a lack of coherence. Contextual admissions are now well established across the sector and most institutions are drawing on a broadly similar set

of indicators. Yet the way these are combined, weighted and translated into decisions varies significantly. As a result, applicants with similar backgrounds may be treated differently depending on where they apply. This also places an informational burden on the applicant to understand all these different approaches and the impact they might have on their application.

The key elements of contextual admissions are **consistency and transparency**, so that contextual admissions systems are easy to understand and navigate; and **continued support** for students who are contextually admitted so they succeed (covered in Chapter 4 of this guide). You should monitor these outcomes and adjust transition or academic support where needed.

Recommendations for contextual admissions practices have been explored at greater length in joint guidance, from the Sutton Trust, Universities UK and UCAS.

Scotland offers a useful example of institutions working towards greater consistency while retaining some institutional discretion. The Scottish model cannot simply be mandated elsewhere. In England, providers can still improve consistency through regional, mission-group or subject-level collaboration where this makes policies easier for applicants and advisers to understand. Guidance on forming such partnerships features in Chapter 1 of this guide.

Assessing applicants

Alongside contextual practices, you should give support and guidance to applicants regarding all stages of the process, including the strongest areas to focus on in a personal statement and how to prepare for interviews.

Personal statements

While a personal statement can act as a vessel for further contextual information from applicants, the Sutton Trust has long highlighted that personal

Case Study

Taking a sector-wide approach: contextual admissions in Scotland

Since the publication of the Blueprint for Fairness report in 2016 (a national strategy for widening participation), universities in Scotland have worked together to establish a shared contextual admissions approach.

All universities use contextual information in admissions and have also adopted minimum entry requirements. Contextual information is linked to clearly defined indicators, with the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, school background and care experience commonly used. Institutions still maintain some autonomy over their contextual practices, by using additional criteria or choosing to use contextual data to make either adjusted offers or gateway offers (similar to foundation years).[42]

The Scottish government has said this has contributed to steady progress in widening participation ambitions; the proportion of students from the most deprived areas increased from 13.7% in 2013/14 before the Commission on Widening Access was established, to 16.7% in 2023/24, though progress has slowed since the pandemic. And despite an increase in students with lower prior attainment being admitted as a result of these practices, overall degree attainment has not decreased over time.[43]

statements can be a barrier for many socio-economically disadvantaged young people.[44] Applicants from such backgrounds are less likely to be able to draw on relevant forms of social and cultural capital in their answers. They are also less likely to receive higher quality support from their school regarding the skills and experiences to mention in their application, as well as support with writing, spelling and grammar.[45]

For 2026 entry, UCAS replaced the single free text personal statement with three structured questions intended to provide clearer scaffolding for applicants. You should explain how responses will be used and assess the relevance of an applicant's experiences rather than the prestige or quantity of activities available to them. Paid work, caring responsibilities, study and other experiences may all demonstrate relevant skills and insight. Outreach should help applicants and advisers understand the new format, noting that schools with time-stretched teachers and less dedicated support offerings on university applications may have limited capacity to support the new format.

Making the selection criteria used when assessing personal statements clearer and, where possible, working with other universities to make the process more consistent across institutions will improve understanding both for applicants and those supporting them.[46]

Activities to help students develop the skills required to put together a strong personal statement should also be covered in outreach activities, such as writing skills sessions, as mentioned in Chapter 1. Opportunities to engage with wider reading and academic activities beyond the school curriculum are also important.

Interviews

Before refining an interview process, you should consider whether an interview is necessary to assess potential or meet a professional requirement. Where the case is unconvincing, removing the interview may be fairer than trying to correct every source of bias.

Speaking to an applicant directly may help to understand the context behind their grades, but those from less-advantaged backgrounds are less likely to have received guidance and support from their school through mock interviews and careers guidance activities.[47] A one-to-one conversation with an interviewer may also be a new experience that could impact their confidence on the day of an interview.

If you interview applicants before making offers, the following steps should be taken so that all applicants can perform to their potential:

- **Explain the interview format, assessment criteria, likely areas of questioning and any tasks in advance**, without undermining the validity of the assessment.
- **Questions should be designed so that applicants can draw on a range of experiences**, rather than focusing on extracurricular activities that may be expensive and experiences of a relevant workplace that those without professional connections may have struggled to find.
- **Where possible, there should be flexibility in the date and time offered for interviews**. It is important to recognise that some applicants may have caring responsibilities, work commitments or other circumstances which make it more difficult to commit to an interview timeslot.
- **Financial support should be available for those unable to cover the cost of travel to an interview**. You should question the need for a dress code, and if you do have one, financial support should be accessible for those who cannot afford smart clothing to wear.

Contextual information can be brought into the process in two ways. Firstly, those who meet a set of contextual criteria can be guaranteed or prioritised for an interview place. This gives applicants who have grades that fall just below the standard entry requirements a further chance to demonstrate their ability. For example, Cardiff University uses contextual information to guarantee an interview place or as additional consideration in the scoring of applicants ahead of interview selection, depending on the subject.

Contextual information can also inform final decisions alongside interview performance, provided its role is defined in advance and applied consistently. Under the University of Oxford's undergraduate admissions framework, contextual information is supplied to colleges in a common format and considered systematically. Final decisions draw on the information used at shortlisting alongside evidence from interviews and any admissions tests. Applicants should be told clearly what information is considered and how it may affect the process.

Subject-specific admissions processes

Using tests, auditions and additional methods of assessment can create further access barriers for socio-economically disadvantaged students who may be less informed about the application process or may be unable to afford additional costs like travel.

The information below builds on research previously released by the Sutton Trust on access to the creative industries and medicine to discuss some of these barriers, highlighting the elements of admissions that are unique to these two subject disciplines. Recommendations here apply to specialist institutions like conservatoires as well as universities that offer such subjects amongst a wide subject offering.

Creative subjects

From portfolios to auditions, creative admissions practices pose additional financial barriers for socio-economically disadvantaged students; for instance, they may be less likely to be able to afford the materials to put a strong portfolio together for a design course. And travel required for multiple auditions across different institutions adds further costs.

While in recent years, the majority of conservatoires have started to offer audition and travel waivers, signposting is often missed by applicants who are put off by the high costs, and currently no institutions offer further waivers for consultations (discussions with admissions staff prior to auditions).[48] To improve accessibility, you should not charge fees for auditions and improve signposting to financial support that is available. Financial support should also be offered to cover materials costs for portfolios and other associated expenses.

Case Study

Guildhall School of Music and Drama's application support

Guildhall School of Music and Drama offers a Supported Application Scheme, where applicants from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are able to apply to a course for free. A travel bursary is offered to cover audition and interview costs; free show tickets are given to grant access to a creative space; and applicants can attend Q&A sessions with staff and students to prepare for the application process. If they successfully enrol at the institution, students receive a £400 start-up fund upon arrival to cover the associated costs of starting a creative course.

Unequal access begins before application as subject choices and opportunities to develop creative practice can narrow across the educational journey. Admissions action should therefore connect to earlier subject outreach and clear guidance on portfolios and auditions.[49]

Contextualising applications to creative subjects often involves a different approach compared to other subjects – for example, in music, musical aptitude is often determined by qualifications gained through private lessons that those from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to afford. Admissions staff may also give more weight to applications from those showcasing talent in traditional and mainstream genres, not recognising the diversity of genres that represent a range of socio-economic backgrounds. The Sutton Trust has previously highlighted the need for collaboration across the creative sector to learn from those who are using contextual admissions practices to make them more commonplace in the sector.[50]

Medicine

Application processes for medicine are notably different to those of other subjects. These complex processes are variable across institutions, and they can be difficult for aspiring medical students to navigate. This is a particular issue for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who are less likely to have access to information from their school or family to guide them through the process.

Across the board, medical schools should work together to simplify their admissions processes and create greater consistency across the sector. Having a central source of guidance that applies to the process at multiple institutions would also be helpful.

Changes made should include improved recognition of the skills gained in work experience in non-medical environments. Admissions staff for medical courses often look for medicine-specific work experience from applicants, but this can be difficult for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to access. Considering a broader range of transferable skills will allow more applicants to showcase their relevant abilities.

Sutton Trust research found that applicants from lower socio-economic backgrounds achieved lower UCAT scores than better-off applicants with similarly high predicted A-level grades.[51] This suggests that the UCAT test may not be achieving its original widening access aim. Alongside outreach that helps applicants prepare for the UCAT, medical schools should contextualise UCAT thresholds for disadvantaged applicants.

Foundation years as an access route

For students who still don't quite reach entry requirements after contextual practices are used, foundation years

can play an important role in widening participation and supporting transition. But they should be treated carefully. They have the potential to bridge the gap between school or college to higher education for students who have not achieved the same grades as those who met a course's typical entry requirements, by helping students build subject-specific knowledge and academic literacies. Strong provision should have a clear educational purpose, transparent progression requirements and integrated academic and pastoral support. You should examine who enters, who progresses and whether students face additional cost or debt without a credible route onto the intended degree. You should also consider whether a foundation year is necessary or whether transition and first year support would suffice.

TASO describes foundation year programmes as high-cost interventions with weak evidence overall, while noting that there is some positive descriptive evidence.[52] They also argue that providers should embed causal evaluation to understand their impact on student outcomes and should analyse students' experiences to understand which students benefit most. This means foundation years should not be presented as a default solution to admission and transition barriers. Overall guidance on evaluation is covered in Chapter 6.

Degree apprenticeships

Degree apprenticeships should be treated as part of widening access to higher education and not solely as an employer recruitment route. Level 6 starts in England reached 26,800 in 2024/25, more than four times the number in 2017/18, but expansion has not led to equitable admissions.[53] After accounting for differences in attainment, the Social Mobility Foundation found that degree apprenticeships were 3.5 times less accessible to young people eligible for free school meals than Russell Group universities. Its analysis of 6,449 vacancies also found that only 20% explicitly accepted BTEC qualifications and 32% were advertised in just ten postcode areas.[54]

Universities delivering degree apprenticeships should work with employers, schools, colleges and careers hubs to advertise opportunities early, reach areas and groups with limited access and help applicants navigate unfamiliar recruitment processes. Entry requirements should recognise vocational qualifications unless there is a clear academic or occupational reason not to, while selection should be structured, transparent and take applicants' circumstances into account. Providers and employers should help with travel and relocation costs and monitor applications, offers, starts, completion and progression by socio-economic background. Apprentices also need joined-up academic, workplace and wellbeing support that recognises the demands of combining employment and study.

Many socio-economically disadvantaged students do not lack the ability to succeed at university; rather, they have overcome adversity linked to missing out on the basic support that others receive throughout their education. Changing your admission practices is a practical way to improve access to university for this group, ensuring that opportunity is not determined by factors outside a student's control.

3. Supporting the transition to university

Access does not end when a student receives an offer. The period between receiving an offer and becoming established in the first term can influence whether a student is able to participate fully from the outset. To tackle the barriers to a smooth transition into higher education, you should:

- **Begin transition support before arrival** and continue it through the first term, using the period after an offer is accepted to address practical, financial, academic and social barriers.
- **Give a senior leader overall responsibility for transition**, with clear ownership across academic departments and professional services.
- **Provide clear, staged pre-arrival information** on finance, accommodation, commuting, course costs, equipment, induction, academic expectations and where to get help.
- **Identify students' needs early** through pre-arrival questionnaires and targeted outreach rather than waiting for students to self-refer once problems have escalated.
- **Reduce upfront costs** wherever possible including through transition grants, travel support, equipment loans, laptop schemes, early hardship support and transparent course cost information.
- **Prepare students for academic study** by explaining university learning, independent study, academic writing, digital platforms, assessment expectations and discipline-specific norms.

This chapter focuses on the transition into university, which is not a single move into the first year of a three-year degree. Students may enter through foundation years, articulation agreements, top-up routes or transfer, and may need renewed support when moving course, institution or level of study.

The focus here is what universities can do before students arrive to reduce financial, practical, academic and social barriers for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Why transition matters

Students arrive with different levels of financial security, prior exposure to higher education and familiarity with how universities work. Sutton Trust research illustrates some of this uneven preparation: 38% of state school pupils reported taking part in no careers related activities, compared with 23% of privately educated pupils. Within the state sector, teachers in the most deprived areas were more likely to report that personal guidance was delivered by non-specialists than teachers in more affluent areas.[55]

This discrepancy is not simply about confidence. University systems can rely on assumed knowledge about independent study, academic language, staff roles, digital platforms, assessment and when or how to seek help. Research on the 'hidden curriculum' has long shown how institutions can rely on unstated knowledge about academic conventions, staff roles and how to seek support.[56] The circumstances in which students make this transition are also changing, with more students taking up part-time work and more choosing to live at home throughout their studies. Indeed, the 2026 Student Academic Experience Survey found that 65% of full-time UK undergraduates were in paid employment during term time.[57] These circumstances should not be generalised to every entrant but they reinforce the need to design transition support for students with different patterns of work, travel, study and residence.

The principal barriers before and during arrival include:

- Upfront costs that arise before student support or institutional funding is paid
- Fragmented information and reliance on unfamiliar terminology or processes
- Uncertainty about academic expectations and discipline-specific ways of learning
- Delays in arranging disability-related support or other adjustments
- Limited opportunities to form early connections with peers and staff

- Activities designed around a residential, time-rich student without employment, caring or substantial travel commitments.

The evidence on the impact of transition programmes remains limited. TASO is currently supporting several evaluations because relatively few university transition activities have been rigorously assessed. The examples in this chapter should therefore be understood as promising or evidence-informed practice unless stronger causal evidence is identified. Providers should evaluate transition support against its intended outcomes using the framework set out in Chapter 6.

Key elements of support

You should build a pre-arrival transition offer that begins once students have accepted a place and continues into the first term. This should not be a generic email sequence. It should combine universal clarity with targeted support for students more likely to face transition barriers.

A strong pre-arrival model should include five core elements:

Provide clear, staged and practical information

You should review pre-arrival communications from the perspective of a student with no prior family experience of higher education. Students need to know what must be done now, what can wait and what support is available if they are unsure. Useful information includes

- Student finance and when payments are likely to arrive
- Accommodation contracts, deposits and guarantor requirements
- Commuting options and likely travel costs
- Course materials which are essential rather than optional
- Digital access, software, laptop expectations and campus IT support
- Induction dates, attendance expectations and what will happen during welcome activities
- Who to contact for financial, wellbeing, disability, academic or accommodation support
- What to do if personal circumstances change before arrival.

The tone of this information matters. Communications should avoid assuming confidence, spare money or prior knowledge. They should normalise uncertainty and the need to seek help. A good test is whether a student could use the information without needing a parent, teacher or graduate sibling to interpret it.

Case Study

The University of Kent – Head Start

The University of Kent's Head Start programme provides pre-arrival resources and guidance throughout the summer before students begin their studies. The offer includes information on campus and accommodation, cost of living, student life and student support. Kent also runs a campus visit day for local students joining the university with opportunities for students and their families or supporters to meet support teams, learn about living on campus or commuting, and receive specialist information. An online option is available for those who cannot attend in person. Evidence submitted to the Sutton Trust indicates that students attending Head Start had higher continuation rates than the wider undergraduate entry population, including a 9.3 percentage point difference for IMD quintile 1 students in 2024/25.

Identify students' needs before term starts

You should not rely only on demographic indicators or wait for students to self-identify once term begins. Pre-arrival questionnaires can help to understand the incoming cohort's expectations, concerns and circumstances before they arrive. This can include questions on confidence, travel, study space, caring responsibilities, paid work, disability, access to equipment, financial concerns and familiarity with university learning.

The value of these tools is not just data collection. They can also be used to show students that their concerns are common and that support exists. Where you use pre-arrival questionnaires, you should quickly connect students to relevant support, as well as feeding back headline findings if helpful. Asking students about their needs and then failing to respond risks undermining trust.

This approach should sit alongside targeted outreach to groups known to face higher transition risks. This may include students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, care-experienced and estranged students, disabled students, mature students, commuter students, students entering through contextual routes, and students from rural or coastal areas where travel and access to services may be more difficult.

Reduce the upfront financial burden

Universities cannot resolve wider student finance pressures, but they can remove avoidable institutional costs and reduce the gap between when costs arise and when financial support is received. Support should not be limited to students who know how to ask. You should publish clear information about bursaries, scholarships and hardship support and their eligibility criteria before applicants make final decisions. Where costs arise before student finance or institutional support is paid, providers should consider advance payments, fee waivers, travel support or short-term bridging help.

Transition support should include an audit of the costs students face before and during the first weeks of term. This should involve academic departments as well as central widening participation and student support teams since many costs are course-specific.

Practical measures could include:

- Clearly publishing expected course costs before enrolment
- Distinguishing essential costs from recommended or optional purchases

- Providing early access bursaries or transition grants for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, accessible before they receive their first loan payment
- Offering travel support for pre-arrival events, offer-holder days and early induction
- Providing starter packs or equipment loans for students on high-cost courses
- Making laptop loan schemes visible before arrival.

Prepare students for academic study

Transition support should include academic preparation as well as social orientation. Students should know how learning at university will differ from school or college, what independent study involves and what academic support is available. This is not remedial. It is good pedagogy and it benefits a wide range of students.

Pre-arrival academic support in the summer before studies start can include short online modules, reading and writing guidance, academic skills sessions, subject refreshers, library introductions, digital learning platform tutorials and opportunities to meet academic staff. It should be tied to the student's course wherever possible. Generic study skills advice is useful, but students also need to understand what counts as evidence, argument, analysis or good practice in their discipline.

Academic preparation is useful when it is structured, sequenced and linked to a clear transition purpose: helping students understand the expectations, learning practices and academic norms of higher education before they arrive.

A 2025 study found that students enrolled in an optional online transition course were 6.2 percentage points more likely to pass their first year compared to a matched group.[58]

Case Study

London South Bank University – Study Ready and Get to Know Us

London South Bank University's transition support focuses on early identification of need, personalised support and reducing barriers before they affect continuation. Their Study Ready programme helps students returning to education and those new to higher education develop academic and digital skills before starting university. LSBU also runs Get to Know Us events, which allow enrolling students and their supporters to meet teams such as mental health and wellbeing, disability and dyslexia support, and student advice.

Build belonging before arrival

Students should have opportunities to meet peers, student ambassadors and staff before the first week of term. This is most important for those who may be less likely to arrive with existing networks. Peer mentoring and ambassador schemes can help students understand what university life is really like, ask questions they may not want to ask staff and see people with similar backgrounds succeeding.

Mentoring can support transition by helping students form relationships and build belonging before arrival. It should have a clear purpose, trained mentors and structured contact, and should complement practical, financial and academic support rather than substitute for it.

You should not assume that any mentoring scheme will work simply because it exists. Mentors need training, relationships need structure and the purpose of the intervention should be clear. For transition, the aim should be practical: reduce anxiety, build familiarity, explain the institution and create early points of connection.

Mentors should be trained and drawn from a range of courses, routes and student circumstances. Contact should begin once places are confirmed and continue through at least the first weeks of term. Chapter 1 reviews the wider evidence.

Case Study

University of Reading – Access Reading

Access Reading supports University of Reading applicants from widening participation groups from March to October before enrolment. It includes an in-person event and online mentoring. Evaluation through pre-, mid- and post-programme surveys found positive and statistically significant increases on participants' sense of belonging and knowledge of support available at university, sustained through the intervention. Reading also reported that participants progressed from application to enrolment in greater proportions than eligible students who did not participate, although conclusions are limited by self-selection into the programme.

Extend induction beyond welcome week

Welcome week can be valuable, but it is often too crowded and too late to carry the full burden of transition. Students may be managing accommodation, finance, travel, employment, anxiety, disability support, caring responsibilities and course registration at the same time. Important information can be missed or forgotten.

You should design induction as an extended process running from pre-arrival into the first term. This should include:

- Early contact before arrival
- Targeted pre-arrival events for students facing transition barriers
- Academic onboarding in the first weeks
- Repeated signposting to support services
- Structured opportunities to meet peers and staff
- Check-ins after the initial induction period
- Monitoring of early engagement and rapid follow-up where students appear to be disengaging.

This requires collaboration between widening participation teams, academic departments, student support, accommodation, libraries, finance teams, careers services and students' unions. Transition cannot sit only with central student services. The course is where students spend most of their time and the course team often has the strongest influence on whether they feel seen, supported and academically confident.

Every incoming student should know who they can contact with an academic, financial or personal concern. That person need not solve every problem, but they should have the time, training and institutional knowledge to give a useful first response and make a supported referral.

You should treat preparation before arrival as a core part of your social mobility work. The most effective transition support is not necessarily the most elaborate. It is timely, targeted and practical. Students need to know what university will cost, what they need to do before they arrive, how academic study will work, who they can contact and where they fit within the institution.

4. Supporting students to succeed

Widening access is only meaningful if students from all backgrounds are equally able to continue and succeed in their studies, while benefitting from the full university experience. To maximise student success, you should:

- **Provide predictable, needs-based financial support.** Make it easy to access and target provisions at the costs most likely to prevent participation or continuation.
- **Ensure students from lower socio-economic backgrounds can access paid work experience, careers guidance and professional networks** as well as the wider opportunities that help convert a degree into future success.
- **Design timetables, curricula, support services and opportunities around the realities of students** who work, commute, care for others or face financial insecurity.
- **Use institutional data and student insight** to identify unequal outcomes, offer timely support and evaluate impact on continuation, attainment, belonging and progression.
- **Give all staff regular appropriate training and professional development** raising awareness of how to support and teach students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Enhance pastoral and mentoring support** for all students to ensure students and staff build up meaningful supportive relationships.

The financial, educational and social inequalities that shape access to university do not disappear at enrolment. They remain visible in student outcomes. In 2023/24, 67% of former FSM students achieved a first or upper second-class degree compared with 79% of other students; the gap between those from the most and least deprived areas was 66% to 84%.[59]

As this chapter discusses, the drivers of these outcomes are complex,[60] and there is intersectionality with ethnicity, disability, age, caring responsibilities, prior educational experience and whether a student lives at home. You therefore need both inclusive provision for the whole student body and targeted action where your own data shows particular groups facing unequal risks or outcomes.

Responsibility across departments

Universities should treat student success as a whole-provider responsibility rather than a set of services added around the fringes of the academic experience. Responsibility should extend across faculties, teaching and assessment, student services, accommodation, finance, estates, careers teams and students' unions. Support should be easy to navigate but the overarching aim must be to remove avoidable structural barriers, rather than expecting students to overcome them individually. It should be offered throughout a student's time at university, with particular focus and targeted support at specific points of the student lifecycle where there are notable transitions, such as the first months of study and the months leading up to graduation.

Inclusive learning, teaching and assessment

Student success cannot be delivered by student services alone. You should examine whether curriculum

content, teaching, assessment, course costs and administrative processes create avoidable barriers. Academic conventions and study practices should be taught explicitly within courses rather than left to optional provision that students must already know to seek out.

Embedding academic skills does not mean lowering standards or removing specialist support. It means making the knowledge needed to meet those standards available to every student through the core course. Course and module review should examine assessment volume, deadline clustering, the clarity and timing of feedback, access to learning materials, placement requirements and persistent outcome gaps.

Staff development should support inclusive curriculum and assessment design while outcome data should be used to identify where particular modules, courses or practices are producing persistent gaps. Indeed, recent analysis across three universities found smaller ethnic awarding gaps where assessments were structured, clearly guided and time-limited, and wider gaps for open-ended, high-stakes tasks placing greater demands on students' self-regulation.[61]

Case Study

London Metropolitan University: embedding social justice in teaching and assessment

London Met's Education for Social Justice Framework is built into course design and review, staff development and student partnership. 95% of substantive academic staff have engaged with it. Student Curriculum Partners review teaching materials and assessments while course teams use module level data to identify gaps. London Met reports that non-submission fell from 15% to 5% and the module mark gap between White students and students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds narrowed from 5.9 to 1.3 percentage points.

Data and monitoring

You should examine continuation, attainment, completion and progression at provider, faculty, course and module level. Analysis should consider how socio-economic background intersects with ethnicity, disability, gender and other characteristics, while avoiding confident conclusions based on very small groups. Individual-level attendance and engagement data can also prompt timely contact, but low engagement should be treated as a reason for a supportive conversation rather than evidence that a student lacks commitment.

Students should be told clearly what is being collected, why and how they may be used to offer support.

One UK study found that 'no engagement' alerts identified students at risk of not progressing or attaining more efficiently than demographic indicators alone.[62] However, identifying risk is not the same as improving outcomes. A 2024 TASO trial at two universities found that adding a support phone call to an email alert produced no measurable improvement in engagement or repeat alerts and no detectable effect on the attendance or withdrawal measures tested.[63] Alerts should therefore lead to a clear and timely offer of support from a named team or member of staff. You should track who takes up that support and test whether it improves outcomes or has unequal effects across student groups.

Named, relational and joined-up support

Digital systems cannot replace trusted relationships. Every student should have a clearly identified academic or pastoral contact with scheduled opportunities to discuss academic progress and barriers affecting their studies. Academic and professional services staff should be clear about how to refer and escalate cases, so that students do not have to repeat their circumstances to multiple teams or navigate institutional boundaries alone.

Staff who hold tutoring or advisory responsibilities need appropriate training, time and recognition within workload models. Training should cover the financial and practical realities facing students; inclusive communication; the boundaries of the tutor role; and routes into specialist academic, financial, disability and mental health support (as discussed below). The aim is not to turn every member of staff into a specialist, but to ensure that students receive a knowledgeable and consistent first response.

Mentoring and coaching can support attainment, belonging and continuation, but programmes vary. You should define their purpose, train and support mentors; make participation easy; and evaluate which students engage and benefit. For more on evaluation, please see Chapter 6.

To ensure this is effective, particularly in institutions and a sector undergoing

constant change and development, tutors need to be properly trained and updated.[64] How to deliver effective pastoral tutoring should be a regular part of continuing professional development for staff. Importantly, an aim of this should be to align the work of academic and support staff, which has been shown to improve staff responsiveness to student needs.[65]

Training should prepare staff for the circumstances of today's increasingly diverse student body, including paid work, commuting, caring responsibilities, financial pressure and different prior experiences of higher education. You should adapt your systems and expectations rather than treat these circumstances as deficits in students.[66] The Advance HE Student Needs Framework offers one tool for reviewing how academic and professional services respond to competence, confidence, belonging and community.

Financial support

Financial pressures continue to shape student life. A study of more than 1,000 students at four universities found that 66% worked to cover basic living costs and 26% to support their families. Students working fewer than 20 hours a week were more likely to be on track for a good honours degree, while flexible and supportive work was associated with better outcomes.[67]

Universities cannot compensate fully for an inadequate national maintenance system, but they should use their resources strategically to reduce the costs most likely to prevent participation and continuation.

English higher education providers reported £739 million of access and participation investment in 2024/25, including £354 million classified as financial support.[68] This shows the scale of institutional provision but not whether it is sufficient, well targeted or effective. You should publish clear information about the support available; monitor take up; and assess whether it reaches students most at risk of financial hardship and improves their outcomes.

Financial support should be needs based, predictable and straightforward to access. When reviewing budgets, universities should assess how changes to financial support would affect socio-economically disadvantaged students and their ability to continue studying, giving students clear notice of any changes. You should review whether household income thresholds still identify students facing hardship and that they are not relying on thresholds that have failed to keep pace with costs. Wherever data permits, bursaries should be awarded automatically.

Information should be provided before enrolment and repeated during study, with targeted communication to students who may be eligible but have not applied. Offering support through one central system can make it more accessible – for example, Imperial College London have partnered with Blackbullion to offer a Funds Management System to all students,

which offers online learning modules on finance, budgeting tools, and hosts applications for funding support packages.

Case Study

University of Bath: combining financial, relational and employability support

Established in 2017, the University of Bath's Gold Scholarship Programme supports around 50 students from low-income backgrounds in each entry cohort. The multi-year programme combines £5,000 of annual financial support with structured skills and employability development, professional mentoring, volunteering and a cohort community. Gold Scholars report strong belonging and confidence while continuation and completion have remained above the institutional average, despite the programme's more disadvantaged intake. 96% reported that the financial support was important to their continuation.

Covering the cost of living

Working students are more likely to miss lectures and classes; to fall behind with their work; submit coursework late or in a rush to meet a deadline; and consequently face lower attainment and growing mental health concerns.[69] To minimise these difficulties, you should endeavour to offer a range of financial support initiatives. These might include bursaries and scholarships, hardship funds, food and drink discounts or vouchers. Each of these are considered below. Support should reflect the actual costs students face including accommodation, travel, food, digital access, course materials, placements and participation in university life. Provision should be co-designed with students and assessed against outcomes such as financial wellbeing, hours of paid work, continuation and participation, rather than simply the amount distributed.

A longstanding problem with student bursaries and scholarships is that many of them remain unclaimed, as students are not aware they are eligible.[70] UCAS's scholarships and bursaries tool guides prospective students to support, but universities still have a responsibility to keep their own information accurate, and communicate directly with eligible students.

Emergency funds are more likely to be needed at short notice and need rapid decisions, clear eligibility and payment arrangements that reflect this urgency. They should sit alongside preventive and predictable support rather than compensate for an inadequate bursary offer. Application and approval times should be kept to a minimum, with a range of payment options available including cash and bank transfers. You should monitor whether referral processes, stigma or opening hours deter those who need help.

Financial advice should reflect current local costs including rent; food; transport; utilities and course materials; and discounts available to students in utilities as well as retail.[71] WonkHE have highlighted cost of living estimates for students. You could look to replicate such models to reflect costs in your local area.

Where food insecurity is identified, institutions should provide dignified and accessible support, and examine whether bursary and hardship provision is adequate. Food banks and redistribution schemes should be treated as emergency measures rather than substitutes for sufficient financial support. You could also offer discounts or vouchers for shops and food outlets on campus, but to avoid limiting student choice, vouchers for supermarkets may be better.

Case Study

Unite Foundation: accommodation as student support

Unite Foundation works with more than 30 universities to provide care experienced and estranged students with 365-day, rent-free accommodation for up to three years, alongside named contacts and community support. An independent Jisc analysis found that 87% of scholars progressed from first to second year, compared with 76% of other care-leaver students, while 71% completed a degree within three years, compared with 60-63% of other care leaver groups. Although the study did not establish causation, it provides strong evidence that the scholarship is associated with better outcomes.

Designing study around students' lives

Course design should recognise that many socio-economically disadvantaged students combine study with paid work, commuting, caring responsibilities or parenthood. These experiences overlap and may mean such students are less available than others. However, this is not evidence of lower commitment.

Consequently, teaching delivery, assessment, support services and student administration need to keep working and commuting students in mind, as well as those who may live on campus or students who do not need paid work.

Commuter students are likely to face particular challenges that others do not. However, they have often been overlooked and not had their needs adequately acknowledged.[72] Sutton Trust research has found that socio-economically disadvantaged students were over three times more likely to live at home during university,[73] and in the light of cost of living challenges, the number of commuter students is increasing. Commuter students can face longer travel times; more home or caring commitments; higher travel costs; fewer opportunities for socialising and making friends or building networks; and less flexibility in arranging meetings.

Key factors that can support working and commuting students in their studies include:

- **Flexible access to lectures and learning resources**. Although students may be encouraged to attend learning in person, for some students on some occasions this just will not be possible.
- **Condensed timetables** to minimise need for commuting travel, publishing them well in advance and sticking to them.
- **A purposeful mix of assessment methods**, reviewing whether format, timing or technology creates avoidable barriers.
- **Access to key administrative and support services outside of office hours.**
- **Support for students in finding flexible working opportunities** that can more easily accommodate learning commitments. This could include fairly paid, openly advertised on-campus work designed around study commitments.
- **Clear and compassionate mitigation processes** for disruption caused by work, caring, travel or financial crises without compromising academic standards.
- **Involvement of working, commuting and caring students in timetable and service design**, including travel support where costs prevent

participation, and suitable spaces between classes.

Access to student societies

Student societies, volunteering, leadership, studying abroad and other activities are a great opportunity to network, learn new skills, travel, develop knowledge, build up experience and raise wellbeing. However, Sutton Trust research has found that student societies are less frequented by working class students than their better off peers, due to paid-work commitments, fear of impacting their studies or feeling out of place.[74] Similarly, only 38% of students living at home participate in extracurricular activities compared to 66% of those living away.[75]

Membership fees are only one barrier: equipment; clothing; travel; tickets; late finishes; and long gaps between teaching and activities can also exclude students. Universities and students' unions should therefore audit the full costs, timing and accessibility of activities; provide targeted participation funds; avoid unnecessary expenditure on travel, clothing and equipment; offer activities at varied times and in different formats; and ensure students understand the skills and opportunities these experiences can provide. Many of these opportunities come at heavily discounted rates or will be free for students to attend, supported by university subsidies. However, this should be true of all societies, not just some or most.

What is more, you should ensure to minimise hidden costs incorporated into activities, including attendance at social events; expectations of buying uniforms, outfits or equipment; and travel expenses. Sometimes, students running societies who do not themselves face financial challenges are not aware of the difficulties that others may face. Universities and students' unions should therefore audit the full costs, timing and accessibility of activities, while also training student leaders and volunteers to address this issue.

Belonging and participation

Belonging is the experience of being accepted, respected, included and supported. It is built through the course; relationships with staff and peers; fair treatment and the ability to take part, not through a standalone event. You should examine whether assumptions about money, accent, time, travel, family support or prior experience make some students believe that university was designed for someone else. A recent survey of university students and applicants by Unite, Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Leeds identified a range of factors contributing to what their report calls 'culture shock' among disadvantaged students.[76] This can involve factors such as large contrasts in lifestyles; financial expectations and capacities; experience of living away from home; or leaving behind communities and socialising experiences.

Academic belonging and friendships formed through a course deserve as much attention as general social activity. Early communication, peer contact and mentoring can help, but belonging cannot compensate for inadequate funding, poor teaching or exclusionary practice. Students should be involved in identifying barriers and judging whether changes improve everyday experience.[77]

Research has found that connectedness and integration are essential factors contributing to student satisfaction, academic success and retention.[78] However, the transition to university life often disrupts social networks. You cannot know what is right for every new student, but you can implement initiatives that will support students in building up their own networks. Peer support or mentoring with people who share relevant experiences can ease transition, but this should open routes into wider academic and social networks rather than become an end in itself.[79] Peer support groups or mentoring with students with similar experiences might, therefore, be integrated into welcome activities.[80]

Students should be involved in identifying barriers and designing responses. You should pay participants where appropriate; offer flexible and accessible ways to contribute; and avoid relying only on students with the time and confidence to volunteer. Peer networks and mentoring may help but they should complement action on curriculum; staff practice; harassment; class prejudice; and both the affordability and timing of university activities. You should analyse belonging and engagement by both socio-economic background and intersecting characteristics, rather than assuming one initiative will work for every student.

Further resources are available via the Centre for Belonging and within a review of what works from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Higher Education Academy and Action on Access here.

Meaningful staff-student relationships are also key to building confidence and improving engagement, particularly for vulnerable students, including those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.[81] This is why targeted building of positive student-staff relationships – through pastoral and mental health support, for instance – is vital.

Pastoral and mental health support

Pastoral support should be a vital part of every student's university experience but even more so for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is important for social and academic integration; network building; confidence building; increasing familiarity with other support services; and maintaining student engagement. The following recommendations should be carefully considered and incorporated into pastoral support:

- **Timetable tutor/tutee meetings**: a common problem with pastoral tutoring is that it is seen as optional or of secondary importance, so meetings are often skipped or missed. Timetabling meetings alongside lectures, classes and other obligations helps ensure attendance and emphasises their importance.
- **Combine one-to-one pastoral tutoring with small group tutoring**: one-to-one meetings are essential for building up trust and understanding, but small group sessions can also help build networks of friends, offer opportunities to share experiences (positive or negative) and build mutual support.
- **A curriculum integrated model:** set simple tasks or purpose for initial meetings. This could be picking up course resources, a welcome pack or even a library card. This can give a

clear purpose to an initial or follow up meeting, ensuring commitment to it from both sides.

There should be clear guidance for those offering pastoral support on how to signpost to mental health support, particularly professional services. The rapid increase in mental health challenges among young people in recent years is widely recognised and needs to be part of any university's plans. Universities UK has issued guidance on how to take a whole institution approach across curriculum and learning; work; support services; and everyday living. Each institution will face its own circumstances. However, key factors in keeping mental health at the top of the agenda can include:

- Formulating a vision for mental health support involving students and staff
- Clear leadership structures at the highest levels, giving visibility to the issue while ensuring effective implementation and monitoring
- Transparent procedures, responsibilities and accountability
- Appropriate training for all staff to raise awareness and support to ensure early identification of issues
- Evidence-based monitoring of procedures and outcomes.

Fair access to careers and work-based learning

A degree does not, by itself, remove unequal access to professional networks, career information and work experience. Sutton Trust research found that 33% of graduates from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds did not think university had given them the skills needed to secure the jobs they wanted, compared with 27% of better off graduates. Among graduates who had not undertaken work experience, 20% of those from disadvantaged backgrounds said they could not afford to do so, compared with 15% of their better off peers.

Students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds continue to experience poorer labour market outcomes than their peers.[82] Contributing factors include lower prior attainment, unequal access to professional networks and the need to spend more time in paid work while studying. This can leave less time for career development or make an unpaid placement unaffordable.[83]

Universities UK's *Future Jobs Roadmap* sets an ambition for all undergraduates in England to have the opportunity to access meaningful work-based learning by 2035, with an interim milestone of 50% by 2030. This is a welcome commitment. However, offering an opportunity through a course does not mean that every student can take it up. Work-based learning also covers very different experiences, from paid year-long placements to live employer projects, job shadowing and virtual activities.

Careers and employability support should begin early; be connected to the curriculum; and be targeted where engagement and outcome data show unequal access. Careers services and course teams should help students identify and articulate transferable skills developed through existing paid work. However, students do not have equal freedom to choose work related to their intended career or to give up essential earnings for an unpaid opportunity. Recognising existing employment should therefore sit alongside action to widen access to professionally relevant experience and networks.

Universities should:

- **Build meaningful, high-quality work-based learning into courses**, with a defined purpose, appropriate work, supervision, feedback and reflection,

so access does not depend on spare time, confidence or personal contacts.

- **Pay students for internships and substantial placements** wherever possible. Otherwise, provide targeted grants towards travel, accommodation, clothing, equipment, childcare and income that students would otherwise forgo.
- **Offer different timings, locations and formats** so that commuting students, carers and disabled students are not excluded.
- **Work with employers to make recruitment transparent and structured**; remove unnecessary experience or network-based criteria; and address potential discrimination, including accent bias.
- **Monitor who is offered opportunities and who applies, secures, starts and completes each form of work-based learning.**

Case Study

Work placements at Nottingham Trent University

One part of Nottingham Trent's employability offer is sandwich work placements, which are year-long placements which take place before a student's final year. All students are able to take one, with the intention that the placements deliver practical industry experience and careers guidance. Through their RISE widening participation initiative, second-year students from disadvantaged backgrounds can engage with a structured programme to help them find placements and succeed in the recruitment process. The programme aims to boost students' confidence and resilience; and to enhance their commercial awareness.

Various forms of support should be accessible to socio-economically disadvantaged students throughout their time as an undergraduate and as soon as they arrive on campus. Eligibility criteria should also recognise that someone's personal circumstances may change throughout their time at university, meaning students should be able to seek support at any time.

5. Widening participation at postgraduate level

Progress in widening access to undergraduate study has not yet been fully mirrored at postgraduate level. To ensure postgraduate student bodies are socio-economically diverse, you should:

- **Tailor postgraduate action to the route.** Analyse postgraduate taught and postgraduate research access separately, reflecting their different purposes, funding arrangements and progression pathways.
- **Use contextual admissions and contextualised funding decisions at postgraduate level**, recognising that undergraduate attainment and research experience are themselves shaped by unequal opportunity.
- **Widen access to research experience.** Offer fully funded placements, internships and bridging provision where evidence identifies a preparation gap.
- **Build early, visible routes into postgraduate study** including research tasters, application support, and funded placements.
- **Set out fees, deposits, living costs, funding and deadlines in one clear place** and reduce the risk that applicants must commit before funding is known.
- **Collaborate with other institutions** to standardise the application process, share opportunities with a wider range of prospective postgraduates and improve data collection.
- **Support students after entry** through inclusive supervision, research skills development, belonging, and guidance on clear progression routes.

Without improvements in access, there is a risk that postgraduate study will become the new frontier of social mobility, with better-off graduates using higher degrees to differentiate themselves from other undergraduate degree holders who face financial barriers to further study.[84] This is important because postgraduate qualifications can shape entry into academia, research, specialist professions and higher-paid graduate pathways.[85] Indeed, taking the postgraduate route can bring a potential earnings boost of more than £6,000 five years after graduating.[86]

The Government's post-16 education and skills white paper set out aims to increase work with the Office for Students and UK Council for Graduate Education. You should not wait for national reform to be introduced before they take action – you should reflect on their own initiatives and set targets to improve postgraduate access at your own institution.

Outreach

Early guidance can make the difference between seeing postgraduate study as a realistic pathway and ruling it out before understanding the route.

The most important themes to cover in postgraduate outreach include:

- How postgraduate admissions differ from undergraduate admissions
- What contextual information applicants can provide and how the admissions team will use it
- Course types at all levels, covering teaching and learning styles. This should cover the difference between research and taught master's programmes
- Progression routes from a master's to a PhD, and associated funding options for undergraduates looking to go straight into a PhD
- How postgraduate funding works, including timelines (particularly the common mismatch between funding

Tailored efforts at different levels:

Postgraduate taught (PGT) and postgraduate research (PGR) study present related but distinct access challenges. PGT courses are usually time-limited qualifications funded largely through student finance or private resources and may be pursued for professional progression or differentiation in the labour market. PGR routes are more closely tied to research funding, supervisory relationships and the pipeline into academic and research careers. Institutions should analyse and respond to each route separately.[87]

Progression also differs. A taught master's may lead into employment or PGR while a research master's, methods training or a funded 1+3 route may form part of a doctoral pathway.

The guidance in this chapter points to tailored approaches to taught and research-based studies, as well as doctorates compared to master's, but you should always bear the differences here in mind when designing your efforts to widen postgraduate access and participation.

and course deadlines) and any hidden costs
- Application guidance
- How to identify and approach potential supervisors
- Career paths post-study.

This information can be shared at careers fairs and other engagement opportunities where post-graduation pathways are set out. Collaboration between university careers teams and student supervisors is important here, so that these opportunities are openly advertised and reach all students.

Outreach should not be limited to final-year students who have already self-identified as potential postgraduates. You should introduce postgraduate options earlier in undergraduate study with a focus on subjects where module choices, dissertation topics, laboratory experience, placements or research methods training affect later eligibility. This is important so that all students can be aware of the need to put applications together in good time in order to apply in often mismatched application windows for courses and postgraduate funding.

For those looking to pursue postgraduate study, one-to-one support with applications should also be given if possible, for example through supervisor meetings. Supervisors should be able to offer subject-specific advice on the postgraduate options available and the careers it can lead to. Academic departments and overarching careers services should make sure that such information is easily accessible and shared with staff across their institution so that supervisors can easily signpost opportunities.

When offering guidance on postgraduate options, you should recognise that there are different barriers to different pathways for socio-economically disadvantaged students. Part-time courses may help those with caring responsibilities, but this may have a bearing on funding; residency requirements may limit access to some courses; and some courses may involve a lot of study away from campus which may suit those looking to live at home but not those who are without a suitable study space at home.

Unequal prior attainment before university remains relevant here,[88] but postgraduate outreach should concentrate on barriers arising at undergraduate level and in the postgraduate application process.

Efforts should also engage those outside of your own institution's student body. Indeed, in 2021/22 more than half of postgraduate researchers were based in Russell Group institutions.[89] This does not reflect the distribution of students at undergraduate level.

Research-intensive institutions should therefore treat postgraduate outreach beyond their own undergraduate population as a core access responsibility. This could include partnerships with post-1992 institutions, further education colleges offering higher education, regional partnerships, doctoral training partnerships and sector networks. Targeted social media campaigns will also be helpful to reach those not currently studying at your institution.

Internships, summer schools and placements

You should offer a range of accessible routes into postgraduate study that are advertised through outreach activities. For example, internships can work as a bridge into postgraduate study, providing opportunities to develop the skills needed to thrive and stand out in applications. The University of York offers funded summer placements during the summer break for second and third year students as well as

integrated master's students in STEMM fields through Generation Research, an organisation that funds placements and studentships in science for students from under-represented backgrounds. These opportunities can allow students to gain first-hand experience in research settings like laboratories and the chance to develop research skills to feature on both postgraduate and job applications.

Postgraduate summer schools are another emerging area, where some institutions have looked to their undergraduate programmes to inspire a similar programme at postgraduate level.

Case Study

Postgraduate access at the University of Oxford

The University of Oxford runs UNIQplus Research Internships, a seven-week research experience for students who would find continuing to postgraduate study challenging for reasons other than academic ability. Interns receive accommodation and a payment designed to cover travel, meals and the opportunity cost of not taking paid work during the summer. The development of these programmes drew on the experience and success of Oxford's established UNIQ undergraduate programme.

They also run UNIQplus PASS – an online research skills development programme over the summer break for students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds planning to apply for postgraduate studies in the autumn of the same year. Sessions cover academic reading, writing, presentation skills, research techniques, methodology guidance and research proposals. Those who complete the programme are then paired with a mentor to support them with their application.

You should look to your undergraduate access programmes to identify which elements can be adapted for postgraduate progression. These opportunities should be fully funded to remove the financial barriers faced by applicants from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. They should also be accessible to students beyond your own institution.

Exploring bridging routes

Where evidence identifies a preparation gap, providers may test fully funded bridging routes such as research methods programmes, subject conversion support or integrated master's-to-doctoral pathways. The Martingale Foundation suggest that this model could replicate the structure of 1+3 year PhD programmes, whereby a student completes a master's then goes on to study a PhD in the same subject discipline. This is a model already funded by bodies like the Economic and Social Research Council.

Other potential models could look at research methods bootcamps, transition programmes and subject-specific conversion support.

These routes could help address gaps in research experience, academic confidence and preparation but they should be fully funded and clearly targeted. Without funding, additional preparatory years risk increasing costs for the very students they are intended to support.

Admissions

You should also review whether your postgraduate admissions systems are transparent, consistent and easy to navigate. As there is not a standard approach across universities for postgraduate admissions, the landscape can be difficult to navigate. This is particularly the case for those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, who are less likely to both

know where to look to find postgraduate courses and have support to help with applying.

You should publish a consistent minimum set of information for every postgraduate course including entry criteria, selection process, funding options, application deadlines, deposit requirements, supervisor contact expectations and available support.

Institutions can also work together to bring a more standardised, shared admissions model. For example, an inclusive postgraduate admissions framework has been developed by Nottingham Trent University as part of their Equity in Doctoral Education through Partnership and Innovation project, which they invite other institutions to use. This has been designed to tackle access issues for ethnic minority groups particularly, but also takes attainment gaps and unequal access to high-tariff research intensive institutions into account.

Having a more joined-up admissions system at postgraduate level across institutions could also help to improve data on the application and success rates of students from different backgrounds, as well as potentially reducing administrative costs for institutions.

Contextual admissions

In addition to undergraduate level, you should develop, publish and evaluate contextual approaches to postgraduate admissions recognising academic potential as well as prior attainment, and taking account of unequal access to research experience, academic networks and funding guidance. Evaluation guidance features in Chapter 6.

Such practices should still use the admissions criteria explored in Chapter 1 of this guide, such as FSM eligibility and parental education, using this to recognise how wider circumstances may have impacted someone's undergraduate performance. At postgraduate level, contextual information should include both pre-university background and undergraduate context. This should cover the following:

- Undergraduate institution type
- Participation in paid work during study
- Caring or parental responsibilities
- Disability
- Access to prior research experience.

This is part of the application process for some courses at the University of Cambridge, whereby students can opt to share contextual information in a form uploaded to their application. The stated aim is to help assessors understand applicants' achievements in context and identify potential for postgraduate study. In the long term, institutions should share their practices with others to bring more standardisation to the postgraduate application process.

Funding

A wide range of funding routes with transparent guidance on the options available will also widen access to postgraduate study. Unlike undergraduate study, government-funded loans do not cover the full fee cost of a postgraduate course at many institutions, and many students are without financial support to cover living costs. This is a particular issue at the country's more selective and research-intensive institutions, as these tend to be more expensive both in terms of tuition fees and living costs.

While universities themselves cannot entirely compensate for challenges with postgraduate student finance, there are clear actions to take to reduce the financial barriers faced. For instance, if you are charging high course fees, it is important to provide adequate financial support to reduce financial barriers

to participation. Ideally, you should also avoid charging application fees at postgraduate level, but if application fees are charged, they should be as low as possible, with waivers easily accessible to any applicants who are unable to afford them.

You should also tackle the financial barriers to postgraduate study that exist even before courses begin. Transition costs may include deposits, travel, relocation, rent before loan or stipend payments arrive. These all come at a time when some students may be losing summer earnings as they have to prepare for studying. Sources of funding available to students facing financial difficulty should therefore be accessible as soon as an applicant is given a place, before they arrive on campus as a postgraduate student. Financial support should also be there to cover the costs directly linked to studying, such as equipment, fieldwork preparation and conference travel. The additional costs faced by those who have had to relocate from their area of undergraduate study should be recognised when designing financial support offerings for socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students.

Paid teaching and marking should be properly remunerated and should not crowd out the time spent on research, training and networks students need for progression. Support should also recognise that some postgraduate students undertake paid work outside the university or combine study with caring responsibilities.

As outlined below, there are various options for funding support that an institution can offer, with some involving collaboration with research organisations, businesses and charities to fund places. Funding should be high enough to support students through all years of study to avoid dropout.

Options may differ between taught and research programmes, but include:

- **Studentships and scholarships**: widening participation criteria can be included in eligibility criteria. Guidance for navigating the competitive application process should be easily accessible. For example, the University of Kent offers The Widening Participation Ambition Scholarship of £5,000 for master's study. Where possible institutions should make such opportunities open to all students, not just undergraduate alumni.
- **Bursaries and grants**: offering a package of support for all students who meet particular widening participation criteria will reach a wider pool of students. This removes uncertainty which applicants may find off-putting.
- **Fee reductions**: discounts on fees could be offered to students who meet certain widening participation criteria.
- **Emergency transition grants**: small, fast-turnaround grants can prevent students from losing places because of immediate costs before funding arrives
- **Hardship funds**: stipends and financial support should be offered through non-repayable grants. Students should be able to apply for these if they are facing financial emergencies so they can receive assistance fast.

Funding is vital but costly. Institutions under financial pressure should still prioritise support where it will remove a clear barrier to access.

Working with charities and foundations to deliver funding opportunities can open up postgraduate opportunities to a wider cohort, offering those from widening participation backgrounds a range of support avenues.

Case Study

Funding models from the Martingale Foundation

The Martingale Foundation partners with 13 leading research institutions to offer fully-funded master's and PhD scholarships. Tuition fees and research expenses are covered, alongside a stipend for living costs. An independent evaluation concluded this stipend allows scholars to reduce the need for loans and part-time work, particularly as the support is available as soon as they start their studies. Application and deposit fees at partnering institutions are also waived for those applying through the scheme.

Scholars have access to application support that is tailored to specific institution requirements and a professional development programme during their studies, covering leadership and networking. 79% of the first two cohorts achieved a Distinction or Merit at master's level, and 67% of the 2024 cohort achieved a Distinction.

Martingale works with charities like the Brilliant Club to target socio-economically disadvantaged applicants. Eligibility includes state-school attendance, household income and FSM status. Among scholars reported to date, 96% came from households with incomes below £35,000 and 53% had been eligible for FSM.

Succeeding at postgraduate level

As is the case with undergraduate study, access is just the start of the widening participation journey. Postgraduate students should receive the support they need to succeed throughout their course, going beyond the financial assistance discussed above. This will improve retention and academic performance.

Students entering postgraduate study may be changing institution, discipline, mode of study or relationship to academic staff. Induction should cover funding, supervision, expectations, research culture, available support and the practical realities of combining study with work or caring responsibilities.

Provision should also distinguish between the needs of PGT students completing an intensive taught course and PGR students developing an extended research project. For PGR students, the quality and clarity of the supervisory relationship are central. Expectations about contact, feedback, training, authorship, teaching and routes for raising concerns should be discussed early.

There should be explicit and accessible opportunities to receive the support covered here. This is important as these skills are often developed informally through networks, encouragement and unpaid opportunities.

Academic supervisors are a notable source of the support discussed here – training for supervisors is important so that they can support their students with study skills and recognise demands on their time that may impact how they balance their studies. These barriers include caring responsibilities, financial stress and part-time work.[90]

Building an inclusive culture

Alongside academic support, there should be a conscious effort to ensure that all students feel included in their student body. This is particularly important for those completing research master's and PhDs, as students are stepping into the academic community that they may not have been a part of before. Inclusivity in the academic community has been under the spotlight in recent years, with research from Wellcome finding that 1 in 10 researchers have experienced discrimination in their workplace based on their socio-economic background.[91]

Being in a new academic environment where your peers may have a more academic background (for example, a highly selective undergraduate institution) may be a new cultural experience.[92] Postgraduate study can also intensify the hidden curriculum of higher education. Students are often expected to understand how to build academic networks, seek supervisory support, attend conferences, publish work and navigate departmental cultures. These expectations may be obvious to students with family or academic networks but opaque to students entering postgraduate study without that social capital.

Wider aspects of postgraduate life, such as peer communities, student societies, conference attendance and networking events should be accessible to all. There is potential for shared cohort experiences among postgraduates across inter-university partnerships, particularly when relationships have a research focus like the GW4.

Collaboration between universities

As highlighted across this guide, working with other institutions is important to share evidence and best practice.

Particularly when it comes to research-intensive postgraduate study, you should work with non-research-intensive institutions to share opportunities and aid students' development of academic skills.

The UK Postgraduate Diversity Network (led by the University of Leeds and the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON)) is one example of such a partnership, which runs a postgraduate study working group. This facilitates collaboration between members through quarterly meetings and a bi-annual conference, focusing on a rotating set of special interests. These include pre-application guidance for students and employability support.

The University of Leeds also co-ordinates the UK Postgraduate Data Observatory.

This aims to improve understanding of postgraduate access and participation by collecting a consistent set of applicant characteristic data that goes beyond standard equalities monitoring. In the absence of a centralised postgraduate admissions system, this kind of shared data infrastructure is essential for understanding who applies, who receives offers and who is able to accept a place. Those working on postgraduate access initiatives should consider engaging with this network and sharing evidence.

Postgraduate access is likely to become increasingly important for social mobility, but the sector does not yet have the same infrastructure for postgraduate widening participation as it has built at undergraduate level. That makes institutional action even more urgent.

6. A whole provider approach to social mobility

Social mobility needs to be a core institutional priority with clear ownership from the executive, governing body, academic departments and professional services. A whole-provider strategy should run across access, admissions, transition, student success, belonging, financial support, careers, postgraduate progression and graduate outcomes. To have the most successful approach, you should:

- **Require every faculty and major service area to identify the barriers it can influence**, act on data and report progress through normal planning and accountability structures.
- **Embed inclusive practice in mainstream systems**: curriculum, assessment, timetabling, accommodation, hardship support, wellbeing, careers, placements and communications.
- **Use students, alumni and staff from underrepresented backgrounds as partners** in design and evaluation and not only as ambassadors or consultees after decisions have been made.
- **Evaluate implementation as well as outcomes**. A whole-provider approach should change how the institution works and not only improve the wording of its access and participation plan.

A university cannot deliver social mobility through specialist widening participation teams alone. The barriers faced by students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds sit across the ordinary systems of the institution: what courses require, how admissions decisions are made, how students are supported before and after arrival, how much it costs to participate fully, how teaching and assessment are designed, how careers opportunities are distributed and who gets access to informal networks.

A whole-provider approach is the sector's attempt to address that structural problem. The Office for Students describes whole-provider approaches as involving coordinated action across the institution rather than activity contained within access and participation teams.

Embedding widening participation in governance, curriculum, student support, staffing, data and resource allocation, it becomes part of how the university operates.

Social mobility depends on institutions changing their own practices. National policy, school attainment and student finance matter profoundly but universities also make choices every day that influence who applies, who is admitted, who thrives and who progresses. A whole-provider approach is how those choices are aligned and made accountable.

The five foundations of a whole-provider model

A successful whole-provider approach relies on five key elements:

1. **Visible and sustained leadership**: The governing body, vice-chancellor, senior executive and academic leaders should understand the institution's access, success and progression gaps and the actions being taken to address them. Leadership should include decisions about resources, incentives, risk, data, accountability and the trade-offs required when budgets are restricted.
2. **A clear operating model**: There should be a senior group or board that connects access and participation to mainstream strategy but there should also be a route from that group into faculties, departments and professional services.
3. **Diagnostic use of data**: Providers should use disaggregated data to understand where barriers sit by course, department, student characteristic, entry route and stage of study. They should combine quantitative data with student and staff insight. The nature of the barriers and the strength of the available evidence may differ between student groups, so institutions should not assume the same applies to everyone. The aim is to identify which practices may contribute to gaps and who can act upon them.

4. **Student and staff partnership:** Institutions should involve students in diagnosing barriers, designing responses and interpreting evidence. Frontline staff and colleagues from underrepresented backgrounds should have clear routes to influence institutional decisions and learning.
5. **Evaluation with implementation**: Evaluation should distinguish between whether the model was implemented as intended, whether institutional practice changed and whether student outcomes improved over time. Findings should be used to adapt the approach where systems or outcomes are not changing as intended.

Embedding widening participation into departments

Academic departments are central to a whole-provider approach because they shape the academic conditions under which students enter, participate and succeed. They influence entry requirements, course information, selection methods, assessment design, contact patterns, placement expectations, hidden costs, academic support, feedback, research opportunities and progression routes. A central access team cannot compensate for departmental practices that unintentionally advantage students who already understand the norms of university life.

Departments should therefore be expected to understand their own data. This should be supported by the staff training and workload arrangements discussed in Chapter 4; departments cannot act on data if staff do not understand the barriers, available responses or their responsibilities. This includes application, offer, entry, continuation, attainment, completion, postgraduate progression and graduate outcome patterns by relevant student characteristics and entry routes. The point is not to punish departments with challenging data. It is to make the problem visible and actionable. A course with lower continuation for commuting students may need different timetabling or attendance support. A course with large hidden costs may need a bursary or curriculum redesign. A subject with weak progression from disadvantaged applicants may need earlier outreach, clearer subject information, contextual admissions or additional bridging support. Findings should feed into course monitoring and periodic review with named responsibility for action.

Departments should also treat curriculum, pedagogy and assessment as widening participation issues. Inclusive teaching is not an optional addition. It shapes whether students understand expectations, can demonstrate knowledge fairly and feel that their background and experience have a place in academic life. Clustering of assessment deadlines, reliance on assumed cultural knowledge, unpaid placements, inaccessible field trips, opaque office-hour norms or optional 'extras' that carry real academic advantage can all widen gaps. A whole-provider approach asks departments to review these ordinary practices systematically.

This is not about lowering standards. It is about designing teaching and assessment so that students are judged on the knowledge, skill and potential the course is meant to assess, not on prior familiarity with the hidden curriculum. Students should not have to decode the institution before they can benefit from it.

Embedding widening participation into professional services

Professional services are equally important. Students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds often encounter barriers not in a single moment but through

cumulative friction: a finance process that assumes family support, an accommodation deadline that comes before a student has funding clarity, a hardship form that is hard to navigate, a careers scheme that rewards unpaid experience or a timetable that makes paid work and commuting harder.

Admissions teams should make contextual policies visible, consistent and understandable (as discussed in Chapter 2). Communications teams should test whether information is clear to students without family experience of higher education. Finance and hardship teams should design processes that are proactive and timely. Accommodation teams should consider 365-day needs, guarantor requirements, deposits, commuting patterns and the interaction between housing and continuation. Careers teams should target access to internships, placements, employer networks and postgraduate information. Alumni teams should mobilise relatable role models and professional networks. Data teams should make the right information available to the right decision-makers. HR should align staff recruitment and progression with the institution's social mobility commitments.

Case Study

University of Exeter: embedding a whole provider approach

Success for All is linked to the University's 2030 Strategy and brings together academic staff, professional services and students through cross-university working groups. A champions network, staff development, an annual conference and an awards scheme are used to spread responsibility beyond the central access and participation team. The model connects admissions, curriculum, student support and progression activity and gives the work visible institutional ownership.

This distribution of responsibility is why a whole-provider approach cannot be reduced to access work. It is an institutional operating model. Specialist widening participation teams should support and challenge this work but not be left to deliver it on behalf of the institution. Where complexity cannot be removed, students should receive clear guidance and a supported route through it.

Responsibilities across an institution

The table below brings together the main implications from across this guide and translates them into indicative responsibilities for different parts of an institution with examples of evidence that could be used to assess progress. It is informed by whole-provider research emphasising alignment across the student lifecycle, involvement across academic and professional functions and sustained institutional leadership, alongside OfS guidance for English providers. It is not a fixed organisational model: institutions should adapt the responsibilities and measures to their structures, national context and identified equality risks.

Table 1: social mobility responsibilities by area

Area	Role in a whole-provider approach	Evidence to use
Governing body and executive	Set and scrutinise institutional ambition; approve resources; scrutinise progress; connect APP commitments to strategy and risk; require learning to be shared.	APP milestones; access, success and progression data; annual evaluation findings; student and staff insight; resource decisions.
WP, student success, data and evaluation specialists	Provide expertise, disaggregated analysis, evaluation support and constructive challenge; identify gaps, duplication and weak evidence.	Evaluation plans, data quality assessments, student insight and evidence reviews.
Faculties and departments	Review entry routes, course costs, curriculum, assessment, placements, academic support and postgraduate pathways.	Course-level application, offer, entry, continuation, attainment, completion and progression data.
Admissions	Make contextual admissions transparent, remove unnecessary barriers, review selection methods and offer-making patterns.	Application, offer, conversion and entry data by disadvantage measures and school/college context.
Student support and wellbeing	Provide proactive, timely support; join up advice, mental health, disability, hardship and academic referrals.	Support uptake, referral completion, waiting times, continuation and student experience data.
Finance, hardship and accommodation	Reduce upfront costs; target bursaries; address housing insecurity, deposits, guarantors and commuter needs.	Bursary uptake, hardship demand, accommodation data, continuation, paid work and student survey evidence.
Careers, employers and alumni	Target access to internships, placements, mentoring, employer networks and postgraduate information; embed progression within courses.	Careers engagement, placement uptake, paid internship access, Graduate Outcomes and postgraduate progression.
Students and students' unions	Identify lived barriers, co-design responses and scrutinise whether changes improve everyday experience.	Participation data, representative student insight and evidence of changes made in response.
HR and organisational development	Collect socio-economic background data; review recruitment and progression; support apprenticeships and entry routes; build widening participation principles into induction and staff development.	Staff background data, recruitment funnel data, promotion and retention patterns, apprenticeship participation.

Pitfalls to avoid

The language of whole-provider work is now widely used but inconsistent implementation is common. Common pitfalls include:

- **Symbolic ownership**: senior leaders endorse widening participation but do not change budgets, incentives or accountability.
- **Diffuse ownership**: every team is said to have a role but no team has clear responsibility.
- **Data without action**: dashboards are produced but course design, support processes and resource decisions do not change.
- **Cultural framing without structural change**: institutions talk about belonging or social justice while leaving assessment, costs, placements and careers networks untouched.
- **Compliance drift**: the access and participation plan becomes an annual reporting exercise rather than a driver of institutional design.

A whole-provider approach should not be presented as a cost saving exercise. Embedding widening participation into mainstream systems can make work more sustainable but it is not cost-free. Staff time, data infrastructure, evaluation, student partnership, financial support and targeted interventions still require resource.

Bringing your approach into access and participation plans

For English institutions, access and participation plans (APPs) are an important vehicle for whole-provider work but they should not become the ceiling of ambition. APPs can help clarify risks to equality of opportunity, set targets, allocate responsibility and establish evaluation commitments. However, whole-provider approaches fail when the APP becomes a document owned by a small central team rather than a strategy embedded in the institution's day-to-day decisions.

A better approach uses the APP as a bridge between regulatory commitments and institutional change. The diagnosis underpinning the plan should draw on the OfS Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR) alongside institutional data, research and evidence from students. The EORR sets out sector-wide risks and should be treated as a starting point rather than a checklist: it may not capture every local barrier or the ways in which risks interact.

Each major APP objective should be translated into faculty plans, service plans and measurable implementation activity. For example, a target on continuation should connect to course-level data, transition support, academic advice, financial support, commuting patterns and wellbeing processes. A target on progression should connect to careers, placements, alumni, employer partnerships, postgraduate access and curriculum-linked employability. A target on access should connect outreach, admissions, marketing, school partnerships and subject pipelines.

Institutions elsewhere in the UK, where APPs are not required, should connect the same principles to their own regulatory and funding frameworks. The shared requirement is to link ambition to governance, resources, delivery and review.

Evaluating progress

Evaluation at whole-provider level requires care. It is easier to evaluate a discrete programme than an institutional operating model but that is not a reason to avoid evaluation. It means universities need to distinguish between three types of evidence: outcome evidence, implementation evidence and explanatory evidence.

Outcome evidence asks whether access, continuation, attainment, completion, postgraduate progression or graduate outcomes are improving for target groups. Implementation evidence asks whether the institution has actually changed: whether faculties have plans, whether staff are using data, whether decision-making routes are clear, whether policies have been revised, whether students are involved and whether resources match priorities. Explanatory evidence asks why change is or is not happening: through student voice, staff interviews, partner feedback, case reviews and analysis of institutional processes.

For individual interventions across the student lifecycle, evaluation should begin with a theory of change and examine implementation, student experience, relevant intermediate outcomes and longer-term outcomes where the sample and timescale allow. Results should be examined by relevant student characteristics and circumstances. Reports should provide sample sizes, response and attrition rates, limitations and the precise basis of any comparison. Differences between self-selecting participants and non-participants should not be described as impact unless the design makes the groups reasonably comparable. Smaller or developing interventions can still generate useful learning through implementation evidence and student accounts (such as interviews and focus groups), provided reports are clear about what the evaluation can and cannot show.

For discrete interventions, use stronger evaluation designs where feasible. For the institution-wide model, combine outcome trends with evidence of what changed in practice and accounts from students, staff and partners. The aim is credible learning: what changed, for whom, why and what should happen next.

A whole-provider dashboard should track implementation, such as departmental action plans and support uptake, alongside student outcomes. Otherwise, it is difficult to tell whether a weak result reflects the approach or its delivery.

In a mature whole-provider model, widening participation is visible in institutional strategy but it is not limited to it. It is reflected in course design, student support, admissions, finance, careers, HR and governance. Institutions should know which interventions have stronger evidence, where the evidence is weaker and what they are doing to learn.

Universities as employers

Universities are major employers in their regions. They recruit large workforces, create professional pathways, contract services, employ students, offer apprenticeships and shape local labour markets. A university cannot credibly promote social mobility for students while ignoring whether its own employment practices reproduce socio-economic barriers. Universities should therefore treat their own employment practices as part of their social mobility mission.

The Sutton Trust's social mobility employer guide sets out key principles for all employers looking to improve socio-economic diversity amongst their workforce. As an employer, you should:

- **Collect socio-economic background data for your workforce**. You should collect parental occupation data as a priority, as it is the most appropriate measure for socio-economic background. School type, free school meal eligibility and parental education are further recommended measures. This is the strongest starting point for employers, as data can inform areas for improvement.
- **Build and nurture talent pipelines** for those from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter your workforce. Work experience, apprenticeship and internship opportunities can be effective routes into your workforce when they are open to all. These opportunities should be shared in outreach activities working with young people.
- **Make your recruitment processes fairer**. Contextual recruitment methods will allow you to go beyond CVs and take broader circumstances into consideration. Universities should lean on what they know from their own contextual practices for student admissions.
- **Ensure those from all backgrounds have equal chances to progress**. An inclusive culture with transparent work allocation and progression routes will also help with retention.

It is important to consider how these aims align with employment opportunities offered to students, whether through a research role, mentoring, delivering outreach programmes or those working in on-campus roles, including roles in a student union.

Next steps: Putting ideas into action

This guide presents a range of recommendations for improving access to university for socio-economically disadvantaged students, supporting them throughout their studies all the way into employment or postgraduate study.

Putting the guide into practice should begin with a defined problem rather than a preconceived activity:

1 **Diagnose**: use data, student insight and local knowledge to understand the barrier, who is affected, where it arises and how experiences differ between groups.

2 **Design and prepare**: choose an evidence-informed approach that fits the diagnosis, set out the intended outcomes and assumptions, assess institutional readiness and agree ownership, resources and an evaluation plan.

3 **Deliver and monitor**: implement the approach with the people who will use or experience it, and monitor whether it is reaching the intended students and being delivered as planned.

4 **Evaluate and learn**: examine implementation and outcomes using methods proportionate to the intervention, its maturity and the decision the evidence needs to inform.

5 **Adapt, embed or stop, and share**: use the evidence to strengthen, change, scale, embed or discontinue the work, taking account of delivery quality and the strength of the findings, and share what has been learned.

Readers of this guide should consider which actions to take away that relate to their own line of work and which overlap with the work of colleagues from other departments. Collaborating to understand what work is happening already, what the priorities are in different areas and the feasibility for creating change at your institution will bring the recommendations here into reality.

Collaboration should be used where partners can solve a shared problem more effectively than one institution acting alone. It should not be treated as an end in itself. The case is strongest where barriers cross institutional boundaries such as gaps in regional outreach, progression routes, transport, course provision or employer engagement. You should begin by mapping existing local and regional arrangements rather than creating another partnership by default. In England, this includes Uni Connect partnerships and their proposed successors, regional access partnerships. Depending on the problem, partners may include universities and

colleges, schools, local authorities, employers, community organisations, charities, national bodies and students.

Effective collaboration needs a shared objective, clear responsibilities, appropriate data sharing and a way to assess whether working together adds value. The case studies in this guide illustrate different approaches but institutions should identify partners suited to their own context.

Third-sector organisations and higher education sector bodies can bring specialist expertise, delivery capacity, trusted relationships and evidence. Institutions should choose partners in light of the barrier they are trying to address, agree responsibilities and data-sharing arrangements, and evaluate whether collaboration adds value. Appendix A provides a non-exhaustive starting point.

Working with the Sutton Trust

Universities can work with the Sutton Trust in different ways depending on their students, provision and strategic priorities. Opportunities include:

- **Partnering with us** to host or co-deliver UK Summer Schools and Pathways programmes where an institution's courses and student opportunities align with the programmes' target group and aims.
- **Providing academic input, admissions and transition guidance**; and access to student ambassadors, alumni, employers and professional networks across Sutton Trust programmes and through Sutton Trust Online.
- **Spreading the word** about Sutton Trust programmes through school and regional outreach.
- **Contributing content, events and opportunities** through Sutton Trust Online (a digital programme to help students explore, apply, prepare for and succeed at university or an apprenticeship).
- **Contributing effective practice, case studies and institutional expertise** to Sutton Trust research and policy work.

Find out more about working with Sutton Trust.

Appendix A: Organisations and sources of support

The following organisations can partner with you to inform and deliver widening access and participation initiatives. The list is a practical starting point, not a comprehensive directory, or an endorsement by the Sutton Trust. Inclusion does not establish that every programme offered by an organisation is effective.

Before entering a partnership, institutions should consider whether the organisation's expertise matches the identified barrier, its geographical and student coverage, accessibility and safeguarding arrangements, cost, data protection and the strength of the available evidence. Categories are indicative because many organisations work across more than one part of the student lifecycle.

Tutoring, attainment and sustained educational support

- Action Tutoring — trained volunteer tutoring in English and maths for pupils facing disadvantage.
- Get Further — English and maths tuition and practitioner development for further education providers.
- The Access Project — in-school university mentoring and academic tuition for pupils from under-resourced backgrounds.
- The Brilliant Club — PhD-led academic programmes, university preparation and Parent Power.
- The Tutor Trust — trained tutors working with schools and colleges, principally in the North of England.
- Children's University — locally delivered extracurricular learning intended to widen children's experiences and engagement with learning.

Guidance and access to higher education

- Causeway Education — application support, resources and training covering higher education, apprenticeships and early careers.
- IntoUniversity — local learning centres providing sustained academic support, mentoring and progression guidance.
- The Elephant Group — school-led collaboration supporting access to selective universities.
- Universify Education — a year-long programme for Year 10 and 11 pupils combining university residentials, coaching and GCSE support.
- Villiers Park — sustained programmes supporting skills, attainment and progression for young people aged 11–19.

Mentoring and coaching

- Brightside — safeguarded online mentoring programmes, technology and support for education and third-sector partners.
- CoachBright — coaching programmes connecting pupils with university-student and professional coaches
- Zero Gravity — digital mentoring and support with university applications and early graduate careers.

Student success, careers and progression

- Become — advice and resources for care-experienced young people, including support through Propel into Education.
- FirstGens — community, bursary and careers support for students who are the first generation in their family to attend university.
- Social Mobility Foundation — the Aspiring Professionals Programme, employer practice and work to widen access to degree apprenticeships and professional careers.
- The Talent Tap — work experience, mentoring and employer connections, including support for young people from areas with limited access to professional opportunities.
- upReach — careers support, skills development and employer connections for undergraduates from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Unite Foundation — rent-free accommodation scholarships and community support for care-experienced and estranged students.

Evidence, evaluation and professional practice

- TASO — evidence reviews, research, evaluation guidance and tools covering access and student success.
- Higher Education Access Tracker — longitudinal tracking and evaluation support for outreach and widening-participation activity.
- NERUPI — a theory-led framework and practitioner community supporting the design and evaluation of widening-participation activity.
- Advance HE — resources and professional development covering inclusive learning, student success, leadership and equality.
- Graduate Futures Institute (formerly AGCAS) — the professional body for higher education careers and employability practitioners.
- AMOSSHE — a professional network for higher education student-services leaders and practitioners.
- Forum for Access and Continuing Education — a network connecting practitioners, researchers and policymakers working on access and lifelong learning.
- HELOA — professional development and networking for staff working in access, outreach, recruitment and education liaison.
- National Education Opportunities Network — professional development, working groups and practice-sharing across widening access and student success.
- Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners — professional standards, accreditation and practice-sharing for access and participation practitioners in Scotland.
- UK Council for Graduate Education — resources and professional support relating to postgraduate education and research supervision.

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