

# HE Policy Update

w/e 31 January 2020 – Access and Participation special edition

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A special feature on this week's big OfS' report analysing the future of HE Access and Participation.

## Access and Participation

The OfS has published [Transforming opportunity in HE](#). It is the OfS' analysis of 171 HE providers' approved access and participation plans covering the period 2020-21 to 2024-25. The OfS [press release](#) covers the headlines announcements but most of the coverage centres on the planned target access gap reduction for the highly selective universities which currently have a poor admission record for the low number of disadvantaged students that enrol.

For those new to Access and Participation here are the **basics**. For those who know all this, please move on to the analysis section below.

Each HE provider - called an approved (fee cap) provider - who wishes to charge the higher level fees must publish an Access and Participation plan noting actions, funding allocated, and measurable targets which tackle a combination of institution or geographically specific aspirations and some of the national key priorities. The OfS aims for *students from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, [to be]... supported to access, succeed in and progress from higher education, and to achieve equality of opportunity in respect of student outcomes within a generation*. The OfS set out an ambition for HE providers to address and eliminate some of the most enduring gaps:

- the gap in entry rates at high-tariff providers between the most and least represented groups
- the gap in non-continuation between the most and least represented groups
- the gap in degree outcomes between white and black students
- the gap in degree outcomes between disabled and non-disabled students.

The plans cover the whole student lifecycle, from access work with pre-University age school pupils, to preparing for university, admissions to university, success and well-being whilst a student at university, degree attainment, and student outcomes post-graduation. This is the link to [BU's plan](#).

Access and participation is a key priority for the Government who are determined to ensure that all people can contribute Britain's prosperity and obtain the skills needed for the UK economy to thrive. They intend that no sector of society be left behind whether this is through geographical, social background or other forms of disadvantage. The OfS faces greater scrutiny of its management and approval of HE providers' Access and Participation plans, and, in turn, they have rigorously dissected and challenged the HE providers' plans. The sector anticipates a higher level of intervention than in the past should sufficient progress not be made. Due to this higher level of focus this OfS report, which discusses and compares the amalgamation of all providers' targets, carries greater weight than previous publications, particularly in its consideration of whether the targets universities have set are challenging enough to meet muster.

On rigour the OfS state:

- *This new regime is designed to achieve transformational change, so it is undoubtedly challenging. But having analysed the first round of these new plans, it is clear that providers have responded positively and their plans demonstrate a significant shift.*

The report continues:

- *...we have seen a real step change in ambition, not only in the outcomes providers are striving for, but also in their commitment to continuously improving the ways they work towards those*

outcomes. Changes to curricula, pedagogy and admissions policies have all been on the table, together with better evaluation.

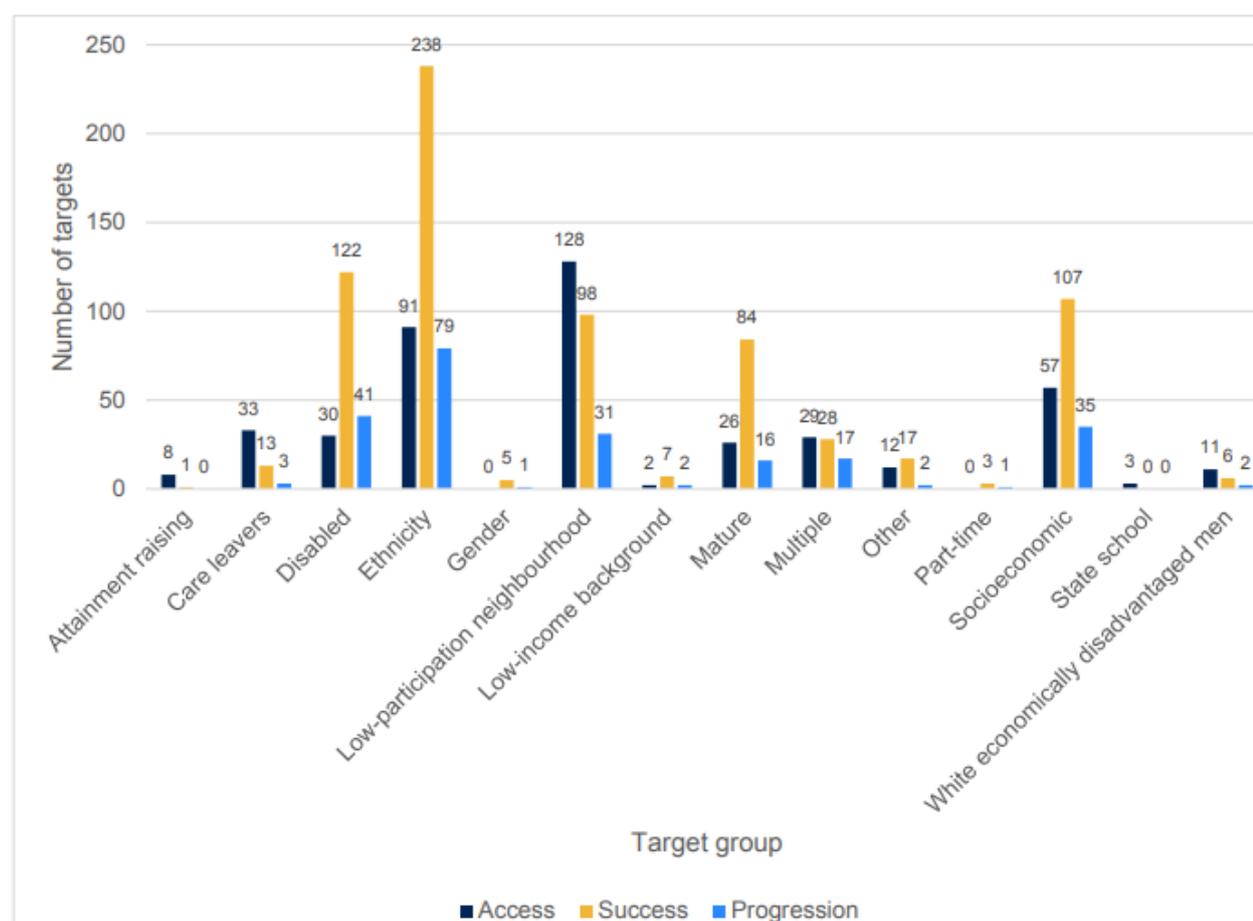
## Analysis

The OfS report covers three main areas:

1. The progress providers are planning to make to reduce gaps in student access, success and progression within their institutions [we cover this in detail below] and how providers plan to embed a more strategic approach to access and participation – *The analysis suggests that the stronger focus on student success in the OfS guidance has resulted in a strengthening of the ‘whole provider’ approach – providers appear to be taking a more holistic, strategic approach to access and participation... most describe how their access and participation strategy aligns with their learning, teaching and assessment policies. Many providers have committed to undertaking reviews of these and other policies such as contextual admissions.*
2. The levels of investment and evaluation providers are committing to in their plans.
3. The ways in which they will be collaborating with partners and consulting students in the delivery of their plans. *Most plans identified how providers would work collaboratively in local areas through Uni Connect (formerly the National Collaborative Outreach Programme), an OfS-funded initiative that brings together 29 partnerships across England to deliver outreach activity to schools, and provides a platform for joint working and delivery of outreach work.*

## The Targets

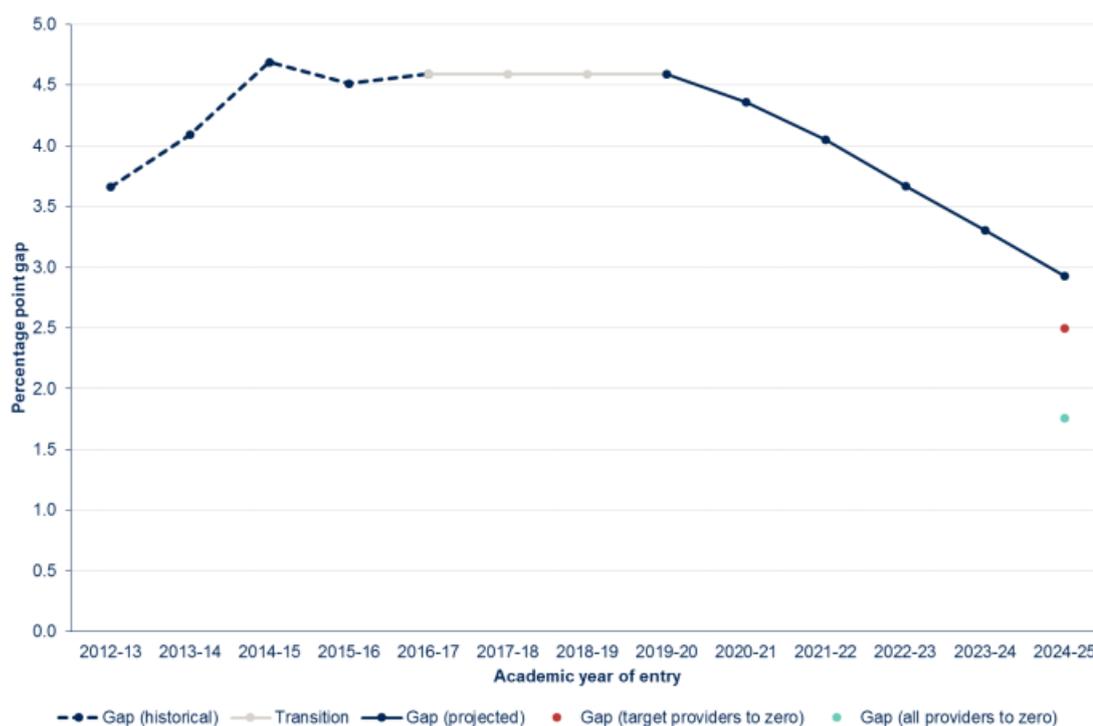
Of the 1,389 targets included in plans, 430 were related to access, 729 to success (degree awards and continuation rates) and 230 to progression into employment or further study. Here are the targets broken down by target group and lifecycle stage:



The analysis of all the providers' plans shows that, if providers hit their targets, by 2024-25:

- Advantaged students are currently 6 times as likely to attend a highly selective university than a disadvantaged student, the targets reduce this gap to less than 4 times as likely. With equal rates of access within the next 20 years if the trajectory continues. *"...this will require significant work to raise attainment in schools, to develop clear pathways combining academic, financial and personal support, and to develop admissions processes that do not rely on public examination results alone as the way to identify potential."* This would mean around 6,500 extra students from the most disadvantaged areas attending a highly selective university each year from 2024-25 onwards.
- The gap in dropout rates between students from the most and least represented groups would fall from 4.6% to 2.9%. To achieve the reduction providers have committed to
  - Improve data analysis and research to better understand the barriers for underrepresented students and develop further measures particular to their own circumstances.
  - Improving student engagement, for example by developing the use of learner analytics.
  - Reviewing the curriculum and academic delivery.
  - Use financial support direct to students bursaries based on household income or for specific underrepresented groups, together with hardship funds) to reduce on-programme barriers.

**Figure 3: Historical and projected gap in non-continuation between POLAR4 quintile 1 and quintile 5 students (KPM3)**



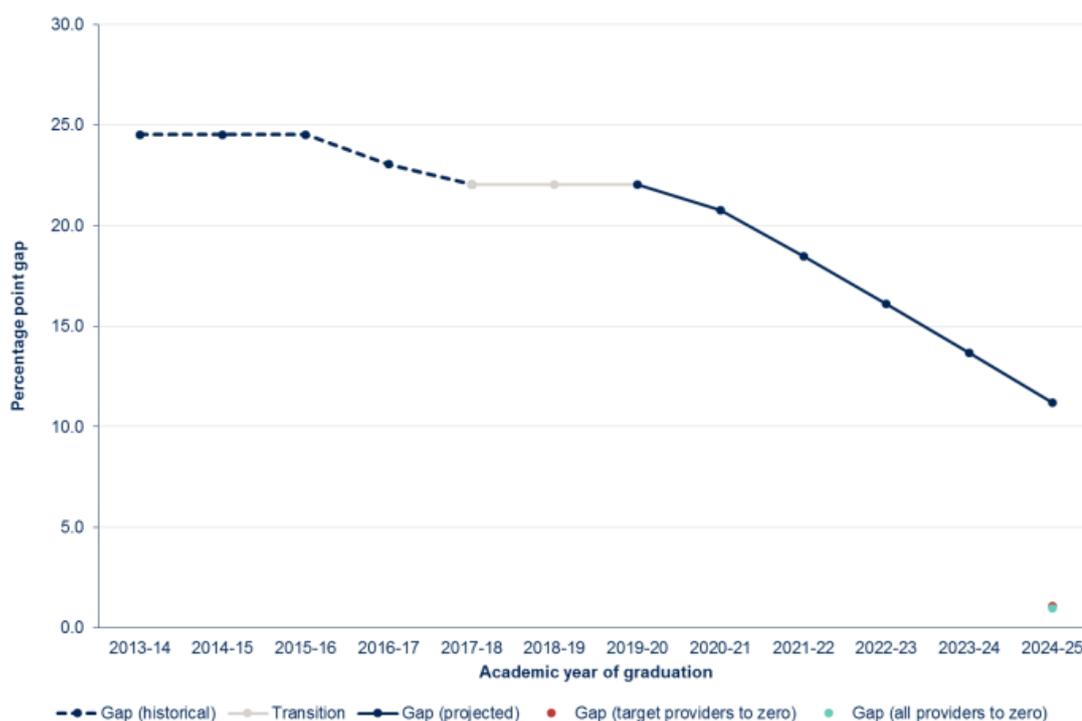
- The gap between the proportion of white and black students who are awarded a 1st or 2:1 degree would drop from 22% to 11.2%. *"...our analysis indicates that, if progress is maintained in the longer term, we could see equality in degree awarding rates between white and black students by the end of the decade."* But the national picture isn't simple – while many providers aimed to halve the existing gap by 2024-25, some will still have large gaps remaining at the end of the plan. Some providers are having trouble identifying factors that will bring about successful change from the volume of interacting factors impacting on the attainment gap and have pledged close interaction with the OfS to support their progress. However the OfS state *it is possible for the sector-wide gap to be almost closed by individual providers targeting their own gaps.* Assuming the proportion of white students remains constant *closing the gap will have*

been achieved by increasing the attainment rate of black students from 61.0 per cent to 71.9 per cent.

Planned strategies to tackle the attainment gap are:

- Developing leadership and provider culture (provider and departmental KPIs, staff training, strategic reviews of provider-wide communications, departmental and course-level data, implementing student success frameworks, improving the diversity of staff, including senior staff).
- Reviewing the curriculum, methods of assessment and anonymous marking policies.
- Developing outreach interventions, student networks and embedding greater first-year or pre-sessional support.

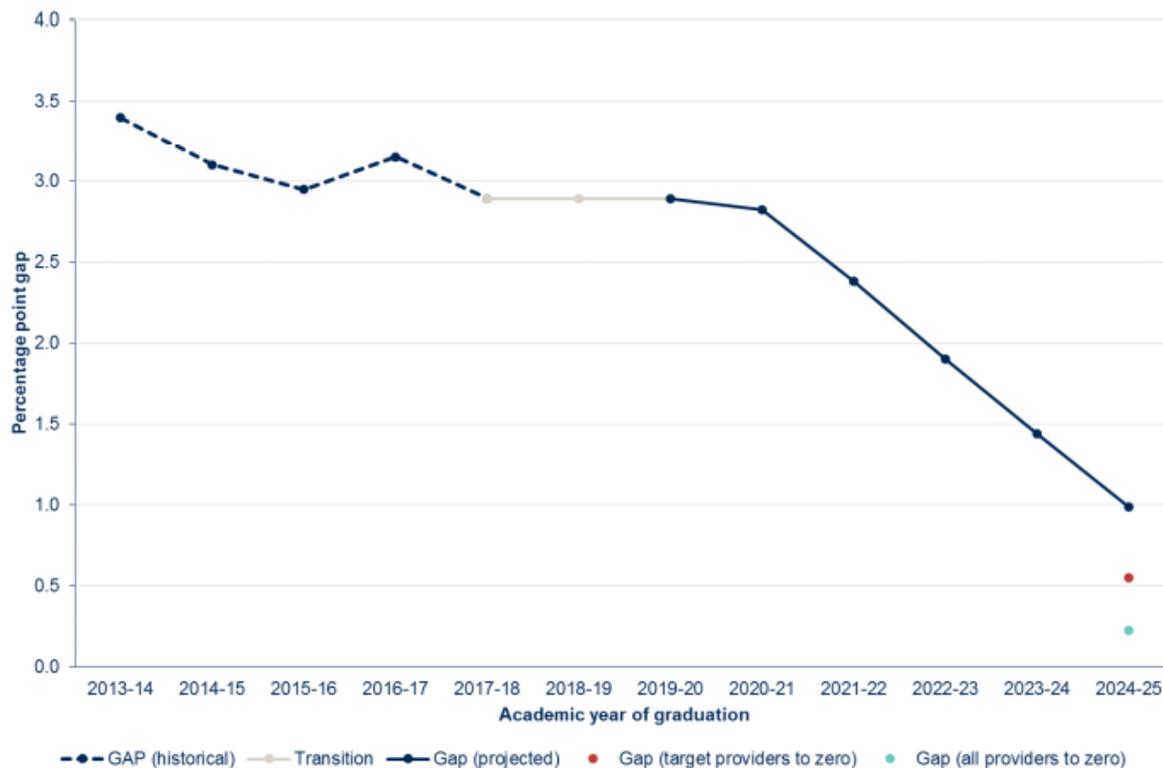
**Figure 4: Historical and projected gap in degree outcomes (1sts and 2:1s) between white students and black students (KPM4)**



- the gap between the proportion of disabled and non-disabled students who are awarded a 1st or 2:1 degree would almost close, falling from 2.8% to only 1%

In response the OfS say: *This puts us on the right track for the generational change we have set as our ambition. But: On dropout rates, providers look set to close their own gaps, but the gap will persist at a national level unless we start to see these rates level out across different providers.*

**Figure 5: Historical and projected gap in degree outcomes (1sts and 2:1s) between disabled students and non-disabled students**



To achieve this reduction plans include:

- Improving use of data and monitoring systems (learner analytics or course level data).
- Reviewing exam access arrangements and use of assistive technologies.
- Staff training for teaching staff on inclusion and accessibility.
- New course approval, including requirements to have considered inclusivity in programme design.

### But...

However, the OfS analysis also highlights some areas of ongoing concern:

- Mature students have not been sufficiently prioritised by many universities and colleges despite low and decreasing numbers of such students. *“...our national target will not be achieved unless universities also embrace those harder-to-reach students who are looking to return to education later in life and provide more flexible learning opportunities for them.”* And: *“Relatively few providers have set ambitions to improve access for mature students. And we need increasingly to understand the effect of intersecting characteristics: the low levels of participation by men from the most disadvantaged areas, for example, and the barriers faced by students of minority ethnicities with mental health conditions.”*
- Addressing the needs of small niche student groups who are particularly underrepresented in HE (such as care leavers, people estranged from their families, young people from military families, and people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities) are still in their infancy and will need time to develop further and for impact to be established. *“There is a need for better understanding of the very specific and complex barriers these [critically underrepresented] groups face in accessing and succeeding in higher education.”*
- A familiar Conservative Government theme reemerges too - bringing the different levels of Education together to work far more collaboratively, share expertise, resources and support each other to improve outcomes for all, but particularly the most deprived students or lower performing institutions. Theresa May tried to force the cooperative working and a toned down

version requiring institutional collaboration was required by the forerunner to the Access and Participation Plans. OfS state:

*while universities must live up to what they say about opportunity in higher education, the inequality we see reflects broader social patterns: by definition, it cannot be addressed effectively without a joined-up approach. For example, the qualifications a person achieves in compulsory education are a key predictor of whether they will go to university, and we know that school attainment tends to be lowest in the places with the most disadvantage. These disparities are then compounded in higher education. Issues such as these could be tackled much more effectively through a joint effort between universities, colleges and schools, together with local authorities and third sector organisations. We will take steps to promote this during the coming year as we review our approach to funding.*

## **Accountability**

The report also mentions the measures to hold universities and colleges to account on the commitments they have made:

- 14 plans were only approved for a shorter timeframe
- 90 providers received enhanced monitoring requirements (additional reporting on specific commitments on top of the annual impact report process)
- 79 providers received 'formal communications' drawing attention to particular areas of the plan they will be expected to address in their first annual impact report in 2022
- No plans were refused and no specific conditions have been applied (in the previous plan process, five providers received specific conditions).

*The interventions we have made so far are about managing risk, not about placing universities in 'special measures'. But we will not hesitate to use our powers to improve progress where gaps are widest or slowest to close.*

*Regulation is a means to an end: better outcomes for all students. Higher education can transform the lives of individual students and the places where they study and work. But this will only benefit all parts of the country and all types of people if there is a fair and equal opportunity for all. That's the challenge we have set for universities in this country and we're expecting them to deliver on it.*

The report states the OfS will hold providers to account for the delivery of their targets through the annual impact reports and they are also

*...designing and testing a 'student submission' with a view to enabling students to produce their own report of the progress made by their provider. This could be submitted to the OfS independently of the provider's impact reports, and students could also use it to hold their providers to account.*

In support during 2020-21 the OfS have committed to a number of actions:

- We will develop further regulatory and funding incentives for mature student participation.
- We will focus on regulatory requirements and incentives that will address low levels of continuation in some providers.
- We will work with providers to improve understanding of the causes and characteristics of the gap in degree outcomes between black and white students, and to promote effective practice in this area.
- We will work with the new Disabled Students' Commission to identify and promote effective practice in relation to supporting specific groups of disabled students.
- More generally, we will continue to invest in and improve:
  - Sustained collaborative outreach through our Uni Connect programme.

- The understanding of student populations, including the intersections between different groups, through the access and participation dataset and a new Associations Between Characteristics measure.
- Tracking of student progress from outreach through to higher education and into employment, through the Higher Education Access Tracker and similar services.
- Evaluation practice and the use of evaluation findings, through a new 'what works' centre, Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education.

## Sector Responses to the OfS Analysis

**Sir Michael Barber, Chair of the OfS**, addressed MPs on the day the report was published to highlight stark regional disparities in access stating these are important for universities and college to address:

- *"The chance to go to university has been something of a postcode lottery, and I welcome the ambitious commitments universities are making to change this state of affairs. What is an assumed rite of passage for many young people across the country is often viewed very differently in rural and coastal communities, the industrial heartlands and military towns.*
- *The North-South divide crops up in many debates around equal opportunities, and higher education is no exception. While areas of extremely low participation are particularly uncommon in the capital, this is also the case in almost a third of parliamentary constituencies across England. In London, 54 per cent of young people go into higher education, but this falls to 39 per cent in the North East and in the South West it is only 37 per cent. So this is more than a simple North-South divide. In fact, the South West has the lowest participation rate of any region..."*

**Chris Millward, Director for Fair Access and Participation at the OfS**, stated:

- *Despite gradual progress in improving access for people from underrepresented and disadvantaged groups, equality gaps have remained stubbornly large. 'Slow and steady' progress is simply too slow when people's livelihoods and opportunities are at stake.*

**Independent Schools Council Chief Executive Julie Robinson** stated:

- *"No young person considering higher education should face barriers when leaving school. This debate should be about creating opportunity for all and how we can support that aim by working together. For example, many independent schools already work successfully with state schools on university entrance partnership projects, helping prepare greater numbers of pupils for the next step in their education.*
- *Of course, there are many alternative routes available to young people but for those who have worked hard for the chance to receive the university education of their choice, we are in favour of fair, fully contextualised admissions processes. They need careful application because, to use one example, school type is not of itself a proxy for background or an indicator of socio-economic advantage or disadvantage. Many pupils in state schools come from high income homes and many pupils attending independent schools receive means-tested bursaries.*
- *There is clearly a question to be asked about the potential for universities and colleges to expand to ensure no aspirational individuals are deprived of a place and to help even more talented young people thrive in the UK."*

**NUS Disabled Students Officer, Piers Wilkinson** commented:

- *"It is encouraging to see the higher education sector promise to take bold steps to address gaps in attainment. NUS, students' unions and activists have been driving these issues for years – but to be meaningful, these commitments need to take into account the long distance many institutions have to travel to iron out institutional prejudices and the intersecting barriers that students face on campus and not just become action to chase targets.*

- *There is also a need for a nuanced understanding of the statistics and numerical targets. The disabled student attainment gap often hides the shocking figures underneath, where the attainment and employment gap vary greatly between impairment classification and type of support provision, for example, funding caps to support which impact visually impaired and blind students. Universities must also ensure that any support disabled students receive is high quality.*
- *The Black Attainment Gap is a symptom of underlying race inequities that permeate through our institutions and their decision-making processes. UUK's #ClosingtheGap and the EHRC's report on racial harassment highlighted that the understanding and capacity to make a change in this area is currently limited. Universities must ensure that the change in this area is meaningful and does not rely solely on the unpaid work of students and academics of colour who already experience marginalisation.*

### Elite Private Schools

The [Guardian](#) cover an 'intervention' by the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (who represent the high fee independent schools) which states the push to increase the number of disadvantaged students at some HE institutions *could lead to discrimination against young people "on the basis of the class they were born into"*. The article states they express concern that *new measures to [improve access](#) for the most disadvantaged students could lead to discrimination against students from elite private schools*. Instead they suggest that *universities should expand to accommodate as many "truly suitable students" as necessary, rather than "rob some students of a future to award it to others"*. He also called on universities to *review the increasing number of international students, rather than "deny places to UK students based on their class"*.

The [BBC](#) also cover the OfS report.

### Social Mobility

The House of Lords debated social mobility this week. Baroness Tyler Of Enfield opened the debate by posing a question asking the Government how they plan to respond to the ten steps to improve social mobility contained in the [Sutton Trust's Mobility Manifesto](#) and the recommendations of the [Social Mobility Commission's 2019 State of the Nation report](#) (both reports concluded it was becoming harder for individuals to rise above their current level of social mobility). You can read the [full debate](#) or the key points below. Note – in brackets are the party allegiances of the contributors.

- Baroness Tyler of Enfield (LD) stressed the importance of social mobility and noted that there were scant references to social mobility in the recent party election manifestos. She stated that low social mobility was ethically and economically undesirable. That improving social mobility required the Government to act across the life course: early years, primary and secondary school, careers education, further education, universities, apprenticeships, access to good employment opportunities.
- Baroness Morris of Yardley (Lab) warned against an over focus on the bright disadvantaged child in such discussions - social mobility is about every child, no matter their level of attainment.
- Lord Bates (Con) said that in order to encourage social mobility, people had to "start raising expectations and aspirations and stop raising excuses".
- Lord Storey (LD) highlighted the importance of early years, stressing that it was about not just the hours but the quality of early years. He called for well-paid, well-trained, quality staff. He concluded by saying that poverty was the root cause of all of this inequality.
- Lord Bassam of Brighton (Lab) noted that the gap between poor students and the well-off remained enormous, particularly at the most selective universities. In addition to tackling the financial barriers to access higher education he called for changes to tackle the structural disadvantage within the system that holds young people back.

- Baroness Berridge answered on behalf of the Government. She agreed on the importance of social mobility to society but warned that there was no "silver bullet" for the issue. She insisted that the Government were committed to making childcare more accessible, saving families up to £5,000 a year. She also highlighted that all three and four-year-olds and disadvantaged two-year-olds could now access at least 15 hours of free childcare each week; and the Government's 10-year target to halve the number of children leaving reception class without the communication, language and developmental skills to access education.
- Berridge said that the Government had already done many of the things mentioned in State of the Nation report, such as: increasing 16 to 19 funding by £400 million; investing in adult learning through a national skills fund; changing how we allocate discretionary bursaries to meet student needs; and reviewing qualifications at level 3 and below to ensure that the reforms work for all students.

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