



**Impetus**  
Private Equity Foundation



# Closing the gap in university access

A response to the DfE Green Paper  
'Schools that work for everyone'

Policy briefing #2  
December 2016

“Going to university leads to new ways of seeing the world, to new horizons and networks, and to significantly enhanced job opportunities. But ... fewer students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds go to university, and when they do they tend not to do as well as their more privileged peers.” – Nicola Dandridge, CEO, Universities UK, 2016

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## Executive summary

This paper outlines our response to the two questions in the ‘Universities’ section of the *Schools that work for everyone* consultation paper:

### 1. How can the academic expertise of universities be brought to bear on our schools system, to improve school-level attainment and in doing so widen access?

We endorse the analysis in the green paper, which states that improving the attainment of underrepresented groups is the best way to widen access. We agree that universities should play a bigger role in the wider education eco-system and that co-operation between universities and schools can reap valuable rewards for both.

However, we do not think that promoting and funding university sponsorship of schools is the most effective policy for closing the access gap, for the following reasons:

- There is very little evidence that universities have succeeded in raising attainment in schools they sponsor.
- Even if all of the UK’s universities and HE settings (less than 200) were to enter into sponsorship arrangement with schools, coverage would be extremely patchy. Many ‘cold spots,’ with low attainment and no university in the locality (like Great Yarmouth or the Isle of Wight), would remain untouched.
- By linking sponsorship to a university’s ability to charge higher fees, universities may in fact be discouraged from entering in to relationships with failing schools where there is under-attainment. If they struggle to turn these schools around – and this takes time, expertise and considerable effort, factors not always readily at a university’s disposal - this will impact their own fee arrangements.

We recommend that universities are better incentivised to collaborate with third sector organisations (such as our charity partners IntoUniversity and The Access Project) with a proven track record of targeting support where it is most needed, raising the attainment of under represented groups and providing them with the support they need to access university.

## 2. Are there other ways in which universities could be asked to contribute to raising school level attainment?

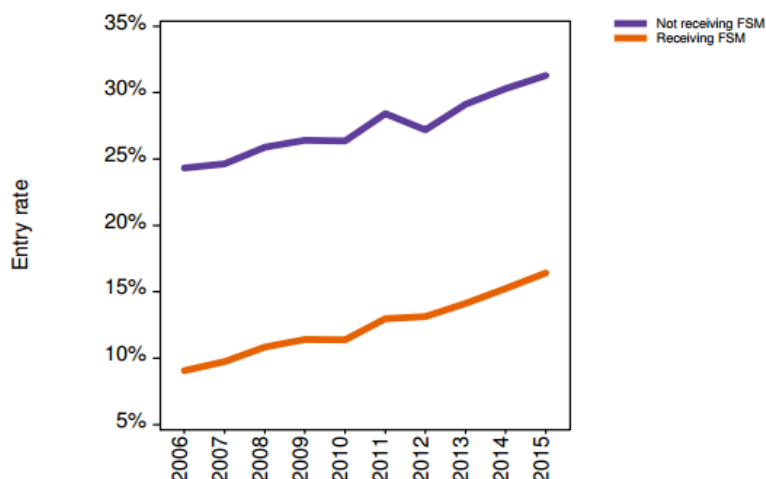
We propose that some of the existing Widening Participation funding, and any funding that would otherwise be channelled in to school sponsorship, be redirected to funding a What Works Centre and piloting a Payment By Results (PbR) model.

We believe that these two innovations would help place student outcomes at the heart of the system, and fundamentally change how access interventions are designed and delivered. In turn, this would lead to a more targeted approach, better student outcomes, increased efficiency and better value for money.

## 1. The disadvantage gap

Overall participation in university has been steadily rising for all young people over the last 10 years. However, the participation gap between disadvantaged young people and their peers has failed to close, remaining at around 15% throughout this period.

Figure.1 Entry rates of FSM and non-FSM groups 2006-15 (UCAS)



## Fast facts

- In the UK, 22% of the population has a bachelor's degree, compared to the OECD average of 16% (OECD 2016)
- Overall participation in university is rising, with 523,300 young people entering a UK university in 2015, an increase of 3% from 2014 (UCAS 2015)
- In England in 2015, 42% of young people were enrolled in university by age 19 (UCAS 2015). The government's target is 50%
- In England in 2015, 16.4% of young people who had been eligible for free school meals (FSM) entered university, compared to 31.3% of the non-FSM group (UCAS 2015)
- The percentage point difference between the FSM and non-FSM groups has remained static at around 15 percentage points over the last 10 years (UCAS 2015)
- 'Privileged' students are disproportionately likely to attend selective universities with independently schooled pupils making up nearly 40% of the intake of the five most selective Russell Group universities (Social Mobility Commission 2016)
- The odds of a young person eligible for FSM at secondary school being admitted to Oxbridge are 2,000 to 1 (Teach First 2016)

## Does it matter?

In short, yes. Access to university has far reaching benefits, for the individual, for the economy and for society.

Among these, it:

- Enables young people to fulfil their potential, deepen their knowledge and broaden their horizons
- Unlocks entry into the professions and higher paying jobs; graduates are less likely to be unemployed and earn up to £250,000 over their lifetime more than non-graduates ([Universities UK](#))
- Increases national productivity; GDP has grown in line with the increase in the percentage of the population going to university and the university sector is estimated to contribute 2.8% of GDP (Universities UK)
- Facilitates social mobility, opening a vital route for disadvantaged groups to progress

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## 2. Widening participation: current trends

Widening participation (WP) – a keystone of higher education (HE) policy – aims to address the discrepancies in the take-up of HE opportunities between different social groups.

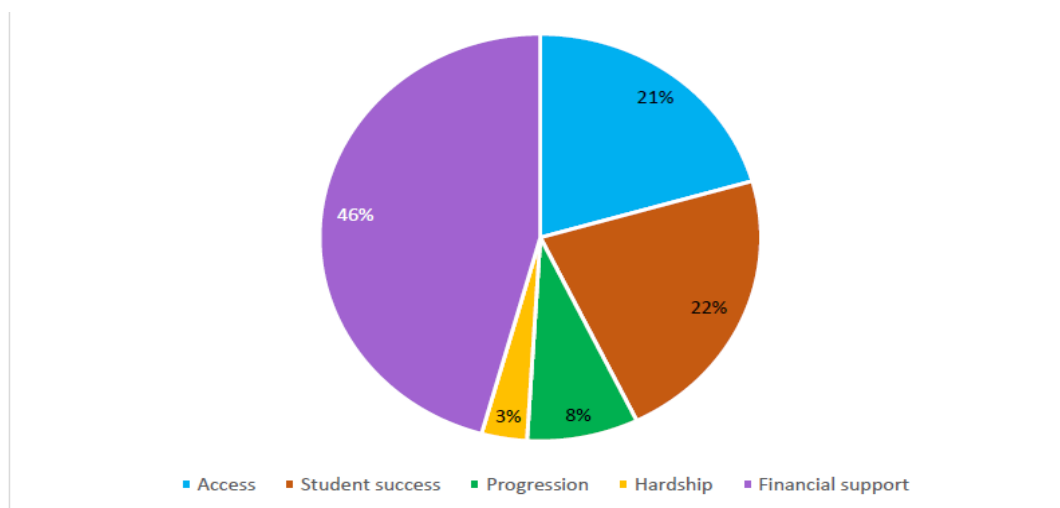
To close these gaps, universities undertake a range of WP activities including:

- offering financial support (scholarships, bursaries, hardship funds) to students from underrepresented groups
- running their own outreach activities with schools and communities
- funding third party organisations undertaking a range of programmes (awareness and aspiration raising programmes, summer schools, tutoring, careers advice, university application support and interview prep)

Universities and colleges charging tuition fees above the basic rate set by government must have an 'access agreement,' detailing what measures they have in place to widen participation, approved by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). These agreements give us a wealth of data about what universities are doing to widen participation.

OFFA estimates that in England, HE institutions will invest £833.5 million in WP under their 2017-18 access agreements. Most of this money will go towards financial support.

Figure 2. Division of predicted access agreement expenditure 2017-18 (OFFA 2016)



Research commissioned by OFFA on the effectiveness of financial support, concluded that “financial support is not the most significant determinant in either the decision to apply to higher education or in the choice between institutions” (Nursaw 2015).

As the government’s *Schools that work for everyone* consultation paper attests, **research tells us that prior attainment is the overriding determining factor for university access.**

We need to increase the pool of students attaining the high grades needed to qualify for a university place (for instance in 2011, only 546 students on free school meals nationally attained the 3 As at A-level required to apply to Oxbridge). It follows that funds should flow to organisations and activities which can raise the attainment of underrepresented groups.

It is important to note that attainment alone is no guarantor of university access; as Teach First outline, there are three main factors: strong attainment; awareness of the opportunity; and assistance to turn aspiration into reality (Teach First 2016).

### 3. Widening participation: the government’s proposals

*Schools that work for everyone* (DfE 2016) seeks to close the disadvantage gap in access to HE; we support this aim. We also endorse the analysis which the green paper presents, concluding that improving the attainment of underrepresented groups is the best way of closing the gap.

The paper proposes to do this by asking universities to play a greater role in the state school system, by either establishing a new free school, or sponsoring an academy.

#### The consultation asks:

- How can the academic expertise of universities be brought to bear on our schools system, to improve school-level attainment and in doing so widen access?

## ➤ Are there other ways in which universities could be asked to contribute to raising school level attainment?

Impetus-PEF has approached these questions from two perspectives; what does the evidence tell us, and what can we learn from the experience of our charity partners?

### The evidence base for university sponsorship of schools

The track record of universities in the school system is **a)** very nascent and **b)** very mixed.

The government's proposals have been met with a spectrum of responses, from the cautiously welcoming:

"We welcome the current work by HEFCE to look at the longer-term impact of sponsorship, especially on academic performance in the schools and progression on to higher education and its plan to provide universities with a tool-kit to help them identify the key factors to consider when developing such arrangements." Universities UK, 2016

to the decidedly sceptical:

"I think it would be a distraction from our core mission. We are having this discussion because we are very good at running a university. We have no experience running schools." Louise Richardson, Vice-Chancellor, University of Oxford, September 2016

We have a relatively small sample size to judge the effectiveness of universities in running schools. Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) estimated that 60 universities are involved in sponsorship relationships with 150 schools (of a total of about 24,000).

A majority of the 60 are from the lower tariff group of universities and over 50 of the schools are University Technical Colleges (UTCs). UTCs have had a troubled trajectory. Analysis by SchoolDash shows that UTCs significantly underperform in GCSE attainment compared with state secondary schools. This is also true of A-levels; pass rates across UTCs in 2015 were 48%, compared to 77% across schools. This does not give a hopeful picture of the ability of university sponsorship to raise attainment in comparison to what schools can achieve.

In some cases – a school run by Teeside university, an academy run by the University of Hull, four sponsored schools and three sponsored trusts – the government has had to intervene with special measures or to shut university sponsorship down altogether (WonkHE 2016).

Where universities have had success in forging relationships with schools, certain factors are discernible. For instance:

- Locality, where universities engage with schools in their local area and are able to forge strong bonds at community level
- Having a faculty of education within the university which can lend expertise around teaching and learning
- Specialisation and selection, for instance the Kings Maths Academy cited in the government consultation, a sixth form which takes the very best maths students from around London and the South East (not to be mistaken as an example of raising attainment as only high-attainers are admitted)

HEFCE outlines an array of contributions universities have usefully made in schools including governance and management advice; curriculum design and development; resource sharing; learner enrichment and teacher training (HEFCE 2016).

Universities should play a bigger role in the wider education eco-system and while such cooperation is undoubtedly valuable to schools, there is very little data which actually links this to raising attainment.

We do not think that promoting university sponsorship of schools is the most effective policy for closing the access gap, for the following reasons:

- There is very little evidence that universities have succeeded in raising attainment in schools they sponsor (over and above what schools without a university sponsorship arrangement have managed to achieve).
- Even if all of the UK's universities and HE settings (less than 200) were to enter into sponsorship arrangement with schools, coverage would be extremely patchy. Many 'cold spots,' with low attainment and no university in the locality (like Great Yarmouth or the Isle of Wight), would remain untouched
- By linking sponsorship to a university's ability to charge higher fees, universities may in fact be discouraged from entering in to relationships with failing schools where there is under-attainment. If they struggle to turn these schools around – and this takes time, expertise and considerable effort, factors not always readily at a university's disposal - this will impact their own fee arrangements

**Our conclusion from examining available evidence is that while university sponsorship of schools may be a good thing to encourage in and of itself, it is not the most effective way of raising the attainment of disadvantaged groups who are not accessing university.**

For evidence of how to do this effectively, we turn to our charity partners.

## The experience of our charity partners

The £833.5m being spent by the HE sector on WP is a considerable sum which can be deployed towards narrowing the disadvantage gap. But this can only be deployed effectively if universities preference spend on those activities and organisations which have a demonstrable impact raising on attainment, which we know is the most powerful driver of access. As we have seen, currently the majority of this funding is spent on bursaries, which have no impact on attainment.

Impetus-PEF invests its money, expertise, time and networks in organisations which have an impact on closing the gap in attainment and sustained employment for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Several of the charities in our portfolio work with disadvantaged young people to raise their attainment and widen their aspirations, including Action Tutoring, Teens and Toddlers, ThinkForward, Adviza, The Access Project (TAP) and IntoUniversity (IU). The latter two, TAP and IU, have closing the disadvantage gap in university access as their defined mission.

## ➤ IntoUniversity

IntoUniversity is an award-winning charity working to inspire young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to attain a university place. Since 2002 the charity has supported over 50,000 young people, providing an integrated programme of after-school academic support, mentoring and aspiration-raising workshops. Its 22 local learning centres, are based in seven cities, in the heart of disadvantaged communities.

In 2015, 80% of IntoUniversity school leavers attained a university place, compared with just 22% of young people eligible for free school meals nationally.

## The Access Project

The Access Project (TAP) works with high-potential students from disadvantaged backgrounds, providing in-school support and personalised tuition, to help them gain access to selective universities.

TAP addresses both of the major barriers to university access: attainment at GCSE and A-level, and making good application decisions. It does this through intensive academic one-to-one tuition delivered by trained graduate volunteers, and through structured mentoring delivered by professional mentors in-school.

Based on a sample of 1,500 TAP students and a 1,500 strong control group of students not receiving TAP support, a recent analysis found that 57% of the TAP pupils were accepted in to a DfE top third university, compared to 33% from the control group.

What IntoUniversity and The Access Project are both able to offer is early, targeted, intense, multi-year and multi-faceted support which they can prove is effective in raising attainment and aspiration.

## Third sector collaboration

**We believe that one of the most effective ways that universities can contribute to raising attainment in schools is to collaborate with and support effective third sector organisations.**

Such collaboration offers the following advantages:

- Specialisation and expertise in the delivery of effective outreach programmes to ensure disadvantaged young people can access university
- Programmes that reach the young people who most need the support
- Integrated and holistic provision to ensure young people are supported with their attainment as well as information, advice and guidance (IAG)
- A commitment to monitor and evaluate impact to improve outcomes over time
- The agility to reach parts of the country and specific communities which universities may struggle to reach on their own
- Value for money, with spend translating more directly in to outcomes

We conclude by proposing two alternative ways of closing the disadvantage gap in university access; through the establishment of a What Works centre and by introducing a Payment by Results (PbR) model.

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## 4. Alternative proposals for closing the disadvantage gap

### A What Works centre

The Cabinet Office oversees the network of What Works centres – such as the Education Endowment Foundation (set up by Impetus-PEF and the Sutton Trust), the National Centre for Health and Care Excellence and the Early Intervention Foundation – whose aims are to generate, transmit and adopt high quality evidence for decision making.

What Works centres support the delivery of effective public services and help ensure value for public money.



They do this by:

- collating existing evidence on how effective policy programmes and practices are
- producing high quality synthesis reports and systematic reviews in areas where they do not currently exist
- assessing how effective policies and practices are against an agreed set of outcomes
- sharing findings in an accessible way
- encouraging practitioners, commissioners and policymakers to use these findings to inform their decisions

(Source: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network#the-what-works-network>)

In October 2016, the Universities UK's Social Mobility Advisory Group recommended the establishment of what it called 'an independent evidence and impact exchange,' to systematically evaluate and promote the evidence relating to the role of higher education in supporting social mobility and to support the sharing of data.

In November 2016, the Social Mobility Commission's *State of the Nation* report recommended that a new social mobility league table be published annually to highlight which universities are doing most to widen access, improve retention and ensure good career progression for their students.

We endorse these recommendations, and we believe that the Cabinet Office's model of What Works centres provides an ideal means of operationalising them. The establishment of such a centre on fair access to university would provide a better evidence base around what works in widening access to underrepresented groups and as such significantly improve the quality of decision-making. It would provide a valuable focal point and centre of expertise as well as an objective repository of evidence which can drive change.

## A payment by results model

The success of WP initiatives is often judged on the number of young people who undertook particular outreach activities (inputs), rather than whether the young people involved did or did not get into university (outcomes).

Payment by results ensures that the focus is squarely on the outcomes achieved because only outcomes translate into payment. The payment by results model creates a clear incentive for providers of outreach services to ensure that they are successful, and reach the young people who need the support. Transparency of outcomes reached and payments drives a better understanding of what works well and less well in outreach provision, raising the quality of design and delivery of these programmes.

As far as we are aware, no WP funding is currently allocated on a payment by results basis – which we believe, plays a part in the very poor level of evidence on how effectively this money is being spent. This in turn makes it less likely that good practice will be repeated and poor practice improved, or discontinued.

At a high level the process of structuring a payment by results model would involve:

- Identifying a target student group
- Defining the target outcomes
- Identifying funding and assigning values to the target outcomes
- Formally commissioning the programme & raising social investment, if necessary
- Implementing the programmes and tracking performance

The following principles would shape the model:

- Payment is triggered when specific outcomes are achieved for the target group e.g. university enrolment of students previously eligible for free school meals
- Providers are incentivised to maximise performance, using on-going performance management
- Outcomes would be evidenced to the commissioning body (e.g. HEFCE or the Office for Students) according to a pre-defined process to trigger an outcome payment. This process could include independent validation from schools or universities
- The dissemination of best practice (via the What Works centre for instance) to enable replication and scale up
- The model would be trailed in areas where provision is fairly well-established. We do not recommend payment by results as a tool for taking provision into currently unserved areas as the challenge of expanding an organisation into a new area and delivering to outcomes would undermine the chances of quality provision.

Channelling some WP spend towards a What Works centre and designing and delivering a payment by results model would help place student outcomes at the heart of the system and fundamentally change how WP interventions are designed and delivered. In turn, this will lead to a more targeted approach, better student outcomes, increased efficiency and better value for money.

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