



Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State

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Sent by email

23 November 2021

Dear Nicola and James,

As you will be aware, today we are announcing the appointment of John Blake as the new Director for Fair Access and Participation, starting on 1 January 2022. We therefore want to take the opportunity to set out, in guidance to the Office for Students (OfS), the new approach we would like the Director for Fair Access and Participation and the OfS to take in relation to Access and Participation (A&P) when John is in post. We are also copying this letter to John as this will provide the strategic direction for his work when he starts in role from 1 January. Please note that this letter provides guidance to the OfS under section 2(3) of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.

Before we set out our priorities and the new direction of travel for A&P, we would like to start by thanking Chris Millward for his work as the Director for Fair Access and Participation over the last four years, during and since the set-up of the OfS, and throughout the ongoing pandemic, and to wish him all the best for the future. We would also like to thank you and everyone at the OfS again for their hard work in exceptional circumstances over the last 18 months.

The future of access and participation

Since 2010, this government has fundamentally changed standards in schools. Our ambitious programme of reforms has given pupils access to a knowledge-rich curriculum, rigorous assessment and qualifications, and high-quality teaching. And we are beginning to see results. More pupils are now taking core academic GCSEs, more children are reading fluently, and most disadvantaged pupils now attend Good or Outstanding schools.

The current system for Access and Participation in HE has had some successes. The proportion of children receiving FSM progressing to higher education by age 19 has increased from 19.8% in 2010/11 to 26.6% in 2019/20; similarly, the proportion of state school entrants to Oxbridge has increased from 59% to 66% between 2015/16 to 2019/20. We want this progress to continue. But the gap between the most and least advantaged students remains stubbornly open. White British young males who received free school meals are amongst the least likely to enter higher education, with just 12.6% progressing to higher education by age 19 by 2019/20. We also see persistent gaps in the attainment of students from different ethnic groups within higher education, with the number of Black students achieving 1st or a 2:1 being 18.3 percentage points lower than for White students. It also cannot be right that some

notional gains in access have resulted from recruiting students from underrepresented groups onto courses where more than 50% of students do not get positive outcomes from their degree.

We would like to see the whole higher education sector stepping up and taking a greater role in continuing to raise aspirations and standards in education – and we would like to refocus the A&P regime to better support this.

In addition to benefiting students and enhancing social mobility, this refocusing should also provide direct benefits to higher education providers. The current system has, at times, been to the detriment of higher education providers, who carry the burden of producing long and bureaucratic A&P plans, with too many incentives to focus on recruitment, and too few incentives to focus on what really matters for disadvantaged students: high prior attainment, successful completion of a high-quality degree, and giving access to high-skilled employment. A new approach should aim to relieve the burden on providers and ensure that students and parents are clear on the actions to which providers have committed to support equality of opportunity.

We believe that now is the time for change, for two reasons. First, our university sector is world leading, but not everyone benefits from their degree, and it is increasingly clear that practices have grown up that can bake inequality into the system.

There has been a strong focus on ensuring more people can get into higher education, but not always as much focus in ensuring that the courses they are admitted to are genuinely high quality, with support for students to both complete their studies and develop the skills and knowledge that will lead to graduate employment or further study. At 25 higher education providers, fewer than half the students who begin a degree will go on to highly skilled employment or further study within 15 months of graduation, and even within providers above this threshold, there will frequently be one or more subjects which are below it. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are being let down by these courses.

Secondly, the pandemic has highlighted the gaps in opportunity and advantage that already existed within our society. Genuine equality of opportunity for all, regardless of background, is fundamental to our ambition to level up skills, growth and economic opportunity across the country. Universities can play a key role, and have a key interest, in raising school standards, increasing pupils' aspirations, and levelling the playing field for future students across the country.

It is time to reset the role that universities play in supporting true equality of opportunity and the OfS, and John as the new Director for Fair Access and Participation, have a critical role to play in making this change.

We would like to see the OfS rewrite the national targets to better align with this new focus, and renegotiate A&P plans with providers to meet these new priorities, including due consideration of regional inequalities, prior attainment in schools and a focus on the findings of the white working-class boys report, which identified that they are one of the groups least likely to attend university.

We encourage the OfS, in the renegotiated plans, to require providers to promote equality of opportunity before entry to higher education, and support schools to drive up academic standards. This includes working meaningfully with schools to ensure that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are encouraged and supported to achieve their full potential. To

increase aspiration and attainment a far greater focus needs to be placed on activities which benefit students, including summer schools, programmes of intervention in schools and targeted bursaries to assist with living costs.

There should be a shift away from marketing activities which serve to benefit the institutions and not students. We must place student needs and requirements into the spotlight and focus all efforts on this. Providers should be working altruistically with students – supporting them to achieve the highest possible grades and onto the best route for them – whether that be an apprenticeship or higher technical qualification, into further education, or a different course at another university. Providers should be given full credit for activities that support students on to other positive outcomes – including apprenticeships, vocational education and access to other universities – not solely judged on increasing access to their own institution.

We know that diversifying modes of study in higher education can be an important method of broadening access and participation. We would like the OfS to strongly encourage providers to set themselves ambitious, measurable targets to significantly increase the proportion of students on higher and degree apprenticeships, Level 4 and 5 courses, including Higher Technical Qualifications, and utilising greater flexibility of access such as part time courses. As with all targets, these will need to be proposed by, specific to and tailored to the provider, but we would expect the majority of providers to have such a target under the renegotiated plans.

Most importantly too, we have concerns that too many students are currently recruited to low quality courses with low completion rates and poor graduate outcomes. As set out in guidance earlier this year, we expect the OfS to progress rapidly to ensure that an enhanced regulatory regime is in place, supported by effective and meaningful enforcement action. As part of this, we welcome a fresh focus from the OfS on the outcomes achieved by disadvantaged and underrepresented groups in higher education. Providers should not be incentivised, nor rewarded, for recruiting disadvantaged students onto courses where too many students drop out or that do not offer good graduate outcomes.

Within this A&P refresh, where courses exist on which significant numbers of students who start drop out or do not progress to graduate jobs or further study, the OfS should expect such providers to set clear, measurable targets to improve the outcomes of such courses, hold them to account for meeting those targets, in a similar manner to how the OfS expects to see access targets in high tariff providers.

This refocusing of the system is not about creating a new, burdensome industry. These changes should streamline the planning, monitoring and evaluation process. Plans should be short, concise, and both accessible and easy to understand. They should focus on results and best practice. Most importantly, plans should be comprehensible to students and parents, and clearly signposted on university websites, so that they can hold institutions to account on their commitments. We would also expect providers to see material efficiency benefits from this less bureaucratic approach.

In carrying out this work we would like to ask John and the OfS more widely to work closely with others active in this area, in particular the Children's Commissioner and Social Mobility Commissioner, to ensure that we are delivering improved equality of opportunity as effectively as possible.

We would like to thank the OfS again and we look forward to working together to deliver real equality of opportunity throughout our education system.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Zahawi'.

Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State for Education

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michelle Donelan'.

Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP
**Minister of State for Higher and Further
Education**