

# **Civic university agreements: exploring synergies with Office for Students access and participation regulation and funding**

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This is an edited version of a submission from the Office for Students (OfS) to the Civic University Commission as part of the UPP Foundation's consultation on civic university agreements. It explores the potential synergies between OfS access and participation regulation and funding initiatives, and civic university agreements. We hope that it will help higher education providers working to develop and deliver their agreements. It is not OfS regulatory guidance.

## **Introduction**

1. The Office for Students (OfS) is the independent regulator of higher education in England. Our aim is to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers.
2. We do this by regulating higher education providers in relation to matters such as access and participation, quality and student outcomes, financial health, student protection and governance. We also regulate at sector level to ensure that higher education delivers activity and outcomes that cannot be achieved by individual providers alone.
3. The OfS has a particular remit to ensure that everyone has equal opportunity to access and succeed in higher education. We promote access and participation in higher education by underrepresented groups, and have set ambitious targets to measure progress in eliminating gaps in access and attainment between these and other groups. We fund a national network of local outreach partnerships, and help higher education providers by publishing tools and guidance on 'what works' in access and participation.

4. We also support higher education providers to make sure that all students gain the skills they need for successful and rewarding careers, and that the pipeline of graduate talent meets the needs of employers and the economy, now and in the future. The government’s industrial strategy identifies a specific role for the OfS in this respect.<sup>1</sup> Our business plan sets out the sector-level work we are undertaking to deliver it. This includes supporting the supply of STEM and digital skills, the growth of higher and degree-level apprenticeships, the take-up of graduate skills in areas of lower productivity and growth, and the student contribution to knowledge exchange.<sup>2</sup> These last two are discussed in more detail below.

5. Civic university agreements have the potential to have a positive impact on access to and outcomes from higher education, while also helping local communities and businesses. Many higher education providers already act as ‘anchor institutions’, making important contributions to local economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing. The agreements can provide a structure for this work, as well as contributing to national expectations and initiatives.

6. This note outlines several areas in which the OfS’s regulation and support for access and participation interacts with civic university agreements:

- Access and participation plans
- National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP)
- Funding to support local graduates
- Support for knowledge exchange activity.

## Supporting underrepresented groups in higher education: access and participation plans

7. The Higher Education and Research Act 2017, which established the OfS, makes provision for the OfS to require providers wishing to charge above the basic fee to undergraduate students to have an OfS-approved access and participation plan if they want to be registered with the OfS and receive public funds. The plan must set out what the providers will do to promote equality of opportunity in their own context. The Act also empowers the OfS to promote good practice in this area.

8. Access and participation plans must include:

- An **honest and rigorous self-assessment**. This should set out the gaps in equality between different groups of students in relation to access, continuation, attainment and progression into further study or work in relation to the provider’s mission and location, and considering factors such as race, disability, age, childhood home and school performance.
- **Ambitious objectives**. Providers should set five-year targets for reducing the gaps identified through their self-assessment and for measuring their broader contribution to improving equality of opportunity locally and nationally.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy-building-a-britain-fit-for-the-future> (p 101).

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/our-business-plan/>.

- **Credible plans** based on a theory of change, setting out the interventions that the provider will make to achieve the targets, the evidence informing them, and the investment underpinning it.
- **Robust evaluation and oversight.** The plan must demonstrate whether interventions are achieving their goals, and how they can be improved over time. It must also set out how the governing body and senior management will provide the institution-wide commitment needed to bridge access and student success.

9. This structure may be useful as a framing device for civic university agreements. Providers also undertake specific access and participation activities that contribute to the civic mission. These include:

- Work with schools to improve understanding and expectations about progression into higher education, and ultimately to raise attainment.
- Work with further education colleges to create diverse pathways into higher education, including for people in work or with caring responsibilities.
- Work with employers and local agencies to improve graduate employability and the take-up of graduate skills, and to meet the skills needs of business and public services.
- Gathering and sharing of evidence on ‘what works’ for different groups of students in different places and at different points in the lifecycle.

10. In all aspects of this work, providers focus on those people and places who are under-represented in higher education, using ward and school-level data to target those most in need.

11. By including these activities in both civic university agreements and access and participation plans, providers will be able to ensure that their accountability locally and nationally is mutually supportive.

## **Supporting outreach: National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP)**

12. The OfS funds partnerships of universities and colleges throughout the country to work together in ‘outreach hubs’ to deliver outreach in a joined-up and efficient way. This includes securing resources and expertise that can be used by different providers, and giving schools and colleges a clear point of contact for advice about higher education.

13. Our guidance for NCOP partnerships for the next two years of the programme encourages them to consider how their outreach hub could link to the civic university agreements signed by a number of universities. The UPP Foundation’s report for the Civic Universities Commission includes four key relevant points:

- **‘Understanding local populations, and asking them what they want.** Analysis of their place and people's priorities are essential.
- **Understanding themselves and what they are able to offer...**
- **Working with other local anchor institutions, businesses and community organisations** to agree where the short, medium and long-term opportunities and problems lie for communities. Linking with local authorities and other local plans, such as the local industrial strategy, is particularly important.
- **A clear set of priorities.** A process of agreeing clear priorities will therefore be necessary and, again, this is where collaboration and aligning resources with local authorities, LEPs (Local Economic Partnerships), NHS bodies and the like can help to identify the live issues that universities can most usefully help with.’<sup>3</sup>

By including activity of this kind in both civic university agreements and NCOP plans, higher education providers will be able to ensure that they are mutually supportive.

## Improving outcomes for local graduates

14. Nearly half of graduates choose or need to study and work in the area where they grew up, and over two-thirds take jobs in their home regions. However, opportunities in some regions are limited due to uneven regional productivity and variable local labour markets. At the same time, areas with the lowest productivity and growth are the places that most need to capitalise on graduate talent to succeed.

15. Through its Challenge Competition, the OfS is funding universities and colleges across the country to find ways to remove barriers to local graduate employment, broaden choice for local graduates, and help ensure that students are getting the right skills to enter rewarding work.

16. We have awarded a total of £5.6 million to 15 projects focused on improving outcomes for local graduates by providing students with work-related training and developing links with local employers and infrastructure. The projects have diverse aims and approaches, but all address one or more of the following priorities:

- improving employment outcomes of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly BAME students and those with disabilities
- improving graduate outcomes for mature students or part-time students who plan to remain in their local area for study and post-study work
- addressing place-based skills gaps by ensuring graduates are well prepared to succeed in local industries.

17. The competition was heavily subscribed, with 88 bids received. This suggests there is a real appetite among higher education providers to work more intensively within their local communities to improve outcomes for those graduates who want to remain local for employment. Civic university agreements could be a vehicle for sharing the learning from these activities, with

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Civic-University-Commission-Final-Report.pdf>

potential to scale up in other towns and cities across the country. The OfS's Fair Access and Participation directorate can advise on gaps in coverage that could be addressed through the agreements.<sup>4</sup>

## Support for knowledge exchange activity

18. The OfS is working with Research England to improve understanding and awareness of how students can be engaged in knowledge exchange activities (KE-S). Current knowledge exchange (KE) mechanisms (both for identifying and measuring KE activity and funding it) do not make this explicit. This means that we cannot sufficiently demonstrate the impact of student or teaching related activities in knowledge exchange.

19. Central to the rationale for supporting knowledge exchange activities is the need to remove barriers to the generation, diffusion, and uptake of knowledge around the system. One barrier is the mismatch between the skills needs of the labour market and the graduate skills flowing from higher education providers. In principle, a typology of KE-S activities and funding could help to address such barriers in a number of ways:

- It could strengthen links between higher education providers and employers by generating a better understanding of future skills needs, thereby increasing the responsiveness of higher education to changing skills needs.
- It could enable more students to engage directly with employers during their time in higher education. This could help to reduce the search costs of matching students to appropriate jobs. It could also help students to develop broader entrepreneurial and innovation-related skills, capabilities and experiences beyond the technical skills they gain through their courses.
- It could address market failures associated with employers' willingness to invest in training, expanding opportunities for work placements and other forms of in-education training for students.

20. Civic university agreements could provide a platform to identify and develop student engagement with knowledge exchange, with benefits to the student experience and student outcomes beyond graduation, as well as the places in which they study and work.

## Conclusion

21. Aligning civic university agreements with national initiatives and regulatory requirements can help higher education providers to ensure that local and national accountability is mutually supportive. They can act as a vehicle to support providers' own ambitions to improve access, student outcomes and knowledge exchange at the same time as benefiting local communities, business and the economy.

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<sup>4</sup> For NCOP-related queries, please email [NCOP@officeforstudents.org.uk](mailto:NCOP@officeforstudents.org.uk). For queries relating to skills and local graduates, please email [skills@officeforstudents.org.uk](mailto:skills@officeforstudents.org.uk).