Annex D: The development of access and participation targets

Background

1.   English higher education providers have made steady progress to improve access and participation over the past decade, but there is still considerable distance to travel before equality of opportunity in higher education will be realised. There are substantial gaps between underrepresented groups and other students at every stage of higher education – from entry right through to transition into work and beyond.

2.   Our access and participation consultation considered how we could ramp up the pace of improvement, and drive transformational change rather than the incremental progress made to date.

3.   In order to achieve this, the objectives we identified in the consultation were to:

- achieve significant reductions in the gaps in access, success and progression over the next five years

- ensure our access and participation regulation and funding are outcome-based, risk-based, underpinned by evidence and joined up with other OfS regulatory activities.

4.   The consultation responses highlighted that, given the levels of inequality across the student lifecycle, we should set ambitious long-term objectives for change, which should be reflected in sector targets.

5.   One of the OfS's four primary objectives is that 'all students, from all backgrounds, and with the ability and desire to undertake higher education are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, higher education'.

6.   In order to achieve this objective, we believe that we should set an ambition that future generations should have equal opportunities to access and succeed in higher education, and to achieve successful and rewarding careers. This is necessarily long term, but to achieve it the sector needs to make significant progress over the five year period for which the next round of access and participation plans will operate, which runs through to 2025.

7.   This paper sets out the process we have followed to develop the targets for our proposed Key Performance Measures for access and participation, and the factors we have considered.

8.   The measures we have developed have been set using the first five of our key performance measures (KPMs), which we published in September 2018[1]:

- KPM 1: Gap in participation between most and least represented groups

- KPM 2: Gap in participation at higher-tariff providers between the most and least represented groups

- KPM 3: Gap in non-continuation between most and least represented groups

- KPM 4: Gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between white students and black students

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- KPM 5: Gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between disabled students and non-disabled students.

The Process

9. The process we followed in developing the access and participation measures can be divided into a number of stages:

1. Inception

2. Intelligence gathering

3. Setting ambitions

4. Understanding our impact

5. Final trajectory setting

1. Inception

10. We have framed the setting of our targets over a twenty year period in order to reflect our generational ambition to deliver equality of opportunity. Within this period, we have also considered what progress would be needed to 2024-25, to align with the period for the next set of access and participation plans.

11. The targets have been developed in a way that is sensitive to external factors that would affect the sector's ability to meet them.

2. Intelligence gathering

12. In order to set meaningful targets we have made use of both historical and peer comparison benchmarking:

Historical benchmarking
13. Historical benchmarks were produced using data on the progress the sector has made against our KPMs to date.

Peer comparison benchmarking
14. We conducted desk research to identify relevant international and home comparators, to understand the level of ambition others demonstrated in setting targets, delivery against them and their impact. The desk research considered:

- International comparisons
  - Australia
  - The Netherlands
  - Scotland
  - Wales
  - United States of America
- Peer comparisons
  - Department for Education
  - Northern Ireland – Department for Education

- o   Republic of Ireland – Department of Education and Skills
- o   Ofcom
- o   Ofgem

3.   Setting ambitions

15.   A top-down approach was taken to setting ambition. We used the information gathered to look at what we wanted to achieve over the medium and long term and used the historical benchmarking data to set an initial trajectory. We then used both the historical benchmarking and the comparison benchmarking to consider what was achievable. This resulted in initial targets being set with a trajectory to support them.

16.   In relation to the participation KPMs, our analysis considered two ways in which the gap in participation could be eliminated over the next twenty years:

- Scenario 1: Broadly maintaining the current size of the higher education sector (in line with DfE forecasts of future student numbers) so that the participation rate for all quintiles converge at the current sector average. This would mean considerably reducing the number of students entering higher education from quintiles 4 and 5 if student numbers across the sector were to remain reasonably stable.
- Scenario 2: Expanding the size of the higher education sector so that the participation rate for quintiles 1-4 increases to that of quintile 5. This would mean approximately doubling the size of the HE sector over the next 20 years.

4.   Understanding our impact

17.   To add context, OfS interventions and work streams expected to impact on the KPMs were identified along with the years in which such impact would be greatest. This provided a picture of the expected rate of progress and the trajectories our interventions would have in terms of:

- contributing to the targets
- the interaction between interventions
- the lead in time for each of them to start impacting behaviour
- the outcomes to be captured in the data.

5.   Final trajectory setting

18.   The final stage was to bring the two approaches together, enabling us to set targets that are evidence-informed, achievable and would challenge the sector to make transformational change in closing the gaps for underrepresented students. The following factors were considered when setting targets and trajectories:

- what the sector has achieved to date
- progress made by high achieving providers
- the impact of our interventions and programmes
- historical benchmarking
- international and peer comparison benchmarking

- expected growth of the sector
- external factors that may impact on progress.

19.　　We have used Department for Education student numbers forecasts to inform our calculations, which predict sector growth of 5.6 per cent between 2016-17 and 2024-25. Beyond this, we have assumed sector growth in line with overall 18-30 year old population growth from the ONS. This predicts a growth of under 5 per cent by 2038.
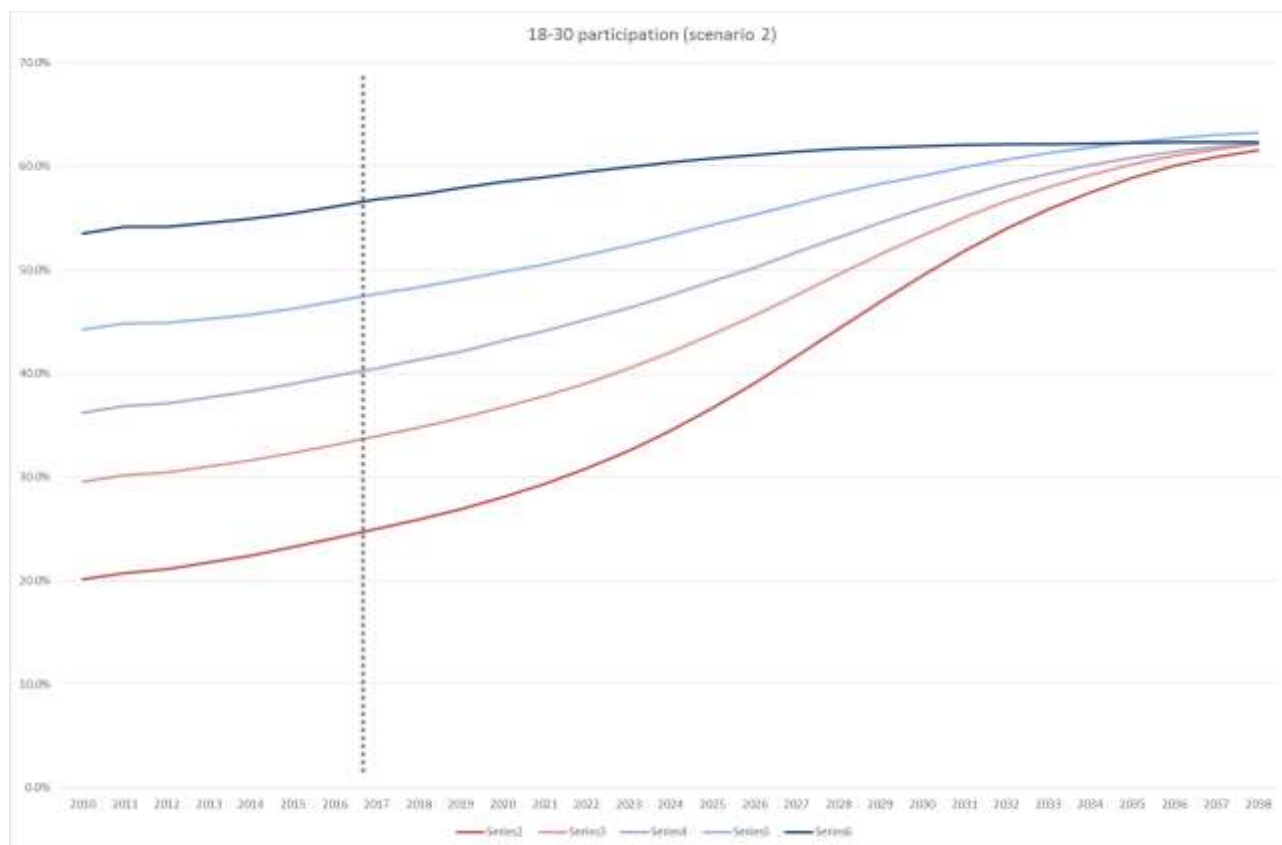
Trajectories

KPM 1: Gap in participation between most and least represented groups

20.　　Our ambition for KPM 1 is to eliminate the gap in 18-30 year old participation between the most (POLAR quintile 5) and least (quintile 1) represented groups over the next 20 years. To achieve this ambition, we have then considered our two scenarios in which this gap in participation could be eliminated.

Scenario 1: Maintaining the current size of the higher education sector (relative to the wider population) so that the participation rates for all quintiles converge at the current sector average.
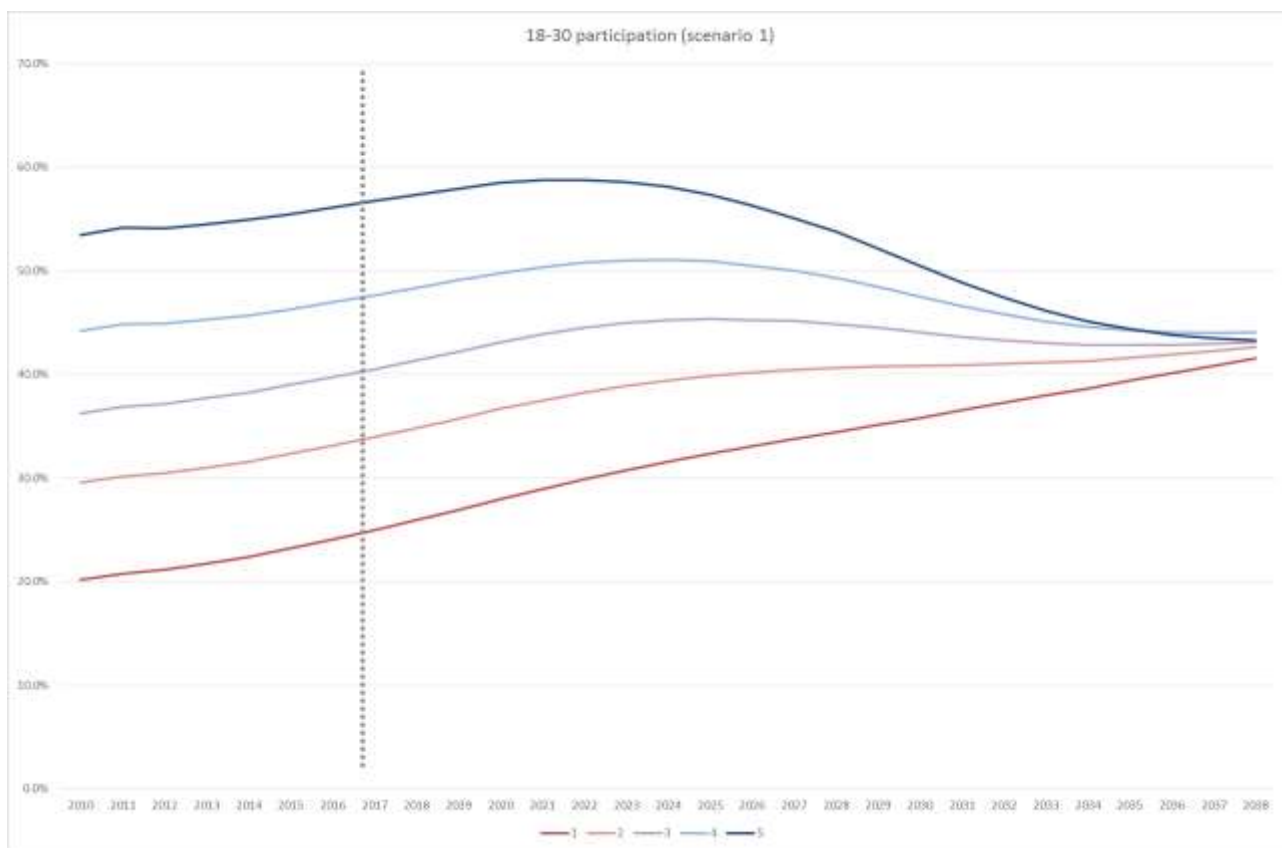
18-30 participation (scenario 1)

Scenario 2: Expanding the size of the higher education sector so that the participation rate for quintiles 1-4 increases to that of quintile 5. This would mean increasing the size of the sector by about half over the next 10-20 years.


21.   There are significant external factors that would critically impact on the achievement or otherwise of any target we set for this KPM. In particular, we anticipate that the government's response to the Augar review will have implications for the size and shape of the higher education sector, which will be pivotal in determining the proportion of students from underrepresented groups. As a result, we propose to defer the setting of targets for this KPM until we know the government's response to the review.

KPM 2: Gap in participation at higher-tariff providers between the most and least represented groups

22.   Our eventual ambition is to eliminate the gap in 18-30 year old participation at higher-tariff providers between the most (POLAR Q5) and least represented (POLAR Q1) groups. However, since there is a time lag inherent in this measure (i.e. the behaviour of current 18 year olds now will continue to influence 18-30 participation for the next 12 years), we anticipate this scenario will involve the gap increasing from 19.6 per cent to 20.6 per cent in 2024-25 (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: 18-30 year old participation rates at higher-tariff providers for students domiciled in the UK and registered at higher education providers in England. Quintile 1: least represented group; quintile 5: most represented.
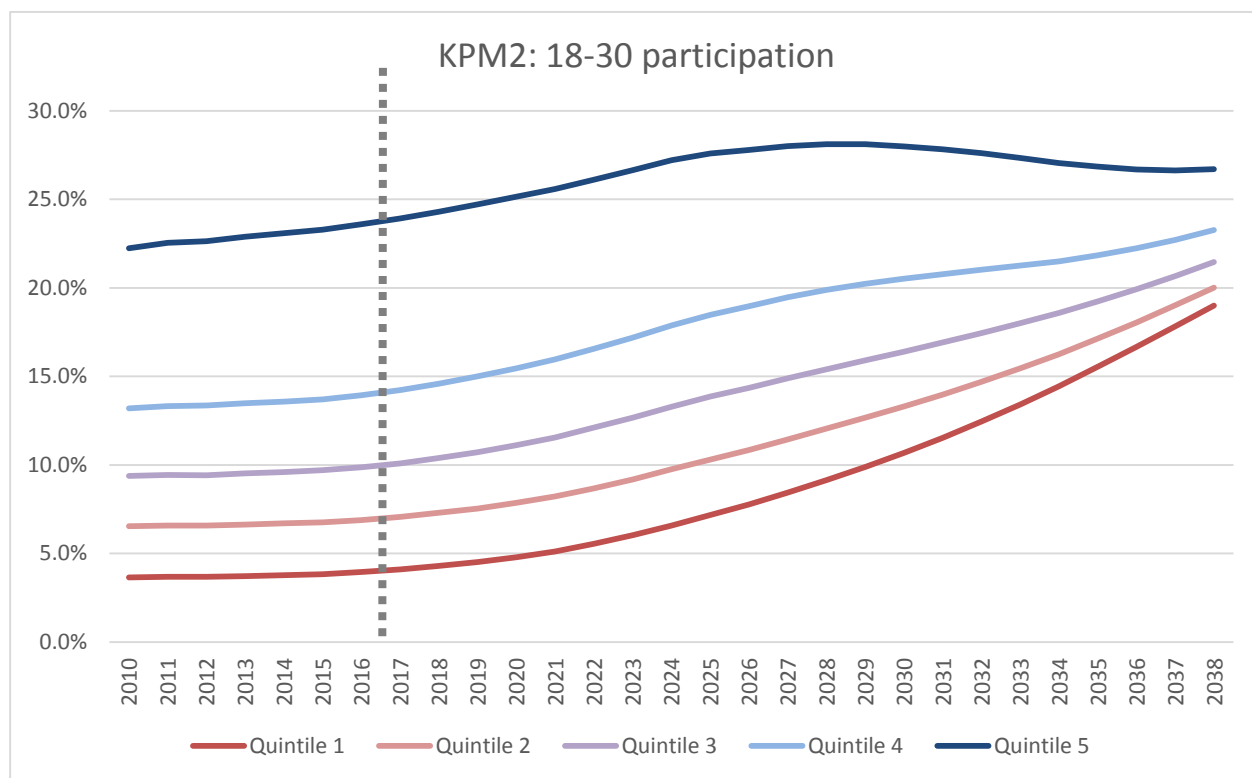
23.   We have therefore focussed on a more immediate measure of our ambition: to eliminate the gaps between the most and least represented groups in terms of entry rates for 18 and 19 year olds, and for 20 to 30 year olds, by 2037-38. This correlates with our ambition to deliver equality of opportunity in terms of entering within a generation.

Developing our targets for KPM 2

24.   DfE forecasts predict that there will be minimal growth in student numbers across the sector. Therefore, to achieve a reduction in the gap in participation at higher-tariff providers between the most and least represented groups can be done through two approaches:

Growth for higher-tariff providers: Higher-tariff providers grow their student numbers, with an increased focus on under-represented groups, resulting in a decline in student numbers in other institutions

Diversification: Higher-tariff providers diversify their student populations, limiting or reversing the growth in participation of students from POLAR quintiles 4 and 5 at those institutions.

25.   When modelling KPM 2 trajectories in the higher-tariff sector, we have combined both approaches, both allowing the higher-tariff providers to grow at a rate of 3.5 per cent per annum, and setting entry rates of all POLAR quintiles to converge by 2038-39.

26.   We will use our regulatory and support levers, including access and participation plans and transparent data, to make progress on this KPM. The reforms to the way we regulate and support access and participation will allow us to better challenge higher-tariff providers to make faster progress in this area.

27.   We would expect the impact of our interventions to have immediate effect, based on the work that has already taken place. Faster progress would be expected from 2021-22, as the impact of the reforms to access and participation plans start to show in the data.

28.   In pursuing this goal, we need to take account of the legal basis for the access and participation plans, as set out in the cover paper, and challenge providers to the extent of the board's appetite for risk in this area.

29.   The trajectory shown in Figure 4 is based on converging the participation rates of undergraduate entrants aged 18-19 by 2038-39, as this group represents over 90 per cent of the students entering higher-tariff providers. The resulting trends in 18- and 19-year old entry are illustrated in Figure 4, and the corresponding numbers of entrants shown in Figure 5[2]. For 18 and 19 year olds, our target by 2024-25 is to reduce the gap in participation between the most and least represented groups from 10.2 per cent in 2016-17 to 8.9 per cent; and for the quintile 5: quintile 1 ratio to decrease from 5.1:1 in 2016-17 to 2.8:1.

30.   We are currently undertaking some modelling to understand the impact of an increase in mature students. This is to account for the potential growth in higher and degree apprenticeships, and to reflect our ambitions to reverse the decline in participation rates for mature students, as set out in the 2019-20 access and participation regulatory guidance. Once this modelling is complete, we will use the results to inform our final target for KPM2; however since mature (age 20+) students represent such a small proportion of overall entrants to higher-tariff providers, the trajectory is unlikely to be significantly affected.

Figure 4: 18- and 19-year old participation rates (new entrants) to higher-tariff providers (UK-domiciled students, coming from areas of least participation (quintile 1) to highest participation (quintile 5))

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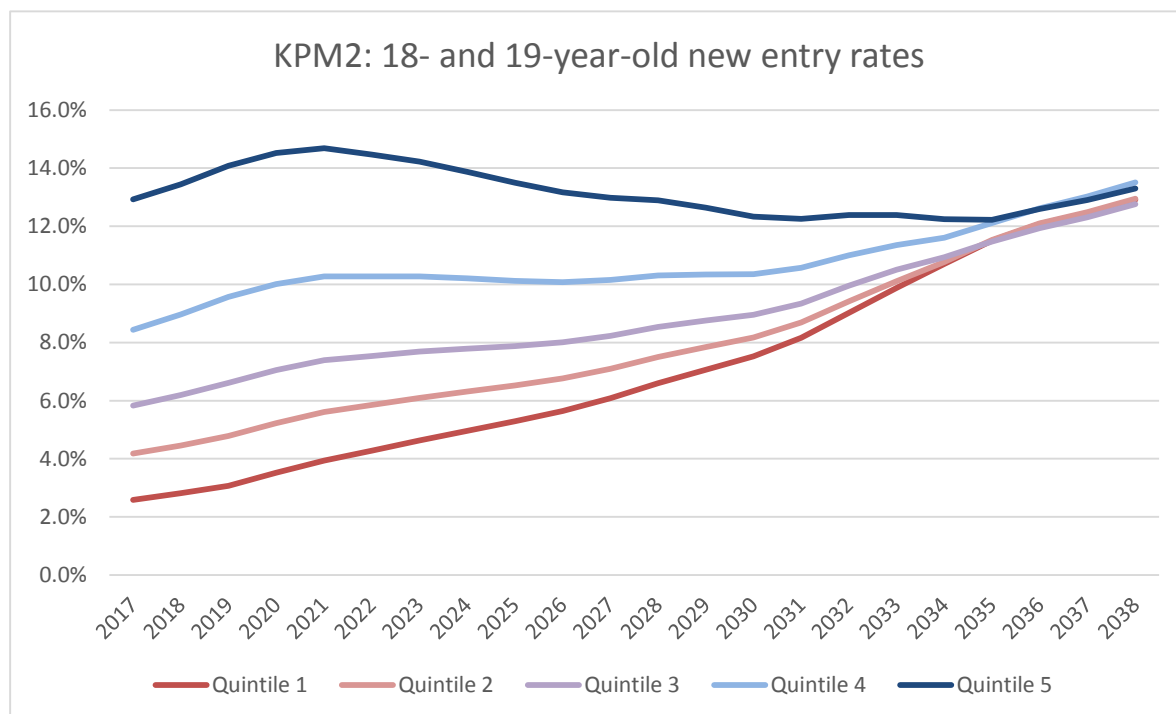
[2] Note that the numbers of entrants from each quintile do not meet because the underlying population sizes in each quintile are not the same

Figure 5: 18- and 19-year old new entrants to higher-tariff providers (UK-domiciled students, coming from areas of least participation (quintile 1) to highest participation (quintile 5))

KPM2: 18- and 19-year-old new entrants

Legend: Quintile 1, Quintile 2, Quintile 3, Quintile 4, Quintile 5
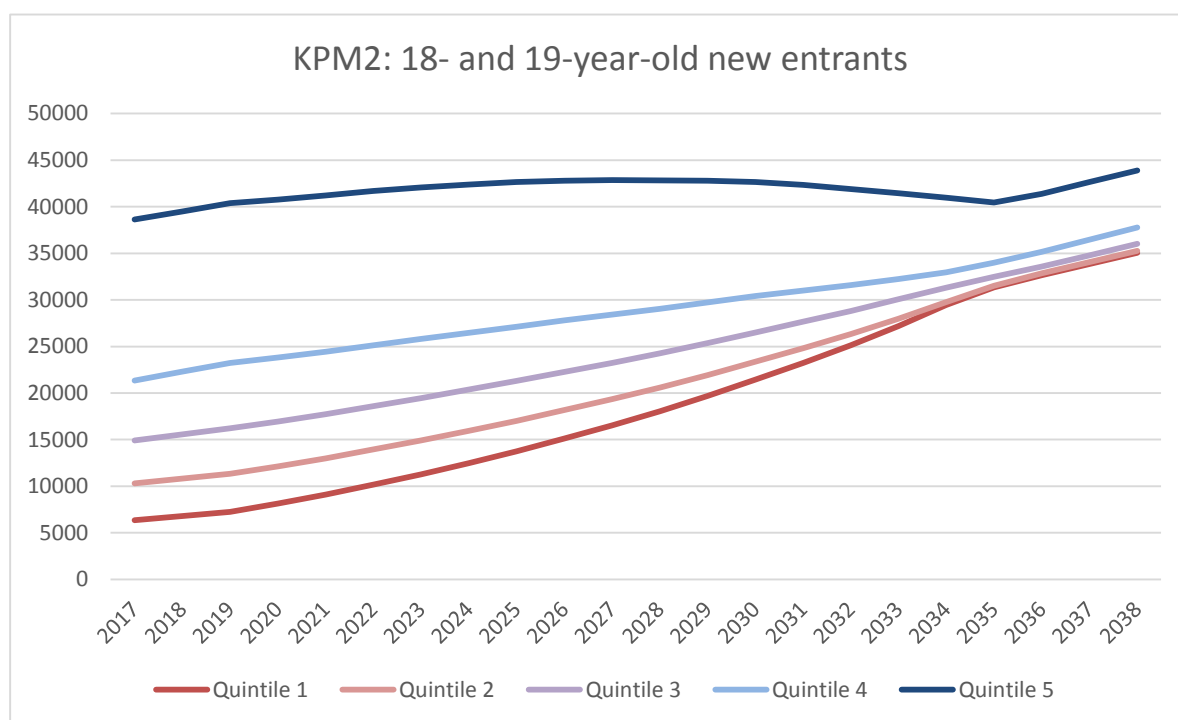
KPM 3: Gap in non-continuation between most and least represented groups

31.   There is a persistent gap in non-continuation between those from the most and least represented groups. Some of the factors that contribute to the non-continuation gap are structural, such as entry qualification, subject of study, age of students, and the provider at which a student studies. Some of these factors are particularly intractable, and interventions will take longer to take effect.

32.   However, once we have taken account of the factors outlined above that are known to influence non-continuation, there remains a significant unexplained difference in non-continuation, which accounts for around 40 per cent of the overall figure. As shown in Figure 6, our target is to eliminate the unexplained non-continuation gap by 2024-25, and to eliminate the overall non-continuation gap by 2030-31.

33.   Unlike improving access to HE, where there are many external factors such as attainment and curricula in schools and colleges, and alternative pathways, all of which can impact on a provider's ability to make progress, it can be argued that non-continuation is an issue over which providers have more direct control. Developing approaches to tackle non-continuation can have a rapid and significant effect. Our analysis provides an insight into the rate of progress that can be achieved to improve non-continuation in individual providers. For example, we have observed that several providers from different parts of the sector have decreased the gap in non-continuation between most and least represented groups in recent years. For example, one provider decreased the gap from 5.3 percentage points to 0.4 percentage points between 2010-11 and 2015-16, while another reduced the gap from 7.2 percentage points to 0.9 percentage points over the same period.

Figure 6: Gap in non-continuation between least and most represented groups for full-time undergraduate entrants aged 18-30, home students domiciled in England registered at higher education providers in England
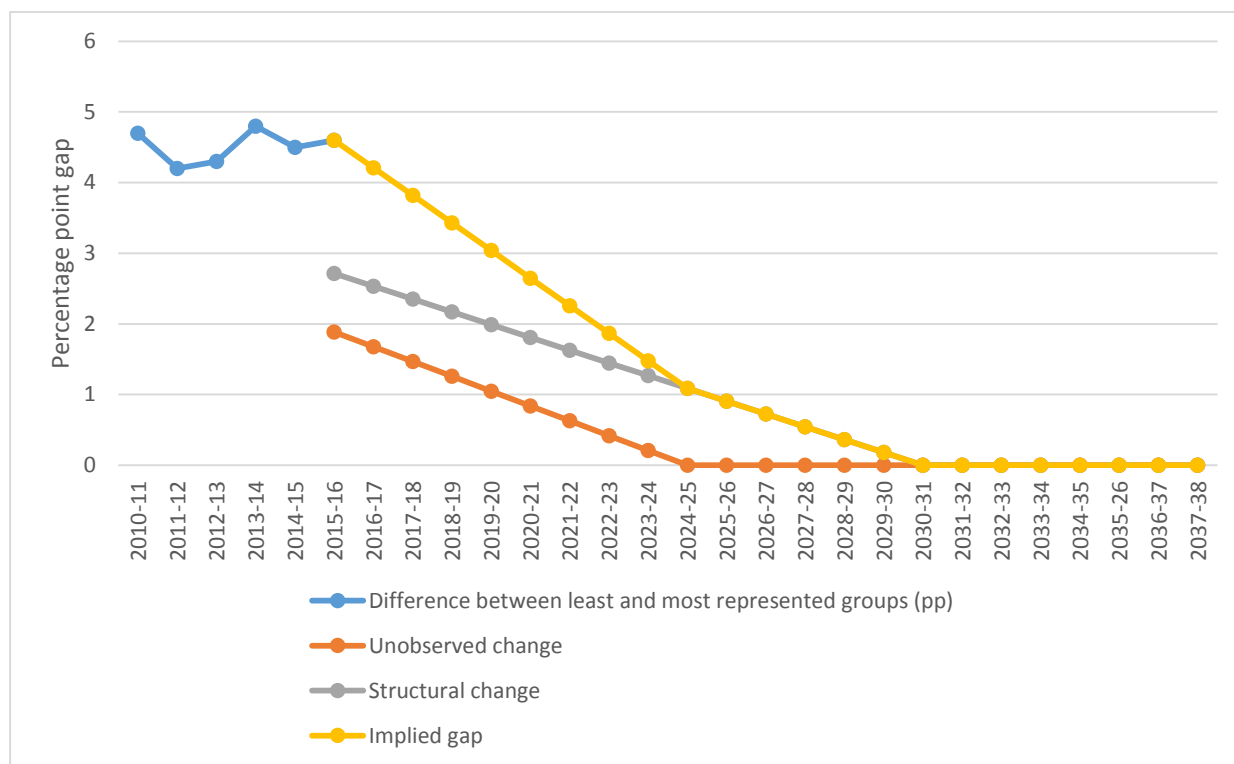

34.   Entry qualifications play a very important role in non-continuation, with higher rates recorded for those students with level 3 qualifications such as BTEC than those who have entered with A levels. Students from underrepresented groups are far more likely to hold these other level 3 qualifications and so there is a risk that in seeking to make progress against non-continuation targets, providers seek to change the profile of entry qualifications they accept. However, this risk can be mitigated to by the continued pressure on providers to make progress against their access targets. In addition, for those providers with existing good records in respect of access, we would not expect them to become less equal than they currently are.

KPM 4: Gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between white students and black students

35.   There is a significantly larger gap in degree outcomes between white and black students. As with non-continuation, we recognise that there are structural factors that contribute to the attainment gap. However, once we have taken account of those factors, there remains a very significant unexplained difference in attainment, which accounts for three quarters of the overall figure. As shown in Figure 7, our target is to eliminate the unexplained attainment gap by 2024-25, and to have eliminated the overall attainment gap by 2030-31.

Figure 7: Gap in degree outcomes (1sts and 2:1s) between white students and black students for full-time undergraduate first-degree home graduates domiciled in England obtaining classified honours degrees from higher education providers in England
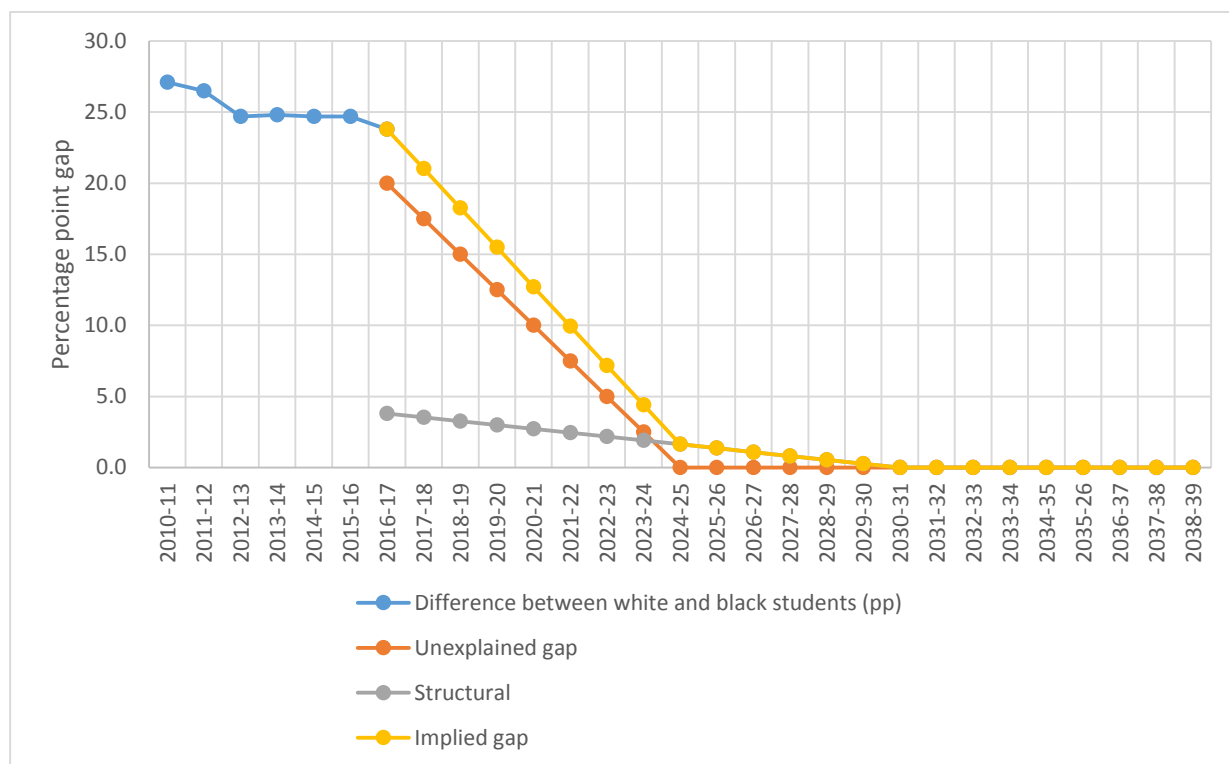
36. There is already a strong focus on the black student attainment gap, including a joint programme led by UUK and NUS, and a number of providers have made significant improvements in a relatively short period of time. For example, two universities from different parts of the sector, which we know to have adopted a strategic approach to addressing the issue, have decreased the gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between white students and black students from 26.6 percentage points in 2010 to 3.1 percentage points in 2016, and from 26.4 percentage points in 2010 to 10.4 percentage points in 2016 respectively. We believe that this can be replicated more widely, and an analysis of the rate of progress that these and other providers have made to close the attainment gap has enabled the calculation of what we believe to be an ambitious but achievable target.

37. OfS activity such as our Addressing Barriers to Student Success programme and the focus on successful outcomes for students from all backgrounds within TEF will support progress against this target, as will the proposed access and participation data set, which will expose the performance of different providers in this area.

38. In pursuing this goal, there is a risk that we stimulate an increase in 1st and 2:1 grades. We will mitigate this through our regulation of quality and standards using the principle established for TEF that successful outcomes for students from all backgrounds must not be achieved by diminishing standards.

KPM 5: Gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between disabled students and non-disabled students

39. Our ambition for the sector is to eliminate the overall attainment gap between disabled students and non-disabled students. Unlike KPM 3 and 4, our analysis suggests that the majority of this gap is caused by structural factors. As the gap is smaller than the other KPMs,

we are actively involved in sharing practice in this area and there is progress already, we believe that this is achievable within the period for the next set of access and participation plans. We are, therefore, setting a target to eliminate the attainment gap between disabled students and non-disabled students by 2024-25. Figure 8 demonstrates the trajectory we would expect to see to achieve this.

Figure 8: Gap in degree outcomes (1sts and 2:1s) between non-disabled and disabled students for full-time undergraduate first-degree home graduates domiciled in England obtaining classified honours degrees from higher education providers in England
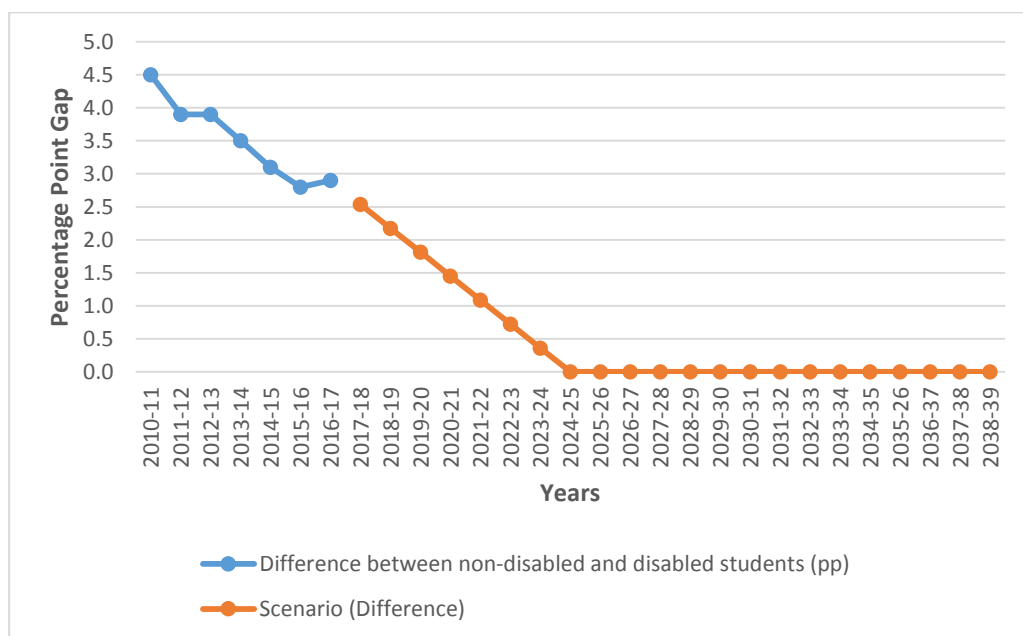
40.   The current trend of the data suggests there is already significant momentum in this area, and while ambitious this should be an achievable target. There are examples of successful work in the sector in closing the gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between disabled students and students with no known disability and a number of providers have managed to eliminate it entirely.

Current sources of uncertainty

41.   There are a number of factors that may impact in various ways and to varying degrees on our KPM and associated targets. We will need, therefore, to review our position as these and other factors emerge. They include:

- The Government's Review of Post-18 Education and Funding

- The impact of the UK's exit from the European Union on the higher education sector, and broader economy

- Developments in the Apprenticeship Levy and expansion of degree apprenticeships

- Diversification of higher education providers

- Expansion or contraction of student numbers across the sector

- Demographic changes to the population

- Changes in the patterns of employment and the demand for graduates.