

Regional Access Partnerships: Analysis of responses to call for evidence

**A report by Pye Tait Consulting for the
Office for Students**

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Executive summary

Background

To succeed the current Uni Connect programme, the Office for Students (OfS) has proposed a reformed national access programme. This proposal aims to improve alignment with existing regional structures and widening the inclusion of higher education (HE) providers. Regional partnerships will inform access and participation plans (APPs), with regional interventions expected to feature in APPs submitted from May 2027 onwards.

The OfS hosted a call for evidence between 5 June and 18 July 2025, seeking views on its regional access partnership proposals. This call was open to anyone, including individuals, organisations and groups.

Pye Tait Consulting, an independent research agency, was commissioned to undertake an independent analysis of the responses.

Of the 220 valid responses received, two in five (41%) are from HE providers, one in seven (14%) from Uni Connect partnerships and around one in 10 (11%) from the school sector. A full respondent profile is in section 1.4. Details of the methodology and interpretations and limitations that readers should be aware of are contained in section 1.3.

Key findings

Findings are split into seven sub-sections. Each is introduced with some brief context such as the relevant question and prompts from the call for evidence, followed by the analysis of respondents' views to that question.

Based on the analysis of the 220 unique responses received to the call for evidence, this summary does not seek to cover the detail of all points raised, but draws together the themes and considerations that were commented on most commonly, acknowledging instances where there is a range of views on certain topics.

Defining effective regional collaboration

- More than half (127, 58%) stated that new partnerships should build on existing partnerships to avoid inefficiency and to preserve well-established, trusted relationships.
- Just over two in five (92, 42%) stressed the importance of schools, employers, communities and local authorities as key connectors in the partnerships, and therefore relationships already built with these groups should be maintained.
- Similarly, several (82, 37%) stated that broad stakeholder engagement – i.e. working with a range of representatives from higher education, further education, schools, employers, community groups and the third sector – is vital to achieving equality of opportunity.

- Eighty-three (38%) urged for shared strategies between partners to reduce duplication and boost impact.
- Over half (122, 55%) highlighted the importance of being responsive to local needs, with place-based boundaries (95, 43%) that reflect meaningful and practical geographies being highly favoured.
- Around a third (78, 35%) felt that disadvantaged students must be prioritised in any future policies for regional collaboration.
- Thirty-one (14%) noted that effective regional collaborations are those which promote and support non-conventional routes into HE, such as vocational pathways, apprenticeships, and technical qualifications.
- Over a fifth (49, 22%) urged evidence-led planning; others highlighted best practice sharing (44, 20%) and resource pooling (40, 18%) to support smaller providers.
- Concerns included funding instability (33, 15%), added bureaucracy (26, 12%), and duplication of efforts (25, 11%), with emphasis on streamlining rather than complicating delivery.
- Many supported clear and consistent branding, with the name 'Regional Access Partnerships' favoured (38, 17%), though flexibility to retain local identity was advised.

Views on the proposed regions

When sharing views on the proposed regions, respondents provided both holistic feedback on the general approach as well as detailed feedback on each proposed region. The points below present overarching feedback, with a full breakdown of feedback by region in section 2.3.

- Concerns included that moving to larger regions could dilute identity, increase competition, lower the quality of interventions, and result in uneven resource distribution.
- Around a quarter (49, 23%) flagged potential geographic challenges such as urban/rural disparities, travel barriers, and loss of local responsiveness.
- Linked with this, some (16, 8%) raised resourcing concerns, especially for rural areas with lower funding and stretched capacity.
- Some (13, 6%) felt the proposals ignored existing structures like mayoral authorities and groupings from the Department for Education.
- Several (28, 13%) believed the rationale for region boundaries lacked focus on student needs and disadvantage indicators.

Collaborative practice

- Many (103, 47%) urged building on trusted existing partnerships to minimise disruption and bureaucracy.
- Around two in five (93, 42%) called for transparent governance with inclusive leadership across sectors.
- Several (66, 30%) cited a necessity for a shared, evidence-based understanding of challenges, with some (38, 17%) stressing the need for a shared strategic direction to avoid fragmented approaches. Similarly, respondents (36, 16%) advocated best practice sharing and referenced the 'hub and spoke' model where strategy is coordinated regionally but delivery remains localised.
- Just under a quarter (53, 24%) backed independent coordination rather than one lead provider, to ensure fairness. However, ten (5%) noted that the lead provider model can work well where relationships are strong.
- Some (32, 15%) asked for flexible, context-sensitive delivery which reflects urban/rural differences and institutional strengths rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Around two in five (85, 38%) emphasised the importance of broad and inclusive collaboration, involving HE, further education (FE), schools, employers, local authorities, community groups, the third sector, and students themselves. Several (48, 22%) also called for a place-based approach, rooted in local demographics and agendas, over a centralised model.
- Several (66, 39%) pushed for data-driven approaches using national and local indicators; others (40, 18%) wanted consistent evaluation, or flagged data sharing, infrastructure, and cold spot mapping.
- A fifth (46, 20%) highlighted the need for stable funding, emphasising that secure, long-term investment is essential for trust, staffing, and sustainable delivery.

Support needs

- As was raised in response to the question on best practices for regional collaboration, nearly two thirds (124, 63%) called for strong frameworks to support collaboration and outcomes and nearly half (93, 47%) wanted existing structures and partnerships preserved.
- Financial support was key for many (120, 61%), with several (48, 24%) calling for long-term funding to ensure stability and impact – again reiterating a topic already raised in other question responses.
- Around a fifth (44, 22%) asked for clear strategic guidance from the OfS to support them in the transition and one in seven (26, 13%) said a longer transition time is needed for effective planning.

- Around a third (63, 32%) stressed the need for shared data and planning tools and around a fifth (36, 18%) requested staff support, especially local expertise. One in ten (20, 10%) suggested sharing best practice through events and workshops.

Integration with APPs

- Some (22, 12%) supported addressing regional risks in APPs, which they feel would allow partnerships to focus on learners with the greatest need, and facilitate better collaboration. Twenty-two (12%) would like to see existing partnerships strengthened to coordinate this work. Others (29, 16%) already include regional collaboration in their APPs.
- Nearly two fifths (71, 39%) raised concerns about the approach, which included the potential diluting of individual APP priorities and adding burden to partners due to larger region sizes under the new model.
- A quarter (46, 25%) urged the OfS to consider contextual factors like size, resources, and demographics.

One in ten (19, 10%) backed shared accountability and saw value in collective responsibility, although there was concern that some partners may be penalised for the actions of other partners within their region.

Independent regional coordinator

Thoughts on an independent regional coordinator appointed by the OfS to facilitate collaboration in each region

- Views were mixed on the proposed OfS-appointed independent regional coordinator: 34 (16%) supported, 42 (19%) opposed; many (96, 49%) raised points for consideration.
- Several (61, 31%) asked for clarity on the role's purpose and proposed qualifications before they could make a judgement on the proposed role.
- While some saw benefits in strategic alignment (21, 11%) and neutral facilitation (15, 8%), many (66, 34%) felt current Uni Connect partnerships could fulfil the role and warned of added bureaucracy (36, 18%) and cost (39, 20%), diverting resources away from learners (32, 16%).
- Key considerations mentioned included ensuring the coordinator has appropriate regional knowledge (24, 12%) and acts as a facilitator (22, 11%) rather than any focus on compliance.

Views on a regional coordinator appointed by the OfS providing feedback on levels of collaboration reflected in APPs

- Some (23, 13%) explicitly supported the approach, with reasons including the potential to share useful insights and data on levels of collaboration, including highlighting gaps and opportunities for better collaboration.
- Over half (93, 52%) expressed concerns including the potential lack of local knowledge a coordinator may possess, and a perception that this may constitute regulatory overstep (i.e. the actions of such a coordinator could risk exceeding the boundaries of the OfS's remit).
- As an alternative, several (39, 22%) suggested existing partnerships and structures are better placed to provide feedback on levels of collaboration directly to the OfS.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In June 2025, the Office for Students (OfS) launched a call for evidence to inform the development of regional access partnerships. This initiative reflects the OfS's strategic ambition to improve equality of opportunity in higher education (HE) by fostering regionally coordinated outreach efforts. The call for evidence invited views from HE providers, schools, local authorities, charities, and other stakeholders on how best to structure and implement these partnerships.

The rationale for regional access partnerships stems from persistent challenges in the current outreach landscape. Despite progress made through Uni Connect and institutional access and participation plans (APPs), disparities in HE participation remain. Outreach efforts can be fragmented, with duplication of activity and uneven regional coverage. The OfS has identified a need for more strategic coordination, particularly in regions where learners face multiple barriers to access, in addition to closer alignment with existing regional structures. Regional access partnerships are intended to address these issues by enabling HE providers within defined geographic areas to collaborate on identifying local risks to equality of opportunity and delivering targeted interventions. It is proposed that these efforts will be captured within each provider's APP, ensuring alignment between institutional commitments and regional strategies.

Regional access partnerships are envisioned as a way to connect national policy objectives with local delivery models. They offer a structure through which HE providers and partners can:

- jointly identify and address regional barriers to access,
- coordinate outreach to ensure full coverage and avoid duplication,
- align efforts with local skills strategies, economic development plans and other civic priorities, and
- share data, evidence and good practice.

The proposal builds on the existing Uni Connect programme, which was launched in 2017 to support collaborative outreach in areas of low HE participation. Uni Connect comprises 29 partnerships across England that work with schools, colleges and other local organisations to help learners from underrepresented groups make informed decisions about their education pathways. The programme has made important strides in:

- coordinating local outreach,
- providing impartial guidance to learners,
- strengthening provider collaboration, and
- focusing on cold spots through data-informed targeting.

Independent evaluations of Uni Connect, including a 2024 review¹ and a formative phase three evaluation,² found that the programme has had a positive impact in many regions, particularly in improving coordination and creating impartial outreach infrastructure. However, the same evaluations also identified a lack consistency in governance and delivery models, variation in regional coverage, and a lack of clear alignment between Uni Connect activity and providers' regulatory responsibilities under their APPs.

The OfS has indicated that the development of regional access partnerships will be informed by a theory of change for a future national collaborative outreach programme.³ The theory of change outlines a future role for regional partnerships that involves conducting regional gap analyses, delivering outreach to underserved learners, and working in alignment with regional labour market and skills priorities. The theory of change proposes a three-part model: a national resource offering impartial information, a regional layer responsible for coordinated outreach, and a local layer for direct engagement. The OfS also plans to use regional access partnerships as a mechanism for embedding collaborative interventions into APPs, thereby integrating regional coordination into institutional accountability structures. APPs submitted from May 2027 onwards will be expected to reflect the work of regional access partnerships, with coverage beginning in the 2028-29 cycle.

The call for evidence sought feedback on the proposed regions, including views on the:

- support required for regional collaboration to improve equality of opportunity,
- role and responsibilities of an independent regional coordinator,
- best practices and suggestions for successful regional collaboration, and
- use of APPs to address regional efforts towards equality of opportunity.

PyE Tait Consulting, an independent research agency, was commissioned to undertake an analysis of the call for evidence responses. This report presents the findings from the analysis of all responses received to the call for evidence.

1.2 Aim and objectives

The overarching aim of this research was to analyse all responses received to the call for evidence and to report the outcomes to the OfS. Specific objectives were to:

- conduct an objective and comprehensive qualitative analysis of all responses to the call for evidence,
- identify and categorise themes, focus areas or questions, and
- report on the findings.

¹ Public First (2024) [A review of collaborative support for improving equality of opportunity in access to higher education](#)

² IPSOS (2024) [Formative Evaluation of Uni Connect Phase 3: Pre-16 Attainment raising Activities](#)

³ Office for Students (2024) [Developing a theory of change for a future national collaborative outreach programme](#)

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 Call for evidence approach

The OfS developed the call for evidence questionnaire, which comprised two core sections to seek views on different aspects:

- an 'about you' section, and
- a section containing seven questions on the elements of the regional access partnerships.

The final call for evidence questions can be found in Appendix 2, and the structure of this report largely mirrors that of the call for evidence. Information relating to each question is provided at each section throughout the report, and Appendix 2 contains the detailed proposals and call for evidence documentation. Appendix 3 of this report details the proposed regions laid out in a table by the OfS for responding organisations, this also assigned existing partnerships to these newly proposed regions. The OfS also provided a map showing the geographical spread of the proposed regions, and a list of providers allocated to each region.

The call for evidence was open from 5 June to 18 July 2025. The main route through which to submit responses was the OfS online 'smart survey' portal. In total, 232 responses were received, of which 231 were received through the online portal, while one offline response was received. The 233 responses included 13 blank responses, leaving 220 responses for analysis (see section 1.3.2 below).

The OfS shared all call for evidence responses with Pye Tait Consulting in line with OfS's privacy policy and data-sharing agreement. Pye Tait Consulting then undertook onward analysis of all responses.

1.3.2 Approach to the analysis

Before undertaking a detailed analysis, responses were first reviewed and cleaned. This process involved checking for errors, blank, duplicate, or coordinated responses.

Responses were analysed at an overall level and subsequently sub-group analysis was undertaken to explore any notable differences by respondent type or by region. Details of the grouping can be found in Appendix 1.

Qualitative analysis of responses received to the open-ended questions was undertaken by Pye Tait Consulting in three successive stages.

- a) High-level review of all responses to identify broad themes and sentiment.
- b) Identify key themes arising from each question. Based on this, a coding framework was developed by Pye Tait Consulting, with checks for inter- and intra-coding consistency, and finalised in collaboration with the OfS.
- c) A comprehensive review to code each response according to the coding framework, to identify frequency of themes overall and by respondent sub-group.

On completion of each stage, outcomes were shared with the OfS before moving forward to the next. While there was engagement with the OfS throughout the process, Pye Tait Consulting was responsible for producing this independent and objective analysis report.

1.3.3 Interpretations and limitations

An open call for evidence of this nature does not seek to be a representative sample of the whole population. The implication of self-selection bias is that an assessment of views can only be made for the respondents who choose to participate and will not represent the entire target population, but rather a small subset. As such, the findings should be interpreted with this in mind.

The sample included 'collective responses' – these are collaborative responses with contributions from multiple organisations and/or individual members. For example, some responses were received from sector bodies which reflect the views of their community. Collective responses have not been weighted in the analysis – in effect, this means each response has an equal weight, although trends by respondent type are drawn out in the report. It is thus acknowledged that some of these responses will represent significant subsets of the sector, despite being only a single response. The reader is advised to bear these points in mind when interpreting the report.

Each sub-section outlines the number of respondents providing responses to each question, therefore numbers and percentages quoted relate to each call for evidence question being discussed, not the overall total number of responses to the call.

Some double counting of responses will have occurred where respondents provided comments which covered more than one theme. The result is that numbers in the report may not add up to 100% due to cases where a respondent discusses multiple aspects within the same question response.

Themes arising in response to each question are generally presented in order from most to least frequently mentioned, with the descriptors 'most', 'many', 'several', and 'some' being used in descending order to represent the relative extent of opinion from most to least common themes for each sub-section.⁴

In response to some questions, there appears to have been a coordinated response (i.e. similar or identical responses from multiple respondents, where respondents have reproduced material that was circulated by, or available from, another respondent). For analysis and reporting purposes, each coordinated response was treated as a separate response, and all coordinated responses were counted and included in the analysis.

⁴ Typically, 'most' is used where over 50% of respondents raise a point, 'many' is used where over 40% of respondents state a theme, 'several' where a point is raised by between 10% and 40% of respondents, and 'some' for themes raised by 25% or fewer of respondents.

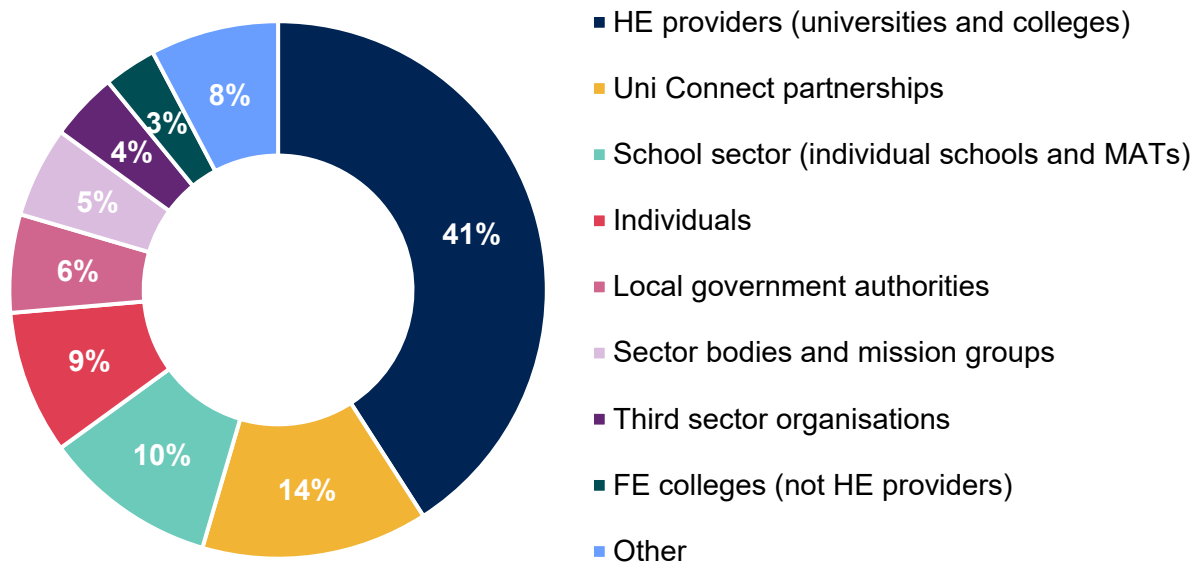
1.4 Respondent profile overview

Of the 220 responses analysed, most (201, 91%) were submitted as collective (or organisational) responses and others (19, 9%) were from individuals.

Respondents were manually assigned to a respondent category by Pye Tait Consulting in agreement with the OfS. Around two in five (41%) responses are responses from HE providers (universities and colleges), while around one in seven were from Uni Connect Partnerships (14%), and one in ten from individual schools and multi-academy trusts (10%).

The 'other' category comprises 11 respondents that did not provide detail of their organisation or affiliation, two other collaborative partnerships outside of Uni Connect, three public sector/government funded organisations and one software as a service (SAAS) provider for HE providers.

Figure 1 Breakdown of respondent types



Base: 220 respondents. Source: OfS call for evidence 2025.

2. Key findings

This chapter provides a detailed analysis of responses to each question within the call for evidence. For reader ease, each question has been analysed separately with its own dedicated section within this chapter, although section 2.7 contains views collated from both questions relating to the proposed independent regional coordinator role.

This initial section 2.1 provides an overview of the recurring themes which emerged across responses to all the call for evidence questions.

2.1 Recurring themes across question responses

In the responses to the call for evidence, themes occurred which cut across the topics of each individual question. These themes are summarised below for ease of reference.

- **Enthusiasm for collaboration:** there was a consistent appetite for collaboration, but respondents stressed this would only be effective with the right support from the OfS, including adequate funding, independent facilitation, and sensitivity to regional disparities.
- **Protecting existing relationships and partnerships:** respondents emphasised the importance of protecting current relationships and partnerships. Many raised concern that large-scale restructuring could undermine long-standing collaborative arrangements that have taken years to build, and warned that losing trust, local knowledge and continuity could risk slowing progress.
- **Transition period:** distinct but closely related was the theme of the transition period. A phased or piloted introduction of new partnerships was suggested, accompanied by clear guidance and sufficient time to adapt, to avoid disruption. Specific proposals included aligning transition with existing APP cycles, enabling the dual running of Uni Connect and new partnerships during the handover, and providing transitional funding to ensure staffing and activities are not destabilised.
- **Localised outreach:** a recurring theme was the importance of ensuring providers can remain responsive to local challenges. Stakeholders warned that overly large or administratively defined regions could dilute the ability to tailor interventions to distinct contexts, such as the different challenges faced by rural, coastal and urban communities (for example, limited transport links in rural areas).
- **Recognition of local knowledge and expertise:** pointing towards the progress achieved under Uni Connect that has relied on trusted, locally embedded relationships with schools, colleges and communities, respondents advised that place-based networks and deep contextual knowledge must be preserved in any new model. Success, it was argued, depends on striking a balance between regional strategy and local delivery, and cautioned against a “one-size-fits-all” approach that sidelines the insights of practitioners closest to learners.

- **Maintaining a student centric focus:** respondents repeatedly cautioned that regional access partnerships must be designed around learner needs rather than institutional convenience. They argued that the definition of regions and the governance of partnerships should be informed by where and how disadvantaged students actually experience barriers, rather than by administrative boundaries alone. Several stated that metrics such as deprivation levels, school attainment and progression rates should play a greater role in shaping partnership priorities.
- **Avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy:** concern was raised that new regional layers could create additional reporting burdens or duplicate existing structures. It was cautioned how this could divert energy and resource away from direct outreach and learner support. Some stressed that coordination roles should be light-touch, facilitative and enabling, rather than compliance driven, to avoid creating another tier of oversight that slows down delivery.
- **Ensuring fair and equitable resourcing:** respondents highlighted the risk that resources could be unevenly distributed within large and diverse regions, with smaller institutions or those serving rural and coastal areas losing out to larger, more urban providers. There were calls for the OfS to consider mechanisms such as minimum funding floors for rural areas, or funding models that reflect differential costs and needs across the country. Without these safeguards, respondents were concerned that widening access efforts could be concentrated in already well-served areas.

2.2 What do effective regions for collaboration on equality of opportunity look like?

This section includes the analysis of responses to the following question from the call for evidence:

What do effective regions for collaboration on equality of opportunity look like?

Prompts:

- Which existing regional structures does your organisation engage with most? (e.g. local authorities, combined authorities etc.)
- What are the opportunities for your organisation if working in defined regions to improve access to higher education?
- What should the regional groupings be called? (e.g. Regional access partnerships, Equality of opportunity partnerships etc.)

In total, 212 respondents shared their views on what effective regions for collaboration on equality of opportunity look like.

2.2.1 Existing structures

Many (127, 58%) emphasised the importance of aligning any new regional arrangements with the existing 29 partnerships; these structures are seen as already having established networks, operational frameworks, and local credibility, meaning they could be used as a foundation for any future Regional Access Partnerships. Respondents stated that these collaborations have developed specialist expertise and that it would therefore be inefficient to start again from scratch. Retaining current partnership boundaries where they work well was seen as important to maintain trust among stakeholders and avoid disruption to effective delivery.

Around two in five (92, 42%) stated that new regions should actively build on existing relationships between providers and partners. This includes strengthening long-standing collaborations (whether formally structured or informally developed over time) and avoiding the imposition of new boundaries that could dilute or disrupt them. Examples were given of relationships with FE colleges, local community groups, and employer networks that have taken years to establish and were seen as critical to local delivery.

‘Many existing partnerships have built strong relationships within their areas. It is important that these relationships are not negatively affected by the formation of new regions, and that disruption is kept to a minimum by trying to ensure a continuity of HE providers and staff.’ – Senior leader, sector bodies and mission groups

Many (82, 37%) highlighted the need to work with local authorities and councils as core partners in any new regional model. Local authorities were described as playing a key role in understanding local needs and connecting education with wider social and economic priorities. Examples were cited where close collaboration with councils and combined

authorities had enabled targeted interventions for groups such as care-experienced children. Continuing local authority involvement in regional access partnerships governance was proposed as a way to ensure alignment between education and other local services.

‘Effective regional collaborations should be structured around existing local and combined authorities to ensure alignment with established governance and accountability frameworks. This approach leverages local knowledge and resources efficiently, while enabling coordinated action across education providers and community partners.’ – Individual

A smaller proportion (29, 13%) referred to existing governance frameworks that could be adapted for the new regional model. These included established boards, consortia governance structures, and cross-sector steering groups, which could provide strategic oversight for regional access partnerships. Using tried-and-tested governance mechanisms was seen as a way to reduce the burden of setting up entirely new structures and help secure buy-in from partners.

A few (nine, 4%) mentioned the need to take account of future devolution and potential changes to council boundaries when defining regions. Regional structures were seen as needing to be flexible enough to adapt to changes in local government geography and powers, to avoid misalignment in the future.

2.2.2 Collaboration and engagement

Around two in five (83, 38%) emphasised the importance of aligning strategies between partners. Respondents stressed that collaboration should be underpinned by a clear and shared purpose, with all partners working towards the same strategic objectives. This was seen as critical to reducing duplication, avoiding competition, and ensuring that outreach activity has maximum collective impact across the region.

‘Effective regional collaboration is underpinned by a clearly articulated shared purpose, [and] a strategic commitment among partners to reduce structural inequalities in access, success, and progression. Rather than functioning as a collection of parallel initiatives, high-impact regions operate through a shared approach, where objectives are jointly agreed, delivery is coordinated, and outcomes are collectively owned.’ – Individual

Several (82, 37%) stressed that effective collaboration relies on wide-ranging stakeholder engagement, bringing together higher and further education institutions, schools, local authorities, employers, community organisations and the third sector. This breadth of input was seen as essential to ensure activities reflect the realities of local contexts, address the needs of different groups, and benefit from the expertise and reach of varied partners. Respondents highlighted that a diverse partnership could better identify and fill gaps in provision, while also making it easier to engage learners.

Just under a quarter (53, 24%) felt that existing strategic networks could play an important role in supporting regional collaboration. Examples included leveraging civic agreements, local skills partnerships, combined authority networks, and sector-specific alliances. Respondents explained that such networks offer established relationships and a platform for coordinated action.

A similar proportion (50, 23%) highlighted trust and cooperation as essential foundations for joint working. Respondents stated that building trust takes time and requires honesty, mutual respect, and a willingness to share both successes and challenges openly. A fifth (44, 20%) highlighted the need to share best practice, arguing that learning from what has already worked in similar contexts could accelerate improvement, avoid wasted effort, and enable the replication of successful models across different parts of a region.

‘Working collaboratively through [partnership] in our defined region has brought benefit to [our institution], specifically our students. We have been able to share best practice resources and data to improve clarity of opportunity for young people in the region and provide improved progression opportunities to higher education.’ – Senior leader, HE provider

Resource sharing was discussed by several (40, 18%) as a key enabler to effective regional working. Suggestions included pooling staff, facilities, and outreach resources so that smaller or more specialist institutions could contribute fully, even where their own capacity might be limited. A further 26 (12%) discussed the need for clear and consistent communication (both from the OfS and between providers) to ensure all partners understand the scope, purpose, and benefits of the collaboration.

Fifteen (7%) underlined the need for long-term planning to make partnerships more stable and impactful, whilst 11 (5%) felt the OfS could support this through clear and timely information, guidance, and expectations. Respondents stated that, without clarity from the outset, partners risk working to different assumptions, undermining both planning and delivery.

2.2.3 Locally responsive approach

More than half (122, 55%) highlighted the importance of being responsive to local needs, noting that barriers to HE participation differ greatly between areas. For example, rural communities were seen as facing issues such as limited public transport and fewer post-16 providers, whereas inner-city areas are unlikely to experience these barriers. Respondents pointed to specific challenges in coastal towns or former industrial areas, where economic decline and some young people showing less ambition to continue to higher education, can be significant barriers; they argued that tailoring outreach and partnership work to these contexts is essential if interventions are to have real impact.

‘Tailored approaches that respond to local needs are key to ensuring that all learners – particularly those who are disadvantaged or underrepresented – receive the support they need to thrive.’ – Senior leader, local government authorities

Many (95, 43%) advocated for place-based regions with boundaries that reflect meaningful and practical geographies. This included aligning with travel-to-learn patterns, local authority or combined authority boundaries, and existing economic or cultural links. Respondents felt that such an approach would strengthen relationships between partners, improve efficiency, and allow work to align with wider local priorities – such as skills plans or sector-specific growth areas.

A smaller proportion (31, 14%) warned about the danger of missing cold spots, i.e. areas of low participation that could fall between the cracks if boundaries are drawn only around

major population centres or HE hubs. Respondents emphasised the need for deliberate planning to ensure that such communities are identified and targeted for outreach.

A similar number (30, 14%) favoured keeping regions small and focused, arguing that more compact groupings would allow for closer working relationships, clearer lines of accountability, and activity that is more relevant to the communities served. They felt that overly large regions could become unwieldy and risk diluting the focus on specific local challenges.

‘Effective regions build upon pre-existing, established partnerships and manageable group sizes. Overly large areas risk becoming ineffective and disconnected from the learner journey. Regions need to be small enough to allow partnerships to identify and work to address local needs and cold spots.’ – Senior leader, HE provider

2.2.4 Student-centred approach

Approximately one in three (78, 35%) highlighted the need to keep the most disadvantaged students at the heart of planning and delivery. Respondents did not generally propose that regional boundaries themselves be drawn around populations of underrepresented groups, but rather that supporting these groups should remain a consistent priority in how regional partnerships operate. They stressed that equality of opportunity work should be concentrated where it can make the most difference, and that regional approaches should be informed by robust data on disadvantage.

‘The primary focus [of partnerships] should be enabling social mobility and meaningful access, and progression, to higher-level skills for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, without adding burden to an already fragmented tertiary system.’ – Local government authorities

Nearly a quarter (53, 24%) discussed the importance of tackling the practical, social, and structural barriers that can limit access to HE. These included a lack of local provision, insufficient information or tailored guidance, limited transport links, and low confidence among young people that they will be able to attend HE (especially in more disadvantaged areas). These social issues were raised repeatedly by respondents across many of the questions in the call for evidence. Respondents argued that regional collaborations should work together to identify these challenges early in a learner’s journey and coordinate targeted support across providers, schools, employers, and community organisations to remove them.

Some (31, 14%) emphasised that effective regional collaboration should promote and support multiple pathways into HE, ensuring that provision is not limited to traditional full-time undergraduate degrees. Examples mentioned included vocational pathways, apprenticeships, shorter technical qualifications, and routes for mature learners. Respondents felt that regions should recognise and coordinate these varied routes, to ensure that learners have access to progression opportunities.

‘Regions should be encouraged to develop innovative and flexible learning opportunities that give potential students opportunities to access HE in modes that work for them, including apprenticeships and shorter

qualifications that lead on to both employment and ongoing study opportunities.’ – HE provider

Around one in ten (25, 11%) provided examples of current student-focused activities that they felt could be scaled, shared, or adapted within a regional model. These included targeted outreach programmes in schools, skills and employability workshops, mentoring schemes linking students with relatable role models, as well as sustained engagement initiatives.

Nineteen (9%) highlighted the importance of engaging with all year groups, not just those in the immediate post-16 phase. They suggested that interventions should start early in the learner journey – in primary or early secondary school – and continue through to application, transition, and successful progression into HE, with support adapted to the learner’s stage and context.

Finally, a few (10, 5%) stressed the value of campus visits, open days, and other outreach activities that allow students and their families to experience HE environments first-hand. These were seen as powerful tools for demystifying HE, building familiarity, and fostering a sense of belonging, which in turn can increase confidence and motivation to apply.

2.2.5 Data and evidence

Over a fifth (49, 22%) emphasised that effective regional collaboration is grounded in robust, evidence-led decision making. They argued that activities should be informed by reliable datasets, detailed demographic analysis, and clear identification of outreach gaps. Respondents referred to using tools such as equality of opportunity risk registers, outreach mapping, and local skills data to identify where need is greatest and inform strategic planning and day-to-day delivery.

Some (31, 14%) discussed the importance of data sharing as a foundation for effective collaboration. Respondents highlighted that many existing partnerships already make use of regional datasets, such as those produced by combined authorities or local councils, to guide targeting and planning. They suggested that future collaborations could build on this by sharing data with all partners, helping to ensure consistency and avoid duplication. However, concerns were raised that schools may be reluctant to share information if they know it will be passed on to a wide range of organisations, suggesting that clear boundaries and trust would be essential for effective data sharing.

A smaller proportion (33, 15%) highlighted the importance of evaluation in ensuring that regional collaborations are effective and accountable. They discussed the value of adopting consistent evaluation frameworks across providers to enable meaningful comparisons of impact and to assess the effectiveness of interventions. Respondents stated that coordinated regional evaluation could help identify and share best practice, providing a clearer evidence base for future planning.

‘Strong evaluation frameworks must be in place to demonstrate impact at a regional level. This ensures accountability, facilitates learning, and strengthens the case for continued investment in regional models.’ - Senior leader, HE provider

2.2.6 Resourcing

Around one in six (33, 15%) raised concerns about the funding available to support regional collaborations. They emphasised that effective partnerships rely on sustained investment, particularly to cover staffing, coordination, and outreach activities. Smaller institutions and FE colleges were seen as especially vulnerable without dedicated funding, as their participation often depends on limited resource. Respondents also reflected on the instability of programmes such as Uni Connect, noting that uncertainty around future funding had disrupted local collaboration and made long-term planning difficult.

'Effective collaboration is built on trust and a collective commitment to long-term impact. This requires sustained engagement and stable funding structures that enable institutions to plan strategically, invest in relationships, and deliver high-quality engagement over time.' – Sector bodies and mission groups

Several (26, 12%) perceived a risk of additional bureaucracy or administrative burden. They worried that the creation of new structures could result in unnecessary duplication of meetings, governance layers, or reporting processes, drawing resource away from direct outreach delivery. Respondents also cautioned that, if the requirements for participation became too onerous, smaller providers or those with limited resources may disengage from the partnerships.

Some (25, 11%) mentioned the risk of duplication with existing initiatives (this point was frequently raised by respondents across multiple questions). They stated that many institutions are already engaged in established collaborations, including Uni Connect partnerships and locally convened networks. Unless the new regional structures are carefully aligned with these, there is a perceived danger that effort could be fragmented, with multiple groups pursuing similar aims in parallel. Respondents therefore emphasised the importance of working with existing partnerships and building on current practice rather than replicating it.

2.2.7 Name for regional groupings

Several (35, 16%) emphasised the importance of clear and consistent branding for the new regional groupings. They highlighted that well-established names, such as Uni Connect, already carry strong recognition and trust among schools, colleges, and local partners. Respondents cautioned that unnecessary rebranding could undermine this recognition and create confusion for stakeholders who are already familiar with the existing terminology.

Several (38, 17%) expressed support for the term 'Regional Access Partnerships'. This was seen as clear, concise, and broadly reflective of the collaborative aims of the programme. Respondents felt it carries a more accessible meaning than technical terms such as 'equality of opportunity', making it easier to communicate with external stakeholders. Respondents also stated that the label could be used as an umbrella term, enabling regions to maintain their established local identities while still aligning under a consistent national framework.

A few (eight, 4%) suggested 'Equality of Opportunity Partnerships' as an alternative name. They felt this more accurately reflects the strategic mission of the partnerships (beyond access) and highlights a shared purpose, while accounting for flexibility in delivery.

Other, individual suggestions included 'Regional Access Hubs', 'Collaborative Access Partnerships', and 'Regional Equality of Opportunity Partnerships'.

2.3 What are your thoughts on the proposed regions?

This section includes the analysis of responses to the following question from the call for evidence:

What are your thoughts on the proposed regions, as set out in Annex A and B?⁵

Prompts:

- What are the barriers for your organisation to working in the defined regions to improve access to higher education?
- Should the Greater London region be broken down further? What should the areas in London be?
- Which region would your organisation fit well in and why? Does this differ from the proposals?

This section provides an overview of common themes emerging across responses, before discussing feedback received for each of the proposed regions. In response to this question, 212 responses were received.

2.3.1 Overarching views on the proposed regions

Twenty-nine respondents (14%) expressed explicit support for the proposed regions. They felt the regional proposals were sensible, well evidenced and functionally coherent. Some discussed how aligning the proposed partnership regions to the existing local authority and combined authority areas could enhance administrative efficiency and stakeholder engagement. Others were content with the proposed regions as these align with their current partnerships and provision.

Around two in five (80, 38%) discussed the large geographic area of some proposed regions – most of these (63) are organisations that are part of a Uni Connect Partnership, while organisations from the South East of England (15) were the most represented here, followed by the East Midlands (nine). Respondents raised concern about collaborating across large regions when areas within are varied in terms of how urban they are, socioeconomic profiles and demographic profiles. They perceived that the size of the proposed regions could have a negative impact on the opportunities, support and delivery of outcomes for target groups, and that the quality of interventions for disadvantaged students may be diluted. There was suggestion (by four) that a typical region could contain between four to eight universities; four others suggested that there could be scope for collaboration with providers in other regions. Specific comments per region are discussed below in 2.3.2.

'I am particularly concerned by the number of larger amalgamated regions, where inevitably there will be a negative correlation between the number of former partnerships in a newly merged region, and ability to make a demonstrable impact. Local knowledge and expertise and ability to target those resources to make positive impact will be diluted, as will the speed of decision making, and willingness to 'take a risk' with more ambitious projects. The proposal to merge some regions into a single entity risks

⁵ [Appendix 3](#) of this report details the proposed regions.

undermining the commitment of the OfS to supporting and enhancing existing local infrastructure.’ – Individual

The physical distance of travel was viewed as a potential issue affecting access to support and opportunities for students in more geographically dispersed regions. This was seen as especially problematic for coastal and rural areas with poorer transport links. It was suggested that, due to geographic proximity, there may be cases where schools find it easier to work with neighbouring institutions rather than those within their wider designated region. Respondents argued that outreach should reflect lived reality and not administrative convenience, and that regional groups should be based more on travel time (and costs associated with it).

Concern was raised (28, 13%) that the rationale for the proposed regions appeared to be based primarily on the number of institutions in the region, rather than focusing on the volume and profile of young people in each region. Respondents discussed how variation will exist (both within and across proposed regions) in levels of disadvantage, school attainment, and post-16 progression, and argued that the needs of learners, particularly in diverse areas, are too varied to be addressed through a one-size-fits-all model. It was thus suggested the proposed regional restructuring may undermine efforts to improve access to HE for the most disadvantaged learners.

‘The current approach appears to lack a student-focused and user-centred perspective. The rationale for how boundaries have been drawn does not appear to be linked to indicators of need, such as educational disadvantage, attainment, or progression to higher education. For example, metrics such as the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) – commonly used in access work – do not appear to have informed the regional areas. This raises questions about whether the proposed regions are the most appropriate structures to address educational disadvantage and access to higher education.’ – HE provider

Some (22, 10% - of which 16 are organisations that are part of a Uni Connect Partnership) felt the proposed regions could break up well-established and successfully functioning regions, which would then risk destabilising existing relationships and partnerships. Further, it was discussed that new relationships could take time to develop, with some arguing that this was not an efficient use of public money.

‘The proposed regions do not seem to be sufficient to truly reflect the complex nature of the different partnerships. As we are currently in two Uni Connect partnerships the proposed new regions are extremely large and this would be a challenge to collaborating as it would mean even more HEIs and colleges with whom potentially there is competition, different priorities and ensuring the equitable distribution of resources and funding amongst partner institutions. There is also the potential to lose the sense of identity.’ – HE provider

Resourcing – linked to staffing and funding – was also discussed (16, 8%). In light of the current financial landscape for HE providers, respondents discussed that insufficient resourcing could present a barrier to engagement, and raised concern that resources could be further stretched if required to work within a wider regional area. With the increased size of some proposed regions, providers would welcome ringfenced funding support to provide

financial stability for regional collaboration commitments. It was also suggested that funding is sensitive to regional disparities in student outcomes and risks to equality of opportunity – for instance, it was mentioned that rural areas receive less local authority funding per capita (41% less than urban counterparts), meaning more rural institutions risk being unable to meet delivery expectations.

Moreover, seven were concerned that uneven burden might be placed on providers, with some regional entities remaining unaffected by the proposed changes whereas other areas would see multiple partnerships destabilised. It was suggested this could result in an uneven playing field and create inconsistency. Five also referenced how providers would have to adapt to a new operating model, including new data collection methods, and new activity offerings, which could create a burden. As an alternative, three suggested the OfS could consider a model of multi-hub delivery, with sub-regional teams in multiple locations feeding back to a central regional team to maintain consistency and top-level oversight, but retaining existing partnership structures.

Lastly, some (13, 6%) were concerned that the proposed regions did not take into consideration other existing groupings such as regional mayoral authorities (which impact HE providers, schools and future funding for inclusive growth and skills) or the Department for Education's (DfE's) regional groupings. Two suggested aligning regional access partnerships with existing and proposed devolved areas to enable continued collaborative working with Careers Hubs.

2.3.2 Regional perspective

This section summarises feedback received on each of the proposed regions.

North East

Eight (4%) provided comments on the North East region – all of which were positive. Three were supportive of this proposed region as it remains unchanged from the current Uni Connect partnership, and explicitly stated the proposal is well suited as it will enable continuity and stability. There was agreement that the proposed region aligns well with the North East's two combined authorities, and reflects existing collaborative partnerships and the structure of local governance. They felt this will support organisations to fulfil their ambition to deepen collaboration with strategic stakeholders across the region, and deliver meaningful, regionally tailored approaches to improving access to higher education. Further, one respondent generally highlighted the well-established collaborative network in the area (North East Raising Aspirations Partnership (NERAP)).

Lancashire and Cumbria

The Lancashire and Cumbria region was discussed by 11 (5%). Four highlighted major variations within the proposed region, such as urban and rural differences and a wide range of social, economic, and demographic profiles. It was mentioned that HE participation patterns and barriers to progression in rural West Cumbria differ significantly from those in urban parts of Lancashire. The divergent nature of Lancashire and Cumbria can be captured in the following quote.

'Merging Cumbria with Lancashire, a more urban and densely populated region, would create a larger and more diverse region in terms of

geography, demographics, and educational needs. This increased complexity could hinder coordination and reduce the effectiveness and responsiveness of outreach delivery. A key concern is that Cumbria's distinct challenges may be overshadowed by the needs of more populous areas. Outreach strategies that are effective in urban centres such as Preston or Blackburn may not translate successfully to rural communities in Cumbria, where learners face different and often more pronounced barriers.'

– Uni Connect partnership

Further, four highlighted the importance of alignment with local context and existing structures. An example was given of the Uni Connect work in Lancashire, which involves collaborative working with combined authorities, local authorities, careers hub, local skills improvement plan (LSIP) stakeholders and other local stakeholders. Each of these stakeholders is said to have a footprint in Lancashire but that it would be beneficial to have distinct hubs in both Lancashire and Cumbria. Another respondent sought reassurance that a centralised model (which combines Lancashire and Cumbria) would be able to support current initiatives, which depend on strong local partnerships, tailored delivery, and a deep understanding of the community context.

Another three discussed accessibility and geographical constraints, highlighting that Cumbria is one of the most sparsely populated regions in the UK with underdeveloped transport links, and areas of significant economic deprivation and social immobility – and further pointed out that, particularly in rural and coastal communities, learners can be geographically isolated, with travel to FE or HE providers being time consuming and expensive. Overall, there was a perception that the proposed region might be impractical as it may be challenging to collaborate.

Finally, one respondent felt that merging Lancashire and Cumbria was strategically logical and appropriate, given the number of HE institutions, schools, and learners across the proposed area. In terms of benefits, they argued it brings potential for stronger strategic alignment, more efficient governance, reduced duplication of effort, and improved cross-regional collaboration.

East and North Yorkshire and Lincolnshire

Twenty-two discussed this proposed region. Eight focused on the potential logistical barriers due to the region's wide geographical spread, and raised concern about poor transport infrastructure resulting in increased costs for attendees of outreach and engagement events if these were centralised in locations such as Lincoln or York. An example was given that Hull, Scarborough and Grimsby communities included in this partnership may face disadvantage due to the limited public transport available to them. By contrast, some felt that disparities in wealth, levels of deprivation, and social mobility across the proposed region created by York's inclusion could mean that learners lose out. This is because a larger region could lead to more generic rather than tailored activity.

'There are challenges and differences of access and opportunities for students living in a coastal geographical area where this relationship we have is critical. Travel to Lincoln or York can take up most of the school day, and the cost of coach hire is a significant burden, especially for families and communities already under financial pressure. One of the greatest risks of the new model is that the very schools most in need of intensive outreach –

like those on the coast – may find themselves marginalised in favour of more easily accessible, better-resourced institutions.’ – School sector

Four underscored the need to maintain existing infrastructure, relationships, and delivery models. Retaining these, it was argued, would ensure regional collaboration was manageable and that all areas are treated equally. Three well-established and respected partnerships were discussed in this regard and respondents would like to see them continue in some form.

West and South Yorkshire

Four comments were received on this region, with three explicitly positive about the proposal. These respondents stated they already work collaboratively with partnerships and individual institutions in this region. There was viewed to be opportunity to further develop and enhance some of the initiatives that function across the wider region such as a foundation to Medicine route. The other respondent mentioned that York was not included in this proposed region despite existing strong relationships between Leeds, York and Sheffield Universities as part of the White Rose Consortia, and thus suggested that either York should be included in West and South Yorkshire, otherwise efforts would need to be made to ensure the proposed regions do not destabilise the existing cross-regional collaboration.

Merseyside

Six shared points in relation to the proposed region of Merseyside and the areas to be included within it. Three highlighted the value of existing partnerships, discussing how currently these provide access activity to students in areas within Liverpool City region, with established projects with local secondary schools, colleges and local authority partners in Sefton and Knowsley. Two HE providers expressed concern about regional restructuring and potentially losing current partners that have been assigned to another region. They suggested that, due to those partners' proximity to Liverpool city region, sizeable intake of students from the area, and historic links with the city of Liverpool, such providers should form part of the Merseyside area. There was a risk perceived that losing these partners from the Merseyside area could lead to a reduction in the number of schools/colleges and prospective students who could be supported and a loss of meaningful input, views and perspectives on regional issues. Finally, one perceived Merseyside to be reasonable as a standalone region, especially when compared with other large regions.

Greater Manchester

Six commented on this proposed region. Three felt it was appropriate as the region is already well integrated, allowing for practical and meaningful engagement with schools and effective coordination capacity. Two underscored the importance of existing partnerships and raised concern around potentially losing these as a result of the proposed new region. They reflected how some providers have developed close ties with areas included in the combined authority of Greater Manchester, and were concerned that those relationships could be lost if those areas are now assigned to other regions such as North Midlands. Finally, one directed attention to local variation within Greater Manchester with different scales of HE provision and different financial pressures.

North Midlands

Forty-two respondents discussed the North Midlands proposed region. Of these, six argued the region is too large both geographically and in terms of the number of schools it covers. They were unclear on the benefits of excluding the existing East Midlands region (that is perceived as well-defined) and instead merging with Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire and Cheshire. Further, three believed the increased number of schools and learners as part of the proposed region was too large as it would be too challenging to serve, thus risking dilution of the quality of interventions, particularly for the most disadvantaged.

Three highlighted the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Collaborative Outreach Partnership (DANCOP) partnership, which was viewed to collaborate effectively with other partners to provide targeted outreach with schools and colleges, and raised concern that disrupting this partnership could risk undoing recent progress and fracturing the trust and cooperation that has been built over the years. Two also raised concern around DANCOP and Higher Horizons operating within the same region. Both were viewed to serve similar groups with challenging areas of deprivation, and low attainment at Key Stage 4, with similar levels of progression to HE but with different operating models – a concern was raised that significant time might be spent aligning these, rather than focusing on beneficiaries.

‘This is not a recognised area in any meaningful strategic, geographical, or partnership sense. It is unclear what this new region is meant to align with. There are no shared combined authorities, LSIPs, transport infrastructure, or established education and employer networks connecting these areas in a coherent or practical way.’ – Local government authorities

Ten raised concerns about misalignment of the proposed North Midland’s region with existing structures. They argued that diverse areas have been combined into this proposed region, and believed these do not align in terms of the economic make-up, culture and HE participation. For example, they felt that grouping Cheshire West, East and Warrington with the North Midlands feels misplaced as those places have very different cultural identities.

Further, some raised concern that the proposed region was misaligned with existing structures as it did not take into account the regional mayoral configuration of the East Midlands Combined Authority (EMCCA) – which has an impact on HE and FE providers as well as schools and future funding for inclusive growth. Moreover, it was viewed not to align with the DfE’s regional group for schools and further education, instead crossing three DfE regional groupings.

Connectivity and logistical challenges were discussed by ten, who felt the proposed region was too large to encourage frequent, meaningful collaboration. For example, one mentioned how Newark-on-Trent to Warrington is a 220-mile round trip, and that transport infrastructure is inadequate for public transport to be used efficiently. They believed the inadequacy of transport infrastructure across the region could restrict opportunities for collaboration given the distance and complexity of travel. In this regard, one cited how Loughborough is working closely with institutions in Derby and Nottingham because of good transport connections.

Other suggestions were mentioned by a small number.

- A suggestion to group Cheshire West, East and Warrington with Merseyside rather than with North Midlands (two respondents).

- A suggestion to align DANCOP with the Pathways Partnership (Leicester, Loughborough, and Rutland). It was argued that the DfE Regional Advisory Board and RISE programme include Leicester and Loughborough, alongside Derby and Nottingham. This region is geographically closer, with transport links via connecting roads and trains, and was perceived as a better fit (two).
- A suggestion to align parts of North Midlands with the region of the East Midlands because the EMCCA covers the four local authority areas of Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Derby and Nottingham (two).
- A proposal to break down North Midlands into a North West Midlands, a West Midlands, and an East Midlands region (one).
- A suggestion that the University of Staffordshire was best placed in a region that retains the current Higher Horizons footprint, including Stoke, Staffordshire and Cheshire, with the addition of Telford and Wrekin (one).

West Midlands

Twenty-nine discussed the West Midlands proposed region. Six focused their response on the scale of the region and associated governance concerns. The West Midlands encompasses over 400 schools, numerous local authorities, and a wide range of HE and FE providers. With the large number of HE providers, there was concern that efforts to ensure equitable input, balanced decision making, and focused delivery across such large partnerships may prove administratively burdensome and dilute the strategic clarity required for impactful collaboration. As a result, there were suggestions that a region with such diversity required a delivery model that is locally informed, flexible, and responsive to the distinct needs of different communities within the region.

'The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) area has some of the highest levels of deprivation in the country, with 63% of residents living in areas within the top three deciles of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), and home to 10% of the UK's most deprived areas. We need a targeted and appropriate system approach to tackle high deprivation and low access of opportunity. In its present proposed formation, we are concerned the West Midlands region is too widely spread to make effective return on this public investment.' – Local government authorities

Six raised concerns about potential disruption to existing regional partnerships. The most common argument was that moving Shropshire to the West Midlands region neglected its historical and demographic alignment with Staffordshire and Cheshire. It was argued that the greatest need in terms of widening access is in the north of Shropshire, which is geographically closer to Staffordshire and Cheshire than to Birmingham and the Black Country. The suggestion that Shropshire should be part of a West Midlands region, while its neighbours in Staffordshire remain elsewhere, was felt to run counter to recent discussions on forming combined authorities between those two counties.

Further, four raised concerns over the size of the region in terms of distance and accessibility challenges. Organisations pointed towards poor transport infrastructure, increasing costs of transportation, and the proposed region not being easily aligned with existing transport links (for example the inclusion of Shropshire/Telford in the West Midlands is perceived to overlook infrastructure challenges).

Four expressed explicit support for the proposed West Midlands region. They welcomed unification of Shropshire with Telford and Wrekin, which was viewed to align with the current developmental efforts of some providers in the area. Two welcomed the single unified West Midlands region as it was perceived to align with the combined authority and local authorities. There was also a positive perception that the proposed region would streamline partnership and collaboration in the region and enhance impact and consistency for learners, schools and providers.

Finally, three suggested alternatives. One proposed a split into a North West Midlands, a West Midlands, and an East Midlands region. A second proposed a split into a North West Midlands region (consisting of Cheshire, Staffordshire - including Stoke-on-Trent, and Shropshire - including Telford and Wrekin), a West Midlands region (consisting of Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Coventry, the Black Country, Warwickshire) and an East Midlands (consisting of Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Rutland). The final suggestion was that the proposed West Midlands region should not include Shropshire as well as Telford and Wrekin, which instead could sit better in a North West Midlands region.

South Midlands

Twelve discussed the South Midlands region. Four raised the importance of maintaining established partnerships and local identity and ensuring that the new proposed regional partnership would not have significant impacts on already established place-based partnerships, such as the University Partnership.

'Grouping [provider's name] into a broader South Midlands region provides some opportunities to learn about, and gain best practice from, wider demographics, but also risks diluting the targeted work we do within Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland. While the proposed grouping for South Midlands has some rationale, the region is large and diverse, encompassing multiple Uni Connect partnerships (including Pathways and Aspire Higher) and distinct local education markets. Employers engaged through our Civic Agreement do so because of a shared commitment to local growth and opportunity. Expanding the geography significantly may lessen their interest or ability to engage, particularly for smaller employers with a local footprint.' – HE provider

Four indicated suggestions for realignment. For instance, it was proposed the South Midlands should be renamed 'East Midlands' given most of the authorities associated with the East Midlands are co-located within the South Midlands entity. Others suggested moving away from South Midlands as an entity, and realigning the Midlands into: North West, West Midlands, and an East Midlands region, to reduce the number of Midlands partnerships from six to three and more closely align with the identities of those areas and public service structures.

Two pointed towards perceived misalignment with existing regional structures. One reflected on the institutional diversity across the region, and the diversity of learners across the areas, which could lead to difficulty in delivering meaningful collaborative activity to support the progression of learners. The other felt there was limited strategic or operational benefit in merging the areas of Leicestershire and Rutland with providers based in Hertfordshire, arguing that NHS trusts do not align across the region and that the geographic area of Leicester and Hertfordshire is too large.

Finally, two discussed practical and logistical challenges for the proposed region. They pointed out that the region is over 100 miles in length, which was not viewed as practical for centralised teams to deliver activities in schools, colleges, or communities. Coordinating activities or meetings across such a wide area, it was argued, may not be viable or inclusive for all partners due to these logistical challenges.

East Anglia

Nine raised points of relevance to East Anglia. Three stated the proposed region makes geographic sense and felt this region was a good strategic and operational fit for them due to alignment in terms of demographics, economic priorities and the widening participation work of HE providers in the region. Three highlighted the value of maintaining existing partnerships, although without providing specific examples, and argued that these well-established partnerships need to be preserved as it would be counterproductive to destabilise them for the purpose of creating larger regions.

Three shared concerns about practical challenges, for instance, that travel across/within the region may be challenging due to its size, which could create issues for those that need to travel to events.

Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire

Four discussed this region. Two highlighted the importance of focusing on deprivation and widening participation in the region, and felt that the proposed area does not maximise opportunities to engage large numbers of students in particular target groups.

‘Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire have roughly a quarter of HEIs, schools and colleges compared to the proposed South East region. It is hard to imagine how consistent expectations could apply to all HEIs given this variance. Study Higher is currently a mid-size Uni Connect partnership. Under these proposals we would become one of the smallest partnerships based on the number of HEIs, number of schools, and geographical area. It is difficult to understand the potential benefits or risks of this when there is little detail of the funding and expectations for regional collaboration.’ – HE provider

One, who supported the proposed region, highlighted solid geographic and strategic alignment as they felt it overlapped with the area covered by the existing Study Higher partnership.

West of England

The West of England was a more commonly discussed region (25, 12%). Ten highlighted regional boundary concerns and the perceived misalignment of Swindon in this region was the most contentious point – respondents argued that Swindon Borough Council is geographically focusing eastwards for collaboration (including through regional devolution) and placing Swindon in the West of England region is at odds with other regional collaboration. Three pointed out plans for Swindon to join a Thames Valley devolution deal, which would mean greater alignment with Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire.

Two stated the region comprises ‘sub-zones’ such as the urban centres of Bath and Bristol, which have a very different demographic make-up and economy to coastal and rural areas

across Somerset, and thus have varying needs which may be difficult to address collaboratively.

Eight also raised concerns about the practicalities and feasibility of the region, in light of its size and reality of travels, discussing long travel times (two to four hours) to reach some schools, which could reduce the frequency and sustainability of outreach activity. To aid this, it is proposed that local hubs will be essential to maintaining access, support and delivery.

‘Geographically it makes sense, however practically there are a lot of different challenges with the locations and barriers that students face, e.g. the rural location of Gloucestershire compared to Bristol city. The region has some very big HEIs and there is a risk that impact in our own area could be reduced if focus and money is on activities and areas with greater levels of deprivation than our own. We have coastal areas such as Weston-Super-Mare, a large city in Bristol and rural areas. Ensuring equality of opportunity for all means understanding the specific barriers which exist and addressing them, this is more difficult when the region is diverse.’ – HE provider

Five expressed support for the proposed region as it is seen to encourage continuity of existing partnerships, and has alignment to the existing West of England Combined Authority area (which includes Bristol, North Somerset, South Gloucestershire, Bath & North East Somerset). Others see the value in Somerset being placed within the West of England as it is a functional economic area around the advanced manufacturing and aerospace economic cluster, and is regarded as developing strong economic and educational ties to the West of England through the Institute of Technology (IoT) devolved adult skills clusters and the LSIP industry sectors, which need to be cultivated.

London

Around one fifth discussed points in relation to London (38, 18%). Several (23, 11%) argue that London should be disaggregated into smaller sub-regions or areas given its large size and diversity, citing that almost nine million people live in Greater London, and the region has over 80 institutions ranging from very small and specialist HE providers to universities of significant size. In terms of diversity, respondents raised how London has significant variation in socioeconomic profiles, educational progression rates, and access challenges across its boroughs. Therefore, respondents felt that a single region strategy could be less relevant and fair, the region could be operationally impractical to manage, and that further division could enable more focused and effective local collaboration.

‘Across the Greater London region there are variable distributions of equality of access to HE, alongside broader educational and health outcomes, uneven distributions of HE provision, with large numbers of specialist institutions and different concentrations of industrial and business sectors. We believe these factors will make a single London-wide approach problematic and will fail to address the underrepresentation of some part of the London community in HE.’ – Senior leader, HE provider

Within the comments advocating for breaking up the London region, a few proposed suggestions including subdivision into central, north, east, south and west London.

Others (11, 5%) believed London should not be subdivided, and shared justification for this.

- Further segmentation could lead to very small regions, with limited opportunities to share best practice.
- Splitting London into two areas could create duplication of effort across both areas.
- Greater London does not require further subdivision due to its strong transport links and existing infrastructure.
- Breaking down the London region further could result in institutions discontinuing work they are currently delivering effectively in other areas of the city.
- Segmenting London would not reflect how learners think or how London HE providers work. Currently, London-based HE providers work with students in all boroughs, and having two or more partnerships could lead to unnecessary bureaucracy.

South East

Thirty-eight discussed the proposed region of the South East. Fifteen expressed concern about its size and complexity, suggesting this may not benefit learners due to the distances involved, and a potential lack of focus on local needs in light of its large size. It was pointed out that some areas have unique populations (e.g. military families) that require targeted support that is not relevant across the entire region, and that the region is complex due to the diversity of counties, urban centres, coastal deprivation zones, rural cold spots, and education governance models.

‘The South East region stands out as disproportionately larger than nearly all the others, second only to London with a proposed 30 HEPs who will be required to collaborate on their APPs, 448 schools and 26 colleges. With a reported age 11–19 population of 778,475, the South East region far exceeds the vast majority of other regions. In fact, only London, with a population of 952,436, surpasses the South East in scale, while all other regions fall well short. This substantial imbalance raises questions about the feasibility, efficiency, and equity of a single regional approach for the South East, especially given the diversity and scale of learner needs.’ – Uni Connect partnership

Eight raised concerns about the proposed region potentially breaking up existing local partnerships, such as the Southern Universities Network (SUN) straddling the South East and South West proposed regions, which could destabilise long established collaboration. Others raised concern with the size of the proposed region, as it was perceived that being part of a large region could slow down joint action and conflict with local structures, which may risk undermining existing collaboration and progress in widening participation.

Six provided suggestions for restructuring. One suggested ‘South Central’ consisting of Dorset, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP), Hampshire (in its entirety), Isle of Wight, Portsmouth, and Southampton. One organisation said it was allocated to the South East region but no longer had a campus there and would welcome representation in the partnerships closer to its existing campuses.

Five perceived a mismatch with civic and strategic boundaries, suggesting that LSIPs, combined authorities, and devolution plans do not sufficiently align across with the proposed region. This, it was felt, could make shared planning more difficult and hinder efforts to improve access to HE for the most disadvantaged learners.

Finally, four highlighted challenges of travel within the proposed region, stating that it was unlikely learners would take advantage of more opportunities within the larger South East region, given that transport links and logistics can act as barriers. There was concern that travel could also be a barrier for schools and young people, especially in rural areas, due to travel time and associated expenses.

South West

Twenty-one (10%) commented on the South West. Eight perceived geographical misalignment, with particular concern that Dorset should not be placed in the South West given that schools will geographically be closer to Somerset (West of England) or Bournemouth/Poole (South East). However, there was a degree of conflicting feedback, with one suggesting that Dorset should be included in South West.

'We disagree with the proposed region as set out in the Annex. It does not reflect the South West in terms of local authority boundaries, school/university relationships or provider ratios i.e. including only part of Dorset and not including Somerset. There is no clear rationale for how the region has been defined. It is neither strategically nor operationally coherent. Somerset and the whole of Dorset should be included in the South West region.' – HE provider

Others suggested that Somerset and parts of Wiltshire could be moved to the South West to achieve a better regional alignment. Respondents reflected how coastal and rural communities can exhibit entrenched patterns of lower HE participation, requiring highly localised, community-focused approaches that might be difficult to address through broader regional models.

Seven raised concerns around travel and accessibility given the region's rural and coastal geography, with perceived poor transport infrastructure such as limited bus services in rural Cornwall. This, it was argued, could result in increased travel costs and logistical complexity for both learners and outreach staff. One mentioned how it would take several hours to travel across the proposed area, and suggested an approach that establishes regional groups based on travel time, taking into account local transport infrastructure.

Finally, six highlighted the importance of protecting and maintaining existing partnerships. They raised concern that some strong Uni Connect partnerships would be split across different proposed regions, primarily referring to SUN's divisions between the South East and South West. They felt this perceived fragmentation could disrupt established partnerships and impact continuity of support for learners. Another respondent pointed out Plymouth's existing partnership agreements with colleges in Somerset, and how these have helped to facilitate the work of the existing Next Steps South West Uni Connect, and would welcome its preservation given the time taken to develop relationships with underserved schools in Somerset.

2.4 How could a region best collaborate to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education?

This section includes the analysis of responses to the following question from the call for evidence:

How could a region best collaborate to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education?

Prompts:

- How could regional partnerships be governed or organised?
- How could regional partnerships work together to identify the best ways to target their effort?
- How could each region be coordinated or led?

In total, 198 respondents shared their views on how a region could best collaborate to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education.

2.4.1 Strategy and leadership

Around half (103, 47%) discussed the value of maintaining and learning from current partnerships and arrangements, such as Uni Connect, local consortia, and other long-standing networks. Respondents felt these existing structures already have the trust, relationships, and operational expertise to deliver effectively, and advised that dismantling them could disrupt delivery and erode partner engagement. There was a general view that any new models should adapt and strengthen what is already working, rather than replacing it entirely. Respondents felt this could be an effective way of safeguarding local knowledge and reducing the risk of bureaucratic complexity whilst effectively improving equality of opportunity.

Many (93, 42%) stressed the need for governance and management that is representative, transparent, and proportionate. Respondents advocated for structures that separate strategic oversight from operational delivery – such as steering groups or committees – and called for inclusivity and representation from HE, FE, Local Authorities, employers, and the third sector.

'It will be important to recognise the existing mechanisms that groups already have in place. Whilst there is of course opportunity in wider collaboration, there should also be careful consideration to ensure that there is opportunity for bespoke provision to enhance, rather than impede, existing structures and work.' – Senior leader, individual

A few (10, 5%) reflected that the current OfS 'lead provider' model could work well where relationships are strong – though others warned it risks over-centralising power and marginalising smaller providers. Alternative suggestions included a rotating leadership model (whereby institutions take turns as the lead provider) or appointing independent coordinators to ensure impartiality (for more detail, see below).

Three in ten (66, 30%) believed effective regional partnerships start with a shared understanding of the key equality of opportunity challenges in their area. This process should be evidence-based and draw from, for example, collective risk registers and mapping of existing provision to establish common priorities. Respondents highlighted that these priorities should not be limited to traditional university entry, but also cover other pathways such as apprenticeships, higher technical qualifications, and vocational routes, to enable more targeted and inclusive action. Several (38, 17%) also stressed the importance of establishing a shared strategic direction for regional partners, which was viewed as essential to avoid fragmented approaches and enable collective progress towards agreed long-term goals.

Just under a quarter (53, 24%) felt regional coordination should be led by an independent party rather than a single provider – this was seen as important to prevent conflicts of interest, ensure fair decision making, and give equal weight to the voices of smaller or specialist providers. Suggestions included independent chairs, regional coordinators, or sector bodies working alongside HE institutions. Respondents highlighted that such models could help foster transparency and facilitate buy-in from a diverse range of stakeholders.

'A practical suggestion for coordination would be to have an independent coordinator or lead for the partnerships, to avoid host institution dominance and ensure equity of all providers irrespective of their size or influence in the region.' – Senior leader, HE provider

A similar proportion (32, 15%) highlighted the need for an approach that allows for flexibility in how each provider implements actions to improve equality of opportunity. This was seen as vital to accommodate differences between urban and rural areas within a region, respond to emerging equality of opportunity risks, and make use of each institution's unique strengths. Respondents warned against a one-size-fits-all model, and instead called for arrangements that give partners discretion over how to meet agreed objectives in ways that reflect their unique circumstances and strengths.

Some (27, 12%) requested more clarity from the OfS on the roles, responsibilities, and expected outcomes for regional partnerships. They argued that, without clear definitions, there was a risk of inconsistent interpretation across regions, which could undermine evaluation and comparison measures. Suggestions included publishing a standard framework for governance responsibilities, minimum requirements for partnership engagement, and a clear process for setting and reviewing regional priorities.

One in ten (22, 10%) felt that successful regional collaborations are those which address local skills needs. Respondents suggested integrating local labour market intelligence, employer feedback, and regional economic developments into equality of opportunity planning. This would ensure that widening participation activity supports not only access to higher education, but also progression into high-demand, sustainable employment sectors.

Some (14, 6%) suggested the OfS should act as an enabler, rather than dictating providers' actions. This could involve facilitating national coordination and offering guidance on evaluation and good practice, while leaving the detailed design and delivery of collaboration to the regional level. Respondents felt this approach would build trust and encourage genuine local ownership of initiatives.

'There is a need for balance between OfS defined collaboration and institution-led collaboration. [Our current partnership] is successful through being institution-led rather than being overly defined by the OfS – the role of the OfS should be more about an informational steer about what local area needs are, rather than what HEIs must do.' – Senior leader, sector bodies and mission groups

Some (11, 5%) suggested rotating the lead role between institutions on a fixed schedule. This was seen as a way to ensure no single organisation dominates the partnership and share the administrative burden more evenly, giving all members an opportunity to shape strategic direction.

2.4.2 Collaboration and communication

Around two in five (85, 38%) emphasised the importance of involving a broad and representative mix of partners in regional collaboration, including HE and FE providers, local authorities, schools, employers, community organisations, third sector groups, and students themselves. Such diversity was seen as essential for ensuring activities are well-targeted, relevant, and reflective of local needs. Respondents also stated the importance of involving sector-specific bodies – for example NHS England or industry networks – to bring specialist expertise into governance and delivery.

'A regional partnership group with representation from career leads, FE, and HE, thereby reflecting the diverse range of stakeholders involved in this initiative, would be welcomed.' – Other

About a fifth (48, 22%) advocated for regional collaboration to be anchored in local contexts (i.e. place-based), reflecting regional demographics, economic priorities, and educational needs. It was felt that aligning partnerships with geographical regions could help integrate HE access work with local skills strategies and civic agendas. Respondents cautioned that overly large or centralised structures risked losing the depth of local intelligence and relationships that underpin effective outreach.

Several (38, 17%) were in favour of using a hybrid model whereby strategic oversight and coordination are centralised, but delivery remains rooted locally. This, it was argued, would enable regional priorities to be consistent, while simultaneously offering flexibility to respond and adapt to local circumstances. Respondents cited existing 'hub and spoke' arrangements as positive examples of a hybrid model, enabling targeted, community-based outreach while retaining strategic coherence.

'[Our current] structure includes a Central Management team which provides strategic direction, partnership management, a data and evaluation function for the whole programme, and 'delivery spokes' in partner institutions. This sort of structure has and could work well in providing independent coordination of this work across regions.' – Senior leader, local government authorities

One in six (36, 16%) stressed the need for more systematic sharing of best practice between institutions and across the sector. It was felt this would help to avoid duplication, build on proven interventions, and spread innovation across partnerships. Respondents suggested

that formal mechanisms, such as regular dissemination meetings, would help to ensure sharing is consistent rather than ad-hoc.

Some (22, 10%) suggested collaboration could be more effective if providers embedded shared regional priorities or targets into their APPs (for more detail on this, see section 2.6). This could help ensure institutional and regional objectives are mutually reinforcing, and that progress could be measured consistently across the partnership. One respondent proposed the OfS could facilitate this by encouraging the inclusion of specific collaborative targets linked to regional priorities within the APPs, alongside existing institutional targets.

Seventeen (8%) emphasised the value of regular and structured meetings between partners. Respondents felt that such engagement builds trust, helps to identify emerging challenges, and ensures momentum is maintained. Suggested approaches included quarterly strategic meetings complemented by smaller, more frequent operational working groups.

Some (16, 7%) stressed that trust between partners is fundamental to successful collaboration. Respondents reflected how strong relationships, openness, and a willingness to work together are prerequisites for meaningful joint work, and that trust takes time and consistent effort to build.

[For a partnership] to be successful, trust and collaboration must come first...the process must be careful and collaborative – but done well, it can build deeper, more sustainable partnerships.’ – Senior leader, HE provider

Some (13, 6%) suggested collaboration could be strengthened by clear incentives (though did not comment on what form these could take). They warned that, without such incentives, engagement may be inconsistent, especially among providers that already have strong performance in widening participation and see limited additional benefit from regional work.

A few (10, 5%) recommended organising collaborative work around institutional or sectoral specialisms rather than purely on a geographical basis. This was seen as a way to leverage unique expertise, reduce duplication, and ensure targeted support for learners interested in specific industries, such as music, art and design, or agricultural studies.

Some (10, 5%) raised concerns about competition between providers – particularly in post-16 outreach – which might undermine collaboration. Two (1%) suggested focusing on pre-16 work, where competition is less of a factor, while one called for clearer rules and frameworks to manage competitive tensions within partnerships.

2.4.3 Resourcing and barriers

A fifth (46, 20%) highlighted the need for secure funding and financial stability. Respondents emphasised that sustainable, long-term funding is essential for building trust between partners, retaining experienced staff, and delivering activities with lasting impact. Short-term or uncertain financial arrangements were seen as destabilising, making it difficult to plan strategically or commit to collaborative projects.

‘Transparency around funding flows and resource distribution is essential. Institutions need clarity on how collaboration activities will be funded and how responsibilities will be shared, particularly given financial pressures faced by many providers.’ – HE provider

Some (18, 8%) emphasised the importance of ensuring that disadvantaged students remain at the centre of regional planning. This included outreach for specific underrepresented groups, such as care-experienced students, asylum seekers, and learners from areas of high deprivation, alongside work to improve progression and success once in HE.

Others (13, 6%) discussed the 'stretch' on smaller providers, and pointed out that specialist or smaller institutions often have fewer staff and limited budgets, which could make it challenging for them to engage fully in regional collaborations. Without targeted support, there was concern that such providers could be marginalised, leading to inequitable participation and an over-reliance on larger providers.

'There should be an awareness of the financial differences between institutions. Larger universities often have more substantial budgets for delivering outreach activities and associated actions which smaller providers will struggle to match.' – Individual

Eight (4%) felt that effective partnerships ought to consider transport and access issues, particularly in rural or geographically dispersed regions. Poor public transport and long travel times were seen as barriers to outreach participation and engagement, with suggestions that regional partnerships should take these logistical challenges into account when planning delivery.

2.4.4 Evidence and data

Many (66, 30%) emphasised the importance of a data-driven approach when developing and delivering collaborative activity. They felt that targeting should be based on robust analysis of local and regional risks to equality of opportunity, with decisions informed by both quantitative datasets and qualitative insights from schools, colleges, and community organisations. While datasets such as the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT), participation of local areas (POLAR), and tracking underrepresentation by area (TUNDRA) were stated as being useful starting points, respondents felt these should be complemented with more locally relevant indicators such as free school meal eligibility, care-experienced status, and local deprivation indices.

'Regional partnerships should adopt a data-informed, evidence-led approach to targeting effort. This means pooling data from HE and FE institutions, local authorities, health and employment services, and Uni Connect to create regional opportunity maps that identify cold spots, high-need groups, and systemic barriers.' – Senior leader, local government authorities

Around a fifth (40, 18%) highlighted the need to track and evaluate outcomes consistently across partnerships. It was suggested that a shared evaluation framework could be agreed at a national level to ensure comparability between regions while still allowing for locally relevant measures. This was seen as key to understand what works, avoid duplication, and ensure that resources are directed to the most impactful activities.

Some (18, 8%) called for greater use and alignment of existing data sources, and discussed how a large volume of relevant data is already collected by institutions, local authorities, and schools, and that better sharing and integration of these resources could strengthen regional evidence bases. Similarly, some (17, 8%) suggested establishing a central database or

shared data infrastructure to enable partners to pool intelligence, track participants, and monitor impact in real time.

Some (18, 8%) explicitly pointed to the need to identify and address cold spots where outreach and access activity is currently limited or absent. They argued that mapping these areas should be a shared priority for regional partnerships, enabling resources to be directed where they are most needed and ensuring that all disadvantaged groups have access to sustained, high-quality support.

Others emphasised the importance of transparency, both within partnerships and in any overarching frameworks (14, 6%). They felt that partners need to be open with one another about priorities, data, and decision-making processes, in order to build trust and ensure accountability.

‘Effective collaboration requires transparent communication channels among education providers, local authorities, and other stakeholders to share accurate data and evidence-based best practices focused on genuine equality of opportunity, not ideological preferences or quotas.’ – Individual

2.4.5 Other comments

Some (12, 5%) discussed the importance of engaging with all year groups, not just those preparing to enter HE. They argued that early, sustained outreach – beginning in primary school or early secondary school – is essential for raising aspirations and tackling entrenched inequalities, particularly for groups who may otherwise disengage from education before post-16 study.

Other comments included the following.

- **Staff training** (two, 1%) – outreach professionals should have access to ongoing development opportunities to strengthen practice and ensure consistency across partnerships.
- **Student mobility** (two, 1%) – regional strategies should account for mobility patterns (i.e. students leaving an area) and ensure that young people are supported to pursue opportunities both within and beyond their local region.

2.5 What support would be required for your organisation to work collaboratively across a defined region to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education?

This section includes the analysis of responses to the following question from the call for evidence:

What support would be required for your organisation to work collaboratively across a defined region to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education?

Prompts:

- How best could the OfS support collaboration?
- What structures would need to be preserved or in place for your organisation to collaborate effectively?

In total, 198 respondents shared their views on the support required to enable partners to collaborate across the proposed regions to improve equality of opportunity in access to HE.

2.5.1 Framework and mechanisms

The most common request for support from respondents was for sufficient frameworks and mechanisms for collaboration and delivery of outcomes (124, 63%). This can be broken down into three categories:

- data and resource sharing mechanisms,
- clarity and strategic direction from the OfS, and
- points of contact, leadership and communication channels for coordination.

Around one third (63, 32%) – most of which (48) are currently part of a Uni Connect Partnership – emphasised the need for data and resource sharing mechanisms. Respondents recognised the importance of data sharing to evaluate the long-term impact of outreach work and argued that equitable access to shared data platforms and planning tools is essential to enable informed decision making and collective evaluation. This could include a shared calendar and base of resources developed collaboratively. It was suggested the OfS could support collaboration by facilitating dialogue between institutions and providing access to relevant data, such as national databases of information. The OfS could, it was suggested, also use the named chair, or representative from each region, to send key participation data, identify groups of particular concern or interest or set the evaluative framework to provide consistency of reporting.

Furthermore, respondents suggested the OfS could support all partnerships in compiling and sharing data to build the evidence base for targeting and delivering appropriate interventions, and supporting tracking through the HEAT and Higher Education Evaluation Library (HEEL). Five (3%) said that, due to the subscription costs of HEAT, not all HE providers subscribe and some that do are choosing to end their subscription. In addition, they pointed out that not all providers are able to commit the resource required for the data submissions to HEAT. As a result, there was a perceived uneven playing field for HE

providers, to not only collaborate but measure impact, with a perceived risk that this burden would then fall to those who have the resources.

Further, four (2%) highlighted the importance of retaining existing data-sharing frameworks to support continual tracking, which currently provide continuity and stability in existing partnerships, building trusted coordination, retaining shared data systems, and drawing on local expertise.

‘A shared infrastructure supported by the OfS for communications and meetings would be essential to facilitate effective coordination. Equitable access to data systems and shared tools for planning and evaluation is vital to enable informed decision making across partners.’ – Uni Connect partnership

Clarity and strategic direction from the OfS was another common theme of support requested (44, 22%) – most (32) are part of a Uni Connect Partnership, and organisations from East Midlands (eight) were the most represented here. Respondents sought clear guidance and rationale from the OfS on the purpose and structure of regional collaboration and to ensure smooth transition. This extended to partners receiving a clear plan they can work towards, with clear targets and opportunities to collaborate with multiple organisations and bodies to improve equality of opportunity for learners. A strategic steer from the OfS would be welcomed to clarify how regional collaboration would align with institutional APP requirements.

Moreover, it was suggested that the OfS and the DfE could help raise awareness of regional access partnerships among schools, multi-academy trusts and local authorities, in particular those not already engaged with existing initiatives. Direct communication from the OfS could, it was argued, help establish legitimacy and accelerate relationship-building for new regional partnerships. The OfS could, it was suggested, also provide guidance on governance structures and defined roles (including expectations for contribution, leadership, and accountability).

‘The OfS should provide clear aims for these partnerships. Collaboration could result in economies of scale and reduce duplication of effort, but partnerships may not be designed to achieve these aims if they are not clearly stated. Each partner needs a clear understanding of why they are collaborating if they are to do this effectively. It would be helpful to understand what deliverables or student outcomes the OfS would like to see because of these partnerships, and to understand how the regulator intends to measure success.’ – HE provider

Points of contact, leadership and communication channels for coordination were also mentioned (11, 6%). Respondents discussed that, for long-term success, forms of distributed leadership (those which empower multiple actors across organisations) should be established with key stakeholders, to ensure relationships and collaborations are not lost when one person leaves their role. Improved communication channels with the OfS were suggested to enable two-way discussions to be developed quickly and productively, and one respondent stated that the DfE and the OfS could contribute to a more cohesive model in this regard by fostering clearer communication channels between the regions. Further, it was suggested that coordination should be led by established partnerships, and not imposed

from above or by external appointees who may lack local knowledge or connection with local delivery and stakeholders.

2.5.2 Funding

The second most common support theme mentioned (120, 61%) was financial support. Just under a quarter (48, 24%) highlighted the need for long-term and sustained funding, stating that, to collaborate effectively across a defined region, organisations require sustained investment and facilitation from the OfS. Such financial stability is necessary, it was argued, to foster enduring partnerships, enable forward planning, and ensure sustained impact. Respondents would welcome a guarantee of multi-year funding to provide financial security for five to 10 years, and suggested this could align with the APP cycle to provide institutions with the confidence and capacity to design and evaluate sustained engagement with schools and communities. A longer-term funding commitment would, it was felt, also mitigate against 'short-termism' in programme planning and evaluation, and reduce the risk of staff attrition and talent loss.

Around a quarter (46, 23%) said that funding support is particularly crucial currently due to the financial pressures facing the sector. Given the current financial landscape for the HE sector, respondents suggested it might be challenging for providers to commit funds to deliver regional access plans on top of existing APPs.

Four (2%) suggested that funding should be representative of the overall size and geography of the regions, and reflect the geography of the regional partnership, as well as the practical challenges faced by its staff and students. Funding, it was argued, would be required not only for direct delivery, but also for coordination, governance and capacity-building across the region.

Some (12, 6%) discussed the general funding model when commenting on funding required for regional collaboration – summarised in the bullets below.

- Two felt the funding model needs to ensure that all institutions are supported to engage, and that it needs to reflect regional priorities and targets, the costs of the collaborative activities identified to address these, and the size and resource of the institutions engaged in delivering them.
- One suggested the OfS could consider an alternative funding model, where funding is allocated more evenly across HE providers from various regions, rather than just "funded" or "non-funded" institutions. These funds could be used alongside those already pledged in APPs, allowing providers to advance further in levelling up equality of opportunity for identified groups.
- One suggested providers avoid models where a large percentage of funding might be absorbed by regional infrastructure instead of reaching the learners.

Some (10, 5%) highlighted the need for financial support to cover costs such as transport to enable effective work and student participation in a region. The importance of transport was attributed to the rural location of campuses/schools, which can act as an obstacle to engagement for staff and learners.

Four (2%) pointed towards funding directed to disadvantaged students. Two highlighted the importance of free school meals for selected targeted groups, which they believe can

support increased attendance at college and progression on to HE. Another believed the use of additional funding could assist young people with caring responsibilities.

‘It is essential that we fully utilise Uni Connect funding and any future regional access partnership funding support from the OfS. This funding is not a duplication of existing efforts but a vital enhancement that enables us to extend our reach and deepen the impact of our planned activity. Without this additional support, there remains a significant gap in provision, particularly for learners who are most at risk of being underserved. These young people are often those who benefit most from impartial, sustained outreach, and without targeted interventions made possible through this funding, they are likely to miss out entirely.’ – Senior leader, HE provider

2.5.3 Structures to be preserved

Around half (93, 47%) raised points in relation to the support required to maintain existing structures and partnerships – most of these (59) respondents are currently part of a Uni Connect Partnership, and organisations from Yorkshire and the Humber (18) were the most represented here, followed by South East (nine).

In general, respondents requested that existing partnerships developed through current Uni Connect programmes are retained as these stakeholder relationships have been carefully cultivated over time and these partnerships are now embedded with links to civic structures, local authorities, and regional education partnerships. This was also discussed in section 2.2.1 in relation to what effective regions for collaboration might look like, and the specialist expertise of these partnerships, as well as in section 2.3 in relation to the importance of continuing established relationships.

‘Maintaining existing governance frameworks and locally tailored strategies is vital to preserving institutional knowledge and community trust. Disruption should be minimised by evolving current models rather than wholesale replacement, ensuring continuity and strengthening collaborative outcomes across the region.’ – Individual

As an example, a few (11, 6%) mentioned the model developed by Humber Outreach Programme (HOP) that is governed by senior HE and FE leaders, schools, local authorities and LSIPs, which was viewed to work very effectively and has a track record of sustained, place-based delivery.

DANCOP was another organisation which six respondents (3%) requested to be preserved, as it was seen to be well embedded and to deliver real impact through joined-up governance, shared delivery, and with strong links to wider regional structures like the East Midlands Combined County Authority.

Other existing partnerships requested for preservation were as follows.

- Maintaining collaborative infrastructure links in the North East. The North East Raising Aspiration Partnership (NERAP) and Uni Connect were viewed to already provide established governance and delivery models that could be streamlined into a single Regional Access Partnership.

- Preserving local structures in Yorkshire and the Humber, in relation to HE access and the success-focused consortium Go Higher West Yorkshire (GHWY) (which is jointly funded by a range of HE providers) to enable providers' effective collaboration.
- Preserving the lead institution model in Greater Manchester, which is viewed to currently function well, with clear coordination and accountability. Regional hubs were seen to further enhance this structure by offering a one-stop service for schools, delivering a supportive and personalised approach that significantly boosts engagement.
- In relation to the South West, one respondent cited the Colyton Foundation which leads a partnership network of schools in close collaboration with multiple HE providers. It was suggested this could be scaled and formalised to serve as a regional access partnership model for the South West.

One in ten (21, 11%) – of which 14 are currently part of a Uni Connect Partnership – stated the need to preserve aspects of the current Uni Connect model. They argued that existing Uni Connect infrastructure should be maintained wherever possible to ensure future work is focused on beneficiaries and not setting up new administrative structures. They discussed a range of aspects to preserve, including retaining:

- experienced teams that support existing Uni Connect initiatives, which could provide continuity and expertise that may otherwise be lost in a system reset (mentioned by five respondents, 3%),
- the evaluation function of the current Uni Connect as some organisations do not have internal resource or expertise to undertake this (three, 2%),
- trusted relationships built through Uni Connect, including school liaisons (three, 2%),
- the legacy data currently managed by Uni Connect and ensuring data collection is not interrupted by the move to the new regional model (three, 2%),
- the established infrastructure of careers education, which could extend to existing support for regional partnerships. Throughout Uni Connect, the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) and organisations' Careers Hubs are seen to have worked well with regional partnerships, and this could be extended (two, 1%), and
- the existing partnerships that Uni Connect partnerships hold with other stakeholder organisations (two, 1%).

2.5.4 Transition period

Support was requested (26, 13%) around the transition period for adopting the new regional approach. Respondents argued that support is vital to allow an adequate transition period without disrupting current successful initiatives and derailing ongoing work. It was requested that transition plans are communicated clearly to avoid delivery gaps and to instil confidence among partners.

Furthermore, there was a perceived need to acknowledge that collaborative work may take a significant amount of time to show results, and that progress may be slow in the first few years. It was suggested that a longer preparation phase would give partners the chance to collaboratively design activities, build consensus on shared objectives, and nurture trusting relationships with schools and regional stakeholders.

Five (3%) mentioned that treating the current 2025-26 academic year as a transition year (and launching new partnerships from September 2026) is impractical and unrealistic as partners may be unable to acclimatise to what is coming due to the short notice and funding announcements for 2025-26 being delayed. There was a perceived need to recognise that each organisation has different capacities and constraints, especially schools and colleges already stretched by other demands.

‘A big concern is the speed with which these new partnerships would need to be formed considering the current timeline and also the significant gaps in detail contained in this call for evidence. With new partnerships due to come into effect from September 2026, there are significant changes that will need to be made to collaboration agreements across partnerships and other agreement of a number of other processes. It would be beneficial if the expectations around this are clear. Currently 2025-26 is being considered a “transition year” but in reality, no actual transitioning will be possible until the later end of the academic year. Is there instead the potential to have a genuine transition year in 2026-27 or at least period of time between July 2026-January 2027 for this to take place.’ – Uni Connect partnership

2.5.5 Staff related support

Around one fifth (36, 18%) felt that support for partner staff would be beneficial – most of these respondents (25) are currently part of a Uni Connect Partnership, and respondents from the South West (seven) or Yorkshire and the Humber (six) were most common here. Respondents highlighted the importance of access to local and trusted staff, as adequate staffing levels would aid the transition to the new partnership model. Good staff, it was argued, will understand the local area and labour market information to provide holistic support to learners and this has been recognised as one of the key reasons behind current programmes’ success and local influence. Respondents voiced concerns about budgetary pressures impacting availability of staff resources, with the indirect effect on APP targets and outreach activity being impacted negatively.

‘Recent experience with the Uni Connect programme has shown that year-on-year funding limits the sector’s ability to innovate and engage meaningfully at a regional level. It also contributes to high staff turnover, driven by the insecurity of short-term contracts, which undermines continuity, erodes institutional knowledge, and weakens delivery capacity.’ – Uni Connect partnership

Some also felt that ongoing administrative duties held by staff and competing priorities will impact their time and capacity and could compromise school engagement, particularly for schools most in need. Thus, it was suggested that a streamlined digital system linking schools and a partnership tracking databases could reduce burden and improve efficiency. There were also concerns about the administrative workload and potential burdens associated with new data-sharing agreements. It was stated, for instance, that the current system in one Uni Connect partnership is manageable for staff, and any new system would need to preserve this simplicity to ensure continued engagement – respondents suggested that administrative support from the OfS could enable partners to participate meaningfully without undue burden.

2.5.6 Sharing best practice

One in ten (20, 10% – 12 of which are currently part of a Uni Connect partnership) highlighted the need to share best practice, which would act as a solid support mechanism. The suggested methods through which best practice could be shared included events, online networking groups, and expert-led workshops. It was recognised that the OfS is well positioned to support regional access partnerships by identifying and sharing best practice and ensuring that it can be effectively replicated in other regions. It was suggested that there could be regular opportunities for knowledge exchange between regional partnerships and the OfS. One suggested the OfS could collate learnings and take them to the DfE and other policy makers to support the wider education sector.

Other individual respondents suggested other ways in which support may be required.

- A suggestion to grant autonomy for regional partnerships to set targets and tailor interventions. There was a perceived need to achieve a balance between oversight and autonomy for providers to operate and collaborate, avoiding over-prescriptive expectations that may hinder innovation.
- A suggestion to use a panel of experts to maximise the quality of partners' intervention strategies – this panel could recommend the OfS releases funding required to deliver the plans.
- A perceived need for a diligent analysis of the current provision and structures before the allocation and consideration of support mechanisms – to prevent provision of support as a consequence of introducing the new model rather than focusing on the aim of improving the access to HE.
- A suggestion for a national approach to tackle attainment, with a centralised repository for training and resources that can support embedding good practice across the country.

2.6 What are your views on addressing regional risks to equality of opportunity in your APP?

This section includes the analysis of responses to the following question from the call for evidence:

What are your views on addressing regional risks to equality of opportunity in your access and participation plan (APP)?

Prompts:

- What would it look like to include regional collaboration on access in your APP?
- What are your views on APP submissions to the OfS being done in waves according to region?
- What are your views on shared accountability for collaborative targets or delivery of other collaborative provisions in APPs? How could this be managed?

Contextual note: As part of this call for evidence, the OfS proposed that, from 2027, APPs will be expected to reflect joint regional strategies, shared interventions, and collective accountability, supported by the regional access partnerships. The OfS stated that this is designed to reduce duplication, strengthen outreach, and better target support for underrepresented groups, while maintaining institutional autonomy.

In total, 183 respondents offered views on addressing regional risks to equality of opportunity in APPs. This first sub-section summarises views related to the overarching question asked by the OfS in the call for evidence, before the following three sub-sections detail views on each of the three prompt questions. The final sub-section groups together suggestions for how partners could address regional risks to equality of opportunity in APPs.

2.6.1 Overarching views on addressing regional risks to equality of opportunity in APPs

Twenty-two (12%) expressed explicit support for the OfS's proposal. Ten (5%) believed the approach could allow partnerships to focus on learners with the greatest need, and specifically mentioned its potential ability to:

- support communities with low participation rates (two, 1%),
- reach the most disadvantaged learners (two, 1%),
- address place-based inequalities (one, 1%),
- address structural challenges such as skills shortages (one, 1%), and
- target cold spots in outreach activity (one, 1%).

In addition, eight (4%) indicated this approach could facilitate better collaboration between partners – for example, three (2%) pointed to a greater alignment of regional and institutional strategy. One believed collaboration could be enhanced through shared resources and adopting a 'collective impact approach'. Another felt by introducing a regional lens in APPs, partners could improve strategic alignment and ensure outreach targets reflect local contexts and areas with the greatest need for support.

Just under two fifths (71, 39%) shared considerations relating to the proposed approach. Just under one in five (34, 19%) felt it could lead to a dilution of individual priorities – six

(3%) warned this should not be at the expense of individual APP targets, with one highlighting the potential for disproportionate burden on smaller providers. Five (3%) believed their institution has more of a national outlook, meaning addressing regional risks may be less appropriate. Others (four, 2%) felt the approach might undermine an institution's autonomy in deciding which collaborative arrangements they engage with. Three (2%) referenced financial pressures, concerned that additional reporting may stretch already scarce resources. Two (1%) believed the proposal undermines current APP work, which has only just been approved and examines institutional rather than regional priorities. Two others (1%) felt this should only be included if the risk genuinely affects their student population.

Another common view (22, 12%) was that the proposed new regions may lead to some challenges – most (but not all) of these (16) are from members of Uni Connect partnerships. Some (13, 7%) raised concern about the time and resource burden of addressing regional risks in their APPs, with four (2%) worried that coordinating with a larger group of partners could worsen this.

'Access and participation regulation is already burdensome, and disproportionately so for small providers, where the development and monitoring of the APP is generally the responsibility of one individual. Adding further requirements to this regulation – requirements which are not particularly relevant to the context of such a provider – increases workload further.' – HE provider

Three (2%) felt it may not make sense for their institution to collaborate with some of the partners proposed under the new model. Another three (2%) believed the model could potentially damage work done by current partnerships, as well as the trusted relationships built up over time, with one arguing that services may become diluted. The same number (three, 2%) pointed out the already difficult nature of addressing regional risk within current partnerships and thought this might only be exacerbated under the new model. Two (1%) believed that risks across different partners may not align under the new model, with one noting the likely diversity between city and rural providers, and varying levels of competition, should the regions be enlarged.

One respondent similarly felt that APPs should not be expanded further, recommending a more streamlined framework to enable better monitoring and clearer outcomes.

A few (13, 7%) felt that the suggested approach is 'one-size-fits-all', which may not reflect nor capture the diversity among partners. One stated that risk must be defined and addressed within an individual context, rather than from a 'centralised blueprint'. Similarly, another felt the OfS should avoid a prescriptive framework, recommending they adopt a simpler approach that does not make the system overly complex.

Wider considerations

Just under one third (59, 32%) mentioned wider considerations to bear in mind when addressing regional risks to equality of opportunity in APPs. Primary among these was a need to consider various contextual factors that affect a partner's ability or need to address risks, including sharing accountability for collaborative targets. These included:

- size and resource capacity: impacting the extent to which partners can address regional risks, and how many resources can be dedicated to collaborative provision (27, 15%),

- partner location: respondents believed there are significant differences in risks to equality of opportunity between rural and urban providers. For example, one mentioned that the higher cost of living in some rural areas affects recruitment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, while another believed there are fewer graduate jobs for those who stay within the region (20, 11%),
- varying objectives and strategic priorities: one respondent said their institution has no specific access targets, therefore any regional collaboration targets would need to sit alongside, rather than being a part of their individual APP (21, 11%),
- regional demographics: for example, two respondents stated their regions have a large majority of people from a white ethnic background, which can deter minority ethnic students from applying (17, 9%), and
- provider type: particularly the different types of challenges facing vocational providers (11, 6%).

Twelve (7%) believed any move to address regional risks in an APP should be voluntary and not enforced, while 11 (6%) felt partners should be involved in the design of a regional risk approach within APPs. A few (seven, 4%) broadly called for stakeholder input within each partnership, and one explicitly suggested all institutions within a partnership should be part of the discussion.

Three (2%) would like to see a mechanism for sharing best practice across regions, with two (1%) requesting further clarity on what the OfS's approach will be for partners that sit outside of the regulator's scope.

2.6.2 Including regional collaboration on access in APPs

Around a third (56, 31%) commented on including regional collaboration on access in APPs. Around half of these (29, 16%) said they already do this, with some (17, 9%) citing examples of what this looks like. These included:

- shared targets, with examples including increasing the percentage of students from ethnic minority backgrounds, progression targets for pupils eligible for free school meals, and supporting children in care (four, 2%),
- a regionally focused implementation strategy targeting key risks such as lack of information, low attainment and education isolation; this includes targeted outreach to groups such as home-educated students, refugees and asylum seekers (two, 1%),
- co-designed and delivered regional programmes with Uni Connect partners (one, 1%),
- shared commitment to joint accountability for reducing gaps in participation (one, 1%),
- shared regional theory of change involving schools, employers, local authorities, and civic partners (one, 1%), and
- sharing data and insight on student barriers that are not captured in the general regional frameworks (one, 1%).

Wider benefits of addressing regional collaboration were also discussed. Seven (4%) believed it would help to align shared priorities, and six (3%) thought that collaborative targets could lead to tangible outcomes, such as the increased participation of higher

education providers. Five (3%) pointed to an increase in shared accountability, while the same number felt the approach could strengthen existing partnerships, for example by acting as statements of intent and formalising collaborative efforts.

Eight (4%) felt that, while including regional collaboration could be valuable, it must be locally informed, recognising individual contexts, rather than imposing centralised metrics.

‘If there were to be shared objectives, individually we would need to set our own milestones and targets. For a collaborative objective to be agreed by a provider it would need to have institutional ‘buy-in’ so that it was relevant and applied across multiple providers.’ – Uni Connect partnership

Four (2%) suggested that any regional collaboration should be distinguished from individual targets within an APP. Three (2%) stated that if regional APPs were to be developed, there would need to be clarity in how these interact with individual APPs, including the current timelines for submission. Two (1%) questioned where regional collaboration would sit and thought it should remain separate from individual APPs.

Another two (1%) explicitly stated they do not wish to see regional collaboration included. One claimed there were no access-related risks at their institution, thus meaning it would be challenging to address. Another believed there were too many practicalities to consider on how partners would be monitored and regulated for it to work.

2.6.3 Submitting APPs in waves according to region

A third (61, 33%) commented on the OfS’s idea to submit APPs in waves according to the newly proposed regions. General sentiment was mixed, with 28 (15%) explicitly supporting the idea, 17 (9%) supporting with caveats, and 23 (13%) disagreeing or expressing a degree of concern. Five (3%) stated they were neutral on the issue.

Support

The main reason for support (16, 9%) was the potential to facilitate greater alignment and collaboration on regional targets and strategic planning. As one respondent highlighted, regional submissions could give partners ample opportunity to review and agree any shared objectives.

Supporting peer learning and the sharing of best practice between partners within a region was also a potential benefit, highlighted by eight (4%) respondents.

‘From the last submission, it was helpful to network and collaborate with equivalents at other institutions, to sense check, unpick requirements and share practice. This is something our existing partnership already facilitated in the last cycle.’ – HE provider

Three (2%) believed the proposed approach may help to align Uni Connect work with APP timelines. According to one respondent, there is currently a misalignment, which makes collaborative access targets difficult to implement.

Less commonly, respondents thought the proposed approach would:

- allow the OfS the time to properly assess APPs (two, 1%), and
- help tailor interventions to specific regional challenges (one, 1%).

Support with caveats

Nine (5%) supported regional submissions provided the OfS minimises burden on providers. For example, one felt the submission process should be made simpler, while another believes partners should be given sufficient lead time to ensure submissions complement, rather than constrain, individual priorities and resources.

Five (3%) said the OfS should recognise provider contexts when designing its submission process, accounting for their relative size and resource, as well as consideration of partners that operate across multiple regions.

One (1%) would support a regional submission provided it is matched by the OfS's capacity to assess in a 'timely and meaningful way'. Another agreed in principle with the concept but would like the OfS to provide more rationale for this course of action.

Considerations

Eight (5%) believed the approach has the potential to restrict the collaboration of partners that operate cross-nationally. One felt this may result in providers that have similar institutional challenges (albeit different regional ones) being less likely to share best practice. Another called for consideration of partners who operate individually but share collaborative targets with other partners outside of their region.

The same number (eight, 4%) stated the risk of ignoring diverse contexts within a region if the approach was adopted, with five (3%) stating these could be 'homogenised'.

Four (2%) felt that, due to the nature of current APP submission waves, a regional approach may not be appropriate due to the complexities of coordinating APP submissions.

'Given the current staggered timing of APP approvals within our partnership, this would require substantial coordination and transition planning. Without synchronised submission cycles, regional waves risk further complicating planning rather than simplifying it.' – HE provider

One respondent raised concern over the potential for delayed feedback on APP approvals, which could affect a partner's ability to implement new activities and access funding.

2.6.4 Shared accountability

A third (62, 33%) provided views on the concept of shared accountability for collaborative targets or delivery of other collaborative provision in APPs. One in ten (19, 10%) gave reasons why it could be useful, 18 (10%) expressed a degree of concern, whilst a quarter (46, 25%) stated other considerations to bear in mind if this was to be introduced.

Support

Most commonly, nine (5%) felt this would be beneficial and would help to uphold collective responsibility for regional outcomes. Six (3%) agreed with the concept and believed it could lead to more shared funding for collaborative activities.

Five (3%) stated that, if carefully designed, shared accountability could streamline reporting on regional progress. For example, one believed existing mechanisms could be adapted to

monitor progress and report on shared targets. Two (1%) felt this could lead to greater support for smaller institutions.

'If there was some expectation for large competitors to support our widening access offer (technical and vocational higher education), recognising our strengths in working with students from underserved groups, this could broaden the range and type of higher education available in the region.' – FE college

Concerns

Fifteen (8%) were worried that partners may be penalised for factors beyond their control. For example, six (3%) highlighted risks such as penalising one partner for the (in)action of another if collaborative targets were to be monitored and evaluated.

Others (seven, 4%) raised concern that shared accountability for regional targets could affect institutional autonomy by undermining individual commitments or compelling partners to collaborate even if it is not appropriate to their needs.

'Collaborative arrangements must respect the independence of each institution, ensuring that participation in joint initiatives does not compromise their ability to make decisions in the best interests of their own students and communities.' – Individual

Seven (4%) are worried about competition between providers and the effect this may have on shared accountability. Of these, six (3%) discussed how institutions often compete for the same students within a region which, in their opinion, contradicts the collaborative nature of what is being proposed.

Five (3%) questioned how – given several proposed partners fall outside the scope of the OfS's regulation – shared responsibility would work. One queried how, if one institution is leading on a particular target, all partners would be held accountable.

Three (2%) discussed funding for collaborative efforts. Without financial certainty, one respondent believed partners could face significant risks in committing resources to collaborative targets.

Other considerations

Shared accountability would, it was suggested (16, 9%), require clear governance structures including clearly defined roles and responsibilities across partners and the OfS. One suggested building on established relationships that are underpinned by trust and cooperation, while another believed their region has a solid foundation through existing partnerships that include relationships with local government.

Twelve (7%) would like the OfS to make clear how shared accountability for collaborative targets would be monitored and evaluated, as well as general expectations of institutional input (three, 2%) and how partners should approach sharing targets (two, 1%).

Three (2%) suggested that the individual in the proposed regional coordinator role (see section 2.7) should be responsible for shared accountability, which may include target setting, reviewing and evaluating.

A further three (2%) cautioned that collective targets should complement, rather than replace, individual goals, while another three (2%) believed collective targets should only be introduced in areas with the greatest support needs.

2.6.5 Suggested approaches

Just over a fifth (38, 21%) gave suggestions on how partners could address regional risks to equality of opportunity in APPs. Most (22, 12%) of these would like to see strengthened, existing partnerships lead this work. For example, one stated their partnership meets regularly to discuss regional risks and challenges, and they believed these established practices should be built upon.

'This needs to be clearly mapped, using the expertise on the ground across the region i.e. all key stakeholders including schools and colleges. Don't rewrite the book but build from the excellent practice and knowledge base already established.' – FE college

Another respondent mentioned that current APPs are in place until 2029, which would allow time for Uni Connect partners to transition into a new phase of delivery to include regional risks going forward.

Ten (5%) would like the OfS to provide clear guidance to help partners understand expectations, and to enable them to coordinate submissions effectively. One felt the OfS should make clear what the expected outcomes would be, while another believed guidance is essential on how expectations would apply across providers of different sizes and types.

Eight (4%) proposed a regional risk register, which could aid alignment between partners. According to one, this should be developed collaboratively and transparently to ensure consistency across partnerships. A different respondent mentioned they have already produced a draft register, which reviews nine access-related risks, examining how they could be mitigated both at regional and institutional levels.

Finally, seven (4%) suggested a joint, regional APP approach with contributions from all partners that could be submitted alongside Uni Connect plans. One indicated this could allow for greater national consistency.

2.7 Independent regional coordinator

This section includes the analysis of responses to the following two questions from the call for evidence.

One option for leadership and coordination would be working with an independent regional coordinator appointed by the OfS to facilitate collaboration in each region. What are your thoughts on this approach?

What are your views on a regional coordinator appointed by the OfS providing feedback to us on levels of collaboration reflected in APPs?

In total, 196 respondents shared their thoughts on the proposed appointment of an independent regional coordinator, while 179 respondents gave views on whether a regional coordinator should provide feedback to the OfS on levels of collaboration reflected in APPs.

This section first outlines the extent and rationale for support, then discusses areas of concern raised, and aspects where clarity was sought, before building on these reactions to collate suggestions from respondents.

2.7.1 Support for the approach

Views on the appointment of an independent coordinator

One in six (34, 17%) explicitly expressed some degree of support for the proposed approach of an independent regional coordinator appointed by the OfS to facilitate collaboration in each region, of which 23 (12%) are members of Uni Connect partnerships, and 13 (7%) are HE providers.

Over one in ten (24, 12%) believed a coordinator could ensure more effective collaboration between regional partnerships. Respondents gave several examples of how better collaboration could be facilitated, including:

- sharing best practice between partnerships (seven, 3%),
- helping partnerships to target resources where they are most needed (six, 4%),
- bringing together new partnerships, especially in newly proposed regions where partners do not have pre-existing relationships (five, 3%),
- leading to greater accountability (four, 2%) – one felt having independent coordination would mean that partnerships would not ‘fail’ due to poor leadership from a single partner, while another believed there would be direct accountability among partnerships to deliver on regional outcomes,
- facilitating cross-partnership communication (two, 1%),
- acting as a liaison between the OfS and regional partnerships (two, 1%), and
- offering a single point for leveraging regional data and intelligence (two, 1%).

Some (21, 11%) felt this would allow for greater strategic alignment, with shared regional objectives (10, 5%) and also with OfS priorities (five, 3%).

'In areas where multiple autonomous providers operate, a coordinator could play a key role in aligning shared objectives, improving communication, and supporting the consistent interpretation and implementation of national priorities.' – Uni Connect partnership

Another reason for support was that the role could offer neutral and unbiased facilitation (15, 8%). Some (10, 5%) stressed the importance of a balanced representation among partner institutions that can have competing interests, while five (3%) referenced the current Uni Connect structure, where a larger HE provider often acts as a lead partner. They indicated that a coordinator may lead to greater parity among HE providers and ensure partnerships are not dominated by the interests of a certain provider.

Views on the regional coordinator providing feedback to the OfS

Twenty-three (13%) explicitly expressed support for this approach. Most commonly (17, 9%), respondents believed it would provide the OfS with valuable insights and data. Nine (5%) said a coordinator would help identify gaps in collaboration to expand collaborative opportunities between partners. Others mentioned the possibility of sharing best practice and recommendations on effective collaborative activity (four, 2%), as well as revealing the extent and quality of collaboration (three, 2%).

Five (3%) believed the proposed approach could strengthen accountability among partnerships to deliver on regional targets. The same number (five, 3%) felt this approach could lead to more consistent evaluation of regional collaboration across England, while another five (3%) thought this could serve to better align institutional and regional priorities. As one commented, providing feedback to the OfS could ensure collective efforts are both coherent and strategically targeted.

2.7.2 Concerns and risks

Nearly half (96, 49%) expressed a concern or risk relating to the OfS's proposed coordinator role – most (68, 35%) are members of a Uni Connect partnership, and 44 (22%) are HE providers. Just over one in five (42, 21%) explicitly disagreed with this proposed role, and many (93, 52%) discussed concerns about a coordinator providing feedback to the OfS, with 28 (16%) disagreeing outright.

Common themes

Most notably, several felt the development of a regional coordinator role was unnecessary as existing partnerships were viewed as capable of both facilitating coordination and providing the OfS with feedback on levels of collaboration.

Over a third (66, 34%) believed existing Uni Connect partnerships function effectively and are well placed to carry out this role – while most (50, 26%) of these responses were from Uni Connect members, others (12, 6%) came from organisations outside of partnerships such as schools, sector bodies and local government authorities. Some (22, 11%) claimed that current partnerships already have a proven track record of facilitating collaboration across their regions. One in ten (19, 10%) were concerned that a coordinator could lead to duplication of work as many regions are likely to have a lead partner who can perform this role. Others (14, 7%) felt the role could damage trusted relationships that have been built over time, with five (3%) stating that established governance structures were well equipped

to oversee and coordinate collaborative efforts. A few (11, 6%) believed existing structures possess the knowledge of local contexts necessary to effectively facilitate regional collaboration.

'In [partnership name] the lead institution model works exceptionally well. Our universities and colleges are highly engaged, and the partnership is characterised by a strong sense of collegiality and shared purpose. There is no sense of rivalry, and there is a clear, collective commitment to our regional goals. With strengthened governance and clearer alignment to regional priorities, our model provides a robust and effective foundation for coordination.' – HE provider

On providing feedback on levels of collaboration, several (39, 22%) also felt that existing structures are capable of doing this. For example, 16 (9%) believed there was no need for a coordinator as partners could simply include this data in their APPs, which the OfS could then access directly through the submission process. Some (11, 6%) indicated that current Uni Connect partnership leads could coordinate with the OfS to provide feedback on the collaboration in the APPs. Two (1%) suggested the OfS could create a reporting structure and outcome framework to allow partners to report directly without the need for a coordinator.

Another common concern was the potential cost of appointing a coordinator role (39, 20%). Most (32, 16%) felt the cost of a coordinator role could divert valuable resources away from other, more valuable areas such as learner support, outreach programmes, and interventions that improve equality of opportunity.

With concerns over the potential duplication of effort and costs associated with the coordinator role, respondents (36, 18%) believed this could be an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy that may result in an additional administrative reporting burden for providers.

Several (29, 15%) were also sceptical about whether an independent coordinator would possess the appropriate knowledge and contextual understanding of the different regions and their specific challenges, to be able to make informed decisions and provide effective feedback to the OfS. They specifically highlighted a potential lack of understanding in relation to:

- pre-existing relationships among current partners (six, 3%), and
- locational contexts (four, 2%) – for example, one reflected how a coordinator based in an urban area may not understand the unique challenges facing partners in rural, coastal or more deprived areas.

Seven (4%) believed that existing partnerships should be involved in the appointment of an independent coordinator, to ensure the individual understands these nuances.

'The coordinator must understand the varied contexts in which providers operate, particularly in rural or disadvantaged areas and avoid applying uniform benchmarks. Feedback should focus on supporting improvement, not enforcing compliance.' – School sector

With the proposed regional model set to increase the number of institutions in regional partnerships, some (14, 7% - including eight current members of Uni Connect partnerships) believed the task of facilitating collaboration and providing feedback to the OfS could be

unmanageable for an individual coordinator, stating that it could be too difficult for a coordinator to meaningfully engage with a large and diverse area.

Comments on the appointment of an independent coordinator

Some (six, 3%) raised concerns about a possible impact on institutional autonomy. Three (2%) outlined the importance for partners to retain their autonomy to only engage with collaborative efforts that make sense within their own context.

Others mentioned that there is a risk of:

- a lack of impartiality, or a potential conflict of interest, if the coordinator is from a single institution (six, 3%),
- local needs becoming too centralised (four, 2%), and
- undermining trust in local partnerships to deliver outcomes (three, 2%).

Comments relating to the coordinator providing feedback to the OfS

One in ten (18, 10%) raised concern about a potential increase in regulatory scrutiny. Five (3%) said the approach sounded 'punitive' and felt the coordinator role could become more of a watchdog than a mechanism for support and facilitation. Similarly, two (1%) others felt the approach blurred the line between facilitation and regulation if the coordinator reports directly to the OfS, while one (1%) believed the process could undermine the perceived independence of the coordinator from the OfS.

'This would be challenging to implement as there is currently no legal mandate for universities to collaborate in this way. In a marketised HE system it is therefore more appropriate for HE institutions to look for relevant opportunities for collaboration rather than to meet mandatory collaborative targets imposed by a third party.' – HE provider

Nine (5%) perceived a potential erosion of trust between partners and the coordinator if they were to report on collaboration as well as facilitate and encourage it. In a similar vein, six (3%) claimed that reporting on levels of collaboration could undermine both an institution's autonomy in the APP process (whereby they currently submit plans directly to the OfS), as well as their freedom to choose the nature of collaborative activities they engage with if a top-down, evaluative approach was introduced (two, 1%).

A few (nine, 5%) were also concerned about the alignment of regional and individual targets within an APP, and how expectations surrounding regional collaboration will be balanced with individual accountability.

2.7.3 Further clarity

Respondents requested further clarity from the OfS on several areas in relation to the proposed role that are yet to be resolved.

Primarily, respondents requested more detail about the role to hold a better understanding before they could make meaningful comments (61, 31%). Roughly half (31, 16%) of these were keen to know more about the functions associated with the role, including the powers and responsibilities a coordinator would have, with two querying whether they would supersede current Uni Connect partnership leads. Others (14, 7%) thought more information

on the intended background and credentials of the individual would be useful, with 13 (7%) questioning who the coordinator would be independent from, and three (2%) asked whether they would be sourced from a partner institution, employed by the OfS, or independent of both. Similarly, five (3%) wondered whether they would hold pre-existing relationships with current partnerships.

Eight (4%) felt more information on how the role would be funded was needed, six (3%) of whom were concerned that funding for front-line delivery could be taken away from existing partnerships, which might affect learner outcomes. Some (seven, 4%) would like to understand how the coordinator would be held to account for outcomes relating to collaboration.

Other, less frequent comments included:

- further detail on where the coordinator would be based, for example at a partner institution or at an OfS office (four, 2%),
- queries on the governance structure for the role, for example the individuals who will sit above and below the coordinator (four, 2%), and
- how the coordinator would manage partner institutions outside of OfS regulation (two, 1%).

A few (nine, 5%) requested further detail on what constitutes 'levels of collaboration' – for example, four (2%) questioned whether this included planning, delivery and targets, while another believed the OfS should define what is meant by this from the outset to make clear whether it relates to a specific measure or key performance indicator (KPI).

How feedback will be used by the OfS (five, 3%), and what feedback might look like (two, 1%), were also points where further clarification was sought.

Other points of clarification mentioned included:

- intended reporting mechanisms for partners (two, 1%),
- potential consequences for partners that do not engage sufficiently in collaboration (one, 1%),
- how the OfS would compare collaboration across different regions (one, 1%), and
- how this would impact partners that sit outside of OfS regulation (one, 1%).

2.7.4 Considerations and suggestions for the coordinator role

With some respondents concerned about the potential lack of local knowledge a coordinator would possess, several (24, 12%) believed this is a key criterion for individuals in this role. To maximise effectiveness, 13 (7%) felt the individual should already be embedded within the region, with three (2%) suggesting they should be chosen from an existing partner.

Roughly one in ten (22, 11%) believed the coordinator should have a facilitating or advisory function rather than being focused on compliance or enforcing collaboration among partners.

'Their focus should centre on enabling cooperation, facilitating the exchange of good practice, and advocating for regional needs at the national level, rather than enforcing compliance.' – Uni Connect partnership

To a lesser extent, respondents felt the role should:

- be sufficiently resourced – as one respondent stated, the role would be complex involving pulling together various partners, and its complexity should not be underestimated (four, 2%),
- allow institutions to retain autonomy to deliver collaborative interventions that suit their individual needs or align with local contexts (one, 1%),
- effectively encourage collaboration and competition between partners (one, 1%), and
- ensure transparency in their decision making (one, 1%).

In relation to the role's element of providing feedback to the OfS, respondents suggested such feedback is supportive, collaborative or encouraging (23, 13%). Some were also keen to stress that feedback should not be compliance focused (13, 7%) or evaluative (four, 2%). One in ten (18, 10%) said any feedback relating to levels of collaboration should be contextualised and consider:

- the relative size and resources of a partner (12, 7%),
- the varying strategic priorities of institutions within a region (nine, 5%),
- the different challenges facing certain regions (four, 2%),
- provider locations (e.g. rural or urban) (two, 1%), and
- provider type (e.g. vocational or academic) (two, 1%)

These considerations were cross-cutting, with contextual factors also mentioned by many respondents in relation to APPs (section 2.6).

Others (12, 7%) said feedback on levels of collaboration should be based on transparent criteria. As one respondent mentioned, the OfS could provide this to ensure partners can benchmark themselves from the outset and understand what they should be working towards.

'Feedback to the OfS should be structured, transparent and include all providers in the region where possible. Feedback should also reflect the diversity of institutions in the sector – including their differing strengths, size and resource levels – as well as the strategic priorities of the region they are in.' – HE provider

To a lesser extent, if coordinators were to deliver feedback to the OfS, five (3%) said they would like to see a mechanism for sharing best practice on effective collaboration to promote cross-regional learning. The same number (five, 3%) believed a coordinator would need the trust and confidence of partners to deliver feedback effectively.

Points less commonly raised included that:

- partners should have the right to respond to feedback given to the OfS, for example to offer further context (two, 1%),
- partners could co-create targets or KPIs with the OfS (two, 1%),
- the quality as well as level of collaboration should be considered (two, 1%),
- feedback mechanisms should be agreed with partners (one, 1%),
- quality assurance on feedback given to the OfS should be considered (one, 1%), and
- feedback should remain separate from APP approval decisions (one, 1%).

2.7.5 Alternative suggestions

Over a quarter (54, 28%) offered alternative suggestions on what they felt is the most appropriate course of action.

Reflecting the view that the OfS could leverage and use current partnerships or individual partners themselves to facilitate collaboration and provide feedback on levels of collaboration, 16 (8%) believed the OfS should focus efforts on strengthening existing Uni Connect partnerships, for example by:

- having a representative from each partnership coordinate directly with the OfS (three, 2%),
- co-designing regional strategies with the OfS (one, 1%).
- rotating the coordinator role between partners in a current regional partnership (one, 1%), or
- refocusing the roles of existing Uni Connect partnership leads to offer 'critical friend' support to partners (one, 1%).

Eleven (6%) thought the best approach would be for Uni Connect partnership leads to coordinate directly with the OfS.

'Another option, which could replace or sit alongside this suggestion, is that partnership leads themselves could act as external reviewers to understand levels of collaboration rather than a new structure and layer of bureaucracy being brought in. Partnership leads could also act as peer reviewers to test and challenge access and participation plans.' – Uni Connect partnership

A similar number (11, 6%) mentioned a desire to return to a previous account management system in place when the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) managed the programme, whereby a regional HEFCE manager would liaise with partnerships to facilitate collaboration and understand current levels of collaboration.

Twelve (6%) felt an individual role was insufficient and recommended a team or group approach to facilitating collaboration. Five (3%) suggested a team of coordinators or steering group already embedded in the region and from existing partnerships, with one suggesting they could be tasked with ensuring partnerships can articulate and defend their delivery models. Another suggestion from three respondents (2%) was to create a team of support staff to assist individual coordinators to manage workloads, while another believed a national rather than regional coordination team could provide strategic oversight to ensure regions are collaborating effectively.

Some (nine, 5%) felt that support from a coordinator should be needs-based and considered on a case-by-case basis, limited to areas that require the most support. Two (1%) added that assistance from a coordinator could be made available on request rather than introducing a permanent position. One said that it may not make sense to disrupt established and well-functioning leadership teams that exist within a current partnership by introducing the coordinator role.

Eight (4%) think that coordination should be more high-level, centralised and strategic, rather than an individual working within each region. For one, this would allow the facilitation of good practice across regions, while another believed a more coherent national model would provide the OfS with better oversight of collaboration across partnerships.

Another suggestion (one, 1%) was appointing an OfS representative to regional partnerships, allowing them to spend time in the region and understand 'what works', to facilitate cross-regional best practice sharing.

3. Conclusions

This report has provided an overview of responses received to the OfS's call for evidence relating to its proposal for regional access partnerships.

The analysis reveals a complex and nuanced landscape of opinion. However, it is evident that there is appetite for collaboration with the shared purpose of improving equality of opportunity. While a minority of respondents expressed clear support for the new regional structure, citing alignment with existing boundaries and potential for streamlined collaboration, a larger proportion raised concerns to varying degrees about the potential disruption to established partnerships, loss of local responsiveness, and the practical challenges of operating across large, diverse regions.

The importance of preserving trusted relationships was highlighted, along with ensuring inclusive and transparent governance, and maintaining a strong focus on improving equality of opportunity for disadvantaged learners. Respondents called for a place-based approach that reflects lived realities and considers potential challenges, such as for those that would be required to travel, socioeconomic variation, and existing civic infrastructure. There was widespread agreement that regional collaboration must be underpinned by robust data, sustained funding, and flexible delivery models that accommodate both urban and rural contexts.

Concerns about administrative burden, resource distribution, and the risk of diluting impact were echoed across feedback on APP integration, coordinator roles, and regional boundaries. Many urged the OfS to prioritise continuity, clarity, and equity, ensuring that regional restructuring enhances rather than hinders progress toward widening participation.

Ultimately, there is clear, shared commitment from the sector to improve access to HE, but also a call for thoughtful implementation that builds on existing strengths, respects local expertise, and focuses above all on the needs of learners.

Appendix 1: Respondent profile

This section outlines a more detailed profile of respondents to the call for evidence. It also contains an explanation of how response categories available to respondents were grouped for subsequent analysis.

Respondent type

All respondents, including those submitting responses offline, were grouped in agreement between Pye Tait Consulting and the OfS, and are reported on according to the following categories.

Table 1: Breakdown by respondent type

Respondent type	Count	Per cent
HE providers (universities and colleges)	90	41%
Uni Connect partnerships	30	14%
School sector (individual schools and multi-academy trusts)	23	10%
Individuals	19	9%
Local government authorities	13	6%
Sector bodies and mission groups	13	5%
Third sector organisations	9	4%
FE colleges (not HE providers)	7	3%
Other	17	8%

Base: 221 respondents. Source: OfS call for evidence 2025.

Table 2: Regional breakdown of respondents

Region of responding organisation	Count	Per cent
Yorkshire and the Humber	28	13%
South East England	27	12%
South West England	25	11%
East Midlands	22	10%
West Midlands	18	8%
North West England	15	7%
London	14	6%
East of England	8	4%
North East England	2	1%
National	26	12%
Unknown ⁶	36	16%

Base: 221 respondents. Source: OfS call for evidence 2025

⁶ These respondents did not provide responses to the question “If you are submitting on behalf of an organisation what is the name of that organisation?”

Table 3: Respondents which are part of a Uni Connect Partnership

Currently part of a Uni Connect partnership	Count	Per cent
Yes	149	67%
No	48	22%
N/A ⁷	24	11%

Base: 220 respondents. Source: OfS call for evidence 2025

⁷ These respondents are either from individuals not responding on behalf of an organisation or did not provide responses to the question “If you are submitting on behalf of an organisation what is the name of that organisation?”

Appendix 2: Call for evidence questions

The full OfS call for evidence questions and wording are listed below.

The full call for evidence documentation, including supplementary wording and context provided for respondents is available at:

www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regional-access-partnerships-call-for-evidence/.

List of call for evidence questions

Question 1: What do effective regions for collaboration on equality of opportunity look like?

Consider:

- Which existing regional structures does your organisation engage with most? (e.g. local authorities, combined authorities etc.)
- What are the opportunities for your organisation if working in defined regions to improve access to higher education?
- What should the regional groupings be called? (e.g. Regional access partnerships, Equality of opportunity partnerships etc.)

Question 2: What are your thoughts on the proposed regions, as set out in Annex A and B?

Consider:

- What are the barriers for your organisation to working in the defined regions to improve access to higher education?
- Should the Greater London region be broken down further? What should the areas in London be?
- Which region would your organisation fit well in and why? Does this differ from the proposals? Please explain your answer.

Question 3: How could a region best collaborate to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education?

Consider:

- How could regional partnerships be governed or organised?
- How could regional partnerships work together to identify the best ways to target their effort?
- How could each region be coordinated or led?

Question 4: One option for leadership and coordination would be working with an independent regional coordinator appointed by the OfS to facilitate collaboration in each region. What are your thoughts on this approach?

Question 5: What support would be required for your organisation to work collaboratively across a defined region to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education?

Consider:

- How best could the OfS support collaboration?
- What structures would need to be preserved or in place for your organisation to collaborate effectively?

Question 6: What are your views on addressing regional risks to equality of opportunity in your access and participation plan?

Consider:

- What would it look like to include regional collaboration on access in your APP?
- What are your views on APP submissions to the OfS being done in waves according to region?
- What are your views on shared accountability for collaborative targets or delivery of other collaborative provisions in APPs? How could this be managed?

Question 7: What are your views on a regional coordinator appointed by the OfS providing feedback to us on levels of collaboration reflected in APPs?

Appendix 3: OfS 15 proposed regions for regional access partnerships

The table below details each of the regions proposed by the OfS for the regional access partnerships, including: the region, the geographical areas within each region, Uni Connect partnerships that currently operate within it, and the number of HE providers, school, and colleges within the proposed region.

- Each provider's registered address was used to locate which local authority it was in and therefore which of the proposed regions.
- The number of schools and colleges has been compiled using the [Department for Education schools database](#). Schools included were tagged as academies, free schools or local authority-maintained schools. Schools categorised as special schools were not counted.

Table 4 Breakdown of the proposed OfS region for regional access partnerships

Region	Areas	Current Uni Connect partnerships	HE providers	Schools	Colleges
1. North East	County Durham	North East Uni Connect Partnership (NEUCP)	10	186	11
	Darlington				
	Gateshead				
	Hartlepool				
	Middlesbrough				
	Newcastle upon Tyne				
	North Tyneside				
	Northumberland				
	Redcar and Cleveland				
	South Tyneside				
	Stockton-on-Tees				
Sunderland					
2. Lancashire and Cumbria	Blackburn with Darwen	Future U	11	168	12
	Blackpool	Hello Future			
	Cumberland				
	Lancashire				
	Westmorland and Furness				
3. East and North Yorkshire and Lincolnshire	East Riding of Yorkshire	Humber Outreach Programme (HOP)	15	207	16
	Hull	Inspiring Choices			
	Lincolnshire				
	North East Lincolnshire	LiNC Higher			
	North Lincolnshire				

Region	Areas	Current Uni Connect partnerships	HE providers	Schools	Colleges
	North Yorkshire				
	York				
4. West and South Yorkshire	Barnsley	Higher Education Progression Partnership South Yorkshire (HeppSY)	22	276	15
	Bradford				
	Calderdale				
	Doncaster				
	Kirklees	Go Higher West Yorkshire			
	Leeds				
	Rotherham				
	Sheffield				
Wakefield					
5. Merseyside	Halton	Shaping Futures	11	111	7
	Knowsley				
	Liverpool				
	Sefton				
	St Helens				
	Wirral				
6. Greater Manchester	Bolton	Greater Manchester Higher	15	234	16
	Bury				
	Manchester				
	Oldham				
	Rochdale				
	Salford				
	Stockport				
	Tameside				
	Trafford				
	Wigan				
7. North Midlands	Cheshire East	Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Collaborative Outreach Partnership (DANCOP)	11	346	12
	Cheshire West and Chester				
	Derby City				
	Derbyshire				
	Nottingham City	Higher Horizons			
	Nottinghamshire				
	Staffordshire				
	Stoke-on-Trent				
	Warrington				
8. West Midlands	Birmingham	Aim Higher West Midlands	20	405	19
	Coventry				
	Dudley	Aspire to HE			

Region	Areas	Current Uni Connect partnerships	HE providers	Schools	Colleges
	Herefordshire	Higher Horizons			
	Sandwell				
	Shropshire	Think Higher			
	Solihull				
	Telford and the Wrekin				
	Walsall				
	Warwickshire				
	Wolverhampton				
	Worcestershire				
9. South Midlands	Bedford	Pathways	12	346	15
	Central Bedfordshire	Aspire Higher			
	Hertfordshire				
	Leicester City				
	Leicestershire				
	Luton				
	Milton Keynes				
	North Northamptonshire				
	Rutland				
	West Northamptonshire				
10. East Anglia	Cambridgeshire	Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach (NEACO)	13	344	14
	Essex				
	Norfolk				
	Peterborough				
	Southend-on-Sea	Make Happen			
	Suffolk				
	Thurrock				
11. Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire	Bracknell Forest	Study Higher	8	181	9
	Buckinghamshire				
	Oxfordshire				
	Reading				
	Slough				
	West Berkshire				
	Windsor and Maidenhead				
	Wokingham				
12. West of England	Bath and North East Somerset	Future Quest GROWS	16	245	14
	Bristol				
	Gloucestershire				

Region	Areas	Current Uni Connect partnerships	HE providers	Schools	Colleges
	North Somerset	Wessex Inspiration Network (WIN)			
	Somerset				
	South Gloucestershire	Next Steps South West (NSSW)			
	Swindon				
	Wiltshire	Study Higher			
13. London	All London Boroughs and the City of London	London Uni Connect	84	653	34
14. South East	Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole	Sussex Learning Network (SLN)	30	448	26
	Brighton & Hove	Southern Universities Network (SUN)			
	East Sussex				
	Hampshire	Higher Education Outreach Network (HEON)			
	Isle of Wight				
	Kent				
	Medway	Kent and Medway Collaborative Outreach Programme (KaMCOP)			
	Portsmouth				
	Southampton				
	Surrey				
West Sussex					
15. South West	Cornwall	Next Steps South West	14	194	8
	Devon County				
	Dorset	Southern Universities Network (SUN)			
	Isles of Scilly				
	Plymouth				
	Torbay				

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