



**Social Mobility
Commission**

Who gets in? University benchmarks for better social mobility

Summary report



@ Social Mobility Commission 2026

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This research was undertaken in the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Secure Research Service using data from ONS and other owners that does not imply the endorsement of the ONS or other data owners.

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About the Commission

The Social Mobility Commission is an independent advisory non-departmental public body established under the Life Chances Act 2010 as modified by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. It has a duty to assess progress in improving social mobility in the UK and to promote social mobility in England. The Commission board comprises:

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The analysis underlying this report was undertaken by Dr Paul Martin and Professor Claire Crawford from the UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities.

Foreword

Alun Francis OBE **Chair** **Social Mobility Commission**



Too often, the debate surrounding higher education treats access as a class problem, focusing on disparities in group outcomes and using compensatory strategies, like contextualised admission, to narrow the gap.

Our research suggests a more pressing challenge: students from disadvantaged backgrounds frequently get the required grades but fail to secure places that reflect this level of achievement. And too many universities - though by no means all - appear to have an intake which reflects socioeconomic advantage rather than merit. It is important to shine a light on this problem and to provoke a debate about what can and should be done to remedy it. This is what our report sets out to do.

For this reason, our vision from the outset was to create a pioneering diagnostic tool for the higher education sector. This report, *Who gets in? University benchmarks for better social mobility*, is a direct response to the government's Inclusive Britain report, which recommended that the Social Mobility Commission provide better information to help disadvantaged students make choices about higher education.

Previous measures of university access have often combined graduate outcomes or simply compared a university's intake to the general population. We want to ask a more precise question: are unequal university enrolments driven by the attainment gap in schools, or are there hidden barriers within universities' own recruitment and admissions processes?

To answer this, we developed a new methodology, the 'social mobility coefficient', which compares a university's actual student intake against the specific pool of young people who have successfully met its minimum entry requirements. This matters for social mobility because it attempts to isolate the root of the problem.

Our analysis shows that unequal access is not a uniform issue across the sector. In fact, we found that for the majority of universities (71%), the student intake is actually more disadvantaged than the pool of young people who meet their entry requirements. This shows us that most institutions are effectively recruiting from the available talent pool, proving that for the bulk of the sector, the primary barrier remains the attainment gap in schools.

However, our research also pinpoints an area of unfulfilled potential. 29% of universities recruit an intake that is more advantaged than the pool of qualified students available to them. This group predominantly consists of high-tariff institutions with high entry requirements. The data tells us that a substantial pool of qualified, disadvantaged talent exists, but these students are either not applying to these institutions, or are disproportionately unsuccessful if they do, which could be due to biases in recruitment and admissions practices.

Location also influences recruitment success. Lower-tariff universities in London consistently rank as the best performers for recruiting disadvantaged students. This is largely driven by the fact that there is a high concentration of highly qualified disadvantaged students living in London. When the data is adjusted to account for location though, the access gap for many institutions shrink. A lack of local, high attaining disadvantaged students therefore acts as a hurdle for many universities trying to diversify their intake. This evidence, along with extensive stakeholder engagement, allows us to put forward a set of recommendations for the higher education sector:

- Improve data access and sharing agreements across government and the higher education sector to enable monitoring of fair access
- The Office for Students should tailor specific access goals and institutions should integrate these into their annual reporting
- Universities already achieving a diverse intake should share best practice, and prioritise completion, performance and labour market outcomes for students
- Universities with more advantaged intakes should remove internal admissions barriers, and deliver widening access interventions proportionate to their size
- Universities should create place-based collaboration and strategic partnerships between higher and further education institutions

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When we ensure that disadvantaged students can access the institutions they are qualified for, we significantly improve their long-term earnings, career trajectories, and social mobility. Crucially, our diagnostic tool shows that these elite universities have the greatest scope to improve social mobility without needing to lower their academic standards.

We are concerned that debates around widening participation very often end up focusing on "moving the goalposts", something we are not convinced necessarily works. But here we face a more acute problem. We have young people who are successfully reaching high academic standards, but who are not progressing into the kind of universities that they perhaps could.

It is not always the case that finding a disparity means there is an inherent unfairness underneath it, but it is deeply important that we shine a light on these patterns using the data we have. We intend for this report to serve as a diagnostic tool for the sector. We invite universities and stakeholders to engage with us, to help explain these findings, and to work collaboratively to ensure that every qualified student can reach their full potential.

Introduction

The Social Mobility Commission (SMC) monitors progress in improving social mobility across the UK. This report outlines the results of an analysis that the SMC undertook to create new benchmarks for assessing access to universities across England from a social mobility perspective.



This new methodology develops a diagnostic tool for universities, comparing the socio-economic profile of their enrolled students against the profile of all young people, and specifically against those who meet the university's entry requirements in the 2018 to 2019 and 2019 to 2020 academic years. ^[1]

The analysis exclusively concerns access to higher education rather than student outcomes such as continuation, degree performance or labour market returns. By isolating access, we can more precisely identify whether under-representation is driven by the attainment gap in schools or by hidden barriers in universities' recruitment and admissions processes. Although post-enrolment outcomes were beyond the scope of this research, they are important for social mobility and should be a focus for future research.

We focus on traditional higher education pathways, specifically examining 18- and 19-year-old full-time undergraduates and assessing entry requirements based on A level and Level 3 BTEC qualifications. This was necessary to ensure a robust, statistically comparable methodology across universities given some limitations in the available data. Alternative routes, such as part-time study, foundation years and mature student enrolment, are essential for widening participation, and future research will need to explore these pathways in depth.

Key findings

- **Access is not a universal problem.** While people going to university are more advantaged than the general population, approximately one-quarter of universities already recruit a disproportionately high number of disadvantaged students. [2]
- **Taking entry requirements into account, most universities do a good job.** For 71% of universities, the students they take in are actually more disadvantaged than the pool of available students who meet their entry requirements, suggesting that they are doing a good job of recruiting from the pool of qualified applicants.
- **The biggest gaps are in high-tariff universities.** [3] The 29% of universities whose intake is more advantaged than the pool of qualified students are generally higher-tariff institutions such as some of those in the Russell Group, suggesting that these universities have the greatest scope to improve recruitment without lowering academic standards.
- **Location matters, especially in London.** Lower-tariff London universities consistently rank among the best performers, although their success is partly explained by the large concentration of highly qualified disadvantaged students living in the area.



A new methodology

The goal of this new measure is that it will serve as a diagnostic tool for universities, helping them to identify whether unequal admissions are due to differences in prior academic achievement or other factors related to student choices and recruitment policies.

The benchmark: understanding the curve

The new measure uses a methodology inspired by the Lorenz curve and the Gini coefficient, [4] enabling the creation of an 'access curve' and a single metric called the 'social mobility coefficient'. This number indicates how universities are performing on recruiting disadvantaged students once attainment is taken into account. The analysis looks at charts for 94 higher education providers [5] in England, comparing three key cumulative percentages against socio-economic status (SES) deciles, [6] decile 1 being the most disadvantaged and decile 10 the most advantaged.

Figure 1. University access benchmark curves



Yellow line	Equal distribution	A hypothetical scenario where the university student population perfectly matches the socio-economic profile of all young people in England (10% per decile)
Blue line	Students enrolling	The actual socio-economic profile of first-year full-time students at the university; on page 13, we explain why the blue line tends to be below the yellow line – what we call ‘the access curve’
Red line	Students meeting entry requirements	The socio-economic profile of the sub-population of all young people in the cohort who meet the institution’s minimum entry requirements

We use the gap between these lines to calculate the social mobility coefficient, which measures the university's performance relative to different benchmarks.

Who and when?

The analysis focuses on students who took their GCSE exams in the 2015 to 2016 academic year, tracking their progression and enrolment at university by age 19 in the 2019 to 2020 academic year, before the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Data was drawn from the National Pupil Database (NPD), which is linked with the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) student record. [Z] While there was more up-to-date data available, grading systems for these cohorts had been disrupted by the pandemic. Earlier cohorts were therefore chosen to represent a baseline. However, trends in access to higher education are likely to have changed during and after the pandemic.

To define SES, we used three indicators: school type (state or independent), free school meal (FSM) eligibility and neighbourhood disadvantage (as defined by the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index, IDACI). The resulting distribution gives greater weight to FSM status and attendance at an independent school than to neighbourhood measures.

Limitations

This study provides an overall picture of who gets into university, but the results should be seen as a helpful guide rather than a perfect measurement. Some of the limitations of the analysis are:

- We do not have records of students' exact socio-economic status. Instead, we use 'proxies' such as whether a child received FSM or the proportion of young people in the neighbourhood who grew up in low-income households, according to the IDACI.
- The information comes from just before the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, university application trends and grades may have changed.
- Instead of using published entry guidelines, we inferred the entry requirements by analysing the actual qualifications held by the students who enrolled.
- The location-adjusted model implicitly assumes that students prefer to stay relatively close to home. However, for top-tier universities such as University of Oxford or University of Cambridge, students are usually happy to move across the country, making our 'local' calculations less precise for them. Instead, these universities should focus on the non-adjusted benchmarks.
- This research looks only at who gets into university. It does not track whether they stay there, what grades they get or what jobs they find after graduating.
- The data shows who is missing from certain universities, but it cannot tell us why. We do not know if disadvantaged students are not getting in because they are not applying (preference), because the admissions process is too difficult (institutional barriers), or because costs such as rent and living expenses are perceived to be too high.

For further detail on the methodology and limitations, please refer to the technical report.

Access

The overall socio-economic profile of students in higher education is more advantaged than the general population of young people in England. However, the challenge of widening participation is not universal:

- Approximately **one-quarter (26%) of universities** in England actually recruit a disproportionately high number of disadvantaged young people, relative to their presence in the wider population.
- Around **60% of universities** enrol a disproportionately high number of students from more advantaged backgrounds.
- The remaining **15%** recruit a student population which is broadly representative of the general population.

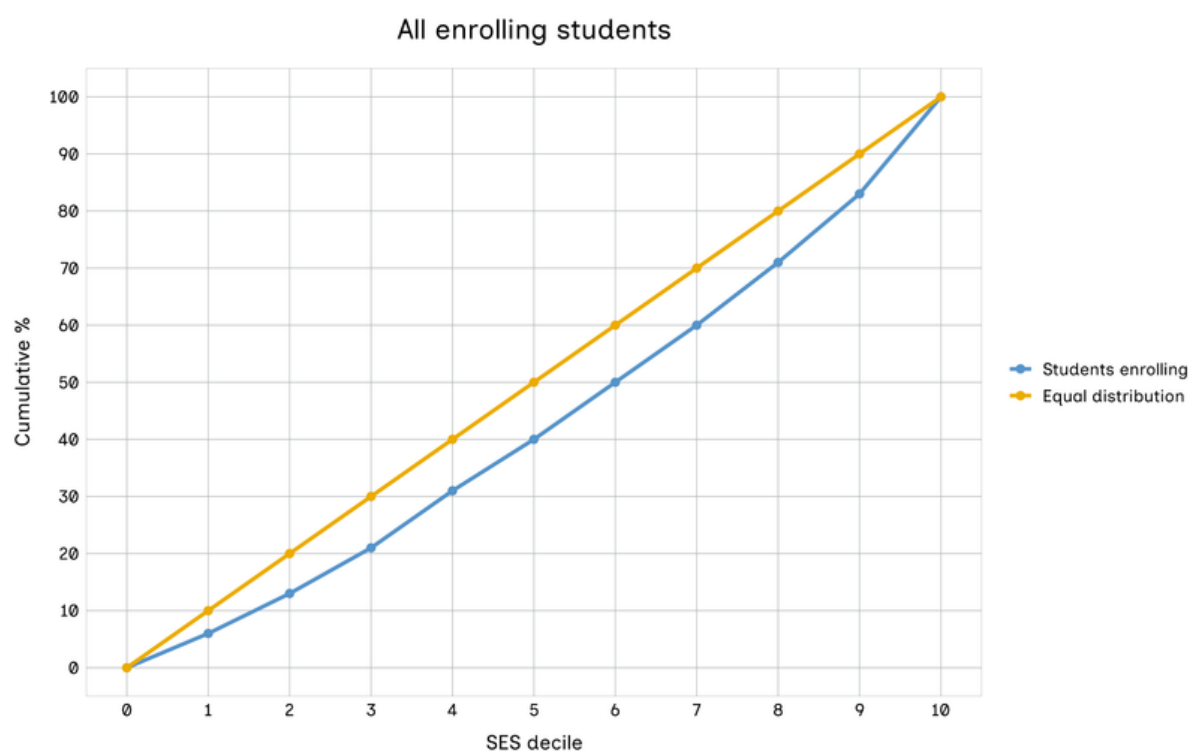
Lower-tariff universities, particularly those based in London, tend to recruit the **highest proportions of disadvantaged students**. Universities with higher entry requirements, such as those in the Russell Group, tend to recruit **higher proportions of advantaged students**.

The overall access gap

When looking at all enrolling students across the English higher education sector, the blue line (actual enrolment) falls below the yellow line (equal distribution). This shows that the student population is, on average, more advantaged than the overall average. For example, only 40% of enrolling students are in the bottom half of the socio-economic distribution (deciles 1 to 5).



Figure 2: Socio-economic distribution of students enrolling at any English higher education provider at age 18 in 2018 to 2019 or 19 in 2019 to 2020



Beyond academic grades

The under-representation of disadvantaged students at some universities can be partly explained by the fact that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds may be, on average, less likely to meet high academic entry requirements. To address this, the analysis introduces a **red line** that shows the socio-economic profile of those students who meet the entry requirements for a given institution.

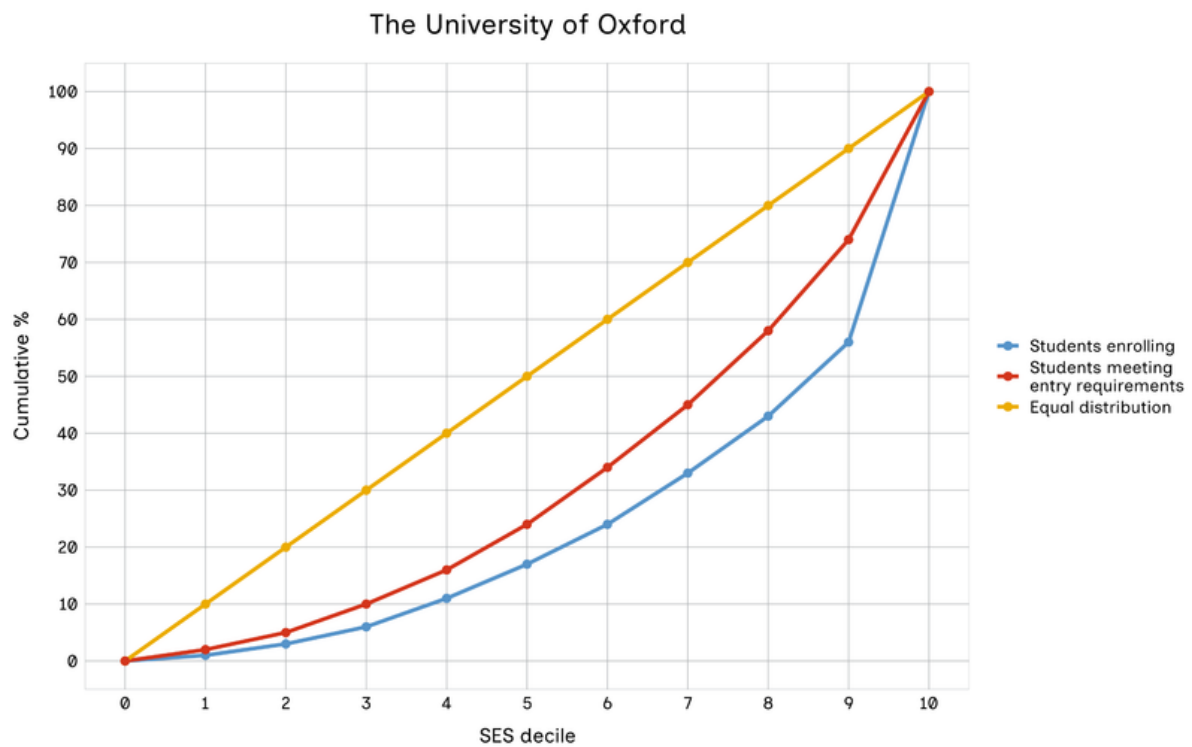
The area between the blue line (enrolment) and the red line (those meeting requirements) in Figure 3 is the most critical measure, representing the **social mobility coefficient**. A positive coefficient means that the university is successfully recruiting a cohort more disadvantaged than the pool of available qualified students. A negative coefficient means the university is recruiting a cohort more advantaged than the available qualified pool, suggesting room for improvement without lowering standards.

Based on the social mobility coefficient:

- for the majority of universities (**71%**), the population of students recruited (blue line) is **more disadvantaged** than the population of all young people who meet the institution's entry requirements (red line beneath blue line)
- for a significant minority (29%), the student intake is more advantaged than the pool of qualified young people (red line above blue line, as is the case for University of Oxford in Figure 3) – these universities have the most potential to recruit more disadvantaged students without lowering their entry requirements.



Figure 3. University of Oxford access benchmark curves



- the **top performers** on this measure are generally less academically selective London institutions (such as Middlesex University and University of East London)
- the **lowest performers** (those recruiting the most advantaged students relative to the available pool) are typically high-tariff institutions with higher entry requirements (such as University of Exeter and University of Oxford). [8]



Ranking	University	Average points on entry [9]	Social mobility coefficient
1	Middlesex University*	70.3	257
2	University of East London*	67.6	253
3	University of Bradford*	76.6	233
4	University of Westminster	74.6	228
5	Brunel University London	86.9	219
...			
90	University of York	122.9	-66
90	University of Leeds	131.7	-66
92	University of Oxford	151.3	-69
93	University of Exeter	117	-79
94	Oxford Brookes University	84.2	-132

Note: We calculate these scores using a specific points system for A level grades: A* = 60, A = 50, B = 40, C = 30, D = 20, E = 10; under this system, the national average of 94.3 points roughly equates to a student achieving three C grades (90 points). Universities with an asterisk (*) also appear in the non-location-adjusted table.

Missing the qualified pool

Where the red line sits above the blue line, this indicates that a university is failing to attract or accept a proportionate number of disadvantaged students who possess the grades needed for entry.

For instance, the graph for the University of Oxford (Figure 3) shows the red line above the blue line, meaning that the proportion of available qualified students from disadvantaged backgrounds is higher than the proportion actually enrolling. Exeter's calculated social mobility coefficient is -79 units. These universities are likely to have prospective students who meet entry requirements who either are not applying or are disproportionately unsuccessful in their applications.

The importance of place

The tendency for the top-performing universities (based on disadvantaged recruitment) to be concentrated in London suggests that **geography plays a crucial role**. This is partly due to a concentration of higher-attaining disadvantaged students in London, and to a student preference for studying close to home, due either to personal choice or financial barriers. To account for this, we apply **location weighting**. [10] This adjustment calculates the red line based on the socio-economic profile of prospective students who meet the entry requirements as well as how close they live to the university.

Once place is taken into account:

- introducing location weighting typically **reduces the size of access gaps** (the social mobility coefficient) on average – confirming that the lack of local high-attaining disadvantaged students constrains many institutions' ability to diversify their intakes
- for some of the most high-tariff universities, such as University of Oxford and University of Cambridge, the access gap appears significantly reduced once location weighting is applied - though caution is needed as they are expected to recruit nationally rather than locally
- for low-tariff London universities, the location weighting reduces the size of the access gap (the red line moves upwards), suggesting that their success is partly attributable to the large pool of qualified disadvantaged students living nearby (for example, location weighting reduces the University of East London's social mobility coefficient from 253 to 141)
- nonetheless, **London universities with lower entry requirements remain highly successful** in recruiting disadvantaged students even after accounting for location
- the **worst performers** on the location-weighted measure are a mix of high- and low-tariff universities, including the University of Birmingham, Oxford Brookes University, University of Liverpool and University of Leeds.

Ranking	University	Average points on entry	Social mobility coefficient
1	University of Bradford	76.6	189
2	Brunel University London	86.9	187
3	Middlesex University	70.3	184
4	Roehampton University	62.9	175
5	Kingston University	69.7	154
...			
90	University of the Arts, London	86.6	-79
91	University of Leeds*	131.6	-89
92	University of Liverpool	116.1	-92
93	Oxford Brookes University*	84.2	-93
94	University of Birmingham*	131.3	-103

Note: * denotes universities also present in the non-location-adjusted table above.



University ‘types’

Based on the shape and position of the lines on the non-location-weighted graphs, universities can be grouped into five categories of recruitment patterns.

Group	Description and characteristics	Examples
Highest proportions of most advantaged students	The blue line is deeply curved below the yellow line, sharply increasing towards decile 10 (most advantaged). For some London universities in this group the blue and red lines cross over, suggesting that they recruit well from the qualified disadvantaged pool and disproportionately from the most advantaged pool.	University of Oxford, University College London, Durham University, University of Cambridge
High absolute gaps in enrolment	There is a large gap between the yellow and blue lines (blue beneath yellow). The red line is usually above the blue line, meaning that the university is failing to recruit a proportion of disadvantaged students commensurate with their qualifications. These universities are not included in the ‘highest proportions of most advantaged students’ group.	Loughborough University, Newcastle University, University of Leeds
Broadly representative by SES	The blue line closely follows the yellow line. These are generally low-tariff, modern (‘post-92’) institutions. In all cases, the red line is beneath the blue line, confirming that the enrolling cohort is more disadvantaged than the pool of students meeting the entry requirements.	Buckinghamshire New University, Canterbury Christ Church University, University of Salford

Group	Description and characteristics	Examples
Small gaps between enrolment and requirements	The blue line closely mirrors the red line. Student intake is generally more advantaged than the wider population, but recruitment mirrors the attainment distribution of those who meet entry requirements. Most are lower-tariff institutions.	University of Surrey, Nottingham Trent University, University of Manchester
Highest proportions of disadvantaged students	The blue line sits clearly above the yellow line. These institutions recruit a disproportionately high number of disadvantaged students. They tend to have lower-than-average entry requirements.	Aston University, Birmingham City University, University of East London, Middlesex University



Recommendations

Our new access curve and social mobility coefficient provide a clear diagnostic tool for understanding whether recruitment gaps are due to prior attainment differences or hidden barriers in outreach, recruitment and admissions.

Policy recommendations

1: Improve data and sharing agreements to enable robust monitoring

- **1A: Acquire application data.** To know whether qualified students are being rejected or simply not applying, the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the Department for Education (DfE) and other relevant data owners should collaborate to find a solution or alternative pathways for linked application data to be published at provider level.
- **1B: Prioritise individual-level data.** The DfE and the Office for Students (OfS) should move the sector away from area-based proxies and expand the use of individual-level metrics, such as integrating verified household income data held by the Student Loans Company (SLC).
- **1C: Track vulnerable subgroups.** The higher education sector must ensure that expanded data access explicitly identifies highly vulnerable groups often missed by broad socio-economic proxies, particularly students with experience of living in care.

2: Set tailored access goals and report on them annually

- These new benchmarks would enable a move away from a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, supporting specific goals to be set in universities' Access and Participation Plans (APPs) and in the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR). Higher education institutions should publicly link their financial planning to these goals by including a dedicated explanatory note in their annual financial statements.

3: Share best practice and prioritise student success

- **3A:** Proactively share best practice across the sector. Universities that already excel in recruiting a diverse student intake should take the lead in identifying 'what works' and sharing this through national forums and sector databases such as the Higher Education Evaluation Library (HEEL).
- **3B:** Prioritise completion, performance and labour market outcomes. Because 'who gets on' is just as critical as 'who gets in', universities must prioritise robust ongoing support to ensure disadvantaged students complete their degrees and successfully transition into strong career destinations.

4: Remove admissions barriers and raise overall school attainment

- **4A: Evaluate internal admissions barriers.** Universities with disproportionately advantaged intakes must immediately audit their own admissions processes to identify and remove hidden barriers for qualified disadvantaged students.
- **4B: Mandate the use of sector evidence.** The OfS should mandate that these specific universities actively apply proven sector evidence (such as from the HEEL) when establishing new recruitment and admissions practices.
- **4C: Deliver proportionate interventions and collaboratively expand the applicant pool.** Rather than competing to recruit the few high-performing disadvantaged students, universities must deliver interventions proportionate to their size. They should engage in cooperative strategies with schools, colleges and the wider sector to tackle the attainment gap and expand the total pool of eligible applicants.

5: Create strategic regional partnerships

- **5A: Actively engage in regional widening-participation forums.** Universities must stop competing regionally and instead participate in local networks (such as Uni Connect) to openly discuss region-specific access challenges, share effective outreach strategies and tackle under-representation collectively.
- **5B: Co-design inclusive pathways.** Universities, further education colleges and employers must work together to create flexible educational pathways, such as foundation years and collaborative degrees, that support disadvantaged students while meeting local labour market needs.

Next steps for research

To build a more comprehensive and actionable diagnostic tool, future iterations of the university benchmarks could focus on the following priorities:

- **Update the data to track post-COVID progress.** The current baseline uses data from 2018 to 2020, which reflects a pre-pandemic landscape. Because universities have significantly altered their recruitment and contextual offer-making since then, future research should update the benchmarks using datasets from 2023 onwards. This will accurately reflect the current reality of higher education admissions and allow us to track long-term trends across the sector.
- **Incorporate application and offer data.** Currently, the benchmarks compare the pool of qualified students against those who eventually enrol, but we cannot see application behaviour. Future iterations must explore partnerships with bodies such as the DfE and UCAS to plot applications and offer rates onto the benchmark charts. This will pinpoint exactly where in the pipeline (outreach, application or offer stage) qualified disadvantaged students are being left behind.
- **Include alternative entry routes and part-time and mature students.** The current model focuses on the traditional A level and BTEC pipeline for 18- and 19-year-olds, to maintain statistical robustness. However, flexible routes are vital for widening participation and sector resilience. Future iterations of this research should explore ways to incorporate part-time learners, mature students and those entering through alternative pathways such as foundation years.

Footnotes

[1] In this report, 'young people' refers to the specific population of students in England who turned 16 and sat their GCSE examinations during the 2015 to 2016 academic year. This includes pupils from both state-funded and independent schools. The analysis tracks their progression into higher education up to age 19 in the 2019 to 2020 academic year.

[2] In this report, socio-economic disadvantage is defined using a composite measure of three indicators: the student's school type (state or independent), their eligibility for free school meals (FSM) and their neighbourhood's level of disadvantage (measured by the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index, IDACI).

[3] In the UK higher education sector, the terms 'high-tariff' and 'low-tariff' refer to the UCAS tariff points that students secure based on their academic qualifications, including A levels and BTECs.

[4] The Lorenz curve is a graph traditionally used in economics to show how equally something, such as wealth or income, is distributed across a population. The Gini coefficient is a single number calculated from this curve that measures the overall level of inequality, ranging from 0 (representing perfect equality) to 1 (representing total inequality).

[5] In this report, the terms 'HE provider', 'HE institution' and 'university' are used interchangeably to refer to English higher education providers registered with the Office for Students (OfS) that submit data to HESA.

[6] This analysis is restricted to England because it uses the Department for Education (DfE) National Pupil Dataset, which exclusively covers England.

[7] We excluded 33 institutions from the detailed analysis due to reporting restrictions, as they had fewer than 25 students in any single SES decile.

[8] The exception is Oxford Brookes University, which is the only university with lower entry requirements to appear in the list. This university appears to be a popular choice for more advantaged students with lower levels of attainment.

[9] This research calculates these scores using a specific points system for A level grades: A* = 60, A = 50, B = 40, C = 30, D = 20 and E = 10. Under this system, the national average of 94.3 points roughly equates to a student achieving three C grades (90 points). Equivalent scores were also given to BTEC qualifications.

[10] In data analysis, 'weighting' is a mathematical adjustment that gives more importance to certain pieces of information to make the results more realistic. For example, in this report we use weightings so that a qualified student who lives very close to a university counts for more when calculating that institution's expected local talent pool.

Glossary

Term	Definition
Access curve	A plotted line showing the cumulative percentage of enrolled first-year, full-time undergraduate students (on the y-axis) against their socio-economic background deciles (on the x-axis). By comparing this curve against a hypothetical baseline of equal distribution, the access curve reveals the extent of the gap in access to higher education by socio-economic background.
Entry requirements	Calculated entry standards based on the actual grades achieved by students who successfully enrolled rather than using the advertised grade requirements published on university websites.
Higher education provider/higher education institution	Used interchangeably to refer to providers in England registered with the Office for Students (OfS) in the approved categories and submit statutory data returns to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). This includes registered providers that do not hold the 'university' title.
High-tariff	Universities that are academically more selective and set higher than average entry requirements.
Location-adjusted	An analytical adjustment that refines a university's expected student intake by taking into account where qualified prospective students actually live.
Low-tariff	Universities that are academically less selective and set lower than average entry requirements.
School attainment gap	The disparity in academic grades and qualifications achieved at school or college between young people from different socio-economic backgrounds.
Social mobility coefficient	A numerical benchmark that indicates how well a university is performing in recruiting socioeconomically disadvantaged students once school-level academic attainment is taken into account.