

Mr Alan Milburn  
Independent Reviewer of Social Mobility and Child Poverty  
Cabinet Office  
70 Whitehall  
London SW1A 2AS

Distinction and Diversity  
in Higher Education



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Dear Alan,

**Re: Report on universities and social mobility**

We are writing in response to your letter of 29 October, concerning your report on universities and social mobility.

We welcomed your wide-ranging report – in particular its understanding that improving social mobility requires action across the student lifecycle. You recognised that this is a task not just for higher education institutions, but begins in schools and ends by equipping graduates for successful careers. You also recognised there was also a role for Government policy-makers, and for working closely with employers. You were right to take this joined-up approach: we recognise the role that higher education institutions can play in improving social mobility, but some tasks will need to be carried out alongside school and college partners and employers, and should be underpinned by effective policy.

We also welcome your acknowledgement that there is no single ‘right’ model of higher education that will work for everyone, and that the UK's current good record on social mobility has come about because different universities have different strengths. Students, too, have diverse backgrounds and diverse needs. It is this diversity which informs the rest of our response and which we believe is essential to addressing the topic of university access and social mobility.

Your report provides a series of recommendations to Government on specific actions to improve social mobility and access to HE. We agree with the broad thrust set out by many of the specific proposals. We welcome your emphasis on contextual data, and would add that contextual information can be used in a range of ways to support access to HE, not solely through making lower offers.

We also note that much work, and many of the issues you have identified, are already being addressed as part of the ‘National Strategy for Access and Student Success’ which Government has asked HEFCE and OFFA to carry out with the higher education sector. This Strategy is very important and should be charged with the implementation of any agenda on social mobility and higher education. It exemplifies the joined-up approach you recommend, and it will be important that the pre-HE sector is engaged in its developments.

The challenge inherent in the social mobility agenda is the challenge of assessing changes in life chances and social outcomes using the right longitudinal measurements. Measurements and evaluation are something which the sector is already discussing, but this issue goes wider than HE alone. Assessing social mobility may take the form of following a particular cohort throughout their lives – and to this end we welcome the commissioning of a new birth cohort study by the Universities Minister David Willetts. But we must also acknowledge that this is an active field of social science, and some of the social mobility data is contested.

Consequently, we cannot expect social mobility in higher education to be measured using static definitions. It certainly cannot be defined simply as access to a small subset of institutions. Individual outcomes from HE are important – such as lifetime earnings and career progression. But working with HEFCE and OFFA, we wish to take a broader approach to the benefit that university participation delivers to individuals and to wider society.

A national access strategy must ensure that individual students choose the best option for them. The economic logic for increasing participation is clear: in a high-skilled economy, we need more higher education, for more individuals, delivering greater overall benefits to society and better serving employers' interests. But it would be counterproductive to consider increasing participation rates and ensuring the best student experience at only a handful of universities. GuildHE represents many specialist HE providers, and specialism is important in a diverse sector. Too often the narrative appears to concentrate on a certain kind of 'selective' institution, when the reality is that the sector offers much more choice to individual students. Some students interested in studying Fine Art may be best served by attending UCL's Slade School of Fine Art; others by attending the University of Falmouth; still others by attending Norwich University of the Arts; and so on.

The point here is that a social mobility discourse which tends to divide the sector into traditional (often generalist) providers and others does not necessarily help students make the best choices for them. There are many types of institution, offering different types of HE, and we need to actively acknowledge and promote this – not simply pretend that it doesn't exist.

Diversity is also important in other ways. Today's students are altogether more different – and more diverse – than most policy-makers, the media and the public believe. We should be wary of over-emphasising the stereotypical high-achieving school leaver as the model of the 'normal' student. Before the Browne Review, data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency showed that 32.4% of all UK-domiciled undergraduates studying for their first degree in public HEIs were aged 21 or over, one third (33.3%) of all undergraduates were studying part-time, and 58% of part-time first degree entrants were aged 30 or over. It is too early to tell if the fee reforms following Browne have influenced this make-up of the student body, but the conclusion to be drawn here is that we must focus our efforts on a diverse range of students, studying in different ways in different places. Promoting access to part-time and 'locally-based' HE, and promoting HE to older learners, are just some important examples of this diversity.

Reflecting this diversity becomes even more crucial to social mobility given that the nation's human capital needs are drawn more broadly than just the rising cohort of school and college leavers. Earning while learning, part-time study, and good locally-based

provision are all vital to ensuring that students can access HE in the way that suits their circumstances, provides them with connections to employers, and vice versa.

It follows that access to HE can be best supported through a better-informed understanding of the available opportunities. Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) is important on a very broad scale. It will need to be comprehensively configured, and that includes work with schools.

But it also includes work to improve IAG elsewhere. Many of those accessing higher education will be 18 year-old school leavers, who will depend on the support of their school or college, UCAS and universities themselves. But as you point out, access to information is uneven, and access to higher education is not just about the young school-leaver. So enhancing IAG must be about more than just increasing the provision of information to well-informed individuals.

Guidance is probably more important than information, but it is worth noting that the need to improve individual guidance has been a feature in most government reports of last two centuries. (The Richard Review of apprenticeships provides one of the latest examples, but access to apprenticeships is just one place where IAG could be better joined up.)

We understand your criticisms of the National Scholarship Programme. We are working to address them with BIS, and with HEFCE and OFFA as part of the National Strategy.

Finally, we recognise your concern about the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). But we are not convinced that your proposal for universities to deliver 'EMA-style funding incentives' would be effective. There are a number of problems here. Firstly, a valuable stream of funding – HEFCE Student Opportunity funding – already exists to support institutions' activities, including those with the pre-HE sector, in a more flexible way than your proposal because it caters for a diverse range of institutional circumstances. Secondly, these institutional circumstances matter in a diverse sector: an individual university may well determine that its resources could effectively be deployed in the way you propose, but it depends on the specific needs of their students or potential HE applicants, which the university itself is better placed to judge than national policy-makers. Thirdly, EMA is not the right 'tool' to use to address the HE access question: EMA was not just about access to university, but about increasing participation in learning at age 17-18; that remains important and critical for progress to higher study but also to other progression routes. Fourthly (and perhaps most compellingly when you consider the figures on mature learners provided above): your proposal would exclude a third of all undergraduates, who would not be eligible as they do not enter higher education at age 18.

I hope these points provide an indication of the way GuildHE believes this agenda should be approached. We look forward to continuing to work with all our partners on a joined-up approach.

With best wishes,



Andy Westwood, GuildHE CEO