Social mobility and elite universities

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Summary

Much of the heavy lifting on widening participation in higher education to date has been undertaken by newer and less selective higher education institutions. The access challenge therefore remains greater at more selective institutions. They could learn from the best practice that exists in less selective universities.

It will take nearly a century for highly-selective universities in England to raise the participation rate for 18-to-30-year olds from the least advantaged areas to the existing participation rate for 18-to-30-year olds from the most advantaged areas. If, instead, the number of degree places at more selective institutions were kept steady, the number of places for advantaged pupils would need to fall by as much as 10,000, which is one-third of current annual intakes.

Failing to find ways of expanding university places will prompt acrimonious battles over who secures degree places – there will be a clash of the classes.

Universities in England should produce two published offers for degree courses: a standard entry requirement and a minimum entry requirement, of up to three A-Level grades lower across three A-Levels (so BBB compared with AAA, for example).

Universities should also consider using random allocation of places for students over a certain minimum academic threshold (as has occurred in other countries).

The Office for Students should challenge highly-selective universities to expand student numbers in innovative ways to diversify intakes, including degree apprenticeships, foundation years and courses for part-time and mature learners.

Social mobility rankings for universities should be established, measuring outcomes for disadvantaged students.

Universities should undertake a social mobility audit, benchmarking their work on outreach, access and academic and pastoral support for disadvantaged students.

1. Introduction

*Why elite social mobility matters*

When the Labour Party announced in June 2019 that it would focus on improving social justice rather than social mobility, it captured a growing sentiment that the focus on diversifying elites detracts from bigger issues of widening inequalities in society.[1] 'The role of our education system is not just about helping a lucky, talented few rise to the top, but about ensuring that everyone can realise their potential,' argued Angela Rayner, then Labour's Shadow Education Secretary.

This put clear blue water between the two major political parties. Boris Johnson had previously argued it would be wrong to stamp out inequality because it is an invaluable spur for wealth creation.[2] Introducing his 'cornflakes box' model of social mobility, Johnson said wealth gaps should be tolerated as long as there are healthy levels of social (or cornflake) mobility: 'There are too many cornflakes who aren't being given a good enough chance to rustle and hustle their way to the top.'

Yet without change at the top, other fundamental reforms are less likely to occur.[3] Social mobility delivers social justice. Try as we may, it is unlikely we will be able to dismantle the academic pecking order itself.[4] This does not mean everyone should aspire to attend highly-selective universities. It also does not diminish the contributions made by other universities and colleges, and indeed schools, in transforming lives. Social mobility is about helping young people to make their own informed choices as to what they want to achieve.

For highly-selective universities, two facts stand out. The first is their graduates dominate the country's most influential positions. The Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission found that Russell Group graduates make up just under half (49 per cent) of elites, with Oxbridge graduates counting for a quarter of people in leading positions.[5]

Progression for A-Level (or equivalent) students to highly-selective universities by age 19, by type of school
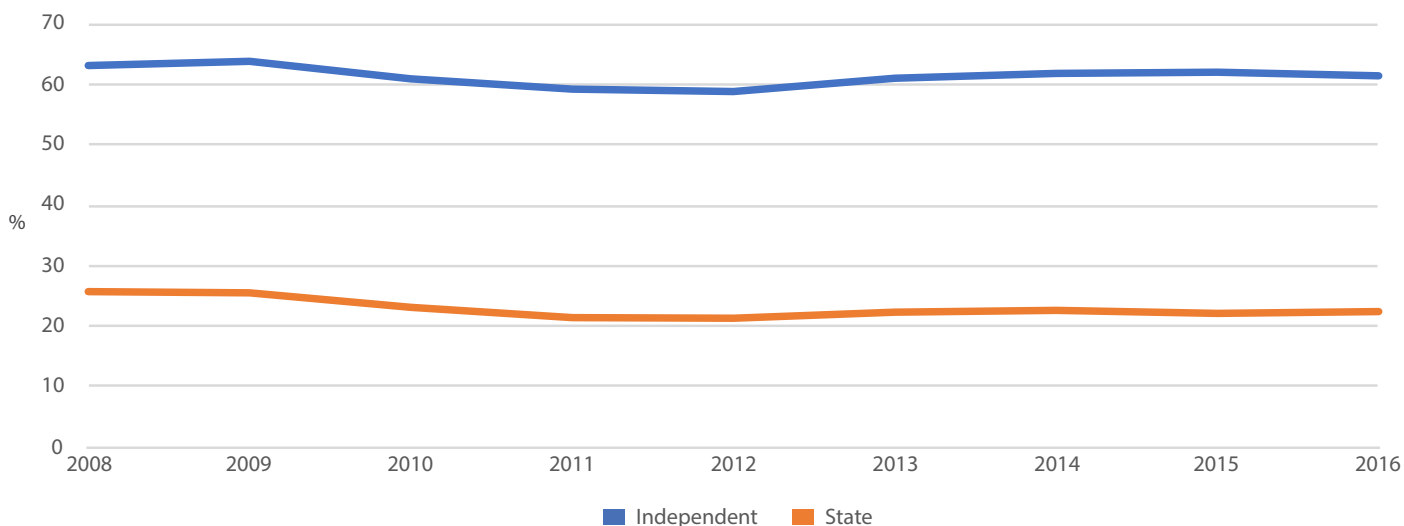
Source: Department for Education

The second is that privileged students make up most of the intakes at highly-selective universities. Six in ten (61.4 per cent) students who took A-Level or equivalent qualifications at independent schools progressed to highly-selective universities by age 19 in 2016/17, compared with just over two in ten (22.4 per cent) students from state schools and colleges. This participation gap was wider in 2016/17 than it was in 2008/09.[6] Meanwhile, the participation gap between pupils who

receive free school meals and their more advantaged peers has remained stubbornly constant: just 5 per cent of free school meal pupils enter higher education.[7]

It is these two facts that explain our focus in this report on improving social mobility into these elite institutions.

2. Targets

In December 2018, the Office for Students, the regulator of higher education in England, published an aspiration to 'eliminate equality gaps in higher education within 20 years'.[8] This means equalising the rates of participation of young people living in the least and most advantaged areas of the country within one generation – by 2037/38.[9] By 2024/25, the Office for Students wants highly-selective universities to make 'demonstrable impact', reducing the gap in participation between the most and least represented groups for 18 and 19-year olds.[10] Our analysis refers to highly-selective universities in England, but what we say relates to the whole UK.

Underlying the targets is an aim that a child born today will enjoy equality of opportunity in higher education as an adult.[11] The Social Mobility Commission has backed the targets.[12] Sir Michael Barber, the Office for Students' Chair, has warned that universities would see their fees cut if they failed to diversify their student intakes.[13]

These are the most ambitious targets ever set for university access in England. To put them into perspective, the participation of the most disadvantaged two-fifths of students at highly-selective universities rose by just half a percentage point from 2.4 per cent to 2.9 per cent from the mid-1990s to 2011.[14]

Future projections

The access measures in England are based on participation areas ranked by the proportion of young people aged 18-to-30 who have entered higher education.[15] These are split into quintiles, with the fifth quintile having the highest participation rates and the first quintile having the lowest participation rates. The targets aspire to eliminate the gap between the lowest and highest quintiles over the next 20 years.

Using official data from the Office for Students to calculate average rates of progress between 2011/12 and 2017/18, we have estimated how long it would take highly-selective universities to reach a less challenging milestone: getting the participation rate in 2030 for 18-to-30-year olds from the least advantaged areas to the participation rate for 18-to-30-year olds from the most advantaged areas in 2017/18.[16] This assumes that the future participation rate for students from the most advantaged areas is frozen at 2017/18 levels, which seems unlikely given their increases over recent years.

In 2017/18, 5.2 per cent of 18-to-30-year olds entered highly-selective universities from the least advantaged areas compared with 25 per cent from the most advantaged areas. Extending average historical increases from 2011/12 to 2017/18 into the future, we find it would take 96 years for participation rates to reach this target, that is to 2113/14.[17] Another way of looking at this is that the universities would need to improve rates of progress at least five-fold to meet the Office for Students' aspirations, as the graph that follows shows.

Projected participation rates for 18-to-30-year olds at higher-tariff universities
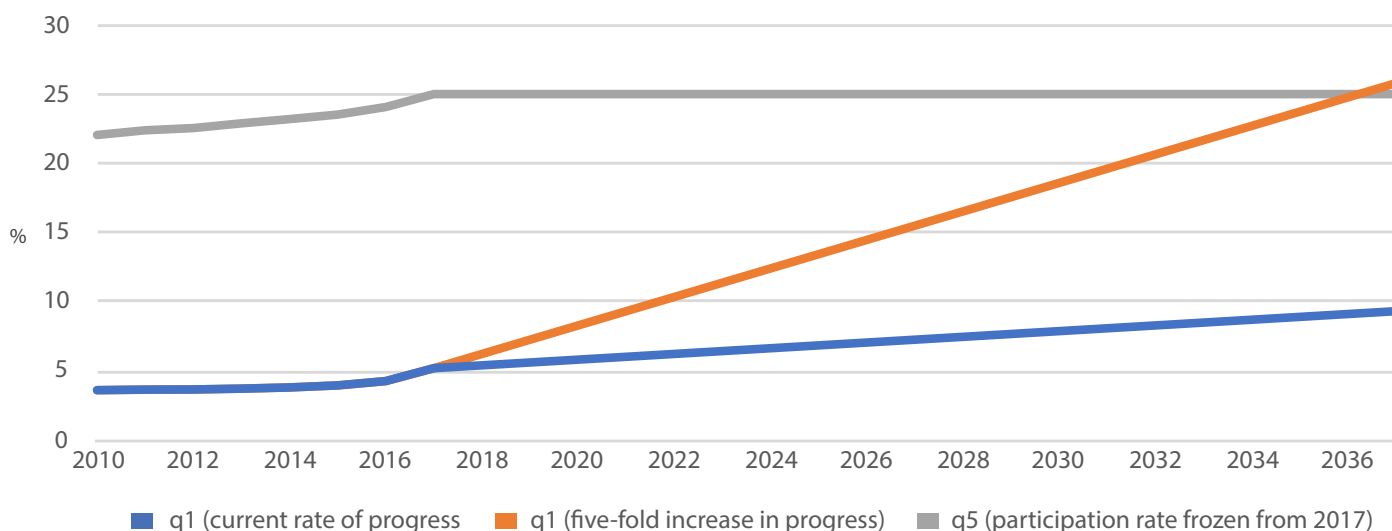
(Based on data from the Office for Students between 2011/12 and 2017/18, and assumptions for future increases in participation)

The figures suggest an extra 19,400 18-year old students from the least advantaged areas would need to enrol each year at highly-selective universities to equal the current participation rate of 18-year olds from the most advantaged areas.[18] That is only a little less than the entire undergraduate population across all years of study at Oxbridge. To put this into broader perspective, in 2017/18, highly-selective universities enrolled 85,000 18-year olds overall, with 7,500 from the least advantaged areas.

This assumes a freezing of degree places for advantaged students, and no growth in places for students in the middle quintiles of the distribution (who would become the least likely to enrol). You would need to double the number of places at highly-selective universities to 170,000 over the next 20 years to ensure all young people, living in all areas, enjoyed the same current participation rate as the most advantaged (an annual increase of 3.5 per cent).

If, on the other hand, the number of degree places was kept at current levels, then you would need to cut the number of places for advantaged pupils by as much as 10,000 – a third of their current places – to equalise participation rates. This assumes that participation rates for young people from the middle quintiles remain constant.

Challenges

These forecasts highlight several challenges. On the one hand, meeting the goals would require more students to be admitted without traditional academic qualifications. On the other hand, failure to fund growth in degree places would mean limiting university opportunities for students from more advantaged areas, an action unlikely to garner much political support. The only way to avoid this would be to expand places. That requires reforming admissions, finding new ways of expanding degree numbers and developing measures to assess universities' social mobility efforts.

3. Contextual admissions

Universities have long taken into account the context of prospective students when assessing their potential. Contextual admissions are used in many ways – giving students a taste of university life, establishing which candidates should be interviewed or offering a degree place on lower grades.

But too often universities operate in the dark, worried that reduced offers will damage their reputations. 'How low can we go?' is the first question, sometimes followed by 'how can we keep this out of the public eye?' What is baffling for applicants is that contextual information is used differently from one university department to another. Research suggests that more consistency and transparency is needed.[19]

In July 2019, UCAS revealed that more than one-in-three university applicants had been offered a degree place regardless of their final exam grades.[20] The Office for Students is to undertake a review of admissions practice.[21] Another report found grades for disadvantaged students are reduced by, on average, half an A-Level grade – little different from reduced offers made to other students.[22]

Evidence suggests that grades at A-Level signal how much support pupils have received as well as their academic potential. Private tutoring outside school hours has boomed.[23] Entrants with lower than standard grades are more likely than not to succeed in achieving a degree – although, as we discuss later, more help can be provided for them during university so they are less likely to drop out.[24]

Many university degrees at highly-selective universities in the UK – Sports Science and Business, for example – look beyond academic measures when selecting candidates. Part-time and mature students are selected by reviewing their qualifications, knowledge and previous work experience.[25] Meanwhile, the majority of undergraduates support the practice of lower grade offers to disadvantaged students, including 57 per cent of those at selective universities.[26]

Ways forward

Universities in England should follow the example of Scottish universities in producing two published offers for degree courses: a standard entry requirement and a minimum entry requirement, of up to three A-Level grades lower across three A-Levels (so BBB compared with AAA, for example). This is a clear and systematic use of contextual offers. Progress has been made in Scotland: the University of Edinburgh has seen places accepted by students from disadvantaged areas rise from 7.3 per cent in 2016/17 to 11 per cent in 2018/19.[27]

Meanwhile, moving to a post-qualification application (PQA) scheme would make for a simpler system, with universities judging applicants on their actual A-Level grades, not grades predicted by their teachers. The flaw of the current system is that pupils' predicted grades are mostly wrong.[28] Disadvantaged students can be under-predicted, thus missing out on potential offers, or over-predicted, leading to higher grade offers, only for them to miss the grades. Some have questioned whether there is room in the academic calendar for PQA.[29] But it could be possible if the current admissions system is simplified.

More radical options

Post-qualification applications would open up more radical possibilities. Universities could use random allocation of places for students over a certain threshold of A-Level grades. This is the fairest way of selecting equally-qualified candidates for degree courses. Lotteries have been used widely in education. You might compensate losers in the lottery – such as guaranteeing a place at another institution. Dutch medical schools select the highest academic performers by traditional means, and enter lower achievers into a lottery.[30]

The benefit of these schemes is their simplicity. Admissions tutors have amassed a battery of criteria designed to distinguish between thousands of equally well-qualified applicants: personal statements; teacher recommendations; predicted exam grades; essays; university admissions tests; interviews; and much more. But how much of this data add to predicting which candidates are best suited for degree courses? And how much does the complexity alienate potentially excellent applicants?

Defining disadvantage

Universities also need to define disadvantage more consistently. Some have argued that we should avoid using area-based measures to determine which applicants qualify for contextual offers.[31] Low participation areas, which some universities prioritise for access work, have surprisingly high proportions of middle-class families.

This suggests it could be better to use individual-level measures, such as free school meal status or lower household income. Free school meal status is not without its difficulties, however. A free school meal pupil in London is, on average, very different to a free school meal pupil in the north-east or south-west of the country.[32] They may experience similar material disadvantage at home, but starkly different opportunities in their neighbourhoods. Should we also consider place of birth when assessing disadvantage?

Defining disadvantage will become more pressing if battles over the fairness of university selection take a litigious nature in the UK – mirroring the legal battles that rage in the United States.[33] One perverse consequence of sticking with postcode data might be middle-class gaming: parents of advantaged young people moving out of high-participation areas into low-participation areas, perhaps only a few streets away, to ensure their children secure university places. Parents resort to a host of tactics to secure coveted school places.[34]

4. Expand, expand, expand!

The last 50 years have seen unprecedented growth in degree numbers – culminating in the Blair Government's aspiration to enrol 50 per cent of young adults into higher education.[35] In 1980, 9 per cent of 26-to-30-year olds were university graduates; by 2015, 39 per cent of 26-to-30-year olds had a degree.[36] In 2014/15, 1.3 million young full-time undergraduates were enrolled at UK universities.[37]

At their best, universities are dual engines of economic productivity and social mobility.[38] More degrees mean more highly-skilled graduates for the knowledge-based economy. Access widens when university places grow. Our forecasts show that equalising participation rates for people from all backgrounds requires a doubling of the number of places at highly-selective universities. With an unprecedented rise in the number of 18 and 19-year olds over the 2020s, demand for degree places will only increase.[39] The question is how to ensure this next wave of university expansion benefits people from less privileged backgrounds.

Healthy returns

Most graduates benefit from wage premia despite the expansion of degrees. More has not meant less. In 1980, male graduates earned on average 46 per cent more than their non-graduate counterparts. In 2017, this earnings uplift was 66 per cent.[40] These average figures conceal increasing variation in the earnings returns from different degrees, with some graduates earning less than peers who have not been to university.[41] 'The rising tide has not lifted all the boats,' argued the Augar review.[42]

This points to the need for clearer information for prospective students on potential future earnings from degrees. Graduates are not just better off financially, but live longer, more healthy and happy lives.[43] Why should we exclude anyone who could benefit from these gains?

The need for fees

Cutting university fees is often seen as a way of enhancing social mobility.[44] But fees enable the expansion of degree places. They free up public funds for other parts of the education system. They generate funds for universities' widening access work. Numbers of disadvantaged students have increased despite rising fees in England.[45] Proposals to substantially cut university fees in England from their current levels of £9,250 a year would be regressive, as the change would mainly benefit the highest earning students.[46] Bolstering maintenance support would be a more effective approach.

New wave of expansion

Universities need innovative ways of diversifying their intakes. Even with rising demand for degrees, there are simply not enough disadvantaged students with the minimum grades to

prosper on demanding degree courses. One study estimates that, if highly-selective universities admitted free school meal pupils with two A-Level grades lower than advertised requirements, this would increase the number of free school meal students admitted from 1,500 to 2,250 each year.[47] So the pipeline of free school meal candidates meeting current selection criteria is thin.

Expanding the potential pool of applicants requires improved school grades. But reviews of progress on narrowing the attainment gap in schools suggest progress is slow.[48] So universities have to look beyond lowering grades to more school leavers. They will need to review their education offering, rethink their definition of disadvantage and recruit a greater diversity of students, considering older learners.[49]

Properly promoted, degree apprenticeships could attract more non-traditional students. The learn-while-you-earn route is expanding rapidly at selective universities, with the University of Cambridge now offering this qualification.[50] Degree apprenticeships can be undertaken by part-time and mature students, without traditional academic qualifications. The challenge is they are largely unknown among school pupils.[51]

Age should not be a barrier to university study. The fall in part-time learning has been called higher education's biggest black spot.[52] Mature students are an untapped resource. The Government should introduce flexible loans for second-chance students, and to students taking a module rather than a whole qualification.

Another growth area is bridging courses to bring students up to speed for degree study. These include further education access courses and foundation years. Some see foundation years as a cynical money-making exercise.[53] But they are one of the few approaches that we know can work. Trinity College Dublin reports that more than 90 per cent of its foundation-year students progressed to full degrees, performing as well as other students.[54] In 2019, the University of Oxford unveiled its foundation year.[55] Fifty students will be enrolled with A-Level grades as low as three Bs.[56]

We need a mixed economy of degree places at even our most prestigious academic institutions. The Office for Students could help by urging universities to diversify students in a much broader way, moving away from the focus on young full-time first-degree students.[57]

As we prepare for rising numbers of school leavers over the next decade, universities can seize the moment. 'Large numbers squeezing to get in acts as a strong headwind for equality,' argued Mark Corver, predicting that demand for degree places could soon outstrip supply.[58] 'If more equal entry is not embedded in universities before the early 2020s then it is quite possible that little progress will be made for a generation.'

5. Measuring, celebrating and embracing social mobility

Peter Scott, the Scottish Government's Commissioner for Fair Access (and a HEPI Trustee), argues that university league tables have 'chilling effects' on universities' efforts to promote social mobility.[59] But rankings are here to stay.[60]

The problem is that league tables punish universities for improving social diversity. Perversely, the tables do not generally measure the gains made by students. Universities gain higher rankings for the higher A-Level entry grades they demand – a direct disincentive to award lower grade contextual offers or consider applicants without traditional academic qualifications. Dropping down the newspaper rankings and losing status can mean fewer future applicants from the very groups a university is trying harder to attract. A succession of government representatives have tried in vain to convince newspaper compilers to reform their rankings.

Social mobility rankings

One response would be to establish social mobility rankings for universities alongside, or as part of, current league tables, developing measures to track the graduation, employment and other outcomes of students from a range of backgrounds. Schools have been measured according to learning gains. Rankings have been produced based on the proportion of university entrants from different postcode areas.[61] The UK is blessed with rich statistics on student trajectories from university entry to graduation and beyond.[62] We have the data.

Social mobility college rankings are well established in the United States. They offer models for this side of the pond.[63] Colleges boasting the greatest gains are not the usual suspects.[64] According to the Social Mobility Index, the rankings have countered traditional academic hierarchies in the US.

Social mobility audit

But these data provide only a partial picture. It is right to focus in part on the monetary returns to university as this is what is easily measurable. But improving social mobility is much more than boosting earnings.[65] Who could argue that graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds becoming teachers, social workers or nurses is not social mobility?[66]

We need a more fundamental cultural shift with universities reflecting on the needs of students from a range of backgrounds, from extra-curricular activities to lectures and tutorials. What level of support is being provided to ensure that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have a reasonable prospect of success? Could we extend the extra Pupil Premium funds for disadvantaged school pupils to higher education?[67] Much of the best practice exists in less selective universities. Widening access is an opportunity to enrich the academic experience.[68]

We suggest institutions undertake a social mobility audit. This could build on universities' current Access and Participation Plans and their submissions to the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF). A good model for assessing work with students is the Social Mobility Employer Index that assesses how major employers perform across seven areas within the organisations, including recruitment, selection and progression.[69]

An institution truly supportive of social mobility would assess the appointment and promotion of its own staff.[70] Any audit would also review the evaluation of access work. Moves to improve evidence are long overdue.[71]

More research is needed to understand the experiences of students from less privileged backgrounds in elite UK universities. Some indications are offered by a study in the US provoking much debate about life in elite colleges.[72] Unlike their more privileged counterparts, poor students do not actively consult academics to help them when they are struggling, and they shun the social clubs and networking enjoyed by others. In the UK, disadvantaged students have higher drop-out rates compared with their more privileged peers.[73] This suggests institutions could do more.

In their seminal 1999 US book, *The Shape of the River,* William G. Bowen and Derek Bok document the success of black graduates at selective colleges, not just in degree grades awarded but their contributions to civic life after university.[74] A generation on, the same principles hold true for highly-selective universities in the UK. League tables are not just about numbers, but the values and beliefs within higher education. The battle over rankings goes to the very heart of what universities are for.

6. Conclusions

Widening access to highly-selective universities should remain a central but not exclusive strand of national efforts to improve social mobility.

Assuming current rates of progress, it will take 96 years for highly-selective universities in England to raise the participation rate for 18-to-30-year olds from the least advantaged areas to the existing participation rate for 18-to-30-year olds from the most advantaged areas. Another way of looking at this is that universities need to improve rates of progress at least five-fold to meet current targets set by the Office for Students.

You would need to double the number of places at highly-selective universities over the next 20 years to ensure all young people enjoy the same participation rates as the most advantaged students.

If on the other hand, the numbers of degree places were kept at current levels, then you would need to cut the number of places for advantaged pupils by as much as 10,000 – a third of their current annual intake to equalise participation rates.

The time has come for a simpler, more transparent, consistent and honest system of university admissions, recognising that A-Level grades (still less predicted grades) are no longer the gold standard of entry.

Failing to find ways of expanding university places will prompt acrimonious battles over who secures degree places – a clash of the classes – with politicians, parents and students questioning the fairness of university admissions.

Universities need to embrace a cultural shift in the support provided for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, seeing greater diversity as an opportunity to enrich the academic experience for all students and staff.

Recommendations

Universities in England should follow the example of Scottish universities in producing two published offers for degree courses: a standard entry requirement and a minimum entry requirement, of up to three A-Level grades lower across three A-Levels (so BBB compared with AAA, for example). This is a clear and systematic use of contextual offers.

Universities, including Oxbridge, should also consider using random allocation of places for students over a certain threshold of A-Level grades. This is the fairest way of selecting equally-qualified candidates for degree courses.

As we prepare for rising numbers of school leavers over the next decade, the Office for Students should challenge highly-selective universities to expand student numbers in innovative ways, including degree apprenticeships, foundation years and courses for part-time mature learners.

The Government should retain tuition fees at current levels. A significant cut in fees would be a backward step for social mobility, benefitting middle-class students and curtailing future growth in degrees.

Social mobility rankings for universities should be established by an independent organisation, reflecting successful outcomes, including graduation and employment rates of disadvantaged students and their contribution to society.

Universities should also undertake a social mobility audit as part of the rankings, benchmarking their work on outreach, access and academic and pastoral support for disadvantaged students. This would mirror the Social Mobility Employer Index and build on universities' current Access and Participation Plans.

Endnotes

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