



Access all areas?: a look at access, participation and higher education reform

Wednesday 7 September; 15:00-16:00; Committee Room 18, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

The APPG met to discuss access and participation in the context of the government's reforms to higher education. The meeting was attended by parliamentarians, students' union officers, and organisations in the higher education and further education sectors.

The APPG heard speeches from Samuel Light (student with **Into**University), Mary Malcolm (Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Bedfordshire), Chris Pane (President, Open University Students Association) and Les Ebdon (Director of Fair Access, OFFA). From their speeches and the following discussions, there were different lessons to reflect on for the different stakeholders involved in ongoing higher education reform.

The Government and the Public Bill Committee

Chris Pane discussed the Higher Education and Research Bill, outlining concerns about provision for part-time and mature students, as well as flexible and distance learning. He noted the importance of protecting students when providers leave the market, and the risk for students of lowering the bar to entry for new providers.

Les Ebdon spoke about the progress made over the last 10 years of access agreements, and the increased entry rates for disadvantaged students as well as high levels of retention. He emphasised that it is critical that the successful features of the present system are maintained, as is the authority and independence of the Director of Fair Access. He noted the importance of keeping issues of access and participation on the public and political agenda. He suggested that board members of the OfS should be selected from those with interest and experience in social mobility.

Attendees discussed the way funding is based on an annual structure, causing barriers for students who might benefit from flexible degrees. The impact of barriers to access – e.g. replacing grants with loans – on the attainment of BME groups in particular, was also raised.

Higher education institutions

Mary Malcolm discussed best practice in widening participation and making participation meaningful. She emphasised the importance of expanding aspiration beyond the point of entry to university, and noted the effectiveness of involving local partners and tracking students engaged in outreach. She also discussed the successful use of employability courses and graduate development programmes. She cautioned that universities must be careful to make sure that these measures are not simply remedial, and are taken with the expectation of students achieving top grades.

- Attendees discussed changes in the way universities are spending money on widening participation, moving away from marketing towards more effective long-term sustained outreach work.
- Attendees shared examples of universities, such as those in Glasgow, that offer transferable credits and summer schools to give more flexibility to students.
- Attendees noted the importance of universities working closely with student unions.
- Attendees noted the obstacles facing some students when accessing extracurricular activities, work experience and volunteering, which may be important when entering the job market.

Beyond higher education: Schools, colleges and third sector groups

Samuel Light spoke about his experience of accessing university and the barriers that some students face. He emphasised the importance of schools collaborating with universities, and suggested linking disadvantaged students with employers as part of improved careers advice and guidance. Attendees highlighted the importance of being able to access work experience opportunities, and suggested that schools keep in touch with inspirational alumni.

Attendees discussed the importance of third sector organisations collaborating with universities, and the role that these organisations can play in engaging parents and families of disadvantaged students.

For further information, please contact Alexander Lee, Public Affairs Officer, National Union of Students (alexander.lee@nus.org.uk).