



# Towards a new mission for widening participation

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**UPP Foundation  
Inquiry 2025**



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**Key facts  
and figures**

# Key facts and figures

**53.4%**

Percentage of people aged 30 and under who have entered higher education.<sup>A</sup>

**2017**

The first year the target of 50% of young people going to higher education was met.<sup>B</sup>

**564,940**

The total number of accepted applicants at the end of the 2024 UCAS cycle.<sup>C</sup>

**48,700**

The total number of full time English-domiciled students starting courses in 2022 who were classified as significantly disadvantaged.<sup>D</sup>

**20.4pp**

The gap between London's higher education participation rate in 2022/23 (61.2%) and that in the North East (40.8%).<sup>F</sup>

**£859m**

The total amount spent by higher education providers on access and participation in 2022/23.<sup>G</sup>

**20.8pp**

The progression rate gap for 2025 between students who are free school meal eligible and non-FSM eligible: the highest on record.<sup>H</sup>

**£5000**

The annual "graduate premium" for young graduates over non graduates in 2025.<sup>I</sup>

**13.1%**

The higher education participation rate for 18 year olds in Barrow-in-Furness in 2023, compared to a national average of 35.8%.<sup>J</sup>

**75%**

The % of teachers in London expecting at least half the class to progress to HE, compared to just...<sup>K</sup>

**45%**

...of teachers in the North West, and Yorkshire and the North East.<sup>L</sup>

**81%**

The number of parents with children under the age of 18 who said they wanted them to go to university.<sup>M</sup>

**£8,405**

The gap between available maintenance support and the minimum income standard for a student studying outside of London.<sup>N</sup>

**18.7**

The number of hours per week at minimum wage a student in England would need to work to cover this shortfall.<sup>O</sup>

**9.4pp**

The gap in continuation rates in 2021/22 between the most advantaged and most disadvantaged students.<sup>P</sup>

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**25%**

The percentage of students stating that they never engaged in any extra curricular activities while at university.<sup>Q</sup>

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**28%**

Rise in the number of students not completing a university course between 2018/19 and 2022/23.<sup>R</sup>

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**26.6%**

The number of students reporting taking on or increasing their hours of paid work to cover increased cost of living.<sup>S</sup>

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A: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7857/CBP-7857.pdf>

B: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7857/CBP-7857.pdf>

C: <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/ucas-releases-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-2024#:~:text=Overall%2C%20the%20number%20of%20accepted,on%2Dyear%20increase%20since%202021.>

D: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/how-we-are-run/key-performance-measures/kpm-5-access-to-higher-education/>

F: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education>

G: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-plan-data/data-from-access-and-participation-plans/>

I: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/are-universities-worth-it/>

J: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/07/18/five-things-to-watch-ahead-of-results-day-2024/>

K: New Public First polling of teachers, via Teacher Tapp

L: New Public First polling of teachers, via Teacher Tapp

M: New Public First nationally representative polling of parents

N: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/06/09/students-cost-of-living-the-he-general-election-issues-day-5/>

O: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/06/09/students-cost-of-living-the-he-general-election-issues-day-5/>

P:

Q: <https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/3135-Student-Futures-Commission-Digital.pdf>

R: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-66940041>

S: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/cost-of-living-and-university-students-2023/>



**Introducing  
the UPP  
Foundation  
Inquiry**

# Introduction

## Introducing the UPP Foundation Inquiry: Towards a new mission for widening participation

Labour's Opportunity Mission, published before the 2025 General Election, set out an ambition to 'break down barriers to opportunity'. It clearly articulates a multi-generational challenge: to make sure that children and young people can get on, no matter what their background; to change Britain so that a children's future earnings are no longer limited by those of their parents; and to make Britain one of the fairest countries in the OECD.

The Opportunity Mission is ambitious in its overall aims, and transformational if these ambitions can be realised. But this remains

a big 'if'. While there was a pledge to "build on the legacy of the last Labour government's target for 50% of young people to go to university"<sup>T</sup>, there was no equivalent target or metric set to match the scale of the New Labour pledge in 1999. This is understandable. The Government rightly understands that the challenge is multidimensional, one which demands that they look at Widening Participation (WP) in the broadest possible sense, scrutinising not only enrolment numbers, but also continuation rates, success rates, and less easily quantifiable measures of success, such as experience while at university.

As the Secretary of State said:

*There is more to do on widening participation, on getting people to know that university can be for them, on accepting that is a role for universities and not just for schools. There is more to do on supporting people from non-traditional backgrounds to get on at university, as well as to get in.*

- Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, Universities UK Conference, October 2023<sup>U</sup>

But there remains significant access challenges. As this paper sets out, the participation gap between those who are free school meal eligible and non-free school meal eligible is the highest on record. Young Londoners are around 20% more likely to go to university than those from the North East.<sup>V</sup> As a Foundation we have also funded projects to support the participation and experience of care leavers and people who have suffered homelessness, and the challenges for people who have specific vulnerabilities are even more stark. Equality of opportunity continues to be an ideal, not the reality. It is therefore important that any agenda or approach for widening participation is both ambitious for access to university and ambitious for the experience at university (and beyond).

The Government recognises this. In the Secretary of State's letter to the sector setting out the inflationary fee rise, expanding access and improving outcomes for disadvantaged students was the first of her five priorities for reform of the higher education system.<sup>W</sup> But the challenges today dwarf those from when the Blair Government introduced the 50% target, or when the Coalition Government claimed to introduce "much tougher conditions on widening participation and fair access"<sup>X</sup> as a condition for raising fees. The sector is facing unprecedented financial challenges. The crisis in university funding and the subsequent restructuring and reshaping of higher education providers has the potential to undermine Labour's WP ambitions and blow the government off

Footnote T: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Mission-breaking-down-barriers.pdf>

Footnote U: <https://www.bridgetphillipson.com/speeches/2023/09/07/speech-universities-uk-conference/>

Footnote V: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education>

Footnote W: <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2024/11/Letter-from-the-Education-Secretary-4.11.24.pdf>

Footnote X: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/progressive-plans-for-higher-education>

course. The Country's fiscal position and the dramatic changes to geopolitics means that the funding challenges are likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Despite the difficult environment we think this agenda is too important to be put on the back burner. And with the Government making it clear that Widening Participation and access are issues that needs concrete action, The UPP Foundation, supported by Public First, is launching an inquiry to establish a new mission for widening participation. The current moment provides a significant opportunity to take a fresh look at a holistic approach to access and participation. To interrogate the way in which access and participation, student finance, student experience on campus, careers guidance, and student belonging intersect.

This inquiry comes at a crucial moment as the new government begins to translate its Opportunity Mission into concrete policies. We want to help the sector, the Office for Students and the Government fill some of the gaps from the Opportunity Mission to set out a series of evidence-based goals and policies which could help make the broader vision a reality, while recognising 'the art of the possible' in an era of fiscal restraint.

This first paper, launching the inquiry, sets out the key issues for access and widening participation in 2025, exploring some of the progress made over the last twenty-five years, but also identifying some persistent gaps and issues that remain unresolved. The paper also includes new data from two short polls of parents and teachers. We found that:

- 75% of teachers in London expect at least half of their class to progress to higher education, compared to just 45% in the North West and Yorkshire and the North East, and just 48% in the Midlands
- Nearly a quarter (24%) of teachers think that the main barrier to higher education progression for their students is an inability of their students to achieve the required grades.
- Teachers in schools with a more affluent intake, as measured by the percentage

of students eligible for free school meals (FSM), believe that more of their students will attend university: more than two-thirds of teachers in the most affluent quartile of schools (69%) feel that at least half of their students will go to university, compared to just one-third of teachers in schools in the most deprived quartile of schools (32%).

- Similarly, 75% of teachers in Ofsted Outstanding schools thought that more than half their class would progress to higher education, compared to just 35% in schools which were rated Requires Improvement or Inadequate
- University is still the preferred post-18 option for the majority of parents, ahead of degree apprentice routes - but over a third of parents (36%) think tuition fees are too expensive, and 31% are concerned about the high cost of living for students.

Following this, we plan to spend the next few months exploring two key questions:

The first investigation will explore how and why there has been persistent failure to raise higher education participation in "cold spot" regions of the country, where a significantly lower than average proportion of young people go on to attend university or a higher education provider. These places often lack an anchor institution or nearby university, but this alone does not explain why, despite repeated interventions and initiatives, these areas of the country remain behind in terms of higher education participation. We want to explore how attitudes toward higher education in cold spots might be impacting overall progression rates, and what interventions might start to substantially improve regional disparities in participation.

The second will look at the disparities in the student experience that have widened dramatically in the last four years. Some of these changes were explored in the UPP Foundation's Student Future Commission, which identified a rise in new technology-enabled teaching and learning, but also a profound disconnect between students and their universities, and an unsettled sense of belonging.

In particular, the pressures of the cost of living (which can also be framed in a student context as the cost of learning) over the last few years have further exposed the very different ways in which students are now interacting with university and their overall time in higher education. Those from more disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be in part-time or even full-time work, commuting long distances, and disengaged from their institution or university life. This is driven in part by the living experience as rising prices and the shortage (or poor-quality supply) of accommodation in some towns and cities is contributing to a bifurcation of the student experience, not to mention wider town-gown tensions.

Our second investigation will therefore

explore further how university experiences differ depending on students' socio-economic statuses and how this contributes to continuation and completion rates, impacting graduate outcomes.

The UPP Foundation Inquiry will culminate in a set of clear recommendations. These recommendations will be grounded in evidence gathered throughout the investigation, and will offer concrete approaches that could help the higher education sector and wider partners fill in the blanks left by the Opportunity Mission. Through this inquiry, we hope to translate the government's ambitious rhetoric about breaking down barriers into action that will drive progress into the 2030s.



Richard Brabner  
**Executive Chair, UPP Foundation**



**State of the  
nation for  
widening  
participation**

# State of the nation for widening participation

**Over the last thirty years, more and more young people have been going to university.**

The growth in the UK's higher education sector over the past 25 years has produced a system in which more young people are choosing to go to university than ever before.

The story of undergraduate education in England over the last thirty years is one of growth being prioritised and achieved by politicians of all stripes. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992<sup>Y</sup> allowed polytechnics to take themselves out of local authority control and incorporate as higher education institutions, removing what was framed in the Conservative Manifesto 1992

as a 'false binary', and expanded student loan provision to capitalise on growing demand for undergraduate education.<sup>3</sup> Shortly afterwards, in 1994, the nascent UCAS achieved its aim of providing a fully unified application system for the HE sector for the first time in English history.<sup>4</sup> In 1997, Tony Blair set out a goal for 50% of young people to go to university by the time they were 30 (a goal that would be achieved much sooner - 2017 - than the timeframe of 'in the next century' that Blair set out), and the Sutton Trust was founded in the same year in an effort to drive more equitable access to higher education.<sup>5</sup>

## Percentage of people aged 30 and under who have entered higher education



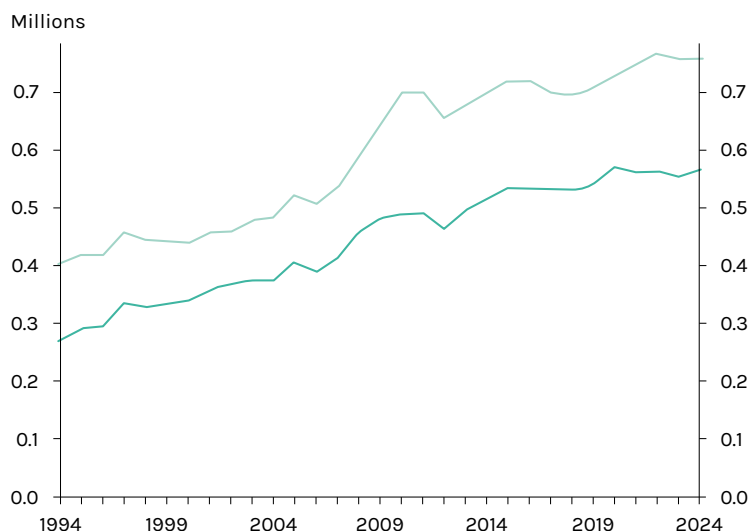
3. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/higher-education-in-general-election-manifestos-the-1990s/>

5. <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/25-Years-of-University-Access.pdf>

Y: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/13/contents>

In the thirty years since UCAS began offering a fully unified admissions system, there has been dramatic expansion in home undergraduate applications and acceptances. In 1994, there were 405,000 applicants and 271,000 acceptances through UCAS; by 2024, those numbers had increased to 752,000 and 565,000 respectively, of whom 495,000 were home students.<sup>2</sup> Although the number of undergraduates in higher education dipped following tuition fee increases in the early 2010s, and the number of part-time entrants to HE fell by 42% between 2009/10 and 2020/21, the total number of home undergraduates in HE reached 2,053,520 by 2022/23, up from 1,541,225 in 2000/01.<sup>7</sup>

## Applicants and acceptances via UCAS



**Getting to this point has been a combined effort, with policymakers, universities, schools and sector bodies all contributing to greater breadth in access to university.**

The push for greater access to higher education has thus been a collective and collaborative effort. Policymakers have established at least four separate collaborative outreach initiatives since 2000, beginning with the Excellence Challenge under David Blunkett and continuing through to the present day with Uni Connect. Although each of these initiatives has had a different focus, they have all aimed to dismantle the barriers to participation among various disadvantaged groups and overcome the collective action problems that encourage universities to focus their recruitment efforts on narrow groups of students.<sup>8</sup> Since 2018, the Office for Students has had overall responsibility for ensuring fair access to universities (replacing the Office for Fair Access), with universities being required to evidence efforts to address barriers to equitable participation through Access and Participation Plans.<sup>9</sup>

This ‘top-down’ approach to improving access to higher education has been matched by a ‘bottom-up’ approach from the school sector

and allied organisations, who have responded to the increasing political salience of access to HE with efforts of their own. Schools have been incentivised to provide greater support for students to apply to universities, with the DfE recording the destinations of schools and colleges’ students after they have finished their 16-18 education, including the proportion of disadvantaged students reaching university,<sup>10</sup> and Ofsted including it within their inspection framework. They have been supported in this endeavour by a wide range of allied organisations, working at the intersection between school and higher education such as the Sutton Trust, the Brilliant Club, IntoUniversity, the Access Project,<sup>11</sup> the UPP Foundation, Villiers Park Education Trust and many more.

These top-down and bottom-up efforts to improve rates of participation in higher education have operated in a media climate that is increasingly receptive to widening participation narratives, accelerating progress further.

6. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7857/CBP-7857.pdf>

7. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he#characteristics>

8. <https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Collaborative-Outreach-Review-Report.pdf>

9. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/access-and-participation-plans/>

10. <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/schools-by-type?step=default&table=schools&region=all-england&for=secondary>

11. <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/25-Years-of-University-Access.pdf>

Z. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7857/CBP-7857.pdf>

Going to university in some form remains the most popular option for parents when they consider their preferences for their own children. 81% of parents with children under the age of 18 said they wanted them to go to university. When we asked parents to rank from a list of options, a traditional university route was the most popular overall, with

degree apprenticeships a close second (and the most popular choice for parents from lower socio-economic groups). This is in spite of comparative public apathy towards universities as a force for good within society, with under 4 in 10 adults in the UK saying that they think universities have a positive impact on society.<sup>12</sup>

## You said you had children under the age of 18. Here are some options for what your child(ren) might do when they leave education at age 18.

Please rank them in order of which you would most like them to do when they leave education.



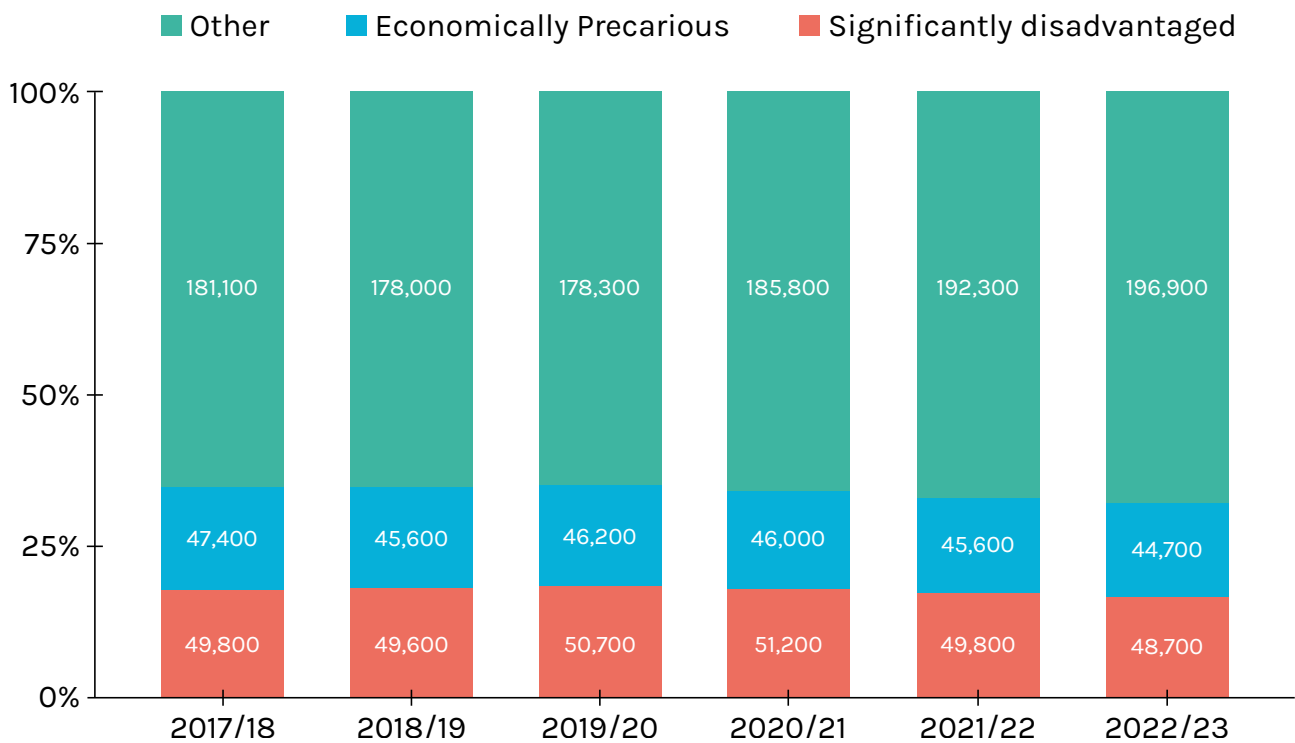
12. [https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2020-06/kings\\_university\\_.pdf](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2020-06/kings_university_.pdf)

However, despite this overall increase in progression to university, there remain marked inequalities in rates of access to HE.

Despite this progress in overall application numbers and rates of higher education progression, persistent socioeconomic gaps in access to HE remain, and in some cases are increasing. This is the case across multiple demographic characteristics, including socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity. Closing these gaps will need to be at the heart of any future strategy for widening

participation. For example, data from the Office for Students tracking access to higher education as a key performance indicator for the regulator shows that the proportion of students accessing higher education each year who can be classed as significantly disadvantaged or economically precarious have both fallen as a percentage of the total over the past five years.

### Office for Students: Access to higher education

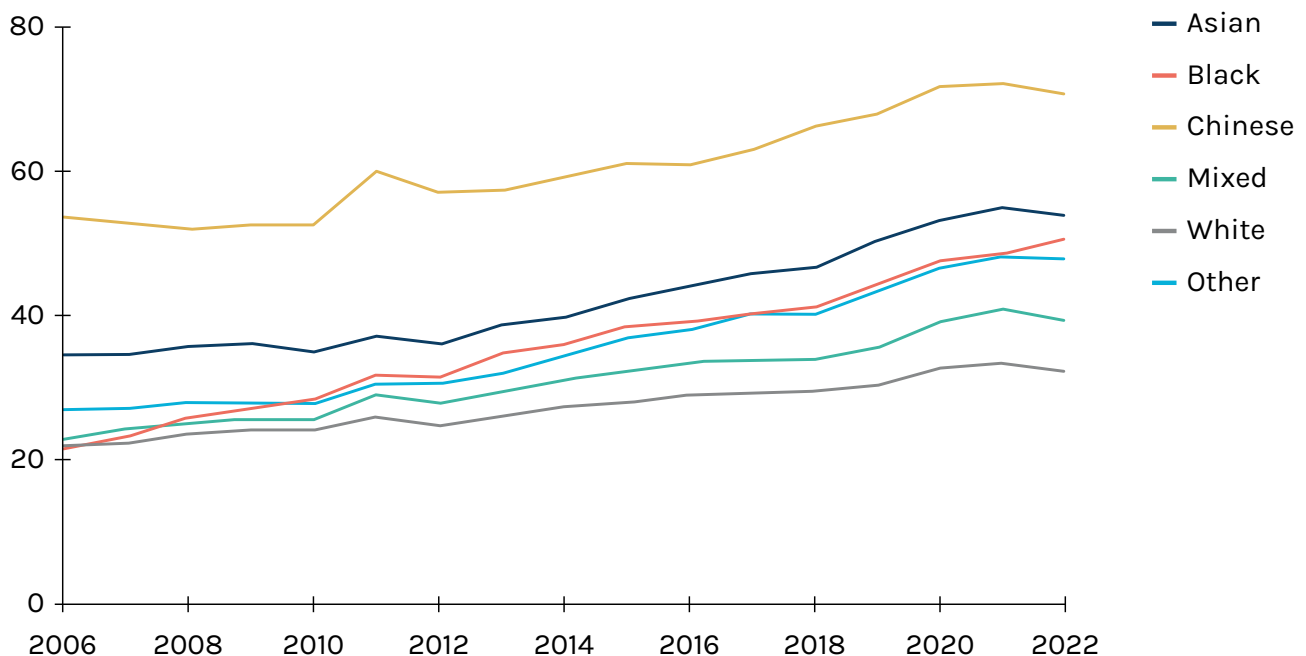


The gap between the rates at which FSM and non-FSM young people go to university has widened in recent years in most areas of England: in 2022/23, among pupils who had been eligible for free school meals (FSM) at age 15, the rate of progression to HE by age 19 was 29%, with the gap in progression rates between FSM-eligible and non-FSM-eligible pupils standing at a high of 20.8%.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that the top-down and bottom-up efforts to support WP have limited power to shrink the gap between rates of access to HE

for disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers.

As well as inequalities on the basis of socioeconomic status, there are also ethnic and gender-based gaps in rates of HE progression. For example, white pupils were the least likely to progress to HE by age 19, with the gap between their rate of progression and the progression rate of Asian/Asian British young people more than 26 percentage points.<sup>14</sup>

### Percentage of state school pupils aged 18 years who were accepted to higher education in the UK, by ethnicity over time



Progression to HE also remains stronger among women than men, and women have consistently higher continuation, completion and attainment rates.<sup>15</sup> DfE data reveals that for school pupils in England who took their GCSEs in 2018, the rate of progression to HE by 19 was 53.6% for females and 40.4% for males, with the 13.2 percentage point gap up from 7.8 percentage points a decade earlier.<sup>16</sup> Enrolment rates remain unequal as well: UCAS's end-of-cycle data for 2023 shows that 57% of applicants were female.<sup>17</sup>

Overlapping demographics are thus particularly at risk, with White British FSM-eligible boys among the most underrepresented groups in HE: Just 14% of white British boys eligible for free school meals progress to higher education, and OfS modelling estimates that 96% of 18-19 year olds in this demographic will sit within the quintile of young people least likely to access higher education.<sup>18</sup>

13. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education>

14. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education>

15. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/poxjljvx/student-characteristics-data-outcomes-report-2024.pdf>

16. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education/2021-22#releaseHeadlines-tables> [data accessed 25/03/2024]

17. <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-resources-2023>

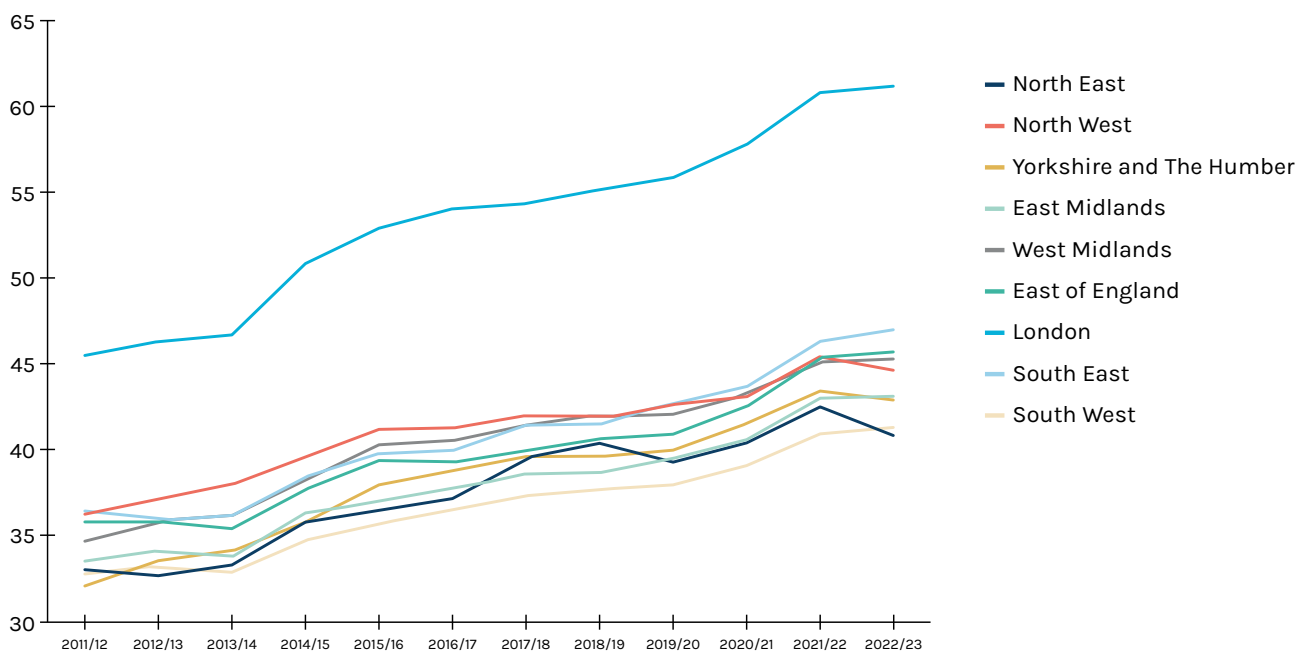
18. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/associations-between-characteristics-of-students/access-to-higher-education/>

## There have also been significant geographical differences in the extent to which disadvantaged young people have been going to university at 18

As the UPP Foundation has outlined in previous work, universities act as important civic anchor institutions in Britain today.<sup>19</sup> This means that as well as providing facilities, opportunities and learning for the communities within which they exist, universities have the potential to change the way in which those living nearby understand themselves and their relationship with the place in which they live. In other words, universities have a profound effect on the places in which they exist, and it is therefore pertinent to understand WP from a place-based perspective.

Alongside gender- and ethnicity-based inequality in rates of progression to HE, there are also sizeable gaps in the rates at which young people from different parts of the country progress to HE by age 19. In 2022-23, the HE progression rate was 46.9% for England as a whole, but London had a progression rate of 61.2%, whereas the North East had a progression rate of 40.8%. The gap in progression rates to selective universities is similarly pronounced, with the HE progression rate to high-tariff universities 21.9% in London as compared to 11.8% in the North East.<sup>20</sup> As well as this, there is a gap in the rates at which FSM-eligible young people progress to HE nationwide, with London's progression rate 48.6% in 2022/23 and the North East's 21.8%.<sup>AA</sup>

### Regional higher education participation 2011/12 – 20



When broken down further, we see even starker variations in geographical rates of participation. 27.1% of 18-year-olds in Houghton and Sunderland South - Bridget Phillipson's parliamentary constituency - progressed to HE in 2024; 9.3 percentage

points lower than the national entry rate. 71.1% of 18-year-olds in Wimbledon entered higher education in 2024 - the highest UK constituency - compared to just 11.2% in Barrow-in-Furness.<sup>AA</sup>

19. <https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Civic-University-Commission-Final-Report.pdf>

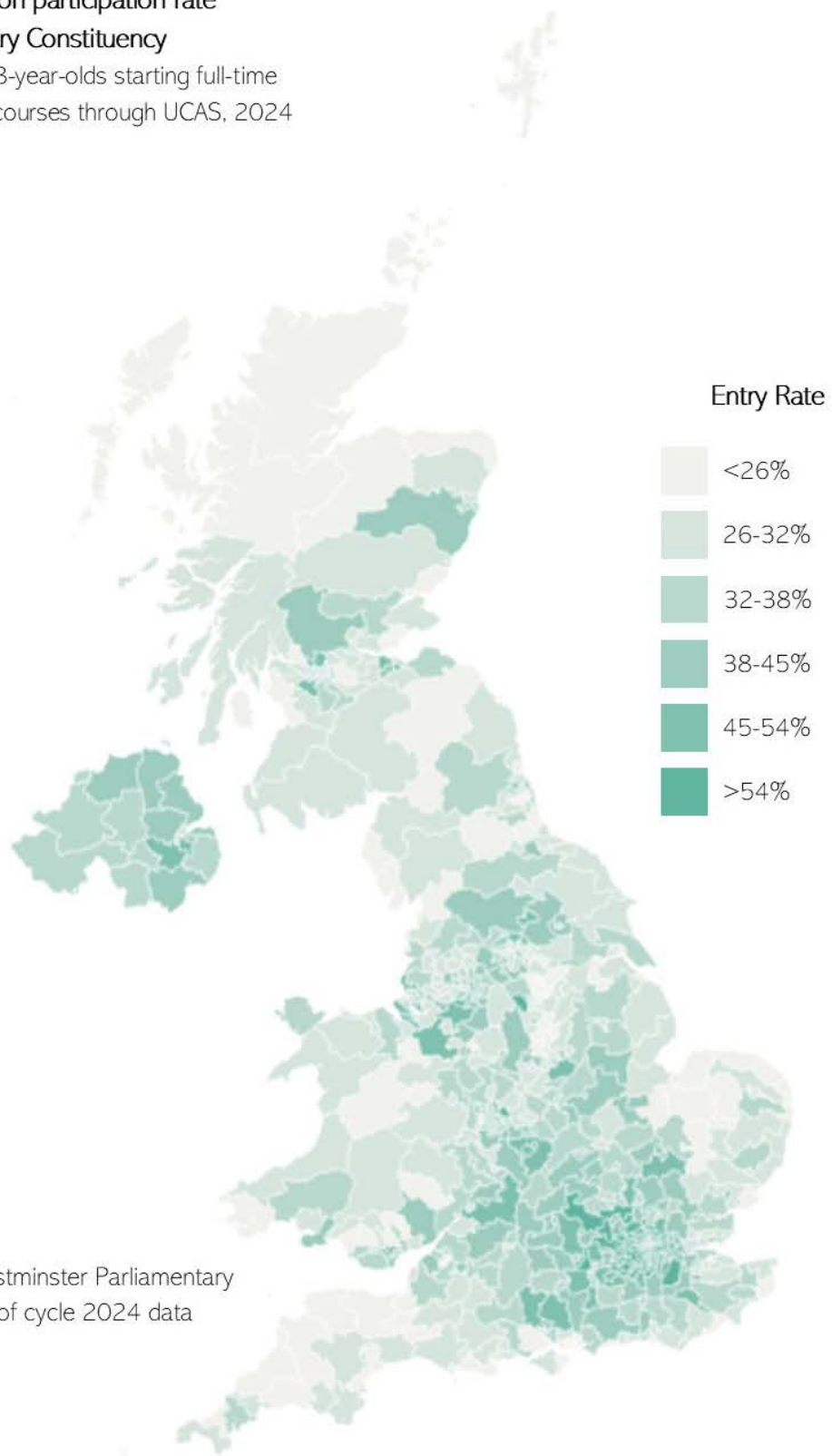
20. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/widening-participation-in-higher-education/2022-23?subjectId=5596cb38-607c-4f9b-0f5c-08dce44b7599>

AH: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/widening-participation-in-higher-education/2022-23?subjectId=c78c00be-0f46-443f-0f64-08dce44b7599>

AA: <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-resources-2023/westminster-parliamentary-constituency-dashboard-end-cycle-2023>

## Higher Education participation rate by Parliamentary Constituency

Proportion of 18-year-olds starting full-time  
undergraduate courses through UCAS, 2024



Source: UCAS Westminster Parliamentary  
Constituency end of cycle 2024 data

In our poll of teachers, we asked, based on the class they most recently taught, what percentage they expected will progress to university within 2 years of leaving education aged 18. Here we also found significant

regional differences, with 75% of teachers in London expecting at least half the class to progress to HE, compared to just 45% in the North West and Yorkshire and the North East, and 47% in the Midlands.

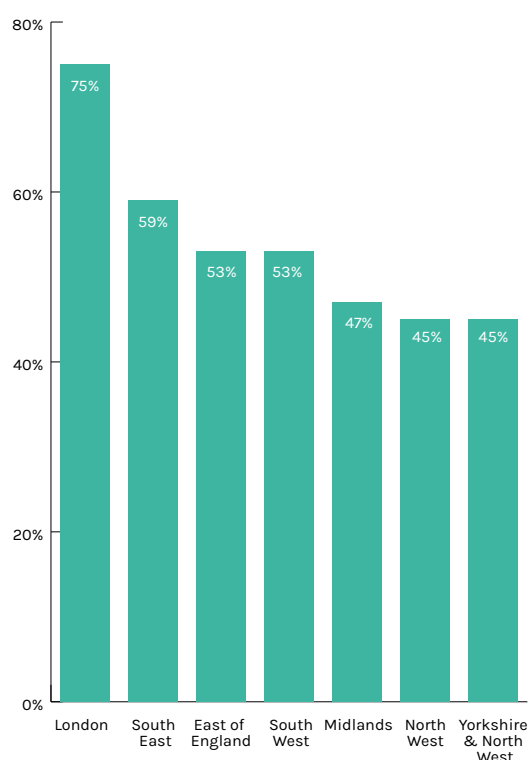
## Think of the class you most recently taught. What percentage of that class you expect will go to university within 2 years of leaving education at age 18?

	East of England	London	Midlands	North West	South East	South West	Yorkshire and North East
0%	5%	2%	5%	5%	4%	5%	9%
10%	12%	4%	13%	12%	8%	9%	14%
20%	10%	3%	12%	12%	7%	9%	11%
30%	11%	9%	13%	12%	10%	11%	10%
40%	7%	5%	7%	9%	7%	9%	5%
50%	13%	11%	13%	14%	13%	15%	14%
60%	8%	9%	7%	6%	9%	9%	6%
70%	7%	12%	7%	8%	8%	7%	9%
80%	7%	12%	9%	6%	10%	7%	6%
90%	9%	11%	7%	7%	11%	7%	6%
100%	9%	20%	4%	4%	8%	8%	4%

Part of this gap in progression to HE is explained by regional attainment gaps, which are visible at both Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5. London outperforms the rest of the country in this regard, with an Attainment 8 score of 50.9 as of March 2025 against an overall average for England of 46.1, whereas the North East has an average Attainment 8 score of 43.4.<sup>AB</sup> This trend is replicated in Key Stage 5, where average points score (APS) per A Level entry is 35.31 for London but 33.68 for the North East, and just 32.61 in the East Midlands.

These gaps become starker still when examined through the lens of disadvantage. In 2023, the average gap in grades at the end of 16-19 education between disadvantaged students and their peers in England was 3.2 grades (a figure that had remained static since 2019), but London had a gap of only 1.4 grades, whereas the North East and South West saw the gap reach 4.2 grades. With this trend replicated in key stages lower down,<sup>21</sup> it is likely that we will see 'baked in' levels of inequality in progression to HE in future years.

### Teachers who expect 50% or more of their classes to go onto university within 2 years of leaving education at 18



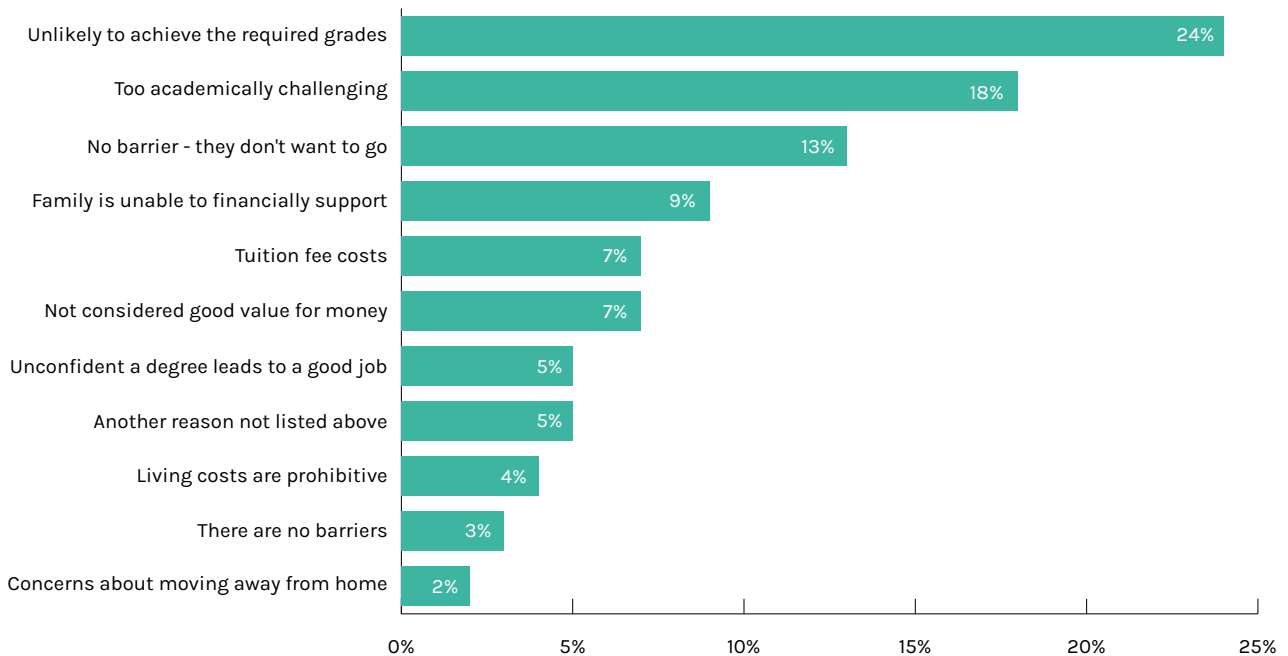
21. <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-regional-gaps-2/>

AB: [https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/lgastandard?mod-metric=6014&mod-area=E92000001&mod-group=ADASSRegionsFrom2018\\_19\\_North-East&mod-type=namedComparisonGroup&mod-period=1](https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/lgastandard?mod-metric=6014&mod-area=E92000001&mod-group=ADASSRegionsFrom2018_19_North-East&mod-type=namedComparisonGroup&mod-period=1), [data accessed on 24/03/25].

Teachers were most likely to suggest that a lack of academic credentials - either in terms of not achieving the right academic grades, or

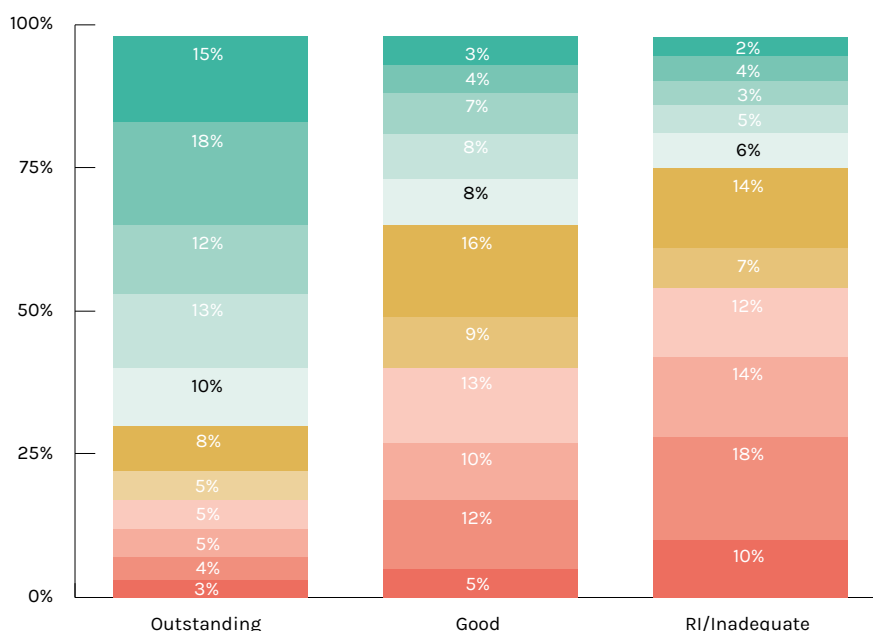
university being too academically challenging - were the biggest single barrier for students who they did not expect to go on to university.

## Thinking of the students you do not think will go to university, what is the MAIN barrier preventing them from going?



There are, however, some aspects of the progression rate gap that cannot just be explained by geographical differences in attainment. We also found significant differences between school types, with a pronounced difference in the expected number of students attending higher education reported by teachers at Ofsted rated outstanding schools compared to those

rated “requires improvement” or “inadequate”. 34% of teachers in outstanding-rated schools expected at least 90% of their most recent class to go to university, with 68% indicating that they expect more than half their class will progress to higher education. In schools rated RI/inadequate, only 6% of teachers expect more than 90% to go to university, and 20% expect more than half to progress.

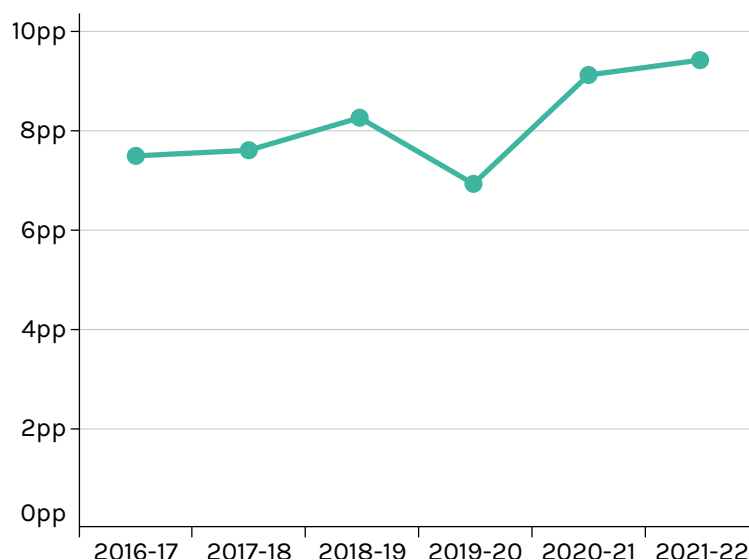


## Persistent gaps in continuation, completion and attainment rates between advantaged and disadvantaged are now beginning to widen rather than shrink.

Despite a significant amount being spent each year on student support, including that targeted at disadvantaged students, we continue to also see gaps in continuation, completion and attainment between advantaged and disadvantaged students widen rather than close.

The continuation gap between students in IMD quintile 5 (least deprived) and quintile 1 (most deprived) reached 9.4pp in 2021-22, compared to 7.5pp in 2016-17. 92.4% of students in IMD quintile 5 complete their course, compared to just 81.6% of those from quintile one - and again the gap has widened over the last six years. 77.2% of the most advantaged students go on to managerial or professional employment or further study, compared to 67.2% of their less advantaged peers.<sup>22</sup>

### Deprivation (IMD 2019): gap between quintile 5 and quintile 1



## Over the past several years, factors such as the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have had a negative and unevenly-distributed impact on the student experience.

Many of the challenges affecting society over the last few years have affected the university experience, with many of these difficulties being borne particularly by less well-off students. Even as enrolment rates were rising through 2020 and 2021, there was a well-broadcast epidemic of poor mental health and wellbeing in the student population as young people faced the effects of remote learning and social distancing throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Surveys by both the ONS and Student Minds found that HE students had lower levels of life satisfaction between January 2021 and January 2022,<sup>23</sup> with 74% of students saying that Covid-19 had had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing at university.<sup>24</sup> With

students experiencing declared mental health conditions at rates above 5%<sup>25</sup> and Public Health England acknowledging links between deprivation and worse mental health and wellbeing outcomes,<sup>26</sup> there is a risk that students from less well-off backgrounds experience poorer mental health and wellbeing while studying.<sup>27</sup>

Closely related to the mental health crisis that students have experienced in recent years is the rising cost of living. The cost-of-living crisis had a considerable effect on the student experience, with the average student's maintenance loans falling some distance short of covering their outgoings each month. Large year-on-year rises in living

22. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/data-dashboard/>

23. [https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/student\\_minds\\_research\\_wave\\_iii\\_2\\_.pdf](https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/student_minds_research_wave_iii_2_.pdf)

24. <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/lifeinapandemic.html>

25. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8593/CBP-8593.pdf>

26. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8593/>

27. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/better-mental-health-jsna-toolkit/2-understanding-place>

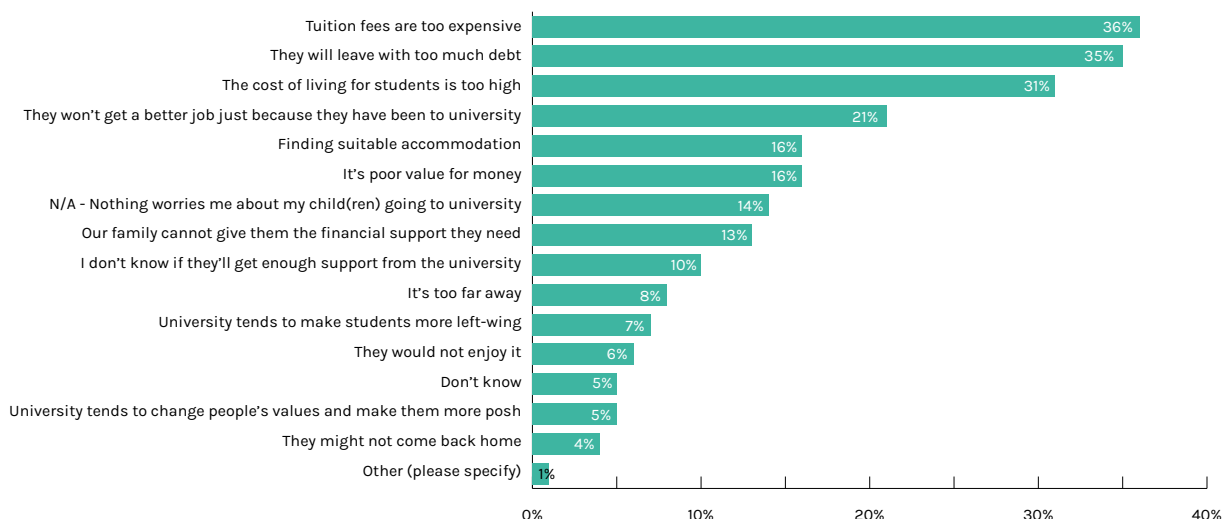
28. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2025-01/opportunity-growth-and-partnership-a-blueprint-for-change-170125.pdf>

costs (including an 8% average rise in rent costs in 2023)<sup>28</sup> slowed in 2024, but this has not halted the adverse impact of high cost of student life on learners' experiences of university, with the proportion of students surveyed receiving hardship funding doubling in 2024 and 22% of students saying that they often skip meals to save money.<sup>29</sup> This financial anxiety is also being felt by applicants, who are apprehensive about the costs involved with going to university.<sup>30</sup> Universities are attempting to address the cost-of-living challenges that students from less well-off backgrounds face in particular, but provision is unpredictable and uneven.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, many of the universities with the highest proportions of WP students are post-92 universities with lower overall endowments,<sup>32</sup> and thus less to spend on

supporting their larger WP cohorts. As well as this, an increasing proportion of students are commuting from home to university, with the cost of living away from home a key factor in this decision, but the decision to become a commuter student incurs costs of its own in academic and financial terms, with these students reporting lower grades than expected due to spending less time on campus.<sup>33</sup>

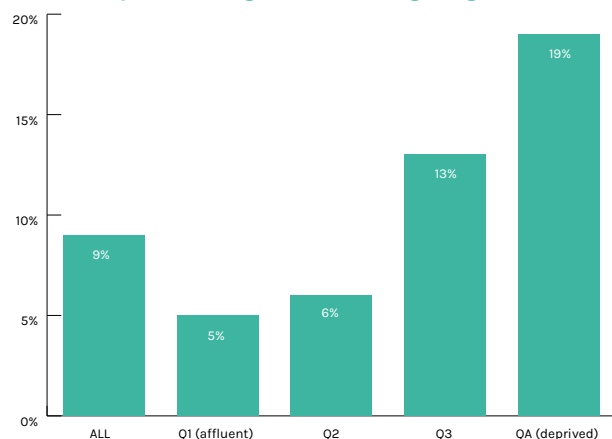
Concerns about costs could be seen in both our teacher and parent polling. All of the top three concerns listed by parents when asked about their children attending university were associated with costs: 36% worried tuition fees are too expensive; 35% worried students would leave with too much debt; and 31% worried that the cost of living for students is too high.

### Of the following options, which (if any) would worry you most about sending your child(ren) to university? Please select up to three



In our teacher survey, the inability of families to give adequate additional financial support was much more likely to be a barrier to progression for teachers from deprived areas than more affluent areas.

### Thinking of the students you do not think will go to university, what is the MAIN barrier preventing them from going?



29. <https://www.savesthestudent.org/money/surveys/student-money-survey-2023-results.html>

30. <https://theaccessproject.org.uk/2024/04/25/cost-of-living-crisis-the-effect-on-education/#:~:text=58%25%20of%20students%20said%20their,compared%20to%2053%25%20last%20year.>

31. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/latest/news/latest-ons-survey-reveals-impact-cost>

32. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/widening-participation>

33. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/inequalities/2024/04/09/the-spiralling-costs-of-higher-education-are-hitting-stay-at-home-students-harder/>

This chimes with previous work in this field, in which both the UPP Foundation and other allied organisations have established that students feel less engaged with student life and more financially dependent on their families than they might have hoped. For example, the UPP Foundation found in 2024 that 44% of students were less engaged with extracurricular activities than they had expected to be before arriving at university, and 25% had never engaged at all, with many focus group participants suggesting that the cost of these activities was a prohibiting factor.<sup>AC</sup> Elsewhere, the Sutton Trust found in 2023 that nearly 47% of students socialised less with friends<sup>AD</sup> and over a quarter (26.6%) had to take on or increase their level of paid employment in order to adjust to the cost-of-living crisis.<sup>AF</sup> Collectively, these findings speak to a deep link between high costs of learning and a less well-rounded university experience, particularly for those from WP backgrounds.

The bifurcation of the student experience between those able to fully access the benefits of teaching, learning and extra curricular activities, and those who are not, is apparent.

Overall, more than half of all full time undergraduate students are now working during studies - and doing on average nearly two days a week. But this headline figure - and it should be stressed that the rise of students working during term time has been shown in university systems across Europe, including systems with low or no tuition fees - disguises an increasingly divergent picture depending on students' socio economic status:

- Of ABC1 students who are working (that is to say, the higher socio economic group), just over 70% are working fewer than 15 hours a week and a further 18% are working 16-35 hours a week - at the highest end, a full time job
- But of C2DE (lower socio economic students) working, fewer than 30% are working 1-15 hours, and over half are working 16-35 - and the remaining almost 1 in 5 students claims to be working more than 36 hours a week<sup>AG</sup>

In other words, even of those working, poorer students are working more hours.

- And previous work by the UPP Foundation on student futures showed a clear link between those students who did and did not participate in wider extra curricular activities, and their sense of belonging:
- For those who participated weekly in some form of extra activity at university, 75% felt they “belonged” at their institution, against 8% who disagreed
- But for those who never participated, only 44% felt they belonged, and 27% disagreed.<sup>AE</sup>

We know from the same work that the reasons given for non participation included costs, and logistics - with commuter students less likely to feel engaged.

It is not hard to see a picture of emerging of two groups of students - those who don't work or who work relatively limited hours, and who have the time and money and logistical capability to engage in university activity and access all the benefits of being a student (and also follow up with academic tutors, spend time in the library, access careers support and so on) - and their peers from lower socio economic backgrounds who are working more hours per week, often at or above full time working hours, who have less time to participate and feel less engaged. And it is equally straightforward to see a link between those feeling less engaged and those who may decide not to continue with higher education.

**Now is the right time to look at both the origins of significant regional disparities in access to HE, focusing on so-called ‘cold spots’, and how we can improve student experiences while at university. The UPP Foundation Inquiry will be publishing two subsequent reports on these issues in the coming months, before concluding with its recommendations to Government in Summer 2025.**

**You can find out more by visiting [website]**

34. <https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/3135-Student-Futures-Commission-Digital.pdf>

AC: <https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/3135-Student-Futures-Commission-Digital.pdf>

AD: <https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/student-voice-cost-of-living/>

AF: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/cost-of-living-and-university-students-2023/>

AE: <https://upp-foundation.org/growing-disconnect-between-students-and-their-university-experience-upp-foundation-report-finds/>

Footnote AG: <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2024/12/Students-at-work-Belong-December-2024.pdf>

