

# Our response to the Office for Students ‘Call for Evidence: Regional Access Partnerships’

Universities UK (UUK) is the collective voice of 141 universities in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Its mission is to create the conditions for UK universities to be the best in the world, maximising their positive impact locally, nationally, and globally. Universities UK acts on behalf of universities, represented by their heads of institution.

## Summary

Universities UK (UUK) has responded to the [OfS call for evidence](#) about proposals to establish new regional access partnerships, to succeed UniConnect from September 2026.

The proposals centre around the establishment of new ‘regional access partnerships’, bringing together local partners such as higher education providers, schools, local organisations, and charities to collaboratively deliver access interventions. These partnerships would operate in much the same way as UniConnect but would rationalise the number, size and shape of regions to align with existing regional structures, such as local authorities and local skills improvement plans. Institutional APPs submitted from May 2027 (for implementation for 2028/29) would then capture the coordinated targeted access efforts agreed between providers in each region.

We have been calling for the establishment of a similar scheme in the form of a [Tertiary Education Opportunity Fund](#), as described in our [Blueprint](#), as an evolution of the UniConnect programme.

We welcome the opportunity to work together with the OfS in designing a national collaborative outreach programme fit for the future and focused on widening access to higher education for learners.

## Key messages

- We welcome the proposal to continue a national programme of collaborative outreach activity, building and learning from the proven effectiveness of UniConnect and previous programmes that came before it. Sustained and long-term investment in this activity will be essential to address inequality in regional participation in higher education and cold spots.
- In order to efficiently harness the collective power of universities to deliver for learners, it will be important to enhance collaboration across the wider education system. This will also improve the accessibility of pathways for learners. However, to effectively incentivise partnership working between institutions operating within a market, it will be vital that the regulator's actions as well as tangible levers encourage the desired collaborative behaviour.
- Collaborating collectively in regions is important to ensure that local solutions are delivered to address local challenges. There is unlikely to be an appropriate one-size-fits-all approach to designating regions. It will be important for regions to be developed through direct engagement with local partners with a flexible approach considering existing local structures and partnerships, demographics of service users, and available resourcing.
- Linking access and outreach activity to skills strategies and the work of Skills England to address regional and national skills needs is an important step. However, this must be done with care to ensure that information, advice and guidance delivered to learners is linked to transparent information about graduate opportunities, enabling each individual to make informed choices that are right for them.

## **Our response**

### **Question 1 – What do effective regions for collaboration on equality of opportunity look like?**

- a) Which existing regional structures does your organisation engage with most? (e.g. local authorities, combined authorities etc.)**
  
- b) What are the opportunities for your organisation if working in defined regions to improve access to higher education?**
  
- c) What should the regional groupings be called? (e.g. Regional access partnerships, Equality of opportunity partnerships etc.)**

Universities already engage in partnership work to address equality of opportunity, for example through activity outlined in university-led APPs, working with charities, partnerships with schools, and engagement with UniConnect. Universities already engage with regional structures when considering provision to address local skills needs via LSIPs, employer needs, and contribution to local communities. However, the current nature of this engagement can be patchy, especially when trying to navigate overlapping geographies of devolution (exacerbated for universities that might fall outside of mayoral strategic authorities, which is the case for 38% of UUK members in England), which limits the ability for effective engagement and can cause inefficient duplicative activity.

The ability for universities to work together regionally with local partners presents a number of opportunities to improve access to higher education. These include planning of provision to address skills needs and address cold spots in course supply, collectively addressing access challenges for smaller communities of underrepresented student groups (such as the children of military servicepeople, or care experienced people), and the ability to regionally evaluate the impact of outreach interventions on access.

The name of the programme should effectively communicate what it is there to do so that it is easy to understand, including for those who are time-poor or outside of the higher education sector. Equality of opportunity relates to broader activity than the currently proposed scope of regional access partnerships so this would be confusing, 'regional access partnerships' therefore probably offers the best option to describe the proposed programme.

## **Question 2 – What are your thoughts on the proposed regions?**

- a) What are the barriers for your organisation to working in the defined regions to improve access to higher education?**
- b) Should the Greater London region be broken down further? What should the areas in London be?**
- c) Which region would your organisation fit well in and why? Does this differ from the proposals?**

Regionality is complex with differing layers of devolution, overlapping geographies and local identities. To a certain extent there is therefore no such thing as a perfect system for designating regions. However, for this reason, it is therefore important that there is close engagement with local stakeholders to understand their local contexts and determine the best approach to designating regions (which will be especially important given that not everyone impacted will have had the time or capacity to respond to this call for evidence). The OfS approach to this should complement rather than disrupt existing collaborative structures. This should include consideration of the number of universities and schools in a given region, as well as the number of target learners. The conclusion reached from this might be for some areas to maintain the current geographical borders of partnerships as they are, supporting the collaborative structures universities already engage with.

Despite the intention for the defined regions to align with regional structures, the current proposed regions don't effectively align with devolved structures (such as local authorities or MCAs) so risk creating an extra layer of local bureaucracy. It would take time and investment to transfer longstanding partnership relationships to new institutions and regions, so we propose that in cases where the borders of a region are changing this change could be best achieved over a staged period of transition. There also needs to be a degree of flexibility for people to work and operate in a way

that is right for them (for example, for universities that are at boundaries between regions). Further, consideration needs to be given for how multi-location or remote providers (such as the OU) can be enabled to access this programme.

### **Question 3 – How could a region best collaborate to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education?**

- a) How could regional partnerships be governed or organised?**
  
- b) How could regional partnerships work together to identify the best ways to target their effort?**
  
- c) How could each region be coordinated or led?**

We know from external evaluation that UniConnect is an effective national collaborative outreach programme in widening participation to higher education. With a multitude of challenges facing the country (including continued regional inequality, stagnant economic growth, skills gaps in areas critical to the future industrial strategy, rising numbers of young people not in education, employment or training), there is opportunity for regional partnerships to evolve to take on a more strategic role locally. Universities are already considering strategic local engagement more widely, but there is scope for this to be further developed in respect of access initiatives. When doing so, expectations should be managed based on the context of significant financial pressures in the higher education sector.

Utilising intelligence from Skills England, local outreach teams could join up advice on study pathways more closely with labour market intelligence relevant to a local area, so that students are equipped to make well-informed choices based on the latest information on skills gaps in graduate jobs. Partnerships can help to both understand and generate demand from learners (including from mature learners for modular provision in the context of the LLE), and coordinate local partners to supply that demand through provision of interventions, programmes, and learning pathways. In this way, the regional partnerships would play a strategic role to broker partnerships and bring together local partners, rather than just delivery of interventions. It is important that this approach is aligned with wider government strategy as expected to be communicated in the upcoming post-16 education and skills white paper, including the higher education reform agenda.

There are some cases where it will be beneficial for regional partnerships to work together, for example on particular access challenges such as diversifying access to creative arts provision, considering the geographic spread of provision across the country.

**Question 4 – One option for leadership and coordination would be working with an independent regional coordinator identified by the OfS to facilitate collaboration in each region. What are your thoughts on this approach?**

The most appropriate model for leadership of the programme will depend on the intended function of the programme (whether that be to deliver outreach interventions across a region itself or to play a more strategic role in brokering partnerships across a region). It is also worth considering how the current UniConnect model involving a lead university in a partnership supports a sector-owned approach to promote trusted partnership working. The role of the ‘coordinator’ could then perhaps be better described as a ‘facilitator,’ helping to facilitate the work of the partnerships as well as strengthen the relationship with the OfS to give weight to the work of the partnerships. When developing this role, it will be important to consider the regulatory powers such an individual would hold and the governance structures that would surround it, clarity on which will be important for relationship management with mayors, LSIP leads, and employers. It is important that universities are able to retain their institutional autonomy to deliver interventions in a way that makes most sense for their own individual contexts.

**Question 5 – What support would be required for your organisation to work collaboratively across a defined region to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education?**

**a) How best could the OfS support collaboration?**

**b) What structures would need to be preserved or in place for your organisation to collaborate effectively?**

Aligning with the wider DfE agenda for universities to be more involved in local structures, explicit encouragement from the OfS for partnerships to work with regional structures (including LSIPs) would incentivise this behaviour. The OfS could

utilise its influence and role to ensure that intelligence gathered through Skills England can be disseminated by universities at a regional level, so that teachers, outreach staff and careers staff are equipped with the latest information about graduate skills needs.

For long-term collaboration to be effective there needs to be certainty about the longer-term policy direction and sustainable funding to support this activity, or else risk the loss of long-standing relationships with schools and third parties as well as highly skilled specialist staff. It should be considered how this can be better achieved given the uncertainty created through the SPG annual budget announcements.

### **Question 6 – What are your views on addressing regional risks to equality of opportunity in your access and participation plan?**

- a) What would it look like to include regional collaboration on access in your APP?**
  
- b) What are your views on APP submissions to the OfS being done in waves according to region?**
  
- c) What are your views on shared accountability for collaborative targets or delivery of other collaborative provisions in APPs? How could this be managed?**

Enhanced regional collaboration when developing institutional APPs means that institutions can consider the spread of access and outreach taking place within a region so that duplication can be avoided and cold spots in outreach activity addressed. This would be enhanced with submission of plans by regional waves. Effective shared efforts to improve equality of opportunity can be enhanced through shared understanding of local challenges. Increased regional collaboration in development of APPs could therefore include agreement on metrics to measure challenges and success, utilising the same datasets to ensure that efforts are based on shared understanding and are labouring in the same direction. Shared accountability could then be built through transparency of institutional targets, however, where useful regions will have the option of agreeing wider targets outside of the APP regime (such as through MCAs, LSIPs or local growth plans).

The new approach to APPs that encourages a risk-based approach to considering individual institutional contexts has been welcome and this should be preserved with individual accountability continued via institutional APPs. However, an unintended consequence of this approach has been to the detriment of smaller groups of underrepresented students (such as the children of military service people, or care experienced people). Considering these groups regionally, reducing duplicative efforts, and implementing outreach interventions that can therefore be delivered at a greater scale would be beneficial for these smaller target groups.

**Question 7 – What are your views on a regional coordinator identified by the OfS providing feedback to us on levels of collaboration reflected in APPs?**

Enhanced collaboration across the sector will have to be built on a basis of mutual trust and a strong relationship with the regulator. An OfS coordinator feeding directly back to the regulator is not the best way to achieve this. However, there is scope to develop and improve on the current information flows between UniConnect leads and the OfS.