REVIEW OF APPROACH TO WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

My Economic Vision places inclusive growth and equitable opportunity at its core. Its four priorities; promoting good jobs with fair pay and security, fostering regional economic balance, raising productivity through skills and innovation, and transitioning to a greener economy, all depend on a higher education system that enables every learner to thrive. Widening participation is central to delivering this vision. By enabling access to higher education, supporting learners throughout their journey, and ensuring successful outcomes, it contributes directly to building a more skilled, inclusive, and resilient workforce. It also supports broader social and economic inclusion, helping to ensure that the benefits of education and prosperity are shared across all communities.

Widening participation refers to efforts that ensure individuals from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds can access, succeed in, and benefit from higher education. These efforts recognise that social, economic, geographic, and personal circumstances can unfairly limit opportunity. Widening participation seeks to remove these barriers through targeted support, inclusive policies, and collaborative action.

While overall participation rates in higher education here compare favourably with other places, persistent gaps remain. I am encouraged by the progress made to date which reflects the collective efforts of the sector. However, challenges remain for some groups facing persistent barriers.

Our unique social, educational, and geographic context, including the legacy of division, regional disparities, and a complex school system, demands an approach to widening participation that is tailored, collaborative, and responsive to local needs. The scale of what we do here offers a unique opportunity to make a real difference. Being smaller than many other places allows us to act with agility, respond quickly to emerging needs, and work closely with one another and support our communities. Within that collaboration lies both power and potential.

This consultation seeks your views on a proposed approach to widening participation that builds on progress to date, responds to emerging challenges, and reflects the voices of stakeholders across the sector. Your feedback will help shape what actions we take forward to support learners to and through higher education, towards outcomes that are meaningful and successful for them.

Together, we have the opportunity to shape a more inclusive and ambitious future - one where every learner, regardless of background, has the chance to thrive.

I look forward to hearing your views.

SUMMARY OF THIS CONSULTATION

Widening participation refers to policies, initiatives, and actions designed to ensure that people from groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education have the opportunity to access, succeed in, and benefit from the opportunities and outcomes that higher education provides.

What is this publication about?

This document sets out a proposed approach to strengthen and refresh widening participation (WP) in higher education, building on the significant work already undertaken in partnership with institutions, community and voluntary organisations, and government departments.

Why is Widening Participation into Higher Education important?

Widening participation in higher education is fundamental to delivering the Minister's Economic Vision, which places inclusive growth and equitable opportunity at its core. By opening access to skills, knowledge, and opportunity, it empowers individuals, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to improve their life chances. For the region, it helps build a more inclusive and resilient society while supporting economic growth through the development of a broader and more skilled workforce. This strengthens productivity, drives innovation, and underpins long-term prosperity.

What needs to be done?

Research reviewing progress since the launch of the 'Access to Success' strategy in 2012 highlights that significant strides have been made. Outreach programmes, access courses, and institutional support services have enabled many learners to overcome barriers to participation. However, despite an overall increase in applications to higher education, persistent gaps remain - particularly for those living in rural areas and individuals with low attainment of formal qualifications. In addition, our engagement and research have identified the need for more targeted support for emerging groups, such as carers and individuals affected by the justice system, as well as action to address gender imbalances in specific disciplines.

How can we work together to do better for all learners?

The proposed approach builds on proven interventions and existing infrastructure. It continues to encourage collaboration, consistency, and continuous improvement, ensuring that widening participation remains responsive to changing needs, emerging challenges, and the voices of those we serve. It reflects what stakeholders have told us through engagement and aims to work collectively to do better for all our learners across our higher education providers. Crucially, it looks beyond access alone, focusing on the full journey to and through higher education, with the goal of supporting successful outcomes comparable to peers, including progression into meaningful graduate employment.

Who will be interested in this publication?

The range of people and organisations interested in this consultation are likely to include:

- Learners and potential learners.
- Parents, carers and families of learners and potential learners.
- Charitable, voluntary and other organisations who work with potential learners or underrepresented communities.
- Higher education providers (including universities and colleges).
- Private Training Organisations.
- Schools and careers advisers.
- Business and industry groups and employers.
- Equality and Human Rights Organisations.
- Student and staff unions.

This is your chance to hear about what is being proposed and have your say. This will help us to understand what the changes might mean for you and help us to make a final decision.

What happens after I respond?

All the responses we receive on the consultation will be summarised and evaluated. A summary of responses received will be published on the departmental website.

We will use the responses to help shape and refine the future approach to widening participation. Our goal is to implement strategic actions that support priority groups on their journey into and through higher education, ensuring outcomes that are meaningful and successful for every learner.

What is being considered and proposed?

The proposed changes are grouped into three sections. Each proposal addresses a specific challenge identified through evidence and stakeholder engagement and is accompanied by consultation questions to gather views on how best to implement or refine the approach. Together, these proposals represent a series of enhancements aimed at improving our widening participation outcomes.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSED APPROACH

SECTION 1: VISION AND PRINCIPLES

Proposed vision: "To ensure that every learner, regardless of background, or circumstance, can access, succeed in, and benefit from higher education, supported by a system that is inclusive, collaborative, and responsive to change."

This vision would be supported by the following proposed principles:

1. **Equity**
   Recognising and addressing structural barriers to participation, ensuring that opportunity is not determined by background.
2. **Responsiveness**
   Adapting to emerging needs, learner diversity, and changing social and economic contexts.
3. **Collaboration**
   Promoting shared responsibility across the education system, including institutions, government, communities, and employers.
4. **Learner-Centred Support**
   Placing the needs, aspirations, and lived experiences of learners at the heart of policy and practice.
5. **Transparency and Accountability**
   Using data and evidence to monitor progress, evaluate impact, and drive continuous improvement.
6. **Alignment with Economic and Social Inclusion**
   Ensuring that widening participation (WP) contributes to regional balance, social mobility, and inclusive growth.

System-Level Targets

A more flexible and collaborative model, avoiding the risks associated with a single target. This would resemble the approach taken in other places, where overarching targets are linked to specific priority groups and tailored to individual institutions. This model may offer a more balanced path for us, combining targeted ambition with system-wide coordination.

Refining Target or Priority Groups

We propose a thematic model for defining priority groups, focusing on four areas:

- Socioeconomic and Geographic Disadvantage;
- Personal Circumstance and Care Experience;
- Educational and Learning Needs; and
- Justice and Economic Disengagement

This approach aims to simplify complexity while addressing persistent barriers to access, success, and progression. It also enables targeted interventions while allowing flexibility for institutions to provide support to others on the basis of local context and emerging needs. A formal review mechanism will ensure the list remains relevant and responsive over time.

SECTION 2: COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH

To ensure that outreach and communications efforts across the higher education sector are strategic, inclusive, and impactful, the proposed purpose of communications and outreach is to:

- Empower learners, and those who support them, to envision higher education pathways, with targeted awareness efforts focused on groups experiencing persistent underrepresentation.
- Support attainment-raising activities, including mentoring, summer schools, and tutoring - that build confidence, strengthen academic foundations, and expand progression opportunities for underrepresented learners.
- Promote alternative routes to higher education, such as Foundation Degrees, Higher Level Apprenticeships and contextual admissions, to ensure flexible entry points that reflect diverse learner journeys and broaden participation.
- Strengthen employer partnerships, highlighting the mutual benefits of widening participation for learners and employers, and ensuring that learners are supported in navigating transitions into the workplace.

Strengthening Contextual Admissions and Pathways

Providers currently adopt varied approaches to contextual admissions, ranging from reduced grade offers to recognition of prior learning and life experience. To ensure fairness and clarity for applicants, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, a consistent framework/ approach is proposed. Contextual admissions should be embedded within a broader plan that includes wraparound support, transparent criteria, and alignment with progression pathways. Improved communication of policies is essential, and greater emphasis could be placed on recognising prior learning, life experience, and transversal skills as valid indicators of potential.

Supporting Retention and Outcomes

Support for retention and outcomes should move beyond entry-level access to focus on sustained achievement and progression. This includes targeted interventions for under-represented groups and a broader recognition of individual success that includes both progression to postgraduate study and access to appropriate graduate employment.

SECTION 3: IMPROVING FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The overarching approach is to ensure that financial support for learners is effective, equitable, and sustainable, with a particular focus on meeting the needs of disadvantaged and priority groups. Any changes to student financial support, including for widening participation (WP) learners, will be considered as part of the wider Higher Education Funding Review, which will provide the strategic framework for future policy decisions in this area.

Enhancing Data, Accountability & Reporting

To address these challenges, a more strategic and coordinated approach to data, accountability, and reporting is proposed. This includes the development of a regional data plan, improved data-sharing protocols, and the exploration of tools to support evidence-based decision-making and continuous improvement. These measures will enable the sector to better understand what works, for whom, and under what circumstances, ensuring that WP interventions are both impactful and equitable.

Support & Structures

It is proposed to formalise and expand the WP Forum as the central cross-sector body for the oversight, implementation, and continuous improvement of widening participation policy and practice. The Forum will provide a platform for collaboration across higher education institutions, further education colleges, community organisations, and employers, enabling the sharing of effective practice, coordinated action, and collective problem-solving. Crucially, it will also support a culture of mutual accountability, where members hold each other to account and work together to address shared challenges. To underpin this, it is proposed a WP Covenant or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) will be developed, setting out common principles and commitments. Governance structures will be strengthened to ensure meaningful learner voice and employer engagement, with representation from learners, community partners, and industry embedded in decision-making processes.

BACKGROUND

What do we mean by widening participation in higher education?

Higher Education refers to third level education that takes place after secondary school, typically at universities, university colleges, or further education colleges offering degrees, diplomas, and professional qualifications. It includes full-time and part-time study, undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and a wide range of subjects and pathways.

Widening Participation has become a term widely used to refer to efforts about ensuring that individuals with the ability to benefit from university-level study are given equitable access and opportunity to do so- especially those who have historically faced barriers.

Widening participation seeks to create inclusive environments, flexible pathways, and targeted support to help all learners reach their potential.

Who delivers higher education here?

Higher education in Northern Ireland is delivered by a diverse range of providers, including Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University, the Open University, the university colleges; Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College, and the region's six further education (FE) colleges.

Why does widening participation matter?

Higher education plays a vital role in shaping lives, communities, and the economy. It offers individuals the chance to develop skills, pursue careers and contribute meaningfully to society. Further, it is a powerful economic driver, boosting productivity, supporting innovation, and strengthening the skills base needed for a competitive, knowledge-driven economy. Graduates typically enjoy higher employment rates, increased earnings over their lifetime, and greater job mobility. At a societal level, higher education contributes to economic growth, reduces reliance on public services, and supports social mobility.

However, access to these opportunities is not evenly distributed. People from certain backgrounds, including those from lower-income households, rural areas, or with disabilities, often face barriers that can limit their participation. In Northern Ireland, school leavers not entitled to free school meals are twice as likely as those entitled to free school meals (to attend) to go straight to a Higher Education Institution (45% vs 22%). Widening participation is about removing these barriers and ensuring that everyone, regardless of their circumstances, has a fair chance to succeed through Higher Education, unlocking both individual potential and broader economic benefit.

Learner experiences highlight the transformative impact of widening participation. One mature student at St Mary's University College shared, *"The welcoming environment and tailored support helped me balance family life and finally achieve my dream of becoming a teacher."* Another student from Queen's University said, *"The Pathway Programme gave me confidence and practical support, from writing my personal statement to managing money, which turned university from a dream into reality."* A student at South West College added, *"Affordable local provision meant I could pursue my degree without the burden of debt, and the support from lecturers helped me overcome challenges along the way."*

The journey so far

In 2012, the Department for the Economy's predecessor Department for Employment and Learning launched Access to Success, a strategy aimed at increasing participation in higher education among priority groups. The strategy sought to ensure that "everyone with the potential to benefit from higher education has an equal opportunity to do so, regardless of their social or personal background". Access to Success placed a strong emphasis on widening access to higher education, focusing on removing barriers to entry and ensuring that opportunity was determined by talent and potential, not background.

Over the past decade, this strategy has guided efforts across the sector which has resulted in notable successes as highlighted by the CFE Research report "Understanding Widening Participation in Northern Ireland (2022)". The strategy has helped to embed widening participation as a core institutional and policy priority, laying a strong foundation for future work.

"There is a need to shift the focus from access alone to a more comprehensive approach that supports learners throughout their higher education journey - from pre-entry, through retention and success, to progression into employment or further study." (CFE Research, 2022, p. 8).

However, the report also notes that inequalities persist, particularly for learners from the most disadvantaged areas, care-experienced individuals, and disabled people. It recommends a renewed and more holistic approach, one that not only supports access but also prioritises learner success, progression, and outcomes.

Where we are now

Today, more people in Northern Ireland are entering higher education than ever before. Enrolments at NI Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have a net increase of 20% over the past decade, rising from 56,125 in 2013/14 to 67,515 in 2022/23. However, not all groups are equally represented. Some learners continue to face barriers and outcomes across the system can vary, recent data shows:

- **Participation rates vary significantly by geographic area.** Analysis of NI domiciled learners enrolled at HEI's shows that students from the most deprived areas (Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM) Quintile 1) account for 14% of enrolments, compared to 25% from the least deprived areas (Quintile 5). For school leavers, progression to higher education is substantially higher among grammar school pupils compared to non-grammar school pupils.

- **Retention and completion rates are lower for some groups.** Performance indicators highlighted by the CFE Research show that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with disabilities are more likely to withdraw early or not complete their qualifications.
- **Gender disparities.** While women continue to make up the majority of, HE enrolments (~58%), they remain under-represented in narrow STEM subjects; conversely, young males from the most deprived areas, particularly Protestant males, are persistently under-represented in higher education overall.

This highlights the need for targeted action and better support across the learner journey, from outreach and access, through to retention, attainment, and progression into employment or further study.

A new approach

Building on the CFE report, the Department initiated a comprehensive review of the approach to Widening Participation through the Widening Participation Forum, itself a key recommendation of the report. The WP Forum has been supported by a wider stakeholder engagement network, including representatives from voluntary and community organisations, employers, and a cross-departmental working group involving other government departments.

Forum members led working groups tasked with exploring the recommendations and data but also reflecting on lived experiences of barriers and challenges faced within the sector and by learners. Proposals emerging from the working groups were shared with the wider stakeholder network, and the feedback received has helped shape the proposals presented in this consultation.

Rather than replacing Access to Success with a new strategy, these proposals aim to form the basis of a delivery-focused action plan, led by the WP Forum in partnership with the sector stakeholders. This marks a shift in approach, one that recognises today's evolving challenges and opportunities, and reflects a commitment to working collectively across boundaries.

The intention is to remain agile, inclusive, and responsive to the changing landscape of higher education and the needs of our learners.

This consultation seeks views on how we can make higher education more accessible and equitable for all. The following sections outline the proposals and invite feedback to help shape the next phase of delivery.

SECTION 1: STRATEGIC FOUNDATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION

Vision and Principles

Widening participation (WP) has long been a policy priority in Northern Ireland. However, persistent underrepresentation, regional disparities, and evolving learner needs call for a refreshed and clarified vision, one that is inclusive, system-wide, and responsive to social and economic change.

This proposed vision is informed by the Department for the Economy's evolving strategic direction, including the Minister's Economic Vision, which places inclusive growth and equitable opportunity at its core. WP is not only an educational imperative but also acts as a lever for broader social and economic inclusion.

Evidence from recent research and stakeholder engagement highlights the need for renewed strategic clarity.

CFE Research notes that while overall participation rates in Northern Ireland are relatively strong, "stubborn pockets of under-representation" persist, particularly among Protestant males, rural learners, and those with low prior attainment.

Stranmillis University College research reinforces the importance of aligning WP efforts with broader goals of economic and social inclusion, as articulated in the Minister's Economic Vision and the Programme for Government.

Stakeholder feedback gathered through the WP Forum and engagement events calls for a sector-wide commitment to shared principles, including equity, flexibility, and learner-centred support.

Building on these insights, we propose a refreshed vision and set of principles to guide the development of widening participation work. This approach recognises WP as a shared responsibility across the education system, embeds principles of equity, responsiveness, and collaboration, and aligns with broader economic and social inclusion goals. The aim is to ensure that WP contributes meaningfully to both regional prosperity and individual opportunity.

Proposed Vision:

"To ensure that every learner here, regardless of background, identity, or circumstance, can access, succeed in, and benefit from higher education, supported by a system that is inclusive, collaborative, and responsive to change."

This vision would be supported by the following proposed principles:

1. **Equity**
   Recognising and addressing structural barriers to participation, ensuring that opportunity is not determined by background.

2. **Responsiveness**
   Adapting to emerging needs, learner diversity, and changing social and economic contexts.

3. **Collaboration**
   Promoting shared responsibility across the education system, including institutions, government, communities, and employers.

4. **Learner-Centred Support**
   Placing the needs, aspirations, and lived experiences of learners at the heart of policy and practice.

5. **Transparency and Accountability**
   Using data and evidence to monitor progress, evaluate impact, and drive continuous improvement.

6. **Alignment with Economic and Social Inclusion**
   Ensuring that WP contributes to regional prosperity, social mobility, and inclusive growth.

These principles are reflected throughout the proposals in this consultation and are intended to guide future delivery and decision-making.

Consultation Questions:
We would welcome your views on the following:

- Do you agree with the proposed vision for widening participation?
- Are the proposed principles appropriate and sufficient to guide future action?
- Are there additional principles that should be considered?
- How can these principles be embedded across the sector to ensure consistency and impact?

System-Level Targets

Currently, individual higher education providers here set annual widening participation (WP) targets through their Widening Access and Participation Plans. In contrast, Scotland has adopted a national target: by 2030, learners from the 20% most deprived areas (SIMD20) should represent 20% of entrants to full-time first degree courses at Scottish universities.
In the South of Ireland, the National Access Plan 2022–2028 sets a series of national targets for specific underrepresented groups, rather than a single overarching participation target.

CFE Research recommends considering more ambitious national and institutional targets to address underrepresentation and improve tracking of progress. The report draws on comparative insights from across the UK, particularly Scotland, where national targets have contributed to measurable improvements in participation. This is echoed in research from Stranmillis University College, which also highlights the positive impact of Scotland's approach.

However, the CFE report also emphasises the importance of tailoring any approach to our unique context, including rural access challenges, lower prior attainment, and persistent underrepresentation among specific groups. Wales takes a collaborative approach to WP, prioritising shared learning and community-based strategies. Rather than setting national targets, Wales relies on evidence reviews and localised plans, with policy guidance cautioning against competitive models.

There are several risks associated with introducing an overarching target, particularly in our context. A focus on boosting participation among one group may inadvertently divert attention or resources from others. Targets based solely on entry proportions using one measure risk overlooking retention, progression, and outcomes, retaining an emphasis on access rather than success. Additionally, postcode-based targets may fail to capture rural disadvantage or individual-level barriers. Targets tied to institutional performance could incentivise competition rather than collaboration, potentially undermining cross-sector efforts.

The CFE report cautions that any future approach should "consider mechanisms to encourage HE providers to work collaboratively to address 'cold spots' in WP provision and reduce duplication".

While the CFE and Stranmillis research primarily reference Scotland's model, it is worth noting that the South of Ireland has adopted a more learner-centred approach through its National Access Plan. This plan focuses on targets for priority groups and shared metrics, rather than a single national target. Rather than relying on a single participation target, this approach supports system-wide coordination while allowing for institutional flexibility. Given our scale, geography, and educational landscape, a national target may not be the most effective mechanism for driving progress. This aligns with the CFE report's recommendation for a more tailored and collaborative approach, supported by:

- Shared principles and goals;
- Common metrics and dashboards; and
- Strategic coordination through forums such as the WP Forum.

This approach promotes flexibility, local responsiveness, and cross-sector collaboration, key strengths within our context and consistent with the strategic priorities identified in the CFE report.

Proposed Approach:

A more flexible and collaborative model, avoiding the risks associated with a single target. This would resemble the approach taken in other places, where overarching targets are linked to specific underrepresented groups and tailored to individual institutions. This model may offer a more balanced path for us, combining targeted ambition with system-wide coordination.

To support the proposed approach, the following actions are recommended:

1. **Set institutional targets linked to specific priority groups**
   Establish annual institutional targets that are explicitly linked to priority groups. These targets should be tailored to each institution's context and learner profile, with annual review cycles to assess progress and recalibrate ambition. This approach supports both accountability and flexibility, ensuring that efforts remain responsive to evolving needs.

2. **Develop a region-wide taxonomy of WP priority groups**
   Create a region-wide taxonomy that defines and categorises WP priority groups using consistent criteria. This will enable coherent reporting, facilitate comparative analysis, and support shared understanding across institutions. The taxonomy should be co-developed with stakeholders to reflect lived experience and ensure relevance.

3. **Review and development of the current Widening Access and Participation Plans (WAPPs)**
   Review WAPPs to streamline reporting requirements, ensuring they are proportionate and focused on delivery. Reporting should clearly communicate available support to learners and the public, while aligning with existing frameworks such as College Development Plans (CDPs) and Higher Education Outcome Agreements (OAs). This will reduce duplication, improve transparency, and enhance strategic coherence.

4. **Embed asset-based language and framing**
   Review and revise terminology used in guidance and WAPPs to promote asset-based language. This means shifting away from deficit narratives and instead recognising the strengths, aspirations, and potential of learners. Embedding this framing will help foster inclusive cultures and more empowering learner experiences.

5. **Introduction of institutional visits and peer review**
   Introduce a programme of institutional visits and peer review to support in-year monitoring and shared learning. These visits will enable timely identification of progress and challenges, promote mutual accountability, and facilitate the exchange of best practice. Collaborative review mechanisms will strengthen sector-wide coordination and continuous improvement.

Consultation Questions

We would welcome your views on the following:

- Would you support the introduction of a national target for underrepresented learners in higher education?
- Would a flexible model of targeting, focused on priority groups and institutional targets, be effective?
- Are the principles identified sufficient to guide the development of a region-wide taxonomy of priority groups to ensure relevance and inclusivity?
- How can institutional visits and peer review be structured to promote shared learning and sector-wide improvement?

Refining Target or Priority Groups

In the context of widening participation, "priority groups" refers to learners underrepresented in higher education who face additional barriers to access, success, or progression. These groups are identified through evidence of disadvantage—social, economic, geographic, or personal—and are prioritised for support through outreach, admissions, financial assistance, and tailored services. Defining these groups ensures efforts remain focused, inclusive, and responsive to those least likely to access or succeed without additional support.

Currently these groups include:

- Learners with disabilities including learning difficulties
- Learners from Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM) quintile 1
- Adult Returners
- Care experienced

The Department also include a monitoring metric within institutional Widening Access and Participation Plans (WAPPs) for young Protestant males. This is due to the persistent underrepresentation of this group in higher education, particularly those from MDM quintile one. Monitoring this group enables us to better understand and address barriers to participation, ensuring our widening access efforts are inclusive and evidence based.

To address persistent issues of underrepresentation, it is essential that resources are directed in a strategic and targeted way. This can be achieved by establishing a regionally agreed set of priority groups, supported by consistent metrics and shared principles. Alongside this, institutions should retain flexibility to support additional groups through their access and participation plans. These groups may not be subject to formal targets but should still be recognised and resourced appropriately.

The CFE report highlights variation in how widening participation activity is targeted across institutions, leading to inconsistency in support and reporting. While some providers focus on specific groups, others adopt a broader approach. To address these gaps, resources must

be directed towards clearly defined priority groups, identified through evidence of persistent underrepresentation. Research from CFE and Stranmillis confirms this among young males from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly young Protestant males, as well as rural learners, disabled learners, and care-experienced individuals. Emerging data on economically inactive young people (NEETs) also highlights the need for re-engagement strategies for those disconnected from education and employment.

Based on this evidence and engagement the following priority groupings are proposed:

1. Socioeconomic and Geographic Disadvantage

These groups experience structural barriers due to poverty, location, or educational access;

- Learners from areas of high deprivation (e.g. MDM Quintile 1);
- Rural learners; and
- Males from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular young Protestant males.

Rationale: These groups are consistently underrepresented and face overlapping challenges in access, attainment, and progression.

2. Personal Circumstance and Care Experience

These learners often lack stable support networks or face additional responsibilities;

- Care-experienced individuals;
- Carers; and
- Estranged learners.

Rationale: These groups require tailored support due to disrupted or absent family structures and caregiving responsibilities.

3. Educational and Learning Needs

These learners may require adapted teaching, pathways, or support services;

- Disabled learners and those with Special Educational Needs (SEN);
- Adult returners
- Learners affected by gender-related barriers, including women in narrow STEM subjects and men in care-related fields (e.g. nursing, social work, early years education).

Rationale: These groups benefit from inclusive teaching practices and flexible entry routes. Their learning needs may intersect with other forms of disadvantage, such as gender, disability, or disrupted education, requiring tailored support to ensure equitable access, retention, and progression.

4. Justice and Economic Disengagement

These groups face barriers related to social exclusion or economic inactivity.

- Experience of the Justice system (e.g. including survivors of domestic abuse or family members affected by the justice system);
- Experience or risk of homelessness; and
- NEET adjacent youth (16–24-year-olds who are economically inactive or otherwise at risk of becoming NEET).

Rationale: These groups tend to be more distanced from higher education due to their disconnection from mainstream education and employment pathways. As such, they require targeted re-engagement strategies to support their inclusion and progression.

Proposed Approach:

This thematic approach to defining priority groups reduces complexity while preserving nuance. It aligns with models used in other jurisdictions, such as the South of Ireland, and supports intersectional analysis as applied in England. It acknowledges that many learners may belong to more than one group and enables targeted interventions across outreach, admissions, retention, and progression.

It is also important to recognise that while many groups may benefit from support, not all are underrepresented in higher education. In the context of Northern Ireland, and given the resources available, support will be strategically focused on those priority groups where evidence shows persistent barriers to access, success, or progression.

At the same time, institutions will retain flexibility to support additional groups based on local context and emerging needs. For example, groups such as Travellers, asylum seekers, and refugees, though not currently subject to formal targets, may still face significant challenges and support can be provided through institutional plans.

The actions outlined throughout this consultation are designed to support these proposed priority groups, it is also proposed that a formal mechanism be established to review and update priority groups on a regular basis. This process should be informed by emerging data, stakeholder feedback, and lived experience to ensure the framework remains relevant, inclusive, and responsive over time.

Consultation Questions:

We would welcome your views on the following:

- Are the proposed priority groups appropriate and sufficient to guide future action?
- Would a thematic model better reflect learner realities?
- Are there additional thematic groupings that should be considered?
- Are there too many priority groups for WP activities and financial support to be meaningful within the resources available?

- Do you agree that all groupings should be priority groups?
- Should any of the groups be prioritised over others?
- Should institutions retain flexibility to support additional groups not formally designated as priorities, such as Travellers, asylum seekers, or refugees?
- Should a formal mechanism be established to regularly review and update priority groups based on emerging data, lived experience, and stakeholder feedback?
- How can institutions best balance strategic focus on priority groups with flexibility to support emerging or locally relevant groups?
- Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that would need to be considered?

SECTION 2: ENABLING SUCCESS ACROSS THE LEARNER JOURNEY

Communications and Outreach

Outreach and communication efforts across Northern Ireland's higher education sector remain fragmented, with limited coordination and uneven access to schools and communities. This fragmentation is particularly pronounced in rural areas and among groups not traditionally targeted by widening participation (WP) initiatives. Messaging often lacks the nuance required to engage specific priority groups in a meaningful way. As highlighted in Section One, these challenges contribute to the persistence of "stubborn pockets of underrepresentation," underscoring the need for a more strategic and inclusive approach to outreach.

Evidence from the CFE Report highlighted the success of the Reach Higher advertising campaign which ran from 2013–2016. The report notes this government-led campaign significantly raised awareness of higher education pathways. It is worth noting that advertising and marketing efforts have evolved with targeting tending to be more digitally focused and data informed to target specific demographics.

Stakeholder engagement strongly supported the development of a sector-wide communications plan, co-designed with stakeholders and tailored to priority groups. A coordinated approach across the sector would improve efficiency, both in terms of resource use by higher education providers and in managing outreach to schools. It was noted that some schools are over-targeted, while others (particularly those not meeting criteria such as free school meal entitlement thresholds) may be overlooked. Importantly, success in outreach should be measured by whether the learner progresses to higher education, not necessarily to a specific institution. Collective efforts should be recognised and rewarded to reflect the shared responsibility for widening participation.

Employers also featured prominently in stakeholder engagement, recognised not only as delivery partners in outreach and mentoring, but as key influencers in shaping learner aspirations and pathways. Their involvement is essential to ensuring that widening participation efforts are aligned with real-world opportunities and regional economic needs. Strengthening these partnerships would embed employability within WP strategies and reinforce the shared responsibility for learner success across education, industry, and community.

The Stranmillis research reinforces the importance of early engagement, particularly with primary-aged children and adult returners, and highlights the value of community-based outreach. This approach is especially relevant for groups who are typically more distanced from higher education and may require targeted re-engagement. The research also emphasises the need for inclusive messaging that reflects the lived realities of learners, ensuring that outreach efforts resonate meaningfully with diverse audiences.

Proposed Approach:

To ensure that outreach and communications efforts across the higher education sector are strategic, inclusive, and impactful, the proposed purpose of communications and outreach is to:

- Empower learners, and the adults who support them, to envision higher education pathways, with targeted awareness efforts focused on groups experiencing persistent underrepresentation.
- Support attainment-raising activities, including mentoring, summer schools, and tutoring - that build confidence, strengthen academic foundations, and expand progression opportunities for underrepresented learners.
- Promote alternative routes to higher education, such as Foundation Degrees, Higher Level Apprenticeships and contextual admissions, to ensure flexible entry points that reflect diverse learner journeys and broaden participation.
- Strengthen employer partnerships, highlighting the mutual benefits of widening participation for learners and employers, and ensuring that learners are supported in navigating transitions into the workplace.
- Further develop community-based partnerships, working with local organisations, voluntary groups, and cultural networks to deliver outreach in trusted spaces, ensuring engagement with learners and families who may be distanced from traditional education pathways.

To reflect this purpose and build on existing strengths, the following actions are proposed:

1. **Coordinated Communications and Outreach Plan**

   A sector-wide communications and outreach plan will be co-designed to ensure consistent and inclusive messaging for priority groups. This will include coordinated access to schools and communities, alignment with careers advice, and shared resources. Outreach activities such as campus visits and taster sessions will be supported by embedded guidance, and consideration of an annual regional event to showcase opportunities and provide CPD for those who support learners.

2. **Early Engagement and Community-Based Outreach**

   Outreach efforts will be strengthened to engage learners earlier, particularly those furthest from higher education, including primary-aged children, adult returners, and underrepresented communities. Delivery will be rooted in local contexts and partnerships with schools, voluntary groups, and trusted organisations, ensuring culturally responsive and inclusive messaging.

3. **Strategic Employer Engagement**

   A coordinated approach to employer engagement will promote inclusive recruitment and address barriers such as unpaid placements. WP learners will be supported to articulate their needs during recruitment, and a single point of contact will streamline employer interaction. Existing programmes will be mapped to identify gaps, with new initiatives developed where needed.

4. Champions and Mentoring or Role Models

For many learners having someone who believes in their potential and helps them navigate the system can be transformative. Institutions will be encouraged to nominate WP champions to act as strategic contacts. Mentoring programmes will be reviewed and expansion considered to connect learners with relatable role models, including peers and professionals. Peer support models, such as buddy systems, will be explored to offer informal guidance and build resilience. Champions and mentors will help learners define and pursue their own version of success, offering continuity, encouragement, and practical support along the way.

Consultation Questions

We would welcome your views on the following:

- Is the proposed purpose of communications and outreach appropriate to guide future sector-wide action?
- Would a coordinated sector-wide plan improve consistency and impact across institutions and communities?
- How can messaging be tailored to effectively engage priority groups?
- Would a joint brand or visual identity strengthen recognition and trust in widening participation efforts?
- How can employer involvement in outreach be strengthened to reflect regional economic needs and learner aspirations?
- Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that should be addressed to ensure outreach is inclusive, locally relevant, and sustainable?

Strengthening Contextual Admissions and Pathways

Admissions processes play a critical role in shaping access to higher education. However, traditional models are often narrowly focused on academic attainment which can disadvantage WP learners who may lack access to consistent academic support, extracurricular activities, or work experience. These learners may also face systemic barriers that limit their ability to demonstrate potential through conventional metrics.

There is growing recognition across the sector of the need for more inclusive admissions practices. This includes contextual admissions, which adjust entry requirements based on individual disadvantage or background, and flexible admissions, which recognise prior learning, life experience, and non-traditional qualifications, particularly relevant for adult returners and vocational learners.

Current sector practice includes:

- At Queen's University Belfast, contextual admissions are offered through the Pathway Opportunity Programme, targeting learners aged 16–19 from disadvantaged backgrounds. Successful participants may receive reduced grade offers, tailored support, and progression opportunities. QUB has also begun to explore broader recognition of prior learning and life experience, including support for adult returners and learners with non-traditional qualifications.
- Ulster University does not operate a formal contextual admissions scheme but offers flexible and inclusive admissions practices. These include Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL, where the University may accept alternative forms of learning for entry), tailored support for care-experienced learners and those with disabilities, and direct entry routes from vocational qualifications.
- The Open University in Northern Ireland (OU NI) helps people of all ages and backgrounds achieve their ambitions through the delivery of high-quality, flexible, online learning.
- Stranmillis University College considers alternative qualifications and welcomes mature applicants, recognising prior accredited learning and appropriate life experience. Its approach is further reflected in collaborative initiatives to expand progression routes and improve regional accessibility.
- FE Colleges routinely consider non-traditional qualifications and prior experience for entry into higher education programmes. They offer Access Diplomas and Foundation Degrees validated by universities, with flexible entry criteria tailored to local learner needs. These pathways are particularly important for adult returners and those progressing from vocational routes.

While contextual admissions are widely supported, some stakeholders raise concerns about fairness and effectiveness. Critics argue that lowering entry requirements may undermine merit-based admissions and risk placing learners in environments where they feel out of place. Risks include imposter syndrome, reduced self-efficacy, and lower retention or academic performance - particularly in the absence of adequate support.[CFE Report]

Stakeholders strongly supported the expansion of alternative routes into higher education, particularly for learners unlikely to follow a traditional full-time academic path. Regional accessibility was highlighted as a priority, especially in rural areas, with FE colleges and distributed HE campuses playing a key role. The growth of Higher Level Apprenticeships (HLAs) was cited as a success, and additional pathways, such as sponsorship models, were flagged for further exploration.

Part-time study was identified as a critical route for WP learners, particularly adult returners and those balancing work or caring responsibilities. Stakeholders noted that employers are keen to support part-time upskilling, and recommended strengthening collaboration to ensure learners can access flexible study options aligned with workforce needs.

Stranmillis Research reinforces the value of alternative routes into higher education, such as HLAs, Foundation Degrees, and part-time study, especially for learners in rural areas and those furthest from traditional academic pathways. It highlights the importance of local relevance, community-based outreach, and flexible delivery models, suggesting that structural and cultural barriers may be better addressed through diverse entry routes rather than admissions reform alone.

Proposed Approach:

Providers currently adopt varied approaches to contextual admissions, ranging from reduced grade offers to recognition of prior learning and life experience. To ensure fairness and clarity for applicants, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds a consistent framework/ approach is needed. Contextual admissions should be embedded within a broader plan that includes wraparound support, transparent criteria, and alignment with progression pathways. Improved communication of policies is essential, and greater emphasis could be placed on recognising prior learning, life experience, and transversal skills as valid indicators of potential.

Proposed actions include:

1. **Develop Consistent Sector-Wide Framework/ Approach for Contextual Admissions**
   Establish clear and transparent criteria for contextual offers, including reduced grade thresholds, recognition of prior learning, and consideration of life experience to ensure fairness and clarity for applicants across all providers.

2. **Embed Contextual Admissions Within Broader Support**
   Ensure that contextual admissions are not standalone measures but are integrated with wraparound support, progression planning, and learner wellbeing to promote retention and success.

3. **Improve Communication and Visibility of Admissions Policies**
   Strengthen how contextual and flexible admissions policies are communicated to prospective learners, particularly those from WP backgrounds and those who may support or influence them, to increase awareness and understanding of available options.

4. **Promote Alternative Pathways into Higher Education**
   Enhance the visibility, value, and accessibility of routes such as Higher-Level Apprenticeships, Foundation Degrees, Access Diplomas, and part-time study - particularly for adult returners, vocational learners, and those in rural areas. Continue to strengthen collaboration between HE institutions and FE colleges to ensure learners can access flexible and locally relevant progression opportunities.

5. **Monitor Impact and Share Best Practice Across the Sector**
   Encourage providers to report on contextual admissions and pathway uptake, share effective models, and contribute to a collective understanding of what works in supporting WP learners.

Consultation Questions:

We would welcome your views on the following:

- Is the proposed approach to contextual admissions and alternative pathways appropriate to guide future sector-wide action?
- Should a consistent framework/ approach for contextual admissions be developed across providers to ensure fairness and clarity for applicants?
- How should prior learning, life experience, and transversal skills be recognised meaningfully within admissions processes for WP learners?
- What support should be embedded alongside contextual admissions to promote retention and learner success?
- How can communication of contextual and flexible admissions policies be improved for WP applicants and those who support them?
- What further actions are needed to strengthen regional accessibility and progression routes, particularly in rural areas?
- Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that should be addressed to ensure admissions and pathways are inclusive, equitable, and sustainable?

Supporting Retention and Outcomes

While access to higher education has improved, retention and progression gaps persist, particularly for part-time learners, disabled learners, and those from MDM Quintile 1. Support varies across institutions and is not always tailored, consistent, or sustained throughout the learner journey.

A fundamental shift is needed: from focusing solely on entry into higher education to supporting learners through their full journey and understanding that success can look different for different learners – while in most cases success would be obtaining a good graduate job akin to their peers or progressing on to further study – for some, success may mean gaining life skills, building confidence, or simply remaining engaged in education during challenging times.

The CFE Report indicates that most higher education providers in Northern Ireland are outperforming their benchmarks for non-continuation, a key indicator of retention. Rates have improved for both full- and part-time learners over the two years considered and, on a seven-year average, are lower than the UK-wide figures. However, gaps remain in progression outcomes for disadvantaged groups, particularly in transitions to employment and further study.

Research from Stranmillis reinforces the importance of supporting WP learners beyond access, focusing on their full journey through higher education and into meaningful outcomes. It highlights that retention and success are shaped not only by academic factors but also by financial, wellbeing, and structural support systems. Tailored interventions for priority groups, such as disabled learners, adult returners, and those from MDM Quintile 1, we highlighted to reduce dropout rates and improve outcomes. Stranmillis also stresses the need for stronger collaboration with employers to ensure WP learners can access placements, graduate jobs, and

inclusive recruitment practices. Barriers such as unpaid placements, which disproportionately affect disadvantaged learners were highlighted for consideration with employer engagement seen as critical to validating WP talent and supporting transitions into the workforce.

Progression to further study or appropriate graduate employment is a key outcome for WP learners that requires greater attention. Stakeholders and research consistently highlight that success for WP learners should include opportunities to pursue postgraduate pathways. However, support for these transitions remains underdeveloped. At the same time, due to personal circumstances, WP learners may be more likely to seek immediate employment, often accepting the first available role rather than securing a graduate-level position aligned with their qualifications. To address this, WP learners need clearer guidance, increased visibility of opportunities, and targeted support to help them navigate both academic progression and entry into appropriate graduate employment.

Proposed Approach

Support for retention and outcomes should move beyond entry-level access to focus on sustained achievement and progression. This includes targeted interventions for under-represented groups and a broader recognition of individual success that includes both progression to postgraduate study and access to appropriate graduate employment.

To ensure WP learners are not only admitted but supported to succeed, the following approach is proposed:

1 **Shift Focus Beyond Access**

   Move from entry-level access to a full learner journey approach, recognising that success varies, from graduate employment and further study to personal development and sustained engagement.

2 **Tailored Support Across the Lifecycle**

   Develop and embed targeted interventions for priority groups that spans from pre-enrolment through to graduation. Support should seek to be consistent, sustained, and responsive to individual needs throughout the learner journey, ensuring WP learners are equipped and encouraged to progress into postgraduate pathways or appropriate graduate employment.

3 **Enhance Employer Engagement**

   Enhance collaboration with employers to improve access to placements, graduate jobs, and inclusive recruitment practices. Working to address barriers such as unpaid placements that disproportionately affect disadvantaged learners and highlight WP talent, remove barriers to placements and graduate jobs, and promote inclusive recruitment practices. This includes addressing unpaid placements, flexible working arrangements, and recognition of diverse learner experiences.

4   Support Transitions to Further Study and Employment

Improve visibility, support and guidance for WP learners considering postgraduate pathways, alongside targeted career support to help them secure graduate-level employment aligned with their qualifications and aspirations. Consider how access to careers, wellbeing, and academic support services can be extended beyond graduation to ensure continuity at key transition points and better support progression into postgraduate study or graduate-level employment.

Consultation Questions:

We would welcome your views on the following:

- Is the proposed whole-journey support model appropriate to guide future sector-wide action?
- What mechanisms are needed to ensure early identification and consistent access to support for WP learners?
- How can employer collaboration be strengthened to support inclusive progression into employment and further study?
- Do you agree that WP support should be extended to include postgraduate learners?
- What actions should be prioritised to support WP learners beyond initial access and throughout their full learner journey?
- How can institutions better tailor support for priority groups?
- Should support services be extended beyond graduation to assist WP learners during transitions into employment or further study?
- Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that should be addressed to ensure retention and successful outcomes for WP learners?

SECTION 3: ENABLING SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

Improving Financial Support

Financial barriers are widely recognised as impacting access, retention, and progression for widening participation (WP) learners. Research consistently shows that WP learners are more likely to have concerns about the cost of higher education, and that fear of debt can deter access and negatively affect retention, attainment, and completion rates. While bursaries and grants exist, eligibility thresholds and variations in support across institutions can pose challenges, risk the effectiveness of financial support, and disproportionately affect learners from priority groups.

Currently, the Department for the Economy expects higher education providers to offer bursaries to eligible learners from low-income households, equating to at least 10% of their course tuition fees. Northern Ireland's bursary levels are modest but proportionate to its lower tuition fees[1] compared to other UK regions.

The Department is in the early stages of undertaking a review of higher education funding. Financial support to students will be within scope of the wider review. Once the wider review is underway, it is expected to take 12-18 months to complete, subject to available resource. Further information regarding the review of higher education funding will be published by the Department in due course.

The CFE Report finds that financial support has a greater impact on retention than on initial access, and that bursaries are more effective than fee waivers. Cash bursaries help with immediate living expenses, whereas fee waivers are a deferred benefit for most learners. This means that while financial aid may not significantly increase enrolment, it plays a crucial role in helping learners stay and succeed once enrolled. The report also notes that the income threshold for bursaries has remained static, resulting in fewer learners meeting the criteria over time. Additionally, philanthropic bursary and scholarship programmes have only been partially realised as a strategic goal, indicating room for growth in this area.

Stakeholder engagement has called for a review of household income thresholds and consideration of pooled resources to target those most in need. There is also a strong emphasis on the need for flexibility in support mechanisms to respond to changing learner circumstances.

Support for part-time learners was also raised, as they face unique financial challenges. There is a highlighted need for better access to fee grants, course grants, and greater flexibility in student finance. While part-time learners in Northern Ireland can access grants and loans for tuition and course costs, as well as Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), they are not eligible

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1   Indicative fees for students starting higher education in 2025: Studying in NI £4,855; England, Scotland and Wales up to £9,535. Tuition fees are not charged in the ROI. All students pay a contribution charge. For the academic year this is €2,000

for maintenance loans or grants for living costs, which are available to full-time learners. Some institutional bursaries and scholarships are also restricted to full-time learners. Furthermore, the means-testing process and course intensity requirements (minimum 25% of full-time equivalent) can exclude those who would benefit most.

FE colleges play an important role in WP by delivering higher education courses locally, often to learners who might not otherwise access higher education. It was suggested that WP resources be pooled at a regional level to ensure support is based on learner need rather than provider capacity. This approach would help smaller institutions, such as FE colleges, offer consistent support.

Employers are also seen as key partners in supporting part-time learners and upskilling initiatives, with the "grow your own" model encouraged, and financial support aligned to workforce needs.

Stranmillis Research emphasises the importance of tailored support for WP learners, particularly those at risk of homelessness, carers, and individuals with caring responsibilities. These groups often face compounded barriers that require more than standard financial aid.

Proposed Approach:
The overarching approach is to ensure that financial support for learners is effective, equitable, and sustainable, with a particular focus on meeting the needs of disadvantaged and priority groups. Any changes to student financial support, including for widening participation (WP) learners, will be considered as part of the wider Higher Education Funding Review, which will provide the strategic framework for future policy decisions in this area. Alongside this, the following actions to ensure financial support is equitable and impactful, are proposed:

1. Review Financial Support Including Consideration of Part-Time Learners
Consideration of household income thresholds for financial support and access for part time learners to fee grants, course grants, and consider the extension of maintenance support for part-time learners, recognising their unique barriers in line with wider reforms.

2. Continue to Progress Philanthropic Scholarship Efforts and Employer Collaboration
Expand targeted scholarships and bursaries, including philanthropic and employer-funded schemes, to address specific barriers for priority groups and align support with workforce needs.

3. Regional Pooling of Resources
Explore mechanisms for pooling WP resources at a regional level to ensure support is allocated based on learner need rather than provider capacity. Consider centralised coordination through the WP Forum to reduce duplication and improve consistency across institutions.

4. Improve Communication and Transparency

Improve communication and awareness of available financial support, ensuring information is accessible, timely, and tailored to the needs of priority groups – especially in relation to part time learners.

5. Consider Developing Tailored Interventions for Priority Groups

Develop and implement tailored financial interventions for groups facing compounded barriers, consideration could be given for example to guaranteed first-year accommodation for those facing challenges personal circumstance and care experience.

6. Work, Employability, and Industry Links

Strengthen employability and industry links by expanding paid internships, employability bursaries, and industry-sponsored placements for WP learners.

Consultation Questions:

We would welcome your views on the following:

- Is the proposed approach to improving financial support appropriate to guide future sector-wide action?
- What changes to eligibility thresholds or support mechanisms would have the greatest impact for WP learners, including part-time learners?
- Would regional pooling of resources improve consistency and equity in financial support across institutions?
- How can communication and awareness of available financial support be improved, particularly for under-represented and part-time learners?
- What role should employers and philanthropic partners play in supporting WP learners?
- Are there additional actions or interventions that should be prioritised to ensure financial support reaches those most in need?
- Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that should be addressed to ensure financial support is effective, equitable, and sustainable?

Enhancing Data, Accountability & Reporting

Robust, consistent, and transparent data systems are essential to understanding the impact of widening participation (WP) efforts and ensuring that interventions are evidence-based, targeted, and effective. However, a recurring theme across research and stakeholder feedback is the significant variation in how WP data is collected, reported, and used across institutions here. This inconsistency can limit the sector's ability to evaluate progress, identify what works, and respond to the needs of underrepresented learners in a timely and coordinated way.

The current Widening Access and Participation Plan (WAPP) process, while valuable in setting institutional priorities, has been described by our delivery partners as administratively burdensome and overly focused on inputs and activities rather than outcomes and impact.

The CFE Research (2022) recommends revising the WAPP process to streamline reporting requirements and shift the emphasis toward measurable outcomes. This would not only reduce duplication but also enable institutions to focus more on delivering and evaluating meaningful change. In line with this recommendation, and as outlined in the System-Level Targets section of this consultation, work has already commenced on a cross-sector review of the WAPP process. This review, led by a dedicated working group, aims to ensure that WAPPs are more outcome-focused, strategically aligned, and proportionate - supporting both institutional flexibility and system-wide coherence.

Stakeholder engagement has further highlighted the need for a regional approach to data and accountability. Proposals include the development of a WP dashboard, underpinned by common metrics and indicators, to monitor access, retention, and outcomes across different learner groups and geographies. Such a tool would support transparency, benchmarking, and strategic planning at both institutional and system levels.

Improved data-sharing protocols are also seen as critical to enabling a more joined-up approach. Stakeholders have pointed to the need for better integration of data across departments and agencies, such as the Education Authority (EA), Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), and Finance NI, to support continuity of support across the learner journey. Further work is progressing on LEO (Longitudinal Education Outcomes), this is a linked, de-identified dataset that combines school, further and higher education, and apprenticeship data to track education pathways and outcomes over time, enabling research on social mobility and educational attainment. This would allow for more effective tracking of learners from school through to further and higher education, and into employment, helping to identify points of risk and opportunity for intervention. All data-sharing developments would be underpinned by robust data protection and ethical governance frameworks, ensuring that learner privacy is safeguarded and data is used responsibly and transparently.

The Stranmillis Research adds further weight to these findings, identifying key gaps in data related to intersectionality, learner progression, and graduate outcomes. It calls for a more holistic and longitudinal approach to data collection that captures the full learner journey, particularly for those at risk of falling through the gaps.

Finally, there is a strong appetite for using data not only for monitoring but also for driving accountability and improvement. Stakeholders have expressed support for mechanisms such as annual WP impact reviews and peer learning processes, coordinated through the WP Forum, to foster a culture of shared responsibility and continuous improvement.

Together, these insights point to the need for a more strategic, coordinated, and outcomes-focused approach to data, accountability, and reporting, one that enables the sector to better understand and respond to the needs of all learners.

Proposed Approach:

To address these challenges, a more strategic and coordinated approach to data, accountability, and reporting is proposed. This includes the development of a regional data plan, improved data-sharing protocols, and the exploration of tools to support evidence-based decision-making and continuous improvement. These measures will enable the sector to better understand what works, for whom, and under what circumstances, ensuring that WP interventions are both impactful and equitable.

Building on this approach, the following actions are proposed to strengthen data systems, enhance accountability, and support more effective reporting across the widening participation landscape:

1. **Develop a Regional WP Data Plan**
   Establish a shared data plan with agreed definitions, indicators, and reporting formats to ensure consistency and comparability across institutions.

2. **Create a Regional WP Dashboard**
   Develop a regional dashboard to monitor access, retention, and outcomes by target group, geography, and mode of study. This will support transparency, benchmarking, and targeted action.

3. **Strengthen Data Sharing Protocols**
   Enhance data-sharing agreements across departments and agencies to enable better tracking of learners across the education lifecycle and support continuity of provision.

4. **Enhance Data on Learner Journeys and Graduate Outcomes**
   Address gaps in data on intersectionality, progression, and graduate outcomes, with a focus on tracking learners across transitions and into employment.

5. **Use Data to Drive Accountability and Improvement**
   Embed data-informed peer review and annual impact reporting within the WP Forum to support mutual accountability, identify effective practice, and inform continuous improvement.

Consultation Questions

- Do you agree with the proposal to develop a regional WP data plan with common definitions, indicators, and reporting formats?
- Would a regional WP dashboard be a useful tool for monitoring progress and informing decision-making?
- What additional data is needed to better understand and support the learner journey, particularly for underrepresented or priority groups?
- How can data be used to support accountability and continuous improvement across the sector?

- Would you support the introduction of annual WP impact reviews or peer learning mechanisms?
- Are there any gaps in the proposed approach to enhancing data, accountability, and reporting that should be addressed?

Support & Structures

A consistent theme emerging from recent research and policy reviews is the significant variation in the support available to widening participation (WP) learners across higher education institutions here. This inconsistency is evident not only in the types and levels of support offered, but also in the mechanisms for coordination, oversight, and accountability. The absence of a formal, sector-wide structure to drive collaboration and reduce duplication has resulted in regional disparities and, in some cases, fragmented provision.

The CFE Research (2022) highlights that while individual institutions have made progress in developing Widening Access and Participation Plans (WAPPs), there is a pressing need for a more joined-up approach. The report recommends the establishment of a collaborative forum to coordinate WP efforts, facilitate the sharing of best practice, and drive continuous improvement across the sector. Such a forum would provide a platform for aligning institutional strategies, monitoring progress, and ensuring that resources are targeted where they are most needed. In response to this recommendation, the WP Forum has now been established. It played a central role in informing this consultation, with task and finish groups, supported by a broader stakeholder network, contributing to the development of proposals. This work was further underpinned by a Cross-Departmental Working Group comprising officials from across NICS departments.

The stakeholder feedback endorsed the WP Forum as a central mechanism for oversight, implementation, and continued stakeholder engagement. The recommendations propose that the Forum should not only coordinate activity but also provide a space for themed sub-groups to address specific challenges, such as support for part-time learners, digital inclusion, or transitions to employment. Importantly, the Forum is seen as a vehicle for cross-departmental alignment, ensuring that WP policy is integrated with broader skills, economic, and social inclusion agendas.

Stranmillis Research further underscores the need for consistent support structures, particularly for learners who may be at risk of falling through the gaps, such as those studying part-time, in further education colleges, or in border regions. The research notes that the lack of a coordinated approach can lead to duplication of effort, inefficiencies, and missed opportunities to share effective practice. It also highlights the importance of ensuring that support is not only consistent across providers, but also responsive to the needs of specific groups. [Stranmillis Research | PDF]

A key finding across all sources is the importance of embedding the learner voice and employer engagement within governance structures. Feedback from the sector lead task and finish groups has called for the inclusion of learners, community organisations, and industry representatives in decision-making processes. This is seen as essential for ensuring that support is relevant, accessible, and aligned with workforce needs. The development of a WP Covenant or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is also proposed, to promote shared ownership and accountability across the sector.

Proposed Approach:
It is proposed to formalise and expand the WP Forum as the central cross-sector body for the oversight, implementation, and continuous improvement of widening participation policy and practice. The Forum will provide a platform for collaboration across higher education institutions, further education colleges, community organisations, and employers, enabling the sharing of effective practice, coordinated action, and collective problem-solving. Crucially, it will also support a culture of mutual accountability, where members hold each other to account and work together to address shared challenges. To underpin this, it is proposed a WP Covenant or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) will be developed, setting out common principles and commitments. Governance structures will be strengthened to ensure meaningful learner voice and employer engagement, with representation from learners, community partners, and industry embedded in decision-making processes. Building on this approach, the following actions are proposed to embed consistency, accountability, and impact across the widening participation landscape:

1. **Formalise and Expand the WP Forum Supported by A WP Covenant or MoU**
   Establish the WP Forum as the sector-wide implementation and oversight body, with responsibility for coordinating WP strategy, monitoring progress, and facilitating collaboration. Create a sector-wide agreement to promote shared ownership, accountability, and consistency in WP activity across all providers.

2. **Embed Learner Voice and Employer Engagement**
   Ensure governance structures include representation from learners, community organisations, and employers, enabling co-design of interventions and alignment with workforce needs.

3. **Coordinate Cross-Sector Collaboration and Promote Consistency**
   Strengthen the role of the WP Forum in aligning widening participation efforts with related departmental initiatives (e.g. RAISE, Fair Start, 14–19 framework) through the WP Cross-Departmental Working Group. Establish themed sub-groups to address retention and outcomes for specific learner cohorts, while using the Forum to identify and address regional disparities, reduce duplication of effort, and share effective practice.

4. Consider the establishment of a WP Data and Insights Hub

Create a central mechanism within the WP Forum to analyse and disseminate data on participation, progression, and outcomes. This would support evidence-based decision-making, enable benchmarking across institutions, and help identify emerging gaps or trends.

5. Introduce Annual WP Impact Reviews

Implement a structured process for annual reporting and peer review within the WP Forum. This would reinforce mutual accountability by enabling members to reflect on progress, share learning, and identify areas for collective action.

6. Develop a Capacity-Building Programme

Offer professional development and peer learning opportunities for WP leads and practitioners across sectors. This could include thematic workshops, mentoring, and knowledge exchange to build capability and foster a shared culture of continuous improvement.

7. Alignment of Funding Mechanisms with WP Priorities and Enable Regional Pooling

Explore opportunities to align existing funding streams with the strategic priorities of the WP Forum and the WP Covenant/MoU. The Forum could also serve as the coordinating mechanism for regional pooling of widening participation resources, ensuring that support is allocated based on learner need rather than provider capacity. This approach would incentivise collaboration, reduce duplication, and promote more consistent, equitable provision across institutions and regions.

Consultation Questions

We would welcome your views on the following:

- Do you agree with the proposal to formalise and expand the WP Forum as the central cross-sector body for oversight and implementation of WP policy and practice?
- What are your views on the proposed WP Covenant or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)?
- How can the WP Forum best support mutual accountability among members and ensure that effective practice is shared and adopted across the sector?
- How can learner voice and employer engagement be meaningfully embedded in WP governance structures?
- Would a WP Data and Insights Hub be a valuable addition to support evidence-based decision-making and benchmarking?
- What are your views on introducing an annual WP Impact Review process?
- What support or capacity-building would be most helpful for WP practitioners and institutional leads to strengthen delivery and collaboration?
- How could funding mechanisms be better aligned with WP priorities to incentivise collaboration and reduce duplication?
- Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that should be addressed to ensure effective and consistent support for WP learners.

HOW TO RESPOND

This consultation will be available online via the Citizen Space platform at:
https://consultations.nidirect.gov.uk/dfe/review-of-approach-to-wp-in-he

Citizen Space has been designed to be user-friendly and accessible, making it easy for participants to complete the consultation. It also enables the Department to efficiently collate responses. For these reasons, we strongly encourage anyone wishing to contribute to use Citizen Space as their preferred method of response.

However, if this is not possible, you can respond to this consultation via email at: wideningparticipation@economy-ni.gov.uk or you can respond in writing to the DfE Widening Participation Branch in Adelaide House by 17:00 on 16th April 2026:

Widening participation Consultation

DfE HEFEWP Branch
4th Floor
Adelaide House
39-49 Adelaide Street
Belfast
BT2 8FD

When responding via email or in writing, please state whether you are responding as an individual, or representing the views of an organisation – and if so, please state the name of the organisation. Also, quote the following Consultation Reference: Widening Participation Consultation.

Any responses received after the closing date will not be considered as part of this consultation process.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

On conclusion of the consultation, all responses will be collated, and a summary will be published on the Department for the Economy website. This summary document will include a list of the organisations that responded but will not include individual names, addresses or other contact details.

Information provided in response to this consultation, including personal information, may be subject to publication or disclosure under access to information legislation (primarily the Data Protection Act 2018/the General Data Protection Regulation 2018; Freedom of Information Act 2000; and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004).

For this reason, you should identify in your response any information which you do not wish to be disclosed and explain why this is the case. Please note that an automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the Department. If we receive a request for disclosure of this information, we will take full account of your explanation, but we cannot give an assurance that confidentiality can be maintained in all circumstances. For further information about how we process your personal data, please see our Privacy Notice at Annex Three.

Copies of the Consultation

This consultation document is being produced primarily in electronic form and may be accessed on the 'Consultations' page on the Department's website at Department for the Economy consultations. If you require access to this consultation paper in hard copy, or in a different format – e.g. Braille, disk, audio cassette – or in a minority ethnic language, please contact wideningparticipation@economy-ni.gov.uk and appropriate arrangements will be made as soon as possible.

ANNEX 1: QUESTIONS SUMMARY

SECTION ONE: STRATEGIC FOUNDATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION

Vision and Principles

- Do you agree with the proposed vision for widening participation?
- Are the proposed principles appropriate and sufficient to guide future action?
- Are there additional principles that should be considered?
- How can these principles be embedded across the sector to ensure consistency and impact?

System-Level Targets

- Should Northern Ireland introduce a national target for underrepresented learners in higher education?
- Would a flexible model of targeting, focused on priority groups and institutional targets, be effective?
- Are the principles identified sufficient to guide the development of a region-wide taxonomy of priority groups to ensure relevance and inclusivity?
- How can institutional visits and peer review be structured to promote shared learning and sector-wide improvement?

Refining Target or Priority Groups

- Are the proposed priority groups appropriate and sufficient to guide future action?
- Would a thematic model better reflect learner realities?
- Are there additional thematic groupings that should be considered?
- Are there too many priority groups for WP activities and financial support to be meaningful within the resources available?
- Do you agree that all groupings should be priority groups?
- Should any of the groups be prioritised over others?
- Should institutions retain flexibility to support additional groups not formally designated as priorities, such as Travellers, asylum seekers, or refugees?
- Should a formal mechanism be established to regularly review and update priority groups based on emerging data, lived experience, and stakeholder feedback?
- How can institutions best balance strategic focus on priority groups with flexibility to support emerging or locally relevant groups?
- Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that would need to be considered?

SECTION 2: ENABLING SUCCESS ACROSS THE LEARNER JOURNEY

Communications and Outreach

- Is the proposed purpose of communications and outreach appropriate to guide future sector-wide action?
- Would a coordinated sector-wide plan improve consistency and impact across institutions and communities?
- How can messaging be tailored to effectively engage priority groups?
- Would a joint brand or visual identity strengthen recognition and trust in widening participation efforts?
- How can employer involvement in outreach be strengthened to reflect regional economic needs and learner aspirations?
- Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that should be addressed to ensure outreach is inclusive, locally relevant, and sustainable?

Strengthening Contextual Admissions and Pathways

- Is the proposed approach to contextual admissions and alternative pathways appropriate to guide future sector-wide action?
- Should a consistent framework/ approach for contextual admissions be developed across providers to ensure fairness and clarity for applicants?
- How should prior learning, life experience, and transversal skills be recognised meaningfully within admissions processes for WP learners?
- What support should be embedded alongside contextual admissions to promote retention and learner success?
- How can communication of contextual and flexible admissions policies be improved for WP applicants and those who support them?
- What further actions are needed to strengthen regional accessibility and progression routes, particularly in rural areas?
- Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that should be addressed to ensure admissions and pathways are inclusive, equitable, and sustainable?

Supporting Retention and Outcomes

- Is the proposed whole-journey support model appropriate to guide future sector-wide action?
- What mechanisms are needed to ensure early identification and consistent access to support for WP learners?
- How can employer collaboration be strengthened to support inclusive progression into employment and further study?
- Do you agree that WP support should be extended to include postgraduate learners?
- What actions should be prioritised to support WP learners beyond initial access and throughout their full learner journey?
- How can institutions better tailor support for priority groups?

- Should support services be extended beyond graduation to assist WP learners during transitions into employment or further study?
- Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that should be addressed to ensure retention and successful outcomes for WP learners?

SECTION 3: ENABLING SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

Improving Financial Support

- Is the proposed approach to improving financial support appropriate to guide future sector-wide action?
- What changes to eligibility thresholds or support mechanisms would have the greatest impact for WP learners, including part-time learners?
- Would regional pooling of resources improve consistency and equity in financial support across institutions?
- How can communication and awareness of available financial support be improved, particularly for under-represented and part-time learners?
- What role should employers and philanthropic partners play in supporting WP learners?
- Are there additional actions or interventions that should be prioritised to ensure financial support reaches those most in need?
- Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that should be addressed to ensure financial support is effective, equitable, and sustainable?

Enhancing Data, Accountability & Reporting

- Do you agree with the proposal to develop a regional WP data plan with common definitions, indicators, and reporting formats?
- Would a regional WP dashboard be a useful tool for monitoring progress and informing decision-making?
- What additional data is needed to better understand and support the learner journey, particularly for underrepresented or priority groups?
- How can data be used to support accountability and continuous improvement across the sector?
- Would you support the introduction of annual WP impact reviews or peer learning mechanisms?
- Are there any gaps in the proposed approach to enhancing data, accountability, and reporting that should be addressed?

Support & Structures

- Do you agree with the proposal to formalise and expand the WP Forum as the central cross-sector body for oversight and implementation of WP policy and practice?
- What are your views on the proposed WP Covenant or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)?
- How can the WP Forum best support mutual accountability among members and ensure that effective practice is shared and adopted across the sector?

- How can learner voice and employer engagement be meaningfully embedded in WP governance structures?
- Would a WP Data and Insights Hub be a valuable addition to support evidence-based decision-making and benchmarking?
- What are your views on introducing an annual WP Impact Review process?
- What support or capacity-building would be most helpful for WP practitioners and institutional leads to strengthen delivery and collaboration?
- How could funding mechanisms be better aligned with WP priorities to incentivise collaboration and reduce duplication?
- Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that should be addressed to ensure effective and consistent support for WP learners.

ANNEX 2: STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

Widening Participation Stakeholder Engagement Network

A stakeholder engagement network was established to support the Review of Widening Participation in Higher Education. A number of task-and-finish groups met between May 2023 and September 2024 to consider findings and recommendations emerging from the various work strands.

The network included a wide range of organisations and bodies, such as:

Government Departments
- Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
- Department for Communities
- Department for the Economy
- Department of Education
- Department of Health
- Department of Justice
- The Executive Office

Higher Education Institutions
- Queen's University Belfast
- Ulster University
- The Open University
- Stranmillis University College
- St Mary's University College Belfast

Further Education Colleges
- Belfast Metropolitan College
- Northern Regional College
- North West Regional College
- South Eastern Regional College
- Southern Regional College
- South West College

Other Education Bodies
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
- Education Authority
- College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise

Industry and Professional Organisations

- Construction Industry Training Board
- Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
- Invest Northern Ireland
- Jisc
- UCAS
- Pearson
- Fujitsu Services Ltd
- EY
- PwC
- Danske Bank
- Unite the Union

Community and Equality Organisations

- Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
- Equality Coalition
- Disability Equality Group NI
- North West Migrants Forum
- Training for Women Network Ltd
- Horn of Africa People's Aid NI
- GEMS Northern Ireland Limited
- Rural Action
- Rural Community Network
- Migrant Centre NI
- Belfast City of Sanctuary
- Voice of Young People in Care
- Adoption UK
- Angel Eyes NI
- Springboard Opportunities
- Christians Against Poverty
- Foyle Women's Aid
- Start360
- MACS Supporting Children and Young People
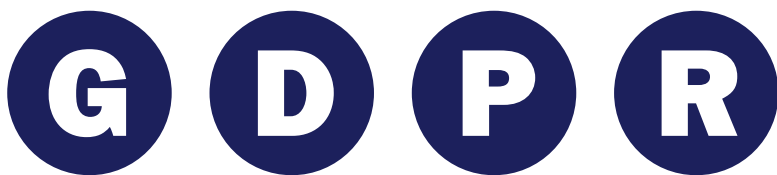- West Belfast Partnership Board

Schools and Colleges

- Ashfield Boys' High School
- De La Salle College, West Belfast
- Conway Education Centre
- All Saints College

Other Stakeholders

- Hastings Hotels
- Rutledge Training Ltd
- Usel (Ulster Supported Employment Ltd)
- Clanrye Group
- Labour Relations Agency
- Northern Ireland Youth Forum
- College Development Network (Scottish Government Agency)
- Forum for Access and Continuing Education

The consultation document is publicly available, but invitations to respond have also been issued directly to organisations and bodies, including those listed above.

If you are aware of other organisations or stakeholder groups not included here who may have an interest or wish to contribute to this consultation, please provide contact details to: wideningparticipation@economy-ni.gov.uk

G D P R

ANNEX 3: PRIVACY NOTICE TEMPLATE – WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Data Controller Name: Department for the Economy

Address: 39 – 49 Adelaide Street Belfast BT2 8FD

Telephone: 028 9054 8650

Email: wideningparticipation@economy-ni.gov.uk

Why are you processing my personal information?

The Department for the Economy (DfE) has launched a consultation on options for a strengthened and refreshed approach to Widening Participation in Higher Education. We would welcome your views on these proposals and the information we collect from you will inform and further develop this work. As part of the survey, you will also be asked if you agree to be contacted via email by a member of the Department if further detail is needed to better understand your survey response – this is entirely optional.

Following closure of the consultation, responses will be analysed, and a summary Departmental response drafted and published. Personal data, such as names and email addresses, will not be published as part of this process. In addition, we do not intend to list any organisations that have responded to the consultation in any published report.

We will use the contact details provided to ensure each respondent receives a copy of the Departmental Response to the consultation at the end of the process.

Our lawful basis for collecting your personal data is that of public task, in accordance with Section 8 of the Data Protection Act 2018 and Article 6(1) (e) of UK GDPR.

What categories of personal data are you processing?

The information we need to collect as part of the consultation is as follows:

- Name
- Status/category (i.e. individual, organisation, parents, or student)
- Organisation name
- Contact email address
- Opinions

Where do you get my personal data from?

You will provide us with your personal data when responding to the public consultation either when responding in a personal capacity or when responding on behalf of an organisation.

Do you share my personal data with anyone else?

We will not share your data with anyone else. DfE is using Delib as a data processor to help us deliver this consultation as it developed and manages the online consultation platform Citizen Space being used. We have a contract in place with them which means that they cannot do anything with your personal information unless we have instructed them to do it.

Information provided in response to this consultation, may be subject to publication or disclosure under access to information legislation (primarily the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Data Protection Act 2018 / UK General Data Protection Regulation).

For this reason, you should identify in your response any information you do not wish to be disclosed and explain why this is the case. When providing your opinions, avoid including any details that could identify you or others. Please note that an automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the Department.

If we receive a request for disclosure of this information we will take full account of your explanation, but we cannot give an assurance that confidentiality can be maintained in all circumstances.

Do you transfer my personal data to other countries?

No. We do not transfer data to another country.

How long do you keep my personal data?

We will retain your data for five years in line with the Department's Retention and Disposal Schedule.

Do you use my personal data to make an automated decision about me or for profiling?

We will not use your personal data for automated decision making or individual profiling.

What rights do I have?

You must advise the data subject what rights they have. Not all rights will be applicable as these are based on the legal justification for processing.

- You have the right to obtain confirmation that your data is being processed, and access to your personal data
- You are entitled to have personal data rectified if it is inaccurate or incomplete.
- You have the right to 'block' or suppress processing of personal data, in specific circumstances
- You have the right to object to the processing, in specific circumstances
- You have rights in relation to automated decision making and profiling

If these rights are applicable and you wish to exercise these please email
DPO@economy-.ni.gov.uk

How do I complain if I am not happy?

If you are unhappy with how any aspect of this privacy notice, or how your personal information is being processed, please contact the Department's Data Protection Officer at DPO@economy-ni.gov.uk

If you are still not happy, you have the right to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).

Contact details of the ICO are available at https://ico.org.uk/global/contact-us/