

Dear Mr Blake,

We write to you on behalf of a network called Practitioners from Underrepresented Backgrounds United through Education (PURSUE).

This group is open to all those engaging in Higher Education who self-identify as coming from a working-class background, or who align with the group's values.

As a network, many of us now work as practitioners in university outreach teams, or for the Uni Connect programme. We are a group who have personal experience of negotiating many of the challenges the Director for Fair Access and Participation seeks to address. As such, we write to you on behalf of our members. Not as institutional representatives, but as individuals who care deeply about addressing the educational inequalities we have faced for future generations.

Engagement and collaboration

Whilst we welcome renewed focus and drive in work by the sector to widen access to Higher Education, we are concerned with a discourse that implies engagement with schools is the 'silver bullet' in addressing inequality in access to Higher Education.

We recognise that disparities in educational attainment for groups who are currently underrepresented in Higher Education is a significant challenge and welcome an impetus to engage with younger audiences. However, for students who are unlikely to be among the 50% already going to university, we would argue that basing activity to rectify this in a school classroom is flawed for two reasons. Firstly, those who are currently most disengaged educationally may well not be in the classroom. Secondly, for those who are, formal educational spaces are not conducive to building trust (Gillies, 2006; Reay, 2002).

As a network, we would ask that greater recognition be given to community-based collaboration, and to the importance of work in spaces outside of formal educational settings. Settings that foster relationships built on trust and shared values, where young people can participate voluntarily. In doing so, we would not be asking to reinvent the metaphorical wheel, but rather put our shoulders to it in activity that fosters [authentic engagement](#). We see such activity regularly employed within children's social care and youth work with great success. Indeed, the National Youth Agency already have a set of [occupational standards](#) that root their approach in similar values.

Evaluation

As a network, we also welcome a drive to increase both the rigour and intensity of practice to evaluate widening participation initiatives. However, it is important to do so in a way that facilitates a recognition of the wider structural inequalities that young people face.

Whilst we appreciate the value of methodologies such as Randomised Control Trials, we are concerned that an over-reliance on such methodologies give little or no recognition to the wider inequalities that groups of students who are currently underrepresented in Higher Education may face. Indeed, we have significant concerns that evaluative methods which give no recognition to inequality borne out of a student's geographic and socio-historic location may do more harm than good.

We would also welcome clarification on what exactly is meant by 'independent evaluation'. Many members are concerned that there appears to be a conflation between independence and rigour. As a significant

number of our members work in institutional teams who have recently employed specialist evaluators with doctoral qualifications, we would ask that express efforts be made to counter such notions.

Notions of individual deficit

'Disadvantaged', 'Under privileged' and 'lacking in aspiration' are terms regularly used to describe young people from underrepresented backgrounds.

We would like to highlight the opportunity that a change in strategic direction offers to pivot away from the notions of individual deficit that have become entrenched in many approaches to widening university access in recent years.

A 'lack of aspiration' has been long cited as a cause of inequality in Higher Education access, despite it having little to no foundation in evidence (Harrison and Waller, 2018; Spohrer, 2016). Alongside this, organisations such as the Education Endowment Foundation have stated that initiatives to raise aspiration have '[little or no impact](#)' on improving academic attainment. A key objective within the new regulatory approach.

For the students our work purports to provide opportunities for, such discourse perpetuates notions that students are personally accountable for not 'aiming high enough', with little or no recognition given to the inequalities they contend with. Given the lack of evidence surrounding efficacy, and evidence suggesting that rather than helping young people, such notions are actively harmful to the communities we claim to serve, we would ask the new regulatory language to avoid such terminology. We would also welcome regulatory guidance that actively dissuades the sector from ineffectual activity based in such approaches.

The new vision

In recent years, the Office for Students have required providers to develop Access and Participation initiatives that are grounded in evidence, which have a defined Theory of Change, and are based on consultation with key stakeholders. We would be interested to engage with the evidence behind the new directive. To better understand exactly how universities can raise attainment with younger students, and how expending resource on third party organisations will achieve this. PURSUE members have significant experience in Access and Participation, both lived and as practitioners – we are resolute in our commitment to the work, and the communities we engage with. We wish to undertake work that contributes to levelling an incredibly uneven playing field.

The new regulatory vision appears to require a radically different approach to devising, delivering, and evaluating the activity we have developed over the last few years. As such, we would welcome a full and clear explanation as to why it will be more effectual, and how it aligns with principles rooted in social justice.

We would be delighted to discuss any of the points highlighted above with you in greater detail, and look forward to an open and constructive dialogue moving forward.

Yours Sincerely,

The PURSUE network

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Signatories

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