University Alliance submission to the Milburn review on Social Mobility and Child Poverty

University Alliance represents 23 major UK universities who work closely with business and the professions to deliver world-class research and a high quality student experience.

Improving social mobility is a great focus and strength of Alliance universities. They have leading graduate prospects and on average over twice as many students from lower-income and under-represented groups compared with the rest of the sector. Universities are contributing to social mobility through opening doors to higher education and breaking barriers into meaningful employment.

1.What do you think are the links between social mobility and child poverty?

Social mobility can generally be defined as the degree to which the patterns of advantage and disadvantage in one generation are passed on to the next. In line with the priorities set out in the Social Mobility Strategy this submission will mainly focus on the transformational impact that higher education and universities can have on intergenerational and relative social mobility.[1]

There are many complex factors that lead to and perpetuate inequality and poverty. As they are often interconnected and self-reinforcing we fully support the lifecycle approach being taken in this review as well as the joint focus on social mobility and child poverty. The Institute for Fiscal Studies indicates that, with the end of household income growth following the recession, and the sharp reduction in social transfers, child poverty will increase over the next few years, with an estimated increase of 800 000 more children living in Britain in households with incomes of 60% of less than the national median by 2014.[2] We believe that access to education provides opportunities for individuals and that it is a primary means of intergenerational economic and social change. In particular, universities are opening doors to higher education and breaking barriers into employment.

Figures and life histories consistently show that education, including higher education, is one of the primary means by which people can break from the constraints of the circumstances into which they are born. Universities, therefore, have a critical role to play in moving Britain towards being a more socially mobile country.

1.1 Access to university

It is extremely important to be very clear that widening access to higher education is not about getting a certain group of people into a select group of universities. There is extraordinary depth and breadth in UK higher education that should be celebrated that is missed if policies focus too narrowly on one part of the sector.

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[1] Relative social mobility referring to the comparative chances of people with different backgrounds ending up in certain social or income groups and intergenerational social mobility the extent to which people's success in life is determined by who their parents are.
[2] Financial Times 17 December 2010; Financial Times 28 April 2011

Access to university is still greatly skewed in favour of the more privileged due, in large part, to the link between educational attainment and background. Universities, therefore have a very proactive role to play in widening access if they are to impact social mobility and, in turn, child poverty.

This is a role, and a responsibility, broadly recognised by the sector and demonstrated by the way it is often part of the core values and visions of institutions, such as:

> *"to promote equality and diversity and social justice, and change people's lives for the better through higher education"* - University of Bradford

> *"to successfully promote and drive opportunity, social justice, creativity and innovation"* - The University of the West of England

> *"demonstrating a real and continuing commitment to social inclusion"* - Teesside University

This commitment is also measured by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). On average there are 4,550 OFFA countable students in receipt of full state support at an Alliance university, more than double the sector average[3]. Within Alliance universities, therefore, there is a wealth of experience and expertise in how best to inspire, reach and support people from non-traditional HE backgrounds from initial contact through to graduation and employment. A selection of examples are included in section 4. We would highly recommend visiting some of our universities as part of your evidence gathering and we would be happy to facilitate this.

1.2 Retention

Universities have a responsibility beyond simply widening access; retention is equally important. Recruiting a student who then subsequently fails to achieve a higher qualification can have a negative impact on social mobility and can impact negatively on life choices for that person. This is recognised in the OFFA guidance for access agreements[4] as students from non-traditional HE backgrounds are more likely to leave prior to completing their qualification.

Teesside University have the highest proportion of students from low participation neighbourhoods [in the UK][5]. In 2003 they received support from the European Social Fund to research retention, which led to the establishment of a central retention team. Their work has been highlighted as an example of good practice by the National Audit Office[6]. The team says that they "develop and support innovative strategies to reach a wider range of students. Keeping students is at the heart of the widening participation agenda and we are committed to better supporting students."[7]

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[3] OFFA Access agreement and widening participation strategic assessment monitoring - Outcomes for 2009-10 Annex C
[4] OFFA Guidance, How to produce an access agreement for 2012-13 (2011)
[5] 2009/10 Young full-time first degree entrants by low participation marker
http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2060&Itemid=141
[6] National Audit Office, Staying the course: the retention of students in higher education (2007)
[7] http://www.tees.ac.uk/depts/retentionteam/

1.3 Access to employment

The Social Mobility Strategy states that

Reforms to higher education funding put new obligations on universities to improve access. In particular, those universities charging over £6,000 will have to attract more students from less affluent backgrounds. Too many young people also struggle to get a foothold in the labour market. This is not a new phenomenon – but we are determined to do better.

Widening access to higher education is an extremely important part of the role universities play in social mobility. However, it is only a part. One of the most common ways of realising social mobility at an individual level is through capable people from disadvantaged backgrounds gaining access to high-status occupations. Coupling access to university with good employability outcomes, universities can have a great impact on social mobility, particularly as the vast majority of professional roles require advanced learning and university degrees.

A significant part of breaking barriers into employment can be achieved by universities working closely with employers and by inspiring and equipping students to start their own businesses.

Experience of work can also facilitate graduate employment but can also build valuable skills that support employability more generally. A HEFCE commissioned report found that "there appears to be evidence, clearest for sandwich placements, that a benefit of structured work experience is improved employment outcomes after graduation."[8] Demonstrating their commitment to working closely with business, over 10% of students at Alliance universities are on sandwich courses, compared with 6% sector average. The report went on to say that "the priority for activity/interventions by the HE sector should therefore be to support work experience placements for students during their period of HE study so that they develop the employability skills employers require and begin to build a body of work experience in advance of entering the employment market proper". Working closely with business and the professions throughout the degree program is a key feature of Alliance universities. From HP collaborating on course design and offering internships with the University of the West of England to Siemens co-location with the University of Lincoln in a new school of engineering[9] there are many examples of innovative approaches to employer engagement being taken at Alliance universities. In section 4 there are some examples of initiatives set up especially targeted at improving employment outcomes for students from lower socio-economic or non-traditional HE backgrounds.

The Government's social mobility strategy, *Opening Doors,* highlights the importance of work experience and the need for recruitment to internships and other work experience to be fair and transparent. *Opening Doors* points to examples of good practice among professional bodies and firms, and proposes a business compact on social mobility to help such practice to become more widespread. [10] Employer engagement throughout higher education benefits all of those involved.

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[8] Increasing opportunities for high quality higher education work experience, Report to HEFCE by Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and CRAC (2011)
[9] Both of these examples, along with others can be found in the University Alliance publication 'Growing the Future: universities leading changing and creating the regional economy' (2011), http://www.university-alliance.ac.uk/campaigns/growingthefuture/knowledgeworkforce/technologyeducation/
[10] The Bridge Group Report Social Mobility through Higher Education (2011)

Students gain valuable experience and contacts and employers can help to ensure that graduates have more of the skills and capabilities beneficial for future employment.

1.4 Access to the professions

There are many barriers for prospective entrants to the professions and these have a profound effect on social mobility, as well as to the UK's long-term economic growth. In his foreword as chair of the Panel for Fair Access to the Professions, the Rt Hon Alan Milburn noted that "one in three jobs today is professional and millions more professionals may be needed by 2020 as our economy becomes ever more service-oriented and professionalised". [11] The pattern emerging is that as the economy has been increasingly based on knowledge rather than routine production and new jobs have been created in large numbers in high-skill, high-wage professional and managerial occupations.[12]

Ensuring that capable young people [and those looking to change career, or gain new skills later in life[13]] can aspire to and access the professions is a fundamental aspect of the social mobility agenda and crucial for economic growth. This is an area of strength and focus for Alliance universities with up to 70% of courses professionally accredited and up to 69% of students coming from lower income or under-represented backgrounds.[14]

For example, this is the case at the University of Bradford. Despite having one of the highest intakes of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, Bradford achieves some of the highest employment rates in the sector. Bradford predominantly delivers courses that are professionally accredited and has a good record of its graduates (particularly in pharmacy, optometry and other science-related professions) from non-traditional HE backgrounds moving into employment within the profession. The University has found that an important route to achieving this is working directly with employers; in many cases it has found that there is a shared interest and need for increasing the diversity of graduates. For example, the University's Law School has used its close links to the local and regional legal profession to establish that there is a clear demand and business case amongst these firms for a greater diversity of Law graduates. In addition, through a strong focus on work placements and mini-pupillages, the university is enabling students to gain the experience that these employers need.

The experience at Bradford as well as at other Alliance universities demonstrates that effectively improving employment opportunities for graduates from a widening participation background needs to be about more than corporate social responsibility. Instead, through the transformational experience of higher education and by gaining meaningful work experience while at university, there should be a strong business case for hiring these graduates.

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[11] The Bridge Group Report Social Mobility through Higher Education (2011)
[12] Paul Simmons, The Work Foundation, The Hourglass and the Escalator (2011)
[13] Mature students make up a large proportion of undergraduates, as an example 34% of Oxford Brookes undergraduates on first degrees are over 21.
[14] OFFA Access agreement and widening participation strategic assessment monitoring - Outcomes for 2009-10
http://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/2011-04+2011-29-OFFA+HEFCE-Access-Agreement-standard-report-web.pdf

2. Do you think the Government's policies, in particular the social mobility and child poverty strategies, will improve people's life chances?

The impact of White Paper policies on social mobility

The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) in their response to the Higher Education White Paper, *Students at the heart of the system*, predicts that the proposed reforms to HE will have a negative impact on social mobility. "Social mobility is likely to be an unintended victim of the White Paper's proposals, and the new methods of allocating resources and controlling student numbers look likely to reinforce relative disadvantage rather than remove it."[15]

HEPI also suggest that the 'core and margin' allocation of student places proposed in the HE White Paper will reduce student places and funds available to the very universities that have been responsible for recent advances in widening participation.

As we highlighted in the University Alliance response to the recent BIS consultation on the proposed changes, the strong correlation between background and educational attainment means that the Government's proposed student number controls have the potential to negatively impact on social mobility in two ways:

- through the redistribution of public investment towards high achieving, high social class students because their courses will be publicly resourced at £9,000 per student whilst other universities face having 8% of numbers taken away year on year unless they reduce their average fee to £7,500
- by reducing choice and access to well-resourced courses for the majority of students from lower socio-economic groups[16]

We also use our response to make the wider point that Government aims for social mobility will will always be negatively affected in a system where places are restricted given the high correlation between social background and attainment. If we assume that the changes do not reduce the demand for higher education to any significant extent, the progress in widening participation will depend on the number of places available. Assuming there is no decrease in participation for the more advantaged groups, social mobility will never fully be realised unless we can achieve total growth of the higher education system. It is therefore essential to improving social mobility that in the longer term we continue to explore how total growth of the sector can be achieved despite tight restrictions on Government expenditure.

As the White Paper highlighted, increased participation has been supported by the HEFCE widening participation allocation over recent years. We are pleased that HEFCE has been able to protect the non-mainstream allocations relating to widening access for 2012-13; this funding has proved to be critical support for social inclusion and social mobility.

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[15] John Thompson and Bahram Bekhradnia, "Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System" an Analysis of the Higher Education White Paper (2011)
[16] University Alliance, response to the Higher Education White Paper 'Students at the Heart of the System', September 2011

3. Are there other policies that could be implemented for the same cost which would ensure that all citizens have the same opportunities?

Given the concerns we outline above in relation to the proposals outlined in the Government's Higher Education White Paper we have suggested that over the longer-term the following cost-neutral solutions should be considered.

3.1 A tapered approach to core and margin

Government and HEFCE should explore the possibility of introducing a tapered approach to the reallocation of student places away from the margin. This would work by ensuring that there is no false, single cut-off point at £7,500 for the allocation (or redistribution after initial allocation) of the 'margin' places. We would recommend allocating these numbers through a more gradual/tapered mechanism to reflect the different markets in higher education (e.g. 20% allocated to £8,000 fee places, 20% to £7,500, 20% to £7,000, 20% to £6,500, 20% to £6,000). These numbers are illustrative but they would avoid the false 'cliff edge' at £7,500 and allow a market to continue to exist between £7,500 and £9,000 whilst averaging out at the same cost for the public purse overall. To be clear, this is a cost-neutral solution. This would enable institutions to make the case for bidding back numbers on the basis of value-for money, both for students and the public up-front investment.

3.2 A radical reduction of the AAB+ threshold

Given that the government's ultimate stated aim is to increase dynamism and reduce control, HEFCE should continue to look at options for a radical reduction of the AAB+ threshold in year three (2014-15) and beyond. In particular, careful consideration should be given to whether this can be achieved in one step, as a gradual reduction would be likely to cause more problems and instability as different institutions are affected year on year. We fully understand that the main reason for the current restriction to AAB+ is the need to control expenditure and that this group is relatively predictable in number. We therefore suggest that there as a pause in year two (2012-13) to allow time for some modelling to be done to assess whether adjusting the remaining core to counter this uncertainty would mitigate against this. Of course reductions in the threshold would need to be finely balanced against the impact of a further reduced core.

3.3 Achieving total growth

As referred to in the White Paper, in the longer-term it should be a priority to re-introduce the Robbins Principle. Can we achieve the separation of some undergraduate numbers from Government subsidy in order to grow the system and achieve a real market in higher education? If we are going to be able to produce the number of graduates we need to stay globally competitive this issue needs to be revisited. Ultimately we need to consider ways to reduce the Government's long-term costs (subsidy reduced) and short-term cost (up-front sale of loan books/encourage up-front repayment).

4. What are the best examples of projects which have brought about real progress in creating a fairer, more mobile society?

In addition to reviewing admissions processes and working with schools, colleges and communities to raise aspirations, inspire people, and make options clear, there is much that universities can do and are doing to bring about real progress in creating a fairer, more mobile society. Below are examples of innovative and creative initiatives at Alliance universities - often delivered in partnership with other universities, colleges, businesses and employers - aimed at widening access and supporting the transition into employment.

4.1 Opening doors to higher education

The University of Bradford and Leeds School of Medicine partner in an initiative to widen participation for students entering medical education and clinical sciences from under-represented backgrounds. Bradford runs a 1 year foundation degree in Clinical Sciences/Medicine from which students can progress directly into second year of Medicine at Leeds. With over 50% of Medics coming from independent schools (a figure unchanged from 1980 to 2000)[17] this kind of initiative is a great example of a universities working in partnership to increase social mobility through access to the professions.

The Open University Openings courses provide access to higher education for under-represented groups. These are short, introductory courses aimed at low socio-economic groups, new inexperienced learners, disadvantaged groups and people on no or low incomes looking for opportunities to raise their aspirations.

Openings courses have been designed to respond to the common barriers faced by these students, so courses are short, introductory, and inexpensive with lots of financial support available. Courses are flexible and accessible with an emphasis on study skills development and confidence building with enhanced tutorial support.

Plymouth University's network of Partner Colleges delivering HE in FE across the region promotes alternative routes to higher education for non-traditional students, namely Foundation Degrees with a 'top-up' progression to Bachelor's Degree study and courses providing access to the professions. Taking a foundation degree at a local college seems low-risk for students who may see themselves as not clever enough for university. But they absorb vital learning skills that prepare them for HE, such as self-directed learning and presentation, which transforms that early lack of confidence into a sense of mission and belonging. Plymouth have found that the benefits are greatest for mature students without recent experience of education.

These factors, together with support from the university, have resulted in a higher proportion of Plymouth foundation degree students (45%) continuing with their studies by topping up to a bachelor's degree than the national average (32%). This partnership approach of the university with its network of colleges is undoubtedly key to this success.

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[17] BIS report, Unleashing Aspiration (2009) http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/migratedd/publications/p/panel-fair-access-to-professions-final-report-21july09.pdf

4.2 Breaking barriers to meaningful employment

The University of the West of England (UWE) Employability and Diversity Programme is primarily based around giving eligible students (from backgrounds often under-represented or disadvantaged in the graduate labour market) opportunities for short periods of high quality unpaid work experience and/or paid summer internships[18] and/or mentoring[19] from regional professionals. This is based on the recognition that these students do not have the social networks that can give them easy access to relevant work experience. UWE has engaged with over 30 regional businesses in the programme, mainly law firms but also public sector, finance and other sectors.

Northumbria University's innovative integrated Law Degrees were developed in response to the difficulties being encountered in finding training contracts and employment by law graduates from non-traditional backgrounds, in particular. For those aspiring to enter the legal profession the School's well established, innovative 4 and 5-year integrated Exempting Law Degrees enable students to combine academic and vocational stages in one programme[20]. Alongside the degree Northumbria provide extensive support for students, with local firms involved throughout the programme. Firms also hold open evenings where students can attend their offices, participate in a range of skills sessions and gain a flavour of what they do. As part of the course students are also able to try out legal practice for real through the School's own legal practice - the Student Law Office. Under the supervision of qualified members of staff students advise and represent members of the public and may even represent their client at court. Together this gives graduates invaluable experience and meaningful links with local employers in the area, breaking down barriers to entering employment.

Glamorgan GATES is a partnership between the University of Glamorgan and the Communities First Unit of the Welsh Assembly Government. It is both a concept – a "gateway" between the university and the community – and a physical presence – a GATES Centre. Initially the focus is on encouraging engagement with learning in a non-challenging way to build confidence, develop self-esteem and broaden horizons to promote personal and community capacity for development and change. In the long term, Glamorgan GATES will seek to make a significant impact on the currently low levels of educational attainment and participation in further or higher education in valley based communities.

This programme sometimes involves higher education but can also involve one to one mentoring and removing barriers preventing individuals from pursuing employment of their choice. One example is of a young Portuguese man wanting to set up his own café after being made redundant from bar work but who needed help in gaining his food hygiene certificate due to language barriers. After receiving mentoring and regularly meeting with a business advisor through GATES he has now been in business for over a year and the GATES mentoring and business advisor continues to provide ad hoc support.[21] This kind of flexible and tailored support can make the vital difference between unemployment and a career.

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[18] UWE internships scheme http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/business/recruitmentservices/recruitinggraduates/undergraduateinternships.aspx
[19] UWE mentoring scheme http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/business/recruitmentservices/recruitinggraduates/mentoring.aspx
[20] http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/sd/academic/law/
[21] Adult and Community Learning in South Wales: a policy and practice perspective, University of Glamorgan and NIACE Dysgu Cymru

UHOVI (Universities Heads of the Valleys Institute) is a strategic partnership between the University of Glamorgan and University of Wales, Newport. Working closely with further education colleges and training providers, local authorities, businesses, schools and the voluntary sector, UHOVI is developing industry-specific skills tailored to the needs of the region.

Entry requirements for UHOVI courses are more flexible to allow non-traditional learners and those without formal qualifications to participate in higher education. Applications for UHOVI courses are direct rather than via UCAS, giving more flexibility regarding timing of applications and removing a potential barrier.

These examples show that there is not a simple, single solution. They do, however, have some similar themes: working in partnership with HEIs, colleges, schools, employers, local authorities; flexible programmes able to work around the often complex needs of students from non-traditional HE backgrounds; recognising specific barriers and finding innovative solutions to remove them.

6. What would be the best way to measure progress on social mobility and child poverty?

In the same way that continuity of policy and funding is important, so too is continuity of measures over time. It is, therefore, extremely important to get these indicators right as performance indicators must remain constant if progress is to be tracked consistently over time.

To measure overall progress on social mobility in the UK it is important to take a whole sector view. Current policy proposals are very institutionally focussed based predominantly on the role of institutional access agreements. The important aspect of partnership delivery and institutional collaboration in promoting access to higher education could therefore be overlooked. Whilst our universities have indicated they will continue in partnership delivery of access programmes, this depends on institutions making a pro-active choice to work with other HEIs/organisations. As one example amongst many, in partnering with Leeds Medical School, Bradford is helping to improve their competitor's widening participation targets while taking on the risk and cost of initial recruitment and retention. Alliance universities have indicated that they are committed to widening participation and improving social mobility but rethinking the incentives for and barriers to collaborative working in this area could actively promote more innovative partnerships to the benefit of the whole sector. An important aspect in the strengthened role of OFFA going forward should be a national monitoring and coordination of social mobility programmes.

Data collected by HESA on student background using information on Socio-economic Classification (SEC) and low participation neighbourhoods provides helpful indicators as to the extent and success of widening participation at each university. It is widely documented that students from lower income or non-traditional HE backgrounds, for a variety of reasons, are more likely to go to universities near their family home. Many Alliance universities are located in areas of low traditional participation in HE. In locations such as Liverpool, Lincoln, Huddersfield, Teesside, Greater Manchester and Bradford, even after significant adjustments made for location, Alliance universities are exceeding benchmarks set. These figures demonstrate the substantial work being done and the wealth of expertise that could benefit the rest of the sector.

OFFA now measures university progress against targets set in access agreements[22] and by looking at the proportion of students in each university who come from lower-income or other under-represented groups (OFFA countable students). This is an area where Alliance universities are making a significant contribution with 29% of OFFA countable students in receipt of full state support studying at an Alliance institution. These data act as a good measure of widening access to higher education.

7. Do you think the indicators set out in the child poverty strategy and social mobility strategy are the right measures?

The factors in indicator 6 in the Social Mobility Strategy are important measures of progress but they only capture part of the picture. The great work being done in the mainstream part of the sector should be captured alongside any improvements to student profiles at the more selective institutions. One way of capturing this could be to develop some kind of added-value measure that would consider both student intake and graduate outcomes.

It is also important to note that a growing number of students are entering higher education after the traditional entry age of 18/19[23]. A trend likely to continue as the current economic climate and the shape of the future labour market[24] will make access to higher education increasingly important. Any student starting a degree at an institution in the majority of the sector who is over the age of 19 will not be captured using the current indicators. This is particularly important as there is some evidence to suggest mature students are more likely to come from the lower socio-economic backgrounds than younger entrants and this likelihood increases if they have no previous experience of HE.[25]

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[22] Access agreements are only required by universities or colleges that want to charge annual tuition fees for full-time home/EU undergraduates that exceed £6000
[23] http://stats.bis.gov.uk/he/Participation_Rates_in_HE_2009-10.pdf
[24] Paul Sissons (2011), The Work Foundation, The Hourglass and the Escalator: Labour market change and mobility
[25]Helen Kay and Annette Sundaraj (2003), Are mature students at Sheffield Hallam University widening participation students?