

University Alliance represents 18 higher education institutions in England and Wales educating almost a quarter of all undergraduates in the UK. Alliance universities have been proud leaders in technical and professional education since the Industrial Revolution and are still crucial to the success of cities and sectors today.

This document forms our written submission to the inquiry into value for money in higher education of the Education Select Committee of the House of Commons.

### **Executive summary**

1. Alliance universities play an important role in delivering the academic, professional and technical education that ensures learners have the wide range of skills, which they need to succeed throughout their working lives. These include employment-specific knowledge and general skills such as critical thinking – Alliance universities co-design and co-deliver many courses with employers to make sure they are relevant. Around 43% of their courses provide students with a qualification from a professional body as well as a degree from the university.
2. Through their leading research and education activities in subject areas such as allied health (including nursing), engineering and art and design, Alliance universities are making a substantial contribution to productivity and growth across national and regional economies. For example, in nursing, significant changes over time means that nurses are now engaging in far more diagnostic activity. The specialised, high quality education provided by Alliance universities equips these health care professionals with the skills they need to think critically about patient care processes and practices and research demonstrates that nurses educated to a degree level are likely to provide a higher quality of care for their patients.<sup>1</sup>
3. The student experience is at the heart of the activities conducted by Alliance universities. As universities with a long history of supporting progression to, and success in, higher education through a wide range of activities, they offer students from all parts of society the chance to pursue life-changing

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/nursing/newsevents/news/2014/degree-educated-nurses-can-reduce-hospital-deaths.aspx>; <https://theconversation.com/youre-more-likely-to-survive-hospital-if-your-nurse-has-a-degree-61838>

opportunities. Alliance universities are also committed to providing high-quality, research-informed teaching aimed at solving real-world problems. The openness of our universities to various modes of delivery, such as Degree Apprenticeships, accelerated courses, and part-time study, allows learners to obtain a higher education qualification in ways that allow them to tailor their studies to other commitments they have in their lives.

4. Alliance universities are committed to demonstrating accountability to the students and communities they serve and to being good stewards of the public and private resources that are provided to them to carry out teaching, research and knowledge exchange activities. They are also constantly evolving and are eager to work with government and other partners to meet these commitments.
5. In response to the issues the Committee is exploring as part of this inquiry, University Alliance's recommendations can be summarised as follows:
  - a. On **graduate outcomes and the use of destination data**, we encourage the higher education sector, government and other stakeholders to continue to support the development of tools seeking to better understand graduate outcomes, all while ensuring their appropriate contextualisation.
  - b. On **social justice in higher education and support for disadvantaged students**, we recommend support for existing and new initiatives aimed at tackling particular gaps in higher education participation and success (e.g. support for part-time and mature students, addressing gaps based on socio-economic status and/or ethnic group).
  - c. On the **quality and effectiveness of teaching**, we recommend universities continue to work with government and other stakeholders to build on existing initiatives that showcase and drive teaching excellence.
  - d. On the **role of the Office for Students**, we recommend that the new regulatory body's approach to risk, regulation and registration conditions recognise existing robust accountability and quality mechanisms within the higher education system.

**Graduate outcomes and the use of destination data**

6. There continues to be a salary premium for graduate universities. As noted by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in 2016, “despite the recent fall in the average graduate real wage, their wage relative to school-leavers’ has remained relatively unchanged. Indeed, at any given age, the wage differential between graduates and school-leavers has stayed essentially unchanged across birth cohorts.”<sup>2</sup>
7. This year’s release of Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) data provides further helpful context on graduate salary outcomes five years after the completion of their first degree, building upon existing measures of graduate outcomes. A large portion of courses continue to produce graduates with salaries that are above the median salary for 25-29 year olds (currently £21,000).
8. Notably, Alliance universities continue to perform very strongly on measures for graduates in employment and further study, which reflects their strong focus on employability, extensive links with employers and efforts to align study programmes closely with the needs of industry. For example, the most recent Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) record for the 2015/16 academic year, produced by HESA, shows that Alliance universities have among the highest proportion of graduates in full-time paid work 3.5 years after they completed their studies.
9. However, the value of a degree must not solely be based on the measurement of salary outcomes of 25-29 year olds. The social benefits of attending university, such as the benefits associated with the exposure to new ideas, the opportunities for first-generation university students to gain social capital and to have a greater choice of career pathways upon completion of their studies, must be considered as part of any discussion on graduate outcomes.
10. Alliance universities play a particular role in preparing students from a wide range of backgrounds for careers that will allow them to thrive and make positive contributions to the cities and regions where they live. Graduates

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/bns/bn185.pdf>

may choose to pursue careers in areas where salaries may be lower but the social impact of their work may be of tremendous value for their communities, such as teaching and nursing.

11. Graduate outcomes data such as LEO may not also fully capture the positive economic and social benefits associated with learners pursuing various forms of study throughout their working lives to gain new skills. University Alliance educates 41% of the UK's part-time students, and many of these students are making strong economic and social contributions during their studies, as well as after them.
12. The use of graduate outcomes data, including, for example, the use of LEO as a supplementary metric in the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), needs to be properly contextualised. Many other factors that can impact graduate earnings, such as the decision to be self-employed and variations in economic conditions between regions, are also not reflected in this measurement.
13. Regarding graduate outcomes and the use of destination data, we recommend the following:
  - a. The higher education sector, government and other stakeholders continue to support the ongoing development of data collection tools seeking to better understand graduate outcomes, such as HESA's Graduate Outcomes record, evolving from the DLHE survey;
  - b. These new tools and the way in which they are used need to be appropriately contextualised to recognise the economic and social value of the academic, professional and technical education Alliance universities provide in Britain's cities and regions.

### **Social justice in higher education and support for disadvantaged students**

14. With the expansion of higher education and universities' ongoing commitments to increase their outreach, access and support activities through their Access Agreements, important progress has been made to ensure under-represented and disadvantaged groups of students are able to pursue a university education, succeed in their studies and transition to an enriching career following their studies. Alliance universities as a mission

group are above benchmark on both access and retention, providing students from all backgrounds with life-changing opportunities, paying attention to every step on a student's journey, empowering and supporting them to succeed.

15. For example, the University of Brighton's widening participation work has been recognised by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) for its positive impact on pre-16 attainment raising in the university's target schools, and the Coventry University Group has been recognised for its efforts in delivering flexible and affordable higher education provision that allows students at campuses in Coventry, Scarborough and the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham to fit other commitments around their study.
16. However, universities recognise that further progress is required to address the challenges that remain around fair access and participation. As noted by the current Director of Fair Access to Higher Education in a publication released by OFFA in August 2017, "our higher education system does not yet offer true equality of opportunity". Gaps in entry to higher education based on socio-economic status and/or ethnic group, among other factors, still persist. As OFFA's responsibilities transition to the Office for Students, there is an opportunity for government, universities, schools, employers and other stakeholders to build on accomplishments to date and make greater progress in ensuring students from a diverse range of backgrounds are able to access the form of higher education that is best for them and obtain the benefits associated with it.
17. Furthermore, as identified by numerous groups including University Alliance in our February 2017 *Ladder and Lifeline* report, there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of part-time and mature students in higher education in the past decade. The overall structure of the funding system (which tends to favour young, full-time, first degree students), the reduction in training offered by employers, limited availability of part-time study loans, debt aversion and limited information, advice and guidance are among the factors that have resulted in this decline. In order to ensure these students can find out about, and access, the range of learning opportunities available to them, a range of incentives, such as the re-introduction of Individual Learning Accounts, the broadening of the Apprenticeship Levy to cover a wider range of courses and the introduction of a 'Help to Learn Bonus' (a top up to

support people who invest their own money in courses), can be used to further encourage study among part-time and mature students. Lifelong learning can play a greater role in the achievement of government priorities related to productivity, place and social mobility.

18. Newer forms of provision, such as Degree Apprenticeships, can also be used to improve access and participation in higher education, as well as social mobility, as long as they have parity of esteem with other higher education qualifications. Through their strong partnerships with industry, Alliance universities are committed to the success of Higher and Degree Apprenticeships: they offer over 120 programmes, and a further 80 programmes are currently in development.
19. We recognise that some of the solutions proposed to tackle the existing challenges related to social justice in higher education and to support disadvantaged students require additional financial support from government. Through Access Agreements and other reporting requirements, universities are committed to ensuring these funds are spent in an effective manner.
20. Regarding social justice in higher education and support for disadvantaged students, we recommend the following:
  - a. The government continue to support the expansion of widening participation and social mobility initiatives undertaken by universities, as outlined in their Access Agreements and other activities, as the regulatory responsibility for fair access and participation in higher education in England transitions from OFFA to the OfS.
  - b. The government work with universities, employers, schools, communities and other stakeholders to consider the implementation of new initiatives to further support access and success of disadvantaged students, such as part-time and mature learners, in higher education.

**Quality and effectiveness of teaching**

21. Alliance universities have a long and proud tradition of excellence in teaching. By designing our courses for employers, we keep our teaching relevant. By constantly innovating, we keep it fit for a fast-changing world.
22. University Alliance has been pleased to engage with government throughout the development of the TEF to date and welcome its intention to use the Framework as a way to champion success and drive improvement. As TEF enters its third year, and as subject-level pilots are introduced, it is important that it continue to be developed in a constructive matter. It must reflect different models of teaching excellence which exist in varied forms across UK higher education providers, and it must support innovation in teaching and learning.
23. We recognise that the Framework continues to be tweaked to improve accountability. We look forward to further understanding the impacts of changes to metrics in future iterations of TEF, such as the marking of top and bottom absolute values and the inclusion of supplementary metrics around graduate outcomes and grade inflation. We welcome the option for providers with a high percentage of part-time students to submit an additional page of quantitative information to supplement their metrics.
24. Many of our member institutions also look forward to engaging with the subject-level TEF pilots, as it will provide an opportunity to fully understand how such an exercise will work in practice, as well as how students will ultimately benefit from the availability of such information.
25. As the TEF has taken shape, University Alliance has developed a Teaching Excellence Alliance programme to promote excellent teaching and learning. It is designed to better understand and define – as well as champion and showcase – excellent teaching at Alliance universities. It is also aimed to support the development of this distinctive Alliance excellence in academic-employer engagement and student support. The pilot year of the programme has provided opportunities for administrators, professors and students from Alliance universities to share best practices and test new ways of designing innovative courses that respond to real-world challenges in multidisciplinary environments.



26. The University Alliance Doctoral Training Alliance also showcases Alliance universities' strengths in ensuring their education responds to industry needs. The DTA is the largest multi-partner and only nationwide doctoral training initiative of its kind – it is aimed at producing independent, highly-employable researchers with expertise and skills in strategically-important research areas (currently applied biosciences for health, energy and social policy). Through the DTA, research students are able to access a broader professional network where they can collaborate and share knowledge.
27. Regarding quality and effectiveness of teaching, we recommend that the TEF be developed so it can work best as a tool for students, and to ensure that innovation in higher education teaching and learning can take shape and be appropriately supported.

### **The role of the Office for Students**

28. As further information on how the OfS may operate upon its creation is made available, we will be fully engaging in activities and discussions related to how the new regulatory body will take shape. We look forward to participating in the Department for Education's consultation on the OfS and its regulatory framework, and we are currently reviewing the recently issued consultation documents with a view to making a response. In broad terms, we will make the case that the new regulatory body's approach to risk, regulation and registration conditions should be efficient and recognise existing robust accountability and quality mechanisms within the higher education system.

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