

# NUS Poverty Commission

## Written Evidence

Deadline: **Tuesday 12 December 2017** at 1.00pm

Please return completed submissions to: [povertycommission@nus.org.uk](mailto:povertycommission@nus.org.uk)

### Overview

NUS' Poverty Commission aims to address barriers working class students face in regards to access, retention and success in post-16 education and deliver a series of policy recommendations in February 2018.

The Commission will meet three times to hear a range of oral evidence and discuss recommendations from both these sessions and the written evidence submitted by stakeholders.

### Why are we consulting?

We know that for many students in higher education poverty is a real issue, from increases in the cost of living to changes in student support, but the issue of poverty and its impact on post-16 education spans far further.

Whilst looking at the experiences of working class students in HE, the Poverty Commission will go further and also address the realities of working class adults wanting to re-enter education and training, the experiences of apprentices at all levels and the impact education has on social mobility on leaving education.

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We will be announcing our Commissioners on **Tuesday 17 October** to coincide with the **International Day for the Eradication of Poverty**.

For more information visit [www.nus.org.uk](http://www.nus.org.uk)

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national union of **students**

# FAQs

## *What do you mean by post-16 education?*

NUS represents students over the age of 16 in colleges, universities and on some apprenticeships. Post-16 education itself includes education that takes place in settings such as sixth forms (school, college and academy), further education institutions and adult and community centres, and universities. It also includes training providers and on the job learning in the workplace, in the voluntary and charity sector, and within institutions such as prisons. It can be academic or vocational, and formal and informal.

## *What do you mean by 'working class' and 'poverty'?*

There are a number of political and economic definitions of 'working class', and, as the nature of work has changed, they have also changed. When we talk about 'working class HE students' we can refer to someone being the first person in their family to attend university or those students who were or are entitled to specific financial support such as free school meals or maintenance grants/loans.

However when we're talking about 'working class people' holistically we need to take broader approach. In part we will be relying on organisations who submit to the Commission to use their own definition of 'working class' in a way that best fits the people they work with or represent.

Regarding 'poverty', some people may face explicit financial barriers when accessing and succeeding in education, but for others poverty may come in different forms, including economic, social or cultural.

The Government's index of multiple deprivation covers:

- income
- employment
- health and disability
- education, skills and training
- living environment
- crime

Although these different themes intersect and we expect them to be touched on during the Commission, our primary focus is on 'education, skills and training' in relations to deprivation and poverty.

## *Why are there only four evidence questions?*

We want a range of different voices to be able to participate in this Commission, including smaller organisations and ones staffed by volunteers. Please feel free to use the text boxes below to provide as little or as much information as you want or are able to.

## *My organization only works with or represents people from Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland or England, not across the whole of the UK. Can I still participate?*

Yes. We expect that a lot of what is submitted will resonate across the whole of the UK. However where policy, projects, funding and initiatives are devolved, we will be drawing on a panel of experts who will look at the devolved context and shape recommendations accordingly.

## *How can I follow the progress of the Commission?*

The Commission is due to report towards the end of February 2018 and we will circulate the final report and recommendations at that time. However, alongside the formal evidence gathering of the Commission, NUS will be working with students and community members to tell their stories and experiences of accessing and succeeding in post-16 education via social media. You can follow and engage with us using the hashtag **#ClassDismissed** on Twitter.

**Please complete the form below and return submissions to: [povertycommission@nus.org.uk](mailto:povertycommission@nus.org.uk)**

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**Which organisation do you represent?**

University Alliance (<http://www.unialliance.ac.uk>)

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, educating the professional workforce of the future providing flexible and responsive R&D to businesses of all sizes and solving the problems facing society locally, nationally and across the globe. We are large enough to take risks, experienced at working with key partners and have never lost the enterprising mindset which says we must constantly innovate to stay fit for a changing world.

Alliance universities are committed to supporting social mobility, widening participation and success for students from all backgrounds. We recruit over 28% of the sector's students from low participation neighbourhoods, and as a collective, our universities are projected to spend over £168 million on fair access and participation initiatives in the 2018-19 academic year.

**Are you happy for information provided in your response to be published as part of our Commission?**

Yes  No

**Would you like to be contacted when the report is published?**

Yes  No

## **What do you perceive to be the barriers for working class people, particularly focusing on the constituents you work with, accessing and succeeding in post-16 education?**

We have identified three broad categories of barriers for working class people in accessing and succeeding in post-16 education. Please note that this categorisation/list of barriers is non-exhaustive.

### 1. Financial barriers

The most significant financial barrier is likely to be insufficient money to live off while studying. While the conversion of maintenance grants to loans has resulted in an increase in the total maintenance support available for university and college students, we hear that some students struggle to manage on the money available to them through maintenance loans. Many students need to work alongside study and, while for some this can be helpful as it enables them to build valuable employability skills, for others it can make it hard for them to attend lectures and seminars or take part in projects with other students. It would be very helpful if the government could run another Student Income and Expenditure Survey - the last one was carried out before the change in student finance arrangements.

Even if the quantum is sufficient, there is a fairness concern related to the fact that it means that the poorest students leave university with the highest debt, which may lead to a psychological burden even if it does not eventually have to be fully repaid.

In relation to tuition fees, there is also some evidence that, despite student numbers (at least for younger students) holding up well since the tripling of tuition fees, student loan debt does put some students off (Callender, C., and Mason, G. (forthcoming). Does student loan debt deter higher education participation? New evidence from England. *Annals of American Political and Social Science*.)

Part-time and mature students tend to be more debt adverse and the switch from grant to loan funding has had a particularly negative impact on this group of students, with UCAS data showing a 14% decline in applicants who are over 25 years old (UCAS' 2017 cycle applicant figures - June deadline). This is more than 11,000 fewer mature applicants than at the same point in 2016.

### 2. Lack of information, advice and guidance

The complete range of learning opportunities, courses and training within the current post-16 education system is not readily understood and may result in individuals not taking up opportunities because they are not aware that they exist or that there is additional support associated with them. While UCAS is widely known as a comprehensive information resource for young undergraduate students, it can be more difficult for other students from various backgrounds to navigate different progression pathways which may involve different levels of learning or the need for subject interdisciplinarity. The government's new careers strategy will launch new initiatives that will help improve information, advice and guidance on education, training and career options, however, further work is required to better understand the types of support that will best serve working class people in overcoming barriers related to post-16 education access and success.

Students from working class backgrounds may also lack access to the various social networks that may help facilitate their transitions into, through and out of the post-16 education system and into the workplace.

### 3. Other structural barriers

The heterogeneity of working class people means that the barriers they face in accessing and succeeding in post-16 education may vary, and solutions cannot be applied in a uniform manner. For example, along with some of the barriers outlined above, people wishing to study on a part-time basis or potential learners considered to be mature, may face challenges in balancing study with other personal and financial commitments, if their study cannot be completed in a flexible manner. Issues related to perceptions of institutional inclusivity might also have an impact on working class people's engagement with post-16 education institutions.

## Are there data, research or statistics your organisation would like to highlight in relation to the work of the Poverty Commission?

The following is a non-exhaustive list of data, research, statistics and other relevant publications that may be relevant in relation to the work of the Poverty Commission:

### 1. Reports by University Alliance

In May 2016, University Alliance released a report on "Supporting thriving communities: The role of universities in reducing inequality" (available online at [https://www.unialliance.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Supporting-thriving-communities-UA\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.unialliance.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Supporting-thriving-communities-UA_WEB.pdf)). It provides an overview of how universities can play a positive role in supporting social mobility if they make a meaningful strategic commitment and adopt sustained strategies for access, retention and graduate success. Successful initiatives aimed at tackling inequalities - such as Kingston University's work to improve outcomes of BME students, and the University of Greenwich's partnerships with local colleges to create progression routes and deliver flexible learning - are featured.

In February 2017, University Alliance also released a report on "Lifelong learning: Ladder and lifeline" (available online at <https://www.unialliance.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/UA-Lifelong-learning-spotlight-paper-web.pdf>), setting out proposals so that people can benefit from education and training opportunities throughout their working lives.

### 2. External reports on post-16 education finance

In its Economic and Fiscal Outlook July 2015 report (available online at [http://budgetresponsibility.org.uk/docs/dlm\\_uploads/July-2015-EFO-234224.pdf](http://budgetresponsibility.org.uk/docs/dlm_uploads/July-2015-EFO-234224.pdf)), the Office for Budget Responsibility recognises the particular impact of the switch from maintenance grants and loans on students from low-income households.

The House of Commons has also produced a research briefing on the abolition of maintenance grants in England from 2016/17 (available online at <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7258>).

The Institute for Fiscal Studies released a briefing on past, present and future options for higher education funding in England in July 2017 (available online at <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/bns/BN211.pdf>). It does analyse the impact of the abolition of maintenance grants on students from poorer backgrounds.

The IfS also produced a briefing on graduate wages in August 2016 (available online at <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/bns/bn185.pdf>).

Researchers at the Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Societies and Economies at UCL's Institute of Education have recently released a report on whether student loan debt deters higher education participation in England (available online at <http://www.llakes.ac.uk/sites/default/files/58.%20Callender%20and%20Mason.pdf>).

### 3. External reports on social mobility, widening participation and access

In June 2017, the Social Mobility Commission released a report assessing successive government's attempts at improving social mobility in Britain over the past twenty years (available online at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/622214/Time\\_for\\_Change\\_report\\_-\\_An\\_assessment\\_of\\_government\\_policies\\_on\\_social\\_mobility\\_1997-2017.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/622214/Time_for_Change_report_-_An_assessment_of_government_policies_on_social_mobility_1997-2017.pdf)). While social mobility may figure more prominently on the public policy agenda, the overall picture is far from positive.

The Commission's most recent State of the Nation report for 2017 (available online at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/662744/State\\_of\\_the\\_Nation\\_2017\\_-\\_Social\\_Mobility\\_in\\_Great\\_Britain.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/662744/State_of_the_Nation_2017_-_Social_Mobility_in_Great_Britain.pdf)) provides specific recommendations to government, local authorities and other institutions to tackle Britain's urgent social mobility challenges.

The Office for Fair Access's most recent 'key facts and biggest issues' report (available online at <https://www.offa.org.uk/press/quick-facts/>) provides an overview of how universities in England are working to improve access and success. It refers to the need for a step change as OFFA's functions shift to the Office for Students, and the opportunity that exists at this juncture to further advance existing progress and build the importance of widening participation and social mobility into the regulator's functions.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has recently released a report analysing poverty rates in the UK and trends over the past two decades (available online at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2017>). While the number of working-age adults with HE qualifications has increased, the report provides useful evidence on the wide range of factors that may have a negative impact on the progress made in recent years to reduce poverty rates in the UK.

**If you work directly with people, is there a project, scheme, partnership or activity you deliver that supports working class people accessing and succeeding in post-16 education? If so, please tell us about it.**

Alliance universities conduct a wide range of activities that support working class people in accessing and succeeding in post-16 education.

Most Alliance universities set out their access and success activities in their access agreements or fee and access plans. For example:

- The University of Central Lancashire is home to the Young Scientist Centre, focused on providing pupils at key stages 2 to 5 with the skills and experiences that may be useful should they wish to pursue further study and or a career in STEM disciplines.
- The University of Portsmouth is participating in a project to raise GCSE attainment (particularly in maths and English) in Portsmouth, using current students as subject ambassadors.
- Nottingham Trent University's 'Success for All' project has resulted in the development of an institution-wide position on how to address current progression and achievement gaps, and provide a framework within which the university's eight academic Schools can develop projects to tackle these gaps. Pilot projects have been launched within the Schools to provide further support for students from disadvantaged groups (e.g. students from low socio-economic backgrounds, those who have entered the university with BTEC qualifications) through their studies and into further study and/or employment.
- The University of South Wales has a designated Care Leaver Coordinator to support care leavers in their application to university and progress throughout their studies, and each care leaver enrolled at the university is provided with a 'nominated person' for bespoke campus support. Care leavers are also provided support through bursaries and access to student support services in a coordinated manner.

Other exemplary projects led by Alliance universities include the following:

- The Open University plays a particularly unique role in ensuring people of all ages and backgrounds across the UK are able to access and succeed in higher education in a way that complements their employment and/or other important life commitments. The OU is part of the Social Partnerships Network, which is committed to developing strategies and activities that offer learners with potential pathways that meet their diverse learning needs. Through SPN activity and collaboration with other organisations, the OU has developed 'PEARL', a resource to help inform adults about the numerous education pathways available to them.
- Sheffield Hallam University is the lead partner of 'South Yorkshire Futures', a social mobility partnership launched in autumn 2017 aimed at improving the life chances of young people in the Sheffield city region and surrounding area. The initiative will build on Sheffield Hallam's excellence in teacher training to improve leadership and knowledge exchange resources for early years' providers, develop a high quality teacher offer to improve local teacher recruitment and retention and improve progression into higher education or work, among other activities.
- Through its campuses in Coventry, Scarborough and London, CU Coventry, part of the Coventry University Group, is providing students with an alternative to the traditional full-time university experience. It focuses on professional and vocational higher education for school and college leavers as well as those already in work. The offer at CU Coventry is flexible, built around allowing students to study at a pace which suits them.

Many Alliance universities are also partners in consortia funded by HEFCE as part of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (<https://www.hefce.ac.uk/sas/ncop/>), aimed at increasing the number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds into higher education by 2020. For example, the University of the West of England leads the Future Quest consortium, focused on partnerships within the Bristol city region. Manchester Metropolitan University leads and the University of Salford participates in the Greater Manchester Higher consortium.

**What would your top three policy recommendations be to support the access and success of working class people in post-16 education?** *(They could be at a national, local or institutional level)*

Our top three policy recommendations to support the access and success of working class people in higher education are as follows:

1. Ensure no student has to pay tuition fees upfront

The removal of student number controls has had a positive impact on opening up higher education to working class communities. According to HESA data, 17.7% more young full-time first degree students from low participation neighbourhoods in England entered university in 2015-16 than in 2009-10. Furthermore, despite the increase in the number of people participating in university education, the graduate "premium" has held up well, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies in 2016. We welcome the government's announcement earlier this year to raise the repayment threshold for graduates, and we look forward to the government's future review of post-16 education funding. It is right to look again at the parameters of the current system and ensure that the costs of the UK's world class higher education system are shared as fairly as possible.

2. Ensure adequate maintenance support for all types of students

We would welcome the introduction of policies to help ensure the poorest students are able to adequately cover their living costs over the course of their studies. The current amount available to students to cover their maintenance costs - whether through loans or grants - may be inadequate. This may be leading students to seek alternative sources of support to cover their living costs, which could have an even more dangerous impact on their debt burdens and economic well being. Updated information on students' income and expenditure patterns, refreshing information available from previous Student Income and Expenditure Surveys, would help provide accurate and timely information on this issue.

In developing solutions to this issue, the impact of the abolition of means-tested maintenance grants, which has led to students from poorer backgrounds graduating with higher debt levels (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2017), must also be considered. Debt aversion and the absence of alternative funding sources outside the loans system (i.e. not being able to depend on parental contributions to their maintenance costs) may affect higher education participation among students from poor backgrounds (Callender and Mason, 2017).

3. Directly address the challenges part-time and mature learners face in accessing and succeeding in post-16 education through additional support

The ongoing decline in the number of part-time and mature learners in UK higher education has negative social and economic impacts - nearly 12,000 fewer widening participation students from this group of learners are participating in higher education since 2011-12. The part-time post-16 sector supports students of all ages in their studies and is the only way many adults can gain the high-end skills they need. New funding measures, such as the reintroduction of Individual Learning Accounts, the expansion of Advanced Learner Loans coverage and the broadening of the Apprenticeship Levy to cover different modes of study, should be considered to help these learners obtain relevant qualifications throughout their working lives in flexible ways that accommodate their other important commitments.

In line with these recommendations we recognise that there will be additional opportunities available to the new Director of Fair Access and Participation within the Office for Students to use data and evidence to drive the further development and growth of initiatives that address current disparities identified by OFFA and the sector. It will be important that these interventions do not impose solutions that may not fit all providers, but encourage the sharing of best practice in a way that will enhance existing activities.

Overall, further collaboration between government, universities, colleges, other post-16 education providers, employers and other community partners will be required to ensure they are all meeting the diverse learning needs of working class people, they recognise the diverse potential these people have, and that they are creating the necessary links that will facilitate learners' transition to the workplace and the acquisition of social capital.

Thank you for submitting your statement to the Poverty Commission. **The Commission will be launching its report in February 2018.**

If you have any further questions about the work, please contact [povertycommission@nus.org.uk](mailto:povertycommission@nus.org.uk)

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