University Alliance Response to OfS Call for Evidence on Regional Access Partnerships

Executive summary

University Alliance welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Office for Students' (OfS) [call for evidence on regional access partnerships](#). As a mission group representing professional and technical universities with deep roots in their local communities, our members are committed to widening access to higher education and addressing regional disparities in educational opportunity. Our response draws on extensive consultation with members, including current Uni Connect leads, senior leadership, policy and evaluation specialists, and widening participation practitioners.

Key messages from our response:

- **Regional collaboration must build on existing partnerships.** Effective regions emerge from local relationships, shared goals and a strong sense of place. Imposed structures risk weakening impact and undermining trust.

- **The proposed regional map needs review.** There is significant variation in region size, institutional density, and alignment with other strategic geographies (e.g. devolution, skills). Without adjustment, this could lead to duplication, inefficiency and disengagement.

- **Sustained funding and strategic clarity are essential.** Regional work must be backed by multi-year investment and consistent objectives. Recent instability in Uni Connect priorities has limited long-term planning.

- **Collaboration should be facilitated, not regulated.** Proposals for independent regional coordinators and feedback on APP collaboration risk creating a parallel regulatory structure. These roles must enable, not oversee, partnership activity.

- **Institutional diversity must be recognised.** APP-related regional targets must reflect the different missions, sizes and recruitment patterns of providers. One-size-fits-all approaches will not deliver equity or effectiveness.

University Alliance is committed to working constructively with the OfS to help design and deliver a future model that improves opportunity and outcomes for all learners — especially those who need support the most.

Q1. What do effective regions for collaboration on equality of opportunity look like?

Effective regions for collaboration are **grounded in place** and characterised by **genuine partnerships** and collaborations that have grown organically over many years rather than being imposed. Many of the legacy partnerships from Aim Higher are still going strong and should be allowed to continue if they are working well.

Regions should be **geographically coherent**, but more importantly, they must align with **institutional missions, learner patterns, and local socioeconomic conditions**. A strong sense of **regional identity and relevance** is vital for stakeholder buy-in and meaningful partnership. A detailed understanding of **local cold spots and social mobility challenges** is essential to targeted intervention.

Regions should bring together a **diverse mix of education providers and organisations**, including universities, FE colleges, schools and third-sector organisations. The regions should align as far as possible with other strategic geographies such as **devolution areas, local skills improvement plans (LSIPs)**, or **Integrated Care Systems (ICSs)**, enabling joined-up planning and delivery.

Imposing regional structures from the centre risks undermining existing partnerships. Our view is that successful regions grow from the bottom up, where partners share a **mutual understanding of barriers** to higher education and a commitment to joint solutions.

The regional groupings could be called "Regional Access Partnerships" to emphasise their focus on improving access to higher education.

Q2. What are your thoughts on the proposed regions?

While we welcome the move towards more coordinated regional working, we have **concerns about the unevenness** of the proposed regional groupings. These vary significantly in size and the number of institutions they encompass, which could lead to **unequal expectations and challenges in collaboration**. For example, some regions have a large number of schools and colleges, while others have fewer.

The South East is a very large region in both size and number of higher education providers with significant demographical variations. For example, its coastal areas and some other pockets have a much higher density of WP students compared to rural areas. These disparities could **impact the effectiveness** of the partnerships.

The Greater London region – with its 40 HE providers –needs to be broken down further to account for its size and diversity.

The proposed approach appears to **lack alignment with other strategic regional priorities** and governance structures, including Combined Authorities, LSIPs, and health and social care partnerships (e.g. ICSs). This undermines opportunities for joined-up planning across education, skills, and place-based strategies.

We also note the absence of consideration for **existing patterns of learner travel, campus locations**, and **multi-regional providers** (including a number of UA members). For example, institutions with campuses straddling regional borders may face duplication or fragmentation in delivery. There is also **no evidence of need-based mapping**, such as access cold spots or regional progression data, which we would expect to underpin any regional design.

In our view, more transparent criteria and engagement with providers are essential to refining regional boundaries.

Q3. How could a region best collaborate to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education?

Effective collaboration depends on:

- **Shared strategic aims**, agreed by partners,

- Use of **regional data and risk registers** to identify local challenges,

- Clear and inclusive **governance structures**,

- Dedicated resource and operational capacity.

Regions should be encouraged to **build on existing Uni Connect infrastructure**, avoiding duplication. Collaboration is most impactful where it leverages the **distinctive strengths of different institutions**, rather than assuming uniformity.

Cross-sector partnerships—including with schools, local authorities, employers, and community organisations—are essential. Collaborative projects could include **contextual admissions schemes**, **shared outreach programmes**, and **joint evaluation** to inform practice and policy.

The ability to deliver on these aims, however, is contingent on long-term planning certainty and appropriate resourcing.

Q4. What are your thoughts on working with an independent regional coordinator identified by the OfS?

In principle, a **dedicated coordinating role** could support effective partnership working and ensure that regional initiatives are well-structured and inclusive. However, we have **reservations** about the current proposal.

There is insufficient clarity about:

- The **scope, authority, and independence** of the role,

- How coordinators would be **appointed and held accountable**,

- Whether this would introduce a **regulatory function via the back door**.

The success of regional coordination depends on **local credibility, impartiality, and trust**. Any role must be designed to **facilitate collaboration—not to monitor, direct, or gatekeep**. Moreover, it must be resourced as an **additional function**, not funded at the expense of delivery capacity.

Q5. What support would be required for your organisation to work collaboratively across a defined region to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education?

Long-term collaboration requires:

- **Sustainable funding**, with multi-year commitments to enable planning and recruitment,

- Clarity around the **strategic objectives and purpose** of regional work,

- Guidance on **data sharing and evaluation**,

- A commitment to **co-creation with providers**, not top-down delivery models.

Our members have managed year-on-year reductions in Uni Connect funding and shifts in focus that have undermined programme effectiveness. If the OfS wishes to see embedded, meaningful regional work, it must offer **policy consistency and operational stability**.

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Q6. What are your views on addressing regional risks to equality of opportunity in your Access and Participation Plan (APP)?

We support the principle of addressing regional risks within APPs. Our members already contribute to regional collaborations and use data to identify local need. Some already include **regionally targeted commitments** within their APPs, often aligned with Uni Connect partnerships or local authority priorities.

However, the **practical challenges of regional targets** must be acknowledged. Institutions vary in mission, recruitment patterns, and community demographics. Collaborative work should not distort individual providers' strategic aims or lead to misaligned expectations.

Regional contributions should be encouraged where appropriate, but **targets must remain proportionate, feasible, and reflective of institutional context**. A shared regional risk register could aid alignment, provided it is developed collaboratively and transparently. However this would likely only addresses one aspect of the APP (access) and not the wider elements of achievement and progression.

Q7. What are your views on a regional coordinator identified by the OfS providing feedback to the OfS on collaboration reflected in APPs?

We have **strong concerns** about this proposal. It risks:

- Creating **another layer of regulation**,

- Introducing **subjective or inconsistent judgments** based on unclear criteria,

- **Undermining institutional autonomy** in the APP process,

- Shifting the focus **from delivery to compliance**.

The role of the regional coordinator must be clearly defined (see Q4 above), and their feedback should be constructive and supportive rather than regulatory. The coordinator should facilitate collaboration and help institutions align their APPs with regional priorities without becoming a regulatory burden. Collaboration should be **incentivised, not policed**. If feedback mechanisms are introduced, they should be region-wide, developmental in tone, and strictly **separated from formal monitoring or APP approval**. Any perception that collaboration is being "scored" by external actors would undermine trust.

Conclusion

University Alliance supports the OfS's intention to strengthen regional collaboration in widening access. Our members have long demonstrated leadership in place-based approaches, and we are committed to contributing to an effective and equitable national programme. However, this will only be achieved through **genuine partnership, clarity of purpose, and stable, long-term investment**.

We encourage the OfS to engage further with the sector on regional design, coordination structures, and evaluation frameworks to ensure the programme is fit for purpose and delivers for learners.

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