Social Mobility and the Office for Students – The Five Essentials

- The creation of the Office for Students provides a precious opportunity to embed social mobility right through the English higher education system. Ministers and the leaders of the Office for Students say social mobility will be a fundamental part of everything the new regulator does.

- The key question is how we can, in the words of Sir Michael Barber, "seize the opportunities that lie before us" and convert good intentions into reality, accelerating progress in tackling long-standing inequality of access to, and outcomes from, higher education.

- The Office for Students is clear that, on access and participation, "market forces alone will not be sufficient to meet the ambitions of students and society" and has outlined an intent to intervene extensively in the market to further its social mobility goals.

- What might this mean in practice? The Open University – the UK's largest institution with 174,000 students – identifies five key principles that can support the Office for Students in achieving its social mobility goals.

1. TARGETS

Set clear national targets for faster progress on access, participation and student success

The social mobility activity of the Office for Students should be guided by specific, measurable targets for access, participation and student success outcomes, with a clear timeframe for when they should be achieved.

This will ensure that the Office for Students regulatory activity, funding decisions and interactions with universities are focused on achieving these goals, maximising the chances of success.

The Office for Students needs to:

- **Have bold targets covering all of the Government's social mobility goals and going way beyond access by full-time 18-year-olds from low participation areas: covering all types of students (e.g. working adults; disabled students; ethnic minorities; older students) and student success (e.g. degree outcomes; employment outcomes).**

2. COLLABORATION

Incentivise collaboration between providers and ensure that all publicly-funded providers are doing their bit to support the Government's social mobility objectives

Achieving the Government's social mobility objectives requires collaboration: relying solely on individual institutions leaves big gaps and won't result in the required progress

The Government invests large sums of public money in achieving social mobility outcomes through subsidising university access expenditure via the student loans system. The Office for Students should ensure that this investment of public money of roughly £570 million results in good value-for-money.

The Office for Students needs to:

- **Broaden initiatives such as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme to widen the focus beyond school leavers in the lowest participation areas.**

- **Require every university to set collaborative access targets and pool financial resources to fund outreach and other activity to help achieve these targets.**

- **Ensure that every university makes a fair contribution to each of the sector's overall social mobility targets through a combination of their own activity, funding collaborative outreach and/or funding social mobility activity in other providers.**

3. FUNDING AND METRICS

Use funding and outcome metrics to help shape the market and incentivise providers to improve social mobility outcomes

Funding is a key lever for improving the functioning of the market by e.g. encouraging providers to offer high-cost subjects and cater for students who need additional support.

Serious market failures affecting the part-time HE market mean many potential students are choosing not to study despite significant benefits to them and to wider society.

There are financial and other disincentives to prioritise social mobility outcomes e.g. additional support costs, impacts on outcome metrics and league table positions.

The Office for Students needs to:

- **Maintain additional funding supporting successful outcomes for disadvantaged students and ensure it complements access agreement expenditure e.g. by supporting activity in low-fee providers with little higher fee income.**
- **Tackle market failures that have reduced student choice, including through a 'part-time premium' to reduce tuition costs for those who want to learn and earn.**
- **Ensure outcome metrics, including Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) metrics, do not disincentivise providers from focusing on widening participation and on students of all ages.**

4. INFORMED CHOICE

Excellent information, advice and guidance (IAG) so that people of all ages and backgrounds can navigate the system, and achieve value-for-money

The higher education market will not work effectively unless all students can make informed decisions about whether, what, where and how to study.

The Office for Students needs to:

- **Ensure there is an excellent system of IAG for everyone, including working-age adults who want to reskill and upskill. This includes personalised advice delivered by professionals plus a single applications and information portal for all applicants, including those wanting to study part-time or by distance-learning.**
- **Ensure that higher education metrics, including those used in the TEF, are useful for all types of student, whatever their age, background or preferred mode of study.**

5. FLEXIBILITY

Ensure that higher education options are flexible enough for people of all ages and from all backgrounds to participate in higher education and achieve successful outcomes

Many students – especially those who are learning while earning – need the flexibility to fit study around their busy lives e.g. break it into bitesize chunks, maybe have a study break, alter their study intensity, transfer to another provider, or be able to return to their studies later on if they need to stop for any reason.

At the moment it is difficult to take your learning credit from one provider to another: too often switching provider means starting from scratch.

The Office for Students needs to:

- **Develop a Universal Credit Transfer System – where learning validated by one provider has common currency throughout the system – including by implementing the recommendations of the recent UK Credit Forum Report.**
- **Ensure that the metrics in the TEF do not penalise universities for helping their students to study flexibly.**
- **Move to a credit-based funding and regulatory system that responds more effectively to the needs of students.**

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