



Civic University
Network

Civic Insights

Improving local prosperity: the big challenge for higher education in 2021

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When the Civic University Commission (CUC) was launched in July 2019, [I set out](#) how I thought universities' ambitions to improve access and student outcomes, for which they are accountable to the Office for Students (OfS), could benefit local communities. This has become more important during the 18 months since.

During 2021, we want to align our statutory duties relating to choice and equality of opportunity for students more closely with the drive for local prosperity in places where it is needed most.

The local prosperity challenge

Coronavirus is hitting the most disadvantaged people and communities hardest as a result of factors such as living conditions, underlying health and working patterns. In education, we can add to this list the gap in resources available to different families and schools for digital learning, which means that [loss of learning has been greatest in the poorest households](#).

Alongside this, we know that [loss of jobs and earnings](#) during 2020 has been greatest among people who could be identified as disadvantaged at the start of the year and [the most vulnerable places](#) have been predicted to be coastal and tourism areas and ex-industrial regions. As OfS analysis has shown, this is also where you will find most of the neighbourhoods with the [lowest levels of higher education participation](#).

“Our research findings of substantial and continuing education loss add to growing evidence that disadvantaged students have fallen behind their more privileged peers due to differences in school provision, and the stark home learning divide in study space, computers and internet connectivity and access to paid tutoring.”

Major, Eyles & Machin (2020) [Generation COVID: Emerging work and educational inequalities](#)

Higher education and local prosperity

[Civic pride is strong in England](#). People care deeply about the places where they live and identify personally with their prosperity. As we saw when exam results were published last summer, we are also passionate about getting into university, which is now central to the ambitions and expectations of families throughout the country.

As universities have expanded, there has been more focus on their contribution to local prosperity and not only in the places where they are based. Through outreach to schools, progression from further education colleges, and partnerships with businesses and public services, the impact of higher education can extend much further.

This is principally achieved by creating pathways for young people from schools and colleges into higher education so they can gain the adaptable skills and knowledge they need for the future. But as we recover from the pandemic and jobs change, it will be vital also to create opportunities for adults and to help employers capitalise on the graduate skills and knowledge in their surrounding areas. Linking education and skills together with research and development will be central to this.



Pathways into higher education and jobs

Through the [Uni Connect programme](#), the OfS supports 29 partnerships of universities, further education colleges and local agencies across all parts of the country. These partnerships create pathways into higher education from the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods by tackling academic, financial and cultural barriers to progression, working directly with students in schools.

In the next phase of work, [on which the OfS is currently consulting](#), we want to enhance the role of further education colleges within the partnerships to improve progression from places where there is not a university presence and through different types of courses like degree apprenticeships. We also want partnerships to give greater focus to mature students, working with employers and communities.

Through the [access and participation plans they have agreed with the OfS](#), universities have committed to enrol significantly more students from those ex-industrial regions and coastal towns identified as the most under-represented in higher education. This includes an extra 6,500 entrants each year into the highest tariff universities where they are least represented.

The OfS issued [guidance](#) to universities and colleges in November 2020 setting out the information we need to understand the progress of their access and participation plans and any changes that may be required to address the new imperatives arising from the pandemic. This could be due to more students facing hardship or requiring digital resources. Or, as the [latest UCAS data](#) shows, more deciding to stay in their local area, including adults who want to re-train. Progression routes from further to higher education could be particularly crucial for this.

We know that [people who study and work where they grew up](#) are less likely to graduate into highly skilled jobs, particularly in those parts of the country with the lowest levels of productivity. So, the increase we are seeing in local study year on year has implications for inequality in relation to the outcomes arising from higher education, not just access to it.

What is the Local Graduates Programme?

A portfolio of support for local graduates, which involves 16 projects across England, funded through the OfS's Challenge Competition: Industrial strategy and skills.

Through a range of initiatives, including curriculum interventions and internships, the projects will support the transition to highly skilled employment and improve outcomes for graduates who seek employment in their home region.

The OfS is addressing this through the [Local Graduates](#) programme, which is testing how universities and colleges across the country can work with local employers to better capitalise on graduate skills and knowledge.

This will be crucial if we are to translate improved access for students from the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods into improved productivity for the businesses and public services where they live and work. During 2020, many of the projects have shifted to more digital modes of working, demonstrating how this could itself spread prosperity by enabling people to stay in their local area whilst working for employers based elsewhere.

During the coming year, the OfS will be sharing the findings from the Local Graduates projects, so the approaches they are using can be deployed across the country. We will also continue to address labour market needs where there is a clear case for intervention that aligns with our duties. This is the

case for [AI and digital skills](#), which we need to build beyond the south east and the major cities, and for [healthcare](#), given the opportunities that will be created by increased demand for trained professionals in the NHS.

Aligning equality of opportunity with the local prosperity challenge

The alignment of choice and opportunities for students with local prosperity runs through all of these activities. It is also central to our collaborative work with UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), for which there is provision within the legislation establishing both organisations. This means that the priorities driving regulation on behalf of students and the allocation of teaching grant to universities and colleges can be joined up with the approach to funding research and knowledge exchange.

The government has said that research and development funding will [take greater account of place-based outcomes](#) in the future, ensuring that it makes the fullest contribution to the levelling up agenda. An important aspect of this will be ensuring that talented students from all backgrounds can engage with [knowledge exchange](#) and progress into [research degrees and careers](#). The OfS is already working on these issues with Research England, but as we review our teaching grant during the coming year there is scope to look further.

The jobs generated through research and development investment extend well beyond researchers themselves. They require management, technical, commercial and legal skills, indeed the full range of attributes and expertise needed by 21st century businesses and public services. If local people are truly to benefit from increased research and development capability, they will need the knowledge and connections to access and compete for the jobs it creates. That means knitting education and skills training at all levels together with research and development strategies in local areas. Given their reach into schools, businesses and public services in local areas, universities and colleges can be the place in which this comes together.





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Chris Millward's role at the Office for Students (OfS) is to ensure that universities and colleges are doing all they can to support underrepresented groups to access and succeed in higher education. He is also responsible for the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), health policy, student welfare and safeguarding. Chris is an executive member of the OfS board.



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The Civic University Network is a national network of universities which aims to identify and enhance ways in which universities and their communities can build mutually beneficial relationships for the public good in order to maximise the civic impact of universities in their place.

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