

Editorial

As we begin the new academic year and settle back into our routines, we're looking forward – primarily through our monthly *eBulletin* but also through extended vacancy and CPD opportunities at a time of upheaval and change - to reconnecting with colleagues, keeping you up to date with much that is happening, and sharing ways of working.

With regard to A Levels or admissions this year – no seismic change just more of the same. Level 3 results day does show a rise in acceptances of disadvantaged and underrepresented students; a disturbing and deepening regional divide; alongside the continuing weakness in mature participation, as a record 262,820 UK 18-year-olds secured undergraduate places, (3% more than in 2025). This is a slight growth, mostly reflecting a larger population rather than a higher likelihood of entering HE.

The House of Lords Library briefing 'Skills and post 16 education policy: Reducing barriers and supporting regional growth', 20 August 2026, comprehensively brings together current policy on HE, FE, apprenticeships, disadvantage, skills shortages and regional devolution and economic growth. In one expression of these policies, the DfE reported that almost 20,000 students received T Level results, up from approximately 12,000 in 2025—an increase of more than 65% - with a pass rate above 90% - reminding us that access work will need to further explore and connect HE, higher technical education, apprenticeships and local employment routes as Widening Participation once again adapts to changing circumstances. A recent ACCA Unifrog survey report shows 80% of pupils are very, or somewhat, likely to start a degree apprenticeship after leaving school with 37% intending to go to University.

And the nearly one million young people remaining outside education, employment or training (ONS statistics published 27 August) reinforces the importance of further developing the sectoral approach - establishing stronger partnerships with Widening Participation to the Youth Guarantee, local skills systems, alternative entry routes and re-engagement. HE providers need to continue development of work in their locales – more strategic partnerships, formal collaborations and civic arrangements to support local industry, employers, schools, colleges, and local authorities and communities.

As we observed last month, Higher Education has a very strong story to tell - a case to make for the critical importance of Universities in the Government's growth and skills agenda, demonstrating the local economic, civic and public service impact of Universities in ways that pro-actively ensure that HE is central to devolution, industrial strategy and opportunity policy.

Further concerns about the continued pressure on the finances of Higher Education providers, manifest clearly in institutional "accountability"; reduced budgets; organisational changes and workforce shrinkage; and a ramped-up policy and media 'campaign' denigrating the value and work-preparedness of many HE courses continue to have an impact on Widening Participation. The Scottish Framework for Universities (see below) illustrates a UK-wide concern as to whether widening access commitments can be maintained under financial constraint - with some institutions faring comparatively well against much of the sector.

HE Providers and charities might want to review role descriptions, frequency records, DBS eligibility, recruitment procedures and safeguarding policies following updated DBS guidance. This may affect University student ambassadors, outreach staff, mentors and volunteers previously treated as outside regulated activity because a teacher or other checked adult supervised them. A supervised person who

teaches, trains, instructs, cares for or supervises children on more than three days or overnights in a 30-day period may now be undertaking regulated activity and are required to undergo an Enhanced DBS check - including the Children's Barred List.

In this month's 68-page *eBulletin*, we have collected and collated diverse reports, perspectives, speculations, and a number of items illustrating the major impacts of this emergent landscape. We also focus on how all of us are working to understand and respond more intelligently to young people and student perceptions and expectations of their futures; the role Higher Education has to play; and the price and value of a degree in this changing world.

In this month's informative Guest Article, Tej Nathwani, Principal Researcher (Economist) at the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) – another one of our valued subscribing organisations - reports on HESA's history and role and the data and statistics it produces. He brings to our attention how HESA is responding to this changing environment with a focus on demographics; Widening Participation; the characteristics of entrants to Higher Education; and Graduate Outcomes in order to assist HE providers and policymakers in monitoring the progress being made towards the ambition of ensuring equal opportunity for all. He invites feedback and staff contributions to their working groups.

Enjoy this month's *eBulletin* enabling you to stay current, updated and abreast of what is happening, what is likely to happen, and how to make it happen - to the greater benefit of yourself, the sector and students. We value the information you share with us and therefore the *Action on Access* network through our website, *eBulletin* and weekly email notifications.

A subscription to the *Action on Access* Information Hub and Emailing Service absolutely pays dividends – as many of you consistently attest.

You Editor,
Andrew.