

## Teacher and Adviser Conference 2026

*Schools Outreach and Widening Participation Team*

<b>Session:</b>	Panel Discussion
<b>Speaker(s):</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lorraine Coghill-Head of Science Engagement</li> <li>• Steve Leech-Head of Transitional Education</li> <li>• Paddy Holland-Learning Coordinator (Libraries &amp; Collections)</li> <li>• Victoria Brown-Vice Principal of St Chad's College</li> <li>• Sarah Prescott- Head of Disability Support</li> <li>• Louise Harrison-Head of Programme Delivery (NERAP)</li> </ul> <p>Facilitated by Ross Wilkinson-Head of Widening Access &amp; Participation</p>
<b>Session Bio:</b>	This panel discussion explored the evolving landscape of university access, outreach and widening participation, including the challenges and opportunities in accessing higher education and supporting student transitions. Through discussion and Q&A, panellists considered how schools and universities could work together more effectively to widen participation and strengthen outreach practice.

### Session Notes:

#### Introductions and Opening Reflections:

*Q. From your perspective, what feels most different about the access and outreach landscape now compared to five years ago?*

Louise

- There is a need to move beyond access alone and place a stronger focus on belonging.
- From a partnership perspective, there is a greater emphasis on place-based approaches. Individual characteristics matter, particularly in the North East where higher education progression and participation is low.
- It is important to focus efforts where need is greatest, both to support individuals and to strengthen local employment and economic outcomes.

## Sarah

- The access landscape has become a lot more strategic, and teams across universities are all being engaged in working with Access and Participation Plans.
- In terms of transition and disability support, there has been a major shift in the complexity and rate of disability disclosures from students. The disclosure rate has increased to an average of 24% of undergraduate students at Durham disclosing a disability.
- This can create complexities in ensuring all applicants have the correct support they require.
- There has been a cultural shift to be as inclusive as possible.

## Victoria

- The relationship between students and universities has become much more transactional and students are viewed as consumers of higher education. This was exacerbated following the pandemic.
- Widening participation is now more focused on fostering a sense of belonging, which is harder to quantify than past measures.

## Paddy

- In the current climate, many schools have financial constraints and can't afford transport to bring students on to campus to visit us. This leads to rationing school trips or looking to subsidise travel costs. Historically, this wasn't an issue and schools were very keen to be on campus.
- As a result there has been a huge increase in demand for in-school outreach instead, forcing teams to make difficult prioritisation decisions.

## Steve

- There is growing recognition that access isn't the whole focus of this work. Transition is important and supporting underrepresented students after arrival should be a priority too.
- Opportunities for under-represented groups must come with strong transition support to minimise future challenges and ensure they can succeed once they get there.

Lorraine

- There has been a shift towards valuing skills, experience and sense of belonging- not just academic attainment.
- About broadening aspirations rather than just raising aspirations.
- The funding models have changed so we are increasingly seeing research and engagement funding including support for longer term collaborations and actively involving the participants.

### The Evolving Access Landscape

*Q. How is widening participation evolving, and what is shaping current priorities for universities?*

Louise

- Education policy is pushing for greater collaboration between FE colleges, universities and employers.
- Should truly be about widening participation and not just considering university as the only option. Stronger emphasis on career pathways and how this supports the regional economy by identifying and filling skills gaps in the region.
- Durham and the NE have high levels of deprivation and child poverty which correlate with lower rates of HE progression—so the priority is not just aspiration-raising but supporting young people and addressing regional disparity.

Lorraine

- There is a need to move beyond one-off interventions and focus on multiple, meaningful touchpoints that connect and support a long-term journey for students.
- Activity should be more strategic and clearly link to what students are doing in school to ensure we are doing what works for young people.

Paddy

- Schools want to focus not just on the topics (e.g. Tudors) but also the careers and pathways in archaeology and the heritage sector.
- Outreach has shifted from a one-off 'tick box' approach to working together with teachers to focus on what students are going to get out of the opportunities

longer term. For example, how someone might begin working in conservation of historical artifacts or the benefits of a history degree.

- Greater focus on what students will get out of a university experience.

### Transition and Student Success

Q. How can we better support students' transition from school or college into higher education?

Steve

- One of the biggest things we can do to support students is offer clearer and more consistent information before they apply. University is a totally different world from school or college with its own rules, traditions and expectations, and we don't do enough to explain them upfront.
- University can be a space to re-imagine yourself and become a more well-rounded person but belonging shouldn't mean conforming to a specific culture. Universities need to actively nurture inclusive communities where students can be their authentic selves.
- Transitioning to university is a huge step. Students are suddenly expected to take real ownership of their education and success often comes down to how much agency they're able to develop. That means we have a responsibility to support them properly through that transition, particularly through colleges and pre-application support. The more agency students build before arriving, the more confident and resilient they are once they're there.
- We often send the message that choosing a university is all about league tables and marketing, but what really matters is the student experience and whether the environment is right for that individual. Our role should be to help students make an informed choice that is best for them.

Victoria

- We tend to focus on academic ability, but success at university is also about things like sense of belonging, confidence, identity, and personal growth. A lot of students struggle with basic soft skills like introducing themselves, dealing with social situations or handling tricky conversations at university. We need to develop soft skills much more intentionally.

- An 'elite' university isn't automatically the best option for everyone. Different institutions support different people better and students should make decisions on lifestyle factors too such as additional opportunities, support services, facilities, environment, finance and commuting considerations.
- Students should move on from asking 'which uni can I get into?' and instead think about what they actually want from their university experience. It is important to acknowledge that university isn't always the right fit for everyone. There's no single 'right' way to do university, you don't have to live in, and support exists either way. The main message is choose what works for you and not just what people expect you to do.

Sarah

- Issues with transition are amplified for students with disabilities. Students might feel out of place, unsure of how to socialise or navigate the environment and need support to move to an adult learning environment.
- It is important to also prepare students for the cultural and structural shifts alongside the academic transition. There is sometimes a misconception that a university is just like school, but bigger. However, the teaching style is different and there is a lot more independent study – so preparing them for open days and setting realistic expectations of coming to university is really important.
- It is important that students are encouraged to self-advocate and articulate their needs as early as possible, for example encouraging the student to contact services themselves and try to speak on their own behalf, with support.

Lorraine

- Encourage students to speak to their local university outreach department to explore opportunities. For example, Science Engagement at Durham University offers science ambassador programmes where young people are trained to be the ambassadors for science in their own community and boost their skills and confidence.

Partnership and Outreach

Q3. What does effective partnership between schools and universities look like in practice?

Lorraine

- Effective relationships and trust can take years to build but can disappear in minutes. Honesty is key and it is very important to be upfront with teachers about what we can and can't do with the resource and staffing we have. Unfortunately we can't do everything we want to do.
- For example, we would love to be able to offer meaningful work experience opportunities but this is restricted by resources. However, we can help connect schools with alternative providers, projects and opportunities.
- It is important that our offer is aligned to school priorities and measures such as the Gatsby benchmarks, making it easier to be given the go ahead by management within school.

Paddy

- There is a real desire to do more for schools, but capacity limits what's possible.
- Long-term relationships with schools lead to higher engagement even without formal partnerships. Positive and open relationships take time to build.
- Meetings with schools help us understand what they need and would benefit from, but Teachers often lack the time and capacity to dedicate to this. This occasionally creates a disconnect between the needs of the school and the provider offering- how do we give teachers more time and capacity.

Louise

- Effective partnerships rely on trust, consistency and having a shared purpose.
- NERAP represents the 5 North East universities and we can deliver impartial and evidence-based outreach across the North East, supporting this collaborative approach.

*These notes summarise a session delivered at the Durham University Teacher and Adviser Higher Education Conference on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2026. They reflect information shared at the time and are intended as a general overview only. For the most up-to-date information, please refer to Durham University's website.*

