

Access & Participation Statement 2024/25

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Introduction

EKC Group is dedicated to fostering an inclusive environment for students, characterised by equal opportunities, freedom from discrimination, and a celebration of diversity among all students and prospective students.

Given our status as a prominent college group, we have the privilege of maintaining direct and consistent interaction with a diverse student body across various academic levels. In our capacity as a higher education provider, approximately half of our current higher education student body comprises individuals who have progressed internally from level 3 or Access courses, while the other half consists of external applicants.

We are committed to ensuring that both our current further education students and the broader local communities are well-informed about the range of educational opportunities available, both within our institutions and beyond. Our efforts are geared towards actively supporting their academic endeavours and fostering their success throughout their time with us.

Summary of Risks to Access and Participation

Given the relatively small size of our current and historical higher education student body, it is not currently advisable to rely solely on internal data to inform this statement. Nevertheless, as a prominent further education college group, we have access to comprehensive data from our further education learners, which we have utilised in our planning process. Additionally, we have consulted the Office for Students Equality of Opportunity Risk Register and national datasets such as IMD, POLAR4, and TUNDRA to develop this statement.

We are fully committed to expanding our higher education offerings throughout the EKC Group in a manner that complements the offerings of other local higher education institutions and provides diverse pathways into local industries. As our higher education student population expands, we will explore alternative methods to identify, assess, and mitigate potential risks specific to our Group.

Risks to Access

East Kent encompasses a diverse landscape, featuring a blend of coastal, non-coastal, rural, and urban areas. Within this region, there exists a spectrum of socioeconomic conditions, ranging from areas marked by pronounced deprivation to those with limited social mobility opportunities. Predominantly, the region comprises areas falling within POLAR (Participation of Local Areas) Quintiles 3 and 4, with minimal representation in Quintile 5 and significant portions in Quintiles 1 and 2.

Based on the latest data, a substantial portion of students enrolling in higher education courses within the Group fall into Associations between Characteristics of Students (ABCS) Quintiles 1 or 2. This suggests that our typical student possesses multiple overlapping characteristics or experiences that might traditionally impede their progression into higher education.

Nationally, data collated by the Association of Colleges¹ highlights that:

- 18% of students in FE Colleges nationally claimed Free School Meals at age 15 compared to 9% in school.
- 35% of all publicly funded HE progress from an FE College
- 42% of disadvantaged young people entering HE progress from an FE College
- 26% of all 16-18 year olds in FE Colleges share a learning difficulty or disability

The Kent & Medway region experiences heightened levels of underrepresentation due to the county-wide selective education system. As a consequence, the following statistics, sourced from the Kent and Medway Progression Federation and varying across college campuses, underscore the local data pertaining to further education (FE) colleges:

- 38-62% are from the most deprived areas (Polar 4, Quintiles 1 and 2)
- 22-41% of students have a learning difficulty or disability.
- 0.5-5% of students are from a care experienced background (*of known data*)

This positioning places EKC Group in a pivotal role to actively promote Widening Access to Higher Education as an integral component of our daily interactions with our own further education (FE) learners. Simultaneously, it enables us to engage meaningfully with our broader communities.

Risks to Participation and Student Success

While recognising that risks to student success are multifaceted and often unique to individual circumstances, we have pinpointed four overarching themes within both our internal operations and the broader national context. These themes will serve as focal points in our efforts to bolster the success of all our learners, with special attention directed towards those belonging to our designated priority groups as outlined below.

¹ <https://www.aoc.co.uk/about/college-key-facts>

Readiness for Higher Education

Young people do not have equitable access to the education or information advice and guidance they need to develop not only their ambitions but also their expectations and understanding of higher education. This disparity significantly affects their prospects of advancing into higher education and persisting within the higher education system.

Belonging

Nationally students studying on Higher National, Foundation Degree, Higher & Degree Apprenticeships, and in non-residential settings are reporting more loneliness and increased working hours.²

Cost of Living

Blackbullion's³ annual report on money showed that just 3% of students feel they have enough money, and the financial gap between what students have and what they need is 89% larger than in 2021.

Wellbeing

Related to loneliness and the cost of living, wellbeing remains a top issue for students locally and nationally. **Prevalence of Mental Health Issues Among University Students:**

- The proportion of home students (those who normally live in the UK) disclosing a mental health condition to their university has increased significantly since 2010, reaching over 5% in the 2020/21 academic year.
- However, surveys of students have found much higher rates of poor mental health than is disclosed to universities⁴, and levels of wellbeing among the student population are some way below that of the general population⁵.

The consequences of mental health issues for students can range from poor academic performance and dropping out of university to self-harm and even suicide.

Priority Groups

- **Mature Students**

In all districts where our colleges are situated, there are pockets characterised by a low proportion of adults possessing higher level qualifications, with significant disparities between the highest (39.3% in Canterbury) and lowest (7% in Sheppey). Despite these discrepancies, we have observed a notable increase in the enrolment of mature learners (aged 21 and above) in recent years. Following a sharp decline in

² [Student Academic Experience Survey 2023 | Advance HE \(advance-he.ac.uk\)](#)

³ <https://business.blackbullion.com/download/student-money-wellbeing-2024/>

⁴ [Student mental health in England: Statistics, policy, and guidance - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](#)

⁵ [Student Academic Experience Survey 2023 | Advance HE \(advance-he.ac.uk\)](#)

2017/18 and 2018/19, we have nearly achieved a distribution of 60% mature learners (over 21) and 40% young learners (21 and younger). Our intention is to sustain this positive trajectory, ensuring robust support for learners of all ages and from diverse geographical areas.

As a large FE provider we have a successful portfolio of Adult learning provision. With, on average, 6,500 students on funded Adult Education provision through our specialist, local centres and bespoke sector-based programmes, we are well positioned to widen access within this large, complex and hard-to-reach group.

- **Refugee and Displaced Students**

Globally only 3% of refugees progress onto Higher Education⁶, and in the UK there are a number of additional barriers faced by refugee and asylum-seeking students, including lack of certainty over immigration status, access to student finance, and challenges around validating previous qualifications.

We are a primary provider of ESOL provision in Kent, with a significant number of refugees, asylum seeking and displaced individuals on our programmes so are able to directly support these learners with their educational plans and navigate the complexities of the UK Higher Education system.

- **Care Experienced Students**

Care-experienced learners, who have spent time in local authority care as children, face several obstacles when it comes to progressing to higher education. Despite efforts to provide support and address these challenges, the numbers of care-experienced students entering higher education remain low:

Academic Attainment Gap: Research has shown⁷ that care-experienced young people tend to have lower academic attainment compared to their peers. This gap tends to increase over time. As a result, they may be less likely to progress to higher education.

Expectations and Aspirations: Young people who were in care or care-experienced at an early age often have lower expectations of attending university compared to their peers who have not been in care. These lower expectations can impact their motivation to pursue higher education⁸.

Financial Barriers: Financial constraints can be a significant barrier. The cost of tuition fees, accommodation, and living expenses can deter them from pursuing higher education.

Emotional and Social Support: Care-experienced students may lack the emotional and social support networks that other students have. Transitioning to higher education

⁶ [Educational Progression | Refugee Education UK | Higher Education | University \(reuk.org\)](#)

⁷ [Care to College: A Study on Care-Experienced Students in Higher Education | ESR!](#)

⁸ [Care-Experienced Young People and Higher Education - What Works for Children's Social Care \(whatworks-csc.org.uk\)](#)

can be overwhelming, and without adequate support, they may struggle to adapt to the new environment.

Disrupted Education: Many care-experienced individuals have experienced disruptions in their education due to changes in placements, schools, or foster care. These disruptions can affect their academic progress and readiness for higher education.

Efforts are being made to address these issues, including targeted information, financial aid, and specialised support staff. However, achieving greater equity in higher education for care-experienced learners requires ongoing commitment and collaboration across institutions and support networks.

- **Students from Polar Quintiles 1 & 2**

As a region Kent has significant areas of Polar⁴ 1 & 2 areas, meaning we have high numbers of areas where progression to Higher Education is at its lowest nationally despite having 7 higher education providers in the region.

- **Commuter Students**

Data suggests that commuter students are both working more (70% are working while studying) and have a larger monthly shortfall than the average student population.¹⁰

While Kent is home to a number of Higher Education Providers, they are heavily concentrated within a small area leaving large parts of Kent with significant travel-to-study distances. As we are a non-residential provider, all of our students will be in accommodation off site and often in a different district to which they are studying, it is important to us that we support this type of learner as a priority.

What we are currently doing to support Access & Participation:

Strategic Projects

Kent and Medway Progression Federation & UniConnect

As a leading partner in the local Kent and Medway Progression Federation (KMPF), our Group actively participates in the national UniConnect project, with one of our staff members representing us on the Board. Within the framework of KMPF, we are deeply involved in supporting the UniConnect initiative. Currently, we have 2.4 dedicated UniConnect Project Officers working across our Group. Their primary focus is to support level 2 and 3 learners through a tailored program of activities aimed at broadening

⁹ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/maps-of-participation-in-higher-education/>

horizons, enhancing knowledge and understanding, fostering a sense of belonging, and ultimately increasing the number of students from our Group who progress into Higher Education.

Research from UniConnect indicates that nationally, students in Further Education (FE) from UniConnect target areas who engage in an intensive program are more than twice as likely to progress to Higher Education compared to a closely matched comparison group. Our Project Officers actively engage with thousands of learners annually, with 75% of participating students classified as disadvantaged based on at least one indicator, including IMD, EST, IDACI, and POLAR4.

Care Leavers Progression Partnership

The Care Leavers' Progression Partnership (CLPP) comprises various organisations in Kent and Medway, of which our Group is a member. Our collective commitment within this partnership is to enhance the post-16 education and training journey for local children in care and care leavers. As part of this initiative, we have played a pivotal role in facilitating a smooth transition for care leavers into higher education. This has been achieved through collaborative efforts with local Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the commissioning of annual reports to examine the profile and educational outcomes of the local care leaver population. These reports serve as valuable tools in shaping our approach to supporting this priority group of learners.

Admissions

We are committed to upholding a fair and transparent admissions process, ensuring that every learner with the potential to succeed is afforded the opportunity to pursue their educational goals. The Group's standard eligibility criteria align with those of other College-based Higher Education (HE) providers, recognising that many learners may have faced barriers to accessing quality education prior to joining us.

In our assessment of candidates' suitability for courses, we adopt a holistic approach, considering the entirety of the individual rather than solely focusing on their academic grades. Moreover, we have implemented a recognition of prior learning process for HE admissions, allowing applicants to utilise their work-based experiential learning as evidence of their eligibility, even if they lack certificated qualifications.

In instances where an applicant does not meet the entry criteria for their desired course, we provide guidance on alternative pathways, such as our Access to HE or Foundation Diploma courses.

Our Group offers a diverse range of Access to HE courses across most of our colleges, along with a Foundation Diploma in Art and Design at Canterbury College. These courses are prominently advertised alongside our HE Provision, emphasising the link between them.

Such courses serve as valuable pathways for mature learners who may not have attained their level 3 qualifications at 18, or who have been out of education for an extended period and require support in transitioning back into a learning environment.

Careers Information and Advice Services

Each college within our Group maintains a minimum of one dedicated and qualified Careers Adviser stationed on site. These advisers are equipped to assist our internal learners across all levels in developing their progression plans. Additionally, they offer personalised advice and guidance to potential Higher Education (HE) applicants as needed, ensuring comprehensive support throughout the higher education application process.

Schools Liaison Teams

The Schools & Events team plan a calendar of activities raising awareness of the educational offer at the Group at all levels, engaging with local schools and the wider community through internal and external events and activities.

Accessibility, Inclusivity & Wellbeing

We employ various resources to support student well-being, including counselling services, workshops, and peer support programs. Students are signposted to external resources such as mental health charities, helplines, and online platforms that provide guidance and coping strategies.

Access to HE Courses

As Group we offer a wide range of Access to HE programmes in science, humanities, social science, health care and veterinary Science.

What we plan to do in the next four years:

Growth of HE Provision

Over the coming years, we are embarking on an initiative to introduce a diverse range of new courses across five of our Colleges. Simultaneously, we are committing resources to invest in new higher-apprenticeship standards. These courses are meticulously aligned with the specific needs of local industries. Through this strategic undertaking, we anticipate achieving several key outcomes:

- It will increase the number of Higher Education subjects and places available in East Kent.
- It will open new pathways into industries not currently on offer at other HEIs, or alternative routes into existing provision and industries.
- It will reduce the distance travelled by some commuter students who previously did not have access to Higher Education provision closer to them.
- Being closely linked to local industries and employers will support our graduates' outcomes.

Partnerships with other local HEIs

In addition to our existing Franchising and Validation arrangement with the University of Kent, we are committed to further supporting our students' success and progression across all levels of education. To this end, we will actively develop and maintain Progression and Articulation Agreements with local Higher Education Providers. These agreements serve to provide clear pathways for our students, outlining the available routes from Level 3 to Level 6 and beyond. By establishing these agreements, we aim to offer our students greater clarity and guidance regarding their educational journey, ultimately enhancing their opportunities for advancement and achievement.

Transition plans

We will develop transition plans for stage one learners to support their readiness for higher level study before they join us.

Identity & Belonging

To enhance our transition plans, we are committed to ensuring that every learner feels fully integrated into the Group from the moment they apply. In collaboration with current, former, and prospective students of the Group, our 'Student Experience Group' will develop strategies to cultivate a sense of belonging among students. These approaches will aim to foster a collegiate atmosphere among learners, while also allowing them to maintain their affiliations with their local colleges and individual identities. Through this inclusive and consultative approach, we seek to create a supportive and cohesive learning community that empowers every student to thrive

Staff Development

Our Higher Education (HE) Group, Learning & Development teams, student support staff, and curriculum areas will collaborate closely to pinpoint areas for staff development. This collaborative effort will ensure that all staff members are equipped with the best practices necessary to support the access and success of our learners, as well as contribute positively to the wider community. By fostering synergy among these teams, we aim to create a cohesive approach to staff development that prioritises the needs of our learners and aligns with our organisational goals.

Financial support

Through our participation in UniConnect, we have secured funding to facilitate a variety of activities, trips, and visits to other Higher Education Providers and employers. These initiatives are designed to broaden our learners' horizons and provide them with opportunities to explore the diverse post-18 options available to them. Additionally, we remain committed to offering means-tested bursaries on an ongoing basis to support our Higher Education students with the cost of living each year. These measures underscore our dedication to fostering an inclusive learning environment where financial barriers do not impede the pursuit of higher education

Wellbeing

Student mental health and well-being in higher education is a critical topic, and it is essential to address the challenges faced by students. The Group is developing a new student mental health strategy in consultation with students at all levels.

Student Voice

Integral to the success of all our initiatives is the active solicitation of feedback from our students, providing them with multiple opportunities to share their experiences and make recommendations to the Group.

In addition to our existing student surveys and one-to-one tuition sessions, we are committed to developing a robust student representative and student voice framework. This framework will empower students to inform approaches and influence decisions that impact both the current and future student body. We will ensure that the diversity of our student population is well-represented within this framework, with particular attention paid to our priority groups.

To facilitate greater student participation, arrangements will be made to enable students to engage in additional student voice committees outside of their regular timetabled hours. By prioritising student feedback and representation, we aim to create a more inclusive and responsive learning environment that meets the diverse needs of our student community