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National Education Opportunities Network

Universities not for everyone:
levelling up and who is missing out on higher education in England

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What is NEON?

The National Education Opportunities Network (NEON), founded in 2012, is the professional membership organisation supporting access, success and progression of under-represented groups to higher education (HE) in the UK. NEON enables those working to widen access to HE at all levels and in all sectors to affect change in their own organisations and communities.

More information on NEON's work can be found at www.educationopportunities.co.uk. NEON has over 150 organisational members including over 100 universities. NEON is based at the University of West London.

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National Education Opportunities Network

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Background

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in his speech to the Conservative Party Conference in October 2023 described the target of 50% of those aged 18-30 experiencing higher education introduced by Labour in 2001 as one of the great mistakes of the last 30 years. Labour has yet to mention of the value of widening access to higher education in any of its recent documents related to its Opportunity Mission which is one of Kier Starmer's 5 missions for a future Labour government. As we approach what will be a crucial general election for the country it is vital that the arguments for widening access to higher education and how it may be best delivered are revisited and renewed. This report focuses on what the data shows regarding regional differences in access to higher education for those from lower socio-economic groups and why such differences matter.

It looks at data published annually by Department of Education on participation in higher education by area for those from free school meal (FSM)/non free school meal (FSM) backgrounds. This annual data release entitled 'Widening participation in higher education' includes estimates of state-funded pupils' progression to higher education (HE) by age 19 according to their personal characteristics at age 15. It also looks at evidence commissioned by the Department of Education pointing to growth in demand for those with higher education qualifications over the last decade. This evidence points to the narrowing of opportunity that the majority of young people from FSM backgrounds face.

Key Findings

Overall, the chances of young people from FSM backgrounds progressing to higher education are low and in many areas of the country have not improved as much as they should have done over the last decade. There is significant geographical variation between regions and local authorities with big differences in participation across the country for this group of learners. The gap between participation for FSM and non FSM learners has increased in the majority of areas.

Key Finding 1: In most areas in England if you a state school pupil in receipt of FSM you have less than a 1 in 4 chance of going onto higher education by age 19 and this increases to less than 1 in 5 in 29% of areas. Of all the state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 in 2021-22 only a very small minority – less than 10% come from an FSM background.

Key Finding 2: Learners from FSM backgrounds are nearly 5 times as likely to go to higher education in the highest performing areas in 2021-22 than the lowest performing areas. In 2021-22 66% of state-funded pupils from an FSM background in Westminster progress to higher education whilst in Swindon 13.8% of state-funded pupils from an FSM background progressed to higher education.

Key Finding 3: In 2021-22 the numbers of FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 is 19,443 which compares to 15,262 in 2011-12 while the numbers of non FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education in 2021-22 was 225,700 while in 2011-12 it was 200,879.

Key Finding 4: The rate of increase in FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 has slowed over the period 2005-06 (when data was first produced) to 2021-22. It was on average 1.22% per year from 2005-06 to 2011-12 and then 0.89% per year from 2011-12 to 2021-22 after policy changes introduced by the coalition government elected in 2010.

Key Finding 5: The % of FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 in 2021-22 from London is more than double that of 5 regions and nearly 20% higher than the next highest region. The region with the lowest % of state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 is the South West – lower than any regions in the north.

Key Finding 6: The gap in in the % of FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 between London and non-London regions from 2011-12 and 2021-22 has increased for each region.

Key Finding 7: Higher education is unavailable to the majority of young people eligible for free school meals. Most local authority areas, 69%, have a FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 rate in 2021-22 below the national average of 29.2%.

Key Finding 8: Some areas though have made good progress in increasing the participation rate of those from FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 over the period 2011-12 to 2021-22. In 13 areas there has been an increase in participation of over 100% from 2011-12 to 2021-22. These areas are drawn from across England.

Key Finding 9: Other areas have made less progress in increasing the participation rate of those from FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 over the period 2011-12 to 2021-22. In 15 areas there has been an increase in less than 25% over the period and in 2 areas – Leicester and Blackpool, the progression rate has declined over the period.

Key Finding 10: In the majority of areas, 63%, the gap between FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 over the period 2011-12 to 2021-22 and non FSM pupils progressing to HE has increased. The areas where it has gone up the most are drawn primarily from London.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Increasing the participation of young learners from FSM backgrounds should form a key part of any future 'levelling up' agenda/mission-based approach to addressing inequality pursued by the next government.

Recommendation 2: A national target to increase participation of FSM learners in higher education to 40% by 2030 should be introduced.

Recommendation 3: Local authorities, with the support where appropriate of combined authorities, should construct their own targets that support this national target

Recommendation 4: Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) or any subsequent attempt at local skills planning should include reference to participation in higher education by those from lower socio-economic groups.

Recommendation 5: A new collaborative programme building on the success of the national Uni-Connect collaborative widening access programme and learning from past programmes should be given increased funding with the objective of driving forward the targets described above working with local and combined authorities.

Recommendation 6: Further research should be undertaken to understand why some areas are making significant progress in improved the participation rate in HE of FSM learners and some are not.

Recommendation 7: Areas where progress has been slow or non-existent should receive extra support via the new collaborative programme described above based around an understanding of the additional challenges they face.

Recommendation 8: In any future review of the higher education funding system consider how specific support for learners from FSM backgrounds can be introduced that covers and combines tuition fee relief and maintenance support.

Summary

This paper shows clearly that contrary to what some people may believe 'all' young people in England do not have the chance to go to university now nor do some people have even a hope of going. Most young people from lower socio-economic groups have little chance of progressing to higher education and these chances haven't improved enough in the last 10 years. In some areas they have gone backwards or barely improved while the gap between FSM and non FSM progression to higher education has increased over the last decade.

1. Introduction

Over the last 25 years policies and practices to widen access and support success for students from under-represented groups has become a permanent part of the higher education system in England. However, while the existence of Access and Participation Plans, statutory documents that all higher education providers have to submit to the higher education regulator the Office for Students (OfS), keeps this issue on the agenda of universities wider support for these goals has wavered. Then Universities Minister Michelle Donelan in 2020 argued that students had been let down by those who have supported them to enter higher education since the early 2000s, stating that *'our young people have been taken advantage of – particularly those without a family history of going to university'*.[1]

More recently Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in his speech to the Conservative Party Conference in October 2023 described the target of 50% of those aged 18-30 experiencing higher education introduced by Labour in 2001 as one of the great mistakes of the last 30 years[2]. Labour itself while taking a different tone when the value of widening access to higher education is concerned than the government, has not in either the report released in November 2022 by the Labour Council of Skills Advisors[3] or the Opportunity Mission related to Education which was one of Kier Starmer's 5 missions for a future Labour government[4] made any mention of the value of widening access to higher education. As we approach what will be a crucial general election for the country it is vital that the arguments for widening access to higher education and how it may be best delivered are revisited and renewed. This report focuses on what the data shows regarding regional differences in access to higher education for those from lower socio-economic groups and why such differences matter.

The shifts away from explicit political support for widening access are in one way recent. Theresa May in her first statement as Prime Minister in 2016 on the steps of No 10 spoke about the problem of white working class boys being less likely to enter higher education.[5] Labour in the 2000s set a target for 50% of young people to experience higher education by 2030 and funded the £7bn Aimhigher programme which aimed to increase participation in higher education for those from lower socio-economic groups. Widening access to higher education remained on the party's agenda throughout the 2010s. The aim of this report is to start a process of reconnecting widening access with what opportunity means in the political context of the early 2020s. It will argue that higher education participation is crucial to the economic and social fortunes of the towns, counties and cities of England and in particular the discussions around 'Levelling Up' that are shaping their future. It shows that participation in higher education while the norm for certain groups in particular parts of the country this is far from universal and for many it remains a dream.

1. Department of Education (2020) '*Universities Minister calls for true social mobility*' - https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/universities-minister-calls-for-true-social-mobility
2. Morgan, J, (2023) '*Sunak: Labour HE target 'one of great mistakes of last 30 years'*, October 4, 2023, - https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/sunak-labour-he-target-one-great-mistakes-last-30-years
3. Council of Skills Advisors Report (2022) *Learning and skills for economic recovery, social cohesion and a more equal Britain* https://labour.org.uk/updates/stories/report-of-the-council-of-skills-advisers/
4. For more information please see: https://labour.org.uk/missions/opportunity/
5. Prime Minister's Office (2016) *Statement from the new Prime Minister Theresa May* https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-from-the-new-prime-minister-theresa-may

2. Methodology

This report draws upon primarily upon data published annually by Department of Education,[6] on participation in higher education by area for those from free school meal (FSM)/non free school meal (FSM) backgrounds. This annual data release entitled *'Widening participation in higher education'* includes estimates of state-funded pupils' progression to higher education (HE) by age 19 according to their personal characteristics at age 15, including:

- eligibility for free school meals (FSM)
- disadvantage
- gender
- ethnicity
- special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) status
- first language
- children in need
- looked after children

The last release was published in July 2023. The release includes information on HE progression by those from FSM backgrounds in 153 local authority areas and also regionally. The data is generated via matching of data from DfE National Pupil Database, HESA Student Record and ESFA Individual Learning Record (ILR).

Free school meals is an imperfect measure of socio-economic background. It does not include those who are on lower levels of income who are experiencing economic challenges. However, as an indicator of lower socioeconomic background it is superior to overall area based measures such as the POLAR measure which until recently has been the measure preferred by the Office for Students and its predecessor the Higher Education Funding Council of England as a proxy indicator of socio-economic background.[7] The participation of local areas (POLAR) classification groups areas across the UK based on the proportion of young people who participate in higher education. Research has shown that POLAR does not reflect socioeconomic background of individual learners well and low participation areas included many learners from higher socio-economic groups.[8]

3. How the report is structured

The report firstly outlines the context where progression to higher education for those from proxy measures of socio-economic background is concerned over the last decade. It then examines progress over the 2011-12 to 2021-22 period in terms of the progression to higher education for state schooled pupils from FSM and non-FSM backgrounds both in terms of the participation rate and the absolute numbers of students progressing to higher education. It identifies the areas where most progress has been made and areas where least progress has been made and the picture in terms of progress across England.

The report then looks at the areas where in 2021-22 the participation in higher education was the highest and lowest for those from FSM backgrounds in terms of both participation rate and absolute numbers. The final aspect of FSM progression that is examined is the gap between those from FSM and non-FSM backgrounds progressing to higher education. The report then discusses the analysis in the context of arguments about the demand for higher education graduates and levelling up before outlining the key findings. The final sections look at the implications for policy of this report and outlines a series of recommendations.

6. Department for Education (2023) *Statistics: widening participation in higher education* https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/widening-participation-in-higher-education
7. For more information on POLAR go to: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/widening-participation-in-higher-education
8. Vikki Boliver, Stephen Gorard & Nadia Siddiqui (2022) Who counts as socioeconomically disadvantaged for the purposes of widening access to higher education?, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 43:3, 349-374, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2021.2017852

4. Access to higher education progression over the last 10 years – the context

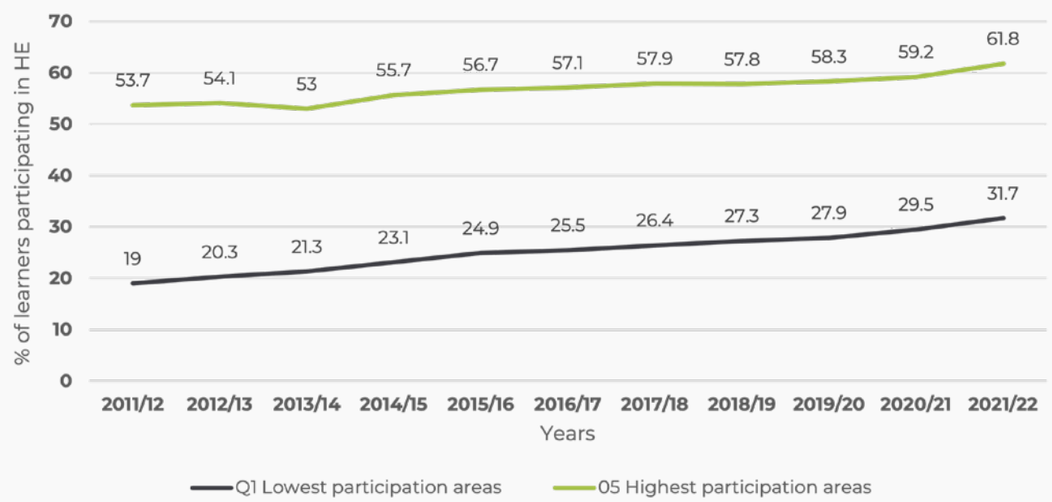
For learners from proxy measures of socio-economic background the main focus of government policy over the last decade has been geographical. The POLAR measure was first formulated in the late 2000s and is described above. In 2011 the coalition government began a change in focus where policies to widen access to higher education were concerned moving away from an approach based around state funded national collaborative outreach work and toward university supported work delivered via Access and Participation Plans (APPs). The Aimhigher national collaborative outreach programme which ran from 2004 to 2011 investing £7bn in regional partnerships of schools, universities and colleges was defunded in 2011 as part of this shift. Further collaborative outreach programmes were funded from 2015 onwards but not to the scale of Aimhigher while APPs became more important.

The focus on POLAR was embedded into the collaborative outreach programmes that followed Aimhigher and APPs up until the most recent guidance for HE providers regarding producing APPs for the next 5 years which has reduced the focus on POLAR considerably.

In terms of higher education participation progress has been made in increasing participation for those from low participation geographical areas identified via POLAR analysis. Diagram 1 below shows the participation rates of those from low participation areas and those from the higher participation areas.

Diagram 1 shows that there has been an increase in 67% in the participation of younger learners from low participation areas over the period 2011-12 to 2021-22. As will be seen below this is slightly higher than the increase in participation for those from high participation areas. The gap between the high and low participation areas has also closed slightly from 34.7% to 30.1%

Diagram 1: HE progression rate for state school pupils by aged 19 in high and low participation areas from 2011-12 to 2021-22



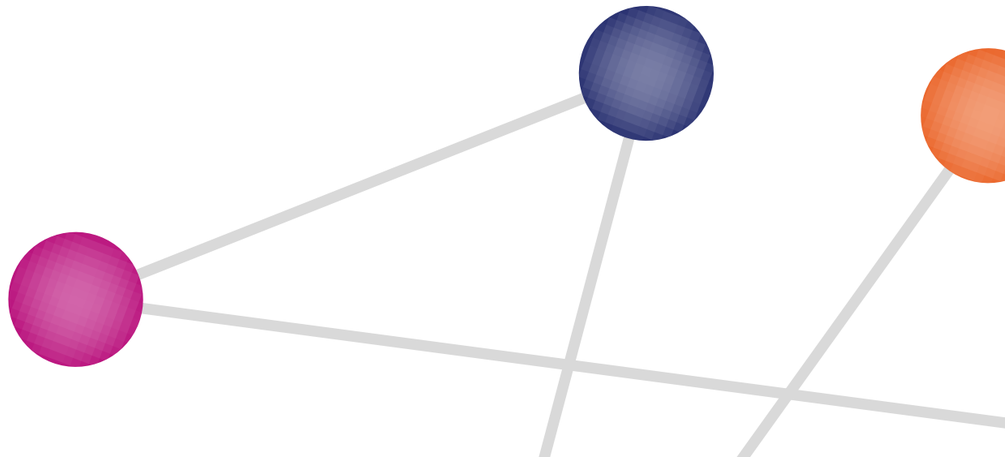
5. The national picture

5.1 National participation rates for FSM and non-FSM learners

Recent years have seen a steady increase in the higher education participation rate for learners from FSM backgrounds but also for those from non-FSM backgrounds. As Diagram 2 below shows the gap in participation between these two groups has increased over the period 2011-12 to 2021-22 from 18% to 19.2%.

Diagram 2 also shows that over the period 2015-16 to 2019-20 progress had stalled for those from FSM backgrounds. It is the pandemic and the increase in higher education that it precipitated that led to an increase in participation for FSM learners over 2020/21 and 2021/22.

Diagram 2: Participation rates in higher education for FSM and non-FSM learners from 2011-12 to 2021-22

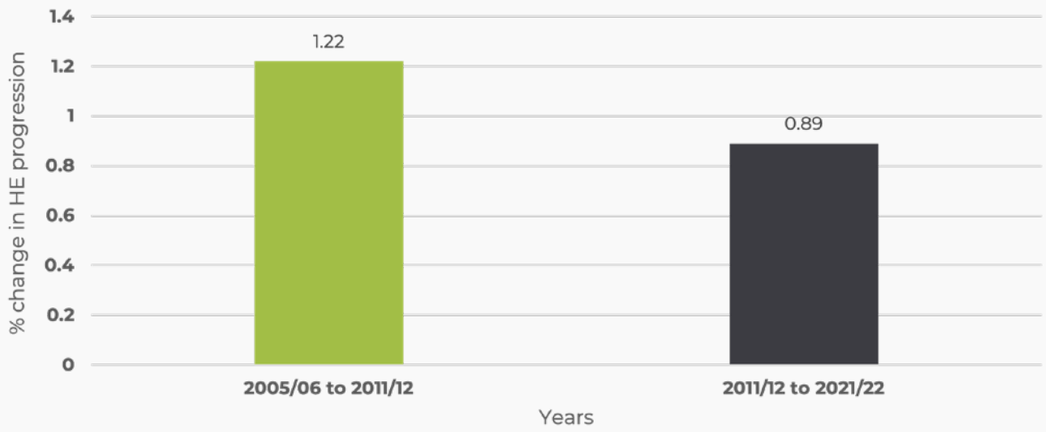


5.2 National participation rates for FSM learners before 2011-12

As outlined in section 4 above there was a shift in approach where access to higher education policy was concerned in the early 2010s with a change in government. It is interesting therefore to compare the progress made after this change in policy with the situation before.

Participation in higher education by those from FSM backgrounds increased quicker before 2011-12, than in the years afterward when work such as Aimhigher was either de-funded or supported at much smaller scales. Diagram 3 shows the rate of increase in participation by 19 for state school pupils from FSM backgrounds prior to this shift in policy and then afterwards.

Diagram 3: Average change in participation in HE by learners from FSM backgrounds each year from 2005-06 to 2011-12 and from 2011-12 to 2020-21

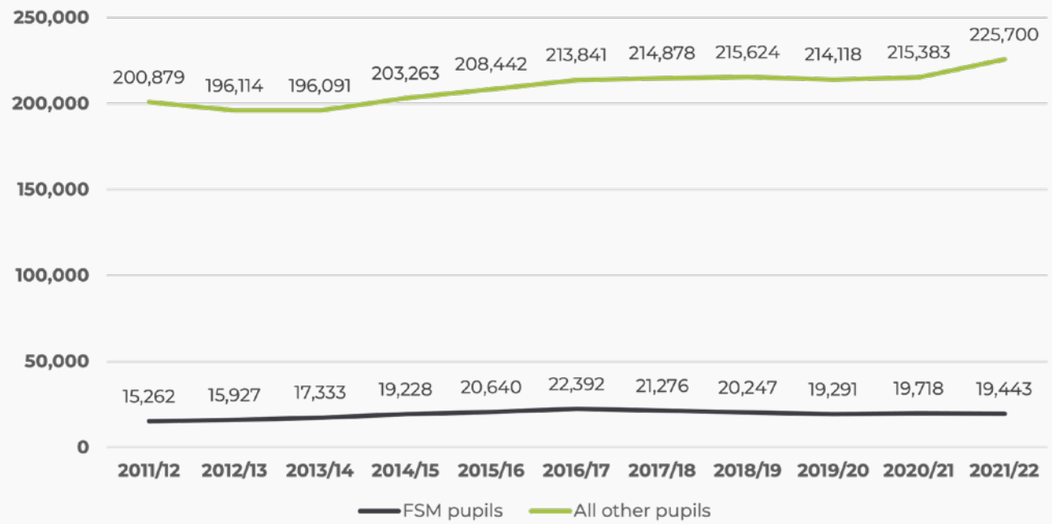


5.3 Numbers of students from FSM and non-FSM backgrounds progressing to higher education

Diagram 4 looks at the changes in the actual numbers of learners progressing to higher education from state school backgrounds by age 19 over the 2011-12 to 2021-22 period. It shows the how the progression gap has widened between the two groups over this period. It also shows that of all the state schooled pupils progressing to higher education by age 19 over this period, only a very small minority – less than 10% come from an FSM background.

As Diagram 4 shows the number of learners from FSM backgrounds progressing to higher education per year is 4,181 higher in 2021-22 than in 2011-12. However, over this period, the number of learners progressing to higher education from non-FSM backgrounds is 24,281 more in 2021-11 than 2011-12. It is also worth noting that the numbers of state schooled learners from FSM backgrounds progressing to higher education in 2021-22 is 2949 less than in 2016-17.

Diagram 4: Numbers of FSM and non-FSM learners participating in higher education from 2011-12 to 2021-22



6. The regional picture

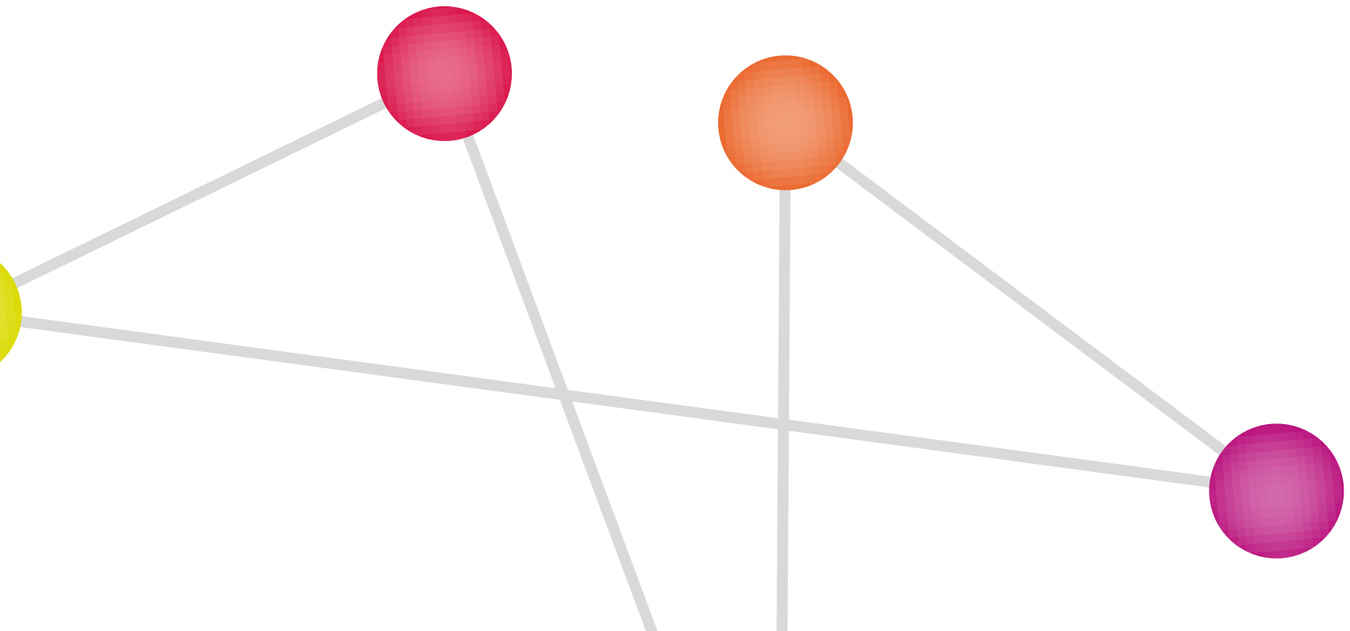
6.1 Regional participation rates for FSM and non-FSM learners

The higher education participation rate of learners from FSM backgrounds to higher education in England is differentiated by region. As Table 1 below shows the participation rate for London is more than double that of 5 regions and nearly 20% higher than the next highest region. However, the region with the lowest participation rate is the South West – lower than those regions in the north. Given the focus on north-south divides in educational achievement it is worth noting that the area with the biggest challenges here is in the south.

For learners from an FSM background the chances of participating in higher education are low. For most areas outside London it is lower than one in 4.

Table 1: Participation rates in higher education for FSM learners from 2011-12 to 2021-22 across English regions

Region	2011/12 (%)	2021/22 (%)	% change
London	36.50	48.80	**33.70**
West Midlands	18.60	29.90	**60.75**
North West	17.50	26.60	**52.00**
East of England	15.60	22.90	**46.79**
Yorkshire and The Humber	14.90	25.70	**72.48**
East Midlands	14.10	21.40	**51.77**
North East	14.00	21.90	**56.43**
South East	13.40	21.20	**58.21**
South West	12.40	18.70	**50.81**



6.2 Gap in FSM participation between London and other regions

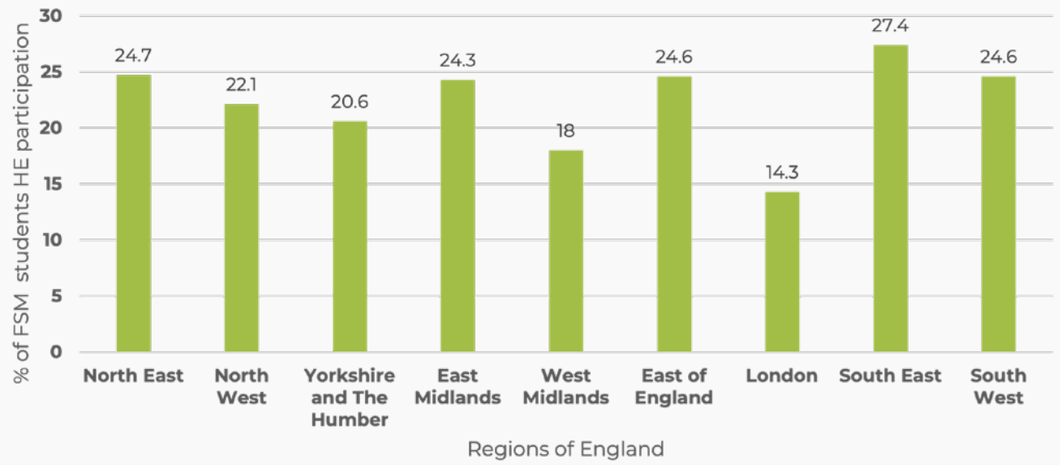
This gap between London and other regions is also increasing. Table 2 shows the gap between London and other regions and how it has increased. The gap between London and the South West and London has gone up 6 percentage points. The gap between East Midlands and London and the East of England and London has gone up 5%.

Table 2: Gap between London and other regions in progression of FSM learners to HE in 2011-12 and 2021-22

Local Authority	2011/12 (%)	2021/22 (%)	% change
West Midlands	17.9	18.9	**1**
North West	19	22.2	**3.2**
East of England	20.9	25.9	**5**
Yorkshire and The Humber	21.6	23.1	**1.5**
East Midlands	22.4	27.4	**5**
North East	22.5	26.9	**4.4**
South East	23.1	27.2	**3.9**
South West	24.1	30.1	**6**

In terms of the gap in progression between FSM and non-FSM learners the gap is smallest in London by some margin. As Diagram 4 shows this gap which in 2021-22 was at 14.3% which is nearly half the gap that exists in the South East of 27.4%.

Diagram 5: Gaps in higher education participation between FSM and non-FSM learners in English regions 2021-22



7. The Local Picture

7.1 Local authorities and the % of FSM learners progressing to higher education in 2021-22

As would be expected given that there are far more local authorities than regions the spread in terms of progression to higher education rates for FSM learners is larger. Diagram 6 below divides the local authority areas by the % of FSM learners progressing to higher education in 2021-22. It shows that the majority of local authority areas have an FSM participation in Higher Education rate below the national average of 29.2%. There are 43 areas where the progression rate is below 20% and the percentage of local authority areas below the national average (29%) is 69%.

Diagram 6: % of FSM learners progressing to higher education in 2021-22 by local authority area

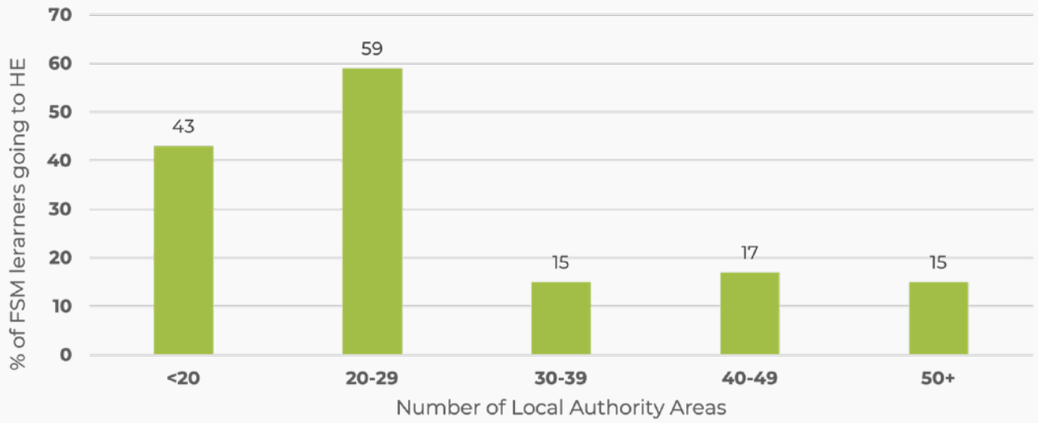


Diagram 6 suggests that the overall national average is being pulled up by the strong performance of a small number of areas in London, in the main inner London. These areas make up the top 10 Local authority areas in the country where FSM participation in higher education is the highest as Table 3 below shows. The actual numbers of FSM learners progressing to higher education in some areas is very low hence this can lead to significant variations in the participation rate year by year. So, only areas with over 30 learners in 2021/22 are included in Table 5 and the subsequent local authority analysis.[9]

9. There are a small number of areas i.e. 12 where participation is less than 30 in 2021/22.

Table 3: Top 10 areas where participation in HE for FSM learners is the highest in 2021-22

Areas	2021/22 (%)
Westminster	66
Redbridge	62.5
Tower Hamlets	58.3
Harrow	57.9
Hounslow	55.6
Brent	54.6
Ealing	54.2
Hammersmith and Fulham	52.7
Southwark	52.4
Haringey	52.3
ENGLAND	29.2

Table 3 shows, as with the Table 2 above looking at regional distributions of FSM learners participating in higher education in 2021-22, that simplistic north vs south dichotomies don't work where higher education participation is concerned. Only 3 of the local authorities with the lowest participation rates come from areas north of the midlands. Table 4 below shows the areas where participation in higher education was lowest for FSM learners from state schooled backgrounds in 2021-22.

Table 4: The 10 areas where participation in HE for FSM learners is the lowest in 2021-22

Area	2021/22 (%)
Cumbria	17.1
East Sussex	16.9
Norfolk	16.5
Barnsley	16.1
Knowsley	16.1
Hampshire	16.0
Portsmouth	15.1
Somerset	14.0
Herefordshire	13.9
Swindon	13.8
ENGLAND	29.2

Looking at Tables 3 and 4 the difference in FSM participation in local authority areas at the top of the distribution and the bottom is stark. The tables show the extent of the gap between the area with the highest rate of participation (Westminster) and the lowest (Swindon) is 52.8%.

7.2 Changes in participation rates for FSM learners at local authority level from 2011-12 to 2021-22

The levels of higher education progression as shown by the latest data available is important. But examining change over time is also important in particular as it could be a springboard for further work to identify whether in areas where significant progress is being made things can be learnt which can then potentially be scaled up.

Looking at participation rates in higher education by state pupils from FSM backgrounds at local authority level of the 150 local authority areas nearly all show progress. Only 2 have gone backwards – Leicester and Blackpool and in the case of Blackpool this is because the participation rate dropped sharply from 2020-21 to 2021-21 otherwise they would have also shown progress. The extent of progress differs though.

Table 6 below shows the 10 local authority areas who have experienced the greatest increase in higher education participation for those from FSM backgrounds in 2021/22 compared with 2011-12. As with above areas where the numbers of learners in 2021-22 is lower than 30 have been left out of this analysis.

Table 6: Top 10 areas where HE participation rate for FSM learners has increased the most over 2011-12 to 2021-22

Area	2011/2012	2021/22	% change
Kingston upon Hull, City of	8.6	27.2	216.28
Southampton	8.5	22.0	158.82
North-East Lincolnshire	8.1	20.6	154.32
East Riding of Yorkshire	11.5	28.1	144.35
North Yorkshire	10.8	24.9	130.56
Nottinghamshire	8.5	19.1	124.71
Medway	11.3	24.9	120.35
Coventry	16.3	35.5	117.79
Darlington	10.1	21.9	116.83
Oxfordshire	10.4	21.4	105.77
ENGLAND	**20.3**	**29.2**	**44**

The areas in Table 6 are all drawn from outside London, with 4 from the Yorkshire and Humber region. Table 7 below shows the areas where there has been the least progress. Again, the geographical spread of these areas is notable.

Table 7: The 10 areas where HE participation rate for FSM learners has increased the least over 2011-12 to 2021-22

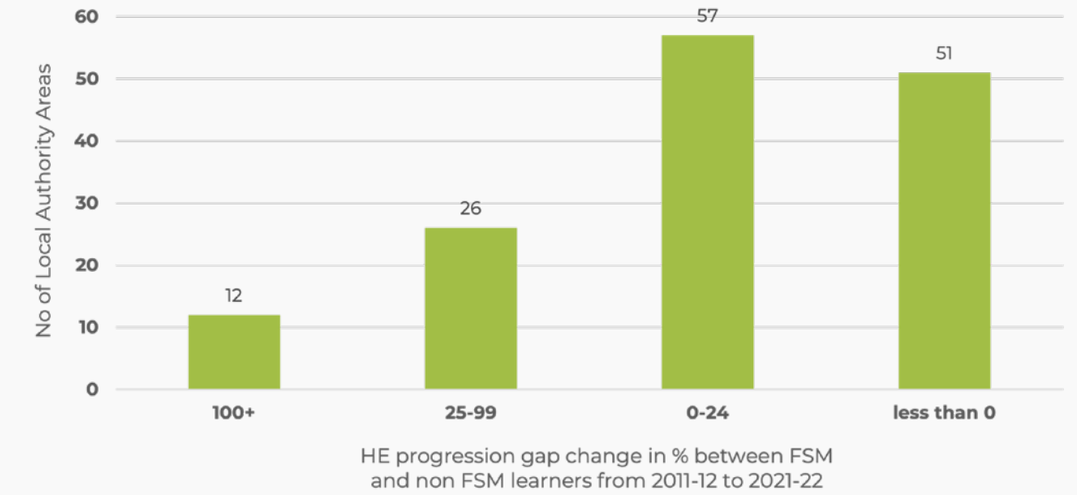
Area	2011/2012	2021/22	% change
Leicester	29.3%	27.7%	-5.46
Blackpool	13.9%	13.3%	-4.32
Kensington and Chelsea	47.9%	51.6%	7.72
Newham	45.5%	51.3%	12.75
Wandsworth	40.7%	46.3%	13.76
Hackney	44.2%	50.3%	13.80
Camden	40.5%	46.6%	15.06
Lewisham	32.7%	38.1%	16.51
Peterborough	19.4%	22.8%	17.53
ENGLAND	**20.3**	**29.2**	**44**

7.3 Gaps in HE participation between FSM and non-FSM learners

Another area of concern for addressing inequality in higher education participation at the local level is the gaps between those from higher and lower socioeconomic groups. In the context of higher education qualifications being an asset in the labour market the progress that is made or not being made in supporting students from FSM backgrounds to go to higher education is dependent to an extent on how the rest of the cohort is doing. Even if progress is being made it may be undermined if the gap between FSM learner and non-FSM learner progression remains significant. Table 2 above showed how the gap at the national level was widening slightly.

Diagram 7 below summarises the changes in the gap between FSM and on FSM learner progression over the period 2011-12 to 2021-22 for each local authority area. The diagram shows that in the majority of areas, 95 which is 63% of all areas where there is data the gap between FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 over the period 2011-12 to 2021-22 and non FSM pupils progressing to HE has increased. The category in Diagram 6 labelled 'Less than zero', are those areas where the gap has decreased over the period 2011-12 to 2021-22.

Diagram 7: Local Authority Areas HE progression gap changes from 2011-12 – 2021-22



At local authority level, Table 8 below shows those areas where the most progress has been made in terms of reducing the gap over the 2011-12 to 2021-22 period. As with the progress made over time in the progression of FSM learners there are no strong regional trends amongst the leading areas here.

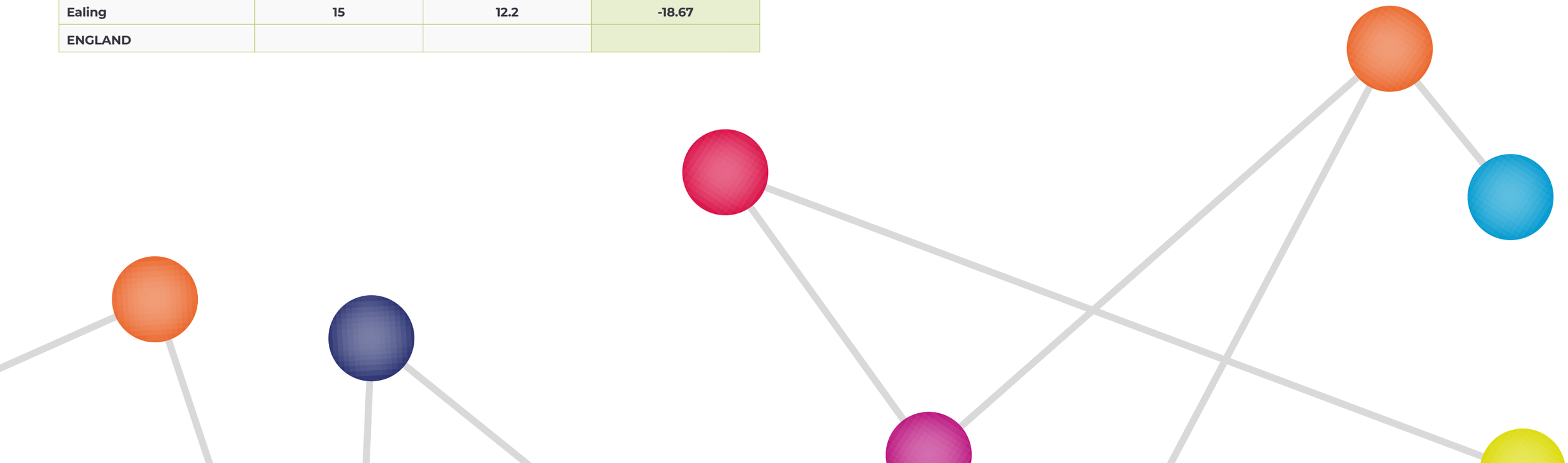
In terms of the areas where the gap between progression to higher education by age 19 for state schooled learners from FSM and non FSM backgrounds has increased the most as Table 9 below shows 8 of these are in London. As illustrated above these areas are those where FSM participation is relatively high. The increasing gap does highlight though that no matter how well those from FSM backgrounds are doing in London, their counterparts who are not in receipt of FSM are still doing better and edging ahead steadily.

Table 8: Top 10 areas where the gap in HE participation between FSM and non FSM learners has decreased the most between 2011-12 and 2021-22

Local Authority	2011/2012	2021/22	% change
Redbridge	16.9	10.7	-36.69
Coventry	21.4	13.8	-35.51
Hounslow	16.5	11.1	-32.73
Lambeth	16.7	12.5	-25.15
Haringey	11.6	8.8	-24.13
Redcar and Cleveland	23.7	18.1	-23.63
North Yorkshire	31.8	24.9	-21.7
East Riding of Yorkshire	28.3	22.5	-20.49
Solihull	29.4	23.7	-19.39
Ealing	**15**	**12.2**	**-18.67**
ENGLAND			

Table 9: Top 10 areas where the gap in HE participation between FSM and non FSM learners has increased the most between 2011-12 and 2021-22

Local Authority	2011/2012	2021/22	% change
Hackney	0	11.7	n/a
Westminster	0.1	4.3	4200
Kensington and Chelsea	2.6	20.4	684.61
Tower Hamlets	1.5	9.3	520
Merton	6.1	20.3	232.79
Newham	5	14.8	196
Leicester	10.5	23.4	122.86
Bristol, City of	14	28.7	105
Wandsworth	7.7	15.6	102.6
Camden	9.4	17.7	88.3
ENGLAND			



8. A social and economic problem

Regardless of the impact that the levelling up policies pursued by this government has had yet, it has propelled regional inequality up the policy agenda to an extent. But higher education participation has not been part of levelling up. It does not feature in any of the 12 missions outlined in the 2021 Levelling Up White Paper which then became part of the 2023 Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. As we approach the next election and the future for levelling up comes under scrutiny any future iteration of regional inequalities policy must include commitments regarding higher education participation.

Several reports released recently have pointed to a potential tightening of the graduate labour market outside London.[10] Other work has argued that focusing on extending access to higher education undermines the value of the kind of jobs that many of those in working class communities do. The most recent evidence on higher education participation for those 18-25 in England shows a rate that is nearly 49%.[11] This increase, along with the data described above showing the reductions in earnings and changing kinds of jobs that graduates in the early part of their careers are experiencing has led a perception that higher education opportunity is something everyone can do and that expansion of the system is out of control. Coupled with this view has been the argument that an over concentration on higher education participation as the route to success, has diminished the value and worth of jobs non-graduate jobs.[12]

The data on graduate earnings and employment outside London reflects the position of many of those in earlier parts of their career as the majority of graduates are. It also reflects the fact that definitions of graduate jobs are moving slower than the realities of work[13]. In addition though, it also established the need for more knowledge intensive investment across the UK outside of London.[14] The central problem overall though is that while it matters what graduates are earning in the early part of their careers higher education is a lifelong investment and thus lifetime earnings are the final arbiter of economic return and such data is not available at anything more than an estimate. It also should be not be forgotten that economic returns are not the sole metric by which graduates value their degree.

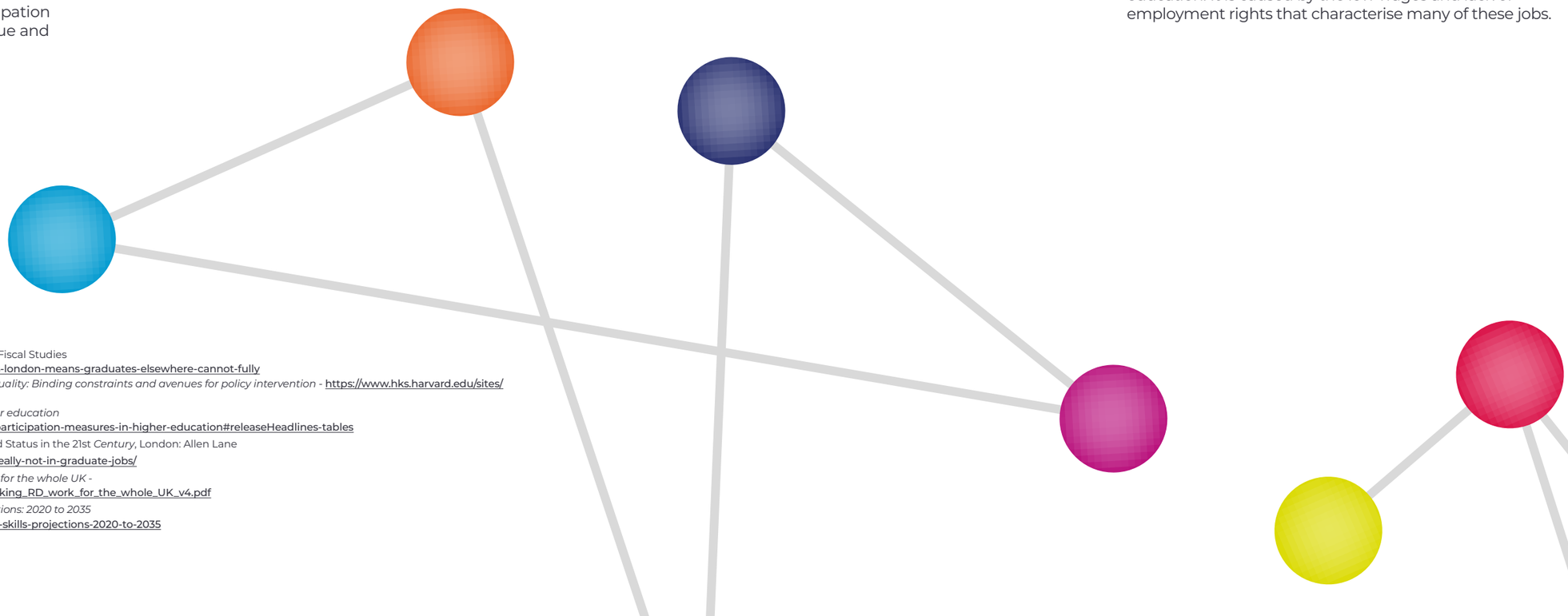
Identifying the demand for graduates, and thus the extent to which the low levels of participation in HE for those from FSM backgrounds is an economic problem, is a matter of understanding the present and the future. We need to look at what our knowledge now tells us about the future demand for graduates and the evidence here is that it is strong. Table 10 below is from work undertaken by The Skills Imperative 2035 research programme, led by the National Foundation for Educational Research and funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The Department for Education (DfE) has funded the subregional analyses as an extension to this project.

Table 10: Employment by Qualification projections over the 2015 to 2035 period [15]

Shares (%)	2015	2019	2020	2025	2035
RQF8 Doctorate	1.4	1.7	1.8	2.2	2.9
RQF7 Other higher degree	9.6	11.9	12.6	15.7	21.2
RQF6 First degree	19.5	20.2	21.4	22.1	23.7
RQF5 Foundation degree; Nursing; Teaching	5.7	5.4	5.7	5.5	5.8
RQF4 HE below degree level	5.4	5.4	5.8	5.9	6.4
RQF3 A level & equivalent	19.7	19.3	19.6	18.9	18.2
RQF2 GCSE(A-C) & equivalent	19.9	19.1	17.9	16.7	13.3
RQF1 GCSE(below grade C) & equivalent	13.7	12.5	11.5	10.0	6.4
No Qualification	5.2	4.4	3.8	3.0	2.2
All qualifications	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 10 shows that it is predicted over the 2020 to 2035 period that percentage of the workforce requiring an undergraduate degree will increase from 46.9% to 59.8% whilst the percentage requiring GCSE (A-C) or equivalent or less will fall from 38.8% to 21.9%.

This gap between the graduate skills and investment in knowledge intensive work should be far more central to future regional inequalities policy. Finally, as regards the 'low status' of some non-graduate jobs the root of this problem is not encouraging too many working class young people to consider progression to higher education. It is caused by the low wages and lack of employment rights that characterise many of these jobs.



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9. Key Findings

Overall, the chances of young people from FSM backgrounds progressing to higher education are low and in most areas of the country have not improved enough over the last decade. There is geographical variation though between regions and local authorities and big differences in participation across the country for this group of learners.

Key Finding 1: In most areas in England if you are a state school pupil in receipt of FSM you have less than a 1 in 4 chance of going onto higher education by age 19 and this increases to less than 1 in 5 in 29% of areas. Of all the state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 in 2021-22 only a very small minority – less than 10% come from an FSM background.

Key Finding 2: Learners from FSM backgrounds are nearly 5 times as likely to go to higher education in the highest performing areas in 2021-22 than the lowest performing areas. In 2021-22 66% of state-funded pupils from an FSM background in Westminster progress to higher education whilst in Swindon 13.8% of state-funded pupils from an FSM background progressed to higher education.

Key Finding 3: In 2021-22 the numbers of FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 is 19,443 which compares to 15,262 in 2011-12 while the numbers of non FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education from non FSM backgrounds in 2021-22 was 225,700 while in 2011-12 it was 200,879.

Key Finding 4: The rate of increase in FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 has slowed over the period 2005-06 (when data was first produced) to 2021-22. It was on average 1.22% per year from 2005-06 to 2011-12 and then 0.89% per year from 2011-12 to 2021-22.

Key Finding 5: The % of FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 in 2021-22 from London is more than double that of 5 regions and nearly 20% higher than the next highest region. The region with the lowest % of state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 is the South West – lower than any regions in the north.

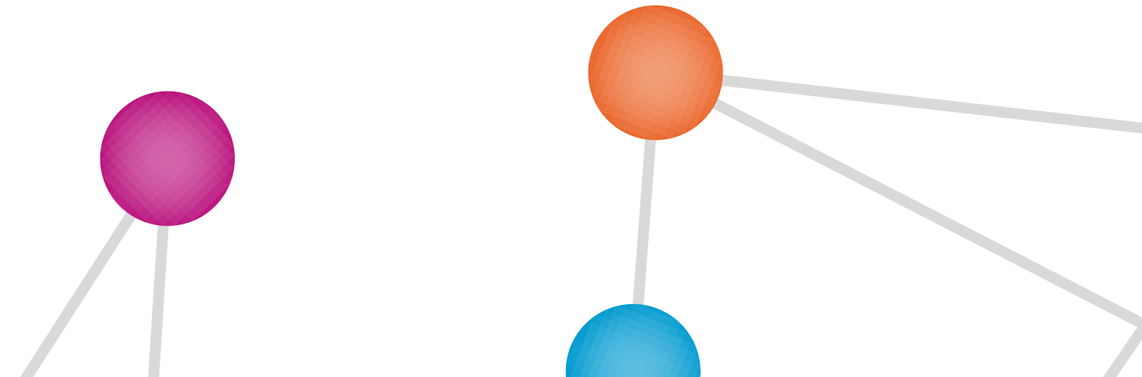
Key Finding 6: The gap in in the % of FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 between London and non-London regions from 2011-12 and 2021-22 has increased for each region.

Key Finding 7: Higher education is unavailable to the majority of young people eligible for free school meals. In most local authority areas, 69%, the % of FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 rate in 2021-22 is below the national average of 29.2%.

Key Finding 8: Some areas though have made good progress in increasing the participation rate of those from FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 over the period 2011-12 to 2021-22. In 13 areas there has been an increase in participation of over 100% from 2011-12 to 2021-22. These areas are drawn from across England.

Key Finding 9: Other areas have made less progress in increasing the participation rate of those from FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 over the period 2011-12 to 2021-22. In 15 areas there has been an increase in less than 25% over the period and in 2 areas – Leicester and Blackpool, the progression rate has declined over the period.

Key Finding 10: In the majority of areas, 63%, the gap between FSM state-funded pupils' progressing to higher education (HE) by age 19 over the period 2011-12 to 2021-22 and non FSM pupils progressing to HE has increased. The areas where the gap has gone up the most are drawn primarily from London.



10. Summary – University is not for everyone

This paper shows clearly that contrary to what some people may believe 'all' young people in England do not have the chance to go to university now nor do some people have even a hope of going. Most young people from lower socio-economic groups have only a small chance of progressing to higher education and these chances haven't changed as much as they could have done in the last 10 years for which data is available.

For many young people from these communities, they will be happy to pursue other routes to higher education. But there are many who could have benefited from higher education who have not been able to do so. It must be stressed as well that as shown above, the economic rewards accruing to other routes that do not require higher education are likely to diminish in the future.

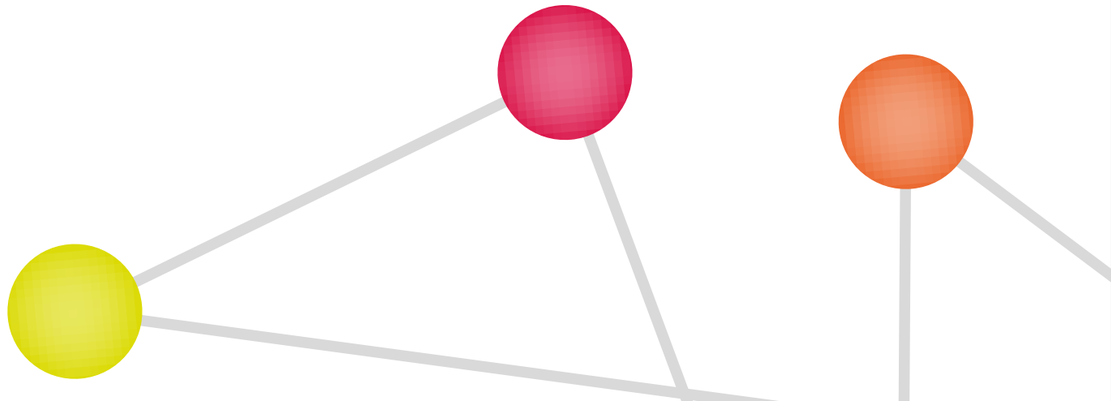
However, while the lack of opportunities for higher education participation for those from the poorest backgrounds is clear there is also significant geographical diversity across England with learners from FSM backgrounds in some areas nearly 5 times more likely to progress to higher education than in others. Some areas have also made significant progress in increasing the progression to higher education of young people from FSM backgrounds over the last decade. But we do not know enough about why some areas have made significant progress and others have not.

In terms of what can be done to address these inequalities, then 8 recommendations are outlined below. Over the last 20 years there has been a gradual drift away from locally owned cross sectoral, target driven approaches to addressing inequalities in higher education participation. This shift has not been effective enough where increasing participation in higher education for learners from FSM backgrounds is concerned. As Section 4 shows it has been more effective where increasing participation for learners from low participation neighbourhoods is concerned. But these learners are not necessarily those from the lowest income backgrounds.

The recognition of the need to devolve power away from Westminster has increased with this now appearing an issue where there is an element of cross-party consensus. It is now the time to re-connect widening access to higher education with its modern-day roots. This means a return to the kind of deeper target driven collaboration between local stakeholders that was common in the 2000s supported by significant, coherent, long-term investment in partnerships. This does not imply a downgrading of the importance of Access and Participation Plans which are world leading and particularly effective at ensuring higher education providers address inequalities in attainment and post HE progression for their students. It does mean re-thinking how access is addressed which has always been an inherently collaborative endeavour.

It also means correcting the mistakes made in 2019 when the levelling up agenda was launched and higher education participation as ignored so that post 2024 iterations of regional inequality policy embed higher education participation within it. Such local collaboration should be underpinned by the integration of higher education participation, and targets related to participation by learners from FSM backgrounds in Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) or any subsequent attempt at local skills planning. The lack of inclusion in LSIPs of higher education is not logical and this should be remedied.

As this report shows the chances of young people from the poorest backgrounds entering higher education in the early 2020s remains extremely low for those in many areas of England. Progress has been slow in the last 10 years and the gap relative to those from non-free school meal backgrounds has increased. Any party that is serious for about 'smashing the class ceiling' need to make addressing these inequalities a priority.



11. Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

Increasing the participation of young learners from FSM backgrounds should form a key part of any future 'levelling up' agenda/mission-based approach to addressing inequality pursued by the next government.

Recommendation 2:

A national target to increase participation of FSM learners in higher education to 40% by 2030 should be introduced.

Recommendation 3:

Local authorities, with the support where appropriate of combined authorities, should construct their own targets that fit with education and skills strategies they lead and feed into the national target.

Recommendation 4:

Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) or any subsequent attempt at local skills planning should include reference to participation in higher education by those from lower socio-economic groups.

Recommendation 5:

A new collaborative programme building on the success of uni connect and learning from past programmes should be given increased funding with the objective of driving forward the targets described above working with local and combined authorities.

Recommendation 6:

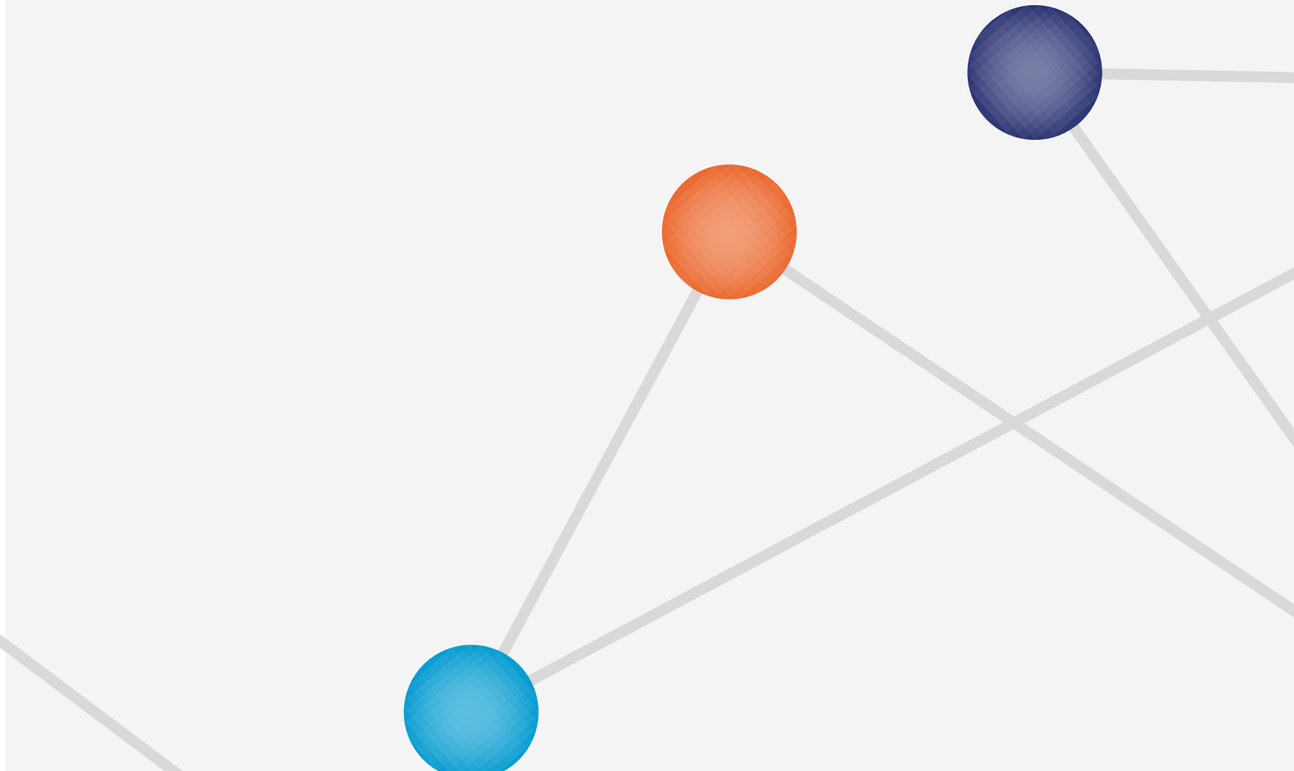
Further research should be undertaken to understand why some areas are making significant progress in improved the participation rate in HE of FSM learners and some are not.

Recommendation 7:

Areas where progress has been slow or non-existent should receive extra support via the new collaborative programme described above based around an understanding of the additional challenges they face.

Recommendation 8:

In any future review of the higher education funding system consider how specific support for learners from FSM backgrounds can be introduced that covers and combines tuition fee relief and maintenance support.



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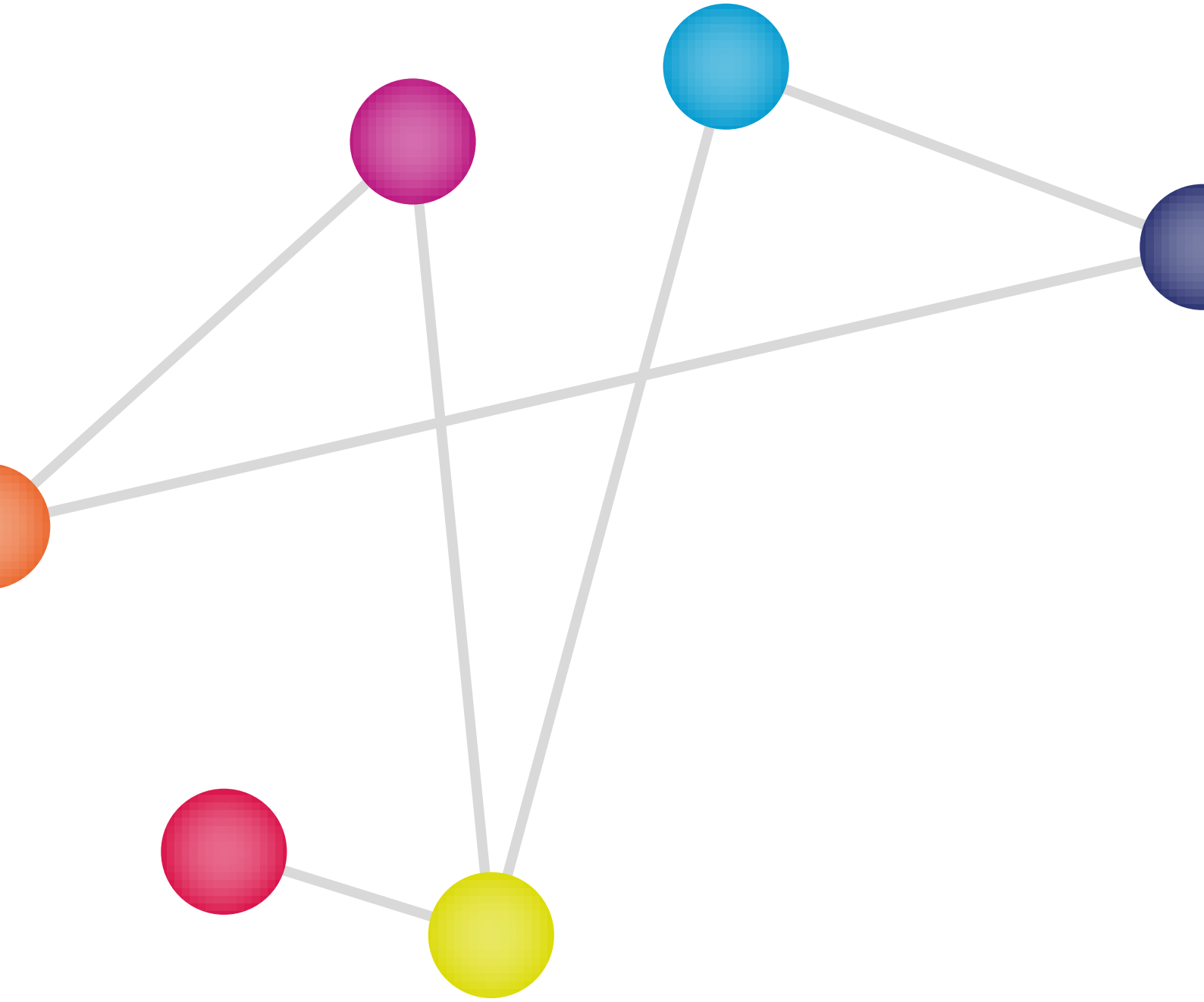

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