# Financial strains in higher education threaten to deepen regional access divides



The financial turmoil facing the higher education sector is emerging as a formidable barrier to widening participation, particularly in areas facing persistent “cold spots,” where access to university education is severely limited. A report published by the UPP Foundation in conjunction with Public First highlights the critical situation, suggesting that universities grappling with financial difficulties will struggle to reverse trends that leave many young people in these regions with substantial barriers to higher education.

The issues facing institutions are manifold. Many universities are contending with severe budget constraints that hinder their ability to invest in initiatives aimed at increasing participation. In light of these financial strains, the Department for Education is currently formulating reforms intended to alleviate the mounting fiscal pressures on universities, with a keen focus on improving access to higher education as a vital component of these changes.

The report delves into the city of Doncaster, identified as the twelfth-worst local authority in England for higher education progression. The findings reveal that, for many in these underrepresented areas, pursuing a university degree is often seen as a “bad bet.” The accumulating debt associated with higher education, combined with disillusionment regarding the potential financial return on a degree, creates a bleak outlook for aspiring students. The data indicates that participation rates are alarmingly disparate across regions; for instance, even though half of school leavers in London proceed to university, the North East sees this figure plummet to just 40.8%.

Concerns extend beyond mere financial barriers. The research points to various factors contributing to the persistence of these educational cold spots. These include a notable lack of graduate job opportunities available locally, deep-rooted familial ties, and the educational system’s inability to adequately prepare young people for making informed decisions about their futures. The report cites an "intergenerational trap," whereby successive generations remain entrapped in cycles of educational disadvantage, making it increasingly difficult for young people to aspire to university education.

The paper argues for a “profound, sensitive, and sustained shift” in the economic and educational paradigms of these areas. Richard Brabner, executive chair of the UPP Foundation, articulated the urgency of the matter, stating that young people in regions like Doncaster “risk getting left behind” if systemic changes are not made. The report urges that the government must prioritise equitable access to education for entire communities rather than focusing solely on individual success stories.

The financial challenges do not operate in isolation; related studies corroborate the precarious situation. The Office for Students has outlined the pivotal role that higher education must play in addressing regional inequalities and boosting local economies by aligning educational pathways with employment needs. The stark realities depicted in various reports underscore that the operational cutbacks currently being adopted by universities—such as course closures and reductions in maintenance investments—are further diminishing the scope for students. With many institutions already consolidating programs and scaling back on essential services, the landscape of higher education is increasingly fractured.

As the government and educational institutions grapple with these challenges, the call for targeted interventions has never been more pressing. Without a clear, actionable plan to address these disparities, the potential for significant loss of talent and aspiration in cold spot areas looms large, posing a profound threat not just to the individuals affected but to the futures of communities and regional economies at large.

The obstinate gap in higher education participation rates signals a need for urgent attention and innovative solutions. By recognising the complex interplay of financial realities and social factors, stakeholders in the education sector may begin to shift the narrative, fostering an environment where all aspiring students, regardless of their backgrounds, have the opportunity to achieve their academic and professional goals.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2
2. Paragraphs 3, 4
3. Paragraph 5
4. Paragraph 6
5. Paragraph 7
6. Paragraph 8

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/universities-in-financial-trouble-will-struggle-to-widen-participation> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://upp-foundation.org/new-research-exposes-extent-of-regional-gaps-in-higher-education-aspirations/> - A report by the UPP Foundation highlights significant regional disparities in higher education participation across the UK. Despite achieving a 50% participation rate in 2017, inequalities persist, with London at 61.2% and the North East at 40.8%. The gap between students eligible for free school meals and their peers has widened to 20.8%, the highest on record. The report emphasizes the need for targeted interventions to address these regional 'cold spots' and ensure equitable access to higher education.
3. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/place-matters-inequality-employment-and-the-role-of-higher-education/> - The Office for Students' report examines the role of higher education in addressing regional inequalities and employment disparities. It discusses how universities can contribute to reducing economic decline in various regions by providing education and training that align with local employment needs. The report underscores the importance of place-based strategies to enhance social mobility and economic growth, particularly in areas facing significant challenges.
4. <https://upp-foundation.org/report-identifies-a-crisis-in-adult-education-as-a-major-threat-to-the-uk-economy/> - A UPP Foundation report warns of a crisis in adult education, highlighting a decline of over 111,000 students aged 25 and over in higher education since 2012. The report emphasizes the need for universities and the government to act urgently to reverse this trend, as the decline poses a significant threat to the UK's economic future, especially in the context of technological advancements and potential reductions in economic migration.
5. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/university-funding-challenges-imperil-widening-access-efforts> - An article in Times Higher Education discusses how the financial crisis in UK universities is jeopardizing efforts to widen access to higher education. It highlights that universities are making operational cutbacks, including reducing investment in repairs and maintenance, and that choices available to students are being reduced, with many courses and departments being closed or consolidated.
6. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/creating-voice-our-members/media-releases/universities-grip-financial-crisis-what> - Universities UK reports on the financial challenges faced by universities, revealing that many are making operational cutbacks, including reducing investment in repairs and maintenance. The survey indicates that choices available to students are being reduced, with 49% of universities closing courses, 55% consolidating some courses, 46% removing module options, and 18% closing departments. The report also notes that 19% of universities have reduced investment in research, with 79% considering future reductions.
7. <https://upp-foundation.org/towards-a-new-mission-for-widening-participation/> - The UPP Foundation's inquiry into the future of widening participation aims to support a new vision with concrete recommendations to break down barriers to higher education and improve student outcomes. Despite achieving a 50% participation rate in 2017, significant inequalities persist, with the gap between students eligible for free school meals and their peers widening to 20.8%. The inquiry emphasizes the need for targeted interventions to address these disparities.