

University Centre Somerset, part of Bridgwater & Taunton College

Summary of 2025-26 to 2028-29 Access and Participation Plan

What is an access and participation plan?

An access and participation plan sets out provisions that will be meaningful and effective in promoting equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups, as determined by the OfS.

You can see the full access and participation plan for University Centre of Somerset, [here](#).

Key points

Our vision for this access and participation plan is to remove barriers, mitigate risks and build a sustainable pathway to HE for a range of learners, promoting all the different HE modes of study that we have available, including Higher and Degree Apprenticeships, Foundations Degrees, Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQ) and Single Registerable Modules (SRMs). Our plan has been designed to address 3 specific risks, those being:

- An increasing number of students declaring a mental health issue at application stage. We are also seeing an increase in the number of requests for extenuating circumstances that reference mental health as an on-course challenge. This intersects across all demographics and courses. We have identified mental health as a key continuation and progression risk for us to address. We also note that Mental Health is likely to have a bigger impact on students from TUNDRA and Polar Quintiles 1 and 2, due to the additional challenges associated with having low socio-economic status. Addressing this risk, we aim to improve continuation rates for these cohorts.
- A higher-than-average number of students from TUNDRA and Polar Quintiles 1 – 3, which is the opposite to the national picture. However, it is clear from both local and national reports that students in receipt of free school meals in Somerset are far less likely to progress into HE than elsewhere in the UK. There are lower proportion of students eligible for free school meals at UCS than those who were not eligible. We have identified that this cohort represent a key access risk for us to address, particularly given our local demographic and agenda of addressing local skills and employability needs.
- An above average proportion of mature students, and our data indicates that we are seeing a widening of continuation rates between our mature and non-mature students. Evidence suggests that this is the result of several risk factors that have a greater impact on the mature cohort than their younger counterparts; cost pressures, ongoing impacts of coronavirus, insufficient academic support. We have identified that this creates a continuation risk for mature students.

See pages 2-3 of the access and participation plan for more information.

Fees we charge

University Centre of Somerset retains the right throughout the duration of the plan and subject to the maximum fee limits set out in OFS regulation to increase fees each year using RPI-X.

See page 54 of the access & participation plan for more information. Alternatively, you can see a full list of fees for our courses at University Centre Somerset for each academic year of the plan [here](#).

Financial help available

We offer financial support to students from underrepresented groups. This helps students access Higher Education and to continue studying until they complete their course. The support includes:

HE Diagnostic Support Fund of £250 - to provide financial support for eligible students to have a full diagnostic assessment carried out by the College

DSA Technology Support Fund of £200 – to provide support for eligible students towards the cost of higher specification equipment as identified by their Technical Needs Assessment (TNA)

HE Bursary Fund of up to £600 (minimum of £300 for all eligible students) – A means tested bursary to support those with a household income of £25,000 or less with costs directly related to their studies. (Other criteria apply)

See pages 30 of the access and participation plan for more information.

Information for students

All information relating to our fees and bursary support inherent to our access and participation plan will be made available on our [website](#) and is fully detailed in our HE/UCS Support Funding Policy and Annual Fee Summary and Fee Policy

See pages 30 of the access and participation plan for more information.

What we are aiming to achieve

As part of the approved access and participation plan, University Centre Somerset have centred our plan around 5 main objectives, and therefore throughout the plan we will:

1. Decrease the continuation gap between part time disabled students and non-disabled students by 6 percentage points (pp) by 2029.
2. Reduce the progression gap for disabled and non-disabled students to 1pp by 2029.
3. Reduce the gap between Free School Meals and non- Free School Meals applicants by 6.4 pp by 2029.
4. Work in partnership with local schools and our FE colleagues, to deliver 400 parent interactions between 2025 and 2029.
5. Eliminate the continuation gap between mature and non-mature students by 2029.

See pages 4-24 of the access and participation plan for more information.

What we are doing to address key risks to equality of opportunity

The identified risks and the above objectives will be addressed through the following interventions:

1. Early intervention Initiative

We will achieve this through a focus on early intervention via enhanced student tracking and monitoring and creating an individualised approach to ensure targeted support and considering the particular impact of mental health as a risk to student continuation. Recognising the need to work collaboratively, we will seek to create positive partnerships with relevant local third-party organisations to signpost appropriate mental health resource for our students to build resilience and self-help strategies. This will be underpinned by the UCS Elevate programme and our existing student support structure.

2. Graduate Careers Offer

We will do this by developing a UCS Graduate careers offer that supports all students to recognise their progression routes and for our disabled students, that they do not have to be limited by their disability. We will also engage with our extensive employer network to create a greater understanding of being a disability confident employer and the advantages of disability confidence to their business, through the design and delivery of workshop events. We already have an established skill's development hub which links employers to students, so we see this as a natural extension of that work. We will also develop a CreaTech (Creative technologies) skills hub to promote the possibilities of self and flexible employment within the CreaTech industries.

3. UCS Outreach Programme

We will do this by creating a UCS outreach programme that builds on existing good practice, our partnership with Uni Connect (Next Steps Southwest), our partnerships and Links with HEIs (such as UWE, University of Exeter and Plymouth University), our relationships with our local schools and through the BTC Multi Academy Trust. We will create an innovative approach that supports learners on their journey from school to our FE and then to our HE provisions with interventions at each stage of the journey.

4. Parents & Carer Information Sessions

We will achieve this through the development of a programme of events designed to inform and engage parents in understanding HE offerings and the diverse HE pathways open to their young person, dispel myths and widen access for underrepresented groups.

5. Mature Learner Support Intervention

We will achieve this by enhanced monitoring and tracking of student data to ensure early identification of students at risk of not continuing programme to ensure early intervention and support. We will work with our learning support team to ensure early intervention and support for DSA applications for these learners. We will work with our extensive employer network to ensure the diversity of our HE offer particularly in relationship to Higher and Degree Apprenticeships which offer a sustainable alternative to mature learners where the cost of living poses a significant risk.

See pages 4-24 of the access and participation plan for more information.

How students can get involved

Two student consultation events were held in the construction of the plan students who attended represented several underrepresented groups our plan aims to support.

Student monitoring and evaluation will be integrated into our provision review, through learner voice and student forums, which will seek feedback on some of the interventions noted in this summary and in the plan. This feedback will be an important part of our plan evaluation strategy and will be included in our interim evaluation reporting

See pages 29 of the access and participation plan for more information.

Evaluation – how we will measure what we have achieved

University Centre Somerset will evaluate to inform our own access and participation plan continuous development cycle, staff CPD, student experience and to contribute to the body of evidence available for providers of a similar profile to our own. This means our evidence base will be focuses on Type 1 and Type 2 evidence. Our cohort sizes and available resource will not accommodate Type 3 evidence generation, and it would be counterproductive to try.

We will incorporate our plan's evaluation into our quality cycle to ensure that activity and progress against targets is regularly reviewed, assessed and reported. We intend to utilise the skills knowledge and experience of colleagues to underpin our evaluation as well as arrange of qualitative and quantitative measures through surveys, PowerBi, ProMonitor, Pro Solution and student voice and forum. This wide ranging approach should enable us to collect high quality data.

See pages 30 of the access and participation plan for more information.

Contact details for further information

Please contact Ashley Kempson, Dean of University Centre Somerset on kempsona@btc.ac.uk or Emma Lilley, University Centre Somerset Registrar on lilleye@btc.ac.uk for more information.