

Consultation Response submitted by  
Association for Real Change, Northern Ireland (ARC NI)  
April 2026

## **CONSULTATION RESPONSE – REVIEW OF APPROACH TO WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The Association for Real Change Northern Ireland (ARC NI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department for the Economy’s consultation on the review of its approach to widening participation in higher education.

ARC NI is an umbrella body supporting over 60 provider organisations delivering services to people with a learning disability, autism and other support needs across Northern Ireland. We also directly support Experts by Experience through our Telling It Like It Is (TILII) groups.

We support the ambition to widen participation in higher education. However, to ensure meaningful change for people with a learning disability and others who experience disadvantage, the approach must be underpinned by measurable actions, clear accountability and robust monitoring.

People with a learning disability remain significantly underrepresented in higher education and face barriers at every stage of the learner journey. Without explicit recognition and targeted action, this inequality will persist.

### **Section 1.1: Strategic Foundations for Inclusive Higher Education**

*Do you agree with the proposed vision for widening participation?*

**Yes**

*Are the proposed principles appropriate and sufficient to guide future action?*

**Yes**

The proposed principles are broadly appropriate. However, they are insufficient without:

- Clear implementation mechanisms
- Defined accountability across institutions and Departments
- Measurable, time-bound outcome

*Are there additional principles that should be considered?*

**Yes**

ARC NI believes that several key principles should be strengthened or explicitly included.

1. Co-production: Policy and practice should be co-produced with those directly affected, including people with a learning disability.
2. Accessibility: Accessible communication and inclusive practice should be a core principle, including Easy Read information and inclusive teaching approaches.
3. Equity: A clear focus on equity, recognising that different groups require different levels of support.
4. Accountability: A principle of accountability and transparency should be explicit.
5. Lifelong Learning: Recognition that participation in higher education must include adult learners and non-traditional pathways.

*How can these principles be embedded across the sector to ensure consistency and impact?*

To ensure consistency and impact across the sector, these principles must be embedded through:

- Clear governance and accountability structures
- Alignment with funding and performance frameworks
- Mandatory standards for accessibility and inclusion
- Ongoing co-production mechanism

## **Section 1.2: Strategic Foundations for Inclusive Higher Education**

*Should Northern Ireland introduce a national target for underrepresented learners in higher education?*

**Yes**

*Would a flexible model of targeting, focused on priority groups and institutional targets, be effective?*

**Yes**

*Are the principles identified sufficient to guide the development of a region-wide taxonomy of priority groups to ensure relevance and inclusivity?*

**Yes**

*How can institutional visits and peer review be structured to promote shared learning and sector-wide improvement?*

Institutional visits and peer review should:

- Focus on shared learning and continuous improvement
- Include Experts by Experience
- Assess both process and outcomes
- Be linked to accountability and improvement planning.

### **Section 1.3: Strategic Foundations for Inclusive Higher Education**

*Are the proposed priority groups appropriate and sufficient to guide future action?*

**Yes**

*Would a thematic model better reflect learner realities?*

**Yes**

*Are there additional thematic groupings that should be considered?*

**Yes**

A thematic model could better reflect overlapping disadvantage and real-life learner experiences. ARC NI recognises that traditional approaches to widening participation (WP) often segment learners into discrete priority groups based on single criteria such as socio-economic status, disability, or care experience. While useful for targeting, this can oversimplify the complex realities of learners' lives and the multiple, intersecting barriers they face. ARC NI encourages the adoption of a thematic lens while maintaining the ability to disaggregate by traditional priority groups where necessary for monitoring and accountability purposes.

*Do you agree that all groupings should be priority groups?*

**Yes**

*Should any of the groups be prioritised over others?*

**Yes**

Those experiencing the greatest structural disadvantage should be prioritised i.e. people with a learning disability. Prioritisation should be evidence-based, intersectional, and flexible, ensuring that resources achieve the greatest impact while maintaining inclusive provision for all underrepresented learners. Thus, ARC NI supports strategic prioritisation of groups facing the most significant or compounded disadvantage, including learners with a learning disability, autism and other support needs

*Should institutions retain flexibility to support additional groups not formally designated as priorities, such as Travellers, asylum seekers, or refugees?*

**Yes**

*How can institutions best balance strategic focus on priority groups with flexibility to support emerging or locally relevant groups?*

A formal mechanism should be established to regularly review priority groups, informed by data, lived experience and stakeholder engagement. Balancing focus and flexibility requires clear national priorities and local discretion within a structured framework.

*Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that would need to be considered?*

**Yes**

Key gaps include:

- Lack of explicit recognition of learning disability
- Limited focus on accessibility
- Insufficient role for community-based engagement

## **Section 2.1: Enabling Success Across the Learner Journey**

*Is the proposed purpose of communications and outreach appropriate to guide future sector-wide action?*

**Yes**

*Would a coordinated sector-wide plan improve consistency and impact across institutions and communities?*

**Yes**

*How can messaging be tailored to effectively engage priority groups?*

Messaging can be strengthened through the use of accessible formats, including Easy Read. Additionally, by community-based delivery and trusted intermediaries. Generic communications often fail to resonate, so tailored messaging is essential to address barriers, reflect lived experience, and build trust. Therefore, effective engagement of priority groups requires co-produced, accessible, contextually relevant, and empowering messaging.

*Would a joint brand or visual identity strengthen recognition and trust in widening participation efforts?*

**Yes**

*How can employer involvement in outreach be strengthened to reflect regional economic needs and learner aspirations?*

ARC NI strongly supports active employer engagement in widening participation (WP) outreach, recognising that meaningful links between learners and the world of work are essential for motivation, aspiration, and future employability. Employer involvement should not be tokenistic but strategically embedded, reflecting both regional economic priorities and the diverse ambitions of WP learners, including those with a learning disability, autism and other support needs. By fostering long-term partnerships, offering accessible engagement opportunities, linking outreach to real-world careers, and coordinating regionally, institutions can ensure that employer engagement supports aspiration, skill development, and equitable access to future employment for all priority learners.

*Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that should be addressed to ensure outreach is inclusive, locally relevant, and sustainable?*

**Yes**

Gaps include:

- Insufficient focus on rural communities
- Limited long-term engagement
- Lack of targeted outreach for people with a learning disability

## Section 2.2: Enabling Success Across the Learner Journey

*Is the proposed approach to contextual admissions and alternative pathways appropriate to guide future sector-wide action?*

**Yes**

*Should a consistent framework/ approach for contextual admissions be developed across providers to ensure fairness and clarity for applicants?*

**Yes**

*How should prior learning, life experience, and transversal skills be recognised meaningfully within admissions processes for WP learners?*

Prior learning and life experience should be recognised through flexible admissions processes and recognition of transferable skills. Traditional entry criteria often fail to capture the full potential of widening participation (WP) learners, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds such as care-experienced students or learners with a learning disability. Recognition of prior learning, life experience, and transversal skills must be systematic, transparent, and embedded within admissions processes to ensure equitable access. Ensuring that WP learners are assessed holistically rather than solely on traditional academic metrics and embedding these practices in admissions will enhance fairness, diversify the student body, and better reflect learners' potential, supporting both access and long-term success.

*What support should be embedded alongside contextual admissions to promote retention and learner success?*

Support alongside contextual admissions should include:

- Academic support
- Mentoring
- Transition support

*How can communication of contextual and flexible admissions policies be improved for WP applicants and those who support them?*

Communication must be improved through clear, accessible information and engagement with community/voluntary organisations.

*What further actions are needed to strengthen regional accessibility and progression routes, particularly in rural areas?*

To strengthen regional accessibility, further education pathways must be enhanced with flexible provision expanded and local delivery models considered.

*Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that should be addressed to ensure admissions and pathways are inclusive, equitable, and sustainable?*

**Yes**

Gaps include:

- Limited focus on accessibility
- Lack of tailored pathways for people with a learning disability

### **Section 2.3: Enabling Success Across the Learner Journey**

*Is the proposed whole-journey support model appropriate to guide future sector-wide action?*

**Yes**

*What mechanisms are needed to ensure early identification and consistent access to support for WP learners?*

ARC NI emphasises that early identification and timely access to support are critical to improving retention, success, and progression for widening participation (WP) learners. Without structured mechanisms, learners from underrepresented groups, especially people with a learning disability, risk falling behind or disengaging before meaningful interventions can take effect. Effective early identification and consistent access to support requires systematic, coordinated, and learner-centred mechanisms. By combining robust data collection, cross-sector collaboration, dedicated support roles, and pre-entry engagement, institutions can proactively address barriers, reduce attrition, and maximise opportunities for WP learners throughout their educational journey.

*How can employer collaboration be strengthened to support inclusive progression into employment and further study?*

Employer collaboration should be strengthened through supported employment pathways and inclusive recruitment practices.

*Do you agree that WP support should be extended to include postgraduate learners?*

**Yes**

*What actions should be prioritised to support WP learners beyond initial access and throughout their full learner journey?*

Support must be continuous, flexible, and tailored to the diverse needs of underrepresented learners, including care-experienced students and students with a learning disability. Key actions to prioritise across the full learner journey:

1. *Structured induction and ongoing orientation*
  - Extended induction programs that: Introduce learners to academic expectations, study skills, and resources Build social networks and peer support Provide priority group-specific guidance, including adjustments for people with a learning disability or mental health needs
2. *Academic and pastoral support integrated throughout study*
  - Dedicated mentoring, tutoring, and academic coaching targeted at priority groups
  - Regular check-ins and progress reviews to identify learners needing additional support
  - Embedded wellbeing and mental health support, recognising the heightened risk of stress, isolation, or disengagement among underrepresented learners
3. *Peer networks and mentoring programs*
  - Facilitate peer support networks, particularly for learners from underrepresented backgrounds
  - Include near-peer mentoring from more senior students or alumni who share similar experiences
  - Create opportunities for learners to develop social capital, confidence, and belonging, which are critical for retention and progression
4. *Co-curricular and extra-academic opportunities*
  - Access to enrichment activities that enhance: Professional skills and employability Leadership and community engagement Cultural and social integration
  - Programs should be inclusive and accessible to all priority groups, including part-time and mature learners
5. *Flexible and tailored learning pathways*
  - Provide adjustable timetables, modular learning, and blended learning options to accommodate diverse circumstances
  - Recognise prior learning, life experience, and transferrable skills in progression pathways, including for postgraduate and vocational study
6. *Financial and practical support throughout study*

- Ensure ongoing financial aid, bursaries, and hardship funds are accessible to priority learners
  - Provide support for childcare, transport, and technology where needed to reduce barriers to sustained engagement
7. *Career guidance and employer engagement*
- Embed career development and work-placement opportunities into all stages of the learner journey
  - Partner with employers to create inclusive internships, apprenticeships, and graduate pathways
  - Ensure that career guidance is tailored to the experiences and aspirations of priority groups
8. *Transition and progression support*
- Prepare learners for postgraduate study, further training, or employment through: Skills development and mentoring Networking and employer engagement Alumni programs and ongoing professional support
9. *Co-production and learner voice*
- Engage priority learners in designing, monitoring, and evaluating support programs
  - Ensure initiatives are informed by lived experience, enhancing relevance, accessibility, and effectiveness
10. *Monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement*
- Collect disaggregated data on retention, attainment, and progression
  - Use evidence to adapt support strategies for priority groups
  - Benchmark outcomes against regional and sector-wide standards to ensure continuous improvement

*How can institutions better tailor support for priority groups?*

ARC NI strongly emphasises that one-size-fits-all approaches are insufficient to meet the needs of priority groups in higher education. Tailored support must recognise the diversity of experiences, barriers, and aspirations among underrepresented learners, including those with a learning disability. To meaningfully support priority groups, institutions must adopt a learner-centred, evidence-informed, and co-produced approach that is flexible, holistic, and responsive. Tailoring support in this way ensures that WP initiatives do not just enable access, but sustain engagement, success, and progression, addressing inequities across the learner journey

*Should support services be extended beyond graduation to assist WP learners during transitions into employment or further study?*

**Yes**

*Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that should be addressed to ensure retention and successful outcomes for WP learners?*

**Yes**

Gaps include:

- Insufficient focus on retention
- Limited attention to post-graduation outcomes

### **Section 3.1: Enabling Systems and Structures**

*Is the proposed approach to improving financial support appropriate to guide future sector-wide action?*

**No**

*What changes to eligibility thresholds or support mechanisms would have the greatest impact for WP learners, including part-time learners?*

Key priorities include:

- Increased maintenance support
- Support for part-time learners
- Addressing hidden costs (transport, childcare, digital access)

*Would regional pooling of resources improve consistency and equity in financial support across institutions?*

**Yes**

*How can communication and awareness of available financial support be improved, particularly for under-represented and part-time learners?*

Communication and awareness can be improved through accessible communication and community-based outreach.

*What role should employers and philanthropic partners play in supporting WP learners?*

Employers and partners should contribute through financial support and paid placements.

*Are there additional actions or interventions that should be prioritised to ensure financial support reaches those most in need?*

**Yes**

Additional actions should include a comprehensive financial support strategy.

*Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that should be addressed to ensure financial support is effective, equitable, and sustainable?*

**Yes**

Gaps include:

- Lack of detail
- Insufficient focus on those with greatest need

### **Section 3.2: Enabling Systems and Structures**

*Do you agree with the proposal to develop a regional WP data plan with common definitions, indicators, and reporting formats?*

**Yes**

*Would a regional WP dashboard be a useful tool for monitoring progress and informing decision-making?*

**Yes**

*What additional data is needed to better understand and support the learner journey, particularly for underrepresented or priority groups?*

A regional dashboard would be valuable if it is publicly accessible and regularly updated. Additional data required:

- Learning disability-specific data
- Retention and progression outcomes

*How can data be used to support accountability and continuous improvement across the sector?*

Data must support accountability through public reporting and linking outcomes to funding.

*Would you support the introduction of annual WP impact reviews or peer learning mechanisms?*

**Yes**

*Are there any gaps in the proposed approach to enhancing data, accountability, and reporting that should be addressed?*

**Yes**

Gaps include:

- Lack of clear accountability mechanisms
- Limited use of data to drive change

### **Section 3.3: Enabling Systems and Structures**

*Do you agree with the proposal to formalise and expand the WP Forum as the central cross-sector body for oversight and implementation of WP policy and practice?*

**Yes**

*What are your views on the proposed WP Covenant or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)?*

ARC NI supports the proposal to introduce a WP Covenant or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) as a mechanism to strengthen shared commitment across the sector. However, for the Covenant/MoU to be effective, it must move beyond a statement of intent and operate as a meaningful accountability framework.

There is a risk that, without clear expectations and monitoring, a Covenant/MoU could become a high-level agreement with limited impact on practice.

*How can the WP Forum best support mutual accountability among members and ensure that effective practice is shared and adopted across the sector?*

The WP Forum can be a transformative mechanism for mutual accountability and sector-wide improvement if it combines structured reporting, peer learning, learner co-production, cross-sector collaboration, and alignment with funding and policy frameworks. Without these features, it risks being a nominal or consultative body with limited impact on widening participation outcomes.

*How can learner voice and employer engagement be meaningfully embedded in WP governance structures?*

Learner voice must be embedded through co-production and funded participation. Moreover, employer engagement should be structured and meaningful.

*Would a WP Data and Insights Hub be a valuable addition to support evidence-based decision-making and benchmarking?*

**Yes**

*What are your views on introducing an annual WP Impact Review process?*

An annual WP Impact Review process is strongly supported. An annual WP Impact Review has the potential to embed a culture of evidence-led practice, accountability, and shared learning across Northern Ireland's higher education sector. For maximum impact, it must be outcomes-focused, data-informed, co-produced with learners, publicly transparent, and linked to accountability and funding mechanisms. Without these features, the review risks being a procedural exercise with limited effect on widening participation.

*What support or capacity-building would be most helpful for WP practitioners and institutional leads to strengthen delivery and collaboration?*

ARC NI emphasises that WP initiatives cannot succeed without well-resourced and supported practitioners.

Key recommendations:

1. Training and professional development:
  - Inclusive practice, accessibility, and co-production methods.
  - Evidence-based intervention design and evaluation.
2. Structured networking and peer learning:
  - Facilitate sharing of effective practice and joint projects.
  - Encourage cross-institutional mentoring.
3. Adequate resourcing and recognition:
  - Dedicated staff time and funding to deliver WP initiatives sustainably.
  - Recognition of practitioner expertise in institutional planning and strategy.
4. Support for co-production:
  - Funding for learner engagement and Experts by Experience involvement.
  - Guidance on accessible engagement methods.

*How could funding mechanisms be better aligned with WP priorities to incentivise collaboration and reduce duplication?*

Funding mechanisms should align with WP priorities and incentivise collaboration. To be effective, funding mechanisms must move beyond supporting isolated activity and instead enable coordinated, accountable and collaborative approaches. Without this shift, there is a risk that widening participation efforts will remain fragmented, with limited impact for those most excluded from higher education.

*Are there any gaps in the proposed approach that should be addressed to ensure effective and consistent support for WP learners?*

**Yes**

Gaps include:

- Limited accountability
- Insufficient funding alignment
- Underdeveloped role of the community sector

**Conclusion**

ARC NI welcomes the ambition of this review. However, ambition must be matched with:

- Clear accountability
- Measurable impact
- Explicit recognition of people with a learning disability

Without this, widening participation will not deliver meaningful change for those most excluded.

We look forward to continued engagement to ensure that widening participation delivers a more inclusive and equitable higher education system.