

This plan applies 2020-21 to 2024-25

# ACCESS & PARTICIPATION PLAN

Scholars School System (SSS) is a registered charity (1153197) wholly committed to adding value to under-represented groups by engaging them in higher education opportunities.

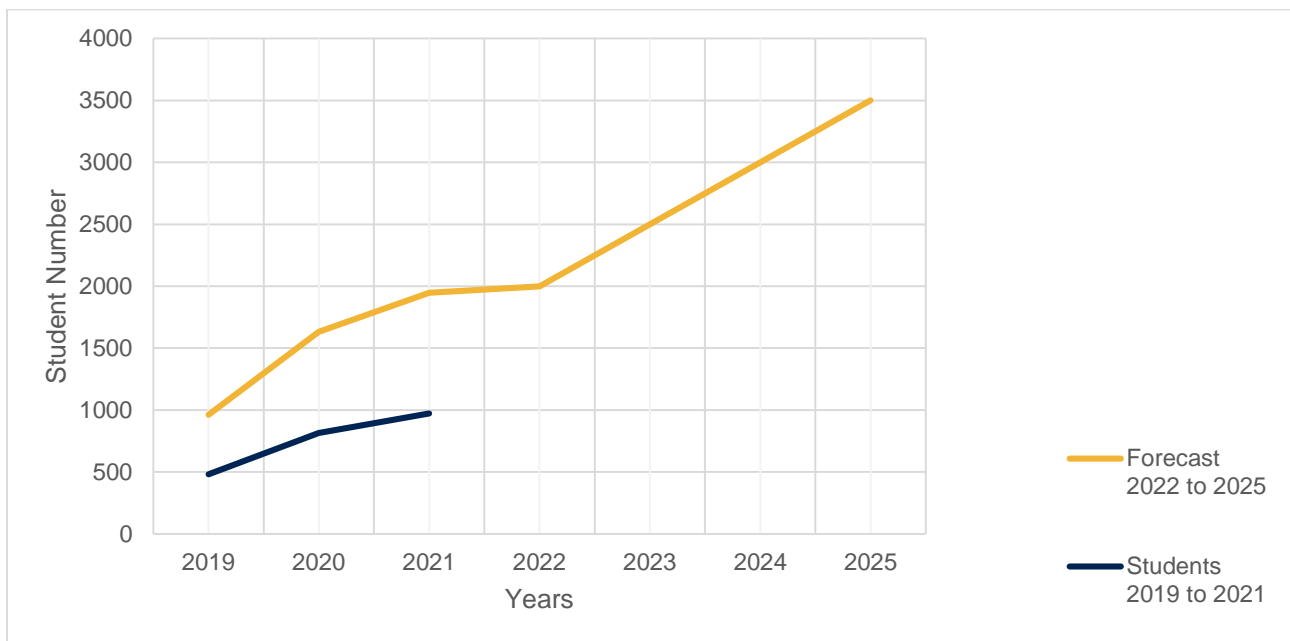


[scholarsschool.ac.uk/](https://scholarsschool.ac.uk/)



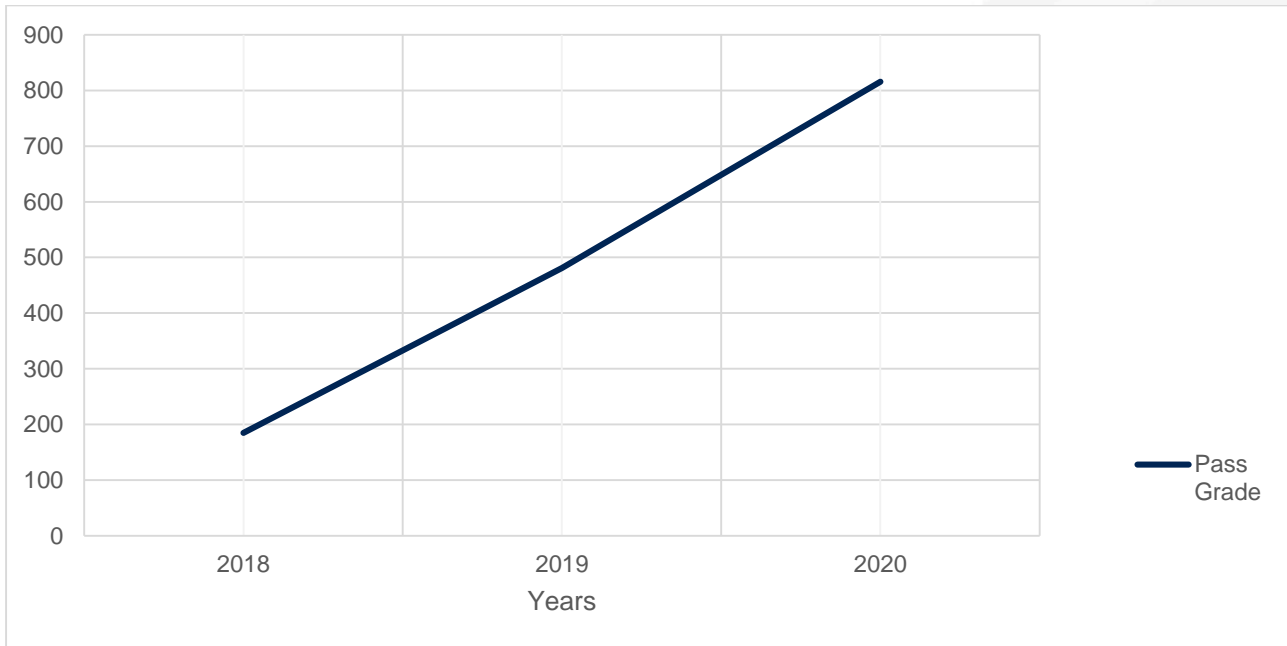
## 1. Assessment of performance

Scholars School System (SSS) is a registered charity (1153197) wholly committed to adding value to under-represented groups by engaging them in higher education opportunities. The primary aim of this document is to create a clear and effective access and participation plan, detailing how the College intends to develop over a five-year period. SSS does not see an attainment gap between under-represented groups and their peers, as these groups comprise the College in its entirety. There is no achievement gap, in this context, to close.

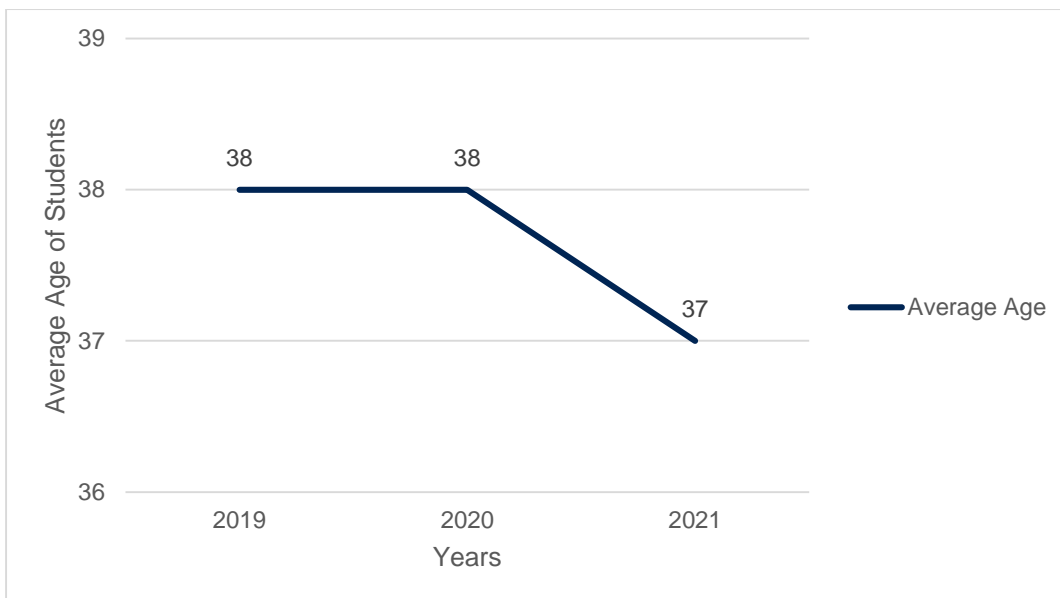


### Student numbers over last three year and projected numbers until 2024-25

Whilst the College has made significant progress in recruiting increasing numbers from socio-economically deprived groups, it remains concerned that the average age of its learners is significantly higher than the University (UK) average, and that the achievement level is grouped at the lower end of the scale.



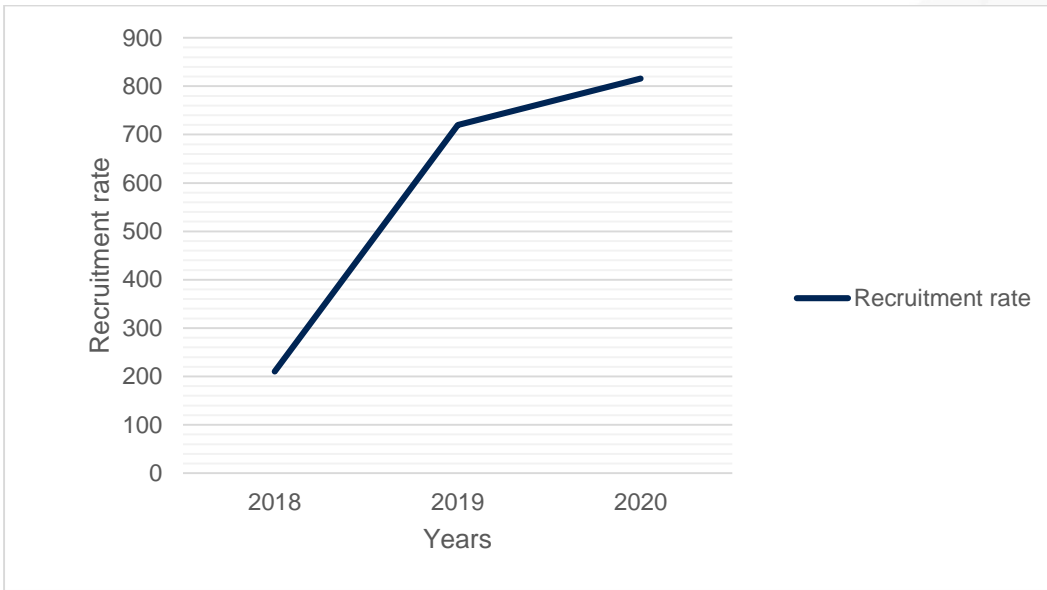
Graph showing student numbers over last three years in terms of end grade achieved.



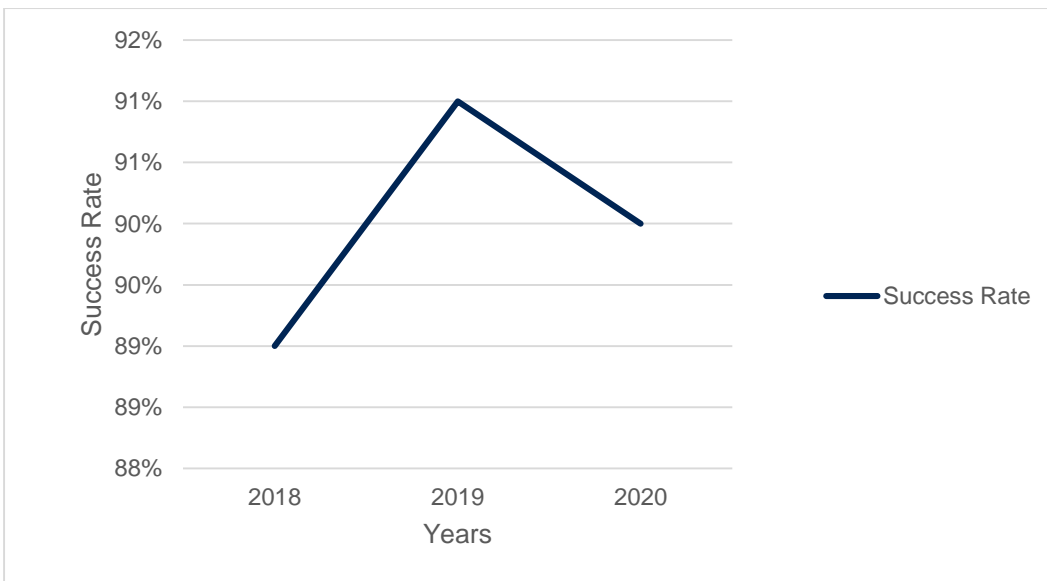
Graph showing average age of students over last three years.

The concern regarding the disparity in the level of achievement is shared with the two partner providers (Leeds Trinity University (LTU) and City of Bedfordshire College (CBC)) and is subject to action by the College. This action is focused on additional academic and non-academic support. It is noteworthy that although the degree of success amongst these groups is lower than the UK standard, the completion rates are higher than UK standards.

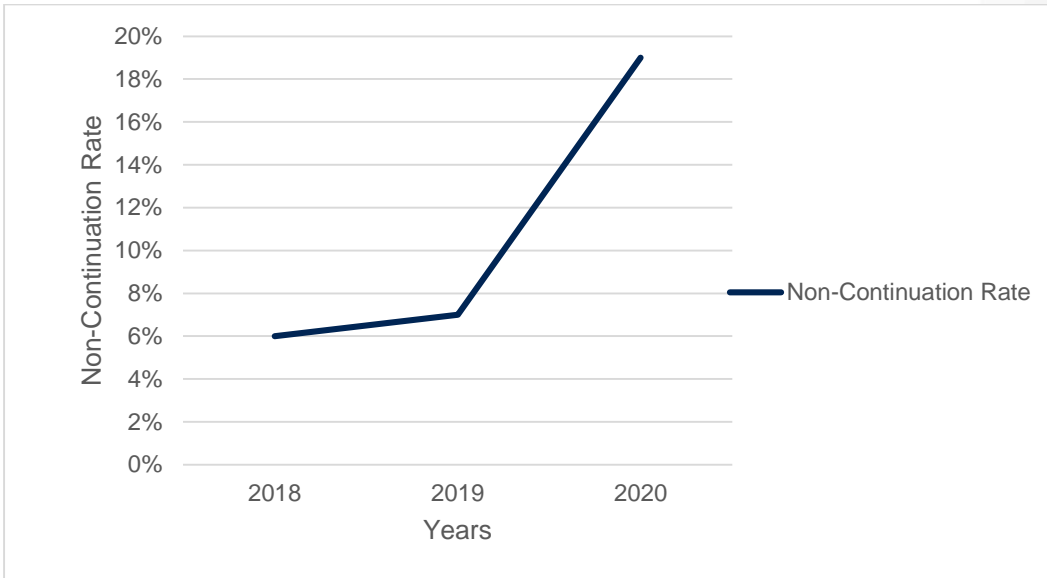
### 1.1 Higher education participation, household income, or socioeconomic status



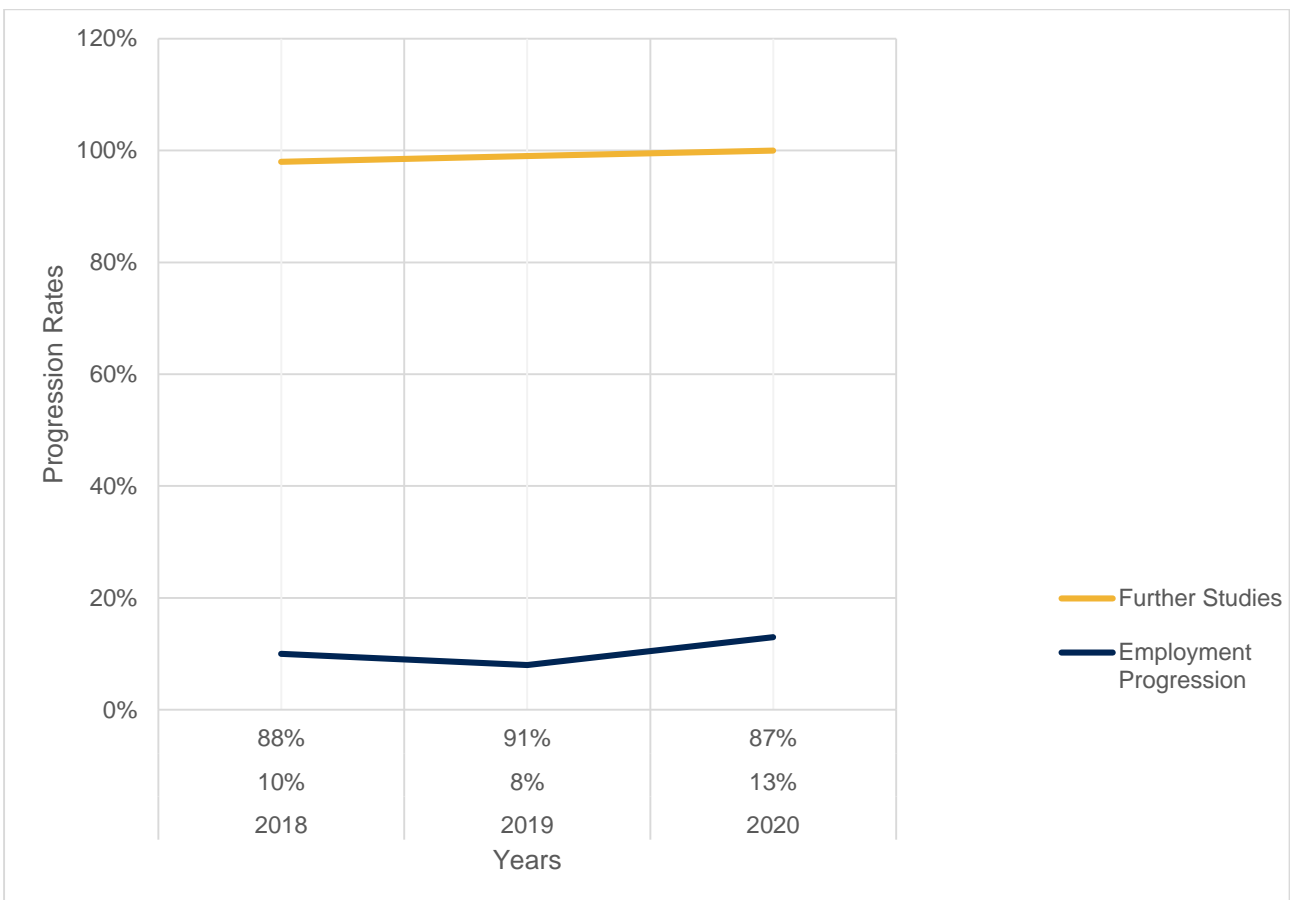
Graph showing recruitment on to HE courses each year last three years



Graph showing success rates for HE courses each year last three years



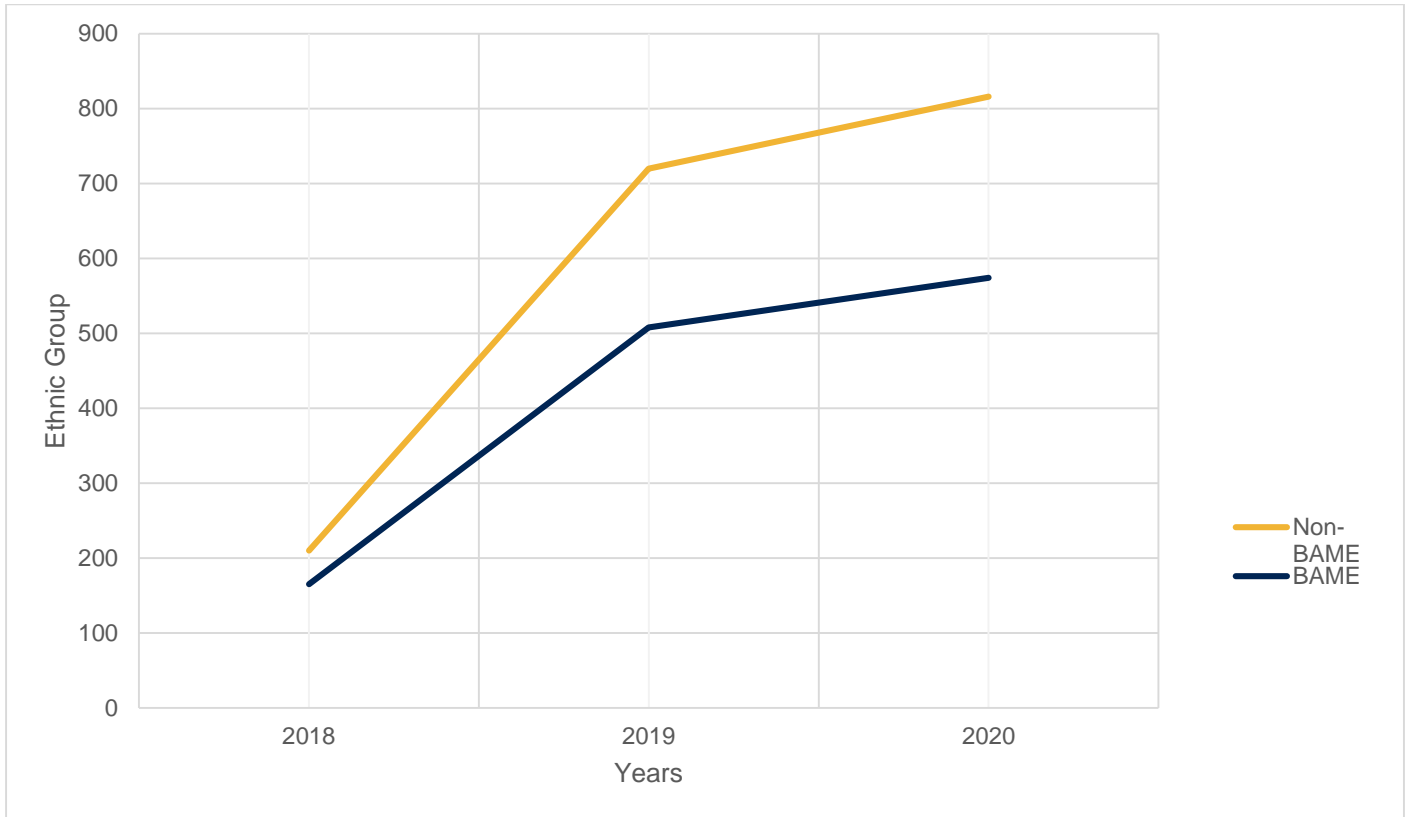
Graph showing non-continuation rates for HE courses each year last three years



The College has data showing progression to employment or further study?

## 1.2 Black, Asian and minority ethnic students

All our learners within one of these groups.



## 1.3 Mature students

If mature is 21 plus, they are all mature?

Scholars School System student populations is 100% 21 plus and they are classed as adult and mature students. This is confirmed by the average age of our students graphs which is in mid to higher thirties.

## 1.4 Disabled students

There are currently no disabled students.

## 1.5 Care leavers

We have no care leavers.

## **1.6 Intersections of disadvantage**

The nature of our recruitment is such that many of our learners are mature, have been outside formal education for an extended period, and are from ethnic minorities. SSS has a refined awareness of the needs of these groups, and the College mission is a desire to help them return to mainstream education and enjoy a high level of success. UCAS data suggests that BAME students have a lower proportion of applications resulting in offers. SSS seeks to remedy this by making BAME students a priority.

## **1.7 Other groups who experience barriers in higher education**

The only group that might fit in here are transgender learners. SSS is not aware currently of having any learners in this category, but appreciate that any that do attend may require additional support.

## Strategic aims and objectives

### 2.1 Target groups

SSS aims to cater for those who were unable to complete their formal education and now wish to do so to attain further skills. These may include people who are already working and wish to go back to education to improve their career prospects. SSS also caters for students who are having difficulties with secondary education and want additional academic support. They may also be people who have been driven away from education due to external or internal factors.

### 2.2 Aims and objectives

It is relevant here to again note that the mission of SSS is to provide **'Education for All'**. This involves 'Creating learning environments where every student can achieve their full potential'.

SSS believes that further and higher education is the most important milestone in building a strong foundation in transition from education to work. The College strives towards creating a stimulating learning environment for students that can help to cultivate good work habits and ethics and gives them focus and motivation in life to achieve their goals.

It would not be appropriate to identify a specific under-represented target group. The College's strategic aims and objectives embrace the entire local and national under-represented communities.

At SSS, there are ambitious goals for the future and a strong vision to lead the way in the region and the country. In terms of further education the vision is to be a leading College for progression and employability.

As the College higher education facilities continue to grow, SSS aims to be a leading provider of flexible, affordable and career-relevant university education.

**College values:** As an organisation, SSS shares a common set of values across the whole organisation. These help to define the College:

- Students and the College community are at the heart of the organisation
- SSS fosters excellence, innovation and creativity
- SSS celebrates diversity and inclusion and the removal of barriers to success
- SSS has high expectations of all staff, students and partners.

SSS argues that the College access and participation plan is a perfect fit with the strategic aims and objectives of the College. It would be inappropriate to see the access and participation plan as only one aspect of SSS. The Plan is the College. Access and wider participation is the principal objective of SSS. Given that all SSS learners fall within the remit of the Plan, they all share a common set of 'problems'. This makes the provision of effective and focused support – both academic and non-academic - a key attribute of the College.



The promotion of educational opportunities is a partnership between SSS and our two providers – LTU and CBC. Both institutions are instrumental in monitoring quality and ensuring parity of experience between SSS learners and those of the providers. Both LTU and CBC are supportive of SSS in its quest to bring opportunities to residents of an area with low higher education participation rates. Learners are predominantly mature black, Asian and minority ethnic in origin. The providers are supportive of SSS ambitions and are keen to identify and rectify any ‘equality gaps in relation to access, success and progression’. SSS is aware of the varying needs of different groups and is keen to ‘disaggregate black, Asian and minority ethnic students into individual groups’ so as to focus appropriate academic and non-academic support.

## 2. Strategic measures

SSS has developed an effective recruitment strategy, managed by a team of experienced staff who oversee both the recruitment and admissions process. The strategic vision of the College is to increase participation amongst under-represented groups. The success of the strategy, which embodies all that SSS embodies, is measured in terms of recruitment numbers and the completion rates of these learners. In order to maximise opportunities to join the College, SSS offers a number of entry point spread across the year.

| Numbers of learners over last three years including current year |      |      | Anticipated learner numbers |      |
|--|------|------|-----------------------------|------|
| 2019   | 2020 | 2021 | 2022                        | 2023 |
| 295  | 706  | 1830 | 5450                        | 5968 |

Completion rates are also monitored closely by the two partner institutions. SSS is mindful of the fact that whilst ‘assessment of performance shows fair access for students from under-represented groups’ continuation and attainment rates continue to be a focus as the number of learners achieving the highest grades is not as good as it could be. This is a focus for classroom activity and all aspects of learning and teaching, and is closely monitored by the two partner institutions. Raising attainment levels is thus an outcome-focused target for SSS, in collaboration with the two partner institutions. This focused strategic activity has been ‘identified by the provider to collectively secure continuous improvement in outcomes for students’ by improving the level of success and continuation amongst SSS learners. The College will work with LTU and CBC to set a series of collaborative targets against which the success of this strategy will be judged.

### 3.1 Whole provider strategic approach

#### Overview

The primary aim of the College is to work towards inclusivity across the College at all stages of the student lifecycle. Staff are recruited on the basis of their support for the College strategic vision of widening participation. This has manifested itself in a revised approach to learning and teaching, where an appreciation of learner background and needs is a guiding factor. This sits alongside 'student welfare and wellbeing strategies to enhance the effectiveness of delivery'. All staff are aware of how issues of mental ill health might manifest itself, not least in a context where Covid 19 has led to a switch to on-line teaching. The College has introduced a series of staff development sessions that focus on the area of mental health. Staff are monitored by a senior manager to ensure there is a high level of 'student engagement'. A return to face-to-face learning is handled with care and understanding as learners adapt to a new learning context. The ability of SSS to offer effective learning to these under-represented groups will only be effective when the ethos is shared by all staff and managers.

#### Alignment with other strategies

The primary aim of SSS as an institution is to increase access and participation amongst under-represented groups in Birmingham and Manchester. This is the primary strategy of the College. All policies are designed to fit with those of the two linked providers – LTU and CBC – whilst promoting learning opportunities locally and regionally. The success of the College in this context is detailed in the learner numbers on the previous page. In addition, as at 1 September 2021 there were 572 learners on Level 3 Foundation programmes.

#### Strategic measures

The curriculum is outside the control of SSS as it is provided by the partner institutions. There is a focus on Business Studies and, in other curriculum areas, a focus on Health and Social Care. The various qualifications are the Higher National Certificate, Higher National Diploma and the honours degree (Bachelor of Arts). The courses are adopted by SSS as appropriate to under-represented groups in the region and fully reflect the nationally approved structure. The delivery of the curriculum is governed by a set of overarching Policies that reflect the revised QAA Quality Code.

All policies are updated annually and are written to ensure SSS policies reflect those of the awarding institution.

Given the whole College focus on access and widening participation, a high level of student support – academic and non-academic – is critical if learners are to succeed. A department of

SSS is dedicated to the support of students as they embrace education, often after many years of absence. The overall focus of Higher National courses is to develop employability skills. This is more important and significant as a high number of learners study in order to develop a future business opportunity.

The College is a collaborative partner of both LTU and CBC. Both partners have a role in monitoring the quality of learning and the level of achievement amongst under-represented groups. As noted in Section 2 above a strategic aim of SSS is to improve the level of achievement, such that there are a greater number of Merit and Distinction grades.

### **3.2 Student consultation**

A primary aim of SSS is to protect and promote the learner voice. This process is undertaken in formal focus group sessions and at various points in the programme. The application form provides a first opportunity for the learner to indicate that they have a need – often not readily identifiable – that the College needs to address.

The induction programme provides the College with an opportunity to identify its processes and procedures that promote student participation. Student representatives are elected in all groups, and individually and collectively offer learners an opportunity to express their ideas and/or concerns. The nature of the student body has two significant characteristics that contribute to a successful feedback loop. Many learners are from a multi-cultural background, so the idea of equality is critically important. Secondly, many learners are 35+ years and have business experience. These two factors make for a student group that will readily express itself as the need arises. Student representatives participate in decision-making groups.

The College delivers programmes on behalf of two external validated bodies – LTU and CBC. The curriculum is thus beyond its immediate control. However, it does have control of the delivery and assessment of the various units. It does this mindful of both the academic and non-academic needs of the learners. A dedicated department is concerned with student welfare, with mental health of primary importance. The availability of this area of the College is promoted by lecturers and course leaders. Student focus groups test the level of awareness of the area and solicit suggestions from learners as to its effectiveness.

The College has some flexibility in framing assessment practice, and is keen to ensure no learner is disadvantaged as a result of special needs. A process of reasonable adjustment will ensure the assessment process is accessible to all learners. The College is totally committed to ‘using equality impact assessments where appropriate’.

### 3.3 Evaluation strategy

The primary aim of SSS is to widen participation and promote student well-being in maximising success. The College is a not-for-profit organisation focused on educational welfare. The majority of its learners (see above for statistical data) are first generation higher education participants, many of which are from an Asian background. The College provides higher education qualifications on a franchise basis from Leeds Trinity University (Health and Social Care) and City of Bedford College (Business Studies). As such the evaluation of the access and participation strategy is an effective evaluation of the College itself.

The College evaluation strategy follows the Office for Students evaluation strategy, notably to structure its evaluation under the following headings:

Strategic Context

Programme Design

Evaluation Design

Evaluation Implementation

Learning to Shape Improvements

Evaluation of Financial Support

#### Strategic Context

SSS has fostered a culture of evaluation (together with the collaborative partners) as assessment of the College's effectiveness in achieving the stated aim of widening access and promoting success. A major part of SSS activity in strengthening the evaluation strategy has been the establishment of a strong, multi-disciplinary, Advisory Board. This sits alongside the College membership of relevant Boards within the collaborative partners. Collectively, these activities ensure that SSS evaluates its activities, identifies issues, and undertakes any necessary improvements.

## Programme Design

The access and participation strategy involves making judgements about SSS activities to ensure they promote the aims of the College and actively reduce inequalities. The strategic plan is to use student data, in association with the collaborative partners, to undertake an assessment of performance. This data involves an analysis of formative and summative assessment outcomes to ensure uniformity of outcomes across modules/units. 'Rogue' modules/units can be identified and research undertaken to identify underlying issues. Focus groups at various points during the semester contribute to an understanding and evaluation of the success of the learner journey.

The design of the programme is determined by the collaborative partners. This includes the nature and sequencing of modules/units. The delivery of the modules/units is within the control of SSS, as is the design of the assessment strategy. Every effort is made to appreciate the needs of under-represented groups, ensuring changes are evidence based and proportionate and appropriate.

## Evaluation Design

This is an area that is under review. The College is developing an integrated evaluative strategy within which focus groups, staff feedback, data collection and evaluation are integrated. The College is working with its collaborative partners in developing and delivering a programme of staff development events. These focus on academic and non-academic aspects of learner support. There is a shared understanding with the collaborative partners in terms of what we are seeking to jointly achieve, with the primary current focus to raise the level of achievement above a Pass grade.

The developing collaborative plan will be submitted to the Advisory Board for consideration and review. A developed plan will be reviewed annually, not least in ensuring that data collected is robust and complete, and used effectively in enhancing College process and procedures.

## Evaluation Implementation

The College is fully aware that it must demonstrate which changes work well and 'learn from not working well'. As the College collects and analyses data, the progress of learners over the short, medium and long-term is tracked. This may involve the identification of a need for additional resources. If a need for specific resources is required, the need identified will be referred to senior management and to the Advisory Board. A system of ongoing evaluation is embedded within course design and 'sets out clearly what (we) aim to find out and what changes (we) want to measure'.

It is relevant at this point to reiterate that the aim of the College is, as a not-for-profit organisation, totally committed to increasing access and widening participation. Its first-generation higher education participants are its priority. The College takes pride in the level of achievement of its learners and tries to provide an excellent environment. The nature and scope of this environment is framed by learner feedback and kept under constant review.

## Learning to Shape Improvements

This area is seen as a strength of the College. As a relatively small higher education institution SSS prides itself on its evaluation strategy. It is informed by student feedback, focus groups, staff feedback and interaction with the partner providers. Staff share the vision and are trained to signpost a range of internal and external links to cover all concerns and eventualities. From September 2021 a detailed report will be produced reviewing progress and formulating a future plan. SSS will utilise the OfS self-evaluation tool on an annual basis.

The College will ensure that the evaluation process leads to ongoing reflection and evaluation. Where changes are made, they will be evaluated to ensure all changes are ultimately positive. Changes will be proportionate and appropriate to the size and structure of SSS. Data collection will be detailed and guided by the requirements of the two partners.

## 3.4 Monitoring progress against delivery of the plan

The College fully appreciates the need to continuously monitor how, and how well, it ensures its strategies are realised. In doing so, it appreciates the significant role played by its learners. Students make a significant personal investment in their future and at SSS are active members of the learning community. They are 'active partners' in developing and evaluating the SSS access and participation strategy.

The Advisory Board will monitor and review progress against SSS stated objectives. It will do this in collaboration with the two higher education providers, who both endorse the plans. The Board will undertake a detailed annual review of the College strategic objectives and how successful it has been in achieving them. The access and participation objectives reflect the overall objectives of the College, where its primary role is to increase higher education participation amongst under-represented groups, and provide for them the best possible educational experience. Progress is also monitored in staff one-to-one post observation interviews, and in student focus groups. The effectiveness of both activities is again subject to Advisory Board scrutiny.

The appointment and training of student representatives ensures that 'there are mechanisms in place to allow all students the opportunity to express 'views'. The age profile of learners, with many of them having previous industrial/commercial experience, ensures that they have the self-confidence to express their views. The College ensures, through its system of student representation, that they have the opportunity to do so. As mature learners, they do not expect to be passive recipients of knowledge, but rather to be active partners in creating, developing and monitoring the learning environment. The College promotes these attributes as part of a positive learning experience.

### **3. Provision of information to students**

The College provides a wide range of information on its website. This includes information on the fee structure and how to contact the College and/or apply to join the learning community. Fees are guided by the two partner providers and reflect national standards. The way information is presented, and guidance on next steps, is written so as to make access as easy as possible - to demystify the idea of higher education and to encourage participation.

In addition to the information provided on the website, potential learners are sent hard copies of information on course fees, course duration, and the range of subjects (modules/units) on offer. Further information is provided at induction, and is reinforced by a detailed Student Handbook. This contains information on various procedural aspects, including appeals and complaints. Details of all aspects of student support, academic and non-academic are also included. The Student Handbook also details expectations of the learner in terms of time, attendance and assessment, plus what the College will provide in terms of tuition and support. These key messages are reinforced by lecturers in the classroom.

Information is provided to learners via the Moodle, which is a constant source of guidance. All key dates are provided, with timely reminders given as appropriate. This has been increasingly important during the pandemic, when there has been no face-to-face teaching. As learners return to the College, notice boards and classroom announcements will have an enhanced role.

Student representative will again meet their peers and again become an important link between the College and its learners.

## 5. Appendix

The OfS will append the following items from the fees and targets and investment documents when the access and participation plan is published:

1. Targets (tables 2a, 2b and 2c in the targets and investment plan)
2. Investment summary (tables 4a and 4b in the targets and investment plan)
3. Fee summary (table 4a and 4b in the fee information document)



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