

Sub-Committee on Education, Skills and the Economy: Careers Advice, Information and Guidance Inquiry

A response from the Russell Group

January 2016

Summary

- Russell Group universities are committed to ensuring their doors are wide open to talented and able students from all backgrounds. However, currently too few students from disadvantaged backgrounds even apply to leading universities and many are not achieving the right grades in the right subjects when they are at school.
- Whilst significant progress has been made, it is still the case that nearly twice as many advantaged as disadvantaged bright students are taking the A-level subjects most often required for entry to Russell Group universities^{1 2}. It is clear more must be done to ensure every individual with aspirations towards studying at a competitive university is made aware of all aspects of the entrance requirements. Russell Group universities already make a significant contribution to tackling this issue, both collaboratively and as individual institutions.
- Russell Group universities create the optimum environment for students to develop a wide range of transferable skills which are highly valued by employers, and as a result our graduates are some of the most sought-after in the world. Our universities now go further than ever in ensuring students are as 'work-ready' as possible via a range of career-specific support initiatives.
- However, while universities can and do play an important role in supporting students, particularly those from less advantaged backgrounds, into higher education and then into the world of work, there is a limit to the impact our institutions can have. Our efforts to support progression into leading universities and beyond must be mirrored by work in schools. Without continued efforts to provide high quality information, advice and guidance to all pupils from an early stage, and to improve attainment and aspirations, the key barriers to widening participation at leading universities will persist.

1. Context

- 1.1 The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector.
- 1.2 This response builds on our written evidence to the Education Committee's inquiry into Careers Guidance for Young People in 2012³.

¹ Sutton Trust 'Subject to Background' (2015)

² The facilitating subjects are those A-level subjects more often required than others for entry to degree courses at Russell Group universities. They are maths, further maths, English literature, biology, chemistry, physics, geography, history and modern and classical languages.

³ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmeduc/632/632vw62.htm>

2. Recognising the key barriers to university access

- 2.1 Ensuring our doors are wide open to talented and able students from all backgrounds really matters to the Russell Group. Our universities work hard to widen participation to those from underrepresented groups so every student with the qualifications, potential and determination to succeed at a leading university has the opportunity to do so.
- 2.2 However, our universities face real difficulties in these efforts and it is important to recognise the root causes of under-representation of some groups at selective universities. The fundamental barrier to progression for disadvantaged students is poor attainment: the attainment gap starts early and widens to Key Stage 5, meaning universities have access to a limited pool of highly-qualified applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds. In 2010/11, for example, fewer than 8,500 students eligible for Free School Meals took three A-levels and only 546 achieved three or more A* or A grades⁴.
- 2.3 It is therefore essential to narrow the attainment gap if we are to make significant progress in increasing access to leading universities for disadvantaged groups. However, the key reason why too few students from disadvantaged backgrounds even apply to leading universities is that they are not achieving the right grades *in the right subjects*.
- 2.4 In June 2015, Ofsted reported schools in general now have a sound understanding of the subjects most commonly required or preferred by universities to get on to a range of degree courses⁵. Ofsted's finding is borne out by the fact that in 2015 the proportion of entries in facilitating subjects reached a peak of 51%, an increase of 6 percentage points since 2010⁶.
- 2.5 This suggests our advice on subject choice is filtering through; however, currently nearly twice as many advantaged as disadvantaged bright students are taking one or more facilitating subjects at A-level⁷. This suggests some students are still not getting the right advice and guidance on the subjects, or qualifications, to study – resulting in many good students not gaining the qualifications they need for their choice of course.
- 2.6 **Therefore, whilst a great deal of progress has been made, it is clear more must be done to ensure every individual with aspirations towards studying at a competitive university is made aware of all aspects of the entrance requirements.**
- 2.7 There are also a range of issues beyond subject choice and attainment which can limit progression to leading universities for underrepresented groups. For example, boys from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly less likely to pursue an academic route post-16 than their classmates⁸; and even with good grades in academic qualifications, state school students are much less likely to apply to top universities than those at independent schools⁹. Research, carried out by the Institute of Education and published by the IFS¹⁰, shows once a student has applied to university, very little other than prior attainment has an impact on the likely success of their application. It follows that a key priority must be to encourage applications from state school pupils – it is therefore concerning that a Sutton Trust report

⁴ A-level attainment of pupils eligible for free schools meals in 2010/11 (Parliamentary question, [116023] (9 July 2012))

⁵ Ofsted 'The most able students: an update on progress since June 2013' (2015)

⁶ Department for Education 'A level and other level 3 results in England, 2014/2015 (provisional)' (2015)

⁷ Sutton Trust 'Subject to Background' (2015)

⁸ Sutton Trust, 'Background to Success' (2015)

⁹ Anders, J. (2012) The Link between Household Income, University Applications and University Attendance. *Fiscal Studies*, 33: 185–210. doi: 10.1111/j.1475-5890.2012.00158.

¹⁰ As for footnote 9

found a high number of state-school teachers would rarely or never encourage their brightest pupils to apply to leading universities¹¹.

- 2.8 Degree subject choice also matters. Young people with less familiarity with or family history of higher education need help to understand the full range of subjects on offer at university. For example, on average, 35% of UK state school applications to the University of Oxford between 2012 and 2014 were for the five most oversubscribed subjects¹². State students also apply in disproportionately low numbers for the least oversubscribed subjects.
- 2.9 **We cannot offer places to those students who do not apply – therefore students need access to early advice which helps to foster ambition, raise aspirations and increase awareness of the opportunities available.**

3. Russell Group universities cannot solve these problems alone

- 3.1 Russell Group universities already make a significant contribution to tackling the issues outlined above. In order to level the playing field, we publish *Informed Choices*¹³ which is aimed at all students considering A-level and equivalent options and provides information about how subject choices at school can impact on university applications. It includes advice on the best subject combinations for a wide range of university courses and on the best choices for those who want to keep their options open.
- 3.2 Russell Group universities have also developed two collaborative activities with a particular focus on helping teachers understand how best to support their students in applying to leading universities:
- (a) Our universities work together to co-deliver biennial teacher conferences for teachers at schools in disadvantaged areas or with low rates of progression to higher education. The conferences cover a range of topics including subject choice, the application process and writing references and personal statements. These events are a practical way of providing comprehensive information about applying to Russell Group universities to those teachers most in need of support.
 - (b) The Russell Group universities have been successful in their bid for funding from HEFCE to develop teacher CPD to support the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach. The 'Advancing Access' project will provide CPD resources and activities via an online platform that will support teachers and advisors as they foster learner progression to selective universities. Teachers will also be able to access virtual teacher conferences so those who cannot attend events 'on the ground' can take part in live web chats.
- 3.3 Individual institutions also undertake a great deal of work in this area and many Russell Group universities deliver teacher CPD events so schools have access to the information they need to support pupils into higher education. For example the University of Cambridge runs the Cambridge Colleges' Regional Teachers' Roadshow - a series of informal information seminars for teachers hosted by schools and colleges across the country¹⁴.
- 3.4 Russell Group universities also work directly with pupils to improve their understanding of how to make a competitive application to a leading university. For example the STEM Potential programme at Imperial College London supports disadvantaged school students over the course of four years. Once in Year 12, participants receive support with their

¹¹ <http://www.suttontrust.com/research/nfer-teachers-poll-2012/>

¹² University of Oxford undergraduate admissions statistics - 2014 entry

¹³ <http://russellgroup.ac.uk/for-students/school-and-college-in-the-uk/subject-choices-at-school-and-college/>

¹⁴ <http://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/find-out-more/teachers/events/regional-teachers-roadshow>

university applications through general application information and workshops on personal statements and university interviews¹⁵.

- 3.5 The provision of support continues at undergraduate level and our members now go further than ever in ensuring students are as 'work-ready' as possible - for example through employability programmes¹⁶. Beyond career-specific preparation, our members also create the optimum environment for students to develop a broad range of transferable skills which are highly valued by employers.
- 3.6 Russell Group universities produce graduates who are entrepreneurial and creative; articulate and numerate; good at problem-solving and robust analysis; highly adaptable to new work environments and quick to learn new information and skills; and able to work independently and within a team. As a result, Russell Group graduates are among the most sought after in the world: seven of the top 30 universities in the world, as ranked by employers, are Russell Group universities¹⁷.
- 3.7 However, while universities can and do play an important role in supporting students, particularly those from less advantaged backgrounds, into higher education and then into the world of work, there is a limit to the impact which our institutions can have.**
- 3.8 Our efforts to support progression into leading universities and beyond must be mirrored by work in schools. Without continued efforts to provide high quality information, advice and guidance to all pupils from an early stage, and to improve attainment and aspirations, the key barriers to widening participation at leading universities will persist.**

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¹⁵ <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/be-inspired/student-recruitment-and-outreach/schools-and-colleges/students/on-campus-activities/stem-potential-programme/>

¹⁶ For example, the Warwick Skills Portfolio Award is given to students at the University of Warwick who complete a programme of seminars and activities to help them develop the skills most valued by employers: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/scs/skills/awards/wspa/>

¹⁷ QS World University Rankings 2015 – Employer reputation