

Supporting under-represented students to access and succeed in higher education

1. Summary

Russell Group universities are working hard to ensure all students have equal opportunities to access the benefits of higher education. We want all students to have the opportunity to realise their potential, regardless of their background. We believe passionately in the transformative power of higher education; a commitment to improving social mobility and social justice is deeply rooted in all our universities. Russell Group universities are:

- **Making steady progress in widening access to their institutions, with the number of disadvantaged and under-represented students at our universities increasing over time.**
- Engaged in an enormous range of activities designed to encourage successful applications from students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds: from mentoring, summer schools and campus visits, to sponsoring schools and providing CPD for teachers.
- Working closely with schools and colleges: our universities make a positive impact with thousands of schools across the UK every year, reaching hundreds of thousands of students.
- Closing gaps in continuation, attainment and progression by providing academic, pastoral and financial support for disadvantaged students to ease their transition to university, help them succeed in their studies and progress to work or further study.
- Evaluating the success of their activities to build a strong evidence base and design interventions which will be highly effective, for example, in supporting specific groups of students.

We recognise progress in widening access and supporting student success needs to continue and the rate of change needs to improve. The root causes of under-representation are complex, and ambitious, long-term efforts are needed across a range of agencies to address these issues effectively – with universities playing a key role alongside schools, employers, charities, local authorities and Government.

2. A commitment to widening access to our universities

Russell Group universities are engaged in a very wide range of activities designed to encourage successful applications from students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds. These activities are aimed at students of all ages, from primary school pupils through to mature learners.

- In 2019/20, the 20 Russell Group universities in England alone are investing £265 million in outreach activities, scholarships and bursaries aimed at the most disadvantaged – with additional investments being made across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

One of the basic problems we recognise is that too few young people from disadvantaged backgrounds apply to our universities. One reason for this is that they are not achieving the right grades in the right subjects at school. We know there is no quick fix for this, but engaging with schools is a critical part of our universities' work. Some Russell Group universities have set up free schools, while others are sponsoring academies - but sponsorship is just one of the ways our universities support schools and teachers.

To help raise attainment, Russell Group universities provide continuing professional development for teachers, mentoring, after-school homework clubs and revision sessions for students, and regularly hold talks and workshops in local schools and colleges. Many also run summer schools, subject taster sessions, and campus visits to inspire young people and their families to engage with academic subjects and familiarise them with life at university.

Collectively, Russell Group universities have an enormous reach through all these activities: our universities make a positive impact on thousands of schools across the UK every year, reaching hundreds of thousands of students.

Work with schools, colleges and students to widen access:

*The Top-Up programme at the **University of Glasgow** has been preparing pupils considering applying for HE since 1999. Participants receive 10 in-school sessions to help develop essential study skills, go on campus visits, and then complete a written assignment. Those who complete the programme successfully receive an adjusted offer from the University. Evaluation has shown that Top-Up students continue to HE in higher numbers (87.3%) than non-Top-Up students (85.5%) and on comparable terms with students from schools with higher progression to HE (i.e. those likely to be more advantaged - 88.1%).*

***Imperial College London** offers free mentors, tutors and classroom assistants to support science activities in London schools. Undergraduates deliver a wide range of support for primary school age pupils through to sixth-form students preparing to enter university. The Wohl Reach Out Lab and the Reaching Further Programme provide high quality science resources for schools, which have the potential to help transform science teaching in underperforming schools or those with low progression into HE. Overall, the College delivers some 4,000 participant days in practical science activities to pupils and teachers from disadvantaged schools every year.*

*The Manchester Access Programme (MAP) admitted its 10th cohort to the **University of Manchester** in 2016. MAP is the University's flagship widening access programme, supporting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Greater Manchester to progress to the University and other research-intensive universities. Students who enter via this route are given a differential offer (two grades lower than the standard offer) in recognition of the additional work they complete through the programme. To date over 1,600 MAP students have gone on to the University. Of MAP students, 74% are from households with incomes of less than £25k and their staying-on rate is higher than the University's average retention rate. Positive graduate destination outcomes are also higher for MAP students compared with the rest of the University's student population.*

*The "Bristol Scholars" programme run by the **University of Bristol** provides an alternative entry route to university for students with high potential who would otherwise be excluded. The scheme allows teachers to nominate students to receive a tailored offer from the university of up to four grades below the standard offer. 12% of the first cohort of Bristol Scholars are young carers and 65% live in POLAR Quintile 1 or 2 areas, the neighbourhoods least represented in higher education. Scholars who accept offers and progress to the university can access a dedicated Bristol Scholars Adviser, study skills support, a peer mentor and a guaranteed internship. Scholars from low income families will also receive a one-year tuition fee waiver and annual bursary of £3,750.*

Russell Group universities also participate in collaborative partnerships which pool resources, ensure good coverage for under-represented students, avoid duplication and share evidence and effective practice. The success of these collaborative activities is not measured exclusively by recruitment at any particular institution. Instead our members aim to improve progression of disadvantaged and under-represented groups across the board.

Collaborative initiatives across our universities and other partners:

We know that teachers play an absolutely vital role in encouraging and supporting their students to progress to leading universities. Our free online [Advancing Access](#) initiative provides teachers with comprehensive information and advice about our universities' admissions processes, helping them to support students with the potential to progress to a Russell Group university. All 24 Russell Group universities are working together through Advancing Access, which is targeted at schools and colleges with low progression to higher education. Of teachers who have used the resources, 93 per cent said their ability to help students write personal statements had been enhanced and that they felt better able to write academic references. In addition, 89 per cent said they felt better able to prepare students for interview. So far, the resources have reached over 2,000 teachers and careers advisers and those in Opportunity Areas are twice as likely to be using the resources as teachers in other parts of the country.

Alongside this, Russell Group universities also produce information, advice and guidance (IAG) aimed directly at school students. Our new interactive website, [Informed Choices](#), helps students as they think

about their post-16 subject choices. The new website provides personalised information for users helping them to understand the relationship between subject choice at school and opportunities in higher education. The website was [tested](#) with hundreds of year 10 pupils in a range of different schools to see how it might help to redress known imbalances in access to IAG on subject choice. We found that, while the overwhelming majority of pupils said they thought the Informed Choices website was useful, a higher proportion of those from comprehensive schools said explicitly that their confidence in choosing A-levels had improved (61%) compared to those from private schools (43%).

Several Russell Group universities¹ work with INTO University centres to drive attainment and support progression to university. The **University of Oxford** supports the 'Oxford South East' centre which provides 7-18 year olds with a combination of after-school academic support, university student mentors, specially-designed study weeks and workshops, and direct experience of university life. The centre has exceeded targets and has had a positive impact on progression to HE for learners who are eligible for free school meals. 77% of students reported they were more likely to go to university as a result of attending.

Russell Group universities have demonstrated progress in widening access to their institutions in recent years: the number of students from POLAR Quintile 1 areas attending Russell Group universities increased by 30% over the five years to 2017/18 and progress has also been made in closing the gap between those from Quintile 1 versus Quintile 5 areas. Over the same period, the number of students attending our universities from Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) Quintile 1 areas has increased by 53%². These figures are likely to significantly under-estimate the value of our universities' outreach work, however, as they do not capture the broader benefits in supporting students to apply and progress to higher education or training at other universities or colleges. These outcomes are difficult to track as administrative data sets at different stages of a students' journey do not yet match up.

Our universities recognise that under-represented students are not a homogenous group and have developed activities to support specific groups to progress to university and to succeed in their studies and future careers. Real progress has been made in improving access for students from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds: the number of UK BME students accepted to study at our universities has steadily increased in recent years (by 58% between 2013/14 and 2017/18). But we recognise that more needs to be done, and our universities are introducing initiatives aimed at specific under-represented groups, including black students and white working-class males.

Programmes addressing barriers for specific under-represented groups:

The 'Fast Trackers' project at the **University of Liverpool** began in 2009 and is a one year mentoring project designed to help 15 to 16-year-old students from a Somali and Yemeni background to get the most out of their final school year and maximise their results at GCSE. Participants receive fortnightly mentoring sessions on a one-to-one basis with trained undergraduate mentors from the University. A number of participants have gone on to study at Liverpool and other research-intensive universities and evaluations have shown that the programme has a positive impact on motivation and aspirations.

The **London School of Economics and Political Sciences (LSE)** has been running outreach programmes for a number of years that target learners from African-Caribbean backgrounds. The LSE Black Achievement Conference is a free one-day event for African-Caribbean students aged 14 to 17 and their families. A line-up of speakers from London's African-Caribbean community aims to inspire students to realise their potential and consider future options. LSE also runs a Promoting Potential Programme aimed at bright 12-year-old African-Caribbean boys from London state schools. Each spring term, 50 students take part in three days of social science workshops to give them a taste of HE.

The **King's College London** Disability Advisory Service hosts a two-day residential transition event for incoming students with long-term mental health conditions or who are on the autism spectrum. Participants are more likely to take up the Disabled Students' Allowance and are more likely to continue studying after the first year.

¹ Russell Group partners are: King's College London, and the Universities of Bristol, Exeter, Leeds, Liverpool, Nottingham, Oxford, Southampton and Warwick. Four Cambridge colleges and two Oxford college are also partners.

² To note, IMD is an area-based measure of deprivation, whereas POLAR is an area-based measure of participation in higher education. IMD Quintile 1 relates to the areas with the highest deprivation whilst POLAR Quintile 1 relates to the areas least represented in HE.

3. Supporting disadvantaged students to achieve successful outcomes and progression

Our universities work hard to make sure a combination of academic, pastoral and financial support helps disadvantaged students to flourish once at university. We want the most talented and able students to apply to our universities, but we also want them to succeed in their studies. We recognise that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can face particular challenges and pressures through their transition from school to university and in progressing to employment and further study.

Many Russell Group universities provide additional support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds while at university, through mentoring and support for employability or further study. Initial research has shown that students who hold bursaries are less likely to drop out and more likely to achieve a good degree than those without a bursary.³

Support for disadvantaged students at our universities:

Six Russell Group universities⁴ have partnered with upReach, an organisation which improves access to professional employment for undergraduates from less-privileged backgrounds. Participants are offered application support, employability workshops and employer events to help build their knowledge, soft skills, networks and work experience. UpReach estimates that since it was founded, participating undergraduates have been five times more likely to secure a job with a partner employer than an average applicant and have secured starting salaries £3,500 more than the average graduate.

The University of Newcastle's PARTNERS programme supports disadvantaged students to gain work experience and develop social capital by providing Careers Insights bursaries to support their work experience and career development. The programme also offers a range of bespoke events. This has led to a 17.4% percentage increase in participating students progressing to highly skilled jobs.

At the University of Leeds, disadvantaged students are offered a range of scholarships and financial support. The package is evaluated annually to ensure that it is having a positive impact on recruitment and retention. The most recent evaluation found that the 78% of those aware of the support before enrolling said this was an important factor in their decision to study at Leeds. The lower the household income the more likely students were to rate this aspect 'very important' when considering their decision.

We know this combination of support is effective: our continuation rates show that students from the areas least represented in higher education (POLAR Q1) are as likely to continue at Russell Group universities as those from the most represented areas (Q5) studying elsewhere. In addition, Russell Group graduates from Q1 areas are now more likely to progress to highly skilled employment or higher-level study than their peers from the most represented (Q5) areas.⁵

4. Enhancing graduates' life chances

The additional earning potential associated with a Russell Group degree means that studying at our universities considerably enhances our graduates' life chances. Beyond university, over the course of their working lives and after deducting the costs of studying, Russell Group graduates on average go on to earn an additional £177,000 after completing a full-time undergraduate degree compared to someone whose highest qualifications are A-levels or equivalent.⁶

Research by the IFS has also found the graduate "earnings premium" associated with attending a Russell Group university is maintained when student characteristics including socio-economic background and prior attainment at school are taken into account.⁷

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³ Evidence from the LSE Centre for Economic Performance

⁴ The Russell Group partner institutions are: King's College London, Cardiff University, and the Universities of Exeter, Liverpool, Southampton and Warwick.

⁵ Office for Students Access and Participation dataset (2019)

⁶ www.russellgroup.ac.uk/media/5608/the-economic-impact-of-russell-group-universities.pdf

⁷ "The relative labour market returns to different degrees", IFS (June 2018)