

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

Russell Group universities are working hard to ensure all students have an opportunity to access the benefits of an excellent higher education in the UK, and then succeed in their studies and beyond. We know higher education can be truly transformative, so we want students to be able to realise their potential regardless of their background or other circumstances. A commitment to improving social mobility is deeply rooted in all our universities, but we can't do this alone: a collaborative approach across the sector, and a more joined-up strategy from Government departments and agencies to tackle disadvantage earlier in the educational lifecycle, is essential for real progress to be made.

1. Summary

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.

However, we recognise the rate of progress in widening access and supporting student success needs to improve even more. As part of their new 5-year access and participation plans, our universities have set ambitious targets to reduce, or even eradicate, gaps in access, non-continuation, and degree attainment.

The right regulatory incentives are needed to facilitate universities' efforts including work with younger learners and through long-term and collaborative partnerships to address barriers to university access early on. To achieve transformational change in the life chances of people from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds, joined-up working is needed bringing together universities, schools, colleges, local authorities, employers and relevant government departments and agencies.

2. Context

The additional earning potential associated with a Russell Group degree means that studying at our universities considerably enhances our graduates' life chances:

- Russell Group graduates from the most under-represented local areas are now more likely to progress to highly skilled employment or higher-level study than their peers from the most highly represented areas.
- 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.¹

- 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.²

All students, regardless of social background, ethnicity, geographical location or disability, should have equal opportunities to access these benefits. For our economy and society to thrive in future, we need to draw on all the talent available to the UK – not just talented people from more affluent backgrounds.

Russell Group universities have demonstrated progress in widening access to their institutions in recent years and supporting disadvantaged students to thrive on campus:³

- The number of students from the most under-represented local areas (those in POLAR Quintile 1) 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 (the most highly represented areas).
- The number of UK students from Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds accepted to study at our universities has steadily increased in recent years (by 58% between 2013/14 and 2017/18). BAME students made up 21.1% of all placed 18-year old applicants to Russell Group universities in 2017 – a greater proportion than in the general young population across the UK.
- Our continuation rates show that students from the areas least represented in higher education (POLAR Quintile 1) are as likely to continue their studies past the first year at Russell Group universities as those from the most represented areas (Quintile 5) studying elsewhere.

Despite this progress, gaps by social and geographical background and ethnicity persist in access to university, especially for selective institutions, and there are sector-wide gaps in student success.⁴ One of the key reasons for this is that disadvantaged pupils tend to achieve lower grades at school than their more advantaged peers and are less likely to pursue academic qualifications post-16. Lack of knowledge about higher education and a lack of practical support in decision-making can also impact negatively on the confidence of under-represented students and undermine their expectations that they can fulfil their ambitions. These barriers are compounded where young people live at a distance from a university campus, in areas with poor transport links, and where subject choice at their schools or colleges is limited.

Following new guidance from the Office for Students in 2019, English universities agreed new plans to boost access and support successful participation for disadvantaged and under-represented students over a five-year period. Russell Group universities’ plans represent a gear shift in terms of the ambition of their objectives, the scale of their activities and the rigour of their approach.⁵ The plans include:

- Ambitious targets to reduce the gap in access to university for under-represented students. For example, the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford have set targets to halve the gap in their intake between the most and least represented students by 2024-25.
- Plans to reduce significantly, or even eradicate, gaps in attainment by ethnic background. For example, the University of Warwick is aiming to eliminate entirely the gap in degree attainment between Black and White students by 2024/25.
- Targeted support to improve access, continuation, attainment and/or progression for disabled and mature students, care leavers, students from military families, and many other specific groups.

¹ www.russellgroup.ac.uk/media/5608/the-economic-impact-of-russell-group-universities.pdf

² “The relative labour market returns to different degrees”, IFS (June 2018)

³ Sources: Office for Students access and participation dataset, Higher Education Statistics Agency Student Record data, ONS census data for England and Wales.

⁴ For example, young people from neighbourhoods which are already highly represented at university are still five times more likely to get a place at a higher tariff institution.

⁵ The plans are available here: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/access-and-participation-plans/>

3. How are Russell Group universities supporting under-represented students?

Collectively, Russell Group universities have an enormous reach: our universities make a positive impact on thousands of schools across the UK every year, reaching hundreds of thousands of students. To help raise attainment, our universities provide continuing professional development for teachers, mentoring, after-school homework clubs and revision sessions for students. 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.

Working with schools and colleges across the country:

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, which have the potential to help transform science teaching in underperforming schools or those with low progression into HE. Overall, Imperial delivers some 4,000 participant days in practical science activities to pupils and teachers from disadvantaged schools every year.

Queen Mary University of London is involved in several innovative partnerships with state schools in East London, helping to improve standards of education and inspiring young people to fulfil their potential. The University co-sponsors the Drapers' Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) in the London Borough of Havering and supports the MAT's specialisms in mathematics and science through close contact with academic departments and help with curriculum development as well as providing a range of progression activities from Year 7 upwards. Queen Mary is also a partner in the St Paul's Way Trust School in Tower Hamlets along with King's College London, the Institute of Education (at University College London) and the University of Warwick. St Paul's Way Trust School has noticeably improved its GCSE results in recent years, and currently holds an 'Outstanding' Ofsted rating.

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. Success is not measured exclusively by recruitment at any particular institution, instead they aim to improve progression of disadvantaged and under-represented groups across the board.

Collaborative initiatives across our universities and other partners:

The 24 Russell Group universities are supporting teachers in schools with low progression to university through the [Advancing Access](#) online programme. Information and advice about how to support students to progress to a competitive university or course was developed in partnership with teachers and advisers in target schools. There are currently over 2,000 teachers and advisers registered on the platform, and those in Opportunity Areas – areas the Government has identified as facing the biggest challenges to social mobility – are twice as likely to be using the resources as teachers in other parts of the country.

Newcastle University is focused on supporting attainment-raising and improved progression into higher education in schools and colleges in the North East, the region in which young people are least likely to access higher education. For example, Newcastle is the lead institution in the North East Raising Aspiration Partnership (NERAP) a collaboration of the five universities in the region (Durham, Newcastle, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside) working on a variety of projects specifically to target hard-to-reach under-represented groups such as young carers, looked after young people and BAME students.

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. To tackle some of the most pressing challenges, our universities are introducing initiatives aimed at specific under-represented groups, including care leavers, black students and white working-class males.

Programmes addressing barriers for specific under-represented groups:

The University of Nottingham provides wrap-around support for care leavers to attempt to mitigate the challenges they face in accessing higher education. This includes extensive pre-entry support, contextual offers, transition support such as practical help with moving to university as well as 365-day university

accommodation. As a result, the number of 'care experienced' students at Nottingham has greatly increased and 'care experienced' students at the University are more likely to continue their studies than the average UK student.

Queen's University Belfast uses sport to foster early engagement with male pupils, primarily from white working-class backgrounds, in years 8 to 10. The University has so far worked with a total of 110 young males from non-selective secondary schools across Northern Ireland and participants are identified based on a range of factors including having a low household income, care experience or a disability, and/or parents who have not attended university.

Our universities work hard to make sure a combination of academic, pastoral and financial support helps disadvantaged students to flourish once at university. 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. Russell Group universities provide additional support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds while at university, through mentoring and support for employability or further study as well as providing bursaries. 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.⁶

Support for disadvantaged students on-campus:

Five Russell Group universities⁷ 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. 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 Plus Programme at the University of Leeds provides students from under-represented backgrounds with transitional and ongoing support once they enter the University to boost retention, student success and graduate outcomes. In 2017/18, the Plus Programme supported 3,000 students across all levels of their degrees. Plus Programme participants are less likely to drop out and more likely to achieve a first-class or 2:1 degree than other students from deprived backgrounds at the University.

4. How can regulation and national strategy support these efforts?

The Office for Students (OfS) in England regulates universities' access and participation efforts and has a key role to play in supporting institutions to continue making progress in diversifying their campuses. The greater focus on evidence and evaluation from the OfS and the move to enable institutions to set longer-term strategies have been instrumental in enabling universities to develop bold and ambitious outcomes-based access and participation plans for the next five years.

However, some aspects of the regulatory framework for access and participation are likely to produce unintended consequences and could actually hamper institutions' efforts. The OfS should make sure the right regulatory incentives are in place, including to ensure universities are able to continue working with younger learners and through long-term and collaborative partnerships to address barriers to university access early on. It is this kind of work which is crucial to widening the pool of applicants from under-represented backgrounds.

But universities' efforts alone are not enough. To achieve transformational change in the life chances of people from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds, joined-up working is needed bringing together universities, schools, colleges, local authorities, employers and relevant government departments and agencies. A new national strategy to tackle inequality across the educational lifecycle and beyond could underpin this approach and help level up opportunity for everyone across the country.

For more information contact:

Cat Turhan, Policy Analyst - 0203 816 1308 cat.turhan@russellgroup.ac.uk

⁶ Evidence from the LSE Centre for Economic Performance

⁷ The Universities of Exeter, Liverpool, Southampton and Warwick and King's College London