

The House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry into Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children

Evidence from the Russell Group of Universities

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Russell Group is pleased to be able to submit evidence to the Education Committee on this important issue.
- 1.2 There is limited evidence on the characteristics of the white working class, and of their underachievement in education, especially higher education. Within the university sector both policy makers and institutions have tended to focus on participation and achievement by students from lower socio-economic groups, and black and minority ethnic students. There is therefore little data available to enable universities to understand the particular challenges faced by white working class students in education and in progressing to a highly selective university such as those in the Russell Group.
- 1.3 However, there is a substantial body of evidence which explains the factors which result in a close correlation between socio-economic background and educational achievement. Research shows that children growing up in poorer families leave school with substantially lower levels of educational attainment; aspirations, attitudes and the behaviour of parents and children potentially play an important part in explaining why poor children typically do worse at school.¹ Complex socio-economic factors drive the underachievement of poorer pupils, but it is also clear that schools and teachers have a role to play in ensuring that the students achieve their full potential.
- 1.4 Universities help schools raise levels of attainment in numerous ways. For example, they are involved in teacher training and in educating graduates who enter the teaching profession. Universities carry out aspiration-raising work amongst pupils from low-income families attending non-selective state schools. Russell Group universities also do a large amount of work to assist schools with educational improvement, engaging with a wide variety of their local schools and academies. Many of these activities will benefit white working class pupils amongst others.

2. Raising Standards in Teaching and Learning

- 2.1 Most previous studies have focused on reasons why working class children are underachieving but there has been relatively little research on the positive experiences of white working class pupils in British schools.² However, in recent years the need for

¹ *The importance of attitudes and behaviour for poorer children's educational attainment* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010)

² Demie, F (2008). *Language Diversity in Lambeth Schools*, Research and Statistics Unit, London Borough of Lambeth, RS141/08, September.

detailed case studies of successful schools in raising achievement has become apparent as a means of increasing our understanding of the ways in which schools can enhance pupils' academic achievement.³

- 2.2 Quality of teaching is one of the most reliable international indicators of a thriving and successful education sector.⁴ A lack of high quality teachers can, in many circumstances, exacerbate existing social, economic and family reasons why a young person might not succeed in life. It is important to ensure the quality of teaching is carefully monitored and developed. According to Ofsted some 11 to 16 schools are insufficiently focused on university entrance; these schools do not provide students with sufficiently detailed advice and guidance on all the post-16 options available to them,⁵ which can hinder pupil progression to university.
- 2.3 The failure of our brightest students to achieve their full potential at GCSE level is likely to have an impact on their subsequent achievement at A-level and entry to university.⁶ The highest grades at GCSE are often a predictor of the highest grades at A-level.
- 2.4 Evidence from abroad reinforces the point about the quality of teaching having an impact on educational performance of the disadvantaged. Studies have shown that focusing on teacher quality can be a main driver to improving individual student learning. For example, research based on data collected in Tennessee showed that if two average eight year old students were given different teachers . one a high performing teacher, the other a low performing teacher . the performance diverged by fifty per cent over three years.⁷ To compare, other evidence shows that reducing class sizes from 23 to 15 students improves the performance by eight per cent at best.⁸
- 2.5 Russell Group institutions have a good reputation for training teachers and deliver Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) qualifications. For example, The University of Sheffield has provided courses in ITT for over 50 years. Their PGCE course prepares students to teach across the 11-18 age range in: English, Geography, Mathematics, Modern Languages and the Sciences. Their School of Education has a strong national and international research profile.⁹ The University of Southampton offers an excellent programme for ITT at its Education School. In May 2012, Ofsted judged all areas of ITT provision at the University of Southampton to be either ~~outstanding~~ or ~~good~~. Southampton Education School continues to build on these strong foundations going forward as it adapts to changes in teacher training nationally.¹⁰ The University of Cambridge's Education Department is ranked as the pre-eminent provider of ITT in the

³ *Raising the achievement of white working class pupils* (Research and Statistics Unit, Lambeth Children and Young People's Service, 2010)

⁴ Barber, M. and Mourshed, M. (2007) *How the World's Best Performing School Systems Came Out On Top*, McKinsey and Company

⁵ *The most able students*, Ofsted (June 2013), p. 30

⁶ *Ibid.* p.14

⁷ Sanders and Rivers, *Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement*, (1996)

⁸ *Does Class Size Matter*, Scientific American, (2001)

⁹ <http://www.shef.ac.uk/education/courses/pgce/corepgce/pgcecore>

¹⁰ <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/education/postgraduate/index.page>

country¹¹ offering PGCE courses to graduates wishing to train to teach in primary or secondary schools.¹²

- 2.6 Teach First is an initiative which aims to advance good teaching, leading to better outcomes for pupils from deprived communities. The scheme enables well-qualified graduates to move into teaching in challenging low-income neighbourhoods and has been a help in the recruitment of high quality teachers during the last decade.¹³ 6% of all Russell Group undergraduate finalists applied to this programme in 2012 and the scheme is now the UK's third largest graduate recruiter.¹⁴ Prioritising schools that have high levels of deprivation is one way in which Teach First aims to improve the aspirations and life chances of those who may be otherwise marginalised by low attainment.
- 2.7 As well as training teachers and working with Teach First, Russell Group institutions work in other ways to raise standards and achievement in academies, schools and colleges. Russell Group universities have helped establish a number of successful free schools and academies in collaboration with other organisations. The University of Liverpool co-sponsors three academies and is involved in a University Technical College (UTC) partnership. University College London is the sole sponsor of the UCL Academy which opened in Camden in 2012 with 180 students in Year 7 and 125 students in Year 12 in its first year. The University of Birmingham has recently announced the establishment of a new free school after negotiations with the Department for Education.¹⁵ The new school will open in a new building 2015, with a focus on academic subjects to prepare pupils for selective universities and a centre for teacher training with close links to the university's School of Education.
- 2.8 Ofsted say that governance and leadership also play a strong role in raising standards in schools. Good leadership also raises standards in the classroom . wherever success is found, good leadership is behind it.¹⁶ The University of Bristol have sponsored the Merchants Academy in south Bristol since it was opened in September 2008. The Academy serves one of the more deprived areas of south Bristol, focusing on raising standards and expectations among both pupils and parents and aiming to develop young people who are prepared to play an active and responsible role in society.¹⁷
- 2.9 Queen Mary, University of London, co-sponsors the Drapers Academy, a specialist mathematics and science academy in the London Borough of Havering. The Academy is part of an educational initiative to regenerate Harold Hill in Havering, an area that has experienced high levels of unemployment and poor progression to further and higher education. The co-sponsor of the school is the Drapers Company, a City Livery Company that has long-standing links with Queen Mary.¹⁸ Queen Mary is also a leading partner in collaboration with King's College, London and other HE, NHS, local authority and private sector groups in St Paul's Way Trust School in Tower Hamlets. The school has a science and visual arts specialism and has been listed amongst the 12 most improved schools in the UK since it reopened in a new

¹¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/education/table/2013/jun/04/university-guide-education> and

http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/University_Guide/

¹² <http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/courses/pgce/index.html>

¹³ *Requires Improvement*, Centre for Social Justice Report, (September 2013), p. 103

¹⁴ Hill R. *Teach First: Ten Years of Impact*, London: Teach First, 2012

¹⁵ See announcement at: <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/community/university-school/index.aspx>

¹⁶ *The Annual Report of HM Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2011/12*, Ofsted, 2012, p. 9

¹⁷ <http://merchantsacademy.org/index.php/home/welcome-from-the-principal/>

¹⁸ <http://www.qmul.ac.uk/about/community/schoolpartnerships/index.html>

£40million building in 2011.¹⁹ Queen Mary is also a co-sponsor of the Bridge Academy in Hackney. Much of the work that the university undertakes with the Academy is orientated towards supporting students and making sure that they have access to a full range of information in order to make an informed choice about life after school. Support is offered to those who want to apply to university, including advice on A-levels and further qualifications.²⁰

3. Outreach Work Undertaken by Russell Group Universities

- 3.1 Russell Group universities take their civic responsibility for the place in which they are situated very seriously and undertake a great deal of outreach and community-building work. Our member institutions care passionately about the area in which their campus is located. For example, the University of Leeds has at the heart of its strategy a commitment to maintaining and developing the good relations it has established with its neighbouring communities.²¹ This strategy includes a commitment to volunteering in local schools and endeavouring to improve the educational attainment levels of children in these deprived areas.
- 3.2 Russell Group universities invest a considerable amount of resource in activities that are designed to challenge those in underperforming schools to aspire to a university education. At the University of Leeds this includes information on a variety of topics including the university application process, the benefits of university, and a guide to financing.²² At the University of Manchester, an emphasis is placed on encouraging local school children to start thinking about applying to university. The University of Manchester Gateways Programme provides Year 7-Year 11 learners within Greater Manchester the opportunity to take part in a coherent series of higher education awareness and subject-specific activities. The programme is targeted at talented learners from the local region who have the ability to progress into higher education and are from backgrounds that are currently under-represented.²³
- 3.3 It is not uncommon for Russell Group universities to collaborate on projects relating to improving participation in higher education amongst deprived communities. The Universities of Liverpool and Manchester co-operate on widening access initiatives, as both institutions recognise the mutual benefits of encouraging an interest in higher education in the North West region. The programme aims to target particular schools in the North West to ensure that first class information and advice is available, specifically in relation to applying to Russell Group or research-intensive universities.²⁴ At the University of Edinburgh the Pathways to the Professions scheme has been set up to encourage progression by students from under-represented groups into professional courses in Law, Medicine, Veterinary Medicine and Architecture.²⁵ A strand of this scheme Pathways to Law has been extended to five other Russell Group institutions across the country - the University of Leeds, the London School of Economics & Political Science, University of Manchester, University of Southampton and University of Warwick.

¹⁹ <http://www.stpauls-way.com/st-pauls-way-trust-school/>

²⁰ <http://www.bridgeacademy.hackney.sch.uk/Partnerships>

²¹ *Inner North-West Community Strategy 2007-2012*, University of Leeds, p. 9

²² <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/ace/access/talks.htm>

²³ <http://www.gateways.manchester.ac.uk/programme/>

²⁴ http://www.liv.ac.uk/educational-opportunities/Liverpool_and_Manchester_Collaboration/index.htm

²⁵ <http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/student-recruitment/widening-participation/projects/pathways-professions/about/background-information>

- 3.4 There is a high level of spending on widening participation by all Russell Group institutions. For example, the University of Birmingham intends to spend up to 29% of the money it receives from its additional fee income on an enhanced range of access and outreach activities during 2013/14.²⁶ In 2014/15, The University of Bristol will invest 31.3% of its additional fee income in additional access measures, to include: financial support for students from low income backgrounds and a comprehensive programme of activities to support outreach and retention of students from under-represented groups.²⁷ The University of Exeter intends to allocate 31% of all additional fee income over £6,000 (gross) for Home/EU undergraduates who commenced their studies in 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15. This totals approximately £9.8 million.²⁸ This spending by Russell Group universities is part of the overall contributions of member institutions to ensure that, through their access agreements with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), they are assisting with the effort to increase the proportion of pupils from disadvantaged entering Russell Group institutions.
- 3.5 In London Russell Group universities have a range of different approaches designed to engage with students from disadvantaged backgrounds. University College London has a bespoke range of activities targeting those who are in school from Year 7 onwards, helping them to focus on a possible future in higher education. This activity is complemented by a series of master classes and summer schools aimed at Year 12 and 13 students, helping them attune their skills and aptitudes to prepare for higher education. King's College, London, also seeks to attract the best of London's students.²⁹ Targeting the brightest students in deprived and disadvantaged neighbourhoods is a priority for King's College, and to this end they have established a long standing collaboration with the Harris Federation of South London schools. The partnership works across different age groups in schools throughout the federation with the objective of increasing the number of pupils who will eventually apply successfully to King's College.³⁰
- 3.6 The University of Nottingham is a co-sponsor of the Nottingham University Samworth Academy (NUSA), an academy that replaced an unpopular comprehensive school on a nearby council estate. The university sponsors NUSA in partnership with local Nottingham businessman Sir David Samworth. The university supports the school in innovative ways; a third of NUSA staff are enrolled on Masters or PhD programmes at Nottingham, and NUSA works closely with the university to assist pupils in visits to the campus on a regular basis. University students also act as classroom assistants and mentors to support learning. Impact in terms of improving educational attainment in a deprived area has been measured positively by recent results, in 2011 NUSA achieved 44% good (A*-C) GCSEs, including English and Mathematics, compared to 19% in the predecessor school in 2009.³¹
- 3.7 The University of Liverpool has sponsorship relations with a number of schools within the most deprived areas of the city. Close links exist with the North Liverpool Academy in the white working class district of Everton. These links have been developed in collaboration with the Royal Liverpool Hospital to establish a University Technical College (UTC) to support advancement and training in bio-medical sciences, engineering and healthcare. In supporting the UTC the university is attempting to

²⁶ *University Access Agreement*, University of Birmingham, 2013/14

²⁷ *Access Agreement 2014*, University of Bristol

²⁸ *Access Agreement 2014/15*, University of Exeter

²⁹ *Strategic Plan 2006-16*, p 7.

³⁰ *King's College London, Access Agreement 2013-14*, p. 16

³¹

help create and sustain the next generation of scientists, healthcare practitioners, engineers and entrepreneurs. Local employers from these sectors are playing a major role in the development of the Life Sciences UTC, working with the university to shape the curriculum, with a specific focus on the technical skills and knowledge that relate to future jobs and skills shortages . matching the needs of the local economy.³² Expert master classes and skills development are also planned for the new college, provided by a range of business partners including industry leaders such as Redx, Pharma, Novartis, Thermo Fisher, Pro-Lab Diagnostics and Unilever.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 The particular educational challenges faced by white working class students would benefit from further analysis. However, a continued focus on improving educational outcomes for poorer students and those from lower socio-economic groups is also necessary. The Government is implementing policies aimed at raising standards in schools and colleges. The Russell Group of universities is playing its part in engaging with young people in some of the most deprived areas of the country to achieve their potential at school or college, and many of these activities will impact on white working class pupils.
- 4.2 In order to see the benefits of increased numbers of white working class children entering higher education in general, and the most selective universities in particular, the Government needs to continue to try and raise standards across the school sector. Raising standards amongst teachers is one mechanism for doing this. Good leadership models are also integral to improving a school's performance. Russell Group universities will continue to take the initiative with local partners in supporting and co-sponsoring schools; helping them to perform at the highest level, developing students who are qualified for a future in higher education and highly skilled employment.

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³² <http://lifesciencesutc.co.uk/sponsors-partners/>