

Participation of BME students at Russell Group universities

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Russell Group universities work with schools and colleges across the country and with a range of other organisations on widening participation (WP) and access initiatives. They put significant investment into bursaries, scholarships and fee waivers aimed at the most disadvantaged, and on outreach activities, including working directly with schools and putting on access schemes and summer schools. BME participation is a very important part of this work.
- 1.2 Real progress has been made in recent years, with the number of Black, Asian and Mixed race students entering Russell Group universities all increasing since 2010. According to the UCAS End of Cycle 2015 report (which details university applicant and acceptance rates for entry in September 2015), published in January 2016:
 - The number of Black students accepted by Russell Group universities has increased by 62%, from 1,690 in 2010 to 2,740 in 2015.
 - The number of Asian students accepted by Russell Group universities has increased by 28%, from 7,285 in 2010 to 9,350 in 2015.
 - The number of Mixed ethnicity students accepted by Russell Group universities has increased by 43%, from 2,760 in 2010 to 3,940 in 2015.

However, we are far from complacent and will continue to invest in schemes designed to boost applications from students from non-traditional backgrounds.

- 1.3 In January 2015 the Russell Group published a two-part report exploring the underlying barriers that mean less advantaged students are under-represented at highly-selective universities and how Russell Group universities are helping to overcome these:
<http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/policy/publications/opening-doors-understanding-and-overcoming-the-barriers-to-university-access/>

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. For example:
 - In 2010/11, fewer than 8,500 students eligible for Free School Meals took three A-levels and only 546 achieved three or more A* or A grades.¹

¹ A-level attainment of pupils eligible for free schools meals in 2010/11 (Parliamentary question, [116023] (9 July 2012))

- In 2011/12 only 3.5% of A-level students from Black backgrounds achieved three A*-A grades. This compares to 26.9% of Chinese students, 11.1% of Mixed Race students, 10.2% of White students, and 9.5% of Asian students.²
- In 2015 only 16% (1130) of the 7115 18-year-old UK domiciled Black students applying to higher education with three or more A-levels had grades AAB or better. This compares to 32% of white applicants.³

- 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.
- 2.4 Another 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. To address this, the Russell Group published a guide to post-16 subject choices, *Informed Choices*, to assist students in choosing appropriate subjects for the degree they hope to study.
- 2.5 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 courses⁴. 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 2010⁵.
- 2.6 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-level⁶. 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.

3. Examples of outreach work by Russell Group universities

Below are just a few examples of work currently undertaken by Russell Group universities to target BME pupils.

University of Liverpool

The 'Fast Trackers' programme⁷, which began in 2009, is a one year mentoring project designed to help Year 11 students from a Somali and Yemeni background to get the most out of their final school year and maximise their results at GCSE.

The students are selected from Liverpool schools and attend fortnightly mentoring sessions organised by the University's Widening Participation and Outreach team. These sessions involve the young people working closely with currently undergraduate mentors, who support them with coursework or homework.

In addition to homework and coursework assistance, participants also have the opportunity to work on their exam technique by working through past papers in discussion with the mentors.

² Attainment at A-level by young people from different ethnic backgrounds (Parliamentary question, [149093] 15 April 2013)

³ UCAS End of Cycle 2015 Report

⁴ Ofsted 'The most able students: an update on progress since June 2013' (2015)

⁵ Department for Education 'A level and other level 3 results in England, 2014/2015 (provisional)' (2015)

⁶ Sutton Trust 'Subject to Background' (2015)

⁷ Details of the scheme can be found at: <http://www.liv.ac.uk/widening-participation/secondary/fast-trackers/>

Throughout the year the project also includes presentations from the Widening Participation and Outreach team, and the mentors, on different aspects of Higher Education such as time management, finance and study skills.

In the past prominent members of the local BME community have also attended and given talks about their own experiences of education, and how these led to their current careers.

The programme is jointly organised by the Liverpool Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service (EMTAS).

London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

LSE is taking steps to engage students of African-Caribbean heritage:

“In 2010, 605 of LSE's UK applicants who disclosed their ethnicity were black African/Caribbean students (7.6% of Home UK applications) - there is an aim to increase the number of black African/Caribbean students applying to LSE to 750 applications from UK-domiciled students by 2019-20.”

LSE already targets BME pupils for outreach work, but there are plans in place to increase engagement with black African-Caribbean communities in order to generate a greater number of applications to the School from these pupils.

The LSE Black Achievement Conference⁸ is an example of existing outreach work in this area. The conference is a free one-day event for African-Caribbean students in Years 10, 11 and 12 and includes a line-up of speakers from London's African-Caribbean community.

LSE also runs a Promoting Potential Programme⁹ which is aimed at bright Year 8 African-Caribbean boys from London state schools. Each Spring term, 50 students take part in a programme of social science workshops to give them a taste of higher education. This is followed up with two “top-up” days in August and November, when prospective students make off-site trips to banks and City law firms to gain insight into the corporate world.

In addition to their outreach work, for 2016-17 LSE is appointing a fixed term, part-time Equality and Diversity Officer to devise and implement an action plan to encourage more black African-Caribbean students into postgraduate study. The post-holder will also undertake continuing research in this area, evaluate any programmes which are developed and analyse student progression and outcomes.

University of Oxford

The University of Oxford runs an Annual Access Conference¹⁰ designed to support comprehensive schools in assisting BME students (and particularly African-Caribbean individuals) to make

⁸ Black Achievement Conference details can be accessed at:
<http://www.lse.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/informationForTeachersAndSchools/wideningParticipation/blackAchievementConference.aspx>

⁹ Promoting Potential Programme details can be accessed at:
[http://www.lse.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/informationForTeachersAndSchools/wideningParticipation/Promoting-Potential-Spring-School-\(Year-8\).aspx](http://www.lse.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/informationForTeachersAndSchools/wideningParticipation/Promoting-Potential-Spring-School-(Year-8).aspx)

¹⁰ Details of the Annual Access Conference can be accessed at:
<http://annualaccessconference.co.uk/about.html>

competitive applications to the University. The conference aims to demystify the Oxford application process for students and teachers as well as helping them to understand the benefits associated with attending the University. The event is run by Oxford's African and Caribbean Society in partnership with the University of Oxford's Admissions and Outreach Department.

The University of Oxford also works with third party organisations Future Leaders¹¹ and Target Oxbridge¹², drawing on their work and networks to ensure BME students are supported to make competitive applications to Oxford. The University's 2016-17 Access Agreement states:

"We have supported two Future Leaders magazines, profiling inspirational BME students, and offering information about outreach initiatives to the audience of BME readers in schools. We continue to support Target Oxbridge in their programme identifying year 11 pupils, who are supported through years 12 and 13 by a series of interventions, including mentoring; and the University is committed to addressing the under-representation of BME staff at Oxford. We are working with the student-led Campaign for Racial Awareness and Equality to review the curriculum for certain courses."

University of Nottingham

The University of Nottingham runs a number of outreach activities specifically for BME learners. For example, the Springboard programme, run in collaboration with the Students Union, aims to tackle low aspirations amongst young African-Caribbean boys in Nottingham. Local school students attend a series of on-campus events and are paired with undergraduate mentors who support them over the course of the academic year.

University College London (UCL)

For 2014 entry, BME students made up 40% of UCL's first-year UK intake. However, this headline figure hides under-representation among certain groups. Black Caribbean students made up 0.6% of the 2014 intake, although black Caribbean people make up 4.6% of the London population.

To address this issue UCL is working in partnership with organisations like SEO London¹³ which provides educational support and career advice to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. There are also plans to increase activity with black African and black Caribbean students via a pilot project to provide targeted higher education advice and guidance to these groups.

UCL also runs the Amos Bursary scheme¹⁴, which seeks to help talented British-born black African and Caribbean students from state schools to access and thrive in higher education.

University of Manchester

The University of Manchester has plans in place to target Caribbean learners through their partnership with IntoUniversity's Supplementary Schools Project¹⁵ which will provide specialist advice to students who could progress to higher education.

¹¹ Details of Future Leaders can be accessed at: <http://www.future-leaders.org.uk/>

¹² Details of Target Oxbridge can be accessed at: <http://www.targetoxbridge.co.uk/index.html>

¹³ Details of SEO London can be accessed at: <http://www.seo-london.com/>

¹⁴ Details of the UCL Amos Bursary scheme can be accessed at: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/prospective-students/scholarships/undergraduate/AmosUCLBursary>

The University of Manchester also runs the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre which is an open access library that supports the study of race and ethnic history. Its collection includes more than 8,000 resources available for use by students, practitioners and the general public. The Centre has a dedicated member of staff who works in the local community supporting young people from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds and more generally raising awareness of the different cultures within Greater Manchester.

University of Bristol

The University of Bristol partners with IntoUniversity¹⁶, a charity which runs a network of local learning centres across the UK. Bright students from disadvantaged backgrounds are encouraged to attend the centres at which they can access a programme of support to help them progress to higher education.

As part of this collaboration the University is in the process of opening two new IntoUniversity centres in Bristol. One of these centres is based in Easton, an area with a large Somali community and it is expected that a high proportion of the students attending the centre will be from BME backgrounds.

University of Leeds

The University of Leeds' African-Caribbean Society, in partnership with Leeds City Council, runs a mentoring project for secondary school students. Undergraduate students volunteer to spend two hours a fortnight working with local young people as part of an effort to share their experience of higher education with students from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹⁷

4. Comparisons with the United States

- 4.1 Both leading public and elite private universities in the US are actually less representative than Russell Group universities, and the gap between professional and working class children at US elite universities is twice that in the UK. Children of professionals are 3.3 times more likely to go to leading US public universities than working class children. That figure is 6.4 for elite private US universities. The figure in England for attendance at Russell Group universities is 3.2.¹⁸
- 4.2 Universities in the UK have been urged by some to emulate the access and admissions practices of elite institutions in the United States. In recent years there has been interest in

¹⁵ Supplementary schools are community-run schools (normally organised by political, faith or ethnic groups) which offer a range of learning opportunities including cultural activities such as sport, music and dance. They are run throughout the week in the evenings and weekends and rely on volunteer support. Details of IntoUniversity's Supplementary Schools Project can be accessed at: <http://www.intouniversityssp.org/>

¹⁶ Details on IntoUniversity can be accessed at: <http://intouniversity.org/>

¹⁷ Details on the mentoring scheme can be accessed at: <https://www.luu.org.uk/groups/afrocaribbean/#Mentoring>

¹⁸ *Family Background and access to 'high status' universities*, Dr John Jerrim (The Sutton Trust, 2013) *At least a quarter of access gap to top universities "not due to academic achievement"*: <http://www.suttontrust.com/least-quarter-access-gap-top-universities-due-academic-achievement-sutton-trust-research/>

the UK in 'early commitment', 'reserved places' or 'percent schemes' for university entrance.¹⁹

- 4.3 A key feature of these US schemes is that a certain number of places at university are reserved for the highest achieving pupils within each school, or that those pupils are fast-tracked within the admissions process, for example with the guarantee of an interview. The aim of these schemes is help those who do not have the highest grades but who have been the strongest performers in schools with more disadvantaged pupils.
- 4.4 It is important to be cautious when drawing comparisons between the higher education systems in the USA and the UK. While the US faces many of the same challenges in terms of improving access to highly selective institutions, in a number of fundamental ways it is very different. Importing US approaches – which some argue have not been effective in any case - would not be the best solution to the challenges that UK universities face.
- 4.5 Individual universities face different challenges, and tailor their approach to admissions, access and widening participation accordingly. So the Russell Group solutions are diverse – there is no 'one size fits all' approach.
- 4.6 Several of the US schemes which are often praised are in fact not very effective in broadening access (please see the Texas 10% scheme example below).
- 4.7 It is important to reiterate that our work can only ever be part of the solution; universities are limited in what they can do to address underlying problems. It is up to others to play their part, but by giving opportunities for students, their parents, teachers and schools to collaborate, Russell Group universities are doing their utmost to improve access through a diverse range of initiatives.
- 4.8 While the US school and higher education systems differ in many ways to those in the UK, many of the challenges faced are familiar. Students from schools with a high proportion of low-income families are less likely to attain highly on standardised tests; less likely to graduate from high school; and less likely to progress to and graduate from university.²⁰ Participation in higher education, and especially at elite institutions, is unevenly distributed across socioeconomic groups.²¹
- 4.9 As in the UK, highly selective universities in the US have very competitive admissions for many of their undergraduate programmes and naturally defend their right to make their own detailed assessment of each candidate who applies. Again, just as in the UK, admissions considerations vary by institution but a student's admission to an elite institution is primarily based on prior academic achievement.
- 4.10 This is usually assessed through standardised SAT or ACT tests and evidence suggests that high-achieving disadvantaged students are less likely than their advantaged peers to take these tests, and on average are likely to score less well.²² Participation and achievement in 'advanced placement' classes (college-level classes for high school students) is often taken

¹⁹ The Sutton Trust, *Innovative University Admissions Worldwide: A Percent Scheme for the UK?* (2009); Nick Clegg and David Willetts cited in Allegra Stratton, "Nick Clegg's new 'report card' aims to improve social mobility", *Guardian*, 30 March 2011; Jon Marcus, "World cribs from the Texas 10 percenters", *THE*, 26 May 2011.

²⁰ Orlich, D. and Gifford, G., *Test Scores, Poverty and Ethnicity: The New American Dilemma* Phi Delta Kappa "Summit on Public Education," Washington, D.C.

²¹ *Family Background and access to 'high status' universities*, Dr John Jerrim (The Sutton Trust, 2013)

²² The Education Trust, *Falling Out of the Lead: Following High Achievers Through High School and Beyond*. (2014)

into consideration during admissions but they tend to be accessed by more advantaged students. Similarly, evidence suggests that high-achieving disadvantaged students are less likely to access rigorous courses than their high-achieving more advantaged peers.²³

- 4.11 Additional admissions considerations given weight by US universities might include a student's relationship with an alumnus, extracurricular activities, or their sporting talent.
- 4.12 One approach taken in the US to increase the number of disadvantaged students to apply to university is 'percent admissions' schemes. A key feature of these schemes is that a certain number of places at university are reserved for the highest achieving pupils within each school. Some argue that this can help to widen participation, particularly to the most selective institutions, and that the guarantee of a university place can encourage more students from under-represented groups to aspire to university than would otherwise do so. In recent years, universities in the UK have been encouraged to introduce this approach. However, as evidence from the 'Texas 10%' scheme highlighted below shows, this is by no means an ideal solution.

Texas 10% scheme

A scheme was introduced in Texas in 1997 where pupils who came in the top 10% of their high school year were guaranteed a place at the public university of their choice.

The scheme was amended in 2009 to ensure universities did not have to allocate more than 75% of their total number of places through this method. Before this, universities had found that up to 86% of all their places were being determined by this guarantee. In practice the guarantee of a place now only applies to those in the top 5%-8% of their high school class.

The Texas 10% scheme has been widely considered to have failed in meeting its objectives. Even with the admissions guarantee in force, eligible students from poor high schools are still only about half as likely as their affluent counterparts to apply to the flagship universities. Research suggests that this may be due to cultural and historical factors relating to the school students have attended, for example. One study found that 'high schools without strong college-going traditions kept many such students from applying or matriculating'.²⁴

Research focused on the Texas experience has concluded that if policy makers want to increase non-traditional student enrolment at selective universities, the focus should be on expanding the applicant pool by improving high school quality rather than on offering guaranteed places.²⁵

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²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Tienda and Harris (2008). "Changes in Texas Universities' Applicant Pools after the Hopwood Decision"; "Hispanics in Higher Education and the Texas Top Ten Percent Law", available from <http://www.texastop10.princeton.edu/workingpapers.html> See also report of this research project in Peter Schmidt, Major Shifts in College Admissions Policies in Texas Had Unforeseen Consequences, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 March 2008. Available from http://chronicle.com/daily/2008/03/2271n.htm?utm_source=at&utm_medium=en

²⁵ Alfonso, M. & Calcagno, J. C. (2007). *Minority Enrollments at Public Universities of Diverse Selectivity Levels Under Different Admission Regimes: The Case of Texas*. Washington, DC: Research Department, Inter-American Development Bank