

How Russell Group universities are supporting students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds to succeed

Summary

Russell Group universities are committed to ensuring students from all backgrounds are supported to access and succeed in higher education, and to achieve their post-study ambitions. Our universities aim to support all students right from the start of their courses through to graduation and beyond, helping them to access outstanding opportunities to learn, develop, and realise their full potential.

We recognise that students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds can face particular challenges and pressures through their transition from school to university and in progressing to employment and further study. As well as investing significantly in widening access, our universities are supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds once they have made a successful application by:

- supporting them in the **transition to university** with pre- and post-arrival strategies to help students acclimatise to university life and independent study
- helping them to **complete their courses successfully** with scholarships and bursaries to support retention and interventions like mentoring and study skills support to improve degree attainment
- assisting students in realising their **post-study ambitions** through the provision of internships and advice about career and further study opportunities, and through support to access study abroad and volunteering programmes to build social capital and employability skills

In 2018-19, Russell Group members in England alone will invest £37 million in supporting success and progression for disadvantaged and under-represented students – with investment in this area more than trebling over the past five years.

We know this combination of support is effective: just 3.9% of disadvantaged students do not continue their course after one year at our universities, compared to 7.2% of students from the same backgrounds at other HEIs. However, we recognise there is more work to do and our universities will continue to provide a combination of academic, pastoral and financial support to help disadvantaged and under-represented students to flourish once at university and beyond.

Supporting students in the transition to university

Our universities seek to ensure that students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds are supported to adjust to life at university through a combination of pre- and post-arrival strategies to help prepare students and ensure a smooth transition from school to higher education.

*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.*

*The **University of Manchester** is working in partnership with the Students' Union to improve the experience and retention of living-at-home students including mature students, student parents, and student carers. The project offers a range of pre-arrival advice and ongoing support for students to access opportunities throughout their studies. A travel reimbursement scheme is being piloted to encourage living-at-home students to engage with extra-curricular activities on campus.*

*The **University of Durham**'s Academic Skills Programme provides a study skills support service that enhances the academic skills development of undergraduate students, before and during their study at the university. The programme comprises workshops, one-to-one support and online resources and is particularly targeted to students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds who have participated in the university's flagship access initiative – the Supported Progression Scheme.*

Helping students to complete their courses successfully

Bursaries and scholarships can help students traditionally under-represented in HE to participate fully in student life, with positive knock-on impacts for their retention and degree attainment:

- Nearly 80,000 students received a bursary or scholarship whilst studying at an English Russell Group university in 2015-16 with the level of support per student averaging £1,680 per year.
- Initial findings from work led by LSE with input from 22 other universities suggest bursaries have a positive impact on completion rates and increase recipients' chances of getting a first or a 2:1.

Our universities are also providing additional support for students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds while at university to build confidence and improve retention and degree attainment. Pastoral care is in place to support the academic and personal welfare of students alongside peer-to-peer networks and mentoring with the aim of increasing students' sense of belonging. Russell Group universities have also developed extended degree programmes for students who may not fulfil the 'typical' A-level entry criteria with additional pastoral and academic support built-in.

*The **University of Bristol** uses peer mentoring to improve degree attainment, focusing on those students that need it. Research showed over 1,500 students had a peer mentor in 2016-17 and 84% of those surveyed said their peer mentor had improved their student experience.*

*The **University of Birmingham**'s mentoring scheme gives students from BAME backgrounds the opportunity to meet and network with successful BAME business and community leaders from the surrounding area in order to boost their employability. First-year BAME students can also take part in a peer mentoring scheme which pairs them with older students to help them settle in.*

*The extended medical degree programmes offered by **King's College London** and the **University of Southampton** are aimed at educationally disadvantaged students and students from non-traditional backgrounds who have the potential to complete a medical degree successfully. The programmes offer a full medical degree but, by extending it by a year, allow students more time to develop subject knowledge and confidence, and give greater access to pastoral and academic support from staff.*

Supporting students to realise their post-study ambitions

Russell Group universities invest in a wide range of student support mechanisms targeted to ensure that disadvantaged and under-represented students are able to achieve their post-study ambitions including progression to professional employment and further study. Support in this area includes:

- Embedding employability skills and opportunities to build "social capital" into the curriculum
- Financial assistance to access relevant work experience and internships, and advice and support designed to help students navigate career and further study opportunities
- Targeted support for students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds to access study abroad¹ and volunteering opportunities

¹ To note, research from Universities UK has shown that the benefits for students of studying, working or volunteering abroad are more prominent for students from under-represented groups, but that these students are less likely to take up opportunities to study overseas.

Queen Mary University of London is pioneering a model of compulsory undergraduate education in which opportunities to develop employability skills and social capital are embedded into all degree programmes. The QMUL Model was introduced for all first-year undergraduates in 2017; students work with tutors to choose activities that develop skills and offer experiences important to them, including themes like entrepreneurship, creative thinking, networking, and communications.

The **University of Newcastle's** PARTNERS programme supports disadvantaged students to gain work experience and develop social capital by providing Careers Insights bursaries. This has led to a 17.4% increase in participating students progressing to highly skilled jobs.

The **University of Exeter** has invested significant resources to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access work experience placements and internships, with 190 students securing an internship or placement in 2015/16.

Four Russell Group universities² 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 Leeds** is leading a project with the Universities of Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, Warwick and York to close the gap in progression to postgraduate taught courses for students from neighbourhoods with low progression to HE and BAME backgrounds. The project is trialling various interventions both pre-entry and on-course, including a study skills module.

The **University of Glasgow** is working in partnership with the University of Adelaide to support disadvantaged students studying Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects to take up opportunities to study abroad. The initiative is supported by an Erasmus+ grant.

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² The RG partner institutions are: Exeter, King's, Liverpool, and Southampton.