Submission to the review on access and participation plans

Summary

Russell Group universities have made real progress in improving access and reducing gaps in attainment and progression for students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds. We recognise this needs to continue and the rate of change needs to improve as well. The development of the access and participation plan process provides an opportunity for the Office for Students (OfS) to consider how it can support universities to make further progress.

Addressing the complex causes of inequality throughout the education system will be critical to achieving the sort of change we and the OfS want to see. Tackling the root-causes of under-representation would help ensure students from all backgrounds have equal opportunities to access the benefits of higher education, including at selective institutions, and to succeed on their courses and beyond.

As well as supporting students once they progress to university, our members are increasingly working with schools and colleges to support attainment, to raise aspirations and expectations, and to provide the information, advice and guidance students and teachers need to support their decision-making. To expand the pool of applicants with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, a coordinated approach is required with the OfS and Department for Education (DfE) working with schools, colleges, universities, charities and employers in partnership.

With this in mind, our priorities for the OfS in developing the access and participation plan process are to:

1. Move from annual to multi-year access and participation plans for all providers, supporting institutions to **set longer-term strategies**, and incentivising sustained interventions which have been shown to be effective

2. Work with DfE to ensure **a coordinated approach** to addressing the root-causes of under-representation and clarify expectations about the role different actors can play, enabling greater coordination of effort across the whole student journey

3. Support universities in identifying and disseminating effective practice and ensure they have the tools available to undertake **robust evaluations** of their work, including through the development of the new Evidence and Impact Exchange

4. Work with the sector and counterparts in the devolved administrations to develop a basket of deprivation measures to underpin **effective targeting and performance measurement**; and work with universities, relevant Government departments and UCAS to unify datasets used to indicate disadvantage and measure progress

5. Enable **collaboration** by recognising institutional contributions to widening participation sector-wide, rather than simply activities which result in direct gains for individual institutions

Overview of Russell Group universities' work to widen access and support participation

Russell Group universities are committed to widening access and participation. Our universities are:

- engaging in a wide 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

- making a positive impact on around 8,000 schools across the UK collectively every year, reaching many hundreds of thousands of students through all these activities

- providing academic, pastoral and financial support to address the challenges students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds face through their transition from school to university and in progressing to employment and further study.

This investment has enabled Russell Group universities to make steady progress in widening access in recent years – although we recognise this progress needs to continue and we also need to focus on the rate of change that is being achieved. For example:

- between 2010/11 and 2015/16, the number of students eligible for free school meals at Russell Group universities more than doubled (increasing by 170% from 910 in 2010/11 to 2,455 in 2015/16)[1]

- nearly 8 out of 10 young people at Russell Group universities studying for a full-time first degree now come from a state school background. The overall proportion of state school entrants to Russell Group universities has increased more quickly over the past few years than for the rest of the sector (+4.3 percentage points since 2010 compared to +1.8 percentage points for all English universities)[2]

- the number of UK students from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds accepted to study at our universities has steadily increased in recent years, rising from 23,105 in 2007/08 to 34,850 in 2016/17. This represents an increase of 51% and compares to an increase of 1.6% among white entrants within the same period.

In addition, **there is evidence to suggest the combination of support our universities provide to disadvantaged and under-represented students once at university is effective**:

- the gap in drop-out rates between young students from low participation neighbourhoods and others is smaller at Russell Group universities than for the sector as a whole (1.1pp vs. 2.2pp)[3]

- whilst there remains an attainment gap between BME and white students which our institutions are seeking to address[4], it is much smaller than at other HEIs (5pp at Russell Group universities vs. 12pp at other HEIs) and the gap is closing over time

- gaps in attainment do not extend to professional employment outcomes: for example, black graduates at Russell Group universities are more likely to be in professional employment than white graduates (81% vs. 78%). This is not the case at other HEIs where only 66% of black graduates are in professional employment (compared to 69% of white graduates).[5]

However, we recognise there is still a significant gap in progression to our institutions by background and ethnicity: students from neighbourhoods with the highest participation in HE are still over five times more likely to progress to Russell Group universities than those from the lowest participation neighbourhoods. This is broadly reflective of trends in prior attainment at school where the attainment gap between applicants from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds and by ethnic group remains considerable:

- in 2017, only 20% of the most disadvantaged applicants held grades AAB or higher compared to 38% of the most advantaged applicants, and only 17% of black 18-year-old applicants held grades AAB or higher. By contrast, 29% of Asian applicants had grades AAB or higher, 34% of mixed ethnicity applicants and 31% of White applicants[6]

- students from independent schools are approximately three times more likely to achieve three A*-A grades at A-level than students at state-funded schools.

---

[1] DfE Key stage 5 destinations England, 2015/16
[2] HESA data 2016/17
[3] These figures do not include Scottish universities. HESA data for full-time undergraduate entrants 2015/16.
[4] For example, our universities have created bespoke strategies to address issues of BME attainment through mentoring, embedding inclusivity into the curriculum and unconscious bias training.
[5] HESA Destination of Leavers from Higher Education data, 2015/16
[6] UCAS end of cycle report 2017

In addition, fewer students from disadvantaged backgrounds (such as those who are eligible for free school meals) continue to study at Key Stage 5 than other young people in state schools, and they are more likely to study vocational subjects. Recent research shows that subject choice is a key determinant of success in applying for selective universities and courses, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to take the A-level subjects most often required for entry to our universities.[7]

In order to achieve the ambition of the OfS to make transformational change in this area, the focus must be on addressing the complex causes of inequality throughout the whole education system. Whilst placing emphasis on short-term fixes may help to improve access at individual institutions, the overall effect is likely to be one of redistribution of applicants within the higher education system rather than genuinely widening access for disadvantaged and under-represented students.

We need to expand the pool of applicants with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, and to do this through coordinated, collaborative efforts with the Office for Students and Department for Education working with schools, colleges, charities, universities and employers in partnership. Long-term and sustained efforts are needed based on robust evidence of the issues and how they can most effectively be addressed in different contexts.

Priorities for the access and participation plan process

Addressing the root-causes of under-representation and gaps in participation/ student success

Multi-year sustained interventions are recognised as characteristics of effective outreach strategies[8] and Russell Group universities already undertake a great deal of such work. We would like to see greater flexibility in access and participation plans to recognise that annual target-setting is not always an appropriate approach to recognising the value of outreach initiatives; for example, this is the case for long-term early interventions where there can be a very significant time-lag before evidence of impact can be presented.

Recommendation 1: Moving from the production of annual to multi-year plans (for example, covering a five-year period with an annual monitoring process) would support all institutions to set longer-term strategies on access and participation. This could be accompanied by appropriate assessment mechanisms which recognise the long-term nature of the issues being addressed and the challenges in proving a causal link between outreach measures and change.

Strategies and targets should continue to be institution-led recognising differences in mission, context/ location and demographics of prospective students, and enabling linkages to broader institutional priorities (on equality and diversity, for example).

In addition, institutions should be provided with sufficient lead-time to implement any new approach before they are required to draw up the next round of plans in early 2019, especially if significant changes are proposed. This will enable them to respond effectively to new priorities.

The guidance on access and participation plans for 2019-20[9] emphasised the need for institutions to increase work to raise attainment in schools and colleges, and Russell Group universities are responding by setting ambitious targets in this area. Successful attempts to support attainment-raising will require long-term sustained efforts with universities working in partnership with schools, colleges, charities and Government in a coordinated and evidence-informed way. At the moment, the evidence base is limited and further research is needed at a sector level to understand "what works" in raising attainment in schools. Work to raise aspirations and expectations also needs to be recognised as a core challenge.

Alongside a focus on universities working with schools in long-term efforts to raise attainment, aspirations and expectations, the Government is also funding the National Collaborative Outreach Programme which is focused on working with young people in areas where higher education participation is lower than might

---

[7] "The relationship between A-level subject choice and league table score of university attended: the 'facilitating', the 'less suitable' and the counter-intuitive" Centre for Longitudinal Studies by Catherine Dilnot
[8] Sutton Trust *Evaluating Access* (December 2015). Teach First research has also highlighted the need to support students before the age of 16, including at key points such as subject choices at aged 14.
[9] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1093/ofs2018_03.pdf

be expected given GCSE results. There is a tension between these different objectives which universities are required to navigate through their allocation of WP resource.

Recommendation 2: By working with DfE, the OfS could ensure a coordinated approach is taken to addressing the root-causes of under-representation. This should seek to develop understanding about what works sector-wide in university-led (and broader) initiatives to raise attainment, aspirations and expectations with input from various stakeholders, particularly schools and colleges.

In addition, expectations about the role different actors can play should be clarified with the OfS/ DfE playing an important role in enabling the education sector to co-ordinate efforts effectively. Such an approach could help ensure that all actors have a better understanding of the causes of under-representation and gaps in participation and student success, and how, when and by whom these can be most effectively addressed during the student journey starting from the early years onwards.

Building the evidence base on "what works"

Russell Group universities are developing evaluative frameworks and collaborating with each other and leading academics, to build and apply evidence of "what works" within their institutions and more broadly. The role OFFA has previously taken in highlighting and disseminating good practice has been helpful and is something we would like to see the OfS continue. Supporting the creation of the Evidence and Impact Exchange, which is currently under development, is an opportunity to deliver on this.[10]

Recommendation 3: In supporting the creation of the Evidence and Impact Exchange, the regulator should focus on helping universities to identify and disseminate effective practice and help to ensure they have the tools to undertake robust evaluations of their work. In order to be effective, the Exchange should:

- primarily be a tool for practitioners, providing a safe space for sharing good practice and also enabling the sharing of evidence about what has not worked to support a greater understanding of how to maximise impact
- draw on and collate evidence from existing initiatives, as well as identifying and addressing gaps in the evidence base through a series of funded research projects
- ensure it is relevant for all higher education institutions by covering the full student lifecycle; ideally, extend to the whole of the UK given widening access and participation remains a key priority for universities in the devolved administrations as well as in England
- recognise there is no one-size-fits-all solution which can be applied across the sector and evaluation results at one institution will not necessarily be comparable with those at another as a result of differences in context.

Russell Group universities are collaborating with others, including through the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT), to track engagement in activities and build evidence of future student achievement to prove the value of outreach. Strengthening the ability of institutions to target interventions effectively using robust indicators of deprivation could make a real difference in enabling progress.

Many indicators currently at the disposal of institutions are flawed: for example, area-based measures such as POLAR do not align with the definitions of disadvantage used in schools (such as eligibility for free school meals), and measures such as POLAR and state school attendance do not necessarily correlate with socio-economic status.

Difficulties in tracking individual students through various administrative datasets need to be addressed so better evidence on student outcomes can be generated. In particular:

- easier access to data for monitoring, evaluation and research (e.g. National Pupil Database and in-cycle UCAS data) would enable tracking of student outcomes in a timely manner

---

[10] For further details of our priorities for the Evidence and Impact Exchange, see our evidence to the recent stakeholder engagement exercise here: https://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/policy/policy-documents/evidence-and-impact-exchange/

- fully implementing the unique learner number throughout the education sector would allow institutions to robustly evaluate the success of their interventions.

In addition, data also needs to reflect prior attainment and subject mix in order to be useful for selective institutions.

Recommendation 4: We would like to see the OfS working with the sector, including with counterparts in the devolved administrations, to develop a shared "basket of indicators" of deprivation (both population-based and individual indicators) to enable institutions to ensure access work is as effectively targeted as possible and performance can be measured more accurately. Greater alignment between both indicators and the language used in schools and HE is also necessary to support collaborative efforts across the education sector.

By working with universities, relevant Government departments and UCAS, the OfS could help to unify, and make available, datasets used to indicate disadvantage and measure progress at each stage within the education system enabling more precise identification and monitoring of students so that this can feed into assessment of institutional performance.

In addition, we understand that the regulator intends to compare an institution's assessment of performance with its' own analysis of national datasets. To avoid confusion, the OfS should make available to institutions, and publish, the data by which they will judge performance.

Universities have the lead role in ensuring prospective and current students have access to appropriate information, including about admissions and student success at their institutions. A number of Russell Group universities already publish very detailed admissions data which is supported by a wealth of data and analysis from UCAS including the equalities dataset, which focuses on offer-making and acceptances by different student groups and controls for prior attainment and course choice.

We recognise the importance of making available data relating to admissions and student success by gender, ethnicity and background. This should be presented in context to ensure it is not open to misinterpretation by potential applicants and their advisers.

Recognising the range of benefits which universities' work can have in improving life chances

The focus on outcomes in assessing institutions' performance on access should be broadly defined to recognise the range of benefits which access schemes can have in improving life chances for those from under-represented backgrounds. As a result of participating in outreach activities, students may be more likely to apply and progress to higher education overall.[11] Measuring outcomes primarily based on institutional recruitment of students therefore underestimates the broader impact of institutions' access work and risks limiting that impact in the long-run as institutions are encouraged to focus primarily on activities which result in direct recruitment gains.

Targets which demand a consistent increase in the intake of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (or with other characteristics) risk disincentivising collaborative working as universities are forced to compete for a small pool of suitably qualified applicants from these groups; this is likely to be exacerbated for selective institutions. Institutions may be deterred from collaborating with each other in the same region, as this makes it difficult to attribute outcomes, and from investing in longer-term interventions working with younger learners.

Recommendation 5: The regulatory framework should incentivise work which is valuable but where returns take longer to deliver or are not easily attributable to one institution. In particular, recognition should be given to collaborative work between universities at the regional level, as well as longer-term and early interventions. Formal recognition for institutional contributions to widening participation sector-wide should be developed and factored into assessment of institutional performance.

---

[11] For example, the Top-Up programme at the University of Glasgow has worked with around 2,000 learners in 68 schools and whilst 250 participants in the programme have progressed to Glasgow, four times more (around 1,000) have gone on to other universities.