RUSSELL GROUP

PATHWAYS FOR POTENTIAL

How universities, regulators and Government can tackle educational inequality

Summary

Introduction

The UK's leading universities deliver a world-class education few other countries can compete with. Yet, for too many, this national asset can feel out of reach. We have made important progress in opening our campuses to students from all walks of life, including the most disadvantaged. But the rate of change has often been too slow. Continuing educational inequality comes at a cost to both the individual and the country and now is the time to address this challenge. This report considers the actions which are needed to accelerate progress in widening access to university and supporting students from under-represented backgrounds to succeed on their degrees and beyond.

To do this, a three-pronged action plan should be implemented:

1. **Universities need to deliver on their responsibility to diversify their campuses** and support their students to reach their full potential by embedding evidence of good practice across their access and participation efforts.
2. **The right regulatory incentives should be in place to support further progress** and ensure universities can pursue collaborative and long-term work to widen the pool of applicants from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds.
3. **To underpin this, a wider drive is needed to tackle inequality throughout the education system,** beginning right from the early years, with a new national strategy to join up efforts across Government departments and all relevant stakeholders.

What is the problem?

The number of disadvantaged and under-represented students progressing to university, including the most selective institutions, has steadily increased over a period of years. The most under-represented students are 60% more likely to enter university now than they were ten years ago, and 30% more likely to enter Russell Group universities than five years ago.

However, gaps by social and geographical background and by ethnicity and disability persist.

In our research, the following factors arose as key social, cultural and financial barriers to access and participation for under-represented students:

- Gaps in prior attainment in school shape people's life chances for years to come. The causes of these gaps are complex and include differences in the challenges faced by schools, parental expectations and the home environment.
- Lack of knowledge about higher education and a lack of practical support in decision-making can impact negatively on the confidence of under-represented students and undermine their expectations that they can fulfil their ambitions.
- Financial concerns can cause disadvantaged students to restrict their higher education choices to institutions in their local area, with many choosing to live at home rather than move away to study.
- People from certain places face greater barriers than others in accessing university as a result of geographical distance from a university campus, poor transport links, and a lack of subject choice and advice at school or college.

Universities have a key role to play in intervening to remove these obstacles and more work is clearly required to ensure disadvantaged and under-represented students are supported to succeed at university and beyond. For our economy and society to thrive in future, we need to draw on all the diverse talent available to the UK.

What have we learnt?

1. Working with current students, parents and schools is fundamental to good outreach and participation initiatives

Evidence shows that engaging users in designing services or schemes has a positive impact on outcomes. Development with users is a key tenet of good service design in the NHS, for example. For universities, working with prospective and current students as well as their teachers, advisers and/or parents in developing and assessing the impact of access and participation initiatives can significantly improve their effectiveness.

2. Different cohorts of students need targeted support

Under-represented and disadvantaged students are not a homogenous group. Different groups have different needs and a person's background and identity often intersect in complex ways. Developing activities to support specific groups and individuals is critical in enabling them to progress to university and to succeed in their studies.

For example, many Russell Group universities are working to improve the experience of white working-class boys, where economic disadvantage, sex and other identities intersect to create barriers to accessing university. Efforts are also being ramped up to address the multiple disadvantages faced by care leavers.

3. Supporting students into *a* university can be as valuable as supporting them into *your* university

Universities undertake a range of outreach activities which can have a fundamental impact on people's life chances, but not all of this work will lead to gains in recruitment. Work with schools and colleges to improve attainment, raise expectations and build links with local communities is highly valuable whether or not it leads to more disadvantaged students progressing to the particular university in question.

4. Successful access and participation work is owned by the whole university

All universities have individuals and teams dedicated to delivering work to widen access and support disadvantaged students to succeed on campus. However, sustained support for these activities from senior managers means clear priorities can be set and embedded across the institution and the right resources can be made available. By introducing a joined-up institutional strategy for widening access and inclusion, universities are bringing together everyone with responsibility for supporting students from pre-entry through to graduation.

5. Evaluation is crucial for understanding what works but there is no one-size-fits-all approach

Developing a better evidence base on what works should support continued progress across the sector. Universities are now embedding evaluation into the design of their initiatives, bringing academic experts and practitioners together, involving students, developing dedicated evaluation units and improving data collection and analytics.

However, institutions face challenges which are highly specific to the environment they are operating in, so it will be important to resist the temptation to apply one-size-fits-all solutions across the board unless there is robust evidence they can work in a variety of contexts.

What more can be done?

Picking up on the lessons learnt, Russell Group universities are committing to five principles of good practice which can be applied across all activities, now and in the future. For universities outside of England, these principles can be applied in their regional contexts recognising the different regulatory and political frameworks to which they are subject. We hope other universities will also take similar steps.

Russell Group universities commit to:

1. Embedding **evaluation** across the full range of all their access and participation activities, as proportionate and appropriate to each individual activity.

2. Building on their **collaborative work**, with each other and other institutions, to share information and reach more people and teachers in areas with lower levels of higher education provision or where fewer students progress to higher education.

3. Ensuring **ownership** of, and accountability for, efforts to widen access and support student success sits with Presidents, Vice-Chancellors and their senior teams.

4. Providing **transparent information on admissions policies** to all applicants by ensuring this information features prominently on institutional websites and embedding it across outreach activities.

5. Building on their **work with prospective and current students from under-represented backgrounds as well as their teachers, advisers and/or parents to develop effective access and participation initiatives.**

The way in which access and participation is regulated by the Office for Students (OfS) in England – and equivalent bodies in the devolved administrations – also needs to support institutions in delivering further progress. The increased focus on evidence and evaluation is welcome, as is the move to enable institutions to set longer-term strategies. However, some aspects of the regulatory framework for access and participation could actually hamper efforts to deliver the transformational change we are all looking for.

In order to support universities to continue making progress, the OfS should make sure the right regulatory incentives are in place. This should include:

1. Ensuring universities can set targets using **indicators which are appropriate to their location, student demography and institutional mission,** so that they can identify and target the most under-represented and disadvantaged students. Institutions should not be put under undue pressure to use POLAR – an area-based measure of participation in higher education – as an indicator.

2. Working with universities, relevant government departments, UCAS and the Higher Education Statistics Agency, to unify, and make available, pupil-level datasets used to indicate disadvantage and enable more precise educational tracking of students. **Data on free school meals eligibility should be provided urgently.**

3. **Encouraging and rewarding collaboration** between universities, by, for example, agreeing regional approaches and targets with groups of institutions to complement ongoing work through the Uni Connect programme.

4. Ensuring the desire to see immediate outcomes does not discourage universities from **early and long-term interventions** to address the root-causes of under-representation.

5. Continuing to **build expertise in evaluation** and address gaps in the evidence base including through the new Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes.

In addition to the OfS, regulators in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland should engage with their universities to consider how to apply these recommendations in their own contexts.

Why do we need a joined-up approach?

The OfS has set stretching long-term targets to eliminate gaps in access to selective ("higher tariff") universities completely over the next two decades, but our analysis shows these targets won't be met without sustained efforts to address the social, cultural and financial barriers which disadvantaged people face – not all of which universities can fix.

For example, the OfS has set a target to eliminate the gap in access to higher tariff universities between students from the most under-represented areas and those from the most highly represented areas (POLAR Quintiles 1 and 5, respectively) by 2039/40.

Based on our modelling, this target can only be met if:

- **The number of Quintile 5 students (those from the most highly represented areas) entering higher tariff universities remains effectively frozen,** and,
- **The number of Quintile 1 students (those from the most under-represented areas) entering higher tariff universities increases by 10% cumulatively year-on-year,** or by 640% over the next 20 years.

This is likely to be extremely challenging as demand from Quintile 5 students is expected to continue to grow and students from Quintile 1 areas tend to have much lower prior attainment at school, meaning many do not meet entry criteria.

If these trends continue, then higher tariff institutions will be required to do the following to meet the target set by the OfS:

- By 2026, higher tariff institutions would need to **recruit all current Quintile 1 higher education entrants with 3 A-levels regardless of the grades they have achieved.**
- By 2035, higher tariff institutions would need to **recruit all Quintile 1 entrants to the whole higher education system** including those currently going to medium and lower tariff institutions, regardless of whether they have studied academic qualifications at all.

To eliminate gaps in access to university, work needs to start much earlier in the education lifecycle. A focus solely on university admissions will not address embedded inequalities. What universities can do is only part of the picture.

Achieving truly transformational change will require a joined-up approach with partnership between universities and a range of other stakeholders including schools, colleges, local authorities, charities, employers and relevant public services. A national strategy is needed to achieve this. But it will require a step-change in government policy to enable partnerships across agencies, government departments and all relevant stakeholders.

In order to address the barriers faced by under-represented and disadvantaged students in accessing and succeeding in higher education, the Government should:

1

Commit to a new national strategy to tackle inequality across the educational lifecycle and beyond. This should be based on the following principles:

- central co-ordination through a national strategy lasting at least ten years
- sustained political support over the long-term
- cross-departmental accountability to address the causes of educational inequality
- a framework to enable and support stakeholders to collaborate in their regions
- national targets which apply to relevant stakeholders including the Government itself (to sit alongside the targets which already apply to universities and schools).

2

Create a new Government Office for Tackling Inequality to achieve buy-in, engagement and coordination across departments.

3

Consider how the National Pupil Database (or other regional data systems) could be made more accessible and user-friendly for universities to access directly, or through trusted third parties, so that they can identify, target and track prospective applicants from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds. The creation of a new household income dataset would enable universities to ensure they are reaching the most disadvantaged students beyond those eligible for free school meals.

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