

## Supporting under-represented students to access and succeed in higher education

### Summary

The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK universities which are committed to widening access and providing transformative opportunities to talented individuals, regardless of background. Our universities are already working closely with schools to help raise attainment, as well as providing outreach and transition support to ensure under-represented students can succeed on campus.

Real progress is being made with gaps in access and non-continuation between the most under-represented students and their peers reducing significantly over time. The proposed variations to current access and participation plans (APPs) will provide an opportunity for the Office for Students (OfS) to consider how it can support universities in making further progress.

With this in mind, we encourage the OfS to ensure the following principles underpin their approach:

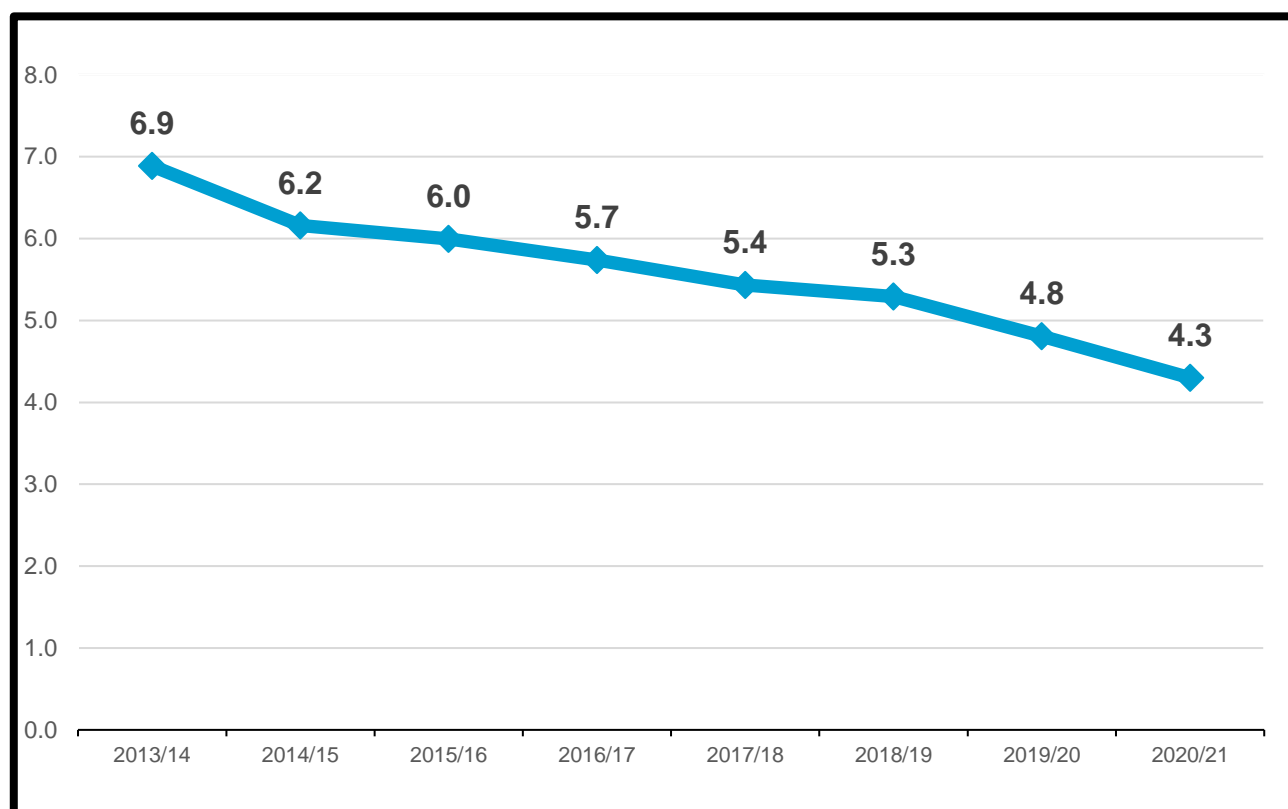
- **A long-term strategic approach** to enable more ambitious activity and support genuine buy-in from school partners and students.
- **Improving, and following, evidence of ‘what works’ in access and participation** and a greater focus on pupil-level datasets such as free school meals eligibility to target interventions to those most in need of support.
- **Providing flexibility to direct activities, set targets and use indicators** tailored to the challenges specific to universities’ different locations and applicant/ student characteristics.
- **Facilitate collaborative efforts** between universities, and with schools and colleges, to support attainment raising, recognising that this will not necessarily lead to gains in recruitment of specific groups.
- **Recognise a fuller range of activities** to widen access and support positive outcomes including: initial teacher training, access to postgraduate courses, continuing education and the provision of non-traditional pathways like degree apprenticeships.

### Widening access and participation at Russell Group universities

Russell Group universities have continued to make real and consistent progress on widening access and participation targets. The ratio between the most and least under-represented students has steadily declined amongst Russell Group universities over the past eight years – see **Figure 1** below. Our universities have set ambitious targets to build on this progress through their APPs; reducing or even eradicating gaps in access, non-continuation and degree attainment.

University of Birmingham • University of Bristol • University of Cambridge • Cardiff University • Durham University  
University of Edinburgh • University of Exeter • University of Glasgow • Imperial College London • King’s College London  
University of Leeds • University of Liverpool • London School of Economics and Political Science  
University of Manchester • Newcastle University • University of Nottingham • University of Oxford  
Queen Mary University of London • Queen’s University Belfast • University of Sheffield • University of Southampton  
University College London • University of Warwick • University of York

**Figure 1: Ratio of Quintile 5 (least under-represented) to Quintile 1 (most under-represented) entry rates of 18 year old new entrants to full-time undergraduate courses at English Russell Group universities.<sup>1</sup>**



Recent HESA data shows a further decrease in non-continuation rates for the most under-represented students at English Russell Group universities:

- Non-continuation rates at Russell Group universities for the most under-represented students (Quintile 1) have steadily declined: from 5.1% in 2017/18 to 2.8% in 2019/20.
- The gap between non-continuation rates for Q1 (the most under-represented) and all other students (Q2-Q5) has narrowed: from 2 percentage points in 2017/18 to 0.9pp in 2019/20.
- Non-continuation rates for the most under-represented students are much higher across the English sector (at 7.1% in 2019/20) and the gap between these students and their peers (in Q2-Q5) remains larger.<sup>2</sup>

### A long-term strategic approach

We welcome the OfS' decision to keep the current APPs active until 2024, with variations in place from 2023. This should avoid an unduly burdensome process of completely re-writing plans, whilst also enabling institutions to reflect a wider scope of activity.

We also welcome the suggestion of a longer-term strategic approach to access and participation. The renewed focus on raising attainment in schools is, by nature, a long-term endeavour requiring relationships to be built and strategies co-created over several years. The long-time horizons for delivering attainment-raising activity also need to be factored into target setting.

**In the forthcoming variations to the APPs, we encourage the OfS to:**

- **support targeting on long time horizons to enable more ambitious activity and,**

<sup>1</sup> Office for Students Access and Participation data:

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/>

<sup>2</sup> HESA UKPIs 2022

- **provide sufficient time for universities to consult internally, and with partner schools, to ensure genuine buy-in from partners.**

## Taking an evidence-based approach

We welcome the renewed focus on evidence sharing and look forward to working closely with the OfS on identifying and sharing evidence of ‘what works’ in different contexts. This can build on the evaluative frameworks which Russell Group universities already have in place. **We encourage the OfS to develop and improve evidence-based guidance from TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education) creating actionable insights for the sector on ‘what works’, especially in complex areas such as support for raising school attainment.**

The process of varying APPs provides an opportunity for the OfS and institutions to reconsider the different datasets used to target and measure access and participation activity. The limitations of POLAR data as a reliable indicator are well-known, especially in London but also in some other urban and rural areas. For example, in London only 1.3% of neighbourhoods are classified as amongst the least represented (i.e. Quintile 1) according to POLAR despite London having a greater proportion of income-deprived children than anywhere else in the country.<sup>3</sup> **We encourage the OfS to move towards the use of alternative metrics like free school meal (FSM) eligibility and enable universities to use a wider range of metrics when setting APP targets.**

In the longer term, we would encourage the OfS to work with DfE and HMRC to explore the creation of a new household income dataset. This would enable universities to identify and support a larger group of students that extends beyond the limitations of FSM eligibility.

## Flexibility to recognise differences in location, strategy and student characteristics

**Having the flexibility to direct activities, set targets and use the indicators which universities judge to be appropriate is critical to achieving success.** This means universities can tailor their interventions to the challenges specific to their location and the characteristics of their applicant and student populations, as well as aligning approaches to their wider strategies.

For example, our universities have approached their work to support raising attainment in schools in diverse ways, according to the context they are operating in. Whilst a number of our universities have created maths schools or established sponsorship activities with local schools, others have focused on regional and national attainment raising initiatives.<sup>4</sup> Both approaches are valid, with the former targeting support to specific schools in an intensive manner and filling gaps in provision in the local area, and the latter reaching greater numbers of pupils and teachers across the country.

## Supporting and facilitating collaborative efforts

Russell Group universities already work closely with both primary and secondary schools to deliver programmes to help raise attainment and widen access to their institutions.<sup>5</sup> Our members also work collaboratively with local HEIs and other Russell Group universities to deliver outreach activities to schools and colleges. Indeed, they have collaborated on a range of long-standing initiatives including:

- [Advancing Access](#), a platform providing resources and CPD to enhance teachers and advisors’ knowledge of university admissions, available across the UK.

<sup>3</sup> HEFCE, POLAR4 classification: A local geography classification for young participation in higher education (2017)

<sup>4</sup> For example, the University of Cambridge runs the Millennium Maths project, a maths education and outreach initiative for ages 3 to 19 and the general public, as well as Isaac Physics, a project designed to offer support and activities in physics problem solving to teachers and students from GCSE level through to university.

<sup>5</sup> For example, King’s College London, along with owning and running their own Maths School, delivers maths tutoring in other local state schools.

- The [Informed Choices](#) website, which provides information on subject choice to students both at the point of choosing their A levels and at university application.
- Biennial Teachers Conferences covering topics such as how to write academic references, admissions requirements, student finance, and information about careers and employability.

Universities cannot drive up school attainment alone, however, and this activity is unlikely to be scalable without additional support from the OfS and Government. **It would not therefore be appropriate to use the APP process to implement any strategy to drive up national attainment standards.** A rigid geographical focus would also risk ‘cold spots’ of provision in areas where there are no local universities, meaning schools might not receive the attention they need. **The variations process for APPs should facilitate collaborative efforts between universities, and with schools and colleges, recognising that this will not necessarily lead to gains in recruitment of specific groups.**

### Supporting innovation and recognising a fuller range of activity

We support the OfS’ appetite for exploring experimental ‘sandbox’ approaches to regulation, to give universities more freedom to trial new access and participation initiatives to understand ‘what works’ and for universities to contribute to a sector-wide evidence base. **Such exploration involves risk and will benefit from an OfS commitment to viewing ‘sandbox’ activity outcomes proportionately.**

**We also encourage the OfS to recognise the full range of activities taking place to widen access and support positive outcomes.** For example, many members deliver initial teacher training programmes along with CPD courses for teachers to support their curriculum knowledge and professional development. In addition, many of our universities are working hard to widen participation to postgraduate education.<sup>6</sup> The additional focus on non-traditional pathways is welcome and should be broadly drawn encompassing degree apprenticeships<sup>7</sup>, levels 4 and 5 and short courses as well as continuing education.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the University of Oxford offers a range of scholarships to support applicants from under-represented groups to undertake graduate study. For the 2022-23 academic year, the University’s Black Academic Futures Scholarships for black students studying at postgraduate level will be expanded.

<sup>7</sup> In total, 14 Russell Group universities deliver higher and degree apprenticeships covering areas such as advanced manufacturing, computer science and engineering

## **Annex A – illustrative case studies of successful access and participation schemes**

### **Access to Leeds, University of Leeds**

Disadvantaged applicants can apply to the University of Leeds through the Access to Leeds and Plus Programme. Applicants complete pre-entry modules consisting of online study skills, tutorials and a subject assignment with accompanying support from a university academic. Successful completion of assessment can lead to a lower offer onto a course at Leeds for applicants who show academic talent but may have been disadvantaged during their A Level studies.

Once at Leeds, students are then supported through the Plus Programme, which is open to a larger number of students who may need additional support. In 2018/19, 880 students registered at the University through Access to Leeds whilst the Plus Programme supported 3,000 widening participation students across all levels of their degrees. The Programme provides transitional and ongoing support to boost retention, student success and graduate outcomes.

Eighty-one percent of 2018 Plus Programme graduates achieved a 2:1 or first-class degree, compared with 66% of students from a deprived background at all English universities. The non-continuation rate for Plus Programme students from a low participation neighbourhood (LPN) was just 5%, lower than the national average.

### **Bursary Scheme, University of Cambridge**

The University of Cambridge offers the majority of its financial support through the Cambridge Bursary Scheme, which provides over £6m per year to UK students from low-income households. Analysis conducted on the bursary scheme found that despite the national trend of students from low-income households underachieving relative to their peers, students in receipt of a bursary had the same outcomes as those not in receipt of a bursary.

Ninety-seven percent of students who received a full bursary continued onto their second year and 86% achieved a positive graduate destination (a graduate-level job or higher-level study).

### **University Schools Trust Sponsorship, Queen Mary University of London**

Queen Mary University of London are the lead sponsors of the multi-academy trust (MAT) University Schools Trust (UST) which currently operates two secondary schools and one primary school in London; St Paul's Way School, Royal Greenwich Trust School and Cyril Jackson Primary School. Three other Russell Group universities sit on the Trust's board; Kings College, UCL and Warwick.

The UST covers the secondary portion of St Paul's Way Trust School, providing education to students aged 11-18 years. In 2009, the school was failing with some of the poorest examination results in the country. Following its collaboration with partners, which established the UST, by 2013 the school was judged as 'outstanding' by Ofsted and is regularly within the top 100 schools in the country in terms of 'value added' for its students.

In 2019, 96% of year 13s at St Paul's Way Trust School went on to study a university degree course and of these, 53% attended Russell Group universities.

### **Sutton Trust Summer Schools**

Eleven of the thirteen Sutton Trust partner universities who organise impactful summer schools for disadvantaged sixth form students are Russell Group institutions. These summer schools give students a real university experience and provide additional information, advice and guidance that the participants may not have received otherwise.

Over the past 10 years, 62% of students who attended a Sutton Trust summer school gained a place at a Russell Group university, and overall, 92% of students who attended a Sutton Trust Summer School gained a place at a higher education institution.

The evidence suggests that exposure to living and learning at university, even for just a week, may increase the chances of a disadvantaged student applying and successfully gaining a place at a higher education institution.