



RUSSELL GROUP

Helping under-represented students succeed in higher education

Higher education can drive social mobility and be transformational for individuals. We are committed to ensuring all students with the potential to succeed have the opportunity to study with us, regardless of their background

The new government has set out a mission to break down the barriers to opportunity and research-intensive universities have a key role to play in delivering this agenda. Building on our extensive collaborative work with schools, colleges and charities, **we look forward to working with the government to help address educational inequality and improve life chances for young and adult learners across the UK.**

The impact of educational inequalities

Gaps in prior attainment in school shape people's life chances for years to come, impacting on access to higher education and labour market success. Existing inequalities have been exacerbated by the loss of learning during the pandemic and the high cost of living; persistently disadvantaged pupils (those consistently eligible for free school meals) are now around one year behind their more advantaged peers by the end of primary school and almost two years behind by the end of secondary school.¹

Educational inequality comes at a cost to both individuals and the country. For our economy and society to thrive in future, we need to draw on all the diverse talent available to the UK. In collaboration with schools, colleges and other partners, universities have a key role to play in helping to tackle educational inequalities, removing obstacles to success in higher education and conducting research to inform impactful policies which can make a real difference.

Narrowing the gap

The number of young students from the most under-represented areas studying at Russell Group universities is growing, with a 35% increase since 2019.² This is the fastest-growing demographic at our universities which has narrowed the gap between the least and most represented students over time.³

Under-represented students at Russell Group universities often perform better than the most represented students at non-Russell Group universities, and comfortably above the quality thresholds set by the Office for Students (OfS):

- 94% of students from the most under-represented areas studying at English Russell Group universities continue onto the second year of their course (OfS threshold is 60%).⁴
- 93% of students from the most under-represented areas studying at English Russell Group universities complete their degree (OfS threshold is 75%).⁵
- 74% of students who were eligible for free school meals (FSM) and go on to study at English Russell Group universities progress to skilled employment or further study.⁶



93% of the most under-represented students complete their degree



74% of FSM eligible students progress to skilled employment or further study



35% more under-represented students since 2019

Research from the Sutton Trust found that **attending a Russell Group university supports disadvantaged students to narrow the gap in labour market success** compared to those who attended private school.⁷

Support for under-represented students to access higher education

Collectively, Russell Group universities make a positive impact on hundreds of schools across the UK every year, reaching thousands of young people through third-sector partnerships and spending an estimated £7m per year on these partnerships.⁸ Our universities work with state schools and colleges in their regions and beyond to provide support, mentoring, curriculum design and continuing professional development for teachers. Many also support local learning centres, academic skills workshops, and campus visits to inspire young people and their families to familiarise themselves with life at university.

[Advancing Access](#) is a partnership between all 24 Russell Group universities which provides a variety of CPD resources, online events and offline conferences for teachers and advisers to help them support students' progression to our universities. All the resources and events are offered free of charge to ensure that teachers, regardless of their access to CPD funds, can support their students – including via sessions on personal statements, UCAS references and contextual admissions processes. As of August 2023, nearly 60% of FE colleges and state schools with a sixth form in England had engaged with Advancing Access. This includes 65% of mainstream state schools and FE colleges in the North East of England.

Co-produced with their local community, the **University of York** has established [The Place](#), a community learning centre which strives to combat the effects of social inequality across the generations in and around the city of York. The initiative strives to close the attainment gap, enhance progression to further and higher education including apprenticeships and training, and forge pathways to fulfilling careers. The centre offers a range of programmes including academic enrichment and targeted interventions, creative after-school and holiday activities, campus and employer visits, mental wellbeing support, and nutritious food provision. The University of York led 18 months of in-depth relationship building with over 250 people to ensure the centre had the support of those living and working locally and has supported more than 300 young people and their families in less than a year.

Universities act as anchor institutions around the country, helping to convene partners within and across regions to improve people's life chances. Our universities recognise the regional disparities in access to higher education, especially in remote rural or coastal areas and in former industrial areas, in turn, supporting initiatives to address educational 'cold spots' or areas with low progression to higher education.

Our universities recognise that under-represented students are not a homogenous group and require a range of interventions to ensure their differing needs are addressed. This is why they have developed tailored interventions which offer the diversity of approach that is critical to delivering impact for students from different backgrounds.

The **University of Exeter** is part of [Next Steps South West \(NSSW\)](#), a consortium of 14 higher education institutions based in Cornwall, Devon and Somerset which works to target schools and students to encourage progression into higher education and raise aspiration and academic attainment. NSSW, which is funded by the OfS, uses targeted outreach focuses on those who can progress into higher education but who live in areas where progression is lower than average. This could be, for example, through workshops for teachers, taster sessions for students or summer schools. The project identifies target schools and a higher education institution in the consortium to work with them.

The [Fast Trackers](#) programme is a joint initiative between the **University of Liverpool** and the Liverpool Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service (EMTAS) which supports Year 11 students from Somali, Yemeni or Black British backgrounds to improve GCSE attainment. The project offers formalised mentoring meetings which can be adapted to each cohort of participants.

The project is strengthened by EMTAS' good reputation in the community and their ability to undertake recruitment through schools and wider connections in the city. The long-term success of the project means that many of those now accessing the programme are doing so through word of mouth, including younger siblings or neighbours of previous participants.

Managing the cost of living and supporting success

Although the rising cost of living impacts all students, those from low-income backgrounds, minority ethnic backgrounds and mature students are more at risk of financial hardship,⁹ and an increasing number of students are taking on part-time work to help fund their time at university. Our universities offer bursaries and hardship funds to help students with the most pressing financial circumstances manage their finances and participate more fully in university life. Analysis from the OfS shows there is strong evidence that bursaries are effective in supporting students' academic success and experience at university. This is seen through the completion of their degree, positive graduate outcomes, enabling them to take a fuller part in social and societal activities and reducing the amount of paid work undertaken or the need to borrow money.¹⁰

In addition to bursaries, Russell Group universities have ringfenced financial support or initiatives for students to help manage the rising cost of living:¹¹

- The **London School of Economics** offers a rent guarantor scheme for students, which supports low-income students whose families might not be positioned to act as a guarantor.
- The **University of Manchester** has a specific Work Experience Bursary which enables students who qualify for financial support from the university and/or the UK government to apply for up to £1,000 to support work experience opportunities each academic year of studies.
- **UCL** provided an additional £500k of accommodation bursaries in 2023/24 to support first-year undergraduate students from lower-income backgrounds to access housing.
- **King's College London** has recruited a team of Money Mentors who work with the Money & Housing Advice Service to support students who might be facing financial difficulty.

To support the most disadvantaged students to succeed at university, government could ease the growing financial pressures on students with **an uplift to maintenance loans to reflect actual average inflation each year and the reintroduction of maintenance grants for the most disadvantaged students** to complement the range of support on offer from our universities.¹²

We would also welcome a review of the parental earnings threshold below which students are eligible for the maximum level of maintenance support. The threshold has been frozen in cash terms at £25,000 since 2008. Had this threshold increased with earnings it would now be closer to £35,000 and tens of thousands more students would be eligible for the maximum level of maintenance support.¹³

Making further progress on breaking down the barriers to opportunity

Whilst steady progress has been made to improve access to and outcomes from higher education for students from under-represented backgrounds, more can be done to accelerate the rate of change. Our universities recognise their responsibility to diversify their campuses and support all their students to reach their full potential, and they have set ambitious targets through their Access and Participation Plans to improve equality of opportunity for under-represented students.

We welcome the government's focus on breaking down barriers to opportunity which recognises the need for a wider drive to tackle inequality throughout the education system, beginning from the early years. **A joined-up, cross-government approach, involving universities, schools, colleges and other partners, will be the most effective way to address the wider social, cultural and financial barriers faced by under-represented students in accessing and succeeding in higher education.**

¹ [Annual Report](#), Education Policy Institute (2023)

² Number of POLAR4 Q1 18-year-old placed applicants 2019-2023, [Equalities data](#), UCAS (2023)

³ Since 2019, there was a 35% increase in the number of 18-year-old POLAR4 Q1 (most under-represented) students, and a 17% increase in the number of 18-year-old Q2 (second most under-represented) students, whereas the number of 18-year-old POLAR4 Q5 (least under-represented) students increased by 12% in the same period. [Equalities data](#), UCAS (2023)

⁴ Continuation rates of full-time, 18-year-old undergraduate students at English Russell Group universities (2021 data for those entering in 2019/20) by POLAR4 metric. [Access and Participation data](#), OfS (2023)

⁵ Completion rates of full-time, 18-year-old undergraduate students at English Russell Group universities (2021 data for those entering in 2019/20) by POLAR4 metric. [Access and Participation data](#), OfS (2023)

⁶ The progression rate for full-time undergraduate students at English Russell Group universities who are eligible for free school meals is 74.1%. NB: There is no regulator threshold for this measure. [B3 data](#), OfS (2023)

⁷ If neither student went to university, on average a private school alumnus is more than three times more likely to be a top earner than a pupil on free school meals, but only around 40% more likely if both attended a Russell Group university. [Universities and Social Mobility](#), Sutton Trust (2021)

⁸ Information from a survey conducted by the Russell Group on its members' partnerships with third-sector organisations. The survey received 20 responses, of which 14 provided an estimate of the average amount spent per annum.

⁹ An [equality impact assessment from the Department for Education](#) found that low-income groups of students would be adversely affected by the real-term decrease in the value of the loan for the 2024/25 academic year. Additionally, students from minority ethnic backgrounds and mature students would be negatively impacted by the 2.5% increase in the loans for living costs.

¹⁰ [Understanding the impact of the financial support evaluation toolkit](#), OfS (2020)

¹¹ More examples can be found in [Cost-of-living support for students](#), Russell Group (2024)

¹² Recent analysis from the Russell Group found that when accounting for the previous government's January 2024 announced uplift to student maintenance, a full-time student living away from home outside London will be left £1,906 short of what the loan would have been had the government raised it in line with inflation since 2020/21. [Cost-of-living support for students](#), Russell Group (2024)

¹³ [Student living cost support cut to lowest level in seven years](#), Institute for Fiscal Studies (2022) and Russell Group analysis of number of additional students which would be eligible.