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Pathways for Potential 2023

Progress towards meeting Pathways for Potential targets on tackling educational inequality and improving access to Higher Education

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Foreword

Published in early 2020, our Pathways for Potential report looked at the work of Russell Group universities to remove barriers to higher education. Identifying both examples of best practice and areas where further work was needed, it set out a blueprint for change with recommendations for universities, the Office for Students (OfS) and the Government.

Three years on, this update highlights that real progress has been made even against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent challenges facing individuals, universities and the country as a whole.

The pandemic changed the way our universities worked with students from under-represented backgrounds, increasing innovation in the methods used for outreach and support. It has also made reaching those people who might traditionally struggle to progress to higher education more important than ever.

Analysis suggests that the impact of the pandemic on young people's learning will be felt for many years to come. Students from groups traditionally less likely to progress to higher education were hit particularly hard. Key stage 2 attainment fell in every subject except reading between 2019 and 2022[1] and the gap in attainment between disadvantaged students and their peers increased in 2020 and 2021 at Key stage 4 and 16-19 education.[2]

Changes to the way post-16 qualifications were graded, and universities' determination to ensure students were not unfairly disadvantaged, saw entrance numbers rise significantly, particularly at higher tariff institutions[3]. The pandemic meant the number of students needing increased academic and other support has also grown, and this is only being exacerbated by ongoing cost-of-living pressures.

Providing students with the additional support they need will require a multi-year sustained effort on the part of Government, schools, colleges, and universities – and we are determined to play our part.

This paper looks at the work that has been done by our universities since 2020 as well as examining how Government and the OfS are working with the sector. It includes findings from a survey we conducted of all 24 Russell Group universities asking how they have taken forward the commitments set out in Pathways for Potential.

In the foreword to the original report, I noted how educational inequality comes at a cost to both the individual and the country. So, as the UK faces up to what may be an extended period of economic and social challenge, it is more important than ever that we continue in a determined way to tackle inequality, champion good practice, and champion those with the potential to succeed.

Dr Tim Bradshaw
Chief Executive, The Russell Group

[1] Key stage 2 attainment, Government statistics
[2] COVID-19 and Disadvantage Gaps in England 2021, Education Policy Institute
[3] Whilst there was a 4% rise in accepted applications at higher education institutions between 2019 and 2021, acceptances to higher tariff institutions increased by 15% over the same period (UCAS end of cycle data 2021).

Introduction



The Pathways for Potential report, published in early 2020, provided crucial insight into the barriers to accessing higher education and the ways in which universities can tackle inequality across the student lifecycle.

The report found that whilst good progress had been made to improve access and outcomes for students from backgrounds traditionally under-represented in higher education, the rate of change was often slow. Russell Group universities therefore committed to improve access and widening participation in five key areas: embedding evaluation, building on collaboration, ensuring senior-level leadership, providing transparent admissions information, and improving opportunities for co-development of initiatives with schools and other partners.

Pathways for Potential also highlighted that while universities have a duty to improve lives through educational opportunities, they cannot achieve this alone.

It discussed the importance of the regulatory environment to encourage collaborative efforts, the crucial role of data and proportionate evaluation, and the need to enable universities to develop access and participation initiatives and targets that are appropriate to their location, student demography and institutional mission.

The report concluded that a wider drive was needed to tackle systemic educational inequality. We called on the Government to take a more strategic approach to tackling inequality across and beyond the education system including by developing a new national strategy and introducing a new Office for Tackling Inequality.

Three years on, this follow-up report provides an update on the progress made by Russell Group universities on the five commitments, as well as insight into the policy and operational changes made by the Government, the OfS and UCAS.

We also set out what more universities, Government and the Regulator can do to keep making progress to reduce educational inequality.

To produce this report, we surveyed all 24 Russell Group universities and conducted in-depth interviews with Widening Participation Directors.

Our survey asked our universities to score their progress on each of the five commitments on a four-point scale: 'a great deal', 'a moderate amount', 'a little' or 'no' progress.

We then asked our universities to evidence the score they chose, providing examples of new or enhanced initiatives, outreach programmes and strategies.

We have included a number of these case studies in this report to provide insight into what progress looks like in practice.

Universities were also asked to explain the barriers to making further progress on each commitment. We have used those responses to develop further recommendations for the Government, the OfS and UCAS to support our universities' work.

We strengthened our understanding of both the progress made and the areas of future development through in-depth interviews with a selection of Widening Participation Directors.

Interviewees helped us to understand better the context of their locality, student demographics, the specific challenges they are facing and how these are being tackled. These interviews contributed to the broader insights contained in this report.

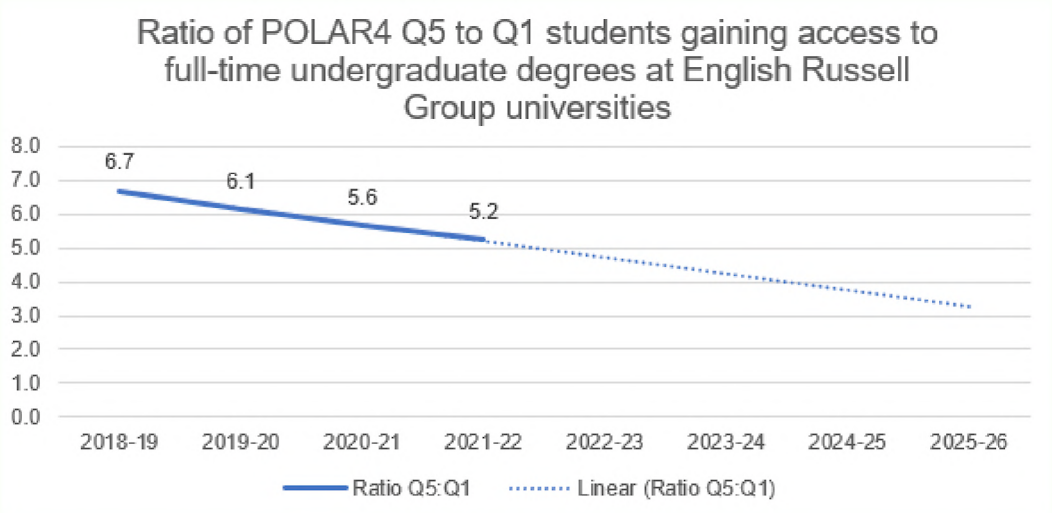
Progress in widening access and supporting positive student outcomes

Russell Group universities have been working hard to narrow the gaps in access and outcomes between students from the most and least represented parts of the UK, as measured using POLAR4[4] (an area-based measure of disadvantage).

Sustained investment is helping to create more opportunities so that students with the talent and determination can access the benefits of an excellent higher education and then succeed in their studies and beyond.

Russell Group universities' investment in access and participation initiatives is helping to close the gap in progression to higher education. OfS Access and Participation data shows that **across all English Russell Group universities, the proportion of students from the least represented areas starting full-time undergraduate courses increased each year between 2018/19 and 2021/22.**

Furthermore, the ratio between students from the most and least represented areas fell by 22% over this period (from 6.7:1 to 5.2:1).[5] If current trends continue, we could see the ratio decrease to 3.1:1 by 2025/26.



Supporting under-represented students so they can successfully complete their course has also been a clear priority for our universities. Many have developed academic and pastoral programmes to support those students more likely to struggle with their studies or balancing university with other commitments.

[4] This dataset measures the participation of students in higher education by local area. These areas are classified into five groups or quintiles, ranging from Quintile 1 (the least represented) to Quintile 5 (most represented) in higher education.
[5] The Q5:Q1 ratio is a simple ratio of the proportion of Q5 students compared to the proportion of Q1 students in the academic year.

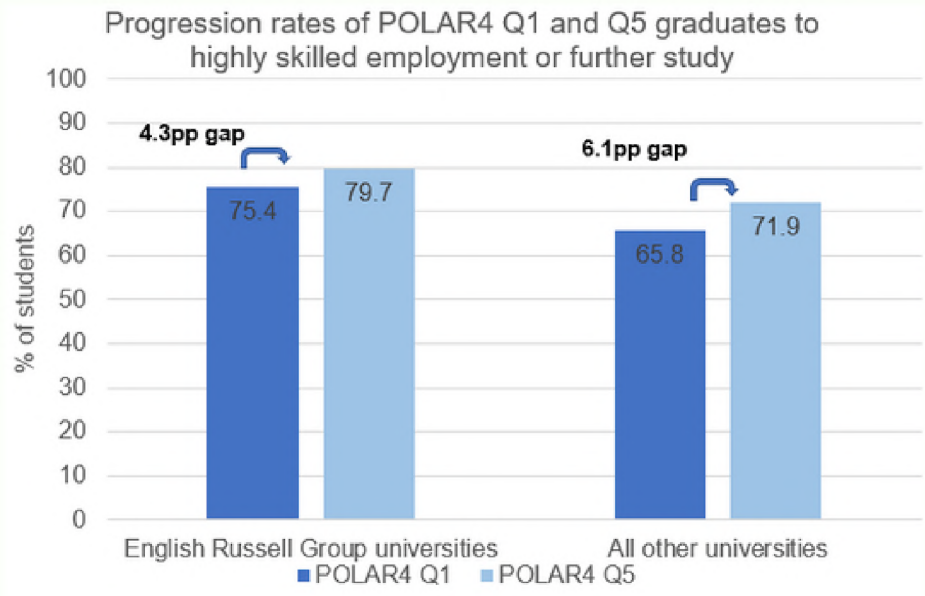
Students from the least represented areas of the UK have higher continuation rates [6] (93.6%) at English Russell Group universities than students from similar backgrounds (88.6%) and even those from the most represented areas (92.2%) at non-Russell Group universities.

Completion rates for those students from the least represented areas are also high at English Russell Group universities (93.1%) and higher than those students from the most represented areas studying at non-Russell Group universities (90.4%).

However, our universities acknowledge there is more to be done given there are still gaps between the continuation and completion rates of those students from the most and least represented areas studying at English Russell Group universities (3.5 percentage points (pp) and 3.8pp respectively).

Our universities are supporting students from all backgrounds to succeed in their chosen studies and beyond, delivering highly skilled graduates into the UK workforce.

Whilst there is a gap in the outcomes of students from the most and least represented areas at English Russell Group universities (4.3pp), success rates are high with 75.4% of those students from the least represented areas in highly skilled employment or further study 15 months after graduation. This compares to 71.9% of students from the most represented areas studying at non-Russell Group universities.



[6] Russell Group analysis of Office for Students Access and Participation statistics

Over recent years, OfS targets for English universities have focussed on POLAR4 and we have therefore assessed progress using this measure[7]. However, as the original Pathways for Potential report noted, there are limitations to using area-based data to identify the most under-represented students, especially in large urban areas. We therefore welcome the OfS's recent move away from using POLAR4 data.



The most recent OfS access and participation dataset instead reports against a number of different measures of disadvantage including TUNDRA, IMD and ABCS.[8] This diversification is welcome, and our members will be looking to use data most relevant to their local context when designing access initiatives and setting future targets.

[7] Unfortunately, the absence of comparable data across the devolved nations prevents an analysis of the progress of all 24 of our universities as a collective. Furthermore, without assessing individual institutions, analysis of our members in devolved administrations is not possible because of their small numbers.
[8] Tracking under-representation by area (TUNDRA), Index of multiple deprivations (IMD) and Associations between characteristics of students (ABCS).

Commitment 1: Embedding evaluation across the full range of access and participation activities

By developing a better understanding of what works, evaluation helps to ensure interventions are effective and maximises the impact of resources available. A better evidence base helps support continued progress across the sector.

Where were we in 2020?

By 2020, our universities were embedding evaluation into the design of their access and participation initiatives, using a range of different approaches. Many were bringing academic experts and practitioners together, involving students, developing dedicated evaluation units and improving data collection and analytics.

Case Study: Cambridge Bursary

Pathways for Potential highlighted evaluation by the University of Cambridge to assess the impact of its Cambridge Bursary for disadvantaged students.

This analysis found that 97% of students in receipt of the bursary continued onto their second year of study, and 86% achieved a positive graduate destination (a graduate level job or higher-level study).

Following this evaluation, the University of Cambridge expanded this bursary to include students whose household income is below £62,000, previously the bursary was available to those with household incomes up to £42,000.[9]

Pathways for Potential highlighted the significant challenges in evaluating initiatives to widen access and support participation, including difficulties in access to data and linking up data to track outcomes of participants, especially those at pre-16 level.

The report also noted the need for evaluation to be proportionate and appropriate to the activity in question to ensure smaller-scale initiatives and those where impact is difficult to prove (for example in the provision of information, advice, and guidance) continue to be viable.

[9] Cambridge Bursary scheme thresholds.
https://www.cambridgestudents.cam.ac.uk/cambridgebursary

What are our universities doing now?

Whilst the Pathways for Potential report found that our universities were already embedding evaluation into their widening participation programmes, it highlighted changes which could be made to increase the efficacy of evaluation findings, support future improvement of interventions and create standard practices for evaluation.

Almost all (21 of 24) Russell Group universities report they have made a 'moderate amount' or a 'great deal' of progress or were already meeting this commitment before publication of the original report. These universities have embedded evaluation across all appropriate interventions, often meaning that evaluation is put in place from the start and a culture of evaluation is clear. The remaining three institutions have been focusing on developing new evaluation strategies and putting in place the right resources and staff but have not yet fully embedded evaluation across all interventions.



Russell Group universities use evaluation methods that are appropriate and proportionate to the access initiatives they have in place, which will vary depending on their local context. Given this, a variety of methods are employed across our universities. For example, testing pupils' understanding before and after taking part in a programme or analysing data to understand the conversion of a student from an intervention participant to applicant.

Common actions include the recruitment of specialist evaluation roles within widening participation teams including PhD and postdoctoral positions, independent evaluations and investment in evaluation through internal student analytics processes.

Eleven Russell Group universities are members of the Network of Evaluating and Research University Partnership Interventions (NERUPI), a community of higher education providers seeking to reduce inequalities in higher education through sharing best practice and expertise.[10]

[10] https://www.nerupi.co.uk/about/our-members

Case Study: The Inclusive Newcastle Knowledge Centre

The Inclusive Newcastle Knowledge Centre (INKC) was established in 2020 to ensure high quality evaluation of the university's access and participation commitments and to share best practice across departments.

The INKC is led by a Professor of Practice who brings together expertise from widening participation practitioners to establish trusted relationships, a shared understanding of the purpose and power of evaluation and innovative and creative approaches to 'what works'.

Staff, students and partners are drawing on and leading collaborative projects across 7 universities to examine the impact of peer review to lend strength and credibility to evaluation. The INKC liaises closely with other evaluation-rich partnerships, such as to provide valuable insights to Newcastle's outreach partners.

Where next?

Russell Group universities will continue to prioritise monitoring and evaluation, building on the work that they have done to put in place more robust evaluation processes that will improve understanding of what works across the sector.

The improvements that have been made in recent years, along with the increase of academic expertise in building new evaluation processes, will continue to drive further access and participation gains, helping more people from under-represented groups progress to higher education and secure high-quality qualifications that can open up more opportunities to rewarding, skilled work.

Whilst our universities in England welcome a greater focus on evaluation from the OfS, **it is important that it promotes a proportionate approach and recognises the challenge of evaluating certain activities, such as attainment-raising in schools, given the range of factors influencing this beyond university interventions.**

With evaluation processes only as good as the quality of the data they can use, we welcome moves from UCAS and governments to examine how universities can gain access to more accurate widening participation datapoints and to consider how pupil-level tracking can be used to ensure interventions are targeted effectively. We are encouraged by formation of the Access Data Working Group in Scotland and look forward to seeing the outcome of this work.

Commitment 2: Building on Russell Group universities' collaborative work, with each other and other institutions, to reach more people and teachers in areas with lower levels of higher education provision or where fewer students progress to higher education

We recognise no single institution or organisation has all the answers when it comes to widening participation in higher education.

Collaborative partnerships between universities, further education (FE) colleges, and charities working with under-represented groups are important to pool resources, avoid duplication and share evidence and effective practice.

Pathways for Potential highlighted that collaborative working to improve attainment, raise expectations and build links with local communities is highly valuable, even if it does not lead to more under-represented students progressing to the universities directly involved in this work.

Where were we in 2020?

By 2020 each of our universities had put collaboration with key partners like schools and colleges at the centre of efforts to deliver on access targets in their local context.

This joint work had led to successful initiatives that were providing alternative routes to higher education for adults with few or no higher qualifications as well as providing good quality information, advice, and guidance to support informed choices for young learners.



Feedback from Russell Group universities suggested that in some cases the regulatory framework and metrics used were discouraging joint working to provide the best possible offer for students.

For example, pressure from the OfS to recruit as many students from target groups as possible was, in some cases, deterring English institutions from pooling resources to maximise the impact of their work.

The report therefore recommended the Regulator take an approach to recognise collaborative initiatives and efforts by universities to provide under-represented groups with the broadest choice of post-18 options including those outside of their own institution, given the benefits this would deliver to all students.

54% **Teachers at 54% of state schools and FE colleges in England have benefitted from admissions guidance through the Russell Group's Advancing Access scheme**

What are our universities doing now?

All Russell Group universities have reported making either a 'great deal' or a 'moderate amount' of progress on this commitment or were already collaborating extensively before 2020.

There has been continued progress in developing strong working relationships with schools and FE providers. All 24 of our universities deliver access programmes for both pre- and post-16 pupils and their teachers and/or parents. Almost all (21) deliver access programmes for primary aged children and/or their parents and teachers and 17 deliver programmes for mature learners.

New programmes have been established such as the University of Glasgow's partnership with 6 FE colleges in West Scotland, offering under-represented students the opportunity to articulate directly into year 2 of an undergraduate degree after completion of a Higher National Certificate (HNC). To be eligible for this programme, applicants must be from an under-represented background which includes living in an area with low participation in higher education.[11]

[11] More information can be found here about the University of Glasgow HNC Articulation programme https://www.gla.ac.uk/study/wp/hncarticulation/

Whilst the pandemic put significant additional resource constraints on work to pursue new partnerships, all 24 Russell Group universities reported that they continued to build new links with schools and colleges alongside measures to support students and staff through Covid-19.

This work has included the opening of the University of Liverpool Maths school in September 2020, a specialist state maths school for talented post-16 learners. Five Russell Group universities have now opened maths schools and two more plan to open schools in September 2023.These specialist schools produce outstanding results for talented students regardless of background. In 2021/22, 100% of King's College London Maths school students achieved A*- B across all subjects, with 96% achieving A* in A Level Maths.[12]

Changes in delivery models forced by pandemic restrictions have helped stimulate discussion and review of working practices to ensure support is as accessible as possible for students, parents and other key stakeholder groups, aiding those who need it the most.

Queen's University Belfast spearheaded a partnership between three universities and six further education colleges in Northern Ireland to develop a programme for students transitioning to further and higher education in 2021. The initiative, funded by the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland), included pre-entry support over the summer and in-year wellbeing and academic support.

The pre-entry support involved providing students with access to online courses curated by The Open University to develop subject-specific skills and general study skills to help prepare them for higher level study. This initiative was subsequently expanded to Jumpstart University, an open platform supporting all UK students transitioning to higher education and developed through a collaboration of Russell Group universities and The Open University. [13]

While joint work continues, our survey of Russell Group universities found that regulatory disincentives to collaboration remain a challenge and are making it harder for practitioners to set out a clear business case for joint interventions.

This is a particular problem where support from one university has been successful in increasing the number of under-represented students progressing to higher level study at other institutions. For example, around 79% (4,400) of those attending the UNIQ summer school at the University of Oxford between 2013 and 2018 went on to study at another Russell Group university.[14]

[12] A Level results, King's Maths School. https://www.kingsmathsschool.com/about/results
[13] https://www.open.edu/openlearn/jumpstart-university
[14] Note that this is only including UNIQ students for whom the University of Oxford has full data records. Numbers have been rounded.

Case Study: Advancing Access

Advancing Access is an advice and guidance service focused on widening participation targeted primarily at schools and colleges which have a higher number of disadvantaged students and lower than expected progression rates to selective universities.

The service is funded and supported by all 24 Russell Group universities and provides teachers and advisers with Continuing Professional Development (CPD) resources designed to help them support students to progress to competitive higher education institutions. All 24 universities have committed to fund the project until at least 2028.

Advancing Access had a successful online offering in place prior to the pandemic, meaning that it was well positioned to continue to support teachers and advisers between 2020 and 2022 through online virtual conferences and smaller virtual CPD sessions, drawing on expertise from Russell Group universities.



93 CPD sessions for schools and colleges were held in 2021/22 with 1,545 teachers and advisors attending and almost 1,000 new website registrations allowing access to a library of webinars and training materials, a year-on-year increase of more than 15%. More than half (54%) of all mainstream state schools with a sixth form and FE colleges in England have now engaged with Advancing Access.

An analysis of UCAS application data completed by researchers at King's College London concluded that schools and colleges that have engaged with Advancing Access have seen greater increases in application rates to Russell Group universities when compared against a group of similar schools which had not engaged.

Where next?

With evidence suggesting the educational impact of the pandemic is being felt disproportionately by students from under-represented backgrounds, a collaborative approach to boosting attainment and progression to higher education and addressing cold spots of outreach activity is more important than ever.

The renewed focus from the OfS's Director for Fair Access and Participation on earlier, longer-term interventions in schools is welcome. Whilst universities alone cannot be responsible for raising school attainment, our universities are working hard to identify evidence-based interventions that can help boost attainment and disseminate this knowledge so it can benefit students in schools across the UK, including those in cold spots.

Ensuring regulatory incentives support joint work with schools will also help programmes which bring together higher education and FE institutions to develop effective strategies to boost progression rates.

Incentives encouraging collaborative working with schools, colleges and between universities is also something that needs to be considered within the devolved administrations. We would encourage, for example, the Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access to consider this topic as work continues to develop a new framework for fair access.



Commitment 3: Ensuring ownership of efforts to widen access and support student success sits with Presidents, Vice-Chancellors and their senior teams

Pathways for Potential found that senior management accountability and strong leadership on access and participation is essential to ensuring clear priorities can be set and embedded across the institution and the right resources can be made available. A joined-up strategy is crucial to ensure that all those with responsibility for supporting students from pre-entry through to graduation are working together.

Where were we in 2020?

There was a high level of commitment to delivering on ambitious access and participation targets across the Russell Group, with senior leaders taking active roles in the delivery of widening participation efforts.

Vice-Chancellors, Pro-Vice Chancellors, and other executive board members frequently took on direct roles in specific projects, but this was sometimes on an ad hoc basis and involvement was not always embedded formally within governance structures.

What are our universities doing now?

All 24 Russell Group universities have made a 'great deal', a 'moderate amount' of progress or were already meeting this commitment prior to 2020.

Widening participation and access is now formally championed or owned by a named individual within the senior leadership team at all Russell Group universities.

Models of accountability for access and participation vary across the Russell Group with universities designing mechanisms which work best in their institutional context.

Common actions include setting ambitious Key Performance Indicators and the appointment of access champions who work across the institution to embed best practice and drive work to widen access and support student success.

Case study: Leading by example, University of Southampton

At Southampton, a recent restructure has seen access and participation being clearly embedded across the organisation, and responsibility evidenced within their governance structures through joint committees and the University Executive Board having ownership.

University of Southampton's President and Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mark Smith, was the first in his family to go to university and speaks openly about his experience and his understanding of the issues faced by students who have come from similar backgrounds to himself.

Over the past two years, under Professor Smith's leadership, Southampton has developed a wider range of programmes that support both access onto University of Southampton courses and degree attainment. In the academic year 2021/22, their pre-entry academic skills team alone has worked with around 5,000 students in over 130 schools and colleges.

Where next?

The OfS's new Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR) sets out the sector-level risks to equality of opportunity in English higher education. Russell Group universities will want to ensure that their management and governance structures enable them to effectively respond to the EORR but also consider risks in their local context and prioritise the most effective and impactful interventions accordingly.

We will facilitate discussion amongst our membership on different models for ensuring senior ownership of access and participation and share experiences of the benefits and limitations of different approaches.

Commitment 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

Russell Group universities have developed admissions policies that are designed to support applicants from under-represented backgrounds, which vary based on the specific needs of prospective students and the local context of the institution.

Whilst this variation is helpful in responding to the challenges different students face, it can make processes difficult for prospective applicants to navigate.

Pathways for Potential underlined the importance of transparency throughout the admissions process, and in particular, the need to ensure applicants from under-represented backgrounds have access to clear information on contextual admissions policies. The report also highlighted the scope for UCAS and others to support the work universities are doing in this area.

Where were we in 2020?

By 2020, our universities had all contributed information on contextual admissions through the Advancing Access platform, to be used in CPD sessions with teachers and advisors across the country. This data was freely available year-round through online training materials.

Discussions had also begun with UCAS to explore options for how information on contextual admissions could feature in their course search tool, making the information easier for applicants to access. However, types of contextual admissions guidance varied by institution and there was room for improvement to ensure all prospective students understood the processes and support on offer.



Initiatives had been established to provide targeted support and information to different applicant groups. For example, in 2017 the University of York partnered with FutureLearn to develop free short courses for applicants to support their subject knowledge and understanding of the application process in an engaging way. Their offering included a course on preparing for interview, diverse routes into higher education and one to support mature learners.

Our universities had also developed transition programmes and early interventions to ensure prospective applicants were equipped with the right information at the right time. For example, Cardiff University established a free two-year programme for college and sixth form students from disadvantaged backgrounds[15] their academic preparedness and equip them with the right skills and knowledge to successfully navigate the application process.



What are universities doing now?

All 24 universities have made a 'great deal' or a 'moderate amount' of progress on this commitment or were already meeting this commitment prior to the original report.

Actions have included reviewing information on their websites and improving content for outreach activities on the admissions process and what to expect and prepare for.

[15] Cardiff University's Step-Up programme. https://cardiffoutreach.education/en/get-involved/step-up/

Pathways for Potential highlighted a particular need to improve information to students who may be entitled to a contextual offer.

Specific actions have been taken to increase transparency of policies related to contextual offers that reflect local feedback from students, teachers, parents and others, including:

- Publishing information about contextual admissions policy on university websites.
- Embedding information about contextual offers into outreach work with schools and colleges.
- Providing guidance on how applications meeting contextual admissions criteria will be treated throughout the admissions process.
- Providing potential applicants with an online postcode checker to provide individual, targeted information on contextual admissions.[16]

Case study: Departmental admissions statements, University of Bristol

Since 2020, the University of Bristol has overhauled online admissions information to provide prospective applicants from under-represented groups with an easy to navigate guide to course criteria across every academic department within the university.

This work standardised the type of information included in departmental admissions statements to ensure consistency across the institution.

Guidance provided to admissions teams has helped ensure online materials include clear and tailored information on how applications are assessed, how contextual admissions work, the weighting placed on GCSEs and level 3 qualifications, what they are looking for in a personal statement, what to expect at interview and specific information for mature applicants.[17]

Where next?

Providing enough information to be useful without overwhelming applicants remains a difficult balance to strike and admissions teams are continuing to refine the materials they provide to prospective students, supported by monitoring and evaluation including feedback from current students, service users and other key stakeholders.

[16] Location-based data such as POLAR quintile is not used by every Russell Group university for contextual admissions purposes.
[17] Each departmental statement can be found here: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/apply/admissions-statements/

New digital tools like postcode checkers and detailed admissions statements which allow for specific, personalised guidance for applicants from under-represented groups are changing the way universities can provide students with the right support.

Russell Group universities will continue to consider how new technologies can be used alongside the extensive face-to-face advice they provide through outreach with local schools, FE colleges and other routes.

Our universities will continue to update information for applicants to ensure it is accurate and reflects changes to level 3 qualifications.

For example, although only around 1,000 students have completed new T Level qualifications so far[18], the majority (22 of 24) of Russell Group universities already have in-depth information related to the new qualification on their websites with 17 Russell Group universities accepting these qualifications for some of their courses.

Admissions policies related to T levels will be reviewed on an ongoing basis as new subjects and courses become available to level 3 learners.



[18] T Level results, Government data. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/provisional-t-level-results/2021-22

Commitment 5: Building on 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

Parents, teachers, and current and prospective students have unique insights into the issues access and participation initiatives are seeking to address.

Putting their experiences at the centre of widening participation work is crucial and Russell Group universities use a range of strategies to co-develop impactful interventions.

18 **Russell Group universities sponsor a multi academy trust, run a maths school or have formal partnership arrangements with local schools**

Where were we in 2020?

Pathways for Potential found that our universities were already engaging with prospective and current students, parents, teachers, and advisers in developing their approach to access and widening participation initiatives and strategy.

This was evidenced through their work with students' unions, engagement with teacher training experts and work with current and prospective students from specific demographics.

These efforts were, and are, continuing to help ensure universities understand local access challenges and develop interventions suitable for their local context. Whilst it was evident that effective co-development of widening participation activities was well developed at Russell Group institutions, more could be done. Our universities therefore committed to improve and increase this co-development work where possible.

What are universities doing now?

Most (18) Russell Group universities have made either a 'great deal' or a 'moderate amount' of progress on this commitment or were already conducting a high level of co-development with a range of stakeholders before 2020.

Our universities are now engaging with service users on more projects and often in more meaningful ways.

In 23 of our universities, current students from under-represented groups are now actively engaged in developing access and participation initiatives, while the remaining university is in the process of producing a new evidence-based strategy that will be seeking views from current students. Around half (13) of our universities also involve parents when developing their access programmes.

Our universities reported pandemic pressures led to changes in planned co-development of new outreach activities. While a number of additional interventions were launched during this period, the challenge of shifting resources to support online delivery of existing outreach activities meant the scale and scope of new programmes was more limited than would have been the case under normal circumstances.

An example of one new initiative is the online tutoring programme launched by the London School of Economics, which aims to tackle attainment gaps in GCSE by matching undergraduate students with small groups of year 10 and 11 students at local schools. The tutoring sessions have been aimed at students in receipt of the Pupil Premium who are, on average, over one grade below their expected attainment level.

Widening participation teams devoted more time and effort to supporting the larger cohort of under-represented students who started courses in 2020 and 2021, many of whom needed additional support. Teachers and families also faced new challenges through the pandemic, which had the effect of restricting their capacity to engage in joint working initiatives.

While successful digital interventions have been maintained post-pandemic to boost accessibility, work to develop new, impactful programmes is now fully underway again. In doing so, all our universities report they have reviewed or will review the way they embed the expertise of service users, parents and teachers in widening participation initiatives.

Where next?

Co-design of widening participation initiatives is crucial in ensuring interventions are targeted effectively and provide prospective and current students with the right support at the right time. **Our universities will be creating more opportunities for service users to help shape widening participation programmes, including talking to existing students to identify and address the most serious risks to equality of opportunity.**

We recognise that schools and colleges who are our partners in this work are themselves facing significant cost pressures, which in many cases is impacting their ability to contribute time and resources needed to prioritise these initiatives. A number of Russell Group universities are responding by increasing support for schools to enable them to engage and co-develop activities.



Case study: Civic University Agreement, Queen Mary University of London

Queen Mary University of London - the first university to be awarded the Platinum-level Engage Watermark by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) in 2021 - launched its Civic University Agreement in 2022. This Agreement formalised Queen Mary's longstanding commitment to supporting East London's society, culture and economy.

The development of the Agreement involved a community listening campaign and the commissioning of independent analysis into the university's impact on the local economy and society. Queen Mary then worked with the local community to consider these insights and co-create its Agreement.

'Pathways for Life', one of the five priority themes in the Agreement, includes commitments that focus on supporting young people through outreach and widening participation programmes.

For example: to deepen and extend its relationships with education providers across East London, including co-sponsored and other local schools; to ensure young people across East London are aware of and have access to Queen Mary as a place to learn; to further develop its Degree Apprenticeship programme; and to provide new educational and employment opportunities in partnership with further education, employers and the NHS, including through the new London City Institute of Technology and Whitechapel Life Sciences development.

Working with Government and the OfS

There are no quick solutions when it comes to tackling stubborn educational inequality and this is not a problem that universities can tackle alone. Only through effective collaborative work across Government, regulators, universities, schools and others will we be able to make and secure further progress.

Stretching targets to eliminate gaps in progression to selective universities in coming years will not be met without sustained efforts to address the full range of barriers facing disadvantaged people – social, cultural and financial.

The original Pathways for Potential report included a series of recommendations for Government and the OfS to boost the ability of universities to design and implement ambitious, impactful access and participation programmes.

Office for Students

Where things were in 2020

Pathways for Potential called on the OfS and relevant bodies in the devolved nations to ensure the right regulatory incentives were in place to support universities in improving access and participation for under-represented groups.

Specific recommendations included:

- 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.
- Working with universities, government departments, UCAS and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) to unify and make available pupil-level datasets used to indicate disadvantage and enable more accurate student tracking.
- Going further in encouraging collaboration between universities by rewarding institutional contributions to widening participation sector-wide.
- 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.
- Continuing to build expertise in evaluation and identifying and addressing gaps in the evidence base including through the development of the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO).

What is the OfS doing now?

Since 2020, the OfS has worked to address a number of the recommendations set out in Pathways for Potential. A new Director for Fair Access and Participation has been appointed and consulted the sector on the future of access and participation regulation in England.

The intention of this review, to ensure proportionate regulation, an enhanced focus on evaluation and to enable providers greater flexibility in responding to local and national challenges, has been welcome. However, it is worth reflecting that engaging and responding to these changes, including a mandatory variation process in 2022, has required significant resource from universities.

Now that the OfS has published guidance on its new approach to regulating of equality of opportunity[19], there is an opportunity for stability and for institutions to focus resource on meeting these new regulatory requirements and delivering for students.

With educational inequality emerging in early years, incentivising long-term interventions that provide targeted support for children from a young age is vital. **The OfS has been clear in their approach to the new round of Access and Participation Plans (APPs) that universities will be encouraged to integrate long-term interventions and targets into their four-year plans. This is an important and welcome change.**

This shift in mindset by the Regulator must be reflected in the way long-term initiatives are monitored. We will work with the OfS to help identify monitoring options for such schemes, so these are not judged by short-term evaluation criteria.



[19] Regulatory Notice 1, Office for Students.
https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/12221897-d0d7-4f37-9c6d-4197db178cfd/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance-march-2023.pdf

The new APP guidance makes clear that universities are now being encouraged to use a range of measures to set and measure Widening Participation (WP) targets.

This is a positive step that will help universities use data most relevant to their local context when designing access initiatives. It will be a particularly important change for universities serving large urban areas where pockets of deprivation and disadvantage can be overlooked when relying on blunt, area-based data, such as POLAR, the limitations of which were described in Pathways for Potential.

Many universities rely on Uni Connect partnerships to support their collaborations with local schools, colleges and other higher education providers. The infrastructure that the Uni Connect programme provides is especially important in eliminating cold spots of support for under-represented students.

The cuts in funding to the Uni Connect budget[20] are therefore a concern and the OfS will need to be clear with the English higher education sector on its future role and intentions in supporting collaborative initiatives.

Where next?

The new APP guidance addresses a number of the issues raised in Pathways for Potential. The challenge now is to ensure the regulatory approach taken by the OfS and how this is applied in practice flows from this guidance.

We also consider that it should be a priority for the Director for Fair Access and Participation to ensure the regulatory burden placed on registered providers by the OfS is proportionate.

While it is important universities are accountable against APP targets and meet their conditions of registration fully, unnecessary red tape diverts energy away from the kind of impactful work outlined in this report.

A risk-based regulatory approach to widening participation which enables flexibility to suit individual universities' local contexts and supports proportionate evaluation will help maximise resources available for student support.

In this context it is a concern that the Regulator is now expecting providers to 'significantly increase the volume and quality' of their evaluations regardless of their current practice.

[20]The OfS cut Uni Connect funding from £60 million in 2020-21 to £30 million in 2022/23.

Whilst this may be appropriate in institutions where evaluation has not been sufficiently prioritised in the past, it could lead to disproportionate evaluation in those institutions already leading the sector in this area and result in resources being diverted away from delivering interventions.

The OfS's Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR) sets out the sector-level risks to equality of opportunity in English higher education. Whilst this national assessment of risk should be a helpful resource for institutions, we welcome that universities are being encouraged by the Regulator to reflect challenges and prioritise risks according to their local context.

Government

Where things were in 2020

Pathways for Potential identified an urgent need for join up between different parts of government to support a drive to tackle educational inequality. Drawing on evidence from successful initiatives in other areas of public policy, the report also called for long-term policy making and a national strategy to drive sustainable interventions.

Specific recommendations included:

- Committing to a new 10-year national strategy to tackling educational inequality, including the creation of national targets to enhance accountability.
- Creating a new Government Office for Tackling Inequality to achieve buy in across government departments and coordinate work.
- Considering how the National Pupil Database (NPD) could be made more accessible and user friendly to help universities identify, track and target prospective applicants from disadvantaged groups with appropriate support.

What is Government doing now?

Significant progress has been made in some areas, notably in improving the quality of data available for universities to guide widening participation initiatives.

Since 2020, the DfE in partnership with UCAS has delivered free school meal eligibility information to universities at point of application. Whilst the timing and delivery format could be improved to ensure all institutions can use this data to help with the early assessment of applications, access to this data has been welcomed by our universities. UCAS has also increased its provision of datapoints related to access and widening participation and now collects care leaver and estranged status on applicants.

While the Government has not committed to a new 10-year national strategy to tackle inequality across the educational lifecycle and beyond, work has been done to create cross-departmental strategic working groups to consider issues of inequality, guided by the Equality Hub within the Cabinet Office.

Elements of Government responses to work from the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities and others have also touched on issues relating to educational inequality, with recommendations adopted including a number of actions designed to promote equality of opportunity.

Where next?

We support the ongoing work of both the Government and UCAS to improve data quality further. This includes the development of new Pupil Parent Matched Data (PPMD) created by DfE which links children to their parent's income to provide a fuller picture of family circumstances.

Whilst this is welcome, further consideration is needed to determine how PPMD and other verified data could be shared with universities to support them in identifying applicants that may need additional support or could benefit from contextual admissions.

In addition, the NPD could be made more accessible and user friendly to help universities identify, track and target prospective applicants from disadvantaged groups with appropriate support.

Greater consideration should also be given to ensuring comparable and consistent datapoints and pupil-level tracking across the devolved administrations to support universities in targeting students earlier and providing them with the support they need when entering higher education. This would be particularly helpful for those universities where there is high cross-border flow of students.

UCAS plans for a new 'grades on entry' tool that will provide information to applicants on the A Level grades that previous successful applicants achieved to gain a place.

The view is that this will improve information for students who do not have access to a careers adviser. Whilst we support the aim of transparency and ensuring applicants have the information they need to make informed choices, it will be important to avoid any unintended consequences in implementing this tool. For example, students accepted on highly selective courses often exceed the entry requirements and their individual offer which may make these courses look even more competitive and demotivate under-represented students from applying.



The impact of the pandemic and associated challenge of closing stubborn attainment gaps presents a significant obstacle to successfully meeting ambitious WP targets. Support provided by Government through Priority Education Investment Areas, the Recovery Premium and other schemes is welcome. However, evidence of a significant and long-term pandemic effect on outcomes from early years onwards underlines the case for a single, national strategy to tackle educational inequality.

It would also be helpful for Government to give more prominence to educational inequalities and measures to address these in its levelling up ambitions and recognise the important role played by universities as part of this.

Closing pandemic attainment gaps from the early years onwards is crucial to delivering sustained increases in the number of qualified applicants from under-represented groups able to progress to highly selective university courses. Failing to support school pupils effectively would risk progress towards widening participation in the longer term. In the shorter term, urgent action is needed to ensure cost-of-living pressures do not undermine or reverse the significant progress that has been made towards widening participation.

Cost-of-living challenges are impacting disproportionately on students from disadvantaged groups, with a survey from the Sutton Trust finding that a third of students from working class families have skipped meals to save money on food costs. The same survey found that a quarter of students say they are less likely to finish their degree as a result of the cost-of-living crisis.[21] Separate research led by students' union colleagues from Russell Group universities[22] showed students from certain groups were more likely to report having considered dropping out as a result of financial pressures: this includes 37% of estranged or care experienced students, and 33% of disabled students.

[21] Sutton Trust, 26 Jan 2023, https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/cost-of-living-and-university-students-2023/
[22] Cost of Living report, Russell Group. https://russellgroupstudentsunions.org/cost-of-living-report

Universities are working hard to reach individuals at higher risk of non-continuation and are investing tens of millions in additional hardship funding.

Given these circumstances the overall level of maintenance support on offer to students is something that needs urgent attention.[23] The 2.8% uplift to maintenance loans and grants announced by the Department for Education in 2023/24 is far below the rate of inflation and contrasts starkly with the 9.4% uplift promised by the Welsh Government[24] and similar commitments made by the Northern Ireland Executive[25] and Scottish Government[26]. We estimate students in England stand to lose out on £1,500 a year as maintenance loans fail to keep up with inflation since 2020/21.[27]

£1500 **some students in England will lose out on £1500 a year in 2023/24 as maintenance loans fail to keep up with inflation**

Further action is needed from Government to increase support via the maintenance loan and increase the parental earnings threshold to ensure more students are eligible for the maximum loan. Without this support we are concerned there will be an increasing impact on students' studies and wider mental health and wellbeing.

Action of this sort, alongside longer-term measures such as the reintroduction of maintenance grants, would help reassure disadvantaged applicants that higher education remains affordable and would complement additional hardship funding introduced by universities to protect progression rates and outcomes.

More broadly, Government will need to consider how financial pressures facing institutions, given the real-terms decline in funding, may start to impact on the quality of education and support they can provide to students, including the most disadvantaged. Our analysis has shown that by 2024/25, per student funding in England is projected to be lower in real-terms than in 2011/12, before higher fees were introduced. Indeed, it will be at its lowest point this millennium.[28]

There is an opportunity over the next couple of years for the sector and Government to come together and look at a new funding formula that will protect the pipeline of skills and high-quality education for the benefit of all students and the wider UK economy and society.

[23] Cost of living support response, Russell Group. https://russellgroup.ac.uk/news/russell-group-universities-step-up-support-for-students-in-response-to-cost-of-living-crisis/
[24] https://www.gov.wales/welsh-students-get-more-help-living-costs
[25] https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/lyons-announces-40-increase-student-maintenance-loans-202324
[26] https://www.gov.scot/news/increased-support-for-students/
[27] Maintenance loans, Russell Group. https://russellgroup.ac.uk/news/students-to-lose-out-on-1500-as-maintenance-loans-fail-to-keep-up-with-inflation/
[28] https://russellgroup.ac.uk/media/6094/rg-funding-resilience-briefing-note-2022.pdf

Conclusion

Russell Group universities have made great progress in shifting the dial on access and participation.

Since the original Pathways for Potential report in 2020, our universities have implemented new programmes, restructured where necessary and put greater emphasis on evaluation.

New collaborative partnerships have emerged between universities, colleges and local schools to improve access to higher education across the board, not just at Russell Group universities.

Local needs have driven the shape and scale of this work. Some universities have sponsored, fully financed, or even created their own multi-academy trusts and schools.

Others have developed foundation years for highly selective courses including medicine, unlocking more opportunities for students who would have otherwise lacked the qualifications to apply for the most academically challenging STEM courses.

A strong focus on transparency has been key as Russell Group universities have implemented new programmes to improve the quality of information available to applicants, teachers and advisors.

Vice-Chancellors and senior staff are taking the lead on access and support for under-represented students through formal governance structures and strong and inspirational leadership.

The commitments our universities made in 2020 were not a ceiling on our ambitions to support students from under-represented backgrounds. We are committed to making further progress in the five areas set out in Pathways for Potential, and the principles of that report will continue to shape widening participation efforts.

Our performance against these commitments will be reviewed again as part of work to prepare new APPs.

It is hard to imagine a more challenging policy context for government, universities, further education colleges and other partners as we work to head off a potential “perfect storm” that could threaten recent gains and undermine long-term efforts to deliver equality of opportunity.

Universities are working hard to reach individuals at higher risk of non-continuation and are investing tens of millions in additional hardship funding.

The progress made since the publication of Pathways for Potential has seen significant improvements in access to and success of under-represented students in higher education. To support Russell Group universities – and others – to protect this positive momentum and build on it, we further recommend:

Government reviews its maintenance support for students.

Current maintenance support has been eroded by inflation and the rising cost-of-living is presenting significant challenges to students. The work that universities have done to support under-represented students into higher education risks being undone without long-term reliable financial support from Government.

The OfS takes a proportionate approach through its new APP process, with appropriate flexibility for English institutions to tailor approaches to their local context. This should include:

- Supporting a proportionate approach to evaluation.
- Ensuring institutions feel confident to use a range of metrics to set and measure WP targets.
- Ensuring its approach to monitoring APPs supports long-term interventions and targets that go beyond the four-year plans.
- Enabling universities to respond flexibly to local risks, drawing on the national framework provided by the EORR as appropriate.
- Auditing its approach after a period of time to ensure it has indeed been risk-based and proportionate.

Governments across the UK work with UCAS to provide more government-verified and pupil tracking data to universities.

This should include but not be limited to:

- Household income, benefits in receipt of and whether any interventions were carried out with the student, for example, a health and education plan.
- Databases that allow universities, colleges and schools to work collaboratively, by tracking students from GCSE through to university graduation would further support work to tackle inequalities and tailor support.
- Ensuring comparable and consistent datapoints and pupil-level tracking across the devolved administrations to support universities in targeting students earlier and providing them with the support they need when entering higher education.

Glossary of terms

Associations between characteristics of students (ABCS) - A set of measures which aims to improve understanding of the outcomes different groups of people are likely to experience across the student lifecycle.

Access and participation plans (APPs) – These plans set out how higher education providers in England will improve equality of opportunity for disadvantaged and under-represented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education. Most providers will be submitting new plans in Spring 2024 for 2025-26 and these will be in place for 4 years. APPs are regulated and monitored by the OfS.

Attainment – Grades achieved at school and university.

Care experienced – Anyone who has experienced the care system at any point in their lives.

Care leaver – A young person who has been in the care of, or has been given accommodation by their local authority (LA) for a period of at least 13 weeks before the age of 16.

Cold spots – Areas with lower levels of higher education provision or where fewer students progress to higher education.

Contextual admissions – Admissions processes which take into context the social and/or educational background of the applicant.

Continuation – Refers to students staying in higher education after their first year of study.

Disadvantaged – Applicants, students and graduates who have experienced barriers to accessing higher education. These can include different circumstances, such as family income, geographical location, or different characteristics and identities such as ethnic background or whether the individual is care experienced.

Foundation year – An alternative route into higher education through an additional year of study prior to starting a degree course which supports students to achieve the academic requirements needed.

Free School Meals data – This dataset identifies children who are entitled to receive free school meals because their parent(s) or guardian(s) fall into a certain income bracket. There is a marked difference in the number of students who are eligible for this benefit and those who actually receive free school meals. This report refers to students who are eligible to receive free school meals.

Mature students – Students entering higher education over the age of 21.

National Pupil Database – An English database, overseen by the Department for Education, which contains information about pupils aged 2-21 based on multiple data collections.

Office for Students (OfS) – The English regulator for higher education providers.

POLAR4 – This dataset measures the participation of students in higher education by local area. These areas are classified into five groups or quintiles, ranging from Quintile 1 (the least represented) to Quintile 5 (most represented) in higher education. POLAR4 is an area-based measure rather than a measure of individual disadvantage.

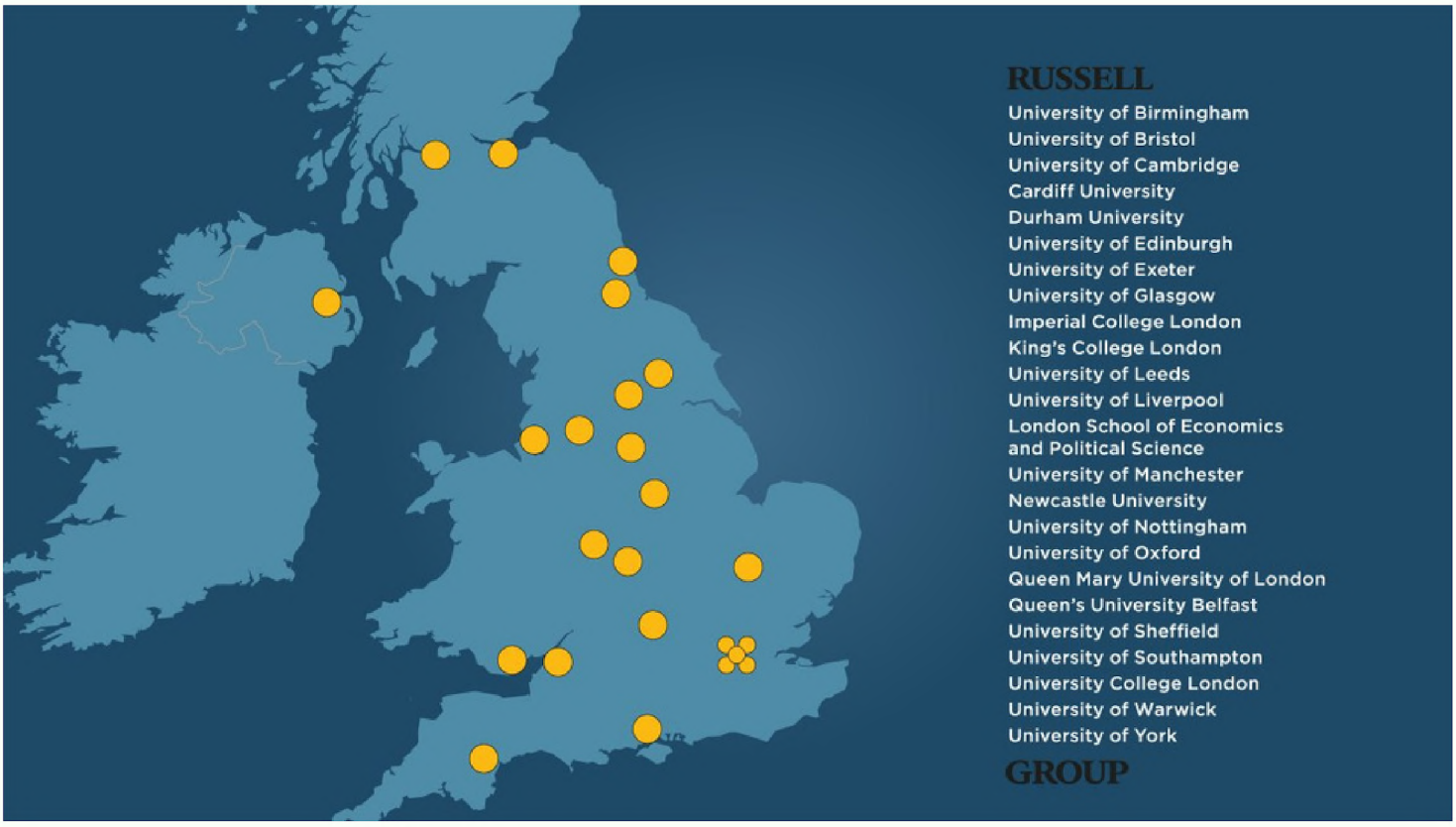
Progression – Refers to what happens to students once they graduate (i.e. if they continue into further study or skilled employment).

Success – This generally refers to students continuing and completing their degree, attaining well and progressing into further study or highly skilled graduate employment. However, individual students and universities will have their own measures of success (as this is a highly complex concept to define).

Tracking under-representation by area (TUNDRA) – This is an area-based measure that uses tracking of state-funded mainstream school pupils in England to calculate young participation. It is an official statistic.

Under-represented – Refers to students who live in areas within the quintile with the lowest levels of participation in higher education, as defined by the POLAR4 metric.

Widening participation – Refers to efforts to increase the rate of access to higher education for those who are currently not well represented in the sector.



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