

Research Briefing No. 31

Widening participation in Russell Group universities: The High-Potential Learners Project

Key findings and implications for Policy Makers

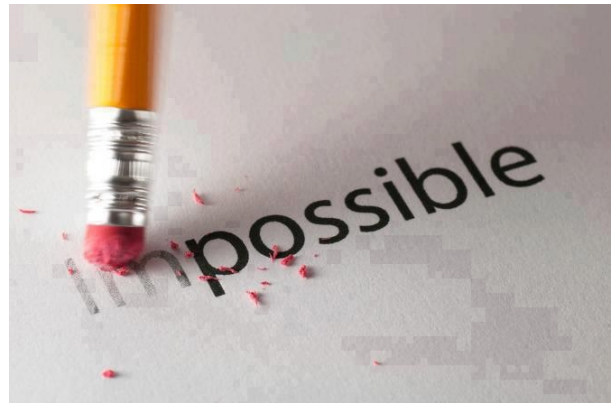
A focus on quality, comprehensiveness and consistency of advice and information may help students in their decision making about university applications. Advice needs to focus clearly on the choice of facilitating subjects at 'A' level and prior to that in the choice of GCSEs that can lead to facilitating subjects.

High-attaining learners from different backgrounds may require different kinds and degrees of support tailored to an awareness of their specific context, family and cultural background. This may also involve more actively engaging in dialogue with families around the different options available to young people and how these relate to future career choices and life aspirations.

Advice should be focused around key "crunch" points in students' decision-making processes: choice of A levels; selecting degree subject; UCAS applications (and whether to do this at the start of Year 13 or at the start of a gap year); receiving predicted grades; and receiving offers from universities. Students may benefit from a sustained relationship with school staff so they can access holistic support at each of these stages.

Schools may benefit from relationships with HEIs to help:

- define the role(s) of teacher(s) with special responsibility for HE;
- provide support for other key players such as parents and subject teachers;
- and offering timely, appropriate advice to students.



The research

The research provides new evidence on key influences on the decision-making of disadvantaged learners with high potential from different types of low-performing institutions. Many high-achieving students are in school and home contexts where university attendance is not taken for granted, but have the potential to go on to RG universities.

Using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods, this research investigated which home, school, and personal characteristics of KS5 students are the key influences on decision-making potentially leading to HE and RG university participation.

The first strand identified a set of key influences from quantitative analysis of a large-scale nationally representative dataset of learners at Key Stages 4 and 5 who could have potentially started HE in 2010. The second strand tracked 44 sixth-form students in 2013/14 and 2014/15 as they progressed through the decision-making process about university applications, in the contemporary context of the current economic recession and increased tuition fees.

Research design

Strand 1: Secondary analysis of the Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England (LSYPE) dataset. We used logistic regression to assess the predictive strength of a range of home, school and personal characteristics for RG participation in 2010 among those with GCSE points score in the top 25% of the national distribution, who chose to begin A-level study in Year 12. We focused in particular on those students in schools and colleges in the bottom 40% of average attainment at KS5.

Strand 2: Case studies of 44 students who have achieved highly in KS4, from five different institutions in the bottom 40% of average attainment at KS5, including schools and FE colleges from rural, urban and large city areas. These case studies focused on the decision-making processes involved in young people aiming towards entrance to RG universities, and how schools support these aspirations. Students took part in 5 interviews and focus groups over the course of their sixth-form studies, to track the development of their thinking about HE applications. Parents and school staff were also interviewed to understand the support given to young people.

Further information

Our work shows how academic factors, such as choice of facilitating subjects at A-level and grades achieved, account for much of the RG participation gap between HPLs in different institutions. This points to the need for greater understanding of how and why learners choose A-level subjects, and how this relates to university choice.

Rose, J. et al (2015) Playing the game of university applications: High-potential learners in schools with low average attainment. Paper at BERA, Northern Ireland.

Rose, J. et al (2015) Understanding opportunities: How do high-attaining learners from schools with low average attainment navigate the process of applying to university. Paper at ECER, Hungary.

Washbrook et al (2015) Elite university participation among high-attaining learners: The role of individual- and school-level characteristics. Paper presented at "Ethnicity and Inequality: The role of aspirations and education" symposium, University of Bristol.

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