

**RUSSELL
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Pathways for Potential 2023 Summary







Introduction

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

Three years on, this follow-up report provides an update on the progress made by Russell Group universities against the five commitments they made in the original report and sets out what more universities, Government and regulators can do to keep making progress in reducing educational inequality.

The findings of this report are based on detailed surveys of all 24 Russell Group universities and in-depth interviews with 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.





What progress has been made?

Russell Group universities' investment in access and participation initiatives is helping to close the gap in progression between students from the least and most under-represented areas of the UK into higher education.

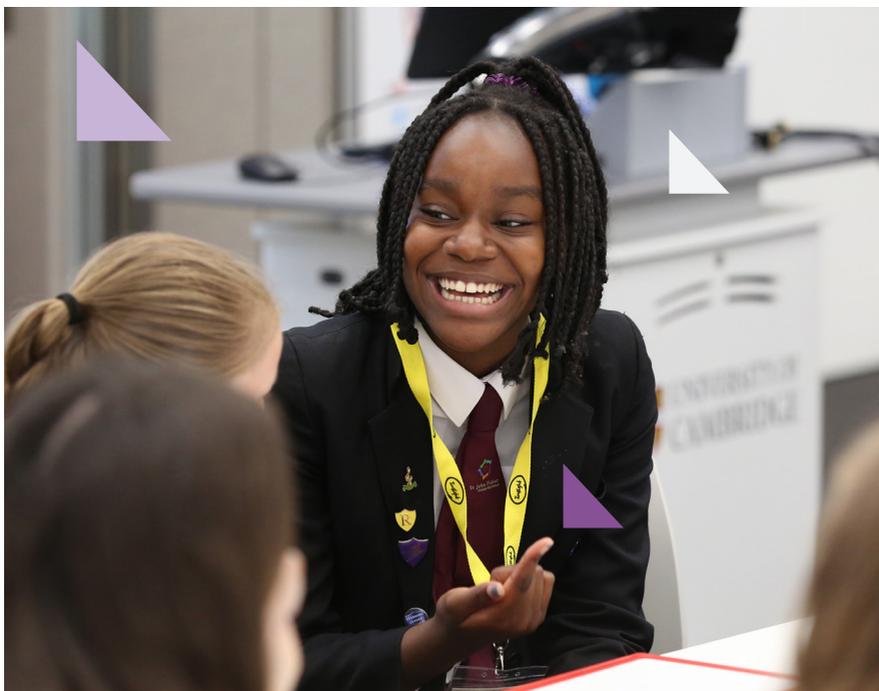
Across all English Russell Group universities, the proportion of students from the least represented areas starting full-time undergraduate courses increased each year between 2018/19 and 2021/22. This progress has been supported and consolidated by work to deliver against the five commitments our universities made in Pathways for Potential.



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

Almost all (21 of 24) Russell Group universities reported they have made progress or were already meeting this commitment before publication of the original report.

These universities have embedded evaluation across all appropriate interventions and have a culture of evaluation. The remaining three institutions are currently focusing on developing and resourcing new evaluation strategies.



Commitment 2: Building on Russell Group universities' collaborative work to share information and reach more people and teachers in areas where fewer students progress to higher education.

Every Russell Group university reported making progress on this commitment. All our universities create access programmes for both pre- and post-16 pupils and their teachers and/or parents. 21 create access programmes for primary aged children and/or their parents and teachers, and 17 create programmes for mature learners.



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

Russell Group universities that were not already meeting this commitment in 2020 all reported progress - with widening access and participation now formally championed or owned by a named individual within the senior leadership team at all Russell Group universities.



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.

All Russell Group universities reported making progress on this commitment or were already meeting this commitment in 2020. Actions have included reviewing information on their webpages, improving admissions content delivered in schools and colleges, and increasing transparency of policies related to contextual offers.



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.

Despite the challenging context of the pandemic, most (18) Russell Group universities have made progress on this commitment or were already conducting a high level of co-development with a range of stakeholders before 2020.

Almost all (23) of our universities engage with current university students from under-represented groups in developing access and participation initiatives and the remaining university is producing a new evidence-based strategy that will be seeking views from current students.



New challenges

Students and families from under-represented groups have been impacted disproportionately by pandemic learning disruption that has affected attainment from the early years onward, and serious cost-of-living increases risk undermining recent progress on continuation and learning outcomes.

Addressing these challenges is not something universities can do alone and Pathways for Potential included a series of recommendations for Government and the OfS to help tackle educational inequality.

Significant progress has been made in some areas, notably in improving the quality of data available for universities to guide widening participation initiatives. We also welcome the positive response from the OfS to a number of Pathways for Potential recommendations, including in its approach to the new round of Access and Participation Plans that encourages universities to set long term targets.



To help Russell Group universities respond to new challenges, protect widening participation gains since 2020 and build on them, we recommend:



Government reviews maintenance support for students. This funding has been eroded by inflation as the rising cost-of-living is presenting significant challenges to students. We estimate students stand to lose out on £1,500 a year as maintenance loans in England fail to keep up with inflation since 2020/21.



The Office for Students should take a proportionate approach through its new Access and Participation Plan process, with appropriate flexibility for English institutions to tailor approaches to their local context.

This should include supporting a proportionate approach to evaluation and ensuring institutions feel confident using a range of metrics to set and measure widening participation targets.



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 data, and whether any interventions were carried out with the student, for example, a health and education plan.

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