

## Widening access to university: Step change needed to support talented learners from disadvantaged backgrounds

Professor Leon Tikly, University of Bristol  
Dr Jo Rose, University of Bristol  
Dr Liz Washbrook, University of Bristol

Ms Wan Yee, University of Bristol  
Dr John Hill, educational consultant

### About the research

Many high-achieving students who have the potential to go on to Russell Group universities come from disadvantaged school and home contexts where university attendance is the exception rather than the norm.

The *High-Potential Learners Project* examined the factors which drive the decision-making of such students with regards to their university choices, by looking at their home, school and personal characteristics. The project explored individual factors such as: the nature of career aspirations; financing considerations; knowledge of opportunities and the “system”; self-confidence; and perceptions of school and teacher support; and school- and teacher-level factors, such as: school ethos; parental engagement; and influence of mentors and role models.

The study, undertaken between 2013 and 2016, analysed data from two groups: a nationally-representative sample of 2,290 high-attaining students, who could have potentially entered higher education in 2010; and a separate group of 44 sixth-form students in 2013/14 and 2014/15 (see ‘further information’ for detail on the methodology).

**The choice of facilitating\* subjects at A-level plays a crucial role in students’ ability to access Russell Group universities.**

### Policy implications

- The provision of advice for students should be timed to coincide with “crunch” points in students’ decision-making processes: choosing A level and degree subjects; making UCAS applications; receiving predicted grades; and receiving offers from universities. Students would benefit from a sustained relationship with school staff and being able to access holistic support at each of these stages.
- The benefits of choosing facilitating subjects at A level, and prior to that GCSEs that can lead to facilitating subjects, should be highlighted to students.
- Support for high-attaining learners from varying family and cultural backgrounds should be tailored to their specific contexts. This would involve more actively engaging in dialogue with families around the options available to young people and how these relate to future career choices and life aspirations.
- Schools should build stronger relationships with higher education institutions. Teachers with special responsibility for these relationships can support students’ progress to higher education, and provide support for other key players such as parents and subject teachers to facilitate students’ progression to higher education.

\* Facilitating subjects are those most commonly required by universities to get on to a range of degree courses

## Key findings

- The research reveals that choice of facilitating subjects at A level and grades achieved account for much of the Russell Group participation gap between high-potential learners in different institutions. There is a need for greater understanding of how and why learners choose A level subjects, and how this relates to university choice.
- For students within the case studies undertaken, family and school were shown to be key influences in decision making. With many families having limited experience of university, schools and colleges had an important role to play in introducing students to university language and culture and in developing students' confidence.
- When making decisions about which universities and subjects to apply for, students within the case studies considered characteristics of the university, such as: concepts of quality; familiarity with a university; location; and what universities want from their applicants; as well as personal characteristics, such as: what they see as the role of education; their own performance at school and how that relates to their changing aspirations; and the ways in which A level subjects channel them into particular pathways.



## Further information

This research used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. Quantitative analysis was undertaken of a longitudinal, large-scale, nationally representative dataset of high-attaining learners who turned 18 in 2009/10, to understand what influenced the likelihood of their participation in a Russell Group university. A series of interviews was conducted with 44 individual sixth-form students in 2013/14 and 2014/15, to probe in more depth how and why decisions around higher education and Russell Group applications were made, within the context of an economic recession and increased tuition fees.

### For further related reading see:

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

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.*

Washbrook et al (2015) *Elite university participation among high-attaining learners: The role of individual- and school-level characteristics.*

*Papers available from the researchers on request*

### Contact the researchers

Professor Leon Tikly:  
[leon.tikly@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:leon.tikly@bristol.ac.uk)

Dr Jo Rose: [jo.rose@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:jo.rose@bristol.ac.uk)

Dr Liz Washbrook:  
[liz.washbrook@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:liz.washbrook@bristol.ac.uk)