



Department  
for Education

# **School and College-level Strategies to Raise Aspirations of High- achieving Disadvantaged Pupils to Pursue Higher Education Investigation**

**Research brief**

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## Introduction

This research briefing reports a study conducted by TNS BMRB and the Institute for Policy Studies in Education (IPSE), on behalf of the Department for Education. Although there is a wealth of research relating to participation in Higher Education (HE), there has been no definitive audit of strategies and activities that schools and colleges use to raise aspirations. This research sought to gain a better picture of this landscape of activity and to investigate which strategies and activities might provide the key to best support high achieving disadvantaged pupils to pursue HE.

## Key findings

### Prioritising aspiration-raising

- There is almost universal agreement in schools and colleges that it is more important to think about all possibilities that are available to students, not just applying for HE.
- The majority of the surveyed institutions agree that encouraging pupils/students to apply for HE is one of their highest priorities (with particularly strong agreement in 11-18 schools (70 per cent) and colleges (73 per cent)).
- While aspiration-raising is seen as less of a priority in 11-16 schools, this is largely because their students do not enter HE directly and, as such, these schools are focused on a wider set of post-16 destinations. Nevertheless, most 11-16 schools state they are trying to increase the number of students who go on to HE.
- In this context, raising attainment and progress are seen as important precursors to raising aspirations for HE in some schools and colleges. This can be important both in terms of meeting minimum grade requirements but also in terms of raising students' aspirations more generally.
- Prioritisation of aspiration-raising varies by geographical location, with London schools making this a particular priority. The difference appears to relate to the relatively high proportion of disadvantaged students in London schools and colleges as well as their close proximity to a large number of HEIs (including selective or leading universities).

### Strategies and activities

- More generally, (across all surveyed schools and colleges) aspiration-raising activities with high-achieving disadvantaged students were reported in 50 per cent of 11-16 schools, 39 per cent of 11-18 schools and 40 per cent of colleges.
- Nearly all surveyed schools and colleges reported at least some activities to raise aspirations among students – with activities most often delivered one-to-one or through small groups.
- The range of activities measured by the survey was diverse but with a particular

focus on guidance about the application process, inviting speakers/visitors into the school or colleges, visits and residential trips and, to a lesser extent, mentor and ambassador schemes.

- Case studies identified key strategies used by schools and colleges in their aspiration raising work that were felt to be particularly effective. These included a focus on guidance, information and advice; specific support for aspirations for HE; and, in particular, an emphasis on students gaining experience of university, through trips, residential visits and summer schools.
- Working with students' parents and carers was also deemed to be very important.
- Staff and students both highlighted the importance of tailored and targeted activities – for example, visits which are focused on activities and learning in the specific subjects students are interested in.
- Activity prior to KS4 remains limited – schools and colleges tend to concentrate activities in the run up to exams at the end of the Year 11 and in the final two years before pupils / students leave.
- Schools tended to identify disadvantaged pupils using eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM), whereas colleges were more focused on socioeconomic and geographical definitions – including postcode.
- There was widespread acknowledgement in case study institutions of the gap in participation in HE between disadvantaged and other students. These schools and colleges had a range of measures to address this, targeted specifically at disadvantage students.
- The range of activities with high-achieving disadvantaged students reflects wider strategies that schools and colleges employ – but with a slight skew towards more tailored and/or one-to-one work.

## **Raising aspirations to apply for Russell Group and other selective or leading universities**

- Nearly all surveyed respondents said their schools or colleges talked to students about different types of HE institutions, including selective or leading universities. Even in 11-16 schools, 80 per cent said they did this.
- In the case-study schools (those with well-organised programmes of activities designed to inform students about HE), there was generally a high-level of awareness of different types of university among students. In the 11-16 schools and the colleges, students' awareness tended to be more limited.
- The Russell Group was one of the most frequently talked about groups within HE – along with selective or leading 'local' universities and Oxford and Cambridge.
- According to the survey, encouraging applications to Russell Group universities was also widespread.
- At case study schools and colleges, emphasis was placed on consideration of the most appropriate universities for individual students and the course they wanted to do in relation to predicted grades. High-achieving students were, on the whole, encouraged to apply to selective or leading universities.
- Specific partnerships with Russell Group universities were most common among 11-18 schools. Survey findings suggest more than half of these schools have a

formal or informal partnership with one of the 24 universities that comprise the Group.

- In the case studies, the term 'link' rather than 'partnership' was more often used, reflecting what were, often informal connections, between schools and colleges, and HEIs. Examples of more well established links included universities regularly funding travel for prospective students to visit.
- The proactive work that Russell Group universities do meant that links were often instigated by HEIs. Other links had been established some time ago through Aim Higher. The commitment of individual staff in schools and colleges to develop and maintain such links appeared to be key to their success.
- Despite widespread recognition of the Russell Group in the survey responses, encouraging applications to these universities among high-achieving disadvantaged students was not common – 14 per cent 11-16 schools, 28 per cent of 11-18 schools, and 29 per cent of colleges say they do this.

## **Perceived barriers and challenges to aspiration-raising activities**

- The financial cost of attending HE was judged to be the biggest challenge to aspiration raising in schools and colleges. Three quarters or more of respondents to the survey in all types of institution described this as a challenge.
- The case studies suggest that financial concerns were a much broader challenge than simply the cost of tuition fees. Educating students about the financial impacts (both in terms of costs and potential longer term benefits) was felt to be an important part of the work that schools and colleges do.
- Other commonly-cited challenges in the survey included students not feeling like HE is 'for them', issues related to support from parents, concerns about living away from home, and students favouring other opportunities such as work or vocational qualifications. Although these were mentioned by less than half of schools and colleges amongst survey respondents they were also evident through the case study work.
- The case studies highlighted a number of broader challenges faced by students, including family support, cultural barriers, locality, and attainment levels. However, the case studies, and in particular, responses from students, challenged the assumption that parents or family constitute a significant barrier to HE.
- Challenges related to aspiration-raising among high-achieving disadvantaged students were felt to be similar (with financial concerns remaining the main concern) amongst survey respondents – although more specific challenges included 'family background' and there being no history of going to HE within the family.
- Other specific challenges among high-achieving disadvantaged students raised by staff in the survey included a lack of motivation to attend (13 per cent of all respondents mentioned this) and lack of confidence (12 per cent).

## **Monitoring outcomes for pupils/students by schools and colleges**

- While nearly all 11-18 schools and colleges monitored numbers of applications

made by students (96 and 99 per cent), less than half (42 per cent) of 11-16 schools do this. This suggests that for schools with no sixth form (11-16 schools) there is a lack of accurate destinations data post-18.

- Despite survey evidence of schools and colleges monitoring applications, the case studies illustrate that monitoring and evaluation practice within institutions is variable, and generally unsystematic, raising questions about the extent to which such monitoring is used and acted upon.
- Case study data also suggests that schools and colleges' evaluation of the success or otherwise of aspiration raising activities and the impact these have on applications to HE from their students is less well developed.
- Furthermore, monitoring applications from disadvantaged students was relatively uncommon – a third or less of those surveyed that monitored applications generally, did so specifically for disadvantaged students (as low as 10 per cent in 11-16 schools).
- The UCAS tracking system was the predominant method by which 11-18 schools and colleges monitor applications to HE - both generally and specifically for disadvantaged students. Internal monitoring through careers discussions, questionnaires and headcounts were also used by around half of these institutions.
- 11-16 schools tended to be reliant on feedback from the colleges that their pupils go on to attend (42 per cent used this to monitor applications).

## **Funding activities and use of Pupil Premium**

- Survey findings reveal that that 44 per cent of 11-18 schools and 57 per cent of 11-16 schools were using Pupil Premium to help fund aspiration-raising activity at the time of the survey.
- Similarly the case studies illustrate that the Pupil Premium funding is being used, in some cases, to support aspiration-raising activities and work specifically with disadvantaged students.
- While Pupil Premium is being used in this area, concerns were raised that it did not adequately replace the support offered by the Aim Higher programme.
- Most often, surveyed schools were using Pupil Premium to fund activities with disadvantaged students.
- There was some limited evidence that schools with higher proportions of FSM were more likely to use Pupil Premium for aspiration-raising, although this is limited to 11-18 schools.
- Around a third (36 per cent) of schools that used Pupil Premium to fund aspiration-raising activities said it had allowed them to develop completely new activities. Although, it was more common for Pupil Premium to be used to expand existing activities (55 per cent) or continue those that might otherwise have been stopped (76 per cent).

## Background

Participation in Higher Education (HE) has increased substantially in the last twenty years. Research by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) suggests an increase from 30 per cent participation of 18-19 year olds in the mid-1990s to 36 per cent at the end of the 2000s. However, despite increased participation, the gap in participation in HE between disadvantaged and other students is well documented. The Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) reported that in 2013 (based on data from the 2010/2011 year) while a total of 35 per cent of pupils in England went to HE overall, 20 per cent of that proportion were pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM).

These gaps are most noticeable when looking at participation in 'selective or leading' HE institutions in the UK. This is the case for universities that form the Russell Group and this is one of the key driving factors behind this study.

## Aims of the study

The primary aims of this research were to:

- investigate the strategies used by schools and colleges to support high-achieving disadvantaged pupils in different year groups to pursue Higher Education and, in particular, to apply to Russell Group universities;
- provide evidence on the extent to which high-achieving disadvantaged pupils are already supported in schools and colleges and identify best practice and where support could be improved;
- assess whether the Pupil Premium is being used by schools and colleges to support these activities.

## Methodology

The methodology consisted of three strands: a nationally representative telephone survey of 400 schools with a purposive boost sample of schools that were known to send a high portion of high-achieving disadvantaged students to HE; a telephone survey of 100 FE and sixth-form Colleges; and, 10 case studies drawn from institutions identified in Strands 1 and 2 as exemplifying good practice and selected to ensure maximal variation.

## Conclusions

Several key issues emerge from this report:

### Identifying 'disadvantage'

There are differences in how institutions defined and operationalized 'disadvantage'. Although the main measure used by the Department for Education is eligibility for FSM, a range of other criteria was also evident, including lower socio-economic group, looked after children, Special Educational Need and postcode. These definitional issues have implications for both the monitoring and targeting of activities.

### Monitoring and evaluation

In terms of monitoring, FSM was often used in relation to attainment, but it was rarely used in the context of HE aspirations and outcomes, reflecting the perceived appropriateness of FSM in this context noted above. Further, there was little evidence that monitoring of aspirations and outcomes was used systematically to inform practice. Clearly, monitoring and evaluation is one area where practice could be improved.

### Targeting

In general, a mix of both universal and targeted provision was adopted by most case study institutions. The evidence showed several factors associated with targeted approaches: staff tended to first identify those who are high-achieving for specifically targeted aspiration-raising activities, there were some concerns expressed about the students who were missing out and the academic/vocational divide could limit opportunities for some disadvantaged students.

### Raising aspirations and attainment

Raising aspirations and raising attainment tended to be seen as highly interlinked in case study institutions, with activities initially aimed at addressing one of these often seen as naturally leading to the other. There was evidence of aspiration-raising with younger pupils in the sense of 'widening horizons' and academic goals; concerns about 'getting the grades' were expressed more widely in relation to older students. Furthermore, 'attainment' was identified as a key challenge to aspiration-raising work in the case study institutions, in particular in relation to disadvantaged students (for some students, unless attainment can be raised then raising aspirations to attend HE was less relevant).

### Recommendations for best practice

The report ends with a number of recommendations for schools and colleges, and for supporting the work of those institutions.





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