

Final Report

Evaluation of Advancing Access

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Executive Summary

We are pleased to provide this report of our evaluation of Advancing Access. This report brings together the findings of the mixed-methods analysis investigating impacts of Advancing Access' services on both staff and students. The evaluation incorporated data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and Advancing Access, as well as directly-collected quizzes and the insights of teachers and current university students.

We find overall that Advancing Access is a valued service to teachers and school staff, and that it likely improves their knowledge of how to support students. Advancing Access has been particularly successful in responding to COVID-19 by expanding its provision online and increasing its reach. We also find some evidence that Advancing Access is having a positive impact on the number of applications that students submit to Russell Group institutions, and no evidence of an accompanying drop in success rates. Our analysis does not provide significant evidence that this has translated into higher progression rates to RG institutions, which is a key point where both further analysis may be warranted in the future, and a disjunct that Advancing Access may want to proactively address.

This executive summary provides a summary of the findings of the evaluation, alongside a summary of our recommendations for ways that Advancing Access can strengthen its offer and its evaluation activities going forward.

Summary of findings

- We find weak evidence that schools who engage with Advancing Access have a more positive trend in numbers of students applying to selective (specifically, Russell Group) institutions between 2017 and 2020. Encouragingly, we see no difference in rate of offers, suggesting that schools engaged with Advancing Access are increasing applications from pupils who are as likely to be accepted, and without a decline in application quality.
- We find no evidence of schools that engaged with Advancing Access between 2018 and 2020 having more positive trends in progression rates to Russell Group institutions from 2017 (before schools engaged with Advancing Access services) to 2020 (after schools engaged with Advancing Access services)
- We also see no linear relationship between marginal increases in engagement with Advancing Access, and increases in progression rates.
- We find that Advancing Access is overall increasing its reach into schools, and proportionally more target schools have had some kind of engagement with Advancing Access between 2016 and 2020. We do not find evidence of meaningful differences in rates of uptake of Advancing

Access resources for target vs. non-target schools, once engaged. Flexible and free-of-charge online resources are a major driver of teacher engagement. These changes warrant consideration for ongoing inclusion in Advancing Access' offer post COVID-19.

- We find evidence that teachers had higher quiz scores across key areas of information, advice and guidance (IAG) at the end of a continuing professional development (CPD) session compared to before it. On balance we consider it likely that this is mainly caused by knowledge-gain as a result of the CPD, but we cannot rule out influences of other factors (such as teachers putting more effort into the post-quiz), and we cannot gauge the extent to which this knowledge is retained in the medium/long term. Contextual admissions processes were identified as a key area of knowledge deficit by both teachers we interviewed and students who participated in focus groups.
- Staff we interviewed reported feeling more confident in disseminating information about universities, and valued the support that Advancing Access provided there. We did not see any meaningful differences between the support that young people from Advancing Access schools reported receiving and the support that young people from other schools reported receiving. This may be something that Advancing Access should consider incorporating into its ongoing monitoring activities; for example, including questions around school IAG support into surveys conducted with member institutions.
- Although teachers spoke positively about Advancing Access' role in their overall careers guidance approach, including the Gatsby Benchmarks, they viewed Advancing Access as marginal in this compared to other resources. Ways that Advancing Access could position itself as more central to careers strategy are to highlight the relevance of Advancing Access to particular elements of the Gatsby benchmarks, for example Benchmark 8, more clearly and to consider producing student-facing material that teachers can easily apply and forward to their students when providing careers advice.

Summary of recommendations

1. Explore why progression rates are not increasing at the same pace as applications, to determine whether there are ways of addressing this in Advancing Access' offer.
2. Continue to run impact analyses as new years of data become available from UCAS. We are happy to provide the list of comparator schools identified, as well as replicable details of the method, to facilitate this.
3. Explore further which components of the Advancing Access offer are most effective, and how teachers can be encouraged to engage in those components as a priority, in order to focus effort and attention on activities that are likely to increase student progression rates.

4. Continue to provide a combination of in-person and online events going forward. Advertising materials should also emphasise that resources remain available online following live events and can be accessed flexibly to accommodate for unpredictable and resource-constrained schedules in schools.
5. Explore ways of mobilising engaged teachers to spread awareness within and across target schools e.g. via a word-of-mouth campaign, asking engaged teachers to forward on materials, or reach out to their colleagues.
6. Explore further what are the constraints and barriers that are preventing target schools for engaging, and how these can be addressed.
7. Harness the 'live' insight of website analytics data to track whether number of users increased or decreased over time and to investigate individual-level engagement trends and their impact on the knowledge of users.
8. Continue to run knowledge-quiz type check-ins. This could be ongoing pre/post quizzes, or website-based pop-up quizzes that could then be matched with the users' history of engagement with Advancing Access resources to test knowledge-gain.
9. Work with engaged further education colleges to understand the extent to which CPD and conference provision serves their needs, and how this might be strengthened.
10. Highlight contextual admissions as a particular area of focus for both developing resources and CPD, and finding ways to engage school staff with these resources.
11. Consider ways of engaging teachers who are Russell Group alumni themselves, and of foregrounding Advancing Access' affiliation with the Russell Group, as these connections were valued by both teachers and students we spoke to.
12. Large schools may face particular challenges in providing IAG that is tailored to pupils' interests and potential. Consider ways Advancing Access can support these schools in particular, such as producing segmented, or student self-complete resources.
13. Develop standard messaging on how Advancing Access fits into careers advice, and is complementary to, rather than competitive with, student-facing resources. Clarity on how Advancing Access can help schools meet the Gatsby Benchmarks may be needed if Advancing Access wishes to be seen as a key resource in this space.
14. Advancing Access should develop an Evaluation Framework that sets out what its substantive and evaluation goals are for the next phase of its development, in order to ensure that it is collecting the necessary data, and to secure credible and robust measures of impact.

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1 Introduction

The Evidence Development and Incubation Team in the Policy Institute at King's College London was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the services provided by Advancing Access, covering its activities from 2017 to 2020.

This report outlines the findings of a mixed-methods analysis to investigate the efficacy of Advancing Access on the awareness, confidence and knowledge of both staff and students on relevant areas of interest when considering applications and entry to a Russell Group (RG) institution. Further, this report will outline the findings of a quantitative analysis of application and successful progression rates of engaged schools, and a set of matched comparator schools that did not engage with Advancing Access.

The report outlines the methods we've used to investigate the primary and secondary research questions and will draw conclusions on the causal impact and context of Advancing Access on raising awareness, confidence and subsequent progression rates into RG institutions for pupils progressing from engaged schools.

1.1 The Evidence Development and Incubation Team

The Evidence Development and Incubation Team (EDIT) is a team within the Policy Institute at King's College London. It draws on the expertise of economists, public policy specialists and higher education evaluators to deliver evaluation activities falling into three categories:

- Supporting organisations, professionals and communities to build their evaluation capacity and expertise, to raise the base level of evidence produced in organisations.
- Supporting early-stage interventions to develop an understanding of implementation, feasibility, and fitness for scale of their programme, with a view to providing concrete recommendations, for example in the form of behavioural science or design thinking, to maximise the likelihood of future success.
- The intervention being evaluated, or the environment it is implemented in, is complex, and hence requires a higher degree of expertise and co-development of evaluation.

Members of EDIT have worked on more than 60 evaluations within educational settings, ranging from early years to primary and secondary schools, sixth form and further education colleges, and universities. Notably, EDIT also incubated, and provided establishing staff to the [Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education](#) (TASO).

1.2 Advancing Access and the evaluation requirement

Advancing Access is an initiative of the 24 RG institutions, which provides IAG training for teachers and advisers so that they are better equipped to support students' progression to higher

education and, in particular, RG institutions. This IAG takes the form of both high quality online resources and in-person CPD sessions delivered to staff in schools. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Advancing Access provided more online engagement in the form of a web conference and seminars, to replace some of its in-person CPD outreach.

A pilot evaluation of Advancing Access in 2017, conducted by Durham University¹, looked at the reach of Advancing Access' web-based resources, collecting feedback from subscribing institutions via an online survey and structured interviews. The findings provided an understanding of the reach and self-reported usefulness of the resources among engaged school staff. This evaluation found a positive correlation between the engagement level of schools and teachers with Advancing Access and their self-reported knowledge of how to provide IAG to students to apply to UK higher education institutions. However, the evaluation did not take 'unmeasurable' factors, such as self-selection, into account. Staff who actively self-selected to engage with Advancing Access are inherently different to staff from non-engaged schools as the former group are more motivated to take action and upskill themselves by engaging with external CPD opportunities such as Advancing Access.

Advancing Access now seeks to further understand the impact of its provision, and how staff and students have benefited from engagement.

2 Evaluation methodology

2.1 Research questions guiding the present evaluation

This evaluation aims to investigate the efficacy of engagement with Advancing Access' online services on improving the quality and consistency of IAG services offered to students in schools and colleges. To investigate these research questions this evaluation has employed a mixed-methods evaluation approach. Table 1 overleaf provides a mapping of the research questions (RQs) and the evaluation methods used to answer them.

¹ For further information on the pilot evaluation of Advancing Access please visit:
https://advancingaccess.ams3.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/uploads/fileupload/file_upload/224/Report_in_Detail_FINAL.pdf

Table 1: Mapping of impact evaluation activities to objectives

	Administrative & UCAS data analysis	Pre/post knowledge quiz	Interviews with teachers and school staff	Focus groups with young people
1. Are more students (especially disadvantaged students) in schools/colleges that have engaged with Advancing Access applying to Russell Group universities when compared to students from similar comparator schools that have not engaged with Advancing Access?	●			
2. Is the progression rate to Russell Group universities at schools and colleges that have engaged with the project higher than for a group of similar comparator schools that have not engaged with Advancing Access?	●			
3. Has Advancing Access been successful in increasing the number of users in target schools who register accounts on the website, download resources and register and take part in Advancing Access events (both online and offline)?	●			
4. To what extent have teachers/advisers improved their knowledge of (as a result of their engagement with CPD): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The nature of more selective universities and the advantages of studying at them • The courses and qualifications on offer at more selective universities • The different elements associated with a successful application to a competitive university • The nature of contextual admissions policies • The WP outreach programmes available at selective universities 		●	●	●
5. To what extent do teachers/advisers feel more confident in disseminating information about more selective universities and the applications process to their students, resulting in students being better supported to make successful applications?			●	●
6. Do staff at schools and colleges who have engaged with Advancing Access feel in a stronger position to meet the requirements of the Government's careers strategy, including achieving the Gatsby Benchmarks?			●	●

These questions will structure the rest of the report.

2.2 Data sources and data collection

The data set for this analysis was drawn from several public and organisational datasets, which are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Description of data sources used, their respective years of coverage and how they map to the research questions

Data	Detail	Data Provider	Data Source	Year	RQs
School-level covariates	Characteristics of schools, including size of cohorts, percentage of disadvantaged students, Ofsted ratings and A-level average points.	Department for Education (public)	School Performance & Characteristics Data	2019/20 ²	RQ1, RQ2, RQ4
Historic RG progression rates by school	Historical RG progression rates by school.	Department for Education (public)	Key Stage Destinations Data	2011/12 to 2016/17 ³	RQ2
RG application, offer and enrolment rates by school	School level application, success, offer and enrolment rates to RG institutions.	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (purchased)	UCAS EXACT service ⁴	2016/17 to 2019/20	RQ1, RQ2
Engagement with Advancing Access	School affiliation of participants, via their Contact ID, as well as the school-level engagement score across Advancing Access' range of resources.	Advancing Access (internal)	Website analytics data	2020	RQ3, RQ4
Knowledge of IAG	Participants' scores on an IAG quiz before and after a CPD or conference session	King's, on behalf of Advancing Access (internal)	CPD/conference participant response data	2020	RQ3
Teacher experience of Advancing Access	Perceived usefulness of Advancing Access' resources for teachers	King's, on behalf of Advancing Access (internal)	Transcriptions of teacher interviews	2020	RQ4, RQ5, RQ6
Student experience of IAG	1 st year undergraduate students at RG institutions' experiences of IAG and whether they progressed from a school that had engaged with Advancing Access.	King's, on behalf of Advancing Access (internal)	Transcriptions of student focus groups	2020 to 2021	RQ4, RQ5, RQ6

² The data provided by the DfE labels academic year data according to the school year a student leaves Key Stage

³ This means that the schools year 2011/12 to 2016/17 translate to the academic years of entry to university in 2012/13 – 2017/18, respectively. For simplicity, 2015/16 school data will be matched with 2016/17 university entry and both will be labelled as 2016.

⁴ UCAS EXACT is a data service provided by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) allowing customers to request aggregated and anonymised data on UCAS undergraduate schemes. To obtain an insight into the most recent HE application and progression rates from UK non-Scotland domiciled applicants to UK HEPs.

As shown in Table 1, four strands of analysis were used to answer the six research questions. We outline these methods below.

2.3 Administrative data analysis

We used administrative data analysis to answer Research Questions 1, 2 and 3.

▶ Deriving a measure of engagement with Advancing Access

In order to answer RQs 1, 2 and 3, we developed an engagement indicator for schools, which captured the relative intensity of their engagement with Advancing Access. This score was derived per UCAS application cycle⁵, and was generated from Advancing Access internal data, shared in a pseudonymised format, with descending weightings attached to the following variables: CPD sessions delivered in schools, school aggregated teacher attendance levels for in-person conferences, school aggregated teacher attendance levels for virtual conferences, the number of resources downloaded, or videos watched on Advancing Access' website, and the number of registered accounts per school. Ranking of these values were created in close discussion with Advancing Access project leads. The final score can take on a value from 0 (no engagement) to 1 (maximum possible engagement) for a given year. A version of the engagement indicator aggregated across years is also used to define the 'treated' group in the differences-in-differences in RQs 1 and 2 (see below), while differentials in engagement rates overall and disaggregated by activity, between target and non-target schools, are used to answer RQ3.

▶ Matched Difference-in-Differences Analysis

A Difference-in-Differences (DiD) is a quasi-experimental methodology that aims to evaluate the causal impact of an intervention on the time-trend of those who receive the intervention vs. the time-trend of comparable cases who do not receive the intervention⁶. We used this method to investigate the impact of Advancing Access on the HE application, offer and progression outcomes of young people (RQs 1 and 2).

Quasi-experimental methodologies are a well-established approach to evaluate complex, whole school interventions⁷, such as the work of Advancing Access. The strength of a DiD is that it compares differences in trends rather than differences in absolute outcomes. A limitation of many

⁵ For example, school engagement from 15th January 2017 to the 15th January 2018, the yearly UCAS application deadlines, would be associated with 2018 RG progression rates.

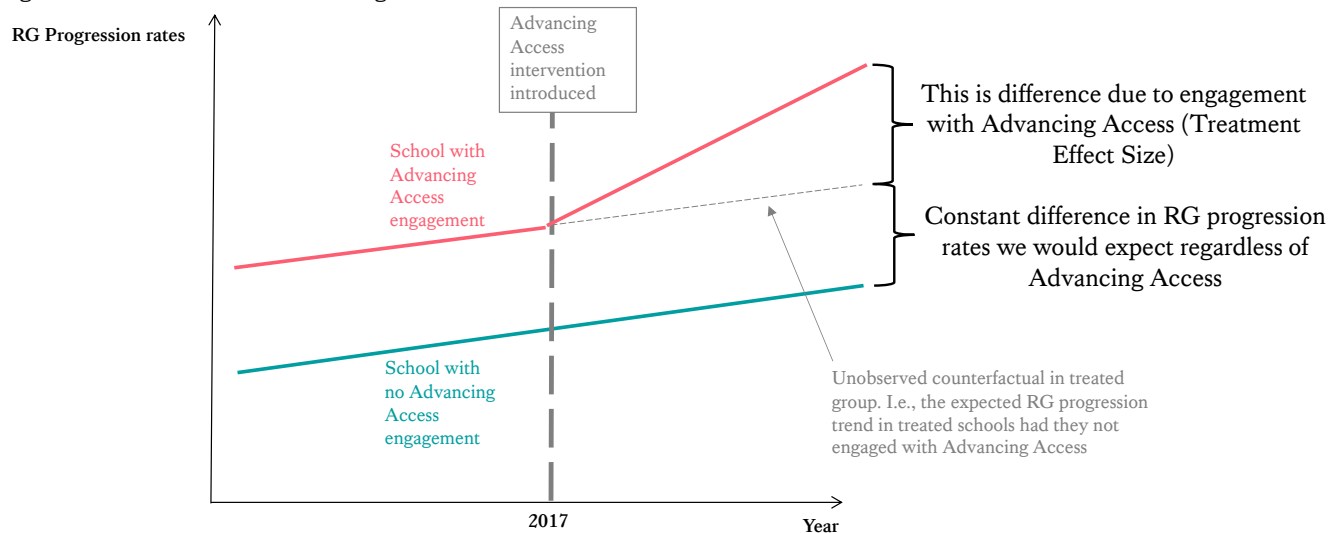
⁶ For further information on the DiD design we recommend: Jakiela, P. (2017). *What Are We Estimating When We Estimate Difference-in-Differences?* [Online]. Available at: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/impac evaluations/what-are-we-estimating-when-we-estimate-difference-differences>

⁷ Anders, J., Brown, C., Ehren, M., Greany, T. Nelson, R., Heal, J., Groot B., Sanders, M., & Allen, R. (2017). Evaluation of Complex Whole-School Interventions: Methodological and Practical Considerations. Education.

quasi-experimental designs (such as pure matching) is that they compare differences in absolute outcomes, which are often caused by a variety of factors that can't be observed, such as motivation, family support, different opportunities in the local area, and so on. If we can't disentangle the impact of those factors, we can't 'prove' that the difference in outcomes was caused by the intervention.

A DiD, by contrast, compares the time trend in the treated and comparator groups. The causal claim of a DiD relies on the parallel trends assumption, which means we have to assume that the two groups would have had the same time trend in the absence of treatment. This means that groups can have different outcome levels, as long as the factors affecting the trend over time are similar, and would continue to be similar in the absence of treatment. If we can see that the two groups have similar time trends in the years before the intervention started, then we can argue that the parallel trends assumption is justified. If the trends start to diverge post-intervention we can argue that this was caused by the intervention. Figure 1 below provides a visual summary of the logic underlying the DiD methodology.

Figure 1: Visualisation of the DiD design



The success of a DiD depends on the quality and similarity of the comparator group. We therefore used matching to identify the best comparator schools⁸. Matching seeks to identify a suitable comparator school for each 'treated' school, by identifying a statistical comparator school

⁸For further information on the principles of matching designs we recommend: Hanita, M., Ansel, D. and Shakman, K. (2017). *Matched-Comparison Group Design: An Evaluation Brief for Educational Stakeholders*. [Online]. Available at: https://www.edc.org/sites/default/files/uploads/matched_comparison_group_design.pdf.

that is as similar as possible to the treated school on a range of pre-specified covariates⁹. We used the following definitions:

- **Treated** schools were those that had an engagement score of more than 0.01 out of 1. This served to remove schools that had only clicked on a couple of resources from the treated set. This led to a ‘treated’ group of 308 schools.¹⁰
- **Possible comparator** schools were any schools whose engagement score was less than 0.01, including schools that had never engaged, and therefore had an engagement score of 0. Possible comparators were first condensed to 1306 schools – of these, 413 had a non-zero engagement score, while 893 had never engaged with Advancing Access. The data cleaning¹¹ removed a large proportion of schools to identify the most appropriate list of schools from which to match from, whilst still preserving a large enough pool of possible comparators, relative to the treatment numbers, to ensure the match itself was strong.
- **Comparator** schools were those that the matching process identified as a good comparator for one of the treated schools.

We used publicly available DfE data on UK secondary schools to perform the match. We used one-to-one matching at the school level, without replacement. We used matching without replacement because it preserves a comparator group of the same size as the treated group, and we had a good ratio of possible comparators to treated schools.

To identify the most similar schools, we used a combination of nearest neighbour matching¹² for continuous variables, and exact matching for categorical variables. Continuous covariates used in the match were the proportion of pupils classified as being disadvantaged¹³, the size of a

⁹ There was some missing data in covariates of interest, but our checks suggested that cases of missingness were generally balanced across treated and potential comparator schools. We used a combination of imputing means, specifying ‘missing’ as a separate factor level and excluding schools from the analysis. This approach to treating missing data was based upon the trade-off to preserve sample size vs bias or inaccurate imputation.

¹⁰ The ‘ever-treated’ groups is thus defined as those schools having any engagement across any time period with Advancing Access. This is the sum of the total treated schools and the non-zero engagement schools equalling 721.

¹¹ The following were removed from the possible comparator set: secondaries that had primary school students; closed schools; schools without a Sixth Form; independent/private schools; Scottish/Welsh schools (due to data availability); and schools that had missing data in either covariates or outcomes. A loose round of preliminary matching then occurred to help remove irregularities, such as matching a mixed school with a same sex school. After the loose matching, we merged UCAS data to our existing dataset by school postcode, as URNs are not currently linked to UCAS data. Schools that could not be merged to the UCAS data were dropped. This cleaning process resulted in a final dataset of 1614 schools across treatment and possible comparators.

¹² Using Mahalanobis distance – a method of quantifying the distance between two points, across multiple dimensions, which takes account of the point’s placement relative to the centre of the distribution.

¹³ The Department for Education identifies disadvantaged pupils as being any of the following: eligible for free school meals, Looked After Children, or children with parents in the armed forces.

school’s Year 13 cohort, and average A-Level attainment, all as of the most recent (2019) DfE data release. Categorical variables used were Ofsted rating and establishment type.¹⁴

The one-to-one matching procedure found a well-matched comparator for all treatment schools, leading to a total matched sample of 616. Tests suggest the procedure produced a good quality matched comparator group across all covariates in the match, as well as RG progression rates for 2012-2017. To gather evidence to satisfy the parallel trends assumption, we tested whether it held in the pre-period; that is, that the progression trends for the treatment and matched comparator schools were not significantly different to each other prior to 2017.

Figure 2: Parallel trends assumption test in the pre-period

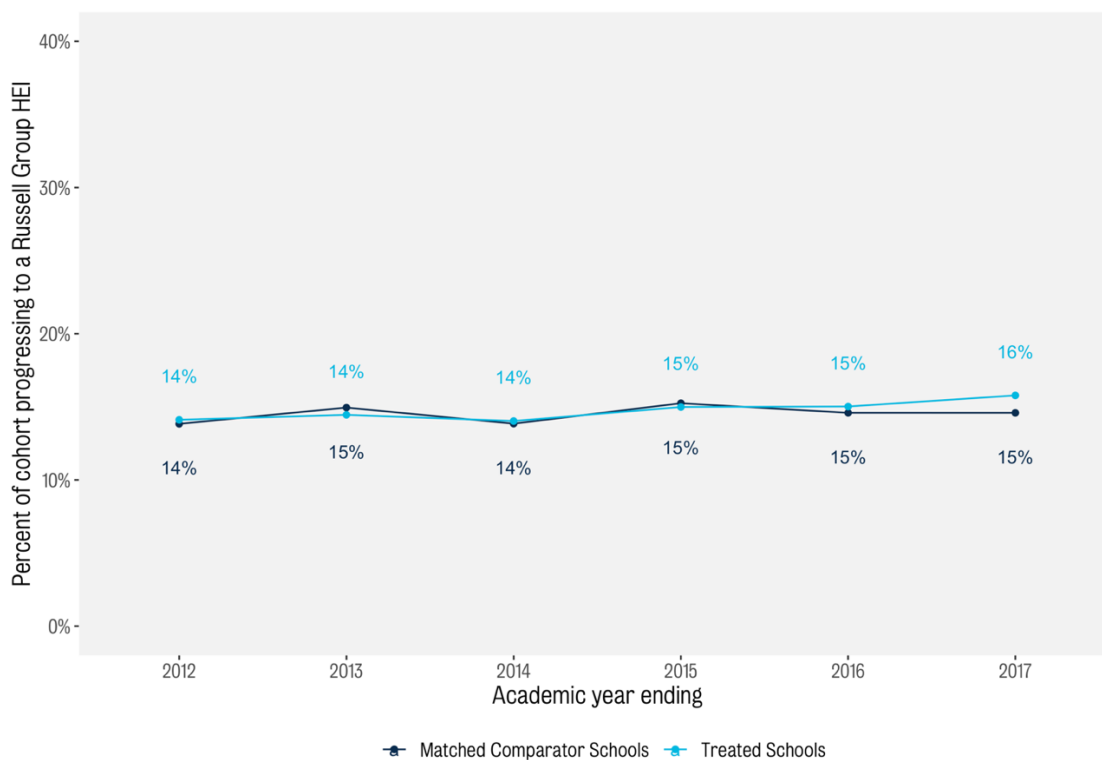


Figure 2 shows that over the period of 2012-2017 there was no more than a 1 percent difference in RG progression rates between our treatment and comparator schools. There is a slight divergence in 2017, but this is not statistically significant. This chart suggests that parallel trends exist in the pre-period, but it is important to emphasise that the parallel trends assumption post-intervention is inherently unprovable.

¹⁴ Establishment types were bundled to reduce the number of categories and improve availability of matches. Further Education colleges, University Technical colleges and City Technical colleges were grouped; Foundation, Studio and Free schools; and Voluntary Aided and Voluntary Controlled schools.

2.4 Pre/post knowledge quiz

We used pre/post knowledge quizzes to answer RQ4. The quizzes were integrated into the remote CPD and conference provision that Advancing Access provided to its users between May – October 2020. The free CPD sessions are offered year-round to interested schools and colleges across the UK. CPD sessions usually last for an hour and focus on a variety of themes that are of relevance to teachers and advisors. However, themes and timings can be customised to suit the requirements of the participating staff. The virtual conference occurred in May 2020 and offered registered attendees the opportunity to attend a variety of IAG-related webinars, to engage with RG-representatives at a virtual exhibition hall, and to participate in a Q&A discussion forum. We focused on measuring accurate answers on topics that were covered in the session to avoid potential bias in self-reported estimates of knowledge, which could arise either from misperceptions or misreporting.

Quizzes were integrated into the delivery of the CPD sessions and were administered during the first and last 5 minutes of each session. For each IAG theme, six knowledge questions were created that related to the material covered in the session. These were then split into two three-question sets, and participants were randomly assigned to which set they saw before vs. after the CPD. This avoided asking the same questions to the same participant within a very short timeframe, and mitigated the risk of bias arising from one question set potentially being more difficult than the other. A third quiz was also distributed to participants six weeks after they completed the CPD activity. This consisted of up to six questions on the topics the participation had undertaken CPD in.

The conference quiz administration broadly followed the same process as the CPD-sessions. We integrated a short pre-test into the sign-up process for the conference. This meant that all participants upon entering the conference were automatically directed to the pre-test. Post-test responses were derived from attendees who responded to an email sent by Advancing Access following the conference. Post-test responses were received three to ten days after the conference. As this was not part of the core evaluation, we did not engage in response-rate raising activities, and only conducted complete case analysis to gauge whether there was any additional insight available from this data to complement the more robust pre/post CPD quiz data.

The content of the quizzes also differed from the CPD analysis as they were not split by subject areas. Instead, the pre and post-test was a randomised selection of 14 questions, taking two questions each from the seven subject topics covered in the conference. Participants were randomly assigned to which set they saw before vs. after the conference. This approach was chosen to mitigate the risk of bias arising from any of the questions potentially being more difficult than others. Information technology issues during the conference however meant that the

random allocation of question sets was not done correctly for all participants: a sub-set of participants attempted both question sets prior to the conference as a result of multiple login attempts, and therefore in the post-test they received a question set that they had already seen and may have scored better on it as a result. The total number of sessions attended ranged from one to the maximum seven sessions on offer. However, the majority of attendees, around 60 per cent, attended three sessions – the combination of which varies from person to person given teachers had the choice to attend any of the sessions. Thus, the mean quantity attended is 2.7 with only 16 attendees attending four or more sessions. The high variability in both the quantity and type of sessions attended by each individual means that pairwise treatment effect comparisons across session topics and individuals are difficult, since there is a lack of a suitable comparator free from knowledge spillovers across the different sessions.

For both the CPD and conference, quiz responses were split by session topic and within each session the quiz with the earlier timestamp was categorised as the pre-treatment quiz, and the quiz with the later timestamp was categorised as the post-treatment quiz. Quiz questions were multiple choice, and were marked as 1 for a correct answer and 0 otherwise. Where the question had multiple correct answers, all correct responses needed to be selected for the participant to be assigned a 1 for that question.

For the CPD data, the cleaned dataset contained 664 identifiable quiz responses, corresponding to 332 complete pre/post sets, across 159 individual participants – the number of pre/post quiz pairs recorded for participants ranged from 1 to 6, with an average of just over 2. The scores for the CPD analysis were stated as gross numbers, rather than percentages given the low number of total questions. Table 3 below provides further details on the sample of the CPD analysis.

Table 3: Sample sizes of CPD quizzes received at each level

Level	Sample Size Pre/Post CPD	Sample at follow-up
Unique responses	332	9
Individual participants	159	9
Schools	45	4
Establishment types	6	3

For the conference analysis, we received 560 pre-conference responses, and 157 post-conference responses. Of these 157 complete post response sets, they were from 77 schools across 9 different establishment types.

The cleaned response data for both CPD and conference sessions were combined with the institutional and engagement datasets outlined previously and formed the final dataset for the

following Analyses of Variance (ANOVA). To analyse knowledge gain, we used two types of ANOVA:

1. *One-way pairwise t-test*

This method assesses whether there is a significant difference in mean quiz scores before vs. after the CPD sessions/conference. This analysis will be conducted at the unique response level, and at higher levels of aggregation; specifically, the levels of the individual, school, and establishment type.

2. *Two-way mixed ANOVA*

This method assesses the extent to which individual factors predict variation in the outcome; specifically, it will be used to gauge the extent to which an individual's school, and the establishment type of their institution, predicts variation in their knowledge, and how much the CPD session/conference contributes explanatory power above these influences.

We defined four levels worth investigating, which are the unique-response level, the individual-level, the school-level and the establishment-level.

- Unique responses (CPD only): measures the difference in means between pairs of pre/post unique responses.
- Individual-level: measures the difference in means between the average pre-test and average post-test score within individuals.
- School-level: measures the difference in means between the average pre-test and average post-test scores aggregated at the individual then school level.
- Establishment-level: measures the difference in means between the average pre-test and average post-test scores aggregated at the school then establishment type level.

To ensure that ANOVA is an appropriate methodology to apply in this context, we tested three assumptions: that the mean scores across the groupings are normally distributed, meaning that they are more likely to cluster around a common mean; that there are no significant outliers; and that there are equal variances in the distribution of scores across all groups. We find evidence that all three assumptions hold within the pre and post-test response data for both the CPD and conference analysis.

2.5 Interviews with teachers

We used a small set of nine interviews with teachers to contribute to answering RQs 4, 5 and 6. We selected semi-structured interviews as they allowed us to understand how the interviewees perceived the opportunities and/or challenges of engaging with Advancing Access, and to probe

their thinking when they referenced key elements or events¹⁵. In addition, we were able to be flexible and allow for an inductive derivation of relevant variables. We believed this was more appropriate to answer research questions relating to teachers' and students' perceptions and beliefs about their ability to engage¹⁶.

Respondents were recruited through a non-probabilistic purposive sampling procedure. Schools with different engagement levels (low, medium and high) were identified by Advancing Access and a random sample of registered users from schools at each level were invited to interview. We received 26 expressions of interest from which we selected three interviewees per engagement level to be interviewed. A £20 John Lewis voucher was offered as an incentive for participants. Interviews ranged from 40-60 minutes and were conducted via Microsoft Teams, Zoom or telephone throughout July 2020. All interviewees consented for the interview to be recorded and transcribed. Each interview had the same topic guide, which covered the below, with 10-15 minutes scheduled for each theme:

- Their background working in IAG and how they have engaged with resources such as Advancing Access.
- How Advancing Access has contributed/not contributed to their school's implementation of government guidance such as the Gatsby Benchmarks.
- How they became aware of Advancing Access and what caused them to register.
- Any influence that Advancing Access has had on their approach to IAG.
- Their engagement with other resources that provide similar services to Advancing Access and how the different services compare.

Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. An independent Research Assistant coded the transcripts in NVivo, with the interviewer reviewing the emerging themes. Where diverging opinions occurred, these were discussed, and an agreement reached. Once coded, cross-analysis was used to identify the reappearance of domains, as well as the categories within each domain.

It is important to note that we only spoke to a small set of interviewees so caution should be used when generalising these findings to all current, past or potential teachers. Participants self-selected to take part, and their experiences may have been different to staff who did not put themselves forward for this research. As interviews took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants' responses to questions often highlighted that their recent experiences had been

¹⁵ Maxwell, J. A. (1998). Designing a qualitative study. In L. Bickman & D. J. Rog (Eds.), *Handbook of applied social research methods* (p. 69–100). Sage Publications, Inc.

¹⁶ Golafshani, N. (2003). Understanding Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 8(4), 597-606. [Online]. Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol8/iss4/6/>.

outside the norm for their role. This disruption has been addressed in the findings; however, it is possible that participants' answers may have been influenced by the circumstances in implicit ways that were not accounted for.

2.6 Focus groups with 1st year undergraduate students

We used a set of focus groups with young people in their first year of an undergraduate degree at an RG institution to further explore RQs 4, 5 and 6. Student participants were self-selected through a call-out for participants. An email was sent to student outreach teams in all Advancing Access partner institutions inviting them to participate. Responses were received from seven universities from across England, who were then sent a template email with an invitation for UK-domiciled, first year undergraduate students from state schools to attend a focus group on one of three dates. As part of expressing interest, students were asked to provide the name of the state school or college they had attended. This was matched with the engagement score outlined in Section 2.3 to determine whether students had progressed from schools or colleges with exposure to Advancing Access.

In total, 21 students attended a focus group, nine having progressed from schools or colleges that had engaged with Advancing Access, and 12 from schools or colleges without any engagement. The sample was primarily from London-based universities: 16 students attended London-based universities, four attended a Northern university and one attended a university on the South Coast. All participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form ahead of the focus groups, and were required to return a signed Consent Form prior to joining the focus group. Each focus group had between five and nine participants, with a lead facilitator and a co-facilitator, and focus groups took place in December 2020 and January 2021. Focus groups were held via Zoom, and were recorded and transcribed.

All focus groups had the same topic guides, which covered the following topics:

- Students' transition to university and their priorities in selecting a course and/or university;
- Students' experience with IAG provision while in sixth form and how this support affected their university choices and application process;
- Students' learnings and reflections on applying to a selective university.

Focus groups were selected as the most appropriate research method for this context and target group as they can provide richer data than interviews¹⁷. Students were able to ask questions of

¹⁷ Lederman, L. (1990). Assessing educational effectiveness: The focus group interview as a technique for data collection. *Communication Education*, 39(2), 117-127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634529009378794>

each other and compare experiences, which provided valuable insight into the similarities and differences of experience between students whose schools had engaged with Advancing Access and those that had not. Given the unusual circumstances and additional burden the current COVID-19 situation has placed on students, focus groups were also considered to be less invasive and burdensome for student participants than, for example, one-to-one interviews.

A team of three researchers was involved in the coding decisions, with two Research Assistants coding the transcripts independently in NVivo, and the supervising Research Associate reviewing the arising nodes and themes. As with the staff interviews, where impressions and coding decisions diverged, these were addressed among the coding team and a mutual decision was made on the final coding framework.

In considering insights from the focus groups, it is important to be conscious of the following limitations: participants were self-selected, so their experiences may differ from students who did not choose to participate. Similarly, 16 of the 21 students who participated in the focus groups were at London-based universities, so the findings may apply more to London-based institutions than institutions based outside of London. Further, we only spoke with students who had progressed into Russell Group institutions, so their perceptions of IAG provision may be different to students who aspired to attend Russell Group universities, but did not receive an offer.

The students interviewed also completed Year 13 during the first national COVID-19 lockdown, and therefore their experiences in their final year of schooling are different from the average experience of a Year 13 student. Furthermore, two of the three focus groups also took place during the third national COVID-19 lockdown, when university students were advised to remain at home rather than returning to university. This may have affected how students spoke about their university experiences or their transition from sixth form to university. As much as possible these disruptions have been addressed in the analysis, however some unobserved impacts may exist that have not been accounted for.

2.7 Mixed methods approach and triangulation of insights

Providing meaningful evaluation of complex social programmes like Advancing Access requires a level of pragmatism and triangulation. To answer the research questions, we have sought to use the most appropriate method, whether quantitative or qualitative, and where possible to combine insights from both. This enables qualitative insights to give context to quantitative findings, and vice versa. Relying on several mixed-methods evaluation-approached aims – to some extent – to outweigh the weaknesses of any single method of analysis. Where possible, we have tried to contextualise the quantitative analysis insights from staff and students. In this way we aim to provide balanced responses to the evaluation questions that are more than the sum of the methods used, if they were mobilised in isolation from one another.

3 Application and entry rates at Russell Group Universities

This section documents the analysis conducted to answer Research Questions 1 and 2, investigating whether schools' engagement with resources offered by Advancing Access increased the number of (disadvantaged) pupils applying and progressing to 'top third' universities. On discussion with Advancing Access, we have focused on application, offers and progression for Russell Group institutions specifically. Since a large proportion of schools' engagement with Advancing Access was in 2019 and 2020, we have focused the analysis on trends in application, offer and entry rates in 2017 & 2020. We also include some insights from the qualitative research, to give context to the findings.

3.1 Analysis of Advancing Access' impact on application and success rates (RQ1)

This section uses administrative data to explore Research Question 1. To do this, we have used UCAS EXACT data as outlined in Table 2 to design a matched difference-in-differences, per the method given in Section 2.3.

We have run two DiD models using two different outcomes of interest:

- **Application rate:** the proportion of the final year cohort who submitted at least one application to an RG institution for a given year.
- **Success rate:** the proportion of offers received¹⁸ out of applications sent to RG institutions per school.

The DiD uses 2017 as the baseline¹⁹, and 2020 progression rates as the endline, being the most recent admissions cycle. Our final data entries are therefore a list of treated and matched schools' outcomes in 2017 (pre-intervention) and 2020 (post-intervention) as well as their covariates. The analysis was conducted as an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with robust standard errors, incorporating an indicator of whether the school engaged with Advancing Access, and an indicator of whether the year was 2017 (pre-intervention) or 2020 (post-intervention), and an interaction term between the two. This interaction represents whether or not the trend change in the outcome from 2017 to 2020 is significantly different for Advancing Access schools than comparators, and is our coefficient of interest. In addition, we re-ran the analysis with only those schools (both 'treated' and comparator) whose proportion of disadvantaged students, per the DfE definition, was above the median.

¹⁸ As at the cut-off date of 20th June for the given year in either 2017 (pre-treatment) or 2020 (post-treatment)

¹⁹ Since Advancing Access only launched in late 2016, shortly before the UCAS application cycle for that year, we assume that any early engagement will not impact 2017 RG progression significantly and that 2017 rates are therefore a suitable baseline.

► **Application rates**

Figure 3 below gives the distributions of application rates. From this we can see that between 2017 and 2020, there was a substantial increase in schools where everybody in their cohort made at least one application to an RG institution, and this is most pronounced among treated schools.

Figure 3: Histogram of application rates, treated and comparator schools

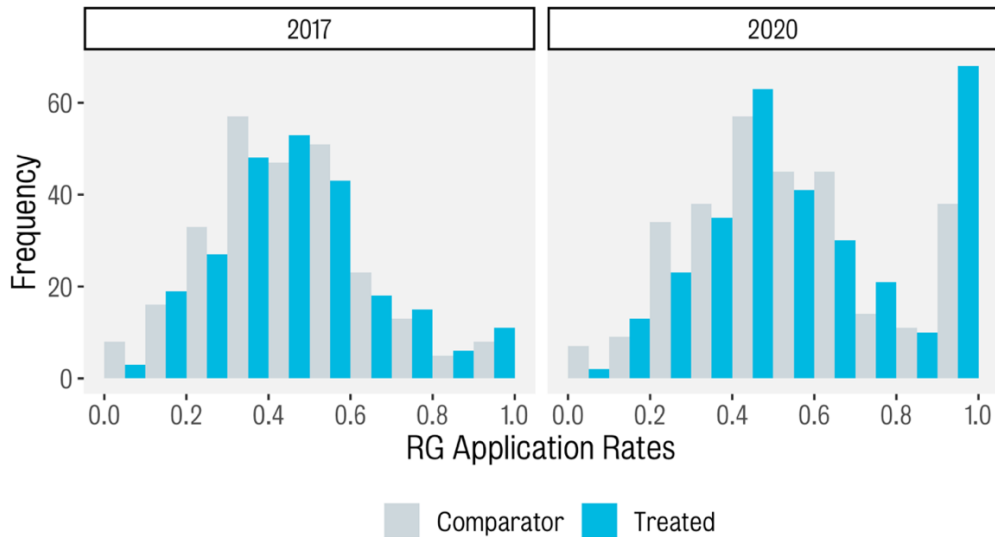
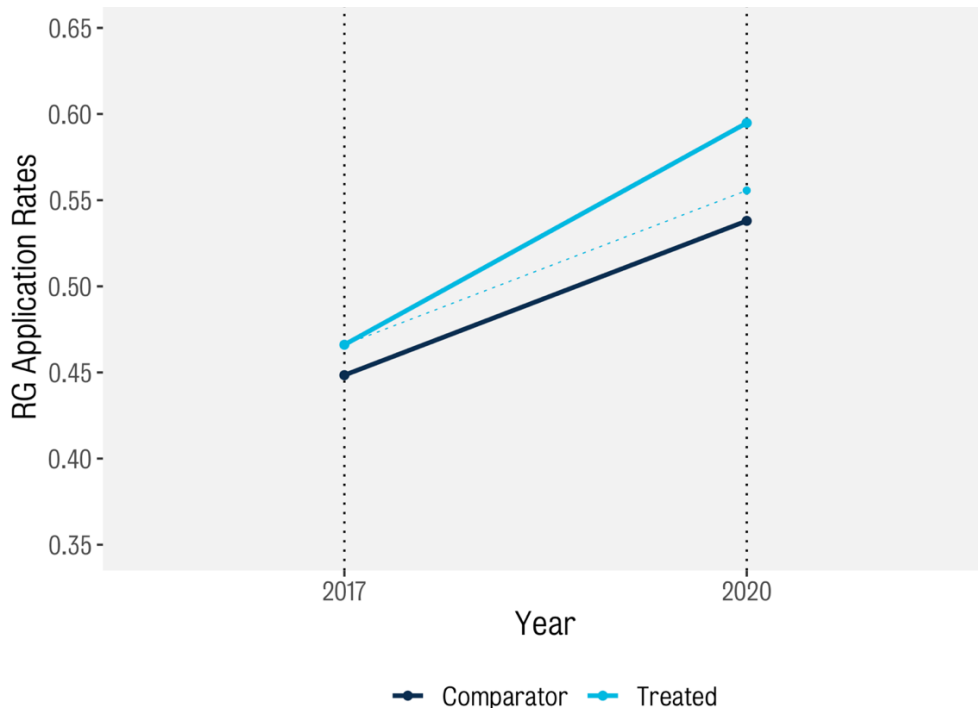


Figure 4 gives the interaction plot for application rates. From this we can see that the positive trend in application rates appears to be steeper among treated versus comparator schools.

Figure 4: Visualising the DiD with Application Rates as the outcome



In order to test whether this visual trend is significant, we ran a regression model with proportion of the cohort applying to at least one RG institution as the outcome. The results are given in Table 4. Model 1 gives the results for the whole sample, while Model 2 includes only those schools with higher than median levels of disadvantage.

Table 4: Results of DiD for Application rates

Coefficient	Model 1: Estimates for Application rates	Model 2: Application rates – most disadvantaged
(Intercept)	-0.088	0.140
Treatment (School involved with Advancing Access)	0.011*	0.025
Time (Year is 2020 not 2017)	0.092***	0.124***
Treatment Effect (Treatment x Time)	0.042+	0.040
Proportion of disadvantaged students ²⁰	0.205***	0.222***
Average A Level points	0.020***	0.010***
School Ofsted Rating ²¹	-0.044***	-0.040***
<i>R</i> ²	0.268	0.169
<i>Adj. R</i> ²	0.264	0.160
<i>Number of observations (Number of schools x number of time periods)</i>	1108	537

***($p < 0.001$); **($p < 0.01$); *($p < 0.05$); +($p < 0.1$)

Model 1 finds that there is a close-to-significant increase ($p < 0.1$) in application numbers for schools that engaged with Advancing Access between 2017 and 2020 relative to the trend for comparator schools. Per Model 2, this positive direction in the trend persists when we focus on more disadvantaged schools only; however, it is smaller and not significant ($p = 0.29$). This is unsurprising as the sample size, and hence our statistical power, is lower. We also see that, unsurprisingly, A Level attainment is strongly predictive of RG application rates, and as a school's Ofsted rating gets worse, its application rates also get lower. The proportion of disadvantaged students in the school is strongly positively associated with application rates.

²⁰ We have used the DfE's definition of disadvantaged pupils as a student being eligible for any of the following criteria: eligible for free school meals, Looked After Children, or children with parents in the armed forces.

²¹ Ofsted Rating is reverse-coded, so the coefficient represents the effect of moving from Outstanding to Good, Good to Satisfactory, etc.

► **Success rates**

This analysis explores the proportion of applications that are successful. Figure 5 plots the distribution of success rates, by treated and comparator school.

Figure 5: Histogram of success rates, by treated and comparator

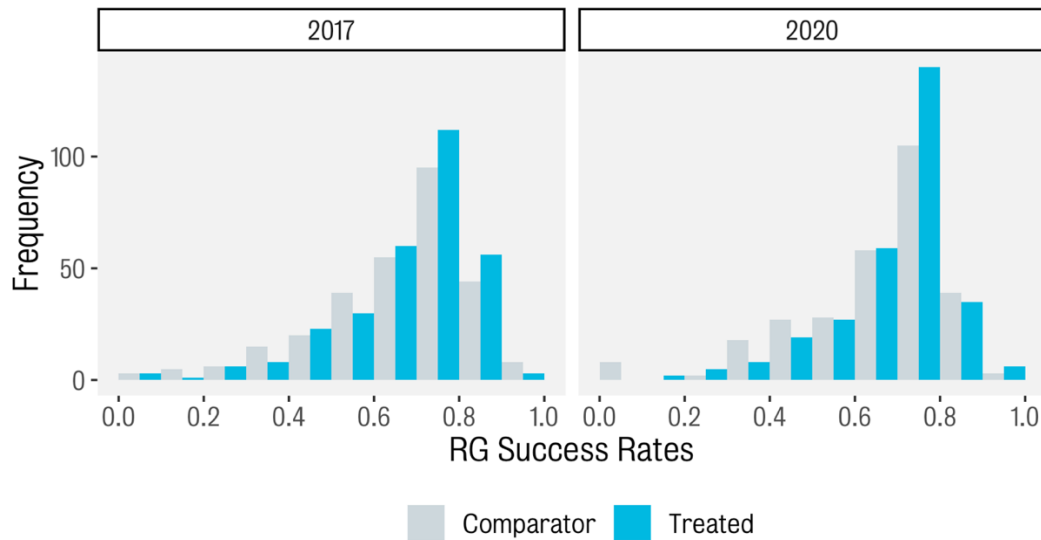
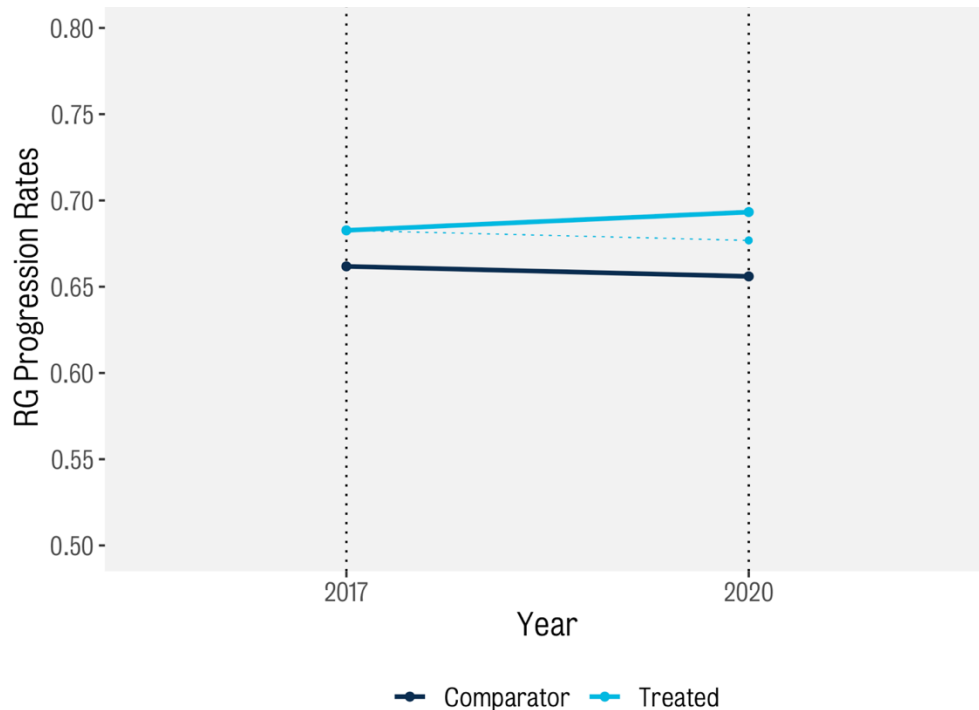


Figure 6 is a visualisation of the interaction between treatment and time. Overall, the trend in the comparator group appears flat, or perhaps weakly downward.

Figure 6: Visualising the DiD with Success Rates as the outcome



In order to test for a significant trend, we again ran two regressions, with success rate as the outcome. Table 5 shows that although the coefficients are positive, there are no significant impacts of treatment on success rates, either for the whole sample ($p = 0.29$) or the more disadvantaged schools ($p = 0.72$).

Table 5: Results of DiD for Success rates

Coefficient	Model 1: Estimates for Success rates	Model 2: Success rates – most disadvantaged
(Intercept)	0.370***	0.193*
Treatment (School involved with Advancing Access)	0.022+	0.049*
Time (Year is 2020 not 2017)	-0.007	-0.003
Treatment Effect (Treatment x Time)	0.018	0.010
Proportion of disadvantaged students ²²	-0.250**	-0.036
Average A Level points	0.011**	-0.014***
School Ofsted Rating ²³	0.001	-0.002
<i>R</i> ²	0.209	0.128
<i>Adj. R</i> ²	0.205	0.119
<i>Number of observations (Number of schools x number of time periods)</i>	1181	578

***($p < 0.001$); **($p < 0.01$); *($p < 0.05$); +(p < 0.1)

There are two possible interpretations of this finding: first, that schools are identifying and encouraging more pupils to apply with equally good application packs to RG institutions; and second that engagement with Advancing Access is not necessarily granting schools a competitive advantage in getting their pupils accepted.

Overall, we consider this a positive finding, but Advancing Access may wish to consider ways of increasing the success rate among applicants further. Our qualitative research provided some insight into why these patterns might be arising, which we consider in Section 3.3.

²² We have used the DfE’s definition of disadvantaged pupils as a student being eligible for any of the following criteria: eligible for free school meals, Looked After Children, or children with parents in the armed forces.

²³ Ofsted Rating is reverse-coded, so the coefficient represents the effect of moving from Outstanding to Good, Good to Satisfactory, etc.

3.2 Analysis of the impact of Advancing Access on progression rates (RQ2)

The preceding analysis focused on applications to and acceptances at RG institutions. This section looks at actual progression rates, which capture whether or not pupils from Advancing Access schools were more likely to take up a place at an RG institution the year following their graduation from secondary school.

We have conducted this analysis on UCAS EXACT data (per Table 2) to measure RG progression between 2017 – 2020. Given that Advancing Access has recorded the highest levels of engagement since its inception in the AY2019/20 we hope to capture potential lift effects in the progression data for the most recent academic year.

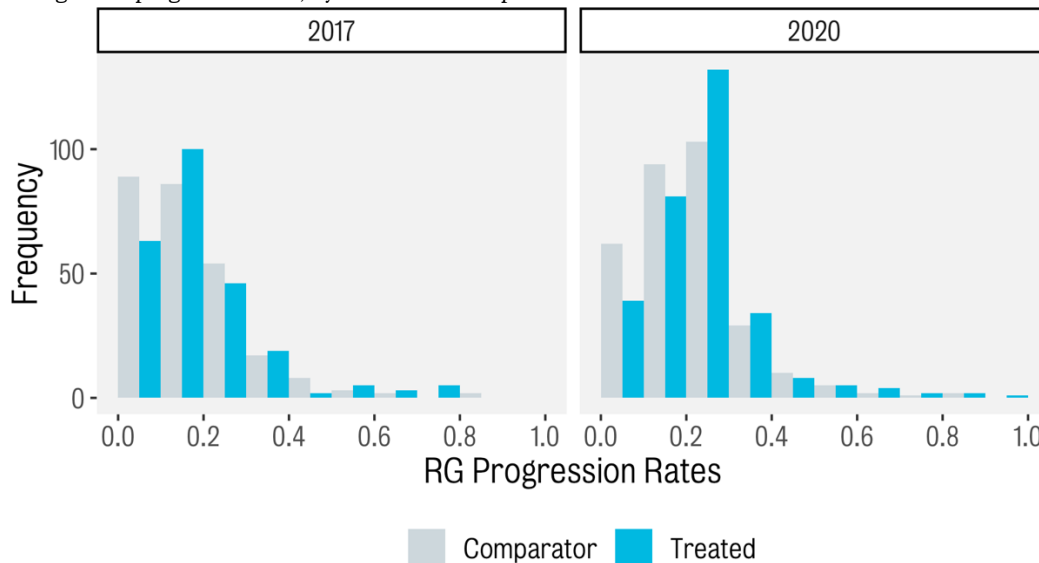
We use the same set of comparator schools (as per Section 2.3) for all analyses.

► **Progression rates**

We created a variable for RG progression rates, which was the number of school-level offer acceptances for RG institutions divided by the total pre-university cohort size of Year 13s for a given year.

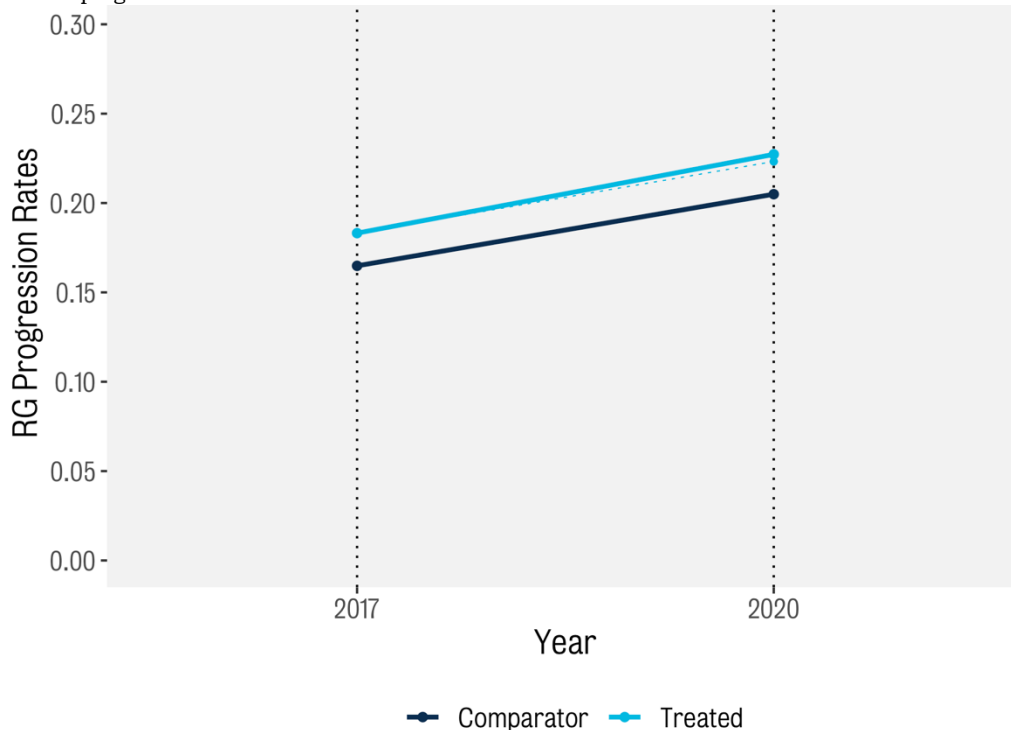
We conduct the analysis with the covariates outlined in the previous section. As with previous analyses, we present a histogram of the distribution of progression rates, in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Histogram of progression rates, by treated and comparator



We then plot the trend in progression rates, from 2017 to 2020, in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Trend in progression rates



This figure suggests that the trend in Russell Group progression in the treatment and control are very similar; we test this via regression, with the results presented in Table 6, overleaf.

The analysis shows, consistent with the visualisation above, that there is no significant treatment effect on the proportion of a cohort progressing to RG institutions, for either the whole sample ($p = 0.64$) or the sub-sample of more disadvantaged schools ($p = 0.37$).

Table 6: Results of DiD for Progression rates

Coefficient	Model 1: Estimates for Progression rates	Model 2: Progression rates – most disadvantaged
(Intercept)	-0.340***	-0.207***
Treatment (School involved with Advancing Access)	0.012	0.015
Time (Year is 2020 not 2017)	0.044***	0.053***
Treatment Effect (Treatment x Time)	0.006	0.015
Proportion of disadvantaged students ²⁴	0.011	0.070*
Average A Level points	0.018***	0.012***
School Ofsted Rating ²⁵	-0.015***	-0.016***
<i>R</i> ²	0.442	0.304
<i>Adj. R</i> ²	0.439	0.296
<i>Number of observations (Number of schools x number of time periods)</i>	1120	545

***($p < 0.001$); **($p < 0.01$); *($p < 0.05$); +(p < 0.1)

We are also interested in whether higher or lower levels of school engagement lead to stronger or weaker impacts on schools' subsequent application and progression rates. We therefore used a time series analysis to investigate whether schools that highly engaged with Advancing Access saw their RG progression rates rise at a greater level than those schools that engaged less with Advancing Access.

Table 7, overleaf, outlines the results of our time series analysis with the first two variables being the main coefficients of interest. The time series uses UCAS data for 2017-2020 progression, with DfE data used for 2016 lagged progression only.

Consistent with the DiD, this analysis suggests that marginal engagement with Advancing Access' resources does not have a statistically significant effect on RG progression rates of either that given year's progression or the following year's progression rates. As expected, a school's

²⁴ We have used the DfE's definition of disadvantaged pupils as a student being eligible for any of the following criteria: eligible for free school meals, Looked After Children, or children with parents in the armed forces.

²⁵ Ofsted Rating is reverse-coded, so the coefficient represents the effect of moving from Outstanding to Good, Good to Satisfactory, etc.

RG progression rates the preceding year are a strong predictor of the following year’s RG progression rates across 2017 to 2020.

Table 7: Results of the time series analysis with RG progression rates as the outcome

Coefficient	Progression
Engagement Score	0.001 (0.003)
Lagged Score	-0.002 (0.002)
Lagged RG Progression	0.062 (0.013) ***
Engagement Score * Disadvantaged proportion	-0.004 (0.011)
Year fixed effect included?	Yes
School fixed effect included?	Yes

***($p < 0.001$); **($p < 0.01$); *($p < 0.05$); +(p<0.1)

We also ran analysis restricting the sample to high engagement schools to discount schools that may have only had a few registered users that did not properly engage with website or conference material, as we hypothesise that these outliers may dilute the treatment effects. However, the results were similar to those outlined in Table 7, meaning we did not find evidence to suggest that a marginal increase in engagement in Advancing Access’ resources led to higher school-level RG progression rates in the short-term (i.e. within two UCAS application cycles).

This time series analysis highlights that there is no linear relationship between a marginal increase in engagement with Advancing Access materials and progression to RG institutions. Advancing Access may wish to explore further what components of its offer are most effective, and to focus on encouraging teachers to engage with the bundle of activities that are likely to be most useful to increase students’ progression rates.

3.3 Insights from qualitative research with teachers and students

The above findings suggest that to the extent to which Advancing Access facilitates higher numbers of applications within a school, a portion of this effect is lost before it translates into higher progression rates. Although this was not an area explicitly covered in our qualitative research, there are some applicable insights from staff and student comments. The below insights are provided as potential avenues of further investigation, rather than a comprehensive exploration or explanation of the variance observed.

During the interviews with teachers, several professionals commented that they encourage all students to submit applications, even if the student is not sure that they want to go to university.

'We ask all our students, no matter what it is they are planning on doing, whether they are planning on getting a job, apprenticeship etc. to apply to university so they have options. It is in every single one of our classes.' (Pastoral Manager in East of England)

While it was not explored whether this was a new (post-treatment) or established (pre-treatment) practice, if after engaging with Advancing Access schools are more likely to encourage all students, rather than just university-inclined students, to apply for university this may help to explain a rise in overall applications to RG, without a significant rise in progression. Likewise, higher numbers of the new applicants resulting from Advancing Access engagement may defer their place, in which case there would be a lag before this was reflected in the data.

Further, the link between rates of disadvantage (and school size) and success rates was also reflected in the qualitative analysis. During focus groups with students, a primary factor that influenced how positively students spoke about their IAG experiences was the intensity of support offered by their school. Satisfaction with IAG appeared to be influenced by both the structure of the support on offer, as well as the distribution of IAG resources relative to the size of the student cohort.

'We had a teacher who was helping us with our personal statements and stuff. They had to send it off and we, too, had to book appointments, but I guess my sixth form was quite tiny so anyone could book any time, there was plenty of space for all of us. Even if they returned it back ten times, it didn't really matter. I guess if you have more people in your year, it will get a bit more messy.' (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

'We had quite a big sixth form as well so there were a lot of us, so there were times when at break time there would be a huge crowd around the teacher trying to get an answer.' (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

Personal statements were the main area that students discussed needing or receiving help from school staff. Again, the way students discussed their experiences suggests that the intensity of the support provision and size of their year group influenced how satisfied students were with their IAG experience.

'My tutor at college was actually really good in terms of checking my personal statement and helping me make edits. She was definitely someone that really helped me. I think it was because although my college was very big, my particular tutor group was quite small and I was applying quite early, so she was able to get to me, whereas later on she wasn't.' (Student from a school with Advancing Access engagement)

'I didn't actually get a lot of support from my sixth form regarding my personal statement. Because there were a lot of students to one teacher, what ended up happening is a lot of us just had to send our applications off without anyone really viewing it.' (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

Though these are only top-line insights, the qualitative findings suggest that further inquiry into both IAG capacity and practices in schools that engage with Advancing Access may be required to explore the discrepancy between applications to RG institutions and students' subsequent progression.

3.4 Limitations

The DiD analysis attempts to account for differences across schools and differences across time that contribute to application, success and progression rates to RG institutions. The goal of a quasi-experimental design as used in this section is to reduce the impact that unobservable factors have on our estimate of the effect of engagement. The matching process produced a comparator group that was very similar to the treatment group in terms of their characteristics and prior progression trends, so we believe there is an argument that the findings in this section represent at least partially a causal impact of Advancing Access on applications to RG institutions.

However, it is important to note that we have to assume that all time trends since 2017 have affected treated and comparator schools equally, and that this assumption is inherently untestable. It could be that our identified treatment schools may have been subject to factors that changed between 2017 and 2020 that did not change in the same way for the comparator group. For example, other widening participation activities focussed on increasing progression rates may have been introduced at treatment schools during this time period but not in our identified comparator schools. Treated schools may also have signed up for other activities that are driving the increase in application and progression rates; or in the absence of Advancing Access they may have taken another equally effective approach. This is an inherent limitation of after-the-fact quasi-experimental designs.

3.5 Findings and Recommendations

► Findings

RQ1. Are more students (especially disadvantaged students) in schools/colleges which have engaged with Advancing Access applying to selective universities when compared to students from similar comparator schools which have not engaged with Advancing Access?

Using a matched difference-in-differences methodology with UCAS 2017 and 2020 data, we find weak evidence that schools who engage with Advancing Access have a more positive trend in numbers of students applying to selective (specifically, Russell Group) institutions between

2017 and 2020. Encouragingly, we also see no difference in rate of offers, suggesting that schools engaged with Advancing Access are encouraging applications from pupils who are as likely to be accepted, and without a decline in application quality.

RQ2. Is the progression rate to ‘top third’ universities at schools and colleges who have engaged with the project higher than for a group of similar comparator schools who have not engaged with Advancing Access?

We do not find evidence that either the progression rate or the trend from 2017 to 2020 to Russell Group institutions is higher for schools that engaged with Advancing Access. We would highlight this as an area that Advancing Access may wish to focus on to increase its impact. As more schools engage, and more data is available for years since Advancing Access was established, this analysis should be revisited, as with more data and more time an effect may start to be observable.

► **Recommendations**

Based on the above analysis, we recommend that Advancing Access consider the following:

Recommendation 1. Explore why progression rates are not increasing at the same pace as applications, to determine whether there are ways of addressing this in Advancing Access’ offer.

Recommendation 2. Continue to run the above DiD analyses as new years of data become available from UCAS. We are happy to provide the list of comparator schools identified, as well as replicable details of the method, to facilitate this.

Recommendation 3. Explore further which components of the Advancing Access offer are most effective, and how teachers can be encouraged to engage in those components as a priority, in order to focus their effort and attention on those activities that are likely to be most useful in increasing RG progression rates.

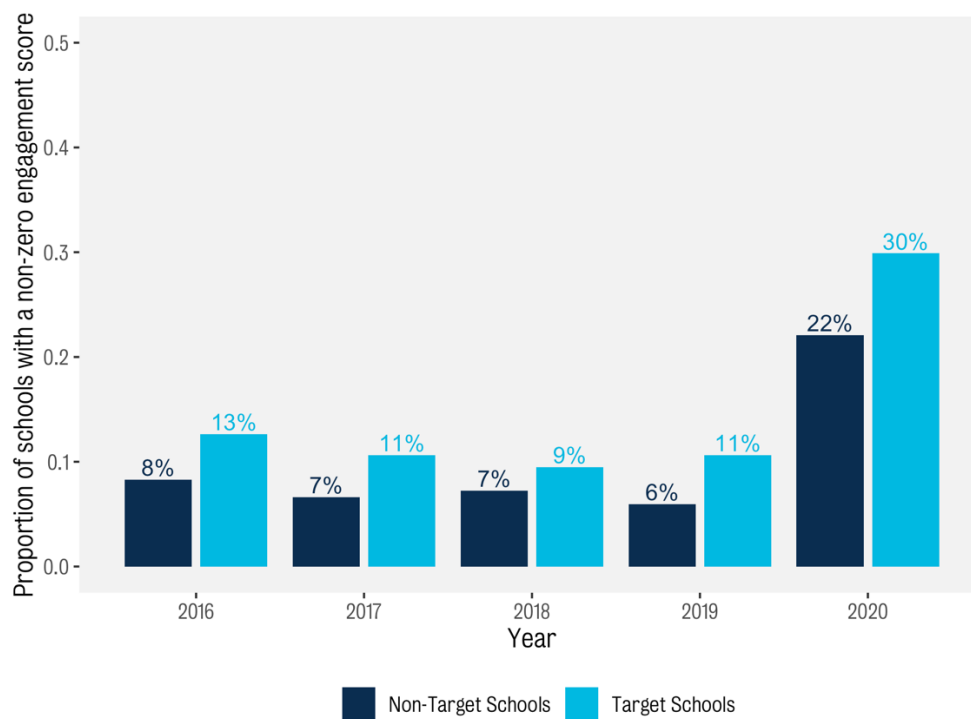
4 Sign up rates to Advancing Access among ‘target’ schools (RQ3)

This section responds to RQ3: whether Advancing Access has been successful in increasing the number and engagement of users in target schools who register accounts on the website, download resources and register and take part in Advancing Access events. We do this by comparing target²⁶ and non-target schools’ engagement with Advancing Access resources since the website’s launch in late 2016²⁷. All analysis in this section is as at October 2020.

4.1 Overall engagement levels

Using Advancing Access’ administrative records, we find that 191 out of 348 target schools had had some kind of engagement with Advancing Access (55 per cent), compared to 547 out of 1325 non-target schools (41 per cent) between 2016 and 2020. Per Figure 9, year-on-year there are proportionally more target schools engaging with Advancing Access than non-target schools. This suggests that Advancing Access is working from a baseline of engagement of target schools.

Figure 9: The number of schools with a non-zero engagement score as a proportion of their given group sample size per year



²⁶ Advancing Access use an internal, customised targeting score to identify mainstream state-funded schools with a direct progression route into higher education that, across a variety of publicly available data points, underperform on their expected HE progression rates.

²⁷ Advancing Access officially launched in November 2016 with a virtual conference. However, further developments to the website and the resources available meant that the website only fully launched in May 2017.

The remainder of this section focuses on the subset of schools classified as ever-engaged, and then considers the engagement levels of target vs. non-target schools in this ever-engaged category. This analysis therefore considers the extent to which, having engaged schools, Advancing Access is providing materials that differentially engage target schools.

4.2 Aggregated engagement scores

The following analysis provides the overall yearly engagement scores for target and non-target schools who have ever engaged, with engagement scores generated as described in Section 2.3 (pg 11). Table 8 gives the aggregate trends in engagement levels across all of Advancing Access’ services that were available in a given year and investigates whether any difference in year-on-year engagement arises between ever-engaged target and non-target schools.

Table 8: Yearly differences between aggregate engagement scores between target and non-target schools

Year (UCAS application cycle)	Average Target Schools Engagement Score	Average Non-target Schools Engagement Score	Difference	p-value
2017	0.28	0.23	0.05	0.42
2018	0.20	0.26	-0.06	0.45
2019	0.14	0.09	0.05	0.22
2020	0.11	0.15	-0.04	0.24

***(p<0.001); **(p<0.01); *(p<0.05); +(p<0.1)

Note that as Advancing Access has increased its overall provision, the maximum possible level of engagement has increased, which partly causes the declining engagement scores year-on-year – if people are accessing five resources out of a possible 20, that results in a higher engagement score than if they are accessing 5 resources out of a possible 50. Noting that proportionally more target schools have engaged overall, comparing engagement scores between target and non-target schools within each year suggests that once they come into contact with Advancing Access, target schools do not have higher levels of engagement than non-target schools.

4.3 Individual engagement categories

The following analysis disaggregates the engagement score to provide analysis of the average differences of engagement with each engagement category since Advancing Access’ website launch in late 2016, within the group of schools who have ever come into contact with Advancing Access. We present all engagement values in Table 9, which compares the average school engagement score for each type of engagement for target versus non-target schools. As mentioned above, this analysis only includes schools whose cumulative 2016-2020 engagement score is greater than zero – the ‘ever-treated’ group.

Within the ever-engaged group, we find that there is no difference between the average number of users per school at virtual conferences for target and non-target schools throughout 2016 to 2019. For the in-person conferences organised in 2019, there is slight evidence to suggest an increase in users from target schools between the conference organised in February and the conference organised in November of the same year, but this is based on only two data-points.

Looking at the number of registered users, we can see that engaged target schools, on average, have a slightly larger (around a quarter of a registered user) user group per school than non-target schools. However, this is not a strong result and this difference between average users per group is not statistically significant ($p = 0.34$). Disaggregating by year, in 2016 the average number of user registrations per school was slightly higher for engaged non-target schools than engaged target-schools. From 2016 to 2019, target schools had a marginally greater average number of new registrations per school, while in 2020, engaged non-target schools had a greater number of registrations than target-schools.

Lastly, we see a small increase in target school engagement with website resources, either by downloading resources or watching the informational videos. Analysing the total number of clicks of website resources per school, we can initially see that target schools have slightly lower engagement than non-target schools in years 2017 and 2018 which is then reversed in 2019 and 2020. The positive difference in website engagement for target schools in 2019 is also significant ($p < 0.05$). However, the effect size is still of a small magnitude and target school website engagement, relative to non-target schools, has increased by less than one extra resource downloaded over the last four years.

Overall, we find that a higher proportion of target schools than non-target schools have engaged with Advancing Access. However, analysis of the already-engaged group suggests that there is more work to be done to ensure that target schools continue to engage, and engage at higher levels, with Advancing Access' materials.

Table 9: Disaggregated engagement levels of target and non-target schools for the resource categories Advancing Access offers

Engagement category (per school)	Average target school engagement score	Average non-target school engagement score	Difference	p-value
Virtual Conferences				
Virtual Conference November 2016	0.15	0.11	0.04	0.35
Virtual Conference May 2017	0.08	0.12	-0.04	0.39
Virtual Conference October 2018	0.17	0.16	0.01	0.94
Virtual Conference June 2019	0.27	0.28	-0.01	0.91
In-person Conferences				
Thomas Gainsborough Conference (Feb 2019)	0.01	0.07	-0.06	0.04*
Newham Conference (November 2019)	0.16	0.15	0.01	0.90
Account Registrations				
Total users ²⁸	2.46	2.20	0.26	0.34
Mean no. of registered users joined in 2016	0.25	0.31	-0.06	0.61
Mean no. of registered users joined in 2017	0.32	0.21	0.11	0.02*
Mean no. of registered users joined in 2018	0.50	0.38	0.12	0.32
Mean no. of registered users joined in 2019	0.44	0.40	0.04	0.54
Mean no. of registered users joined in 2020	0.52	0.59	-0.07	0.51
Website Engagement & Resource Download				
Total clicks 2017	0.4	0.56	-0.16	0.36
Total clicks 2018	1.36	1.45	-0.09	0.85
Total clicks 2019	0.79	0.43	0.36	0.02*
Total clicks 2020	3.3	3.07	0.23	0.71

***(p<0.001); **(p<0.01); *(p<0.05); +(p<0.1)

²⁸ This is the total number Contact ID's (registered users) attributed to a given school at the point of data access.

4.4 Insights from qualitative research with teachers

The quantitative findings of Advancing Access' engagement data, particularly among target schools, highlight emerging increases in website engagement – particularly over 2019 and 2020. These trends can be further triangulated with insights from our teacher interviews. And while we are not able to discern any significant difference between the experience and engagement of target schools and non-target school teachers (six of the nine teachers we interviewed were employed by target schools), the reported experience and usefulness of Advancing Access' provision may help to contextualise some of the increases and decreases in engagement that the quantitative analysis has identified.

The flexibility of Advancing Access' online content is a major draw

Advancing Access' online presence, and the breadth and flexibility of content afforded by a web platform, was clearly one of the main reasons that teachers found it a useful resource. While most interviewees found Advancing Access through colleagues, one third of the teachers we spoke to found Advancing Access through a search engine while looking for resources on a particular topic. Several interviewees spoke of the immediately positive experience they had when they logged on to Advancing Access' website, which encouraged them to explore the content further.

'I came across it and then just instantly, kind of, thought "This looks really good, this is something that we can use.' (IAG Manager at a London Sixth Form)

Asked about the most useful and used features, interviewees mostly referenced webinars as a valuable resource, followed by the annual conference. They emphasised that the online delivery of the conference and webinars was critical. Several stated that if the conference had been run in person they would not have been able to attend due to capacity or funding limitations, and that the online delivery meant that they were able to fully participate.

'Normally it's face to face and networking and all that sort of stuff, we can't always go because we can't always get the time off or the colleges can't afford to send us with the training fees' (Pastoral Manager in the East of England)

In fact, almost all of the interviewees identified that the increase in online working during the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak had increased their capacity to engage with learning and CPD resources. As well as more content being offered online, interviewees noted that being outside the school environment afforded greater flexibility with their working hours.

'I think the fact that you're not in school every day means that we're working to a slightly different time scale. I mean, I wouldn't have had time to do this [CPD] in my traditional school'

day. So, there is a, sort of, degree of flexibility that we maybe wouldn't have had in a normal working week.' (Head of Sixth Form in the East of England)

The ability to return to the online content from the conference and webinars was also a highlight for many interviewees, as it allowed them to engage with sections that were most relevant in the moment and then return to other resources as needed.

'I was able to go through and do all of the different things that I wanted to do [at the conference] and then catch up with other ones later on as well, that maybe I didn't have the time to do on the day. So, it was absolutely brilliant.' (Pastoral Manager in the East of England)

One of the benefits of attending the live webinars and conference identified was the Q&A feature. Participants appreciated having someone on hand to answer their questions, as well as being able to see the breadth of questions and answers from other education settings that were different from their own.

'I like the fact that there is always someone in your chat box thing that is able to answer questions. I think the questions that are asked, because you have got more people involved, rather than just being our college, you get questions and answer and things that you wouldn't have thought about.' (Pastoral Manager in the East of England)

Overall, the layout of the website was well received, with three interviewees specifically mentioning that they found the website easy to navigate. However, one participant did comment that they did not find the website particularly user-friendly.

'I didn't find it super easy to navigate, I think it was when I was trying to find the conference and I was just, kind of, going round in circles a little bit, trying to find the resources.' (Tutor in London)

4.5 Findings and Recommendations

► Findings

RQ3. Has Advancing Access been successful in increasing the number of users in target schools who register accounts on the website, download resources and register and take part in Advancing Access events (both online and offline)?

Our analysis found that proportionally more target schools have ever-engaged with Advancing Access, but we did not find evidence of meaningful differences in rates of uptake of Advancing Access resources for target vs. non-target schools, once engaged. The triangulation of our quantitative findings with insights from interviews conducted with teachers at target and non-target schools further highlighted how interviewees engaged with Advancing Access' resources and how school staff rated the usefulness of each of these for their own work. The online nature and free-of-charge access of resources was a common driver of engagement among

our group of interviewees. As interviews took part during the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, interviewees highlighted the flexibility of engaging with video recordings as increasing their ability to engage with relevant material when convenient to them. This flexible and frictionless route to engage was also mirrored when interviewees reflected on the usefulness of the virtual conference. Not having to spend time and money on travelling to an in-person conference, was a feature that, according to our interviewees, allowed more staff to engage with Advancing Access' services in 2020.

► **Recommendations**

Based on the above analysis, we recommend that Advancing Access consider the following:

Recommendation 4. Continue to provide a combination of in-person and online events. Advertising materials should also emphasise that resources remain available online following live events and can be accessed flexibly to accommodate for unpredictable schedules in schools.

Recommendation 5. Explore ways of mobilising engaged teachers to spread awareness within and across target schools. Advancing Access has strong word of mouth recruitment channels, so explore ways to increase the effectiveness of these channels; for example, by asking engaged teachers to forward on materials, or reach out to their colleagues.

Recommendation 6. Explore further what are the constraints and barriers that are preventing target schools from engaging and how these can be addressed.

Recommendation 7. Harness the 'live' insight of website analytics data to track whether the number of users increased or decreased over time and to investigate individual-level engagement trends and their impact on the knowledge of users.

5 Teachers' knowledge of IAG (RQ4)

This section addresses RQ4, using ANOVA on pre/post quiz scores, as outlined in Section 2.4 to investigate whether engagement with either the CPD or conference resources offered by Advancing Access improved knowledge of IAG-related themes covered in these resources.

5.1 Impact of CPD sessions

► One-way pairwise t-tests

One-way pairwise t-tests enable us to explore the extent to which there are significant differences in mean quiz score before vs after the CPD sessions. Table 10 summarises the results of the t-tests.

Table 10: Pairwise t-test comparisons with quiz scores aggregated to the individual participant level

Grouping level	Sample size	Increase in mean quiz scores from pre-test to post-test	Adjusted P-value ²⁹
Unique response level	376	0.55	2.9 x 10 ^{-18***}
Individual level	184	0.591	5.61 x 10 ^{-11***}
School level	44	0.522	0.007**

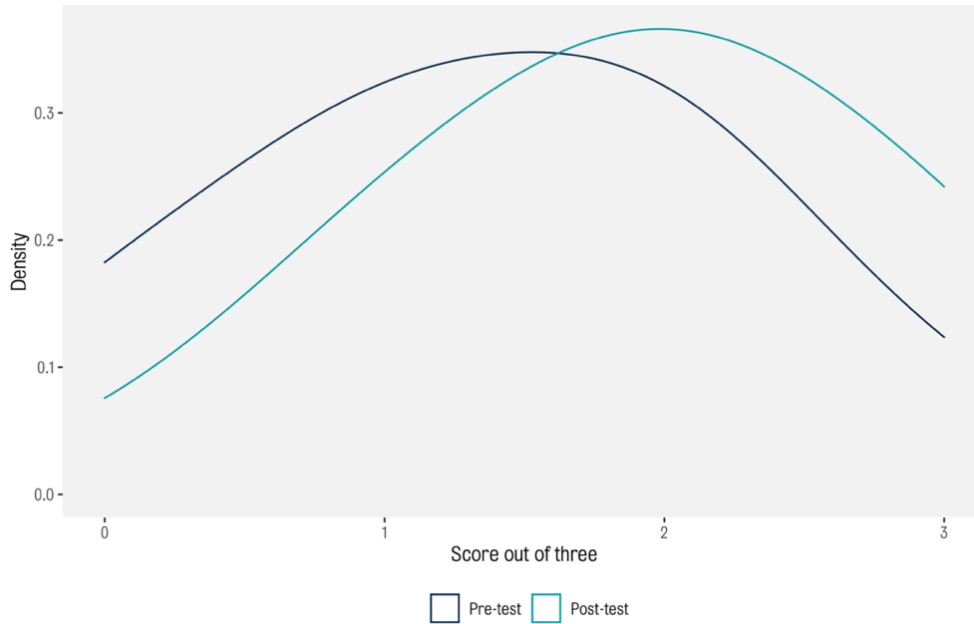
***(p<0.001); **(p<0.01); *(p<0.05); + (p<0.1)

At the unique response level, on average, 1.4 out of 3 questions were answered correctly in the pre-CPD quiz. The average score increased to 1.9 in the follow-up quiz distributed at the end of the same session. The pairwise t-test, which accounts for scale and variability, indicates this increase in scores is highly significant ($p < 0.001$).

We can conclude with near certainty that participants' knowledge, as measured by quiz scores, is higher post-CPD than pre-CPD. Figure 10 illustrates the distribution of scores for each unique response. This visually depicts the fact that the distribution has shifted higher in the post-test, reflecting an overall increase in the level of knowledge, with fewer participants getting 0 or 1 out of 3 correct in the post-test, and more respondents getting 2 or 3 out of 3 correct.

²⁹ All p-values have had a Bonferroni correction applied to them to reduce the risk of estimates being incorrectly identified as significant (i.e. the risk of Type 1 error).

Figure 10: Density plot of the unique response level teacher scores



Aggregating unique responses to the level of the participant reduces the impact that teachers participating in a lot of topics have on the overall estimate. It might be expected that these teachers are atypical as they are self-evidently more engaged. When accounting for this, the increase in scores has a similar magnitude and remains highly significant.

As a further check, we have taken the individual-level aggregate quiz scores and grouped them by the school the participant works at. This helps us capture the variation at school level that may affect engagement. Grouping at the school level also reduces the extent to which the results from teachers employed at schools with a large number of users influence the estimated impact on the increased knowledge of these teachers. Similar to our previous analysis, the grouped scores on the school level indicate a significant effect size in improving participants' knowledge between pre and post-CPD training.

This is encouraging as it suggests that the significant difference between pre and post-CPD scores is likely observed across all engaged institutions rather than being driven by highly engaged teachers or schools. However, owing to the lack of a comparator group who did not receive the training, we cannot rule out the possibility that this increase could be caused by factors other than the information provision in the CPD.

► **Mixed two-way ANOVA**

In this section we conduct two-way mixed ANOVAs: One grouping individuals' aggregate at the school level, and the other grouping scores at the level of establishment type. The two-way

mixed ANOVA produces a generalised *eta* squared (GES), which estimates the proportion of variation in the outcome that is explained by the parameters in the ANOVA³⁰. This can help us disentangle the extent to which school and establishment type may explain variations in participants' quiz scores.

School level

We find that a participant's school is a large and significant predictor of variation in quiz scores. Table 11 provides further details on the cluster size of schools and the results of our ANOVA.

Table 11: two-way mixed ANOVA, grouping by time and by school, using the individual participant level dataset

Predictor variable	Number of predictor categories/levels ³¹	Number of observations	GES (effect size/coefficient)	P-value
School	44	184	0.270	0.0003***
Time (pre/post)	1	184	0.032	0.01*
School x Time	44	184	0.174	0.173

***($p < 0.001$); **($p < 0.01$); *($p < 0.05$)

The analysis suggests that around 27 per cent of the variation across individual aggregate quiz scores is explained by differences in wider school-level context ($p < 0.001$). The GES for the interaction between school and time is 17 per cent, which suggests that school-level factors may explain some of the variation in knowledge gain. However, this correlation is not statistically significant ($p = 0.17$) so interpretation of these findings needs to be done with caution. In contrast, 3.2 per cent of the variation across individual-level aggregate quiz scores is explained by whether the quiz was taken pre- or post-CPD ($p < 0.01$).

Overall, analysis suggests that although, as per the preceding analysis, there is a strong increase in average individual knowledge levels from pre to post-CPD, there is also high variability in both the starting point of knowledge, and possibly in how well participants from different school establishments processed and retained the information within Advancing Access' material.

Establishment type level

Running a similar two-way mixed ANOVA but instead using the aggregated school level scores and grouping by establishment type shows us how different establishment types affect knowledge and knowledge gain from Advancing Access' CPD training (Table 12).

³⁰ GES is calculated as the sum of the squares for the effect under study over the sum of the squares of all effects (both observed and unobserved) and interactions in the two-way ANOVA study.

³¹ This excludes one baseline/reference category, hence why it is one less than the number of schools/time-periods

Table 12: two-way mixed ANOVA, grouping by time and by establishment type, using the school level dataset

Predictor variable	Number of predictor categories/levels ³²	Number of observations	GES (effect size/coefficient)	P-value
Establishment Type	6	88	0.262	0.27
Time (pre/post)	1	88	0.175	0.01*
Establishment Type x Time	6	88	0.245	0.037*

***($p < 0.001$); **($p < 0.01$); *($p < 0.05$)

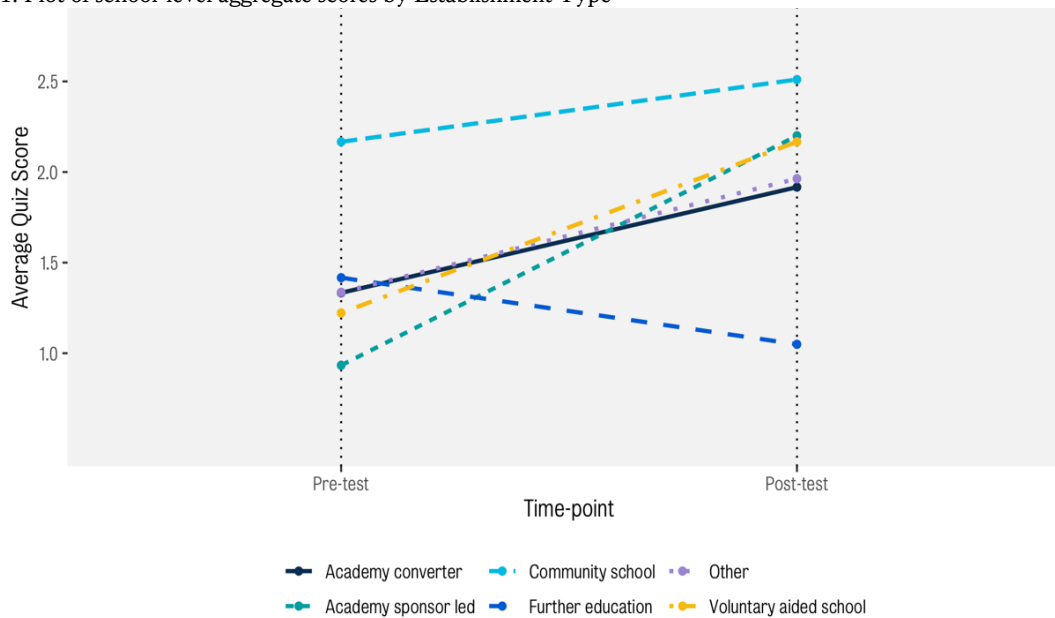
The analysis suggests that Establishment Type is not a significant predictor of school-level IAG knowledge. However, the interaction between Establishment Type and time is significant, which means that individuals from certain types of establishment are responding better to the CPD training than others. Strikingly a quarter of overall variation in school level scores can be explained by this interaction between establishment type and CPD training ($p < 0.05$). Figure 11, overleaf, gives a graphical representation. There is more score variability in the post-test than the pre-test phase, as the points are less distributed together in the pre-test (ranging from an average of just under 1 out of 5 to 2.2 out of 3) than post-test (ranging from 1.05 out of 5 to 2.5 out of 3). Please note, the data contained only one sponsor-led Academy, and two community schools.

The figure also suggests that average knowledge levels in further education colleges (FECs) may have been lower at the post-test. When this analysis is done at the level of individual participants, the knowledge gain for staff of FECs is essentially flat, suggesting that the negative slope here is driven by FECs with smaller numbers of participants. This may be because lone staff members indeed experienced worse knowledge outcomes, but it is also possible that those participants all by chance received a more difficult post-test quiz. However, considering both individual and school-level data, there is a robust overall picture that knowledge gain was weaker among staff of FECs³³.

³² This excludes one baseline/reference category, hence why it is one less than the number of schools/time-periods

³³ It is worth noting that this analysis is based on seven FECs in the CPD session data. Out of these seven FECs, four FECs included one respondent each, and three FECs employed more than one staff who had engaged with Advancing Access CPD resources..

Figure 11: Plot of school-level aggregate scores by Establishment Type

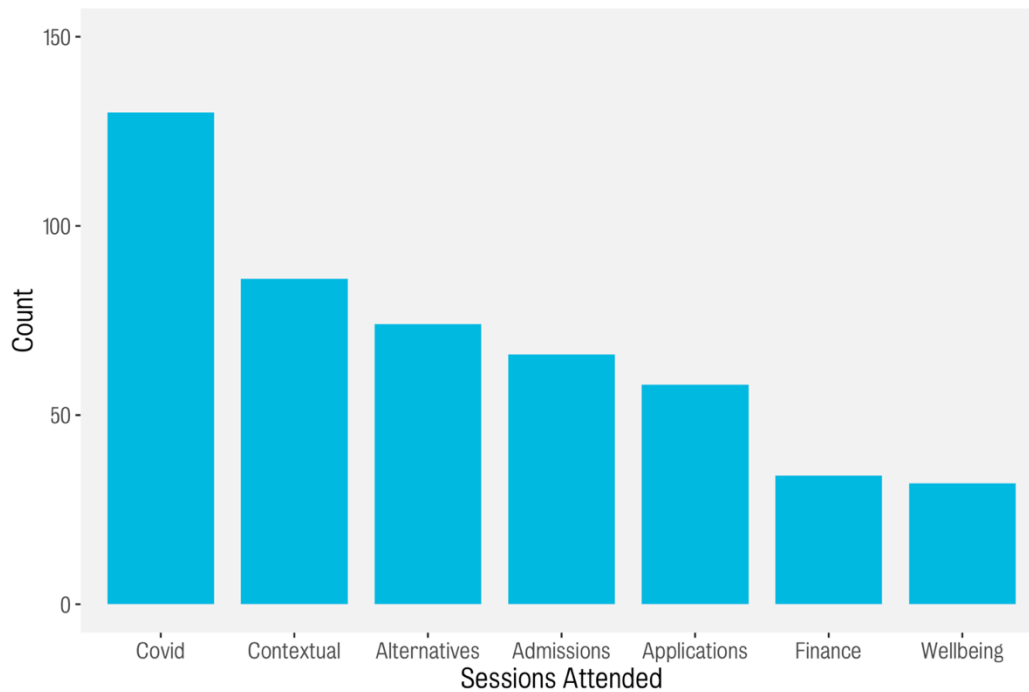


5.2 Administration of repeated knowledge quizzes (Conference Attendance)

There was an opportunity to conduct similar pre and post-quizzes with attendees at Advancing Access’ 2020 virtual conference. In this context, attendees were asked questions at registration, and then again via the follow-up survey circulated a few days after the conference. This data was also affected by technical limitations (outlined from pg. 15 onwards) which mean we do not think it is sensible to report the analysis in detail. In this section, we therefore summarise the findings from conducting parallel analyses to those conducted on CPD quiz data. We do not report coefficients or p-values; instead, we comment on complementarities between the two analyses.

We also conducted descriptive analysis to investigate which of the seven different types of sessions that were offered in Advancing Access’ conference saw the highest attendance, as well as the distribution of the total number of sessions attended by participants.

Figure 12: Bar chart showing the popularity of Advancing Access' different sessions on offer in their conference, among those who responded to the post-conference survey



Understandably, ‘supporting applicants during the COVID-19 pandemic’ was the most popular session with 130 respondents indicating they had attended this session, followed by ‘an overview of contextual offers’, which 86 respondents said they attended. Figure 12 also shows the least-attended sessions among those who responded to the post-conference survey were the ‘student finance’ and ‘student wellbeing support’ with 34 and 32 attendees respectively.

Mean differences in knowledge after vs before the conference

As with the CPD quizzes, we see overall higher quiz scores post-conference – the mean pre-conference score of complete cases was 7.9 out of 14, while the post-conference score was 8.6 out of 14, meaning an increase in average correct responses of about half a question, which is broadly similar in absolute magnitude to the CPD-quizzes. Although the conference quiz was out of 14, as outlined in Section 2.4 (pg 15), participants attended an average of 2.7 sessions, resulting in between 4 and 6 questions in the quiz where we might reasonably expect their knowledge to have been increased.

We should be cautious about reaching conclusions on the basis of this data. There were technical issues with administration of the pre-quiz, meaning that some people will have seen the same questions at least twice, and therefore might have been familiar with the question. It is also important to bear in mind that for the conference analysis less than one in three participants

completed the post-conference quiz, therefore only measuring the knowledge gain for an unrepresentative subgroup of the original participant population. The actual knowledge-gain across attendees could either be higher or lower than that which is reflected by the pre/post quiz responses we have.

School and establishment-type level influences on knowledge

Our analysis here has findings broadly consistent with that from the CPD analysis. Among the complete cases of conference participants, we find some evidence that the increase in knowledge from pre to post-conference is observed across respondents from different schools and establishment types. However, there appears to be a high variability in both the starting point of knowledge, and possibly in how well participants from different schools processed and retained the information within Advancing Access' material.

Across staff from 18 different FECs we also saw that respondents from FECs showed no increase in quiz test scores post-conference. This mirrors findings from the preceding CPD analysis, where certain establishment types (such as FECs) seem to retain less knowledge from the conference than other establishment types (such as Academies). And while the small sample of FECs in the CPD analysis gave room for caution in regard to the generalisability of results, the conference analysis finds, on average, no increase in test scores. Pairing these results with the findings of the CPD analysis suggests knowledge gain may be weaker among participants from certain establishment types, such as FECs.

5.3 Insights from qualitative research with teachers and students

Our interviews with school staff, and focus groups with young people, mainly focused on exploring staff confidence and the support young people received. However, throughout, one particular knowledge gap was highlighted, which related to contextual admissions.

► Staff are less knowledgeable across information about contextual admissions

Few of the professionals we spoke to had viewed Advancing Access' content on contextual admissions. Many participants seemed to be less confident in their knowledge of how contextual admissions processes operate and view it as a complex area. They therefore reported that that they do not discuss contextual admissions with their students:

'It's [contextual admissions] a difficult one because different universities [...] use different sources of information, don't they? So, it's a tricky one.' (Tutor in the North West)

One participant stated that they felt that contextual admissions processes were an underhanded tactic used by some universities. While this was only raised by one participant, it suggests a

concerning misunderstanding of the difference between contextual admissions and conditional/unconditional offers:

'I can't say we've spoken about it [contextual admissions] except to one student about universities being sneaky, in terms of, "You need to accept an offer by this time or you won't get this", or the thing where you have to put them as the first choice to get certain things. We've warned students about that.' (Tutor in the South East)

A minority of participants stated that they previously had little knowledge about contextual admissions but were more confident in speaking on the topic after engaging with Advancing Access' resources. One participant explained that after attending an Advancing Access webinar on contextual admissions, they had been able to advise a student on their entitlements:

'Before the contextual offers [webinar], I would have had no idea of even how to go about looking for that [POLAR data], let alone the significance of it and, sort of, the encouragement for her to apply to Cambridge.' (Head of Sixth Form in the East of England)

This suggests that Advancing Access' resources on contextual admissions are valuable for Teachers but that lack of engagement with the resources means that participants were uninformed on the topic. Another area in which participants felt less confident was providing advice on apprenticeships. Increasing the number of resources provided by Advancing Access that offer for students who are less academically inclined was suggested by several participants. Teachers were particularly keen to see content about apprenticeships, as the application process is seen as less straightforward than the centralised system for university admissions:

'I, personally, still struggle with apprenticeships in terms of trying to give advice on them. I think it's not as straightforward as UCAS where you've got, "Right, this is your deadline for this. This is how you apply." Apprenticeships are quite... I find it a lot more difficult. Obviously, you can apply through the year. There isn't one website where you apply through.' (Destination Coordinator in London)

Participants were also concerned about the viability of apprenticeships given the state of the economy due to COVID-19, and several mentioned that they find it difficult to discuss this with students who are determined to pursue an apprenticeship pathway. Conversely, one participant raised that their students are often set on pursuing university, even when an apprenticeship could be a better option for that student. Degree apprenticeships could answer both of these concerns, though overall knowledge about degree apprenticeships in participants was low:

'There are entry levels and courses that you can do... I can't remember what they're called now, like apprenticeship- What are they called? Those new ones.' (Tutor in the South East)

► **Students are not provided with consistent information about contextual offers**

It was clear through the staff interviews that contextual admissions are viewed as a complicated area, and teachers are not always confident discussing the process with students. This was further reflected in the student focus groups. Though almost all students were aware of contextual admissions, only very few had found out about it through their school (with no difference between schools that had engaged with Advancing Access and those that hadn't). The most common way students received information about contextual admissions was through external programmes such as summer schools.

'I applied to [a summer school], and then that's when I saw they asked all these questions about our postcode. I was, "What's that?" and then, yes, realised they have this postcode thing. Then I looked at other universities and realised that some universities offer contextual admissions based on, yes, postcode.' (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

External programmes, such as social mobility schemes and university-provided summer schools, were frequently cited as sources of valuable support. However, several students commented that their colleges had not provided them with information about external programmes, which could be a disadvantage to students who are not aware of these options.

'I don't think it's really spoken about enough by members of staff at schools. It's more something that's addressed by kind of outreach programmes, if you just so happen to attend one. So, I think it would be more useful if schools in disadvantaged areas spoke about them more, because I think it's something that a lot of students are actually missing out on because they just don't have the knowledge.' (Student from a school with Advancing Access engagement)

Other means through which students found out about contextual offers were university websites, word of mouth, and simply receiving a contextual offer and then looking into what that meant.

'I never really knew much about them until I actually got an offer with a contextual offer. I was a bit confused as to why I had received one, but I think it was just to do with the fact that I was probably from an underrepresented background [...].' (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

Students were clear that contextual offers should be discussed more, and several raised that a lack of communication from school staff about contextual offers might discourage some young people from applying to certain universities, or university altogether.

'I definitely think schools should talk about contextual offers way more than they are doing now. I think a lot of people are put off from applying to really good universities because they think that they can't get in, but a lot of the time, if they factor in these little things and talk about contextual offers, then I think more people would be encouraged to go to the best university.' (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

We suggest that Advancing Access consider the best way to promote existing content on contextual admissions, and increase teachers' engagement with this topic.

5.4 Limitations

The analysis reported in this chapter sets a strong foundation for future analysis of actual increases in knowledge for participants and how these may differ across individual participants, different staff groups between schools and between different establishment types. Given the relatively small sample sizes across both the CPD and conference analysis, and the attrition from the endline measurement post-conference, we chose to be conservative in specifying the analysis, to avoid spurious or non-sensible findings arising from over-specification or unsupported assumptions about respondent behaviour. We are unable to comment on the impact of other participant characteristics, such as participants' role within their institution, their level of experience, gender, age or geographic location on pre-/post- quiz scores.

Moreover, both the CPD and conference analysis can only provide indicative correlations between engagement with Advancing Access and tested subject-knowledge due to the lack of data from a comparison group that did not participate in these activities. And lastly, the very low response rate to the final follow-up post-CPD quiz means that we are unable to assess the extent to which knowledge is retained over a longer time horizon.

5.5 Findings and Recommendations

► Findings

RQ4. To what extent do teachers/advisers have improved knowledge of (as a result of their engagement with CPD):

- ♦ The nature of more selective universities and the advantages of studying at them
- ♦ The courses and qualifications on offer at more selective universities
- ♦ The different elements associated with a successful application to a competitive university
- ♦ The nature of contextual admissions policies
- ♦ The WP outreach programmes available at selective universities

We find that teachers had higher quiz scores across key areas of IAG support at the end of a CPD session/conference compared to before it. A pre/post within-subjects design does not allow certainty that the change in knowledge-level is because of Advancing Access. There may be other underlying factors contributing to/causing the observed knowledge increase in our analysis. For example, it is possible that participants may have put more effort and thought into the post-conference test than the pre-conference test and therefore scored higher because they tried harder, rather than because they knew more. Nevertheless, given the short timeframe between pre to post-quiz for the CPD-sessions (none of the session lasted for more than 60

minutes) it is likely that the majority of the observed increase in knowledge is attributable to the CPD activities. However, we cannot gauge the extent to which this knowledge is retained over the long term.

Of the key knowledge areas outlined, contextual admissions were identified as an area of knowledge deficit by both teachers we interviewed and students in focus groups.

► **Recommendations**

Based on the above analysis, we recommend that Advancing Access consider the following.

Recommendation 8. Continue to run some form of knowledge-quiz type check-in with Advancing Access users. This could take the form of either ongoing pre/post quizzes, or website-based pop-up quizzes that could then be matched with the users' history of engagement with Advancing Access resources, with those whose engagement has previously been low serving as a comparator group for high-engagers.

Recommendation 9. Work with engaged FE colleges to understand the extent to which CPD and conference provision serves their needs, and how this might be strengthened.

Recommendation 10. Highlight contextual admissions as a particular area of focus for both developing resources and CPD, and finding ways to engage school staff with these resources.

6 Teachers' confidence in providing IAG

The primary aim of our teacher interviews (see Section 2.5, pg. 17) was to investigate whether teachers who had engaged with Advancing Access reported greater confidence in their knowledge of IAG, and whether they felt that this knowledge had improved their IAG support to students and colleagues. In addition, the student focus groups (see Section 2.6, pg. 19) also asked students to reflect on the support they had received from teachers in applying.

6.1 Teachers' confidence in disseminating information about selective HEIs (RQ5)

This section focuses on reflections from the interviews and focus groups to answer RQ5, which relates to the extent to which Advancing Access resources made teachers feel more confident in disseminating information about more selective universities and the applications process to their students, resulting in students being better supported to make successful applications.

► Reflections from staff interviews

All nine interviewees were positive about their experiences with Advancing Access, whether that was attending an in-person CPD training in previous years, having attended an online conference or seminar during 2020, and/or as users of the website resources. There was a general perception among interviewees that Advancing Access is a trustworthy, broad platform of easy-to-access resources that help staff build confidence and upskill themselves and their colleagues.

Almost all of the interviewees with either medium or high engagement with Advancing Access reported that it had improved their knowledge and helped them upskill when advising students.

'By updating my knowledge, I am then able to help with the students a whole lot more and I am able to be literally up to date to the moment. Knowing what is available, knowing what has changed. So, I can answer their questions a lot better than before.' (Pastoral Manager in the East of England)

The knowledge that participants received from Advancing Access not only helped them improve their offer to students, but also allowed them to support and upskill their professional networks.

'I not only feel like I'm in a better position to support students now, but I think almost more importantly than that, I feel in a confident position to support other colleagues in my school, in supporting teachers.' (Head of Sixth Form in the East of England)

Interviewees further liked that Advancing Access provided a broad repository of information on a range of topics relating to Russell Group institutions. The fact that the information is seen as coming directly from Russell Group institutions was highlighted, with one participant describing it as accessing *'insider information'* (Tutor in the North West). Advancing Access' link to the Russell Group seemed to convey that it was reliable and quality-assured information.

'It's almost run by the Russell Group, so I trust it. I think in an age where people are making resources left, right and centre, knowing what to trust is really good.' (Tutor in the South East of England)

This sentiment was specifically echoed for Advancing Access' resources around personal statements. Indeed, resources relating to assisting students in writing personal statements were mentioned by interviewees as being the most used in practice because they provide a *'fairly authoritative source'* (Tutor in London) on how to guide students:

'When I do the session for teachers on what to look for in personal statements, I used – most of my information came from Advancing Access for that. Then they knew what to put together or what to look for so when a student said to them, "Is this any good?", they knew whether or not it was any good.' (Destination Coordinator in London)

Our limited set of interviews suggests that for teachers who engage with Advancing Access, it helps build confidence in providing IAG and supporting students to apply to RG institutions.

▶ **Reflections from student focus groups**

Overall, there was little difference in how students spoke of their experiences applying to higher education between students whose schools had engaged with Advancing Access and those who had not. Students who had received a more intensive IAG offer were more likely to be satisfied with the support they received, while those who had limited resources available to them were more likely to describe receiving little or no support for their applications.

In the staff interviews, teachers who had engaged with Advancing Access explained that it increased their confidence in both delivering IAG to students, as well as upskilling other colleagues. In the student focus groups, whether a student had attended a school that had engaged with Advancing Access did not change how they rated the knowledge of school staff in relation to the Russell Group. Overall, approximately half of all students from both groups rated staff at their school as 'very knowledgeable', with the other half saying, 'somewhat knowledgeable'. Several students (from both schools that had engaged with Advancing Access and those that had not) described comprehensive support to apply to RG institutions.

'[Y]ou could email the staff, you could go into the office for the sixth form team, and they were very based around all the university stuff, all the sessions and all the support. They were very efficient when it came to questions like that. If they weren't sure of the answer, they would help you find out [...] especially with Russell Group universities, the support and encouragement was there and the information.' (Student from a school with Advancing Access engagement)

'The main thing was the fact that loads of the staff had connections to people at the universities. The school itself, they knew about the admissions processes for all of these different universities, so they would give tailored advice based on where you were applying. So, when you were getting

to your personal statement, you knew exactly what you had to put in when you aggregated it for all the universities you were applying for so it met the criteria of all of these different universities, which I think was the most influential part of why loads of people were applying to a Russell Group university at my college.’ (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

When asked about how knowledgeable staff were about Russell Group universities, several students justified their responses by referencing the number of teachers within their school who had attended Russell Group universities themselves. Students who attended schools that had not engaged with Advancing Access were more likely to use this as a reason for saying that their school staff were more or less knowledgeable about the Russell Group. Though only a small group of students raised this as a consideration, it is interesting to note the preference for staff who have personal knowledge of RG institutions.

‘I didn’t rate it any lower [than staff being very knowledgeable about Russell Group universities] because my teacher at school in charge of all the UCAS applications, he was a professor at a Russell Group university, and other teachers around the school had studied in universities like Cambridge, Oxford, so they were very knowledgeable.’ (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

‘For me it was only one or two teachers who actually went to Russell Groups. All the others went to maybe universities outside of London. So, because I wanted to apply to a London university and a Russell Group as well, it was quite hard to find someone who was really knowledgeable about that. But the one or two teachers who did go to Russell Groups were really helpful in guiding us.’ (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

Overall, it is not clear that a school’s engagement with Advancing Access leads to perceptibly better IAG for students. However, we are conscious that a relevant comparator here was not available to us as we could not compare the experience of IAG among previous cohorts of students in the same school, who were supported by teachers before and after they engaged with Advancing Access. We are also conscious that the impacts brought about by engaging with Advancing Access (i.e. greater confidence of the engaged teacher(s)) may not have been directly perceived by students, even if they benefited from them. Advancing Access may wish to explore this further going forward; for example, by establishing regular mechanisms for seeking feedback from pupils in engaged schools.

6.2 Teachers’ confidence in delivering careers strategy (RQ6)

This section again draws on our qualitative research with both teachers and students to explore RQ6, which relates to the extent to which engagement with Advancing Access puts schools in a stronger position to meet the requirements of the government’s careers strategy, including achieving the Gatsby Benchmarks.

► Reflections from staff interviews

When asked about the Gatsby Benchmarks, responses about the role of Advancing Access in meeting the benchmarks were mixed. Some respondents had no involvement in the benchmarks so weren't able to comment. This is itself telling, if engaged users of Advancing Access are not those with a broader remit for careers advice.

For those who did have some role in the benchmarks, around half said that Advancing Access was helpful, mostly through developing the interviewee's own knowledge that they could then share with their students.

'I would say Gatsby Benchmark 8, so personal guidance, is relevant. So definitely it [Advancing Access] has helped me to understand personal statements a bit more, given me more resources to work with, with students, so, yes, I guess Gatsby Benchmark 8 is the one [where Advancing Access] would help' (Careers Facilitator in Eastern England)

There were three interviewees who said that they did not use Advancing Access for the purpose of meeting the Gatsby Benchmarks as their school have other services in place. Two of the respondents stated that their school used Unifrog³⁴ for tracking their progress on the benchmarks, and the third cited Compass+³⁵ as their school's main resource for meeting the Gatsby benchmarks. Even beyond the Gatsby Benchmarks, Unifrog was a commonly quoted resource for IAG. When asked what services similar to Advancing Access they also use, four of the nine respondents said Unifrog. Unifrog was seen as being very student-friendly.

'Their whole website is obviously geared towards eventually getting the students to write their personal statements and it's how it's structured [...] it makes the students more engaged as they go through the process [...] it does it in a more student friendly way.' (Tutor in the North West)

While this was viewed as a positive, one interviewee made a clear distinction between the value of Unifrog as a student-facing resource, versus a service like Advancing Access which is specifically designed for teachers:

'I find, Unifrog, the advice on personal statements and things is quite basic, whereas Advancing Access, I think, goes into a lot more detail and a lot more depth. That's, I think, more... I think the students would find it too difficult, I think, the stuff on Advancing Access. I think it's a more teacher-based website, which then you can take information from.' (Destination Coordinator in London)

³⁴ For further information on Unifrog please visit: <https://www.unifrog.org/>

³⁵ For further information on Compass+ please visit: <https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/schools-colleges/compass-plus>

This distinction between student-facing and teacher-facing resources came up in several interviews, with some interviewees believing that Advancing Access would be improved by having direct-to-student resources:

'I see Advancing Access as a resource for teachers to support students. Whereas, I think actually it could develop to become a resource to support students directly.' (Head of Sixth Form in the East of England)

However, some teachers saw Advancing Access' focus on teachers as a unique offer that made Advancing Access stand out as a staff-only IAG resource.

'I think they're [Advancing Access' resources] very directed at teachers, which is nice. There are often resources directed at students, but not a lot at teachers.' (Tutor in the South East)

Overall, when asked how they'd rank Advancing Access compared to other similar resources, interviewees placed Advancing Access above average. From interviewees who directly ranked Advancing Access to competitors, the outcome was either top four, top three or top two of available resources.

'I would say it's probably like number two. The only one that really comes above is [our local university], but only because they literally have it completely tailored to us.' (Pastoral Manager in the East of England)

The following two sections offer general reflections on how interviewees integrate HE options into their broader IAG approach, and how Advancing Access can fit into this approach.

Teachers consider the best fit rather than institutions' reputation

It was clear from the interviews that interviewees sought to understand a young person's skills, interests and objectives before providing advice, rather than always encouraging a particular pathway. Though several interviewees stated that their schools were interested in increasing the number of students progressing to RG institutions, none felt that the Russell Group is always the right choice for a student, or stated that they would always encourage a student to apply for a RG institution:

'Some of our SLT are very much, sort of, you know "We need people at Oxbridge, we need people attending Russell Group universities." [...] Whereas if you talk to individual subject teachers, some of the individual subject teachers are more aware of where are good universities for their subjects in a way that maybe the Russell Group doesn't always acknowledge.' (Head of Sixth Form in the East of England)

There were several common threads that interviewees identified advising students of potential good fits for universities. The student's grades were a common response in terms of whether they

would be able to keep up with the academic rigour of an RG institution. Interviewees also stated that they would consider the subjects that the student is interested in and whether the institution they're considering performs strongly in that subject area. Finally, the location and student lifestyle of the institution were also commonly cited as key factors to consider. However, with COVID-19 restricting the ability to hold university tours, as well as uncertainty about what university lifestyles will look like for the foreseeable future, interviewees were concerned that students graduating in 2020 might be less likely to continue to university.

'If you're in Year 13, "I've applied to university, and they've said they're not going to do face-to-face lectures." They're going, "What is the point for me?" Some of our other students are going, "Well, we don't know when they're going to stop doing these online lectures, so I'm going to pay £15,000 a year to go to university and not even meeting someone?" This is, I think, really negating the kind of work that's been done.' (Sixth Form Manager in London)

These approaches to helping a student choose the best university are in line with how Advancing Access presents university choice across its resources, suggesting that the current format is aligned with the actual provision of IAG across interviewees' institutions.

While interviewees were clear that they provide advice based on the individual student's needs and preferences, several interviewees did note that their schools require all students to sign up for UCAS, even if university 'is their backup choice' (Destination Coordinator in London). Most interviewees also discussed how they encourage students to be aspirational in their choices, and to raise their expectations. This is where several interviewees discussed encouraging students towards Russell Group if they believed the student had a chance.

'If we think students, perhaps, aren't being ambitious enough, we let them know, but I think it's definitely a case of "Make it your choice," [...] We like to suggest that it's not just the Russell Group name. We want them to also be aware of, you know, what the Russell Group means and that it is quite important.' (Tutor in the South East)

Two interviewees from schools in areas with lower HE progression rates also discussed the need to break down stereotypes and pre-conceived notions about university with their students in order to get them to consider applying to more prestigious institutions, or even considering going to university at all.

'I think with certain programmes that actually allow students to understand that somewhere like Imperial, or King's, or UCL is actually within their reach. I think that a lot of students, certainly in [our] area, kind of, rule themselves out from places because they see themselves as being a state school student.' (Sixth Form Line Manager in London)

Teachers seek to provide tailored content to varied groups of students

Interviewees highlighted ways in which they segment their students into different groups based on their university plans. One participant explained how their school formally divided students into one of three categories, ranging from those re-taking their Level 2 qualifications through to the 'Extended Programme' which is for students with grade averages of 7 or above out of 9 who are looking at RG institutions, medicine or veterinary courses. Other interviewees described a more informal process where staff may be aware of students who fall into different levels of engagement and may require different approaches.

'We have quite a few students who are first-generation applicants. We have students who are from very low income. Then we also have students who, from day one they will say, "I want to go to a Russell Group university. My family went here, my dad said this [...]" (Tutor in London)

Interviewees also discussed how to target information to students with particularly high aspirations – primarily Oxbridge, Russell Group, and/or medical candidates. To advise these groups, several interviewees had used online resources such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams to provide IAG since the COVID-19 lockdown, with one interview stating that these tools are something they will consider continuing post-pandemic.

'I've got a Teams group for my Oxbridge candidates. I've never done that before [...] but actually it's a really useful way of sharing resources and sharing ideas [...] we've got the same thing for medical students, as well. So that's something that we haven't done previously but, actually, I would do it after lockdown as well, because it's a really good way of doing things and we don't all need to be in the same place.' (Head of Sixth Form in the East of England)

Interviewees also described different approaches to sharing content from Advancing Access. There were three main ways that participants described utilising Advancing Access' resources. First, interviewees simply downloaded relevant resources and disseminated these without amendment to relevant groups of students.

'I've printed quite a few bits or at least emailed them, so it gives me the chance to share information with them that's concise and accurate without my having to explain it.' (Tutor in the South East)

Second, some interviewees integrated Advancing Access' content into their work by paraphrasing resources in student presentations or handouts.

'Usually, I'll look at it and then I will paraphrase it [...] generally speaking I just take bits and pieces for what I think necessary for our students.' (Destination Coordinator in London)

Lastly, some of the interviewees also mentioned that the resources were used among their professional networks. In this case, interviewees sharing learning materials with colleagues to upskill staff across their school.

'I'd say it's probably more with staff that I've kind of, referred to Advancing Access. I'd probably be going to staff [...] "Can you go and visit this website, and can you look at this? You were discussing and asking me questions, so can you go and have a look there?"' (Sixth Form Line Manager in London)

► Reflections from student focus groups

This section offers some general reflections from the student focus groups on the IAG the received, which can inform the way Advancing Access positions itself within the broader careers IAG space, in order to offer the most benefit to students.

Students feel more supported if IAG provision begins before Year 13

Though some students stated that they had started thinking about higher education early in life, the most common timeline for starting to receive IAG on applications and options was in Year 12. A small number of students stated that their IAG support had started in Year 11 (one student from a sixth form that had engaged with Advancing Access, and one from a sixth form that had not), while three students (all from colleges that had not engaged with Advancing Access) hadn't received substantial support until the beginning of Year 13.

Students whose schools/colleges started providing IAG in Year 11 or early Year 12 were more likely to describe themselves as having enough time to complete their application.

'I always knew I wanted to go to university [...] but my school started sessions for university specifically when I was in Year 12, in the January, so in second term. So, it went from January to January, so throughout Year 12 and 13, so that is when I really started to seriously think about where I wanted to go and why. So, yes, I was supported from quite early.' (Student from a school with Advancing Access engagement)

Students who started receiving support later were more likely to describe feeling rushed by the process.

'Throughout Year 12 they talk about university so that you are thinking about it and it is in the back of your mind, but throughout Year 12 we were like, "So how does UCAS actually work?", "What are the Year 13s doing right now?". Then, as soon as Year 13 started, it was, "Right, so I hope your personal statements are ready. We are going to start your applications now", and we were just like, "Is anyone going to explain this to us?"' (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

When asked what advice they would give to a Year 13 student applying to an RG institution, several students highlighted the importance of starting early to ensure that applicants have time to research their options and prepare for all the elements of the application process.

'I would say the number one thing for me was just starting early. I really panicked about trying to pick my degree subject. Then, once I'd picked my degree subject, I had a panic about picking what university [...] Through all of that, I didn't spend enough time preparing for my admissions tests and everything like that. I would just say, if I'd started that all just six months earlier, if I'd started thinking about it at the beginning of Year 12 – especially your subject – it would be so useful because I think a lot of people rush themselves.' (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

This is a common thread throughout both widening participation practice and careers advice more generally, and suggests that Advancing Access may wish to increase its support to teachers to engage students earlier and prepare them for careers decisions that involve higher education.

► **Students do not feel that they are always directed to the best course for their needs**

Despite the staff interviews suggesting that teachers seek to match a student to the best university choice for that student, the focus groups do not reflect this from the student perspective. Almost half of the students who participated noted that their school had strongly encouraged or pressured them to applying to prestigious universities, in particular Oxbridge. This was observed by students from schools that had both engaged and not engaged with Advancing Access.

Not all students saw this as a bad thing; however, several described feeling like their school was more interested in statistics than whether applying was actually the right choice for that student.

'[Schools should not] focus so much on the schools' interests, like everyone said with Oxbridge they often try to want to make sure that they have enough Oxbridge applicants, and it looks quite good on the website or whatever, but just trying to make sure that not one-size-fits-all and just because the school as a whole wants to do well, each of the students have different ambitions.' (Student from a school with Advancing Access engagement)

Conversely, some students were discouraged from applying to top-ranking RG institutions because their school did not think they would be accepted based on the institution's statistical or historical data, rather than the students' abilities. This experience was described by students who went to schools that both engaged and did not engage with Advancing Access.

*'[M]y school was very statistically-focused, so they looked at UCAS' website, which shows, based on your predicted grade, what probability you'd get in [...] So for Oxbridge they said, "Anyone who didn't get predicted A*A*A* hasn't got in, so it's very unlikely that you would get in," and they made me choose between [two top universities], but then after that I kind of thought, "There are times where anomalies can happen," and I ended up applying to both and it worked out. So, it was just an example of statistics isn't the only reason why things can happen, it's more based*

on how your application is and I feel like that went against the school's methods'. (Student from a school with Advancing Access engagement)

*'In my school, when I decided I wanted to apply to Cambridge [...] everyone basically said that I shouldn't be doing it because of my GCSE grades [...] But then I made a huge improvement, my grades went up to As and A*s, but they were still saying no. I think this is mainly because my school was in a really disadvantaged area and it was a state school, and no one has ever gotten into Oxbridge before. But it's just ridiculous how they could just say, "You shouldn't be applying there, apply somewhere else," instead of trying to push you harder and give you that support and believe in you.'* (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

Having an understanding of the workload for the course was also raised as an issue that had not been adequately discussed during sixth form (by students from sixth forms that had both engaged and not engaged with Advancing Access). If students aren't aware of the course structure and workloads at different universities – particularly prestigious universities – they may not choose the right course.

'I feel like some people just don't fit into the Oxbridge type [...] I feel like we're just always encouraged to go to all these big schools when we don't actually know the workload [...] they never asked us: do we actually value our social life more, or work more? [...] I think they should really get to know the student individually and understand what's best for them, as opposed to what's best for just school stats.' (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

Furthermore, if students aren't aware of the workload associated with a degree, it can also set unrealistic expectations and make the transition to university more difficult.

'Schools sugar-coat the [Russell Group] lifestyle, like, "Oh, yes, you're a part of so many societies, we did this, it's such a good collective student body," etc., but they didn't show the bad sides of that. Like the endless night work, the endless reading lists, the exam stress, all that stuff.' (Student from a school with Advancing Access engagement)

Students identified the importance of understanding the specific content of the courses they were applying to, and that this was sometimes not provided through their sixth form. This issue was raised by students from sixth forms that both had and had not engaged with Advancing Access.

'[The staff at my school] didn't realise how much maths is in my degree. They wanted me to do economics and maths, but they didn't realise half my degree at the moment is already maths. I think they need to have a better understanding of what our modules consist of and what kind of exams are present for us and what our abilities are.' (Student from a school with Advancing Access engagement)

However, most students who raised this issue believed that the onus for finding this information lay with the student.

'I'd say maybe read up like really detailed on what you are getting yourself into and what the modules really are [...] because for me right now, our first year, we don't get to choose anything, we don't get to choose any modules. All the ones we are doing are compulsory, and you have to really know what you are getting yourself into and know if you will find it interesting enough to continue that year instead of wasting your time.' (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

Overall, many students stressed the importance of Year 13 students learning to be more self-reliant, including during the higher education application process. Though students stressed that it's important to make use of any support available, many felt that doing independent research and managing your own time through the application process were important steps towards preparing oneself for the independence of university.

'I would say you probably have to be self-reliant. I think just you would have to independently research it and to maybe not rely on teachers too much because from university onwards anyway you are going to be on your own.' (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

► **Students perceive an inequality in IAG provision between different applicant groups**

As identified in the staff interviews, most sixth forms either formally or informally segment students into distinct HE-progression pathways and provide different support for different pathways. However, unlike teachers who viewed this as an efficient and practical method of ensuring students can easily access relevant information, many students in the focus groups felt that this created inequality in IAG provision and low expectations towards disadvantaged students leading to these underrepresented not applying to the most prestigious institutions.

Students most commonly identified that those applying to Oxford or Cambridge received additional support. Some students had benefited from the additional support for Oxbridge applicants because they themselves had applied, while others had only observed it.

'When my principal found out that I was applying to Cambridge, he organised extra meetings and stuff with him and then we would talk about the interview prep and writing a personal statement and he would write an extra letter of support.' (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

'We didn't really get a lot of time with the teachers one-to-one on how to improve our personal statements, but I think that was purely because there were about 120 people applying to Oxbridge at my school. So, it was quite tight and there was quite a bit of inequality as to who they would favour.' (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

Other students spoke about their schools offering programmes to high achieving students, which was also viewed by several students as exclusionary. Again, some students had experienced these programmes themselves while others had observed them happening but not been included:

'It almost felt elitist in the sense that they'd target the top students, whereas the middle students were overlooked and abandoned in terms of support. I felt like that is something they could have improved on, being more inclusive, and not just ruling out people who didn't necessarily do amazing in their GCSEs.' (Student from a school with Advancing Access engagement)

Several students also raised that their school had provided more support to students pursuing certain subjects, most frequently medicine, while students applying to lesser-known subjects did not receive the additional support. The prioritised subjects seemed to vary from school to school, with several law students saying their school had not been well informed to support them, while other students commented that they felt that their school had prioritised law students because it was perceived as a prestigious degree.

'I guess it makes sense to concentrate and put more resources into the subjects that loads of students are going into, but I think if teachers would look at and give support to students reading other subjects at uni as well, instead of just economics, medicine, and engineering or whatever.' (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

For students applying to less popular subjects, one of the common issues was that schools did not provide support for additional entrance requirements such as standardised exams or interviews. This issue was raised by students from schools that had both engaged and not engaged with Advancing Access.

'[T]he emphasis was a lot on personal statement, not so much about what you need to do for the university itself [...] I had no support whatsoever in terms of the LNAT [...] So I think a lot of it was basically saying, "Okay, let's get your foot in the door" but then they weren't really helping you open the door completely in the sense of giving you the support that you needed to actually get a spot at that place.' (Student from a school with Advancing Access engagement)

'My school [...] was very, very medicine heavy, so there was a lot of support for students who wanted to study medicine at Oxbridge, like a ton of test support. There were, yes, school societies especially for [...] the tests for medicine [...] but all the other subjects they didn't care about.' (Student from a school with no Advancing Access engagement)

Some students stated that their school supported them well in mock interviews or exam preparation, with one student noting that though the programme their school offered prepared them well, it also highlighted the inequality between state and private school application processes.

'Because my school was rather small [...] for interview prep they kind of sent everyone for whatever degree they wanted to go to, to other schools for interview practice. They had collaborations with some private schools as well as some other state schools. The private school that I went to for my Cambridge preparation: the questions that they asked were a harder version of what I got in the actual interview. It kind of shows that private schools have some sort of advantage because in a sense I was over-prepared for my interview when I went to Cambridge'

because they already gave questions that were beyond what I needed.' (Student from a school with Advancing Access engagement)

As with contextual offers, students who received little support from their schools for interviews or additional exams often supplemented this with support from external programmes.

'I am with [mentoring scheme], so I had a mentor that's a solicitor [...] and when it came down to interviews he did a phone interview with me as well, whereas at college I didn't have that interview support or anything.' (Student from a school with Advancing Access engagement)

'I found that my school was quite lacking, and I relied more on external programmes that I was with for support. Like with [support scheme], they were able to provide me with mock interviews [...] I think it is because my school didn't really know how to approach mock interviews with history.' (Student from a school with Advancing Access engagement)

6.3 Findings and Recommendations

► Findings

In this section, we drew on insights from interviews with teachers and focus groups with first year students at RG institutions to explore the extent to which teachers who engaged with Advancing Access felt more confident in providing IAG, and whether students felt more supported (RQ5) and the extent to which Advancing Access engagement helped them deliver an overall careers strategy for pupils (RQ6).

RQ5. To what extent do teachers/advisers feel more confident in disseminating information about more selective universities and the applications process to their students, resulting in students being better supported to make successful applications?

Staff we interviewed reported feeling more confident in disseminating information about universities, and valued the support that Advancing Access provided there. We did not see any meaningful differences between the support that young people from Advancing Access schools reported receiving and the support that young people from other schools reported receiving. This may be something that Advancing Access should consider incorporating into its ongoing monitoring activities; for example, including questions around school IAG support into surveys conducted with its member institutions.

RQ6. Do staff at schools and colleges who have engaged with Advancing Access feel in a stronger position to meet the requirements of the Government's careers strategy, including achieving the Gatsby Benchmarks?

Although teachers spoke positively about Advancing Access' role in their overall careers guidance approach, including the Gatsby Benchmarks, they viewed Advancing Access as

marginal in this compared to other resources. Ways that Advancing Access could position itself as more central to a school's careers strategy are to highlight the relevance of Advancing Access to particular elements of the Gatsby benchmarks, for example Benchmark 8, more clearly and to consider producing student-facing material that teachers can easily apply and forward to their students when providing careers advice.

Teachers felt Advancing Access was a trusted resource that offers quality-assured and relevant information on the every-changing landscape of university admissions. Staff reported that Advancing Access' online resources helped them to advise students. It became obvious that engaged teachers had often heard about Advancing Access through other colleagues and some interviewees confirmed that they had shared relevant resources with staff across their school, which they reported improved IAG provision across networks and target groups.

Further work can be done to target available resources to different teachers. Staff interviewees reported that they didn't use Advancing Access resources to inform their work towards Gatsby Benchmark 8 and often referenced competitors as more useful tools for general careers advice. Further promotion and potentially labelling resources towards particular target groups of staff could assist in increasing awareness and uptake of these resources.

In general, we found no distinct difference in how student focus group participants reported on the quality of IAG provision depending on whether their school had engaged with Advancing Access or not. Instead, students seem to associate more generic school characteristics as drivers for better or worse IAG provision: where IAG provision was more targeted and staff had a smaller student to staff ratio to accommodate attendees generally reported more positive experiences. Generally, a large number of students reported to have felt unprepared for the demands of university and felt that IAG staff didn't highlight the demands of independent study sufficiently when promoting a Russell Group degree. There further seemed to be a perception that staff who had lived experience of the Russell Group, either as previous staff or graduates, were more knowledgeable and helpful in providing an 'insider perspective' on what RG institutions are really like and what to consider when choosing to apply to one.

Advancing Access can take advantage of these insights and particularly target and encourage teachers that graduated from an RG institution to engage with its services. Likewise, additional material on course requirements and associated time commitments (to a relatively granular detail) could be made available to IAG staff to provide students with an insight into the study schedule and requirements of a typical undergraduate degree.

► **Recommendations**

Based on the above analysis, we suggest that Advancing Access consider the following.

Recommendation 11. Consider ways of engaging teachers who are RG alumni themselves, and of foregrounding Advancing Access' affiliation with the Russell Group, as these connections were valued by both teachers and students we spoke to.

Recommendation 12. Large schools may face particular challenges in providing IAG that is tailored to pupils' interests and potential. Consider ways Advancing Access can particularly support these schools, such as producing segmented, or student self-complete resources.

Recommendation 13. Develop standard messaging on how Advancing Access' resources fit into careers advice, and are complementary to, rather than competitive with, student-facing resources such as Unifrog. Clarity on how Advancing Access can help schools meet Gatsby Benchmarks may be needed if Advancing Access wishes to be seen as a key resource in this space.

7 Conclusion

This report summarises the findings of our mixed-methods evaluation into the efficacy of Advancing Access to increase the Russell Group application and, ultimately, progression rates of its engaged group of schools. We've investigated this ambitious research goal via a combination of research methods, including analysis of UCAS and Advancing Access data, administration of quizzes, and conducting qualitative research with school staff and students. This mixed-methods approach has allowed us to take a holistic and balanced view of the effectiveness of Advancing Access' activities to engage teachers, improve their support to students, and ultimately increase the rates of application and progression to RG institutions.

Overall, we find that Advancing Access is appreciated and trusted by teachers, and that it likely both increases teachers' knowledge and possibly the application rates from their schools to RG institutions. As of 2020, we cannot identify a significant impact on progression rates to RG institutions, which is a key point for further research. In addition, we find that although teachers report that Advancing Access increases their confidence in providing IAG, students do not necessarily experience noticeably improved IAG as a result. We also find that Advancing Access could take further steps if it wishes to be viewed as a general careers resource, as opposed to a resource specific to HE admissions.

Throughout the report, we have incorporated our reflections into recommendations, which cover both next steps for Advancing Access, and how it can take evaluation activities further in future. Both of these strands are key to demonstrating the sustained value of Advancing Access.

In terms of next steps for the service, we would like to particularly highlight the need to understand how to better sustain engagement among target schools specifically, as although proportionally more target schools are engaged, once engaged, they do not display higher intensities of engagement than non-target schools. We would also highlight the finding that CPD appears to be raising knowledge levels among FE college staff less than for staff of other types of establishment, and the need to understand and address this. Lastly, in deriving an engagement score with Advancing Access resources, we used a bottom-up approach looking at the data and coding activities in collaboration with Advancing Access. We would encourage Advancing Access to continue to identify what the key components of the offer are, which particularly contribute to outcomes for young people, and consider how to ensure that teachers engage with these components as a priority. Engagement with these 'core' resources could then form the basis of a more top-down, Theory of Change-led engagement measure.

In terms of evaluation, we see great potential for Advancing Access to simply and straightforwardly continue some form of the CPD quizzes, either as a pre and post-CPD activity

as we have done for this evaluation, or as embedded quizzes on the website, which could be matched to the engagement history of the user to identify knowledge-gain and retention from various different activities. Advancing Access could also consider embedding quizzes in a yearly user engagement survey in order to achieve this goal. We would be very happy to provide further scoping of the practicalities of embedding this type of quiz into business-as-usual.

We would also encourage Advancing Access to invest in re-running the Difference-in-Differences analysis in subsequent years as year-on-year additions to the current UCAS EXACT abstract should be relatively cost-efficient. We are happy to share the comparator group and method to facilitate this. Advancing Access may also wish to purchase the 2016 data, in order to increase the amount of data available to the analysis in the pre-period. The credibility of the analysis increases with more data points, particularly as treatment intensity ramps up over time with the increased provision of resources and the accumulation of knowledge in schools.

We believe the present evaluation provides an indication of both Advancing Access' impact and areas where it may wish to direct activities further in order to embed that impact, but we are also conscious of the caveats and limitations of the analysis underpinning our findings. We would encourage Advancing Access to consider developing an Evaluation Framework that can guide both future data collection activities and future evaluations. Evaluations that are specified before the activity commences are generally able to provide more robust findings with fewer caveats, and to consider evaluation methods that enable the making of stronger causal claims of impact.

Recommendation 14. Advancing Access should develop an Evaluation Framework that sets out what its substantive and evaluation goals are for the next phase of its development, in order to ensure that it is collecting the necessary data, and for the credibility and robustness of measures of impact. TASO provides [evaluation guidance](#) that may be of use in developing the framework.