



# Breaking barriers to the Russell Group





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THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
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# What are the barriers to Russell Group Universities?

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## What are the main barriers to any student entering higher education?

- Financial concerns and financial deterrence
- Lack of information, advice and guidance
- Prior attainment
- Cultural perceptions
- Limited course type / delivery

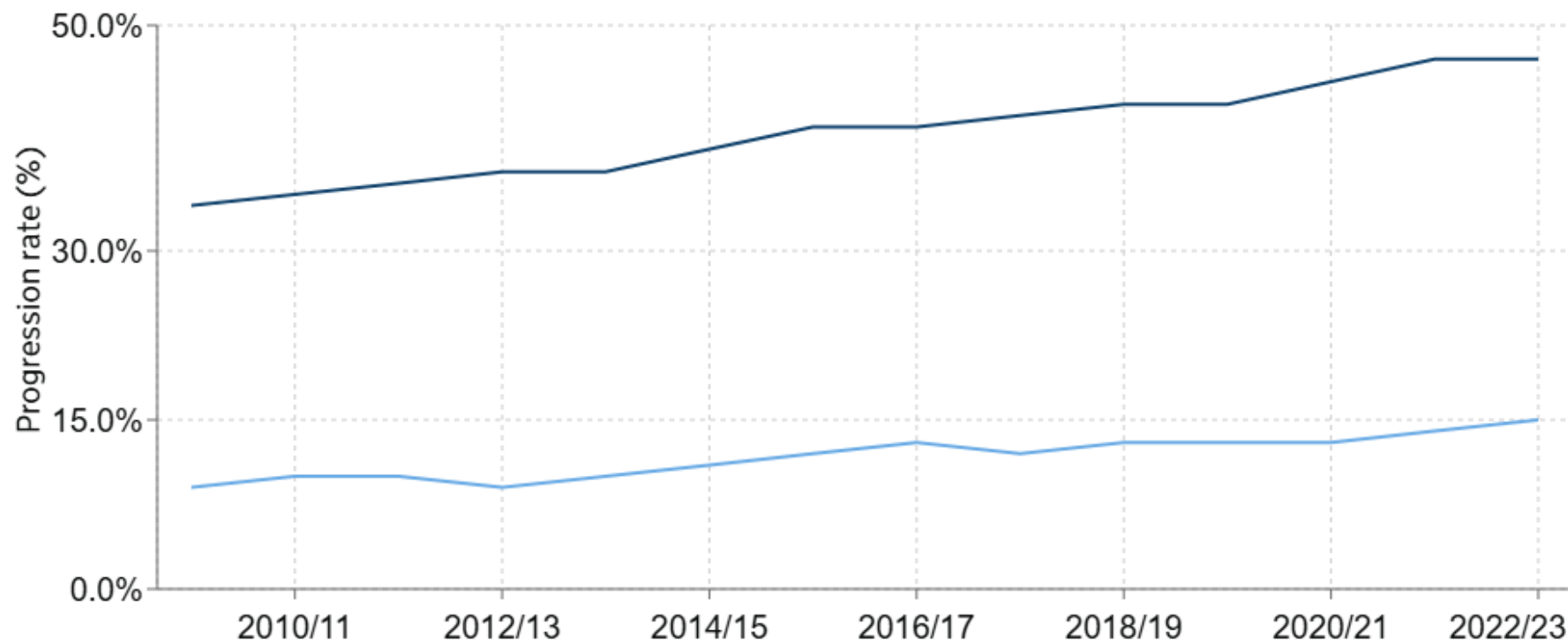
Which of these barriers might be amplified if a student considers Russell Group study?

## Experiences that might present additional barriers:

- Socio-economic status
  - First in family to attend
  - Lack of role models / insider knowledge
  - Insufficient careers support or access
  - Lived experiences
  - School performance or inconsistent attendance
  - Unstable home dynamic
  - Confidence & self efficacy
  - Moving away from home
- Office for Students:**
- Students from low-income households
  - Ethnicity
  - Religion
  - First in family
  - Disabled students
  - Mature students
  - Commuter students
  - Service children
  - LGBTQ+
  - Estranged students
  - Students with parental responsibility
  - Care Experiences students
  - Young carers

# What does the data say?

Progression to HE by age 19 by Looked After Children Status

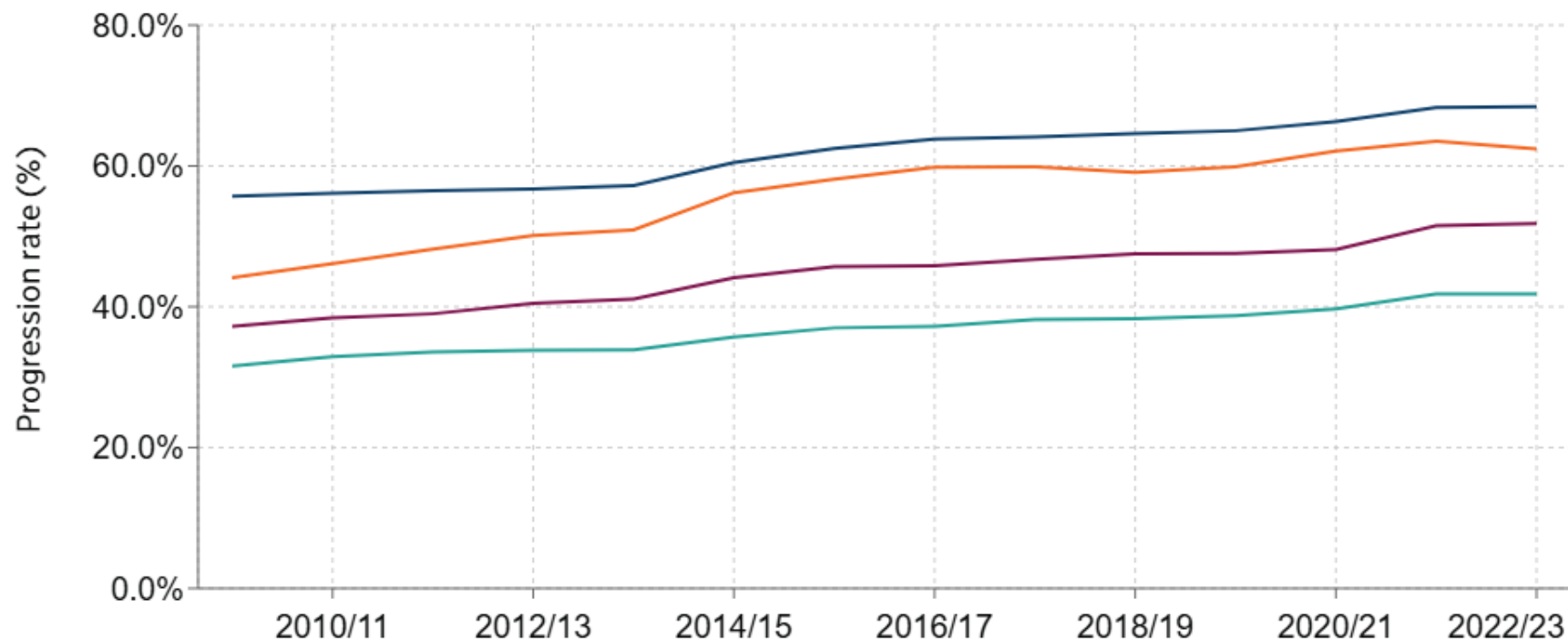


- HE Progression Rate (All Other Pupils, England)
- HE Progression Rate (Looked after continuously for 12 months or more, England)

Source: Matched data from the DfE National Pupil Database

# What does the data say?

Progression to HE by age 19 by Ethnic Group

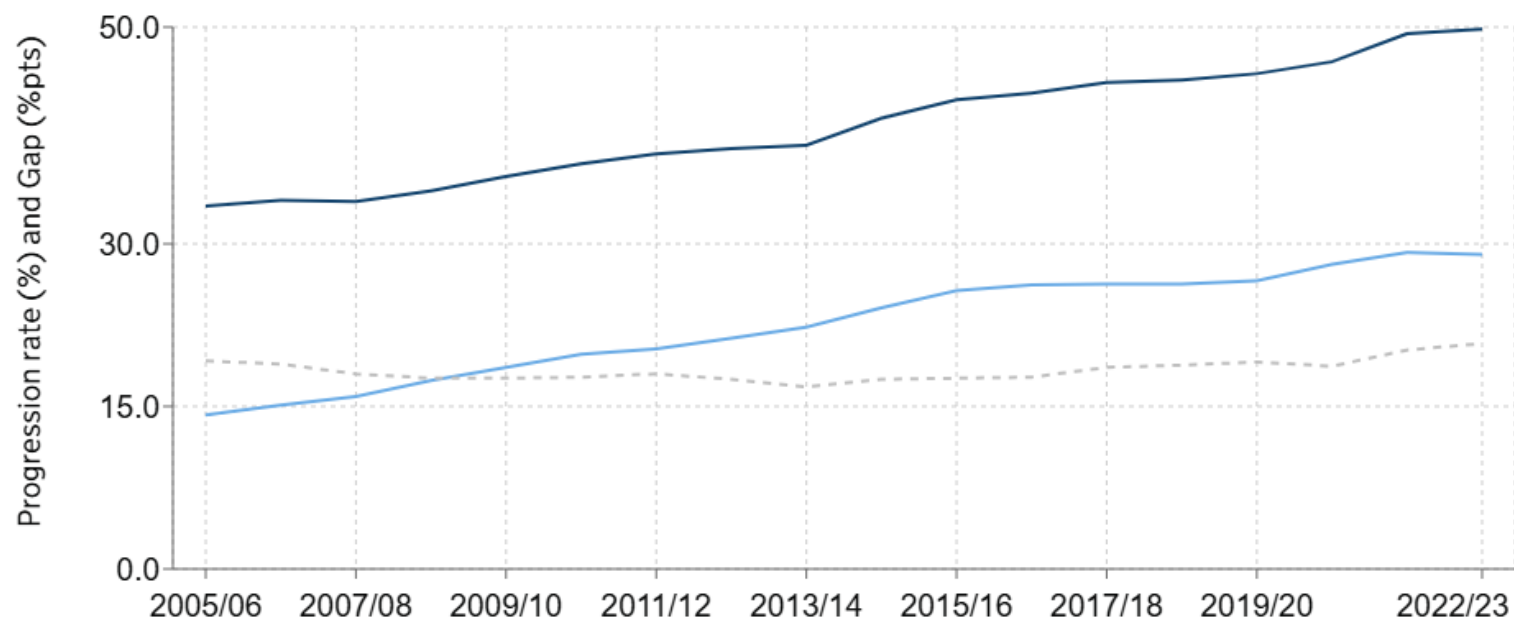


- HE Progression Rate (Asian / Asian British, England)
- HE Progression Rate (Black / African / Caribbean / Black British, England)
- HE Progression Rate (Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups, England)
- HE Progression Rate (White, England)



# What does the data say?

Progression to HE by age 19 by Free School Meal eligibility



- HE Progression Rate (FSM) (England)
- HE Progression Rate (Non-FSM) (England)
- Progression Rate Gap (England)

## Footnotes

1. The progression rate gap is the difference (in percentage points) between the HE progression rates of pupils who were eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) at age 15 and those who were not eligible for FSM at age 15



# Barriers as experience

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Every student's experience is different and unique but let's think about the types of experiences and challenges that they might face.

In pairs, consider for 5 minutes the additional barriers to Russell Group study for:

A Care Experienced Student

A Student From a Black Background

A Student eligible for FSM

What could these students be more likely to have experienced / faced?



5 minutes

# Care Experienced Student

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## What could an experience look like?

- Disruption to education e.g. moving schools and geographical areas
- Disruption to care placements
- Stressful and chaotic living environment
- High rate of school exclusions
- More likely to have a disability (which includes physical disability, neurodiversity and SEN)
- Language barriers - may be an unaccompanied asylum seeker
- Trauma from previous poverty, abuse or neglect
- Mental health issues
- Practical issues e.g. moving
- Lack of support network
- Low self-esteem, confidence or expectations from others
- Non traditional qualifications and/or low attainment
- Financial concerns

### Summary

- **Information and guidance**
- **Financial support**
- **Network support**
- **Academic support**

# Student from a Black background

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## What could an experience look like?

- (non)inclusive curriculum
- Lack of potential role models
  - Including role models within the workforce
- Authentic student experiences
- Sense of belonging
- Mental health challenges, exacerbated from discrimination
- Access to cultural assets
- Geographic distribution and mobility
- Progression from university
- Family experience and understanding

### Summary

- **Information and guidance**
- **Role models**
- **Sense of belonging**
- **Geographic mobility**

# Student eligible for FSM

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## What could an experience look like?

- Attainment gaps and outcomes
- Resources for academic support
- Overwhelming financial barriers
- Lack of access to information and guidance
- Costs associated with research and application
- Financial limits on geographic mobility
- Limited cultural exposure to university
- Intersectionality – e.g disability
- Cultural experience of university
- First in family to attend
- School and College grade predictions
- Work experience, interview practice

### Summary

- **Information and guidance**
- **Attainment gaps**
- **Perceptions**
- **Financial support**

## Leave to achieve

How universities can contribute  
to social mobility in their regions

Dani Payne

# A (potted) history of Widening Participation

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# History of WP

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## 1970s – 1990s:

Adults from working class backgrounds entering HE – history of ‘working class’ consciousness

## Late 1990s:

Dearing report & pilot initiatives on Widening Participation

## Early 2000s:

Excellent Challenge & Partnerships for Progression

## 2004:

Creation of AimHigher & ‘Raising Aspirations’

## 2006:

Creation of OFFA (Office for Fair Access)



# History of WP

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## 2011/2012:

The end of AimHigher and the introduction of the Plan 2 student loan system

## 2015:

National Networks of Collaborative Outreach

## 2017:

National Collaborative Outreach Project

## 2018:

Creation of the OfS (Office for Students)

## 2020s:

APPs, UniConnect & On-Course Support

- Universities have suffered from policy-churn and a lack of a clear, long-term government strategy for higher education and social mobility.
- England suffers for not having clear national access targets for universities to work towards. Scotland, in comparison, has benefited from strong political focus on widening access, with clear institutional and national targets.
- As a result, policymakers and stakeholders perceive higher education to be a sector lacking a clear sense of its overall purpose and mission, and the public can sometimes view universities as out of touch with local needs and too inward looking.

## Access

This involves **increasing the number of individuals from underrepresented** groups entering higher education, often through targeted recruitment, outreach, and flexible entry requirements. It also means ensuring a **fair and inclusive application process** and providing support to make higher education attainable for all.

## Success

This focuses on creating a **supportive and inclusive learning environment** that promotes student engagement and achievement. This can include providing academic support, tutoring, and mentoring, as well as fostering a sense of belonging and community.

## Progression

This involves supporting students as they **move on to further study or employment**, often through career guidance, internships, and networking opportunities. It also means ensuring that students have access to the resources and support they need to succeed in their chosen field.

# The Current & Future Landscape

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# Success & Progression

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## HOW TO CRACK THE CLASS CEILING



# Access – Headline Figures

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- Full-time undergraduates jumped from roughly 150,000 in 1960 to over 1.5 million by 1990, with women moving from under **20% to over 40% of entrants**.
- The proportion of pupils previously eligible for free school meals progressing into higher education by age 19 has risen from **14.2%** in 2005-6, to **29%** in 2022-23. For those not eligible for free school meals, progression has risen from **33.5%** to **49.8%** in the same time period.
- 20 years ago, young people from the most privileged groups were four times more likely to go to university than the least privileged, **that gap had halved by 2022**.
- In 2015-16, around **9% of POLAR Q1** students entered HE for the first time. This increased to around **12.5% by 2020-21** thanks to national initiatives such as the uniconnect programme.

## Independent vs State Schools

**What is the % of  
independent school A-level  
students who progress on to  
HE?**

57%

87%

80%

26%



## Independent vs State Schools

**What is the % of state school  
A-level students who  
progress on to HE**

57%

87%

80%

26%

## Independent vs State Schools

**% of independent school A-level students who progress onto a high tariff HEI**

57%

87%

80%

26%

## Independent vs State Schools

% of state school A-level  
students who progress onto  
a high tariff HEI

57%

87%

80%

26%

Office for  
Students



OfS

## We aim to ensure that...

**every student,  
whatever their  
background,**

**has a fulfilling  
experience of  
higher education**

**that enriches  
their lives and  
careers.**

### Participation

### Experience

### Outcomes

#### Objective 1

All students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education.

#### Objective 2

All students, from all backgrounds, receive a high quality academic experience, and their interests are protected while they study or in the event of provider, campus or course closure.

#### Objective 3

All students, from all backgrounds, are able to progress into employment, further study, and fulfilling lives, and their qualifications hold their value over time.

### Value for money

#### Objective 4

All students, from all backgrounds, receive value for money.

# Value for Money...

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## 'DAVID BECKHAM STUDIES' - STAFFORDSHIRE UNIVERSITY



# Activity - Discussion



## Activity title

In small groups or pairs, discuss what your students are telling you about the prospect of Higher Education.

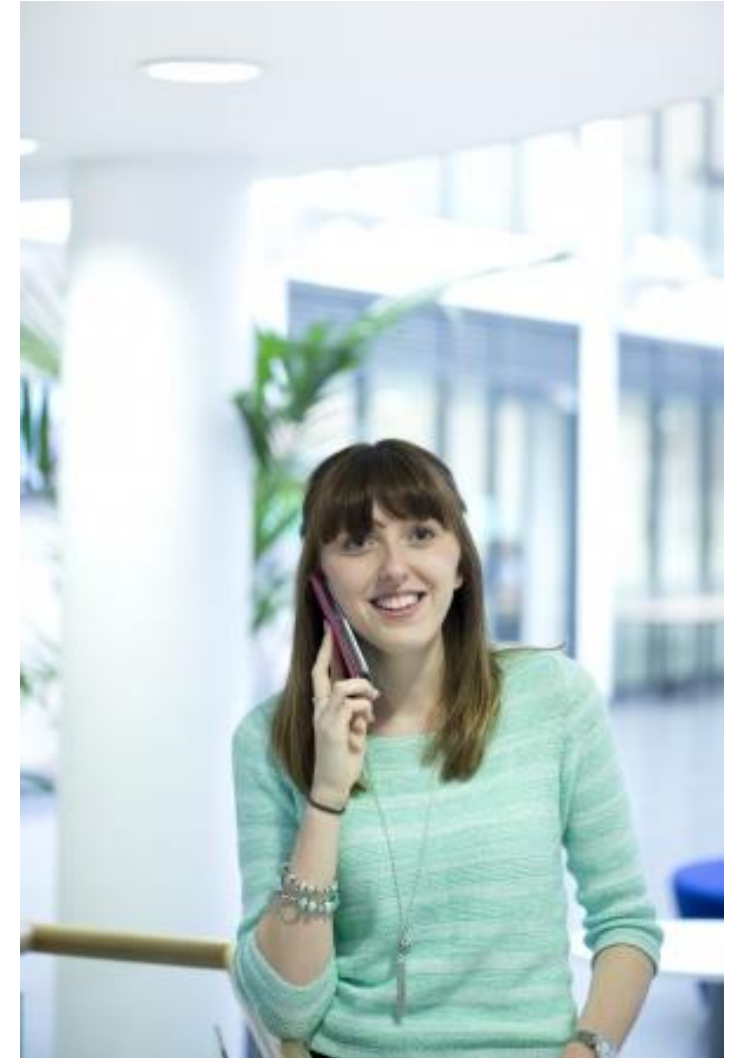
Have you seen a change in attitude/trend towards HE?

Do you feel that students are scrutinising 'value for money' more than before?

In your opinion, how should universities react to these challenges?



5 minutes





# Discussion - Challenges

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## Falling Numbers & Birth Rate

- Total enrolments fell by 1.1% in 2023/24 – the first drop in almost ten years
- Demographic projections warn that a shrinking population of 18-year-olds could trigger a 7% decline in demand between 2030–35, and up to 20% by 2040 unless universities adapt recruitment strategies and diversify provision.

## Male Participation

- In 2024/25, about 44,000 fewer UK-domiciled young men than women accepted HE places. To match female participation rates would require a 37% boost in male enrolment—equivalent to some 55,000 “missing men” each year over the past decade.

## Internationalisation

- Overseas students numbered 732,285 in 2023/24, accounting for 23% of the total HE cohort—up from 679,970 in 2021/22, though enrolments dipped by 4% from the 2022/23 peak.
- Fee income from international students hit £12.1 billion in 2023/24, representing 23% of total HE revenues and cross-subsidising domestic teaching costs.
- EU student numbers have fallen circa 40%, but non-EU applicants have raised sharply

# Discussion - Challenges

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## Increase in available provision

- The growth of higher education delivery beyond traditional universities—to include further education (FE) colleges and a growing number of private and alternative providers—has created a crowded market where institutions compete fiercely for ever-smaller cohorts of students.

## Financial pressures – students & the sector

- The threshold below which families qualify for the full maintenance loan has been stuck at £25,000 since 2008 (**with inflation, it should be closer to £35,000**).
- Research by Russell Group Students' Unions found that 1 in 4 students regularly missed meals or went without other necessities because they simply couldn't afford them.
- UK universities have seen tuition fees frozen at £9,250 since 2017, with only a modest increase to £9,535 planned for autumn 2025. This freeze, coupled with cumulative inflation of around 18% since 2012, has eroded real-term income per domestic student, forcing institutions to seek alternative revenue sources just to break even.

*‘Graduates earn more, are healthier, and are more civically engaged than nongraduates. Studies have found that attending a higher education institution as a student from a lower socioeconomic background is the best mechanism we have for promoting absolute upwards social mobility’*

## HE remains the premier choice for school leavers

- There were 758,000 applications for full-time undergraduate places through UCAS in 2024, up by 500 on 2023 but below the record level from 2022. Almost 565,000 of these applicants were accepted.

## Earnings

- Sutton Trust analysis found that 22% of graduates from a disadvantaged background achieved earnings in the top quintile of the population by age 30, compared to just 6% for those who didn’t attend university.
- For graduates from a disadvantaged background who attended a ‘top third’ (more selective) university, they earned on average approximately £36,000 16 years after KS4, compared to £25,000 for graduates from a less selective institution, and £16,000 for those with no known qualification after KS4

# Upwards Social Mobility

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## Career Flexibility

- Universities equip graduates with a portfolio of transferable skills—critical thinking, communication, data analysis and independent learning—that are highly valued across industries.
- The forthcoming Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), due in 2027, will formally accredit Year 1 study and enable students to pause, retrain or resume learning in different subjects or at other institutions—strengthening mid-career flexibility.

## Crime Rates

- A study from King's College London found that keeping young people in school longer—especially through compulsory education laws—can reduce crime through *dynamic incapacitation*. That means students are less likely to commit crimes simply because they're in school during peak risk years.

## Civic Engagement

- HE participation correlates with higher levels of volunteering and civic engagement, all of which bolster social cohesion, political stability and collective wellbeing.

# What can students get involved in?

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## Intervention strategies

- Contextual offers
- School and College engagement
- Mentoring
- Individual support
- Residentials
- Talks and Workshops
- Subject Tasters
- Application support
- Online events
- Information and guidance
- Careers fairs
- Collaboration with regional partners
- Community centres
- Bursaries
- Recruitment activities
- Visits to Campus

**Many of these intervention rely on School and College partnerships with Russell Group institutions**

## Commitment to Public Good

### Pre-16

Regional partners with schools

Focus on attainment raising

Partnerships with IntoUniversity

### Post-16

Informed choices about higher education

Skill building and equipped to be a successful student

Application support and guidance

**Alternative offer up to three grades below our typical offer**



How you can work with us:

1. [Sign up to our Schools and Colleges Newsletter](#)

2. [york\\_outreach](#) on "X"

3. Visit our Teachers' and Advisers' Hub  
[york.ac.uk/schools-and-colleges/teachers-hub/](http://york.ac.uk/schools-and-colleges/teachers-hub/)





# OUR PROGRAMMES

Pre-16

Post-16



## Care Experienced Students

- Dedicated point of contact (pre and post entry)
- Contextual offers
- VIP visit to Campus (travel & accommodation)
- Accommodation Subsidy (currently capped at £130 per week)
- Care Leaver and Estranged student bursary
- Social events and practical support (luggage, cards, move in packs)

## Students from a Black background

- Black Access programme
  - Support and mentorship
  - Online and on-campus events
  - “For Black Students, By Black Students”
  - Guaranteed offer, interview and up to three grade discounted offer
- Transition and student success programmes too

## Our commitment to Widening Participation

We're committed to creating and supporting a diverse student body, welcoming students from every background to join our global community.

Our widening participation programmes offer free activities for UK state school students to support their progression to LSE and other top universities

Our overall priority groups are:

- **Care-experienced students**
- **Students living in areas with low progression to university**
- **Students from low-income households who have been eligible for free school meals during their secondary education**

### New initiative to support pre-16 attainment raising

In the upcoming 2025/26 academic year, LSE and Imperial will be launching a new collaborative attainment raising project, working with KS3 female students to improve maths attainment and confidence via small group tutoring and enrichment events.

*‘High-achieving girls from lower-income backgrounds are at greater risk of not achieving their potential at GCSE, and not pursuing Maths beyond GCSE’*

## Long-term programmes

NOV

18 months

### Pathways to Law and Pathways to Banking & Finance

Delivered in partnership with the Sutton Trust

*Programme begins in November/December of year 12*

A free 18-month programme for students who live within commuting distance of LSE. Through in-person and online activities, students explore university study and careers in the fields of law or banking and finance. Students also have access to bespoke work placements and employability events with top firms.

JAN

10 months

### LSE Springboard

*Programme begins in January of year 12*

A free 10-month programme for students who live in UK regions outside of London and south-east England. Students have the chance to take part in three visits to LSE. These are complemented by an online super-curricular academic enrichment programme where they join bespoke university-style sessions with current LSE PhD tutors on their specialist subjects.

FEB

9 months

### LSE Thrive

*Programme begins in February of year 12*

A free 9-month programme for students of Black heritage who live within commuting distance of LSE. Online and in-person activities explore student life, with Black LSE student mentors providing an authentic insight into their experiences.

## Standalone events

MAY

### LSE Explore

*Webinar series in May of year 12*

A series of online subject taster events which offer an insight into selected undergraduate degree subjects at LSE. Each event offers an introduction to what it's like to study in that department, an academic taster lecture and insights from current LSE students.

MAY

### LSE Black Achievement Conference

*Webinar in May of year 12*

Celebrating the achievements and contributions of the Black community at LSE. The event engages contributors from across the university community at LSE and includes a taster lecture from one of our world-leading professors, as well as an inspiring talk from a graduate of LSE.



## Navigate



# Questions?

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ADVANCING  
ACCESS / From the  
RUSSELL  
GROUP

