



# Research Brief

## Evaluating Access

Pressure is mounting on universities to increase the number of non-privileged students they enrol, and the Government is calling on the sector to double the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds it admits by 2020.<sup>1</sup>

Entry rates for 18 year-olds from the most disadvantaged group to universities with the highest entry requirements have increased considerably<sup>2</sup> and higher education participation from the most disadvantaged 40% of young people has also increased over the last ten years. Yet disadvantaged students remain chronically underrepresented in the most selective institutions. A student from a privileged background is still 8.5 times more likely to attend a selective university than their least privileged counterpart.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, there are still far too many high-attaining low-income students failing to gain access to higher education.

Since tuition fees increased to £9000 a year, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) has developed spending guidelines outlining the proportion of their budgets universities should spend on Widening Participation. As a result, universities now spend £750 million a year on activities to improve outreach, retention and progression.

OFFA has encouraged a growing proportion to be spent specifically on outreach, with universities set to spend £124 million on such

### The best outreach strategies

- Mentoring
- Multi-year combined interventions
- Personalised application information and assistance
- Residential programmes
- Tutoring

### What makes effective outreach?

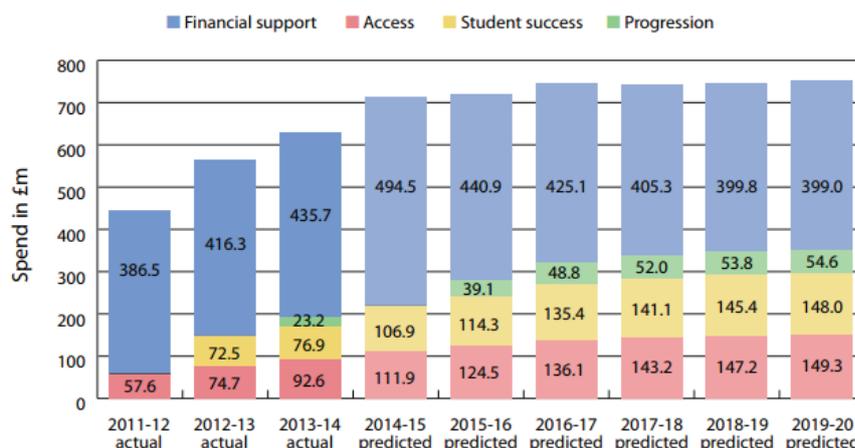
- Combining several strategies into one longitudinal programme
- Improving academic attainment
- Intervening early
- Involving teachers
- Working closely with parents

initiatives in 2015/16, Outreach initiatives come in many shapes and sizes, and include summer schools, mentoring schemes, tutoring, teacher engagement, parental support, information campaigns and more. Although some universities seek feedback from their participants and track their later academic success rates, very few institutions are rigorously evaluating the impact of their outreach programmes.

There is a lack of robust evidence from the UK indicating which outreach strategies work best, yet there is a small - and

growing - body of international evidence. The Trust has collated the most promising research into a literature review entitled *Evaluating Access* which gives an initial indication of which outreach strategies may work best. The review also highlights some common features of the most successful outreach programmes. Taken all together, there is strong evidence that outreach activities, in general, do succeed in attracting and admitting students from non-privileged backgrounds, but there is not enough evidence indicating which particular initiatives work.

### Universities' spending on Widening Participation over time<sup>5</sup>



## Evaluating Access: Research Review

Existing research in the UK too often lacks a control group against which to benchmark participants' outcomes. Failing to provide a counterfactual makes it very difficult to quantify the impact of an initiative and therefore to ascertain whether it actually works. The gold standard for such quantitative research is the randomised control trial (RCT) and a report authored by Professor Carole Torgerson of Durham University published alongside this review, finds that there is very little research of this standard in the UK. Across all outreach strategies, the majority of robust research has been undertaken in an international context. Nevertheless, initial findings from the Evaluating Access review shed light on several promising interventions that have had measurable positive impact within their own national context. Some common elements of effective outreach to emerge from the research literature

include early intervention, attainment-raising, interaction with parents and teachers, and combined outreach programmes.

The review includes both quantitative and qualitative research undertaken within the last 15 years focusing solely on outreach strategies, rather than strategies related to student attainment, retention or post-university outcomes. The review looks specifically at the impact on low-income students, and does not consider evidence related to mature or part-time students. These caveats should be carefully considered before drawing conclusions from the review's findings. Bursaries, for example, have not been shown to have a positive impact on university access and retention, however this doesn't mean they don't have an impact on either. Similarly, there is a lack of evidence indicating the impact of combined interventions that result in a transferrable offer of a university place. Yet this appears to be because these interventions are relatively new and remain largely untested. A lack of evidence in

a particular area should not be equated with a lack of impact.

## Evaluating Access: Joint Research Project

The overall conclusion of the Evaluating Access Research Review is that, while outreach initiatives are having a positive impact, there is a severe lack of evidence identifying which initiatives work - despite universities spending £120 million annually on this activity. The Trust is working to address this by partnering with OFFA and universities from across the sector to undertake a series of research trials measuring the effectiveness of their outreach programmes. The project is set to begin in spring 2016.

By working collaboratively with other institutions, and guided by a lead academic, the project will enable universities across the sector to develop a research methodology that tackles common problems: such as isolating the impact of each intervention, achieving



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

### Embedding Evaluation

The University of Birmingham has an overarching evaluation plan for pre-entry activity which targets students for particular activities; collects detailed data; and tracks students on particular programmes. The university employs a dedicated officer with specific responsibility for evaluation within the outreach team to coordinate this work.

The university is also involved in a PhD linked research project with the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Access. The study's control and experimental groups span the 14-19 phase and include young people who meet all, some or no widening participation targeting criteria.



University of  
Chester

### Targeting and Longitudinal Tracking

An evaluation framework for outreach activity has been developed at the University of Chester using POLAR3 neighbourhood-based participation data to target resources. The university is undertaking detailed assessments of application data from targeted schools and colleges to provide initial indicators of influence. The institution intends to make use of the new Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) to support its longer term evaluation activity.



University of  
BRISTOL

### Comparison Group Trials

In 2011, academics from the University of Bristol undertook a quasi-experimental study of the Sutton Trust's UK summer school programme. They found that summer schools generate proportionately more UCAS applications and registrations, and attending the summer schools reduces these differences to the relative advantage of the more underprivileged students.

They used two sets of control groups - 'inner' controls of students who applied for a summer school place unsuccessfully, and 'outer' controls, by recruiting students with similar characteristics to the Trust's eligibility criteria, but who never applied.

good response rates, and developing robust data collection practices. The project will emphasise the importance of using a comparison group in all evaluations. The ultimate aim is to foster collaboration between universities in order to build expertise among widening participation practitioners so that robust evaluation can be sustainably embedded in all university outreach work. Universities, by their very nature, are home to world-class analysts and researchers, yet many widening participation teams do not harness the expertise within their own institutions. The project will act as a call to action for universities, challenging them to use their institutional expertise to conduct rigorous evaluations and to make the results publically available. Improving the

national evidence base requires coordination among universities. Evaluations of financial support are plentiful, yet open days are very rarely evaluated for their impact on non-privileged applicants. These disparities can only be addressed by communication and collaboration across the sector.

Universities must ensure that their outreach budgets are spent in a way that maximises their impact on under-represented groups. This report calls on universities to take responsibility for improving the evidence base and puts forward several recommendations to universities. The Trust also calls on the Government to support the scale-up of those outreach projects that have robust evidence of impact.

## References

<sup>1</sup><https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/cameron-access-targets-major-factor-higher-education-green-paper>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.offa.org.uk/uncategorized/celebrating-ten-years-of-access-agreements/#sthash.5YvujBde.dpuf>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/ICOF-REPORT-2015.pdf>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newsarchive/2015/Name,104404,en.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Access-agreements-for-2016-17-key-statistics-and-analysis.pdf>

## Recommendations

1. Universities should increase their spending on evaluation with the ultimate goal of undertaking robust research trials. Universities should spend at least 10% of their outreach budget on evaluation of this kind.
2. Universities should utilise the research expertise within their own institutions to undertake evaluations using comparison and control groups.
3. Universities should publish the outcomes of their evaluations fully and independently, in order to contribute to the wider evidence base.
4. Universities should make use of joined-up data collection methods like the Common Evaluation Framework (CEM) and the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT).
5. Universities should collaborate with each other to build research designs that can be replicated across the sector.
6. Widening participation teams should further educate themselves about the existing evidence base and how they could contribute to it.

*We would also encourage universities to register an interest in joining the Sutton Trust/OFFA Research project, aimed at building a common research methodology and undertaking robust evaluations, which is set to begin in Spring 2016.*

## Credits

Sophie Maddocks,  
Dr Lee Elliot Major,  
Prof Carole Torgerson

## Acknowledgments

The Trust is grateful for the assistance of Prof A Hoare, University of Bristol; Kirsty Younger and Dr Andy Wiggins, Durham University; Prof Anna Vignoles, University of Cambridge; The University of Sheffield Widening Participation Team; Prof Susan Dynarski and delegates from the University

of Michigan; The Sutton Trust Common Evaluation Advisory Group; the Education Endowment Foundation; and The Boston Consulting Group