



**The Reach for Excellence Programme: a
summary and discussion of findings from
the first cohort of students**

The Sutton Trust, January 2010

Key findings

University destinations

- Students on the Reach for Excellence (RfE) programme were twice as likely as similar students in the control (comparison) group to enter a research intensive university, with just under half (45%) of RfE students entering these universities, compared with one-fifth (21%) of those from the comparison group.
- RfE students were also more likely to enter higher education generally: 87% of RfE students gained a place at university compared with 65% of similar students in the control group.
- Three quarters of RfE students who went to university enrolled at an university within 50 miles of Leeds.
- RfE students were slightly more likely to have planned to attend university compared to their control group counterparts (87% versus 82%) at the start of the programme; by the end, this gap in aspirations had significantly widened (95% versus 72%).

University preparations

- RfE students are significantly happier than their control group peers about the amount of information and guidance they have received to help them to make decisions about university.
- At the end of the programme, 44% of RfE students were concerned about ending up in debt as a result of attending university compared with 58% of similar students in the control group.
- Over nine in ten RfE students deemed advice from university staff or students as useful – compared with five in ten students or fewer who deemed advice useful from school careers coordinators.
- Just under three quarters (72%) of A-level grades achieved by RfE students were As or Bs compared with just over half (55%) for students in the comparison group. 61% of RfE students achieved at least one A grade, compared with 38% of the control group.

Key characteristics of RfE students

- 86% of RfE are students first generation university applicants, reporting that neither their mother nor father had attended university

- 85% of RfE students have between 9 and 18 GCSEs as A* to C.

Introduction

This summary describes the main findings of an evaluation by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) of the Reach for Excellence Programme at the University of Leeds (forthcoming). Launched in 2007 and sponsored by Halifax and the Sutton Trust, the RfE programme is an extended university outreach scheme that provides support for a group of local highly-able 16 year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds, with the aim of raising their chances of enrolling at a research intensive university such as the University of Leeds. The programme operates over a two year period, providing advice sessions and lectures, a summer school, university visits and individual mentoring. It will benefit 360 students overall, composed of three consecutive year cohorts.

An important strand of the programme has been to establish at the outset a robust evaluation assessing the impact of the scheme. Outreach work undertaken by universities has expanded rapidly over the last decade. But there have been concerns over the lack of reliable evidence on the outcomes of participating students¹.

This NFER evaluation represents one of the most rigorous and long term evaluations of a UK university outreach scheme to date. The outcomes of RfE students have been compared with a control group of similar students who didn't take part in the programme²; and the outcomes of students (and their control group counterparts) will be tracked right up until they gain their final degree results³.

The evaluation also provides a number of valuable insights that relate to many of the key challenges facing university outreach work, including:

Targeting -- ensuring support is targeted at the right students, those with the academic promise that indicates they would thrive in a research university environment, but also those from

¹See for example the Milburn Report on Access to the Professions, which questioned whether 'widening participation funding is delivering value for money'. <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/227102/fair-access.pdf>

²In December 2007 and January 2008, before the students were informed of the RfE programme, baseline surveys were completed by 295 students. Of these, 114 were from students who subsequently gained a place on the programme; 27 were from students who applied but did not gain a place; and the remaining 154 were from students who were eligible to apply, but chose not to. These two latter groups formed the 'control group' for the remainder of the research.

³The high university aspirations of both RfE and control students suggests that they are all highly motivated students, and that motivation itself is not likely to be the reasons for any differences in outcomes.

genuinely disadvantaged or non-privileged back grounds.

Engagement -- developing longer term support programmes for targetted students that sustains their engagement throughout.

School links - forging and sustaining meaningful links with local schools to maximise the success of outreach work.

Recruitment versus widening participation -- recruiting local students that directly access the university's own degree courses, while raising aspirations more generally so that more local students enter higher education as a whole.

Advice and guidance – ensuring pupils make informed choices in schools and that they consider a variety of higher education options appropriate for their ability and aspirations.

This report summarises the outcomes so far - with data on the immediate university destinations of students. But a key question for forthcoming reports will be whether RfE students do as well as other students in their degrees when they go to university – a subject on which there is a lack of good data in the widening participation field.

The surveys of students when they are at university will also help inform another debate: what extra support might be needed for pupils from deprived backgrounds when they are in higher education.

Background

Students from less advantaged backgrounds remain a small minority in the UK's most research intensive universities. Government Performance Indicators in 2004/05 showed, for example, that under one in five young degree entrants to Russell Group universities⁴were from the four lower social classes -- while these groups account for just under 30% of young students in higher education overall, and half the UK population (excluding those who have never worked or are long-term unemployed)⁵.

⁴The Russell Group Universities are the following: Birmingham; Bristol; Cambridge; Cardiff; Edinburgh; Glasgow; Imperial College, London; King's College London; Leeds; Liverpool; London School of Economics & Political Science; Manchester; Newcastle; Nottingham; Oxford; Queen's. Belfast; Sheffield; Southampton; University College, London; Warwick

⁵http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/NCEE_interim_report.pdf

Increasing the numbers of students from less advantaged backgrounds to research-intensive universities is an important strand of the drive to widen access to higher education more generally⁶. A series of surveys by the Sutton Trust have shown that graduates from these institutions dominate the professions, particularly at the higher levels⁷. Other analysis meanwhile suggests that the earnings premium is greater on average for graduates attending such universities⁸. It is critical that students from all backgrounds are aware of the differences between different universities and courses, and can make informed choices appropriate to their talents, interests and aspirations.

This is particularly the case at a time of constrained public spending and cuts in university funding which mean that competition for places in higher education will be fiercer than ever. In such a context it is even more important that the fixed number of places available in research-intensive institutions go to the brightest and best, regardless of where and to whom they were born.

University destinations

The primary goal of the Reach for Excellence programme is to enable highly able but disadvantaged students to enrol at a research intensive university (such as the University of Leeds) – as well as entering higher education in general. The table below, derived from data in the main evaluation report by the National Foundation for Educational Research, shows the destinations of the first cohort of students, entering higher education in September 2009.

Table 1: Destinations of students from the first RfE cohort compared with students from the control group

Destination	Numbers		Percentages	
	RfE n=78	Control n=110	RfE	Control
University	68	72	87	65
Research intensive university*	35	23	45	21
Gap year/gap year then university	7	11	9	10
Other (college, school, job, apprenticeship)	2	18	3	16
Employment	1	9	1	8

Respondents fall into more than one category so percentages do not sum to 100.

** refers to Russell group or 1994 Group universities*

Source: NFER destination and grade data provided, 2009.

⁶The Government has recognised this particular challenge, see: <http://www.bis.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/publications/Higher-Ambitions.pdf>

⁷http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/ST_MilburnSubmission.pdf

⁸See <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cp259.pdf>

The figures show that students on the programme were twice as likely as similar students in the control (comparison) group to enter a research intensive university (defined here as any institution that is a member of the Russell or 1994 groups⁹). This figure is arrived at by comparing the numbers of students enrolled at a research intensive university with the total numbers in each of the RfE and control groups for whom destinations data is known: while just under half (45%) of RfE students entered these particular types of universities, only a fifth (21%) of those from the comparison group did the same.

Additionally, the table above shows that RfE students are also more likely to enter higher education more generally: 87% of RfE students gained a place at university compared with 65% of control students. NFER also calculate the proportion of research intensive university entrants as a proportion of all university entrants, and find that proportionally more students from the RfE programme have progressed on to a Russell Group University than their control counterparts (49% versus 32%).

One important feature not revealed in table 1 is the large number of students (of whom destinations are known) entering the University of Leeds specifically – 19 in all from the RfE programme – over half of the students enrolled at research intensive universities (this compares with 8 - one-third -from the control group)¹⁰. This result is important as it demonstrates that the RfE programme has a direct beneficial impact for the University of Leeds in terms of its own recruitment, as well as raising the educational aspirations of local students more generally. It also indicates the positive relationship the university built up with the RfE students over the two years of the programme.

A noticeable pattern is the general tendency for students to opt for universities in the geographical region around Leeds, if not Leeds itself. Three quarters of RfE students who went to university enrolled at an university within 50 miles of Leeds. Popular research intensive universities included Manchester, Sheffield and York for example. Other popular institutions among both RfE and control students were Bradford, Huddersfield and Leeds Metropolitan universities. This may reflect a general trend to study more locally among university students, particularly those from non-privileged backgrounds who may wish to save money and to maintain strong links with family and friends.

⁹The 1994 Group is composed of: Bath, Birkbeck, Durham, East Anglia, Essex, Exeter, Goldsmiths, Institute of Education, Royal Holloway, Lancaster, Leicester, Loughborough, Queen Mary, Reading, St Andrews, School of Oriental and African Studies, Surrey, Sussex, York

¹⁰This is comparable to the enrolment rates to the host universities for Sutton Trust summer schools, on average 15% of participants. See: <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/TenYearReview-SuttonTrustSummerSchools.pdf>

University Intentions

Surveys on the intentions of RfE students and control group students undertaken before and after the two year programme reveal how these change over the period. Annual national surveys by the Sutton Trust have demonstrated that 7 in 10 school children say that they are fairly or very likely to go on to university-level study – yet in reality just over 3 in 10 young people go onto higher education after school¹¹.

At the time of the baseline survey (two years ago), RfE students were slightly more likely to have planned to attend university compared to their control group counterparts (87% versus 82%). However, by the time of the follow-up survey (after the programme), this gap in aspirations had significantly widened (95% versus 72%). Given their impressive academic results at GCSE level, it is not surprising that the RfE students had high aspirations towards higher education, but what is noticeable is how these intentions remain for RfE students but decline among other students.

At baseline, NFER found that similar numbers of RfE and control students were considering applying to at least one of the Russell Group Universities. By the time of the follow-up survey, this gap had significantly widened. Eighty-three percent of RfE students had applied to Russell Group Universities, compared to just 62% of the control group.

Preparing students for university

The RfE programme also aims to prepare students for higher education, and to provide them with sufficient skills and knowledge to make informed decisions about their university choices. NFER conclude that the programme has achieved this, and in most cases the RfE students are more knowledgeable or prepared for university than their control peers.

Furthermore, students involved with the programme feel more satisfied with the amount of information, advice and guidance that they have received than the control students. Information on the financial aspects of university has been of particular value. The evaluation concludes that this is likely to have contributed to the positive outcomes - in terms of progression rates to university - that have emerged for those involved in the scheme.

¹¹<http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/MORI2008.pdf>

Fears over debts

Fears over debt emerged as one of the key factors apparently influencing university decisions among many students, with six in ten agreeing with the statement, 'I'm concerned I will end up in debt', in the initial baseline survey. However, by the time of the follow-up survey, a considerably smaller proportion of RfE students (44%, versus 66% at baseline) held these concerns. Amongst the control group, however, this proportion remained virtually unchanged (60% agreed at baseline and 58% at follow-up). NFER suggest that this is an indication that the RfE programme is effectively preparing students for Higher Education, making them aware of the financial support available during study as well as the financial benefits of investing in university study.

Sources of advice

Another noteworthy set of findings in the evaluation concerns advice and guidance for school pupils. A series of reviews commissioned by the Sutton Trust have indicated that careers and education advice and guidance is inadequate in half of state schools, and that significant numbers of teachers will advise pupils not to consider elite universities – even when they have the A-level grades to do so¹². Involving university staff and students more in this area through programmes such as RfE may be one way of addressing these concerns.

Before the programme started, students reported that useful sources of advice on higher education were mostly from 'other' family members (e.g. siblings or cousins), university staff and parents. Noticeably teachers or school advisers were not rated as highly. By the time of the follow-up survey, advice from university staff, current students and teachers was deemed more useful than previously – and the most valuable sources of advice were considered to be university staff and current students, suggesting the scheme had been successful in getting accurate information through to the participants (see table 2 below). The least useful sources were employers, Connexions and school careers coordinators.

¹²See for example: http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/NCEE_interim_report.pdf

Table 2: useful sources of advice for all students (RfE and control)

Source of advice	% students rating advice 'very useful' or 'useful' (n=153)
University staff	96
Current students	95
Teachers	89
'Other' family members	84
Parents/carers	76
Connexions	54
Employer	47
Schools careers coordinators	47

Source: NFER Reach for Excellence Follow-up Survey, 2009.

Academic attainment

As well as gathering information on the destinations of the control and RfE students once they left year 13, their achieved A-level grades were also gathered. In total, data was provided for 223 of the original 295 students who had completed a baseline survey (a response rate of 76%).

As the table below shows, proportionally, RfE students achieved significantly more A and B grades than the control students. Seventy-two percent of A-level grades among RfE students were As or Bs compared with 55% for the control students. Sixty-one percent of the RfE students achieved at least one A grade, compared with 38% of the control group.

Table 3: Percentage of A to U grades as a proportion of all grades achieved

Grade	Percentage	
	RfE (total number of grades n=267)	Control (total number of grades n=375)
A	43	22
B	29	33
C	16	23
D	9	11
E	1.5	8
U	1.5	2

Source: NFER Grades Data, 2009.

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

It is difficult to make any claims as to the role of RfE in the achievement levels of the students. However, NFER conclude that it is likely that the RfE programme has encouraged students to reach their full potential and to strive to get high grades – and, indeed, the programme includes sessions, such as study skills events, which are intended to help performance in exams. The evaluation of cohort two (due to report in December 2010) will provide a more detailed overview

of achievement levels, drawing on both predicted and actual achievement levels at an individual student level.

Predicted A-level grades were not gathered before the programme, but the baseline survey provided information about the GCSE grades achieved by the control and RfE students. The RfE group were high achievers at age 16 (71% achieved between ten and 12 GCSEs at grade A* to C). The equivalent rate for the control group was similar, at 67%. However, more of the RfE students achieved between 13 and 18 GCSEs at A* to C than the control students (14% versus 7%, respectively), suggesting that the RfE were of a slightly higher ability.

Characteristics of RfE students and engagement levels

Targeting

Details of the composition of the student cohort on the RfE programme show that it has been extremely effective in targeting local pupils with the academic potential to prosper in the demanding environment of a research intensive university, but who also come from genuinely deprived backgrounds. This is an important finding as there have been concerns among universities that the available pool of untapped talent in schools is extremely limited - as children from deprived backgrounds are 'lost' so early in the schooling system.

A related concern has been that many university summer schools and outreach schemes are poorly targeted - benefitting many children from advantaged backgrounds. A recent national analysis of summer schools supported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England for example found that about half of attendees came from the top four social class groupings¹³.

As the breakdown below shows, the RfE programme indicates that there is in fact a pool of academically able pupils at later stages of school that universities can target who may, because of their backgrounds, be less likely to gain entry to a degree place, particularly at a research-intensive university¹⁴.

¹³http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_11/

¹⁴Further analysis of national datasets by the Sutton Trust indicates that this is also the case nationally. About 35,000 pupils scoring highly in GCSEs for example do not go on to take A-levels. Another 50,000 pupils score highly in GCSEs at age 16 but do less well in their A-levels.

Key characteristics of RfE students

- 86% of RfE students are first generation university applicants, reporting that neither their mother nor father had attended university
- 88% of RfE students were in receipt of an Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), available to those from families with a household income of no more than £30,810 per year
- 58% of RfE students attended schools where the average percentage of GCSEs achieved at grades A* to C in 2007 (including English and mathematics) was below the national average
- 85% of RfE students have between 10 and 18 GCSEs as A* to C.
- 61% of RfE students are female¹⁵
- 54% of RfE students are from White British backgrounds, and 31% from Pakistani backgrounds

The control groups are very comparable to the RfE students on the basis of gender, university aspiration, number of GCSEs achieved, and family members who have attended university. Students in the RfE group were, however, more likely to be in receipt of an EMA than their control group peers.

Levels of engagement

The high numbers of genuinely disadvantaged students on the RfE programme provides an opportunity to assess what really works for these students in raising aspirations. One challenge that has arisen during the programme has been is the variable engagement of students on different sessions. The evaluation concludes that some 57% of students had low levels of engagement with the programme – not attending the majority of sessions available.

Neither the distance from the student's school to the University of Leeds, nor the number of RfE pupils in each school, had a consistently negative or positive effect on engagement levels. Rather, the schools' commitment to the programme, and the links they have with Leeds University, appear to be one of the major factors influencing engagement. Unsurprisingly students with a 'high' level of engagement with the programme are significantly more likely to feel prepared for university life than those who engage less.

¹⁵This is in line with other university outreach schemes such as summer schools and broadly reflects the composition of GCSE-level results.

There has been much debate about the extent to which universities have the time and resources to link with local schools. The Government is encouraging universities to work more closely with schools generally and to build up significant and sustained links¹⁶. There is some anecdotal evidence here at least that the close working partnership between the University of Leeds and local schools is a key element in the success of the programme.

The University is introducing a series of measures to increase the engagement of RfE students in the third cohort (who will engage in the school years 2009/10 to 2010/11). These include a 2-day residential early in the RfE programme, a student mentoring programme, and subject-specific and study skills sessions which will be delivered within schools and colleges to ensure that all students are reached.

¹⁶See: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/circlelets/2009/cl01_09/