



Report

Final report for the Sutton Trust

An evaluation of the Reach for Excellence Programme: Cohort Three and school/ college links views

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Summary report

The evaluation of Reach for Excellence: findings from cohort 3 and school and college links

The Reach for Excellence programme (RfE) aims to support able young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Yorkshire to gain a place at a top university. It is run by the University of Leeds, and funded by the Lloyds TSB Foundation. Over the three year course of the programme, 16-18 year olds from Yorkshire schools benefitted from regular advice sessions and lectures, a summer school, university visits and individual mentoring. The programme also aims to raise the aspirations, achievement, confidence and self-esteem of the young people involved.

This report sets out the findings of the evaluation of the third cohort of students (those who enrolled in 2009, and left the programme in 2011). It also provides findings from a small-scale survey and interviews with school and college links from where students from all cohorts of RfE were drawn.

Key findings

- The experiences of cohort 3 students reflect those from previous cohorts, and demonstrate the value that RfE offers to participants. It is apparent that students are largely opting to progress to research intensive universities (37 out of 49 students have applied to at least one research-intensive university), thus fulfilling one of the key aims of the RfE programme.
- The majority of students felt that participating in the programme has raised their aspirations, made them more prepared for university, and helped them to develop a range of study skills and personal attributes that will help them to be successful in their application to university and in their subsequent studies.
- Students felt that the most valuable elements of the programme were: spending time on campus, attending the summer school, subject-specific sessions and information around UCAS applications.
- The responses of staff in the schools and colleges from where RfE participants have been drawn echoed those of the students, showing the value that they too place on the programme.
- School/college staff thought that RfE targets young people well.
- RfE was felt to offer students opportunities and support beyond that which the schools and colleges could provide themselves.

Experiences of cohort 3 students

Fifty-two students from 23 different schools and colleges provided their views on their intentions of finishing year 13, the level of information they have about university, the impacts of RfE and their experiences of the programme.

Intentions on finishing year 13

- The majority of students (49 out of 52) intended to progress to university
- The most popular university choices were the University of Leeds (to which over half (27) of all students had applied) and the University of Bradford (to which 18 had applied). Other northern-based universities were also favoured, such as the University of Manchester, Sheffield, Huddersfield and Leeds Metropolitan University.
- Two-thirds of respondents who intended to progress to university (37 of the 49) had applied to at least one research intensive university¹; around one-half (24) had applied to between one and three. High proportions of RfE students are therefore opting for some of the most highly regarded and competitive UK universities.
- The most popular subject choices were medicine/medical science, biology/biological science, pharmacy and law.

Information about university

- Sources of advice and information most frequently rated as 'very useful' or 'useful' were: visits to university campuses; university residential summer schools; information provided at RfE sessions; RfE staff and RfE student helpers. These factors are all directly related to university experiences or the RfE programme, as opposed to advice given by others more removed from the university setting.
- As a result of RfE, students who intended to go to university stated that they felt a 'lot more prepared' for: meeting new people, university life in general, and getting used to a new university campus/place of study.

The impact of Reach for Excellence

- Around two-thirds of respondents (35 of the 52) agreed or strongly agreed that the RfE programme has raised their aspirations to attend university.
- Of the students who intended to progress to university and who knew what a research intensive university was (39 students), around one-half (19) agreed or strongly agreed that RfE had raised their aspirations to attend a research intensive university.

¹ Defined as the Russell Group and 1994 group universities. The 'Russell Group' universities include: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Imperial College, Kings College London, Leeds, Liverpool, London School of Economics, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Queens University Belfast, Sheffield, Southampton, University College London, and Warwick. The 1994 group is comprised 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.

- The majority of students (44 out of 52) did not feel that RfE had caused them to change their initial plans for university. Hence, while RfE is considered influential in raising aspirations, it does not appear to have changed students minds about their initial plans, such as whether or not to attend university. This is consistent with the fact that RfE only take on students who are interested in applying to university.
- The vast majority of students (43 out of 49) who were intending to go to university were happy with the amount of information and guidance they had received from RfE to help them to make decisions about university.
- Students reported that the RfE programme had helped them to learn about a whole range of aspects of university life and study, particularly in relation to the nature of the student experience, how it differs from school, the entry requirements and funding for university.
- Students also reported that RfE has led to improvements in their skills and to personal development. For example, self-confidence, the ability to research information to help them to make decisions, study skills, the ability to set goals and to reference academic sources were all considered to have been improved 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' by at least 30 of the 52 respondents.
- Nearly three-quarters of those who intended to go to university (36 out of 49) felt that RfE would help them at university. It was thought it would be helpful as they are more prepared for university life, have enhanced confidence in meeting new people and in their academic abilities, as a result of newly acquired skills and due to their greater understanding of a 'typical university day'.

The most useful elements of Reach for Excellence

- The most useful elements of RfE were considered by students to be: getting to visit university, the RfE summer school, subject-specific sessions, sessions on UCAS applications and study skills sessions.

The views of school and college links

A small-scale survey was sent to all links in the schools and colleges from which RfE students from cohort 1, 2 and 3 had been drawn. Twenty-one of a possible 53 links returned a survey to NFER. Eight of these were interviewed in more depth.

Respondents' views on attracting eligible students to participate in RfE were gathered, as were the benefits for the participants and their host school or college. The perceptions of the most valuable elements of the programme, as well as suggested improvements, were also explored.

Attracting eligible students to participate in RfE

- Nine out of every ten respondents felt that RfE attracts the young people who would benefit most from it. This was largely considered to be because RfE attracts the young people who most need their aspirations and confidence raising, as the criteria are deemed 'clear' and 'sensible', and because it recruits young people whose parents have no university experience.

Benefits for participants

- RfE was considered to be most successful in increasing the confidence of participants and in preparing young people for university study.
- Around two-thirds of respondents (13 of the 21) felt that RfE helps students to apply to the most prestigious universities.

Benefits for schools

- Thirteen of the respondents (around one in every six) felt that their school or college had benefitted from their students being involved in RfE. Examples of benefits for schools and colleges included stronger links with the University of Leeds, the individual level support that RfE provides to their students (that the school can't provide themselves), and impacts on other students who are not directly involved in RfE.

Valuable elements of RfE

- Respondents tended to rate all elements of RfE highly for bringing about positive impacts in their students. Subject-specific sessions, financial information sessions and UCAS application session were considered to be particularly beneficial.
- Being on campus and having direct contact with university staff and students, the need for students to travel outside of their local area to engage in RfE and being around students from other schools and colleges were also considered to be valuable aspects of the programme.

The added value of RfE

- Twenty of the 21 respondents felt that RfE offered something to students beyond that which their own school or college could provide.
- The added value of RfE included: that it offers practical insight into university life; that it can provide more information on courses and different universities; that it has the resources to offer students a range of activities, as well as support for parents; that it takes students out of the local area; and that it provides insight into the enrolment at the university of Leeds.

Improvements to RfE

- Three main improvements suggested by school and college links were keeping schools and colleges better informed (about which students were involved in RfE, which students were dropping out of RfE and of the activities they are engaging in); running some sessions off campus (such as in local schools or through virtual/interactive activities); and broadening the scope/selection criteria to allow more young people to engage. However, it should be noted that due to the academic entry requirements of research-intensive universities, the selection criteria for RfE cannot be changed.
- Other suggested improvements included interview preparation, more careers advice, more subject-specific sessions in the humanities, and more sessions on university finance.

Continued support for RfE

- All but one respondent to the survey (who reported that they would no longer have sixth form provision) stated that they would continue to recommend and support students to apply for RfE.

1. Introduction

1.1 About the Reach for Excellence programme

In 2007, the University of Leeds was awarded funding from the Lloyds TSB Foundation² to help able young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Yorkshire to gain a place at a leading research university, and ensure they entered Higher Education (HE) in general. The Reach for Excellence (RfE) programme was subsequently established as the only university access programme of its kind in England. Over the first three years of the programme, over 360 16-18 year olds from Yorkshire schools benefitted from regular advice sessions and lectures, a summer school, university visits and individual mentoring, with the overall aim of raising the aspirations, achievement, confidence and self-esteem of the young people involved. The programme also seeks to provide appropriate and impartial guidance in an environment that will stretch bright and capable students who may not have considered entry to prestigious research-intensive universities.

1.2 Eligibility criteria

To ensure that the programme was targeted accurately, eligibility criteria were set for inclusion. To take part in RfE, candidates must also:

- have been living in Yorkshire
- had the potential to achieve 3 or more A-levels at grade B or above and to be a candidate for study at a leading research-led university
- have gained 5 or more GCSEs (including English Language and Mathematics) at grade C or above.

Candidates were also required to meet at least two of the following criteria:

- to have been in receipt of an Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) (when this was still available to students)
- to have grown up in or be in public care
- to have had their studies disrupted or adversely affected by circumstances in their personal, social or domestic life
- to be the first member of their family to apply to HE (excluding older brothers or sisters).

² Initially the HBOS Foundation until the banks merged in 2009.

1.3 The evaluation

The Sutton Trust commissioned the NFER to carry out an evaluation of the RfE programme. This involved tracking the first cohort of 120 students as they progressed from year 12 to year 13, supported by RfE, comparing their progress to a comparison group of young people³. The research developed to track the progress of the second cohort⁴, to explore the impact of the programme on the third cohort, and also to track students from cohort one and two as they progress into university education, or otherwise⁵. The evaluation runs until the end of 2012.

This report sets out the findings of the evaluation of the third cohort of students (those who enrolled in 2009, and left the programme in 2011). It also provides findings from a small-scale survey and interviews with links/representatives (such as heads of sixth form or other staff responsible for overseeing progression to HE) at schools and colleges that students from all cohorts of RfE had attended.

Cohort three students were provided with a range of opportunities, including:

- the summer school, in August 2010
- study skills and personal development events (e.g. learning and memory and note-taking skills, exam preparation, presentation skills, research and referencing, and a motivational speaker)
- subject-specific events (e.g. a medical engineering event, and sociology, psychology, history, English, dentistry and chemistry subject-specific sessions)
- higher education-oriented events (e.g. parent/carer information sessions, a UNIAID finance session, personal statement workshops, campus tours, and 'student experience panels').

Aims

The primary aim of the NFER evaluation is to ascertain how many pupils, who would otherwise not have done so, went on to a research-intensive or other university because of the scheme. In order to meet this aim, the study also explored the following research questions:

- Do pupils completing the RfE programme have a greater awareness of the options available to them, of the HE sector and of the funding available?
- How many pupils who complete the RfE programme enter higher education?
- How many pupils who complete the RfE programme secure a place and attend a research-intensive university?

³ Lamont, E., White, R and Wilkin, A. (2010) *Evaluation of the Reach for Excellence Programme. Cohort 1* Slough: NFER.

⁴ Lamont, E. Flack, J. and Wilkin A. (2011) *Evaluation of the Reach for Excellence Programme. Cohort 2*. Slough: NFER.

⁵ Flack, J., Lamont, E. and Wilkin, A. (2011) *Evaluation of the Reach for Excellence Programme. Cohort 1 Longitudinal Report*. Slough: NFER and Kettlewell, K., Lamont, E. and Aston, H. (2011) *Evaluation of the Reach for Excellence Programme. Cohort 1 and 2 Longitudinal Report*. Slough: NFER

1.4 Methodology

This report draws on two data collection exercises:

- a survey of cohort 3 students
- a small-scale survey of school and college links in the institutions from which students in either cohort 1, 2 or 3 were drawn.

Survey of cohort 3 students

In the summer term of 2011, a paper-based survey was sent to the home addresses of all cohort 3 students. The RfE central team at the University of Leeds sent out these questionnaires with covering letters, and offered an incentive to return the survey to NFER. A reminder letter and an additional copy of the survey were sent out to all those who had not responded one month after the first survey was sent. In total, fifty-two out of a possible 142 were returned to the NFER (a response rate of 37 per cent).

The survey asked students about the following:

- sources of information and careers advice
- intentions after finishing year 13
- levels of information and knowledge about university
- useful elements of the RfE programme
- benefits of participation.

Small-scale survey of school and college links

In the summer term of 2011, a short paper-based survey was sent to all 'links'/representatives from the schools and colleges from which the cohort 1, 2 or 3 students had been drawn. The surveys were sent to 'links' in 53 different schools and colleges and 23 responses were returned (a response rate of 43 per cent). Reminder letters and surveys were sent to those who did not initially respond, and school and college links were also offered an online form of the survey to boost response rates. Reminder telephone calls were also made to all links.

Short telephone interviews were carried out with 8 of the school and college links who returned a survey. These explored their responses in more depth.

1.5 About the report

This report firstly sets out the findings from the cohort 3 student survey before moving on to the learning from the small-scale survey of school and college links.

2. The views of cohort 3 students

This section draws on the survey of cohort 3 students, to which 52 students from 23 different schools and colleges responded. We discuss the students' intentions on finishing year 13, the level of information they have about university, the impacts of Reach for Excellence, and their experiences of the programme.

2.1 Intentions on finishing year 13

This section explores students' future plans regarding progression to university, and examines university and subject choices.

2.1.1 Intended destinations

The vast majority of students (49 out of 52) intended to follow a university course of study. The remaining students were intending to stay on at college to re-sit their exams or as part of an extended course. This reflects the previously observed patterns in cohort 1 and 2 of high numbers of students planning to go on to higher education.

2.1.2 University choices

Students who intended to progress to university were asked which universities they had applied to⁶. The 49 respondents named 29 institutions in England and one abroad as places to which they had applied. The most popular choices were:

- The University of Leeds (to which over half of all students (27) had applied)
- The University of Bradford (to which 18 had applied)
- The University of Manchester (15)
- The University of Sheffield (13)
- The University of Huddersfield (12)
- Leeds Metropolitan University (9)
- The University of York (8)
- The University of Liverpool (7)
- Newcastle University (6)
- The University of Nottingham (6)
- Sheffield Hallam University (6)
- Northumbria University (6).

⁶ Students can apply to up to five different universities, hence the numbers do not sum to 49.

It is notable that these universities are all located in the North of England, relatively close to the University of Leeds, where RfE is based. It is also notable that the University of Leeds and the University of Bradford are by far the most popular first and second choice university destinations (with 23 and 11 respondents listing these in their top two choices, respectively).

The most popular choices of university also contain a very high number of research intensive universities⁷. Indeed, two-thirds of the respondents who indicated that they were planning to go on to university (37 of the 49) had applied to at least one research intensive university. Around one-half of respondents (24 out of 49) had applied to between one and three research intensive universities. This suggests that high proportions of the participants are opting for some of the most highly regarded and competitive UK universities.

2.1.3 Subject choices

The most popular subject choices amongst the 49 who intended to progress to university were:

- medicine/medical science (13)
- biology/biological science (7)
- pharmacy (6)
- law (5).

It is interesting to note that, apart from law, these subjects are all science related. Furthermore, all of the four most popular courses lead to a professional career route, suggesting that the respondents are intending to progress into these careers.

2.2 Information about university

This section sets out the perceived usefulness of different forms of career advice and information and support around university, and how prepared students feel for entering Higher Education.

2.2.1 Sources and usefulness of university advice

The students were asked how useful they had found a range of different sources of information and advice about university.

⁷ Defined as the Russell Group and 1994 group universities. The 'Russell Group' universities include: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Imperial College, Kings College London, Leeds, Liverpool, London School of Economics, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Queens University Belfast, Sheffield, Southampton, University College London, and Warwick. The 1994 group is comprised 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.

The most frequently accessed sources of advice were:

- teachers
- students' own research
- visits to university campuses
- university prospectuses.

Those least accessed were:

- employers
- Connexions advisers (possibly due to the phasing out of the Connexions service)
- school career coordinators.

Of the different sources of information and advice about university that were accessed, those rated most frequently as 'very useful' or 'useful' were:

- visits to university campuses
- university residential summer schools
- information provided at RfE sessions
- RfE staff
- RfE student helpers.

Sources of information and advice deemed least useful by respondents were other RfE students and employers.

It is interesting that the most useful factors are all directly related to university experiences or the RfE programme, as opposed to advice given by others more removed from the university setting. This finding implies that RfE, with its focus on university experiences, continues to be useful in providing prospective students with the kinds of advice about university that they consider to be most useful.

2.2.2 How prepared students feel for university

The students who indicated that they were intending to go to university were asked how much more prepared they were for a range of aspects of university education as a result of their participation in RfE. It is encouraging to note that the vast majority of respondents (between 76 and 98 per cent) felt either 'a lot more prepared' or 'a little more prepared' in every aspect listed as a result of the RfE programme. The top three areas in which students reported feeling 'a lot more prepared' were:

- meeting new people (28 out of 49 respondents)
- university life in general (27 out of 49)
- getting used to a new university campus/place of study (24 out of 49).

The two aspects most commonly cited as ones in which students felt 'no better prepared' were independent study and managing finances (10 out of 49 students selected this response in both cases). It is also worth noting that 10 of the 49 respondents stated that they did not know how much more prepared they were for living away from home, or that it was not applicable to them. This would suggest that these students were intending to live at home when they progress into HE.

2.3 The impact of RfE

This section addresses the impact of RfE on students' aspirations and on their learning about, and skills for, university. It also discusses other benefits of the RfE programme.

2.3.1 The impact of RfE on aspirations

Students were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that the RfE programme had raised their aspirations to attend university. Thirty-five of the 52 respondents (approximately two-thirds) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement; while only five respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. This response clearly shows that students found the programme influential with regard to their desire to attend university.

Students were also asked to indicate their agreement with the statement that RfE had increased their intention to attend a 'research intensive' university. Students who had previously indicated that they did not know what a research intensive university was were filtered out of this question, as were those who did not intend to go to university. So, of those who knew what a research intensive university was and who intended to go to university (39 students), 19 agreed or strongly agreed that RfE had raised their aspirations to attend one (six students disagreed or strongly disagreed, and the 14 remaining respondents stated that they neither agreed or disagreed with the statement). This response shows that the RfE programme encouraged around half of the cohort 3 students who were considering a university and who understood what a research intensive university was, to attend one. This reflects the high rates of applications to research intensive universities set out previously in Section 2.1.2: two-thirds of the respondents who intended to go to university had applied to at least one research intensive university.

When asked whether the RfE programme had changed their initial plans for university, a majority of students (44 out of 52) felt that it had not caused them to change their plans. It is therefore clear that, while the RfE programme was seen by students to be influential in raising aspirations, they did not feel that it had influenced their initial plans. This could suggest that it did not change students' minds about whether or not to attend university, but it did affect where they aspired to apply. This

finding is reflected in the longitudinal reports that have tracked the progress of cohort 1 and 2 students⁸.

Among the very small number of respondents who felt that RfE had changed their initial plans for university, the reasons behind this were:

- increased aspirations to 'aim higher'
- that they chose the university with the best course
- increased self confidence to apply to university
- that they changed their mind over what to study due to greater knowledge about possible courses.

It is interesting to note that, within this small number, a heightened aspiration is the most popular answer. This reflects the finding that the RfE programme is influential in raising aspirations.

2.3.2 Students' happiness with the amount of information and guidance that RfE offered

The vast majority of students (43 out of 49) who were intending to go to university indicated that they were happy with the amount of information and guidance they had received from the RfE programme to help them to make decisions about university. Only three of the responding cohort 3 students disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

2.3.3 Impacts on students' learning about university

Students were asked to rate how much they felt they had learnt about a number of aspects of university study as a result of their participation in RfE. Responses were ranked on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating that they had learnt 'a lot' about the area, and 5 meaning they had learnt 'nothing' about it. There was also a 'don't know/not applicable' option.

The different aspects that the cohort 3 students were asked to rate are listed below, in order of the frequency with which they responded with a score of '1' or '2' (indicating that they had learnt 'a lot'):

- how university study compares to school (rated as a '1' or '2' by 39 of the 46 respondents)
- what student life is like (rated as a '1' or '2' by 38 respondents)
- the grades you would need to get into university (37 respondents)
- their knowledge about the UCAS application process (36 respondents)

⁸ E.g Flack, J., Lamont, E. and Wilkin, A. (2011) *Evaluation of the Reach for Excellence Programme. Cohort 1 Longitudinal Report*. Slough: NFER. and Kettewell, K., Lamont, E. and Aston, H. (2011) *Evaluation of the Reach for Excellence Programme. Cohort 1 and 2 Longitudinal Report*. Slough: NFER.

- the costs and financial support available for university (34 respondents)
- the advantages and disadvantages of different universities (29)
- research intensive universities (29)
- what the subjects that interested them involved (28)
- future career options and choices that are open to them (28)
- the best universities for the subjects that interest them (26)
- the advantages and disadvantages of different course options (24).

It is clear that the vast majority of students intending to go to university felt that the RfE programme had helped them to learn a considerable amount about the various aspects of university life, particularly in relation to the nature of the student experience, how it differs from school and the entry requirements for university.

These figures also show that over 50 per cent of all cohort 3 students who responded to the survey felt that they had learnt 'a lot' about all of the elements that the RfE programme was intending to provide information on. This suggests that the participants are equipped with the right kinds of knowledge and information to help them to make informed decisions about their university careers.

2.3.4 Impacts on students' skills

Students were asked how much RfE had helped them to improve a range of skills and to develop personal attributes. They were asked to respond on a four point scale, with 1 indicating that RfE had helped them to improve that skill 'a lot', and 4 that RfE had not helped them to improve that skill 'at all'.

The skills most frequently identified as having been improved 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' as a result of RfE are listed below, in order of frequency:

- self confidence (rated as a '1' or '2' by 37 of the 52 respondents)
- ability to research information to help them to make decisions (rated as a '1' or '2' by 34 respondents)
- study skills (31)
- ability to set goals (31)
- ability to reference academic sources (30)
- presentation skills (29)
- revision skills (28)
- exam preparation skills (23).

This also shows that at minimum, just under half of all respondents felt that RfE had helped them to improve in each of the areas listed above. Hence, the programme is leading to tangible improvements in the skills that will help students to be successful in their application to, and future study at, university.

2.3.5 How RfE might help at university

When asked, nearly three quarters of those who intended to go to university (36 out of 49) felt that the RfE programme would help them at university. The students' felt that their experience of RfE might help them in the following key ways:

- to be more prepared for university life (cited by 17 respondents)
- through their increased confidence in meeting new people (also cited by 17 respondents)
- through increased confidence in their own abilities (cited by 9 respondents)
- as a result of newly acquired study skills (7)
- a greater understanding/experience of a 'typical university day' (7).

Smaller numbers of students also felt that their RfE experiences might help them at university because of their greater knowledge of different courses, their knowledge of financial management, and because they were more prepared for attending universities that were some distance from their home.

2.3.6 The main benefits of participation in RfE

Students were asked to reflect on what they felt the main benefits were of their participation in RfE.

Amongst the 49 of the 52 respondents who gave an answer to this question, the benefits that emerged most frequently were:

- the opportunity to taste and experience university life
- meeting new people
- a better knowledge of available courses
- increased confidence.

In their responses, the students regularly referred to the RfE summer school, suggesting that this was a particularly beneficial aspect of the programme. The usefulness of the different elements of RfE are explored in Section 2.4 below.

2.4 The most useful elements of RfE

In order to ascertain what parts of the RfE programme might be helping to lead to the benefits cited in the sections above, the students were asked how useful various elements of the RfE programme had been in providing them with relevant information about university and/or encouraging them to aim high. It should be noted that not all respondents had participated in every component, and hence, only the ratings of those who did engage in the different activities are included in the analysis.

The elements of the RfE programme are listed below, in order of how useful they were reported to be:

- getting to visit university
- the RfE summer school
- subject-specific sessions
- sessions on UCAS applications
- study skills sessions
- financial sessions
- sessions for researching courses/universities
- mentoring/e-mentoring
- the RfE virtual learning environment (VLE).

The two elements considered to be least useful by those who had taken part were the RfE virtual learning environment (VLE) (approximately one third of respondents rated this highly) and mentoring/e-mentoring (rated highly by half of those who had engaged in it). It should be noted that the numbers taking part in mentoring were smaller than those for any other element. Respondents' opinions of the value of this element were also more varied than for any of the other components. This difference of opinion may be due to variations in the quality of individual mentoring received.

Hence, activities that bring students on to the campus, and provide insights into student life are considered to be most valuable to participants. This finding resonates with the views expressed by school and college links, as set out in Section 3.4.

In summary, this section has shown that, like other cohorts of RfE participants, the cohort 3 students report tangible impacts of their involvement and feel that RfE has impacted on their aspirations and preparedness for university. They attribute a number of changes in their knowledge about university, their university choices and the development of skills and personal attributes to the programme, and also rate the sources of support provided through RfE more highly than the support they could have accessed from outside the programme. The next section of the report moves on to address the views of staff in the schools and colleges from which all cohorts of RfE participants have been drawn. It is notable that the findings in this section resonate very closely with those of the school and college links.

3. The views of school/college links

This section of the report draws on the data gathered from the links in the schools and colleges from which the three cohorts of RfE students have been drawn. Data was gathered through a short survey of views (to which 21 links responded), and 8 follow-up telephone interviews. The respondents represented all three cohorts of students.

Respondents' views on attracting eligible students to participate in RfE are addressed, as are the benefits for the participants and their host schools or colleges. Perceptions of the most valuable elements of the programme, as well as suggested improvements, are also considered.

3.1 Attracting eligible students to participate in RfE

Respondents were asked whether they felt that the RfE programme attracts the young people who would benefit most from it. Nineteen of the twenty-one respondents believed that it does.

When asked for the reasons behind their answers, the following main justifications were given:

- RfE attracts the young people who most need their aspirations and confidence raising: *'few of the students that it targets aspire to Russell Group universities – they tend to go for former polytechnics, so they benefit from programmes such as this as it is pointed out that they can apply to some of the top universities and they develop the belief that they are able to do it'.*
- The criteria are *'clear'* and *'sensible'* and *'put the most appropriate young people on the programme'*. It was also noted that staff can get involved in identifying and targeting the most appropriate students, and are granted some flexibility in putting students forward, and this is valued.
- The criterion that requires students to be from families with no parental experience of university is valued, as it is felt that RfE provides the insight and experience of university life that these young people really lack.

Respondents did express concern that only the most motivated students apply to RfE as the school/college cannot offer individual support to every young person who is eligible. Concerns were also expressed by two respondents who feel that it is a shame to have to turn some students away where they do not meet the eligibility criteria, but do recognise that a cut-off point is required.

3.2 Benefits for participants

This section looks at the perceived success of RfE in leading to a number of pre-defined benefits for the participants. It also addresses the impact that RfE might have on applications to the most prestigious universities.

3.2.1 Does RfE lead to particular benefits for participants?

Respondents were asked to rate how successful they felt that RfE was in a number of areas. They responded on a rating scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being 'not at all successful', and 5, 'very successful'. Each element that was rated is listed below, in order of frequency with which respondents rated it with a '4' or '5':

- Increasing the confidence of participants (18 of the 21 respondents rated this as a '4' or '5')
- Preparing young people for university study (again rated by 18 respondents with a '4' or '5')
- Raising the university aspirations of the young people who participate (16 respondents)
- Providing participants with financial information about university study (14 respondents)
- Providing information on the UCAS application process (12 respondents).

Hence, the programme is considered to be successful in each of the areas by more than half of all respondents. It is considered to be most successful in increasing confidence amongst participants, and in preparing them to study at university. A score of '1' or '2' (e.g. meaning that RfE is not successful) was only given in two cases, once for raising the aspirations and once for increasing confidence.

3.2.2 Does RfE help students to apply to the most prestigious universities?

The links in the schools and colleges were asked whether they felt that RfE helps students to apply to the most prestigious universities. Six respondents (just over one-quarter) felt unable to answer this question, but 13 (around two-thirds of respondents) felt that RfE does help students to apply to the most prestigious universities.

When asked for the reasons behind their answers, those who felt that RfE does help students to apply to the most prestigious universities cited two key reasons. Firstly, that the students '*lack self belief, not ability*'. It is felt that RfE provides students with the confidence and self-belief to make applications to top universities where they might not otherwise have done.

‘One of the girls who participated was quite intelligent but not overly confident. Being able to apply for the scheme really helped her and I know that going along to some of the activities that she did really helped as well...really boosted her confidence and helped her to go into uni...’

Secondly, the programme provides an insight into what the most prestigious universities are looking for in candidates and hence students can work towards this, and tailor their application forms to maximise their chances of receiving offers from the more competitive universities.

Two respondents felt that RfE did not help students to apply to the most prestigious universities, and stated that this was because RfE encourages students to apply to the best university for the course that they intend to pursue and because other factors override the desire to apply to the most prestigious universities, such as staying closer to home for financial reasons.

3.3 Benefits for schools

The links in the schools and colleges were asked whether their school had benefitted from their students being involved in the RfE programme. Thirteen of the respondents (around one in six) felt that their school had benefitted, whilst 6 felt it had not. Two respondents felt unable to answer the question.

Examples of benefits for schools and colleges included connections that have been made with the University of Leeds, including, specifically, connections with the access academy and with individual departments. School and college links also reported that their students were getting into ‘good’ universities or on the courses that they wanted to, and that this was beneficial for their own institution.

One of the interviewees noted that the individual-level support provided to students by personnel in the RfE team was extremely valuable to their school: *‘they care about the students and give a lot of support and advice to students applying for different courses at university – it’s made a big difference’*. Similarly, one respondent to the survey also noted that *‘RfE puts the emphasis on the student, not just the grade’*. In this sense, RfE can provide tailored individualised support which some schools and colleges may struggle to provide. This links into the perceived added value of RfE, covered in Section 3.6.

One of the interviewees noted that the benefits of the programme spread out to other students in the school/college who were not directly involved in RfE: *‘we always have big numbers of students who want to apply for the programme, and students do talk about the experiences they have had and what they have done. It’s another piece of the jigsaw in encouraging them to go to university – anything that is a positive experience does filter through back onto other students’*.

3.4 Valuable elements of the RfE programme

The links in the schools and colleges who completed the survey, were asked to rate how much impact different elements of the RfE programme had on their students' aspirations and plans for university. They were asked to rate the aspects on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 meaning that they had 'no impact' and 4 meaning that they had a 'great deal of impact'. There was also a 'don't know/can't say' option.

The responses are detailed in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: The impact of different elements of RfE

Elements of the RfE programme	Amount of impact				Don't know/can't say
	1 'None'	2	3	4 'A great deal'	
The summer school	0	1	5	10	5
Subject-specific sessions	0	0	10	9	2
Campus visits	0	2	8	4	7
Financial information sessions	0	0	14	2	5
UCAS application sessions	0	0	10	6	5
Mentoring	0	1	7	5	8
Study skills sessions	0	1	8	6	6

Source: NFER Reach for Excellence Survey of Heads of Sixth, 201, n=21

As Table 3.1 shows, the school and college links found it hard to rate the impact of some of the elements listed. This could be because they had not spoken to the students about what had led to the most impact, or because they did not know about the specific elements of the programme.

However, it is encouraging that respondents tended to rate the impact of the different elements highly (typically with a rating of '3' or '4'). When the 'don't know/can't say' responses are removed from the data set, the subject specific, financial information and UCAS application sessions emerge as the most highly rated (given a '3' or '4' by all respondents).

The school and college links were also asked a more general question on what aspects of the RfE programme they felt are most valuable for the young people, and why? The **subject-specific sessions** were cited most often. The school and college links had heard good feedback on the sessions from their students, and felt that the sessions provided insights into different career routes and helped young people to

consider and then to focus their choices. They were also seen as being particularly relevant to the young people's decisions about university.

Actually **being on campus** and having **direct contact with staff and students** was also considered particularly valuable: *'providing students with first-hand experience helps to raise aspirations and encourages and motivates students to go on to university'*. In this sense, both campus visits and the summer school were cited as offering insight to participants that was most closely related to the university experience: *'The summer school provides students with the experience of being at university. It allows students to spend time overnight which has a big impact on them'*. Mentoring was similarly valued for offering a good insight into life as a student, and the study skills were seen to be useful in preparing the students for studying at a different level.

Being on campus, also means **travelling out of the local area** for many of the RfE participants: *'It broadens students desire to move a little bit further away, geographically, from where they might otherwise have gone. Parents become more accepting of the idea of them moving away to a different university and place and the students themselves think, actually, this is really good. They see that there is a bigger world out there'*.

The **small group** nature of some of the activities was believed to help the less confident students and to offer more chances to learn and ask questions: *'working in a small group at these events has a massive impact...when you are in a small group you have more opportunity to ask questions'*.

Being around students from other schools/colleges who are considering applying to university was also considered a valuable element of RfE: *'They are a big fish in a small pond in school, and to see themselves as a little fish in a big pond somewhere else is a real eye opener for them. It gives them something to aspire to, something even better, because when you are the best at everything in your own school, where's the need to improve?'*. Also, for some students, meeting peers who are similar to them is really valuable: *'some students see university as something for the rich and privileged. When they meet students just the same as them they realise that other people there are no different to them'*.

Hence, some of these most useful elements reflect those identified by the students themselves (see Section 2.4). They also suggest that RfE offers something to students that the schools or colleges cannot provide themselves, as discussed further in Section 3.5 that follows.

3.5 The added value of RfE

The school and college links were asked whether RfE offers something to students beyond that which their own school or college could provide. One respondent stated that they did not know; the remaining 20 all thought that it did.

The following reasons were given for the positive response:

- **RfE offers practical insight into university life** that schools cannot offer. For example, the school and college links value the access that the programme gave to current university students, and how the summer school offered the opportunity to live with other prospective students: *'it brings tangible benefits and real work learning rather than anecdotal support'*.
'It gives students access to university students and provides them with the opportunity to speak to lecturers and to experience the university environment'.
- **RfE can provide more information on courses and different universities** than school and college links feel they can offer: *'they can experience a wide variety of subject choices, which broadens their outlook and improves subject choice'*.
- **RfE has the resources to offer students a range of activities**, as well as support for parents, whilst schools and colleges do not: *'We simply don't have the resources to offer everything the programme does'*.
- **RfE takes students out of their local area**: *'RfE offers a fantastic, structured and supported way of helping students to become more confident in an environment outside of their frame of reference'*.
- **RfE provides insight into enrolment at the University of Leeds**: *'It is a big advantage for students to receive information on the enrolment side of things from the perspective of the university. We do our best from what we know from our perspective, but hearing directly from the university is a good thing'*.

It is therefore apparent that the programme is adding value to the HEI preparation that schools and colleges can offer to students themselves.

3.6 Improvements to RfE

When asked if they felt that there were any ways in which the RfE programme could be improved, half of all the school and college links (11 out of 21) commented that they did not know. Four respondents stated that they had no suggested improvements, and 6 felt that there was indeed scope to improve. The school and college links who were interviewed were also asked if there were any suggested improvements. In total, the three main improvements that were cited were:

- keeping schools and colleges better informed
- running some sessions off campus
- broadening the scope/selection criteria.

Keeping schools and colleges better informed

It was suggested that informing the links in the schools and colleges about what students could and had engaged with would be beneficial. This would enable them to do follow-up work with the students and encourage sharing of what they had learnt with other students. It was also suggested that an up-to-date calendar of activities would be valued, although one respondent reported that they had this, suggesting that although this might be produced, it is not always reaching the right person. Informing schools and colleges of students who have dropped out of the programme, was also suggested as a potential improvement. Indeed, when speaking with school and college links, they were not always sure which students had completed the programme, and in some cases, which students had participated. Comments included: *There needs to be better communication between the RfE team, the students and people within the schools, particularly at the start.*

Unless I proactively ask the students, I don't know what they have gone on. It would be helpful if there was some easy way that the university could inform me of this and then I can easily follow it up. I'd forward an email like that on to subject teachers and form tutors then everyone knows what the students have been on, they can pursue them, ask questions about it.

Running some sessions off campus

School and college links suggested that the programme could be improved by holding some meetings/events in local schools, rather than at the university campus. It was felt that this would improve student engagement in the activities as many students are very reluctant to travel out of their local area into Leeds, either for financial reasons or because they have rarely travelled beyond their immediate vicinity. One interviewee suggested that they could host RfE events at their school that all RfE students could attend, although they expected this to attract just RfE students from relatively local schools. Another suggested that more virtual/interactive activities might be beneficial to those reluctant to travel. However, as noted earlier, campus visits are seen to be valuable to the students, so there is no real consensus regarding this point.

Broadening the scope/selection criteria

Given the value attached to the RfE programme by the school and college links, it is perhaps not surprising that there was some call to broaden the selection criteria so that more students are eligible for participation. For example, one respondent suggested that students predicted 'C' grades could be considered, and another that greater flexibility for some students who 'just miss out' on the criteria would be valuable. It was also suggested that providing the level of input offered through RfE to all students in their school/college would be beneficial.

Other improvements that emerged in the interviews or survey responses included:

- giving students help with interview preparation

- maintaining momentum with students in the second year of the programme (some students reported that contact and events ‘dropped off’ in the second year)
- offering more careers advice
- providing more subject-specific sessions around the humanities. It was felt that these have focused on science subjects, yet many of the students would also be interested in pursuing humanities
- offering more sessions on financing university study, including sessions for parents: *‘The financial element is quite a minefield and they need to hear it more than once, they need more tailored advice on a one-to-one basis’.*
- coming into the schools and colleges to recruit students to RfE, and providing support with the application forms at that time.

It is worth noting that the programme does offer a full programme of activity in year 13 and also careers interviews for students. It also offers all schools and colleges the opportunity of having a member of the RfE team visit them when recruiting students. However as shown above, link teachers believed there is room for improvement in these areas. This may suggest that improving the communication about these aspects of the programme, rather than the programme itself, would be helpful.

3.7 Continued support for RfE

Respondents to the survey were asked whether they would continue to recommend and support students to apply for RfE. All but one respondent (who reported that they would no longer have sixth form provision) stated that they would.

The following key reasons were given for the continued support:

- the range of positive benefits that it brings to students: *‘It’s a fantastic opportunity that supports our young people to be focused in their ambitions and provides practical help in becoming more independent’.*
- positive feedback from students
- the value added that it provides (as set out in section 3.5 above): *‘It’s excellent value; it provides what we, as a school, don’t have the resources to do’.*

Hence, respondents in the schools and colleges who returned a survey to NFER, will continue to recommend that their students engage in RfE as it moves forward with subsequent cohorts.

In summary the views of the links in the schools and colleges echo those of the students. They recognise the benefits that RfE can have on its participants, and rate the programme highly for the experiences that it can offer to students, particularly where they feel that they cannot fulfil this role themselves.

4. Conclusions

The experiences of cohort 3 students reflect those from previous cohorts, and demonstrate the value that RfE offers to participants. It is apparent that students are largely opting to progress to research intensive universities, thus fulfilling one of the key aims of the RfE programme. Students feel that their aspirations have been raised through participation, that they are more prepared for university, and that they have developed a range of study skills and personal attributes that will help to secure success in university admissions as well as university life and study. Heightened confidence and a greater insight into university life appear to be key outcomes for participants.

Students report that some of the most useful sources of information and advice that they have received about university have been elements of RfE (such as the summer school, the RfE sessions, staff and student helpers). If these young people were not involved in RfE they may not have accessed such sources. Actually being able to spend time on campus, attend the summer school, subject-specific sessions and information around UCAS applications are considered to be particularly valuable elements for those who participate.

The responses of staff in the schools and colleges from where RfE participants have been drawn echo those of the students, and show the value that they also place on the programme. Link staff thought that RfE targets young people well, although there is some call to widen its scope so that even more young people can participate. Again, subject-specific sessions were thought to be particularly beneficial for the students, as were opportunities to be on campus and mixing with university staff and students.

RfE was thought to offer students opportunities and support beyond that which the schools and colleges could provide themselves. Indeed, school and college links felt that RfE can offer a level of insight and information about HE where they lack the resources and knowledge to provide to their students.

In summary, the findings set out in this report reflect those of the earlier cohorts of RfE students, and continue to demonstrate the benefits of the programme for participants. It is certainly felt, by both students and link staff, to be a worthwhile programme that can lead to heightened aspirations, which can potentially change the track of a young person's life and their future success.

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