

ROOM AT THE TOP

Access and success at leading universities around the world

Dr Graeme Atherton

November 2020





About the Sutton Trust

The Sutton Trust is a foundation which improves social mobility in the UK through evidence-based programmes, research and policy advocacy.

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NEON are an independent non-state funded organisation supporting those who work towards widening access to higher education, hosted by London Higher (the representative organisation for universities in London). NEON brings together HE institutions, schools, colleges, the voluntary sector, professional bodies and employers to widen access to HE at all levels, in order to create change in organisations and communities.

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Foreword

Since I founded the Sutton Trust in 1997, fair access to the most prestigious universities in the UK has come a long way. Our early research showed that, at the 13 most selective universities, there were three thousand (10% of the total) ‘missing’ state school students each year who had good enough grades, but were not getting in. We started the first summer school programme in this country to help young people from low and moderate income backgrounds to get into Oxbridge and other prestigious institutions – a programme we have expanded enormously.

Access and outreach work to these universities is no longer a cottage industry, but a huge investment by the sector each year. While the gap between those from well-off homes and the rest remains stubbornly wide, there have been consistently higher numbers of students from low and moderate income backgrounds getting into the most selective universities. However, there’s a lot we can learn from other countries.

I’ve spent 20 years in the United States, and the US has the majority of the highest ranking universities in the world. But they have a different philosophy on admissions. For a certain number of candidates they take a ‘value added’ approach. It’s not about taking the student with the top grades in every case, they consider applicants holistically, looking at who might benefit the most from their university. They ‘balance the class’ on the principle that the students learn as much from each other as they do from the professors.

That’s one reason I set up the Sutton Trust’s US Programme, to send kids from British schools to top American universities, where they benefit from a varied and in-depth curriculum, and full funding for both tuition and living costs. Since 2012, we have enabled over 450 young people to get into the best American universities, including Harvard, MIT, Princeton and Yale, leveraging \$125 million of financial aid.

Today’s report showcases some of the great work done by some of the world’s most elite universities, in widening access, but also in supporting students from under-represented groups when they get there. Creating an inclusive and supportive environment for students from all backgrounds is vital. Recent stories in the British press about the discrimination some students have faced at university indicate that we still have work to do in this regard.

Today’s reports also highlight the level of financial aid available to low income students in the US and other countries, while in England we have persevered with a student finance system built on young people running up significant debts. The research reveals that the majority of countries have offered extra financial assistance to young people due to the impacts of the pandemic, with many struggling as their families are hit financially, and opportunities for part-time or summer work have dried up. While individual universities have done great work offering increased hardship funds, England is an outlier among developed nations in not offering these extra supports across the university system.

Universities across the UK are among the world leaders in many fields, but we can also still learn from other countries in terms of access, outreach and support for student success.

I’d like to thank Dr Graeme Atherton for this vital research to support that process.

Sir Peter Lampl

Founder and Executive Chairman of the Sutton Trust, Chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation

“Universities across the UK are among the world leaders in many fields, but we can still learn from other countries in terms of access, outreach and student success.”

Executive Summary

Background

- Attending a more selective, research intensive university brings significant advantages in labour market outcomes in comparison to those who went to different higher education providers or did not attend higher education at all. Access to such universities in the United Kingdom is concentrated amongst those from higher socio-economic groups and much effort has been made in recent years to address this. In this regard, the UK has been a leader internationally. However, less has been written looking at how inequities in participation to leading universities work across countries, and most importantly what English universities can take from how they are addressed in other contexts.
- This report examines how universities who are seen as leading internationally and/or in their own national contexts are supporting greater access and success for learners from low-income and other marginalised groups. It looks at these issues along five major themes:
 - Actions and commitment at the strategic and institutional level
 - Financial support for low-income/marginalised group students
 - Non-financial support at the pre higher education level (outreach)
 - Support to enable student success
 - The role of national/regional policies
- By looking at how they work with schools, learners and parents prior to HE entry, the financial support offered, the strategic commitment of institutions, and crucially how they support low-income learners when they enter HE, it is hoped that this report will be a resource for those in the UK concerned about this agenda. It also aims to add to the global understanding of how inequalities in higher education access can be addressed.
- Findings are based on reviews of existing literature, along with a survey of 20 leading universities in the United States, Sweden, Finland, Australia, Chile and the Netherlands. Consultations were also undertaken with universities from the United States, France, Canada, Ireland and South Africa.
- Comparison between countries in the area of access and success by social background is challenging as systems, cultures and contexts differ. But this study shows the value of examining policies and practices internationally. It illustrates the potential for 'leading universities' to act not just as leaders in terms of research, but in access and success work as well, pioneering new approaches to financial support and outreach, along with instigating ongoing conversations in their institutions on access, success and diversity.

Key Messages

1. Show strategic leadership on access/success

Research examining the progress in advancing socio-economic diversity suggests that leading universities in the US that have been most successful have made a strategic commitment to this goal with strong backing from institutional leaders, for example in mission statements.

2. Set ambitious aims in financial support and communicate them to students

Work done by the World Bank looking at the relative effectiveness of financial support in producing greater access to higher education for those from low-income backgrounds shows that financial support needs to be ambitious and significant in scale. The study includes examples of how the US leading institutions are adopting a goal of '100% financial support' for low-income students.

3. Undertake open institutional conversations

The analysis undertaken for this study identifies powerful examples of how this commitment can manifest itself via institutional conversations on access and success from the US, South Africa and Canada. It could be a significant step forward if leading universities in England were to, as Harvard and others have done, initiate an open institutional conversation on diversity and inclusion that included access and success as a key part. However, it is vital that these conversations produce tangible action.

4. Explore the pros and cons of admission quotas

In several states in the US, most notably Texas, quota admission systems have been used, where a given % of students from each school are guaranteed entry into leading universities in the state. The evidence from Texas and other US states appears on balance positive. While this would be a significant departure in the UK, it may be worthwhile exploring how similar approaches could be piloted here. In particular, focusing on some areas of the country where schools send very few students from widening access target groups to leading universities.

5. Make 'First Generation' a celebrated identity and form dedicated student support units

The difference between how first generation and low-income student identity is dealt with in the US and other countries, including the UK, is striking. If leading universities were to explore such approaches as their counterparts at the top of global rankings tables are doing it would display their willingness to lead on access/success issues nationally as they do on research.

6. Develop student support models based on theory and evidence

Recent reports in England of unwelcoming environments at prestigious universities for those from less well-off backgrounds highlight that widening access is only one part of the story, it must be followed by action that supports the success of such students when they arrive. The best examples of coherent long-term approaches to supporting students when they enter higher education from South Africa, the United States and Ireland are grounded strongly in theoretical approaches which look to tackle 'deficit models' of understanding students from low-income and other marginalised groups.

7. Collaborate together in a proactive way

The study indicates the value of leading universities working together both through representative organisations and charities to take forward access and success goals, with particularly strong examples from Australia, United States and Ireland. Such collaborative work does happen in the UK, but this study highlights its value and how it could be extended.

8. Engage in national access/success strategies

The evidence from other countries that have national access and success strategies (in particular Australia, Ireland and the United States) show that leading universities benefit from them. One overall difference between these programmes and those in England in particular, are that they focus on both access and success. Including a focus on success in national programmes may be particularly valuable to explore.

9. Form a global network to exchange practice/knowledge in the field of access and success

There is a range of similar but varied work being undertaken in outreach across leading universities globally, which includes leading universities from North America, Europe, Africa and South America. There would be great potential value in such universities learning more from each other regarding what different approaches are possible and the benefits they can bring.

10. More international research looking at impact on access and success in leading universities is needed

While this study does attempt to capture the present situation where access and success at leading universities is concerned, more is needed to identify what work is being done, and, especially, to show its impact. The study identifies a number of programmes focused on both access and success that were in their relatively early stages where future impact evaluation may be very beneficial.

1. Introduction

It should not need repeating that attending a more selective, research intensive university in England brings significant advantages to a student. You are likely to earn more money and enter higher status occupations than your counterparts who went to different higher education providers or did not attend higher education at all.¹ Nor is there a shortage of evidence regarding the relationship between entering these more selective universities and social background. Young people from the most advantaged areas of England are currently over six times as likely to attend one of the most selective universities – including Oxford, Cambridge and other members of the Russell Group.² However amongst the plethora of reports that describe the inequities in participation in leading universities in England the focus on understanding the problem and how to address them has remained very much a domestic one.

Little, if anything, has been written looking at how inequities in participation to leading universities specifically work across countries and most importantly what English universities can take from how they are addressed in other contexts. There has been some work that looks to compare the situation in England/UK with that in the United States (US).³ However, beyond broad comparisons with the US, the focus on how to address these inequities appears to be shaped mainly by reference to what happens in the UK itself. This report aims to provide a different perspective on this issue by bringing together examples of how universities who are seen as leading internationally and/or in their own national contexts are supporting greater access and success for learners from low-income and other marginalised groups. By looking at how they work with schools, learners and parents prior to higher education (HE) entry, the financial support offered, the strategic commitment of institutions and crucially how they support learners from low-income/marginalised groups when they enter HE, it is hoped that this report will be a resource for those in the UK working on this agenda. It also aims to add to the global understanding of how inequalities in higher education access can be addressed.

Who/what are leading universities?

The proliferation of international university rankings over recent years has enabled the concept of leading universities to be interpreted in an increasing number of ways.⁴ Rankings now exist comparing universities within countries, across regions and on different dimensions of institutional performance.⁵ The formula upon which these rankings are based favour universities with significant research prestige. The overall rankings of the major global rankings bodies tend to coalesce around a small group of universities, with those in the highest positions drawn mainly from the US and UK.

But it is important to recognise here that most countries have some form of hierarchy in their higher education system, hence have some universities who are perceived as more prestigious than others. These universities may not feature in the higher places of the global rankings tables but students from low-income or other marginalised backgrounds in these countries are likely to face similar challenges in

¹ Department of Education (2018) *The relative labour market returns to different degrees Research report*, London: Department of Education. Available at: <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/13035>

Richardson, H (2019) *Job applications 'filtered by university ranking'* BBC News 18th September 2019. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-49728941>

² Office for Students (2020) *Universities pledge to reduce equality gaps dramatically within five years*. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/universities-pledge-to-reduce-equality-gaps-dramatically-within-five-years/>

³ Jerrim, J. (2013) *Family Background and access to 'high status' universities*, London: The Sutton Trust

⁴ Hazelkorn, E. (2009). Rankings and the battle for world-class excellence: Institutional strategies and policy choices. *Higher Education Management and Policy*. 21. 4-4.

⁵ University rankings: A closer look for research leaders (2020) [h Available at: https://www.elsevier.com/research-intelligence/university-rankings-guide](https://www.elsevier.com/research-intelligence/university-rankings-guide)

entering them as those students looking to enter the highest ranked institutions in the world in the US, UK and elsewhere. In this report the universities examined include some of those seen as globally leading in the major ranking systems overall, but also some universities who are leading in their own countries but not necessarily ranked in the highest positions globally.

Comparison between countries in the area of access and participation by social background overall is challenging.⁶ Where there is data available it shows unsurprisingly that across the world these leading universities, either globally or in a particular country, have lower levels of participation from low-income/marginalised groups.⁷ But the extent to which this data on participation by background characteristics is publicly available at institutional level differs significantly across countries. With the exception of the US and Australia, data is not as easily available in other countries as it is in the UK. It is only in these three countries where comparisons between universities in terms of participation by a student's background characteristics is common. Context-specific ways of measuring socio-economic background, combined with differences in data collection capacities mean that international comparison in this area is still very much a work in progress. Some attempts have been made, most notably the 'Impact ranking' by the Times Higher that assesses universities against the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Universities are ranked individually against SDGs and include a ranking for SDG 4 which measures universities' contribution to early years and lifelong learning, their pedagogy research and their commitment to inclusive education. A component within this ranking is the proportion of first-generation students.⁸

Nevertheless, despite the limitations, comparative analysis in the field of inequalities in access and success in higher education is crucial work to undertake, in particular where leading universities are concerned. It is these universities where the biggest barriers to entry for low-income/marginalised groups exist and the problem seems the most intransigent. Looking at approaches from other countries can provide the inspiration for new, innovative work and help in breaking out of the parameters that we inevitably construct around what is possible or not possible in our own contexts.

⁶ Atherton, G, (2016) *Charting Equity: Drawing the Global Access Map*, London: Pearson

⁷ Campbell, S. et al (2019) *Inequalities in Student to Course Match: Evidence from Linked Administrative Data* London: Centre for Economic Performance. Available at: <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1647.pdf>

⁸ THE World University Rankings (2020) Impact Rankings 2020: quality education. Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/rankings/impact/2020/quality-education#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/undefined

2. Methodology

2.1 How data was gathered

In order to understand how leading universities are working to extend access and success for those from low-income/marginalised backgrounds, a short survey was undertaken which elicited responses from 15 universities in the United States, Sweden, Finland, Australia, Chile and the Netherlands. Consultations were also undertaken with universities from the United States, France, Canada, Ireland and South Africa. This work was supported by secondary analysis of reports and data covering leading universities featured in the Times Higher Education global rankings and their regional dimensions.

This study was undertaken whilst the Covid-19 pandemic was impacting severely on the higher education sector across the world. The pandemic presents serious threats to attempts to make all kinds of higher education institution more inclusive and access to leading universities is no exception. However, the challenges faced in enabling such access/success are enduring ones and the focus in the report is on the strategies and practice in place that began before the pandemic and it is anticipated will continue to be in place when its impact eventually abates. Recent developments specific to the global health crisis are discussed in the accompanying research brief, published alongside this report.⁹

2.2 What is included in the study

In terms of what data is included in the report, building a linear causal relationship between actions a university may take and the impact on access and success in the institution is not straightforward. The number of studies which look at particular interventions and examine these using experimental methods is limited. But there has been a recent attempt to identify the characteristics of activities that enable increased access and success undertaken by the World Bank in 2019, which looks at 75 outreach and financial support interventions across the world (but mainly in the US).¹⁰

In terms of the criteria used to select the examples of policy and practice in the study a three-pronged approach is taken. Firstly, the World Bank report will be used to inform the identification of outreach and financial aid support examples. Secondly, activities related to access/success and strategic engagement work where other evidence of impact that exists will be featured. Thirdly, actions or policies that relate to a theoretical model which can be seen to potentially prove impact are also included.

With regard to the terms used in describing the findings below, ‘access’ is used to refer to entry into higher education. The term ‘success’ refers to students reaching their potential, i.e. not dropping out and achieving the best degree qualifications they can. In addition, success may also include students engaging with non-academic aspects of university life, including accessing career services, mentorship opportunities etc.

The terms used to describe who we are trying to promote access and success for also vary across the world.¹¹ In this study ‘low-income’ is used as it is clearer than lower socio-economic group and ‘marginalised’ is used to encompass other students who are either under-represented numerically in higher education or whose student experience or outcomes are in need of clear improvement.

⁹ Atherton, G (2020) *University Access, Student Success and COVID-19 in a Global Context*, Sutton Trust.

¹⁰ Herbaut, E & Koen, G (2019) *What Works to Reduce Inequalities in Higher Education? A Systematic Review of the (Quasi-)Experimental Literature on Outreach and Financial Aid*, Policy Research Working Paper World Bank

¹¹ Atherton (2016)

2.3 The organisation of the findings

The next part of the study outlines the findings associated with the five following themes:

- 1. Actions and commitment at the strategic and institutional level*
- 2. Financial support for low-income/marginalised group students*
- 3. Non-financial support at the pre higher education level*
- 4. Support to enable student success*
- 5. The role of national/regional policies*

3. Actions and commitment at the strategic and institutional level

Commitment at the strategic level with regard to access and success is seen in the UK as a crucial across the UK.¹² All the universities who responded to the survey and were consulted in the study stated that access and success for low-income/marginalised students was a strategic commitment. But these commitments manifest themselves in different ways across each institution. The two most notable ways in which this happens is described below.

3.1 The role of the mission statement

There is significant evidence to point to the influence of mission statements on organisational culture and performance.¹³ In the field of higher education, recent research looking at the mission statements of leading universities across the world has pointed to a relationship between what they universities say they stand for, and their priorities and outcomes in terms of access and success.¹⁴ An analysis of the mission statements of 227 universities in each region in the world by Bayrak showed that the term most frequently seen in such statements was 'research'.¹⁵ Diversity was only seen in less than 20% of the North American universities analysed but nowhere else. However, looking at the universities consulted for this study, there does appear evidence of a commitment to access/success in mission statements or values.

The Universidad de Chile is the oldest university in Chile, founded in 1842. It is the most prestigious in the country with nearly 40,000 students and ranks in the top 200 in the world. One of its 7 guiding principles is that:

'Education is conceived as a public good and a fundamental social right that contributes to individual and collective development. It gives a privileged place to the access and development with equity and inclusion of students of all social levels.'

And '*strengthening equity in access and permanence in the university of Chile*' is one of its strategic objectives.

At the University of Sydney, diversity and inclusion features prominently in the institutional vision and values, with the statement '*We will never limit people's pursuit of excellence on the basis of their background or circumstances.*' Finally, the Karolinska Institute is one of the world's foremost medical research universities and Sweden's single largest centre of medical academic research. How the Karolinska Institute articulates its values highlights the importance of international networks as potential agents to promote access and success. In articulating its values, it outlines not a set of distinctive institutional values but states that rather, it subscribes to the values embodied in the Magna Charta Universitatum (MCU), which are supported by over 900 universities across the world. A new version of the MCU is set to launched in 2020, which includes for the first time explicit reference to access and inclusion in higher education. The MCU states that:

*'Universities are non-discriminatory spaces of tolerance and respect where diversity of perspectives flourishes and where inclusivity, anchored in principles of equity and fairness, prevails. They therefore commit themselves to advance equity and fairness in all aspects of academic life including admissions, hiring and promotion practices.'*¹⁶

¹² Atherton, G (ed) (2016) *Access to Higher Education: Understanding Global Inequalities*, London: Palgrave MacMillan

¹³ Dasmidt S., Prinzie A. and Decramer A. (2011). Looking for the value of mission statements: A meta-analysis of 20 years of research. *Management Decision* 49(3): 468-483.

¹⁴ Bayrak, T. (2020) A content analysis of top-ranked universities' mission statements from five global regions, *International Journal of Educational Development*, Volume 77, September 2020

¹⁵ Bayrak, (2020)

¹⁶ MCU 2020 Available at: <http://www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum/mcu-2020>

Even the brief outline of mission statements above reveals the differences in language and focus across the world. They highlight, as will become evident through the study, that access and success are shaped by the particular social, cultural and economic context of the country or continent.

However, the examples above illustrate it is feasible for a leading institution to aspire to lead on access/success in the same way that they usually aspire to do on research.

3.2 The importance of the institutional conversation

In order for leading universities to try and lead on these issues, producing a mission or vision commitment to access and success needs to be supported by an active manifestation of that mission/vision at the institutional level. Examples of detailed institutional conversations were not found to be common across the universities examined, but there are some examples of such detailed conversations which appear to be having a tangible impact on institutional policy and practice. These examples are described below. The first example of how this can be done comes from work at Harvard University outlined in Box 1.

Box 1: Presidential Task Force on Inclusion and Belonging¹⁷

In 2016, the then President of Harvard University launched a university-wide task force composed of faculty, students, and staff to consider a set of important and interrelated questions designed to advance the university on the path from diversity to belonging. The aim of this task force was ‘to strengthen Harvard’s capacity to pursue excellence on a foundation of inclusion’. The task force brought together a group of academics, administrators and students from across the university. It looked at 4 major issues, which included widening access and supporting student success. It positioned these however within a wider set of concerns:

- **Demographic Realities:** examining how to increase the diversity of faculty, staff and students and the initiatives, incentives, processes and resources that would bring positive change.
- **The Fabric of the Institution & the Lived Experience of Belonging:** looking at the Harvard’s ‘common culture’, and the lived experience of diversity, inclusion, empowerment, and belonging among students, staff, and faculty with the aim of achieving not just inclusion but full belonging and empowerment.
- **Academic Resources & Contributions:** assessing the intellectual resources devoted across the University to understanding and advancing issues of diversity, inclusion, and social and organisational transformation with relation to teaching and research agendas and curricula.
- **Harvard’s Organisational Structures:** identifying how the plethora of diversity officers, programs, and initiatives can most effectively work together.

The final report produced 8 recommendations. These included a focus on inclusive symbols and spaces incorporating a revision of the university’s mission statement and a new interfaculty university research centre looking at higher education, inclusion and belonging, and organizational change. Five of the recommendations concentrated on the theme of ‘inclusive excellence’, that is, creating a community that draws on the widest possible pool of talent to unify excellence and diversity and fully embraces individuals from varied backgrounds, cultures, races, identities, life experiences, perspectives, beliefs, and values. These recommendations included asking each school and business unit to integrate inclusive excellence at the strategic level; alignment and coordination of inclusive excellence work in the Office of the President and Provost, and a triennial assessment of the University’s progress toward inclusive excellence.

The university has set up a new Office for Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging informed by the recommendations of the task force, which aims to ‘guide Harvard’s culture toward sustainable inclusive excellence by convening stakeholders, serving as a catalyst for strategic efforts, analysing University-level progress, optimising investments, and facilitating University-wide coordination’.

¹⁷ [Presidential Task Force on Inclusion and Belonging](https://inclusionandbelongingtaskforce.harvard.edu/). Available at: <https://inclusionandbelongingtaskforce.harvard.edu/>

There were three key characteristics of the Presidential Task Force approach described above. The first is the importance of the 'Institutional conversation'. Universities, especially leading ones, are founded on discourse and debate. The task force engaged those from across the university to initiate this open discussion through a range of mechanisms including surveys, discussion groups, debates and interviews.

Secondly, the access and success of low-income/marginalised students is positioned within the context of broader issues of diversity within the university. The task force looked at the diversity of staff, their sense of belonging and how via all its work the university could embody principles of inclusion. It was not a conversation on access and success of low-income/marginalised students alone.

Finally, a real tangible output in the form of the Office for Diversity and Inclusion has resulted from the conversation. As important as the conversation itself is, there needs to be a visible result or the gains from the conversation cannot be built on.

Harvard is not the only leading university that instigates and/or maintains institution wide conversations on access/success. In South Africa the University of Cape Town produces an annual transformation report that provides an overview of the different ways in which inclusivity is being mainstreamed at UCT.¹⁸ This comprehensive report examines how both in its internal practices and external relationships and research UCT is addressing the inequalities that are engrained in South African society as a result of decades of social division.

McGill University in Canada 2017 initiated a Provost's Taskforce on Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Education.¹⁹ The taskforce aimed to coordinate collaboration with McGill and Indigenous communities to identify, explore and advance ideas and initiatives that will enhance the presence and success of Indigenous students, staff and faculty. Finally in the Netherlands, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, concerned about whether different groups of students felt they belonged in the university, undertook an institution wide belonging survey with over 2000 students to understand better what belonging means and who needs what extra support.²⁰ Each of the examples above show how institutional conversations on access/success can be taken forward in different ways. They also show the value, particularly where universities are concerned, of placing access and success for students from low-income and marginalised groups in the context of broader issues of staff diversity and institutional culture.

¹⁸ University of Cape Town Transformation Report 2019. Available at: http://www.oic.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/470/Documents/home/2019_UCT-Transformation-Report.pdf

¹⁹ Provost's Task Force on Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Education. Available at: <https://www.mcgill.ca/ptisie2016/#:~:text=The%20aim%20of%20Task%20Force,Indigenous%20students%2C%20staff%20and%20faculty>.

²⁰ Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Diversity. Available at: <https://www.vu.nl/en/about-vu-amsterdam/mission-and-profile/diversity/index.aspx>

4. Financial support for low-income/marginalised group students

Offers of financial support for low-income students is a common feature of the approaches taken by the universities consulted in this report. As student finance systems (in particular the level of fees) differ across countries, this form of support differs. Within the UK there are 4 different forms of student finance system. There are three notable features with regard to the international evidence on delivering financial support that could inform how leading universities in the UK, regardless of the nation they are in, can address the issue of financial support for students from low-income/marginalised groups:

- Making financial support understandable
- Be ambitious and aim for full financial support for low-income students
- Showing leadership on financial support issues

4.1 Making financial support understandable

Despite England being the most expensive place on average to undertake first degree higher education study in the world, the information and advice on the student finance system is fragmented.²¹ While the financial support on offer being significant from many leading universities there is still a lack of awareness and understanding of the system and support available.²² Hence, providing information is vital. The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation undertook a review²³ of how leading universities in the US were supporting access and success for students from low-income and marginalised groups in 2017 and produced a series of recommendations with regard to providing information on student finance and support that are outlined below:

- **Make clear the true cost of university attendance:** it was found that there was little information on the full cost of higher education attendance including accommodation, food, non-study activities etc.
- **Provide easy-to-access and clearly stated information about financial support on all university admissions websites:** this information was not as straightforward and clear as it could be.
- **Allow students to estimate attendance costs using net price calculators:** to help estimate true costs online calculators where very popular amongst students.
- **Use accurate and up-to-date information to estimate full costs:** it was also found looking at these leading institutions that where information on broader costs was provided, it was not being updated.
- **Partner with schools to develop student finance information/initiatives:** not enough was being done in the area of outreach support looking specifically at student finance.
- **Partner with the relevant voluntary sector organisations or other programmes to provide reliable financial support advice:** as with work in schools, student finance information needs to be a key part of outreach support.
- **Ensure that language used to communicate financial support information is inclusive:** there are several strong examples in the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation report of information being

²¹ Universities UK (2019) Improving the provision of information on students finance: Report of the NEON-UUK student finance information advisory group. Available at: <https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019-11-improving-student-finance-info.pdf>

²² Office for Students (2019) 'Parents need more support to help their children make good decisions about university' Press release 12 September 2019. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/newsblog-and-events/press-and-media/parents-need-more-support-to-help-their-children-makegood-decisions-about-university/

²³ Opening Doors: How Selective Colleges and Universities Are Expanding Access for High-Achieving, Low-Income Students. Available at: <https://www.jkcf.org/research/opening-doors-how-selective-colleges-and-universities-are-expanding-access-for-high-achieving-low-income-students/>

provided by leading universities that contains assumptions about finance that do not apply to the lowest income communities in society.

These recommendations provide a potentially useful checklist for leading universities in any country to use in assessing how they provide financial information to potential students.

4.2 Be ambitious and aim for full financial support for low-income students

Great care must be taken if downplaying the importance of financial support in enabling low-income students to enter HE. However, the World Bank report from 2019 does state that:

the available causal evidence on the effect of some aid schemes for disadvantaged students remains extremely limited, most notably for universal grants, loans and tax-credits.

Although it then goes on to say:

interventions that offer very generous subsidies were found to have large effects on enrolment.

This evidence suggests that if leading universities are to use financial support as a mechanism to increase the numbers of students from low-income/marginalised groups they need to be ambitious in the financial support they can offer. Box 2 below, taken from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation report referred to above, describes the work of Davidson College in the US.

Box 2: Providing ‘100% financial support’

Davidson College is a liberal arts college with 1,950 students located in North Carolina. In 2007, Davidson became the first liberal arts college to meet 100 percent of students' demonstrated financial need through grants and campus employment, without loans, through "The Davidson Trust." The Davidson Trust receives more than one-quarter of all alumni giving, including funds raised from "Dinner at Davidson" – an annual student-led event which supports a scholarship for high-achieving students with financial need. About 51 percent of Davidson students receive need-based aid from the college, and 70 percent receive aid in total. Since creation of The Davidson Trust, enrolment of low-income students (from families earning less than \$50,000 annually) has risen from 10 to 14 percent in the class of 2020, and the economic diversity of the applicant pool has broadened.

The particularly interesting aspect of the Davidson model is the connections between student financial support and the role of alumni. Davidson College and others like it are wealthy institutions with large endowments, and also admit small numbers of students. Not all leading institutions are like this in the UK or globally. However, a focus on cultivating relationships with alumni is common across leading institutions in the UK. There may be the potential to steer more of that work toward encouraging alumni to support students from low-income/marginalised backgrounds.

4.3 Showing leadership on financial support issues

Leading universities by their nature are those which usually wield influence relative to other HE providers. This could be used to drive forward an access/success agenda per se, including greater financial support for low-income/marginalised students. An example of where attempts to push the financial support agenda can be seen in the work of the Group of Eight (Go8) universities in Australia.

The Group of Eight (Go8) is a body comprising Australia's leading research-intensive universities which looks to influence 'the development and delivery of long-term sustainable national higher education and

*research policy.*²⁴ They are working with the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), a membership organisation for community organisations addressing poverty and social exclusion across the country.

The Group of Eight works with ACOSS on policy dialogue and engagement to promote more equitable outcomes for students from low socio-economic backgrounds and from regional and remote locations. A key part of the work they are doing together is to try and increase the support payments that students can access, as these payments have not been increased for 25 years. Together they are taking forward a joint student equity campaign to influence federal budget decision making.²⁵

The work that the Go8 are doing illustrates the potential for leading universities to work collaboratively to try and address access and success challenges, and to do so working with non-higher education sector bodies from civil society.

²⁴ Group of Eight Australia. Available at: <https://go8.edu.au/about/the-go8>

²⁵ Group of Eight Australia (2019) *Go8-ACOSS Joint Communique: Enabling Education Access for All: Supporting Australian Students*. Available at: <https://go8.edu.au/go8-acoss-joint-communique-enabling-education-access-for-all-supporting-australian-students>

5. ‘Outreach’/non-financial support work at the pre higher education level

Work with schools and learners prior to the point of higher education admission was undertaken by over 80% of the leading universities who participated in the survey or were consulted in this study. This does not mean it is common to all leading universities though. There is far less evidence of such systematic work across universities in Europe and Asia in particular. In keeping with the relatively high level of attention placed on addressing inequalities in HE participation across the university system in general, ‘outreach’/non-financial support work is most widespread and well developed amongst leading universities in the US and Australia.²⁶

5.1 The global outreach/non-financial support picture

In all the universities who participated in the survey there was some form of outreach/financial support being undertaken. A sample of the work of the leading universities in this pre HE outreach space is outlined in Table 1 below, with each example conforming to the good practice features described in research by the World Bank. The World Bank 2019 report, accepting the limited evidence available on the impact of outreach interventions, concluded that:

*‘.....outreach policies are broadly effective in increasing access for disadvantaged students when these policies include active counselling or simplify the university application process’, with ‘interventions which complemented information with assistance or individualised guidance on college or financial aid application’ which ‘were found to increase enrolment rates of disadvantaged students in most cases’.*²⁷

While the initiatives described below are all very different, a common characteristic is that they display the features associated with proven effective outreach programmes as described above.

The work described in Table 1 offers a range of insights into how leading universities undertake access work. Trinity College Dublin offers a particularly important example of a coherent approach rooted in evidence and theory that works with both students and teachers, offering the latter a tangible qualification for their participation. The TA21 website includes a range of further papers on their impact and method.²⁸ The examples from South America highlight the potential for sustained working with students, with a focus on addressing issues of cultural knowledge/capital. In the case of Universidad de Chile this focus on cultural capital manifests itself through learning about academia, art and culture. This focus on developing a broader set of cultural attributes is also seen in the approach of Sciences Po through the inclusion of ‘social and behavioural’ skills in their Priority Education Conventions (CEP) programme.

In the cases of both McGill and Melbourne, the links with community based organisations is of interest, as well as the emphasis on significant research opportunities as part of the outreach portfolio in the case of the former and the existence of a coherent institutional approach that links access and success in the latter. In terms of Australian universities, while Melbourne is highlighted in the table, examples of practice consistent with the World Bank criteria are found across their leading universities. The University of Sydney for example undertakes a comprehensive and progressive programme of activities that begins at primary level and goes through to year 12 engaging with over 250 schools per year.²⁹

²⁶ Salmi, J. (2018) All around the world – Higher education equity policies across the globe Lumina Foundation. Available at: <https://worldaccesshe.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/All-around-the-world-Higher-education-equity-policies-across-the-globe-FINAL-COPY-2.pdf>

²⁷ Herbaut, E & Koen, G (2019)

²⁸ Trinity Access 21: Available at: <https://www.tcd.ie/ta21/>

²⁹ University of Sydney (2016) Widening Participation and Outreach 2016-2020 Strategy. Available at: <https://www.sydney.edu.au/content/dam/corporate/documents/about-us/values-and-visions/wpo-strategy-2016-2020.pdf>

Table 1: Pre-higher education entry work in leading universities across the world

Country	University	Details
Australia	University of Melbourne	The university's access and participation plan outlines a range of activities from outreach work at primary level through to supporting graduates from low-income/marginalised groups into employment. ³⁰ In 2017, \$1.64 million was allocated to a selection of outreach programmes including literacy and numeracy support programmes with external community based partners, online mentoring work and discipline focused work in the sciences and humanities. This work is supported by the Access Melbourne programme which offers guaranteed entry to certain courses a place with lower entry grades if you are mature, come from an Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander community, or a mature student. In 2018 31% of undergraduate offers were made through Access Melbourne.
Brazil	Universitas Campinas (UNICAMP)	ProFIS is a two year course that enables students to enter, without entrance exam, an undergraduate course at UNICAMP. The goal is to offer students an integrated view of the contemporary world, enabling them to understand a diverse range of professions the most diverse professions. It aims to expand social inclusion at UNICAMP working with public schools in the region. Students cover a range of disciplines the human, biological and technological sciences. In addition, trainees receive a certificate of completion of a sequential higher education course. Students who attend receive a scholarship and help with meal and transport costs. ³¹
Canada	McGill University	McGill University delivers a range of activities with schools in their locality. In particular, they focus on supporting entry into the university for indigenous learners, building on the work of 2017 Provost's Taskforce on Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Education. A key part of the work is collaboration with educational centres and councils in indigenous communities. In 2020 a new pilot project was launched called Indigenous Mentorship and Paid Research Experience for Summer Students (IMPRESS) which hires Indigenous CEGEP or high school students to work with a McGill professor on a summer research project for eight weeks. ³²
Chile	Universidad de Chile	The Acompañamiento Program for Effective Access to Higher Education (PACE) programme works with 7 schools. As a 30 workshop per year programme it has three parts: 1. 'Development of Capacities and Abilities of the XXI century' works with learners on critical thinking, Social and Critical Awareness and learning about Academic, Art and Culture and Project-Based Learning. 2. 'Orientation and life' works with both students and teacher and provides information on university admissions and on teaching/learning approaches at the University. 3. 'My Professional Path' links professionals, graduates and academics of the University of Chile with students of public high schools through talks and workshops. PACE is supported by the 'Priority Entry System for Educational Equity', which is a special entry route into the University of Chile. ³³
France	Sciences Po	The Priority Education Conventions (CEP), a selective access route for eligible students enrolled in high schools, was launched in 2001. It works in 106 schools across France providing a support programme from primary upwards covering Expressive skills: writing, reading, speaking, English; Methodological skills: questioning, documentary research, analysis and synthesis; and Socio-behavioural skills: listening, autonomy, perseverance, reflexivity, ability to work in a team. CEP also provides support in navigating the admissions process and interview at Sciences Po. The aim is to double the number of participating schools in 2021. ³⁴
Ireland	Trinity College Dublin	The TA21 project partners with schools to implement four core practices; 1) Mentoring, 2) Leadership through Service, 3) Pathways to College, 4) 21st Century Teaching and Learning, Students participate in 1-3, with 4 supporting teaching practice through a Post Graduate Certificate in 21st Century Teaching & Learning. ³⁵

³⁰ University of Melbourne, Students and Equity. Available at: <https://provost.unimelb.edu.au/students-equity>

³¹ PROFIS. Available at: <https://www.prg.unicamp.br/profis/>

³² McGill's Community Outreach Programme. Available at: <https://www.mcgill.ca/branches-program/impres>

³³ PACE-University of Chile: Opening Paths in Education. Available at:

[https://www.uchile.cl/portal/presentacion/vicerrectoria-de-asuntos-estudiantiles-y-comunitarios/oficina-de-equidad-e-inclusion/programa-de-acompanamiento-y-acceso-efectivo-a-la-educacion-superior-\(pace\)/113833/presentacion](https://www.uchile.cl/portal/presentacion/vicerrectoria-de-asuntos-estudiantiles-y-comunitarios/oficina-de-equidad-e-inclusion/programa-de-acompanamiento-y-acceso-efectivo-a-la-educacion-superior-(pace)/113833/presentacion)

³⁴ Sciences Po Admissions. Available at: <https://www.sciencespo.fr/admissions/fr/bachelor/bacheliers-lycees-francais/conventions-education-prioritaire>

³⁵ Trinity College Dublin (2020) Trinity Access 21 College For Every Student Research Update. Available at: https://www.tcd.ie/trinityaccess/assets/pdf/TA21_Infographic_2017.pdf

5.2 Pre-higher education entry work in leading universities in the US

In the US, inequalities in access to higher education have been a concern of policymakers and institutions, going back to at least the 1960s.³⁶ Most recently, the production of more data illustrating the inequalities in access to leading universities has led to an increased focus on this issue by such universities. Taken together with the historical interest in inequalities in participation, along with the sheer size of the system, the result is the development of an ‘ecosystem’ concentrated on improving access to leading universities. This is made up of activities led by universities themselves and a range of organisations that have been set up with such improvements as one of or their sole aim. Box 3 below describes this ecosystem.

Box 3: Access to leading universities ecosystem in the United States³⁷

There are at least 50 organisations that exist to promote access to higher education in the US working nationally and regionally.¹ This is in addition to the federally funded TRIO programme described below and the GEARUP programme, which works with over 500,000 learners in schools every year. The National College Access Network (NCAN) acts as a membership organisation supporting community based organisations, national charities and universities. In terms of non-university organisations working to support access to leading universities specifically, the 2 most prominent organisations are described below:

Questbridge - Founded in 1994 and with members drawn from many of the United States leading universities, Questbridge aims to increase the percentage of talented low-income students attending such universities. Its main programme is called Talent Match. This is a recruitment programme where Questbridge prepares high ability low-income students and helps them ‘match’ with leading universities. Questbridge is effectively providing the support for low-income students to progress through application and admission that low-income students often lack.

American Talent Initiative (ATI)- The American Talent Initiative (ATI) aims to bring top colleges and universities together with the philanthropy and research communities to expand access and opportunity for talented low- and moderate-income students. By 2025, ATI aims to attract, enrol, and graduate an additional 50,000 lower-income students at 327 colleges and universities. ATI focuses not on direct learner support like Questbridge but on raising awareness of the need for greater access to leading institutions via advocacy and supporting institutions to develop the strategic commitment and practical policies related to access/success.

The United States is unique in the depth of its engagement with inequalities in access and success in higher education. The examples above illustrate that the role that specific collaborative ventures involving leading universities play. Questbridge is, to an extent, unique to the US in that it is set up to try and match the very large number of students who are achieving at the level to enter leading universities but do not apply. ATS is particularly interesting as instead of being created to work with learners directly it actually exists to push the universities themselves to be more committed to access/success.

³⁶ Atherton (ed) (2016)

³⁷ About Questbridge. Available at: <https://www.questbridge.org/about>
American Talent Initiative. Available at: <https://americantalentinitiative.org/>

6. Support to enable student success

The scale of the challenge in extending access to leading institutions should not deflect attention away from the need to support students when they enter. The evidence shows that while students from low-income backgrounds may enter with strong academic potential they are still at risk of failing to achieve this potential as they confront the cultural differences between their background and the institutions they enter.³⁸ Such cultural differences have been documented in particular for students from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds in the UK. In late 2020 challenges facing students from northern, working class backgrounds entering more selective universities were also reported.³⁹

The information provided via the survey and the consultations on the support that exists for students from low-income/marginalised groups is less detailed across universities analysed in this study than that on outreach work outlined above. The three most detailed examples of how institutions have developed significant comprehensive programmes to address this dissonance between student and institution are described below. The first of these examples is from the University of Berkeley in the United States.

Box 4: Education Opportunity Programme and the University of Berkeley⁴⁰

Launched in 1964, the Educational Opportunity Program at the University of Berkeley (UoB) provided first generation, low-income, and under-represented college students with the guidance and resources necessary to succeed. Of the approximately 25,000 students who enter Berkeley every year around 47% are either from low-income backgrounds, are the first in their family to go to higher education or are from another under-represented group. UoB is consistently ranked as one of the top universities in the world and the top public university in the United States.

The EOP consists of a number of strands. The major two strands are:

Peer Academic Counselling

EOP pioneered the Peer Advising Program in 1974 to provide outreach activities and assist students in their transition to Cal. Today, EOP Peer Academic Counsellors are current undergraduates that serve as student-to-student advisors after participating in an intensive year-round training program. This training, along with the richness of their own personal student experiences, allows them to serve as a vital resource to fellow students.

Academic Counselling

EOP has developed an “*Aspirational Academic Counselling Approach*” and specializes in delivering high-quality academic counselling to individual students. Aspirational academic counselling empowers historically marginalised students with a sense of belonging and ownership of their college experience. Built on a commitment to educational equity and justice, academic counsellors practice a holistic, multicultural, and comprehensive approach individualised for each student’s unique needs. This approach is grounded in a strong theoretical framework which includes theories on counselling itself, the nature of students’ social capital and its strength, transition to higher education, which are all underpinned by philosophies of social justice. The theoretical basis to the Aspirational Academic Counselling Approach is key to its delivery. Of particular importance is the perspective on social capital which focuses not on the deficiencies of students from low-income or other marginalised groups but their strengths in six areas: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance. In 2019-20, EOP met with nearly 3000 students via its Academic Counselling strand.

Alongside the two strands above, EOP has a Basic Needs Centre which provides support for students who are hungry, have accommodation problems, welfare or financial aid needs. EOP also provides guidance and support to help students understand their campus budgets and financial aid awards, and an annual First Generation College celebration.

³⁸ Reay, Diane, et al. “‘Fitting in’ or ‘Standing out’: Working-Class Students in UK Higher Education.” *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2010, pp. 107–124., www.jstor.org/stable/27823589. Accessed 10 Nov. 2020.

Fawehimni (2020) How universities can do more for the wellbeing of black students – and to close the attainment gap. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education-and-careers/2020/07/22/universities-must-do-address-wellbeing-black-students-close/>

³⁹ Parveen, N (2020) UK’s top universities urged to act on classism and accent prejudice, Guardian Saturday October 24th 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/oct/24/uk-top-universities-urged-act-classism-accent-prejudice>

⁴⁰ Educational Opportunity Programme Available at: <https://eop.berkeley.edu/>

Aside from the long history of the EOP and the range of support it provides, its defining characteristic is how the model is informed by theory with the rejection of the 'deficit model' of the low-income or under-represented student at its heart. The next example looks at work undertaken at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. In a similar way to the EOP the basis of the approach described is to move away from a deficit to a 'value-added' model of institutional engagement with students from low-income or marginalised groups.

Box 5: The Academic Development Programme in the Commerce Faculty at the University of Cape Town

The University of Cape Town is the oldest highest education institution in South Africa and is the highest ranked university in Africa in the major global university rankings. Of UCT's nearly 30,000 students in 2018, 45% were Black, Indian or Chinese. Across the South African higher education system overall, nearly half of all Black students do not complete their studies. At UCT there is also a distinct gap between the achievement of Black and White students.

In 2001 an Academic Development Programme (ADP) was initiated in the Education Development Unit (EDU) of the Commerce Faculty programme. From a programme engaging less than 100 students in 2001, it now works with nearly 1300 students. The graduation rate (approximately 78%) is increasing and is far above the national average of 31% in five years for the Business/Management sector in higher education. The ADP students are all Black and the majority are from working class, rural and/or township backgrounds and do not have English as their home language. While the programme began by focusing on students who had low entry scores into the programme, its success now means that participation is by application.

The programme acknowledges the primacy of the social and interactive aspects of learning and the importance of student experience. It aims to consciously foster a sense of belonging, actively nurturing social connectedness and building a sense of community and inclusion. Over the lifetime of the programme there has been a fundamental move away from only addressing factors impacting upon the individual student, to addressing structural issues and practices that need to be transformed.

What the programme does

The programme supports the reflexive development of teaching at the level of the whole Faculty, based on a more nuanced understanding of teaching techniques and multiple ways of learning and teaching, with a strong emphasis on student: student interaction and engagement.

Specific interactive interventions for students exist in subject knowledge, academic and language literacies and broad life, presentation and leadership skills, including:

Induction programme at the beginning of the year for all new ADP students aims to forge a close family network which provides a sense of belonging and identity

Well-developed website, communication network, birthday/examination/graduation wishes and newsletter enhance contact, news and information.

Monthly class meetings are held for all cohorts in order to ensure continuity, receive feedback, identify appropriate interventions and use role models to inspire and motivate.

The annual awards ceremony acknowledges students' academic excellence and progress, and also provides a platform for students' dance, music and poetry creations.

It is clear that, in terms of values, the work at the University of Berkeley and University of Cape Town is similar, where they differ is the emphasis in the latter on structural change. Fundamental to the development of the Academic Development Programme has been engaging with academic staff to engender changes in learning and teaching. The differences between the two initiatives described above

are in the main a result of how they were constructed. The EOP has a particular remit and focus. But the work at University of Cape Town illustrates the case for combining the creation of inclusive support structures for students from low-income and marginalised backgrounds with ongoing work to change learning and teaching approaches.

The final example in this section returns to the United States and the work of the Freshman Scholars Institute and the Scholars Institute Fellows Programme (SFIP) at Princeton University.

Box 6: The Freshman Scholars Institute (FSI) & Scholars Institute Fellows Programme (SFIP) at Princeton University⁴¹

Princeton University is fourth oldest higher education institution in the United States and regularly ranked in the top 10 in the world.

Freshman Scholars Institute (FSI)

FSI is a seven-week residential summer programme (it was delivered virtually in 2020 due to Covid-19) that allows participants the chance to experience the intellectual, co-curricular, and social life at Princeton prior to the beginning of the Fall Semester. It is targeted at students who have not yet had the chance to experience similar enrichment programs or mentorship experiences. Participants are primarily those who are first in their family to attend college and those coming from lower- to moderate-income backgrounds. FSI is an immersive course that aims to introduce students to the full Princeton experience and nurture their ability to excel as future leaders. Students participating in FIS take two, full credit-bearing courses that count toward graduation requirements.

- Ways of Knowing emphasises critical thinking, reading, and writing, and allows the student to engage with texts, fellow scholars, and their course instructor to dig deeply and creatively into questions about power, institutions, and identity.
- A STEM mini-course where students can choose between 5 options including Chemistry, Physics, Molecular Biology, Engineering and Statistics/Data Visualisation.

Alongside the two courses, students participate in co-curricular experiences which include orientation regarding the support services at the university and guest presentations from Faculty, along with a full range of Social Programming focusing on health, wellness and team building. FSI alumni are also invited to apply to join Princeton's four-year Scholars Institute Fellows Program (SIFP).

The Scholars Institute Fellows Programme (SFIP)

SFIP provides all first-generation and lower-income students at Princeton with mentorship, academic enrichment and scholarly community throughout their studies at Princeton. Participants benefit from:

- Mentorship and support from a community of peers, alumni, staff and faculty
- Guided exposure to campus leadership and enrichment opportunities
- Eligibility to apply for summer funding as Research Fellows, Course Fellows, RCAs, and Programming Fellows for the Freshman Scholars Institute
- Fully-funded extracurricular activities and events hosted by SIFP throughout the academic year and invitation to a mid-year retreat.
- Invitations to networking events featuring upperclassmen, faculty, administrators and Princeton alumni.

To remain in the programme, upon registration, participants must attend at least 75% of their weekly mentorship group meetings. SIFP Fellows are part of a larger first-generation community of peers, staff and faculty at the University. The SIFP began in 2015. Evidence already suggests that progress is being made in enhancing the graduation rate of students who have participated in the SFIP. A longitudinal study is now underway to track SFIP participants and better understand the benefits the programme is bringing them.

⁴¹ Scholars Institute Fellows Programme. Available at: <https://sifp.princeton.edu/>

The FSI and SFIP provide a pathway of support for students from low-income and marginalised groups from the pre-university to graduation stage. As with the previous two examples, addressing deficit models is seen as crucial, as is providing strong academic as well as broader pastoral support to students in the programmes. The programme also illustrates the value of connecting pre HE entry and support during study together.

6.1 Focusing on students from low-income & marginalised groups

The examples above all target in different ways those from low-income and marginalised groups explicitly. It is in this explicit targeting that there is a clear point of departure with present practice in England. It is the United States where initiatives that are based on a recognition, acknowledgement and celebration of ‘first generation’ student identity is most commonplace. Table 2 looks at the 6 US universities who were in the top 10 of the Times Higher 2020 world rankings. As Table 2 shows, each of the universities has set up a dedicated department/initiative to support students from first generation/low-income backgrounds.

Table 2: Initiatives/departments to support success of first generation students in leading US universities

University	Name of initiative	Description
California Institute of Technology (Caltech) ⁴²	Centre for Inclusion and Diversity	We work with the Caltech community to promote and provide access to information and resources to support academic and personal goals.
Stanford University ⁴³	First Generation and Low-income Office	The FLI Office aims to provide holistic support for students. This includes providing them with critical resources, networks, and services that ensure their success.
Massachusetts Institute of Technology ⁴⁴	First Generation Programme (FGP)	The FGP is committed to building a sense of community among first generation MIT students, faculty, alumni, and staff, and raising awareness of their unique experiences.
Princeton University ⁴⁵	The Scholars Institute Fellows Programme (SFIP)	SFIP provides all first-generation and lower-income students at Princeton with mentorship, academic enrichment and scholarly community throughout their studies at Princeton.
Harvard University ⁴⁶	Office for Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging	The Office aims to facilitate collaboration and strategic partnerships across Schools/Units, coordinate common language and vision, and create and manage the institutional infrastructure necessary to achieve sustainable inclusive excellence.
Yale University ⁴⁷	The Community Initiative	The Initiative partners with students who are first in their families to attend college, lower-income, and/or DACA/Undocumented. The Community Initiative works with these students to foster identity development, navigate campus resources, and build community.
University of Chicago ⁴⁸	First-Generation, Low-Income, Immigrant Network (FLI)	Aims to connect students, faculty, administrators, and alumni who identify as first-generation, low-income, or immigrant (regardless of immigration status), and allies with the goal of creating a community of support.

Table 2 shows that, while each of the universities have given these entities a slightly different title and they have their own individual programmes, their goals are very similar. Extending the analysis to a broader set of more selective US universities would reveal more initiatives of this nature (the EOP at Berkeley has already been described). Organisations are now forming to exchange practice and knowledge

⁴² Caltech Centre for Inclusion and Diversity. Available at: <http://diversity.caltech.edu/>

⁴³ First Generation and or Low-income. Available at: <https://fli.stanford.edu/>

⁴⁴ First Generation Programme: Available at: <https://firstyear.mit.edu/first-year-advising-programs/first-generation-program>

⁴⁵ See Educational Opportunity above

⁴⁶ See Presidential Task Force on Inclusion and Belonging above

⁴⁷ The Community Initiative: Available at: <https://fgli.yalecollege.yale.edu/our-community/mission-statement-our-vision>

⁴⁸ First-Generation, Low-Income, Immigrant Network Available at: <https://flinetwork.uchicago.edu/>

between them, such as the First Generation Lower Income (FGLI) consortium.⁴⁹ Finally, it is also noticeable that most of these initiatives have been created relatively recently. While progress is no means universal across more selective universities in the US, there has been some increase in the numbers of students from low-income backgrounds entering in recent years. These improvements, in combination with the heightened attention placed on inequalities in the nature of the student experience at leading US universities, has led such universities to recognise the need to put more rigorous support structures in place for the new students who they have attracted, or hope to do so.

⁴⁹ FGLI Consortium. Available at: <https://www.fgliconsortium.org/>

7. The role of national and regional policies

The work of all leading universities is located in the context of the national and regional policies with regard to access and success in higher education, as well as policies specifically targeting universities that are seen as leading ones in a country or region. The extent to which access and success in higher education is a priority for governments across the world differs. The most comprehensive study of government policies in this area was undertaken in 2018, looking at such policies in 71 countries.⁵⁰ It found that only 6 countries had formulated and implemented a comprehensive strategy to promote access and success. These countries were Australia, Cuba, England, Ireland, New Zealand and Scotland. Overall, only 32% of the countries surveyed had defined specific participation targets for any equity group.

7.1 Quotas and focus on leading universities

Given the relative lack of focus on access and success in higher education by policymakers across the world, examples of policies that concentrate explicitly on leading universities are rare. One example does come from China, where in 2017 the government put in place an initiative to increase the number of rural students in their leading universities by 10%.⁵¹ A quota based system to encourage greater access to higher education from under-represented groups is also in existence in India, which includes leading universities.⁵² Such quota systems can be seen as one policy option where extending access to leading universities is concerned. However, they would need to be delivered in combination with programmes to ensure that students entering via any quota based category have received the necessary support to meet entrance criteria. In India, despite leading universities having a quota for admission for students from lower caste groups, places remain unfilled, as not enough students from these groups are achieving the levels necessary to enter leading universities. There are also examples of quota systems being implemented in the US. One of the most high profile of these initiatives is the Texas 10 per cent plan, described in Box 7 below.

⁵⁰ Salmi, J. (2018) All around the world – Higher education equity policies across the globe Lumina Foundation. Available at: <https://worldaccesshe.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/All-around-the-world-Higher-education-equity-policies-across-the-globe-FINAL-COPY-2.pdf>

⁵¹ Xinhua (2017) Xinhua Insight: More enrollment for rural students as China eyes higher education's role in poverty relief. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-04/21/c_136226892.htm

⁵² Atherton (ed) (2016)

Box 7: The Texas 10 per cent plan⁵³

The 10% plan is a law that guarantees Texas students who graduated in the top ten percent of their high school class automatic admission to all state-funded universities, and has been in place since 1997. It has gained much attention from policymakers and been the subject of several different evaluation reports. One of the goals of the policy was to enable those from low income and BAME backgrounds to enter the more selective universities in the state. Two recent evaluation reports appear to reach different conclusions on the impact of the programme.

The first, presented in 2019 at the American Educational Research Association conference, argues that 45% of Texas's 1,700 public high schools never sent students to the 2 leading universities in the state in the years before the 10 percent program. After the policy change, only 7 of these 775 "never" high schools consistently sent any students to these universities. However, research produced by the National Bureau of Economic Research in 2020 shows that students with relatively high performance at schools that had traditionally sent few if any students to the University of Texas flagship campus in Austin, became more likely to attend the university. They came from schools with lower average test scores and above average shares of under-represented minorities and low-income students.

This second study builds on previous reports that point to the positive impact of the programme on admission of students to the leading universities in the state. Approaches such as the Texas 10 per cent plan have also been adopted in other US states. It is argued as well looking at how such plans have been implemented across different states, that while they can be effective they need to be embedded in a broader set of policies to support access to higher education for low income/marginalised groups.

A quota based approach to university admissions would be a departure from present access policies in England or the UK. It may also face hurdles in implementation given that university admissions are the responsibility of institutions and not the state. However, the evidence does show that there are very large differences between schools in the UK in terms of sending pupils to leading universities.¹ If these differences are to be addressed, there may be some merit in exploring how a 10 per cent scheme could fit within an overall policy approach to access to leading universities in the UK.

7.2 National state-funded access/success initiatives

As well as a lack of specific policies focused on increasing access/success to leading universities, in the countries where leading universities were analysed, only 3 countries had national programmes which include access/success in their remit. Table 3 below outlines these programmes from Australia, Ireland and the US.

⁵³ Barshay, J. (2019) *Texas 10% policy didn't expand number of high schools feeding students to top universities*. Available at: <https://hechingerreport.org/texas-top-10-policy-didnt-expand-number-of-high-schools-feeding-students-to-top-universities/>
Sandra E., Black J.T. Denning J.R. (2019) *Winners and Losers? The Effect of Gaining and Losing Access to Selective Colleges on Education and Labor Market Outcomes*. Available at: https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w26821/w26821.pdf

Table 3: National Access and Success Programmes Overview

Country	Policy initiative	Description
Australia	HEPPP (Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme)	<p>The HEPPP was established in 2010. It has three components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation: provides funding to universities to increase the participation of domestic students from low SES backgrounds and support the retention and success of those students. Funding is allocated to universities by formula, based on the number of enrolled students from low SES backgrounds. • Partnerships: provides funding to universities to raise the aspirations and build the capacity of people from low SES backgrounds with primary and secondary schools, community organisations etc. • National Priorities Pool: provides funding for projects that support the more effective implementation of HEPPP nationally and at the institutional level. <p>From 2021 the HEPPP will be refocused to support regional, remote and Indigenous students as well as those from low SES backgrounds.⁵⁴ Over 130 million Australian dollars was invested in HEPPP in 2020. An assessment of HEPP from 2010 to 2015 indicated it worked with over 300,000 students.</p>
Ireland	Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) and Higher Education Access Route (HEAR)	<p>The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) and Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) offer students who meet the eligibility criteria for the programmes the ability to enter higher education requiring lower grades in the Irish school leaving examinations and additional academic and pastoral support when they enter higher education. The support offered to HEAR and DARE students varies by different universities. From 2015-2017 over 15,600 students accepted an offer through either DARE or HEAR.⁵⁵ Universities will allocate a certain number of places to HEAR or DARE applicants.</p>
United States	TRIO Programmes	<p>The Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) support those from disadvantaged backgrounds through 8 different programmes from middle school to post-graduate level. TRIO began in 1964. Over \$900m was invested in TRIO programmes in 2019, and they work with over 800,000 low-income, first-generation students and students with disabilities per year.⁵⁶</p> <p>The 8 different programmes include the 'Upward Bound' programmes which provide additional academic support and advice consisting of year round activity from 11-12 year olds onwards; education opportunity centres that provide counselling and information on college admissions to qualified adults, and student support services projects, which fund universities to give academic and pastoral support to students from low-income backgrounds.</p>

The three initiatives above all engage with the leading universities in their respective countries. In the United States, by virtue of its size and the scope of TRIO, engages with all types of higher education provider. In Ireland the more selective universities engage strongly with HEAR and DARE. At University College Dublin, for example, there are approximately 5% places reserved for HEAR eligible applicants and 5% for DARE eligible applicants. Trinity College links HEAR and DARE to its outreach as well as its student support programmes. In Australia, HEPPP allocations are received by all universities, including leading ones. The University of Melbourne delivered over 40 student programmes in the 2015-2017 period reaching of over 55,000 students using HEPP funding.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). Available at: <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-participation-and-partnerships-programme-hePPP>

⁵⁵ Irish Universities Association (2018) DARE HEAR Facts and Figures 2017-2018. Available at: <http://accesscollege.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/DARE-HEAR-Facts-and-Figures-2017-2018-Summary-Report.pdf>

⁵⁶ US Department of Education. Available at: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html>

⁵⁷ University of Melbourne Social Inclusion Barometer 2018. Available at: https://provost.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/3066766/2018-Social-Inclusion-Barometer-Web.pdf

There is evidence to support the effectiveness of all the programmes above.⁵⁸ The 2013 evaluation of HEAR and DARE states '*that much has been achieved by HEAR in contributing to national targets*'. With regard to TRIO, an evaluation undertaken in 2009 '*found that UB/UBMS participants were 3.3 times more likely to obtain a BA in six years when compared to those reporting no participation in college access supplemental services*'.⁵⁹ The HEPPP evaluation in 2013 described a range of work by participating universities, pointing to the impact that the programme was having on the expectations of learners from target groups and how it was supporting the achievement of institutional goals.⁶⁰ However, there has been also a call in each country for stronger evidence regarding the impact of the respective programmes.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the international evidence does suggest that state funded national initiatives have an important role to play in the development of national access and success 'ecosystems', and crucially that leading universities can and should engage in them.

⁵⁸ Byrne, D (et al) (2013) An Evaluation of the HEAR and DARE Supplementary Admission Routes to Higher Education Commissioned by the DARE/HEAR Strategic Development Group. Available at:

<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.693.2864&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

⁵⁹ Cahalan, M and Goodwin, D (2014) Setting the Record Straight: Strong Positive Impacts Found from the National Evaluation of Upward Bound Re-Analysis Documents Significant Positive Impacts Masked by Errors in Flawed Contractor Reports. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED555877.pdf>

⁶⁰ Acil Allen Consulting (2017) Evaluation of the HEPPP. Available at:

https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/final_heppp_evaluation_report_2017.03.16_0.pdf

⁶¹ Zacharias, N. (2017) *The Australian Student Equity Programme and Institutional Change: Paradigm Shift or Business as Usual?*. Available at https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Nadine-Zacharias_Executive-Summary.pdf
Universities Ireland (2018)

New America: Stoking Competition: Background on Grant Programs in Higher Education. Available at:

<https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/closing-evidence-gap/stoking-competition-background-on-grant-programs-in-higher-education/>

8. Moving forward

8.1 Where is progress being made?

The work described above offers a range of potential future actions that universities and policymakers in the UK could adopt to improve access and success at leading universities. Nonetheless, there are challenges with the strength of evidence available regarding the impact of access/success work globally, as there are in the UK. Aside from the challenges with the government programmes outlined in the previous section, looking at the data on progress in access/success to leading universities the data, where it exists, presents a mixed picture. For example, while the percentage of students from lower socio-economic groups entering Australian universities overall has increased in recent years, this has not been the case for the leading 'Group of Eight' universities.

In the United States, research in 2017 found that students coming from families in the top 1 percent—those who make more than \$630,000 a year—are 77 times more likely to be admitted to and attend an Ivy League university than students coming from families who make less than \$30,000 a year.⁶² But at the same time, the percentage of students eligible for the Federal 'Pell' low-income support grant at some of these universities has grown significantly. At Princeton University, the percentage of first year students eligible for Pell Grants in 2016 had tripled compared to 2008.⁶³ This improvement was attributed to the bringing together of the approaches outlined in in this report. These include a comprehensive financial support package where students with family incomes up to \$65,000 have 100 percent of their tuition, meals and accommodation paid for. At Yale University there has been a 50% increase in Pell Grant recipients between 2015/2016 and 2019/2020.⁶⁴ This increase is attributed to a combination of outreach initiatives, financial aid policies and focusing on how admission decisions are made.

Overall, there does appear to have been some progress in recent years where access to leading universities is concerned in the United States. The 128 members of the American Talent Initiative described above admitted over 12,000 additional students eligible for the Pell Grant between 2015–16 and 2017–18. However, between 2017-18 and 2018-19 overall progress had declined to zero with around half of the universities experiencing increases in Pell Grant student participation and around half reductions.⁶⁵ The progress report for ATI published in 2019 however, highlighted that in the individual universities that were making progress they displayed many of the features of 'good' practice highlighted in this study; in particular a strategic commitment to access/success supported by resources, innovation in outreach, and commitment to working with a range of schools and organisations, along with offering targeted financial support based on need.

8.2 The 10 key messages

On the basis of the evidence collected for this study there are 10 key messages which may enhance the work being undertaken to extend access and success at leading universities in the UK. What is especially noticeable looking at international approaches is the emphasis on supporting students when they enter leading universities. If, as we hope, leading universities become more diverse, this will only become more important in the UK.

⁶² Chetty, R. (et al) (2017) *Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility*. Available at: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w23618>

⁶³ Princeton University (2016) Pell-eligible students comprise 21 percent of Princeton's freshman class. Available at: <https://www.princeton.edu/news/2016/11/14/pell-eligible-students-comprise-21-percent-princetons-freshman-class>

⁶⁴ YaleNews (2020) Yale's low-income student population grows. Available at: <https://news.yale.edu/2020/02/20/yales-low-income-student-population-grows>

⁶⁵ America Talent Initiative (2019) Expanding Opportunity for Lower-Income Students Three Years of the American Talent Initiative. Available at: https://americantalentinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ATI-Impact-Report_Feb-2020_Expanding-Opportunity-for-Lower-Income-Students.pdf

1. Show strategic leadership on access/success

The ATI study from 2019 quoted above states that ‘ATI members that have been most successful in advancing socioeconomic diversity are those whose leaders prioritise and put resources behind a comprehensive strategy for expanded opportunity’.⁶⁶ There is evidence of strategic commitment to access/success in the UK, in particular via the Access and Participation Plans of English institutions. But there is room for leading universities to aim even higher than they do now and look to lead on the access/success agenda nationally, and even internationally, as their counterparts in other countries are doing.

2. Set ambitious aims in ‘student support’ and communicate them to students

The 100% financial support goal is more difficult to achieve in the UK perhaps than at very well resourced US institutions. However, if a commitment to working toward this goal was adopted across leading UK institutions, it may be extremely powerful in not only supporting students practically, but shifting perceptions regarding the accessibility of these institutions.

3. Undertake open institutional conversations

Leading UK universities, like their counterparts in several other countries, are engaged in a broader set of debates at present about identity, heritage and diversity. It could be a significant step forward if they were to, as Harvard and others have done, initiate an open institutional conversation on diversity and inclusion that included access and success as a key part. These conversations need to confront issues in particular of ethnicity, disability and also social class and how they intersect, dealing with well recognised issues related to BAME groups but also ones related to social class which are at risk of becoming ‘taboo’.⁶⁷

4. Explore the pros and cons of admission quotas

The evidence from Texas and other US states appears, on balance, positive with regard to such quotas. While this would be a significant departure in the UK, it may be worthwhile exploring how similar approaches could be piloted here, in particular focusing on some areas of the country where schools send very few students from widening access target groups to leading universities.

5. Make ‘First Generation’ a celebrated identity and form dedicated student support units

The difference between how first generation and low-income student identity is dealt with in the US and other countries, including the UK, is striking. This is to a degree the product of cultural context, but this is not such a barrier as to prevent such approaches being piloted in the UK. If leading universities were to explore such approaches as their counterparts at the top of global rankings tables are doing, it would display their willingness to lead on access/success issues nationally as they do on research.

6. Develop student support models based on theory and evidence

The best examples of coherent long-term approaches to supporting students when they enter higher education, from South Africa, the United States and Ireland, are grounded strongly in theoretical approaches which look to address directly deficit models of understanding students from low-income and other marginalised groups.

⁶⁶ American Talent Initiative (2019)

⁶⁷ Coughlan, S, (2020) The ‘taboo’ about who doesn’t go to university, BBC News 26th September 2020 - The ‘taboo’ about who doesn’t go to university. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-54278727>

7. Collaborate together in a proactive way

There are several examples outlined in this report of the value of leading universities working together, both through representative organisations and charities. This does happen in the UK, including Realising Opportunities, and the Sutton Trust consortium of university access partners, but this study highlights its value and how this could be extended.

8. Engage in national access and success strategies

The evidence from other countries that have national access and success strategies show that leading universities benefit from them. This evidence illustrates that the particular needs of such universities are not so different as they do not benefit from working with other universities which differ in nature to them. One overall difference between these programmes and those in England in particular, are that they focus on access and success. Including a focus on success in national programmes may be particularly valuable to explore.

9. Form a global network to exchange practice/knowledge in the field of access and success

Section 6.1 shows that there is a range of similar, but nonetheless varied, work being undertaken in outreach across leading universities globally. There would be great potential value in such universities learning more from each other regarding what different approaches are possible and the benefits they can bring. This could be done through the actions of one or more leading universities or with the support of other initiatives that aim to initiate international exchange of practice in the field of access and success in higher education.

10. More international research looking at impact on access/success in leading universities is needed

While this study does attempt to capture the present situation where access and success at leading universities is concerned, there is more that needs to be done to identify what is being done and especially to show its impact. This may be part of what any global network described above could do, but would also benefit from the active engagement of higher education researchers at leading universities.

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