The Brilliant Club Annual Conference in conjunction with King’s College London

Where can we find solutions to break the link between household income and admission to the UK’s highly selective universities?

2015 Digest
Press coverage

The conference was featured in both Times Higher Education and on BBC News Online.

Chris Havergal,
writing for Times Higher Education
‘Ride the nerd wave’ to widen access to selective universities, conference told

‘Universities and schools should “ride the nerd wave” of role models such as Brian Cox and Mark Zuckerberg to encourage more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to apply for higher education. This was among the suggestions made at a conference, organised by educational charity The Brilliant Club, that explored how the link between household income and admission to the UK’s most selective universities could be broken.

Dan Abramson, Headteacher of King’s College London Mathematics School, told a panel session that the key issue was to provide children with more positive role models. ‘Ed Byrne, the principal of King’s, said that some children were held back by the “lack of aspiration” that their families had for them. Providing more diverse pathways into higher education and then between institutions would help young people to fulfil their potential, he suggested.

BBC News Online
Top universities urged to solve access problem

In a speech to the Brilliant Club’s annual conference, Prof Ebdon will tell an audience of university staff that the key to making faster progress is to make better use of the research expertise they have available to them. In his speech, Prof Ebdon will say: “There have been stubborn gaps in participation at highly-selective universities for a long time, but the ‘nerd wave’ is starting to turn. “Highly-selective universities are starting to achieve real change, by developing creative, evidence-led solutions underpinned by increasing understanding of what’s most effective at each particular institution”

Pupils from William Tyndale Primary School reported on the conference for their Burnet News Group, which is supported by The Economist Educational Foundation.

The Economist Educational Foundation

To university or not to university? That is the question.
The importance of education and what our economy needs is debated on a daily basis. Research shows that people who attend higher education are mostly those who go on to higher paid jobs. However despite this, we are still faced with huge inequality. According to the Guardian, ‘26% of jobs in the economy explicitly requires a degree’. That means that if you do not have a degree 26% of jobs are inaccessible to you.

Reporters from William Tyndale’s Burnet News attended the annual Brilliant Club Conference held at King’s College London in July 2015 to find out a little more about what can be done to close this gap.

The Brilliant Club aims to inspire, motivate and work with students to go to university. Places at the top 12 universities in the United Kingdom, known as the Russell Group, are few and far between for students from lower income backgrounds. 1 in 50 students from state schools are likely to attend a university in the Russell Group, whereas 1 in 3 students from private schools will get a place. As students from state schools, we find these figures alarming. Out of the 6 reporters, 3 of us have parents who went to university. That’s 50%. Probably a much higher percentage than if we asked the rest of our class.

It is not only the motivation and inspiration that The Brilliant Club are trying to instil in students, as there are other barriers to attending university; tuition fees, attitudes towards education and as a consequence whether or not your parents attended. In the United Kingdom, between 28% - 41% of the population has a degree (this is based on different sets of data) and shows that more than half of the UK’s population have not attended higher education.

The conference, ‘Where can we find solutions to break the link between household income and admission to the UK’s highly-selective universities?’ highlighted many of these issues and discussed solutions. We attended a seminar and were asked to give our thoughts. We highlighted that it should perhaps not only be on household income but it could be measured on how many people live in a house compared to the number of bedrooms.

As children, we feel that visiting universities is a really exciting way to inspire young people and get them interested in their own future. We visited King’s London and were so impressed with the range of courses and opportunities that are available. If children do not know about these opportunities, then they will not be motivated to continue with their education. School can be hard for some children and we all need a little motivation!

As a group of Year 6 primary school students about to embark on the next stages of our education, our visit to King’s College London and discussions with staff at the university and the CEO of The Brilliant Club made us determined to attend university.

From attending this conference, there are still many questions to be answered but the key question remains; what is the best way to get students from state schools into higher education? We think it is simple- open opportunities for state schools to visit and work with universities. It worked with us so it will work for other children too.

Burnet News, William Tyndale
The Burnet News Club is a unique network of school news clubs for students aged 10+ at non-selective state schools in the UK. It equips young people with the knowledge, skills, authentic audiences and influential connections they need to have their say about current affairs. To find out if your school could take part, contact Emily Evans at The Economist Educational Foundation (emilyevans@economist.com).
Delegate feedback

“Hearing from employers has got me thinking about further support and preparation we need to do in school to improve presentational and social skills.”

All the pupils stated they enjoyed participating, and crucially felt like they were both involved and listened to. Interestingly, I questioned them about university aspirations before the event and afterwards: over half had changed to considering places at the most competitive institutions.

Shirley Morrison, Gifted and Talented Coordinator, Northampton School for Boys, with former pupils Robert Allen and Rosie Barnes

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Excellent and very interesting conference from our point of view.

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The ongoing ‘theme’ of this year’s conference seemed to be confidence and resilience building: ensuring students overcome the feeling of lack of entitlement. This was a very interesting area to discuss and has highlighted a new area of work we should be focusing on.

We genuinely feel privileged to be a small part of something so important. Both Robert and Rosie are going to get involved with the outreach projects in their respective universities when they return and they were genuinely inspired by everything they saw.

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“I felt that the sessions were very helpful, in terms of speaking to a range of stakeholders about important issues around the subject.”

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Bryn James, Trainee teacher with the Researchers in Schools programme, Lampton School

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2015 Conference: Digest

Welcome

Anne-Marie Canning, National Programme Director, King’s College London

Dr Chris Wilson, National Programme Director, The Brilliant Club

Key points

• Chris Wilson and Anne-Marie Canning opened the conference by directly addressing the conference key question, with both speakers highlighting that multiple parties are crucial in breaking the link between household income and admission to the UK’s highly-selective universities. Teachers, universities, parents and carers, charities and employers all have to be involved; it is only by collaboration within and between these parties that problems can be solved.

• The speakers highlighted that the 2015 Conference was a platform for developing and finding such links and solutions to the conference question.

• Delegates were advised to capitalise on the diverse groups of attendees at the conference and to seek out new perspectives.

Opening Keynote: What is the problem of fair access to leading universities and why does it matter?

Professor Les Ebdon, Director, Office for Fair Access

Key points

• Les Ebdon highlighted that fair access remains a stubborn problem at leading universities. He noted that whilst there has been a 40% increase in the number of students from disadvantaged areas entering such universities since 2011, there remains a huge difference in progression to these providers based on background. Students from the most disadvantaged areas are 6.8 times less likely to progress to them than the most advantaged areas.

• Universities play a key role in changing aspirations and attainment, with long-term outreach fundamental in changing attitudes.

• OFFA remains committed to reducing the link between household income and admission to the UK’s highly-selective universities – and will continue to do so by encouraging and promoting creative, evidence-led and strategic programmes and working more closely with universities.

Key points

• Diversity is the key to creativity: it helps to block group thinking and helps to overcome challenges. Employers are learning this and are diversifying their employees.

• If highly-selective universities don’t diversify their intake, organisations will increasingly look to different universities. Clifford Chance and Aspiring Solicitors are examples of organisations that are already doing this.

• We have to look for ‘disruptive ideas’ and question the status quo. For example, Clifford Chance provides alternative entrance routes where applicants are produce a 500-word essay instead of academic records. Other examples cited were using contextualised data and ‘blind’ CVs.

• The way that students may present themselves can act as a barrier to access. Knowing how to make ‘small talk’ and lacking self-belief in certain situations were cited as examples of this. Finding strategies to tackle this would be hugely beneficial to those students.

Breaking down social barriers in other industries: lessons for higher education

Chair: Dr John Green, Life Fellow, Queens’ College, University of Cambridge

Laura Yeates, Head of Graduate Talent, Clifford Chance

Pippa Cobbing, primarySTEPs Programme Manager, The Royal Ballet School

Morgan Lobb, CEO, DiversityJobs.co.uk & thebigIdea.co.uk

Gemma Baker, Assistant Director, Aspiring Solicitors

Key points

• There were similarities in the factors constraining fair access between all countries discussed on the panel. Social class was mentioned as a key factor by all speakers.

• The English system of widening participation was identified as an example good practice. Early intervention, partnerships and collaboration and Information and Guidance (IAG) were identified as exemplary practice in this national context.

• There were similarities in the factors constraining fair access between all countries discussed on the panel. Social class was mentioned as a key factor by all speakers.

• The Irish and English systems were compared. In Ireland, access to university is a big part of institutional & National strategy. Ireland also uses a multi-indicator approach to determining socio-economic disadvantage, which included financial, as well as social and cultural indicators.

• Experience in Washington highlighted the tendency of students from low-income households to ‘self-select’ away from prestigious institutions when applying for places at universities. This was highlighted as significant when accounting for low rates widening participation in the United States.

How can we learn from universities & schools internationally?

Chair: Michael Slavinsky, Teaching and Learning Director, Researchers in Schools

Lindsay Bowes, Acting Managing Director, CFE Research

Lewis Purser, Director (Academic Affairs), Irish Universities Association

Anne Lavellé, Access Centre Outreach Manager, University College Dublin

Dr Tania Nguyen, Washington DC Chapter, The Brilliant Club

Lucy Crehan, Teacher, Consultant and Writer

Key points

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Are Free School Meals the best indicator of social disadvantage?

Chair: Teresa Tunnadine CBE, Headteacher, The Compton School

Josh Oware, Research and Community Affairs Coordinator, RARE Recruitment

Laura Blazey, Senior Officer – Data & Impact, Teach First

Russell Hobby, General Secretary, National Association of Head Teachers

Key points
• All panellists agreed that FSM was a useful but crude measure.
• Josh Oware highlighted the issue around the financial cap of £16,000, and gave the example that whilst a family with only 1 child and a household income of under £16,000 would be eligible for FSM, a family of 5 children with a household income of £20,000 would not, despite the fact that both families may still be living in relative poverty.
• FSM doesn’t consider families who have a higher income but low cultural capital – this is something the audience identified as problematic with the FSM indicator.
• The key question from the debate was what could be used alongside FSM to help improve the targeting of Widening Participation learners. Both audience and panel suggested using geodemographic (ACORN) or the Higher Education POLAR3 data measures.
• It was suggested that whatever means schools use to measure disadvantage should be available to universities during the admissions period via UCAS.

Sustained interventions: the argument for universities starting young and working with the same cohort over the medium to long term.

Chair: Simon Coyle, COO, The Brilliant Club

Dot Salmon, Team Leader, IntoUniversity Centre in Hackney

Samina Khan, Director of Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach, University of Oxford

Gideon Waldeslausie, Project Manager Post 16, Generating Genius

Catherine Mc Nicholl, Outreach Officer (WP), University of Warwick

Katy Redfern, Head of Access, University College London

Key points
• All speakers agreed that there is a need to work with younger pupils.
• A range of research evidence was used showing the disadvantages that young people can face. For example: children at 22 months who come from a lower class background are disadvantaged in comparison to their peers (Dot Salmon). By the age of 14, a pupil’s education aspirations are fixed (Katy Redfern).
• All speakers agreed that the lack of collaboration between organisations is a barrier to access. However, examples of good practice – collaboration between the University of Oxford and IntoUniversity for example - were provided.
• Catherine McNicholl argued for intensive programmes like summer schools which are successful because they are repeated interventions at crucial points in the pupils’ lives.
• A further barrier is the lack of data - questions arose on how organisations were really able to track low-income students.

The role of resilience in widening access

Chair: Ruth Squire Widening Participation Manager King’s College London

Sinead Gallagher, Senior Project Manager, Department for Education and Skills, Welsh Government

Andrew Wright, Head of Sixth Form, Tapton School

Jon Finn, Founder and Managing Director, Tougher Minds

Key points
• There was a strong consensus that educating students about, and supporting the development of, emotional and psychological resilience was essential. Emotional and psychological barriers might impact student progression to higher education as much as economic or social concerns.
• Students should see failure as something to be built upon rather than a sign of incompetence. Andrew Wright suggested that this combination of resilience and audacious goals was particularly effective for FSM students.
• All speakers argued that there was an important relationship between self-esteem and resilience. It was noted that it might be important to legitimise extra-curricular activities including paid work as supporting an application to a highly-selective university.
• A question from the audience raised the issue of measuring the success of the resilience agenda. Why should academy chains embed it without a way to look at impact? The panel suggested that student data and progress could be the measure to do so.

Fair access to research intensive universities: future policy and collaboration

Chair: Anne-Marie Canning, Director of Widening Participation, King’s College London

Professor Les Ebdon CBE DL, Director, Fair Access to Higher Education

Jenni Chambers, Head of Public Engagement with Research, Research Councils UK

Sarah Howls, Head of Student Opportunity, Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)

Key points
• There was a focus on clear short term gains; for example, simply getting more pupils into sixth form could be a useful goal as this automatically increases the numbers eligible to apply to highly-selective universities.
• Universities need to consider how they are going to approach access in light of the abolition of the student numbers cap.
• The development of high quality and systematic CPD opportunities for teachers was noted as potentially very fruitful in widening access.
• Postgraduate access will become increasingly important and this should be looked at alongside undergraduate access.
• Collaboration needs to be enshrined at policy level in a way that respects the challenges faced by schools, is flexible and allows innovation.
• Data needs to be used more intelligently to ensure the targeting areas of the greatest need. More research is needed into the differential outcome of students at university, and how these can be addressed.
• Selective universities were urged to engage a lot more approach. develop long term initiatives rather than a ‘confetti’
nurture systematic partnerships with academy chains and
• Advocated Widening Participation Departments should he backs ‘free schools’ as an initiative.
poorly performing. However, he highlighted that in theory ‘good’ schools should be kept, but removed if they are
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Key points
• The changes announced in the 2015 budget –the removal of grants– may not necessarily result in a fundamental change. Adonis argued that there was limited evidence that grants impact access.
• Apprenticeships need to be good quality by ensuring employability. They must be longer than a year and provide a qualification of value. Apprenticeships were a clear example of market failure in the UK, with the state itself being one of the worst apprenticeship providers.
• Adonis’ position on free schools was mixed; he argued ‘good’ schools should be kept, but removed if they are poorly performing. However, he highlighted that in theory he backs ‘free schools’ as an initiative.
• Advocated Widening Participation Departments should nurture systematic partnerships with academy chains and develop long term initiatives rather than a ‘confetti’ approach.
• Selective universities were urged to engage a lot more systematically with their local schools.
The role of the media in forming perceptions of higher education

How can we work with parents, carers and school communities to break down barriers to access?

Lessons from the chalkface 2: Universities

What can universities and schools do to boost attainment?

Key points

- The panel shared the concern that the media was responsible for perpetuating or failing to challenge some enduring stereotypes about the higher education sector.

- This was confirmed by pupils from Lampton School and Walworth Academy, who provided useful reflections about how social media, rather than traditional media, might offer new ways to speak to them directly about their experiences of school.

- Students pointed to the common understanding that university was “expensive” and for “posh white people”. They argued that this put them off applying.

- Chris Havergal suggested that giving a more diverse range of academics a platform in the media might challenge stereotypes of the sector.

- It was highlighted that students have a belief about what their path is; they don’t ‘make a decision’ about whether to go to university or not.

- The panel discussed that the best time for intervention was early on. Transition periods are good to target as this is where confidence is most commonly lost.

- Examples of effective schemes were where making contact was easy, but where the necessary information was not drip fed and where parents were not overloaded. It was stressed that parents should lead on the exchange of information, in order to allow them to contribute their knowledge and expertise.

- There isn’t a one size fits all approach, constant adaption is crucial for parents.

- ‘Communications Management’; you need to dive deep into the iceberg; reaching those parents who aren’t easy to reach and reflecting on what their experiences of school would have been like. Cultural context is the most important factor in identifying barriers to progression to higher education.

Key points

- Each university representative began by offering some potential solutions that they had found effective in their attempts to increase the number of students from this group that they were able to recruit.

- Questions from the floor probed the choice taken by Queen Mary University of London and the panel discussed the importance of making contact early on. Transition periods are good to target as this is where confidence is most commonly lost.

- The panel discussed the benefits of in-school modelling of university-style learning through seminars, using an online learning environment and tracking alumni progress.

- It was seen as imperative to make sure teachers can access education research such as the Sutton Trust papers. Opportunities to discuss new pedagogy are also important.

- There has to be a buy-in from everyone; teachers, parents and/or guardians and the pupils themselves.

- As teachers, the panel feel it is important to inform the practical strategies used in class with a pedagogical toolkit which will have a direct impact on progress and attainment. A teacher should be able to have 1-2-1 contact with all pupils, and to champion a planning culture in their classroom.

- Even though there is progress being made, KCL Maths School (Dan Abramson) and Cambridge HE Plus (Tom Levinson), argued that schools and universities could together still do more to boost attainment.
How can we work together to encourage academically able pupils from low income households to apply to leading universities?

Chair: Chris Wilson, National Programme Director, The Brilliant Club

Edward Byrne, Principal, King’s College London

Professor Michael Arthur President and Provost, University College London

Paul Greatrix, Registrar, University of Nottingham

Dan Abramson, Headteacher, King’s College London Mathematics School

Shirley Morrison, Gifted and Talented Co-ordinator, Northampton School for Boys, with former pupils Robert Allen and Rosie Barnes

Key points

- There is no golden bullet to tackle this issue but there was consensus around getting students to study the right subjects in order to open instead of close doors; raising aspirations – getting students used to the university environment and demystifying higher education; starting young with high quality and targeted outreach from an early age; a move towards contextualised admissions. The influence of parents and schools are key in young people’s decisions
- Also discussed was the extent to which widening participation is the responsibility of schools or universities. Paul Greatrix argued that universities were there to help with attainment but it was not their job to widen participation; Edward Byrne argued that universities had the power to influence but were fourth in the queue behind schools, teachers and peers.
- Another point raised was university retention of disadvantaged students. A number of suggestions included a series of support packages in place to help these students and removing the financial burden via bursaries; providing additional skills and support sessions, and close tracking of pupils.

Advertising for good

Chair: Anne-Marie Canning, Director of Widening Participation, King’s College London

Collette Lux, Director of Marketing, King’s College London

Key points

- The Advertising for Good session invited two advertising agencies, TBWA\London and Goodby Silverstein & Partners, based in New York, to answer the conference question as creative advertising pitches.
- Anne-Marie Canning introduced the session and explained her belief in the importance of learning from the experts in advertising to young people.
- Goodby Silverstein & Partners’ idea was radical – to link up with brands and products that young people use and admire every day, and to turn them into digital vehicles for promoting higher education. Nike trainer labels would have links to enable young people to find out more about the designers and engineers who created them and the subjects that they studied, at which universities, to get those jobs. Turning everyday items into information hubs, the #dowhatyoulove campaign would encourage young people to think about what a university degree could mean for them in the long term.
- Next up was Ryan Wain from TBWA\London, who introduced a campaign with the tagline ‘All you need to go to uni is a brain’, and shared a compelling manifesto film. The campaign hijacked university communications such as Open Day forms and posters to remind potential students that background wasn’t important as long as you could think.
- The panel was made up of students Eoin McLaughlin and Thom Glover from King’s College London as well as Collette Lux. Their reaction to this was supportive, and they saw benefits in sharing the message through communications vehicles that already existed, and changing the message put forward by universities themselves.
- The audience were invited to participate, through hand-held anonymous voting buttons, which gave a good deal of excitement to the proceedings! In the end, TBWA\London’s campaign ‘All you need to go to uni is a brain’ was successful.

Your feedback

Specified reasons for attending the conference

- Networking
- Learning more about the field of Fair access
- Sharing examples of best practice in universities
- Sharing examples of best practice in schools
- Sharing examples of best practice in the third sector

Did the conference help you to identify practical steps as an organisation or an individual?

- Yes
- No

Sectors represented

- Universities – Widening Participation
- Schools
- Other
- Universities – Research

What went well

- Thought-provoking and innovative sessions
- To look beyond schools and universities by exploring ideas earning from other sectors
- A good diversity of speakers on the panels
- The presence of school pupils - these are the people we’re all trying to reach through the work we do
- Good timekeeping
- Practical ‘top-tips’ sessions
- A great variety of talks and workshops
- Hearing about other countries and what they do
- An excellent event to network and make new connections
- An excellent opportunity to share good practice
- Lunchtime information and ‘meet your market’ sessions
- Lovely food
- Focused discussions – which led to more focussed ideas and useful avenues to take away and explore further

Improvement Suggestions

- The format and content of sessions:
  - Allow more time for discussion and questions with longer and fewer breakout sessions
  - We will look into repeating popular sessions
  - More focussed lines of enquiry in each session
  - Even more workshops and practical tips sessions
  - Even more pupils on panels
  - A session to address the regional nature and variation of the issues facing schools and HEIs
- Greater representation from:
  - Primary schools – and an emphasis on starting ‘younger’
  - Schools from outside of London successfully tackling disadvantage – particularly from rural or coastal areas
  - Parents