

**The
Brilliant
Club**

Impact Case Study Series

Barriers to Access

**Five lessons for creating effective school-
university partnerships**

July 2019



About The Brilliant Club

The Brilliant Club exists to increase the number of pupils from underrepresented backgrounds that progress to highly-selective universities. We do this by mobilising the PhD community to share its expertise with state schools. In pursuit of this mission, The Brilliant Club delivers two programmes:



The Scholars Programme recruits, trains and places doctoral and postdoctoral researchers in schools to deliver programmes of university-style tutorials, which are supplemented by two university trips.



Researchers in Schools recruits PhD graduates, places them as trainee teachers in schools and supports them to develop as excellent teachers and research leaders committed to closing the gap in attainment and university access.

Find out more about our work on our website at www.thebrilliantclub.org.

Research and Impact Series

This **Impact Case Study** forms part of our **Research and Impact Series**, which provides several ways to engage with the work of The Brilliant Club's Research and Impact Department and that of our partners. More information and previous publications in the series are available on The Brilliant Club's [website](#).

About the Authors

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Executive Summary

The inequality in access to a university education – especially at the most selective universities – is a serious and persistent problem in the UK. One-in-four of what UCAS term the 'most advantaged' fifth of young people progress to a highly-selective university, compared to one-in-fifty from the 'most disadvantaged' fifth. Partnership working between schools and universities – whether directly or facilitated by a third party – is widely acknowledged to be integral to addressing this inequality. But a range of factors mean that this partnership working is not always possible or as effective as it could be.

This report is the seventh in a series of impact case studies about topical issues in university access. It draws on the views of staff in schools and universities to identify the greatest barriers to effective school-university partnerships and proposes lessons for practitioners and policy-makers to address these barriers.

School-university partnerships are important to eliminating access gaps in higher education, but **significant barriers still prevent existing opportunities from being accessible to all schools:**

- Schools and colleges play a key role in preparing young people for success post-18 and helping them to engage with opportunities to learn about higher education.
- The Office for Students (OfS) expects universities to specify in their Access and Participation Plans how they will work with schools (OfS, 2019a) and it has published advice on how this can be done effectively (OfS, 2017; OfS 2019b). Universities UK notes there has been an increase in 'widening participation' activities that focus on working with schools (Universities UK, 2017).
- While there seems to be broad agreement in the sector around the potential benefits of school-university partnerships, the debate needs to shift focus on how to overcome the barriers that currently prevent schools from accessing support.

Based on a Teacher Tapp survey for The Brilliant Club of more than 3,000 teachers, we have identified **five key challenges** that represent barriers to partnership working:

- 1) **Teachers cite awareness, time and logistics as the main barriers to engaging with external university access programmes – even more than they cite cost.** While classroom teachers are most likely to cite lack of knowledge, a quarter of head teachers say they "don't know what opportunities are out there". Teachers were almost as likely to say that "opportunities are logistically difficult to engage with" or "we don't have the staff time to pursue these kinds of opportunities".
- 2) **Although cost and availability of opportunities are not prohibitive across the board, there is a hard core of high-need schools who are not currently being served.** Teachers in schools with the highest proportion of pupils on free school meals were most likely to say that "opportunities are too expensive for us", "there are few/no opportunities for schools like ours" and "opportunities are not designed to meet my school's needs".
- 3) **The perceived barriers to engagement vary by the type of school,** with primary school teachers most likely to say they didn't know what opportunities were available (48%) and secondary school teachers more likely to say their school

lacked staff time (36%) or that opportunities were logistically difficult to engage with (35%).

- 4) Despite recent press reports of 'positive discrimination', **private schools find it significantly easier to involve their pupils in opportunities to learn about university** – over half of teachers in the independent sector said they “hadn't encountered any barriers to working with universities and related organisations”.
- 5) **While most teachers are confident in talking to pupils about whether university is right for them, levels of confidence vary:** Confidence is higher for teachers who attended a more-selective university themselves, those in independent schools and those in secondary schools.

Drawing on qualitative research – and The Brilliant Club's experience of partnering with more than 800 schools and 40 universities each year to deliver university access programmes to over 13,000 pupils across the UK – we put forward **five key lessons** for addressing these challenges:

- 1) **The most resilient partnerships work hard to minimise logistical burdens and align priorities across sectors to create a sense of urgency.** Interpersonal relationships will always be important in partnership working. But, where personal relationships are the basis of a partnership, it is likely to be fragile and difficult to scale.
- 2) **Providers** of university access opportunities should go out of their way to **reach schools that are currently being underserved**, and they should consider which aspects of their offer schools are currently unable to engage with. **Policy-makers** should **clarify whose responsibility it is to ensure underserved schools have access** to these opportunities and **align funding streams** accordingly.
- 3) **Providers** of university access opportunities should start to **engage pupils early** and articulate to primary schools what provision for young pupils looks like. **Policy-makers** should **resolve the conflict** between the evidence that says we should start early and the desire to see immediate outcomes.
- 4) **There should be a concerted national effort to help state schools build their capacity to select and engage with external university access opportunities**, recognising that they are unlikely to have the same resources to do this as private schools.
- 5) Coherence in the respective roles of schools and universities requires a **two-way conversation about who will be best placed to do what** to support pupils with university readiness.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows: we briefly review the literature on school-university partnerships, before then providing more detail on the five key challenges from the Teacher Tapp survey about accessing external university opportunities. Based on additional surveys and interviews with our school and university partners, we then elaborate on the lessons we have learned regarding these five challenges.

Effective school-university partnerships are crucial for fair access

Fair access is a challenge for all types of universities, but it is particularly acute at the most selective institutions. Significant progress has been made in recent years with more pupils from underrepresented backgrounds progressing to higher education. Yet, access to highly-selective universities has remained stubbornly low for what UCAS call the 'most disadvantaged' quintile of young people. Over the last decade, their entry rate has largely flatlined and is currently at 2.3% (UCAS, 2019). The educational inequality has broader societal consequences: nearly half of what the Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission identify as the 'British elite' went to a Russell Group university, compared to only 6% of the UK working population as a whole (Sutton Trust/Social Mobility Commission, 2019).

Partnership working between schools, universities and the third sector is widely seen as crucial for making progress with fair access. In its guidance for universities, the Office for Students (OfS) stresses the "vital role" that strategic school-university relationships can play in reaching its ambitious targets to reduce the access gap in higher education (OfS 2019a: 44). OfS guidance for 2019-20 Access and Participation Plans included an "expectation that all providers set out how they will work with schools and colleges to support raising attainment for those from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups," specifying that this should include "consideration of those from areas where there is less higher education provision, such as rural and coastal areas regions" (OfS, 2017: 2).

In Scotland, the Commissioner for Fair Access, Peter Scott, has highlighted the importance of access and bridging programmes from universities and has called for a more coordinated approach to fair access (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2019). The Seren Network was established in Wales in response to the call from the Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales, Paul Murphy, for the "Welsh Government, schools and colleges, and universities [to] act to reduce the element of chance in [more able and talented] provision which currently exists in our education system" (Murphy, 2014: 11).

In 2018, the DfE published guidance "for schools and universities on sharing expertise and resources, to improve educational outcomes and opportunities for young people" in which it sets out how universities can support schools in areas including teaching, curriculum, sponsorship of governance and targeted activities to help pupils prepare for university (DfE, 2018). Universities UK has published several reports and case studies on how universities can work with schools, including to help raise attainment (Universities UK, 2009, 2016, 2017). Research Councils UK and the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement conducted research on the "school-university partnership learning initiative", which aimed to improve quality and impact of partnership programmes. Among the barriers to effective partnership working they identify is a "mis-match between HEIs and schools in terms of the rhythm of their years and the speed at which they need to move" (NCCPE, 2014, p. 8).

A partnership approach is a core principle of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) which delivers university access interventions to young people in England in school years 9 to 13. In 2017-18, NCOP worked with around 1,500 schools and colleges to reach more than 100,000 young people (NCOP, 2019). Early evaluation of the NCOP suggests that the main barriers for schools to engage in NCOP activities included a

lack of time for schools to engage with NCOPs and building new relationships being time-consuming (Tazzyman et al, 2018).

The academic literature on school-university partnerships has identified trends in partnership working and factors linked to their success. Baumfield and Butterworth note that school-university partnerships involve a broad spectrum of activities beyond widening participation (including initial teacher education, continuing professional development of teachers and consultancy and research). They describe a “gradual shift in emphasis” away from a university-led model of working to “partnership and collaboration” (Baumfield and Butterworth, 2007).

The literature identifies components of successful partnership working as including, “the importance of shared leadership, shared goals, development of social and intellectual skills needed for collaborative work, and adequate time” (Arhar et al., 2013) as well as reciprocal understanding of how each organisation works, mutual trust and pride in the outcomes achieved (Lieberman, 1986: 7). Bickel and Hattrup have emphasised the importance of partnerships being well-structured, with strong processes, arguing that “a shared purpose does not guarantee efficient, productive, collaborative processes” (Bickel and Hattrup, 1995).

Five challenges: The barriers that keep schools from accessing school-university partnerships

To better understand the existing barriers for schools in accessing available opportunities, we worked with Teacher Tapp to survey more than 3,000 teachers. Teacher Tapp is an app that is available to any teacher with a smartphone. Researchers at Teacher Tapp use the English Workforce Census and the Independent Schools Council survey to weigh survey responses so that they are representative of the entire teacher population in England.

Based on the survey findings we then conducted interviews with 11 teachers and university access practitioners from partner schools and universities. This chapter summarises this research and identifies five key challenges for school-university partnerships.

In the survey, we asked teachers to identify the main barriers to accessing external opportunities for their pupils to learn about university. Their responses pointed to **five main challenges** for school-university partnership working.

Challenge 1: Teachers cite awareness, time and logistics as the main barriers to engaging with external university access programmes – even more than they cite cost. While classroom teachers are most likely to cite a lack of knowledge, there is still a quarter of head teachers in England that say they “don’t know what opportunities are out there”.

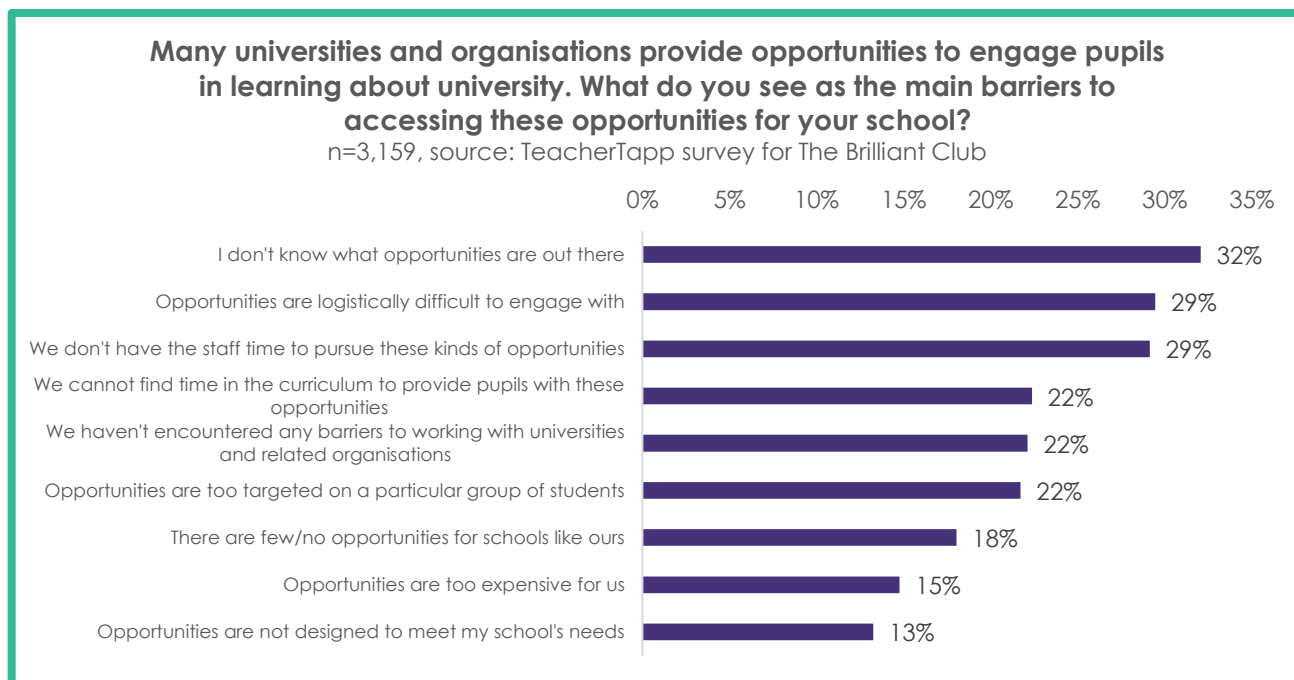


Figure 1: Survey findings for all teachers. Respondents could choose multiple responses. Those answering 'not relevant/cannot answer' were excluded from the analysis.

There is so much pressure with exams and curriculum making it difficult to find the time to plan other things. **We want to give our pupils opportunities to learn about and prepare for university, but it must become easier for us to engage with what is out there.** What helps is being able to plan programmes in advance, so they fit in our schedule and for universities to come into school wherever possible.

Lisa Johnston, St James' Catholic High School (Barnet)

A further breakdown of results by teacher seniority shows that there is no difference in the assessment of cost as a barrier. 15% of classroom teachers state 'opportunities are too expensive for us' compared to 14% of middle leaders, 13% of SLT and 17% of headteachers.

Restrictive pupil targeting criteria are mentioned by 22% of teachers as a barrier for their school, and only 13% of teachers state that "opportunities are not designed to meet my school's needs", but – as we shall see – responses varied by school characteristics.

Challenge 2: Although cost and availability of opportunities are not prohibitive across the board, there is a hard core of high-need schools who are not currently being served.

Teachers in schools with the highest proportion of pupils on free school meals (FSM) were most likely to say that:

- “opportunities are too expensive for us”
- “there are few/no opportunities for schools like ours”
- “opportunities are not designed to meet my school's needs”.

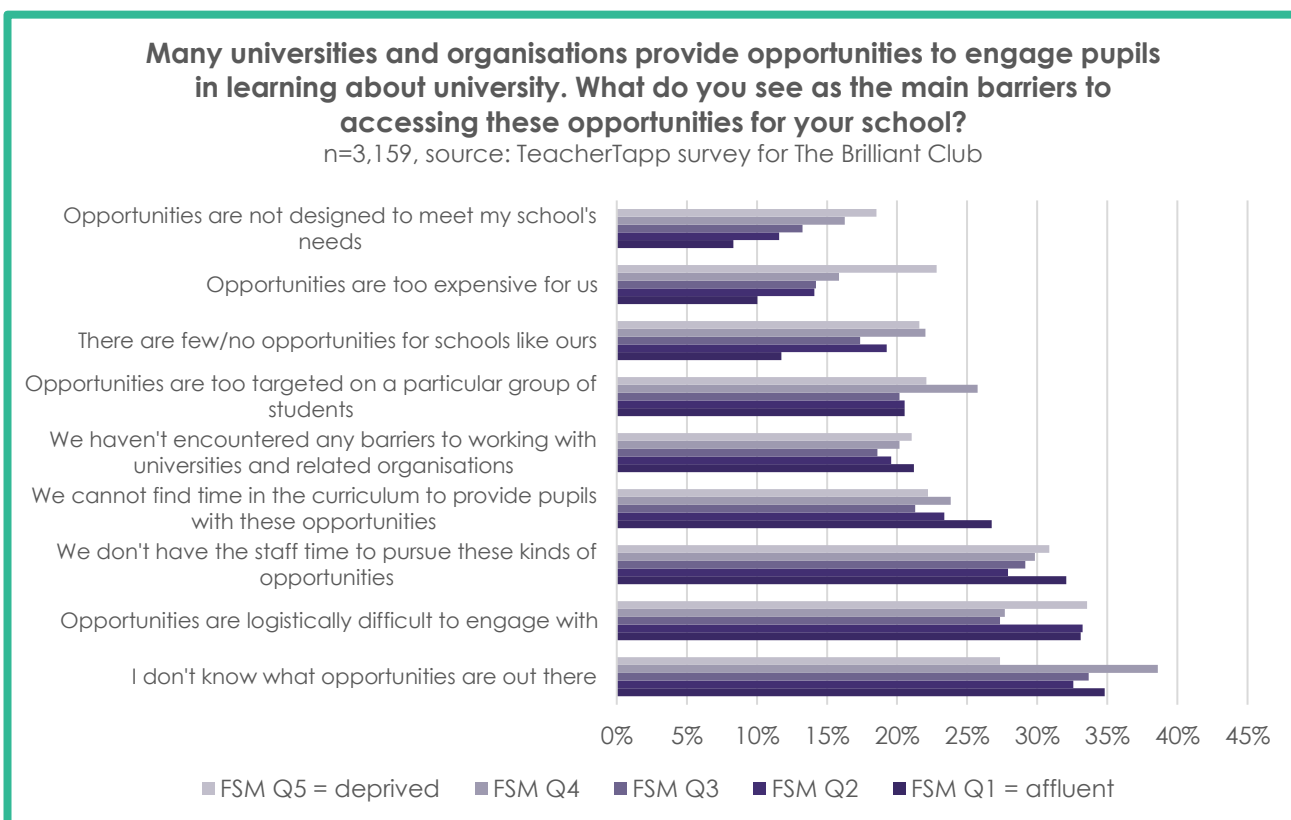


Figure 2: Survey findings by free school meals quintile. Respondents could choose multiple responses. Those answering 'not relevant/cannot answer' were excluded from the analysis. Responses are grouped by share of pupils eligible for free school meals with schools in in Q1 having the lowest share of FSM pupils (0% to 6%) and Q5 the highest (21% or higher).

There is no consistent pattern by school-level FSM across all of the potential barriers, but there is a notable difference between the schools with the highest share of FSM pupils (Q5) and those with the lowest (Q1) with regard to 'design-for-our-needs', cost and availability of opportunities. For each of these barriers, schools with a high share of FSM pupils are more likely to identify these barriers as a problem.

Only 10% of teachers in Q1 schools said "opportunities are too expensive for us" compared to 23% of teacher in Q5 schools. Despite the existence of funding for pupils on FSM, via the

government's Pupil Premium, teachers in schools with a high share of FSM pupils are still most likely to see cost as a barrier to pursuing external university access opportunities. Given that the costs charged to schools participating in programmes run by universities and other partners, in cash terms, are generally the same or lower for schools in areas of high deprivation, this is surprising (and concerning). It may be that wider environmental pressures on these schools make greater demands of their resources, or that the ancillary costs of engaging with opportunities (e.g. travel to campuses) are harder for them to meet. Interestingly, no such differences are visible when comparing schools by urban or rural location or when looking at the geographical proximity of schools to universities.

Challenge 3: The perceived barriers to engagement vary by the type of school, with primary school teachers most likely to say they didn't know what opportunities were available (48%) and secondary school teachers more likely to say their school lacked staff time (36%) or that opportunities were logistically difficult to engage with (35%).

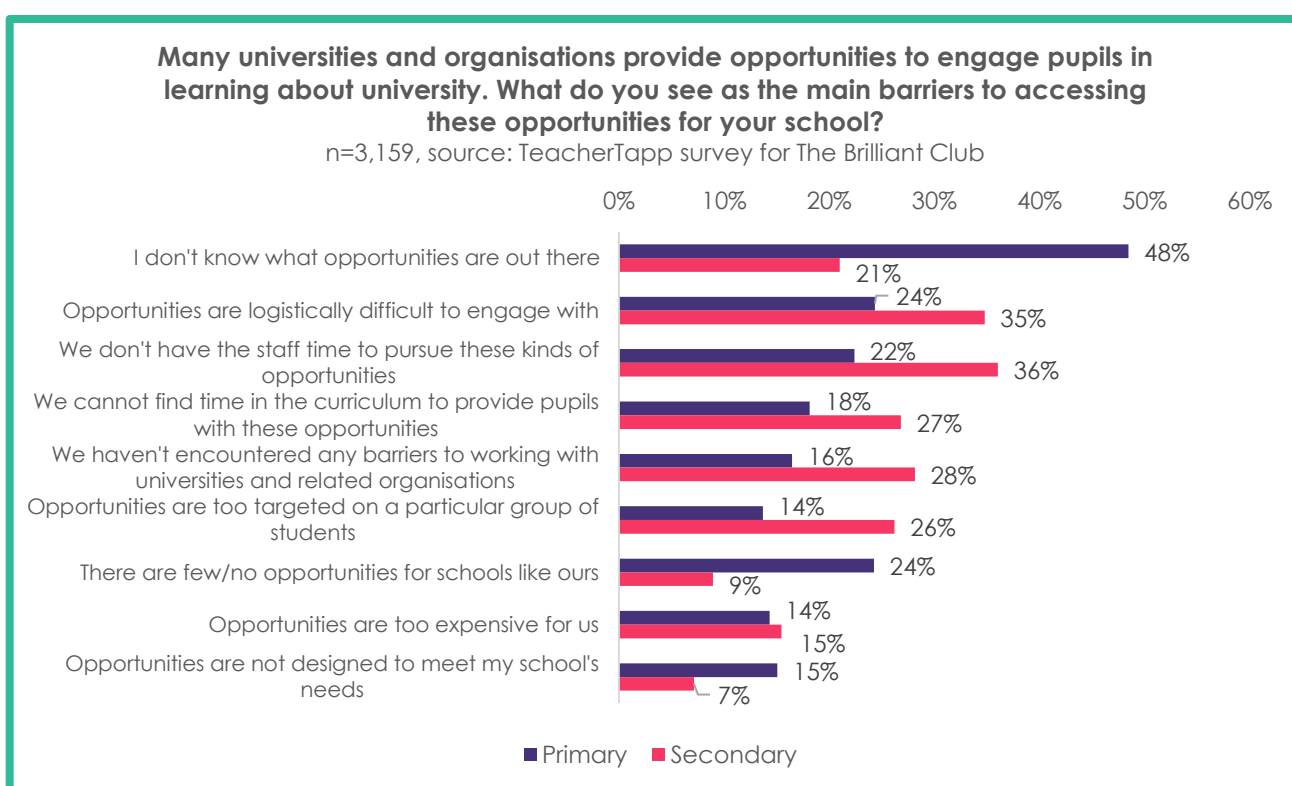


Figure 3: Survey findings by school phase. Respondents could choose multiple responses. Those answering 'not relevant/cannot answer' were excluded from the analysis.

All schools are busy places, but the implications for staff time of engaging university access activities outside of the curriculum can be different between primary and secondary schools. In a primary school, a teacher taking pupils on a campus visit certainly has to manage numerous logistical challenges. However, in a secondary school – where teachers routinely have lessons with multiple classes across different year groups – covering a single teacher's absence is likely to involve greater cost and more complex coordination than in a primary school.

The high share of primary school teachers saying they “don't know what opportunities are out there” reflects the fact that most university access opportunities are targeted at older age groups. But the fact that still so many primary school teachers cite lack of knowledge

as a barrier is a concern, given what research tells us about the importance of early interventions in widening participation (Cheung, 2017).

Challenge 4: Despite recent press reports of 'positive discrimination', **private schools find it significantly easier to involve their pupils in opportunities to learn about university** – over half of teachers in the independent sector said they “hadn't encountered any barriers to working with universities and related organisations”.

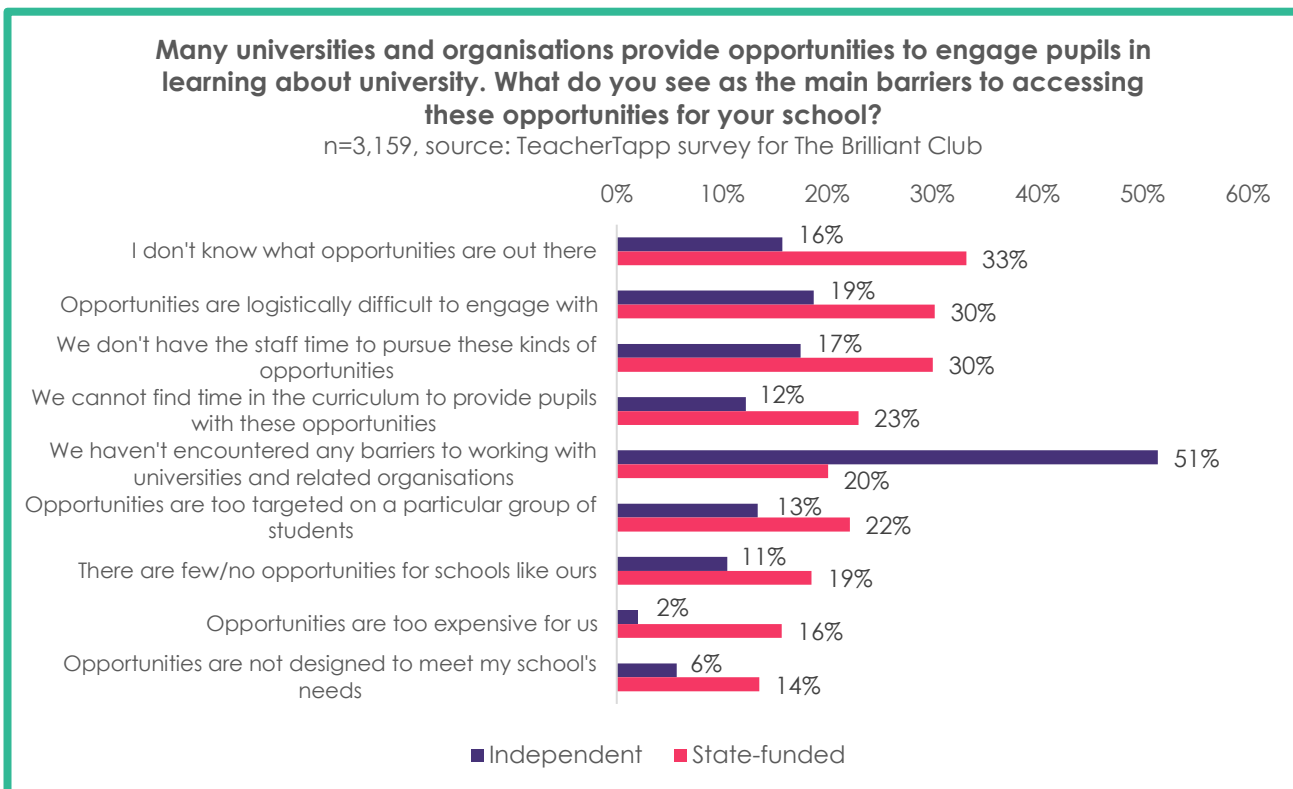


Figure 4: Survey findings by school funding. Respondents could choose multiple responses. Those answering 'not relevant/cannot answer' were excluded from the analysis.

Gaps between state and private schools exist for all barriers, including cost, which only two percent of private school teachers flagged as concern. Teachers at state schools are twice as likely to state they “don't know what opportunities are out there” and they also find it more difficult to find staff time and to overcome logistical challenges in pursuing external university access opportunities for their pupils. It seems that – while providers of outreach interventions are unlikely to target private schools – the greater resources available to these schools mean they are better placed to research, coordinate engagement with and take advantage of those opportunities that are open to them.

One big challenge at our school is that many pupils think university is only for certain careers. **Grammar and private schools are able to do a lot of things to push pupils for work experiences and other opportunities.** It's a bigger challenge for us to make pupils aware that people beyond their immediate circle of friends and family are happy to talk to them about careers and that they should grab opportunities that are out there.

Dr Joshua Griffiths, Researchers in Schools Teacher, Oasis Academy Oldham

Challenge 5: Most teachers are confident in talking to pupils about whether university is right for them, but levels of confidence vary. The survey also asked teachers how confident they felt in helping pupils develop an understanding of whether university is right for them. It found that – while confidence is relatively high across the board – it is highest for teachers who attended a more-selective university themselves, those in independent schools and those in secondary schools.

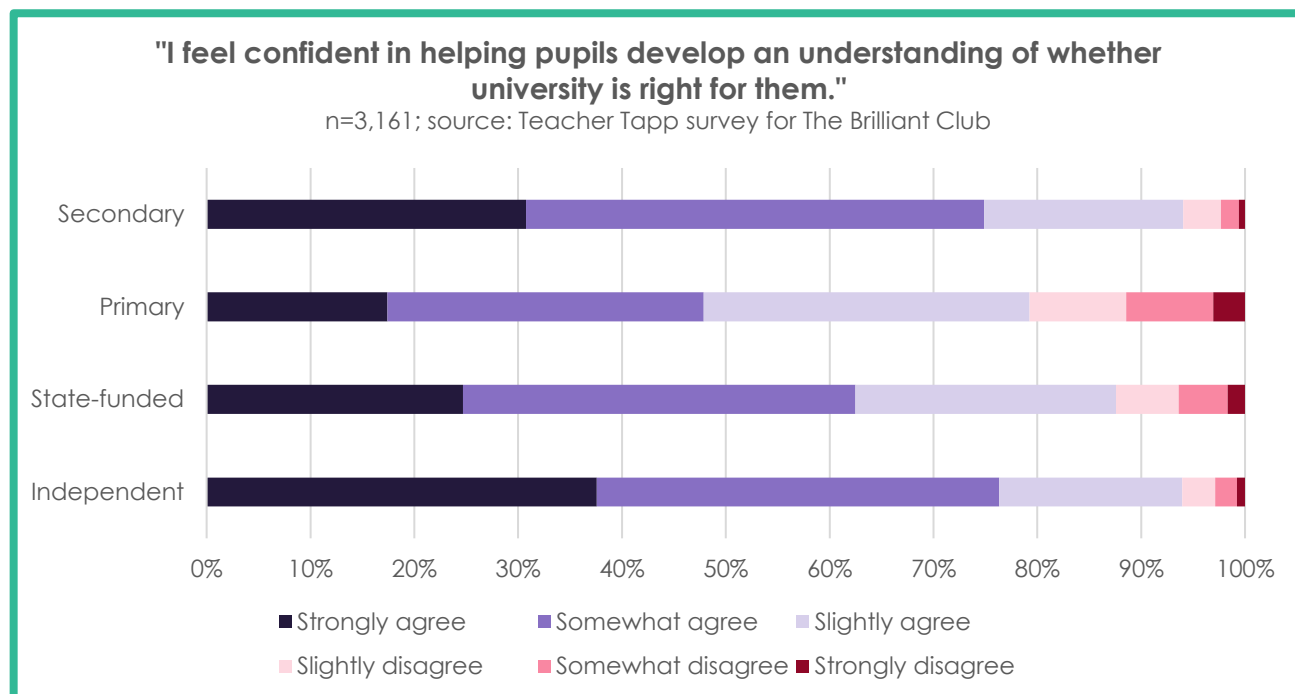


Figure 5: Survey findings by school phase and funding. Respondents could choose multiple responses. Those answering 'not relevant/cannot answer' were excluded from the analysis.

In follow-up interviews with teachers, we asked them to identify areas of information in which they felt they and their school could most benefit from external support. A commonly mentioned area was information on student finance, both for pupils and parents.

Explaining student finance continues to be a challenge. There are many misconceptions about fees, including among parents. **Universities could make a big difference coming into schools and speaking with authority about the details of student finance.** The earlier we can have this conversation with pupils and parents, the more of a difference it can make.

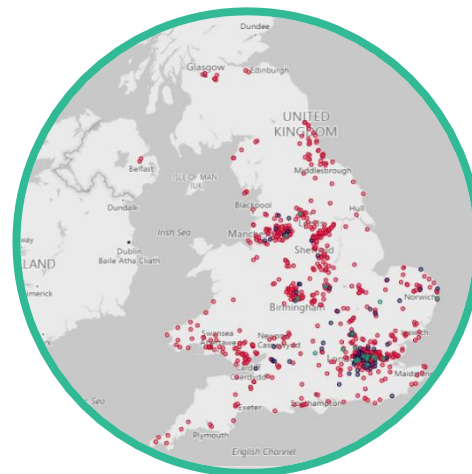
Gemma Watson, Bingley Grammar School (comprehensive school in West Yorkshire)

A further interesting difference in teacher confidence can be seen in teachers' academic background. Graduates from Oxford or Cambridge are more likely to strongly agree or somewhat agree with the statement (81%) than graduates from other Russell Group universities (69%), 'pre-92' universities (66%) and 'post-92' universities (57%). This suggests a need to support schools with navigating the complexities and nuances associated with preparing for the most selective universities (although it may also indicate the importance of understanding and valuing the full range of higher education options).

Five Lessons for effective school-university partnerships for fair access

In this section, we draw on interviews with school and university staff, as well as on our experience of working with schools, universities and other partners to increase the number of pupils from underrepresented backgrounds that progress to highly-selective universities.

In 2018/19, The Brilliant Club has partnered with more than 770 schools and 40 universities to deliver The Scholars Programme to over 13,000 pupils in all regions of the UK. Our Researchers in Schools programme – which recruits PhD graduates, places them as trainee teachers in schools and supports them to develop as excellent teachers and research leaders committed to closing the gap in attainment and university access – has partnered with 92 schools this year.



The Brilliant Club's network of partner schools in 2018-19

In response to the five challenges identified in the previous chapter, we put forward **five lessons** about what is likely to make for effective school-university partnerships for fair access.

Lesson 1: The most resilient partnerships work hard to minimise logistical burdens and align priorities across sectors to create a sense of urgency.

Many of the best and most innovative partnerships begin when one or two individuals in a sector take the initiative to reach out to individuals in another sector and invest the time to understand their needs and priorities. The Brilliant Club itself started as a partnership between a couple of teachers, a handful of PhD students and their institutions.

Later this year I will take pupils to the University of Manchester where we will meet a researcher that I had worked with in a previous role. Pupils will visit a lecture, participate in a workshop and do a tour of the university. **Having these personal connections makes it much easier for me to organise this day and for my pupils to have a personal experience of university and research.**

Dr Carly Wright, Researchers in Schools Teacher, Cedar Mount Academy (Manchester)

Interpersonal relationships will always be important in partnership working. However, where personal relationships are the basis of a partnership, that partnership is likely to be fragile and difficult to scale. It is not wise to assume that the enthusiasm of 'early adopters' will be shared as widely as is needed for an intervention to grow and spread, or that partnerships based on interpersonal dynamics will survive a change of personnel. Nor is it wise to ignore the impact that organisational priorities and external stresses can have on even the strongest partnership.

At the outset, for partnerships to exist at all, potential partners must be able to find each other. In schools, this usually means that a member of staff must set aside time to research and then engage in external university access opportunities. The easier it is for teachers to find out about opportunities that would meet the needs of their pupils, the better. Under Lesson 2 we discuss some of the regional and national structures that can help make this process easier for both schools and universities.

I am Head of Department, but I rarely receive any offers from universities. **We usually have to go out and search for our opportunities**, but this can take up a lot of time.

Dr Dearbhla McGrath, Researchers in Schools Teacher Challney High School for Boys (Luton)

While individual teachers can go out of their way in setting up opportunities for their pupils, this is only sustainable when school structures are in place that would easily allow their successors to continue this work. This is easier to do for well-resourced schools and those with the fewest environmental pressures pulling on their time.

In interviews, both school and university partners frequently told us that having a clear in-school point of contact to coordinate university access activities is crucial to the success of collaboration. Teachers that had some time off from their normal teaching responsibilities for this purpose felt in a better position to actively research opportunities for their pupils and to take time to organise the logistics of trips to universities.

What makes **the biggest difference for us being able to successfully engage with schools is when they have a dedicated role in place that is easy to contact**. They also need enough clout in the schools to be able to create time for activities.

Dr Karl Devincenzi, Recruitment and Schools Relationship Manager, University of Exeter

School leaders should consider the best way to coordinate university readiness activity in their school, and the best ways to support and empower the staff playing this coordination role. Universities and charities who provide access interventions should carefully design their processes to take account of the needs of school staff and minimise the logistical burden on them as much as possible. This can be as simple as scheduling activities to avoid the busiest times in the school calendar or as complex as providing insightful impact reporting to help schools position the intervention within their broader strategy for increasing pupil outcomes.

Lesson 2: Providers of university access opportunities should go out of their way to reach schools that are currently being underserved, and they should consider which aspects of their offer schools are currently unable to engage with. Policy-makers should clarify whose responsibility it is to ensure underserved schools have access to these opportunities and align funding streams accordingly.

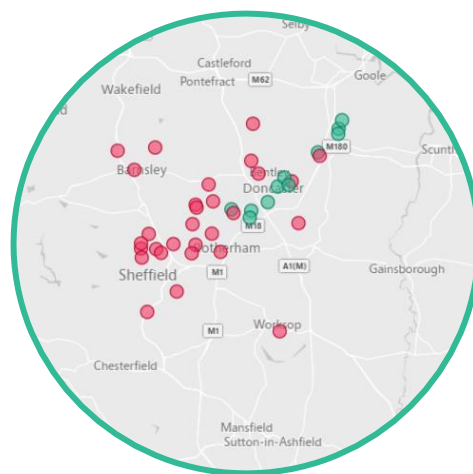
A big test for providers of university access opportunities remains making their offer available to all schools, whether in cities, post-industrial or coastal towns or in rural areas. The Brilliant Club has written before about the geographical challenges of delivering fair access programmes in our report [Going the Distance: Improving University Access in Rural and Coastal Areas](#) (Rünz, 2018). To make our programmes available to more schools that are currently being underserved, we have also collaborated with a range of different partners across the UK.

In England, NCOPs play an important role in creating opportunities for schools in low HE participation areas. The Brilliant Club works with NCOPs across England, including GM Higher, HeppSY+, DANCOP, Hello Future, Higher York, Next Steps South West, Higher Horizons+, Aspire to HE and Make Happen. For some of these partnerships, NCOP partners provide financial support to help local schools take part in The Scholars Programme. For others, NCOPs incorporate The Scholars Programme model as part of a wider university access programme designed to meet local needs.

Normally I would say that finance is the biggest barrier. But **our school has been lucky to benefit from funding from GM Higher NCOP that we can use towards accessing university experiences for our pupils.**

Dr Carly Wright, Researchers in Schools Teacher, Cedar Mount Academy (Manchester)

Partnering with NCOPs has allowed schools to access The Scholars Programme that otherwise might not have signed up to the programme. For example, our collaboration with HeppSY+ in South Yorkshire has meant that 30 schools in Barnsley, Doncaster, Nottinghamshire, Rotherham and Sheffield were able to access The Scholars Programme at no or a reduced cost in 2018/19. Many schools in these areas fall into the category of schools with a high share of FSM pupils that are more likely to identify costs as a barrier to accessing external opportunities about university (see Challenge 2 above). While we have worked with HeppSY+ to deliver The Scholars Programme to key stage 4 and 5 pupils in South Yorkshire, our partnership with Doncaster Opportunity Area in the same region has also provided free access to The Scholars Programme to 11 primary schools.



2018-19 Partnerships: Brilliant Club **partner schools** fully or partially funded by HeppSY+ (red) or fully funded by Doncaster Opportunity Area (green)

Similar examples of partnership working include **First Chances Fife**, an innovative programme collaboratively funded by the University of St Andrews, Fife Education, The Robertson Trust, the Scottish Funding Council and Fife Council. The programme “aims to raise the aspirations and attainment of selected pupils from P7 to S6 throughout their school journey, with continued support into further and higher education.” As part of the “senior

phase" of First Chances Fife, pupils have the option to take part in The Scholars Programme to work with a PhD Tutor in university-style tutorials.

Although the financial support provided through regional partnerships can be important, we should not underestimate the crucial role these partnerships play – both in brokering school-university collaboration in an efficient way and in building a sense of shared ownership and urgency around the university access agenda in a region. In fact, in many of the collaborations described above, schools were expected to make at least some financial contribution; this ensured schools were 'bought into' the intervention, and that those delivering in the intervention were accountable to the schools.

Even the best designed interventions will have a limited impact if schools are not aware of them. A helpful model for **raising awareness** about university access opportunities among all schools in a geographical area can be found in Wales. The Welsh Government's Seren network includes every secondary school and FE college in the nation, working through 11 regional hub coordinators who know the schools in their area. The national Seren programme builds relationships with universities across the UK. Seren also has strong relationships with partners like The Brilliant Club and the US-UK Fulbright Commission, which supports students to study in the United States. The Seren regional hubs facilitate access to opportunities with these partners in a more comprehensive manner than would otherwise be possible.

Early evaluation of Seren found that hubs "share a common understanding that the purpose of the Seren Network was about providing super-curricular experiences, raising student aspirations, expanding their horizons and encouraging them to consider a wider range and more competitive institutions than would otherwise have been the case" (Bryer, 2018). Our recent impact case study on The Scholars Programme in Wales looks at the Seren network in more detail (Jones, 2019).

In all of the above examples, the partners involved have managed to align available funding streams to make opportunities accessible for schools. But the 22% of teachers in our survey who cited "restrictive pupil targeting criteria" as a barrier suggests that, sometimes, policy choices can make alignment difficult. For example, some outreach programmes are targeted using statistical indices like [POLAR](#) – a measure of HE participation by local area, used in assessing English universities' performance in widening participation. Eligibility may be restricted to pupils living in a POLAR Quintile 1 (low participation) area. However, POLAR is not part of the accountability framework for schools. For example, a headteacher may be prepared to commit funds and staff time for an intervention that will support pupils eligible for free schools meals (who qualify for the government's Pupil Premium), or one that will raise pupil attainment, but they may not agree that the cohort of pupils eligible for the outreach programme are those best suited to that particular intervention. In such an example, two potential partners – both publicly funded – may find themselves unable to work together. Funding and accountability frameworks designed with partnership working in mind could avoid this sort of impasse.

University Partner Case Study: University of Manchester

The University of Manchester is one of The Brilliant Club's partner universities. The university hosts pupils for their 'launch' and 'graduation' trips and PhD researchers affiliated with the institution deliver university-style tutorials in schools as part of The Scholars Programme. We have partnered with the university since 2015, placing 75 researchers to work with nearly 2,000 pupils.

In 2018/19:

- 29 PhD tutors from Manchester were recruited and trained by The Brilliant Club to deliver The Scholars Programme in 46 schools.
- 615 pupils worked with their PhD tutors from the university on topics ranging from *Mind over Matter - How much control does the brain have over pain?* to *Does a text have an unconscious? Literature and psychoanalysis*.
- 106 schools visited the university at launch or graduation trips.

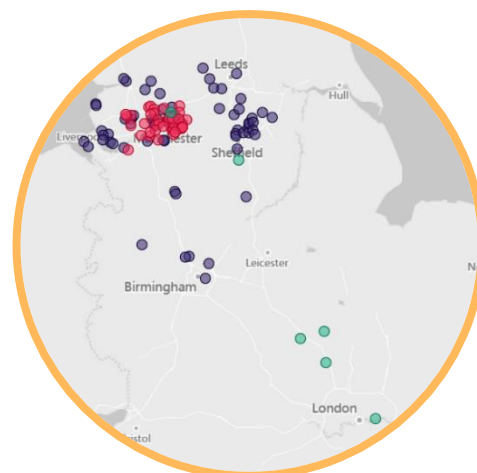
*"The Brilliant Club helps us to **increase our reach**. The majority of our WP work is in Greater Manchester. With The Brilliant Club's network of schools in Yorkshire and Merseyside, we are able to reach these schools too."* – **Roz Webster, Student Recruitment and Widening Participation Officer, University of Manchester**

Based on its intermediate outcomes framework, The Brilliant Club creates bespoke impact reports for its partner schools and universities. For schools, these reports show the progress that their pupils have made on six university readiness competencies, including critical thinking and meta-cognition. Universities can use this evaluation of pupil outcomes to assess the impact that their PhD researchers have on pupils' academic progress.

*"Our job is not to teach pupils the curriculum. But we can inform pupils about their options, show them the university, and we go into schools to run IAG sessions. The work that our PhD researchers do as part of The Scholars Programme is a **meaningful way for us to deliver attainment-raising work**."* – **Roz Webster**

In the context of the new OfS guidance on Access and Participation Plans, The Brilliant Club is increasingly using outcomes-focused targets in strategic planning with universities. In partnership with The Brilliant Club, universities can use the outcomes framework to set targets on attainment-raising competencies.

*"We set an output-based target in collaboration with the Brilliant Club in our 2019/20 Access and Participation Plan around the number of learners attending our on-campus events. We've built on this, with a great deal of support and expertise from colleagues at The Brilliant Club in terms of the data, to develop an outcomes-based target for our 2020/21 APP looking at the number of target learners who make at least 5% progress in their academic assignment as part of The Scholars Programme. **This is a truly collaborative target that requires action from both parties to see progress**, and we are looking forward to working with The Brilliant Club to do this in the coming years. We have submitted this target as part of our 2020/21 APP to the OfS and we are currently awaiting approval from OfS on our APP and associated targets."* – **Rachel Bailey, Student Recruitment and WP Manager, University of Manchester**



2018-19 Partnerships: Brilliant Club **partner schools** visiting the University of Manchester at trips (red), working with a PhD Tutor from the university (green) or doing both (purple)

Lesson 3: Providers of university access opportunities should start to engage pupils early and articulate to primary schools what provision for young pupils looks like. Policy-makers should resolve the conflict between the evidence that says we should start early and the desire to see immediate outcomes.

The Brilliant Club has written before about the importance of early interventions and how we have built our network of primary schools to give their pupils the opportunity to experience university-style learning in our report [Starting Young: Improving University Access Through Early In-School Interventions](#) (Cheung, 2017). In 2018/19, we are partnering with 139 primary schools and working with 1,731 key stage 2 pupils via The Scholars Programme.

From growing our provision with primary schools, we have learned that there is a strong interest among primary school leaders to give their pupils an opportunity of university-style learning. Where university access programmes align with school priorities, some of the challenges around finding staff capacity and time in the curriculum can be less pronounced than for secondary schools (see Challenge 3).

But there is a potential mismatch between the accountability regime for universities – which emphasises shorter-term changes in admission figures – and the opportunity to start working with pupils before they develop a self-conception about whether university is or isn't right for them. Although the OfS has explicitly addressed the need for partnership with schools on pre-16 outreach work in its guidance (OfS, 2019c), some university staff have informally told us that they feel disincentivised from investing resources in work at the primary phase which, arguably, would take too long to evidence results.

In fair access, there is an understandable tension between focusing on the pupils who are about to make their university choices and the long-term sustained effort of getting and keeping underrepresented pupils on track, starting in key stage 2. But the evidence is unequivocal – we must do both.

Lesson 4: There should be a concerted national effort to help state schools build their capacity to select and engage with external university access opportunities, recognising that they are unlikely to have the same resources to do this as private schools.

The survey findings show that there is a capacity gap in creating university access opportunities, with state schools not having sufficient or equal staff time to fully research and take advantage of opportunities for their pupils. Providers of university access opportunities need to be aware that even when an opportunity is designed to be available for all schools and pupils – open days being the most literal example – not all schools and pupils are equally well placed to take advantage of the opportunity. To truly make access equally available, we must consider how to advertise more among state schools and to arrange transport for rural schools.

Some schools are very on it when it comes to university access. It is often these schools that have dedicated staff to coordinate university work and cover the administrative burden that is necessarily involved. In some cases, **schools that are unable to provide staff time have students who would benefit the most from widening participation programmes.**

Eftyhia Alexandrou, Pre-16 Widening Participation Manager, King's College London

There are many possible ways to increase the capacity and expertise in state schools to engage with these opportunities. One of them is to get more university experts into the teaching profession and protecting time for them to champion university access.

In-school champions for access: Researchers in Schools

The Brilliant Club's Researchers in Schools (RIS) programme offers a **tailored route into teaching exclusively for PhD graduates**. It is specifically designed to **utilise the academic expertise of researchers** to the benefit of pupils, schools and universities. RIS places participants in non-selective secondary schools across England.

To help RIS participants make the most of their skills and experience, they work towards the **Research Leader in Education** award, which is a three-year programme of professional development for teachers on the RIS programme. To help RIS participants to achieve this, they have one day per week of **protected time** to work towards The Brilliant Club's mission of increasing the number of underrepresented pupils that progress to highly-selective universities. This includes delivering Uni Pathways, a pupil-focused widening participation intervention that is modelled on The Scholars Programme. Participants are supported to understand the university access context in their school, and encouraged to use their experience (for example, of university teaching or interviewing) and networks (for example, links with their academic departments) to create opportunities for their pupils.

Many pupils at my school and at other state schools don't have family that went to university, so they feel like it's just not for them and they find it difficult to imagine what it means to go to university. As the **first in my family to go to university** I can identify with that. Now as a **Researchers in Schools Participant** I try to help my pupils to develop the skills and academic confidence they need to get ready for university.

Dr Dearbhla McGrath, Researchers in School Teacher, Challney High School For Boys

However, while champions for university access within individual schools, universities and other partners are certainly necessary, they may not be enough to reverse the inequality in 'access to access opportunities' identified by our survey.

We have already seen how the Seren network has helped to coordinate partnership working in Wales, and Scotland's Commissioner for Fair Access has recently called for "a national framework for outreach, access and bridging programmes [to] be established as soon as possible, to increase their transparency and transferability" (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2019). We believe that there is also a need for a concerted, coordinated, cross-sectoral effort to make a high-quality infrastructure for university access available in every school and college in England.

Lesson 5: Coherence in the respective roles of schools and universities requires a two-way conversation about who will be best placed to do what to support pupils with university readiness.

The survey findings suggest that teachers are far from feeling helpless when it comes to advising their pupils about university. However, there remain specific areas where university support for schools is seen as a more pressing need than for others.

We asked teachers from our partner schools about the responsibility for developing the skills that pupils need to succeed at university. None of the 49 schools said that this was the chief responsibility of universities. Four out of ten saw schools as mostly responsible, while the remaining six out of ten view schools and universities as equally responsible.

But how can universities best support schools in developing pupils' university readiness? Through a separate survey we asked a small sample of schools that partner with The Brilliant Club about what types of external support they find most helpful. While this sample does not allow any statements about schools in the UK in general, it suggests that our partner schools do seek external support that helps raise their pupils' university readiness. The statement finding highest agreement is that external support is most helpful for "raising pupils' self-confidence that they can succeed at university", whereas these schools see less of a role for universities in – for example – directly helping with exam preparation.

When I was doing my PhD and teaching at university, colleagues complained about the level of university readiness of students and that secondary schools don't properly prepare them. **I think schools do the best they can, but they have a lot on.** Here is where universities can take more responsibility by coming to speak to our pupils about what kind of students they want to attract and what steps our pupils need to take to successfully apply.

Dr Dearbhla McGrath, Researchers in Schools Teacher, Challney High School For Boys (Luton)

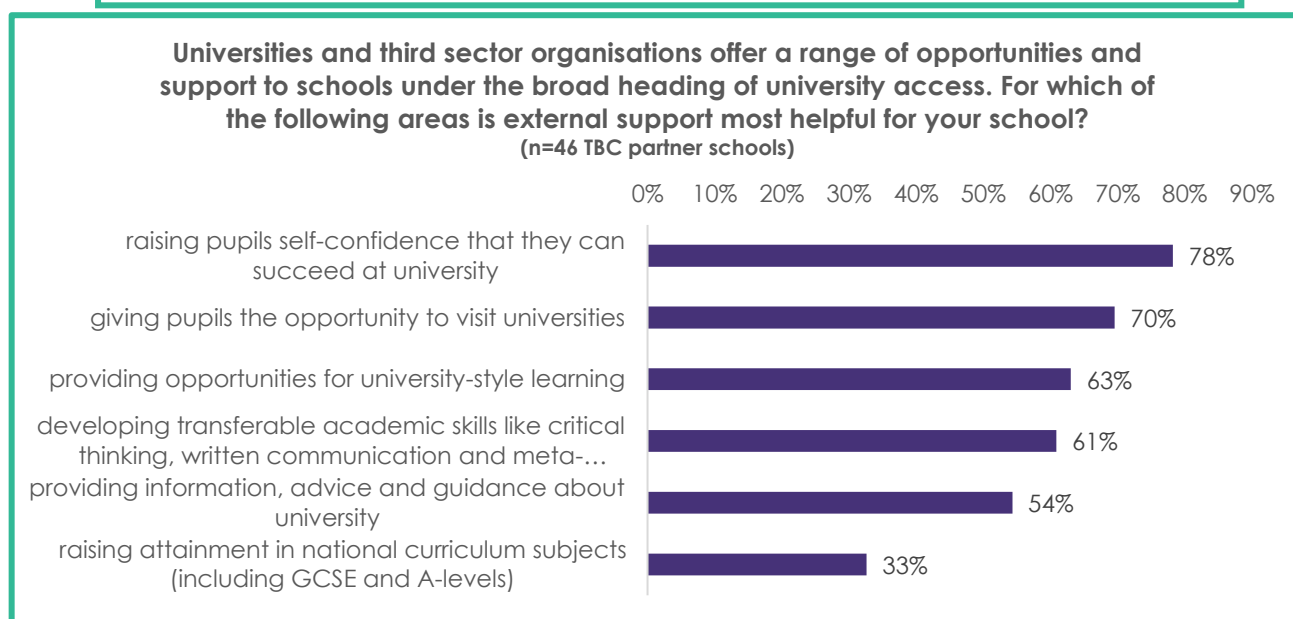


Figure 6: Brilliant Club partner schools survey. Respondents could choose multiple responses.

At Birkdale High School, we want to equip our pupils with the skills they need to succeed at university. But **it can be difficult to push for independent learning in a school environment**. Working with a PhD Tutor requires our pupils to engage with specialist topics that they have to research on their own. The achievement of writing a 2,000-word essay helps pupils to get over the anxiety often involved with tackling tasks that seem daunting. There is a tendency of pupils to think that they cannot do something that is really challenging, but attending the graduation trip helps boost pupils' academic confidence.

Dr Emma Deeks, Birkdale High School (Sefton)

Different approaches for universities to help raise attainment are discussed in more detail in our report [Raising the Bar: Driving Attainment to Increase University Access](#) (Bellaera, 2019). Ultimately, each school has different needs, and each university or other partner involved in access work has something unique to offer. The surest way to ensure that needs are best met, and opportunities best exploited by schools, is to engender a two-way conversation through effective partnership working.

Conclusions

University access is inherently an exercise in supporting young people from one phase of their education to the next – giving them a genuine choice and a fair chance at a key transition point in their lives. Collaboration between partners from both phases is essential if we are to support this transition effectively.

There is no lack of effort in university access, and examples of strong, valued partnership working are plentiful. Yet we know from the data that whatever we are collectively doing hasn't been enough to close the gap in participation – especially at the most selective institutions. The results of our survey of teachers point to one reason why the gap may have persisted: despite the effort, not all schools are equally well placed to take advantage of the opportunities on offer.

We hope challenges highlighted in this paper will strengthen the case for urgent action, and that the lessons we have put forward will inform the debate about what we, as an education system, should be doing. Whatever the approach taken, the success or failure of that approach will hinge on our ability to create and support effective school-university partnerships.

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