

Impact Case Study Series

Family Matters: Engaging Parents in University Access

July 2018



Research and Impact Series

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About the Author

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Contact Details

This is the fourth in a series of impact case studies which can all be found on our [website](#). If you would like to learn more about The Brilliant Club or have specific questions about this case study, please contact:

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About The Brilliant Club

The Brilliant Club exists to increase the number of pupils from under-represented 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.

Executive Summary

This is the fourth in a series of impact case studies about wider thematic topics relating to widening participation. The focus for this case study is on the challenge of effectively engaging parents in widening participation. It explores the literature on parental engagement and shows how The Brilliant Club has engaged and informed the parents whose children have studied on The Scholars Programme. It will also suggest what the charity, and others can do in the future to embed and improve such approaches.

Parental engagement in widening participation is important, particularly for parents of pupils from under-represented backgrounds

- Parental engagement is increasingly seen as an important part of effective widening participation strategies (Mulcahy, 2018).
- A majority of pupils with parental history of HE progresses to a high tariff university, whereas pupils whose parents did not attend university are most likely to attend low or medium tariff institutions (HEFCE, 2017).
- Parents who did not attend university have cited a lack of information about the process of applying to university as a barrier to helping them to support their child (Sutton Trust, 2013).

Involving parents in university access is a priority for schools and universities, but can be a challenge to implement

- Parental engagement is consistently linked with a child's educational success, but there is relatively little evidence of what works in increasing pupil outcomes via parental engagement programmes (EEF, 2018).
- Schools tell us that contacting some individual families can be difficult as maybe they work unusual shift patterns or ignore calls from the school as they are used to hearing 'bad news'.
- Universities tell us that sometimes parents have preconceptions about university or education more generally which are often a result of their personal experiences. Challenging this can be difficult.

The Brilliant Club focuses on giving pupils the opportunity to learn with a PhD researcher, but we try to integrate parents wherever we can in our programmes

- In 2016/17, more than 1,200 parents and carers attended graduation events at our partner universities to celebrate the achievements of their children and to also attend parent sessions about university access. For 42% of those this was the first time that they had visited a university.
- As part of The Scholars Programme, schools are offered in-school launch events, which are delivered by The Brilliant Club team and are attended by parents/carers, pupils and teachers.
- The Scholars Programme also uses newsletters as a means of communicating key information regarding the university application process and any opportunities such as subject taster days that are available for pupils.

Reaching out to parents and carers of pupils on The Scholars Programme is a challenge, however as a charity, we are committed to ensuring that we have embedded successful strategies and approaches to help support parents. This case study will outline our current practice and reflect on how we can improve in the future.

The Link Between Parental Engagement and Access to Higher Education

Throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, researchers have consistently demonstrated the link between parental engagement and the effect this has on the educational outcomes of a young person. Specifically, research has shown that parental involvement in a child's learning has a significant impact on their academic achievement, as well as progression to university.

Definitions of parental engagement

A recent report commissioned by King's College London and produced by LKMco (Mulcahy, 2018), makes two distinctions that emerge when considering definitions of parental engagement: practical engagement versus the transmission of attitudes and values, and activities that take place in the school versus those that take place in the home. There is a debate amongst researchers over the effectiveness of each of these classifications and the strategies that they promote, however the report also outlines a specific definition in relation to parental engagement and access to higher education. In this instance, parental engagement means "the extent to which parents are involved with and interested in their child's education."

The importance of parental engagement

Parental encouragement and involvement has been reported in numerous studies to increase a child's educational aspirations (Conklin and Daley, 1981; Garg et al., 2002) and attainment (Hill and Craft, 2003) which in turn increases the likelihood of them attending university (Sewell and House, 1993). Pupils with high attainment are more likely to obtain the GCSE and A-Level grades needed to accept an offer from the UK's top universities. Feinstein et al. (1999) also found that among the non-school factors relating to school achievement like socioeconomic background, parents; educational attainment and family structure, it was parental involvement which has the strongest connection to attainment.

In recent years, there has been a growing body of research that demonstrates the impact that parental engagement can have on a child's post-compulsory education choices. In a report based on 1000 UK parents, 93% of young people believe their parents influence their key education choices and career choices and 57% think this influence was a 'fair amount' or a 'huge amount' (Philips and Newton, 2014). In a US based study, it was also found that parental academic involvement in both home and school contexts has been shown to impact on the likelihood that a student expects to go on to higher education and earn a bachelor's degree (Trusty, 1999).

This demonstrates that parental engagement is a high priority for schools, universities and charities like The Brilliant Club, who work to increase the number of pupils from under-represented backgrounds progressing to highly-selective universities.

Parental involvement can be influenced by financial income

A variety of factors can influence a parent's involvement with their child's schooling, and scholars have noted that parental engagement can be linked to socio-economic status (SES). Parents with more money tend to be able to direct and influence their child's education more so than a parent with low income or SES. The Sutton Trust report, *Parent Power* found that middle class families are able to use their financial and social capital to secure choices for their children in a way that working-class families cannot. Middle-class parents are more likely to have the financial resources to be able to pay for private tuition to support entrance exams into

independent and grammar schools, move to a new house to access the catchment area of a high-performing school and pay for additional travel costs to get their child there (Sutton Trust, 2013). In fact, the report found that one third of parents who sent their child to a private school paid for private tuition. This evidence suggests that such practices are only deepening the inequality that exists within education and wider society.

Family background and access to highly-selective universities

In England in 2017, only 1 in 40 of young people who had been eligible for free school meals entered highly-selective universities, compared to 1 in 10 of those who were not eligible. 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 under-represented backgrounds progressing to higher education. Yet over the past ten years, the percentage point gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils entering highly-selective universities has actually grown from 6.3 to 7.2 points (UCAS, 2017).

We also know that entrants to higher education whose parents did not attend university are more likely to study at low or medium tariff institutions, whereas students with a family background in higher education are most likely to study at a high tariff university (HEFCE, 2017).

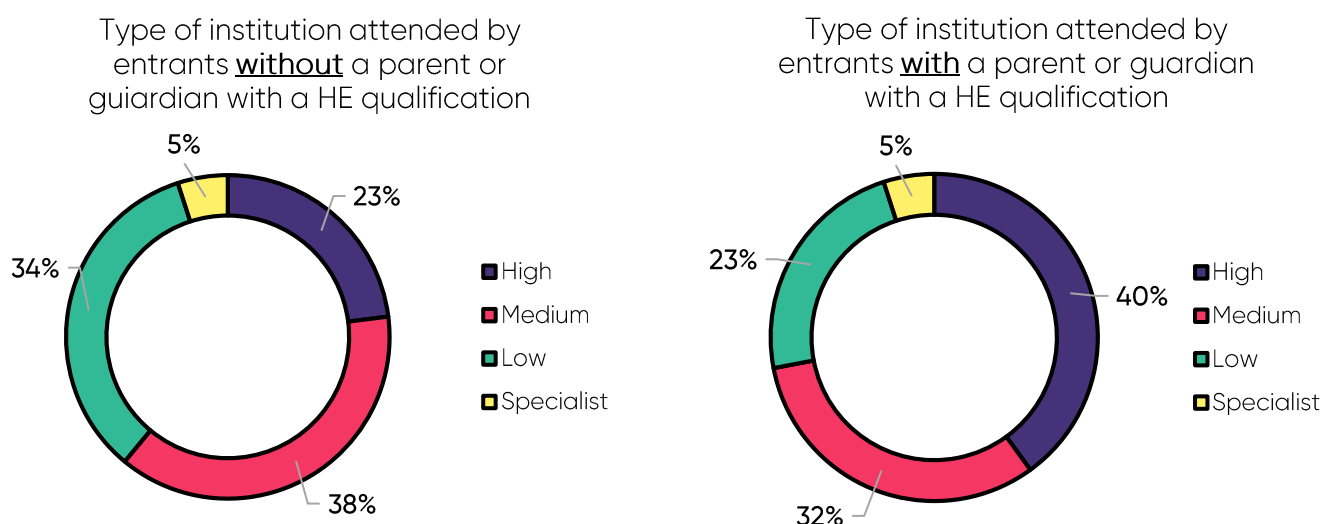


Figure 1: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/opthesa/> (2017)

Research has shown that a parent's experience of higher education can have a significant impact on their own child's education, as these parents tend to have more knowledge about the education and higher-education systems (The Sutton Trust, 2013). Parents of students with a low socio-economic status have cited finance and a lack of information about the process of applying to university, a barrier to helping them to support their child in progressing to high education (Harris and Goodall, 2007). Parental knowledge of the higher education system is often lower in this group, as more parents have not been to university themselves and thus often lack the experience or expertise needed to inform their children about the process (McConnell et al, 2000). It is clear from these findings that educational institutions must develop successful strategies to effectively engage with parents from these backgrounds and provide them with knowledge about the higher education system, so that they can support their child to fulfil their potential. This report will outline and reflect on the main approaches that The Brilliant Club has developed to inform parents and carers about the Scholars Programme and higher education more generally.

The Challenges of Informing Parents about University Access

One of the challenges with engaging parents in university access is that for the majority of a child's secondary education, time spent with teachers primarily focuses on the behavior, attainment, effort and homework of their child. These areas are what formulates discussions at parents' evenings, reports and other forms of contact. The main priority for many teaching staff is to support their students to obtain great exam results, in order for them to have access to the best opportunities. Quite often before a pupil reaches sixth form, information about university access and higher education is omitted from the conversations that teachers, school and parents have.

However, by the time a child has reached sixth form, there is a limited time frame for parents and carers to amass the information they need to support their child in their decisions regarding university applications. As previously highlighted, parents with no higher-education background have cited that advice and information about applications to university, are extremely important in order for them to successfully support their child through the process. Therefore, it is vital for other education institutions, who offer expertise in this field, to provide additional advice and guidance for parents while the child is at school.

One of the main forms of engagement a parent or carer has with their child's education is through the school that they attend. At primary or secondary school, this could potentially be a five to seven-year relationship, where staff have the opportunity to establish long term contact with parents and carers. Even then, schools have reported that it is still difficult to get in contact with parents. Shelley Crumbie, the lead teacher at Quarry Hill Academy Primary School in Thurrock comments on some of the challenges with engaging parents:



"At points, parents do not wish, or are not able to attend meetings to receive the information. Some parents have work commitments which prevent them from attending sessions, information is sent in letter form if this is the case. "

Shelley Crumbie, Lead Teacher, Quarry Hill Academy Primary School, Spring 2018

For other educational organisations working with schools, such as The Brilliant Club, it can be a challenge to engage with parents when the timeframe of the programme is relatively short. This can make it difficult to create opportunities for sustained contact and support. The Scholars Programme runs for a period of approximately three months and therefore, the window of opportunity to reach out to parents is limited. Furthermore, not all university partners have the capacity to invite parents and carers to the graduation events, which makes it difficult to establish contact with *all* of the parents of pupils who study on the programme. Nevertheless, The Brilliant Club is aware of these challenges and continues to trial and implement new ways of engaging with parents in order to further support its mission.

The Scholars Programme and Parental Engagement: What we do to support and inform parents

About the Scholars Programme

The Scholars Programme is an in-school intervention for pupils from primary school (Key Stage 2) to Year 12 (Key Stage 5). PhD or post-doctoral researchers deliver seven university-style tutorials on their subject of expertise to groups of six pupils at a time. The programme aims to help pupils build academic skills including subject knowledge, critical thinking and written communication, as well as increasing pupils' knowledge of university and meta-cognitive skills. Over half (55%) of pupils selected from each school are required to meet at least one of our targeting criteria: 1) pupil premium eligible; 2) no parental history of higher education in the UK; 3) deprivation according to postcode as indexed by IDACI decile 1-4. The programme includes two trips to highly-selective universities in the UK, which take place at the beginning and at the end of the programme. Activities on the day include a tour of the university, an opportunity to meet with student ambassadors and staff from the university who deliver information and guidance sessions (IAG) and a study skills workshop. At the graduation trip, pupils who submitted their final assignment are then invited to graduate from the programme in a certificate ceremony.

ThinkUni Pilot

The Brilliant Club worked alongside the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to develop an innovation delivery model for parental engagement and tracked its impact across a two-year period (2014-15 and 2015-16). The model – ThinkUni – was piloted in the Midlands from 2014-15, before key elements were introduced to The Scholars Programme on a national scale. ThinkUni involves the parents of children who were participating in The Scholars Programme.

Programme Overview

In the first iteration of the ThinkUni programme, activities included:

- An hour-long focus group 'Direction Session' to receive pupil and parent input in shaping the programme.
- 'ThinkUni events': three-hour tailored events incl. a university-style modular mini-lecture and information, advice and guidance (IAG) on higher education and study skills, as well as targeted Q&A. This event was open to the wider school community.
- Structured guidance on university preparation, equipping parents with the information and resources to support pupils through university application and at university
- A reflective journal for pupils to complete throughout their time on the Scholars Programme, with sections designed to include parents and at-home discussion.

In 2015/16, the following activities were added:

- Termly newsletters were sent to parents at home in hard copy. These included one letter before the programme began to inform parents about what to expect and how to help, and one letter after the programme ended to encourage parents to follow up.
- Graduation trips held on Saturdays, so parents could attend with their children. These included specific ThinkUni sessions for parents. This addition received positive feedback from parents, for example one who said:

"I found my day extremely enjoyable, informative and beneficial. It was inspiring to both myself and my daughter, and has certainly confirmed her desire to achieve and aspire to attend a top university."

Parent, ThinkUni pilot, 2014/15

Reflections

One of the biggest successes of the ThinkUni pilot was the increase in parents and carers visiting universities with their children for their graduation trips. By the end of 2015/16, parents/carers who took part in the pilot came to just under 50% of trips. These trips were held across a number of highly-selective universities, including the universities of Nottingham and Warwick in the Midlands.

In terms of the impact on parents and carers, a 2015/16 survey of 346 parents, who attended the trips found that:

59%

Of parents had not attended university

97%

Agreed that they enjoyed visiting a university for The Scholars Programme Graduation Trip

83%

Agreed that the visit would help them to better support their child to secure a place at university

93%

Said they planned to speak with their child about university in general after the visit

Inviting parents to graduation trips provides The Brilliant Club with an opportunity to provide parents and careers with tailored information, advice and guidance sessions and for parents to discuss any questions or queries directly with university staff. It also allows parents to celebrate their child's achievements with them, which can positively impact on the conversations that parents later have with their children around the programme and their future.

"An excellent insight to ensure parents are aware of how to help make the right choices for their child in the future"

Parent, Eldon Grove Academy, The Scholars Programme 2016/17

Considerations for future parental engagement strategies:

- In comparison to the ThinkUni pilot, The Scholars Programme runs on a much larger and national scale. Therefore, not all aspects of the pilot were incorporated into the main programme, such as, the tailored focus group sessions and the tailored 'ThinkUni' events. However, inviting parents (where possible) to pupils' graduation events could be an effective way to engage parents with the programme and university access.
- Due to the volume of pupils that we work with, we are unable to offer invitations to parents for all graduation events as universities do not always have the space to accommodate such large numbers. Equally, some parents/carers are not always able to attend the graduation events. Therefore, we need to re-consider the ways in which we could reach out to these parents.
- Nevertheless, research has noted that engaging parents as part of a wider student programme or activity is an effective outreach strategy and can have a meaningful impact on parents (Torgerson et al., 2014).
- The ThinkUni pilot demonstrated that The Brilliant Club could adapt several graduation events in order to invite parents and provide specific information, advice and guidance sessions.

From Pilot to Programme Implementation

Graduation trips

Saturday or evening graduations are now offered at several institutions that we work with, including King's College London and the University of Warwick.

In 2016/17, we worked with 10,625 pupils in total.

Of these, 8738 (82%) submitted a final assignment and were invited to a Graduation Trip. 7058 (81%) of pupils and 1133 (16%) of their parents attended the Graduation trip.

43%

Had not visited a university before

93%

Agreed that they enjoyed visiting a university for The Scholars Programme Graduation Trip

80%

Agreed that the visit would help them to better support their child to secure a place at university

89%

Said they planned to speak with their child about university in general after the visit

"An excellent insight to ensure parents are aware of how to help make the right choices for their child in the future."

Parent, Eldon Grove School, The Scholars Programme 2016/17

"I found today very informative and I am sure it will help when making decisions for the future."

Parent, The Thomas Aveling School, The Scholars Programme 2017/18

Joanna Merchant, Widening Participation Officer at King's College London comments on the importance of parental engagement to the university, and how The Scholars Programme has helped their department to reach out to more parents and carers:

"Parents can shape the ambitions of their child. They frame the dialogue that takes place at home around university. The involvement is therefore essential in raising aspirations and forming a positive attitude towards education"



"The Scholars Programme has enabled us to reach a large parental audience. The celebratory nature of the graduations means that parents are far more likely to attend the event, and this provides us with a great opportunity to tackle head on the concerns and queries parents have about higher education."

Reflections

- Our survey results show that inviting parents to graduation events can have an impact and that most parents agree it would help them to support their child. Furthermore, our university partners view the graduation trips as valuable opportunities for them to directly engage with parents to discuss concerns or queries.
- However, we are aware from feedback that parents would value more input from us, and our university partners around other aspects of university access including finance and financial support for students at university. Our survey results from 2016/17 show that 61% agreed, or strongly agreed with the statement "I think that today's visit has helped me to better understand the financial support that would be available to my child at university."
- Although IAG sessions at graduation trips would cover the topic of student finance, we are aware from this feedback that more focus around finance support for pupils would be useful for parents.
- Research has also demonstrated that common concerns for parents in relation to university include the debt and living costs of university, and the value that this financial investment would bring for their children in terms of their future employment prospects (Mulcahy, 2018).
- In a survey of parents, whose children were aged between 7 and 18, 65% ranked debt in their top three concerns around university access and 36% ranked it as their number one concern. (Mulcahy, 2018) Furthermore, it has been noted that IAG sessions are deemed as 'good' strategies for universities to engage with parents due to the fact they can challenge any misconceptions parents may have about university. Recent evidence has demonstrated that IAG sessions can reduce parent and carers concern about the cost of higher education and de-bunk any myths that may exist in the media (Mulcahy, 2018).

Other initiatives

In-School Launch evenings

The Scholars Programme also deploys a variety of other methods to engage parents in the programme. The programme offers an in-school launch event where a member of The Scholars Programme team will deliver a presentation about the charity and what the pupils will be expected to do whilst on the programme. It also helps inform parents about how they could support their children and offers the chance for parents to ask any questions about the process. These are typically scheduled to take place after school or in the evening.

Highcliffe School, Christchurch, Dorset – Spring 2017-18

The Scholars Programme team visited Highcliffe School, located in Christchurch, Dorset to deliver an in-school launch event for parents and carers of pupils enrolled onto the programme in the Spring term. Katy Lorek is the lead teacher for the placement and describes the challenges with parental engagement and also, it's importance to the school:

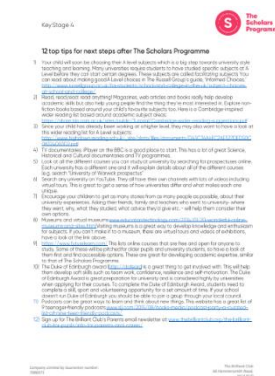


"With some individual families it can be difficult to contact parents – maybe they work unusual shift patterns, maybe they are used to hearing 'bad news' when the school calls them, so they now ignore the calls...by engaging positively with parents, we can encourage them to support their child's educational career. This makes for a more positive experience for the child in school – both from a wellbeing point of view, and in academic progress."

Katy believes that hosting an in-school launch event is an important way for parents to be aware of how they can successfully support their child on the programme, and makes parents feel more "comfortable to speak about any queries or issues they have whilst their child is taking part."

Newsletter

Parents can sign up to a half-termly newsletter via our website, which is written by Brilliant Club staff and contains information about free events hosted at universities, information and guidance about what parents can do to support their child at school and reminders about key stages in the UCAS application process. Schools are also sent a leaflet detailing 'Top Tips' about how parents and carers can support their child in their next steps after completing the programme



Conclusions and lessons learned

The Brilliant Club recognises that parents and carers play a vital role in the education of a young person. Our programmes engage parents in a positive way, celebrating what their children can achieve. We are excited to see the increased sense of urgency in the sector around engaging parents and the new research that suggests practical lessons for designing parental engagement strategies in widening participation (Mulcahy, 2018). We will be working with our school and university partners to apply these lessons.

"I think the idea behind this is exceptional and very worthwhile both from a parent and pupil perspective. Having not attended university myself, it was a fantastic insight and has created positive discussions about my child's future"

Parent, Swanwick Hall School, Derbyshire, The Scholars Programme 2017-18

Table 1. Key challenges surrounding Parental Engagement and access to higher education

Challenges	How can we support parents?	The Brilliant Club's response	Lessons learned and next steps
Creating sustained and effective long-term strategies for parental engagement can be difficult.	Universities and charities like The Brilliant Club have a duty, when there is contact with parents or carers to offer support and guidance about university processes. Long term strategies are useful, but we must not forget the impact of short and concise interventions, like in school-launches and parents sessions at graduation trips.	The Brilliant Club is committed to trialling different strategies to engage with parents on a longer-term basis. The ThinkUni pilot was a two-year programme with multiple opportunities for parents and carers to engage with university access. Furthermore, responses from our Parent Self-Evaluation forms show that parents and carers find our sessions useful.	Alongside our introduction of a newsletter for parents, we are reviewing other forms of communication that will enable us to keep parents informed and updated about the university application process.
For parents with no history of higher education, a lack of knowledge of the processes can be a barrier to them supporting their child.	We must ensure that when there is contact with parents, tailored information sessions and planned and delivered.	Our Parent Self-Evaluation forms from 2015 show that between 40%-50% of parents visiting the graduation trips had not been to university themselves. The trips provide a great opportunity for universities to help inform parents about	We are reviewing our parent information sessions at graduation events to ensure they are as effective as possible in supporting parents to help their child's progression to university and to address any misconceptions about university study

		the choices for their child beyond secondary education.	and finance. We will also work with our partner schools to more actively promote the benefits of in-school launches to engage parents.
Reaching out to all parents or carers is a challenge as parents cannot always commit to attending events.	It is important to offer resources that do not require a parent to take time out of their day to attend. For example, information can be sent via email or in a letter. In order to support attendance at events, an effort should be made to organise events so that they do not coincide with working hours.	The charity ensures that a number of our events take place outside of working hours in the evening or on weekends to make it easier for parents to attend. However, sometimes there is a lack of parent attendance during these times.	Following positive feedback from a series of pilot evening graduation events, we are working with our university partners to offer an increased number of evening graduation trips. We understand that parent's attendance at trips can positively contribute to the support that they are able to provide to their child.

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