



# Join the club

Strategy  
2021-2026

# Our new strategy is an invitation to Join the Club. The Brilliant Club.

## *Pupils and parents, partners and PhDers.*

In this strategy we set out an ambition for university access and success that can be delivered only by working together. Our previous strategies focused on sustainability and outcomes; the next five years will focus on you and your participation. You have the power to help more young people progress to university and thrive when they get there. Let's make it happen, together.

### **Pupils and students**

Being a part of The Brilliant Club is something special. Firstly, we'll be working with more pupils and students than ever before. So it's even more important that your voices are shaping the programmes you participate in. When you progress to university we'll be there to help you settle in and make a success of your time as a student. And you'll be able to help the next generation of learners as Brilliant Alumni or by becoming a Brilliant Club Ambassador. You're a member of The Brilliant Club for life. Welcome.

### **Parents and carers**

Hello. We want to stand with you in making sure your children get the opportunities they deserve. We'll engage with you in the way that best works for you. Whether it's receiving regular updates about your child's progress on our programmes or building communities with other parents to help each other, we're here for you. We know parents and carers have the strongest influence on their children's educational journey. Let's make that journey together.

### **Partners**

To our existing and future partners: universities, schools and colleges, supporters. We'd like to work with you to support young people across the student life cycle. We want to join the dots to ensure pupils can successfully transition to higher education and flourish there. Together we can ensure that underrepresented pupils have solid foundations to fulfil their potential. We can make progress on eradicating attainment gaps and boosting social belonging for less advantaged students. We will do this through bridging provision, academic support and inclusive teaching and learning practice that we co-develop. You can partner with us on specific projects, co-deliver our programmes or provide invaluable funding to the charity. And we'll continue to evaluate and build our shared understanding of what works.

### **PhDers**

You are what makes The Brilliant Club unique, always have been and always will be. The PhD tutor is at the heart of everything we seek to do in the coming years. The PhD community is a force for change. You are already pushing the boundaries of knowledge, and we need you to help us push the boundaries of educational opportunity too. In this strategy, you're not just a tutor with The Brilliant Club. You're part of a team. A movement. A collective endeavour. We'll have more ways for you to make positive social change: boosting academic achievement and opening up the world of higher education via The Scholars Programme or delivering student success initiatives like Join the Dots. We'll continue building our PhD community and unlocking its power to make a difference.

To all our communities, we want to deliver our mission together with you. By joining the club you'll be a part of the largest movement working to improve university access and success in the UK.

Yours,  
Anne-Marie Canning MBE  
(CEO, The Brilliant Club)

*Anne-Marie Canning*







Right now, students from the **least advantaged** backgrounds have a **2 in 100** chance of accessing the most competitive universities, compared to **28 in 100** of the **most advantaged**.



This disadvantage doesn't disappear when they enter university.



This affects an individual beyond their time at university and impacts society as a whole.

Disadvantaged students are therefore

**14x**



more likely to miss out on life-changing higher education.

DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS ARE

**20%**

MORE LIKELY TO MISS OUT ON A 1ST OR 2:1 GRADE AT UNIVERSITY

University graduates are more likely to access professional careers and have higher rates of life satisfaction. On average, they will earn **£10,000** more than their peers.



We believe it is fundamentally unfair that a young person should miss out on these opportunities simply because of their background.

**Access**

We want to support **100,000** students to access the most competitive universities via our access programmes

**Success**

And work with **10,000** undergraduates by 2026 to enhance their achievement through our university partnerships

We'll be there every step of the way for young people – from primary school to graduation.



Supported by three enablers that will make our goals possible

Communites

Capabilities

Consultancy

Together we can meet the challenge. **Join the Club.**





We mobilise the PhD community to support students who are less advantaged to access the most competitive universities and succeed when they get there.



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Students from the **least advantaged** backgrounds have a **2 in 100** chance of going to the most competitive universities, compared to **28 in 100** of the **most advantaged** students. Disadvantaged students are therefore **14 times** more likely to miss out on life-changing higher education.

# 1. The Problem

**Pupils from the least advantaged backgrounds have a 2 in 100 chance of going to the most competitive universities, compared to 28 in 100 of the most advantaged pupils (UCAS, 2023). Disadvantaged pupils are therefore nearly 14 times more likely to miss out on life-changing higher education.**

In the UK today, how and where a young person grows up – what part of the country they live in, or the qualifications, jobs and income of their parents and carers – has consequences. These factors are out of the control of young people, yet they have a huge influence on their chances of educational success and good life outcomes, including access to higher education.

While more young people from the least privileged backgrounds go to university than ever before, inequality in access to the most competitive universities persists. At these universities, students from the most advantaged backgrounds are almost 12 times more likely to enter than students from the least advantaged groups (UCAS Multiple Equality Measure).

The effort to widen participation and increase fair access to higher education has seen some successes over the last decade, including in access to the most competitive UK universities. In 2021/22, 3,564 pupils in England who were eligible for free school meals (FSM) at age 15 entered a high-tariff university compared to just 1,889 in 2010/11 (DfE, 2023). The numbers show progress in the number of FSM pupils attending

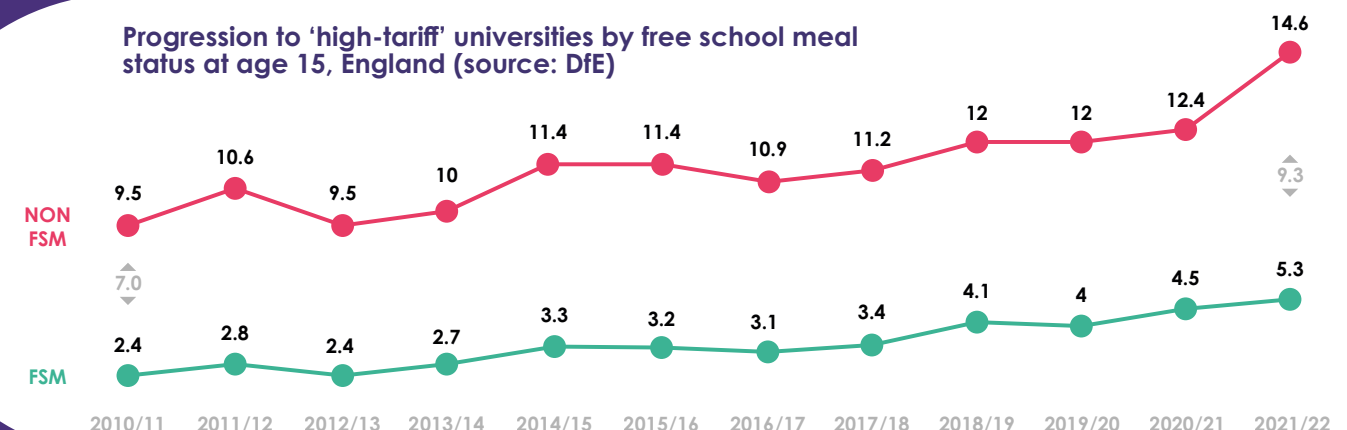
these institutions. However, if we look at the difference between FSM pupils and their more advantaged peers, it is clear that the access gap widened between 2010/11 and 2021/22 (see chart below).

The gap in access to high-tariff universities by FSM status exists in every English region, including London. But progression rates of disadvantaged students are lower outside of London, with just over 5% of FSM students in any region outside the capital progressing to high-tariff universities. Over half of FSM eligible students in Inner London progressed to higher education by age 19 in 2021/22, compared to 29.2% nationally and fewer than a fifth in the South West (DfE, 2023).

The problem of unequal access to university exists in every nation and region of the UK.

- The South West has the largest attainment gap in England at the end of secondary school. In 2021/22, only 18.7% of FSM pupils entered higher education by age 19 – the lowest of all English regions.
- In the North East, 21.9% of FSM-eligible students progress to university and just 3.5% to the most competitive institutions.
- Wales has double the attainment gap of England, and currently stands at 22-23 months between the most and least advantaged students. 21.6% of young people from low-participation areas (POLAR4 Q1) in Wales progress to university, compared to 25.1% in England.

Progression to 'high-tariff' universities by free school meal status at age 15, England (source: DfE)





**Disadvantage does not disappear when students walk through the doors of their university, so we need to strengthen efforts to secure student success.**

In recent years, a growing body of research has highlighted the inequalities that exist at undergraduate level. Some students are less likely to receive good grades in their first year, more likely to drop out before their second year and less likely to graduate with a 1st or 2:1 in their degree. The attainment gaps we see, even at the most competitive universities, are significant (Office for Students, 2020a):

- The gap between young people from areas with the lowest participation in higher education (POLAR Q1) and their peers in high-participation areas (POLAR Q5) gaining a 1st or 2:1 degree has remained at 10 percentage points since 2013/14.
- 85.7% of White students graduate with a 1st or 2:1 compared to 67.1% of Black graduates. Among Asian graduates, the proportion gaining a 1st or 2:1 degree is 79.9%.

If we want to achieve a fairer society, access to the most competitive universities and the success students can achieve once there is a key challenge we must overcome.

**Despite continued challenges, a future with more equal university access and student success is possible.**

Every higher education provider develops an Access and Participation Plan detailing their work to close access and success gaps at their institution. If the most competitive universities meet the targets that they set out in their Access and Participation Plans, the ratio between POLAR4 Q1 and Q5 students entering high-tariff universities will decrease from 6.2 to 3.7. This would equate to an additional 6,500 students from low-participation areas (Q1) entering high-tariff universities in 2024 compared to the baseline year of 2017.

UCAS estimates that the UK's 38 most selective universities would each need to admit only an additional 70 students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds in England every year to close the collective equality gap in their admissions by 2030 (UCAS, 2020).

Goals also exist for student success, and the targets set out by universities in Access and Participation Plans add up to a reduction of the gap in degree award outcomes between Black and White students from 22 points in 2017/18 to 11.2 points in 2024/25 (OfS, 2020b).

The playing field for young people in the UK will not be levelled overnight, and, as demonstrated in the chart on p.9, the coronavirus pandemic worsened existing inequalities. Yet there is great opportunity over the final three years of this strategy to make significant progress with fair access and student success. The Brilliant Club will play its part in this collective endeavour, which will have a wider impact on society.

**86% of white students graduate with a 1st or 2:1 compared to 67% of Black graduates. Among Asian graduates, the proportion gaining a 1st or 2:1 degree is 80%**






## 2. Our Response

The Brilliant Club was founded by two teachers in 2011, following the successful pilot of a scheme to give 19 students in one state school a taste of university by completing an academic course with a PhD researcher. Twelve years later, we are working with over 22,000 young people each year, who attend over 1,000 schools and colleges in every nation and region of the UK.

### Target students

Educational inequality is complicated. A student is not a number, but numbers and statistics can help us to understand and measure inequality and our progress in eliminating it. The Brilliant Club has an established approach to ensuring we support the students who need us the most. A target student is a young person who meets one or more of the following criteria:

-  Is eligible for free school meals (FSM)
-  Lives in one of the most deprived 40% of postcode areas
-  Has no parental history of higher education in the UK.

Our approach to targeting is simple for schools and recognises the value of a teacher's professional judgement and understanding of a young person's context beyond data. On The Scholars Programme, we require that at least 55% of the students that schools put forward for the programme meet one or more of these criteria. In practice, over 80% of the students taking part in The Scholars Programme meet at least one of the targeting criteria, with over 45% being eligible for FSM.

Going forward, our targeting approach for The Scholars Programme will stay the same. However, we will change the emphasis of our messages to schools to encourage them to put forward as many young people eligible for FSM as possible and aim for 85% of participants to be target students.

Just because we have targeting criteria, it doesn't mean that we think students in these groups are the only ones facing educational inequalities. Someone's ethnicity, whether they live in a rural, coastal or former industrial area and other personal circumstances all affect their chances of going to university and their chances of succeeding when they get there. These factors can interact to mean some students face exceptional barriers.

For our university transition and success projects, the targeting criteria we use will depend on the partners we're working with and the inequalities they need to address in their own context. We'll proactively seek out opportunities to work with partners on projects that address discrete inequalities, especially projects that:

- address racial injustices or intersectional inequalities in the education system by targeting support for specific groups of young people (for example, Black pupils, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils, White working-class boys)
- focus support on low-participation areas facing the most complex economic challenges (for example, rural and coastal areas or former industrial towns)
- support young people with disabilities, those who are or have been in local authority care, those who have caring responsibilities themselves, estranged students (those without support from family), refugees, forced migrants, young people from military families and mature learners.

Finally, we'll continue to be open and honest with our data so that everyone can see how our programmes are serving different groups of young people. A priority is to collect more complete data on ethnicity from schools, students and parents so that we can build a better understanding of the extent to which we're addressing racial injustice in education.

### Partners

The Brilliant Club remains focused on addressing the inequality in access to the most competitive universities. However, we recognise that while, on average, some universities are much more competitive to get into, some of the most competitive degree courses are at institutions not listed as 'high-tariff providers' by the government or UCAS. We also recognise that many excellent courses are not especially selective in admissions terms.

Of our 56 current university partners, 25 have been classified by the Department for Education as 'high-tariff providers' over the last ten years. We remain committed to mobilising the PhD community, wherever their research is based, and partnering with every university that shares our vision for educational equality. As part of our student success work, we'll expand and deepen our partnerships across the university sector.

We currently work with over 1,000 non-selective schools and colleges in the state sector. Our strategy will also feature partnerships with a greater diversity of organisations, including fellow charities, community groups and civil society institutions.

### Ambition and goals

By the end of our five-year strategy, we'll scale our impactful access programmes, including our flagship programme, The Scholars Programme, to support 100,000 pupils. We'll also extend our work across the student life cycle to support 10,000 young people to make the transition to university and succeed when they get there.

Goal 1: Access	Goal 2: Success
Support 100,000 pupils to access the most competitive universities via our access programmes by 2026.	Support 10,000 undergraduates in our partner universities to reach their full academic potential by 2026.

Underpinning our goals are three enablers, or ways of working, that will make it possible for us to deliver our ambitions.

Ways of working: Three Enablers		
<b>Communities</b>  Create change with over 1,000 parents and carers across 35 chapters in the UK.	<b>Capabilities</b>  Enhance our technological capabilities, culture and customer-centricity through digital transformation.	<b>Consulting</b>  Create system-level change by collaborating with universities and mission-aligned organisations to generate evidence and impact.

The coronavirus pandemic has shown us how plans can be subject to change. This is why we committed to undertake a midpoint strategy review in Summer 2023, to allow us to take stock, assess progress against ambition and calibrate the strategy further. Below, we explore how our work has evolved since the beginning of the strategy in 2021.

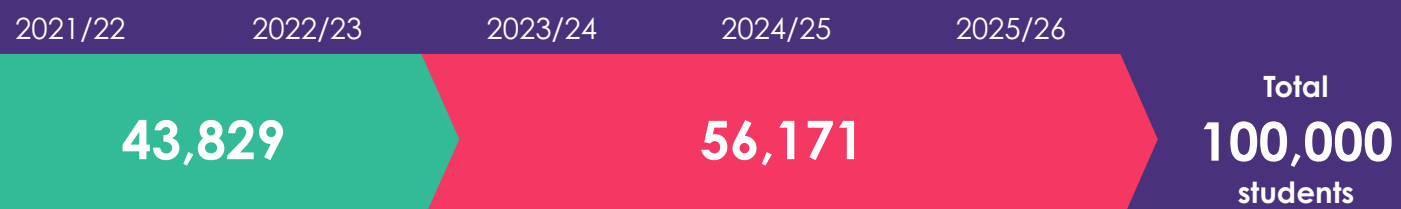


### 3. Goal 1 – Access



**“ I always loved learning, but coming from a state comprehensive school, first-generation background, higher education wasn’t on my radar. One day, my teacher called us all to a meeting about a new opportunity called The Scholars Programme. I still remember when our tutor told us only a few people in the world knew about his speciality. I definitely think the experience was the most important factor in my decision to apply to Keble College, Oxford, where I’ve now spent the happiest years studying English and Italian. Collaborating with The Brilliant Club as part of my work with the Oxford First-Gen Society has been a real highlight. I can’t thank The Scholars Programme enough for giving me that all-important first push. ”**

Scholars Programme  
participant



**We need your support to grow our access programmes to reach 100,000 students by 2026**

## Scaling The Scholars Programme

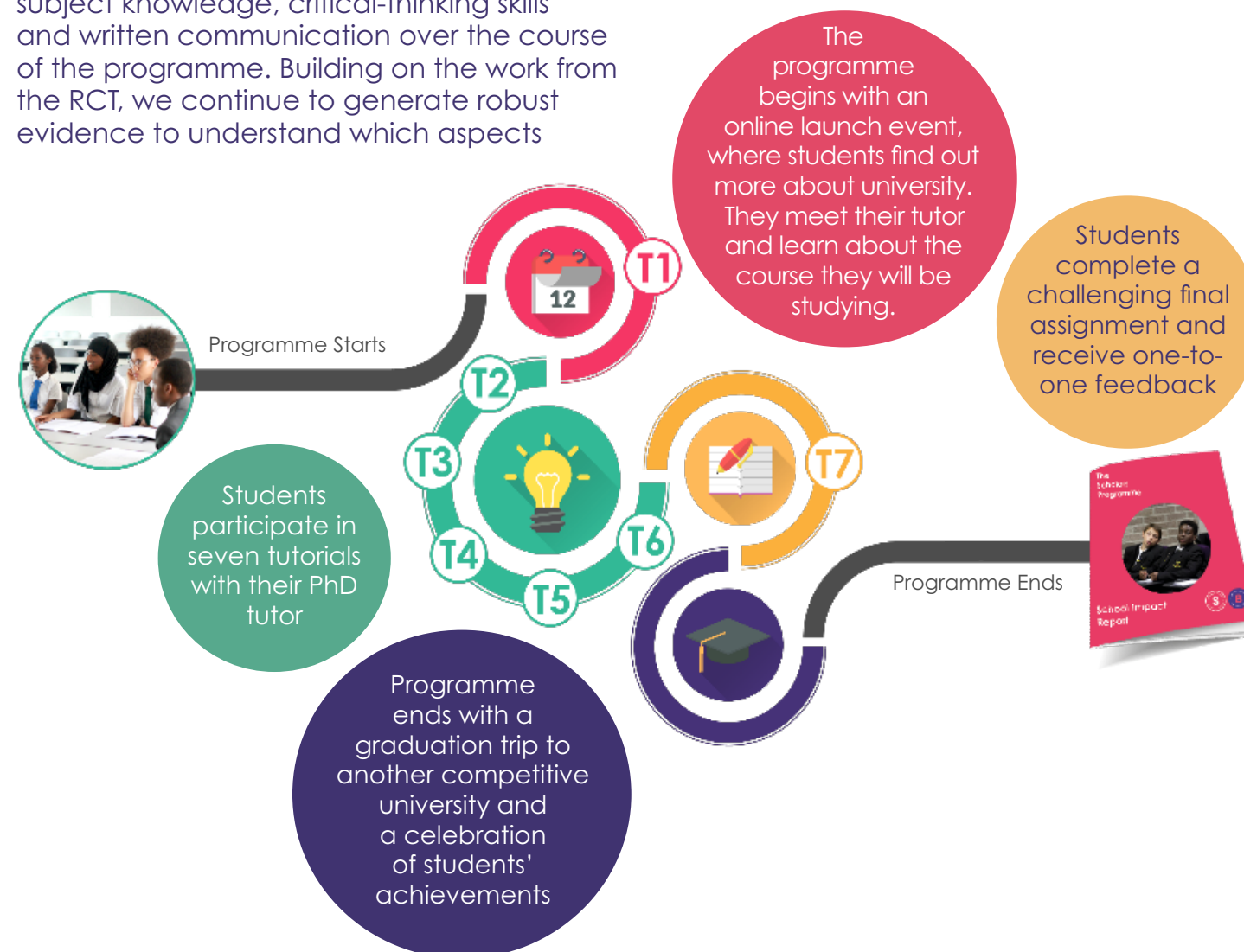
The Scholars Programme is our award-winning and longest-running programme. We recruit, train and place PhD researchers in schools to deliver courses of university-style tutorials to small groups of students aged 8–18. Since the beginning of the Join the Club strategy, nearly 40,000 pupils have taken part in The Scholars Programme, in every nation and region of the UK.

Seven years' worth of matched control-group analysis by UCAS has shown that Scholars Programme graduates are statistically significantly more likely to apply to, receive an offer from and progress to one of the most competitive universities. A randomised controlled trial (RCT) conducted by researchers at the University of Cambridge in 2019/20 showed why this might be: students who take part in The Scholars Programme report significantly higher levels of self-efficacy for university-style learning. Our intermediate outcomes data also shows improvements in students' subject knowledge, critical-thinking skills and written communication over the course of the programme. Building on the work from the RCT, we continue to generate robust evidence to understand which aspects

of the programme contribute the most to student outcomes (see Section 6, Measuring our progress, for further information).

The Scholars Programme is made possible by over 1,000 partner schools and colleges, which contribute the majority of funding for the programme, and our 56 partner universities, which support programme costs, help us to recruit PhD tutors, and host campus visits for participating pupils. The programme is also supported by philanthropic funding, which is vital to delivering a high-quality programme and impact reporting, while ensuring that costs are accessible and sustainable for schools.

Our goal for the remaining three years of the strategy is to continue to scale The Scholars Programme and make it available to more young people who would benefit from participating. By 2026, our aim is to have over 20,000 pupils to be taking part in The Scholars Programme. That would make it by far the largest university access intervention in the UK.





To enable more pupils to benefit from The Scholars Programme we will need to do three things:



Continue to build our PhD community to ensure that we can support as many students as possible through our impactful Scholars Programme. This involves increasing the total number of PhD tutors that we work with as well as more tutors delivering multiple placements over a number of years



Reach out and build secure relationships with more schools and colleges – especially those in areas where we have not worked before and social mobility cold spots. The Brilliant Club already works with more schools and pupils in rural and coastal towns and villages than metropolitan areas



Secure efficiencies and enhancements to programme delivery that mean stakeholders find the programme easier to work with and we can maintain affordable prices for schools and colleges. Key areas planned for the latter half of the strategy include expanding our automation work and enhancing the user experience.

## Securing attainment through access programmes

One of the biggest barriers to accessing the most competitive universities is achieving good grades at secondary school. The Education Policy Institute estimates that by the time they sit their GCSEs, FSM-eligible students have fallen 18.4 months behind their peers (Education Policy Institute, 2022).

The Scholars Programme is an attainment-raising programme that develops outcomes that are strongly associated with improvements in school attainment. Linked to this, we conducted a review examining the 'intermediate' or 'short-term' outcomes that are associated with attainment on behalf of the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO). There is clear evidence that intermediate outcomes are an essential 'stepping stone' for attainment both within school and university settings (Thomson, Bellaera, Ilie & Maragkou, 2022). For pupils who complete The Scholars Programme, we consistently see improvements in attainment-related outcomes, including academic self-efficacy, critical thinking and written communication.

We also support attainment-raising activities through subject curriculum tutoring. In 2020, as part of the government's National Tutoring Programme, we delivered The Brilliant Tutoring Programme and supported more than 13,000 Year Key Stage 3 and 4 students over a three-year period. Drawing on our experiences of partnering with the National Tutoring Programme, we established our own attainment-raising programme called Make your Mark. This programme has been developed using research evidence and school leader insights and aims to boost the attainment of Year 10 pupils through the development of study strategies within core curriculum subjects.

In 2022/23, we launched Make your Mark in collaboration with the University of Sussex. The initial pilot showed a positive change in curriculum subject knowledge and metacognitive strategies following the completion of the programme.

“

I am so glad that others in my school will be doing this too because I have gained so much, picked up lots of skills and advice but more importantly have experienced a new way of learning.”

Scholars Programme graduate  
from Gloucestershire

“

Working with The Brilliant Club has made me a more confident teacher and a more thoughtful researcher.”

Laura Ryan,  
Scholars Programme Tutor





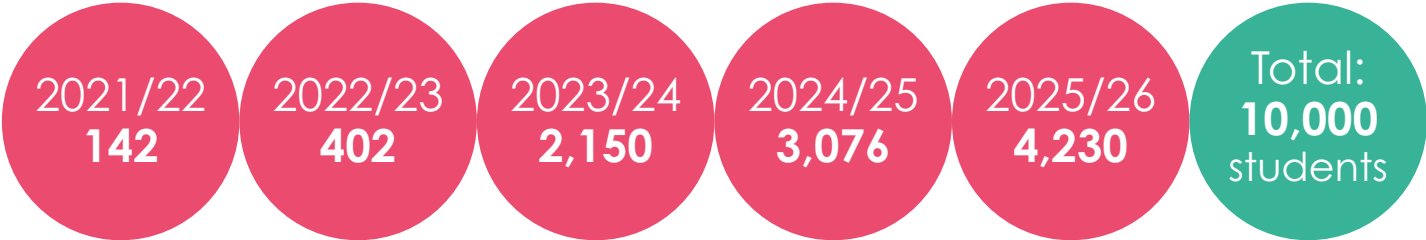
# 4. Goal 2 – Success



DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS ARE

20%

MORE LIKELY TO MISS OUT ON A 1ST OR 2:1 GRADE AT UNIVERSITY



Breakdown of our plan to work with 10,000 students through our student success programmes by 2026.

## Higher education transitions and academic support

A growing body of research has highlighted the inequalities that exist at undergraduate level. Some students are less likely to get good grades in their first year, more likely to drop out before their second year and less likely to graduate with a 1st or 2:1 in their final degree. The attainment gaps we see, even at the most competitive universities, are significant for less advantaged and underrepresented undergraduates.

Most students who drop out of university do so during or immediately after the first year (van der Zanden et al., 2018). Furthermore, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more at risk of withdrawal: data on non-continuation rates in 2020/21 show there was a nearly six percentage point gap in higher education continuation rates between FSM-eligible and FSM-ineligible students (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2023). This means that the transition between school and university is pivotal for students' success at university.

In response to this, we developed Join the Dots in collaboration with the Reach Foundation and the London Academy of Excellence Tottenham. Join the Dots brings schools and colleges together with universities to support students who are most likely to face barriers during the transition to higher education.

On the programme, schools and colleges identify less advantaged Year 13 students who meet key targeting criteria and have applied to one or more of the programme's partner universities. Students will take part in a series of university preparation activities, delivered through in-school resources and by The Brilliant Club.

On Results Day students are then matched with a PhD coach from their university. Each PhD coach supports up to eight students and works together with each student's school or college to support them throughout the six-month transition programme.

One cohort has taken part in Join the Dots so far and our second cohort is about to enter university. Initial findings from the pilot year show

a statistically significant impact on academic self-efficacy over the course of the programme, as well as an increase in the use of effective study strategies and sense of belonging (Join the Dots Impact Report, 2022-23). We will also track retention into the second year of university along with first year marks, and eventually degree outcomes via the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) to add to our growing evidence base.

**I think Join the Dots has helped me manage the transition from Year 13 to university by helping me become more independent through self-learning... The coach is also really friendly and helpful.**

*Student, Join the Dots*

The need to invest in student success initiatives to support students from less advantaged backgrounds has been further supported by our recent strategy review. Working with Bain & Company, we examined the latest research and spoke to key experts on the topic of student success. It was clear there are a range of factors impeding less advantaged students' experiences and achievements during university, including a lack of readiness for academic rigour as well as challenges in navigating social and academic norms. There are also specific difficulties that occur at certain time points around accessing the right information and navigating funding sources within an institution. This means that any initiative designed to support students has to tackle both academic and social and emotional barriers.

By the end of 2026, we aim to have worked with university partners to support 10,000 undergraduates both prior to and during university. We will do this through a range of student success interventions, with Join the Dots as our flagship programme.





“

**Before working as a PhD tutor with The Brilliant Club, my teaching experience was minimal. The Brilliant Club ensured that I completed training in pedagogic approaches and techniques, which meant that when I entered schools for tutorials I was well prepared and able to disseminate knowledge effectively. During tutorials my confidence grew and I discovered what worked for me and my pupils, given the context and the content of the course. My most valued experience has been constructing a bespoke course that revolves around my research. I believe this has all contributed to me recently being offered a lecturer position at a university, who were impressed by my reflections on course creation and moderation, my marking knowledge and teaching competency.**

*PhD tutor, The Scholars Programme*

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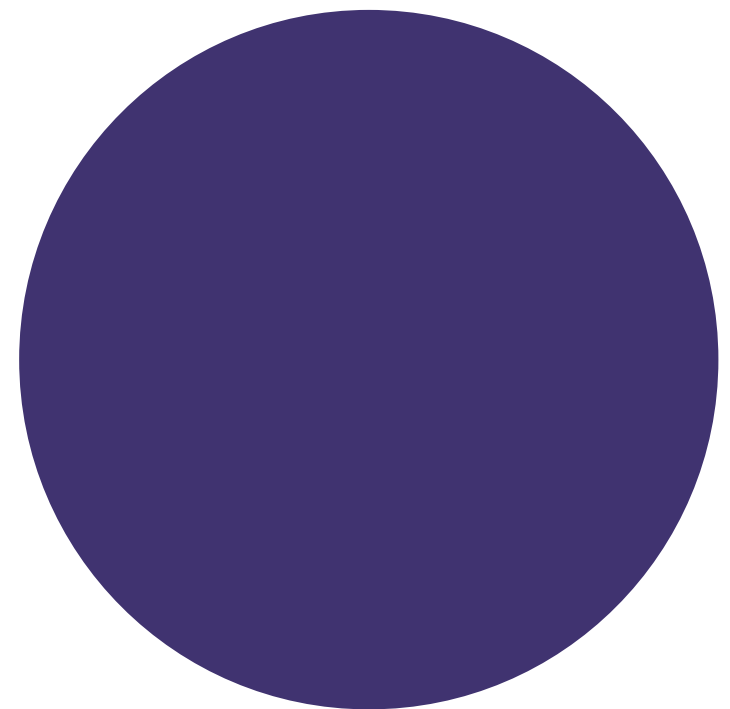
## Quality assuring our programmes

To ensure that our programmes have the greatest impact possible on students, we need to quality assure their delivery. This is especially true as our access and success programmes continue to grow. For us, quality assurance is process-oriented, focusing on preventing quality issues throughout a programme cycle and involves the following types of activities:

- Testing the extent to which the programmes' pedagogical underpinning and curricula set out the knowledge, skills and related activities that students will achieve and complete
- Evaluating the quality and effectiveness of training delivered to our tutors to ensure they have the most impact when working with students
- Empowering staff to understand their role in quality assurance and what they need to do within it to maximise programme quality.

To support this work, we have established a new pedagogy, curriculum development and quality assurance function within our research and impact team that will lead this work, in collaboration with our programme teams.

This area will continue to evolve over the next three years of the strategy, and we will engage other education organisations to help improve the overall quality and provision of access and success interventions.





## 5. Ways of working: Our three enablers

### Communities

The Brilliant Club has been building communities since its inception. Our programmes have created small communities of learners in schools and colleges across the country. As our charity and programmes grow, we are determined to keep relationships at the heart of what we do and build communities to support our mission.

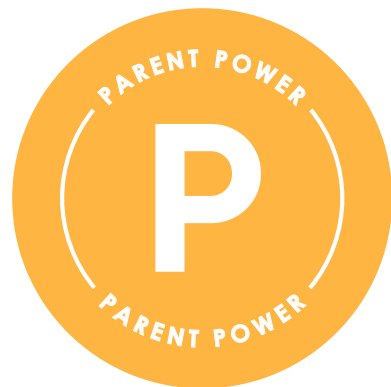
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This was an amazing opportunity for my son, from a single-parent, low-income family he feels he can achieve so much more now. Thank you for this experience and the opportunity you gave him. Because of this he will go on to do great things and I have been inspired to sign up to a degree programme too.

Parent of a Scholars  
Programme participant

”





## Parent Power

The evidence base is clear: parents have the power to help their children progress to competitive universities. We believe we have found a scalable model that meaningfully engages parents and carers: Parent Power. The model creates parent and carer communities across the UK, each one supported by an anchor university or local institution. Through advice and guidance on accessing higher education, and developing skills in community organising, Parent Power empowers parents and carers to make change in their children's future.

The parents themselves decide what activities will benefit their communities and children, and Parent Power chapters across the UK have arranged tailored university trips, received training on student finances and secured bursary places at summer schools. Our approach is underpinned by a strategic partnership with Citizens UK, which provides training and expertise in community organising and development techniques.

Parent Power chapters have been established in Cardiff, East London, East Oxford, Fenland, Knowsley, Mansfield and Oldham with more in the pipeline. We will convene a national meeting of all Parent Power chapters in 2024. This will be the largest education-focused gathering of ordinary Mums and Dads in the UK.

By the end of this strategy Parent Power will have engaged with 1,000 parents and carers.



**Dr Vicki Kay-Price,  
Community Organiser  
(Fenland)**



**Why did you become a Parent Power community organiser?**

I'd previously tutored for The Brilliant Club's Scholars Programme and found it to be an enjoyable and rewarding experience, so I was excited to see the Fenland Community Organiser role advertised. My own journey to university was not always one of success. Neither of my parents went to university. We had no idea how any of it worked: finance, accommodation; the socialising or the academic assessments. At 18, I went to my first-choice university, but within the first month I dropped out. I felt like university just wasn't for people like me. However, I eventually found my path, and I received my PhD in 2021. Higher education is not one-size-fits-all and I believe that had I and my family had access to something like Parent Power, I would have made the right decision for me the first time round, and we all would have avoided a lot of emotional and financial stress. Every child and every parent/carers deserves to have access to the information, advice and guidance to empower them to make the right choice for their future.

**What has been your biggest Parent Power achievement?**

There have been lots of achievements across Fenland and Peterborough so far. Fenland is working on a campaign to establish a safe cycle route to provide access to a train station and all the educational and employment opportunities this opens up. Peterborough families have won a bespoke, fully-funded open day to Trinity College, Cambridge. My personal highlight has been seeing the huge growth in confidence of parents, carers and children alike. Many of the parents and carers are investigating going to university themselves while the young people are excited about the different options available to them. Before being part of Parent Power, many members thought they couldn't attend university due to things like ADHD or dyslexia. The information, advice and guidance they've had access to has shown this isn't the case. Attitudes are changing, and that's amazing to see.

**What excites you most about the future of Parent Power?**

I am really excited to see Parent Power is expanding and that new chapters are being established across the UK. I'd love to see a network of support spanning the UK. Parents and carers have the potential to be a real force for change.





**Samia Egeh,  
Community Organiser  
(Cardiff)**

### **Why did you become a Parent Power community organiser?**

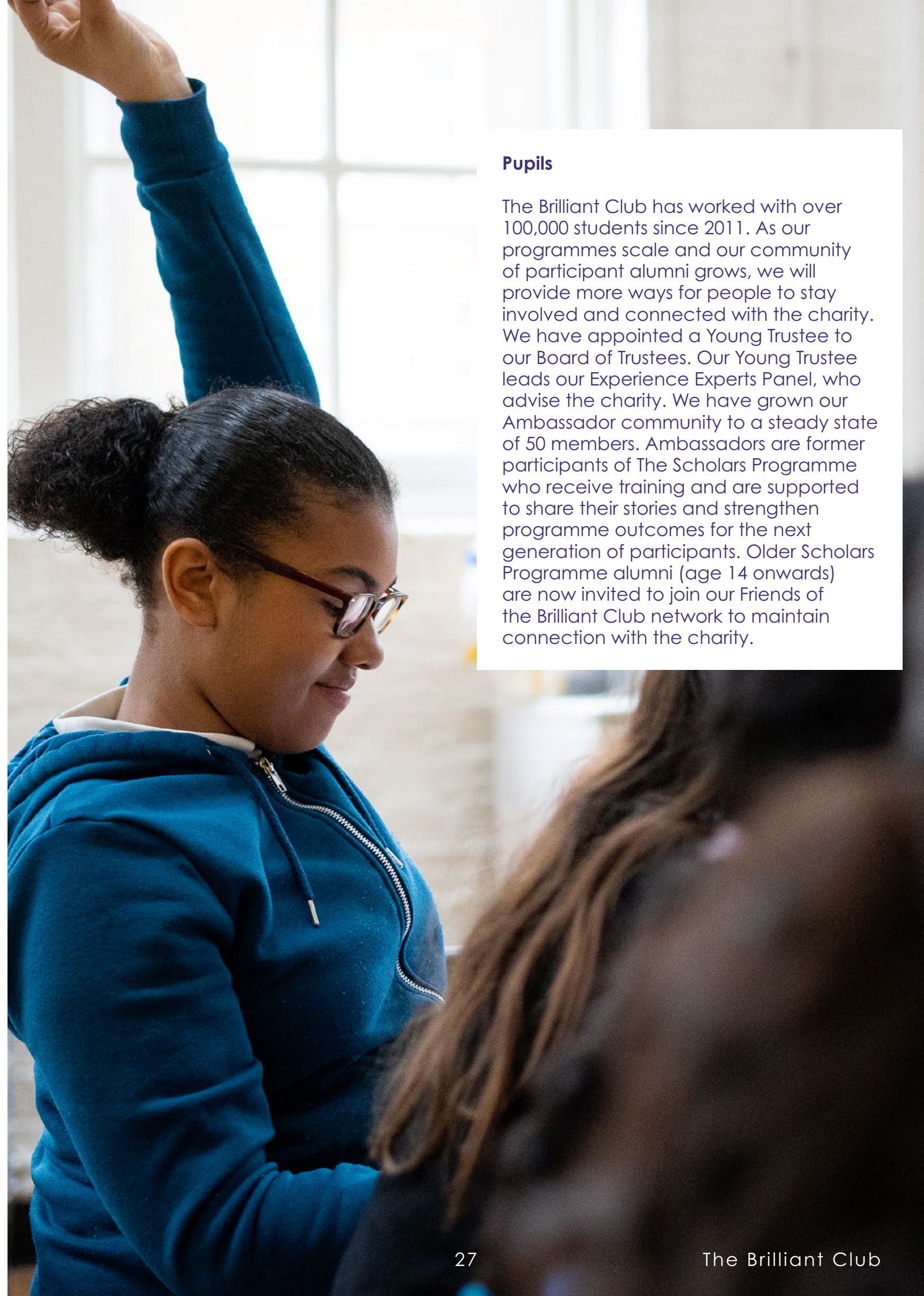
I became a Parent Power community organiser because I recognise the immense impact parents can have on shaping the future for our children and young people. As a parent, it ignites a deep sense of responsibility within me to create a better world for the next future generations. I am committed to mobilising parents and carers, strengthening their collective voice to advocate for improved education through a strong support system. I believe that supporting parents to have their own voice can drive positive change, fostering a sense of unity, resilience, and progress within our communities. Being a community organiser allows me to channel my love for my own children into a force for positive transformation that benefits all young people.

### **What has been your biggest Parent Power achievement?**

Our successful campaign to improve contextual admissions information provided by Cardiff University. This win not only brought in a change for young people to have improved access to higher education, but also inspired parents to become more engaged and realise the power that they have. It is a testament to the tangible impact parents can make when they unite with determination and a shared vision for a brighter future for their children and young people.

### **What excites you most about the future of Parent Power?**

The potential for widespread positive change. As parents become more organised, they become more powerful, and we can envision a future where our collective voices shape policies and systems to better serve our children and young people's needs. I'm enthusiastic about fostering a culture of engaged parents that transform local communities. With technology facilitating communication and collaboration, parents can share insights, strategies, and support on a larger scale. This can drive much-needed progress in higher education.



### **Pupils**

The Brilliant Club has worked with over 100,000 students since 2011. As our programmes scale and our community of participant alumni grows, we will provide more ways for people to stay involved and connected with the charity. We have appointed a Young Trustee to our Board of Trustees. Our Young Trustee leads our Experience Experts Panel, who advise the charity. We have grown our Ambassador community to a steady state of 50 members. Ambassadors are former participants of The Scholars Programme who receive training and are supported to share their stories and strengthen programme outcomes for the next generation of participants. Older Scholars Programme alumni (age 14 onwards) are now invited to join our Friends of the Brilliant Club network to maintain connection with the charity.



# Capabilities

The Brilliant Club's growth over the past decade has been underpinned by strong operations that have given us the workplace culture, financial stability and technology needed to scale our programmes. The Brilliant Club was placed in the top three of The Sunday Times Best Not-for-Profit Organisations to Work For in 2019 and 2020. The goals set out in this strategy are ambitious and will require an operational approach that matches the very best, not just in the charity sector but in the public and private sectors.

During the remaining years of the strategy, we will continue to consolidate and develop excellent operations across communications and finance and foster a dynamic and inclusive culture among staff at the charity.

To achieve programme scale, it is vital we transform our technology platforms so that they are fully aligned to the needs of the students, teachers and tutors using them. We have developed a digital transformation strategy to support our work in this area.



# Digital transformation

In our pursuit of ambitious goals at the charity, we recognise technology's pivotal role as an enabler. Our digital transformation strategy outlines our exciting plans to continue the work we've done, increasing our digital maturity year-on-year and taking advantage of the advancements in technology. For the remaining three years of the strategy, we're focused on achieving our 3 Cs: Capability, Customer-centricity and Culture.



## #1 Capability:

Our colleagues feel equipped with the skills, knowledge, and tools to harness the power of technology to drive operational efficiency and improve data-driven decision-making. We're able to understand and communicate the impact of decisions we're making at a strategic and operational level.

## #2 Customer-centricity:

Our technology is inclusive and user-friendly. The students, teachers, tutors and parents we work with can access what they need, when they need it and in a way that makes sense to them. It's easier for us to see what works, and what doesn't, and make changes to improve their experiences. Because of this, they want to work with us again.

## #3 Culture:

Our charity is committed to embracing technology. We see digital solutions and ways of working as integral to unlocking growth at the charity. We need to be agile and innovative in our decision-making to support the communities we serve in a landscape of turbulence and fast-paced technological growth.

With the support of our trusted partners and funders, we're fortunate to work with leading industry experts and cutting-edge technology as we move into the latter part of the strategy. These partnerships continue to enable us to deliver our roadmap of exciting projects using artificial intelligence, machine learning, and advanced automation that will improve operational efficiencies, drive decision-making, and create a more impactful experience for our students.



# Consultancy

In the final three years of the strategy, we will expand our research and evaluation consultancy service, working with more universities and mission-aligned organisations than ever before. We will do this in three ways:

1. Supporting universities to evaluate their student access and success activities. By providing higher education institutions with wrap-around evaluation support we will ensure they are equipped to evidence and articulate the impact of their access and success work. Our key evaluation activities include theory of change workshops, survey development and validation, and quasi-experimental methods and secondary data analysis. What's more, we can bring these findings and insights to life via impact reports, offering practical recommendations that can be embedded within access and success teams.

2. Supporting universities with their Access and Participation Plans. By offering an independent bird's eye view of the access and success landscape and engaging stakeholders on behalf of higher education institutions, we are able to provide strategic insights to help shape this work.
3. Collaborating with sector-wide evaluation bodies and policy organisations. A key priority is supporting projects that provide robust and practical evaluation resources to the university access and success sector, and which contribute to mobilising knowledge about evaluation methods in practice. A concrete example is continuing to collaborate with TASO, but we also want to expand our reach to work with different types of sector-level organisations in order to build our system-level impact.

The areas we have identified come from building our consultancy work over several years. Understanding what works and how it works, as well as what it means when it doesn't work, and what we can do about it, is pivotal to our ethos.



**“ The Brilliant Club were excellent to work with on this project. They worked with the team to align their outreach projects with attainment-related outcomes and worked alongside myself and the Manager of the Outreach Team to select the most appropriate measures for specific projects. The Brilliant Club were keen to ensure that we were making the best use of the toolkit and were not prescriptive in their approach. The evaluation training was excellent and clearly developed the confidence of those participating within it. Myself and colleagues in the Evaluation and Impact Team have used the toolkit with other projects, and colleagues are using the lessons learnt from the programme to redevelop our learning outcomes on Outreach projects moving forward. ”**

*Chris Bayes, Outreach and Student Success Manager - Lancaster University*



# 6. Measuring our progress

In achieving the goals set out in this strategy, we will make a significant contribution to reducing the overall long-term inequality in university access in the UK. We can achieve this by operating our programmes at scale and by influencing the system via communities and sharing our research expertise.

## Intermediate outcomes

A large part of our programmatic evaluation work focuses on the measurement of the charity's intermediate outcomes. The term 'intermediate outcomes' refers to outcomes that occur following a targeted intervention or activity, and may include changes in behaviour, attitude, knowledge, or skill.

It is important to identify empirical evidence that an intermediate outcome is associated with positive changes in the relevant long-term outcome. In the case of widening participation, this is often attainment and progression to higher education. However, more recently, success in higher education (e.g. retention, degree classification) has also been cited as a key long-term outcome, consistent with a more comprehensive definition of higher education access and success. Ensuring we have robust measures to assess intermediate outcomes is important in understanding the impact of widening participation activities.

Through our work with TASO, we have developed a set of validated outcome measures that can be used in university access and success programmes (TASO, 2023). The outcomes we have prioritised in our programmes include: academic self-efficacy, cognitive and metacognitive strategies, critical thinking, sense of belonging, subject knowledge and written communication. Based on our own evidence as well as wider evidence from the research literature, we are confident these outcomes will support less advantaged students throughout the student life cycle.

For example, in our student access work we focus on a broader set of academic skills needed to support school attainment (i.e. critical thinking, subject knowledge and written communication). In contrast, the academic support that we provide to university students will be specialised, securing deeper levels of learning (i.e. metacognitive strategies). Academic self-efficacy and sense of belonging will feature in both our access and success programmes, as we know these to be key drivers of student outcomes.

## Long-term outcomes

Beyond seeing short-term changes in intermediate outcomes, we are developing datasets and methods to evaluate the long-term impact of our programmes. Through relationships with HEAT (Higher Education Access Tracker) and the UCAS Outreach Evaluator, we are exploring ways of expanding the evaluation of our programmes for both younger and older sets of students. Through the HEAT dataset, we can track the educational continuation of Brilliant Club students by seeing if and where they go to university and their academic attainment while at university. Every year, our database through HEAT is growing as more students participate in The Brilliant Club programmes. We also conduct annual matched control group evaluations using the UCAS Outreach Evaluator service, which contributes to our causal evidence base.



## Reach

Our ambition is to support **100,000** state school pupils in the UK by giving them the opportunity to take part in university-style tutorials with a PhD researcher. In terms of system-level impact, this would mean that graduates of The Scholars Programme will make up a sizeable share of cohorts of state school pupils entering the most competitive UK universities. By the end of this strategy, we estimate that 1 in 14 state school pupils entering the most competitive UK universities in 2027 will have successfully completed The Scholars Programme. By the end of the decade, we expect **1 in 10** state school pupils entering competitive universities to be a Scholars Programme graduate. Based on our current metric, we are on track to achieve this. Further details of our target and impact modelling can be found in the Appendices.

We know that following the destinations of programme alumni is not enough. The time lag between pupils engaging with The Brilliant Club and then progressing to and through university can be substantial. Because of this time lag, for most students we will work with between 2021 and 2026 we will not know these long-term outcomes until several years after the completion of the strategy. We will continue to track the destinations of programme graduates and evaluate the impact of our programmes on students' likelihood of entering the most competitive universities for example, via the HEAT database or the UCAS Outreach Evaluator. But if we are to stay on track to achieve our ambition, we need to check our progress as we go. For this reason, we have identified two key goals:

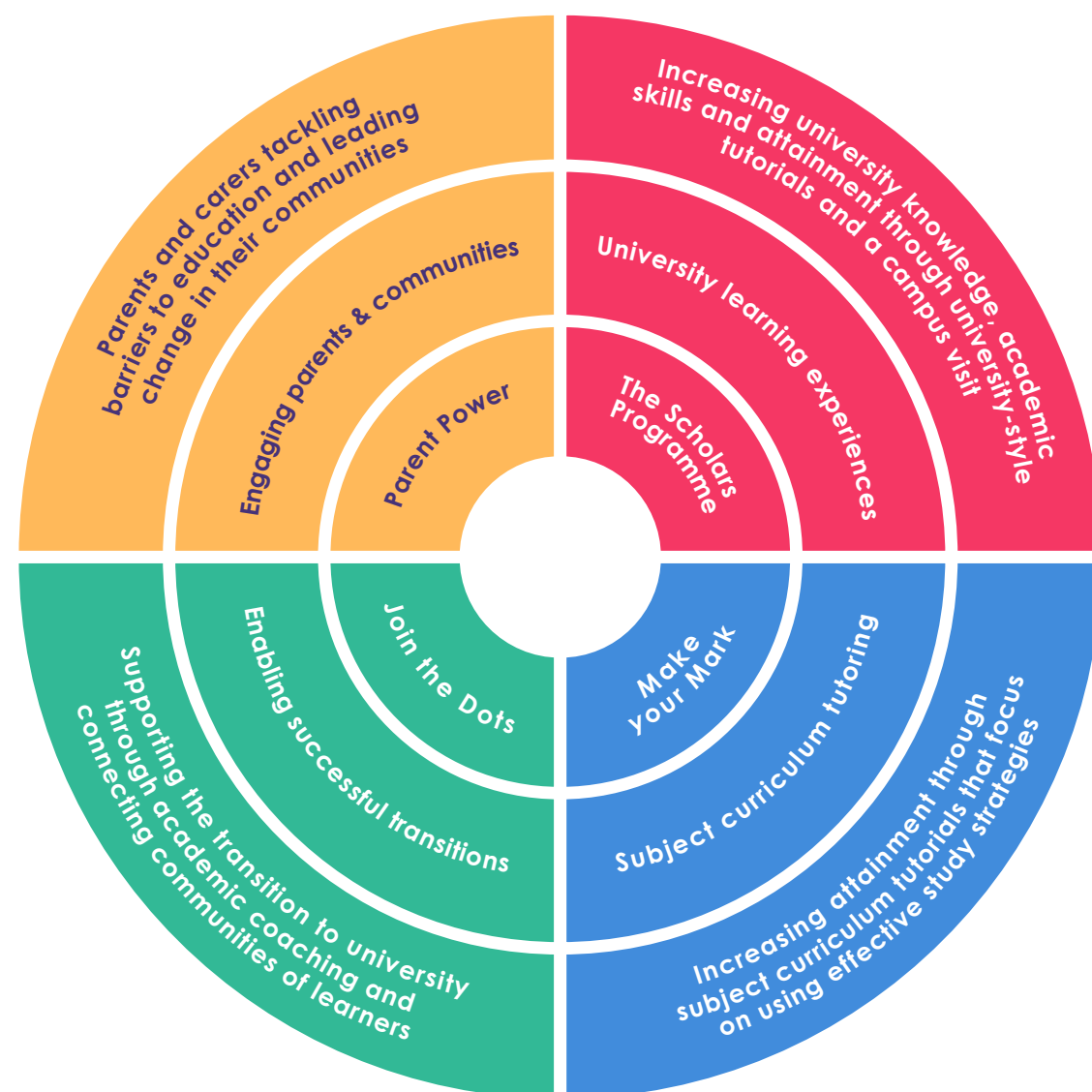
Goal 1: Access	Goal 2: Success
Support 100,000 pupils to access the most competitive universities via our access programmes by 2026.	Support 10,000 undergraduates in our partner universities to reach their full academic potential by 2026.

We will use these reach goals to check our progress, supplementing them with long-term outcomes data on university progression as we receive it.





# 7. Appendices



## Theories of change

Research and impact team

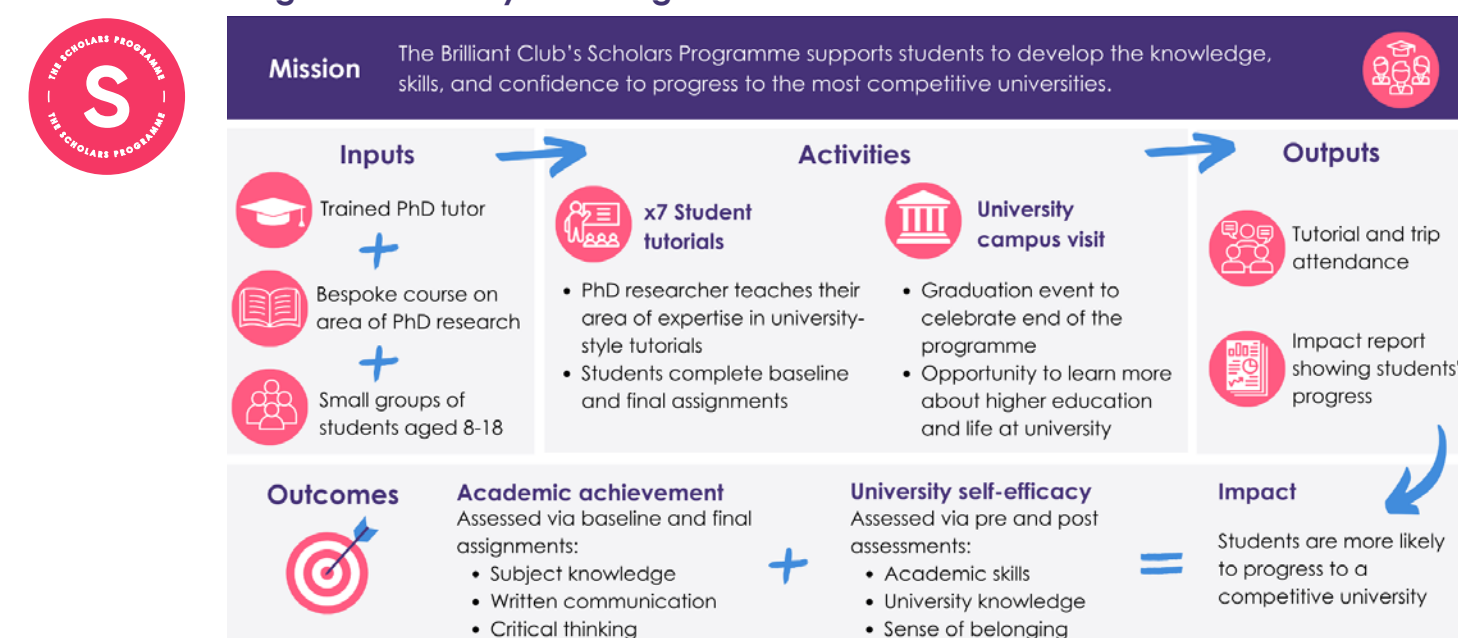
We have thought carefully about how we will work with young people and their communities to improve outcomes that are likely to reduce educational inequalities in higher education. To this end, we have developed theories of change for our programmes. Simply put, a theory of change lists the defining activities of a programme; the programme's intended short-term outcomes – what we call intermediate outcomes; and then the long-term outcomes or goals. It is through this logic chain model that one can hypothesise how a programme is having an impact, and then empirically test whether the programme is impacting the intended intermediate and long-term outcomes. In what follows, we present a theory of change for our university access and success programmes, which closely follows the Theory of Change models provided by TASO.

## The Scholars Programme

We have an established theory of change for The Scholars Programme from our previous strategy. Furthermore, we have clear evidence that The Scholars Programme is effective in supporting progression to the most competitive universities. Seven years of UCAS findings show that students who complete the programme are statistically significantly more likely to apply to and progress to a competitive university.

We also have a good understanding of the intermediate outcomes bringing about this long-term impact. For example, evidence from our internal programme evaluations shows that The Scholars Programme supports the development of critical thinking, subject knowledge and written communication skills (average percentage changes of 23–28%). A randomised controlled trial conducted by the University of Cambridge in 2019/20 showed that taking part in The Scholars Programme causes a statistically significant improvement in students' university self-efficacy – that is, the belief in one's ability to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to succeed at university.

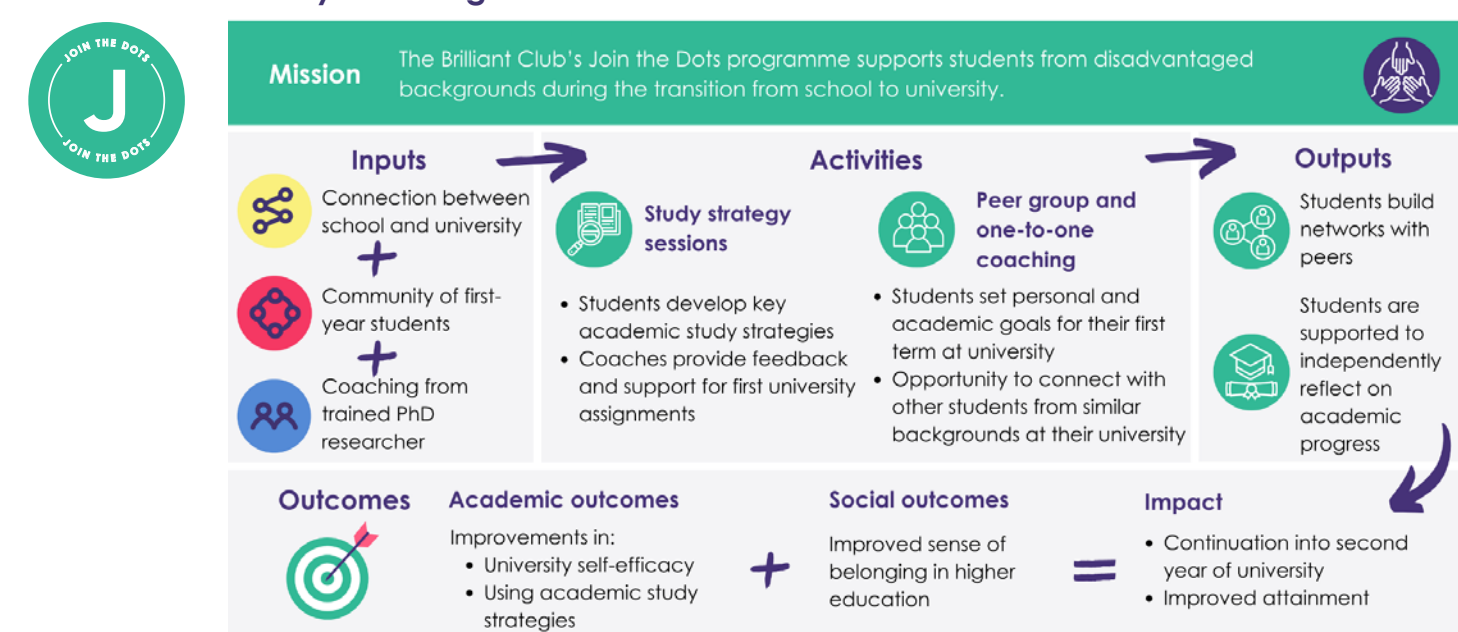
## The Scholars Programme Theory of Change



## Join the Dots

Join the Dots is a national programme built in collaboration with two partner schools on the principles of community, connections and coaching. It brings schools and colleges together with universities that co-create networks of support for students during the transition to university. It is targeted at students who are most likely to face barriers in making a successful transition to university, and who are at risk of missing out on the life-changing opportunities that come from successfully earning a degree from a competitive university. A PhD coach supports students in their first term at university through coaching (1-1 and peer group) and provides a link for students between their school and their university's support systems.

## Join the Dots Theory of Change

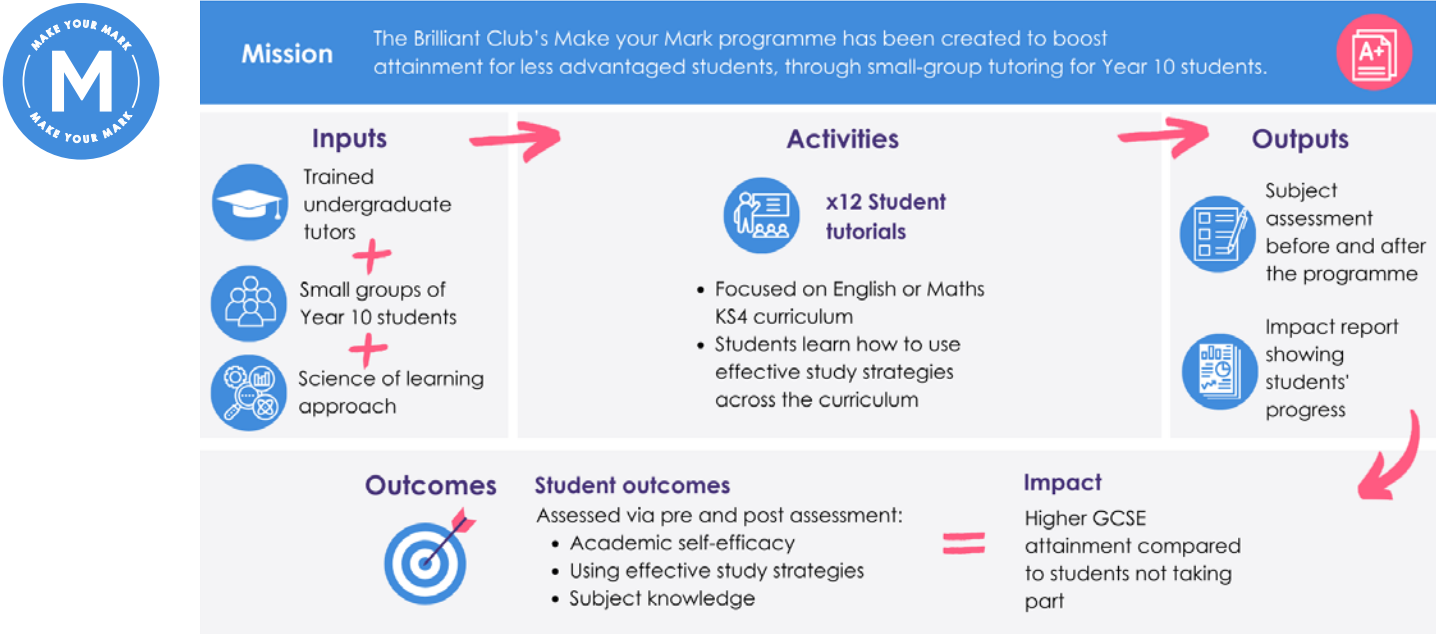




Make your Mark

In partnership with the University of Sussex, we have used evidence and school leader insights to design an attainment-raising programme, Make your Mark, that supports both students and teachers. The programme is targeted at Year 10 students because GCSE attainment is an important indicator of future participation in higher education. Students take part in English or Maths curriculum tutorials, led by an undergraduate tutor. The tutorials focus on teaching students study strategies, which have been shown to improve academic achievement and have a proven impact on attainment in other subjects.

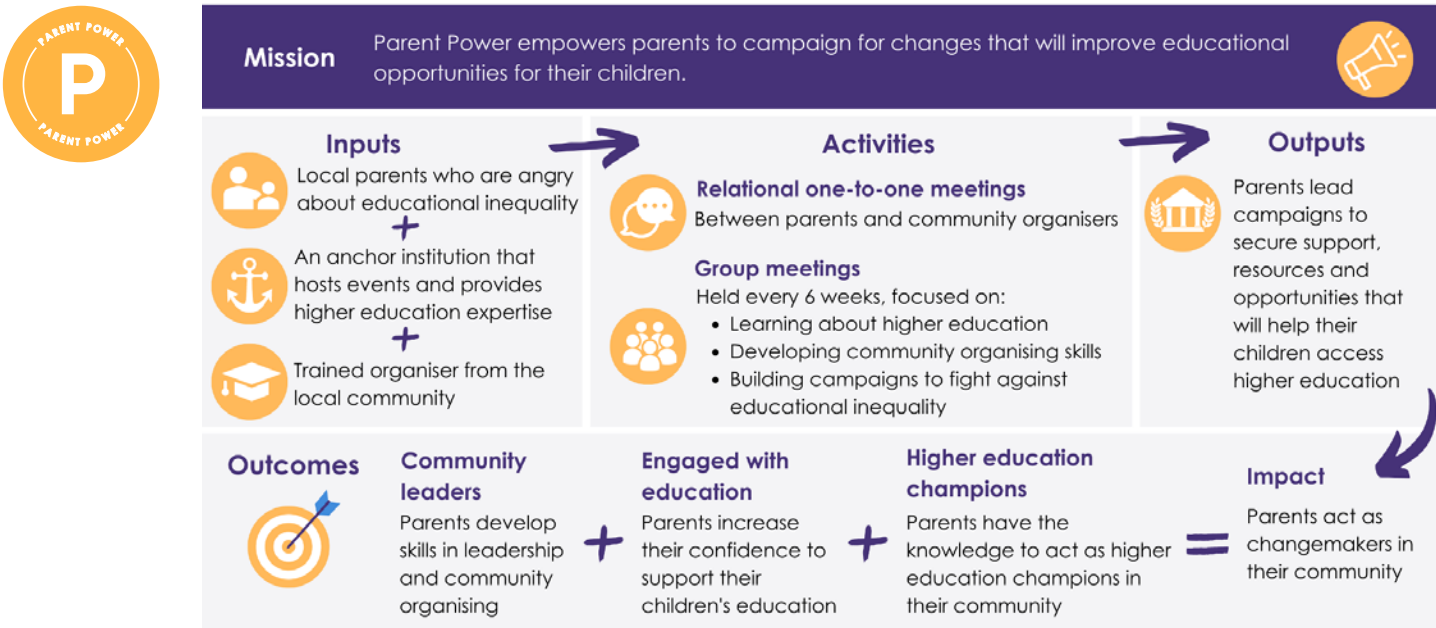
Make your Mark Theory of Change



Parent Power

Parent Power creates parent communities across the UK, each one supported by an anchor university. Parents and carers are empowered to make change to support their children's futures by coming together and using community organising skills to take action. The model gathers interest from parents through schools and universities. Our local, trained community organiser then brings parents and carers together for six weekly group meetings, during which they work together to identify common issues and activities that will benefit their communities, such as tailored visits to universities for young people, visits from university alumni, or training on tutoring, student finance or university access.

Parent Power Theory of Change



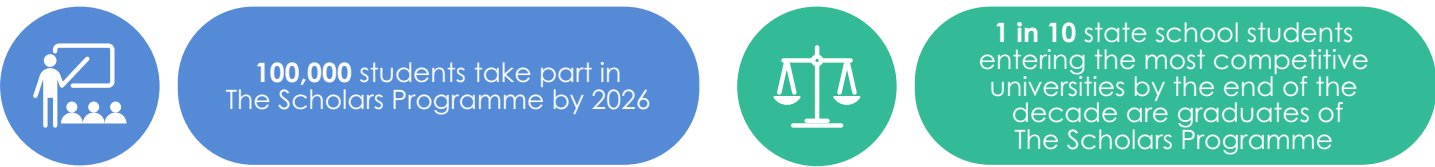
Modelling our targets and impact

Research and impact team

Last Updated: September 2023

We have quantified the difference we expect to make via The Scholars Programme over the five-year strategy in two ways. First, in terms of pupil reach: we will support **100,000** state school pupils in the UK by giving them the opportunity to take part in university-style tutorials with a PhD researcher. Second, in terms of system-level impact: **1 in 14** state school pupils in the UK who will enter one of the most competitive universities in 2027 will be a graduate of The Scholars Programme. By the end of the decade, we expect the share of Scholars Programme graduates among state school pupils entering competitive universities to be **1 in 10**.

This appendix explains our calculations for estimating pupil outcomes and system-level impact.



We've established an evidence base that shows The Scholars Programme is effective in supporting more pupils from the least advantaged backgrounds to enter the most competitive universities. From seven years of analysis (2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23) that tracked the applications of more than 3,000 Year 12 graduates of The Scholars Programme, we have learned that:

- 43% entered Department for Education 'top third' universities
- Scholars Programme graduates are significantly more likely to apply and progress to the most competitive universities than peers from similar backgrounds.
- The programme delivers results for participants from all backgrounds, including pupils from our target groups (Pupil Premium, Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index or no parental history of higher education)
- It's also effective in different parts of the country: Year 12 Scholars Programme graduates from schools in rural or coastal areas were significantly more likely to apply and progress to Department for Education 'top third' universities, as were pupils from low-participation areas (POLAR4 Q1/Q2) for most years of our analysis.

The problem section (page 9) shows there is a continuing need for efforts to increase fair access to the most competitive universities. That's why we will work with **100,000 pupils** from non-selective state schools on The Scholars Programme by 2026. The Scholars Programme has become the single biggest university access programme in the UK. But what difference will it make to the overall inequality in access to the most competitive universities in the UK that we outlined in the problem chapter?

To answer this question, we modelled several scenarios for how the gap in access to the most competitive universities will develop over the next decade and what share of state school entrants will be graduates of The Scholars Programme. **Our main scenario projects that by 2027, 1 in 14 state school pupils entering the most competitive UK universities will be graduates of The Scholars Programme.** By the end of the decade, we expect the share of Scholars Programme graduates among state school pupils entering competitive universities to go up to 1 in 10. The remainder of this section details the assumptions we have made in estimating these targets and impact.



1) How we estimate the number of Scholars Programme graduates entering the most competitive universities

The estimate is based on our pupil reach targets and UCAS STROBE evaluation of progression rates of previous cohorts of pupils completing The Scholars Programme.

Step 1: For the 100,000 pupils we aim to reach by 2026, we estimate the split by year groups in which they will take part in the programme, and we set year-group-level targets for how many will graduate from the programme by successfully completing their final assignment.

Step 2: From UCAS STROBE analysis we know that 52% of Year 12 Scholars Programme graduates progressed to a competitive university, 34% for Year 10, 38% for Year 9 and 33% for both Years 7 and 8. By competitive universities, we mean any university that was part of the Department for Education's top third or high-tariff list (DfE, 2020). For year groups without UCAS STROBE evaluation data, we make the following estimates: Year 5/Year 6 we assume a progression rate of 14%, slightly higher than the national 18-year-old progression rate to the most competitive universities.

Step 3: By multiplying the estimated number of Scholars Programme graduates (Step 1) with their year-group-specific estimated progression rate (Step 2), we calculate that more than 30,000 state school pupils who will have completed the Scholars Programme between 2021 and 2026 will enter one of the most competitive universities in the UK by 2034.

2) How we estimate the share of Scholars Programme graduates among all state school pupils entering the most competitive universities

Our aim is to estimate, each year, how many Scholars Programme graduates will enter competitive universities, as well as their share among the total population of state school pupils in the UK entering competitive universities. There's helpful sector data that we can use to build our forecast of the overall number of state school pupils who will enter competitive universities:

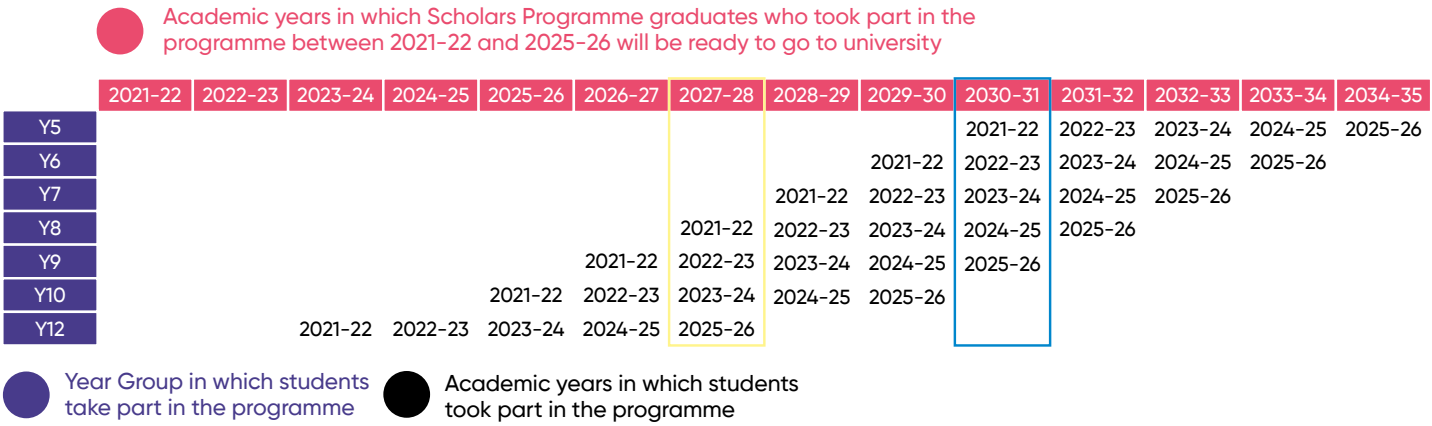
- The DfE publishes statistics on the number of A-level pupils in England from non-selective state schools and from private schools who go on to study at high-tariff universities. In 2020/21, 23% of A-level pupils at non-selective state schools progressed compared to 57% of private school pupils (DfE, 2023).
- The DfE forecasts pupil numbers in England up to 2030 (Office for National Statistics, 2022).
- The OfS has analysed the growth plans of universities in England and found that high-tariff universities planned to grow UK/EU student numbers by 5.2% over a period of four years between 2018 and 2022 (OfS, 2019).
- The OfS has analysed Access and Participation Plans of universities in England and found that high-tariff universities have set themselves targets to significantly increase equity in entry for pupils from areas where historically the fewest young people go to university (POLAR4 Q1) and areas with the highest participation rates (POLAR4 Q5) (OfS, 2022).

Three things follow from this sector data for our estimation. First, we model access to DfE high-tariff universities to be consistent with sector-level data. Second, as detailed sector-level data is available for England (but only less complete data for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), we use data about England as a starting point and extrapolate for the rest of the UK. Third, based on the OfS data, we assume that the gap between state and private school pupils entering high-tariff universities will decrease in future years, but the increase of state school pupils will be in line with expected places available at high-tariff universities.

We estimated the share of Scholars Programme graduates among all pupils from non-selective state schools for all years between 2021/22 and 2034/35, the year in which Year 5 pupils who will have taken part in the Scholars Programme in the final year of this strategy will be ready to go to university (see figure below).

In 2027/28, four cohorts of Scholars Programme graduates from the next five years will be ready for university, including pupils who did the programme in Year 12 (2025/26) and in Year 10 (2023/24), the two year groups for which we have UCAS STROBE evaluation data. For 2027/28, we estimate that 1 in 14 state school pupils entering the most competitive universities will be graduates of The Scholars Programme.

We also project impact by the end of the decade. In 2030/31, five cohorts of Scholars Programme graduates from the next five years will be ready for university. To estimate the number of all cohorts of Scholars Programme graduates, we also include projections about Year 10 pupils taking part in the programme in 2026/27 and Year 12 in 2028/29 by assuming that The Scholars Programme keeps growing after 2025/26, but at only half the growth rate target we've set for the final year of this strategy. For 2030/31, we estimate that 1 in 10 state school pupils entering the most competitive universities will be graduates of The Scholars Programme.



To account for the uncertainties in assumptions about the future we also took the following steps:

- We compared two strategies for extrapolating our estimate for England to the rest of the UK. Simply extrapolating by the overall population distribution (England: 84%, Scotland/Wales/Northern Ireland: 16%) leads to similar results as using the high-tariff university entry rate published by UCAS (England: 87%, Scotland/Wales/Northern Ireland: 13%).





### 3) How we will monitor progress towards these targets

Monitoring outcomes of university access interventions is an exercise in patience. For pupils in Year 12, the oldest group we work with, it takes two years to see their university destinations. For younger age groups, especially our work with primary schools, it takes much longer. This delay between running our programmes and seeing results means we won't know in 2026 if we have reached our outcomes target. It also means we need to consider intermediate outcomes to understand if we are on track and how to adjust our programmes to best support the young people we work with. Having said that, we will continuously update the assumptions that underlie our ambition model as new data comes in. For example, we will monitor the rate of pupils on The Scholars Programme who successfully graduate from the programme by submitting their final assignment and check if they are meeting the expectations we set out in our model. We will also use university destinations data from Scholars Programme cohorts prior to 2021 to update our assumptions about what share of programme graduates enter the most competitive universities.

### 4) Why we don't make causal assumptions in our outcomes and impact targets

In short, we considered it, but we think the data we currently have does not allow us to make estimates with confidence about the causal effect of the programme from 2021 to 2026. The UCAS benchmarking analysis shows that Year 12 Scholars Programme graduates apply and progress to the most competitive universities at significantly higher rates than their peers. We need to wait for the same analysis of younger age groups of Scholars Programme graduates to be able to confidently quantify the effect on progression to the most competitive universities for all the year groups we work with. Understanding the overall causal effect of The Scholars Programme on university entry remains an evaluation priority in the coming years, and we will continue to build on the emerging evidence we have from UCAS STROBE evaluations and the randomised controlled trial with the University of Cambridge.





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## 9. Acknowledgements

Our message 'Join the Club' is about coming together to deliver our new strategy as we support young people to access and succeed at the most competitive universities. Writing this strategy and setting our direction for the next five years has been a collaborative endeavour. It has only been possible because of a supportive and engaged club of people, who have helped us to get here. It would be impossible for us to acknowledge every colleague, partner, teacher, funder, pupil and parent that has contributed to this strategy. We appreciate the time, energy and enthusiasm that we have received throughout this process. We feel very lucky to have such a supportive club and community around us. We must, however, give special thanks to those who have played a particularly vital role in this process.

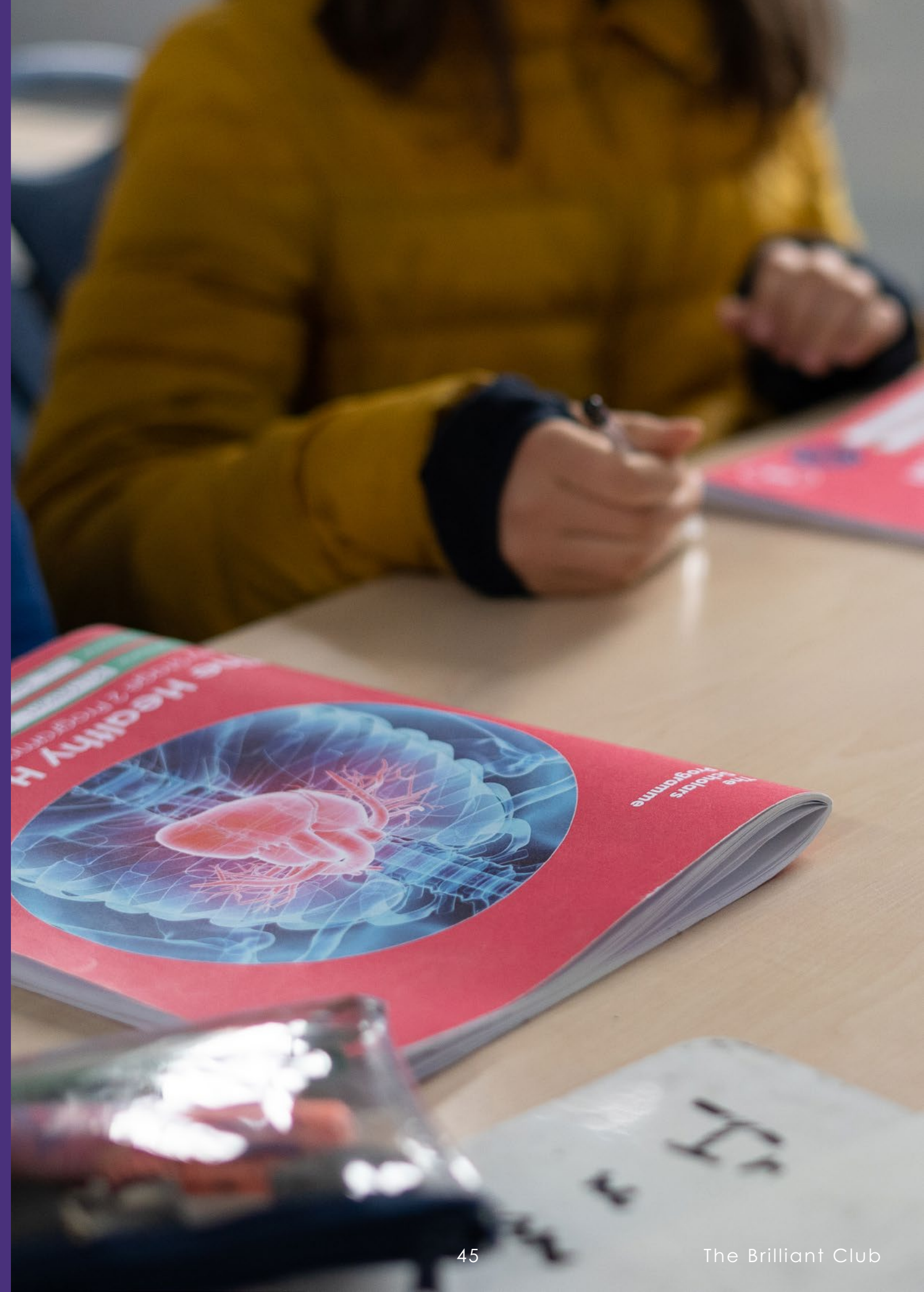
Our Board of Trustees, led by Dr Josie Valentine, have provided invaluable advice, challenge and support as we decided what the next five years would mean for The Brilliant Club.

We must also say a very special thank you to those who have set the foundations upon which we're building this strategy. In 2020, Dr Chris Wilson moved on from his role of CEO. While he may have left The Brilliant Club, he has remained a firm friend of the charity. His advice, support and enthusiasm for our new strategy have been much appreciated – and we thank him for the leadership he gave to the charity and the friendship he continues to provide. Dame Sue John also stepped down from her role as Chair of Trustees in 2020. Sue has been a champion of the charity since its inception. Her leadership of our Trustee Board and support of the CEOs during her tenure as Chair have made a significant impact on the charity's story so far. Thank you for everything over the past decade, Sue.

We also would like to thank the co-founders of The Brilliant Club, Jonny Sobczyk and Simon Coyle. When they founded The Brilliant Club in 2011, they did so because they felt passionate about supporting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to access the most competitive universities. The Brilliant Club started with a pilot supporting 19 pupils in one state school. Ten years later, we are working with over 22,000 young people each year, who attend over 1,000 schools and colleges in every nation and region of the UK. As we move into the next stage of The Brilliant Club's journey we would like to thank Jonny and Simon for co-founding The Brilliant Club and giving us such strong foundations to build upon.

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## 10. Work with us

### Programmes

**The Scholars Programme**  
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**Join the Dots**  
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**Parent Power**  
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### Partnership

We are always open to partnership conversations with universities and higher education organisations. Please contact  
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