Join the Dots
Programme Summary

In the UK today, graduates from the most competitive universities are more likely to access professional careers and have higher rates of life satisfaction\(^1\). On average, they will earn £10,000 more per year than their peers\(^2\). However, disadvantage does not disappear when students walk through the door of university. Data shows that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are three times more likely to miss out on a 1st or a 2:1 degree at university compared to their more advantaged peers\(^3\).

Furthermore, they are more at risk of withdrawing from university, with 8.9% of students from POLAR 4 neighbourhoods dropping out of university after their first year, compared to 6.3% of students from other areas\(^4\).

The Brilliant Club was approached by a group of schools who wanted to do more to support their students to make the transition to university, particularly those at risk of facing these additional barriers. Working closely with schools, universities and students, The Brilliant Club is leading a collaborative programme to join the dots between schools and universities, to support students to succeed in their next stage of their education journey.

Join the Dots will be a national programme built on the principles of community, connections and coaching, it will bring together universities and schools to develop a network of support for students during the transition to university. It will be 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.

Join the Dots approach

Join the Dots will bring together schools and universities to support students to make the transition to university. Participating schools and colleges will identify Year 13 students who meet the Join the Dots targeting criteria and have selected one of the programme’s partner universities as a firm choice. Students’ participation will be confirmed on results day, when they will be matched with a PhD Coach from the university they are going to. Each PhD Coach will support a group of eight students through a six-month transition programme. This includes school-university check ins, where the student, their teacher and their PhD Coach meet. These meetings are designed to create a space where students are supported by a teacher, who knows them well, to share concerns and set goals for the transition to university. Students will have 1:1 support from their PhD Coach, meet in small peer groups to share challenges and be part of a national network of students who are also making the transition to university.
Programme elements

Principle

Connections

The PhD Coach will be the link point between the student’s time at school and university. They will meet with the student and their teacher at a school-university check in at the beginning of the programme. This will act as a bridge between school and university to ensure that knowledge and support for students is not lost between Year 13 and first year. Prior to the meeting, the teacher will work with the student during the summer term to prepare them for starting university, guided by a Join the Dots resource pack.

At this first school-university check in, the teacher and the student will share what their experience of school has been like so far, and the student can share what their hopes and concerns are about making the transition to university. A recent study showed that supporting students to think about how their previous life experiences may affect their transition to university and to set intentions for their university experience before commencing their studies enabled students to engage more with peers and faculty when at university.

At the end of the programme, the student, PhD Coach and teacher come together again to reflect on the first term of university. This gives students the chance to look back on their original intentions, and subsequent progress. Showing students that they have successfully overcome difficult tasks and providing them with encouragement can increase their self-efficacy.

Throughout the programme, the PhD Coach will connect the student to the institution they are joining, making sure they know the different support services available and how to navigate the university.

Communities

The programme will foster peer-led communities, which is important for building a sense of belonging. The students will be part of a national network of students who come together at a Join the Dots launch event, giving them the opportunity to form networks, which first-generation students can struggle with. Students will then come together in peer groups of eight, facilitated by the PhD Coach, to reflect on their experiences of making the transition to university.

The importance of fostering a sense of belonging in the university community, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, is well evidenced. It leads to higher levels of persistence and ultimately results in better degree outcomes for individuals. Research shows that hearing from students from similar backgrounds and going through a similar transition can improve sense of belonging, because it normalises challenges and presents them as temporary.

Coaching

Through 1:1 coaching and the peer group sessions, PhD Coaches will support groups of eight students to develop their study strategies and academic self-efficacy. Session content will be guided by the student’s need to ensure students are developing strategies related to their academic discipline.

Using effective study strategies has been found to be the strongest predictors of university retention and are linked with improved achievement. Furthermore, providing encouragement, guidance, and positive feedback to students can help to develop their academic self-efficacy, especially when faced with difficult tasks.

Evaluating Join the Dots

Gathering evidence to understand the impact of Join the Dots is a fundamental part of the programme. The Brilliant Club has an established Research and Impact team, with over five years’ experience of evaluating its own national access programmes as well as working with higher education institutions to evaluate their local outreach activities.

The programme’s impact will be assessed by measuring intermediate and long-term outcomes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intermediate outcomes</th>
<th>Long-term outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>Second year continuation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic self-efficacy</td>
<td>Degree completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study strategy use</td>
<td>Degree outcomes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings from the Join the Dots programme will be published in a report in early 2023. It is hoped that the publication of our findings, along with formative insights and reflections, will support schools and universities to better understand what works when it comes to supporting students as they transition to university. We will also report back to university partners about how the programme has impacted their students.

References

5 https://www.gov.org.uk/research/education-benefits-summer-term

Join the Dots has been developed by The Brilliant Club in partnership with the Reach Foundation and London Academy of Excellence, Tottenham. With thanks to the following schools, universities and organisations, who have also supported and contributed to the development of Join the Dots:

• Appleton Academy
• Careers and Enterprise Company
• Citizens UK
• Dr Chris Wilson
• Kettering Academy
• King’s College London
• Kingston University
• Michael Slavinsky
• Teach First
• Royal Holloway, University of London
• The University of Manchester
• West London Zone

Thank you to Halé (University of Oxford), Jonathan (University of Southampton) and Sinan Haji (LSE) for sharing their experience as students to inform the programme’s development.

To find out more, please contact david.jones@thebrilliantclub.org.
We mobilise the PhD community to support students who are less advantaged to access the most competitive universities and succeed when they get there.

CONNECT WITH US

✉️ thebrilliantclub.org
Twitter @brilliantclub
✉️ hello@thebrilliantclub.org

Registered charity no: 1147771 (England and Wales) SC048774 (Scotland)

The Brilliant Club is a registered company limited by guarantee in England and Wales (no. 07986971)

We are a Living Wage Employer

Registered with the Fundraising Regulator