



The Scholars Programme

Evaluation Update 2022/23

The mission for our national access programme, [The Scholars Programme](#), is to support students from less advantaged backgrounds to secure a place at a competitive university. We do this by recruiting, training and placing PhD researchers in schools and colleges across the UK to deliver university-style learning.

As part of our [Join the Club](#) strategy, we are committed to understanding the impact of The Scholars Programme. This work is led by our research and impact team, who commission annual independent UCAS evaluations, conduct evaluations using data from the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT), and assess the skills and knowledge students develop from participating in the programme. In what follows, we provide an update on our latest UCAS evidence and reflect on some of the current challenges of evaluating university access programmes post the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Current Education Landscape

The education sector has faced unprecedented challenges over the past three years, with students and their families having to deal with:



Crucially, all these factors will impact university progression rates for several years to come, especially for students from less advantaged backgrounds who were most acutely affected by the pandemic and now the cost-of-living crisis. Meanwhile, the higher education sector is becoming increasingly competitive, particularly at the most selective institutions and courses. This is set to continue as UCAS predicts that there will be more than [one million applicants](#) by 2030.

In this ever-changing and increasingly volatile landscape, we know that it is more important than ever to evaluate the impact of university access work on progression to higher education. We also know that undertaking evaluation work has been complicated by changes in the education landscape and specifically the immediate legacy of the pandemic. For example, Year 12 students who progressed to university in 2022/23 received [Centre Assessed Grades for their GCSEs](#) and we know that these grades [differed in a number of ways](#) from GCSE grades that are awarded through exams, meaning the methodologies normally used to assess university progression have been affected – we discuss this in light of our latest independent UCAS evaluation.

“The Covid-19 pandemic has meant that we have been dealing with a myriad of factors that have impacted evaluation work across the university access sector, and education sector, more widely. As a result, any evaluations that draw upon data from the pandemic period should be understood within this context alone. At UCAS, we will continue to share sector level insights about the effects of the pandemic on HE progression and the implications moving forward – including the fact that by 2030, we are expected to see up to [1 million undergraduate applicants](#).” **Ben Jordan, Head of Policy, UCAS**



This UCAS evaluation was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic – therefore, caution should be taken when generalising the findings outside of this context. For information about the impact of our programme, beyond the pandemic, you can read our [six previous UCAS evaluations](#).

Independent UCAS Evaluation

For the last seven years, we have worked with UCAS to independently evaluate the impact of The Scholars Programme on progression to higher education. Our latest evaluation is based on students who progressed to university in the Autumn 2022/23 term, and the context of this evaluation is very different to previous years because of the impact of the pandemic on education.

Methodology: UCAS compared the university applications of over 800 Year 12 students who took part in The Scholars Programme in 2020/21 (both online and in-person) to a matched control group. UCAS created the comparison group by matching on several key variables, including ethnicity, postcode and GCSE attainment. From this, we can see whether Scholars Programme graduates are significantly more likely to progress to a competitive university than similar students who did not take part in the programme.

This type of evidence is considered one of the most robust evaluation methods for understanding causal impact. However, we should keep in mind that because students were matched on Centre Assessed Grades as opposed to grades that students received through sitting GCSEs, the precision of the matching may have been impacted. Nonetheless, we still think it is important that we continue to run evaluations of this nature, and over time we will be able to report on longitudinal trends as well.

Findings: We found that Year 12 students who complete The Scholars Programme, including those eligible for Pupil Premium, are **statistically significantly more likely to apply to a competitive university** than students from similar backgrounds, and as a result they also progress to a competitive university at a higher rate.



From further breakdown of the UCAS evaluation we found that:

- 9 in 10** 9 in 10 Scholars Programme graduates that applied to university applied to a competitive one.
- 1 in 2** 1 in 2 students eligible for Pupil Premium who graduated from The Scholars Programme progressed to a competitive university.
- x2** Scholars Programme graduates, including those eligible for Pupil Premium, applied to Oxford and Cambridge universities at more than double the rate of their peers from similar backgrounds.
- 37% vs 30%** Scholars Programme graduates living in POLAR Q1/Q2 areas progressed to a competitive university at a higher rate than students from similar backgrounds.
- 1 in 5** 21 out of each 100 (equivalent to 1 in 5) Scholars Programme graduates that progressed to a competitive university might not have done otherwise.

Higher Education Access Tracker

The Brilliant Club is a member of the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT). HEAT is a national collaboration between Higher Education outreach providers that allows members to track students who participate in widening participation activities into university.




HEAT is an important part of how we evaluate The Scholars Programme. For the first time, this year we are publishing headline findings from our analysis of the university destinations of more than 2,000 Scholars Programme participants who took part in the programme between 2016/17 and 2018/19.

We find that the elements of the programme **most associated with progression to a competitive university** are:



Continuous Programme Improvements

We continuously seek ways to understand and improve the impact of The Scholars Programme. Three ways we have done this are:

<p>Improving support for students</p>  <p>We introduced Support Predictors to help us identify Scholars Programme students who need the most support. Support Predictors use machine learning to predict a student's likelihood of submitting a final assignment, using carefully selected data features. With the use of Support Predictors, we can concentrate additional interventions and help students successfully complete The Scholars Programme.</p>	<p>Making better use of qualitative feedback</p>  <p>We have built an app that allows Brilliant Club staff to interactively browse and search written answers to our surveys. The tool allows staff to search for 'trending' words, identify the sentiment of feedback and code and export written responses. This has made the way we use qualitative data far more accessible and efficient, meaning we can understand feedback from our stakeholders better.</p>	<p>Engaging parents</p>  <p>We know that parental engagement has a positive impact on student outcomes from academic research. Following a successful trial, which found that emailing parents had a positive association with student outcomes on The Scholars Programme, we now email all parents and carers who provide their contact details at key points during the programme.</p>
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Reflections and Future Evaluation

The challenges of evaluating university progression following the pandemic should not be understated, and we know that other education and university access organisations have been impacted in a similar way when running these types of evaluations. Crucially, we believe that it is important to share the latest UCAS findings and the methodological challenges – especially because there will be a long-lasting impact of the pandemic on evaluation work. Moving forward, we remain committed to the continuous improvement of The Scholars Programme, and as well as our external evaluations offering a snapshot in time of our progress, we have robust measures in place to measure the impact of the programme throughout the year, including intermediate outcomes for students that measure their progress for key learning skills and behaviours linked to university progression and success.

If you would like to speak with us further about the UCAS evaluation or our work more widely, please contact: lauren.bellaera@thebrilliantclub.org