



The Scholars Programme: How we target students effectively

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Ensuring that individuals from underrepresented groups can engage in activities that will increase their likelihood of progressing to higher education is a founding principle of university access work. However, targeting students is complicated as a range of measures exist and there are no universally agreed-upon criteria, which reflects the intricate and geographical nature of disadvantage, as well as the shifting policy landscape (Benson-Eggleton, 2022; Office for Students, 2023).

This means that organisations supporting university access must make choices about how to best support the regional and national geographies that they work in. The Brilliant Club's [Scholars Programme](#) is the UK's largest university access programme and utilises a 'basket of measures' approach to identify students who will benefit significantly from university access programmes. We use the following measures of disadvantage to target students for our university access programme:

- 1) **Students who are eligible for Pupil Premium, this includes those who are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) with the last six years.** It should be noted that most students who are eligible for Pupil Premium are also FSM children and therefore these two criteria overlap significantly. For example, in 2022/23, 91% of Pupil Premium students were FSM students (Roberts, 2023).
- 2) **Students living in a postcode within the bottom 40% according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IDACI).** Based on Office for Students (OfS) data, most students who are from the bottom 40% IDACI are also found in the bottom 40% of their higher education access measure showing the relationship between low IDACI scores and progression to higher education (Office for Students, 2022).
- 3) **Students whose parents have no history of higher education in the UK.** Research indicates that one of the strongest predictors of a child's likelihood to pursue higher education is whether their parents have a university degree (Adamecz-Volgyi et al., 2021).

On average, 85% of students in The Scholars Programme meet at least one of these criteria, 50% meet two or more. Importantly, we do not require all students to meet targeting criteria for disadvantaged groups in our programmes because we know that there are many students who need support, who do not meet a certain measure. Similarly, there are a diverse range of schools and geographical regions where representation cannot be captured by a simple set of targets. For example, in some rural, farming communities, students may not live in a deprived area or receive Pupil Premium but due to the remoteness from higher education institutions and/or dominance of local industry, progression to university doesn't seem like an option for many young people in the area. In what follows, we discuss our targeting measures in more detail and how they support students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.



Pupil Premium

The Scholars Programme targets students who are Pupil Premium eligible. The Pupil Premium scheme extends support beyond those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) by encompassing students who have been eligible for FSM within the last six years, as well as those who are currently or have previously been in care, and children from military families (Roberts, 2023). This criterion captures a wide spectrum of students who encounter barriers to higher education. However, it's important to note that if a student is FSM eligible then that student also is eligible for Pupil Premium resulting in a high overlap of these two measures.

The rationale behind targeting students with past FSM eligibility within a six-year window is particularly compelling. It acknowledges the fluctuating financial situations of families that hover around the FSM eligibility threshold. A slight increase in family income above the FSM cutoff does not necessarily equate to a substantial change in a child's socio-economic environment. Thus, using Pupil Premium as a criterion for targeting students for university access programs ensures that support reaches those who experience marginal fluctuations in family income yet continue to face similar challenges as their FSM-eligible peers. Additionally, only 14% of care experienced students and 24% military family students' progress to higher education progression rates compared to 29% of FSM eligible students (Goodwin, 2023; Office for Students, 2020; Department for Education, 2023).

Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI)

Targeting students living in the bottom 40% of IDACI postcodes is a critical strategy for The Scholars Programme aim at addressing socio-economic disparities in higher education. The IDACI measure serves as a robust proxy for socio-economic disadvantage by highlighting areas where high proportions of children are living in economically deprived families. Based on OfS data, most students who are from the bottom 40% IDACI are also found in the bottom 40% of their higher education access measure showing the poor relationship between low IDACI scores and progression to higher education (Office for Students, 2022). The Sutton Trust also highlights it as a measure of deprivation which is aligned with educational attainment (Jerrim, 2021). Furthermore, the bottom 40% cutoff we use aligns with the Sutton Trust's empirical analysis of where the cutoff for IDACI should be to measure disadvantaged students (37%).

We are aware that universities are also interested in other postcode measures of disadvantage (e.g., Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), tracking underrepresentation by area (TUNDRA), etc.) and that all postcode measures have their strengths and weaknesses, and these often vary by geography too. This is why we are committed to reporting to our university partners on the postcode measures that most closely support their work and can provide statistics on other measures on request.



No parental history of higher education

The Scholars Programme aims to support students whose parents do not have a history of higher education. Research underscores the pivotal role of parental education in determining a child's educational attainment. For instance, using data from the National Pupil Database for students born in 1989/90, Adamecz-Volgyi et al. (2021) found that the lack of parental higher education background is the most significant predictor of university attendance, surpassing other factors such as special educational needs (SEN), FSM eligibility or socioeconomic status, before considering prior academic achievement.

Students whose parents do not have a higher education background often meet multiple criteria of interest to widening participation programmes. A recent study highlights that first-generation students are more likely to come from minority backgrounds and have attended state-funded schools. They are also less likely to attend selective universities, which often require high entry grades, compared to their peers whose parents attended university (100 Faces, 2024).

Additionally, the Social Mobility Commission in their "State of the Nation 2023" report discusses a clear association between parental education and children's educational levels (Social Mobility Commission, 2023). Despite an overall increase in educational mobility within the UK, they explain that notable gaps persist. The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) emphasises the importance of widening access for first-generation students to highly selective universities (Coombs, 2022). A 2021 survey involving more than 10,000 university students indicated that first-generation students had a 50% lower likelihood of attending a Russell Group university compared to their counterparts with university-educated parents (Coombs, 2022). Furthermore, HESA researchers found that first-in-family university students were less likely to achieve a first or upper second, within deciles of HESA's deprivation measure, than students whose parents have a higher education qualification (HESA, 2023).

Distinctiveness of measures and their intersections

Using multiple measures to target students for The Scholars Programme ensures that we capture the various dimensions of disadvantage that affect higher education progression. Rather than seeking an exact match across criteria, we aim to address the different challenges students face. This includes economic hardship reflected in the Pupil Premium (linked to parental income and occupation), geographical disparities measured by IDACI, and lack of family experience in higher education. This broad approach ensures we support a diverse group of students, acknowledging that disadvantage manifests in various ways regionally across the country.

Moreover, the variation in educational progression between FSM eligible students and those who are not is significantly wider in some regions than others, with a 25-percentage point gap in the North East compared to a 13-percentage point gap in Inner London for the 2021/22 academic year. This regional disparity, alongside the evolving nature of educational gaps across different areas, as reported by the



Education Policy Institute, emphasises the importance of geographically targeted interventions as opposed to a one size fits all approach (Education Policy Institute, 2023).

Disadvantage interrelates with other forms of underrepresentation, and we have most recently seen this in the Office for Students' work on intersectionality (Office for Students, 2022). The importance of intersectionality is why, alongside our targeting criteria, we monitor other demographic variables (e.g., gender, ethnicity) for students that take part The Scholars Programme. We know that how we target students for university access programmes will evolve as new data comes available and that, at the core of this, there will be an emphasis on how criterion interact together. Therefore, using a basket of measures helps us to ensure we are directly addressing the complexities of university access and fully acknowledging the contextual factors and experiences of the students that we seek to support.



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