

Topic briefing: Raising attainment in schools and colleges to widen participation

This briefing aims to stimulate thinking and discussion about how universities and colleges can improve higher education access and participation by helping to raise attainment in schools. We hope it will support and encourage evidence-led approaches tailored to institutions’ own contexts and circumstances.

It gives an overview of why higher education providers with access agreements and access and participation plans should support the attainment of school pupils from underrepresented backgrounds. It also highlights the work currently being done through access agreements, gives effective practice examples and includes questions for universities and colleges to consider when developing their work.

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Why is raising attainment in schools and colleges important?

There is a clear link between academic attainment in schools and colleges, and access to higher education. As the charity TeachFirst highlights in its report ‘Beyond access: Getting to university and succeeding there’ (2017)¹: “No matter how much support is provided to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, they will not get into university unless they reach the required academic standards.”

When disadvantaged students achieve the same levels of attainment as their advantaged peers at age 16, they are almost equally likely to go to higher education². However, only one-third of disadvantaged students get the GCSE grades³ associated with higher education entry, compared to two-thirds of their advantaged peers. In addition, those from disadvantaged groups are often not able to access as many opportunities to develop the specialist skills⁴ required in the admissions processes of some providers, such as in art, music or agriculture.

¹ www.teachfirst.org.uk/reports/beyond-access

² <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/#attainmentks4>

³ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/#linkwithdisadvantage>

⁴ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/#specialistskills>

Greater action to support the prior attainment of those from underrepresented groups is therefore vital in order to achieve further, faster change in fair access and participation to higher education. As the Social Mobility Advisory Group recommended in its final report (2016)⁵, there should be “a greater focus on outreach activities by universities, colleges and employers to support attainment in schools”.

Universities and colleges have identified prior educational attainment, and the need to work with students earlier in their education, as a key target area for fair access to higher education. For example, the University of Oxford recently said that: “On the whole, the areas sending few students to Oxford tend also to be the areas with high levels of disadvantage and low levels of attainment in schools. Rectifying this is going to be a long journey that requires huge, joined-up effort across society – including from leading universities like Oxford – to address serious inequalities.”⁶

OfS’s guidance on raising attainment

Because prior attainment is a key barrier to higher education for students from disadvantaged groups, especially to higher tariff institutions, we expect higher education providers to put measures in place to address this barrier. In his foreword to the regulatory framework consultation⁷, Sir Michael Barber, OfS Chair, states: “On social mobility, there is a huge opportunity to do much better. The creation of the OfS brings a new opportunity to strengthen ties between schools, colleges and universities and to think innovatively about diverse pathways to success in work and life.”

The OfS’s guidance on 2019-20 access and participation plans⁸ included an expectation that all providers set out how they will work with schools and colleges to support raising attainment for those from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. This includes consideration of those from areas where there is less higher education provision, such as rural and coastal regions.

We expect this work to include activities where the primary aim is to support the attainment of disadvantaged students that is over and above business as usual for the university or college. These activities should be strategic, collaborative and sustained. Our expectation is that all universities and colleges will deliver ambitious and impactful activity that has been shown to be associated with the increased attainment of students from the disadvantaged groups which they are targeting.

Evidence about raising attainment and widening participation

Academic attainment at school is associated with disadvantage

Students who are eligible for free school meals, or who have been in care, achieve significantly worse outcomes at GCSE level than their peers in three key measures, as shown in Table 1 below.

⁵ www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/working-in-partnership-enabling-social-mobility-in-higher-education.aspx

⁶ www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-41664459

⁷ <https://consult.education.gov.uk/higher-education-regulatory-framework/>

⁸ www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-guidance-on-access-and-participation-plans-for-2019-20/

Table 1 GCSE achievements of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 by disadvantage status (free school meal eligibility and children in care), 2015-16

| | Average Attainment 8 score per pupil | Percentage of pupils achieving A*-C in English & maths GCSEs | Percentage of pupils achieving 5+ GCSEs A*-C or equivalent including English & maths GCSEs |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Disadvantaged pupils | 41.1 | 43.1% | 37.2% |
| Advantaged pupils | 53.3 | 70.6% | 65.1% |

Source: Department for Education, Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England: 2015 to 2016 (2017)⁹

Furthermore, the difference between performance for students whose parents who attended higher education and those whose parents had no qualifications is two GCSE grades and four full extra GCSE entries (Department for Education, 'Influences on students' GCSE attainment and progress at age 16', 2014)¹⁰.

Disadvantaged pupils have less access to specialist skills tuition

Many specialist universities and colleges do not have academic entry requirements and use auditions or other measures of ability in their admissions processes. But pupils from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups often have fewer opportunities to attain the required level in these skills, making them less likely to have equal opportunity to fairly compete for entry to these institutions.

For example, a report by the University of Warwick and several cultural leaders for the creative industries has highlighted that in state schools, specialist arts teachers have declined by 11 per cent (The Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value, 'Enriching Britain: culture, creativity and growth', 2015)¹¹. And a report by The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) has found that children who had access to private music lessons as a child were more likely to continue learning music than those who did not (ABRSM, 'Making music: teaching, learning and playing in the UK', 2014)¹².

Attainment at Key Stage 4 is a key predictor of participation in higher education

Between 2006 and 2014, students with higher GCSE grades were more likely to apply to higher education, as shown in Figure 1 below. For example, in 2014 the application rate for those with a GCSE point score of 40 (equivalent to eight C grades; slightly below the England average) was around 30 per cent compared to 80 per cent for those with 56 points (equivalent to eight A grades).

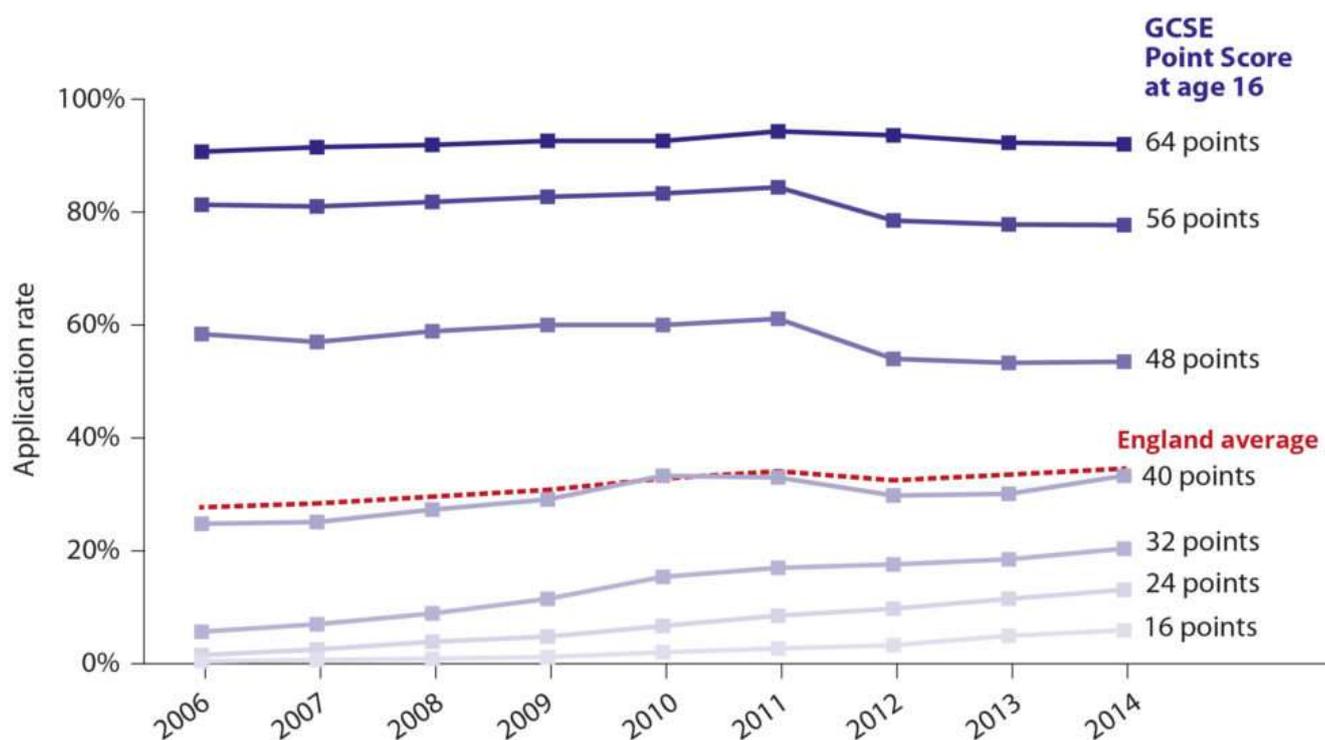
⁹ www.gov.uk/government/statistics/revised-gcse-and-equivalent-results-in-england-2015-to-2016

¹⁰ http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/20875/1/RR352_-_Influences_on_Students_GCSE_Attainment_and_Progress_at_Age_16.pdf

¹¹ <https://warwick.ac.uk/research/warwickcommission/futureculture/finalreport/>

¹² <https://gb.abrsm.org/en/making-music/preface/>

Figure 1 Application rates of 18 year-olds in England by selected GCSE attainment profiles



Source: UCAS Analysis note 2014/03 (2014)¹³

Also, GCSE attainment is related to the likelihood of going into higher education, particularly for high-tariff institutions, regardless of Key Stage 2 or post-16 attainment (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 'Socio-economic, ethnic and gender differences in higher education participation', 2015)¹⁴.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies research 'Family background and university success' (2016)¹⁵ found that there was 37 percentage points raw difference in higher education participation between the richest and poorest 20 per cent of state school students. In addition, attainment at Key Stage 4 could explain almost all of the difference in higher education participation since there was almost zero difference in participation rates between those with the same GCSE attainment (as shown in Figure 2 below).

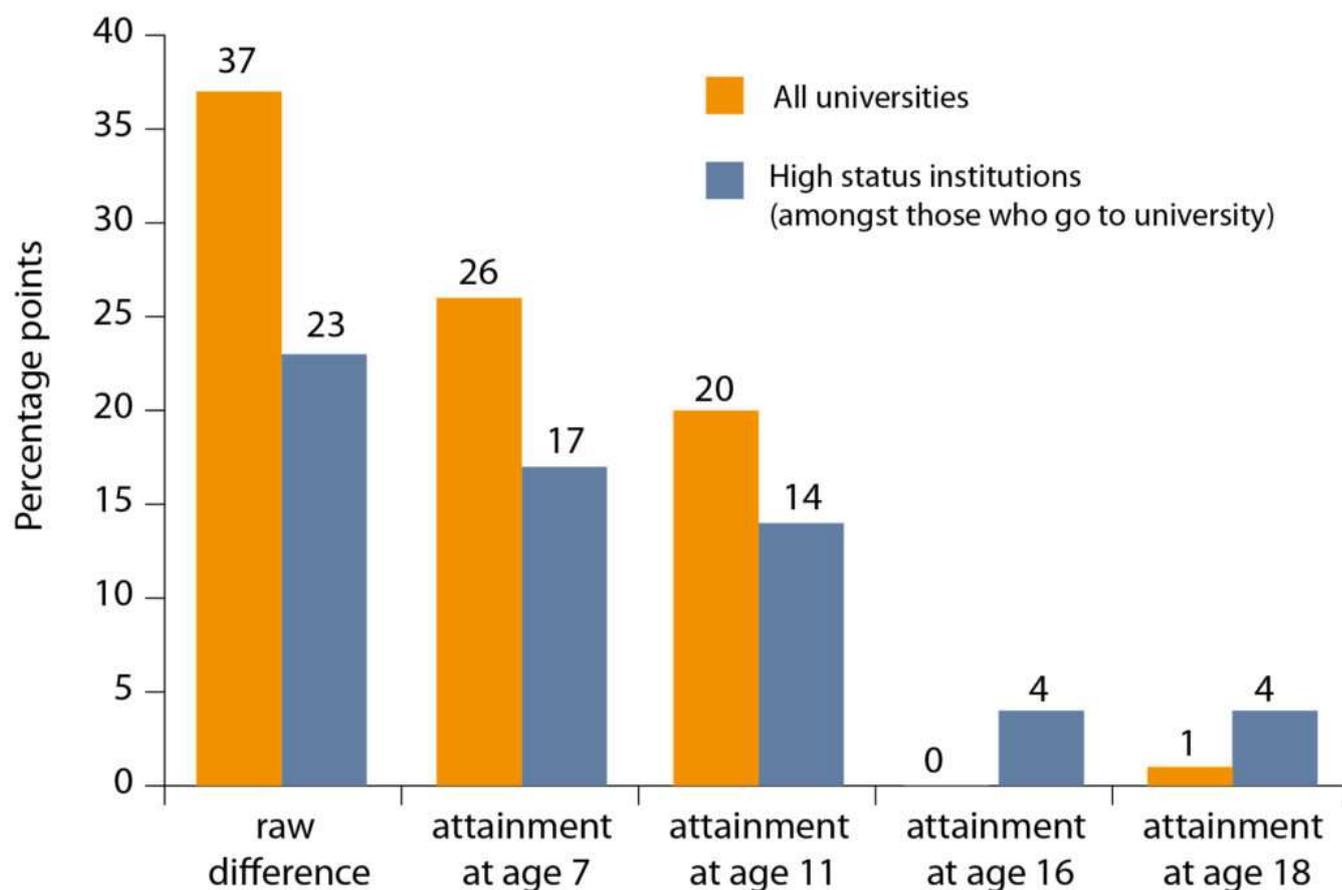
This means that regardless of background, students with comparable GCSE grades are equally likely to go to higher education, and attainment at Key Stage 4 is a key predictor of participation in higher education.

¹³ www.ucas.com/corporate/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-analysis-notes

¹⁴ www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/474273/BIS-15-85-socio-economic-ethnic-and-gender-differences.pdf

¹⁵ www.ifs.org.uk/publications/8799

Figure 2 Differences in the percentage of state school students from the richest and poorest 20 per cent of families who go to university, controlling for attainment at different ages



Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies 'Family background and university success' (2016)¹⁶

Prior academic attainment has also been highlighted as a key barrier to higher education for specific target groups, such as White British students from low socio-economic status backgrounds (DFE, 'Education Committee – first report: underachievement in education by white working class children', 2014)¹⁷, children in care (REES Centre, 'The educational progress of looked after children in England: linking care and educational data', 2015)¹⁸, and for some black and minority ethnic groups (BIS Report, 'Higher education participation: socio-economic, ethnic and gender differences – BIS research paper 186', 2015)¹⁹.

Academic attainment is a key predictor of success in higher education

Students with better A-levels do better in higher education. More than 80 per cent of students with grades AAB or above gain a first or upper-second degree compared to approximately 50 per cent or less of those with CCC or lower (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 'Differences in degree outcomes: key findings', 2014)²⁰.

¹⁶ www.ifs.org.uk/publications/8799

¹⁷ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/142/14202.htm>

¹⁸ <http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/research/educational-progress-of-looked-after-children/>

¹⁹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-participation-socio-economic-ethnic-and-gender-differences

²⁰ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201403/>

What is already being done through access agreements?

In 2018-19 access agreements²¹, universities and colleges described a wide variety of approaches to supporting the attainment of underrepresented groups to contribute towards the longer term goals of improving fair access and participation, and many used multiple activity types. Broadly, the approaches taken by higher education providers are as follows.

School sponsorship, establishing a free school, mathematics schools, or formal partnership arrangements with schools

The Government hopes and expects more universities will come forward to be involved in school sponsorship and free schools (Source: written answer by Justine Greening MP to William Wragg MP, 27 June 2017²²), including more mathematics schools, although support need not be limited to those means.

Types of activities include:

- more enrichment opportunities for students (outreach)
- sharing of resources/scalability (e.g. finance, HR) to enable more resource to be available for teaching and learning
- governance, management and advice
- training for teachers or senior staff
- support with curriculum design
- facilitating collaborative networks.

For example:

- Bridgwater and Taunton College²³
- The University of Chichester²⁴
- Newcastle University²⁵
- The University of Kent²⁶
- The University of Oxford²⁷
- The University of Surrey²⁸
- The University of Worcester²⁹

²¹ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511111521tf/https://www.offa.org.uk/access-agreements/>

²² www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-questions-answers/?page=1&max=20&questiontype=AllQuestions&house=commons%2clords&uin=714

²³ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/case-study-bridgwater-taunton-college/>

²⁴ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/case-study-university-chichester/>

²⁵ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/case-study-newcastle-university/>

²⁶ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/case-study-university-kent/>

²⁷ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/case-study-oxford-university/>

²⁸ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/case-study-university-surrey/>

²⁹ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/case-study-university-worcester/>

Sustained, collaborative, and strategic outreach

Types of activity include:

- summer schools
- mentoring/tutoring
- supplementary schools
- academic enrichment programmes
- access to university facilities
- collaborative partnerships
- involvement of parents/carers.

For example:

- The Urban Scholars Programme³⁰ at Brunel University is a Saturday school for students aged 12-18, selected from local secondary schools, which provides research-based supplementary education. The programme works with 31 schools and 300 scholars, of which 250 students are drawn from eight local authorities.
- Imperial College London's Wohl Reach Out Lab³¹ provides additional facilities to deliver practical programmes and an experience of university for pupils aged six to 18, specifically from schools without ready access to laboratories. The university has been forming links with 'hub' schools with strong science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) facilities or STEM curriculum expertise, which then cascade the newly developed STEM activities to their wider group of affiliated secondary and primary schools that face challenges in delivering high-quality STEM teaching and whose students are thus disadvantaged in progressing to STEM study in higher education.
- Kingston University has a co-ordinated and sustained approach to raising attainment with a focus on STEM subjects. This includes sponsorship of the Kingston Academy³², a specialist STEM school; the university also employs a full-time STEM outreach offer who works on activity in its STEM Outreach Centre and mobile 'Labs in a Lorry'³³ activity aligned with the school curriculum.
- The University of the Arts London and The University for the Creative Arts both offer portfolio support to prospective students, as this is an important aspect of the application process for higher education courses in art and design.

Support and development networks for university or college staff who are school governors

For example:

The University of Manchester places staff and alumni in state schools as governors to support the leadership and strategic direction of schools and colleges. There are 514 governors in the network and university staff contribute a range of skills. Over 70 per cent of the schools that the programme works with have above-average numbers of students receiving free school meals.

³⁰ www.brunel.ac.uk/education/talent-development-programmes/urban-scholars

³¹ www.imperial.ac.uk/be-inspired/student-recruitment-and-outreach/schools-and-colleges/wohl-reach-out-lab/

³² www.thekingstonacademy.org/

³³ www.kingston.ac.uk/schools-and-colleges/book-activities/lab-in-a-lorry/

Partnerships with third sector organisations that offer outreach provision

Types of activities include:

- supplementary schools
- tutoring programmes
- homework clubs
- use of learning centres.

For example:

- The Royal College of Music is working in partnership with the charity IntoUniversity³⁴ and the music services of local authorities, having found that local authority partners are best able to identify students from disadvantaged backgrounds and are the key to successful projects. This partnership work has included setting up the Tri-Borough Music Hub³⁵ and has led to new partnerships with schools at both primary and secondary level, and new partnerships with other arts organisations. The Royal College of Music is also conducting an independent research study, collaboratively with another conservatoire, to explore the social demographics of young people who are on pathways to conservatoire study.
- The Access Project³⁶
- The Brilliant Club³⁷

Other approaches

A variety of other activities are described in access agreements, such as employer engagement, foundation provision which is specifically targeted towards disadvantaged students and over and above normal business, and academic research ('Regulatory Advice 6: Good practice advice on the preparation of access and participation plans for 2019-20'³⁸ details when research is countable as part of your access and participation plan investment). All of these approaches formed part of wider raising attainment strategies.

For example:

- City College Plymouth and the University of St Mark and St John have sponsored the Plymouth Studio School³⁹. They are working in partnership with city employers to offer a range of academic, vocational and professional qualifications in sport, leisure and tourism and hospitality and event management.
- The London School of Economics and Political Science are commissioning a literature review to support their understanding and inform the direction of their raising attainment for widening participation activities.

³⁴ <https://intouniversity.org/>

³⁵ www.triboroughmusicclub.org/

³⁶ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/case-study-access-project/>

³⁷ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/case-study-brilliant-club/>

³⁸ www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1105/ofs2018_06.pdf

³⁹ www.plymouthstudioschool.co.uk/

Effective approaches

A model for raising attainment to improve access and participation in higher education

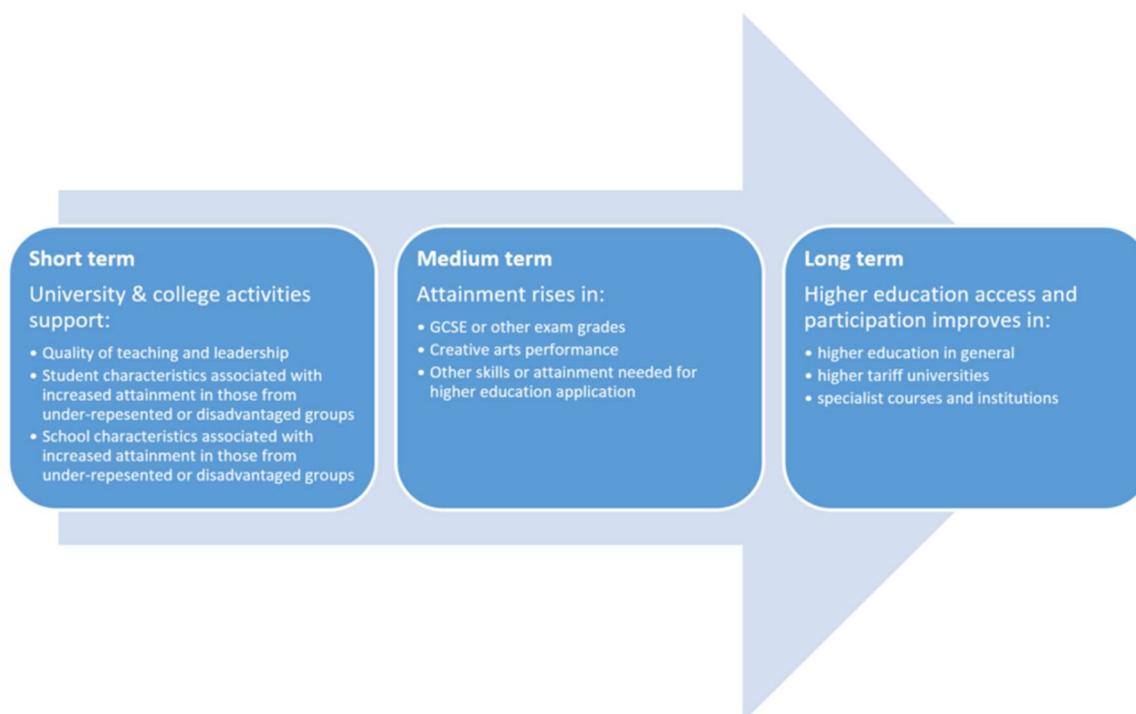
The most appropriate ways for an individual higher education provider to raise attainment in schools and colleges will depend on the provider's context and aims. Before deciding on an approach to raising attainment, higher education providers may wish to conduct a review to understand the key issues in their context, for example by using local and national data and research, and understanding how this area of work aligns with the institutional mission.

The key factor is that whatever the approach a provider takes, it should be strategic and well evidenced, as this makes it more likely to have the greatest impact. Below is a model framework designed to support higher education providers in designing such an approach.

How universities' and colleges' activities contribute to higher education access

Evidence shows that raised attainment supports better access and participation⁴⁰. Therefore, activities that contribute to raising attainment support the longer term goal of improving fair access and participation, as shown in this diagram. (Here, 'short', 'medium' and 'long term' refer to the relative stages in supporting access to higher education, rather than specific lengths of time.)

Figure 3 The link between raising attainment and higher education access and participation



A university or college may contribute to this process in a variety of ways. Attainment, in academic or specialist skills (the middle column of Figure 3), is influenced by a variety of factors such as subject knowledge, confidence, parental/community influence, teacher expectation, peer support,

⁴⁰ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/#attainmentks4>

quality of teaching, access to resources, exposure to stress and time spent studying, which can be supported by higher education providers' activities (the left-hand column of Figure 3).

To ensure that their interventions are having the desired impact on attainment, universities and colleges should be able to explain which short term (left-hand column) factors they are targeting to support medium term (middle column) attainment goals, and why. They might do this by referring to research about which factors influence attainment, and potentially use some of the tools from the research to measure impact. Widening participation teams may wish to draw on the expertise of academic staff when deciding which factors to target and how to measure them.

To aid this, below is a summary of evidence demonstrating the shorter term factors that have been shown to be associated with attainment. Here, these factors are broadly categorised into teacher, student, and whole school characteristics.

Providing support for quality of teaching and leadership

The Sutton Trust research 'Improving the impact of teachers on pupil achievement in the UK – interim findings' (2011)⁴¹ found that "for poor pupils the difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher is a whole year's learning". In a summary of evidence, the Sutton Trust report 'What makes great teaching?' (2014)⁴² found six teacher characteristics associated with increased attainment which includes a strong pedagogical knowledge. And research by the London School of Economics found that individual teacher retention has a small impact on the attainment of pupils, but this has a larger cumulative effect in disadvantaged schools where staff turnover is high (Gibbons, S, Scrutinio, V and Telhaj, S 'Does teacher turnover affect young people's academic achievement?' CentrePiece 500, 2017)⁴³.

Examples of activities that universities and colleges might engage in to support improved quality of teaching and leadership are continuing professional development, activities to aid teacher retention, and facilitating collaboration using teacher and leadership networks.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has found that initial teacher training can be a powerful way of instilling the use of evidence in professional practice early on. Its partner organisation in Australia, Evidence for Learning, has collaborated with Monash University to inform trainee teachers on effective use of evidence.

The Foundation has also conducted research that has found that passive dissemination of evidence about 'what works' is not enough to change teacher behaviour: more intensive support is needed to transform evidence into practice. In response the EEF has set up a network of Research Schools which share best practice. It advises that collaborating across existing networks of local schools that universities may have can be a powerful way of making sure that schools are supported by trusted local stakeholders when implementing a new approach.

The book 'Overcoming Disadvantage in Education' by Stephen Gorard and Beng Huat See (2014) reviews evidence to conclude which are the most promising approaches to supporting the attainment of disadvantaged students, and highlights where there is a need for further research.

Helping to improve student characteristics associated with increased attainment for disadvantaged groups

Reports by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation⁴⁴ summarise research about which attitudes, behaviours and other factors are associated with increased attainment.

⁴¹ www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/improving-impact-teachers-pupil-achievement-uk-interim-findings/

⁴² www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/great-teaching/

⁴³ <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cp500.pdf>

⁴⁴ www.jrf.org.uk/people/education?f%5B0%5D=field_taxonomy_article_type%3A1

The Education and Employers research 'The impact of career development activities on PISA mathematics tests' (2017)⁴⁵ demonstrates a link between employer engagement in schools and attainment. Therefore, they are encouraging universities and colleges to ask staff and alumni to engage with their Inspiring the Future⁴⁶ programme, or volunteer as school governors.

An example of the type of activity that universities and colleges might engage in to support schools in improving these areas is The Access Project⁴⁷, which focuses on knowledge, independence, motivation and attitude to learning.

Addressing school or college characteristics associated with increased attainment for disadvantaged groups

The Inspiring Governance⁴⁸ website, funded by the Department for Education, includes a range of resources, such as the Framework for Governance, which supports governing bodies to evaluate their effectiveness.

The Department for Education reports 'Influences on students' development at age 16' (2014)⁴⁹ and 'Influences on students' GCSE attainment and progress at age 16' (2014)⁵⁰ highlight that school characteristics such as attendance, high quality early years provision, attitudes and behaviours, and amount of time spent on homework are all associated with higher attainment.

The EEF teaching and learning⁵¹ and pupil engagement and behaviours⁵² toolkits and guidance reports⁵³ summarise evidence about some whole school approaches to learning and pupil engagement which may have an impact on attainment. The EEF has conducted randomised controlled trials of over 100 structured interventions that seek to improve pupil attainment and has a list of interventions that have been found to be promising⁵⁴ in these trials. Other resources such as the Evidence 4 Impact database⁵⁵ provide similar summaries of other programmes.

Universities and colleges might support work to improve issues such as curriculum development, attitudes of teachers and learners, or support scalability and thus free up schools' resources to focus on teaching and learning.

Evaluating the impact of attainment-raising activity

Higher education providers need to ensure that resources put into activities are truly having a positive impact on the medium term goals of raising attainment and, in the longer term, on higher education access and participation. However, as longer term outcomes, by their nature, take a number of years to become apparent, it is important to demonstrate an understanding of how short term activities are connected to longer term improvements in access and participation – in other words, how the provider's approach is operating strategically in the framework shown in Figure 3. Providers may then report on the rationale, shorter term outcomes, and future targets in yearly assessments. These aims, objectives and methods of evaluation should ideally be developed at

⁴⁵ www.educationandemployers.org/research/the-impact-of-career-development-activities-on-pisa-mathematics-tests-an-analysis-of-data-from-the-organisation-for-economic-co-operation-and-development-oecd/

⁴⁶ www.inspiringthefuture.org/

⁴⁷ <http://web.archive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/2018051112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/case-study-access-project/>

⁴⁸ www.inspiringgovernance.org/

⁴⁹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/influences-on-students-development-at-age-16

⁵⁰ [http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/20875/1/RR352 -
Influences on Students GCSE Attainment and Progress at Age 16.pdf](http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/20875/1/RR352_-_Influences_on_Students_GCSE_Attainment_and_Progress_at_Age_16.pdf)

⁵¹ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/resources/teaching-learning-toolkit/>

⁵² <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/school-themes/pupil-engagement-behaviour/>

⁵³ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/resources/guidance-reports/>

⁵⁴ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/tools/promising/>

⁵⁵ www.evidence4impact.org.uk/

the start of a new programme or reassessment of an existing programme where the primary objective is to raise attainment.

The specific aims used, the metrics chosen to evaluate success, and rationale for choosing these, will depend on an institution's own context and available resource, but some examples are:

| Aims | Example metrics |
|--|---|
| Long term – based around access to higher education | Entry to higher education compared to comparison groups Tracking using the Higher Education Access Tracker ⁵⁶ Progression into conservatoire education |
| Medium term – related to improved attainment in the provider's selection method | Improved academic grades (particularly in teacher, Key Stage 2 or GCSE assessments) Improved Ofsted rating Impact on Progress 8 Measurable improved subject knowledge Improved audition results |
| Short term – related to student, teacher or school characteristics which have been evidenced to be associated with increased attainment in the selection method for the provider | Whole school metrics e.g. attendance, quality of governance Coursework outcomes Student feedback and focus groups demonstrating impact Feedback from teachers demonstrating impact Portfolio review Testing of increased subject knowledge |

The OfS appreciates that it is difficult to fully isolate the effects of any one factor on attainment, and that evaluation is likely to be measuring a higher education provider's contribution to attainment raising alongside other influences. However, higher education providers have a responsibility to be ambitious about addressing this issue and to try to evaluate whether activity is having the desired impact. Universities and colleges may evaluate their work by using comparison groups, or qualitatively by addressing the questions "what difference did the intervention make?" or "what would have happened if the intervention did not occur?".

The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) commissioned research⁵⁷ to explore how providers can effectively evaluate the effect of pre-16 outreach on attainment. This has been taken forward by the Office for Students, and the findings will be published in 2018. In the meantime, for further information on how to effectively evaluate, please see guidance from OFFA⁵⁸ and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)⁵⁹. Nesta⁶⁰ also offers a variety of tools and resources available to support the development and evaluation of successful projects and partnerships.

Where universities and colleges plan to fund or deliver untested programmes, they can contribute to building the knowledge base by evaluating their approaches and sharing findings. Many universities will already have expertise in evaluation, but the EEF will also share expertise and resources that it has gathered through running randomised control trials in schools, including information on school recruitment and using pupil data.

⁵⁶ <http://heat.ac.uk/>

⁵⁷ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/egp/improving-evaluation-outreach/pre-16-outreach/>

⁵⁸ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/egp/improving-evaluation-outreach/>

⁵⁹ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/tools/diy-guide/getting-started/>

⁶⁰ <http://www.nesta.org.uk/centre-social-action-innovation-fund-evaluations/nesta-standards-evidence>

Examples of organisations using this model:

- University of Surrey⁶¹
- Brilliant Club⁶²
- The Access Project⁶³

Successful collaboration

The School-University Partnerships Initiative report School-university partnerships: fulfilling the potential (2014) identifies five key factors for creating a successful and sustainable partnerships. These are:

- all partners have equal value, including university/college (academic) and school (teacher) voice
- strategic leadership from both organisations to drive the project
- a strategic plan and relevance for both organisations. The report summarises that “successful partnerships are often design-led and focused on solving locally defined problems through an enquiry approach: bringing together academic research, practitioner knowledge and priorities, and commercial expertise in a sustained programme of activity”
- creating a “third space” with shared values away from the cultural values of either organisation
- material resource.

Therefore, when developing or adapting an initiative in partnership with other organisations, you should consider starting with a high level conversation between all your potential partners to understand their motivations, seek opportunities, and align expectations. Stakeholders may include, but are not limited to, universities and colleges (widening participation professionals, academics, students researching education, senior leadership, and initial teacher training providers), schools, the local authority, relevant employers, and third sector organisations.

Raising attainment activities are not about replacing existing school and college expertise. It is about using universities’ and colleges’ resources and expertise to enhance existing provision through effective collaboration, and allowing higher education providers to have greater insight into the broader education sector to better understand the experiences and needs of students from disadvantaged groups.

The EEF has a wealth of information and resources for higher education providers about using their skills, knowledge and expertise to enhance attainment-raising activity in schools and colleges through collaboration.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England publication ‘Higher education sponsored academies, university technical colleges and free schools’ (2016)⁶⁴ provides an overview of existing university and college school sponsorship arrangements, and a guide about what to consider if you are establishing your own arrangement.

⁶¹ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/case-study-university-surrey/>

⁶² <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/case-study-brilliant-club/>

⁶³ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-raising-attainment/case-study-access-project/>

⁶⁴

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112330/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2016/heschools/>

A strategic and sustained approach

The TeachFirst reports 'Impossible? Social mobility and the seemingly unbreakable class ceiling' (2017)⁶⁵ and 'Beyond access: Getting to university and succeeding there' (2017)⁶⁶ highlighted, respectively, the barriers disadvantaged students face throughout their education and the need for universities and colleges to support students before the age of 16, including at key points such as when students are making subject choices aged 14.

Furthermore, for outreach specifically, the Higher Education Access Tracker's 'Key Stage 4 attainment-raising impact assessment' (2017)⁶⁷ suggests that regardless of POLAR3 quintile, participants who took part in multiple outreach interventions were more likely to get five A* to C at GCSE than those who participated in only one intervention. The approach a provider takes may include multiple co-ordinated activities over the student lifecycle which all contribute to the same longer term outcomes of improved attainment and higher education access in those from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups.

Questions to consider

1. What are the key issues relating to the attainment of disadvantaged students given the context of your institution?
2. Given your institutional context, what are your shorter term (factors associated with attainment), intermediate (attainment related), and longer term (higher education access and participation) goals?
 - Can you explain why your activities relate to the increased attainment of disadvantaged students?
 - Can you demonstrate the impact of your activities on the shorter and intermediate term goals?
 - Are you going to invest in any research to support this area of work?
3. Are you being ambitious, and collaborating with other organisations to ensure effective, and wide reaching targeting of interventions?
 - How can you ensure that those in areas less well served by higher education, such as rural and coastal regions are supported to achieve their attainment potential?
4. Will you adapt existing initiatives, and/or develop new initiatives to support the attainment of disadvantaged groups?
5. What tools are you using to evaluate impact on the short, intermediate and long term outcomes?
 - Can you use expertise from your institution, existing research, or external stakeholders to support the evaluation of your activities?
 - Have you consulted the OFFA, Nesta, or Education Endowment Foundation standards of evaluation?

⁶⁵ www.teachfirst.org.uk/reports/impossible

⁶⁶ www.teachfirst.org.uk/reports/beyond-access

⁶⁷ www.heat.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/HEAT-Aggregate-KS4-Attainment-Raising-Infographic.pdf