

Achieving Fair Access: Removing Barriers, Realising Potential

A report from

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February 2012

A report and proposals for Fair University Access

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MANIFESTO RECOMMENDATIONS

The Fair Access to University Group exists to advocate measures which support fair, open and meritocratic access to higher education. This facilitates the creation of a higher education system which both promotes social mobility and recognises talent, thereby ensuring that the most able students, regardless of academic or social background, are able to access the UK's top institutions without the need to compromise on institutional autonomy or academic excellence.

The Group believes that universities do have a key role to play in widening and broadening access, particularly in the provision of information which allows students to make informed choices before choosing A-level subjects. However a focus purely at the moment of university admission risks diverting attention from the root causes of skewed access. The most important interventions must in fact be made throughout the secondary education system because the stage where pupils come to fill out their UCAS forms is simply too late.

THIS MANIFESTO PROPOSES:

- Urgently reviewing the powers and focus of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA)
- Raising the standard of the teaching profession through publication of teachers' qualifications and greater financial incentives for high achievers to go into teaching
- Supporting the outreach initiatives of top universities and facilitating the sharing of best practice amongst these universities
- Encouraging the study of rigorous subjects by publishing not only the entry requirements for university courses but also the qualifications of successful applicants
- Abolishing the "UCAS points" system
- Encouraging schools to publish information on the number of students applying and being accepted to top universities and which subjects these students studied - using this to rank schools according to pupils' higher education destinations
- Supporting efforts to encourage wider uptake of STEM subjects and protecting the study of these and other strategically important subjects
- Tackling the misconceptions propagated during the tuition fee protests about the unaffordability of university attendance at the school level
- Expanding the Teach-First programme which places graduates from top universities in schools based in disadvantaged areas
- Greater face-to-face interaction from the National Careers Service with young people
- Focusing greater attention on the issue of access to postgraduate education and sustainable provision for research funding
- Considering a partnership with independent schools to recruit bright FSM pupils funded jointly through a direct grant or passport funding system

BACKGROUND

The Coalition Government is right to make relative social mobility a policy priority, tackling unfairness at every stage of life to ensure that each individual has the opportunity to fulfil their potential, regardless of the socio-economic background to which they were born.

With graduates earning 77% more than non-graduates, higher education has a large role to play within this strategy.¹ University participation can and should provide students from low income backgrounds with a route into the professions and thus enable them to reach a higher income bracket. Put simply, fair access is critically important for the life chances of young people from deprived backgrounds.

At present, however, statistics show that whilst much progress has been made in getting greater numbers of disadvantaged students into the university sector as a whole², this trend has not been replicated amongst the UK's more academically selective institutions. In 2010 the Sutton Trust found that pupils from independent schools were over 22 times more likely to enter a highly selective university than state school children entitled to Free School Meals (FSM), an advantage that extended to 55 times more likely when entering Oxbridge. Moreover, this entrenched advantage often echoes into later life, limiting access to the top professions. For example, three quarters of judges, well over half of top journalists, barristers, solicitors and finance directors, and half of civil servants are educated at independent schools.³

Recent findings have confirmed the existence and extent of this gap in access to the best universities. Figures show that five high performing schools sent more pupils to Oxford and Cambridge between 2007 and 2009 than 2,000 schools and colleges across the UK combined; Westminster, Eton, St Paul's, St Paul's Girls' and Hills Road Sixth-Form college in Cambridge produced 946 Oxbridge entrants during this time period, accounting for more than one in twenty of all Oxbridge admissions whilst 2,000 other schools and colleges produced only 927.⁴ This disparity explains the Government's push for fairer access to higher education, the appointment of Simon Hughes as Government Advocate for Access to Higher Education and the publication of the Hughes Report to make specific recommendations for improving access – all of these endeavours are measures the Fair Access to University Group supports.

In attempting to address this issue, **it is clear that the problem lies not in universities' admissions policies but in the lack of adequate preparation being given to disadvantaged students throughout their secondary education.** Universities are meritocratic institutions, possessing no other incentive than to admit the strongest students, whatever their social background. In fact, Professor Michael Arthur, Vice-Chancellor of Leeds University (and current Chair of the Russell Group), has made clear that universities would "*bite their arm off*" to admit students from lower socio-economic groups.

As recent Russell Group⁵ research has shown, the real barriers facing disadvantaged students are **underachievement at school** combined with, and compounded by, **poor advice on the best choice of A-Level subjects.**⁶

It is becoming increasingly challenging for academically prestigious and selective universities to admit a significant enough proportion of disadvantaged students on the basis of merit when the attainment gap is

¹ Reform, *A new level*, June 2009, p.8

² A report by The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), *Trends in young participation in higher education: core results for England*, shows that progress has been made in the way of increasing the proportion of young people entering higher education from disadvantaged areas. The White Paper states this number as having increased by around 30 per cent over the past five years and by around 50 per cent over the past fifteen years.

³ The Daily Telegraph, *Bright, poor children deserve a place at elitist schools*, Rob Wilson MP, 10 March 2011.

⁴ Sutton Trust, *Degrees of Success*, July 2011.

⁵ The Russell Group represents 20 leading research-intensive universities which are committed to maintaining the very best research as well as an outstanding teaching and learning experience. These include: the University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, University of Cambridge, Cardiff University, University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, Imperial College London, University of Leeds, University of Liverpool, London School of Economics & Political Science, University of Manchester, Newcastle University, University of Nottingham, University of Oxford, Queen's University Belfast, University of Sheffield, University of Southampton, University College London and University of Warwick.

⁶ Russell Group, *The Future of Higher Education, written evidence to BIS Parliamentary Select Committee*, 25 March 2011, paragraphs 6.3 and 6.4.

widening. This point has been acknowledged by Sir Martin Harris, the former Director of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), whose report, *'What more can be done to widen access to highly selective universities'*, noted that whilst state schools are improving on their own record of performance, the proportion of pupils achieving 3 As or more at A-Level is significantly higher in both independent and academically selective schools.⁷ Russell Group statistics also show that fewer disadvantaged students are studying the subjects identified by its member universities as 'facilitating'. Instead they are studying less academically rigorous subjects as part of schools' bids to boost league table performance. This serves to further disadvantage such individuals in meeting the preferred entry requirements of the UK's leading higher education institutions compared with their more advantaged counterparts. Furthermore, it places disadvantaged students out of contention for the UK's top jobs, restricting social mobility and entrenching disadvantage.

The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was created in 2004 as a direct response to the worry that increased fees would negatively affect participation. This body can and should have a role to play in making sure each pupil has the opportunity to pursue higher education. The Fair Access to University Group wants OFFA to function as effectively as possible in order to meet the Government's objectives as outlined to the Director of Fair Access in February 2011:

1. *To increase social mobility by enabling more people from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter higher education and subsequently gain employment in the professions and other rewarding, well paid occupations;*
2. *To make greater progress in extending fair access for applicants of the highest ability to the most selective higher education institutions;*
3. *To continue to make progress in widening participation to higher education at large, attracting a higher proportion of students from under-represented groups.*⁸

To this end, the Government has proposed several measures in its White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System*, released June 28th 2011. Amongst other suggestions, the Government has emphasised the role of OFFA. Its resources have been strengthened and all universities intending to charge over the basic level of £6,000 in tuition fees as of 2012 have been made to submit new access agreements containing more ambitious admissions targets. These are to be subjected to review on an annual basis, with universities facing severe financial sanctions for falling short.

This rightly suggests that universities have an important role to play in widening participation in higher education. However, in order to have the most influential impact, the Fair Access to University Group believes that **OFFA's focus needs to be on aiming to increase aspiration, attainment and eligibility on the part of pupils throughout their secondary education.** Such an approach will encourage increased diversity in Britain's student body without this being at the expense of institutional autonomy and academic excellence, the two principles which the Government does not wish to undermine and, moreover, OFFA has a legal duty to protect. **OFFA's recently increased powers and resources give it significant potential for a level of interference, which some have described as social engineering, that could be damaging to the world class reputation of the sector over time. The Government should urgently review the powers and focus of OFFA.**

The Hughes Report also recognises the importance of secondary level intervention. It highlights that the Department for Education (DfE) is equally responsible along with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) for ensuring fair access and Hughes specifically calls for a programme to ensure that students have, from the age of 14, full information on future pathways. Hughes also notes the importance of strong links between higher and secondary education and efforts to dispel the myths around higher education costs in the wake of the fees debacle⁹ - something the Fair Access to University Group wholeheartedly supports. However the report does not go far enough in targeting the root problems of attainment and eligibility of secondary school leavers, and instead endorses incentives to contextual admissions. This manifesto aims to build on the

⁷ Sir Martin Harris, Director of Fair Access for OFFA, *What more can be done to widen access to highly selective universities*, p.20, paragraph 22, April 2010.

⁸ BIS, *Guidance to the Director of Fair Access*, February 2011.

⁹ Simon Hughes, Report to the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister from the Advocate for Access to Education 'The Hughes Report', July 2011

recommendations and work of the Hughes Report to ensure that intervention is targeted directly at the stage where it will have maximum impact on improving access and without undermining excellence and autonomy.

DELIVERING FAIR ACCESS

1) BOLSTERING ATTAINMENT

The measures to be taken:-

- **Improve the quality of teaching in British schools.**
 - Schools should be made to publish teachers' qualifications.
 - The prestige of the teaching profession must be restored. This should be done by increasing its financial rewards and placing it on a par with other well-respected professions such as Law and Medicine. This strategy has been shown to have had much success internationally. Finland attracts over 6,600 applicants for 660 places on its primary school teacher training programme and due to this demand it is able to recruit from the top 10% of graduates possessing both an undergraduate and postgraduate degree. Attracting successful graduates has been demonstrated as being the key to improving educational quality. Supporting this assertion is the success of the UK's Teach First Programme in deprived areas. Ofsted reported in 2008 that the top graduates participating in this scheme were making a "notable impact" in transforming underperforming departments and boosting students' attainment levels. This has been a step in the right direction, upon which the Government and OFFA should build.
- **Support and strengthen top universities' outreach initiatives.**
 - Leading universities have demonstrated a long term commitment to improving the life chances of those from disadvantaged backgrounds, running a number of outreach schemes aiming to raise attainment. These programmes are focused on younger learners all the way through to school leavers in recognition of the fact that the problems restricting student eligibility for places at academically selective institutions are prevalent before as well as during the years of GCSEs and A-Levels. Typically, these support pupils with their current academic work and introduce them to the idea of higher education through visits to universities and speaking to current undergraduates.

CASE STUDY 1 – UNIVERSITY OF CARDIFF

National Mentoring Project: Cardiff hires 72 students to mentor 360 year 10 pupils in 8 Cardiff Schools. Students work on a one-to-one basis with pupils from September through to April in order to improve GCSE grades and to increase awareness of higher education.

CASE STUDY 2 – UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Forward Thinking: Local schools in Birmingham each select students in Year 8. These students are offered support with their academic work. They and their parents are provided with guidance on progression into education after 16, including the transition to university. This is aided by visits to the university and face to face mentoring by undergraduates.

- These attempts to support entry into higher education are reinforced by several foundation programmes specifically created for disadvantaged students who have the ability to succeed on

a certain course but do not have the necessary grades or subjects to progress directly through the traditional route.

CASE STUDY 3 – UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Foundation Years: Preliminary years are provided in Medicine, Physics, other science courses, Mathematics and Engineering as well as Social Sciences and Law. The Foundation Years enable students without standard entry qualifications to progress to a wide range of degree courses.

- **Increase access to the best schools**

- Disadvantaged pupils should have a chance to study at the best schools, acquiring a first-rate education for the next step up in applying to the most selective universities. This can be achieved through the implementation of a voluntary scheme for independent day schools to commit a percentage of places for bright FSM pupils, with support from the Government with direct grants or passport funding.

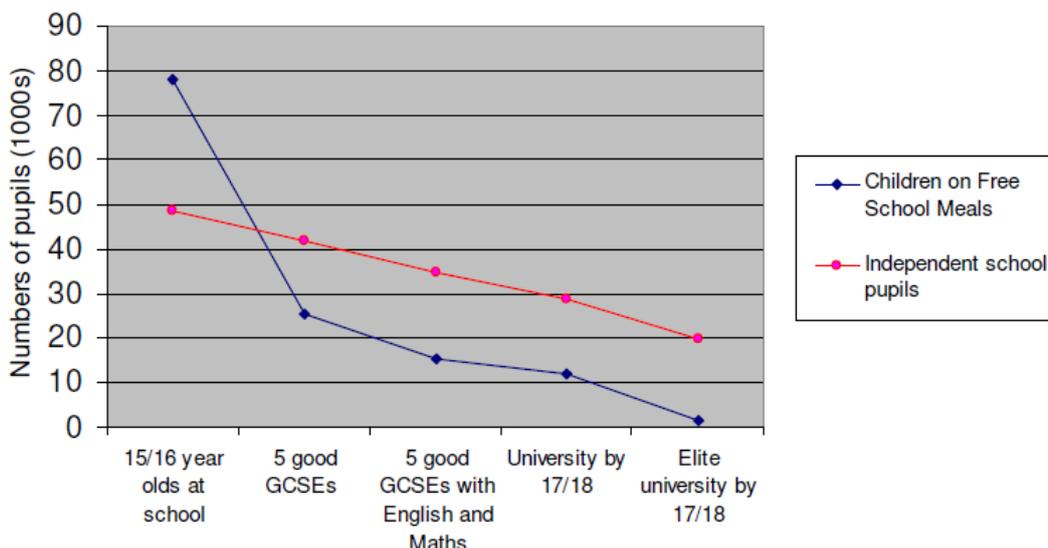
Why?

The most important reason explaining why fewer disadvantaged students attend or apply to leading universities is that they do not achieve the required grades at school. This is in stark contrast to their more advantaged peers in the independent/academically selective sector.

The Sutton Trust has shown that a significant education gap exists between affluent and disadvantaged pupils before they take their GCSEs, with fee-paying pupils being three and a half times more likely than FSM pupils to attain five such qualifications at grades A*-C including English and Maths. This can be expected to directly affect aspiration as well as A-level choices and results. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that in 2009 only 232 FSM students, amounting to 4.1% of the total, achieved 3 As at A-level or the equivalent. These pupils went on to account for less than 1% of the student body at the most selective universities.¹⁰ This is the case because too few disadvantaged pupils achieve the A grades at A-level needed to become a potential candidate for these institutions.

Education gap between poor and privileged students:

*Graph, Sutton Trust, *Responding to the new landscape of University Access*, December 2010.



This disadvantage extends to other pupils educated in the state sector. Figures confirm that independent school students account for a disproportionately large fraction of the top grades at A-level despite accounting for a significantly lower number of A-level entrants.¹¹

In 2010:

- 17.9% of entries from independent schools achieved an A* compared to 5.7% in the comprehensive sector.
- 51.3% of entries in the independent sector were awarded an A or A* compared to 20.9% in the comprehensive sector.
- Independent school pupils accounted for just under a third (32.3%) of those candidates who gained 3 or more A* or A grades despite providing only 9.9% of all A-level candidates. Only 12.8% gained 3 or more A* or A grades across all candidates from all education sectors.
- Comprehensive schools accounted for 44.4% of all A-level candidates, but only 20.9% of those achieved 3A*-As. Only 8.2% of entrants from comprehensive schools got 3A*-As.
- The best results within the state sector were achieved by students in selective schools. Selective state schools accounted for only 10.3% of all A-level candidates, but 22% of those students gaining 3 A*-A grades. 27.4% of entrants in selective state schools gained 3A*-As.
- This 'over-representation' of A grades amongst pupils at independent and selective schools is most pronounced in the key subjects required by highly selective universities and courses, including Maths and Science.
- 28% of students on the top 500 Higher Education courses with the highest entry qualifications came from independent schools, despite accounting for only 13% of A-level candidates.

To address the effect this attainment gap has on university participation, the Government has told OFFA to "*focus more sharply on the outcomes of outreach and other access activities rather than the inputs and processes*". Progress will be measured against targets which must illustrate a level of ambition proportionate to how much more than the basic fee level the institution intends to charge. Institutions will be set to face annual financial sanctions of up to £500,000 if they fall short, or be refused permission to charge above £6,000 in fees.

This has clear implications for universities' admissions policies, **putting pressure on institutions to apply their admissions procedures with reference to social, rather than purely academic considerations**. This is despite the fact that a significant feature of the 2004 Higher Education Act is OFFA's legal duty to protect academic freedom. The Labour Government guidance in 2004 defined academic freedom as being, amongst other things, "*the freedom of institutions...to determine the criteria for the admission of students*". As a result, universities' admissions policies were deliberately and explicitly outside OFFA's remit. New guidance issued in February 2011 is much more assertive and seriously risks OFFA being in breach of this duty, risking academic freedom and institutional autonomy in a way that seems somewhat unnecessary considering the leading universities' previous and current commitment to widening participation. These institutions have a record of investing significantly more than the £75 million expected by OFFA on access initiatives, having supplemented the additional fee income used to fund such schemes with other university sources. By 2015, under current plans, these institutions will collectively spend as much as £28.8 million on outreach activities in conjunction with £153.7 million directed towards fee waivers, bursaries and scholarships for students.¹² The latter figure represents an average per institution of £9.6 million, with some of the best universities spending as much as

¹¹ Sutton Trust, *Degrees of Success*, July 2011; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2009), *Applications, Offers and Admissions to Research Led Universities: a joint report by the Sutton Trust and BIS*, Research Paper Number 5, August 2009; DfE: GCE/Applied GCE A/AS and Equivalent Examination Results in England, 2009/10 (Revised). Available from: <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000986/index.shtml>

¹² Dr Wendy Piatt, Russell Group Press Release, *Russell Group universities redouble efforts to attract poorer students but regulation should not distract from tackling root causes of under-representation*, Tuesday 12th July 2011.

£17 million. Overall, this will amount to over £5.9 million more per institution than the sector average of £3.7 million, illustrating that our best universities do not need to be forced to take measures to improve access and support to disadvantaged students, they are already leading in this field.

The Government's approach, emphasising targets and outcomes, must not be allowed to be a distraction and divert attention away from addressing the root cause of lower participation rates amongst disadvantaged students, this being that too few poorer students achieve the right grades at school. The challenge of making leading universities more accessible to disadvantaged pupils is getting harder because the attainment of pupils at independent and grammar schools is getting even better. The most effective way to get low income students into the best universities is to help them improve their academic performance at an early stage.¹³ We need to stop an already wide gap from getting even wider. This is especially the case considering the White Paper's proposal to remove restraints on the recruitment of AAB students. Unless we enable our nation's disadvantaged students to acquire grades AAB in the appropriate subjects, widened participation amongst these groups will only become harder to achieve.

Similarly, the Government's emphasis on the use of contextual data must not be allowed to become a substitute for the need to make sure that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are fully equipped for the challenge that lies ahead in attending a top academic university. Many leading higher education institutions actually already ask for information regarding an applicant's social background in order to pinpoint those with real potential, also aided by interviews during the selection procedure. To quote Mike Nicholson, Director of Undergraduate Admissions at Oxford University: "A bright student is a bright student... it doesn't matter what their school or educational background is, the interview will allow us to pull that out." Furthermore, to their credit, several universities have created foundation courses to help bridge this gap but the fact remains that the need for them must be minimised. Put simply, foundation courses treat the problem's symptoms instead of providing a cure. Rather than increasing this practice to retrospectively compensate for problems occurring earlier in the education system, the real barrier of underachievement must be tackled.

Boosting attainment and eligibility is paramount. This manifesto contends that the measures outlined above will help to boost attainment beyond its existing parameters and in doing so increase accessibility to the best higher education institutions by laying the foundations for success in secondary education.

¹³ Russell Group, *Comment on HESA Performance Indicators*, March 2011.

2) INFORMED SUBJECT CHOICE

Measures to be taken:-

- Encourage the study (at GCSE and A-level) of the rigorous 'facilitating' subjects looked for by leading higher education institutions.
- Build on Russell Group practices to publicise subject entry requirements for university courses and the qualifications of successful applicants.
- Abolish the university points system to end the culture of equivalence which has misled students into believing that an A grade in an academically 'soft' subject such as Media Studies is equivalent to an A grade in a rigorous subject such as Mathematics.
- Rank schools according to successful applications into higher education.
- Demand that schools publish information regarding how many of their students apply to top ranked universities, how many do so successfully and which subjects their pupils studied at GCSE and A-level. Relying only on UCAS points data, as the Sutton Trust's *Degrees of Success* has done, will not explain why schools with apparently similar levels of attainment do not get students into selective universities. UCAS points do not take account of subject choice. Universities do.
- As proposed by the Hughes Report,¹⁴ ensure that the National Careers Service's face-to-face advice service is available to young people as well as adults.
- Support Russell Group STEM¹⁵ related activities, promoting the study of strategically important subjects such as Maths, Science and Engineering.

CASE STUDY: KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

STEM outreach activities: King's College London holds regular taster-days, masterclasses, summer schools, homework clubs and student shadowing in these subject areas. 'Student Ambassadors' provide Maths support to Year 11 students in local homework clubs and over 100 students visit King's to experience a taste of university life and study through the Year 12 'Uni for a Day' sessions focused on Biomedical Sciences and Physics.

- Protect the study of strategically important subjects which may be adversely affected by the policies of unrestrained AAB recruitment and the redistribution of 20,000 student places to institutions offering courses at less than £7,500.

Why?

As identified by the Russell Group, the subjects which are desired by its member universities from their applicants are:-

- Mathematics and Further Mathematics
- English (Literature)
- Physics
- Biology

¹⁴ Simon Hughes, Report to the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister from the Advocate for Access to Education 'The Hughes Report', July 2011

¹⁵ STEM is an acronym for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, subjects that are integral to the UK's success.

- Chemistry
- Geography
- History
- Languages (Classical and Modern)

These ‘facilitating’ subjects are not only desired by selective universities but they are also greatly respected by employers. Yet, there has been a significant fall in the number of students taking them, with comprehensive schools noticeably lagging behind. Under the Labour Government, the number of GCSEs and A-levels taken by pupils fell prey to the perverse incentive offered by league table rankings for schools to offer academically ‘soft’ subjects in which their students could attain consistently higher grades. Ofqual¹⁶ reports that the number of GCSEs achieved by British pupils fell from 6.4 million in 2006 to 5.8 million in 2010 whilst the number of BTECS and NVQs rose from 6.1 million to 6.8 million, with more students in 2010 sitting an exam in ‘food safety in catering’ than traditional GCSE subjects. This pattern is again to be found in the number of A Levels sat by sixth form pupils, the average being just 1.94 in 2009 compared with 3.32 in 1996.¹⁷

What this illustrates is that core academic standards in British education are too narrow and too low. The English education system expects students to study only two academic GCSEs in English and Mathematics. This is in stark contrast to the four or five subjects expected of students in most other comparable countries. In Britain, this kind of broad and rigorous curriculum has increasingly become the preserve of schools in the independent and academically selective sectors.¹⁸ This explains why the trend towards ‘soft’ and Russell Group ‘non-preferred’ subjects has affected pupils from comprehensive schools more acutely than their peers at independent and academically selective schools. As the Head of Research at the Independent Schools Council has noted, the latter two explicitly design their curriculum with university entrance in mind.

As a result, in 2010:-

- Of the 124,846 pupils taking A-levels at comprehensive schools, only 40% sat examinations in Biology and/or Chemistry and/or Physics compared with 74% of the 22,006 pupils at selective schools and 63% of the 35,245 pupils at independent schools.
- Only 21% of these comprehensive school pupils took Mathematics compared with 37% and 38% at selective and independent schools.
- Only 7% of comprehensive school pupils were entered for at least one Modern Foreign Language compared with 13% and 19% at selective and independent Schools.
- Comprehensive schools entered three times as many students for examinations in Media Studies than at selective schools and nine times as many than at independent schools.¹⁹

This has significant implications for a student’s eligibility to gain a place on a competitive course at a highly selective university. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that independent school pupils in this year were subsequently nearly four times more likely, and pupils at selective schools just over three times more likely, than those attending comprehensive schools, to achieve the required grades of AAB in the right subjects to be considered by top universities.

¹⁶ Ofqual - Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, responsible for maintaining standards, improving confidence and distributing information about qualifications and examinations.

¹⁷ Ofqual, *Delivery of Summer 2010 Examinations of GCSE, A Level, Principle Learning, Project and the Diploma*, November 2010.

¹⁸ Reform, *Core Business*, December 2009.

¹⁹ All Figures courtesy of Elizabeth Truss MP, *written question to the Secretary of State for Education*. Available at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110720/text/110720w0001.htm#110720124003113>.

This is a direct result of a pervasive belief that a large minority of English students are not capable of studying for academic qualifications. This has severely worked to the detriment of individual students, denying many the chance of pursuing higher education at a selective institution.

Every pupil in every school in the country must be given an equal chance to study the most rigorous qualifications, following the example of Japan where the education system rejects the idea that people are born with different levels of ability and are suited to different modes of study. As Reform's comparative research into education has noted, the Japanese system, unlike that of the UK, is predicated around an understanding that accomplishment can always be increased. Likewise, in Canada, students are expected to study English, Social Sciences, Science, Mathematics, and a range of optional subjects, with almost all provincial governments stipulating the minimum amount of time that should be spent on the core subjects. This ensures that a basic level of academic education is accessible to all.²⁰

With a wide-ranging programme of reforms, the Government has begun to tackle the need to broaden and improve the standard of the academic core curriculum in England. This is paramount if we are to reverse the culture of low aspiration and even lower educational standards in British schools. Furthermore, the Government's National Careers Service, due to be established in 2012, will provide a single access point to online and telephone services for school pupils and face-to-face guidance for adults, offering comprehensive and impartial information and advice about all higher education opportunities in the context of skills and career possibilities. However, more must be done in order for it to become the norm for every pupil to be studying English, Maths, the three separate Sciences, a Modern Foreign Language and History/ Geography at GCSE, as well as maintaining rigorous study in other optional, but appropriately rigorous, subject areas in GCSE and A-Level years.

The Hughes Report identified the importance of holding schools to account over the higher education destination of their pupils' post-16 in improving access. It calls for Ofsted to make use of destination data in its school inspection programme and to investigate cases where a school or college has a particularly poor record of access to further and higher education²¹. However in order to ensure that schools are facilitating access to the full range of higher-education institutions and truly opening up access they must be compelled to publish information regarding how many students enter top-ranked institutions. This will support the erosion of the perverse incentives enshrined in the current league table system.

Unrestrained recruitment of AAB students could potentially harm this push for rigorous study at GCSE and A-Level. Universities losing applicants to the institutions most popular with the UK's strongest students as well as losing student places to cheaper institutions offering courses at less than £7,500 may subsequently be tempted to accept AAB grades in less rigorous academic subjects, further perpetuating the perverse incentives that are already so apparent in our secondary school system. Redistributing 20,000 student places in this way, is also likely to be detrimental to the study of strategically important subject areas. This is because courses including Medicine, Engineering, Chemistry and Physics, which are important to the future success of the UK's economy, have teaching costs that are significantly higher than other subjects due to the requirement for expensive laboratories and equipment. These costs cannot be sustained on tuition fee income alone. Furthermore, the threshold of AAB might serve to make young people less inclined to even pursue the study of subjects such as Science and Maths because the higher grades at A-level are harder to achieve in these subject areas. Bearing in mind that state school students are already half as likely to take these as their independent school counterparts, this measure might prove to be counterproductive in trying to achieve the overall aim of getting more state-educated pupils into higher education at selective institutions.

²⁰ Reform, *Core Business*, December 2009, p. 10.

²¹ Simon Hughes, Report to the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister from the Advocate for Access to Education 'The Hughes Report', July 2011

3) BUILDING ASPIRATION

Measures to be taken:-

- Increase the numbers of disadvantaged students applying to study at university, particularly the UK's most selective institutions.
 - Tackle the widely held misconception of the unaffordability of university attendance in the aftermath of increased tuition fees and the heavily publicised student demonstrations in response to this decision. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are unlikely to seek out this information. It must not only be available but actively taken to schools and explained to pupils.
 - In partnership with the independent school sector, establish voluntary schemes which target FSM pupils based on merit for a percentage of places in its schools. Without such a scheme the best pre-university education will remain dominated by those with the ability to pay rather than by the most meritorious pupils, regardless of their background.

In addition to the proposal above, support schemes which target a wide variety of young people, particularly those that are hardest to reach, and which have been proven to successfully encourage such individuals to explore and enter into a range of higher education options, even if this does not result in an application to the institution funding the programme.

- Expand the Teach First programme. This would not only improve the attainment levels of school pupils but would also help to combat the false and negative impressions of selective universities in disadvantaged areas. This is because top graduates entering the teaching profession will respect and value the benefits of a leading higher education experience and will work to dispel the myths of research-intensive universities. They also know how admissions to top universities work and have good specialist subject knowledge. It is in light of this that Lord Adonis, who served as Schools Minister and Transport Secretary under the Labour Government, told the Independent Academies Association (IAA) conference that admissions figures cannot be transformed *“unless you at least have a certain proportion of your teachers who have themselves come from leading universities in to which you intend to send your best students”*.²² Improving the prestige of the teaching profession will then aid to make this a nationally consistent experience.

CASE STUDY: TEACH FIRST - HEAPS PROGRAMME

After completing their initial two years of teaching in schools, Teach First Teachers can become education ambassadors. The Higher Education Access Programme for Schools brings these ambassadors together to provide mentoring for students in order to raise aspiration, and crucially to ensure they are making informed decisions to fulfil their potential with regards university progression. All HEAP ambassadors previously attended top universities. Eligible students who have achieved at least six B's at GCSEs are nominated by current Teach-First teachers, who have been monitoring their progress, to enter the programme. 96% of students reported that HEAPS provided them with the information they needed to get to the University of their Choice.¹

Why?

As Dr. Wendy Piatt, Director General of the Russell Group of Universities has declared, *“We cannot offer places to those who do not apply”*. Expanding the numbers of disadvantaged students in these selective institutions, therefore, needs to explicitly target aspiration and application.

²² Lord Adonis, *Academies: The New Orthodoxy*, IAA National Conference Report, February 2011.

Sir Martin Harris' Report in 2010 makes clear that even well qualified students from comprehensive schools are less likely to apply to highly selective universities than their peers from independent schools.

The BIS/ Sutton Trust analysis which forms the basis of Sir Martin's report suggests that if the application patterns were the same for all students based on attainment, we would see many more applications from the state sector and we should expect to see around 4,500 additional pupils from this educational background entering the top 500 courses each year.²³

As the system currently operates, we fear that many highly talented students may have not been suitably identified and informed of the educational opportunities available to them at university. Consequently, students will have failed to reach their potential. For those with the most potential, and eligible for FSMs, a scheme to identify and maximise their ability, together with an opportunity to study at an independent school, will increase aspiration and preparedness for a university education.

However, failure in the identification of talent is not the only problem in building aspiration.

The Government's flagship policy of the National Scholarship Programme might suggest that a crucial factor in the low application rate is financial. However, if we look at Russell Group performance in this area, it can be seen that in 2008-9 alone Russell Group universities in England spent £66.5 million of their additional fee income on bursaries. This represented an average of £4.2 million per institution, over £1.5 million more per institution than the average of the sector as a whole. In 2010, over 31,000 students from the very poorest backgrounds attending Russell Group universities received bursarial support averaging £1,523, nearly five times the minimum bursary of £310 required by OFFA. Leading UK universities, therefore, whilst being academically selective are committed to ensuring disadvantaged students are not denied a place for financial reasons.

Moreover, in its first submission to the Browne Review,²⁴ the OFFA team demonstrated that the financial package in place since the fee increase of 2006, consisting of fees, grants, loans and bursaries, has not deterred young people from seeking entry into higher education. Whilst many feared there would be a significant decline, this fear did not materialise. Instead, there has been a consistent upward trend in applications, with proportionate increases in applications from disadvantaged students. In light of this, OFFA has already been advocating increased expenditure on outreach aimed at boosting attainment and aspiration amongst disadvantaged students rather than on bursaries, believing the former to be a more effective way of widening access.

Admittedly, as Sir Martin has suggested: *"2012 is not 2006"*.²⁵ Even though the threshold for repaying student loans has been raised to £21,000, some commentators believe that the size of the increase in contributions may well lead some disadvantaged students to question the benefit of a university education. Certainly, a further increase in tuition fees as of 2012 has been a cause of much controversy, and the perception that university is now unaffordable has been enhanced by highly publicised student demonstrations. Tackling this perception is one of the most significant challenges ahead, evidenced by the result of recent research which suggests that only a third of students actually understand how the fees system works. A recent Sutton Trust survey has found that over a fifth of pupils believe the family of a young person will pay for university whilst as many as a tenth of the pupils asked, thought that a young person would pay with money earned before doing a degree. As the Hughes Report recognised these misconceptions have *"not been helped by the fact that a recent high profile online advertising campaign funded by the government only mentioned the fact that students will not have to pay any upfront fees to go to university in the fifth paragraph of a section of the website entitled 'Can I afford to go to university?'"*²⁶

²³ Sir Martin Harris, Director of Fair Access for OFFA, *What more can be done to widen access to highly selective universities*, April 2010.

²⁴ Lord Browne, *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education*, October 2010

²⁵ Sir Martin Harris, Director of Fair Access for OFFA, *What more can be done to widen access to highly selective universities*, April 2010.

²⁶ Simon Hughes, Report to the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister from the Advocate for Access to Education 'The Hughes Report' July 2011

This general misunderstanding must be answered with a targeted information campaign, as recommended in the Hughes Report, but it must also be accompanied by rigorous attempts to improve academic attainment and eligibility of secondary school pupils as well as correcting widely held but false perceptions of highly selective universities. This is because, in spite of the challenges the forthcoming fee increases pose, it is clear that financial reasons do not account for the pre-existing low application rates amongst disadvantaged students.

As one of the ambassadors on the Oxford Access Scheme, now studying Law at Brasenose College, admitted:

"I knew I wanted to be a lawyer but I'd never seriously thought about Oxford. I admit I believed all the myths, that the students were all rich and all stuck-up. Each workshop, residential and meeting chipped away at this opinion until I realised that the only thing stopping me from applying was my own belief that I wouldn't fit in. Now I'm here, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else - nobody cares about your background, it's all about the work and the people you meet".

Implementing a Post-Qualification Application (PQA) system has been suggested as a possible remedy to the problem of aspiration and application. Under such a system, students would apply to higher education once their exam results are known, rather than relying on predicted grades. The Government believes a PQA system would work to the benefit of disadvantaged students for the reason that it would give candidates more time to consider their options as well as encourage applicants from disadvantaged and non-traditional backgrounds to apply to more selective courses and institutions in the knowledge that they have achieved the qualifications necessary for admission. This is particularly important, it is argued, because of UCAS figures suggesting that nearly half of predicted grades are inaccurate.²⁷ Most of these, the Government states, are over-estimates which work to the detriment of poor students, whose grades are less likely to have been inflated. The Russell Group contends that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are far more likely to have over-predictions not under-predictions of likely performance.

Unfortunately, this would require significant changes to the term times and examination schedules of schools and universities, neither of which wish to lose teaching time. It is important that the confidence of disadvantaged students is raised, in order to increase aspiration and application to selective institutions. Top universities worry that a change to a PQA system (and the associated term scheduling) would not allow sufficient time to run high quality access schemes – meaning the system could be counter-productive.

However, whilst changing the application system in this manner will allow more students, who exceed expectations, to apply to a higher-ranking university than currently can do so during the existing 'adjustment' period, it will not correct the imbalance of attainment between independent, selective and state-maintained schools. It also assumes that the students who manage to achieve high grades despite their disadvantaged background, have managed to do so in the correct subjects.

The fact that the Government has decided to focus on access agreements and universities' admissions instead of tackling these problems is a cause for concern. Dr. Wendy Piatt of the Russell Group has commented that this "risk[s] focusing too much on regulation rather than resolving the real problems". The Fair Access to University Group believes that universities should be allowed to spend their money in the ways they feel would be most appropriate to widen participation effectively. Indeed, there is a fear that the Government's emphasis on targets and outcomes could work to the detriment of successful outreach schemes already in place. Severe financial sanctions for falling short of targets might provide a disincentive to universities from continuing with activities in deprived areas which target those students hardest to reach, when it is very difficult to ensure that these students will actually apply to the university funding the outreach scheme. In instances such as this, penalties for not meeting these targets would not only be unfair but they would also reduce money available for programmes to help poorer students win a place elsewhere. This would be a tragedy because these schemes are often very successful at inspiring non-traditional students to study at a range of other colleges or universities.²⁸

²⁷ Research from UCAS concluded that predicted grades were only accurate in 45% of cases. These figures were presented in a recent briefing paper for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

²⁸ Dr Wendy Piatt, Russell Group Press Release, 'Russell Group universities redouble efforts to attract poorer students but regulation should not distract from tackling root causes of under-representation, Tuesday 12th July 2011.

CASE STUDY – UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

The Early Outreach Scheme: Targeted at pupils in Years 9-11 who ordinarily would be unlikely to consider aiming for higher education. The scheme aims to increase their awareness and perception of higher education and eventually to interest them in applying for a university place, although not necessarily at the University of Sheffield. Schools can participate in the scheme if they have low levels of attainment, a high proportion of pupils for whom English is a second language, and low levels of progression to higher education. The scheme includes a university day visit, a parents' evening, a residential stay and a university conference. Students are tracked into their post 16 studies when they can access further support and guidance from the university.

4) ADDRESSING POSTGRADUATE ACCESS

Measures to be taken:-

- Adequately address the issue of access to postgraduate education and the need to create sustainable provisions for research funding.

Why?

As the Russell Group's submitted evidence to the Government Review of Postgraduate Provision made clear, the UK has a strong international reputation for high-quality postgraduate education, making it an attractive option for European and overseas students. It cites compelling figures to make this case, claiming that 58% of European students and 53% of other overseas students studying for a research-based postgraduate qualification are currently enrolled at Russell Group institutions.²⁹

This reputation relies upon these institutions' world-leading research highly supported by competitive facilities and researchers. The Russell Group argues that this demonstrates the importance of excellence and sustainable funding provisions, both of which the Russell Group argues should be the major driving force of education policy.

It is a cause for concern that as undergraduate tuition costs increase, fewer students will entertain the option of staying on for postgraduate study. Those most likely to stay in academia beyond their undergraduate degree, according to research carried out by Dr. Paul Wakeling in 2008 at the University of York, are those already studying at leading research universities.³⁰ When we consider that pupils from private and academically selective schools are currently much more likely to attend one of these institutions than state school pupils, the danger is that access to the leading research universities at undergraduate level is allowed to essentially become a de facto entrance test for postgraduate study. Postgraduate selection in many ways is actually occurring at 18, with significant numbers of students being denied this future opportunity. Disadvantaged students must be enabled to compete with their more advantaged counterparts on a meritocratic basis for access to undergraduate study so as to allow them the viable option of pursuing postgraduate qualifications at a later date, should they wish.

²⁹ Russell Group, *Government Review of Postgraduate provision - submission of evidence from the Russell Group of Universities*, January 2010.

³⁰ Dr. Paul Wakeling, *Social Class and Postgraduate Education*, 2008.

CONCLUSION

Although much progress has been made in increasing the numbers of disadvantaged students entering higher education over the past fifteen years, this trend has not been replicated to the same extent in the UK's most academically selective universities, whose entrants are disproportionately drawn from independent or academically selective secondary schools.

It is right that the Government should prioritise widening access to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds in order to encourage social mobility and the improvement of these individuals' life chances and the work of Simon Hughes in his role as Advocate for Access to Higher Education is a vital step forward in this direction. However, research demonstrates that the best way to do this would be to address the issue of attainment at school and the study of less rigorous subjects at GCSE and A-level, which are not attractive to the best universities and top employers alike. The emphasis on targets and outcomes, however, as enshrined in the new access agreements submitted to OFFA on July 11th 2011, whilst recognising that universities have an important role to play in addressing this problem, risks obscuring the need to treat the causes rather than merely the symptoms of this barrier to social mobility, which universities quite simply are not able to cure alone.

The Fair Access to University Group suggests that in light of the widening attainment gap between the UK's poorest students, coming from the comprehensive section of the state-maintained sector, and those from independent and academically selective schools, the Government should do all it can to improve attainment levels and ensure that all pupils study a broad and rigorous curriculum that will adequately prepare them, and leave them eligible, to apply for entry into an academically selective higher education institution. This will involve improving the prestige and quality of the teaching profession, making sure all students are given adequate and tailored advice as to their future options, opening up opportunities for FSM students to study at independent schools based on merit and ensuring they study the right subjects to do so, instead of being mis-sold qualifications that are not respected, due to the perverse incentives offered by the league table system.

The Coalition Government's White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System*, proposes much of merit to aid this situation. The National Careers Service, for example, will serve to build upon the Russell Group's attempts to make sure students are able to make *Informed Choices*³¹, but the Hughes Report rightly identifies that attempts must be made to widen the face-to-face service, currently set to be the preserve of adults seeking career guidance, so as to recognise the need for young people to have information tailored to their own individual needs. However, when it comes to measuring progress by outcomes as well as increasing the use and importance of contextual data within admissions and proposals to change to a Post-Qualification Application system, it is important to remember that whilst it is crucially important the confidence of disadvantaged students is raised, in order to increase aspiration and application to selective institutions, these measures will not address the imbalance of attainment between independent, selective and state-maintained schools. It also assumes that the students who manage to achieve high grades in spite of their disadvantaged background have managed to do so in the correct subjects. These are remedies to potentially ease the symptoms of lower participation rates amongst disadvantaged students within higher education but they are not the solution.

The solution lies in making sure our students achieve the right grades in the right subjects and that we make a concerted effort to dispel the myths propagated during the debate over fees, and in doing so redouble efforts to create a culture of aspiration in our schools. It is only then that students will be able to compete on a meritocratic basis with their peers, winning places to top universities irrespective of their socio-economic background. It is only then that universities will be able to accept students without sacrificing the academic excellence that sets them apart and without risking the infringement of their institutional autonomy. This remains a large risk when increasing emphasis is being placed on universities' admissions policies in terms of enhanced social rather than academic considerations.

Failing to achieve this will mean that the top grades in the most respected subjects will remain the preserve of independent and academically selective schools and Britain will risk losing her status as one of the pre-eminent higher education sectors in the world. The choice is clear.

³¹ Russell Group, *Informed Choices*, February 2011.

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