



**Evidence for
Excellence in
Education**

Report

Realising Opportunities

Cohort 2 Final Report – July 2012

National Foundation for Educational
Research (NFER)



Realising Opportunities

Cohort 2 Final Report – July 2012

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Contents

Executive summary	i
About Realising Opportunities	i
Key findings	i
1. Introduction	5
1.1 About the Realising Opportunities (RO) programme	5
1.2 Eligibility criteria	6
1.3 The evaluation	6
1.4 Report structure	7
2. About the cohort	8
2.1 Overview of the cohort 2 participants	8
2.2 Experience outside of school/college	10
2.3 Books in the home	11
2.4 Experience at school/college	12
3. University progression	13
3.1 Intentions to progress to university	13
3.2 Applications to university	13
3.3 Offers from universities	15
4. The influences over university choices	16
4.1 Influence over university choices	16
4.2 Attending a university close to home	18
4.3 The importance of alternative offers	19
4.4 Research intensive universities	19
5. Career intentions and support	21
5.1 Statements on the future	21
5.2 Important factors in career choices	21
6. University information and support	23
6.1 Sources and usefulness of university advice	23
6.2 Confidence in career goals	25
6.3 The influence of university visits	26
6.4 Levels of information and knowledge	27
6.5 Satisfaction with levels of information, advice and guidance	28
6.6 How prepared students feel for university	28
7. Participants' views of Realising Opportunities	30
7.1 Completing Realising Opportunities	30
7.2 Benefits of Realising Opportunities	30
7.3 How Realising Opportunities compares with other access programmes	32
8. Conclusions	33
9. References	35

Executive summary

About Realising Opportunities

Realising Opportunities (RO) is a unique collaboration of 12 universities¹, working together to promote fair access and social mobility of students from under-represented groups.

Students are supported through a coherent programme of activities designed to raise their aspirations to progress to research intensive universities. Successful completion of the programme leads to recognition at the point of application to one of the 12 Partners, where students can receive an alternative offer through UCAS. RO begins in Year 12 with a National Student Conference at which each student is paired with an undergraduate mentor who works to tailor the RO programme to meet the student's needs and interests. After this first meeting, mentoring takes place online through a secure portal, and the ementor provides ongoing support through Years 12 and 13.

Completion of the RO Programme involves the opportunity to take part in aspiration raising activities such as masterclasses, taster sessions and skills development workshops, which focus on giving students a taste of academic life. Students take either the Realising Opportunities Academic Assignment or Extended Project Qualification which allows them to develop and demonstrate independent learning and research skills. The pilot project began in September 2009.

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has been commissioned by RO partner universities to assist in measuring RO's impact. This report sets out the findings from a baseline and follow-up survey completed by the second cohort of students, recruited to the programme in December 2010.

Key findings

About the cohort

Overall it appears that cohort 2 students have been well targeted. The majority of students (98 per cent) were in receipt of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) or discretionary payments. Sixty six per cent of students recruited were from areas with the lowest participation rates in higher education and 84 per cent were from households where neither parent or carers had been to university.

¹ University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, University of Essex, University of Exeter, King's College London, University of Leeds, University of Leicester, University of Liverpool, University of Manchester, Newcastle University, University of Warwick, University of York.

The majority of students felt well supported at home and at school or college. Ninety four per cent had someone at home who asked about school or college, while 97 per cent of students reported feeling supported in their studies at school or college. A notable proportion of students were undertaking activities accounting for a considerable proportion of their time outside of school or college. A quarter of students reported having a job and, similarly, a quarter had a single interest such as music or sport that was taking up more than ten hours a week.

University progression

The majority of students (94 per cent) said that they were planning to go to university. Students' intentions to go to university did not alter over the course of RO. Ninety-two per cent of those who planned to go to university had applied for a place at university.

According to UCAS data, 67 per cent of the RO cohort had applied to at least one RO partner university². Students were more likely to have applied to their RO host university than to other RO universities, reflecting students' desire to remain close to home. Students involved in RO had generally applied to study competitive and professional career-related subjects such as law, medicine and dentistry.

Students were generally successful with their applications, with 94 per cent receiving an offer from a university and 59 per cent receiving an offer from a RO university.

The influences over university choice

At the point of the follow-up survey, the most important factors that influenced students' university choice were the subjects the university offers, how good the university was for their chosen subject and the facilities on offer. This reflected the findings in the baseline survey. However, compared with the baseline survey, the closeness of the university to home had become more influential, while factors such as university league tables and how good the university was for the chosen course, while still important, had become less influential to students. Similarly a teacher or school suggesting they should go and being involved in a programme run by the university had also become less influential.

RO has influenced the majority of students' university choices to some extent. However, the alternative offer appears to have had a slightly greater influence on students' university choices³ (54 per cent were influenced by the alternative offer compared with 46 per cent influenced 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' by RO) suggesting how important this element of the programme is. At follow-up, a significantly greater

² The RO central team provided the NFER with anonymised and collated data on the cohort 2 RO participants who applied through UCAS.

³ As part of RO, students have the opportunity to receive an 'alternative offer' through UCAS from RO partner universities. Alternative offers recognise the successful completion of RO, with a lower offer of up to 40 UCAS tariff points or two 'A' level grades. Currently ten RO partners offer students the opportunity to receive an alternative offer.

proportion of students than at baseline understood what a research intensive university is and said that they believed it was important to attend one.

Career intentions and support

The majority of the cohort appeared to be focused on their futures and have career plans. Sixty three per cent of students at baseline and 62 per cent at follow-up said that they know what career they want to do. The most popular choices were medicine, teaching, and law-related careers, reflecting the courses that the RO cohort applied to. The factors students considered most important in choosing a job or career were interesting work, job security and work that helps people. These views did not alter during the course of RO. However, students appeared to be less sure about their lifelong goals at follow-up compared with baseline, with 65 per cent having lifelong goals at follow-up compared with 72 per cent at baseline.

University information and support

Over the course of RO, the sources of advice about university that students accessed altered. At baseline, students were most likely to get advice from teachers, parents and carers and through their own research. At the point of follow-up the most common sources of information and advice were university prospectuses and visits to university campuses. All of the respondents to the follow-up survey had visited a university, with 98 per cent having visited a RO partner university.

At the follow-up stage, the most useful sources of advice about university were university staff; visits to university campuses; students' own research; and current university students. Students rated the information provided through RO very highly. For example, 93 per cent rated RO as 'very useful' or 'useful'. Similarly, 82 per cent rated the RO programme guide in the same way.

By the time of the follow-up survey, students were significantly more likely to know about all of the elements of university study covered in the baseline and follow-up questionnaires. These included how to find out about courses; how university study compares to school; what different subjects involve; costs and financial support available for university; and what student life is like. This suggests that students were much more informed about university at the point of the follow-up than they were at baseline. Furthermore, students were significantly more likely to have agreed that they were happy with the amount of information, advice and guidance they received to help them to make decisions about university by the time of the follow-up survey than they were at baseline.

By the end of RO, students were significantly more likely to report that they felt more prepared for managing their finances and university life in general compared with at baseline.

Participants' views of RO

Overall, students were satisfied with the amount of time required of them to complete RO. RO has impacted on participants in a wealth of positive ways. The main ways students felt that RO has helped them were in the areas of referencing academic sources (74 per cent), study skills (70 per cent), understanding what a research intensive university is (65 per cent), student finance (62 per cent) and knowledge about the UCAS process (61 per cent).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings from cohort 2 suggest that RO is encouraging and supporting 'the most able but least likely' students to apply to research intensive universities and is therefore meeting its aims. Students in the second cohort were very positive about the benefits of RO and the knowledge and information they have gained throughout their involvement. The findings from the second cohort of students are similar to that seen for the first cohort, implying that the utility and quality of the programme has remained consistently good in the eyes of the beneficiaries.

1. Introduction

1.1 About the Realising Opportunities (RO) programme

Realising Opportunities (RO) is a programme involving 12 universities⁴, led by Newcastle University, aimed at encouraging and supporting the ‘most able but least likely’ students to apply to research intensive universities.

RO aims to offer targeted students the opportunity to:

- participate in aspiration raising and enrichment activities, increasing their ability to apply and gain entry to leading universities
- make informed choices about their higher education options and learn more about the benefits of studying at a world class university
- develop the skills required to be successful in a research intensive university such as independent thought and analytical and research skills
- enhance their application to 12 leading universities in an increasingly competitive environment
- access information, advice and guidance to increase their awareness of employment opportunities within some of the country’s top professions.

Participating students join the programme in Year 12, and are provided with opportunities to engage in university events and experiences over its two-year course. Activities include residential experiences, subject taster events and a national student conference. Students also take part in an online study skills module and complete a tailored academic module or the Extended Project Qualification⁵. Support is provided through online mentoring, where each student is linked to an undergraduate student mentor to encourage progression and provide support with all elements of the programme and transition to university.

⁴ University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, University of Essex, University of Exeter, King’s College London, University of Leeds, University of Leicester, University of Liverpool, University of Manchester, Newcastle University, University of Warwick, University of York.

⁵ The academic module and the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) are pieces of work in a subject that the young people are interested in. They are designed to allow the young people to demonstrate their potential, develop and acquire new skills such as analysis and critical thought, increase their preparation for HE study, explore new areas of knowledge, and experience independent learning. The EPQ is offered and assessed by some schools/colleges. The RO academic module is assessed by an academic tutor from a RO partner university.

1.2 Eligibility criteria

In cohort 2, Year 12 students were targeted to meet the following eligibility criteria. Students had to:

- have a minimum of eight A* - C GCSEs (including English and mathematics) with five GCSEs at a minimum of Grade B
- be among the most academically talented in their year group
- be in receipt of (or entitled to) an Education Maintenance Allowance or be living in, or have experience of, local authority care.

They were drawn from targeted schools that:

- had greater than 60 per cent of students from the first 13,000 super output areas in the Index of Multiple Deprivation⁶
- perform at lower than the national average for 5A*-C GCSE grades (i.e. lower than 49 per cent including English and Mathematics).

1.3 The evaluation

The evaluation of cohort 2 students gathered 'baseline' and 'follow-up' data on the second cohort that progressed through the RO programme.

- Baseline data on participants was gathered during the application stage via a paper-based questionnaire (October/November 2010).
- A similar questionnaire was then sent to all participants for completion in April 2012 (the follow-up stage), when they were nearing the end of their RO involvement.

The Realising Opportunities central team also gathered contextual data through the RO application process, which was shared with the NFER for analysis purposes.

A comparison group of students was included in the original design of the cohort 2 evaluation. In total 168 students completed a baseline questionnaire and were therefore included in the comparison group. However, despite the extensive efforts of the RO central team, at the point of follow-up only 16 of the comparison students returned a completed questionnaire. Due to the small numbers of returned questionnaires, it was not possible to make reliable comparisons between the RO group and the comparison group. As such this group was omitted from the analysis and just the RO group has been included in this report.

The questionnaires gathered information on:

⁶ The first 13,000 super output areas in the Index of Multiple Deprivation represent the most deprived areas and contain 40 per cent of the working population.

- future plans post-Year 13 (for example, whether students intend to progress to university and, if they do, where they plan to go and what they plan to study)
- the factors that might be influencing their university choices
- career intentions
- career advice
- contextual information about support at home and at school
- the impact of Realising Opportunities.

This report sets out the findings from the baseline and follow-up questionnaires received from cohort 2 participants. In total, 298 RO students returned a questionnaire at baseline (an 85 per cent response rate), and 97 at follow-up (33 per cent of the baseline responses). Please note, despite the response rate for the follow-up survey being below 100, we have reported responses for both the baseline and follow-up surveys in percentages.

1.4 Report structure

The findings are presented under the following headings:

- About the cohort
- University progression
- The influences over university choices
- Career intentions and support
- University information and support
- Participants' views of Realising Opportunities
- Conclusions.

2. About the cohort

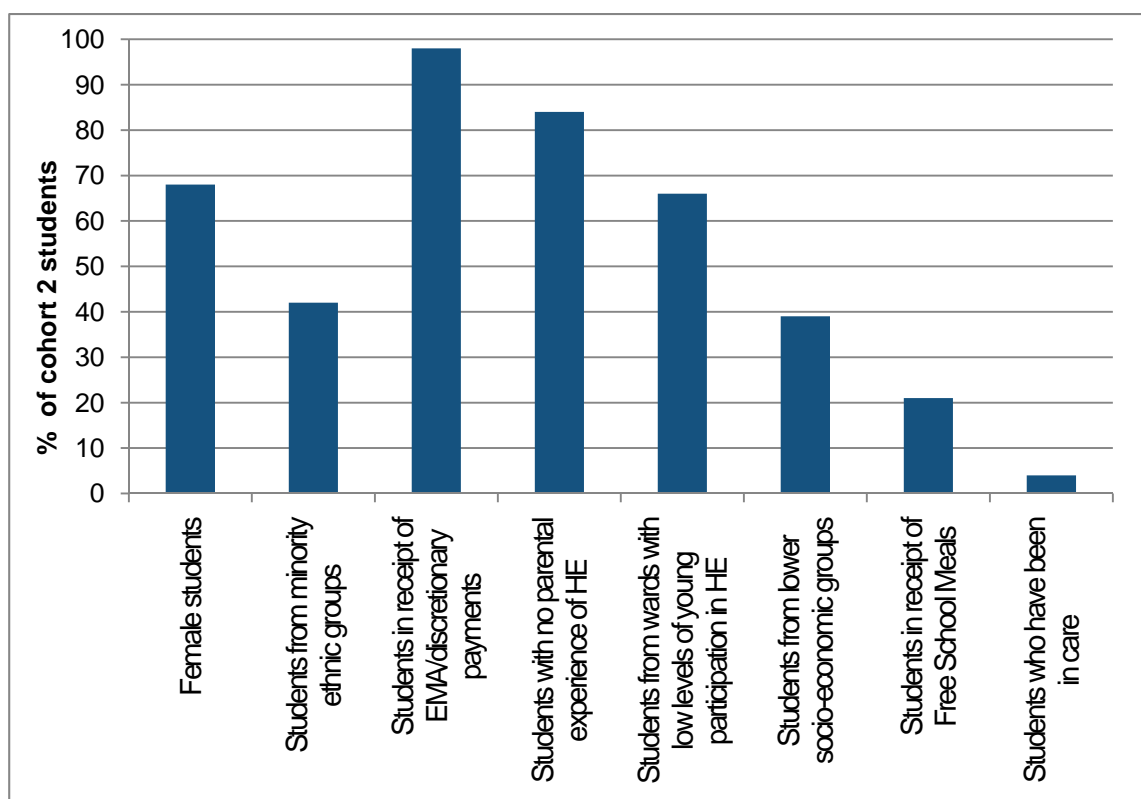
This section presents contextual information about the Realising Opportunities students in cohort 2. It draws on data from the NFER baseline and follow-up surveys and from the Realising Opportunities application form and positions this against national and cohort 1 data where this is illuminative.

2.1 Overview of the cohort 2 participants

This sub-section of the report draws on data collected through the RO application form. It includes the extent to which participants are drawn from areas with high/low participation in higher education among young people (POLAR2 data) and parental participation in higher education.

Figure 2.1 provides an overview of the characteristics of the students in cohort 2. Over two-thirds (68 per cent) of the students in cohort 2 were female, which is consistent with the proportion seen in cohort 1. Forty two per cent of the students were from minority ethnic groups.

Figure 2.1 Overview of characteristics of cohort 2 participants



Source: Application data collected by RO central team

When we look at the data relating to socio-economic and university participation rates, we can see the RO appears to have had considerable success in reaching those students who are least likely to go to university. As Figure 2.1 demonstrates, the majority of students (98 per cent) in the second cohort of RO were in receipt of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) or discretionary payments, while 21 per cent had been in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM). Thirty nine per cent of the cohort were classified as coming from lower socio-economic groups⁷. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2011) shows that the average proportion of university entrants in 2010/11 from lower socio-economic groups was 31 per cent across all English universities and 21 per cent across the 12 RO universities. This shows that a higher proportion of RO students come from lower socio-economic groups compared to all university entrants in England. The difference in proportions is even greater when we compare RO students and all those entering RO universities.

POLAR2⁸ data provides a classification of local area wards by participation of young people in higher education. Areas are classified into one of five quintiles, with one being areas with the lowest levels of participation and five being areas with the highest levels of participation. This gives an indication of the extent to which students who are enrolled on RO come from areas with traditionally high or low levels of young participation in higher education. The data shows that:

- sixty six per cent of students recruited in cohort 2 were from areas with the lowest participation rates (the bottom two quintiles), with 36 per cent coming from the lowest quintile
- only seven per cent were from areas with the highest participation rates.

Therefore, around two-thirds of RO participants were from areas where young people do not traditionally progress into higher education. HESA data (2011) shows that, in 2010/2011, just 11 per cent students entering English universities were from the lowest quintile. For the subset of RO universities, this average falls to seven per cent. In comparison, 36 per cent of students recruited by RO were from lowest quintile. This suggests that RO is reaching students that do not traditionally attend RO universities. Furthermore, the proportion of students from areas with the highest participation rates was lower in cohort 2 compared with cohort 1 (seven per cent compared with 16 per cent), suggesting that the targeting of students has improved.

Eighty four per cent of students in cohort 2 had parents with no experience of higher education. Indeed, just 14 per cent of students came from households where one or both of their parents/carers had been to university. This shows that the majority of students engaged in cohort 2 did not come from a household with parental experience of university.

⁷ As measured by National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC). Lower socio-economic groups are classified as groups four to eight on the classification.

⁸ POLAR2 is formed by ranking 2001 Census Area Statistics wards by their young participation rates in higher education for the combined 2000 to 2004 cohorts. This gives five quintile groups of areas ordered from '1' (those wards with the lowest participation) to '5' (those wards with the highest participation), each representing 20 per cent of UK young cohort. It draws on data provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, the Learning and Skills Council, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, the other UK funding bodies and HM Revenue and Customs

2.2 Experience outside of school/college

In the baseline and follow-up surveys, students were asked a series of questions about the support they receive at home, their experience of work, their interests, their exposure to a university environment, and their experience of mentoring and tuition.

2.2.1 Support at home and additional responsibilities

At the point of the baseline survey, the majority of students felt well supported by their families. Indeed, 94 per cent of students had someone at home who asked about school or college and 92 per cent said that they had someone at home to talk about their future with. However, a notable minority reported having additional responsibilities at home (30 per cent at baseline and 28 per cent at follow-up).

2.2.2 Experience of work

At baseline, one-quarter (25 per cent) of respondents had a job and, of these, almost half (45 per cent) said that they worked more than ten hours per week. At the follow-up survey, the proportion of respondents with a job increased to 34 per cent; of these, 16 students said that they worked for more than ten hours per week.

2.2.3 Interests

Around one-quarter of students said that they had a single interest that took up more than ten hours per week. This proportion remained consistent from baseline through to the follow-up (24 per cent at baseline and 25 per cent at follow-up), indicating that students were able to continue with their extra-curricular activities whilst studying for their A-levels. Students most commonly reported interests such as sports, musical pursuits or voluntary based activities.

2.2.4 Exposure to a university environment

At baseline, just under one-third of students (32 per cent) reported having a sibling who had been to university. When coupled with the high proportion of students from households in which neither parent/carer have been to university, this may imply that a high proportion of these students may be the first in their immediate families to plan on attending university.

At the point of the baseline survey, almost one-half (47 per cent) of students said that they had a friend who had been to university. By the time of the follow-up survey, a higher proportion of students reported having friends who had been to university (65 per cent) and, similarly, a higher proportion said that they knew someone who had been to one of the 12 universities involved in RO (69 per cent at follow-up compared with 55 per cent at baseline).

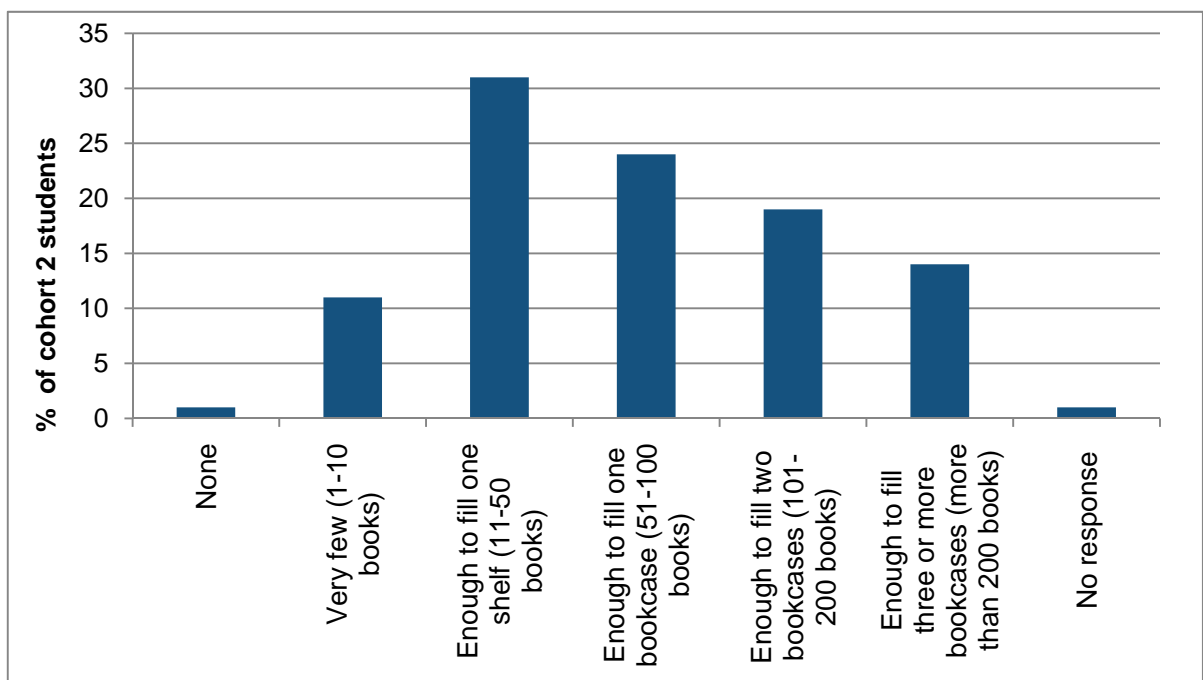
2.2.5 Mentoring and tuition

The vast majority of students at the point of the baseline survey (87 per cent) said that they had not received additional tuition outside of school/college (at follow-up, this was 92 per cent). A similarly high proportion of students at baseline (89 per cent) had not received any mentoring from university students, suggesting that the mentoring they went on to receive as part of the RO programme may have been their first experience of this type of intervention. However, a notable minority (38 per cent) were involved with mentoring younger students.

2.3 Books in the home

In the baseline survey, students were asked approximately how many books there are in their home. This is a proxy measure for parental education. The findings are presented in Figure 2.2 below.

Figure 2.2 The number of books students reported having in their home



Source: NFER baseline survey of cohort 2 RO students, 2011

The findings show that 55 per cent of students in cohort 2 were from homes with between 11 and 100 books (between one shelf and one bookcase). Twelve per cent of students reported having 'none' or 'very few' books in their home, while 14 per cent had enough books in their home to fill three or more bookcases.

These findings suggest that many of the young people are from homes with relatively few books, which points to lower levels of education among participants' parents. The

wider evidence tells us that parental education impacts on students' achievement (for example, Chowdry *et al.*, 2008; The Sutton Trust, 2010).

2.4 Experience at school/college

At the point of the baseline survey, students were asked whether they felt supported in their studies, and whether they had access to a wide range of resources. The vast majority (97 per cent) reported that they felt supported in their studies at least some of the time, while the same proportion of students believed that they had access to a wide range of resources. These figures are similar to the proportions seen in cohort 1 (95 per cent and 94 per cent respectively).

3. University progression

This section explores students' future plans and progression to university. It includes the findings from the baseline and follow-up surveys and UCAS data gathered on the full RO cohort⁹, relating to intentions of going to university; applications made to universities; offers received from universities; and the choices made by the students. UCAS data was collected in March 2012, before the process of applying to university had been completed. As such, this data provides an indication of university progression rather than definitive destinations.

3.1 Intentions to progress to university

At the time of the baseline survey, 94 per cent of students were planning to go to university. The findings from the follow-up survey show that the aims of students to attend university had not changed, with the same proportion planning to go on to university. While the overall proportion of students who planned to go onto university had not changed, a higher proportion of students at follow-up were planning to take a gap year before university compared with those at baseline (five per cent compared with two per cent).

This indicates that the intentions of the students had not altered to any great extent over the course of RO, implying that their interest in attending university was maintained over the course of the programme. This finding is notable, considering the increase in tuition fees that will affect this cohort of students. Indeed, recent research undertaken by the NFER found that 15 per cent of students in Years 10 to 12 who had planned to go to university were no longer planning to attend due to the increase in tuition fees¹⁰.

3.2 Applications to university

This section looks at applications to university generally, to partner universities and other research intensive universities, as well as applications to host universities.

3.2.1 Overall application to university

At the point of the follow-up survey, 92 per cent of students who said that they planned to go to university reported having applied for a place at university. Five per cent of students said that they had not applied for a place at university. When asked

⁹ The RO central team provided the NFER with anonymised and collated data on the full cohort of RO participants who applied through UCAS (more than just those who had completed a baseline or follow-up survey). This data provided details on the numbers of applications made, types of universities students applied for, the offers received and replies from students

¹⁰ <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/about-nfer/press/releases/prospective-university-students-are-re-considering-their-options.cfm>

why they had not applied, the main reasons students gave were not being sufficiently qualified or needing to repeat a year at school or college in order to apply.

According to UCAS data, 85 per cent of RO students had submitted a UCAS application by March 2012.

3.2.2 Applications to partner universities and other research intensive universities

The UCAS data shows that, as of March 2012, 67 per cent of the whole RO cohort had applied to at least one RO partner university. The proportion applying to partner universities was notably higher than the proportion applying to other research intensive universities (31 per cent) but slightly lower than those applying to other, non-research intensive universities (72 per cent).

3.2.3 Applications to host universities

Students appeared, in most cases, to be more likely to apply to their RO host university¹¹ compared with other RO universities. Indeed the application data shows that:

- seven of the RO universities had students apply to them as host university, in higher proportions than to other RO universities
- three RO universities had students apply to them as host university and another RO university in equal numbers
- students hosted by two RO universities (King's College, London and the University of Warwick) were more likely to apply to another RO university than their host university. In both cases this was the University of Birmingham. It is worth noting that these two institutions do not offer RO students an alternative 'lower' offer, but instead give RO students' applications additional consideration.

3.2.4 Subjects being applied for

Students involved in RO had generally applied to study professional career-related subjects such as law, medicine and dentistry. RO students most commonly applied for the following subjects:

- subjects allied to medicine (199 applications made in total, 49 to RO universities)
- biological sciences (158 applications made in total, 57 to RO universities)
- law (81 applications made in total, 31 to RO universities)
- business and administration studies (80 applications made in total, 28 to RO universities)
- medicine and dentistry (66 applications made in total, 49 to RO universities)¹².

¹¹ Based on UCAS data from March 2012.

¹² Figures based on the whole RO cohort.

This shows that the RO cohort were applying to courses at university that could lead them into some of the country's top professions. This is consistent with the types of courses that the first cohort of students applied for.

3.3 Offers from universities

This section sets out an overview of the offers made to students, and their satisfaction with the offers made. Data collected by UCAS in March 2012 shows that:

- Ninety four per cent of all those who had applied through UCAS had received an offer from a university. Students received an average of 3.4 offers per student.
- Fifty nine per cent of RO students had received an offer from a RO partner university.
- One-quarter of students had received an offer from another research intensive university, not involved in RO.
- Over three-quarters (76 per cent) of RO students had received an offer from another (non-research intensive) university.

Within the follow-up survey, students were asked whether they were happy with the offers had received from universities. In total, 86 per cent of students who reported that they had applied to university said that they were happy with the offers they had received. Furthermore, 78 per cent of students reported having received an offer from their first choice university. This is a slight increase, compared with the proportion of survey respondents from the first cohort who received offers from their first choice university (73 per cent).

In reference to the UCAS data, students made 398 applications to RO universities, of which 232 resulted in an offer being made – a success rate of 58 per cent. However, the proportion of applications that resulted in a successful offer varied greatly depending on the type of course the students applied for. For example students made 31 applications to RO universities to study law, of which 26 resulted in an offer (a success rate of 84 per cent). In contrast, students made 49 applications to RO universities to study medicine and dentistry, of which just three resulted in an offer (a success rate of six per cent).

At the point at which the UCAS data was collected (5th March 2012), just ten per cent of the cohort (24 students) had accepted an offer from a university, of which half of those (12) had accepted an offer from an RO university. Due to the low numbers involved, no further analysis into the types of offers students have accepted can be done at this stage.

4. The influences over university choices

This section explores the factors that impact on students' university choices. It explores what factors have the greatest influence on learner choice and to what extent these influences have changed since the baseline survey.

4.1 Influence over university choices

In both the baseline and follow-up surveys, students were asked to what extent a range of factors had influenced their choice of university, if at all.

4.1.1 Influence over university choice at follow-up

Table 4.1 outlines the findings from the follow-up survey and demonstrates that the most influential factors are:

- the university offering the subject they want to study (76 per cent rated this as having 'a lot' of influence)
- how good the university is for their chosen subject (60 per cent)
- the facilities the university has (39 per cent).

Table 4.1 Extent to which selected factors influenced students' university places

Influence over university choices	A lot	Quite a lot	A little	None at all	No response	Not applicable
	%	%	%	%	%	%
University league tables	11	41	35	7	7	-
The reputation of the university	33	49	11	1	7	-
Familiarity with the university	13	29	39	12	7	-
The quality of student life there	18	47	25	3	7	-
The facilities it has	39	41	12	1	7	-
How good it is for my chosen subject	60	32	2	0	7	-
The university offering the subject I want	76	13	4	0	7	-
Its closeness to home	23	27	27	16	7	-
RO	16	29	36	12	7	-
Whether the university is a RO university	17	29	36	12	8	-
Knowing someone who went/goes	1	7	35	42	7	9
School/a teacher suggesting you should go	0	3	37	40	7	13
University visits	28	38	25	1	7	1
Being involved in programmes being run by the university	10	11	22	18	8	32
N = 92						
<i>A series of single response questions.</i>						
<i>Due to rounding percentages may not sum to 100.</i>						
<i>Source: NFER follow-up survey of cohort 2 RO students, 2012</i>						

Students said that the following factors had little or no influence on their university choices:

- knowing someone who went/goes to the university (42 per cent stated this had no influence at all)
- school/a teacher suggesting they should go (40 per cent stated this had no influence at all).

4.1.2 Significant differences in the influence of factors between the baseline and follow-up survey

Generally, it can be seen that the factors that students rated as having the most and least influence were the same at baseline and follow-up. However, statistical testing revealed that the strength of this influence on student choices for some factors has changed between baseline and follow-up. We used multi-level modelling to explore whether there are any significant differences between the factors that influence students' university choices at the time of the baseline survey and at the point of follow-up.

The analysis shows that, at the point of follow-up, students were more likely to state that the closeness of the university to their home had influenced their choices.

In contrast, at the point of follow-up, students were *less* likely to state that the following factors had influenced their choices:

- university league tables
- how good it is for their chosen subject
- school or a teacher suggesting they should go
- being involved in programmes being run by the university.

This suggests that the closeness of the university to a student's home became more influential as students got nearer to the point of attending university.

4.1.3 The influence of RO on university choices

At the point of follow-up, the majority of learners had been influenced to some extent by RO. Indeed, nearly half (46 per cent) of the survey respondents said that they had been influenced 'a lot' or 'quite a lot', and a further third (36 per cent) had been influenced 'a little' by RO directly. Just over one in ten students (12 per cent) reported that RO had no influence over their university choice. Similarly, 46 per cent of students stated that they had been influenced either 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' by whether a university is a RO partner university, with a further 34 per cent being influenced 'a little' by this factor. Just 13 per cent of respondents said that the university being a RO partner university had no influence over their university choices.

Together, these findings suggest that RO has had an influence on the choices students made about which universities to apply to. The self-reported data is further corroborated by the actual university applications made by students to RO universities (see Section 3.2.2). These findings are very similar to those seen for cohort one suggesting that RO is consistently having an influence on those students involved.

4.2 Attending a university close to home

Reflecting the findings in section 4.1.2, a higher proportion of students at the follow-up survey point felt it was very important to go to a university close to home compared with the proportion who felt this at baseline (20 per cent compared with 14 per cent).

These findings are consistent with the patterns seen in the applications to RO universities (see Section 3.3). It appears that RO students are strongly influenced by the proximity of the university to their home and this is evidenced in the higher numbers of applications made to their host universities. It also appears that this influence becomes stronger the closer students are to attending university.

4.3 The importance of alternative offers

Students enrolled on RO have the opportunity to receive an 'alternative offer' through UCAS from some RO partner universities. Alternative offers recognise the successful completion of RO, with an offer lowered by up to 40 UCAS tariff points or two 'A' level grades. Currently ten RO partners offer students the opportunity to receive an alternative offer. All students enrolled on RO receive additional consideration for their application when applying through UCAS for the majority of courses across all 12 RO partner universities.

Students who completed the follow-up survey were asked if the possibility of receiving an alternative offer had influenced their decisions about which universities to apply to. Over one-half of the students (54 per cent) stated that this opportunity had influenced their decision. This is a similar proportion to that seen with the first cohort of students (52 per cent), indicating the consistent influence of this aspect of RO. Furthermore, the proportion of students stating that they had been swayed in their choice of university by the possibility of receiving an alternative offer was higher than the proportion of students who stated that they had been either influenced 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' by RO (46 per cent). Again this further indicates the importance of this aspect of RO and the influence it has over students' choices.

Fifty eight per cent of students said that they had received an alternative offer from one of the RO partner universities, while just over one-fifth (21 per cent) reported not having received such an offer.

4.4 Research intensive universities

At the time of the baseline survey, around one-third of cohort 2 students (31 per cent) said that they did not know what a research intensive university was. Forty four per cent of students thought that it was either 'very important' or 'quite important' to go to a research intensive university, whereas one-fifth (24 per cent) felt it was 'not very important' or 'not at all important' to go to a research intensive university.

At the point of the follow-up survey, just four per cent of students said that they did not know what a research intensive university was. The proportion of students who said that they believed it was important to attend a research intensive university increased to 57 per cent. However, a third of students (33 per cent) said that they did not believe it was important to attend a research intensive university. This shows that the vast majority of students have gained in their knowledge and understanding of research intensive universities to an extent where they have an opinion about their importance.

Multi-level modelling revealed that by the time of the follow-up survey, students were significantly *more* likely to know what a research intensive university is and believe it is important to attend one than at baseline. This implies that knowledge and understanding regarding research intensive universities improved over the course of

RO, resulting in proportionally more students believing it is important to attend such a university.

5. Career intentions and support

5.1 Statements on the future

Students were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement 'I have lifelong goals (10 years ahead)'. At baseline, almost three-quarters of students (72 per cent) either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. By the time of the follow-up survey, it can be seen that the proportion of students agreeing with this statement had decreased to 65 per cent. Multi-level modelling reveals that this difference is significant and that, at follow-up, students were less likely to agree that they have lifelong goals compared with students at baseline.

Students were also asked to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement 'I know what career/job I would like to do'. At baseline, 63 per cent of students 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with this statement. This suggests that the RO cohort have largely considered their careers/future jobs. At the point of the follow-up a similar proportion said that they agreed with this statement (62 per cent), suggesting that their views had not altered significantly over the course of the programme.

Those students who knew what they wanted to do for a job/career were asked to specify what this was. At baseline, of the 189 students who knew what career they wanted, the top three choices were medicine (35 students), teaching (28 students) and law (20 students). By the time of the follow-up survey, these professions continued to dominate the top choices. However, of the 60 students who said what career they would like to follow, law was mentioned most frequently (eight students) followed by teaching (seven students), while medicine had become the third choice and comparatively less popular than at baseline, with six students now choosing this as a career. This change may reflect the finding that the success rate of applications to medicine and dentistry courses was very low at six per cent (see Section 3.3), though we do not have the data to know this.

5.2 Important factors in career choices

Students were asked how important they considered a range of factors to be in deciding on a future career or job.

At baseline, the three factors considered most important when choosing jobs/careers were:

- that the work is interesting (67 per cent rated this as 'very important')

- that the work provides job security (49 per cent), and
- that the job helps people (47 per cent).

Students also rated these three factors as the most important at the point of the follow-up survey (74, 40 and 44 per cent, respectively, rated these factors as 'very important').

By contrast, in both the baseline and follow-up surveys, students were most likely to rate the following two factors as being 'not important' or 'not very important':

- working close to home (53 per cent at baseline, 48 per cent at follow-up), and
- the job providing 'high status' (37 per cent, at baseline and 41 per cent at follow-up).

The findings suggest that the participants' views as to what is important in a job or career have not altered significantly over the course of their involvement with RO.

6. University information and support

This section sets out the usefulness of different forms of career advice and information and support around university. It addresses student confidence in their career goals, the influence of university visits, the level of information and knowledge that students currently have about university, and how prepared they feel for entering higher education. The section draws on data from the baseline and follow-up surveys.

6.1 Sources and usefulness of university advice

The usefulness of different sources of advice about university is covered in this section. It sets out what students rated as the most and least important factors at baseline and at the time of the follow-up survey. It also looks at any significant changes in students' perceptions between these two time points.

6.1.1 Sources and usefulness of university advice at baseline

At baseline, students were most likely to have accessed university advice from teachers (96 per cent had done so) and parents and carers (94 per cent had done so). They were also very likely to have undertaken their own research (96 per cent had done so).

Of the different sources of advice that were accessed, students were more likely to rate the following sources as 'very useful':

- university residential summer schools (by 51 per cent of respondents who accessed this support)
- visits to university campuses (by 45 per cent)
- university prospectuses (by 33 per cent)
- current university students (by 33 per cent)
- university staff (32 per cent)
- own research and initiatives such as Aimhigher (by 31 per cent for both).

Apart from their own research, students were more likely to rate information provided by universities directly, or experiences of university, as being of most use. This finding suggests that these students would find RO particularly useful as it focuses on university experiences.

When the responses 'very useful' and 'useful' are combined, we are able to see which of the sources of advice are generally perceived as useful by students. At baseline, these were:

- their own research (91 per cent of those who rated this source)
- university staff (91 per cent)
- university prospectuses (91 per cent).

Those rated as being of least use were Connexions advisers and employers (both with 34 per cent of students rating these as 'not very useful' or 'not at all useful'), and school careers coordinators (27 per cent of students rated this as 'not very useful' or 'not at all useful').

6.1.2 Sources and usefulness of university advice at follow-up

By the time of the follow-up survey, students reported that they most frequently access information and advice through university prospectuses and visits to university campuses (with all students accessing these sources of information). This shows that the types of support accessed has changed over the course of RO.

At the follow-up stage, the most useful sources of advice were considered to be:

- university staff (rated as 'very useful' or 'useful' by 95 per cent of those who said that they access this advice)
- visits to university campuses (94 per cent)
- students own research (94 per cent)
- current university students (91 per cent).

This shows that there is little change in the sources of advice about university that students feel are most useful.

6.1.3 Significant changes in perceptions between baseline and follow-up

Multi-level modelling has been used to explore whether there were any *significant differences* between the usefulness of the different sources of advice at the time of the baseline and follow-up survey.

The analysis reveals that, at the point of follow-up, students were significantly *more* likely to find the following sources of advice useful than they had at baseline:

- visits to university campuses
- university staff
- their own research.

They had initially rated visits to campuses and their own research highly, but this emerged as even more important by the time of the follow-up surveys.

The students were significantly *less* likely to find school careers coordinators, Connexions advisers and initiatives such as Aimhigher useful at follow-up compared with baseline.

These sources were also previously rated quite low, so emerge as even less useful by the time of the follow-up. It should be noted that Connexions advisers were phased out in many local authorities over the last two years which may have resulted in many of the young people not having access to this form of advice. It is also the case that in many areas Connexions services have focussed on post-16 provision, particularly in relation to those at risk of being not in education, employment or training (NEET).

6.1.4 Sources of advice specific to Realising Opportunities

The follow-up survey included some additional sources of advice that students might have accessed that were not included at baseline. These were:

- Realising Opportunities (e.g. the programme in its entirety) (rated as ‘very useful’ or ‘useful’ by 89 of 96 students who rated this)
- the RO Programme Guide (78 of 95 students who rated this)
- their RO ementor (75 of 95 students who rated this)
- the RO National Student Conference (71 of 94 students who rated this).

The second cohort of RO students rated the information they have received through RO very highly. It should be noted that many of the other sources that students rated highly (such as visits to university campuses, university staff and current university students), are also all elements of Realising Opportunities (albeit they are also likely to have been offered by other access schemes or through individual university recruitment activities that students may have been involved with).

6.2 Confidence in career goals

At baseline, three-quarters of the RO cohort (75 per cent) were confident that they would achieve their career goals, while 78 per cent knew what they needed to do to achieve their career goals.

However, less than half of the cohort (39 per cent) knew anyone who was doing the job that they wanted to do and only one-fifth (20 per cent) had been visited at school by someone doing that job. This suggests that students in the cohort were not very likely to have come into contact with people who can give them direct advice about their chosen career routes before their RO participation.

Multi-level modelling of the follow-up data shows that there was no significant shift in participants’ confidence in achieving their career goals over the course of the

programme. Similarly there has been no significant change in their contact with people doing the kind of work they are interested in.

6.3 The influence of university visits

At baseline, 82 per cent of the RO cohort had visited a university. Fifty nine per cent had visited between one and three times (this could include multiple visits to the same university), and a further 16 per cent between four and six times. Seven per cent of students had visited seven or more times (possibly as a result of other access programmes). However a notable minority (18 per cent) had never visited a university.

By the time of the follow-up survey, all of the respondents reported that they had visited a university at least once (including multiple visits to the same university). Over half of the students (52 per cent) reported visiting a university on more than seven occasions, while over one-third (36 per cent) had visited a university between four and six times.

In total, ninety seven per cent of respondents said that they had visited a RO partner university during their time on the programme, with the majority (53 per cent) visiting between one and three times. Furthermore, 77 per cent of respondents had visited a RO partner university other than their host university.

The most common reason for visiting a university at baseline was for subject-specific visits. At follow-up the most common reasons were for open days and for the RO National Student Conference. At both baseline and follow-up, students were less likely to visit a university for residential visits and to visit friends or family.

Of those who rated the support at baseline, students were most likely to rate subject-specific visits and open days as having 'a lot' of influence, or 'quite a lot of influence' over their university decisions or choices (76 per cent and 75 per cent respectively). Similarly at follow-up students said that these two types of visit had the most influence on their university choices and decisions, although the proportion rating them in this way had increased to 90 per cent and 92 per cent respectively. At both survey time points, students were least likely to rate visits to friends or family as having 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' of influence (45 and 41 per cent respectively). Sixty-four per cent of respondents to the follow-up survey who had attended the RO National Student Conference, said that it had 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' of influence over their university decisions/choices. Therefore, for over two-thirds of the respondents, the National Conference had been influential in their decision making about university.

6.4 Levels of information and knowledge

At baseline and follow-up, students were asked how much they felt they knew about a range of different aspects of university study.

At baseline, students in the cohort rated themselves as knowing 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' about:

- how to find out about different courses (66 per cent)
- future career options (59 per cent)
- what the subjects that interest them involve (55 per cent)
- how university study compares to school (52 per cent).

However, they rated themselves as knowing only 'a little' or 'nothing' about:

- research intensive universities (84 per cent)
- what different universities are like (67 per cent)
- how to apply to university (62 per cent).

Multi-level modelling demonstrates that students at follow-up were significantly *more* likely to know about *all* of the elements of university covered in the survey questions (regardless of whether or not they planned to go on to university) compared with baseline. Specifically, at the point of follow-up students rated themselves as knowing 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' about:

- how to apply to university (99 per cent)
- how to find out about courses (93 per cent)
- how university compares to school (80 per cent)
- what student life is like (80 per cent).

Students were still more likely to rate themselves as knowing 'a little' or 'nothing' about research intensive universities compared with other factors. However, the proportion has fallen from 84 per cent at baseline to one-third of students at follow-up.

Together, these findings indicate that students are much more informed about university after completing RO.

6.5 Satisfaction with levels of information, advice and guidance

At baseline, just under half of the RO cohort (47 per cent) agreed to some extent that they were happy with the amount of information, advice and guidance they had to help them to make decisions about university. However, almost one-quarter (23 per cent) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, suggesting that at the point of the baseline survey there was a notable minority of students who would have welcomed further information, advice and guidance.

At the point of the follow-up survey, student satisfaction with information, advice and guidance increased considerably, with 92 per cent of students saying that they agreed to some extent that they were happy with the amount of information, advice and guidance they had received. Furthermore, none of the students said that they disagreed with this statement, although eight per cent reported that they neither agreed nor disagreed. Multi-level modelling indicates that students were significantly more likely to be satisfied with their levels of information, advice and guidance at follow-up compared with baseline.

6.6 How prepared students feel for university

Students who indicated that they were intending to go to university were asked to rate how prepared they felt for a number of aspects of university study. At the point of the baseline survey, students most commonly rated themselves as being 'very prepared' or 'prepared' for:

- meeting new people (95 per cent)
- independent study (91 per cent)
- getting used to a new university campus/place of study (80 per cent).

In comparison, students felt least prepared for managing their finances (57 per cent rated themselves as being prepared for this) and living away from home (60 per cent rated themselves as prepared).

At the point of the follow-up survey, students most commonly said that they were 'very prepared' or 'prepared' for:

- independent study (88 per cent)
- university life in general (85 per cent)
- meeting new people (83 per cent).

The proportion feeling prepared for managing their finances increased from 57 per cent at baseline to 73 per cent. The proportion of students who were prepared for

living away from home remained consistent (60 per cent at baseline and 59 per cent at follow-up).

Multi-level modelling was used to identify any significant differences in the preparedness of students at follow-up and baseline. The analysis reveals that students at follow-up were significantly *more* likely than at baseline to be prepared for:

- managing their finances
- university life in general.

There are no significant differences between RO students' levels of preparedness at baseline and follow-up with regards to meeting new people, independent study, living away from home or getting used to a new university campus/place of study. Overall it appears that since being involved in RO, students have become more prepared for university life in general and, in particular, in relation to their finances.

7. Participants' views of Realising Opportunities

This section explores students' views of RO. It details students' satisfaction with the amount of time needed to complete RO, the benefits they have gained through the programme and, where relevant, how RO compares to other access programmes they are involved with. The findings in this section are based solely on the findings from the follow-up survey students completed after finishing RO.

7.1 Completing Realising Opportunities

Students reported being overwhelmingly satisfied with the amount of time needed to complete RO. Ninety-two per cent said that the time they had been given was 'about right'. Four per cent of students said that they have had 'too much' time while four per cent also reported having had 'too little' time. This suggests that the design of the programme is allowing students the right amount of time to complete activities and does not need altering.

7.2 Benefits of Realising Opportunities

Students were asked to what extent RO has helped to improve a range of factors relating to skills and preparedness for university. The majority of students feel that RO has benefited them in all areas considered (as set out in Table 7.1).

Table 7.1 Benefits of RO

RO has helped to improve	A lot	Quite a lot	A little	Not at all	No response
	%	%	%	%	%
Your knowledge of student finance	18	44	30	7	1
Your understanding of what a research intensive university is	22	43	25	9	1
Your knowledge of different courses at university	21	37	34	7	1
Your knowledge about the UCAS application process	30	31	31	8	0
Understanding your personality type	26	29	31	14	0
Your self confidence	18	36	34	12	0
Your study skills	32	38	22	8	0
Your presentation skills	27	32	30	11	0
Your ability to set goals	26	31	32	11	0
Your revision skills	21	32	34	13	0
Your ability to reference academic sources	41	33	18	7	1
N = 97					
<p><i>A series of single response questions. Due to rounding percentages may not sum to 100. Source: NFER follow-up survey of cohort 2 RO students, 2012</i></p>					

Students reported that RO has helped them the most in the following areas:

- ability to reference academic sources (74 per cent ‘a ‘lot’ or ‘quite a lot’)
- study skills (70 per cent felt this helped them ‘a ‘lot’ or ‘quite a lot’)
- understanding of what a research intensive university is (65 per cent)
- student finance (62 per cent)
- knowledge about the UCAS application process (61 per cent).

Overall, students are positive about the benefits of RO, with over half of the survey respondents stating that RO has helped them improve ‘a lot’ or ‘quite a lot’ in each of the areas the survey asked about. However, a notable minority of students reported that RO has not helped them at all with the following areas:

- understanding your personality type (14 per cent ‘not at all’)
- revision skills (13 per cent ‘not at all’).

The findings suggest that students have particularly benefited from RO particularly in relation to the skills and understanding they need in applying to, and beginning to study at university. When coupled with their responses in Section 6.4, in which students’ levels of information and knowledge regarding university were significantly higher at follow-up than at baseline, this suggests that students have benefited a great deal from their overall involvement with RO.

Students have also gained an increased understanding of what a research intensive university is, with a much higher proportion of students at follow-up knowing what it is and believing it to be important to attend a research intensive university compared (see Section 4.4).

7.3 How Realising Opportunities compares with other access programmes

Just over one-quarter of cohort 2 students (28 per cent) said that they have been involved in other access programmes whilst engaging with RO. Other access programmes include the Manchester Access Programme (University of Manchester), Scholars Scheme (University of Liverpool), Supported Progression (Durham University) and other academic enrichment programmes at colleges or universities. Students who have been involved in other programmes were asked to compare these with RO in order to gauge the usefulness of RO.

Of the 27 students who answered this question, 11 rated the usefulness of RO about the same as the other access programmes they have been involved with. Six said that they feel it has been more useful and 10 described it as being less useful.

When asked to explain this answer, it is clear from their responses that students have different needs from access courses. For example, some students said that they like the fact that RO provides information on a range of universities while others stated that they prefer another access course because it is specific to a university they want to attend. Those that had said that they believe RO is similar in usefulness to other courses explained that the access courses have similar activities and information to RO.

8. Conclusions

This report has explored the impact of Realising Opportunities on the second cohort of students involved.

The research shows that Realising Opportunities appears to be making a difference to the students involved. Young people rate their involvement with RO as beneficial and also believe that it has influenced their decisions on which university to attend. In addition, the sources of information students have found the most useful, such as university campus visits, summer schools and speaking with university staff, are all part of RO. Students are more likely to be satisfied with the information, advice and guidance they have received after they have completed RO and they rate themselves as more prepared for university life generally. Together, these findings suggest that RO is having a positive impact on students' university decisions and preparedness, although without a control group to compare against, we cannot attribute the benefits directly to RO.

RO is being successful in reaching its targeted students and the students enrolling in cohort 2 are generally from backgrounds with very little immediate familial experience of university. They are also often from areas where there are lower than average levels of young participation in higher education. The type of practical support offered through RO is likely to be of real benefit to these students and, as the findings show, enables them to become more knowledgeable about how to apply to university, how to find out about courses, about the differences between university and school life and about what student life is like. All these areas contribute to the students feeling more prepared for university life, and are the areas of support that students would probably not have been able to gain at home.

Despite the increase in tuition fees, students have maintained their goal of applying to university. This may reflect an understanding of the value and, based on their career choices, necessity of a university education. A further comparison of UCAS destinations data and students perceptions from the NFER survey data would be useful to identify whether RO students realise their university aspirations.

Many of the students are aiming to enter some of the most competitive sectors, such as law and medicine. These career aspirations have remained consistent over the course of RO, despite the current economic situation of high youth unemployment. However, it does appear that students are less sure about their longer term goals. The reasoning behind this remains unclear but may relate to the current rates of youth unemployment which may be having an impact on how confident young people are about their future plans.

One of the aims of RO is to offer students the opportunity to make informed choices about their higher education options and learn more about the benefits of studying at a world class university. Students' understanding of a research intensive university

has increased greatly since becoming involved with RO. Students are able to make an informed choice as to the importance of attending a research intensive university, which had not been the case for many of the students prior to RO. That said, further research is needed to investigate the reasons why a third of students do not believe it is important to attend a research intensive university after completing RO. It may be that students value other factors above this but, without further investigation, it is unclear why this is the case.

Overall, participating students are positive about the different aspects of RO and generally feel RO has influenced their decisions about university. However it appears that some aspects of the programme are more influential than others and RO may wish to investigate this further. For example, with reference to the RO National Conference, it may be worth investigating why a third of students do not feel they have been influenced by this to any great extent, if at all.

The opportunity to receive an alternative offer remains an important aspect of the programme with a greater proportion of students believing they have been influenced by this than by RO as a whole. This suggests that the alternative offer should be promoted, to further highlight the importance of this aspect of the offer to students.

In sum, the findings from cohort 2 suggest that RO is encouraging and supporting 'the most able but least likely' students to apply to research intensive universities and therefore meeting its aims. Students in the second cohort are very positive about the benefits of RO and the knowledge and information they have gained throughout their involvement. The findings from the second cohort of students are similar to those from the first, indicating that the utility and quality of the programme has remained consistently good in the eyes of the beneficiaries.

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