



Report

Final Report for the Sutton Trust

Evaluation of the Reach
for Excellence Programme:
Cohort One

Longitudinal Report

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Executive Summary

The Reach for Excellence programme (RfE) aims to support able young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Yorkshire to gain a place at a top university. It is run by the University of Leeds, and funded by the Lloyds TSB Foundation and the Sutton Trust. This report sets out the findings from the longitudinal research that tracks the first cohort of students to engage in the programme and is part of a larger evaluation being carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

The first cohort of RfE students enrolled in 2007 and left the programme in July 2009. Eighty-seven per cent of the RfE students went on to gain a place at university in September 2009, compared with 65 per cent of equivalent students from a 'control' group¹. Just less than one-half (45 per cent) of the RfE students, for whom destination data is known, entered research intensive universities².

Methodology

The findings are based on two data sources:

- proforma responses from 55 of the RfE students
- survey-style telephone interviews conducted with 30 of these RfE students.

Key findings

Post school/college destinations of RfE students

From the 55 proforma responses received, an overwhelming majority (50) of the RfE students are current university students, while five are not currently attending university. Of the five students not attending university at the time of the research, four had taken a gap-year and were planning to commence a university education in September 2010.

Of the 50 RfE students currently attending university, **more than half (29) are attending research intensive universities**. The University of Leeds is the most

¹ In December 2007, before students were introduced to the RfE programme, baseline surveys were completed by eligible students. Of these, 114 were from students who subsequently gained a place on the programme; 27 were from students who applied but did not gain a place, and the remaining 154 were from students who were eligible to apply, but chose not to. These two latter groups formed the 'control group' for the remainder of the research.

² For the purposes of this research, research intensive universities have been classified as universities in the Russell Group or the 1994 group. This includes (Russell Group): Birmingham; Bristol; Cambridge; Cardiff; Edinburgh; Glasgow; Imperial College, London; King's College London; Leeds; Liverpool; London School of Economics & Political Science; Manchester; Newcastle; Nottingham; Oxford; Queen's, Belfast; Sheffield; Southampton; University College, London; Warwick and (the 1994 Group): Bath, Birkbeck, Durham, East Anglia, Essex, Exeter, Goldsmiths, Institute of Education, Royal Holloway, Lancaster, Leicester, Loughborough, Queen Mary, Reading, St Andrews, School of Oriental and African Studies, Surrey, Sussex, York.

common destination for RfE students (16 of 50 students). Other research intensive university destinations for RfE students included those within easy reach of West Yorkshire such as the University of Manchester, the University of Newcastle, Lancaster University, the University of York and Durham University. A smaller number of RfE students gained places at prestigious Russell Group universities further afield. These included the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge and Imperial College London.

None of the students returning a proforma had started university and subsequently abandoned university studies. This suggests that retention rates are high among RfE students.

Perceived impacts of the RfE programme

Young people participating in the interviews identify a wealth of benefits accruing to them as a result of participation in the RfE programme. These include:

- provision of an insight into university life
- developing social skills
- help with applying to university
- acquiring study skills
- help with university choices
- provision of information on student finance
- advice and guidance from current students.

A majority of RfE pupils feel that the programme did indeed help them to effectively plan for their future.

Almost all of the interviewees disagree that they ‘probably wouldn’t have ended up at university’ if they hadn’t attended the RfE programme. Interestingly, though, half of the interviewees agree that attending the RfE programme *helped* them make the decision to attend university. So, in line with earlier findings, almost all RfE students had the intention of attending university, but for half of the students, attending RfE helped with making the decision to actually attend.

Interviewees were asked to identify any aspects of the RfE programme that they found particularly helpful. The top five most frequently identified aspects of the programme were:

- study skills sessions
- the summer school
- meeting other people
- subject-specific sessions
- information on finance.

The mix of helpful areas and components of the RfE programme identified by young people reveals that they draw help from the programme in both 'hard' areas, such as skills and information, as well as 'soft' areas of development such as confidence and self-belief. Their high rating of the overall helpfulness of RfE suggests that students continue to acknowledge the value of participating in the programme, and the benefits that they enjoy as a result of their participation.

Student views on possible improvements to the RfE programme

When asked whether they felt that any improvements could be made to the RfE programme and to their experiences of it, students overwhelmingly stated that they could not think of a way to improve it.

The few suggestions that were made, however, included the following:

- Improve the range of courses that offer taster-days. Five students felt that the range of subjects covered was too narrow, and would welcome a widening of this.
- Provide more information on other universities. Three students felt that the programme was too focused on Leeds University and they would have welcomed more insight into other universities as well.
- Provide more one-to-one support. Two students felt that they would have appreciated more one-to-one support to talk through their options and choices.

Concluding comments

The data gathered from the cohort one students continues to demonstrate that the RfE programme has led to a wealth of benefits for those involved. Those who took part continue to recognise the impacts that the programme had whilst they were making university choices, but also impacts that have helped them to settle in, or to prepare them for a university education.

It will be interesting to see how these students fare over their second year of university study, and to ascertain the extent to which the impacts of RfE endure longer than the first year of study. It will also be valuable to look at achievement rates as students work towards their final grade at university.

1. Introduction

1.1 About the Reach for Excellence programme and the evaluation

The Reach for Excellence Programme (RfE) aims to support able young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Yorkshire to gain a place at a top university. It is run by the University of Leeds, and funded by the Lloyds TSB Foundation and the Sutton Trust. This report sets out the findings from the longitudinal research that tracks the first cohort of students to engage in the programme and is part of a larger evaluation being carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). The overall evaluation aims to explore the university progression of the RfE students; their awareness of Higher Education (HE) options and of funding available; and to track how many RfE students attend a research-led university.

1.2 Methodology

This report presents data from the longitudinal follow-up of the first cohort of RfE students. This cohort completed their A-levels (or equivalent) in summer 2009, and at the time of the research, had been pursuing their post-school/college paths for approximately one year.

The findings are based on two data sources:

- proforma responses from 55 RfE students
- survey-style telephone interviews conducted with 30 of these RfE students.

The proforma

In June 2010, a short proforma was mailed to every RfE student in cohort one (those who had completed the programme in summer 2009). The proforma contained questions on students' destinations after finishing school, including details on their university studies.

Follow-up telephone calls, text messages and emails were sent to students to maximise the response rate. In some cases, where telephone contact was made with a student, an NFER researcher asked the proforma questions over the telephone.

In total, 55 proforma responses were received out of a possible 91 RfE students (a response rate of sixty per cent).

The telephone interviews

During July and August 2010, an NFER researcher conducted brief telephone interviews with 30 RfE students. These interviews were carried out with young people who had indicated that they were happy to take part in an interview, or in some cases with students with whom telephone contact was made whilst seeking proforma responses. The interviews sought to gain an understanding of how students felt their involvement in RfE had impacted on them, approximately one year after leaving school/college.

1.3 Report structure

The report contains findings on the following:

- post-school/college destinations
- perceived impacts of the RfE programme
- student views on potential improvements to the RfE programme
- concluding comments.

2. Post-school/college destinations of RfE students

From the 55 proforma responses received, an overwhelming majority (50) of the RfE students are current university students, while five are not currently attending university.

2.1 RfE students attending university

The following section outlines students' university destinations, including institution and subject areas studied, as well as students' level of academic achievement during their first year. It also includes details on students' accommodation arrangements.

2.1.1 RfE students attending university

The 50 RfE students are attending a range of universities across England. These are predominantly in the West Yorkshire region, but smaller numbers of students report attending universities across a number of northern cities and smaller numbers again are studying at universities in the south.

The most common university destination for the RfE students is the University of Leeds (16 RfE students). This is unsurprising given that the RfE programme was delivered through Leeds University, and that many of the RfE students undertook activities on campus. Bradford University is the next most common university destination for those responding to the proforma (12 students). These two universities are considerably more popular destinations than any of the other universities for RfE students.

More than half of the RfE students who have gone on to university study (29 out of 50) are attending research intensive universities³. These tend to be universities within close proximity to West Yorkshire, such as the University of Leeds, the University of Manchester (three students), the university of Newcastle (three students), Lancaster University, the University of York and Durham University (one student each). However, a smaller number of RfE students have gone on to attend prestigious Russell Group Universities further afield such as the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge and Imperial College London (one student each). Other

³ For the purposes of this research, research intensive universities have been classified as universities in the Russell Group or the 1994 group. This includes (Russell Group): Birmingham; Bristol; Cambridge; Cardiff; Edinburgh; Glasgow; Imperial College, London; King's College London; Leeds; Liverpool; London School of Economics & Political Science; Manchester; Newcastle; Nottingham; Oxford; Queen's. Belfast; Sheffield; Southampton; University College, London; Warwick and (the 1994 Group): Bath, Birkbeck, Durham, East Anglia, Essex, Exeter, Goldsmiths, Institute of Education, Royal Holloway, Lancaster, Leicester, Loughborough, Queen Mary, Reading, St Andrews, School of Oriental and African Studies, Surrey, Sussex, York.

research-intensive university destinations included the University of Leicester and Loughborough University.

Of the 30 interviewees, 24 felt they had made the right decision about which university to attend, while four felt that it was too early to tell. Just one student felt he had not made the right decision.

2.1.2 Subjects studied

The RfE students now attending university are studying a wide variety of subjects. The most commonly identified areas of study are:

- psychology (9 students)
- medicine (5 students)
- engineering (3 students)
- clinical science (3 students)
- pharmacy (3 students)
- law (3 students).

2.1.3 Achievement levels

RfE students responding to the proforma were asked to indicate the grades they had been receiving in their first year of university study. The most commonly achieved grades are at 2:1 and 2:2 level, with 26 and 7 students respectively. Four of the students have received marks equivalent to a First Class grade. Eleven of the students indicate that they did not know what their grade equivalent was, that their grades varied, or simply indicate that they have received passing or merit grades. One pupil has received grades equivalent to a Third, while another has received non-passing grades.

2.1.4 Accommodation choice

The majority of RfE students attending university (31 out of 50) indicate that they are living at home during the term time, rather than in university accommodation. This is unsurprising given the destinations outlined above. For those attending Leeds and Bradford (and perhaps Huddersfield and York) Universities, staying at home may have been an appealing option, especially considering the economic concerns of the past 18-24 months.

Of the 30 students participating in an interview, 26 felt they have made the right decision about whether to live independently or at home. Two felt that it is too early to tell. One student, who has decided to remain at home while studying, felt she had not made the right decision. One student did not provide a response to this question.

2.2 RfE students not currently attending university

Only five of the 55 RfE students returning proformas are not currently university students. Of these five, four had taken a gap-year and were planning to commence a university education in September 2010 (this includes two students who had secured places at two different Russell Group universities to study medicine). The RfE student who has decided not to attend university is in employment, and feels that her career progression is not contingent on university study.

None of the students returning a proforma had started university and subsequently abandoned university studies⁴. This suggests that retention rates are high among RfE students.

⁴ One student, however, had moved away to study at university, but has since moved home to study at a university closer to home.

3. Perceived impacts of the RfE programme

This section explores the extent to which RfE students feel the programme has been helpful to them, and the benefits they identify as arising from their participation in the programme. The data for this section is taken from the interviews with the 30 RfE students.

It covers students' perceptions of:

- the benefits of their participation in the RfE programme
- how helpful RfE has been in supporting them to make decisions about university
- how helpful RfE has been in preparing them for university study.

The benefits cited by interviewees tend to relate to benefits associated with the application process or with preparation for university. Less attention was given to any impacts that might directly help students to stay at university. However, the study skills, the social skills and confidence, the financial information and the feeling that they have made the right choices around their university education are likely to enhance the prospects for the students, and ultimately mean that they progress successfully through their studies.

3.1 Benefits of participating in the RfE programme

The 30 young people interviewed were asked about the benefits they thought that their involvement in the RfE programme had led to. All of the interviewees place high value on the RfE programme, and, even one year on, identify a wealth of ways in which the programme has supported them both in their decisions about university, and also throughout their first year of study (or otherwise).

The benefits cited by the young people are set out in order of frequency, below.

3.1.1 Providing an insight into university life

The most frequently cited impact of the RfE programme is the insight into university life that it offers students (mentioned by 14 students). The programme activities, and particularly the summer school, proved to be a valuable way of giving students a flavour of what to expect at university, and to allay anxieties about and set up realistic expectations of, what being a university student might be like. The students value learning about lectures, student accommodation and student life, which has helped them to settle into being students and to make informed decisions over whether or not to attend university.

It gives you an insight into what university life is like....so it just kind of opened your eyes to what university is like.

It was a good way of getting a gist of how uni life would be, like how the lectures would be set out and stuff.

It gave a sample of what to expect once arriving at university.

We had our own rooms and our own accommodation and it was a way of easing me into the whole university lifestyle...it helped me to get an idea of most of the aspects of university.

3.1.2 Developing social skills

The students place a lot of value on the social skills that they developed during the RfE programme (cited by 13 students), and feel that the new social experiences have really contributed to the way in which they settled into university. They also report that the social experiences have given them more confidence to move away to university, and prepared them for interaction with the new people they met when making the transition to their current place of study.

Being pushed into living with people that you'd never met before, and having to introduce yourself...it gave me a little bit to fall back on when I went to uni, as in halls you are thrown in at the deep end and don't really know anyone, so that helped a lot.

Meeting new people was good. It developed my confidence because I met loads of people that I'd never met before.

Meeting people helped, helped socialising, integrating with others and getting used to university.

3.1.3 Help with applying to university

It is evident that the RfE programme has been significant in helping the students to apply to university (cited by 13), and some students state that they bear the application information in mind when applying for other things, such as employment. RfE is seen as valuable for helping with UCAS personal statements, and in some cases, was the only source of support for doing this. Students feel that the programme had encouraged them to broaden the information they included in their personal statements, and in one case, to tailor it towards the requirements of Oxbridge applications.

It really did help with things like personal statements, it gave us pointers as to where we were going wrong.

It helped with the application process to get into university. At the summer school they taught you how to write the personal statement and things which I'd been really struggling with before.

It helped me a lot with writing my CV, my personal statement particularly. It helped me with job opportunities so I know how to fill out an application form.

3.1.4 Acquiring study skills

Around one-third of the students (11) recognise the value of the study skills sessions, and feel that these have been particularly useful since starting university study. Students particularly refer to their learning around referencing, to the time management session, and to learning new research skills. Along with the social skills, these seem to be particularly useful in helping the students whilst at university, rather than just preparing them for the transition.

It was useful. It taught us about skills that we do use at university, particularly research skills.

It was very good because I got used to the idea of referencing. It made you think about time management.

It gave a basis on how to research for coursework essays.

3.1.5 Help with university choices

Importantly, eight students recognise that the RfE programme had helped them to make decisions about university, and that these had been the right decisions. It could be assumed that making informed decisions, that students feel were right for them, helps to retain students at their chosen institution. The students feel that RfE has helped them to choose the 'right' university, assisted them with subject/career choices, and in some cases, helped them to develop the confidence to actually progress to university or to recognise their ability in applying to universities that they had previously not considered. More detailed information on students' perceptions of the helpfulness of RfE for making university decisions is provided in Section 3.2.

The main benefit was actually deciding to go to university and by making that choice, improving my future prospects.

I was always thinking of applying to Manchester, but I wasn't thinking of applying to ones that were as far away as I did, or maybe with as high required grades. It sort of gave me the confidence that I needed to apply to places that I wanted to go.

The taster day was really helpful. I just gave me an insight into what they study at Leeds and what they did every day...and it showed me that medicine was what I thought it might be, and I liked it, so I went for it!

3.1.6 Provision of information on finances

Seven students feel that RfE has been particularly helpful in providing them with valuable advice and information around financing their university study, and some students are still applying what they have learnt to how they currently manage their money.

I didn't know anything about student finance before, and they kind of, well, the sessions helped me to understand when you have to pay your loan back, and what sort of help is available.

There were workshops in finances which prepared you for what was coming.

3.1.7 Advice and guidance from current students

It is apparent that the advice offered by current students is considered to have been really valuable to some of the students (cited by three students). The advice helped them to make decisions and allowed them to learn from the first hand experience of current students.

Meeting current students was the best part, because there wouldn't be any other chance for me to talk to other people that do medicine because its quite hard to get in, and they give you a lot of useful advice. You get the information from people who have done it themselves instead of reading it on line or in a prospectus.

On the summer school I got talking to a history student and that was quite good for learning a bit more about the course, and it ended up that I didn't want to do the course but at least I had the opportunity to talk to someone who actually did it.

3.1.8 Other benefits

Small numbers of students also refer to other benefits of their involvement in the RfE programme. These include: greater familiarity with the Leeds University campus (cited by three students); help with studying for A-levels (cited by one student); recognition of the benefits that can be associated with moving away to university (cited by one student); and the provision of information about university in light of very little advice being provided at home (again, reported by one student).

3.2 Helpfulness of RfE for students making decisions on university attendance

RfE students participating in the interviews were asked to what extent, on a scale of one to five, attending the RfE programme had helped them to effectively plan for their future. Eighteen of the 30 interviewees indicated a score of four or five, where five was 'to a great extent'. A further 10 interviewees responded with a score of three.

This indicates that a majority of RfE pupils feel that the programme did indeed help them effectively plan for their future.

RfE students were also asked to indicate, on a scale of one to five, whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements pertaining to areas where the RfE programme might have been helpful.

The distribution of responses to these questions is displayed in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Influence of RfE on students' decision making

	Strongly disagree			Strongly agree	
	1	2	3	4	5
If I hadn't have participated in the RfE programme, I probably wouldn't have ended up attending university	16	11	3	0	0
Participating in the RfE programme helped me make my decision to attend university	3	5	7	10	5
Participating in the RfE programme helped me to decide which university to attend	4	7	11	7	1
Participating in the RfE programme helped me to decide which university course to undertake	7	8	9	4	2

Source: NFER Reach for Excellence Cohort 1 Longitudinal Interviews, 2010, n=30.

Reinforcing the findings from earlier phases of the research, almost all (27) of the interviewees disagree with the statement that they 'probably wouldn't have ended up at university' if they hadn't attended the RfE programme. Interestingly, though, half of the interviewees (15) agree that attending the RfE programme *helped* them make the decision to attend university. Again, in line with earlier findings, almost all RfE students had the intention of attending university, but for half of the students, attending RfE helped with making the decision to actually attend.

When students were asked whether the RfE programme helped them to decide which university to attend, or which course to undertake, the responses were quite widely spread. In both cases the most common response was a neutral 'three'. In the case of both questions, more students disagree than agree with the statements. While this muted response from interviewees suggests that some students did not find RfE helpful in deciding where to study, and which course to pursue, responses to subsequent questions (as will be outlined in section 3.3) revealed that students found other aspects of the programme more notably helpful.

3.3 Helpfulness of RfE in preparing students for university study

Interviewees were asked to rate the ‘helpfulness’ of the RfE programme across a number of areas that it is designed to develop. Unsurprisingly, those aspects of the programme identified in these questions as most helpful mirror similar impacts that students identified independently, as presented in section 3.1.

Responses to these questions reveal that **students’ responses to RfE are overwhelmingly positive**, as shown in Table 3.2. A broad range of areas of the programme are seen to be helpful. Twenty-three of the 30 interviewees responded with a four or five (which is toward the ‘very helpful’ end of the scale) when asked how helpful the RfE programme was, overall, in preparing them for university study.

The area where RfE was most commonly identified as helpful by interviewees was ‘providing information about university life in general’ (25 students responded ‘four’ or ‘five’). This was followed by ‘providing guidance on finances associated with university study’ (23 students responded ‘four’ or ‘five’). The next two areas most commonly identified as helpful were related to giving students the ‘confidence’ and ‘belief’ to pursue university study (21 and 20 students, respectively, responded ‘four’ or ‘five’).

Table 3.2: Influence of RfE on students’ decision making

How helpful has RfE been for you in the following areas?	Not at all helpful			Very Helpful	
	1	2	3	4	5
Developing your independent study skills	1	1	10	13	5
Giving you the belief that you were capable of university study	1	1	8	14	6
Giving you the confidence to proceed with your plans for attending university	1	1	7	15	6
Providing guidance on finances associated with university study	0	3	4	12	11
Providing you with information about university life in general	1	0	4	11	14
Developing your social skills	2	2	9	8	8
Preparing you for independent living ⁵	1	0	8	3	3
Overall, how helpful would you say that your participation in the RfE Programme was in preparing you for university study?	0	1	6	15	8

Source: NFER Reach for Excellence Cohort 1 Longitudinal Interviews, 2010, n=30.

⁵ Asked only of those living away from home for university, n=15.

Interviewees were asked to identify any aspects of the RfE programme that they found particularly helpful. The top five most frequently identified aspects of the programme were:

- study skills sessions (18)
- summer school (15)
- meeting other people (13)
- subject-specific sessions (13)
- information on finance (13).

The mix of helpful areas and components of the RfE programme identified by young people reveals that they draw help from the programme in both 'hard' areas, such as skills and information, as well as 'soft' areas of development such as confidence and self-belief. Their high rating of the overall helpfulness of RfE suggests that students continue to acknowledge the value of participating in the programme, and the benefits that they enjoy as a result of their participation.

4. Student views on possible improvements to the RfE programme

When asked whether they felt that any improvements could be made to the RfE programme and to their experiences of it, students overwhelmingly stated that they could not think of a way to improve it. This testifies to the level of student satisfaction with the programme, and to the fact that students feel it provided a good preparation for university study and life.

Once I finished the RfE programme, I knew everything that I needed to know, so it helped me quite a lot.

There was such a wide range of material, they covered everything and I couldn't really have asked for anything better.

The few suggestions that were made, however, included the following:

- **Improve the range of courses that offer taster-days etc.** A minority of students (five) feel that the range of subjects covered was too narrow, and would welcome a widening of this.
- **Provide more information on other universities.** Three students feel that the programme was too focused on Leeds University and they would have welcomed more insight into other universities as well.
- **Provide more one-to-one support.** Two students feel that they would have appreciated more one-to-one support to talk through their options and choices.

5. Concluding comments

The data gathered from the cohort 1 students continues to demonstrate that the RfE programme has led to a wealth of benefits for those involved. Those who took part continue to recognise the impacts that the programme had whilst they were making university choices, but also impacts that have helped them to settle in, or to prepare them for a university education.

Overall, the data shows that over half of those for whom we have longitudinal data are studying at research intensive universities. Of note, none of the 50 students for whom we have university attendance data reported that they left university before completing their first year, and most were confident that they had made the right university choices. There would be value in comparing these rates of progression and retention to national data sets to see how the small cohort of RfE students fare when compared to other students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

Students readily identify a range of helpful aspects of the RfE programme. These relate to the provision of valuable information, for example in relation to student finance, and development of skills in areas such as effective study techniques. Students also acknowledge areas of personal development as a result of their participation in the programme, including development of self-belief, confidence and social skills. This personal development and learning of skills has helped pave the way for successful engagement with the first year of university study for the overwhelming majority of RfE students.

It will be interesting to see how these students fare over their second year of university study, and to ascertain the extent to which the impacts of RfE endure longer than the first year of study. It will also be valuable to look at achievement rates as students work towards their final grade at university.

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