Ten Years of Reading Scholars

A reflection on changes over the last ten years (2012-2021) and long-term impact of the scheme

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What is Reading Scholars?

Programme currently offering approximately 500 young people[i] per year from Widening Participation backgrounds (see Appendix 1 for inclusion criteria) the opportunity to experience university study and life.

The programme is currently formed of 16 different subject strands, giving participants the opportunity to explore what it will be like to be a student of that subject in the future. The numbers of young people accepted onto the scheme and the number of subject strands available has changed over the lifetime of the scheme. A full breakdown of numbers

As well as progression data and targeting evolving over time, so has the structure of the programme. In the initial years there was no summer residential experience, and the length of the residential has increased from 3 days to 4 days in recent years. With larger cohorts, certain elements of the programme have had to change when we spoke to alumni who took part in the programme in 2016 they spoke fondly of an afternoon they spent exploring Reading town centre with their mentors. This is something which is no longer a part of the programme however, this was also before the residential was added. We would therefore hope that the residential allows for that time to connect with

A year 10 strand was also added, offering a university experience and study skills development to approximately 100 pupils from local schools. Again, participants are required to meet eligibility criteria but are selected to participate by their schools rather than by individual application. The evaluation of this strand of the programme is outside the scope of this report but annual evaluation is carried out.

Impact of Reading Scholars

The key objectives of the Reading Scholars programme include:

Progression to Higher Education
Increasing confidence in applying to university
Increased knowledge and expectations of higher education
Enrolment to the University of Reading

The impact of Reading Scholars is then measured in a number of ways, including:

Qualitative feedback from the participants themselves as to how they feel the programme has benefitted them, via surveys and focus groups.
Quantitative data on intermediate outcomes:
- Likelihood of applying to university
- Knowledge and expectations of higher education

Quantitative data on both progression to higher education broadly and

from their schools/colleges and many are also taking part in similar schemes offered by other higher education institutions. Currently we are unable to include comparison data

Ethnicity: Black: 7.5%[viii]	Ethnicity: Asian: 17.2%[ix]

Table 2: National progression to HE by specific characteristics

While it is not possible to directly compare each of these national measures against the whole cohort of Reading Scholars, it is not unreasonable to consider that overall progression from the Reading Scholars programme remains above that which could be

"The subject content – it helped me better understand what university study would be like and I could make links with what I was studying at Sixth form."

When asked about any potential long-term impact of the programme alumni spoke about being more comfortable once they had started at the university because they already knew their way around, they already knew some of the staff and they already had a sense of fitting in or belonging. The programme gave them confidence that they had made the right choice in applying to Reading, with one explaining that they gave up an offer from a different university that they had previously been much more interested in so that they could accept their offer from Reading.

"Because of Scholars I had some ideas, like I knew roughly where a building was, or what colour it was. Like, I had little road maps. So, when my first lecture was in a room that I had already been to I knew where it was and I didn't have to go check the day before, or anything like that. I didn't feel as overwhelmed as I would have if I hadn't visited."

"I just sort of fell in love with it, I suppose. I had an offer from another university but in the end I made Reading firm and didn't add an insurance choice because I was that sure about it."

"I felt more at ease when I started as a student because I had been there before. I knew the campus was really nice and I knew some of the buildings. Scholars gave me the reassurance that I was going to like University because over the course of the programme I got so familiar with it."

Further long-term follow up with participants is needed to measure the longer term impact of the programme and to better understand why
come to the University of Reading.

Individual level data residential vs. non-residential

something not properly explored in the evaluation i.e. the proportion of students who change their subject preferences pre and post.

Relatedly, a number of students reported that they would be the first in their family to attend university, and so the programme helped them gain insight their families were unable to provide. There is perhaps a case therefore for moving no parental attendance at HE higher as a higher priority within the eligibility criteria (Appendix 1).

Similarly, students provided varying accounts of the amount of HE related support their schools offered and the nature of HE participation amongst their school peers (i.e. numbers of students attended highly selective universities). For example, a couple of students attended schools which offered very high levels of support and had high numbers of students attending top universities (with the school actively encouraging Oxbridge/ Russell Group institutions). Perhaps some of these points could be embedded with the eligibility/targeting criteria to ensure the scholars programme engages those who need it most (those at low-participation schools with limited support).

The Future

Reading Scholars is an established and well-respected programme. There are a large number of schools and colleges, both locally and nationally, which support pupils to take part in the programme year on year (see Appendix 2)
can be complacent and not continue to focus on development and improvement.

Carrying out this retrospective review of the programme has highlighted the need for changes to our data capture to allow for deeper analysis of outcomes for those who participate versus those who do not allowing us to say with more certainty if the programme is having the desired impact of increasing progression to higher education. However, even with this comparison it would be disingenuous to suggest a causal relationship as the programme does not

proportion of the group. Further work should be carried out to identify why participants do or do not choose Reading. Work has already begun in UK Recruitment & Outreach to support those who complete the Scholars Programme once the programme has finished with an offering throughout Year 13 and into their first year should they come to Reading.

While efforts have been made in the past to maintain contact with Scholars once the programme finished these efforts have been limited by staff capacity with a new post-holder focused on transition work, Scholars participants can have a more reliable point of contact throughout the year and benefit from a follow-on programme of activity.

This effort to increase the proportion of participants who go on to apply to Reading should be achieved through changes to the programme content and through follow-up support in year 13. It is right that the scheme continues to seek to attract those least likely to attend higher education and therefore we should not necessarily be seeking 100% progression to higher education. The intermediate outcomes of increased knowledge and understanding of higher education capture the fact that part of Scholars is to give young people experience of university life, which they may decide is not the right decision for them. More effort should be placed in marketing the scheme to schools with low-progression to higher education and limited capacity to provide additional support to their pupils.

Notes

This report was reviewed by the APP evaluation team with some suggestions on structure and reporting.

Per year, although this number has changed over time as the programme has grown. In the first year the scheme was offered to just 35 young people. Current plans are to keep the intake at approximately 500 per year for now.

APP Evaluation