



SPEAKERS
for schools

DOUBLE DISADVANTAGE

Does the decline in quality work experience impact state school students' access to Russell Group universities?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Kingdom is fortunate to be home to some of the highest-ranking universities in the world. Admission to these prestigious institutions can carry multiple benefits for a young person and can help smooth the path to some highly regarded and lucrative careers. It is of little surprise, therefore, that fair access to top universities has become a focus of attention for those seeking to improve social mobility.

Year-on-year increases in volume of applications has intensified competition for places at top universities. Most recently, this has contributed to the proportion of offers from Russell Group Universities dropping, from 60% in 2021 to 55% in 2022. Analysis of offers made shows that a young person from an affluent area is six times more likely to get into a top university than a young person from a disadvantaged area. The odds of success remain heavily stacked in favour of young people from more privileged backgrounds.

It would be easy to dismiss this as being wholly the result of pupils from more affluent families achieving better academic outcomes, and that the path to greater equity lies in reducing the attainment gap in school. There is more than an element of truth to this. The attainment gap between the least advantaged and their most affluent peers is greater now than at any point in the last ten years. The attainment gap undeniably creates a major obstacle for disadvantaged young people to reach Russell Group universities. However, our report shows that success is dependent upon much more than just getting the grades.

Unequal access to insights, information and support plays a crucial role in determining whether a talented young person will apply to a top university, and then succeed in their application. This includes aspects such as information to inform GCSE and A-level selection; access to opportunities for relevant work experience and enrichment activities; sufficient familiarity with the choices available; and knowledge and support in preparation for application and interview.

Participation in work experience, enrichment, and extracurricular activities can showcase passion, commitment, and interest to the admission officers. According to UCAS, demonstrating work experience and extracurricular activities in personal statements is a way of elevating an application beyond high grades. Analysis by Education and Employers in 2011 demonstrated that work experience was a requirement for a number of competitive courses at Russell Group universities. Our updated analysis shows this to have continued significance, for some highly-competitive courses, including Medicine and Veterinary Science. Compounding the attainment gap, the disparity in access thus creates a double disadvantage for young people educated in the state sector - and in particular for those from the lowest/most challenging socio-economic backgrounds.

Recent research by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) shows that admission officers looked at personal statements to find evidence of work experience on at least a third of occasions. Yet our own analysis of course requirements suggests that this is not always stated explicitly. Lack of transparency is a problem, particularly for disadvantaged young people who struggle with access to first-hand insight and information about requirements for a successful application to selective courses and universities. The evidence is clear that access to such insights is strongly associated with social class and family backgrounds.

Speakers for Schools has previously shown that access to work experience unfairly favours those from a privileged background, whether through personal connections or attending schools with the capacity to provide a high-quality career education. If young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are not receiving a clear message on how to make a successful application to a prestigious university, and don't have the means of accessing opportunities to showcase their interests and achievements, the challenge can become unsurmountable.

Negative preconceptions about what life at a prestigious university would be like, and young people's concerns about whether they are likely to 'fit in' and thrive, have been shown to affect intent to apply. Research by Zero Gravity found twenty-four per cent of students from state schools lacked the self-belief to get into a Russell Group university, despite meeting the grade requirements.

Russell Group universities are a pipeline to many top jobs. It is imperative that admissions processes are sophisticated enough to recognise talent and potential, wherever it lies. But it is also incumbent on government, educators and employers to ensure that we provide young people with the opportunities they need to demonstrate their potential, beyond academic study, and the insights they need to make informed choices.

Recommendations:

Russell Group universities should:

1. Be consistent and transparent about the value of work experience and enrichment activities. If it has a positive impact on admission, they should signal this clearly on admission pages.
2. Extend outreach to schools serving more challenging communities, to challenge stereotypes and democratise access to valuable information and advice on how to successfully apply.

Government should:

3. Ensure schools and colleges are adequately funded to support universal access to high-quality work experience and enrichment activities, targeted at more disadvantaged communities.
4. Ensure schools are properly recognised for valuing and prioritising meaningful career education, work experience, and volunteering, as important ingredients in preparing young people for success, beyond school.

School leaders should:

5. Ensure all young people have fair access to multi-day, high-quality work experience.
6. Embed Gatsby Benchmark 7 meaningfully in their practice to ensure access to advice and opportunities around higher education.

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Advantages of a Russell Group University Degree

There is already evidence that attending a Russell Group university brings substantial benefits. One of these is more chance of getting a high-prestige job with higher earning potential on graduating. The social, economic and cultural status of a Russell Group university degree has long served as a compelling incentive for young people to apply.

A degree from a Russell Group university is widely recognised as a valuable qualification, and the evidence of the premiums attached to earning one confirm why. According to data from the Institute for Fiscal Studies for the Department for Education (2020), once in employment, there is a 20% average gain in net lifetime earnings due to attending Russell Group universities¹. In addition, data from the job search engine Adzuna suggests that jobseekers from Russell Group universities can expect to earn up to £13,500 more per year than those from non-Russell Group universities five years after graduating – a potential wage gap of £513,000 over an average working life². In 2023, Adzuna showed³ that of the top 20 universities that produced the highest-earning graduates, 13 were part of the Russell Group.

Russell Group universities have substantial social, economic, and cultural impacts. According to Sutton Trust research (2019) Oxford and Cambridge together produced 71% of senior judges, 56% of Permanent Secretaries, 51% of diplomats, 44% of newspaper columnists, 40% of public body chairs, 36% of the News Media 100, 36% of junior ministers and 33% of select committee chairs. While most of these percentages have fallen since 2014, it remains clear that a degree from an elite university opens doors⁴.

How competitive is it to secure a place at a top-tier university?

Competition for places is fierce and getting fiercer. Given the major benefits of a Russell Group university degree, it is understandable that there is great competition to secure a place. According to the University of Southampton⁵, Russell Group universities receive a staggering 800,000 applications for 100,000 places, while the Student Good Guide⁶ claims that the average acceptance rate is around 15%. The impact of the pandemic has created even greater competition. The Covid Social Mobility and Opportunities Study (COSMO)⁷ showed that a substantially greater number of young people planned to go to university in the academic year 2020-21 than in previous years. The Russell Group itself reported a 12% increase⁸ in applications from 2019-22. Consequently, as applications increase but the number of places remain unchanged, the proportion of applications that result in an offer of a place in Russell Group universities are falling, from 60.5% in 2021 to 55.1% in 2022.⁹

Research from 2022 showed that applicants from affluent areas of the UK are nearly 6 times more likely to have a prestigious university offer¹⁰, such as a Russell Group institution, than those living in a disadvantaged area. Similarly, the Sutton Trust (2019)¹¹ found that applicants from independent schools were twice as likely to gain a place at a Russell Group university than those from non-selective state schools. In total, 60% of students from independent schools¹² attend Russell Group universities, compared to less than a quarter of students from state schools.

The competition is evident, and once again we see that the most disadvantaged young people are the most likely to miss out.

The intensity of competition for places at Russell Group institutions reflects not just the quality of the teaching and research, but a perception by young people and their families that certain courses provide opportunities for upward social mobility. Securing a place on a course at a Russell Group university can be a significant step in future life outcomes and earning potential. As a result, Russell Group admissions can shape or perpetuate groups with the greatest earning potential¹³. The high level of competition to secure a place is apparent in the employability ranking index published by the Complete University Guide. This shows how attending a Russell Group university improves employability¹⁴.



The role of academic attainment in admission to Russell Group universities

The Russell Group¹⁵ describes their undergraduate degree offers as highly selective. An inspection of course entry requirements demonstrates the high grades that universities need applicants to achieve. This reflects the highly-academic environment of Russell Group universities and an apparently meritocratic entry system based on competition. Perpetuating the high threshold for entry even further is the recent news¹⁶ that more entrance exams will be introduced by Cambridge and Imperial in mathematics and engineering, in addition to existing medicine and law entrance exams. The academic conditions young people must meet for consideration by a Russell Group university are evident and those positioned to succeed best educationally will have the greater advantage.

Research by the Institute of Education in 2019¹⁷ established that students who attend private school achieve significantly higher A-level results than their state school counterparts. Further findings from 2014¹⁸ revealed that the strongest predictors of Russell Group university attendance are school type (state or private) and high school grades on entry. It follows that an attainment gap creates a major obstacle for disadvantaged young people to gain access to opportunities to succeed. We argue that this is compounded by the lack of opportunities for work experience and career guidance, creating a double disadvantage.

Widening participation

In 2022, mentoring service Zero Gravity found 24% of state school students did not intend to apply for Russell Group universities due to a lack of belief in being offered a place, despite being predicted the required entry grades (YouGov survey of 1000 16-18-year-olds). We believe this attitude can be traced to a lack of representation in Russell Group universities, rooted in insufficient support of disadvantaged students applying for places and interventions to tackle stereotypes.

Yet the Russell Group shows commitment to identifying and working with underrepresented groups of young people to widen participation. A recent major milestone in the Russell Group's mission to come in the form of the 2020 Pathways to Potential report¹⁹. Based on the evidence that pupils from a privileged background were over 4 times more likely to get the grades ABB or higher in their A-levels than pupils from a disadvantaged background, there was a clear rationale for the Russell Group's proposals. Suggestions for action in the report included working with stakeholders such as educators, families and students to offer tailored support specific to different groups.

Other strategies to widen participation have included contextual offers when universities take account of personal circumstances and disadvantage to adapt offers. This strategy appears to be popular with students at Russell Group universities²⁰. However, the Russell Group says meeting goals from the Office for Students to reduce inequalities in university entry by 2039/40²¹, would only be possible if entry is halted for young people from the most represented backgrounds. Plus, entry for the most disadvantaged young people (whether or not they meet the entry grades) would have to increase 10% year-on-year. The Russell Group believes this is unrealistic – and that earlier intervention is critical. A 2023 update to the Pathways to Potential report shows that their ambitions are being partially met. The ratio of advantaged to disadvantaged students has fallen since the 2018-19 Russell Group cohort²².

The challenges of the pandemic have created larger issues for the Russell Group to consider. These include the cost-of-living crisis and the inability to access extracurricular opportunities which disproportionately impact disadvantaged young people. One of their 2020 commitments was to ensure transparency in the application process for all young people and to facilitate high-quality outreach activities. However, the evidence of this being met is weak – the report only says that all Russell Group universities have made progress or were already meeting this commitment before 2020. There is no robust data to verify the progress claimed. The evidence is also weak on whether this has been done consistently across all 24 universities in the group or partly delivered by top-performing ones over the years.

A 2014 report concluded²³ that when students with similar attainment were compared, those who attended non-selective state schools with a high proportion of Free School Meal (FSM) students were significantly more likely to graduate with a 2:1 or higher than those who attended independent or selective state schools. So, besides the critical need to deliver fairer and more diverse representation in Russell Group institutions, there is strong evidence that students from disadvantaged backgrounds perform excellently when they reach university. There is a major justification for widening participation in prestigious universities.

Russell Group alumni returning to their previous schools to provide insider knowledge of applying for highly-selective universities such as Cambridge²⁴ offer an excellent insight for students. But for those in schools without such chances, the opportunity gap becomes even wider. As reported by Zero Gravity²⁵ in 2022, it is as likely that a young person who attends a state school will not know anyone that went to Cambridge, as it is that a private school student will know more than 9 alumni. As such, it is imperative that Russell Group universities, educators, employers and policymakers review their approaches to supporting disadvantaged young people in their educational journeys. The issue is greater than attainment alone. As crucial as it is to mitigate against

the attainment gap, focus also needs to be on creating equitable experiences for young people to widen their horizons through real-world experiences.

Other factors affecting competition

Our evidence shows that access to extracurricular opportunities outside of school can factor in determining whether applications to top-tier universities are successful or not. We present this in full as part of the next section of the report.

As a charity, we have amassed a body of evidence that demonstrates the benefits of high-quality work experience. During 2023-24, Speakers for Schools investigated the benefits of participation in providing insights into careers, building confidence, and supporting decision-making. We found that young people that took part in high-quality work experience go on to achieve better outcomes during their transition to early adulthood. These outcomes include lower chances of becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET) and a wage boost when in full-time employment²⁶.

Research by Education and Employers in 2017 showed that 30% of young respondents attending state schools stated they would have welcomed more help from their schools/colleges on how to get into university, compared with just 13% attending independent schools. It also revealed that young people in non-selective state schools consistently stated they would welcome more help from schools/colleges in transitioning to the adult world and insights into the workplace. This included how to create a good CV, perform well at interviews, find a job and understand what skills, attitudes and qualifications employers require. Significantly, it also established that these are all areas in which independent school-educated young people more consistently self-identified/rated themselves as feeling better prepared/equipped²⁷.

New analysis in this report evaluates the criteria for Russell Group entry requirements. Together with our previous research, we show that there is a disparity between what universities expect young people to evidence in their applications, and access to extracurricular opportunities such as work experience, which appears to be an important component for many courses. We have previously established how beneficial work experience is to young people, and that the most disadvantaged are the least likely to gain access. Urgent action is required to ensure that the playing field is levelled to support young people beyond attainment and to facilitate successful transitions into higher education and employment.

Access to wider opportunities with impact on admission – what does the evidence show?

Evidence suggests that high-quality work experience and participation in wider enrichment activities are an advantage when putting together a university application. When taking a deep dive into the entry requirements for Russell Group university courses, interesting trends emerge to establish that such experience is preferred by admissions offices and unequal access to these opportunities could impact success in applications.

In January 2023, UCAS published a report²⁸ spotlighting key outcomes of their work in driving a successful admissions journey. UCAS assessed the value of the personal statement to students and education providers and explored the benefits of a more standardised model which identified six key focus areas. Among them is: “Preparation through other experiences”. UCAS states that this aspect could focus on self-directed extracurricular learning, sports or social clubs, and employment or other work experience – and should include reflection on the skills developed.

A survey of 113 admissions professionals by HEPI²⁹ shows that although most respondents felt their decisions were primarily based on grades, the UCAS personal statement was considered important for vocational or highly-selective courses. Personal statements are used mainly to assess applicants’ interest in a course (88%). Of the other uses, 29% were for assessing work experience.

The [UCAS work experience and volunteering](#) website advises young people that:

“Work experience, placements and volunteering are a great way to demonstrate your enthusiasm, knowledge and passion for your chosen subject area in your personal statement.”

Work experience – whether in-person or virtual – is also suggested as a good way to research a profession and decide if it’s the right path. It also provides evidence of a good understanding of what it would be like to study that subject and a realistic grasp of a career in the area.

While it is rarely the sole relevant factor, whether as an essential requirement or as evidence of commitment and awareness, work experience is beneficial in applications. As well as its impact in impressing an admissions officer, work experience is also relevant in its impact on the young person. It can increase motivation and confidence and provide essential skills to discuss at the interviews for highly-selective universities³⁰. Research by Education and Employers (2017) underlines the difference in support and opportunities available by school type. They observed that young people attending state schools have less access to advice on how to get into university compared with those attending independent schools. They also have fewer contacts to help them navigate or maintain confidence throughout the process, and so may be disproportionately impacted by any additional requirements³¹.

In 2011, the charity Education and Employers investigated work experience as a requirement in undergraduate admissions policies at Russell Group universities. The research aimed to show whether the Russell Group cohort of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) expected their undergraduate applicants to have done work experience how much work experience strengthened their application.

When Education and Employers conducted their original research, proof of academic ability through grades was generally believed to be a gateway to a place at a top-tier university. Although attainment was important, it was only one of the requirements for some of the highly-selective courses in top-ranking universities. As stated by the then Minister of State for Universities and Science, David Willetts, universities should, “look beyond headline A-level grades to what that individual’s potential might be.” Back in 2011, the list of things to look at when selecting applicants included their UCAS application form (where students could explain in more detail who they were) experiences of the world of work or subject they had gained through their school education and what they aspired to become.

In 2011, admissions policies for many university courses included work experience as an essential or preferred requirement for which applicants should provide supporting evidence. Some of these courses result in getting the most highly-paid jobs on graduation. Education and Employers selected six courses to represent top jobs and identified which required or preferred work experience as part of their admission policy.

The six courses – Business/Economics/Management, Dentistry, Engineering, Law, Medicine and Veterinary Medicine – were selected because they typically provide high wages. The research involved a review of online materials setting out HEI admissions criteria for each subject. Materials were reviewed to assess whether work experience (or experience of the world of work) was cited as an essential or desirable admissions requirement or not mentioned.

Subject 2011	% of Russell Group universities stating work experience in their admission criteria	Number of Russell Group universities offering this course
	Essential or Desirable	
Veterinary Medicine/ Science	100%	6
Dentistry	91%	11
Medicine	88%	18
Law	37%	19
Engineering	28%	18
Business/Economics/Management	21%	19

Table 1: Results of Employer and Education 2011 review into how many Russell Group universities stated work experience in their admission criteria.

The result of their desktop review shows that some courses, such as Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science, overwhelmingly stated work experience was essential or desirable. In other areas, such as Law, Engineering and Business, almost a third of universities noted that work experience is essential or desirable as part of their selection criteria. Below are a few examples of the wording provided by universities for a selected number of courses in 2011:

Veterinary Medicine/Science:

“Experience of working with animals is a key part of our entry requirements.”

(University of Edinburgh)

Dentistry:

“The personal statement is read to ensure that the applicant has knowledge of and insight into the profession with emphasis on work experience/observation. Candidates are expected to show a range of skills, and it is desirable on all dental programmes that candidates have

completed a period of work experience/shadowing in a local dental setting or hospital and preferably in more than one establishment.” (University of Liverpool)

Medicine:

“Medical Schools expect applicants to have a range of work experience for two reasons. Firstly, this demonstrates that you have a realistic insight to the profession – you are after all committing to a lifetime career when you apply to study Medicine. It is important that you have an understanding of the complex nature of a doctor's role, as well as being aware of the highs and lows of the profession. Work experience is also important in enabling you to develop (and to demonstrate that you have) the relevant skills and qualities that are essential to becoming a good doctor.” (University of Sheffield)

A unique analysis of UCAS personal statements in 2011 also found that testimonies about work experience featured prominently in university applications and could influence how places are allocated to the most competitive university courses³². Applicants were advised to “include details of jobs, placements, work experience or voluntary work, particularly if it's relevant to [your] chosen course(s)”. As part of their analysis, the research team assessed the quantity and quality of the work-related activity that applicants from different educational backgrounds drew on and looked at how it was described and conceptualised in the corresponding personal statement. The analysis exercise showed that work-related activity was found to be a significant area of difference in personal statements.

Work experience as a barrier: a historical overview

The researchers at Education and Employers in 2011 were interested in exploring whether the requirement for work experience from highly-selective universities would be a barrier for students.

The use of non-academic indicators appeared credible on the basis that historically, private schools in the UK have enjoyed a “performance advantage” over state schools. So academic attainment was not always a robust measure of students' ability. The rationale then followed that because the personal statement allowed applicants to outline their non-academic qualities and skills, such as workplace experience and extracurricular activity, it should enable admission tutors to assess applicants more holistically and make better-informed selection decisions.

However, on closer inspection, the evidence showed much disparity in access to opportunities such as work experience and other extracurricular activities among applicants. It revealed that young people educated in private schools were much more likely to have participated in a higher volume of activities that gave them a competitive advantage in applying for selective universities, especially for courses in which work experience was mandatory.

A 2011 YouGov survey of young adults aged 19-24 found that while 42% of former independent school pupils found that the work experience they had completed at school between 14 and 19 was useful in getting into higher education, only 25% of their counterparts educated at non-selective state schools agreed³³.

Independent school applicants were found to draw on 55% more examples of work experience than applicants from other educational backgrounds. The nature of the work experience was also different: for state school candidates, it was more likely to be a ‘job’ (paid, unskilled, low prestige) than an ‘experience’ (such as a placement or internship). However, for independent school applicants, it was six times more likely to be the other way around. As comparisons were restricted to applicants with identical A-level grades, the concern was that the UK's university admissions process gave further advantage to applicants from more privileged backgrounds. It was possible young people with the grades and potential to gain a place at a top university were being turned

away because they had only ‘Saturday jobs’ to talk about while their privately-educated peers drew on a range of high-prestige placements³⁴.

Education and Employment’s findings echoed those from the Sutton Trust following a similar analysis in 2011. According to the Sutton Trust’s review of about 300 UCAS personal statements, some independent school applicants could list up to nine prestigious placements, internships and shadowing activities. This was in stark contrast to other applicants who were left describing school outings and part-time jobs³⁵.

Work-related activity: independent school applicant	Work-related activity: state school applicants
<p>“As an 18-year-old, I have had a variety of short periods of experience in the workings of business in today’s financial world. I first became aware of the workings of business when to supplement my savings, I worked for [company name], a designer in London, as a model. I have also worked on the trading floor of a London brokers’ firm, [company name] ... My other experience thus far includes work with my local BBC radio station, events planning with a corporate five-star country hotel and working in the marketing team of a leading City law firm. I have since had a variety of jobs, most recently managing a small gastro pub.”</p>	<p>“In Year 11 we were taken on a school trip to Cadbury World to analyse the aspects of the business. During the day we were given a presentation by the workers at Cadbury World who explained how they advertise, produce and promote their new and existing products. I felt this was particularly valuable to my understanding of the business world.”</p> <p>“In my final GCSE year there was an opportunity for a group of us to manage the school lockers.”</p>

Table 2: Results of the 2011 Sutton Trust analysis to compare work-related activity referenced in UCAS personal statements by independent school applicants versus state school applicants.

According to the Sutton Trust analysis, family networks make a profound difference in the quantity and quality of work experience referenced. This was evident from how frequently access to opportunities found through parental or familial networks featured across the personal statements of privately-educated applicants. To understand the true impact of the difference in access to opportunities we should consider how state school students wishing to apply for Russell Group university courses such as Medicine or Dentistry that stipulated relevant work experience as an essential entry requirement could have met this requirement. They have a distinct lack of familial networks to support them in accessing appropriate work-related opportunities. In this way, the Sutton Trust findings show how access to opportunities depended on access to social capital, which was not distributed equally across different social classes.

The final, but equally important point to acknowledge from the 2011 research is awareness. Access to information, insight and guidance on selective universities and specific courses requirements varied by school type. The result was an uneven playing field for students attending schools where provision for careers education, advice and guidance was extremely inconsistent. Similarly, students whose families did not attend university – or had not followed the same pathway as the young person aspired to pursue – were at a disadvantage. They did not have the experience, or knowledge of ‘the system’, to offer guidance and advice. Table 3 (shown below) presents an indicative level using data from a YouGov survey from 2011³⁶.

Careers Advice	Non-selective with sixth form	Grammar with sixth form	Independent with sixth form	Number of Respondents
Yes	44%	48%	57%	336
No	56%	52%	43%	395
Total	530	122	79	731

Table 3: Results from 2011 YouGov survey showing comparative engagement in four employer engagement activities recalled by young adults (aged 19-24) who attended the same type of school between the ages of 14 and 19.

Table 3 shows that independent schools were more likely to have provided career advice for their students. In the same paper, in qualitative interviews, high-performing independent schools were asked why they provide their students with programmes such as work experience, career advice and other employer engagement activities. In their answers, all the respondents emphasised the importance of engaging with employers to help pupils enter university courses of choice. Interviewees were keenly aware that work experience was often a highly-desirable or essential requirement for influencing successful admission to highly-competitive university courses. Interviewees also noted that where undergraduate courses related closely to a specific vocation, for example Medicine, work experience (and other employer engagement activity) could provide excellent opportunities for pupils to show insight and commitment to careers linked to intended courses of study. A fair and consistent level of access to information, advice and guidance – whether through engagement with employers or school staff – would increase awareness of what young people need to do to achieve a place at a highly-competitive university, if that’s what they aspire to.

Has this changed over the past decade?

In this report we have repeated the review originally undertaken by Education and Employers in 2011 to establish whether the situation has changed. We explored the number of Russell Group universities referencing work experience as essential or desirable for the same six courses with the addition of Computer Science. We have included this because recent labour market analysis indicates that this course now also leads to similarly well-paid jobs. The paper uses the same methodology, looking at the online admission pages for Russell Group universities³⁷ for the above courses.

The search criteria were to find references to work experience as part of the admission requirement and whether this was an essential requirement or desirable. Since 2011, four more universities have joined the alliance, and this analysis looks at the total number of 24 universities as part of the search.

Reviewing the admission websites for all 24 Russell Group universities shows an interesting shift. On average, fewer courses now require work experience compared to 2011. However, there’s been some fluctuation in whether work experience is essential or desirable across these courses. Some of the most marked shifts are for Medicine – where work experience as an essential requirement has more than doubled. While work experience as an essential requirement for Veterinary Medicine/Science has significantly reduced, the number of courses stating it is desirable has almost doubled.

A comparison of the 2011 and 2023 results also reveals that both Law and Business/Economics/Management had no essential requirements for work experience in 2011 – but now some of the courses require it. It is a similar story for Engineering, where a comparison of results shows twice as many courses in Engineering now have work experience as an essential requirement than in 2011.

However, despite shifts in course requirements, we have shown that UCAS and HEPI still recommend showcasing work experience on personal statements to improve university applications. The advice from both is at odds with individual university's course requirements. The lack of clarity on the value of work experience for successful applications exacerbates the double disadvantage that young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds already face. Their academic success is hindered by wider societal factors, and access to work experience relies on who they know. If work experience is of value to universities to any extent, then it should be universally available.

In a 2021 Sutton Trust survey, only 30% of final-year students said they had completed any school-organised work experience, with the figure even lower for younger students³⁸. That figure may have been impacted by the consequences of the pandemic. Still, a recent Speakers for Schools' survey covering respondents aged 18-30 (ranging from those who left school before the election of the Coalition to those who had only just left) shows how far we have come from near-universal coverage. The survey found that a third of students aged 16 - 18 recalled doing work experience³⁹. Additionally, according to a recent report by the Social Market Foundation, almost half of the students still do not have work experience available to them⁴⁰.

While not a guarantee of application success at a Russell Group university, having more opportunities to reference work experience in an application is likely to increase a young person's chance of securing a place on a highly-competitive course at a top university. As has been seen time and time again, Speakers for Schools' research (2022) shows that young people from private education were twice as likely to have completed multiple types of experiences while in education than those who attended state schools⁴¹. We evidence the disparity between young people's level of access to experience opportunities in the state and independent education as a factor of unequal access to Russell Group universities.

The challenge for Social Mobility

The evidence presented in this report shows that access to Russell Group universities is still a challenge for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The obstacles that less privileged young people face when applying for university are part of a bigger picture that Speakers for Schools has seen in the past – that the most disadvantaged are the most likely to miss out. The attainment gap is ever present, and the lack of opportunity for work experience is creating a double disadvantage. As Russell Group university access is an issue of social mobility, these barriers must be addressed.

Our review of admissions policies for a select number of highly-competitive Russell Group university courses shows that demand for work experience as an essential or desirable criterion still exists. Our exploration considers the unequal distribution of opportunities for work experience – especially high-quality specialist work experience. As a result we conclude that is a significant issue for state school students. It is an issue that can prevent many from successfully gaining a place on these highly-selective courses and/or can make the application process more confusing to navigate for those with little to no support.

The HEPI analysis of UCAS personal statements⁴² identified that personal statements are used for assessing work experience. They position work experience as a good way to showcase individuals' interests and aspirations to pursue their education careers. In our previous research we have shown the benefits of work experience for a young person's trajectory – that work experience is a component of a successful Russell Group university application emphasises how important an asset it is. Until access to work experience is equally available to all, the playing field cannot be considered level for all potential Russell Group university course applicants. This is a challenge for the education sector, and our case for Russell Group university admissions improvements sits within our vision for work experience opportunity reform at all levels.

No matter how well-intended, efforts by the Russell Group universities alone to widen participation will never fully address the opportunity gap. Closing the opportunity gap properly requires more proactive intervention earlier to ensure that every child benefits from the same high standard of careers education underpinned by meaningful experiences of the world of work, delivered in a timely and consistent manner. Systemic change of this scale is complex but not impossible. It demands a collaborative approach from a wide range of stakeholders and necessitates their sustained support over a much longer time span.

The evidence gathered in this paper underlines the scale and urgency of the situation we now face. It also leads us to conclude that the combined impact of the attainment gap reaching its highest point in 10 years, alongside a growing opportunity gap, puts young people attending state schools – especially those from the least privileged backgrounds – at a double disadvantage. This is because they are most likely to be the ones hit hardest by both the attainment and opportunity gap.

Finding alternative ways of assessing applicants may mitigate slightly against the unequal access to meaningful work experience opportunities between state and private school students. But this is a workaround, not a substitute for improving access to close the opportunity gap and level the playing field in the longer term. Work experience remains both a driver of social mobility and an impactful tool for schools and parents to give the young people in their care the best chance. More than that: it empowers young people and is of benefit in its own right – to students, universities, employers and society.

Implications for Policy and Recommendations

The UK is at a pivotal moment in time. Post-Covid, and post-EU, virtually all sectors report skills gaps and recruitment challenges. The lack of diversity of talent in many senior roles, as highlighted in this report, acts as a brake on our ability to compete on the global stage. Russell Group universities serve as a pipeline to many top jobs. It is imperative that admissions processes are sophisticated enough to recognise talent and potential, wherever it resides. But it is also incumbent on the wider education system to ensure that we provide young people with the opportunities they need to demonstrate their potential, beyond academic study.

Through our recent [Work Experience for All campaign](#), Speakers for Schools has demonstrated its commitment to highlighting the important role that work experience can play in improving careers education and closing the opportunity gap. The findings in the current paper strengthen our argument for change even further. The portfolio of research we are building demonstrates how pervasive social mobility challenges are today.

It remains our aim to use our research and influence to help shape a viable, costed solution for making high-quality work experience accessible for every young person. This must be a solution that fully acknowledges the scale and complexity of the challenge, that can work for all stakeholders, and ultimately close the opportunity gap between the most and least privileged in our society. In light of that, here are our policy recommendations:

For Russell Group universities

- **Consistent and transparent communication about the importance of work experience for successful admission.** We have seen inconsistencies in Russell Group admission requirements suggesting a lack of clarity in what constitutes successful admissions. We suggest that as part of widening participation efforts, Russell Group universities engage with young people as early as possible to communicate clearly what a successful application looks like. By doing so, young people from all backgrounds will have more time to seek out work experience opportunities and build a powerful university application.
- **Democratise access to privileged information about successful applications.** The attainment gap is at a 10-year high. There are successful academic catch-up initiatives such as tutoring that show progress to close this gap is possible. We also encourage a similar approach to closing the opportunity gap now that the evidence shows access to experiences such as placement and enrichment activities could influence the chances of success post-school. We encourage universities, especially the top-tier competitive institutions, to step forward and offer insight about successful applications, what it is like to study there and a chance to meet staff. These could be through taster sessions or connecting with the local schools and colleges to offer placement opportunities.

For government, current and future

- **Ensuring schools and colleges are adequately funded to support universal access to high-quality work experience for all.** Speakers for Schools has been campaigning to provide every young person the opportunity for high-quality placement. We have explored the funding requirement for this ambitious but inexpensive policy. According to Speakers for Schools research commissioned by the Social Market Foundation⁴³, the cost of providing one work experience for all young people during pre-16 education is £35m and £75m for both pre- and post-16 placements. This is a small price to pay for levelling the playing field in access to opportunities and closing the skills gap in the long term.

- **Reviewing the accountability system and the curriculum to find space for meaningful career education and work experience.** From our work with young people and employers, it is clear the system needs to develop young people for their potential and future labour market needs. This is especially true for young people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. In our experience, it needs to make young people aware of their pathway to education and work. Young people continuously share their uncertainty about the future. Despite reported progress against Gatsby Benchmarks and higher levels of employer engagement in education, they feel unprepared and concerned about transitions to education and employment.

There is a growing consensus that we have yet to find the right balance in the curriculum – and that focus on academic achievement has squeezed other important activities out of the school day. The system currently fails around a third of young people each year, who leave school without the necessary grades in English and Maths. We fail them too by not adequately preparing them for the world beyond school, and by not introducing them to potential employers soon enough. This is not a zero-sum game. Evidence shows that by forging stronger education and employer links we enrich the curriculum and engage more young people in learning by helping give meaning and motivation to their study and attendance at school.

For School Leaders

- **Ensure all young people have access to multi-day, high-quality work experience.** It is critical career leaders and teachers are supported to secure placements and provide extracurricular activities that could have a life-changing impact on the future of students. By providing that support, schools will be equipped to take creative approaches in timetabling activity. Work experience and career advice should be flexible and inclusive, and career leaders and teachers should be supported to deliver this. This is particularly the case in rural and coastal communities with limited access to local employers, for instance. It is vital for educators to partner with existing organisations which could help them lift the burden and provide interventions that could support them in delivering the same opportunities available to others from more privileged backgrounds.
- **Embed Gatsby Benchmark 7 in practice to ensure access to information, advice and opportunities.** Gatsby Benchmark 7 is about providing encounters with further and higher education during school years. The Careers and Enterprise Company defines what good looks like to embed GB7 into practice:
 - a) By the age of 16, every student should have had a meaningful encounter with providers of the full range of educational opportunities, including universities.
 - b) By the age of 18, all students who are considering applying to university should have had at least two visits to universities to meet staff and students.

This research is another reminder of how vital it is for students, especially those with limited access to social and financial capital, to access information and advice early enough during their education journey. Evidence also shows that high-achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to apply to higher education, attend a high-status university, or access high-status professional jobs than similarly qualified peers from more affluent backgrounds. It is not that students from disadvantaged backgrounds don't have high aspirations, but their access to opportunities to develop career insights and skills is limited. Closer ties with top-tier universities and providing encounters with recent graduates who can discuss what it is really like – and why it is for 'people like us' – should be an essential part of modern career provisions.

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