Access Reading 23/24: An Evaluation

Amy Fairbrother, Student Recruitment & Access Manager, December 2024

Contents

Executive Summary

The activity

Access Reading offers applicants to the University of Reading from IMD quintile 1 & 2 (among other widening participation students) the opportunity for further support through an in-person event and online support to aid in the transition to University and to increase the numbers of students from those groups enrolling at the University of Reading.

The evaluation

The evaluation methodology was a mixture of Type 1 and Type 2 evaluation types, as there was a single survey at the end of the in-person event (Type 1), and we were able to compare enrolment data of those that attended Access Reading and those that were invited and didn't attend (Type 2).

Main findings

Attendance at the Access Reading in person event contributed to increasing the number of students from IMD Q1 & 2 enrolling at the University. Whilst not being the primary driver to making a firm choice for the majority, it may have helped to convert others that had yet to make decisions. It succeeded in some of its primary aims to increase the sense of belonging for students looking to come to Reading and increase knowledge about HE and coming to University.

Conclusions/recommendations

We would look to increase engagement in the programme next year as numbers represented a very small number of the group that were invited. We hope to do this through peer-to-peer engagement prior to the day. The evaluation will also include a pre and post survey element.

Introduction

Report caveats

This report is part of the first cycle of more robust evaluation in line with our new Access and Participation Plan. Therefore, we acknowledge that the evaluation still has limitations and we do not intend to over-claim the strength of any conclusions.

In particular, it is noted that this evaluation is based primarily on self-reported data, which can be impacted by many factors. There were practical challenges to data collection, and it is acknowledged that only collecting post-intervention data reduces the robustness of claims about the programme's effectiveness beyond immediate reactions. Nevertheless, the data here still provide valuable insights into engagement and the immediate perceived benefits of the programme. Future evaluations will aim to strengthen data collection, ensuring a more robust set of pre- and post-intervention measures. Long-term data will also become available.

Driver/Rationale

Within the University of Reading, students from IMD Q1 & Q2 are significantly under-represented both against their peers in other quintiles and in comparison, to the HE sector. There is a 24.1% gap between IMDQ1 and IMDQ5 students in terms of entrants (4 year aggregate from University of Reading; Office for Students dashboard). They apply in disproportionately lower numbers than students in other quintiles, are more likely to apply to Reading without the required pre-attainment (e.g., subject profile or GCSE requirement) and are less likely to choose or enrol at the University of Reading when in receipt of an offer. This can be seen in the table below that shows conversion data at each stage of the application process.

Conversion rates from stage to stage (2023 data)

	Applications to offer	Offer to firm	Firm to Enrol	Overall applications to Enrols
IMD Q1	83%	22%	67%	12%
IMD Q5	92%	24%	88%	19%
Overall	88%	24%	82%	17%

As such, these students are a target group across our access-related interventions. Access Reading is designed to increase knowledge of higher education and support skills required to succeed once in HE.

Intervention

The overarching aim of Access Reading is to facilitate a smooth transition to university for targeted University of Reading applicants. This aim encompasses the following objectives for the programme:

1. To aid participants' academic preparedness for university-level studies by equipping them with essential course-related study skills.

2. To establish meaningful connections between participants and university affiliates, including academics, current students, and prospective peers. In turn fostering a stronger sense of belonging, easing apprehension, and developing transferable skills.

3. To equip participants with comprehensive knowledge of essential university processes to support their university entry, topics included personal statement, student finance, accommodation and clearing.

4. To familiarise participants with university life, particularly at the University of Reading, and our student support systems. This familiarity aims to make participants feel more comfortable with the concept of university, instil confidence in our institution and the uptake of student support during their university experience.

Context

This evaluation covers the academic year 2023/24. The following groups of students were invited to attend. All "Reading Scholars" and Regional "Prep4Uni" participants are emailed in the Autumn term and invited.

Link to Access & Participation Plan (APP)

This activity contributes to the following APP aims:

Objective A: Reach more disadvantaged people through programmes of activity that support a successful application to UoR courses.

Objective B: Further reduce perceived and real barriers to entry to UoR for applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Objective C: Achieve a student population that is more representative of society.

Previous evaluation

No previous evaluation as this is the first year evaluating the programme.

Methodology

Research questions

Does participation in the in-person events of Access Reading have a positive impact on self-perceived student knowledge, confidence and sense of belonging?

Does participation in Access Reading increase progression from offer holder to enrolment (Reading) compared to previous years? Compared to similar applicants who did not take part in Access Reading?

Note: as this was the first year, question two was assessed against similar applicants, rather than previous years.

Participants

Post "UCAS Equal Consideration Deadline", specific applicants receive targeted communications to encourage them to apply for Access Reading 2024. Participants had to meet the following criteria:

Applied to the University of Reading as well as:
- reside in England or Wales,
- and have minimum grade predictions of 3 Cs (A-levels) or 3 Merits (BTEC) or equivalent,

And either had:
- a [Widening Participant offer](#) from The University of Reading.
- OR took part in the Regional "Prep4Uni" programme.

These participants include any applicants in IMD Q1. Although the scheme is not limited to these participants, all IMD Q1 applicants would be able to attend Access Reading if they applied in time. Therefore, although the programme doesn't target IMD Q1 students exclusively, these students will benefit from Access Reading, so it contributes to closing the access gap.

As applicants made decisions about their university choices, they may drop off the programme. Only applicants who held the University of Reading as **firm** or were still **undecided** would continue to be offered activity and email comms. Applicants who put us as their **insurance choice** or **declined** our offer dropped off.

We advertised Access Reading to 4844 students and 171 students initially signed up to the Access Reading in person event and email communications and a further 36 students signed up to the email communications/ access to Access Reading Hub with resources. There is not currently a maximum capacity for the number of students that can engage with Access Reading although there would be a room capacity issue for

the in-person event if limited to a 1-day event which would be 200 participants. There are no such restrictions for students engaging in the online provision.

Data collection

Survey

Survey questions were based on a combination of adapted TASO questions and bespoke questions that we felt captured the aims of the Access Reading day, as well as some for practical feedback for the in-person event. The questions we asked were the following:

- I found the day helpful
- Today has contributed to feeling like I would fit in at the University of Reading.
- I have learnt more about the support services that are available at the University of Reading
- I have learnt something new e.g., skills or subject knowledge
- If applicable, what did you learn? Do you think this will be helpful to your future studies and how?
- I have increased understanding of what studying at university looks like?
- I have increased knowledge of how studying at university is different from studying in school or at college.
- This event has positively influenced my desire to study at the University of Reading?
- Thinking about the transition to university, what other topics would you like covered in virtual events and email support in the summer term?
- What could we do to improve the day overall?
- What aspect of the day did you find most helpful and why?

Enrolment data
Data was gathered for those students that had participated in Access Reading along with enrolment data for the control group which were those that had been invited to Access Reading but not taken up the opportunity to attend on the day or the virtual offering.

Ethics and Data Security

Participants for the in-person event were informed that by completing the survey they consented for their data to be used for evaluation purposes and published in a report externally in an anonymised form.

Data analysis

For the survey, descriptive and qualitative analysis was used. We used a scale of opinion to look at how valuable the day was as well as opportunity to give specific feedback. For the enrolment data we used descriptive analysis to look at the numbers that attended, rejected us, chose the University as firm or insurance and ultimately enrolled or not.

Type of evaluation

The evaluation methodology was a mixture of Type 1 and Type 2 evaluation types, as there was a single survey at the end of the in-person event (Type 1), and we were able to compare enrolment data of those that attended and didn't attend Access Reading (Type 2).

Limitations

With any enrolment data it is difficult to assess with certainty that an isolated event or interactions had a direct impact on whether a student eventually enrolled to the University or not as there may be many external factors such as not achieving the grades or had family, economic or social pressures that made them change their minds about coming to the University. Equally they may have done better than expected and chosen to go elsewhere. So without contacting each individual student and getting their reasoning it is difficult to say with certainty.

Results

Post event survey

Survey Question	Mean score (*SD*)
I found the day helpful.	4.24 (*0.74*)
Today has contributed to feeling like I would fit in at the University of Reading.	4.22 (*0.80*)
I have learnt more about the support services that are available at the University of Reading.	3.74 (*0.84*)
I have learnt something new e.g., skills or subject knowledge.	4.00 (*0.79*)
I have increased understanding of what studying at university looks like	4.17 (*0.60*)
I have increased knowledge of how studying at university is different from studying in school or at college.	4.05 (*0.64*)
This event has positively influenced my desire to study at the University of Reading.	4.10 (*0.80*)

A Likert scale of 1-5 has been used with 5= Strongly agree, 4=Agree, 3= Neither agree nor disagree, 2= Disagree, 1=Strongly disagree

Only 77 of 86 participants on the day completed the survey as a small number needed to leave earlier in the day. They were emailed the survey but did not complete it. Note that surveys were anonymous, so we can't know the exact demographic make-up of the 77 respondents. The table shows that the vast majority of students attending Access Reading found it a helpful experience and positively influenced their decision to come to the University of Reading. Overwhelmingly, students agreed or strongly agreed that the day helped them to see whether they would fit at the University of Reading and increased their understanding what studying at University would be like. There were a small number of students (n = 5) for whom the day was not helpful but then other answers to the survey were positive.

Most helpful aspect of the day

The main themes were: Meeting and talking to other students that would be going to Reading either socially or in the networking session, talking to the academics and the study skills session. Students also enjoyed talking to the student ambassadors about their experiences and getting to know the University more.

Broad subject of comment	Number of mentions of subject (note, this was free text, so participants were not restricted to one)
Study skills	36
Networking (meeting lecturers and prospective students on course)	24
Meeting other students/social time	22
Finding out about Uni life from Student Ambassadors	9
Knowing the University/university campus	3
Support Services	3
Lecturers/student ambassadors were helpful.	3
Getting used to how University will be	2

There were a few negative experiences, and the following were cited: critical thinking session, food, careers session, networking session. A few students did not have academics from their subject areas but were spoken to by other staff and student ambassadors.

Qualitative data

In terms of qualitative data below are the questions and their responses to add to the statistical data and provide context and explanation.

Question 1: Today has contributed to feeling like I would fit in at the University of Reading

Most of the comments were around being able to meet other prospective students, make friends, meet staff and get a real feel for what the University was like. A lot commented on the friendliness and approachability of staff. Some of the verbatim comments are below:

> *The university has the perfect mix of academic support and athletics to support my wants and needs.*

> *Much more immersed than offer holder days.*

> *I had worries about coming to uni and not making friends. But things like the networking session in particular helped me to talk to people and has made me feel more confident about coming to uni.*

> *More familiar with surrounding and what to expect from academic and uni life.*

> *Feels like a real taster of what life at Reading is like.*

> *Everyone is very friendly and I felt like I already go here.*

> *Talking to ambassadors/ fellow peers allowed me to settle.*

> *Loved the staff, students and campus.*

Students that didn't feel that they "fit" cited the following reasons: there wasn't anyone else from the course that they were applying to, there were not people that they connected to or were unable/unwilling to talk to others. The verbatim comments are below:

> *My course wasn't represented.*

> *Didn't talk to people much.*

> *Nothing on social life/ accommodation life.*

> *A lot of people I met aren't going here and I didn't meet anyone taking my course this year.*

> *Not a lot of people like me.*

> *I need to explore & experience other universities.*

Question 2: I have learnt something new e.g., skills or subject knowledge.

The majority of students that replied to the question cited the critical thinking aspect of the day as being a new skill that they had developed, along with analysing data, academic papers and referencing. There was only one session in the day that was based around transferrable skills helping in the transition to University.

Broad skill	Number of mentions
Critical thinking	23
How to analyse data	6
How to analyse academic texts	4
Properly reference	4
I learned what life will be like in the university and what the lessons would be like	2
Problem solving	2
Course details	2
How seminars are structured	2
Teamwork, how my character tailors to the group.	2
What student jobs are on offer and how to apply	1
Budgeting (buying course books)	1
Useful sessions of making me aware of broader thinking	1
How to be confident	1
Way to think etc. Helpful insight to future	1
I learned lots of little details about university life which made me less nervous about attending	1

There were a number of students (n = 15) who stated that they neither agreed nor disagreed to learning a new skill and most did not cite a reason for their answer. Those that did (n = 4) had done critical thinking before, thought the session was too general or stated that it made them aware of broader thinking. One person wanted to find out more about Clearing.

The general feedback from the study skills session was to shorten it, make it more interactive and related to the course that they are applying for.

Question 3: What could we do to improve the day overall?

This question was completed the least in the survey, but the main themes were around giving students more social networking time both in and out of sessions, making the study skills sessions more interactive and in general shortening sessions. With all feedback there are different perspectives on the day and there were some that liked sessions others did not.

Students were also asked to evaluate the study skills sessions in relation to 'what support you think you would need to feel more equipped for University study'.

The main feedback was around reducing the length of the session, making it more related to the course that they had applied for and making the session more interactive.

Comment	No. of mentions
More interactive	11
More relevant to course	10
All good	5
Slightly shorter session	4
More enthusiasm from tutor. More interactive tasks	3
Have more subject specific sessions, student finance	2
You can't	2
More discussion may be nice	2
More time meeting other future students. Looking more into the societies	1
Have more sessions	1
Don't do it	1
Doing more work independently, doing a project	1
More physical activities/more movement	1
Perhaps an exploration in student resources, such as the library textbooks and websites. Ways to study, such as writing/ typing notes	1
Making it more interesting with a more diverse topic choice for different students	1
More simplistic knowledge & less complexity	1
Maybe lab based, more of a workshop	1
Breakdown of types of exams, modules and lectures	1
I know it's hard to do in subject strands but find someone taking the same course I've applied to	1
More people to work with in groups	1
There wasn't anyone available for my subject, so having that would have been more helpful	1
Have more exact courses like philosophy	1
Have one booklet in order of activities- I got in a flap with all the bits of paper	1

Impact

Overall impact

Overall, 171 students booked to come on the in-person Access Reading event which is 3.5% of the total number of students that were invited. Prior to the day we had 33 cancellations and ultimately 86 attended the in-person day. Of those 86, 51 went on to enrol, which is a 62% conversion rate (excludes the 4 that deferred) from attended the in-person event to enrolled at the University.

Number Invited	No. Attended Access Reading	No. Enrolled	Conversion from application to enrolment
4844	86	51 (excludes 4 that deferred entry for 2025 entry)	62% conversion from application to enrol

Number Invited	No. did not attend Access Reading	No. Enrolled	Conversion from application to enrolment
4844	4758	935	19.6% conversion from application to enrol

Comparison group

We invited 4844 students to the in-person Access Reading event and of those that did not attend, 935 enrolled at the University which is only a 19.6% conversion rate from application to enrolment. Although the majority of students that opted to come to Access Reading had already come on an offer holder day they were obviously keen to visit again which could have been for a number of reasons, for example seeking more information about the university, wanting reassurance, and the desire to meet people and academics from the course that they had applied for before they came.

The qualitative feedback from the in-person day clearly shows that students had a greater sense of belonging after coming to the University on the day and an increased knowledge of what University was going to be like. The majority of students also highlighted that they have learnt new skills or gained knowledge from the day. Overwhelmingly, students mentioned that opportunities to connect with other students was important.

Conclusions & recommendations

Conclusions

Access Reading has had a positive impact on those that participated, making them more likely to enrol than students who were eligible to take part but decided not to. Whilst not being the primary driver to making a firm choice for the majority, the programme is likely to have had its main impact via helping to convert others that had yet to make decisions.

Future evaluation including pre and post surveys will help to pick out the more direct impact of Access Reading. However, Access Reading is having a positive impact on

many offer holders' confidence to progress to enrolment and positively contributing towards closing access gaps for IMDQ1 students.

Recommendations

Based on the feedback, the following changes to the programme will be implemented in the next cycle:

1. The webinar aspect of Access Reading is poorly attended, so the virtual hub and signposting in email communications and on Unibuddy Community, plus using video resources rather than live webinars will be the strategy.
2. More will be made of Access Reading being the whole package of in person and online support through the Access Reading Hub and Unibuddy rather than isolated elements.
3. Networking session will be kept, with the goal of better attendance from academics
4. Use of Unibuddy community to provide a forum for students getting to know other students both pre and post in person event and hopefully encourage students to sign up for the day. Also, as an on-going channel to highlight resources on Access Reading and provide support where we know that key messaging is going to offer holders from our applicant engagement team
5. Try and get academics or student ambassadors to make more subject orientated skills sessions and to deliver something more general within the UK Student Recruitment & Outreach team
6. Add in an additional touch point at the June Open Day for anyone who wanted to visit again or had additional questions.

In terms of evaluation, we will gather pre and post data from the next cycle, to more directly measure the impact of Access Reading. This will use the TASO Access and Success Questionnaire validated scales to increase robustness and allow us to test for statistically significant differences.

We will continue to compare enrolment rates between years and between eligible offer holders who participate in Access Reading and eligible offer holders who do not.

References

TASO (2023) Widening participation questionnaire

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the students who completed the surveys and took part in this research. We would also like to thank the University staff and students that contributed to the in-person day and supporting materials for the Access Reading Hub.

Notes

This report has been reviewed by members of the Access and Participation Evaluation Subcommittee (APES).

Appendix – Theory of Change

Situation	Within the University of Reading, students from IMD Q1 are significantly under-represented both against their peers in other quintiles and in comparison, to the HE sector. They apply in disproportionately lower numbers that students in other quintiles, are more likely to apply to Reading without the required pre-attainment (e.g., subject profile or GCSE requirement) and are less likely to choose or enrol at the University of Reading when in receipt of an offer. As such, these are a target group across both our access-related interventions. Access Reading is designed to increase knowledge of higher education and support skills required to succeed once in HE.
Aims	The overarching aim of Access Reading is to facilitate a smooth transition to university for targeted University of Reading applicants and therefore increase enrolments from these applicants.

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impact
Process			**Impact**	
Staff time on outreach Student ambassador time and resource Budget for travel and delivery Academic/wider university staff input	Campus visit to give students exposure and sense of belonging in a HE environment Student ambassador engagement to give exposure to current students, increasing sense of belonging Support for applicants to increase confidence and knowledge to navigate the application process Study skills sessions to increase academic confidence OOC Unibuddy Community to help foster a sense of belonging and reduce unease about going to University	Exposure to HE campus environment Opportunity to learn about HE/process Opportunity to develop skills and confidence	Increased knowledge of what to expect when they get to university, social and academic Increased sense of belonging (pre-HE) Reduced concerns around accessing HE (e.g financially, academically, role models) Increased confidence around university life and support systems	Enrolment in HE Ideally enrolment specifically to UoR Resulting in University of Reading having a more diverse and representative student population

Rationale & Assumptions	We assume that students will engage with all aspects of the programme, particularly the online aspects. We assume that students will participate in the in-person event as a key component of the programme, or if not, attend the open day as an alternative. We assume that confidence and knowledge are the key barriers to enrolment for the target groups, rather than another challenge such as grades.