

# Year 12 Scholars Programme: Evaluation 2023/24

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## Executive Summary

The Year 12 Scholars Programme is a targeted initiative designed to support students from underrepresented backgrounds in accessing Higher Education (HE). The programme aligns with Access and Participation Plan (APP) objectives, aiming to reduce barriers, provide practical guidance, and increase representation in HE.

### Key Findings:

**Expectations of HE:** While students' expectations about university life showed a slight increase, this change was not statistically significant, indicating the need for additional support to enhance this aspect.

**Knowledge of HE:** The programme significantly improved participants' knowledge of HE systems, courses, and financing, with a medium effect size, highlighting its success in addressing critical information gaps.

**Study Skills:** Participants demonstrated a significant but modest improvement in study skills, emphasising the programme's role in strengthening academic preparedness, though further development in this area is recommended.

### Impact

The evaluation underscores the programme's effectiveness in delivering meaningful improvements in knowledge and skills, contributing to the broader goals of widening participation and reducing disparities in HE access. By fostering greater awareness and preparedness, the programme equips participants to navigate the complexities of HE, aligning with the University's commitment to social mobility and equity.

# Introduction

## Report caveat

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. It is acknowledged that the sample size of pre- and post-intervention data could be larger. 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, plus a follow-up measure, and will include comparison groups where possible. Long-term data will also become available.

## Rationale

Evidence suggests that students in IMD (Indices of Multiple Deprivation) Q1 can have less Social and Academic capital (awareness of HE), less familiarity with HE and therefore challenges with ‘fitting in’, lower skills capital (problem-solving/decision-making/planning/communication) and Intellectual capital (academic skills – raising attainment and subject/HE knowledge) essential for progression to HE<sup>1</sup>.

Activities such as on campus visits and residential experiences can increase knowledge and awareness of HE, which contributes to closing the gaps in progression to HE between the student groups mentioned above, and other students.

The Reading Scholars Scheme aims to provide students who meet specific eligibility criteria with an experience of higher education including information, advice and guidance as well as study skills and subject exposure.

## Intervention

Reading Scholars is a programme with multiple interventions to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds to be informed about, and supported with, making applications to university. The programme is specifically for state school students who are in their first year of further education in England or Wales.

The programme covers IAG through activities that focus on three areas: Academic life, student experience and Applications support. The activities cover these three areas through an on campus welcome event, an on campus academic strand day, an online application support week, a 4 day on campus residential and is all underpinned by an online mentoring programme (provided by undergraduates from the university on the Brightside platform).

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<sup>1</sup> [Carneiro and Heckman, 2003](#), [Chowdry et al., 2013](#), [Hatt, Baxter, and Tate \(2009\)](#)

## Context

This evaluation covers the academic year 2023/24. Participants were those who engaged with Reading Scholars activities and, for the short term outcome measurement, those who completed both a pre and post questionnaire.

## Link to Access & Participation Plan (APP)

- ☒ 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

## Methodology

### Research questions

This evaluation set out to answer the following research questions:

Does participation in Reading Scholars increase self-reported university expectations and knowledge?

What proportion of Reading Scholars participants apply to the University of Reading?

What proportion of Reading Scholars participants who apply to Reading go on to attend the university?

Does participation in Reading Scholars increase progression from application to enrolment (Reading) compared to a demographically similar group matched via HEAT?

### Participants

Participants on the Reading Scholars Scheme must meet pre-defined eligibility criteria.

Participating students must be:

- Attending a state school or college
- Have achieved at least 5 GCSE 9-4 Grades (or equivalent) including English Maths and Science
- Be on track to achieve good A-Level Grades

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Applicants are then prioritised based on the following criteria. Applicants are scored as to the number of criteria they match with places being offered to those with the highest scores first.

Applicants **MUST** meet at least one Category A or Category B criteria to be eligible for a place on the programme.

Category A	Category B	Category C
Living in a POLAR4 Quintile 1 postcode	Living in a POLAR4 Quintile 2 postcode	Discretionary points awarded for attending a partner school/college
Living in an IMD Quintile 1 Postcode	Living in an IMD Quintile 2 postcode	No parental experience of HE (used in borderline cases)
Eligible for Free School Meals	Household income under £25,000 (but not eligible for free school meals)	Priority given to those who meet the criteria and are intending to study a course offered by The University of Reading
Looked After or Care Experienced	Young Carer	
Sanctuary Seeker	Gypsy, Roma, traveller	
	Service Child	
	Declared Disability	
	Estranged	

A total of 638 applications were received to take part in the programme for a maximum of 450 places. Applications were scored against the eligibility criteria and offers made to those who were eligible. A breakdown of the eligibility criteria by application is shown below. Many applicants met more than one eligibility criteria. The number of applications received overall was lower than in previous years, however, the overall number of eligible applicants was much higher with all but 1 applicant meeting at least one of the eligibility criteria.

Criteria across all apps	
IMDQ1	137
POLARQ1	96
FSM	190
LAC	16
Asylum Seeker	7
IMDQ2	195
POLAR Q2	113
Income	228
Young Carer	46
Forces	11

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Disability	48
Estranged	8
First Generation	434

Offers were made to 427 young people. The breakdown of the eligibility criteria for those who were made an offer is shown below. As applicants may meet multiple criteria (e.g live in an IMD Q1 postcode and be eligible for Free School Meals) the total numbers here are higher than the number of offers made.

<b>Criteria across all those made an offer</b>	
IMDQ1	121
POLARQ1	83
FSM	175
LAC	12
Asylum Seeker	7
IMDQ2	143
POLAR Q2	83
Income	191
Young Carer	34
Forces	9
Disability	35
Estranged	6
First Generation	297

**Data collection**

Data was collected through the use of pre and post programme surveys. The pre-programme survey was completed at the start of the first visit to campus and the post-programme survey was completed at the end of the academic content of the residential (prior to the graduation ceremony due to logistical need). Survey responses were then matched and resulted in a final sample of 191 matched responses.

The demographic breakdown of the 191 matched responses were:

Gender:

Male	47
Female	135
Other	7

Ethnicity:

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Asian or Asian British/Bangladeshi	<5
Asian or Asian British/Indian	12
Asian or Asian British/Pakistani	6
Black or Black British/African	25
Black or Black British/Caribbean	3
Chinese	<5
Gypsy/Roma/Traveller	<5
Mixed White and Asian	<5
Mixed White and Black African	<5
Mixed White and Black Caribbean	6
Other (please state ethnic background below)	10
Other Asian background	22
Other Black background	<5
Other Mixed background	<5
Other White background	17
Prefer not to say	<5
White British	71

### POLAR4 Quintile:

<b>1</b>	39
<b>2</b>	35
<b>3</b>	27
<b>4</b>	53
<b>5</b>	34

### IMD Quintile:

<b>1</b>	41
<b>2</b>	59
<b>3</b>	30
<b>4</b>	33
<b>5</b>	25

Application and enrolment data will be tracked via HEAT and internal systems when this becomes available.

The concepts measured were:

Concept	Items
Expectations of Higher Education	<p>I think going to university will be an enjoyable experience</p> <p>I want to go to university</p> <p>I am looking forward to living independently</p> <p>I am excited to build on my existing knowledge when I go to university</p>
Knowledge of Higher Education	<p>I know what I want to study at university</p> <p>I believe I would have the opportunity to further my hobbies and interests at university</p> <p>I have a clear understanding of student finance, what I would receive and what I would have to pay back after</p> <p>I know how to find information about different university courses at different universities</p>
Study Skills	<p>I am good at solving problems</p> <p>I am successful at communicating my ideas to others</p> <p>I enjoy working independently in my work to demonstrate my own ideas</p> <p>I work well as part of a team</p> <p>I am able to use and build on other people’s ideas alongside my own when working in a team</p> <p>I am good at receiving feedback and acting on this</p>

Note, these were bespoke questions; future iterations of the evaluation will use the TASO Access & Success Questionnaire validated scales.

### Ethics and Data Security

Standard ethics procedures were followed. All data was stored securely. All participants were informed that their data would be used for the purpose of evaluating the programme.

### Data analysis

Increase in student’s university expectations and knowledge	Paired T tests comparing pre and post scores. Wilcoxon signed tank test where data was not normally distributed (expectations of HE)
Conversion from Scholars programme to Reading applications	Descriptive statistics.



Comparison of conversion from application to enrolment at Reading – Scholars vs non Scholars	Descriptive statistics; potential for significance testing.
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## Type of evaluation

This evaluation was conducted to Type 2, according to the Office for Students’ Standard of Evidence classification. The intermediate outcomes were measured pre- and post-activity, with the same participants. Once application and enrolment data becomes available, there will be a comparison between Reading Scholars participants and demographically similar non-participants.

## Limitations

This scheme takes place over a period of 7 months, during which participants will also be likely to be receiving other interventions. As a result, all results must be considered with this in mind and any impact achieved cannot be solely attributed to Reading Scholars. The nature of the evaluation type means that causal inferences cannot be made from any results – there may have been other factors influencing the students. As with many evaluations of activities in the complex landscape of higher education, it can be challenging to link activities directly to causes.

Participants who take part in the scheme self-select to do so, and as a result it is possible that they already have a positive disposition towards Higher Education, although changes made to the application process and scheme advertising this year attempted to target those who are less sure.

Some students who completed the scheme did not complete both surveys, meaning some potential data was lost.

As with all self-reported data, there is the risk that participants report what they think the researchers want to know, rather than how they really feel.

## Results

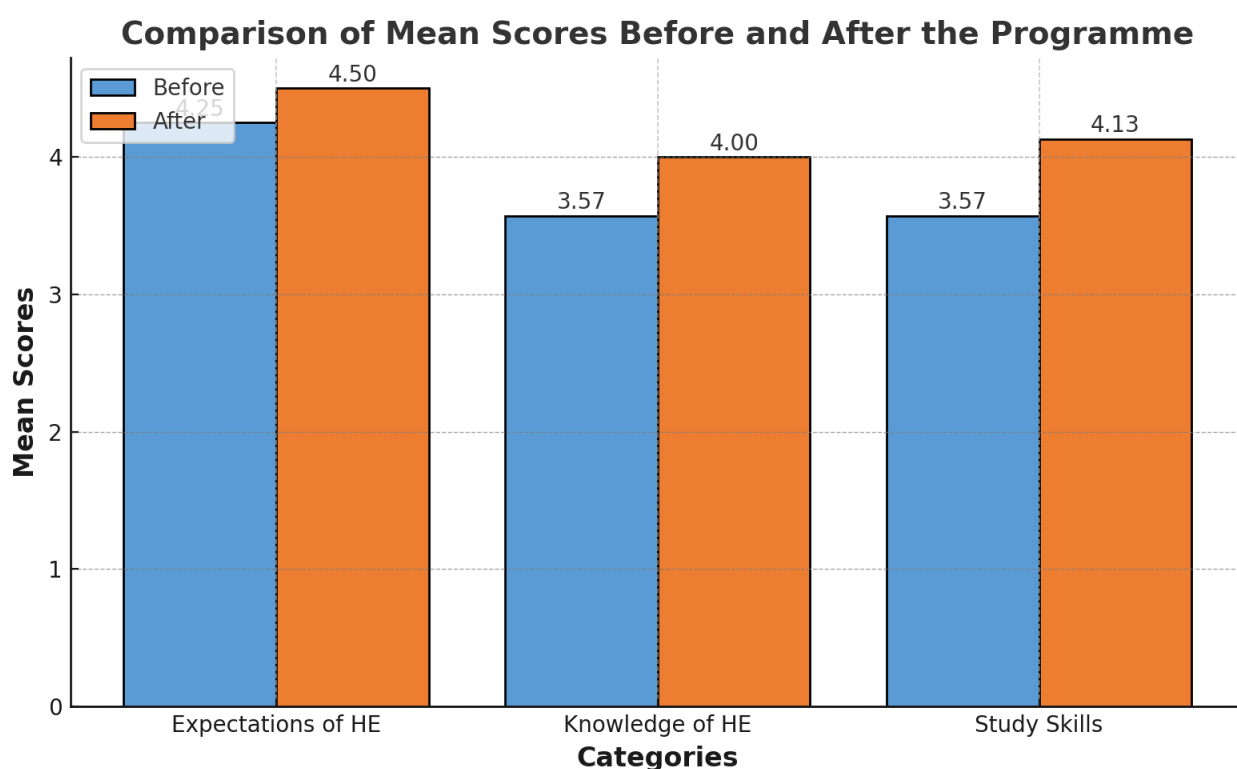
Surveys:

The mean scores, statistical significance test and effect sizes are shown below (n = 191).

	‘before’ Mean (SD)	‘after’ Mean (SD)	Statistical test	Effect size
Expectations of HE	4.25 (0.59)	4.5 (0.60)	Z=-1.025, p>0.05	r = 0.12

<b>Knowledge of HE</b>	3.57 (0.60)	4.00 (0.62)	$t(190)=-8.23, p<.001^{**}$	$d = 0.72$
<b>Study Skills</b>	3.57 (0.59)	4.13 (0.61)	$t(190)=-3.20, p<0.001^{**}$	$d = 0.26$

\*\* = significant at 1% level.



### Expectations of Higher Education:

A Wilcoxon signed rank test showed that there was no significant difference ( $z = -1.025, p>0.05$ ) between 'pre' scores given for *university expectations* compared to 'post' scores. The median score for the 'pre' was 4.25 compared to 4.50 for the 'post'. Therefore, the programme appears not to have a significant effect on university expectations.

### Knowledge of Higher Education

Post programme scores for Knowledge of Higher Education ( $M = 4.00$ ) were higher than the pre-programme scores ( $M = 3.57$ ). A paired samples t-test found this difference to be statistically significant ( $t = -8.23, df = 190, p < .001$ ). The effect size is 0.72 which is a medium effect.

### Study Skills:

Post-programme scores for Study Skills ( $M = 4.131$ ) were higher than the pre-programme scores ( $M = 3.98$ ). A paired samples t-test found this difference to be significant ( $t = -3.2$ ,  $df = 190$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The effect size is 0.26 which is a small effect.

## Conclusions & recommendations

### Conclusions

The Year 12 Scholars Programme demonstrates its value as a targeted intervention aimed at increasing knowledge and preparedness for Higher Education (HE) among students from underrepresented groups. The evaluation revealed key insights:

1. **Expectations of HE:** While there was a slight increase in expectations, the change was not statistically significant. This suggests that while the programme may contribute to setting a positive tone regarding HE, additional or alternative measures might be needed to significantly enhance expectations.
2. **Knowledge of HE:** There was a statistically significant improvement in students' knowledge of HE, with a medium effect size. This indicates the programme effectively provides participants with actionable and practical information about HE systems, courses, and financing, addressing critical gaps in understanding.
3. **Study Skills:** Participants exhibited a statistically significant improvement in study skills, though the effect size was small. This highlights the programme's contribution to strengthening students' academic competencies, albeit with room for further enhancement in this area.

Overall, the programme successfully addresses its core objectives of improving knowledge and skills relevant to HE, aligning with Access and Participation Plan (APP) goals to reduce barriers and increase representation from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### Recommendations

To build upon the successes and address areas for further improvement, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Enhance Engagement with Expectations:** Develop additional activities or resources explicitly targeting students' expectations about HE, such as

motivational talks, testimonies from alumni, or tailored workshops that focus on envisioning university life.

2. **Sustain and Expand Knowledge-Focused Activities:** Continue delivering comprehensive information about HE, ensuring clarity about funding, applications, and study pathways. Consider embedding more interactive components such as student panels or virtual campus tours to reinforce understanding.
3. **Strengthen Study Skills Training:** Expand the scope of study skills sessions to include time management, critical thinking, and exam techniques. Offering follow-up activities post-residential could help sustain improvements in these areas.
4. **Evaluate Longitudinal Impact:** Conduct follow-up evaluations to determine the programme's long-term effects on university applications, enrolments, and success rates. Tracking cohorts via the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) can provide robust data for ongoing improvement.
  1. **Address Self-Selection Bias:** Explore strategies to reach students who might not self-select into the programme, such as collaboration with schools to identify eligible students who may benefit but lack the confidence to apply. This may link to recommendation 1, in that fewer participants would already be expecting to attend university when they start the programme.
  2. **Increase Inclusivity and Representation:** Ensure activities are tailored to meet the specific needs of participants from diverse backgrounds, including those with disabilities, young carers, and asylum seekers, to ensure equitable outcomes across all groups.
  3. **Investigate the feasibility of gathering additional qualitative data to add richness to the evaluation:** potentially in the form of focus groups or open questions.

These recommendations, aligned with the programme's objectives and the broader goals of APP policy, aim to enhance the impact of the Year 12 Scholars Programme, further empowering participants to access and thrive in Higher Education.

## References

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## Notes

This report has been reviewed by members of the Access and Participation Evaluation Subcommittee (APES), with particular support from Lydia Fletcher on data analysis in an earlier version.

## Appendix: Theory of Change

