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Education**

Report

Realising Opportunities Evaluation

Cohort 3 Final Report – July 2013

National Foundation for Educational
Research (NFER)



Realising Opportunities

Cohort 3 Final Report – July 2013

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Executive Summary

Background

Realising Opportunities (RO) is a unique collaboration of leading universities, working together to encourage and support the ‘most able but least likely’ students to apply to research intensive universities. For Cohort 3, the Partnership involved 12 universities but from 1 August will include three new institutions¹.

Participating students enrol in a two-year structured programme from Year 12, which provides a range of activities designed to raise their aspirations to progress to research intensive universities. Successful completion of the programme leads to recognition at the point of application to one of the Partners, where students may receive an alternative offer through UCAS. The Programme involves a National Student Conference, ementoring from a dedicated undergraduate ementor, an academic element and the opportunity to attend a range of events and activities, including summer schools, masterclasses and open days.

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has undertaken an evaluation of the first three cohorts of RO, beginning in 2009. As with the previous two cohorts, the evaluation of Cohort 3 gathered ‘baseline’ and ‘follow-up’ data on the students who started RO via surveys. In total, 428 of the 496 RO students returned a baseline survey and 194 returned a follow-up survey. The RO Central Team also gathered contextual data through the RO application process and UCAS data collected in June 2013, which they shared with NFER for analysis purposes.

Overview of the Cohort 3 students

Almost all of the students in the third cohort of RO came from households without any parental experience of higher education (HE). Almost one-third of students lived in neighbourhoods that traditionally have ‘low participation’ in HE². Together this suggests that RO is targeting those students who may not traditionally have gone to university.

University choices

The vast majority of students remained committed to following a university education throughout the RO programme:

¹ For Cohort 3 the 12 participating universities were: University of Birmingham; University of Bristol; University of Essex; University of Exeter; King’s College London; University of Leeds; University of Leicester; University of Liverpool; University of Manchester; Newcastle University; University of Warwick; University of York. Three further universities have subsequently joined RO for Cohort 4 onwards. These are: Goldsmiths, University of London; King’s University of Sheffield; University of Sussex.

² Based on POLAR2 classification. The POLAR2 classification is formed by ranking 2001 Census Area Statistics wards by their young participation rates for the combined 2000 to 2004 cohorts. Those students whose postcode falls within wards with the lowest participation (quintile 1) are denoted as being from a low participation neighbourhood.

- Ninety five per cent of students stated that they planned to go to university at baseline, with the figure at follow-up being 92 per cent.
- Ninety-two per cent of those who planned to go to university reported at follow-up that they had applied for a place at university.
- The data from UCAS reveals that 93 per cent of the RO students who applied to university had accepted a firm (first) offer from a university.

In total, RO students³ made 1020 applications to research intensive universities. This accounted for 51 per cent of all applications RO students made to universities. However, the majority of these applications were to RO partner universities (706 applications; 69 per cent), suggesting students were more likely to apply to RO partner universities than other research intensive universities not involved with RO.

Students most commonly applied to their host RO university. Almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of RO students who applied to a university had received an offer from a RO partner university. Forty per cent of the students who had applied to university⁴ had accepted a firm offer from a RO partner university.

Factors affecting university choices

The most influential factors on university choice at baseline remained the same at follow-up: *the university offering the subject I want* (95 per cent at baseline; 91 per cent at follow-up); *how good it is for my chosen subject* (96 per cent at baseline; 89 per cent at follow-up); and *the facilities it has* (87 per cent at baseline and 83 per cent at follow-up). At follow-up students were significantly more likely to state that *university visits* had influenced their choices compared with baseline.

Specifically related to student involvement in RO, we can see that:

- The majority of students (83 per cent) believed that RO had influenced their university choices at least a little.
- Over three-quarters (79 per cent) had been influenced at least a little by whether or not the university was a RO partner university.
- Over half (54 per cent) of the students stated that the opportunity to receive an alternative offer⁵ had influenced their university decisions.
- Prior to their involvement with RO, a third (32 per cent) did not know what a research intensive university was. By the time of the follow-up survey, just two per cent of students did not know what a research intensive university was and 63 per cent stated that it was important to attend one.

³ UCAS data is based on the entire cohort of students who enrolled on RO.

⁴ Figures are based on all students who had enrolled on RO and had applied to a university through UCAS.

⁵ Students enrolled on RO have the opportunity to receive an 'alternative offer' through UCAS from most RO partner universities. Alternative offers recognise the successful completion of RO, with an offer lowered by up to 40 UCAS tariff points or two 'A' level grades.

University information and support

Students had changed how they accessed information on universities over the course of the RO programme:

- At baseline, students were most likely to have accessed advice from teachers and careers coordinators. The vast majority (94 per cent) had also done their own research.
- By the follow-up survey, all students had accessed advice from university prospectuses and through their own research. Nearly all (99 per cent) had been on university visits.

Students particularly valued: *visits to university campuses* (98 per cent); *their own research* (97 per cent); *university staff* (93 per cent); *university prospectuses* (89 per cent) and *Realising Opportunities* (88 per cent) as useful sources of advice.

At the point of the follow-up survey, students' visits to universities had increased considerably:

- Eighty eight per cent of students had visited a university at least four times. A quarter of students had visited a university eleven times or more. In comparison at baseline, most students had visited a university three times or less (69 per cent).
- Ninety-eight per cent of students who completed the follow-up survey reported having visited a RO partner university at least once.

Students' self-reported knowledge on a range of university areas was considerably higher at follow-up when compared to the baseline survey. At follow-up, students felt particularly knowledgeable about: *how to apply to university* (94 per cent); *what subject(s) that interest you involve* (93 per cent); and *how to find out about courses* (93 per cent).

At baseline, around half of the students in Cohort 3 were happy with the amount of information, advice and guidance they have had to help them make decisions about university (49 per cent). By follow-up survey, student satisfaction with information, advice and guidance had increased to 88 per cent.

Career intentions and support

Students' career aspirations have remained fairly constant over the course of the RO programme. The top three career choices at both baseline and follow-up remained: doctor; teacher; and work in the legal profession. Most students have not had access to people currently working in their chosen career area. Despite this, the majority of students were confident that they could achieve their career goals.

Participants' views of Realising Opportunities

Students felt that RO had benefited them particularly in the areas of: *understanding of what a research intensive university is* (76 per cent); *study skills* (73 per cent); *ability to reference academic sources* (73 per cent); *knowledge about different courses at university* (70 per cent); and *ability to set goals* (70 per cent). Students reported that the amount of time needed to complete RO was about right (86 per cent).

Conclusions

Overall, our evaluation of three cohorts of students shows that RO is consistently supporting the least likely but most able students to progress to university.

Just over half of all applications to university made by RO students were to research intensive universities, suggesting that RO is meeting its aim of encouraging students to apply to research intensive universities. However, the majority of these applications are to RO partner universities, which may suggest more needs to be done to encourage students to apply to research intensive universities more generally.

Students continue to feel they have benefited from RO – both in terms of their knowledge about university life and in the skills they will need to succeed at university. Based on the perceptions of its beneficiaries, RO remains a very successful programme in terms of design, content and impact.

1. Introduction

1.1 About Realising Opportunities

Realising Opportunities (RO) is a programme involving 15 universities⁶. Led by Newcastle University, it is aimed at encouraging and supporting the ‘most able but least likely’ students to apply to research intensive universities. RO was originally funded through the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) from 2009 to 2012. RO became self-funding from August 2012 and partner universities have committed funding from Access Agreements until 2016, enabling a total of six cohorts of students to take part in the programme.

RO aims to offer targeted students the opportunity to:

- participate in aspiration raising and enrichment activities, increasing their ability to apply and gain entry to leading universities
- make informed choices about their higher education options and learn more about the benefits of studying at a world class university
- develop the skills required to be successful in a research intensive university such as independent thought and analytical and research skills
- enhance their application to leading universities in an increasingly competitive environment
- access information, advice and guidance to increase their awareness of employment opportunities within some of the country’s top professions.

Participating students join the programme in Year 12, and are provided with opportunities to engage in a range of events and experiences over its two-year course. Activities include residential experiences, subject taster events and a National Student Conference. Students also take part in an online study skills module and complete the RO Academic Assignment or the Extended Project Qualification⁷. Support is provided through online mentoring, where each student is linked to an undergraduate student mentor to encourage progression and provide support with all elements of the programme and transition to university.

⁶ For Cohort 3 the 12 participating universities were: University of Birmingham; University of Bristol; University of Essex; University of Exeter; King’s College London; University of Leeds; University of Leicester; University of Liverpool; University of Manchester; Newcastle University; University of Warwick; University of York. Three further universities have subsequently joined RO for Cohort 4 onwards. These are: Goldsmiths, University of London; King’s University of Sheffield; University of Sussex.

⁷ The Academic Assignment and the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) are pieces of work in a subject that the young people are interested in. They are designed to allow the young people to demonstrate their potential, develop and acquire new skills such as analysis and critical thought, increase their preparation for HE study, explore new areas of knowledge, and experience independent learning. The EPQ is offered and assessed by some schools/colleges. The RO Academic Assignment is assessed by an academic tutor from a RO partner university.

This report details the findings from evaluation of the third cohort of students to take part in RO and builds on the evaluation of cohorts 1 and 2.

1.2 Eligibility criteria

In Cohort 3, Year 12 students had to meet all of the following criteria:

- have achieved at least 8 A* to C grades at GCSE (or equivalent, eg GNVQ, BTEC Certificate) including English Language and Mathematics and a minimum of 5 GCSEs at grades A*/A or B
- come from a home where neither parent attended university in the UK or abroad or have lived in or be living in local authority care
- be a Home/EU registered student.

And meet at least one of the following criteria:

- live in a 'low participation' neighbourhood. This is defined by home postcode, or,
- be in receipt of or entitled to discretionary payments at school/college, or
- be in receipt of or entitled to FSM.

They also had to come from a school which met the following criteria:

- be performing below the national average for 5 A*- C at GCSE (including English and Mathematics), or
- be performing below the national average at key stage 5, or
- have a higher than the national average number of students eligible for free school meals, or
- have greater than 60% of students from the first 13,000 super output areas within the Index of Multiple Deprivation.

In total, 496 students of the 538 originally recruited started RO Cohort 3.

1.3 The evaluation

The RO Central Team commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake an impact evaluation of the first three cohorts of RO. The evaluation began in 2009. As with the previous two cohorts, the evaluation of Cohort 3 students gathered 'baseline' and 'follow-up' data on the students enrolled in the RO programme.

Baseline data on participants was gathered early in the RO programme via a paper-based questionnaire (January-March 2012). A similar questionnaire was then sent to all participants for completion in April 2013 (the follow-up stage), when they were nearing the end of their RO involvement.

The RO Central Team also gathered contextual data through the RO application process. This along with UCAS data collected in June 2013, which was shared with NFER for analysis purposes.

The questionnaires gathered information on:

- future plans post-Year 13 (for example, whether students intend to progress to university and, if they do, where they plan to go and what they plan to study)
- the factors that might be influencing their university choices
- career intentions
- career advice
- contextual information about support at home and at school
- the impact of Realising Opportunities.

This report sets out the findings from the baseline and follow-up questionnaires received from Cohort 3 participants. In total, 428 RO students returned a questionnaire at baseline (an 86 per cent response rate), and 194 returned a follow-up survey (45 per cent of the baseline responses).

1.4 Report structure

The findings are presented under the following headings:

- About the cohort
- Intentions on leaving school and university choices
- Factors affecting university choices
- University information and support
- Career intentions and support
- Participants' views of Realising Opportunities
- Conclusions.

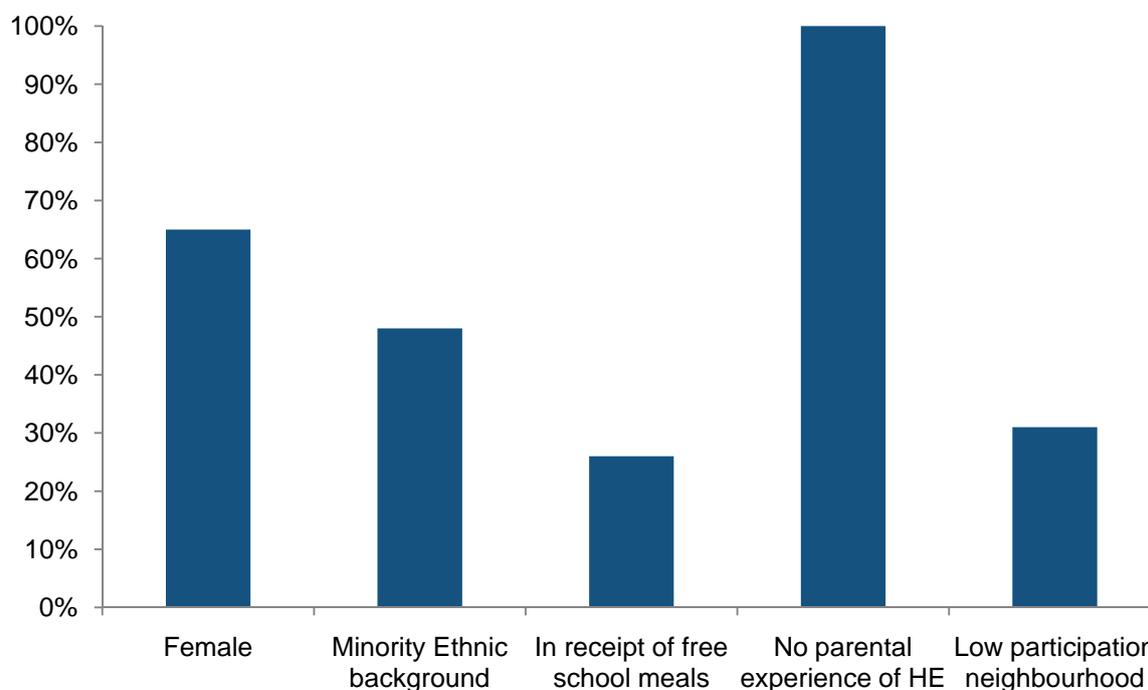
2. About Cohort 3

This section highlights the characteristics of the third cohort of students enrolled on the RO programme. It provides information on family background and their experience within and outside of school/college.

2.1 Overview of the Cohort 3 students

Figure 1.1 provides an overview of the characteristics of the complete third cohort of RO students.

Figure 1.1 Selected characteristics of students in Cohort 3 of the RO programme



Source: Whole-cohort data provided by Realising Opportunities team, March 2012

As highlighted in the graph above, almost all of the students in the third cohort of RO came from households without any parental experience of HE (100 per cent; 494 of 496 students). This is an increase on the proportions seen in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 (83 per cent and 84 per cent respectively). It reflects changes to the targeting criteria in Cohort 3, whereby all students must be the first generation to attend university, which was not the case in previous cohorts.

Looking at the data on the other eligibility criteria, further suggests that RO is targeting students who may traditionally be less likely to apply to university:

- Over a quarter (26 per cent) of students in Cohort 3 were in receipt of free school meals (FSM).
- Almost one-third of students lived in neighbourhoods that traditionally have 'low participation' in HE⁸.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2012) data for the academic year 2011/12 showed that 14 per cent of that year's undergraduates came from low participation neighbourhoods, while only 9.2 per cent of RO universities' intake did so (with a range from 4.7 to 12.6 per cent⁹). In comparison, almost a third (31 per cent) of this RO cohort came from low participation neighbourhoods. Just two per cent of this RO cohort lived in areas classified as having the highest participation rates in HE; compared to seven per cent of cohorts 1 and 2. This suggests an improvement in the targeting of students for Cohort 3 compared to cohorts 1 and 2.

2.2 Experience of school

At the time of the baseline survey, students were asked whether they felt supported in a range of academic and aspirational factors. The majority of students said that they 'always' or 'sometimes':

- felt supported in their studies (97 per cent)
- had access to a wide range of resources to support their studies (93 per cent)
- felt supported to achieve their career aspirations (78 per cent).

Similarly high proportions of students also said that there were teachers or other adults that they were happy to ask for advice and help 'always' or 'sometimes' (95 per cent). Eighty five per cent of students also said that someone at their school/college 'always' or 'sometimes' supported them in their aspirations for university (85 per cent).

Overall, these findings suggest that schools and colleges are providing a good level of support to this cohort of students, which is consistent with the findings from Cohort 2.

⁸ Based on POLAR2 classification. The POLAR2 classification is formed by ranking 2001 Census Area Statistics wards by their young participation rates for the combined 2000 to 2004 cohorts. This gives five young participation quintile groups (qYPR) of areas ordered from '1' (those wards with the lowest participation) to '5' (those wards with the highest participation), each representing 20 per cent of UK young cohort. Students have been allocated to the neighbourhoods on the basis of their postcode. Those students whose postcode falls within wards with the lowest participation (quintile 1) are denoted as being from a low participation neighbourhood.

⁹ Figures based on the original 12 RO partner universities.

2.3 Experience outside of school

Through the baseline and follow-up surveys, students were asked a series of questions about their experiences outside of school/college. These included the support they received at home, their experience of work, their extra-curricular interests, exposure to a university environment and access to books in the home.

2.3.1 Support at home and additional responsibilities

Students in the third cohort appear to be well supported by their families. Ninety four per cent of young people who completed the baseline survey reported having someone at home who asks them about their school or college work. Similarly, 92 per cent of baseline respondents said that they had someone at home to talk to about their future plans; while 90 per cent reported that they had support from someone at home in achieving their career or higher education aspirations.

While the majority of students reported being supported by their families in their academic studies and future aspirations, a third of students (33 per cent) at the point of the baseline survey reported that they had some additional family responsibilities, such as caring for a parent/guardian or sibling (30 per cent at follow up). These findings are consistent with the findings for the second cohort of students.

2.3.2 Experience of work

At baseline, just over a quarter of students (28 per cent, or 120 of the 428 students) reported that they had a job and 63 students confirmed that they work more than ten hours per week at least some of the time. At the time of the follow-up survey, 39 per cent (76 of the 194 students) stated that they have a job and 41 students worked for more than 10 hours a week.

2.3.3 Interests

At the point of the baseline survey, one-quarter of students (25 per cent) stated that they had a single interest that takes more than ten hours per week, while at follow-up the proportion was 23 per cent. The most frequently cited activities were sports and voluntary-based activities.

2.3.4 Exposure to a university environment

At baseline, under a third of students (29 per cent) reported that they had a sibling who had been to university. When coupled with the finding that almost 100 per cent of the third cohort of students came from households in which neither parent/carer had been to university, this suggests that the majority of students will be the first in their immediate families who plan to attend university.

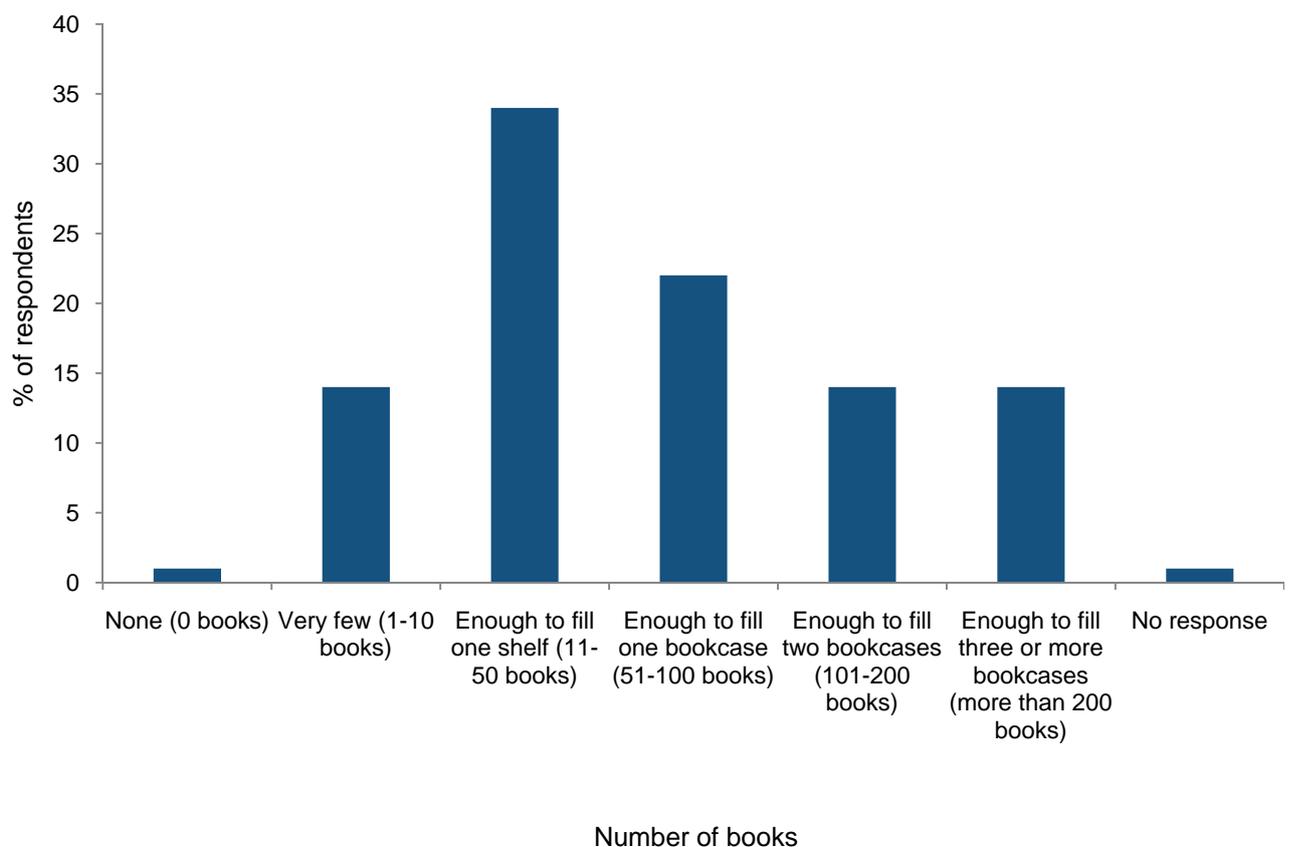
At the point of the baseline survey, almost one-half (47 per cent) of students said that they had a friend who had been to university. By the time of the follow-up survey, this had

increased to 65 per cent. Similarly, a higher proportion of students at follow-up said that they knew someone who had been to one of the 12 universities involved in RO¹⁰ in Cohort 3 compared with baseline (66 per cent at follow-up compared with 54 per cent at baseline).

2.3.5 Books in the home

Students were asked approximately how many books there are in their home. They were asked not to count newspapers, magazines and school books. The findings are presented in Figure 2.2 below.

Figure 2.2 The number of books students reported having in their home



Source: NFER baseline survey of Cohort 3 RO students, 2012

Half of the respondents were from households with enough books to fill one or more bookcases. However, around one in seven students (14 per cent) reported having ‘very few’ books in their home. This suggests they may be at greater risk of educational disadvantage, because books in the home is often used as a proxy measure for parental education level (Mullis *et al.*, 2011). The wider evidence tells us that parental education impacts on students’ achievement (for example, Chowdry *et al.*, 2008; The Sutton Trust, 2010).

¹⁰ The universities involved in RO for Cohort 3 are: University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, University of Essex, University of Exeter, King’s College London, University of Leeds, University of Leicester, University of Liverpool, University of Manchester, Newcastle University, University of Warwick and University of York.

3. Intentions on leaving school and university choices

This chapter explores students' future plans and progression to university. It includes the findings from the baseline and follow-up surveys and it also draws on UCAS data gathered on the full RO cohort¹¹ relating to: applications made to universities; offers received from universities; and the choices made by the students.

3.1 Intentions to progress to university

At the time of the baseline survey, 95 per cent of students stated that they planned to go to university. The findings from the follow-up survey found a similar proportion, 92 per cent, stating that they were planning to go straight to university or take a gap year before progressing to university. The findings indicate that the vast majority of students remained committed to following a university education throughout the RO programme.

With regards to the 15 students not planning on progressing to university, the follow-up survey showed that:

- Five students (three per cent) plan to get a job.
- Three students (two per cent) plan to go to college.
- Two students (one per cent) plan to progress onto an apprenticeship or other training programme.

This suggests that five of the 15 students who did not plan to progress to university (including those stating don't know) were still committed to continuing formal learning in some capacity.

3.2 Applications to university

This section looks at applications to universities, in general to RO partner universities and to non-research intensive universities. The findings are drawn from follow-up survey data and UCAS data.

¹¹ The RO central team provided the NFER with anonymised and collated data on the full cohort of RO participants (those who started on the programme and not just those who completed) who applied through UCAS (more than just those who had completed a baseline or follow-up survey). This data provided details on the numbers of applications made, types of universities students applied for, the offers received and replies from students.

3.2.1 Overall application to university

Ninety-two per cent of students who said that they planned to go to university reported that they had applied for a place at university. Eight per cent of students said that they had not applied for a place at university. When asked why they had not applied, the main reasons students gave were because they needed to complete a further year at college, needed to repeat a year at school/college or were not sure what they wanted to study.

According to UCAS data, 82 per cent of the entire cohort of RO students¹² had submitted a UCAS application by June 2013. Students made an average of 4.9 applications¹³ to universities.

3.2.2 Applications to partner universities and other research intensive universities

The UCAS data shows that RO students¹⁴ made 1020 applications to research intensive universities. This accounted for 51 per cent of all applications made by RO students with an average of 2.5 applications per student to research intensive universities¹⁵. However, the majority of these applications were to RO partner universities (706 applications; 69 per cent of the applications to research intensive universities). Indeed, 77 per cent of RO students who had applied to a university had applied to at least one RO partner university while 48 per cent had applied to other (non-RO) research intensive universities.

3.2.3 Applications to host universities

When looking at which RO partner universities students applied to, the UCAS data shows that students most commonly applied to their host university compared with other RO partner universities. Indeed, for 10 of the 12 RO partner universities involved in Cohort 3, students applied to their host RO university more frequently than to other RO partner universities. The two exceptions were the universities of Bristol and York. Students hosted by Bristol were equally as likely to apply to Bristol and Leicester, while students hosted by the University of York were most likely to apply to the University of Leeds.

3.2.4 Subjects being applied for

At the point of the baseline survey students were most interested in studying medicine and dentistry (31 per cent), followed by biological studies (19 per cent), subjects allied to medicine (14 per cent) and law (12 per cent). The UCAS data (based on the entire RO Cohort 3) show that RO students most commonly applied for the following subjects:

¹² UCAS data is based on all students who enrolled on the RO programme, including those who may have withdrawn or not completed the programme.

¹³ Application averages based on students who had applied to university.

¹⁴ UCAS data is based on the entire cohort of students who enrolled on RO.

¹⁵ Application averages based on students who had applied to university.

- subjects allied to medicine (297 applications made in total)
- biological sciences (183 applications made in total)
- medicine and dentistry (174 applications made in total)
- business and administration (153 applications made in total)
- law (128 applications made in total)¹⁶.

This suggests that while a large proportion of students had planned to apply to study medicine and dentistry when starting their A Levels or equivalent courses, by the time students came to apply to universities, many had decided to study subjects *allied to* medicine and biological sciences rather than applying for pre-clinical medicine or dentistry courses.

3.3 Offers from universities

This section gives an overview of the offers made to students, and their satisfaction with the offers made. The UCAS application data reveals that nearly all (96 per cent) of the students who had applied through UCAS received an offer from a university. These students received an average of 3.6 offers per student who applied to university. Three-quarters of students reported in the follow-up survey that they had received an offer from their first choice university, while most students (83 per cent) stated that they were happy with the offers that they had received from UCAS.

When looking at the UCAS data in more detail we can see that:

- Almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of RO students who applied to university received an offer from a RO partner university.
- Of the 706 applications to RO universities, 491 resulted in an offer; a success rate of 70 per cent.
- One-third (33 per cent) of students who had applied to university had received an offer from a research intensive university not involved in RO.
- The majority (73 per cent) of RO students had received an offer from another (non-research intensive) university.

3.4 Students' decisions on university offers

The data from UCAS reveals that 93 per cent of RO students who had applied to university at the point of the data analysis had accepted an offer from a university as their first choice (firm offer) and 83 per cent of students had accepted an insurance offer from a university.

Forty per cent of RO students had accepted an offer from a RO partner university as their first (firm) choice, while a quarter of students had accepted an insurance offer from a RO partner university. Students were less likely to accept offers from research intensive universities that were not involved in RO. Just 14 per cent had chosen a non-RO partner

¹⁶ Figures based on the whole RO cohort.

research intensive university as their first choice, with an even smaller proportion (eight per cent) choosing this type of university as their insurance place. The data suggests that students were more likely to apply to a research intensive university involved in RO, and therefore may not have otherwise applied to and accepted offers from these universities.

Table 3.1 RO Cohort 3 firm and insurance offer acceptances by type of university

University choices	Proportion of RO Cohort 3 accepting offer as firm choice %	Proportion of RO Cohort 3 accepting offer as insurance choice %
RO Partner university	40	25
Other research intensive university	14	8
Non-research intensive university	39	51

Source: UCAS applications data provided by RO team, June 2013

Fourteen per cent of students had accepted firm and insurance offers from a RO partner university while four per cent had accepted a firm offer from an RO partner university but had no insurance offer. Twenty eight per cent of students had accepted a firm and insurance offer from a non-research intensive university.

When we look at geographical location, the majority of students accepted firm offers from universities within the region they lived. For example, 20 of the 38 students whose host was the University of Birmingham accepted firm offers from universities within the West Midlands. This pattern was seen for all RO partner universities with the exception of the University of Essex where the majority of students were seen to accept firm offers from universities across three regions (although these three regions were in the south and east of the country and therefore in close proximity to the University of Essex). This suggests that students value the closeness of the university to their home when deciding where to study.

4. Factors affecting university choices

This chapter will explore the factors affecting university choices and the influence of RO on university choices. It will also look at the extent to which these factors have changed since the baseline survey.

4.1 Influence over university choices

In both the baseline and follow-up surveys, students were asked to rate the extent to which their university choices had been influenced by a range of factors. The most influential factors (rated as having a lot or quite a lot of influence) at baseline and follow-up have remained the same:

- The university offering the subject I want (95 per cent at baseline and 91 per cent at follow up)
- How good it is for my chosen subject (96 per cent at baseline and 89 per cent at follow-up)
- The facilities it has (87 per cent at baseline and 83 per cent at follow-up).

At the point of the follow-up survey, students were most like to rate the following factors as having little or no influence on their choices:

- Knowing someone who went/goes to the university (49 per cent stated this had no influence at all)
- School/teacher suggesting they should go (42 per cent stated this had no influence at all).

Multi-level modelling, used to test any significant differences between baseline and follow-up responses, revealed that there were very few significant differences between students' views of the most influential factors at baseline and follow-up. This suggests that the factors that influence students remained constant. However in a few cases some significant differences emerged:

- Students were significantly **less** likely to state that '*how good it is for their chosen subject*', '*the school or teacher suggesting they should go*' and '*being involved in programmes being run by the university*' had influenced their choices at follow-up compared with baseline.
- Students were significantly **more** likely to state that '*university visits*' had influenced their choices at follow-up compared with baseline.

4.2 The influence of RO on university choices

The majority of students believed that RO had influenced their university choices at least a little at the point of the follow-up survey (83 per cent). Indeed, over half of the students (54 per cent) stated that RO had influenced their choices either 'a lot' or 'quite a lot'. Similarly, 79 per cent had been influenced at least a little by whether or not the university was a RO partner university, while 51 per cent were influenced either 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' by this factor. Just nine per cent of students stated that they were not influenced at all by RO and 13 per cent said that they were not influenced at all by the university being a RO partner university. This suggests RO is influencing the university choices of the majority of students.

4.3 Attending a university close to home

Overall, it appears that a majority of students believed that they are not being influenced to any great extent by the closeness of a university to their home. Overall, 39 per cent of students believed that closeness to home had influenced their university choices either 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' (39 per cent at baseline also).

When asked how important it is to go to a university close to home, 14 per cent felt this was very important at baseline and 17 per cent stated this at follow-up. A further 30 per cent said it was quite important at baseline (26 per cent at follow-up). At both time-points around half of all students (53 per cent at baseline and 50 per cent at follow-up) felt it was not very or not at all important.

This suggests that students do not believe they are being influenced by the location of the university. However, from the pattern in their applications and firm offers, it appears that students are planning to attend universities closer to home.

4.4 The importance of alternative offers

Students enrolled on RO have the opportunity to receive an 'alternative offer' through UCAS from some RO partner universities. Alternative offers recognise the successful completion of RO, with an offer lowered by up to 40 UCAS tariff points or two 'A' level grades. Of the 12 Partners involved for Cohort 3, 11 RO offer students the opportunity to receive an alternative offer (although one of these universities offers this for Medicine and Dentistry courses only). The twelfth university gives additional recognition rather than an alternative offer to RO students. All students enrolled on RO receive additional consideration for their application when applying through UCAS for the majority of courses across all 12 RO partner universities involved in Cohort 3.

Students who had applied to university were asked, at the point of follow-up, if the possibility of receiving an alternative offer had influenced their decisions about which universities to apply to. Over half (54 per cent) of the students stated that this opportunity had influenced their decision. This is a similar proportion to that seen with the first two cohorts of RO students (54 per cent in Cohort 2 and 52 per cent in Cohort 1) and suggests that this

particular aspect of the RO programme has a considerable influence on the students' university decision.

In total, 68 per cent of the students planning to attend university said that they had received alternative offers while 16 per cent had not. This is higher than the proportion of students receiving alternative offers in cohort 2 (58 per cent).

4.5 The influence of research intensive universities

Before students had been involved with the RO programme, a third of students (32 per cent) did not know what a research intensive university was. Around half (52 per cent) of the students felt that it was important to attend a research intensive university, and 13 per cent did not think it was important.

By the time of the follow-up survey, just two per cent of students who planned to go to university did not know what a research intensive university was and 63 per cent stated that it was important to attend one. Twenty-eight per cent said it was not important. Together these findings suggest that students' knowledge and understanding of what a research intensive university is, had improved a great deal and therefore they would be better able to make an informed decision about the importance of attending a research intensive university.

5. University information and support

This chapter sets out the usefulness of different forms of career advice and information and support around university. It addresses the influence of university visits, the level of information and knowledge that students currently have about university, and how prepared they feel for entering higher education. The section draws on data from the baseline and follow-up surveys.

5.1 Sources and usefulness of university advice

At the point of the baseline survey, students were most likely to have accessed university advice from teachers and careers coordinators. The vast majority (94 per cent) had also done their own research. Students were less likely to have accessed advice on university from employers or through university residential summer schools, with almost half of the students stating that they had not been provided with information through these routes (45 per cent and 43 per cent respectively). By the follow-up survey, all students had accessed advice from university prospectuses and through their own research. Nearly all (99 per cent) had been on university visits.

Looking only at those students who have used each source of information, at the point of the baseline survey, students rated the following sources as the most useful¹⁷:

- university prospectuses (92 per cent of the 362 students who have used this)
- visit to university campuses (92 per cent of the 322 students who have used this)
- own research (90 per cent of the 402 students who have used this)
- current university students (87 per cent of the 325 students who have used this)
- university staff (86 per cent of the 298 students who have used this).

At the follow-up stage, the most useful¹⁸ sources of advice were considered to be:

- visits to university campuses (98 per cent of the 193 who had used this)
- own research (97 per cent of the 194 who had used this)
- university staff (93 per cent of the 191 who had used this)
- university prospectuses (89 per cent of the 194 who had used this)
- Realising Opportunities (88 per cent of the 191 who had used this).

¹⁷ Combined percentages for factors rated as 'very useful' or 'useful'.

¹⁸ Combined percentages for factors rated as 'very useful' or 'useful'.

This shows that there has been little change in the sources of advice about university that students feel are most useful. It also suggests that students found RO a particularly useful source of advice.

Multi-level modelling has been used to explore whether there were any significant differences between the usefulness of the different sources of advice at the time of the baseline and follow-up survey.

The analysis reveals that, at the point of follow-up, students were significantly *more* likely to find the following sources of advice useful than they had at baseline:

- university staff
- university prospectuses
- visits to university campuses
- university residential summer schools
- current university students
- their own research
- parents and carers.

The students were significantly less likely to find school careers coordinators and employers useful at follow-up compared with baseline.

5.1.4 Sources of advice specific to Realising Opportunities

Students responding to the follow-up survey rated the following sources of advice specific to RO as useful:

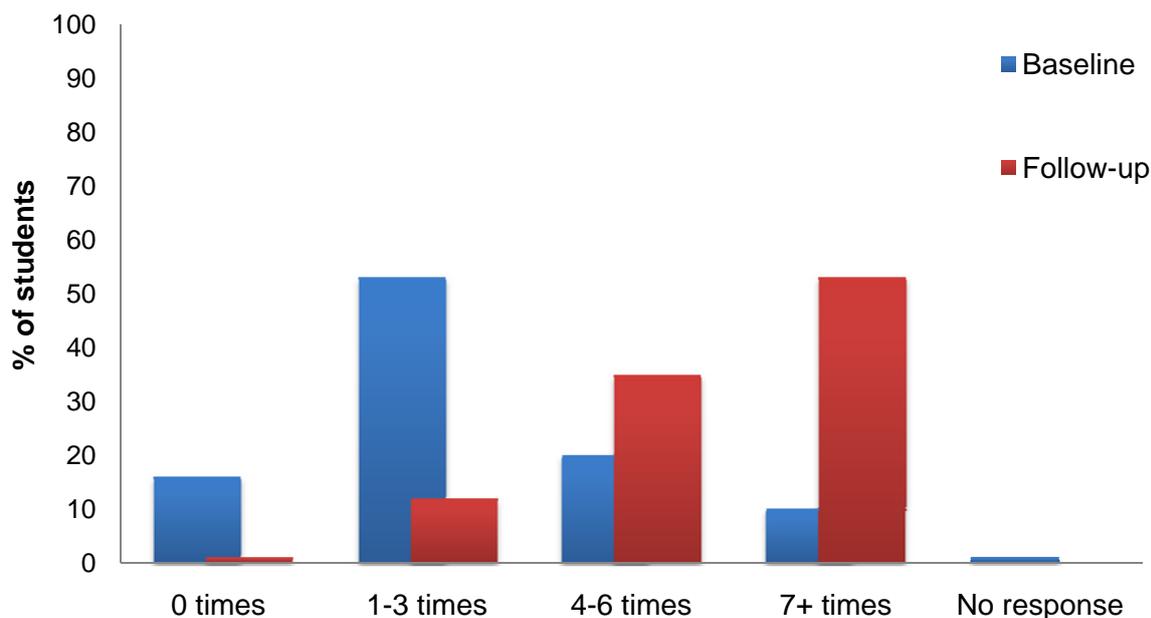
- Realising Opportunities (e.g. the programme in its entirety) (88 per cent of the 191 students who rated this)
- the RO Programme Guide (75 per cent of 186 students who rated this)
- their RO ementor (70 per cent of the 182 students who rated this)
- the RO National Student Conference (72 per cent of 197 students who rated this).

These findings suggest that students valued the sources of advice provided through RO and found them to be useful. It should be noted that many of the other sources that students rated highly (such as visits to university campuses, university staff and current university students), are also all elements of RO (although they are also likely to have been offered by other access schemes or through individual university recruitment activities that students may have been involved with).

5.2 The influence of university visits

Figure 5.1 shows the numbers of visits to universities students reported having made at the time of the baseline and follow-up surveys. The figure shows that, at the point of the baseline survey, most students had visited a university three times or less (69 per cent). In contrast, 88 per cent of students at the follow-up survey had visited a university at least four times. Indeed, a quarter of students had visited a university eleven times or more.

Figure 5.1 Visits to universities



Source: NFER surveys of Cohort 3 RO students, 2012 and 2013

Ninety-eight per cent of students who completed the follow-up survey reported having visited a RO partner university at least once. Over half of the students (52 per cent) had made between one and three visits to a RO partner university, while 26 per cent had visited between four and six times. Most students had also visited another RO partner university, besides their host university; 73 per cent of students had visited a different RO partner university (not their host) between one and three times.

The most common reason for visiting a university at baseline was for subject-specific visits. At follow-up the most common reasons were for the RO National Student Conference and open days. Forty per cent of students at baseline had not attended an open day compared with just seven per cent at follow-up. At both survey time points, students were less likely to visit a university for residential visits or to visit friends or family than for other reasons, although a greater proportion had attended both of these at the time of the follow-up compared to baseline.

Students found the following types of university visit influential over their university choice¹⁹ at the point of the follow-up survey:

- open days (81 per cent)
- subject-specific visits (74 per cent)
- RO National Student Conference (60 per cent)
- residential visits (57 per cent).

5.3 Levels of information and knowledge

At both baseline and follow-up, students were asked how much they felt they knew about a range of different aspects of university study. At baseline, students rated themselves as knowing 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' about:

- how to find out about courses (72 per cent)
- future career options and the choices that are open to them (63 per cent)
- what the subject(s) that they are interested in involve (62 per cent).

In contrast, over half of the students rated themselves as knowing only 'a little' or 'nothing' about:

- research intensive universities (75 per cent)
- what different universities are like (63 per cent)
- the costs and financial support available for university (57 per cent)
- the advantages and disadvantages of different course options (57 per cent)
- how to apply to university (57 per cent).

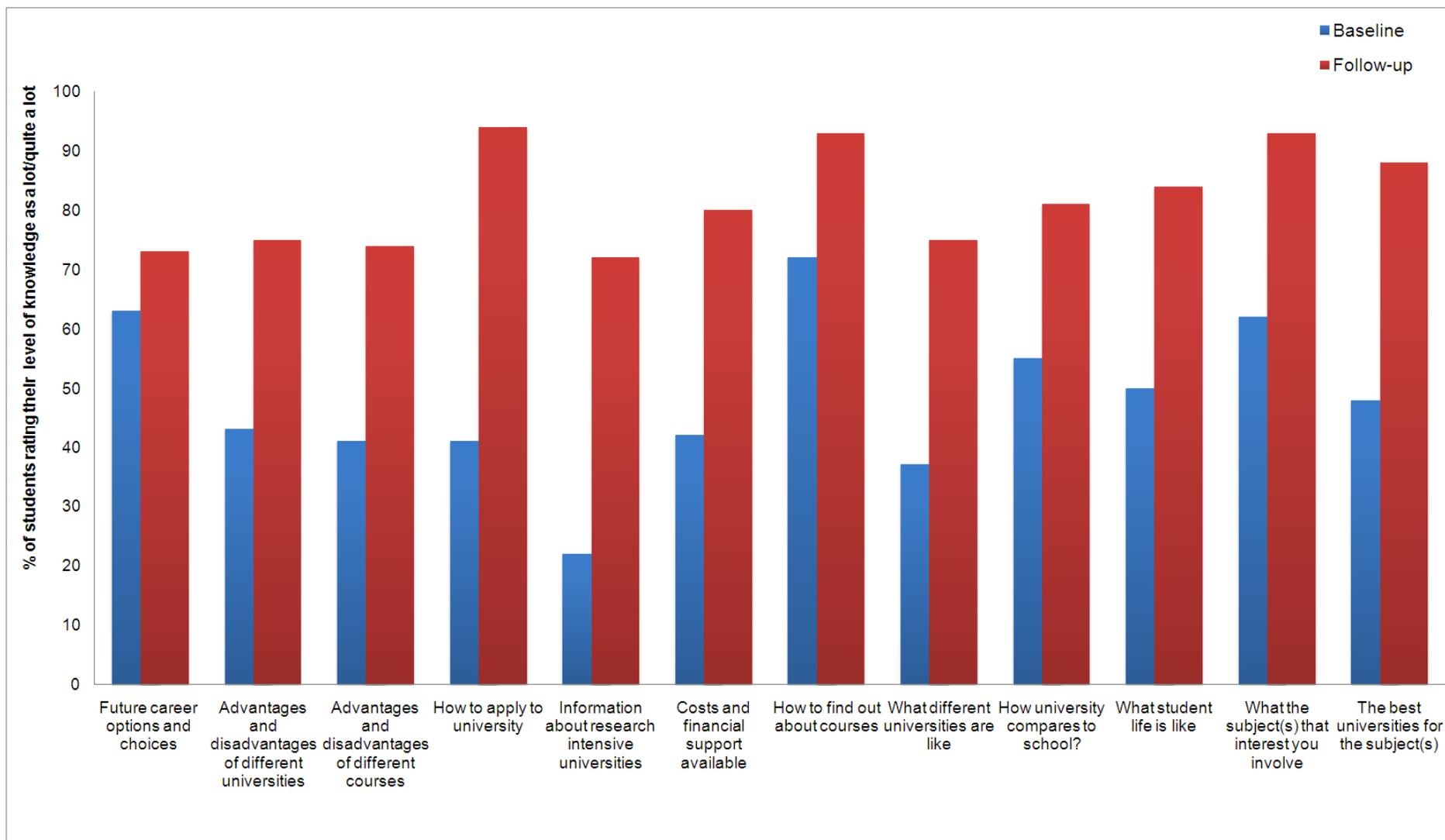
As highlighted in figure 5.2, at the point of the follow-up survey, students' knowledge in all areas had increased. Students felt themselves to be particularly knowledgeable²⁰ about:

- how to apply to university (94 per cent)
- what subject(s) that interest you involve (93 per cent)
- how to find out about courses (93 per cent).

¹⁹ Combined percentages for responses rated as 'a lot' and 'quite a lot' when asked how influential this factor was over university choice.

²⁰ Combined percentages for responses rated as knowing 'quite a lot' or 'a lot'.

Figure 5.2 Students' knowledge of university areas at baseline and follow-up



The proportion of students who knew only 'a little' or 'nothing' about each of the elements was small (less than one third). However a notable minority of students did say that they knew only 'a little' or 'nothing' about:

- research intensive universities (28 per cent)
- advantages and disadvantages of different course options (26 per cent)
- future career options (26 per cent).

Multi-level modelling demonstrates that students at follow-up were significantly more likely to know about all of the elements of university covered in the survey questions (regardless of whether or not they planned to go on to university) compared with baseline. Together, these findings indicate that students are much more informed about university after completing RO.

5.4 Satisfaction with levels of information, advice and guidance

At baseline, around half of the students in Cohort 3 were happy with the amount of information, advice and guidance they had received to help them to make decisions about university (49 per cent of students either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed'). However, 19 per cent 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed', suggesting that these students would have welcomed further advice and information relating to decisions about university.

At the point of the follow-up survey, student satisfaction with information, advice and guidance increased considerably. Overall, 88 per cent of students agreed to some extent that they were happy with the amount of information, advice and guidance they had received. Just five per cent of respondents disagreed with this statement. Multi-level modelling indicates that students were significantly more likely to be satisfied with their levels of information, advice and guidance at follow-up compared with baseline.

5.5 How prepared students feel for university

Students who indicated that they intended to go to university rated how prepared they felt on a range of aspects related to university life. At the point of the baseline survey, students most commonly rated themselves as being 'very prepared' or 'prepared' for:

- meeting new people (91 per cent)
- independent study (91 per cent)
- getting used to a new university campus/place of study (81 per cent).

Students felt least prepared for managing their finances (62 per cent rated themselves as being prepared for this) and living away from home (63 per cent rated themselves as prepared).

At the point of the follow-up survey, students most commonly said that they were 'very prepared' or 'prepared' for:

- independent study (87 per cent)
- meeting new people (85 per cent)
- university life in general (80 per cent).

The proportion of students who felt prepared for managing their finances remained almost the same (64 per cent) as it was at baseline (63 per cent), while the proportion who felt prepared for living away from home decreased slightly from 63 per cent at baseline to 59 per cent at follow-up. However, a greater proportion of students at follow-up said that being prepared for living away from home was not applicable to them, compared to at baseline (11 per cent compared to one per cent). This may reflect the notable proportion of students planning to attend a university close to home, and who therefore may be planning to live at home.

Multi-level modelling was used to identify any significant differences in the preparedness of students at follow-up and baseline. The analysis reveals that students answering the baseline survey were significantly more likely to report feeling prepared for meeting new people. This may indicate that students were more aware of the realities of university life at the point of the follow-up and therefore may have felt less prepared.

6. Career intentions and support

This section explores students' views on their future careers and confidence in reaching these goals.

6.1 Statements on the future

Students were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'I have lifelong goals (10 years ahead)'. At baseline, almost three-quarters of students (74 per cent) either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. By the time of the follow-up survey the proportion of students agreeing with this statement had decreased to 65 per cent. Multi-level modelling reveals that this difference is significant.

Students were also asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'I know what career/job I would like to do'. At baseline, 68 per cent of students 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with this statement. At the point of the follow-up a slightly larger proportion said that they agreed with this statement (70 per cent). This suggests that the majority of students continued to know what career they wanted to have over the course of the programme.

Students rated a range of factors on how important they were when deciding on a future career or job. The three factors considered most important²¹ when choosing jobs/careers were:

- interesting work (97 per cent)
- that the work provides job security (94 per cent)
- good promotion prospects (84 per cent).

Students were less likely to value working close to home (42 per cent rated this as important) and high status (61 per cent rated this as important).

6.2 Awareness of chosen career path

The top three career choices at both baseline and follow-up were:

- doctor (25 per cent at baseline; 20 per cent at follow-up)
- teacher (13 per cent at baseline; nine per cent at follow-up)²²
- work in the legal profession (nine per cent at baseline; 12 per cent at follow-up).

²¹ Combined percentages for those factors rated as 'very important' or 'quite important'.

²² Combined percentages for those who mentioned 'teacher (generic/unspecified)', 'primary school teacher' and 'subject teacher at secondary school'.

This suggests that students' career aspirations have remained fairly constant over the course of the RO programme.

Just over a third of students who completed the follow-up survey knew someone who was doing the job they wanted to do in the future (38 per cent). This had not changed considerably since baseline (36 per cent). A smaller proportion of students stated that someone doing the job they were interested in had visited their school (28 per cent), and this proportion had decreased from the baseline survey (36 per cent). This suggests that most students have not had access to people currently working in their chosen career area throughout their involvement with RO.

Despite a lack of input from people currently working in or employed in the careers the students were interested in, students were confident that they could achieve their career goals. At baseline, three-quarters of the RO cohort (76 per cent) were confident that they would achieve their career goals, while 82 per cent knew what they needed to do to achieve their career goals. These proportions remained the same at the follow-up survey.

7. Participants' views of Realising Opportunities

This chapter explores students' views of RO. It details students' satisfaction with the amount of time needed to complete RO, the benefits they have gained through the programme and, where relevant, how RO compares to other access programmes they had been involved with. The findings in this section are based solely on the findings from the follow-up survey students completed after finishing RO.

7.1 Completing Realising Opportunities

Students reported that the amount of time needed to complete RO was about right. Indeed, 86 per cent felt this, while only eleven per cent felt they had too much time. Just four per cent felt that they were not given enough time. For the majority of students involved in RO, the design of the programme seems to allow adequate time for completion and therefore does not need altering.

7.2 Benefits of Realising Opportunities

As noted in previous sections, students rated RO highly in terms of its usefulness and its influence. Table 7.1 shows how students have rated particular benefits of RO. Overall students felt that RO had benefited them²³ particularly in the areas of:

- understanding of what a research intensive university is (76 per cent)
- study skills (75 per cent)
- ability to reference academic sources (75 per cent)
- knowledge about different courses at university (70 per cent)
- ability to set goals (70 per cent).

²³ Combined responses for those factors rated as increasing their knowledge 'a lot' and 'quite a lot'.

7.1 Perceived benefits of RO

RO has helped me to improve:	A lot %	Quite a lot %	A little %	Not at all %	No response %
Your ability to reference academic sources	40	35	20	6	0
Your knowledge about the UCAS application process	35	32	23	10	0
Your study skills	34	41	16	9	0
Your understanding of what a research intensive university is	32	44	19	5	0
Your ability to set goals	28	42	21	9	0
Your presentation skills	25	37	25	13	0
Your knowledge of different courses at university	24	46	22	8	0
Your revision skills	24	35	27	14	0
Understanding your personality type	23	40	23	14	0
Your self confidence	23	40	26	10	1
Your knowledge of student finance	18	41	28	13	0
Number of students = 194					

A series of single response questions.

Due to rounding percentages may not sum to 100.

A total of 194 respondents gave at least one response to these questions.

Source: RO follow-up survey 2013.

These findings reflect those seen in previous cohorts of RO students and suggest that RO is continuing to help students to develop the skills needed to progress at university.

7.3 How Realising Opportunities compares with other access programmes

Almost a third of students (31 per cent; 61 students) who answered the follow-up study had been involved in other access programmes, in addition to RO. These students were asked to compare their experiences of other programmes with RO, in order to gauge the usefulness of RO. In total, 27 of the 61 students felt that RO was about the same in terms of usefulness, while 19 students felt it was more useful. The remaining 15 students felt it was less useful than the other programme they had been on. Due to the small numbers involved, readers should however treat these findings with caution.

When asked to explain this answer, it is clear from their responses that students require different things from access courses. While some students liked the fact that RO provided information on a range of universities and stated that this was why it was more useful than their other access programme, others preferred access courses that were more specific to one university. Those that had said that they believed RO to be similar in usefulness to other access courses explained that they had provided similar levels of information and both courses had provided useful information.

8. Conclusions

This report has explored the perceived impact of RO on the third cohort of students. Overall, as with previous cohorts, the message is a positive one: RO seems to be making a difference to the students involved.

Importantly, RO is successfully reaching its target students: those who are most able but least likely to go to university. Almost a third of Cohort 3 RO students came from low participation areas and nearly 100 per cent are to be the first generation in their family to go to university. RO offers the type of practical support that these students would probably not have been able to gain at home, despite the large majority being well supported by their families in their university and career aspirations.

RO students have high aspirations for their future careers, with professional careers that (in the main) require a degree dominating. Medicine, teaching and law are the most popular career options. It is interesting to note that while medicine is particularly popular among RO students (as with previous cohorts) both as a subject and a career, more students applied to subjects allied to medicine (such as ophthalmics, pharmacy, pharmacology, nutrition) than pre-clinical medicine itself.

The data shows that students' intentions to go to university remained high over the course of RO, suggesting an understanding of the value of gaining a degree, despite the increased cost of doing so. At June 2013, 82 per cent of students had submitted an application to UCAS. Students made 706 applications to partner universities and 314 applications to other research intensive universities. Just over half of RO students (54 per cent) accepted a firm offer from a research intensive university, while 39 per cent accepted a firm offer from a non-research intensive university. Understanding the reasons why a notable minority of students did not apply, accept or receive a firm offer from a research intensive university would be helpful.

Students' knowledge and understanding of research intensive universities improved considerably over the course of the programme. This suggests that RO is largely meeting its aim of enabling students to make informed decisions about their university choices and to understand the importance of attending a research intensive university. Almost two-thirds of students stated that it was important to attend this type of HE institution, while just over a quarter disagreed. The Partnership may find it interesting in the future to investigate the reasons why some RO students do not feel that attending a research intensive university is important, in order to support programme development.

RO students who accepted a firm offer at a research intensive university were proportionally more likely to choose a RO university. This suggests that involvement in the RO programme is helping universities to attract this cohort of able but disadvantaged students. However, there is still quite a lot of scope to increase the proportion of students who wish to attend a

research intensive university and more investigation will need to be done to identify how best to encourage students to apply to these universities.

RO students continue to study close to home. Even when students do not cite proximity to home as an influencing factor, their choice of university indicates that they have chosen not to move very far from home. This issue would merit further investigation, as attending a university in the region in which they live may not be the best choice for some students.

As with previous cohorts, RO is a major influence on student university choices. The alternative offer is an important aspect of this, which suggests that retaining and promoting the programme element is important. Students' applications to research intensive universities are generally low when you exclude RO partner universities – suggesting that they do have an influence. However it may suggest that these students are still not confident in applying to research intensive universities generally, despite their academic potential. Further investigation into this issue would be useful.

It is clear that it provides information and advice in formats that the students value. The evaluation shows that students' knowledge of university has increased considerably since the beginning of the programme. Indeed, multilevel modelling shows that students were significantly more likely to know about all of the elements of university we asked them about, after they had participated in RO, irrespective of whether they intended to go to university. However, this increase in knowledge is coupled with a slight perceived decrease in preparedness, which may reflect a more realistic understanding of what going to university entails.

Overall, our evaluation of three cohorts of students show that RO is consistently supporting the least likely but most able students to progress to university. Students continue to feel they have benefited from RO – both in terms of their knowledge about university life and in the skills they will need to succeed at university. Based on the perceptions of its beneficiaries, RO remains a very successful programme in terms of design, content and impact.

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