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## Report

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# Realising Opportunities Evaluation

## Cohort 1 Final Report – July 2011

National Foundation for Educational  
Research (NFER)



# Realising Opportunities Evaluation

## Cohort 1 Final Report – July 2011

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# Executive summary

Realising Opportunities (RO) is a programme involving 12 partner universities<sup>1</sup>, led by Newcastle University, aimed at encouraging and supporting the 'most able but least likely' students to apply to research intensive universities.

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 12 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.

In cohort 1 (students who enrolled in March 2010 and completed RO in summer 2011), eligible students were: high academic achievers; in receipt of, or entitled to, an Educational Maintenance Allowance; or living in, or have experience of, local authority care. They were drawn from targeted schools that were in deprived areas and performed at lower than the national average for 5A\* GCSE grades.

Participating students join the programme in Year 12, and are provided with opportunities to engage in university events and experiences over its two-year course. Owing to the project set up timescale, Cohort 1 was recruited in the Spring of 2010 rather than the Autumn of 2009 and therefore experienced a shortened programme, with the bulk of interventions experienced in Year 13. Cohort 1 therefore did not experience the 'ideal' programme timeframe that is now in place for future cohorts. They are 'hosted' by a local university, but encouraged to attend events at other RO partner universities.

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has been commissioned by the RO partner universities to assist in measuring ROs impacts. This report sets out findings from a 'baseline' and 'follow-up' survey given to the first cohort of RO participants.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

## Key findings

- The RO programme appears to be meeting its aims.
- The programme was successful in recruiting those it was intended to benefit: those students who were most able but least likely to apply to research intensive universities.
- There is a high rate of application to the RO partner universities, demonstrating that the majority of the cohort 1 participants have aspired and applied to leading universities.
- The location of the university is important to the RO cohort. Students are more likely to apply to their host RO university or to partner universities in close proximity to their home, compared with other partner universities. They are also more likely to accept offers from universities in the same region as their host university (which is near to their home). Hence, there appears to be a general lack of geographical mobility reflected in the university applications.
- The students feel that they are well informed about their higher education options. They are more likely to understand what a research intensive university is, as well to consider it important to apply to such universities at the time of the follow-up, than they were at baseline.
- Beneficiaries of RO state that RO has improved their study skills, as well as other skills that are central to success in a research intensive university.
- RO students are more informed about their future career options and choices by the end of RO, than they were at its inception. The students typically aim high – with the most popular course choices being medicine and dentistry.

By the time of the follow-up survey, students were significantly more likely to believe it is important to attend a research intensive university than they were at baseline. This implies that knowledge and understanding regarding research intensive universities has improved over the course of RO.

- Without the presence of a comparison group of young people, it is impossible to ascertain whether the positive changes and impacts observed in this research are a direct result of RO, or of other factors.

## About the cohort

- Cohort 1 students have been well targeted. For example, two-thirds of participants are from areas where young people do not traditionally progress to Higher Education and the majority (56 per cent) of participants' parents (from whom data is available) have not attended Higher Education. Furthermore, the participants are largely all high academic achievers<sup>2</sup>.
- Cohort 1 students are well supported by families (e.g. 93 per cent have someone at home who asks them about their school/college work).

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<sup>2</sup> POLAR2 and GCSE point score data provided by the RO programme manager

- Many of the students are from homes with relatively few books. The wider evidence on the link between number of books in the home and educational achievement suggests that the cohort may be more likely to have lower levels of educational achievement than those from homes with more books.
- The vast majority of students (96 per cent) feel supported in their studies, and a similar proportion (94 per cent) feel that they have access to a wide range of resources to support their studies.

## University progression

- The majority of students are planning to go to university at follow-up, which reflects the findings at baseline. This indicates that the students' intentions have not altered over the course of RO.
- Ninety-five per cent of the RO cohort have applied for a place at university. The majority of students have applied to at least one RO partner university. In comparison, a much smaller proportion have applied to a research intensive university that is not involved with RO<sup>3</sup>.
- Nearly all of those who have applied through UCAS have received at least one offer of a place and students are generally happy with the offers they have received.
- Nearly three-quarters of students have received an offer from a RO partner university. Just 27 per cent have received an offer from other research intensive universities<sup>4</sup>.
- Nearly all those who received an offer have accepted a firm place. Over half of the students have accepted a firm place from a RO partner university.
- The location of the university is important to the RO cohort. Students are more likely to apply to their host RO university or to partner universities in close proximity to their home, compared with other partner universities. They are also more likely to accept offers from universities in the same region as their host university (which is near to their home).
- Students involved in RO have generally applied to study competitive and professional career-related subjects such as medicine and dentistry.

## The influences over university choice

- As with the baseline survey, the most important factors that influence students' university choice are the subjects the university offers, how good the university is for their chosen subject and the facilities on offer.
- Compared with baseline, however, the closeness of the university to home and knowing someone who went to the university have become more influential to students. Conversely, factors such as how good the university is for the chosen

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<sup>3</sup> The RO central team provided the NFER with anonymised and collated data on the cohort 1 RO participants who applied through UCAS.

<sup>4</sup> Other research intensive universities refer to the Russell Group and 1994 Group universities that are not RO partner universities.

course, whether the university offers the course and a teacher or school suggesting they should go, have become less influential.

- RO has influenced the majority of students' university choices to some extent. Similarly the alternative offer also appears to be an important factor in deciding which university to attend and therefore suggests it is an important aspect of the programme<sup>5</sup>.
- Students' awareness and understanding of research intensive universities has improved markedly since the baseline survey. The majority of students now feel that it is important to attend a research intensive university, which reflects the high proportion of learners applying to RO partner universities.

## Career intentions and support

- At the time of the baseline survey, the majority of the cohort were focused on their futures and had long-term plans; 69 per cent 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the statements 'I have lifelong goals' and 'I know what career/job I would like to do'. There was no significant change in responses by the time of the follow-up survey.
- At baseline, the cohort also generally knew what job or career they wanted to do, and this did not alter by the follow-up point. The most popular choices continued to be medicine/health, teaching, and law-related careers, reflecting the courses that the RO cohort have applied to.
- The factors considered most important in choosing a job or career are interesting work, job security and work that helps people. These views did not alter during the course of RO.

## University information and support

- Over the course of RO, the sources of advice about university that students accessed altered. Students more often accessed advice from university staff and current students, possibly due to increased exposure to such sources of information.
- At the follow-up stage, the most useful sources of advice about university are: students' own research; visits to university campuses; university staff; current university students and university prospectuses. This reflects the baseline survey results, but the information provided by current university students has increased in value, moving up in usefulness above advice provided by teachers.
- Students rate the information provided through RO very highly. For example, 87 per cent rate RO as 'very useful' or 'useful'; 80 per cent rate the RO programme guide in the same way. Seventy six per cent of students rate their RO mentor and 73 per cent rate the RO National Student Conference as 'very useful' or 'useful'.

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<sup>5</sup> As part of RO, students have the opportunity to receive an 'alternative offer' through UCAS from RO partner universities. Alternative offers recognise the successful completion of RO, with a lower offer of up to 40 UCAS tariff points or two 'A' level grades. Currently ten RO partners offer students the opportunity to receive an alternative offer.



- Students remain confident in their ability to achieve their career goals over the course of RO. However, by the follow-up survey point, students are significantly more likely to state that they know what to do to achieve their career goals; they know someone who is doing the job they would like to do; and that someone doing the kind of work they are interested in has visited their school and provided them with useful information.
- All of the respondents to the follow-up survey have visited a university. Ninety-eight per cent have visited a RO partner university, with the majority visiting between one and three times. However, 17 per cent have not visited a RO partner university other than their host university.
- By the time of the follow-up survey, students are significantly more likely to know about all of the elements of university study covered in the baseline and follow-up questionnaires. These include how to find out about courses; how university study compares to school; what different subjects involve; costs and financial support available for university; and what student life is like. Therefore, students are much more informed about university than they were at baseline.
- At follow-up, students are also more likely to know about research intensive universities, and about what different universities are like. However, 29 per cent of respondents feel they know only 'a little' or 'nothing' about research intensive universities and 27 per cent feel the same about their levels of knowledge of what different universities are like.
- Students were significantly more likely to agree that they were happy with the amount of information, advice and guidance they had received to help them to make decisions about university by the time of the follow-up survey than they were at baseline.
- By the end of RO, students are significantly more likely to report that they are more prepared for managing their finances; possibly living away from home; getting used to a new university campus/place of study; and for university life in general.

## Participants' views of RO

- Overall, students are satisfied with the amount of time required of them to complete RO.
- RO has impacted on participants in a wealth of positive ways.
- Students believe that the key benefits of RO are that it has helped them with study skills; their ability to reference academic sources; their understanding of what a research intensive university is; and their ability to set goals. These are key aims of RO.
- Over one-quarter of students (28 per cent) have been involved in other access programmes. These students generally felt the usefulness of RO to be similar to that of other access programmes, which may imply that where students are involved in other access programmes, the benefits of RO are more limited.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 About the Realising Opportunities (RO) programme

Realising Opportunities (RO) is a programme involving 12 Universities<sup>6</sup>, led by Newcastle University, aimed at encouraging and supporting the ‘most able but least likely’ students to apply to research intensive universities. The scheme aims to build on the lessons learned from the last ten years of widening participation activities in schools, colleges and universities.

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 12 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 university 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 a tailored academic module or the Extended Project Qualification<sup>7</sup>. 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.

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> The academic module 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 module is assessed by an academic tutor from a RO partner university.

## 1.2 Eligibility criteria

In cohort 1 (students who enrolled in April 2010 and completed RO in summer 2011), Year 12 students were targeted to meet the following eligibility criteria.

Students must:

- have a minimum of 8 A\* - C GCSEs (including English and Mathematics) with 5 GCSEs at a minimum of Grade B
- be among the most academically talented amongst their year group
- be in receipt of (or entitled to) an Educational Maintenance Allowance or be living in, or have experience of, local authority care.

They were drawn from targeted schools that:

- had greater than 60 per cent of students from the first 13,000 super output areas in the Index of Multiple Deprivation<sup>8</sup>
- perform at lower than the national average for 5A\*-C GCSE grades (i.e. lower than 49 per cent including English and Mathematics).

## 1.3 The evaluation

The evaluation of cohort 1 students has gathered 'baseline' and 'follow-up' data on the first cohort that progressed through the RO programme.

- Baseline data on participants was gathered shortly after the application stage via a paper-based questionnaire.
- A similar questionnaire was then sent to all participants for completion in May 2011 (the follow-up stage), when they were nearing the end of their RO involvement.

Data was also gathered by the Realising Opportunities central team, through the application process, and this has been shared with the NFER for analysis purposes.

This research design has allowed the progress of participants to be tracked over the course of the programme. For the first cohort, it was not possible to include a comparison group of young people (e.g. a matched group who have not participated in the programme) due to timescales for the set up of RO and research commissioning. As the evaluation progresses to focus on cohorts 2 and 3, a robust comparison group is included in the design.

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<sup>8</sup> The first 13,000 super output areas in the Index of Multiple Deprivation represent the most deprived areas and contain 40 per cent of the working population.

The questionnaires gathered information on:

- future plans post-Year 13 (e.g. whether they 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 1 participants. In total, 194 students returned a questionnaire at baseline (a 62 per cent response rate), and 126 at follow-up (again, a 62 per cent response rate<sup>9</sup>). Eighty-six individual students returned both a baseline and follow-up questionnaire.

## 1.4 Report structure

The findings are presented under the following headings:

- About the cohort
- University progression
- The influences over university choices
- Career intentions and support
- University information and support
- Participants' views of Realising Opportunities
- Conclusions.

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<sup>9</sup> A proportion of students withdrew from RO before the follow-up survey took place, hence there were lower number of students to whom the follow-up survey was sent.

## 2. About the cohort

This section presents contextual information about the students. It includes information about their experience both in and outside of school/college. It draws on data from the NFER baseline and follow-up surveys, as well as from data collected by the Realising Opportunities application form, supplied by the RO central team.

### 2.1 Overview of the cohort 1 participants

This section looks at data from the RO application form, and provides contextual information on:

- the extent to which participants are drawn from areas with high/low participation in higher education among young people (POLAR2 data)
- parental participation in Higher Education
- levels of GCSE achievement
- free school meal (FSM) uptake.

#### 2.1.1 POLAR2 data<sup>10</sup>

Analysis of POLAR2 data shows that:

- 66 per cent of students recruited in cohort 1 came from areas with the lowest participation rates in higher education among young people
- 16 per cent came from areas with the highest participation rates.

Therefore, around two-thirds of participants were from areas where young people do not traditionally progress into higher education.

#### 2.1.2 Parental participation in Higher Education (HE)<sup>11</sup>

- 16 per cent of participants in cohort 1 have a parent with a HE qualification
- 56 per cent of participants did not
- for 28 per cent of participants, this was unknown.

Hence, of those for whom data is available, the majority of participants' do not have a parent who has attended HE themselves.

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<sup>10</sup> Data provided by the RO project manager.

<sup>11</sup> Data provided by the RO project manager

### 2.1.3 GCSE point score data

Of the participants in cohort 1, 291 were matched on the National Pupil Database<sup>12</sup>. On behalf of the RO Partnership, The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) analysed this matched GCSE data. The analysis demonstrates that:

- almost all of the cohort have more than 360 capped points (an average grade of a B in their best 8 GCSEs), in line with the cohort 1 targeting guidance<sup>13</sup>
- of those who are claiming free school meals, 1 in 4 fall into very high attainment groups (460-480 points – an average of 8 A\* grades)<sup>14</sup>
- just over half of all participants, based only on attainment, fall into the category where their chances of being accepted into one of the most selective third of HEIs are less than their chances of being accepted into a less selective HEI. The other half of the cohort fall into the category where they are more likely to be accepted into one of the most selective HEIs than a less selective one<sup>15</sup>.

## 2.1 Experience outside of school/college

In the baseline and follow-up surveys, students were asked a series of questions about the support they receive at home, their experience of work, their interests, their exposure to a university environment, and their experience of mentoring and tuition.

### 2.1.1 Support at home and additional responsibilities

The young people on the programme appear to be well supported by their families, but also take on responsibility at home for caring for others. Indeed, more than nine out of ten students (93 per cent) have someone at home who asks them about their school or college work, and a similar amount (89 per cent) have someone at home to talk to about their future plans. However, around one-third of students (36 per cent at baseline, 30 per cent at follow-up) have additional family responsibilities such as caring for a parent/guardian or sibling.

### 2.1.2 Experience of work

At baseline, one-third (33 per cent) of respondents had a job, and of these almost half (45 per cent) worked more than 10 hours per week.

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<sup>12</sup> The English National Pupil Database contains at least one record for each pupil at a state school in England, covering both the pupil's characteristics and their examination results.

<sup>13</sup> HEFCE analysis provided to the NFER

<sup>14</sup> HEFCE analysis provided to the NFER

<sup>15</sup> HEFCE analysis provided to the NFER

### 2.1.3 Interests

At baseline, almost one-quarter of students (23 per cent) had a single interest that took more than ten hours per week. Of these, the most frequently cited activities were sports (37 per cent) or voluntary based activities (28 per cent). It is possible that the voluntary activities are forms of work experience.

### 2.1.4 Exposure to a university environment

The baseline survey showed that one-third of students (34 per cent) have a sibling who has been to university and four out of ten students (43 per cent) have a friend who has been to university. Furthermore, almost six out of ten students (57 per cent) know someone who has been to one of the 12 universities involved in RO.<sup>16</sup>

This demonstrates that the majority of the young people on the programme are the first of their siblings to go to university<sup>17</sup>, although many have friends who have taken the step into Higher Education.

### 2.1.5 Mentoring and tuition

At baseline, the vast majority of students (93 per cent) had not received additional tuition outside of school/college (at follow-up, this was 96 per cent). However, almost one-quarter (23 per cent) reported receiving mentoring from university students. Around four out of ten students (42 per cent) also reported that they had mentored younger students.

## 2.2 Books in the home

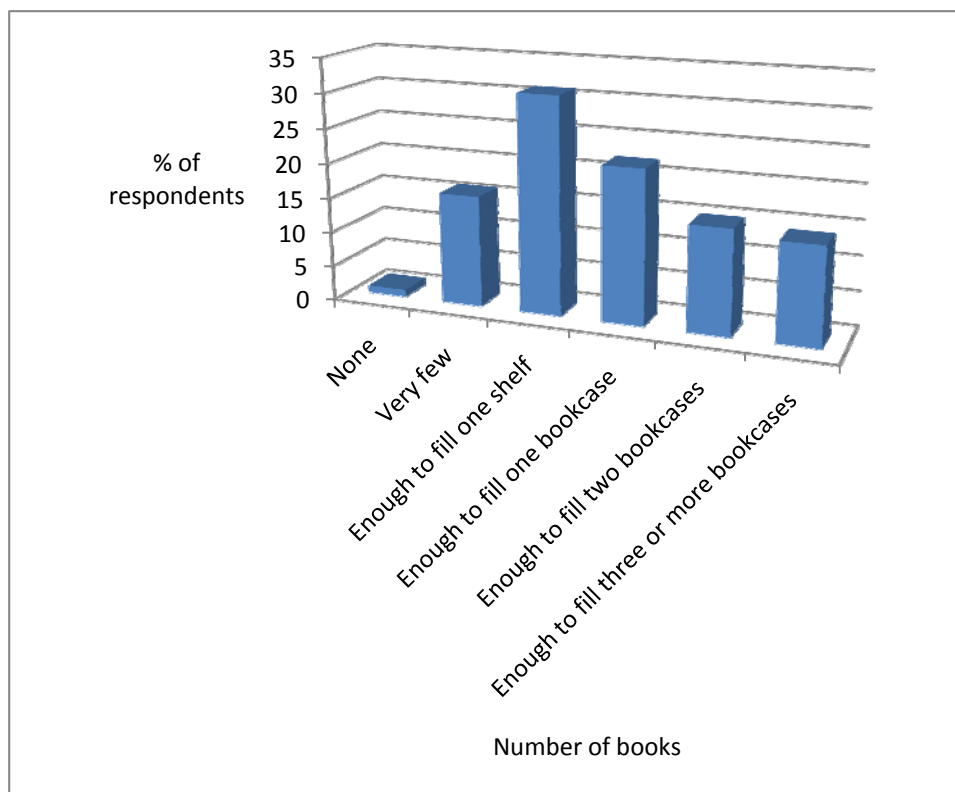
At baseline, students were asked approximately how many books there are in their home. The findings are presented in Figure 2.1 below.

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<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> Of note, we do not have a gauge on whether or not they have any other siblings or indeed, if they are the eldest sibling.

Figure 2.1 The number of books students reported having in their home



Source: NFER baseline survey of cohort 1 RO students, 2010

The findings show that the majority of respondents are from homes that have enough books to fill one shelf, to one bookcase. About one in six students (16 per cent) report having ‘very few’ books in their home and only one in seven (14 per cent) have enough books in their home to fill three or more bookcases.

These findings suggest that many of the young people are from homes with relatively few books. Wider evidence on the link between number of books in the home and educational achievement suggests that the cohort may be more likely to have lower levels of educational achievement than those from homes with more books.

### 2.3 Experience at school/college

At baseline, students were asked whether they felt supported in their studies, and whether they had access to a wide range of resources. The vast majority (96 per cent) report that they feel supported in their studies and a similar proportion (94 per cent) that they have access to a wide range of resources to support their studies. This suggests that their schools/colleges are providing a good level of support to the students participating in RO.



## 3. University progression

This section explores students' future plans and progression to university. It includes the findings from the baseline and follow-up surveys and UCAS data gathered on the full RO cohort<sup>18</sup>, relating to intentions of going to university; 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, 96 per cent of students were planning to go to university, showing that the majority of those engaged with RO were planning to move onto higher education. This reflects the expectations of the cohort, who were likely to have previously been involved with Aimhigher activities and to have been identified as gifted and talented. At the time of the follow up survey, 95 per cent of students were planning to go to university, with 4 per cent of these students planning to take a gap year first. There were no significant differences between the proportions of students who plan to attend university at baseline and follow-up.

This indicates that the intentions of the students had not altered to any great extent over the course of RO – yet the students were already aiming very highly so were unlikely to increase significantly. Research suggests that aspirations to study at university are not always translated into actual participation, so the maintenance of the intention to attend university is noteworthy.

### 3.2 Applications to university

This section looks at applications to university generally, to partner universities and other research intensive universities, as well as applications to host universities.

#### 3.2.1 Overall application to university

Overall, by the time of the follow-up survey, 97 per cent of students stated that they had applied for a place at university, a slightly higher proportion than those who stated that they planned to go to university. This might be a result of some participants applying for university, but then deciding not to take up a place this year, or not securing the place they wanted.

Of those who had not applied to go to university, the main reason was that they were planning to take a gap year before attending university. These findings are consistent

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<sup>18</sup> The RO central team provided the NFER with anonymised and collated data on the full cohort of RO participants 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

with the UCAS data on the total RO cohort which reports that 95 per cent of the cohort had applied to universities through the UCAS system.

### 3.2.2 Applications to partner universities and other research intensive universities

The UCAS data shows that 85 per cent of the RO cohort had applied to at least one RO partner university, with the average being 2.5 partner applications per student. The proportion applying to partner universities is notably higher than the proportion applying to other research intensive universities (41 per cent, with an average number of applications of 1.5 per student) and also slightly higher than those applying to other, non-research intensive universities (74 per cent, with an average number of applications of 2.5 per student).

### 3.2.3 Applications to host universities

Students do appear, in most cases, to be more likely to apply to their RO host university<sup>19</sup>. A higher proportion of students from eight of the 12 partner universities had applied to their host university, than proportions applying to other RO partner universities. However, students hosted by four universities (Bristol, Essex, Warwick and York) were more likely to not apply to their host university and instead more applications have been made to other partner institutions. Where this had happened, the highest number of applications have been to another partner university within proximity to the student's host university and, therefore, their home. For example: Students hosted by York University had most commonly applied to Leeds University<sup>20</sup>, while students hosted by Warwick University had most commonly applied to Birmingham University.

Furthermore, partner universities that are more isolated in their proximity to other RO partner universities tended to receive fewer applications from students hosted by other universities, for example Exeter University and Newcastle University. This suggests that the location of the university plays an important part in where students apply and that there is scope for partner universities that are in close proximity to work together to attract more students.

### 3.2.4 Subjects being applied for

Students involved in RO have generally applied to study competitive and professional career-related subjects such as medicine and dentistry. Indeed, RO partner universities received the most applications from the RO cohort for the following subjects:

- medicine and dentistry (55 applications)

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<sup>19</sup> Based on UCAS data from February 2011.

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that due to the lack of schools in the York locality that were eligible for RO, York University worked with schools outside of their immediate area, and worked with schools in the Leeds/Bradford area instead. This reflects findings that students are indeed wishing to stay local.

- subjects allied to Medicine (54 applications)
- biological sciences (30 applications)
- law (27 applications)
- physical sciences (26 applications).

This shows that the RO cohort are applying to courses at RO partner universities that could lead them into some of the country's top professions.

### 3.3 Offers from universities

This section sets out an overview of the offers made to students, and their satisfaction with the offers made.

- Overall, 96 per cent of all those who had applied through UCAS had received an offer from a university. This equates to an average of 3.5 offers per student.
- Nearly three quarters of students (73 per cent) had received an offer from a RO partner university while just 27 per cent had received an offer from other research intensive universities.
- In total, 70 per cent of learners had received an offer from another (non-research intensive) university.

Generally, participants who completed a follow-up survey were happy with the offers they have received from universities (87 per cent report that they are happy with their offers). Indeed, 73 per cent of these participants had received offers from their first choice university. Where students were not happy about the offers they received, the main reason was learners not receiving an offer from their first choice university or not getting onto the course they had wanted to.

While 55 applications were made to study medicine or dentistry at RO partner universities, just 14 of these resulted in an offer being made – a success rate of 25 per cent. This reflects the competitive nature of these courses and that students do not receive an 'alternative offer' for these courses in a number of cases. RO students applying for other subjects were more successful. Indeed, over half of the applications for subjects allied to medicine resulted in an offer, while over three-quarters of applications for the other most popular courses (biological sciences, law and physical sciences) resulted in an offer being made.

### 3.4 Students' decisions on university offers

The UCAS data shows that 97 per cent of students had replied with a firm choice (meaning they had accepted an offer as their first choice) while a slightly lower proportion, 86 per cent, have also replied with an insurance choice (meaning they had accepted an offer as their second choice). As Table 3.1 shows, over half of the RO cohort who had applied to university had accepted an offer from a RO partner

university as their firm choice (first choice). A further third of the cohort (33 per cent) have chosen a partner university as their insurance choice. These proportions were much higher than the proportions of learners choosing another research intensive university as their firm and insurance choice (eight per cent and four per cent respectively).

**Table 3.1 Firm and insurance places**

University choices	RO Cohort 1 (%)
RO partner university as firm choice	58
Other research intensive university as firm choice	8
Other university as firm choice	29
RO partner university as insurance choice	33
Other research intensive university as insurance choice	4
Other university as insurance choice	49
<b>Total (n)</b>	<b>181</b>

Source: UCAS applications data on RO participants 2011

Further to this, 27 per cent of the RO cohort who applied to UCAS had accepted offers from RO partner universities as *both* their firm and insurance places. Hence, students appear much more likely to intend to progress to a RO partner university than any other.

One-quarter of students (25 per cent) had accepted a firm offer from a partner university and have an insurance offer from a non-research intensive university. In comparison, one-fifth of learners had a non-research intensive university as their first and second choice, while just two per cent of students had other research-intensive universities as their first and second choice (for full details please see Appendix A1).

As highlighted above, a much higher proportion of RO students had applied to RO partner universities and have accepted offers from these universities, compared with other research intensive universities. Students on RO had neither applied to, nor accepted offers from non-RO research intensive universities to any great extent. This might imply that they have applied and accepted offers to the partner universities, where they may otherwise not have done.

The UCAS data also shows that students on RO were more likely to accept offers from universities within the region where they live. For example, students hosted by the University of Birmingham or the University of Warwick were more likely to have accepted a firm offer or an insurance offer from universities in the West Midlands. The same pattern is seen for nearly all of the partner universities, with the exception

of the University of Essex. As highlighted in Section 3.2.3, the proximity of the university appears to be an important factor in where students plan to attend university. This is discussed in more detail in the following section.

## 4. The influences over university choices

This section explores the factors that impact on students' choices about university. It looks at what factors have the greatest influence on learner choice and explores whether these influences have changed since the baseline survey.

### 4.1 Influence over university choices

Students were asked to what extent a range of factors had influenced their choice of university, if at all, at both the baseline and follow-up survey points.

Table 4.1 outlines the findings from the follow-up survey. It can be seen that, in line with the baseline survey, the three most influential factors remained as:

- the university offering the subject they want to study (72 per cent)
- how good the university is for their chosen subject (61 per cent)
- the facilities the university has (40 per cent).

**Table 4.1 Extent to which selected factors influenced students' university places**

Influence over university choices	A lot	Quite a lot	A little	None at all	No response	Not applicable
	%	%	%	%	%	%
University league tables	11	51	27	7	0	4
The reputation of the university	25	52	17	2	0	5
Familiarity with the university	14	37	34	11	0	3
The quality of student life there	23	48	24	2	0	3
The facilities it has	40	44	12	0	0	3
How good it is for my chosen subject	61	29	6	1	0	3
The university offering the subject I want	72	17	6	1	0	3
Its closeness to home	25	26	33	13	0	3
RO	13	34	36	14	0	3
Whether the university is a RO university	12	33	33	19	0	3
Knowing someone who went/goes	7	13	27	34	15	3
School/a teacher suggesting you should go	2	10	33	36	17	3
University visits	22	44	13	10	6	3
Being involved in programmes being run by the university	17	17	10	17	35	4
N = 126						

*A series of single response questions.  
Due to rounding percentages may not sum to 100.  
Source: NFER follow-up survey of cohort 1 RO students, 2011*

Furthermore, the factors that had little or no influence on student choice remained as:

- school/a teacher suggesting they should go (36 per cent stated this had no influence at all)
- knowing someone who went/goes to the university (34 per cent stated this had no influence at all).

The majority of learners had been influenced to some extent by RO. Indeed, nearly half (47 per cent) of the survey respondents had been influenced 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' and a further 36 per cent had been influenced 'a little' by RO directly. It is noteworthy that only 14 per cent felt that RO had no influence over their university choice.

Similarly, whether a university is a RO partner university influenced 45 per cent of students either 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' while a further third had been influenced 'a little' by this factor. Again, only 19 per cent of respondents felt that the university being a RO partner university had no influence over their university choices. The influence of RO is consistent with the high proportion of students who have applied to RO partner universities (see Section 3.2.2).

Multi-level modelling has been used to explore whether there are any significant differences between the factors that influenced students' choices at the time of the baseline survey and at the follow-up survey. Students' responses at baseline and follow-up were put into a number of multi-level models, in order to ascertain any significant differences.

The analysis revealed that at the point of follow-up, compared to baseline, students were significantly *more* likely to be influenced by:

- the university's closeness to home
- knowing someone who goes to the university.

At the point of follow-up, compared to baseline, students were significantly *less* likely to be influenced by:

- how good the university is for their chosen subject
- whether the university offers the course
- school or teacher suggesting they should go.

This suggests that the closeness of the university to a student's home and knowing someone who went to the university have become more influential. This may imply that the closer students' come to going to university, the more important practical factors and familiarity become to students. They are also likely to have had more contact with current students through ementoring and visits to universities. Factors that become less important to learners relate to the subject or course the university offers.

## 4.2 Attending a university close to home

Reflecting the findings above, a higher proportion of students at the follow-up survey point felt it was very important to go to a university close to home compared with the proportion who felt this at baseline. Indeed, 21 per cent felt that it was very important to go to a university close to home; in contrast just 10 per cent felt that this was not at all important.

These findings are consistent with the patterns seen in the applications to universities and offers accepted by RO students (see Sections 3.3 and 3.4). It appears that RO students are strongly influenced by the proximity of the university to their home and this is evidenced in the higher numbers of applications made to their host universities and other partner universities close to home. Indeed, the majority of RO students accepted a firm offer from a university within their own geographical region.

## 4.3 The importance of alternative offers

As part of RO, students have the opportunity to receive an 'alternative offer' through UCAS from RO partner universities. Alternative offers recognise the successful completion of RO, with a lower offer of up to 40 UCAS tariff points or two 'A' level grades. Currently ten RO partners offer students the opportunity to receive an alternative offer. Over one-half of the students (55 per cent) have received an alternative offer from one of the RO partner universities. One-quarter of learners (25 per cent) reported that they had not received such an offer.

Students who completed the follow-up survey were asked if the possibility of receiving an alternative offer had influenced their decisions about which universities to apply to. Over one-half of the students (52 per cent) stated that this opportunity had influenced their decision. This is slightly higher than the proportion of students who felt that RO had influenced their decision 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' (47 per cent, noted in section 4.1), which indicates the importance of this aspect of RO on influencing students' university choice.

## 4.4 Research intensive universities

At the time of the baseline survey, more than one-third of respondents (35 per cent) did not know what a research intensive university was. Around two-fifths (39 per cent) of students thought that it was either 'very important' or 'quite important' to go to a research intensive university, while nearly one-quarter (24 per cent) felt it was 'not very important' or 'not at all important' to go to a 'top' university.

By the time of the follow-up survey, only five per cent of students do not know what a research intensive university is. Of those who do know what a research intensive university is, over two-thirds of students (70 per cent) believe it is 'very important' or



'quite important' to go one, while 30 per cent do not think it is important to go to a research intensive university. Multi-level modelling has shown that by the time of the follow-up survey, students are indeed significantly *more* likely to believe it is important to attend a research intensive university than they were at baseline. This implies that knowledge and understanding regarding research intensive universities had improved over the course of RO. Furthermore, the more students feel they know about research intensive universities, the more likely they are to feel it is important to attend one. The importance of attending a research intensive university can be seen in the high proportion of the RO cohort who have applied to RO partner universities (see Section 3.2.2).

## 5. Career intentions and support

This section presents findings from questions exploring students' career intentions, including whether or not respondents knew what type of job or career they would like in the future. It draws on findings from the baseline and follow-up surveys.

### 5.1 Statements on the future

At baseline and follow-up, students were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement 'I have lifelong goals (10 years ahead)'. At baseline, almost seven out of ten (69 per cent) 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed'. Multi-level modelling using the follow-up data revealed that there was no significant change in responses to this question by the time of the follow-up survey. This demonstrates that the majority of the RO cohort are still focused on their futures and have long-term plans.

Students were also asked to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement 'I know what career/job I would like to do'. At baseline, about seven out of ten (68 per cent) 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed'. This suggests that the RO cohort have largely considered their careers/future jobs. Again, analysis suggests that this general trend did not alter significantly over the course of the programme.

Those students who knew what they wanted to do for a job/career were asked to specify what this was. A range of responses were given, but the three most frequently cited jobs are in areas related to medicine/health (41 per cent), teaching/lecturing (20 per cent), and law (10 per cent). These choices correlate to some extent with university subject choices, and feature some of the 'top professions'. By the time of the follow-up survey, these professions continued to dominate the top choices.

### 5.2 Important factors in career choices

Students were asked how important they considered a range of factors to be in deciding on a future career or job.

At baseline, the three factors considered most important when choosing jobs/careers were:

- that the work is interesting (67 per cent rated this as 'very important')
- that the work provides job security (55 per cent), and

- that the job helps people (51 per cent).

These are also the three most important factors at follow-up (72, 59 and 48 per cent, respectively, rated these factors as 'very important'). By the time of the follow-up survey, promotion prospects were also rated highly (46 per cent of respondents rated this as 'very important').

By contrast, the two factors that students most often rated as 'not important' or 'not very important' in both the baseline and follow-up surveys were:

- working close to home (52 per cent at baseline, 53 per cent at follow-up), and
- the job providing 'high status' (38 per cent, at baseline and 44 per cent at follow-up).

The findings suggest that the participants' views as to what is important in a job or career did not alter significantly over the course of the programme, and that they continue to rate interesting work, that is secure and helps people, as important to their future careers.

## 6. University information and support

This section sets out the usefulness of different forms of career advice and information and support around university. It addresses student confidence in their career goals, 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.

### 6.1 Sources and usefulness of university advice

The usefulness of different sources of advice about university is covered in this section. It sets out what was rated as most and least important at baseline and at the time of the follow-up survey. It also looks at any significant changes in perceptions between these two time points, and at the usefulness of specific elements of RO.

#### 6.1.1 Sources and usefulness of university advice at baseline

At baseline, students were most likely to have accessed university advice from teachers, university prospectuses, parents/carers, schools careers coordinators and visits to university campuses. They were also highly likely to have completed their own research (96 per cent had done so).

Of the different sources of careers advice that were accessed, those rated as 'very useful' were:

- visits to university campuses (by 44 per cent of those who accessed this advice)
- university prospectuses (by 39 per cent)
- initiatives such as Aim Higher (37 per cent)
- university residential summer schools (35 per cent).

It was interesting that these factors were all directly related to university experiences, as opposed to advice that can be given by others who are more removed from the university setting. This finding implied that RO, with its focus on university experiences, would be very useful in providing the RO students with the kinds of advice about university that students consider to be most useful.

When the responses 'very useful' and 'useful' are combined, we are able to see which of the sources of advice are generally perceived as useful by students. At baseline, these included:

- visits to university campuses (rated as useful by 95 per cent of those who accessed this advice)
- university prospectuses and their own research (both 92 per cent)
- university staff (91 per cent)

- university residential summer schools (88 per cent)
- teachers (84 per cent).

These findings show that, at baseline, students' own research and advice from university staff are also considered useful, as is advice from teachers. Those deemed least useful were connexions advisers and employers.

### 6.1.2 Sources and usefulness of university advice at follow-up

By the time of the follow-up survey, the most frequently accessed sources of advice were university prospectuses, their own research, visits to university campuses, university staff, current university students and teachers. This shows that the types of support accessed changed over the course of RO, as more students accessed advice and information from university staff and current students at follow-up than at baseline. The increase in access to information from current students is highly likely to be a result of the ementoring strand of RO.

At the follow-up stage, the most useful sources of advice are considered to be:

- students own research (rated as 'very useful' or 'useful' by 98 per cent of those who accessed this advice)
- visits to university campuses (96 per cent)
- university staff (93 per cent)
- current university students (92 per cent)
- university prospectuses (91 per cent).

This shows that there is little change in the sources of advice about university that students feel are most useful. However, the information provided by current university students has increased in its value, moving up in usefulness above the information provided by teachers.

### 6.1.3 Significant changes in perceptions between baseline and follow-up

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

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

- visits to university campuses
- other family members (e.g. sister, uncle)

- their own research.

They had initially rated visits to campuses and their own research highly, but this emerged as even more important by the time of the follow-up surveys.

The students were significantly *less* likely to find these sources of advice useful:

- school careers coordinators
- connexions advisers.

These sources were also previously rated quite low, so emerge as even less useful by the time of the follow-up. It should be noted that connexions advisers were phased out in many Local Authorities over the last 12 months, and prior to this were more focused on post-16 transitions than post-18.

#### 6.1.4 Sources of advice specific to Realising Opportunities

The follow-up survey included some additional sources of advice that students might have accessed that were not included at baseline. These were:

- Realising Opportunities (e.g. the programme in its entirety)<sup>21</sup> (rated as 'very useful' or 'useful' by 87 per cent of those who provided feedback)
- the RO Programme Guide<sup>22</sup> (80 per cent)
- their RO ementor<sup>23</sup> (76 per cent)
- the RO National Student Conference<sup>24</sup> (73 per cent).

Therefore, students rate the information they had received through these sources highly. It should be noted that many of the other sources rated highly (such as visits to university campuses, university staff, current university students etc), are also all elements of Realising Opportunities (albeit they are also likely to have been offered by other access schemes or through individual university recruitment activities).

## 6.2 Confidence in career goals

At baseline, two-thirds of the RO cohort (69 per cent) were confident that they will achieve their career goals, and almost three-quarters (73 per cent) knew what they need to do to achieve their career goals.

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<sup>21</sup> Feedback provided by 99 per cent of respondents

<sup>22</sup> Feedback provided by 98 per cent of respondents

<sup>23</sup> Feedback provided by 95 per cent

<sup>24</sup> Feedback provided by 93 per cent

However, half of the cohort (51 per cent) did not know anyone who is doing the job that they would like to do, and two-thirds (63 per cent) had never been visited at school by someone who is doing the job that they would like to do. This suggests that students in the cohort were not very likely to have come into contact with people who can give them direct advice about their chosen career routes before their RO participation.

Multi-level modelling of the follow-up data shows that there was no significant shift in participants' confidence in achieving their career goals over the course of the programme. However, by the follow-up survey, students were significantly *more* likely to state that they knew what to do to achieve their career goals; that they knew someone who was doing the job they would like to do; and that someone doing the kind of work they are interested in has visited their school and provided them with useful information. This suggests that they have received more information about how to reach their goals and their chosen career path over the 18 months that they were involved in RO.

### 6.3 The influence of university visits

At baseline, 95 per cent of the RO cohort had visited a university. Fifty per cent had visited between one and three times (this could include multiple visits to the same university), and a further 27 per cent between four and six times. Interestingly, almost one-fifth (18 per cent) had visited seven or more times (possibly as a result of other access programmes).

By the time of the follow-up survey, all of the respondents had visited a university at least once (including multiple visits to the same university). The majority had visited 4-6 times (44 per cent), and 39 per cent had visited seven times or more.

Ninety-eight per cent of respondents had visited a RO partner university during their time on the programme, the majority (63 per cent) visiting between one and three times. However, seventeen per cent of respondents had not visited a RO partner university that did NOT include their host university. This suggests that almost one-fifth of respondents to the follow-up survey have not visited other RO partner universities and may therefore not be gaining the full benefits from RO.

The most common reason for visiting a university (at baseline and follow-up) was for subject-specific taster days and open days. Residential visits and visits to friends and family were less common. At the follow-up stage, 91 per cent of respondents stated that they had visited a university for the RO National Student Conference.

The students were asked to rate how influential the different type of visits they had experienced had been.

- At baseline and follow-up stages, subject-specific visits and open days were most frequently rated as having ‘a lot’ of influence, or ‘quite a lot of influence’ over their university decisions or choices.
- Visits to friends and family were considered the least influential.
- Sixty-nine per cent of respondents to the follow-up survey who had attended the RO National Student Conference, rated it as having ‘a lot’ or ‘quite a lot’ of influence over their university decisions/choices. Therefore, for over two-thirds of the respondents, the National Conference was influential in their decision making about university.

## 6.4 Levels of information and knowledge

At 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 in the cohort rated themselves as knowing ‘a lot’ or ‘quite a lot’ about:

- how to find out about different courses
- what the subjects that interest them involve
- how university study compares to school, and
- future career options.

However, they rated themselves as knowing only ‘a little’ or ‘nothing’ about:

- research intensive universities
- the costs and financial support available for university, and
- what different universities are like.

By the time of the follow-up survey, multi-level modelling demonstrates that students were significantly *more* likely to know about *all* of the elements of university covered in the survey questions (regardless of whether or not they plan to go on to university). A table showing levels of knowledge at the follow-up stage is provided in Appendix A2. Other elements included in the survey were: the advantages and disadvantages of different universities and of different course options; how to apply to university; what student life is like; and the best universities for the subjects that interest them.

Therefore, the students appear to be much more informed about university. Albeit, at follow-up, 29 per cent of respondents felt that they knew only ‘a little’ or ‘nothing’ about research intensive universities and 27 per cent felt the same about their levels of knowledge of what different universities are like.



## 6.5 Satisfaction with levels of information, advice and guidance

At baseline, just under half of the RO cohort (48 per cent) agreed that they were happy with the amount of information, advice and guidance they have had to help them to make decisions about university. A further three per cent strongly agreed with the statement. Seventeen per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed, therefore suggesting that these students would welcome the information, advice and guidance that the RO programme can provide.

By the time of the follow-up survey, 66 per cent of the respondents agreed that they were happy with the amount of information, advice and guidance that they had received, and a further 28 per cent strongly agreed. Only two per cent disagreed with this statement. Further analysis shows that students were significantly more likely to be happy with the amount of information, advice and guidance they had received by the time of follow-up.

## 6.6 How prepared students feel for university

At baseline and follow-up, the students who indicated that they were intending to go to university were asked to rate how prepared they felt for a number of aspects of university study. At baseline, ninety-one per cent of the students felt either 'very prepared' or 'prepared' for independent study, and 87 per cent felt the same about meeting new people. The students appeared to be reasonably well prepared for university life in general and getting used to a new university campus/place of study (with 74 per cent and 76 per cent of students respectively rating themselves as either 'very prepared' or 'prepared' for this aspect of university life).

At baseline, the student cohort felt least prepared for managing their finances, and living away from home. Respectively, only 50 and 52 per cent of students felt prepared for these elements of university life.

Multi-level modelling of the follow-up data shows that the students are significantly *more* prepared for:

- managing their finances
- possibly living away from home
- getting used to a new university campus/place of study
- university life in general.

There was no significant change in their levels of preparedness for meeting new people or for independent study.

Again, this shows that over the 18 months that the students were involved in RO, the students have become more prepared for university study. However, as we have no

comparison group for Cohort 1, how far we can say that this is a result of the programme itself is limited.

## 7. Participants' views of Realising Opportunities

This section explores students' views of RO. It looks at how satisfied students are with the time needed to complete RO, the benefits they have gained and how RO compares to other access programmes they are involved with. This section focuses solely on the findings from the follow-up survey.

### 7.1 Completing Realising Opportunities

Students were generally satisfied with the amount of time required of them to complete RO. Indeed, 83 per cent of students felt that the time needed was about right. A further 10 per cent of students felt there was too much time to complete it while four per cent believed there was too little time. This implies students were generally comfortable with the length of time they were given to complete the programme requirements.

### 7.2 Benefits of Realising Opportunities

Students were asked to what extent RO has helped to improve a range of factors relating to skills and preparedness for university. Overall it appears that the majority of students felt that RO had benefited them in all areas considered (as set out in Table 7.1).

**Table 7.1 Benefits of RO**

RO has helped to improve	A lot	Quite a lot	A little	Not at all	No response
	%	%	%	%	%
Your knowledge of student finance	13	45	39	2	1
Your understanding of what a research intensive university is	25	40	30	4	1
Your knowledge of different courses at university	17	46	30	6	1
Your knowledge about the UCAS application process	19	40	31	8	2
Understanding your personality type	25	36	27	12	1
Your self confidence	19	38	31	11	1
Your study skills	29	42	22	6	1
Your presentation skills	18	40	27	14	1
Your ability to set goals	19	47	25	9	1
Your revision skills	18	40	31	10	1
Your ability to reference academic sources	26	40	25	8	1
N = 126					
A series of single response questions. Due to rounding percentages may not sum to 100. Source: NFER follow-up survey of cohort 1 RO students, 2011					

The main areas in which students believed RO had helped them the most were:

- study skills (71 per cent felt this helped them ‘a ‘lot’ or ‘quite a lot’)
- ability to reference academic sources (66 per cent ‘a ‘lot’ or ‘quite a lot’)
- ability to set goals (66 per cent)
- understanding of what a research intensive university is (65 per cent).

This is a positive finding given that RO aims to develop the skills required to be successful in a research intensive university.

In contrast, a notable minority of students felt that RO had not helped them at all with the following areas:

- presentation skills (14 per cent ‘not at all’)
- understanding your personality type (12 per cent ‘not at all’).

This implies that students have benefited from RO through gaining skills that will help them prepare for university study. Learners have also gained an understanding of what a research intensive university is, which reflects the finding that a much higher proportion of students at the baseline survey did not know what a research intensive university is compared with a much smaller proportion at follow-up (see Section 4.4). Importantly, this also suggests that the learners were able to identify the benefits they have received through being involved in RO and could attribute these to the programme.

### **7.3 How Realising Opportunities compares with other access programmes**

Owing to the shortened timescale for recruitment of Cohort 1, a number of universities transferred students to the programme that had been recruited for other compact schemes/access programmes. As such, just over one-quarter of the students (28 per cent) have been involved in other access programmes, in addition to RO. Other access programmes include the Manchester Access Programme, AimHigher, Scholars Scheme and other academic enrichment programmes at colleges or universities. These students were asked to compare these programmes in order to ascertain the usefulness of RO. Of the 35 learners who answered this question, 15 rated the usefulness of RO about the same as the other access programmes they had been involved with. A similar number felt it was less useful, while just 6 felt that it was more useful.

When asked to explain their answers, the majority of comments related to the benefits of other access courses such as Manchester Access Programme or Scholars Scheme. In particular students felt other access courses were more specific

to a certain university or had more activities or events to attend. The most common reason given to explain why RO was seen to be more useful than other courses was that it provided more suitable help or guidance.

Students also felt that the support and events offered have not been distinctly different from those of other access courses. This may imply that where students are involved in more than one access programme, the benefits of RO are limited. Despite this, the applications to RO partner universities, coupled with the benefits highlighted above, implies that young people have been influenced by RO and have benefited from their involvement.

## 8. Conclusions

This report has explored the impact of Realising Opportunities on the young people who participated during its first two years of operation. There are five main aims of RO, and the research suggests that RO appears to be meeting these aims. However, without the presence of a comparison group of young people, it is impossible to ascertain whether such changes and impacts are a direct result of RO, or of other factors. Of note, given that cohort 1 experienced a shortened timeframe in which to complete the programme, it is particularly encouraging that the participants have viewed the programme positively.

**RO aims to offer targeted students the opportunity to participate in aspiration raising and participation activities, increasing their ability to apply and gain entry to leading universities.** Responses to the surveys suggest that students have had exposure to university environments, and rate their experience of different elements of the RO programme highly. They are also significantly more likely to know about how to apply to university at the follow-up survey point than they were at baseline. UCAS data also shows that 85 per cent of cohort 1 students have applied to at least one of the RO partner universities and 58 per cent accepted a firm offer from a partner university. Hence, the majority of the cohort is applying to leading universities.

**RO aims to offer students the opportunity to make informed choices about their higher education options, and learn more about the benefits of studying at a world-class university.** The survey results show that students are happy with the amount of information, advice and guidance that they have received over the course of RO, and rate the university-related information provided by RO, the programme guide, their mentor and the National Student Conference, highly. Furthermore, by the time of the follow-up survey, RO participants are significantly more likely to know about the advantages and disadvantages of different universities and course options, about what different universities are like, and the best universities for the subjects that interest them. They are also significantly more likely to know about research intensive universities, and rate the importance of attending such universities more highly than they did at baseline.

**RO aims to offer targeted students the opportunity to develop the skills required to be successful in a research intensive university.** The survey data suggests that almost three-quarters of students feel that RO has helped them to improve their study skills 'a lot' or 'quite a lot', and around two-thirds feel it has also helped to improve their ability to reference academic sources and to set goals.

**RO aims to enhance participants' application to 12 leading universities.** This research has focused less on the fulfilment of this aim, but elements of RO such as the Academic Assignment or the Extended Project Qualification may have gone some way to enhancing applications. Furthermore, the completion of RO is designed

to help students to secure alternative offers from (some of) the partner universities. Over one-half of the survey respondents reported that they had received an alternative offer from a RO partner university. It is also notable that high proportions of students had applied to RO partner universities, but not to other research intensive universities. This could suggest that if they were not involved in RO, they may not have applied to research intensive universities (or as many).

Finally, **RO aims to offer students the opportunity to access information, advice and guidance to increase their awareness of employment opportunities within some of the country's top professions.** The students who participated in RO aimed highly in their careers from the outset, and UCAS data shows that the most popular course applications are medicine and dentistry. RO participants are also significantly more likely to state that they know more about future career options and choices that are open to them at follow-up, than they were at baseline.

The findings from cohort 1 suggest that the aims of RO are successfully being achieved. What we cannot determine from this stage of the research is whether changes in students' attitudes and actions are attributable to RO. The evaluation of cohorts 2 and 3 will be particularly useful in developing our understanding in this respect, as it will test out whether positive impacts are measurable again with other cohorts, but most usefully, whether these are significantly different from the changes over time for matched young people who are not engaged with RO.

## Appendix A: Data tables

### A1: Firm and insurance choices

Firm choice	Insurance choice	RO cohort (%)
RO partner university	RO partner university	27
Other research intensive university	Other research intensive university	2
Other university	Other university	25
No insurance	No insurance	4
Other research intensive university	RO partner university	4
Other research intensive university	Other research intensive university	2
Other research intensive university	Other university	3
Other research intensive university	No insurance	0
Other university	RO partner university	3
Other university	Other research intensive university	1
Other university	Other university	20
Other university	No insurance	4

Source: UCAS applications data on RO participants 2011



## A2: Levels of information about university

Regardless of whether or not you plan to go on to university, how much do you feel you know about the following	A lot %	Quite a lot %	A little %	Nothing %	No response %	Total %
Future career options and choices that are open to you	25	52	23	1	0	100
The advantages and disadvantages of different universities	20	56	22	2	1	100
The advantages and disadvantages of different course options	22	55	21	2	0	100
How to apply to university	67	32	1	0	0	100
Information about research intensive universities	29	43	24	5	0	100
The costs and financial support available for university	33	54	13	0	0	100
How to find out about courses	51	44	6	0	0	100
What different universities are like	25	48	27	0	0	100
How university study compares to school	40	46	13	1	0	100
What student life is like	25	56	18	1	0	100
What the subject(s) that interest you involve	51	43	6	0	1	100
The best universities for the subject(s) that interest you	38	55	6	2	0	100
N = 126						

*A series of single response questions.*

*Due to rounding percentages may not sum to 100.*

*A total of 126 respondents gave at least one response to these questions.*

*Source: NFER Realising Opportunities Cohort 1 Follow-up Survey, 2011*

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- independent
- insights
- breadth
- connections
- outcomes

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