PRE-ENTRY WIDENING PARTICIPATION ACTIVITIES

## An LSE Widening Participation research briefing

AUGUST 2017

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Within our sector, research, policy and practice all emphasise the relationship between social mobility and higher education[i]. Although universities have always recognised their role in encouraging students from all kinds of backgrounds into higher education, the Government laid out more formal requirements when it introduced variable tuition fees.

In 2004, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was established. OFFA required any university charging a higher level fee to complete an Access Agreement, which would set out the institution's commitments to support fair access through outreach, bursaries and other pre-entry support. Universities' formal requirements on Widening Participation extend only to Home UK undergraduates.

Subsequently, "fair access" has been extended to include student retention and success once they've got a university place. But this briefing focuses on the pre-entry stage, on encouraging applications from under-represented groups and ensuring the most talented, able students feel that highly selective universities such as LSE are a realistic option.

Our work matters for several reasons. LSE must report to OFFA each year on its progress against specific targets, and it seems likely that at least some of this will feed into the TEF. But just as importantly, LSE is enriched by a diverse student body: as a specialist social science institution and a leading global university we can and should ensure that the widest range of perspectives and experiences are present in our classrooms.
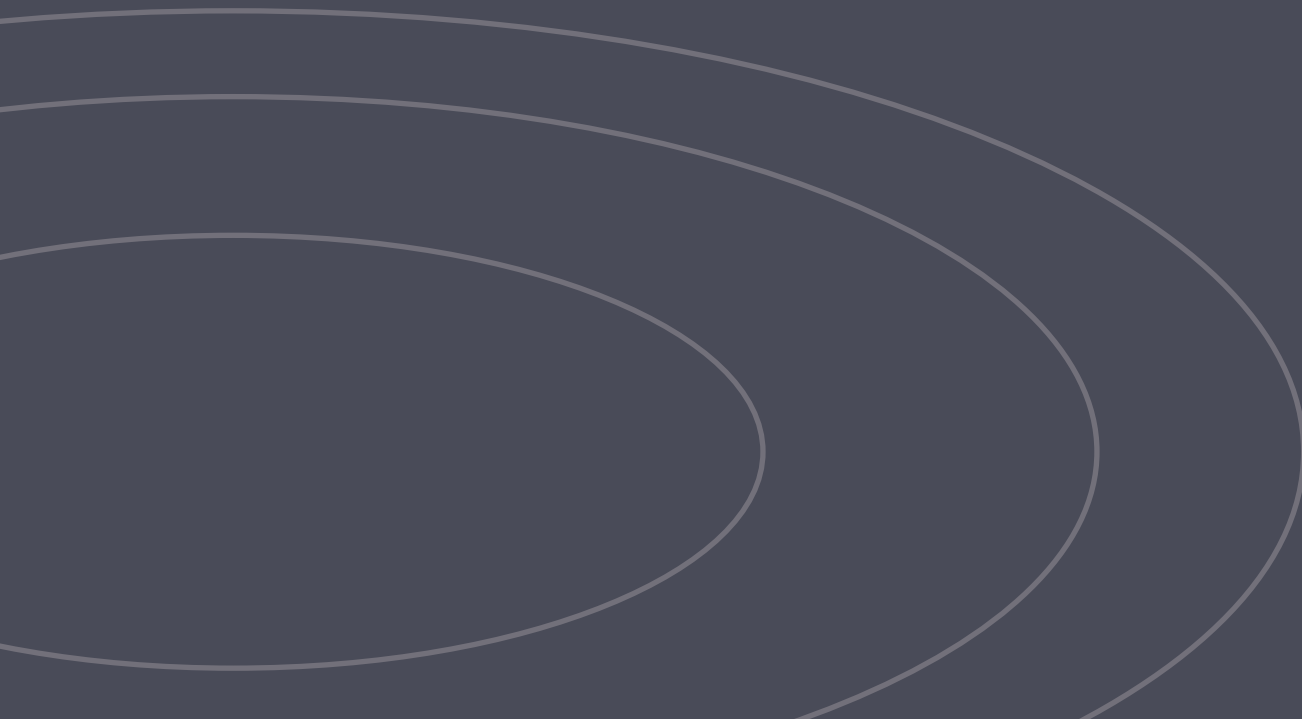
WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SHOW?

The biggest barriers are not necessarily financial

There is a huge body of literature devoted to understanding the factors which affect access to higher education. At first, and perhaps because OFFA was established at the same time as variable tuition fees, guidance and practice focused on financial considerations. Institutions spent significant amounts of money on bursaries to ensure financial issues didn't constrain student choice[ii]. Subsequent research has found that **bursaries do not seem to play a major role in student decisions about where to study** (although broader financial considerations do matter)[iii]. Indeed, early evidence suggests that the change in student finance systems actually increased applications from disadvantaged students[iv]. The sector has responded to these findings: OFFA state that institutional spend on financial support measures is expected to decline slightly over the next five academic years, while expenditure on access measures increases[v].
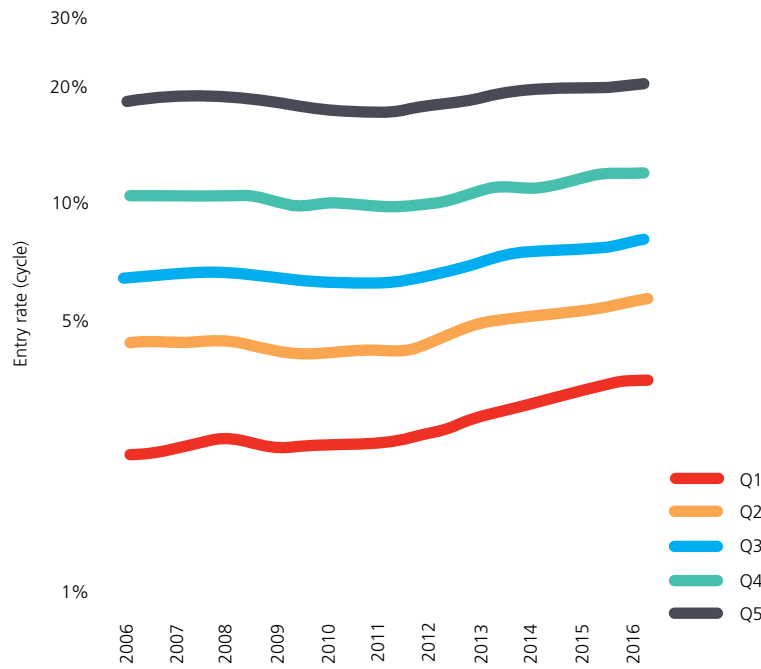
Attainment is crucial to HE participation

Studies show that prior educational attainment is the main determinant of progression to higher education among UK students[vi]. This holds true for higher education in general and also for competitive universities like LSE. When statistical models control for prior attainment, the differences in participation rates between different socio-economic groups, ethnic groups and genders get much smaller[vii]. For this reason, recent Government policy asks universities to play a more active role in raising attainment prior to university, an outcome they believe will be best achieved by university sponsorship of schools. To date there is very little evidence that this does actually raise attainment[viii].

"As a specialist social science institution and a leading global university we can and should ensure that the widest range of perspectives and experiences are present in our classrooms."

2011-12 Actual: £57.6m Access, £386.5m Financial support

2012-13 Actual: £74.7m Access, £72.5m Student success, £416.3m Financial support

2013-14 Actual: £92.6m Access, £76.9m Student success, £23.2m, £435.7m Financial support

2014-15 Predicted: £111.9m Access, £106.9m Student success, £494.5m Financial support

2015-16 Predicted: £124.5m Access, £114.3m Student success, £39.1m, £440.9m Financial support

2016-17 Predicted: £136.1m Access, £135.4m Student success, £48.8m, £425.1m Financial support

2017-18 Predicted: £143.2m Access, £141.1m Student success, £52m, £405.3m Financial support

2018-19 Predicted: £147.2m Access, £145.4m Student success, £53.8m, £399.8m Financial support

2019-20 Predicted: £149.3m Access, £148.0m Student success, £54.6m, £399m Financial support

Legend: Access | Student success | Progression | Financial support

Source: **www.offa.org.uk/press/quick-facts**

English 18 year olds, entry rates to higher tariff providers by POLAR3 groups (logarithmic scale)

Entry rate (cycle)

30%
20%
10%
5%
1%

2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016

Q1
Q2
Q3
Q4
Q5

English 18 year olds, entry rates to lower tariff providers by POLAR3 groups (logarithmic scale)

Entry rate (cycle)

30%
20%
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2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016
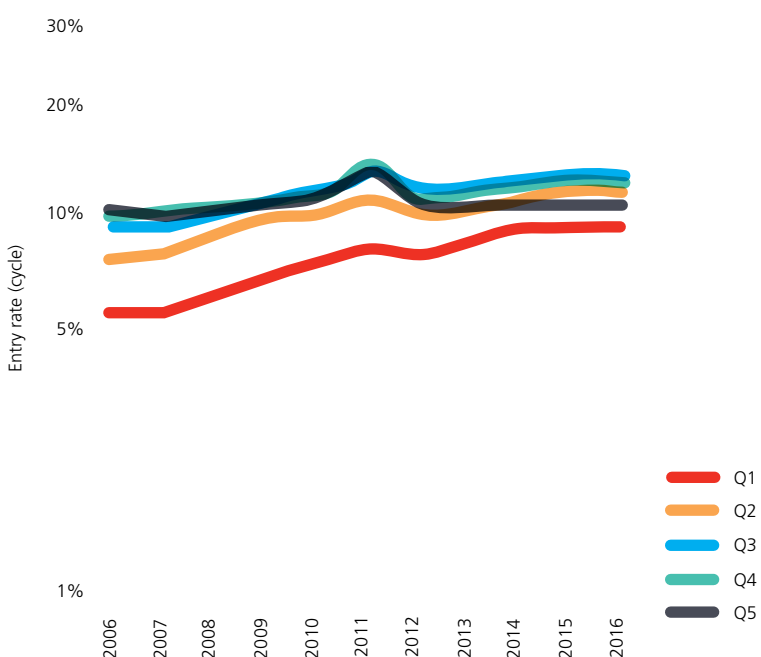
Q1
Q2
Q3
Q4
Q5

High expectations and informed choices are key

But attainment is not the only determinant of university participation and choice of institution. Pre-entry Widening Participation work started out by speaking the language of "aspiration", but in fact modern students – and their parents – generally have high aspirations for university education, especially when the decision to attend is several years in the future[ix]. The challenge is really about supporting young people (and their families) to understand how to realise these aspirations – and then to do it[x].

Research suggests that **young people from less privileged backgrounds make different choices about their post-14 and post-16 study** – the institution type, the qualifications and the specific subjects – compared to their more privileged peers, even when you control for prior educational attainment and the study options that are available[xi]. In general, their choices tend to limit their options at 18. Family expectations and support matter, as does the school context, in shaping their choices about where to study[xii]. Research has shown that high-achieving but disadvantaged students from state schools are particularly likely to be given "under-predictions" for their A-level grades, leading them to dismiss applications to more competitive universities[xiii].

Demographic characteristics affect participation

We know that every student who applies to university is an individual. Their application is shaped by their own, distinctive, combination of experiences and the contribution they can make to an institution is likewise unique.

But for both ethical and statutory reasons, universities and their funders regularly review participation rates for various demographic groups. **There are nuanced differences in participation for specific groups of students**. For example, at the end of the 2016 admissions cycle, UCAS reported that the entry gap between students living in the lowest and highest participation areas (POLAR3 quintiles 1 and 5) had decreased across all kinds of university. But the difference is still much bigger at high-tariff institutions – 4 per cent to 21 per cent – than at the lower tariff providers – 10 per cent to 13 per cent[xiv].

Source: Figure 54 and Figure 56, UCAS End of Cycle report 2016

But characteristics must be understood in combination, not isolation

Increasingly, policymakers recognise that **we must look at a combination of many factors in order to fully understand and explain different rates of participation**. Research which looks at ethnicity while controlling for prior educational attainment at key stages 2, 4 and 5 and background characteristics such as gender, socio-economic status and month of birth (indicating age within the school year) finds that the raw differences in participation become much smaller[xv]. As of 2016, UCAS has begun to report on a "multiple equality measure", using a statistical model to identify that certain combinations of income, sex, ethnicity and geography can lead some young people to be as much as ten times more likely to enter a selective university than others in their peer group[xvi].

Analysing LSE's own undergraduate application data, we find that different characteristics interact with each other to affect the likelihood of an application being successful. Furthermore, certain characteristics are correlated, making it difficult to identify the underlying cause of different success rates for different groups. For example, Black, Bangladeshi and Pakistani applicants are consistently more likely than their white counterparts to be aged 21 and over – are any differences in offer rates due to an applicant's ethnicity, or their maturity?

What is a "WP" student anyway?

In the decade since "Widening Participation" entered higher education's lexicon, our understanding of barriers to university entry has deepened. At the same time, society and higher education policy has changed around us. It is no bad thing, therefore, that the sector has never committed to a firm definition of what constitutes a Widening Participation student.

Various measures of relative "deprivation" are used across the sector to identify students of interest. Additionally, **each institution will have its own groups that are under-represented**, which may or may not correlate with groups that are under-represented within their mission group or within the sector as a whole. At LSE, we are constantly reviewing our criteria, ensuring that we are evidence-led in our targeting and that we strike a balance between politically-led or sector-wide priorities and our own understanding of areas that need to be addressed. LSE's broad trajectory and specific areas of focus are detailed in our published Access Agreements.

These are some of the current and emerging measures used by universities to identify candidates for Widening Participation activities

POLAR3 (Participation of local areas) classifies UK wards into quintiles based upon the proportion of 18 year olds who enter higher education aged 18 or 19 years old. Quintile 1 areas have the lowest rate of participation, and quintile 5 have the highest[xvii]. This is a standard tool for UK higher education Widening Participation teams, and all universities have HESA benchmarks highlighting the recruitment of these students. London has a relatively low number of Quintile 1 areas compared to the rest of the UK, despite high levels of deprivation using other metrics.

Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) is a postcode-based central government measure which ranks 32,844 small areas in England using a number of different measures of deprivation. Some universities are beginning to use this as an alternative or additional way to identify possible Widening Participation candidates[xviii].

Acorn is a commercial geodemographic profiling tool, initially developed for retail and marketing but increasingly used by universities as an alternative or additional way to identify possible Widening Participation candidates. Acorn classifies postcodes into six categories, 18 groups and 62 types and describes the priorities, behaviours and preferences of each group[xix].

School performance can be measured in a number of different ways, at key stage 4 (GCSEs and equivalent) and key stage 5 (A-levels and equivalent). Each university makes its own decision about which measures to use, but in general if a school underperforms against one or many measures over one or many years, universities will consider its pupils to be candidates for Widening Participation interventions. At LSE, we also use the proportion of pupils in receipt of Free School Meals as a way of identifying schools we want to work with[xx].

What is happening at LSE?

Pre-entry support

LSE's activity in support of widening access predates the formal Government requirements by some years. Our current programme works with students aged 10-18 from across London, introducing them in an age-appropriate way to university, LSE and the social science subjects that are our specialism. This table shows the activities offered by LSE during the 2016/7 academic year: more up-to-date information on current opportunities can be found on our website.

LSE Widening Participation Projects

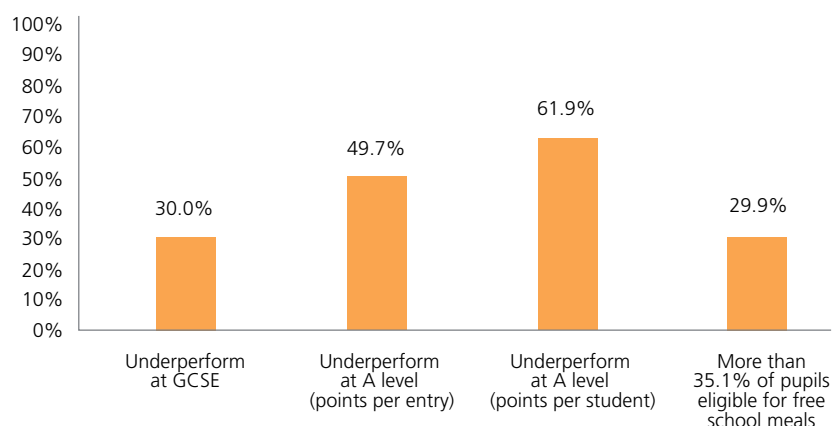| Project name	Description	YEAR 6	YEAR 7	YEAR 8	YEAR 9	YEAR 10	YEAR 11	YEAR 12	YEAR 13
LSE Tutoring	Placing LSE students in London schools to support school students with their academic work and encourage them to consider higher education when they leave school.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
LSE Student Mentoring	Placing LSE students in London schools to partner with school students to raise aspirations, improve confidence and grow motivation, focus and organisation.		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Moving On	Showing pupils transitioning to secondary school that change happens throughout life and can be a positive experience including continuing to progress in education.	✓	✓						
Promoting Potential	Giving boys from Afro-Caribbean backgrounds a taste of university life and study, including the wide range of subjects they can choose for a degree.			✓	✓				
ACE and ACE High Days	Familiarising students with a university campus and student life, encouraging them to think about the opportunities and options available to them in higher education.			✓	✓	✓	✓		
The Black Achievement Conference	As part of Black History Month, encouraging students and their families to continue to aim high, celebrate past achievements and involve parents/carers in the education decision making process.					✓	✓	✓	
Introduction to Pathways Programmes	Offering students a chance to explore LSE's campus and find out more about law or finance-related degrees as well as legal and financial careers.					✓	✓		
Introduction to Social Sciences	Exploring the content and language of the social sciences with LSE academics in a university teaching environment.					✓	✓	✓	
Year 11 Summer School	A week-long intensive course giving students the chance to study with peers from across London and a taste of different subjects and how they are taught at university.						✓		
Politics Conference	Offering students a taste of what it is like to study politics-related degrees at university, with lectures and seminars led by LSE academics and research students.							✓	
Alison Wetherfield Law Programme	Supporting young people with an interest in law to improve their education and develop their career through a series of masterclasses, conferences and peer support.							✓	
BSc Management Taster Day	Raising awareness of the breadth of subjects covered in Management, with tailored advice and taster seminars for students with a strong background in Maths.							✓	
Pathways to Law (London)	A two-year programme of tailored lectures, seminars, careers events, university guidance sessions and more for students who are interested in a career in law.							✓	
Pathways to Banking and Finance (begins September 2017)	A two-year programme of tailored lectures, seminars, careers events, university guidance sessions and more for students who are interested in a career in banking or finance.							✓	
LSE CHOICE	An intensive summer-school and series of Saturday masterclass sessions to help talented young people apply to LSE and other highly selective universities and courses.							✓	✓

We target our work carefully. Where we work with groups of students from a single school, we require that the school be underperforming compared to the national average, or have a comparatively high proportion of students receiving Free School Meals. On projects where we ask individuals to apply, we also consider their personal circumstances and characteristics.

As a result, every student we work with is part of a group identified by research as under-represented at university and/or at high-tariff institutions like LSE.

Demographic characteristics of LSE Widening Participation project participants in 2015/16

Bar chart:
- *POLAR3 Q1/2: 10.3%
- No parental HE experience: 60.6%
- Individual FSM: 40.8%
- BAME: 75.0%
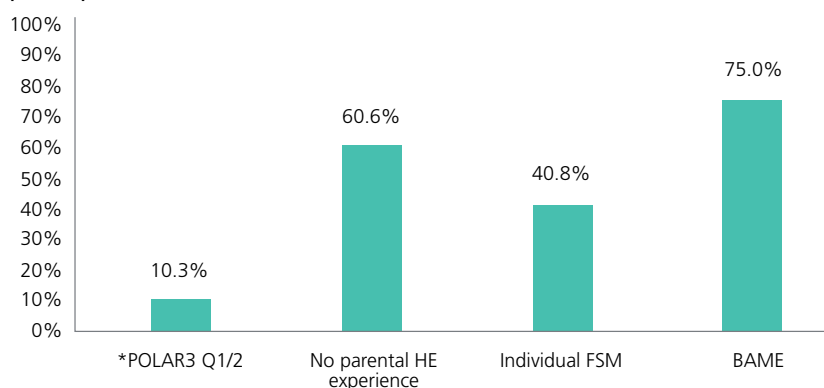
School characteristics of LSE Widening Participation project participants in 2015/16

Bar chart:
- Underperform at GCSE: 30.0%
- Underperform at A level (points per entry): 49.7%
- Underperform at A level (points per student): 61.9%
- More than 35.1% of pupils eligible for free school meals: 29.9%

Performance indicators for schools selected to participate on LSE Widening Participation projects, and all London schools in 2015/16

Bar chart (Participant schools / All London schools):
- Underperform at A level (points per entry): 84.6% / 74.3%
- Underperform at A level (points per student): 92.9% / 84.1%
- Underperform at GCSE: 45.5% / 39.7%
- More than 35.1% of pupils eligible for free school meals: 38.0% / 13.2%
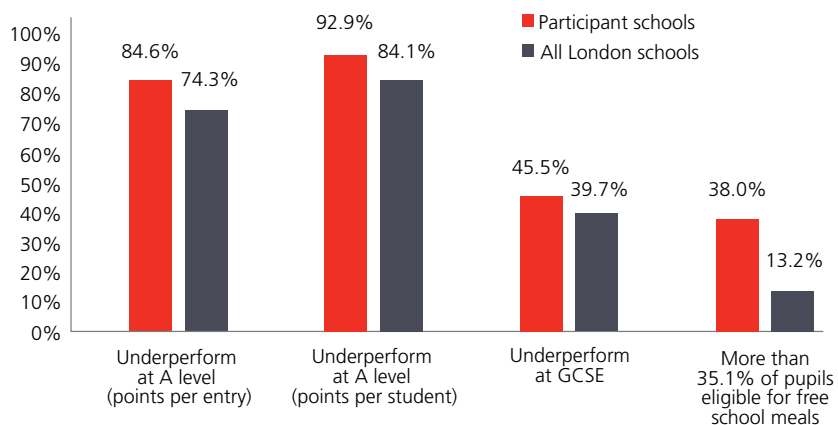
*This proportion is roughly in line with the percentage of students in London schools from POLAR3 quintile 1 or 2 areas.

95% of participants met at least one of the four demographic criteria

87% of participants met at least one of the four school criteria

100% of participants met at least one criteria for targeting

100% of schools selected for our projects met at least one of our WP criteria

What's the impact of LSE's pre-entry work?

We're in the process of reviewing our evaluation and data collection to ensure we have the best possible understanding of what changes for individuals who participate on our projects. We've introduced a set of aims and objectives spanning our entire programme, which are translated into tailored testable outcomes for individual projects. Our current data shows that individuals enjoy, and benefit from, participating in our projects:
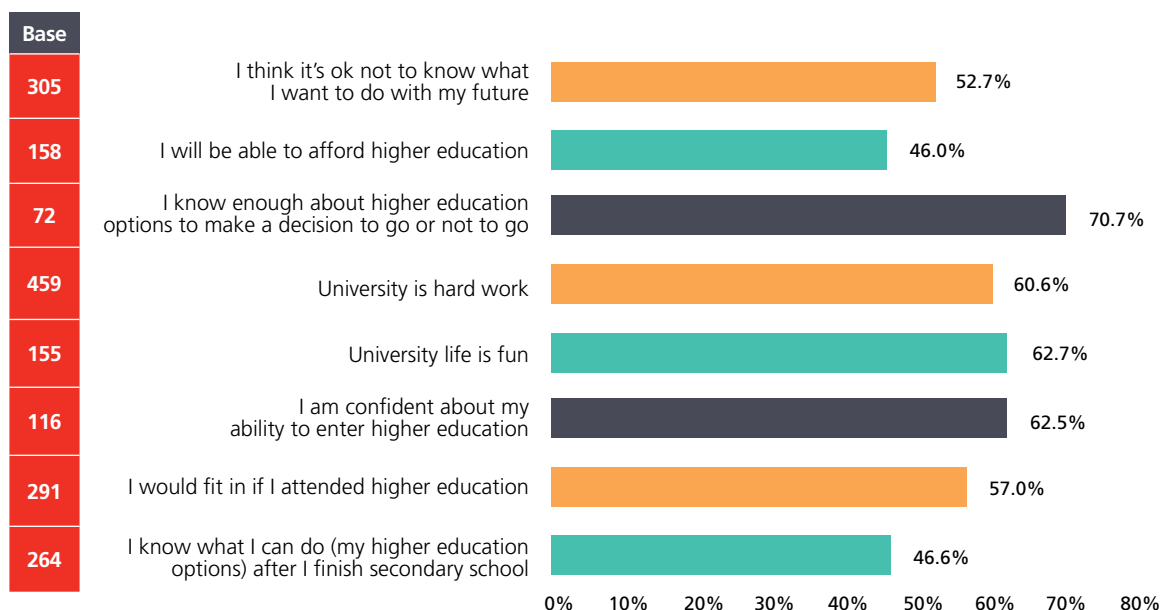
Feedback from WP project participants

Legend: ■ Strongly agree ■ Agree

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree
The overall project was good	48.6%	40.9%
Connection with student ambassadors was good	59.5%	30.1%
It changed my view on the subject(s)	49.5%	48.8%
It gave me an insight into university	27.4%	56.5%

Base	1,275	1,216	422	457
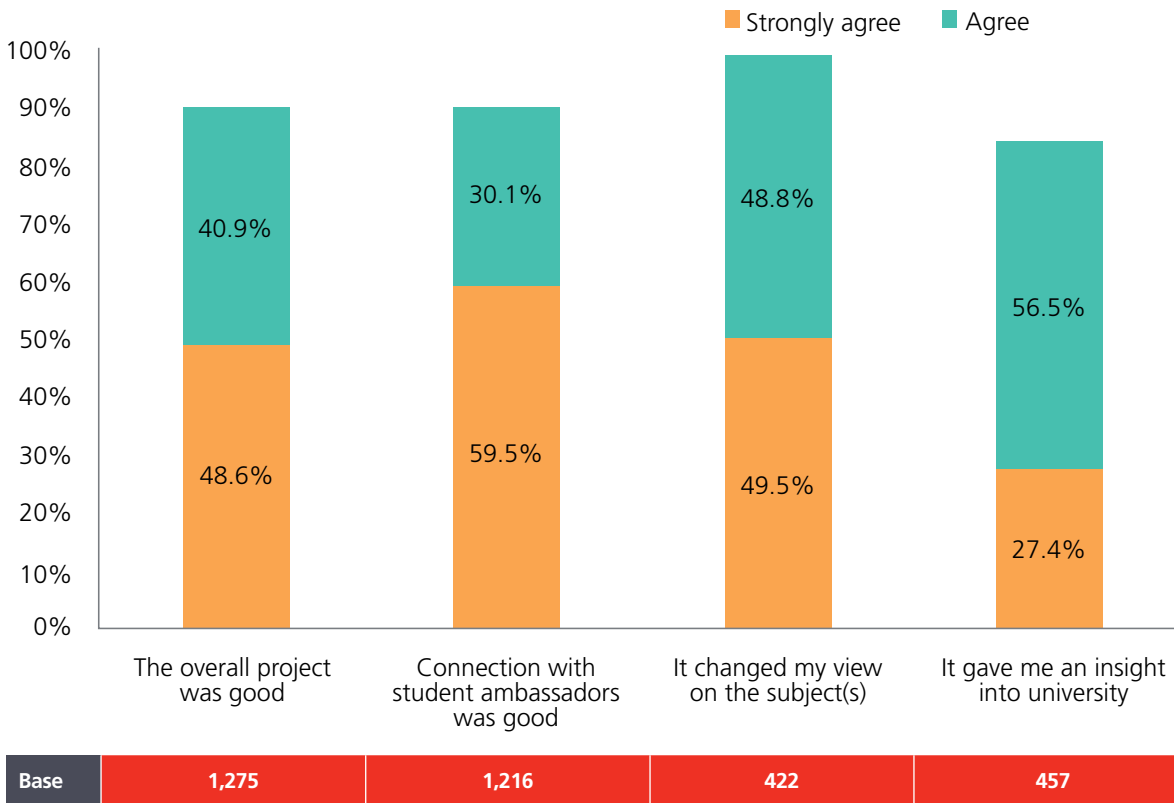
On some aspects of some projects, it's possible to track changes in pupil attitudes before and after they participated. The following chart shows the proportion of pupils who completed both a pre- and post-event evaluation and who finished the day agreeing with certain statements about university and the future. In most cases, a sizeable minority of those pupils had, when starting the project, disagreed or been unsure about the same statements.

This shows clear progress in attitudes and opinions as a result of participating (although, of course, we cannot be sure from this evaluation how long those changes persist and whether they affect pupil behaviour and choices).

Shifts in participant attitudes following LSE Widening Participation projects
(disagree – unsure/agree or unsure – agree)

Base	Statement	Percentage
305	I think it's ok not to know what I want to do with my future	52.7%
158	I will be able to afford higher education	46.0%
72	I know enough about higher education options to make a decision to go or not to go	70.7%
459	University is hard work	60.6%
155	University life is fun	62.7%
116	I am confident about my ability to enter higher education	62.5%
291	I would fit in if I attended higher education	57.0%
264	I know what I can do (my higher education options) after I finish secondary school	46.6%

University applications

In September and October of 2016, we contacted students who had been part of our flagship intensive projects and were now eligible to enter university to find out what their plans were.

OF THE

237 students we were able to contact,

204 were holding confirmed offers to university, and

119 of these were holding confirmed offers at a Russell Group institution

71% of respondents to our survey said their participation on the LSE Widening Participation programme had been

"very helpful" OR **"quite helpful"**

with their application to university

THE MAIN REASON FOR NOT APPLYING TO LSE WAS TO STUDY A SUBJECT NOT OFFERED BY LSE OR TO STUDY OUTSIDE LONDON

In the 2016/17 application cycle, LSE applications from WP project participants were up

59%, and offers made by LSE to WP project participants were up

116%

University type for 2016 tracking cohort with confirmed offer
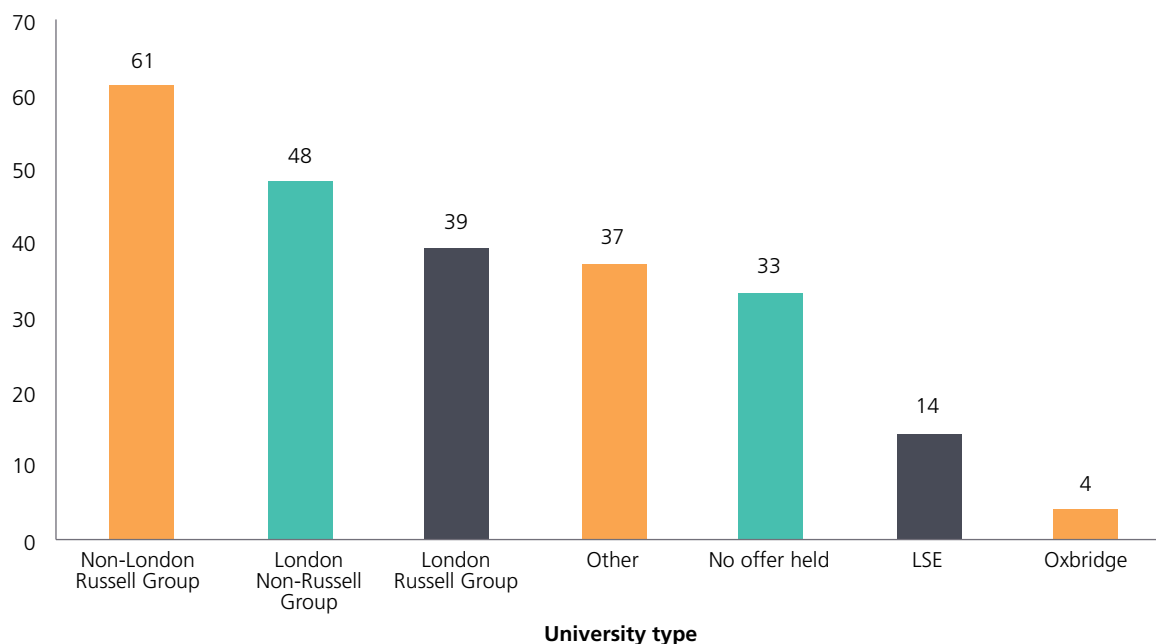
(Note that this does not include four participants from the 2014/5 project cycle who enrolled at LSE following a gap year.)

What are we planning to do next for evaluation and monitoring our pre-entry work?

We want to keep building the evidence base for our work to ensure we are making decisions based upon the best possible information. Over the next year, we will be:

• Building relationships with LSE researchers to undertake targeted projects that investigate research questions around interventions and impact of interest to LSE and the sector more broadly

• Working at the forefront of wider sector efforts to robustly evaluate the impact of Widening Participation activities

• Continuing to review our priorities for targeting our pre-entry activities, to ensure we are identifying key groups of students for our work.

We will continue to develop our pre-entry activities to ensure that they support young people throughout their educational journey. Work on this will be outlined in a different document.

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