

# Ten Years of Reading Scholars

A reflection on changes over the last ten years (2012-2021) and long-term impact of the scheme

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## What is Reading Scholars?

The Reading Scholars Programme is the University of Reading's flagship Access Programme currently offering approximately 500 young people<sup>i</sup> per year from Widening Participation backgrounds (see Appendix 1 for inclusion criteria) the opportunity to experience university study and life.

The programme is currently formed of 16 different subject strands, giving participants the opportunity to explore what it will be like to be a student of that subject in the future. The numbers of young people accepted onto the scheme and the number of subject strands available has changed over the lifetime of the scheme. A full breakdown of numbers admitted to the scheme each year is provided later on in this report.

The programme consists of three one-day visits to the university campus and a four day residential experience. Over the course of these visits and experiences, participants take part in subject based activities as well as future focused information, advice and guidance sessions. They work to complete an academic project, which they present during the residential and receive feedback on both from the academic staff and from their undergraduate mentors. Alongside the visits to campus, participants also benefit from continuous e-mentoring from current students for the length of the programme through the online platform Brightside.

Participants on the programme are required to meet specific eligibility criteria to take part (see Appendix 1). This criteria is aligned with the underrepresented groups outlined in the Access and Participation plan. As the scheme aims to increase recruitment to the University of Reading, as well as progression to Higher Education more broadly, we ask that all participants are on track/expected to achieve well in the A-Levels (or equivalent) to ensure that they would be successful in receiving an offer from Reading. The targeting criteria (see Appendix 1) has changed slightly over the years to reflect the changing targets of the university but has always remained focused on those facing barriers to progression.

## How has Scholars developed over time?

Reading Scholars began in the 2012/13 academic year with a small cohort of just 35 participants. In the years since, the annual cohort size has grown to approximately 500 in 2022, with the total, cumulative number of participants reaching 3091. The number of available subject strands has also grown as the programme has evolved, offering young people more choice and more opportunity with 16 subject strands available in 2022. As the programme has grown in numbers it has subsequently reached more disadvantaged young people and is now accepting more participants who are not already sure of their decision to go to university. This is reflected in the progression figures for the programme – of the first cohort, 100% (n=19) of those tracked in HEAT (Higher Education Access Tracker) progressed to Higher Education, whereas for the 2017/18 cohort 73% (n=179) progressed to Higher Education.

As well as progression data and targeting evolving over time, so has the structure of the programme. In the initial years there was no summer residential experience, and the length of the residential has increased from 3 days to 4 days in recent years. With larger cohorts, certain elements of the programme have had to change – when we spoke to alumni who took part in the programme in 2016 they spoke fondly of an afternoon they spent exploring Reading town centre with their mentors. This is something which is no longer a part of the programme – however, this was also before the residential was added. We would therefore hope that the residential allows for that time to connect with mentors and also experience “student life” in more detail.

A year 10 strand was also added, offering a university experience and study skills development to approximately 100 pupils from local schools. Again, participants are required to meet eligibility criteria but are selected to participate by their schools rather than by individual application. The evaluation of this strand of the programme is outside the scope of this report but annual evaluation is carried out.

## Impact of Reading Scholars

The key objectives of the Reading Scholars programme include:

- Progression to Higher Education
- Increasing confidence in applying to university
- Increased knowledge and expectations of higher education
- Enrolment to the University of Reading

The impact of Reading Scholars is then measured in a number of ways, including:

- Qualitative feedback from the participants themselves as to how they feel the programme has benefitted them, via surveys and focus groups.
- Quantitative data on intermediate outcomes:
  - Likelihood of applying to university
  - Knowledge and expectations of higher education
- Quantitative data on both progression to higher education broadly and progression to The University of Reading specifically.
  - HEAT/HESA data
  - University of Reading admissions data

All participants complete both a pre- and post- programme survey as well as event specific surveys after each event. The pre and post survey aims to capture data around confidence and readiness for Higher Education with the hope being that participants gain knowledge and confidence and become more ready to access higher education throughout the programme. Care must be taken when looking at the results to remember that the events do not happen in isolation – rather the programme runs across the course of a full academic year, during which time participants will also be receiving intervention

from their schools/colleges and many are also taking part in similar schemes offered by other higher education institutions. Currently we are unable to include comparison data to show the relative impacts to those who did not participate in Reading scholars, but it is something that could be possible in future using HESA data.

## Progression to Higher Education:

Over the years the overall progression to higher education from participants on the programme has remained high, but has reduced each time the number of participants has grown.

Cohort	Expected year of entry	Number of students in the cohort	Number of students identified in HEAT <sup>1</sup>	Number of students enrolled in HE	Percentage identified students progressed to HE
2012/13	2014	35	19	19	100%
2013/14	2015	60	21	19	90%
2014/15	2016	136	70	65	93%
2015/16	2017	194	128	110	86%
2016/17	2018	195	188	153	81%
2017/18	2019	220	179	130	73%
2018/19	2020	295		Not yet available	Not yet available
2019/20	2021	407		Not yet available	Not yet available
<b>Totals</b>		1542	605	496	82%

Table 1: Overall progression figures by year

The young people targeted by the scheme are statistically least likely to progress to higher education. While it has not been possible to create a bespoke benchmark to measure the programme against some progression rates nationally for the type of young people on the programme are detailed below (all percentages related to the 2020/21 year of entry):

National measures of progress to HE	
POLAR4 Quintile 1 progression: 12.5% <sup>ii</sup>	POLAR4 Quintile 2 progression: 15.8% <sup>iii</sup>
IMD Quintile 1: 21.9% <sup>iv</sup>	IMD Quintile 2: 21.3% <sup>v</sup>
Free School Meals progression: 28.1% <sup>vi</sup>	Entrants with declared disability: 17% <sup>vii</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Not all students give permission to be tracked, therefore some students' destinations are unknown.

Ethnicity: Black: 7.5% <sup>viii</sup>	Ethnicity: Asian: 17.2% <sup>ix</sup>
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Table 2: National progression to HE by specific characteristics

While it is not possible to directly compare each of these national measures against the whole cohort of Reading Scholars, it is not unreasonable to consider that overall progression from the Reading Scholars programme remains above that which could be expected for a group of young people from the targeted groups outlined in Table 2.

However, it is also important to consider that participants on the scheme self-select to take part, many will already be considering higher education before they complete the programme, and many young people who take part in Reading Scholars will also be taking part in similar programmes with other providers.

An important piece of future evaluation to carry out would be to look at the progression rate of all those who apply to Reading Scholars but do not take part versus those who apply and take part in the programme. However, due to the ways in which data has been captured in previous years this is not possible retrospectively.

## Enrolment to The University of Reading:

From an institution perspective, this is perhaps the most important measure of success for Reading Scholars. The scheme is part of our Access and Outreach activity, aiming to increase the number of applications and enrolments to the university from under-represented groups. The data below shows the numbers of applications, offers and enrolments over the years.

Cohort	Expected year of entry	Number of students in cohort	Number of applications	Number of offers made	Number of firm choices	Number of insurance choice	Number of enrolled students
<b>2012/13</b>	2014	35	11 (31%)	5 (14%)	4 (11%)	1 (3%)	3 (9%)
<b>2013/14</b>	2015	60	13 (22%)	12 (20%)	1 (2%)	3 (5%)	0 (0%)
<b>2014/15</b>	2016	136	37 (27%)	37 (27%)	10 (7%)	3 (2%)	9 (7%)
<b>2015/16</b>	2017	194	62 (32%)	59 (30%)	15 (8%)	4 (2%)	11 (6%)
<b>2016/17</b>	2018	195	62 (32%)	62 (32%)	15 (8%)	9 (5%)	12 (6%)
<b>2017/18</b>	2019	220	76 (35%)	72 (33%)	21 (10%)	21 (10%)	21 (10%)
<b>2018/19</b>	2020	295	97 (33%)	88 (30%)	23 (8%)	21 (7%)	16 (5%)
<b>2019/20</b>	2021	407	97 (24%)	92 (23%)	28 (7%)	9 (2%)	29 (7%)
<b>2020/21</b>	2022	513	130 (25%)	128 (25%)	26 (5%)	4 (1%)	TBC

The data shows that, although the raw number of applications has increased compared with previous years, it has not increased as a proportion of the total cohort. This does

potentially pose a question about quantity vs. quality – higher numbers of participants does not necessarily correlate with proportionally higher numbers of applicants.

There is also very little change in the raw number of firm choices between 2017/2018 and 2020/2021 despite participants more than doubling, thus representing a fairly large drop in the proportion of scholars participants making Reading their firm choice. While there will be natural variation from year to year, this 4 year data window does appear to suggest a number of potential dynamics:

- Participation in scholars encourages applications (to a certain degree), but does not encourage firm choices. Perhaps there is some additional work required around conversion.
- Scholars students don't intend to study at Reading but use it as a tool to explore subject choices and the university experience.
- More cynically, the programme may be used as a way of boosting personal statements (this came out of the focus groups – schools encouraged students to take part to boost their profile for UCAS applications).
- Reading Scholars is just one of many projects students are participating in simultaneously (we know this to be true in a number of cases, but data is not easily accessible to quantify this), so Reading is competing with other programmes.
- Scholars participants are 'mobile' in their university choices – selecting 'better' (higher ranked etc.) universities.

Additional follow-up evaluation and focus groups could be carried out with participants who both do and do not enrol at Reading after completing the programme to identify why they did/did not choose Reading. During the summer of 2022 a number of participants were invited to take part in focus groups after the residential – these participants have given consent for follow-up contact at the year of Year 13 and the end of what we hope will be their first year at University. We hope to continue this longer term tracking and engagement with participants to continue to evaluate why participants choose Reading or not and identify any long-term benefits of Reading Scholars.

## Voices of the participants

### Alumni:

During the spring and summer of 2022 efforts were made to reconnect with a number of past-participants from the programme. Those contacted were identified as having taken part in Reading Scholars and completed a programme of study at The University of Reading and successfully graduated. This proved to be a challenging undertaking as contact details for past participants are not kept up to date and many young people apply to the programme using their school or college email addresses which cease to work after they leave the institution.

## APP Evaluation – reflective evaluation of Reading Scholars

In total four “Scholars Alumni” were successfully recruited – while this number is not large, it did give us a chance to explore what they remembered and what they felt had been the greatest benefits of the programme. All four of these alumni took part in the programme in the 2015/16 academic year, three of them chose to become Scholars mentors during their time at Reading and one has since started a PhD at Reading.

Each alumnus was asked the following questions:

Why did you apply to Reading Scholars?

What do you remember most about Reading Scholars?

Do you think there has been any long-term impact from taking part in Reading Scholars?

Would you recommend Scholars to a Year 12 student?

While all four gave different answers depending on their overall experience of the programme they were overwhelmingly positive and similar themes emerged in their answers.

While many participants will choose to take part in Reading Scholars because they already have an interest in attending University of Reading only one of the four alumni spoken to expressed this as their reason for applying. Rather their reasons focused on a chance to experience university life, subject experience and an opportunity to meet others with an interest in the same subject. Positive recommendations from a trusted teacher also carried some weight.

*“I was the only person at my school doing A-Level French, my teacher said Scholars would be a good opportunity to meet other students studying languages.”*

*“I wasn’t considering Reading at all; I was mostly looking at Russell Group Universities. So, when I started Scholars I wasn’t doing it because it was Reading, but more just for the programme and subject experience.”*

When asked about what they remembered from the programme, bearing in mind that the interviews took place six years after the end of the programme, alumni had some good memories to share. They focused on people they met, the subject experience and being able to link university study with their A-Level study at the time.

*“I remember meeting people and making quite a few friends. I realised that French was not the right choice for me at University. The lecturers were really nice. It definitely helped my French.”*

*“I remember my mentor, she was really nice and helpful. She had time for my questions and made me feel at ease.”*

*“The subject content – it helped me better understand what university study would be like and I could make links with what I was studying at Sixth form.”*

When asked about any potential long-term impact of the programme alumni spoke about being more comfortable once they had started at the university because they already knew their way around, they already knew some of the staff and they already had a sense of fitting in or belonging. The programme gave them confidence that they had made the right choice in applying to Reading, with one explaining that they gave up an offer from a different university that they had previously been much more interested in so that they could accept their offer from Reading.

*“Because of Scholars I had some ideas, like I knew roughly where a building was, or what colour it was. Like, I had little road maps. So, when my first lecture was in a room that I had already been to I knew where it was and I didn’t have to go check the day before, or anything like that. I didn’t feel as overwhelmed as I would have if I hadn’t visited.”*

*“I just sort of fell in love with it, I suppose. I had an offer from another university but in the end I made Reading firm and didn’t add an insurance choice because I was that sure about it.”*

*“I felt more at ease when I started as a student because I had been there before. I knew the campus was really nice and I knew some of the buildings. Scholars gave me the reassurance that I was going to like University because over the course of the programme I got so familiar with it.”*

Further long-term follow up with participants is needed to measure the longer term impact of the programme and to better understand why participants do or don’t choose to come to the University of Reading.

## 2022 participants

Each year a series of pre and post event surveys are completed by participants. Respondents answered the same set of questions before the programme and after (7 months gap), and didn’t see what they scored previously when answering for the second time. Respondents scored how much they agreed with a statement was true for them, from 1 for not at all to 5 for very much.

Post event evaluation forms were used to get feedback on how participants found each individual activity, and how these could be improved for future groups. These were anonymous, and focussed on the specific activity.

Finally, a small number of focus groups were conducted with students from two strands (English Literature and Psychology) in order to enrich the pre/post survey results.



## **APP Evaluation – reflective evaluation of Reading Scholars**

For the first time, this year, participants who did not attend the residential but who had attended at least one of the on-campus events were also invited to complete the post programme survey so that comparison between the groups that did and did not attend could be carried out.

Data from the pre and post surveys for 2022 showed there is very little difference in students reporting that they want to go to university. The numbers show that these scores are high from the start, possibly suggesting the scholars participants are already positively oriented towards university. As the programme applications open very early in Year 12 this is not surprising and has always been a consideration when evaluating the programme. This also correlates with findings across the sector that there is a great deal of selection bias in schemes such as this, with those who apply to them already having this positive disposition. More attention needs to be paid to how the scheme is marketed and how to reach the hardest to reach young people who are not already on a trajectory to higher education.

The trends are almost exclusively positive, with students reporting increases across all measures. Perhaps most pertinently, the data shows that students who attended the residential reported significantly higher scores on the measure of 'I will be applying for a course at the University of Reading' than those who did not attend the residential. This could demonstrate one of two things – students who attended the residential were more likely to apply to Reading, or, students who had decided they wouldn't be applying to Reading chose not to attend the residential. Further follow ups with participants who chose not to attend the residential could add richness to this data but is harder to obtain.

**APP Evaluation – reflective evaluation of Reading Scholars**

Individual level data – residential vs. non-residential

Target label	Percentage of participants reporting an increase		Number of participants reporting an increase, no change, or decrease on target label based on 4 point scale		
	Target	Outcome	Increase	No change	Decrease
Increase in participants reporting they have ‘a clear understanding of student finance’	25%	80%	124	28	3
Increase in participants reporting they have ‘a clear understanding of student finance’	25%	77%	43	8	5
Increase in participants reporting they ‘know how to find information about different university courses at different universities’	20%	69%	107	38	10
Increase in participants reporting they ‘know how to find information about different university courses at different universities’	20%	70%	39	14	3

*Self-report survey scores on knowledge of student finance and searching for courses and universities – individual change scores (of 155 students who completed pre and post surveys and attended the residential/ of 56 students who completed pre and post surveys and did not attend the residential)*

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Target	Target	Increase	No change	Decrease	% change
Increase in perception of students that university will be an enjoyable experience	20%	63	74	18	40%
Increase in perception of students that university will be an enjoyable experience	20%	14	37	5	25%
Increase in participants reporting that they 'want to go to university'	8%	29	102	24	19%
Increase in participants reporting that they 'want to go to university'	8%	10	32	14	18%
Increase in participants reporting 'I know what I want to study at university'	NA	74	53	28	47%
Increase in participants reporting 'I know what I want to study at university'	NA	37	10	9	66%
Increase in participants reporting 'I would have the opportunity to further my hobbies and interests at university'	15%	81	57	17	52%
Increase in participants reporting 'I would have the opportunity to further my hobbies and interests at university'	15%	21	23	12	38%
Increase in participants reporting 'I will be applying for a course at the University of Reading'	NA	87	46	22	56%
Increase in participants reporting 'I will be applying for a course at the University of Reading'	NA	18	21	17	32%
Increase average score for skills development measures (problem solving, communicating, independent working, team working, combining ideas, feedback)	20%	72	70	14	46%
Increase average score for skills development measures (problem solving,	20%	27	23	6	48%

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communicating, independent working, team working, combining ideas, feedback)					
Increase in participants reporting 'I am excited to build on my existing knowledge when I go to university'	10%	45	89	21	29%
Increase in participants reporting 'I am excited to build on my existing knowledge when I go to university'	10%	14	33	9	25%
Increase in participants reporting 'I am looking forward to living independently'	15%	63	73	19	40%
Increase in participants reporting 'I am looking forward to living independently'	15%	25	23	8	45%

*Self-report survey scores on university attitudes, skills, and dispositions – individual change scores (of 155 students who completed pre and post surveys and attended the residential/of 56 students who completed pre and post surveys and did not attend the residential)*

It is interesting to note that for students who did not attend the residential, there were more respondents reporting a decrease in wanting to go to university than an increase. The early application for Reading Scholars means we are often picking up young people who are perhaps on a pathway to university but as they develop through Year 12 they realise there are other pathways open to them (e.g apprenticeships) and as such might change their mind about their progression to University.

While the survey data provides a useful overview of the students' movement in terms of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, there are limitations to the richness of what they can tell us about the programme impacts. To address this, focus groups were conducted with students from two strands – Psychology and English Literature, with a total of 12 participants. It is hoped this could become a more embedded part of the evaluation in future years, with greater numbers of participants taking part from a wider range of strands. While the size of the sample did not justify more systematic analysis of the focus group data, there were a number of useful outcomes:

- Students who attended the residential described a positive impact on their knowledge of student life, confidence in living independently, and significantly increased confidence in making the transition to university – some of which are not currently part of the wider scholars evaluation but should perhaps be included in future.
- A common narrative was that students were already set on a path to university prior to the scholars programme, but that the experience enabled them to explore subject choice and university life more closely. The theme of subject is also

something not properly explored in the evaluation – i.e. the proportion of students who change their subject preferences pre and post.

- Relatedly, a number of students reported that they would be the first in their family to attend university, and so the programme helped them gain insight their families were unable to provide. There is perhaps a case therefore for moving ‘no parental attendance at HE’ higher as a higher priority within the eligibility criteria (Appendix 1).
- Similarly, students provided varying accounts of the amount of HE related support their schools offered and the nature of HE participation amongst their school peers (i.e. numbers of students attended highly selective universities). For example, a couple of students attended schools which offered very high levels of support and had high numbers of students attending top universities (with the school actively encouraging Oxbridge/ Russell Group institutions). Perhaps some of these points could be embedded with the eligibility/targeting criteria to ensure the scholars programme engages those who need it most (those at low-participation schools with limited support).

## **The Future**

Reading Scholars is an established and well-respected programme. There are a large number of schools and colleges, both locally and nationally, which support pupils to take part in the programme year on year (see Appendix 2). However, this doesn’t mean we can be complacent and not continue to focus on development and improvement.

Carrying out this retrospective review of the programme has highlighted the need for changes to our data capture to allow for deeper analysis of outcomes for those who participate versus those who do not allowing us to say with more certainty if the programme is having the desired impact of increasing progression to higher education. However, even with this comparison it would be disingenuous to suggest a causal relationship as the programme does not exist in isolation.

Additionally, the evaluation framework used has changed over the last decade meaning it is not possible to directly compare results from previous years. Maintaining a consistent evaluation framework and ensuring consistent data capture will allow for better evaluation in the future. Collecting contact details and consent to follow up with participants after they complete the programme will allow for better long-term impact evaluation. For 2024 onwards, there will be consistent pre and post Scholars questions capturing university knowledge and expectations. Progression to HE and to Reading specifically will continue to be measured, providing longer-term outcome data. We will also endeavour to create a matched comparator group using HEAT, to compare outcomes for Scholars compared to similar non-participants.

While the number of participants on the programme has grown significantly over the last ten years, applications and enrolment to The University have not increased as a

## **APP Evaluation – reflective evaluation of Reading Scholars**

proportion of the group. Further work should be carried out to identify why participants do or do not choose Reading. Work has already begun in UK Recruitment & Outreach to support those who complete the Scholars Programme once the programme has finished with an offering throughout Year 13 and into their first year should they come to Reading.

While efforts have been made in the past to maintain contact with Scholars once the programme finished these efforts have been limited by staff capacity – with a new post-holder focused on transition work, Scholars participants can have a more reliable point of contact throughout the year and benefit from a follow-on programme of activity.

This effort to increase the proportion of participants who go on to apply to Reading should be achieved through changes to the programme content and through follow-up support in year 13. It is right that the scheme continues to seek to attract those least likely to attend higher education and therefore we should not necessarily be seeking 100% progression to higher education. The intermediate outcomes of increased knowledge and understanding of higher education capture the fact that part of Scholars is to give young people experience of university life, which they may decide is not the right decision for them. More effort should be placed in marketing the scheme to schools with low-progression to higher education and limited capacity to provide additional support to their pupils.

### **Notes**

This report was reviewed by the APP evaluation team with some suggestions on structure and reporting.

## APP Evaluation – reflective evaluation of Reading Scholars

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<sup>i</sup> Per year, although this number has changed over time as the programme has grown. In the first year the scheme was offered to just 35 young people. Current plans are to keep the intake at approximately 500 per year for now.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/fdadb846-2cc2-4bb5-a8fb-9c7dc1ece5bd>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/>

## Appendix 1: Eligibility Criteria

Category A	Category B	Category C
In or has been in local authority care Asylum seeker or refugee Estranged from family Young carer Lives in POLAR4 Quintile 1 post code Lives in an IMD Quintile 1 or 2 post code.	Eligible for Free school meals or discretionary school payments Lives in a home with a household income below £25,000 Live in a POLAR4 Quintile 2 post code Has a disability Was a participant on the Year 10 Reading Scholars Programme GRTSB “Service Child”	No parental experience of Higher Education BAME Other relevant information

Eligibility criteria for 2022/23

## Appendix 2: Applications to Scholars by year

Individual applications:

2023	2022	2021
535	457	946

Schools involved:

2023	2022	2021
139	148	262