REALISING OPPORTUNITIES

Working Together | Supporting Talent

Statement of Closure

Realising Opportunities is a higher education access programme which has been running since 2009. In that time, Realising Opportunities has supported over 16,400 students, across 17 cohorts, through partnerships with 20 high tariff universities, including 14 Russell Group institutions.

With regret, the current Realising Opportunities Partnership of nine universities has taken the difficult decision to close the programme in July 2027, once the current cohort of students has completed the Programme. The decision has not been taken lightly. A gradual reduction in the participating institutions over several years has created increasing financial challenges and pressures. The Partnership feel now is the right time to bring the programme to a close, ensuring a positive and impactful legacy for both the partnership and the many students who have benefited from the opportunities it has provided.

Realising Opportunities has provided a strong, unique and strategically led partnership for high tariff universities to collaborate and address national access needs for under-represented young people into higher education. The core aim of the programme was to support and increase the number of students who were most able in their peer group but amongst the least likely to apply to and enter research intensive universities – these are universities which focus on performing research alongside teaching their students and are traditionally high tariff institutions. Through an innovative, engaging and progressive programme, Year 12-13 participants gained and developed their awareness and understanding of research intensive universities, alongside the skills needed to progress from school or college into higher education, and to be successful in their degree outcomes and beyond.

Evaluation of the programme has provided robust, long-term insight into the outcomes of students who participated in Realising Opportunities. This includes evaluation on their participation in the programme, applications, offers and progression to university, as well as degree choices and outcomes. To date, the programme has been highly successful in its core aim, with over 85% of tracked participants progressing to higher education[1]. Of these, 54% have entered research intensive universities. This compares

to a national average of 27% of students from state funded schools who progress to a high tariff institution.[2]

For Realising Opportunities students on free school meals (FSM), 30% progressed to a high tariff institution, this compares strongly to the average of 3.4% for national progression of FSM pupils to high tariff institutions over the same period.[3]

When looking at outcomes, 83% of tracked students achieved either a 2.1 or a 1st class degree, and 80% of Realising Opportunities students on Free School Meals went on to achieve a 2.1 or a 1st, significantly more than the national average of 69%[4]. Realising Opportunities graduates also enter highly skilled roles (managers/ professionals/associate professionals) at a similar rate as all graduates, despite the additional barriers they face throughout their educational journey.

All Realising Opportunities Partner universities committed to alternative offers in their admissions policies as part of the programme, meaning participating students could apply to any Partner university and potentially receive additional consideration, including a lower offer to study there. This has broadened access to high tariff universities on a scale not otherwise seen in the UK.
Evaluation has shown that alternative offers have also contributed towards an increase in students' confidence and sense of belonging. 55% of Cohort 14 respondents said that receiving an alternative offer increased their confidence a lot about going to university and 49% said it increased their sense of feeling wanted by the university a lot. This has led to an improved evidence base in the sector where the use of contextual admissions, and access or supported entry schemes, are now widespread. Realising Opportunities will continue to contribute to this evidence base through a new research paper on contextual admissions due to be published in early 2027.

September 2026