



# IMPACT REPORT

over **4000** most able students, least likely to progress to higher education (HE) have participated in Realising Opportunities (RO) from across England since 2009

**92%**

of RO students have parents with no experience of HE

The participation of RO students in HE (measured as Young Participation Rate - YPR) compares favourably to the national average for 2011/12. The national average includes students from the most advantaged backgrounds

**83%**

of RO students tracked through HEAT<sup>1</sup> achieved a 1st or 2:1 degree compared to 66% of all students nationally. No RO students tracked received a 3rd

RO students have achieved at least

**8 A\*-C** or equivalent at GCSE, including at least 5 at grade B or higher

**39%**

Realising Opportunities YPR

**38%**

National YPR

**40%**

Realising Opportunities POLAR quintiles 1 and 2<sup>2</sup> YPR

**25%**

National POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 YPR

**82%**

of RO students tracked through HEAT from POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 achieved a 1st or 2:1 degree compared to 61% of all students nationally

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UCAS analysis has shown that RO students are more likely to enter research intensive universities than a comparator group of students at similar schools and with similar backgrounds<sup>3</sup>

Impact Report published December 2016. All information correct as of December 2016.

DATA NOTE:

Please note, statistics in this report cover cohorts 1 – 7. Cohort 7 are in Year 13 in 2016/17. Cohort 6 were in Year 13 in 2015/2016 and were first eligible to progress to higher education in 2016. Unless otherwise stated, statistics are from internal RO Partnership records and analysis of Partnership data. The Partnership is grateful to our colleagues at the Higher Education Application Tracker (HEAT), Universities and Colleges Admissions Services (UCAS), National Foundation for Education Research (NFER), the Institute for Effective Education (IEE), the Department of Education at the University of York, Critical Thinking, Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and Brightside for their work on the evaluation of Realising Opportunities.

1 Higher Education Applicant Tracker (HEAT).

2 The POLAR classification looks at how likely young people are to participate in HE across the UK and shows how this varies. Students from quintiles 1 and 2 are the least likely to participate in HE.

3 UCAS, October 2015.

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# Foreword



*Professor Les Ebdon,  
Director of Fair Access to  
Higher Education*

**As the fair access regulator, my job is to challenge and support universities and colleges to improve access to higher education. An important part of that is to recognise and celebrate positive impact where it is being made. I am delighted to be able to do that here.**

Fair access in England is a national success story, with more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education than ever before, and organisations like the Realising Opportunities Partnership have played an important part in achieving those record participation rates. As this report shows, Realising Opportunities can demonstrate that it is changing the lives of numerous young people for the better.

Of course, there is still a lot further to go across the whole sector, and especially at the most selective universities, until we have true meritocracy in access and outcomes. Tough challenges remain, with students from the most advantaged backgrounds still over twice as likely to enter higher education as the least advantaged.

Further, faster progress is needed and collaboration will be key to that – but in an increasingly competitive higher education sector, collaboration brings its own challenges. So I am encouraged to see in this report how the partner institutions within Realising Opportunities are making joint working work at every stage of the student lifecycle.

After all, improving participation in the sector as a whole benefits everyone. It enriches the lives of individuals, contributes to economic growth and boosts social mobility. Most importantly, we owe it to those students with the potential to achieve great outcomes who may otherwise miss out.

Higher education changes lives and should be equally available to all with the talent to benefit from it, regardless of background. Yet for many of the students involved in Realising Opportunities, who are likely to be the first in their families to go to university, higher education may seem a world away. The Realising Opportunities programme may be the first time they have ever been on a university campus and the importance of this first hand experience cannot be underestimated.

While universities cannot solve the problem of fair access all by themselves, and many others across the whole education sector also have a role, if we are to truly level the playing field, the work of the Realising Opportunities Partnership is more vital than ever. I look forward to seeing it go from strength to even greater strength in the years to come.

# Introduction



*Professor Ella Ritchie,  
OBE, Chair of Realising  
Opportunities, Emeritus Professor  
at Newcastle University*

Realising Opportunities (RO) is proud of its vision to work together in a unique national partnership to increase the number of ‘most able, least likely’ students applying to, entering and succeeding at research intensive universities across all subjects. It is therefore with great pleasure that I introduce you to this impact report that explains how, since 2009, the RO Partnership has worked to realise this vision. RO began as a HEFCE<sup>4</sup> and DBIS<sup>5</sup> funded pilot project which ran until 2012; since then RO has been wholly funded by equal contributions from Partner universities.

Monitoring and evaluation have been key components of RO since the Partnership was established and this report outlines how we have assessed and analysed the impact we have had on those students who have participated in the innovative RO Programme.

This report also introduces you to several of the students who have benefitted from the RO Programme, along with undergraduate ementors who support RO students, and staff at Partner institutions who have worked tirelessly to ensure RO continues its successes. We also hear from teachers and advisers about the impact RO has had on the young people at their schools and colleges.

I am delighted that we not only showcase our successes, students, ementors and individual Partners but also the RO Partnership itself. We have demonstrated that a group of leading universities from across England can work together in a

strong Partnership to promote widening participation, fair access and social mobility. We were thrilled to be recognised early on with receipt of the Times Higher Education Award for Widening Participation in 2011 and since then have gone from strength to strength, with four new research intensive universities (RIUs) joining us and the number of 'most able, least likely' students we work with increasing each year.

The May 2016 White Paper 'Success as a Knowledge Economy' emphasised a widening participation approach which covers the whole higher education (HE) lifecycle for disadvantaged students. The Partnership's agreement to continue working together to support talented young people until at least 2019 highlights the way in which RO is seen as a key tool for achieving progress towards the government's aims for retention, progression and employability for widening

participation students by these leading institutions. RO is making a contribution to government ambitions to double the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds progressing to HE and for increasing the participation of specific groups, for example black and minority ethnic groups and white males from lower socio-economic groups.

The Partnership will use the next stage of collaboration not only to address the government's targets but, crucially, offer RO students an experience which raises their awareness of RIUs and gives them space to make informed choices, increase their confidence in their abilities and prepares them to be successful in their higher education studies and beyond.

Should you wish to know more about anything contained in this report, please contact the RO Central Team at [info@realisingopportunities.ac.uk](mailto:info@realisingopportunities.ac.uk).



**RO students judge the programme as a source of beneficial information, advice and guidance, which positively assists their transition to university<sup>6</sup>**

# What *Realising Opportunities does and* why

Participation in higher education in England has increased significantly since 1990 when 19% of young people went to university. This has risen to 40% in 2016 and includes more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds than ever before.<sup>7</sup> Realising Opportunities (RO) works to address the gaps that still remain in the system. Despite numbers increasing, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are still 2.4 times less likely to progress to university than those from the most advantaged backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> The difference is even more distinct when considering progression to highly selective institutions, to which 21% of the most advantaged students progress compared to 3% of the least advantaged.<sup>9</sup> The 2016 higher education white paper called for students to be able to make informed choices. The RO programme is designed to give students a wide range of information in a wide range of ways in order for students to have the space and support to make these informed choices.

As a Partnership of leading research intensive universities (RIUs),<sup>10</sup> RO aims to:

- Increase the number of applicants and entrants to RIUs from under-represented groups in support of fair access and social mobility.
- Prepare students for success at RIUs and progression to graduate careers and/or postgraduate study.
- Raise awareness and understanding of RIUs.
- Broaden geographical horizons and help students make an informed academic choice.
- Improve the evidence base among the participating universities for the use of compact schemes and contextual data in admissions.
- Inform and influence government policy in widening participation and fair access.

To realise these aims, the Partnership offers a targeted, national compact scheme to students in Year 12 and 13 across England.



**All Partner universities recognise the successful completion of the RO Programme with alternative, reduced offers of up to two A Level grades or equivalent**

<sup>7</sup> As reported in the 2016 White Paper, 'Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice'.

<sup>8</sup> As above.

<sup>9</sup> As reported in the 2015 Green Paper, 'Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice'.

<sup>10</sup> Members of the Russell Group and former members of the 1994 Group.



# *The Realising Opportunities* Programme

Students start the innovative Realising Opportunities (RO) Programme in Year 12 and it offers them support throughout sixth form. Successful completion of the Programme can result in an alternative, reduced offer from any of the Partner universities. The table below outlines the Programme and its associated benefits for students.

## *Programme elements*

## *Benefits*

### *Academic Element*

Students undertake an assessed piece of independent research in an area of their own interest. This can either take the form of the Realising Opportunities Academic Assignment, supported by a university tutor, or the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) in conjunction with their school/college.

Students are able to demonstrate their potential to be successful at a research intensive university (RIU). They undertake independent research in an area of personal interest to them, and they develop analytical, critical thinking, and academic skills including research and referencing.

### *Skills4uni*

Students work through an online study skills module provided by the University of Birmingham. The skills4uni module has interactive tasks, videos and information designed to build students' awareness of RIUs and increase their skills levels.

Skills4uni offers students invaluable insight into the vibrant teaching and learning on offer at RIUs and helps students develop skills to be successful at university.

*Students who recently completed the RO Programme said:*

'I enjoyed the whole RO programme and it has helped immensely with the skills that I have as well as helping me to learn about research intensive universities'

'I think it is a really good programme as it guides us through what university will be like and what is expected from us, it has helped me to become a better student and a more motivated individual'

'I have developed a lot of skills through this programme and learnt that I shouldn't allow my background to prevent me from aiming high'

## *Programme elements*

## *Benefits*

### *Events & Activities*

Students attend a range of events and activities including the RO Local Launch at their host university and the RO National Student Conference where students meet representatives from all Partner universities. Students are also offered a wide range of events and activities across the partnership such as subject taster days, residential summer schools, master classes and Open Days.

The range of events and activities aims to promote the national feel of RO, and encourage geographic mobility. Together they are designed to build students' confidence, foster a sense of belonging to RO, upskill students, encourage informed choices and raise awareness of RIUs. Students can attend as many events as they like, with travel costs supported. This is a unique opportunity to visit RIUs across England.

### *Ementoring*

Students are supported by an undergraduate student ementor from one of the Partner universities and they follow a detailed online programme of activities and conversation. Students also have access to a huge range of resources, activities and information on the ementoring portal, including 'Ask the Expert' featuring a professional each month who answers students' questions about their industry and career, and offers advice.

Ementoring provides students with structured support covering key topics at key times – such as student finance, higher education research and UCAS applications. Crucially, ementoring offers students access to someone with first-hand experience of studying at an RIU and who can answer their questions and offer a peer perspective, and be a positive role model.

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Student evaluation has facilitated an understanding of the affect RO has had on students in a number of key areas

46,497

messages sent by students on the ementoring portal

“

The alternative offer has proved to be a real factor in influencing student choice, as over half of respondents reported that the potential to receive an alternative offer influenced their decisions about which universities to apply for



of students reported that they had an improved understanding of research intensive universities after taking part in RO



9913

hours spent on the ementoring portal by RO students



8879

visits to Partner universities have been made by RO students, with many travelling to events and activities outside of their local area



109,090

visits by students to the ementoring portal and Bright Knowledge Bank



RO has helped improve students' skills for university<sup>11</sup>



## *My RO story*

Kymrun Dhami was hosted on the RO Programme by the **University of Warwick**. Kymrun then went on to study Mathematics at the **University of York**.

My favourite part about the Realising Opportunities Programme was being able to visit a whole range of research intensive universities and being able to experience university life first hand. Each visit meant you could talk to current students at the university and get up-to-date information about life at the university rather than simply reading about it in a prospectus. It helped to provide a more realistic insight and made it easier to understand how different each university was and the range that was on offer.

The Realising Opportunities Programme helped me in so many ways. One of the main things I gained was finding my university through it. I was not originally considering attending the University of York as it seemed a bit too far away from home, however I had the chance to visit it on an Open Day and see what it was like. It was only when I actually visited the university I knew it was the one for me, this is something I never would have discovered if it hadn't been for RO.

I was also able to use a lot of skills I had developed when completing the Academic Assignment element of the programme in my degree. In my first year of university I had to complete a small project which had a very similar style to the Academic Assignment so I felt very well prepared for it. Moreover, RO gave me access to a range of university summer schools whilst in sixth form; it made me feel a lot more confident and prepared for university - it was all a little less daunting as I'd already had an insight into university life.

The thing I enjoyed most about university was having the opportunity to meet a whole range of new people. I have made so many wonderful friends and have learnt so much about other people's lives and backgrounds. It is also nice to study alongside likeminded people on your course who share a similar passion to you. I can't imagine ever having been able to meet and get to know such a vast and diverse amount of people if it wasn't for university.

# Participants

Realising Opportunities (RO) participants are very able students from backgrounds which make them less likely to progress to higher education (HE), especially to research intensive universities. They come from schools which are performing below the national average at key stages 4 and/or 5, or have a higher number of students eligible for free school meals than the national average.



over  
**4000**

students in total have taken part in RO



**34%**  
male



**66%**  
female

**1 & 2**

**68%**

of RO students are from POLAR quintiles 1 and 2<sup>12</sup>



**92%**

of RO students have parents with no experience of HE

**£**

**54%**

of RO students are in receipt of or entitled to discretionary payments in school or college



**27%**

of RO students are in receipt of or entitled to free school meals

<sup>12</sup> The POLAR classification looks at how likely young people are to participate in HE across the UK and shows how this varies. Students from quintiles 1 and 2 are the least likely to participate in HE.



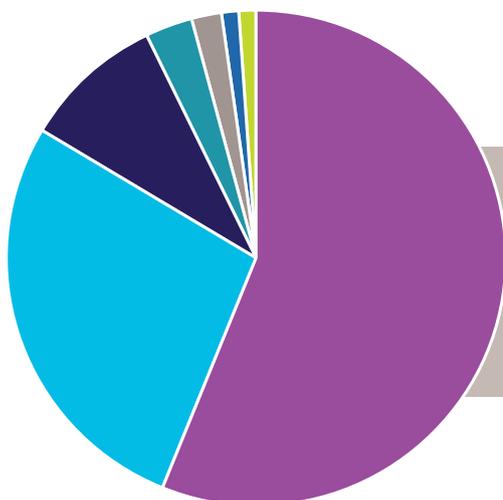
Statistics show that those who have experienced care are less likely to progress to HE.<sup>13</sup> In 2012 only 5.6% of care leavers went to university. 3% of RO students have lived in local authority care



Work by the Department of Education at York in 2016 found that the number of care leavers participating in RO constitutes approximately 6% of all looked after children who progress to UK HE<sup>14</sup>



UCAS data have shown that there is a higher proportion of Black and Asian students taking part in RO when compared to the population as a whole<sup>15</sup>



Ethnicity of RO students since 2009

13 <https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-care-leavers/>  
14 Hancock, S., Wakeling, P., and Ewart, A. (2016) Evaluation of the Realising Opportunities Programme: Report for the Realising Opportunities Partnership. York: University of York, Department of Education.  
15 UCAS, October 2015.



## *My RO story*

Marco Alidoro was hosted on the RO Programme by **Goldsmiths, University of London** and has gone on to study **Childhood and Youth Studies: Theory and Practice** at the **University of Sussex**.

My favourite part of Realising Opportunities was getting the opportunity to visit the many RO universities; being able to see what the different universities were like and to see that it was realistic for me to apply to some of the best universities in the country. When you've had no one in your family go to university before, you don't get those chances to get to know what life is like at university so it was important to see that.

Taking part in RO really helped me become more focused and expand my horizons. I think before I took part in RO, I didn't really know what I wanted to do at university or if I even wanted to go but it really helped guide me to make the right decisions when picking university options. All the elements of RO really gave me the skills that I have used at university; for example, by completing my Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), I have the research skills needed to complete a balanced argument essay and see points from both sides which is really important at university.

One of my favourite things about university so far has been meeting people from all over the world and getting to learn all about new and different topics within my subjects as it completely opened up my eyes to the world around me. It's also been great getting the opportunity to be completely independent!



# Impact

In order to fully understand the impact of Realising Opportunities (RO) on students, the Partnership has a robust evaluation framework that involves collection of student contextual data, student evaluation through independent evaluators<sup>16</sup> and tracking through the Higher Education Applicant Tracker (HEAT) and UCAS. This approach allows us to look at our impact in a national context and understand the students' own perceptions of their involvement in RO.

HEAT data has shown that RO's young participation rate (YPR) in higher education (HE) of 39% compares favourably with the national YPR of 38% for 2011/12, which includes students from the most advantaged backgrounds.

When considering the national average YPR for students in POLAR quintiles 1 and 2, RO's YPR is 15 percentage points higher - 40% compared to 25%.

UCAS tracking data has shown that 577 RO students progressed to research intensive universities (RIUs)<sup>17</sup> between 2011 and 2015. This is equivalent to 24% of RO starters who were eligible to apply through UCAS up to 2015 entry (2374 students). This compares favourably with data that shows that in 2012/2013, the proportion of state school and college

students, regardless of individual backgrounds, progressing to the most selective HEIs<sup>18</sup> was 23%.<sup>19</sup>

In 2015, UCAS reported to the Partnership that RO participants applied to and entered RIUs in higher numbers than a UCAS-constructed comparator group of students from similar schools with similar backgrounds. Furthermore, they reported that actual offer rates for RO participants who applied to HE are higher than what would be expected, with entry rates for males who have participated in RO double the national average.

HEAT tracking has also facilitated an understanding of the success RO students are having in their degree results and their progression beyond undergraduate study.



In 2015 UCAS reported that RO seems to “neutralise” background differences<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> National Foundation for Educational Research 2009 – 2012, Institute for Effective Education and the Department of Education, University of York 2013 – 2016, Institute for Employment Studies with CRAC 2016 – 2019.

<sup>17</sup> UCAS, October 2015.

<sup>18</sup> The most selective HEIs are defined as the top third of HEIs when ranked by mean UCAS tariff score from the top three A level grades of entrants.

<sup>19</sup> DBIS report, 'Widening Participation in Higher Education', July 2015.

<sup>20</sup> UCAS, October 2015.

83%

of RO students tracked through HEAT achieved a 1st or 2:1 compared to 66% of all students nationally.

82%

of RO students from POLAR quintiles 1 and 2<sup>21</sup> achieved a 1st or 2:1 compared to 61% of all students nationally.

25%

of RO students tracked through HEAT progressed to postgraduate study within one year of qualifying with a First Degree compared to 11.9% of all students nationally.

93%

of RO students tracked by HEAT, who graduated in 2013/14, were in work and/or study six months after graduation. This compares with 89% for leavers from all UK HEIs in 2013/14.



## My RO story

Jodie Connon was hosted on the RO Programme by the **University of Birmingham** and went on to study at **University of Sheffield**, graduating in 2016 with a 2:1 in BSc Molecular Biology. Jodie is now working at **University College London** as a Graduate Ambassador within the Widening Participation Department.

My favourite part of RO was the opportunity to participate in summer schools at the host universities. Prior to these, I was worried about whether or not I would enjoy university life. The summer schools eased any nerves or concerns I had about university and following them, I couldn't wait to become a university student!

Realising Opportunities enabled me to come into contact with people who could provide first hand university experience and advice, and these were all people who I wouldn't normally meet in my own day to day life! One of these people was my student ementor who answered any concerns I had about settling into a new university. I also had my tutor during the Academic Assignment, who introduced me to new ways of writing and referencing that I hadn't previously covered in school. The experiences of these people I believe gave me a great advantage when starting university.

It is difficult to choose just one thing that I enjoyed most about university but for me, it is the independence you gain, especially if you choose to move away from home! For me, my first year flatmates became my best friends and being all in the same boat together in our first year, it made moving out of home and learning all the chores involved in living independently a lot easier and more fun.

21 The POLAR classification looks at how likely young people are to participate in HE across the UK and shows how this varies. Students from quintiles 1 and 2 are the least likely to participate in HE.

# National Student Conferences

*bringing everyone together*



The National Student Conference is a key element of the Realising Opportunities (RO) Programme providing an opportunity for new RO students to attend an event focused on providing them with skills and information to help them make informed choices about their future. For the majority of students, the RO Conference involves travelling to a research intensive university (RIU) outside of their local area.



## National Student Conferences

### *bringing everyone together*

As part of the National Student Conference students:

- Visit an RIU and see the facilities on offer.
- Experience an event designed to build their confidence about applying to and being successful at an RIU.
- Meet and speak with representatives from all of the RO Partner universities and collect information at the exhibition.
- Attend skills based workshops of their choice (students choose workshops on study skills, preparing for university and student finance).
- Meet other students and current university students.

Over 3600 RO students have attended a National Student Conference.

At the end of their involvement in RO, more than a year after attending the National Student Conference, over 70% of students responding to the RO follow-up questionnaire rated it as a useful source of information with over 50% stating attendance at the Conference had “a lot” or “quite a lot” of influence over their university decisions.

*The most recent National Student Conferences were held in March 2016. After the events, students said:*

“The exhibition was very informative, I had the opportunity to ask questions which will help me to decide where I want to go and what I want to study”

“[The most useful part was] getting the chance to talk to people from different unis directly and getting all of my questions answered”

“I found a lot of universities that offered courses that I didn't know about”

“I enjoyed the ‘UCAS explained’ workshop as I gained a better understanding on how to apply to university”

“The workshops for me were the most useful and valuable part of the conference. This is because I now have a clearer idea of how to choose the right university”

“[The most useful part was] going to the financial talk. I found out about combined course degrees which I did not really know about before”

*National Student Conference events have so far been hosted by:*

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

Goldsmiths  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

Newcastle University

The University Of Sheffield.

WARWICK  
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

UNIVERSITY of York



*The unique and innovative*

# Academic Assignment

The Realising Opportunities (RO) Academic Assignment allows students to demonstrate their potential and develop the independent research and study skills that are vital when studying at a research intensive university. The Academic Assignment is also designed to prepare and support students for the transition to university study.

Working with an Academic Tutor from their host university, students complete their assignment in a subject area of their choice, allowing them to study in depth a topic of real interest to them.

Titles that students have worked on have included ***“How did the surrealist painter Rene Magritte represent himself within his painting and in what way does this contrast Salvador Dali’s portrayal of himself in his work?”*** and ***“Is the extensive use of neonicotinoids as insecticides wholly responsible for the decline in bee populations worldwide?”***

The Academic Assignment has been developed by the Partnership drawing on the expertise and best practice of all the RO universities. The model has a robust framework with students being guided to demonstrate an agreed set of learning outcomes and their work is assessed against the RO assessment matrix. A comprehensive quality assurance process ensures parity and rigour across the Partnership.

## *Tutorials*

Academics from host universities support students with completion of assignment and assess work.

## *Marking and Internal Verification*

Academic tutors use the RO assessment matrix to mark work. Marked assignments are internally verified by members of the Academic Advisory Board.

## *External Moderation*

Assignments are externally moderated to ensure parity across institutions. Moderators report on quality and standards and recommend good practice and improvements to the Academic Advisory Board.

## *Academic Advisory Board*

The Academic Advisory Board, consisting of Academics from all Partner universities, oversees the delivery of the Academic Assignment and meets annually to review improvements and ratify students’ results.



## *My RO story*

Azizah Al-Islam is hosted on the RO Programme by **University College London (UCL)** and is studying at the UCL Academy, Camden, London.

The title of my Academic Assignment is "Discuss the drawbacks and benefits of combination therapy in HIV Treatment". I hope to study Biomedical Sciences at university and believed that a topic such as this would help me prepare for degree level study. I knew that, within Biology, I was most interested in topics such as immunology and diseases. As HIV is part of my A-level course, I already had some interest and knowledge on the virus. With the help of my tutor, I chose a topic that would give me the opportunity to learn more in depth as well as write a good essay. Having a tutor to guide me while writing my Academic Assignment is what I enjoyed the most. I liked that we were able to contact them at any time if I needed any questions answering. It was also nice to talk to someone who has studied a similar subject to what I hope to do, and therefore knew what advice to give.

## *My RO story*

Akidah Ahmed is hosted on the RO Programme by **University College London (UCL)** and is studying at the King Solomon Academy, Marylebone, London.

My title is "Heart Failure and its Current Drug Treatments". I chose this topic as I have a keen interest in drug treatment and I wanted to find out more about the different types of drug treatment available for different illnesses. What I've enjoyed the most about the Academic Assignment has been meeting a great PhD student and learning about their studies as well as learning new things related to the subject area that I am interested in.

## *My RO story*

Robert Milthorpe was hosted on the RO Programme by the **University of York**, graduated from **King's College London** with a first class honours degree in History and went on to do a Masters degree at the **University of Sheffield**. Rob now works as a Regulatory Analyst for KPMG's Financial Risk Management Team.



I found that the Academic Assignment really helped me to get a feel for academic writing and research. My UCAS application was much stronger, but more importantly I feel I gained valuable skills that I transferred into university.



**Lynne Hampson, Reader in Oncology at the University of Manchester, and RO Academic Assignment Moderator and Academic Advisory Board member.**

My involvement with RO began in 2010 when I was invited to take on the role of the Manchester University RO Academic Advisory Board representative for sciences. I attend the annual advisory board meeting and act as the University of Manchester's RO liaison academic, RO assignment Internal Verifier, and new tutor trainer. I have also sat on several RO Academic Advisory Board working groups, formed to evaluate and progress Academic Assignment (AA) developments such as the assessment matrix. In 2012, I was delighted to join the RO external moderating team as a moderator.

There are huge differences in the learning styles and expectations of students when they move from school/college to a higher education establishment. Self-motivation is a fundamental requirement of this transition and in completing the AA, time is planned, organised and 'actioned' solely by the student. This mimics how students will be expected to work at university. Guidance is available from the AA tutor, but there will be no one

to continually prompt or tell the student what to do.

The AA challenges the way in which students traditionally approach work tasks. Unlike at college they are no longer taught the relevant facts for a given topic, instead they will be given the knowledge to go and find these facts themselves and determine what they personally think is relevant. If they need outside input then they will have to pro-actively seek this from the tutor and learn to accept feedback and respond to it positively. Students are experiencing what it will be like moving from a taught environment to that of an independent learner.

When embarking on the AA, students are encouraged to step outside their comfort zone. They are asked not to just accept the first thing they read on a given topic but to broaden their research and look for other viewpoints or opposing evidence. Once completed the student will have used key academic skills such as information gathering, data analysis, fact selectivity,

structuring, summarising and referencing. In this way RO provides a fantastic tool kit for future study.

The AA is challenging for the students in a good way and for some it 'clicks' into place more quickly than others. At the first draft stage there is, as might be expected, a wide range of standards but this gap narrows considerably by final submission following further input and guidance from the tutors. Considering this is the first time the students are likely to have been asked to research and write about a topic in this way the quality of pieces is very good and often exceptional. It is not uncommon to see assignments written at a level usually expected from undergraduate students.

UK universities are in constant competition with one another. RO goes against this trend in that it brings together a host of partner universities who work collectively to share best practice in widening participation and to establish a scheme that can be adopted by all. Crucially it is the student who provides the

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The intuitiveness and maturity shown by many students never ceases to amaze me

fundamental driving force. At Manchester we have been keen to share our experiences and ways of approaching widening participation with our RO partners and in turn learn their processes.

From a personal perspective being involved with RO has been one of the most fulfilling roles I have had as an academic and one which, despite the ever increasing workloads we are faced with, I would not wish to give up.

My association with RO has also greatly helped my career and continuing personal and professional development. I have also been fortunate to meet colleagues from universities across the UK and to discuss widening participation practices at their individual establishments. Within my university, where social responsibility is a strategic priority, my work with RO has been appreciated and recognised and I am certain that this contributed to my career progression.



# Ementors

*offering one-to-one dedicated support*

Realising Opportunities (RO) ementors have been instrumental in making the Programme a success, ensuring RO students are supported through the Programme and have a great experience.

Undergraduate students are recruited from all of the RO Partner universities to work as ementors. This is a paid opportunity for the ementors which gives them great experience of working with young people. The role builds skills in communication, time management and problem solving. Ementors also get to meet other undergraduate students from different Partner universities at training events.

Once ementors have been trained they work with a group of RO students over a 10 month structured programme during which they communicate with their group via a secure portal, provided by Brightside, on a weekly basis. As well as having discussions with their students they support them by signposting them to useful links and resources, and work through activities with them.

Students who participated in the first six years of RO have been supported by **496** undergraduates from our Partner universities. These ementors have covered topics with students such as Course and University Research, Student Finance and Study Skills.

Ementors do an amazing job supporting RO students and put a lot of time in to make sure

that students are benefiting from participating in the Programme. The ementors who worked with students during the first six years of RO spent **6173** hours supporting RO students by sending **113,498** messages through the ementoring portal.

Ementors who supported Cohort 6 students were asked how they felt about ementoring:

**92%**

agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed being an ementor

**88%**

agreed or strongly agreed that being an ementor is a good part time job

**99%**

agreed or strongly agreed that ementoring had a positive impact on their mentees

When asked how they had benefitted personally from being an ementor they reported that they found the experience very rewarding and they had developed new skills, had ideas about their careers, and increased their knowledge about widening participation!



## *My RO story*

Oli Steele, studying Medical Sciences at the **University of Exeter**, is part of the most recent team of ementors.

I became an RO ementor to help make students more aware of the opportunities available to them, and in turn make the most out of those opportunities. Since coming to university I've thoroughly enjoyed my time and been consistently surprised at how much more to university there is than the course you study. I think ementoring is a brilliant resource and would have loved to have this available to me when I first started thinking about university!

With my mentees we mostly discuss student life - so anything from homesickness, paying bills and meeting new people to studying, contact time and playing sports. We regularly discuss the differences between courses and universities too. I've helped out a couple of students with ideas for personal statements, work experience and extended projects too.

I find being an ementor really rewarding. Being able to answer questions and put concerns to rest about what happens after school/college, is a really rewarding thing.

“

To know I may have helped someone decide what to do with their future and the rest of their lives...it's an incredible feeling

# Award-winning

## *students and ementors*

Realising Opportunities (RO) works with Brightside to provide the ementoring portal and a knowledge bank of interactive activities and resources which support the interactions between RO students and their undergraduate ementors. Brightside works with over 60 projects across the country and recognises the achievements of all those involved in their ementoring programmes at their annual awards ceremony.

The RO Partnership has been delighted to have the achievements of its students and ementors acknowledged at the national finals of the awards. They recognise the valuable work that RO ementors do in supporting our students at key times in their educational career and the progress made by the students taking part.

### *RO Roll of Honour – Brightside Award Winners!*

#### *2013 Awards*

Name		Host University	Category
India Stacey	RO Student	Newcastle University	Most Inspiring Mentee Journey

#### *2014 Awards*

Name		Host University	Category
Bethany Partridge	RO Ementor	University of Exeter	Student Mentor of the Year

#### *2015 Awards*

Name		Host University	Category
Zain Hameed	RO Ementor	King's College London	Student Mentor of the Year
Summer Dolan	RO Student	University of Sheffield	Mentee of the Year (HE)



India Stacey and Bethany Partridge



## *My RO story*

Zain Hameed, RO ementor and Brightside Student Mentor of the Year 2015, is studying Dentistry at **King's College London.**

I became an ementor as I felt very fortunate in receiving a great deal of help from others in obtaining my university place, and wanted to help others to achieve their aspirations.

I took part in online mentoring with the purpose of helping the students I supported to achieve as much as possible in their A levels and to prepare them for the numerous challenges faced in higher education. I helped my students with advice on revision tips and how to acquire work experience, and there was a vast bank of fantastic articles and interactive activities available for us to use on the online portal. Activities included problem solving and reflective tasks, such as how to budget and evaluate one's own strengths and weaknesses.

I found ementoring to be one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever undertaken.

I thought it was a real privilege being able to mentor such intelligent and capable young adults, all with very bright futures ahead of them. It was a pleasure to be able to help them with any problems, big or small, dealing with concerns that I now take for granted such as the UCAS process, student finance and revision tips.

Ementoring has been a life changing experience for me, positively resonating across many aspects of my personal and professional life.

It was astounding to witness the tremendous progress of my mentees: from initially feeling anxious about their futures and doubting their capabilities, to by the end of the year, meeting the grade requirements for their desired courses and being full of confidence in what they could accomplish.

I still feel a great sense of disbelief at winning the Brightside award! It is an honour to have received the award out of hundreds of other extremely hard working and committed ementors. I feel very grateful to my mentees and those on the mentoring teams who felt my work deserved to be recognised in the way that it was. I would like to emphasise the fact that it was the wonderful nature and enthusiasm of my students and the support of staff which enabled me to work productively in the role.

I now hope to complete my dental degree and continue using the invaluable life skills I have learnt through mentoring to benefit my patients daily. I also hope to continue helping younger students both in accessing and progressing through their course, passing on the knowledge I have gained from the brilliant teaching provided here at King's.

# Working nationally

*with schools and colleges*

Realising Opportunities (RO) has worked with over 260 schools and colleges across England. Schools and colleges are targeted using criteria that identifies those that are performing under the national average at key stages 4 and/or 5, or have a higher number of free school meal students than the national average.

RO Partner universities maintain close links with schools and colleges involved in RO and a national network for colleagues working in schools and colleges has been established.



Gill Woodman, Careers and Vocational Links Coordinator, Felpham Community College, West Sussex, linked to the **University of Sussex**.

My students have benefitted hugely from taking part in RO. It has broadened their horizons, given them an invaluable insight into research intensive universities (RIUs) and helped prepare them for moving on to higher education. Some of them possibly hadn't considered what attending such an institution would mean in terms of facilities and resources.

I think the whole scheme is beneficial to all students taking part, though individuals will find certain aspects of more benefit than others. It's a great scheme and those that drop out do so for reasons that are not connected with RO. It is highly valued by the students and their families. I had a mum at the start of the last academic year ask me if her son could be part of the programme as his brother, who was in our school's first cohort, had benefitted hugely from taking part.

I have also found that RO has improved my knowledge of RIUs, and so helps me when advising all of our students, not just those taking part in RO.

“

UCAS reported in 2015 that almost half of all RO participants tracked through UCAS up to 2015 entry come from the secondary schools with the highest proportion of pupils claiming free school meals<sup>22</sup>



Stewart McGill, Assistant Headteacher, Ralph Thoresby School, Leeds, West Yorkshire, linked to the **University of Leeds**.

We have been involved in Realising Opportunities since 2014 and the outstanding work of the Central Team and the exceptional work of our local coordinator at the University of Leeds has helped to provide substantial benefits to our students, who as a body have become more committed to exploring research intensive universities (RIUs). Arguably, it is the joined-up approach of the Partner universities which has helped students to see that there is a diversity in the HE landscape and it is their responsibility from an early stage to seek out the experiences that make them credible candidates in Year 13.

The completion of the Academic Assignment has given students confidence to engage with academics, to draw on research and to use skills that would typically only be developed whilst at university. The majority of our students undertook a summer school and this helped them to realise that university really was a desirable option for them. As such, they have sought to develop a substantial professional network with peers from across the country.

Participation in Realising Opportunities has gone beyond just raising awareness of RIUs, but has led to a changed culture of students aspiring to the country's best universities. As a school the proportion of students applying to these sorts of institutions has gone from a very low figure to one that is very pleasing for the students' future outcomes. RO has also increased the geographical spread of university applications from being focused on our locality to representing the university that will offer the best outcomes for the students in both the

short-term (whilst at university) and in the longer-term (their graduate destination opportunities).

For me, the single most important feature is that students have access to truly exceptional events and experiences from across a range of fantastic universities. The very fact that they are supported in going to try out summer schools, campus events and Open Days at institutions across the whole country gives them a holistic view of the university landscape.

Of course, students are hugely incentivised by the grade reduction. As a school we are always very clear that students must aim for the very highest outcomes. However, knowing that they will have a safety net gives them the confidence to take calculated risks in their UCAS applications. These risks seem to be well rewarded. The programme is a huge boost for those applying to competitive courses. To be given contextualised offers for aspirational courses such as medicine is having undoubtedly the biggest impact in social mobility I have ever seen in our locality. Students are confident to approach their futures differently to how they might if we were unable to offer Realising Opportunities.

Often unmentioned, the great work at Leeds to involve parents is very important from my perspective. At the Local Launch event a session to help parents to understand how universities work was held. It is by us all working together that outcomes can be achieved.

It is incredibly useful for me to have excellent local and national contacts, who can provide additional guidance and insight.

# Realising Opportunities

*the unique collaborative partnership*

Higher education is an increasingly competitive sector, yet the Realising Opportunities (RO) Partnership has consistently demonstrated the value of universities collaborating. In 2011, the Partnership was awarded the Times Higher Education Award for Widening Participation and since then the Partnership has grown to include new research intensive universities (RIUs), work with an increasing number of students annually and year on year has seen an increased number of students progress to RIUs.

RO is funded by Partner universities providing equal financial contributions annually. Commitment from Partner universities is demonstrated by the involvement of staff at every level. A Strategy Group made up of Pro-Vice-Chancellors or equivalent from Partner universities directs RO, with the Management Group (made up of Heads of Widening Participation or equivalent) and the Programme Development Group (made up of those responsible for the day to day management of RO) overseeing the Programme's development and delivery. Partners also include a collaborative target for RO in their OFFA Access Agreements.





**Andy Johnson, Senior Widening Participation Officer, University of Leicester, Deputy Chair of the Realising Opportunities Programme Development Group.**

The University of Leicester is proud to have been a founding member of Realising Opportunities (RO) and looks forward to continuing our involvement in this fantastic collaborative programme for many more years to come.

We appreciate the collaborative approach to RO which strengthens the links between all institutions and enables the open sharing of best practice that not only supports the further development of RO, but benefits the wider Widening Participation (WP) work we do within our own institution.

RO forms a key strand of our WP work and is built into our OFFA agreement and our university WP Strategy. RO offers us another access programme that sits alongside our own institutional initiatives and allows us to further engage our talented WP students from around the East Midlands region.

During our involvement, we have to date supported nearly 350 students to engage with RO and have welcomed over 70 RO participants to begin their studies with us here at Leicester. Not only do these students bring a wealth of talent and diverse experiences to our institution which has helped us to maintain our diverse student body, but they have also supported us in demonstrating our continued commitment to WP by contributing to our HEFCE WP benchmarks.

The benefits we've seen for both RO participants and the wider benefits to our institution are the main reasons that we have signed up to the RO funding agreement to continue to support the programme until at least 2019.

All elements of the programme play an important part in ensuring the overall success of RO and enable participants to get as much out of the opportunity as possible. Our students tell us that one of the most beneficial elements of RO is the opportunity to interact with current university staff and students through programme events, the academic element and the e-mentoring programme. Our students also highlight that taking part in a residential summer school is very well received and a positive experience for those involved.

RO gives us another strand of activity to offer to eligible schools that enhances our current portfolio of activities already available to them here at Leicester. We are able to use our RO partner school status to prioritise Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) sessions toward these schools which has further strengthened our relationship with them.

The real life successes we have seen from RO students, who successfully gained entry to and completed their university studies, and are now accessing their chosen careers (as lawyers, doctors, etc.) is a real demonstration of the success Realising Opportunities can have on helping students realise their potential and reach their own academic and professional goals.



**Gail Rothnie, Head of Outreach, University of Birmingham, Deputy Chair of the Realising Opportunities Management Group.**

Partnership working and collaboration is a key element of RO which has benefited Birmingham. It allows the universities to work together to increase the number of students from underrepresented groups progressing to research intensive universities (RIUs). It also provides us with a network to share best practice, and promotes social and geographic mobility and supports fair access. RO sits alongside our own institutional access scheme (A2B) and it is invaluable to have a national programme to help enhance our own scheme.

RO plays an important role within our widening participation strategy. RO is embedded in our Access Agreement as part of a long term strategic focus on widening access. It is an important strand of work to increase the number of students from underrepresented groups from outside of the region.

A2B is a year 13 scheme and it has been useful to be able to provide Partner institutions with the offer of participating in RO at year 12, as this provides further time for information, advice and guidance for students. It has also enabled us to promote the possibility of geographical mobility to students who traditionally do not apply to university outside commuting distance.

RO allows us to build and enhance our links with targeted schools and colleges locally and nationally. It raises awareness of the benefits of studying at an RIU within our partner schools and helps to support and prepare students who have the ability to apply and study at such universities. Our partner schools are involved with both RO and our own institutional access scheme but are aware that RO is most suited to students thinking of applying to other RO universities or RIUs. This is a real selling point for schools as the scheme aims to broaden geographic mobility of students who are more likely to apply to a local university. RO students have also benefited from hearing directly from students from similar backgrounds who have moved out of their home area to study and being in RO has also provided contact with professionals to give career guidance. These are elements of the scheme that have enhanced our work with the Partner institutions involved.



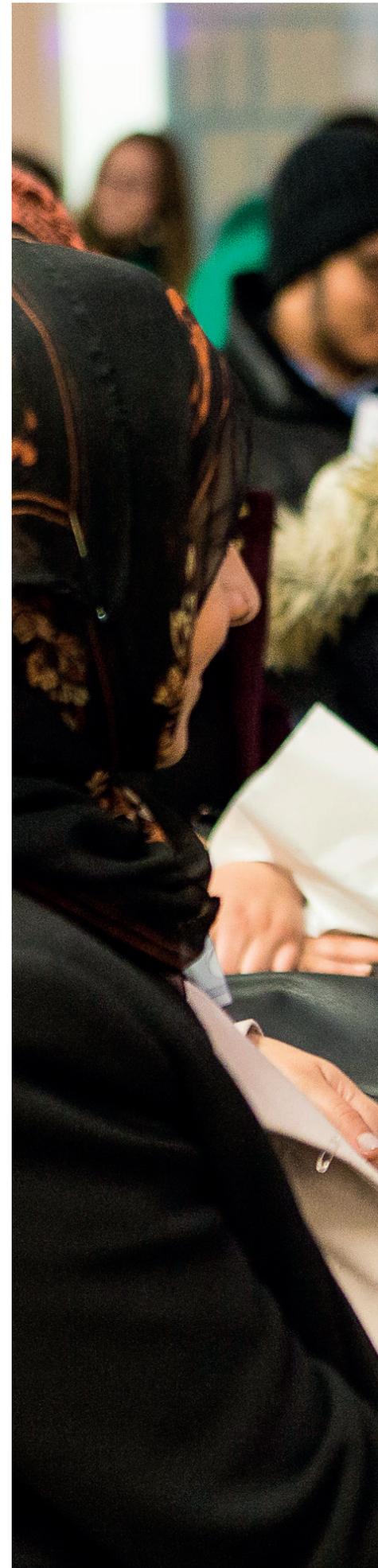


Professor Gavin Brown, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education, **University of Liverpool**, Deputy Chair of the Realising Opportunities Strategy Group.

As members of the RO Partnership, we have benefitted from being part of a network of universities, sharing good practice and developing good links between us which has meant that further collaboration between institutions is more likely. We have also taken some ideas from the Partnership to inform our own programmes. Membership has also been profile raising for the University.

Involvement in RO has had an impact on our targeting of schools for other Y12 and Y13 projects as we aim to spread the delivery as wide as possible and ensure the maximum number of students benefit. RO also represents an additional opportunity for students we have worked with pre-16 to continue to engage with us, even if they are considering leaving the Merseyside area.

The fact that research intensive universities work collaboratively to focus on Widening Access is arguably the project's greatest strength. Some collaborative outreach partnerships can spread their efforts thinly, lose focus and it can be difficult to see tangible, measurable outcomes. In terms of RO, the collaboration itself is more powerful than the day to day activities delivered to the students. The project's structure facilitates high level collaboration in terms of having a national Strategy Group, Management Group and Project Development Group. This allows each tier of the management structure to focus their efforts on specific outcomes. Ultimately, the students benefit from this as it leads to a robust, interesting programme with guaranteed benefits for students. In terms of the programme itself, the opportunity to earn reduced offers and in some cases undergraduate bursaries at any of the Partners, is the main strength. If we delivered the activities, without the guaranteed benefits for example, we would not have a meaningful or worthwhile project.





# The Central Team

Realising Opportunities (RO) is led by **Newcastle University**, where the co-ordinating Central Team is based. The team oversee the day-to-day delivery and development of RO, working closely with colleagues at Partner universities. More information about the team and its members can be found at [www.realisingopportunities.ac.uk](http://www.realisingopportunities.ac.uk).





## *My RO story*

Katie Stamps, who studied at **Newcastle University**, was the Realising Opportunities Ambassador August 2015 - May 2016, and is now working for the Social Mobility Foundation.

I have a long-standing interest in widening participation and fair access, and this in part stems from having faced some of the barriers to higher education myself, being the first in my family to attend university. I applied for the Realising Opportunities Ambassador role because I believed it would be an excellent opportunity for me to specialise a little further in widening participation and fair access, whilst allowing me to work with students.

My main responsibilities within the team were supporting the Project Coordinator and Assistant Project Manager with the planning and delivery of the National Student Conferences; administering the mentoring programme; developing marketing materials and resources for students on the programme; maintaining web content; and implementing a strategic social media plan and blog.

I really enjoyed working with the students, whether they were students on the programme or mentors. I enjoyed delivering mentor training and local launch presentations, and talking with students at the conferences. I'm always very inspired by the drive and passion students have for their studies and I love to see their determination to reach their goals. The RO Central Team was very supportive and allowed me to be creative with my role, so I also really enjoyed developing blog and web content, social media plans and new materials such as an Academic Assignment Guide.

I definitely learned a lot about widening participation and the sector in general, which has been a massive benefit to me in my role with the Social Mobility Foundation. The training I was offered from the team such as event planning and writing for the web has made me feel so much more confident when brainstorming new activity to do with students in the region. I've also benefited on a personal level from having had the opportunity to work in a team who are so very enthusiastic and passionate about what they do - it's provided me with an excellent insight into what a very successful widening participation initiative looks like.

# In close



*Lucy Backhurst, Head of Recruitment and Admissions at Newcastle University and Chair of the RO Management Group*

**It has been a pleasure to lead the Realising Opportunities (RO) Management Group since 2009 and to be part of such a successful collaboration which has students at the very heart of its work. The commitment that the Partner institutions, and the individual colleagues at every level within those universities have made has been vital for building a programme which not only allows Partners to deliver on government aims for widening participation and fair access, but supports students to realise their potential to be successful students at research intensive universities.**

As this report highlights, there has been a phenomenal number of events attended by students out of their local area, a huge number of hours spent chatting to ementors, and a range of ambitiously executed Academic Assignments submitted by the students. The RO students continue to impress us with their commitment and dedication at every turn. Our first students are now becoming graduates and our evaluation and monitoring framework will continue to allow us to understand the journey of our students beyond RO into higher education and employment. We will continue to use this information, alongside student feedback, to enhance our support for future RO students. Underpinned by the sharing of best practice amongst the Partners, we will continue to offer students a truly innovative programme with unique benefits.

We are always happy to provide more information about anything contained in this report, or to discuss RO with you further. Please do contact the RO Central Team to arrange this at [info@realisingopportunities.ac.uk](mailto:info@realisingopportunities.ac.uk).



# REALISING OPPORTUNITIES

Working Together | Supporting Talent



# REALISING OPPORTUNITIES

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King's College London  
University of Leeds  
University of Leicester  
University of Liverpool  
University of Manchester  
Newcastle University  
University of Sheffield  
University College London  
University of Sussex  
University of Warwick  
University of York

## Contact

The RO Central Team co-ordinates the Programme on behalf of the RO Partner universities.

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