

University of Kent Academies Trust: Reflections on attainment raising and school sponsorship

This case study focuses on the raising of attainment at Brompton Academy since the University of Kent became formally involved in the governance of the school.

The University of Kent has been lead sponsor of Brompton Academy, a mixed non-selective school in Gillingham, since 2010. It is part of the University of Kent Academies Trust (UKAT).

The University of Kent Academies Trust consists of two schools: Brompton Academy and Chatham Grammar. The University of Kent's relationship with the two schools in the trust goes well beyond a formal governance role. Over 500 hours of outreach activities are run at UKAT each year alongside a substantial community and adult education offer and a primary school partnership project.

Brompton Academy is a non-selective school within a local authority with a large grammar school system.

Medway (where Brompton Academy is based) is an area of highly selective education, with 25-30 per cent of state-educated pupils entering grammar school each year, compared to an average of 5 per cent of state-educated pupils nationally.

Due to selective entry criteria, pupils at grammar schools are much less likely to have low prior attainment when starting secondary school (0.1 per cent in 2018 compared to the 12.7 per cent national average) and much more likely to have high prior attainment (93.5 per cent in 2018 compared to the 42.6 per cent national average)¹. This means that a non-selective school in a highly selective area, like Brompton Academy, has fewer high prior attainers than the national average.

Brompton Academy sits between several areas of high deprivation (IMD) and has a higher number of free school meal students than the national or Medway average. Medway, like Kent, has a significant disadvantage attainment gap which widens notably between primary and secondary school.

In 2006 only one student from Brompton Academy applied to higher education through UCAS and fewer than 30 per cent achieved A*-C in English and maths. The challenge was to work in partnership with the school to raise attainment and support increased progression to higher education.

These two elements of the challenge are inextricably linked, and the responses to both needed also to be linked. The University of Kent worked with senior leaders and teachers to develop a broad and sustained response to this challenge.

The University of Kent and school leaders have taken an approach characterised by sustained involvement at multiple levels. The six levels of partnership are:

These six levels of partnership were inspired by a vision for the university to be involved with students' learning and school experience from the start. The aim was support the building of key learning skills and create a sense of familiarity with the higher education environment, and for higher education students to be role models.

Alongside this the university adds value through specific programmes co-designed with teachers to support targeted groups of students most at risk of underachieving in identified areas, and provides wider enrichment opportunities. These varied programmes provide multiple ways in which students might engage and find the support, inspiration or challenge they need at different points in their journey.

Finally, the university worked with school leaders to develop the UKAT schools as anchor institutions in their area, providing community and adult learning opportunities and wider partnerships.

Success as a whole looks like a thriving school community with improved attainment and increased progression to higher education. Students will reach their potential and will have the skills and knowledge to progress onto the next stage of their educational journey.

The university evaluates its work at Brompton Academy through a range of mechanisms:

- yearly baselining of all students
- attainment data and progression outcomes
- individual programme and project evaluations
- teacher observations and reflections.

GCSE attainment at Brompton Academy increased significantly over the ten years since the university became lead sponsor, from approximately 30 per cent A*-C in English and maths to 53 per cent in 2019. In 2022 48 per cent of pupils achieved a grade 4 or above in English and maths. This figure was 38 per cent for disadvantaged students and 50 per cent for special educational needs (SEN) students, not including students with and Education, Health and Care Plan.

In 2022 the Progress 8 gap had decreased for disadvantaged students, and SEN students had a better Progress 8 score on average than other students, showing improvements for both these cohorts.

In September 2022 70.5 per cent of students who had completed year 13 in 2022 started an higher education course or had a place.

It is clear that there is more work to be done, in particular to further improve outcomes for disadvantaged students at GCSE, but the significant improvement in attainment and progression suggests that the aims of the partnership are being achieved.

Could the approach be replicated?

This approach could be replicated by other large institutions with a diverse range of courses and a significant pool of student ambassadors, but elements and principles could be adapted and utilised by any provider.

Could the approach be scaled up?

The University of Kent's approach to work with UKAT is based on a deep engagement with the specific area in which the trust is situated. The partnership is fully embedded within the identity, ethos and structure of the UKAT schools to create mutual stability and longevity. The

approach could be scaled up through appropriate partnerships; any increase of scale would require collaboration and cooperation to be at its heart.

Is there evidence of sustainability beyond the lifetime of the project?

The UKAT project is by its nature a sustained partnership, with no plans to 'end' the project. Having said that, with the principles of the partnership embedded in the schools the impact should be sustainable were elements of the programme to be changed.

Notes