

# The most able students

Are they doing as well as they should in our non-selective secondary schools?

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## Foreword by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Too many of our most able children and young people are underperforming in our non-selective state secondary schools.

Many of these able students achieve reasonably well when compared with average standards but, nevertheless, fail to reach their full potential. This is most obvious when we consider the pupils who did well in both English and mathematics at primary school and then examine their achievement at GCSE five years later. At the national level:

- Almost two thirds (65%) of high-attaining pupils leaving primary school, securing Level 5 in both English and mathematics, did not reach an A\* or A grade in both these GCSE subjects in 2012 in non-selective secondary schools. This represented over 65,000 students.
- Just over a quarter (27%) of these previously high-attaining students attending non-selective secondary schools did not reach a B grade in both English and mathematics at GCSE in 2012. This represented just over 27,000 young people.
- In 20% of the 1,649 non-selective 11 to 18 schools, not one student in 2012 achieved the minimum of two A grades and one B grade in at least two of the facilitating A-level subjects required by many of our most prestigious universities.<sup>1</sup>

These outcomes are unacceptable in an increasingly competitive world. If we are to succeed as an economy and society, we have to make more of our most able young people. We need them to become the political, commercial and professional leaders of tomorrow. Predictably, the able students who are most likely to underachieve are those from poorer backgrounds.

The founding principle of comprehensive education – that all pupils and students should be given the opportunity to achieve their full potential – is a noble one. For this principle to be fulfilled, we need to have the highest expectations of the most able children in non-selective schools, where the great majority are taught.

Indeed, just over three million students attend non-selective state secondary schools. Only 160,000 students attend selective state secondary schools. Therefore, it is right that the focus of this survey should be on the ablest young people in these non-selective schools.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Facilitation subjects are the subjects most commonly required for entry to degree courses at Russell Group universities. The DfE description can be found at: [www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/16to18\\_12/c4.html](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/16to18_12/c4.html).

<sup>2</sup> For example, in 2012, around 100,000 high-attaining students from the non-selective sector took English and mathematics GCSEs compared to some 16,000 students in the selective state sector schools.

We must do much more to narrow the gap between selective and non-selective schools in terms of applications and admissions to our most prestigious universities. I know that this can be done in our non-selective schools, not least because of my own personal experiences as a teacher and headteacher. It now needs to happen for the most able in all of our non-selective secondary schools.

Too many non-selective schools are failing to nurture scholastic excellence. While the best of these schools provide excellent opportunities, many of our most able students receive mediocre provision. Put simply, they are not doing well enough because their secondary schools fail to challenge and support them sufficiently from the beginning.

In too many lessons observed by inspectors, teaching is not supporting our highest-attaining students to do well. We know from our inspections that this is particularly the case in mixed ability groups. This survey suggests that few checks are made on whether mixed ability teaching helps the most able to achieve their potential.

Although the term 'special needs' should be as relevant to the most able as it is to those who require support for their learning difficulties, a few of the schools visited for this survey did not even know who their most able students were. This is completely unacceptable.

It is a serious concern that many non-selective schools fail to imbue their most able students with the confidence and high ambition that characterise many students in the selective or independent sector. Why should the most able students in the non-selective sector not have the same belief that they, too, can reach the top?

There are three key challenges.

First, we need to make sure that our most able students do as well academically as those of our main economic competitors. This means aiming for A\* and A grades and not being satisfied with less. Not enough has changed since 2009, when the PISA tests<sup>3</sup> found that England's teenagers were just over half as likely as those from other developed nations to reach the highest levels in mathematics in international tests.

The second challenge is to ensure, from early on, that students know what opportunities are open to them and develop the confidence to make the most of these. They need tutoring, guidance and encouragement, as well as a chance to meet other young people who have embraced higher education. In this respect, independent schools as well as universities have an important role to play in supporting state schools.

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<sup>3</sup> J Bradshaw, R Ager, B Burge and R Wheater, *PISA 2009: Achievement of 15-year-olds in England*, NFER, 2010; [www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/NPDZ01](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/NPDZ01).

The third challenge is to ensure that all schools help students and families overcome cultural barriers to attending higher education. Many of our most able students come from homes where no parent or close relative has either experienced, or expects, progression to university. Schools, therefore, need to engage more effectively with the parents or carers of these students to tackle this challenge.

This report reveals some of the reasons why too many schools are failing to meet the needs of their most able students; it also provides examples of excellent practice. It makes important recommendations for schools, for the government and for Ofsted. Unless we all act on its findings, England will continue to lag behind other leading nations in meeting the needs of its most able students. We cannot allow this to continue. I hope this report provides a catalyst for change.

Sir Michael Wilshaw  
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

## Executive summary

National data show that just over a quarter of the pupils who achieved Level 5 in English and mathematics at the end of Year 6 did not make the progress expected of them in their non-selective secondary schools. As a result, they failed to attain at least a B grade in these subjects at GCSE. In 2012, 20% of the 1,649 non-selective schools with sixth forms teaching A levels failed to produce a single student with an A-level grade profile of at least two A grades and one B grade in at least two of the facilitating subjects required by many of the most prestigious universities.<sup>4,5</sup>

This survey investigated why so many of our brightest students in non-selective state secondary schools, including academies, fail to achieve their potential compared with students who attend selective and independent schools. The vast majority of young people attending secondary schools are educated in non-selective state schools, so it is vital that we assess the current position, and suggest what might be done to improve outcomes in the future.<sup>6</sup> We also examined why relatively few students from non-selective state schools apply to, or gain places at, the most prestigious universities. The survey focused on two key questions.

- Are the most able students in non-selective state secondary schools achieving as well as they should?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'most prestigious' is used to describe the Russell Group of 24 leading United Kingdom universities.

<sup>5</sup> *Key Stage 5 Performance Tables 2012*, Department for Education; [www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance).

<sup>6</sup> The Annual School Census collection in 2012 identified 3,234,875 children and young people on roll at state-funded secondary schools (including academies and free schools). Of these, approximately 160,000 attended state-funded grammar schools.

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2012](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2012).

<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of this survey, 'most able' is defined as the brightest students starting secondary school in Year 7 attaining Level 5 or above, or having the potential to attain Level 5 and above, in

- Why is there such disparity in admissions to the most prestigious universities between a small number of independent and selective schools and the great majority of state-maintained non-selective schools and academies?

We reviewed evidence from a variety of sources, including a survey of parents and 2,327 lesson observation evidence forms completed by Ofsted inspectors during recent inspections of 109 non-selective secondary schools. We visited 41 non-selective secondary schools across England in March 2013 to help us to understand the reasons why the most able students do not routinely achieve the highest grades.<sup>8</sup> Schools were selected from all eight of Ofsted's regions and were a mixture of size and type. Nearly all of the schools visited had a broadly average intake in terms of their students' prior attainment at the end of Key Stage 2, although this varied from year group to year group. We gathered evidence about:

- the leadership of the school
- the achievement of the most able students throughout the school
- the transfer and transition of these students from their primary schools and their induction into secondary school
- the quality of teaching, learning and assessment of the most able students
- the curriculum and extension activities offered to the most able students
- the support and guidance provided for the most able students, particularly when they were choosing subjects and preparing for university.

The survey findings present a discouraging picture of what it means to be one of the most able students in non-selective secondary schools in England. The 2,327 lesson observation evidence forms scrutinised separately as part of this report showed that the most able students in only a fifth of these lessons were supported well or better in such schools. Moreover, in around 40% of the schools visited in the survey, the most able students were not making the progress of which they were capable. In a few of the schools visited, teachers did not even know who the most able students were.

Poor provision in the weaker schools visited resulted in:

- fragile transfer arrangements between primary and secondary schools
- students being placed in groups where the teaching did not challenge them

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English (reading and writing) and/or mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2. Some pupils who are new to the country and are learning English as an additional language, for example, might not have attained Level 5 or beyond at the end of Key Stage 2 but have the potential to achieve it.

<sup>8</sup> Inspectors also visited three selective schools for comparative purposes but their data and the evidence gathered are not included in the body of this report.

- irregular checks on progress
- a focus on students near the GCSE C/D grade borderline at the expense of more able students
- a failure to prepare them well for A-level examinations.

The visits also identified common characteristics in the schools that were doing well for their most able students:

- leadership that was determined to improve standards for all students
- high expectations among the most able students, their families and teachers
- effective transition arrangements that supported the students' move from primary to secondary school, ensuring that the most able sustained the progress they had made and maintained the pace of their learning
- early identification of the most able students so that teaching was adapted, and the curriculum tailored, to meet their needs
- flexibility in the curriculum, allowing the most able students to be challenged and extended
- groupings that allowed the students to be stretched from the very start of secondary school
- expert teaching, supported by effective formative assessment and purposeful homework, that stimulated students' enjoyment of the subject
- effective training and cooperative practice, ensuring that teachers learnt from one another
- tight checks on the progress of the most able students so that any slippage was identified early and acted on
- an effective programme that encouraged and supported the most able students to apply to our most prestigious universities.

## Key findings

- **The most able students in non-selective secondary schools are not achieving as well as they should.** In many schools, expectations of what the most able students should achieve are too low (paragraphs 24–28).
- **65% of pupils who achieved a Level 5 or above in both English and mathematics at the end of Year 6 failed to attain A\* or A grades in both these subjects at GCSE in 2012 in non-selective schools.** These top GCSE grades are a key predictor of success at A level and progression to university (paragraphs 4–6).
- **Leaders in our secondary schools have not done enough to create a culture of scholastic excellence, where the highest achievement in academic work is recognised as vitally important.** Schools do not routinely



give the same attention to the most able as they do to low-attaining students or those who struggle at school (paragraphs 29–37).

- **Transition arrangements from primary to secondary school are not effective enough to ensure that students maintain their academic momentum into Year 7.** Information is not used carefully so that teachers can plan to meet the most able students' needs in all lessons from the beginning of their secondary school career (paragraphs 38–44).
- **Teaching is insufficiently focused on the most able at Key Stage 3.** In over two fifths of the schools visited for the survey, students did not make the progress that they should, or that they were capable of, between the ages of 11 and 14. Students said that too much work was repetitive and undemanding in Key Stage 3. As a result, their progress faltered and their interest in school waned.
- **Many students become used to performing at a lower level than they are capable of. Parents or carers and teachers accepted this too readily.** Students did not do the hard work and develop the resilience needed to perform at a higher level because more challenging tasks were not regularly demanded of them. The work was pitched at the middle and did not extend the most able. School leaders did not evaluate how well mixed-ability group teaching was challenging the most able students (paragraphs 27, 28, 31–34).
- **The curriculum and the quality of homework required improvement.** The curriculum in Key Stage 3 and early entry to GCSE examinations are among the key weaknesses found by inspectors. Homework and the programme of extension activities for the most able students, where they existed, were not checked routinely for their impact or quality. Students said that too much homework was insufficiently challenging; it failed to interest them, extend their thinking or develop their skills (paragraphs 45–53).
- **Inequalities between different groups of the most able students are not being tackled satisfactorily.** The attainment of the most able students who are eligible for free school meals, especially the most able boys, lags behind that of other groups. Few of the schools visited used the Pupil Premium funding to support the most able students from the poorest backgrounds (paragraph 54).
- **Assessment, tracking and targeting are not used sufficiently well in many schools.** Some of the schools visited paid scant attention to the progress of their most able students (paragraphs 56–60).
- **Too few of the schools worked with families to support them in overcoming the cultural and financial obstacles that stood in the way of the most able students attending university,** particularly universities away from the immediate local area. Schools did not provide much information about the various benefits of attending different universities or help the most able students to understand more about the financial support available (paragraphs 67–70).

- **Most of the 11 to 16 age-range schools visited were insufficiently focused on university entrance.** These schools did not provide students with sufficiently detailed advice and guidance on all the post-16 options available (paragraph 74).
- **Schools' expertise in and knowledge about how to apply to the most prestigious universities were not always current and relevant.** Insufficient support and guidance were provided to those most able students whose family members had not attended university (paragraphs 70–75).

## Recommendations

The Department for Education (DfE) should:

- ensure that parents receive from schools a report each year which communicates whether their children are on track to achieve as well as they should in national tests and examinations
- develop progress measures to identify how well the most able students have progressed from Year 6 through Key Stage 4 to the end of Key Stage 5
- promote the new destination data, which will show what proportion of students in sixth form providers go to university and, particularly, the Russell Group of universities.

Maintained schools and academies should:

- develop their culture and ethos so that the needs of the most able students are championed by school leaders
- help the most able students to flourish and leave school with the best qualifications by providing first-rate opportunities to develop the skills, confidence and attitudes needed to succeed at the best universities
- improve the transfer between primary and secondary schools so that all Year 7 teachers know which students achieved highly, know what aspects of the curriculum the most able students have studied in Year 6, and use this information to plan and teach lessons that build on prior knowledge and skills
- ensure that work continues to be challenging and demanding throughout Key Stage 3 so that the most able students make rapid progress
- ensure that senior leaders evaluate mixed ability teaching so that the most able students are sufficiently challenged and make good progress
- evaluate the quality of homework set for the most able students to ensure that it is suitably challenging
- give the parents and carers of the most able students better and more frequent information about what their children should achieve and raise their expectations where necessary

- work with families more closely, particularly the families of first generation university applicants and those eligible for free school meals, to overcome any cultural and financial obstacles to university application
- develop more in-house expertise and up-to-date knowledge to support applications to the most prestigious universities, particularly in relation to the knowledge and skills required for undergraduate courses
- publish more widely a list of the university destinations of all their students.

Ofsted will:

- focus more closely in its inspections on the teaching and progress of the most able students, the curriculum available to them, and the information, advice and guidance provided to the most able students
- consider in more detail during inspection how well the pupil premium is used to support the most able students from disadvantaged backgrounds
- report its inspection findings about this group of students more clearly in school inspection, sixth form and college reports.

## Introduction

'Ensuring that the brightest pupils fulfil their potential goes straight to the heart of social mobility, of basic fairness and economic efficiency.'<sup>9</sup>

1. National performance data show that able students are not doing as well as they should. Research by the Sutton Trust and others shows that failure to gain examination grades at the highest levels means that a 'glass ceiling' remains for too many of the most able students in our non-selective maintained schools and academies.<sup>8</sup> This failure to ensure that our most able students achieve their potential both restricts their choice of university and limits their future economic well-being.
2. This survey was commissioned to investigate why many of the brightest students who go to non-selective maintained secondary schools or academies fail to achieve their potential compared with students who attend many of our grammar schools and independent schools. It also looks at how these students make decisions about university applications and what support they need to be successful.
3. We report our findings in two parts. The first considers published evidence of the achievement and progress of the most able students in the state non-

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<sup>9</sup> A Smithers, and P Robinson, *Educating the highly able*, Foreword by Sir Peter Lampl, Sutton Trust, 2012; [www.suttontrust.com/research/educating-the-highly-able/](http://www.suttontrust.com/research/educating-the-highly-able/).

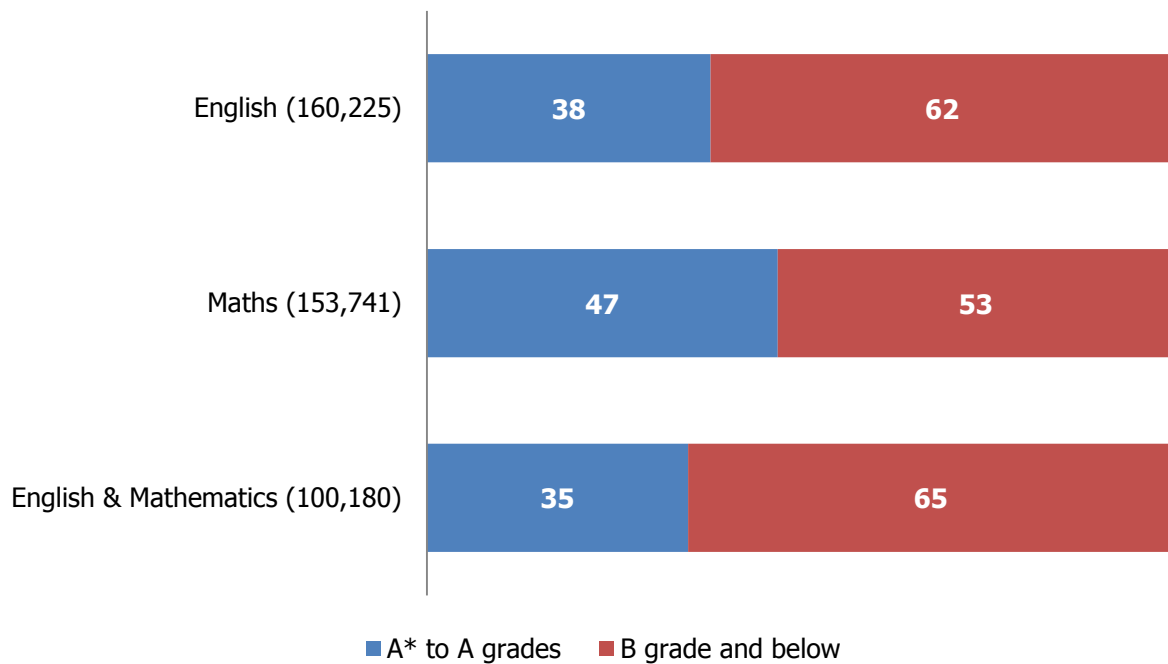
selective secondary school sector. The second part summarises the evidence from the field visits to 41 non-selective secondary schools during which the following aspects were evaluated: achievement; leadership; transition between schools; the quality of teaching, learning and assessment; the curriculum; extension activities; and support and guidance. The second part of the report also draws on the separate scrutiny of 2,327 lesson observation evidence forms.

## **Are the most able students in non-selective secondary schools achieving as well as they should?**

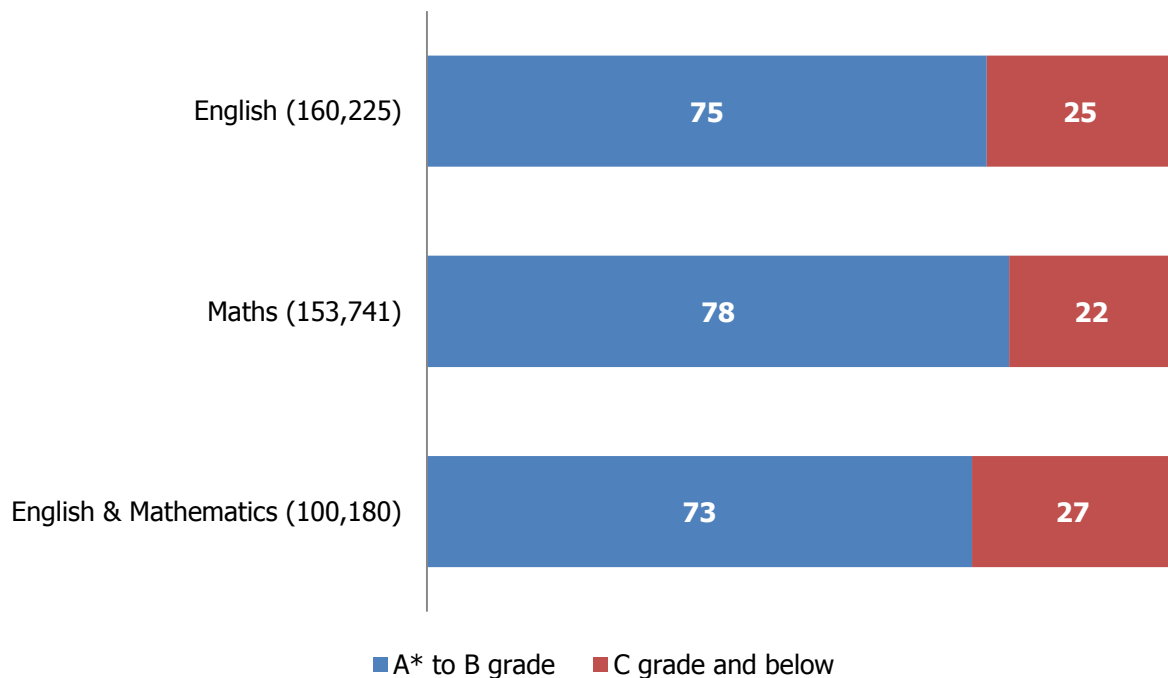
### **The attainment of the most able: an overview**

4. National data show that 62% of students who gained Level 5 in English at the end of primary school did not gain an A\* or A grade in this subject at GCSE in 2012 while attending non-selective secondary schools. Twenty-five per cent of students who gained Level 5 in English at the end of primary school failed to gain a B grade: this corresponds to just over 40,000 high-attaining students not making the expected progress in this subject.
5. In mathematics, 53% of students who gained Level 5 at the end of primary school did not gain an A\* or A grade in this subject at GCSE in 2012 while at non-selective secondary schools. Twenty-two per cent of students who gained Level 5 in mathematics at the end of primary school failed to gain a B grade: this corresponds to just under 34,000 high-attaining students not making the expected progress in this subject.
6. Of those pupils who achieved Level 5 in both English and mathematics at the end of primary school, just 35% achieved an A\* or A grade in both subjects at GCSE in 2012 while at non-selective secondary schools; 65% did not. Over one quarter – 27% – of these previously high-attaining students did not achieve at least a B grade for both subjects.

**Figure 1: Percentage of the most able students that attained Level 5+ at Key Stage 2 gaining A\* to A at GCSE in 2012**



**Figure 2: Percentage of the most able students that attained Level 5+ at Key Stage 2 gaining A\* to B at GCSE in 2012**



7. The failure of our brightest students to achieve their full potential at GCSE level is likely to have an impact on their subsequent achievement at A level and entry to university. The highest grades at GCSE are a predictor of the highest grades at A level; and A-level grades at A\*/B are now the benchmark level of qualification for entry to Russell Group universities.
8. Data show that hundreds of secondary schools across England did not produce a single student with high enough grades in the subjects usually required by the most prestigious universities. The Key Stage 5 Performance Tables for 2012 show that 334 (20%) of non-selective secondary schools<sup>10</sup> did not produce any students with grade profiles of at least AAB, including at least two of the key subjects of mathematics and further mathematics, English literature, physics, biology, chemistry, history, geography, and modern and classical languages.<sup>11</sup>

### **Differential attainment among groups of the most able**

9. Some groups of the most able students do significantly less well than others. For example, students eligible for free school meals, boys and White British students are not doing as well as other groups and make less progress from their starting points at the end of Key Stage 2.

### **Socio-economic disadvantage**

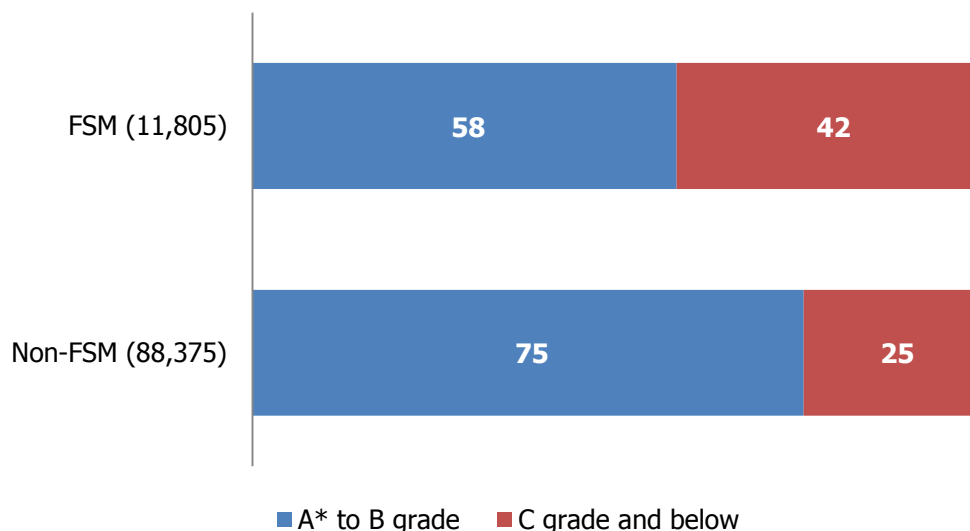
10. For the most able students who are known to be eligible for free school meals (FSM), the difference in outcomes compared with the non-FSM most able students is stark. Only 58% of FSM most able students in non-selective secondary schools do well enough to attain an A\* to B grade in English and mathematics at GCSE (Figure 3). The gap in achievement between these students and those who are not eligible for free school meals is large, at 17 percentage points in English and mathematics combined.

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<sup>10</sup> That is, schools with a sixth form that entered five or more students for A-level examinations.

<sup>11</sup> *School and local statistics*, Department for Education, 2012;  
[www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/download\\_data.html](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/download_data.html).

**Figure 3: Percentage of the most able students eligible and not eligible for free school meals that attained Level 5+ at Key Stage 2 gaining A\* to B in English and mathematics at GCSE in 2012**



- The report by the Sutton Trust *Wasted talent? Attrition rates for high-achieving students* identified 60,000 students who, at the ages of 11, 14 or 16 were among the top fifth of academic performers in English state schools each year but who had not subsequently entered higher education by the age of 18.<sup>12</sup> The report indicated that students known to be eligible for free school meals were 19 percentage points less likely than other school students to enter higher education by the age of 19 – a gap similar in size to the attainment gap noted in paragraph 10 above. The Sutton Trust identified that the single most important factor contributing to the relatively low proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds attending selective universities was the level and nature of the qualifications the students obtained.<sup>13</sup>

## Gender

- In 2012, the most able girls in non-selective secondary schools outperformed boys in GCSE English by 11 percentage points at the higher A\* to A grade. At A\* to B, they outperformed boys by 11 percentage points. In mathematics, girls did better than boys at both A\* to A and A\* to B, although by the smaller margin of six and five percentage points respectively. Data for students attaining the higher A\* to A grades for English and mathematics combined

<sup>12</sup> *Wasted talent? Attrition rates for high-achieving students between school and university*, The Sutton Trust, 2008; [www.suttontrust.com/research/wasted-talent/](http://www.suttontrust.com/research/wasted-talent/).

<sup>13</sup> *Sutton Trust submission to Sir Martin Harris: Widening access to selective universities*, The Sutton Trust, 2010; [www.suttontrust.com/research/sutton-trust-submission-to-sir-martin-harris/](http://www.suttontrust.com/research/sutton-trust-submission-to-sir-martin-harris/).

show that girls are 10 percentage points ahead of boys. Girls' attainment is also higher than that of boys by 10 percentage points at the expected A\* to B grade level.

13. In 2012, girls' attainment at A level was slightly better than that of boys at the highest levels (A\*/A) in English and further mathematics. There was no difference in mathematics. In science, girls' attainment was slightly above that of boys in biology and chemistry.

### **Ethnicity**

14. GCSE data for 2012 show that non-White British students performed better than White British students in mathematics, as well as in English and mathematics combined. At the expected A\* to B level, non-White British students performed the same as their White British counterparts in English, were two points ahead in mathematics, and were one point ahead in English and mathematics combined. At the higher A\* or A grade level, non-White British students attained the same outcomes as their White British counterparts in English, were three percentage points better in mathematics and one percentage point better in English and mathematics combined.

### **Acceptance by higher education institutions**

15. There is a disparity in the admission of students to Russell Group universities between the majority of maintained secondary schools and independent schools. The Sutton Trust's report *Degrees of success: university chances by individual school* shows that, between 2007 and 2009, 68.3% of sixth form students from 2,343 schools and colleges in England were accepted into higher education over that three-year period.<sup>14</sup> The proportions going on to higher education varied for different school sectors: 69% from non-selective state schools; 86.4% from selective state schools; and 75.5% from independent schools.
16. The report found that independent school students were more than twice as likely as students in comprehensive schools or academies to be accepted into one of the 30 most highly selective universities: 48.2% of independent school students in England were accepted by these universities compared with 18% of students in non-selective state schools. One hundred schools, comprising 87 independent schools and 13 grammar schools (just 3% of schools with sixth forms and sixth form colleges in the United Kingdom), accounted for over a tenth (11.2%) of admissions to highly selective universities during the three-year period.

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<sup>14</sup> *Degrees of success: university chances by individual school*, The Sutton Trust, 2011; [www.suttontrust.com/research/degree-of-success-university-chances-by-individual-school/](http://www.suttontrust.com/research/degree-of-success-university-chances-by-individual-school/).



17. The study also indicated that the difference in the admission rates to highly selective universities could not be attributed solely to the schools' average A-level or equivalent results. Fifty-eight per cent of higher education applicants from the 30 best comprehensive schools (with average scores for students exceeding three A grades at A level) were accepted into the 30 most highly selective universities. This compared with 87.1% of applicants from the 30 best independent schools and 74.1% from the 30 best grammar schools.

### **How does England compare internationally?**

18. The PISA tests in 2009 reported international comparisons in reading, mathematics and science and provide an insight into England's standing compared with our international competitors.<sup>15</sup>
19. In reading, 14 countries had a higher proportion of 15-year-olds attaining the highest level in the assessment. Only one per cent of England's 15-year-olds attained this highest level. Although this was above the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) overall average of 0.8%, it was below that of other English-speaking countries such as New Zealand (2.9%), Australia (2.1%) and Canada (1.8%).
20. In mathematics, the performance of England's 15-year-olds at the highest level was below that of 32 other countries; 1.7% of English 15-year-olds attained the highest level compared with the OECD average of 3.1%. Attainment was well below that of Switzerland (7.8%) and Belgium (5.8%).
21. Performance in science was better. The achievement of 15-year-olds at the highest levels in England was 1.9%, which was above the OECD average of 1.1%. Nevertheless, attainment was below that of Singapore (4.6%), Finland (3.3%) and Japan (2.6%).

### **Findings from the schools visited by Her Majesty's Inspectors**

22. To investigate the reasons for the uneven performance of our most able students, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) visited 41 non-selective secondary schools and academies. The findings from these visits are set out below.
23. Alongside these visits, HMI considered evidence from a survey of parents and 2,327 lesson observations taken from 109 inspections of non-selective secondary schools and academies in the academic year 2012/13. This evidence

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<sup>15</sup> J Bradshaw, R Ager, B Burge and R Wheeler, *PISA 2009: Achievement of 15-year-olds in England*, NFER, 2010; [www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/NPDZ01](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/NPDZ01).

indicated that inspectors had observed good or better support for higher-attaining students in only about a fifth of those lessons.

## Achievement

24. The most able students were not achieving their potential in over 40% of the schools visited for the survey.<sup>16</sup> Many of the most able students in these schools failed to attain the highest levels at GCSE and A level.
25. In Key Stage 3, the academic progress of the most able students required improvement in 17 of the schools visited. Seven schools did not have either accurate or robust data about their most able students. The most able students were making slow progress in a range of subjects, including English, mathematics and science. In other subjects, the progress made by the most able students differed widely.
26. In Key Stage 4, the most able students were making less progress, relative to their starting points, than the other students in 19 of the secondary schools visited. In 17 of the schools visited, the most able students at Key Stage 5 were making less than expected progress in one or more subjects.
27. The reasons for the slow progress being made by the most able students varied from school to school and from subject to subject. They included: a failure to recognise and challenge the most able students; variability in approaches across subjects and year groups; the inconsistent application of school policy; and a lack of focus by senior and middle leaders on the most able students.
28. Weaker provision included the following characteristics:
  - insufficient tracking of the most able students as a discrete group. As a result, schools did not know accurately enough the rates of progress being made by the most able students
  - inadequate strategies for rapid intervention if a high-attaining student was at risk of falling behind
  - students being given the same homework tasks as other, less able, students with few examples of more challenging or open-ended tasks
  - Pupil Premium funding being used only to support middle or lower-attaining students who were at risk of underachieving, rather than being used to support the most able disadvantaged students
  - few checks to evaluate the impact of teaching of, and support given to, the most able students

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<sup>16</sup> In this second part of the report, the schools visited that are referred to include non-selective maintained schools and academies.

- lack of distinct arrangements for inducting the most able students into Year 7
- an absence of activities aimed at encouraging students to apply to the most prestigious universities.

## Leadership and management

29. Nearly all of the school leaders spoken to by inspectors claimed that they were very ambitious for their most able students. However, this ambition did not translate into practice in over two fifths of the schools visited.
30. In the less effective schools, inspectors found that initiatives to support the most able students were usually rudimentary or in the early stages of development. Where they were in place, school leaders had not evaluated their impact.
31. In a few of the schools, decisions about the way classes were organised inhibited the progress of the most able. For example, a lack of knowledge about the effectiveness of differentiation in mixed ability classes, coupled with a lack of challenge for the most able students (particularly at Key Stage 3), meant that many of the most able students in these schools did not achieve as well as they should.

## Impact of mixed ability groups

32. In around a third of the schools visited, students were taught mainly in mixed ability groups throughout Key Stage 3. Where setting by ability occurred at an early stage, this was usually only for mathematics. Sets were introduced at various times for English and science, but often only in the later stages of Key Stage 3. For most other subjects, mixed ability classes were retained throughout Key Stage 3.
33. In the very best schools, this did not appear to have a detrimental impact on students' progress because the teaching was carefully planned and well matched to the most able students' needs. In the less effective schools, the work was pitched at the level of the average-attaining students. It was not challenging enough for the most able and their progress was insufficient. The findings of Ofsted's surveys, such as *Mathematics: made to measure*, have shown that teaching is often weakest in Key Stage 3 where the students are more likely to be taught by less experienced, temporary or non-specialist teachers.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Mathematics: made to measure* (110159), Ofsted, 2012; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/110159](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/110159).

34. It was evident in some of the schools visited that school leaders had responded to recent research findings about mixed ability teaching, particularly in Key Stage 3. Eight of the schools had moved recently towards grouping by ability, particularly in English, mathematics and science. Some other school leaders recognised that their earlier grouping arrangements had not always promoted the best outcomes for the most able students. They indicated that they were moving away from mixed ability teaching to setting, streaming or banding in most subjects. Schools' data shown to inspectors during the visits indicated that these moves were beginning to have a positive impact on outcomes for the most able students.

### **Early entry to GCSE**

35. Leaders in seven of the schools surveyed indicated that they had revised their approach towards early entry for GCSE because they recognised from their internal assessment data that it was having a negative effect on the number of their most able students who were achieving the top grades. However, inspection evidence shows that early entry is still prevalent in a number of schools across England.<sup>18</sup>

### **What did successful leadership and management look like?**

36. Leaders in the best schools visited exhibited very high aspirations for their brightest students. They provided high-quality teaching and work that was well matched to the needs of their most able students, with suitable extension activities and a high degree of challenge. In these schools, students' outcomes were good, with results well above average at the end of Key Stage 3, GCSE and A level. In addition, high proportions of students attained the highest A\* to A grades at both GCSE and A level. In one school, for example:

Students' attainment and progress in mathematics were outstanding and their performance was in the top 20% of all schools. Highly refined assessment processes enabled staff to identify the most able mathematicians, to set them, and to challenge them to achieve the highest grade possible. The effective policy on early entry had enabled exceptionally gifted and talented mathematicians and those who were identified as very able to achieve the highest grade (A\*) in mathematics from as early as Year 9. Additional curriculum time was used very well to begin preparatory work for A level. Exceptionally gifted and talented students were nurtured very well through fast-track programmes such as art, dance, mathematics, and information and communication technology. Excellent opportunities were provided for students who had been fast-tracked to work alongside highly qualified practitioners and professionals

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<sup>18</sup> *Schools' use of early entry to GCSE examinations* (120198), Ofsted, 2013; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120198](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120198).

to develop their skills further. For example, Year 9 students who gained A\* in art worked alongside an artist in residence.

37. The most successful schools in the survey shared common features, the most important of which was determined leadership with high expectations and a focus on raising the attainment of the most able students. The best leaders:
- promoted high aspirations for the most able students, which were communicated to, and understood by, all in the school community
  - established clear expectations that high-attaining students would achieve their goals, for example by ensuring that the most able students were given challenging and stretching targets
  - recruited highly qualified and committed staff and deployed them as specialists
  - created a dynamic, innovative learning environment.

### **Transfer and transition from primary to secondary school**

38. The quality of transition between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 was much too variable in the schools surveyed. Arrangements for transfer and transition were weak in over a quarter of the schools visited. Teachers in Year 7 were frequently unaware of what the most able students had studied or achieved previously in their primary schools. Time was wasted, either because work was repeated or because it failed to challenge the most able students at an appropriate level. Opportunities were missed to extend and consolidate learning because teachers were unaware of the themes studied in the previous phase of education and the levels that students had reached. Too few schools used the Department for Education's *Key to Success* website, a resource that has been available for a number of years.<sup>19</sup>
39. Effective transition from Year 6 to Year 7 (from primary to secondary) can be challenging, especially where secondary schools admit students from large numbers of primary schools. Transition was most effective when it was simplest. For example, it worked well when primary schools sent their pupils mainly to one secondary school or where local cluster arrangements between the feeder primaries and secondary school were of long standing.
40. In the best examples of effective transition from primary to secondary, schools had ensured that good links were a priority: for example, secondary schools supported the most able students before transfer by providing subject-specialist teaching or providing a range of pre-secondary activities such as workshops,

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<sup>19</sup> [www.keytosuccess.education.gov.uk/](http://www.keytosuccess.education.gov.uk/)

transfer projects or summer schools. Seventy-one of the 76 parents and carers who responded to the question on transition in Ofsted's questionnaire on the National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE) website either agreed or strongly agreed that the transfer between primaries and the secondary school was handled appropriately.<sup>20</sup>

41. Although all the secondary schools visited referred to a range of activities that they had provided for their most able students before they started in Year 7, these activities were, typically, available to all students and not arranged specifically for the most able. In addition, too many school leaders did not know how effective their transition arrangements were in helping their most able students to get off to a flying start in secondary school.
42. In over a quarter of the schools surveyed, students did not get off to a good start in Year 7. This was because teachers' expectations of what the most able students could achieve were not high enough. The most able students spoken to during the visits to these schools reported that work in Year 7 was insufficiently demanding and that they did not feel challenged in the majority of their lessons. One Year 7 student said, 'In geography, teachers give you the information and they do not expect students to find out things for themselves.' Another said, 'We're doing circuits and forces in science and I already know that from primary school.'
43. Overall, inspectors found serious weaknesses in the transfer arrangements between primary and secondary schools. They did not enable secondary schools to build on the achievements of the most able pupils in Year 6.

### **What supports successful transition?**

44. The survey visits found some examples of effective transition arrangements for the most able students as they moved from primary to secondary school. These included:
  - effective pre-transfer liaison with primary school teachers, which included careful discussion about the most able students
  - the gathering of a wide range of data beyond simply the Year 6 national test results. These data were used to inform setting or class groups in Year 7; this was supported by a further detailed assessment of students' skills, knowledge and understanding on entry to secondary school
  - identifying the most able students early, and constructing and implementing programmes of support in the secondary school so that students could maintain their academic momentum

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<sup>20</sup> In all, 93 parents responded to the questionnaire, although some parents did not answer all the questions in it.

- fully evaluating the range of activities provided for the most able students before they started at secondary school to determine their impact, and adapting future programmes to respond to the findings.

## **The influence of the curriculum and the quality of extension activities offered to the most able students**

### **Curriculum**

45. In over a quarter of the schools visited, inspectors found that aspects of the curriculum, including homework, required improvement. In two of the schools, the curriculum failed to meet the needs of the most able students.
46. In one in seven of the schools visited, leaders had made recent significant changes to the curriculum. For example, inspectors noted an increased emphasis on academic subjects and a greater use of setting. Typically, these schools offered English language and English literature, triple science and two modern foreign languages. At A level, such schools offered subjects that were relevant for entry to degree courses. These 'facilitating' subjects, so called because choosing them at A level leaves open a wide range of options for university study, include: mathematics and further mathematics; physics; biology; chemistry; history; geography; modern and classical languages; and English literature.
47. More generally, the schools visited did not always listen carefully enough to the views of their most able students. Discussions with school leaders showed that many did not ask their students about how well the school was meeting their needs or what the school needed to do to improve their learning further. One Year 13 student said, 'Some teachers ask for views about how we are finding the lessons... but not all teachers do this.'

### **Homework and extension work**

48. The most able students in the weaker schools lacked opportunities to deepen their understanding of subjects. They were rarely, if at all, given extension work. The sixth form students spoken to reported that they were not challenged sufficiently to think reflectively or presented with enough suggestions for wider, independent reading.
49. The lack of challenge in some subjects meant that students were not adequately prepared for study to the highest standards at A level and beyond. Of the 75 parents who responded to the question on students' research outside school in Ofsted's questionnaire on the NACE website, 41 said that their child did not engage in higher-level research and study when not at school: 'He will do what is set by the teacher and sees no need to do anything extra,' wrote one parent.

50. Many of the most able students from the less effective schools visited believed that the homework that was set for them could be more challenging. Few of them were set relevant wider research or extension tasks. One Year 7 student said, 'We get asked to design a lot of posters. All abilities get set the same homework. Sometimes we just have to finish what we have started in lessons.' Master classes in advanced mathematics, for example, or work that involved reflective thinking, were seldom undertaken. Twenty of the 75 parents who responded to the question on challenging homework in the questionnaire felt that the homework the school provided failed to offer the right level of challenge for their child. One parent wrote, 'He never seems to have much homework and is not keen to do anything "extra" himself.'
51. Some school leaders argued that while the homework set was often similar, additional challenge was provided for most able students. Many of the students disagreed. Students who had been given imaginative homework projects talked about their increased motivation and engagement. They described how such projects helped to develop their independence and creativity. In the better schools visited, homework was well matched to students' specific needs, and extension tasks were interesting and challenging. Discussion with the school leaders showed, however, that few were aware of the quality of homework provided for their most able students. Many of the schools in the sample did not have either robust or effective strategies for auditing and evaluating the impact of homework on their most able students. Consequently, some school leaders and staff were unable to speak confidently about whether or not homework was sufficiently demanding or challenging for these students.
52. Most of the school leaders said that a wide range of extension tasks and extra-curricular and enrichment activities was provided to support the most able students. This view was supported by parents and carers, who described a broad range of activity, including mathematical challenges, engineering workshops and science master classes. However, these activities were usually provided for all students regardless of ability. When additional activities had been undertaken, they were very rarely evaluated. Consequently, their benefits and their impact on the achievement of the most able students were not known.
53. Recent research findings from the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring have suggested that students with better-educated parents spend more time on educational activities both in and outside school, and there is evidence that this leads to better outcomes for such students.<sup>21</sup> If this is the case, then it is particularly important that schools offer such activities for the most able students whose own parents are not providing them themselves.

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<sup>21</sup> A Wiggins, R Coe, K Jones and M-Y Kan, *Evidence of educational support outside school*, The Sutton Trust, 2009; [www.suttontrust.com/research/evidence-of-educational-support-outside-school/](http://www.suttontrust.com/research/evidence-of-educational-support-outside-school/).



## **Pupil Premium funding**

54. Pupil Premium funding was used in only a few instances to support the most able students who were known to be eligible for free school meals. The funding was generally spent on providing support for all underachieving and low-attaining students rather than on the most able students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## **What is crucial to ensuring strong and effective practice?**

55. Examples of strong and effective practice were reported by inspectors where:
- the school's curriculum was carefully considered and well matched to the needs of the most able students and, consequently, contributed positively to their achievement
  - a good range and quality of extra-curricular activity were provided and all available opportunities were used to raise expectations
  - the Pupil Premium was used effectively to enrich the curriculum and the educational experience of the most able students
  - imaginative homework projects, tailored to the needs of the most able students, motivated and engaged them, helping to develop their creativity and independence.

## **Assessment, tracking and targets**

56. Almost all the schools surveyed had assessment and tracking systems. However, in over a third of the schools visited, the tracking of the most able students was not secure, routine or robust. Leaders and teachers did not always analyse or use data sharply enough. Consequently, when the progress of the most able students was found to have slowed, intervention occurred too late and left some of the most able students failing to achieve their potential.
57. School leaders in the weaker schools had focused mainly on students working at the grade C/D borderline. The better schools also focused on the higher A\*/A grades as they believed that their most able students had the potential to do better than the B grade that is implied by the 'expected progress' measure from Level 5. Some of the schools visited used their assessment systems inconsistently, particularly in relation to some Key Stage 3 foundation subjects. In these instances, assessment coordinators and heads of department were unclear about how well the most able students were doing as they had insufficient data, or the data were inaccurate. In one in five of the schools, the targets set for the most able students lacked precision and challenge. Students were unclear about what they needed to do to achieve more.

58. Senior leaders are crucial in raising the attainment of the most able students. In a fifth of the schools visited, leaders had implemented improved systems that would provide them with the information they needed to hold staff to account for the achievement of these students. However, in a number of instances, implementation of such systems was at a very early stage. In these schools, leaders had yet to analyse emerging findings and establish how best to respond to students who had been identified as falling behind. In the best schools, however, the systems were well established.
59. The most effective checking involved senior leaders in scrutinising the progress of the most able students through regular meetings and a wide range of monitoring and evaluation, including lesson observation, work scrutiny, analyses of data and reviews of teachers' planning. These activities helped to ensure that the needs of the most able were being met. In the better schools, students had a clear understanding of their targets and knew exactly what they needed to do to attain the next level or grade. They felt suitably challenged because they received regular feedback about how well they were doing.

Extremely high expectations of students' progress, including of the most able, had been established. Targets were challenging and 'are never lowered'. All targets were set on a basis of four levels of progress, so Level 5 students would have targets of A\*/A. If students were on track to exceed their target, greater challenge was introduced and targets were raised. High-ability students were mentored to support them in achieving high grades. Consequently, a very large majority of the most able students made good or better progress throughout Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. They attained well in a range of subjects, although performance in English and mathematics was particularly strong. Students spoken to said that they were stretched and challenged in all key stages. Independent learning was promoted actively and homework was suitably differentiated.

### **What does good practice look like?**

60. The most successful of the schools visited were implementing a wide range of strategies that were instrumental in raising standards. These included:
- ensuring that staff had a thorough and detailed knowledge of the most able students in their classes, including the extent of their strengths and interests
  - implementing a comprehensive approach to assessment, which led to high-quality support and carefully planned, challenging programmes that met the needs of the most able students in all subjects
  - tracking and monitoring of the most able students rigorously at year, department and key stage level, coupling this with swift intervention for those in danger of falling behind.

## The importance of training

61. Although leaders in all of the schools surveyed had established continuing professional development for their staff, in many of them a focus on the most able students had not been explicitly explored or developed.
62. Leaders and staff in over one fifth of the schools visited had not emphasised or tackled the particular, unique needs of their most able students. As a result, the teachers in these schools had not developed the required skills to meet the needs of the brightest students. Teachers in secondary schools and academies need to know precisely which aspects of the curriculum pupils have been taught in Year 6, so that they can extend students' skills and knowledge in Year 7. Recent changes to the end of Key Stage 2 national tests, for instance, mean that Year 6 pupils might already have achieved Level 6 in the tests before joining Year 7.
63. Schools that had a strong and effective programme of professional development to improve teaching and learning for their most able students increased their teachers' expectations and understanding of how they should meet these students' needs. Alongside learning from, and developing practice with, their peers, the schools had established effective links with different external agencies such as universities, external consultants and other local schools.

Continuing professional development was used very well to meet the needs of the most able students. For example, external companies provided specialist training to increase teachers' awareness of how to meet the needs of these students, such as employing a range of teaching strategies to engage and challenge them. The school had high expectations of teaching and learning and had drawn up its own criteria for teaching. This ensured that all staff knew what constituted good teaching and learning for the most able. Consequently, teachers set challenging targets and students felt that they were extended and pushed to the limit to achieve A\*/A in the GCSE and A-level examinations.

## Support and guidance for university entry

64. The support and guidance provided to students when they were thinking about, and applying for, university varied in quality, accuracy and depth in the schools surveyed. Although most of the schools considered themselves to be providing good support and guidance, around half of them accepted any university as an option and did not have aspirations that their students should aim to apply to leading universities. Almost a quarter of the schools visited had much to do to convince students, and their families, of the benefits of attending university; and they began doing this too late. The schools that began such work in good

time – that is, before the students reached the sixth form – increased the likelihood that the students concerned would attend university.

65. Analysis of data provided by 26 of the 29 non-selective 11 to 18 schools visited shows that just 16 students went to Oxford or Cambridge in 2011, including one student who was eligible for free school meals.<sup>22</sup> However, almost half of these students came from just two of the schools visited. 19 of the schools visited did not have any students accepted at Oxford or Cambridge at all. The picture was marginally better in 2012; 26 students were accepted to Oxford or Cambridge, including three who were eligible for free school meals.<sup>23</sup>
66. Further analysis of the 2011 data shows that a total of 293 students from the schools visited went on to study at one of the Russell Group universities. Just six of these students were eligible for free school meals. The remaining students, between a third and two thirds of each school's Year 13 cohort, went on to study at other universities. In 2012, 352 students went on to study at one of the Russell Group universities, including 30 who were eligible for free school meals. Over a quarter of these 352 students came from just two of the schools.

## **Factors that affect choice of university**

### **Cultural and financial factors**

67. The schools and students surveyed gave several reasons for not applying to one of the selective universities – or not applying at all. These included pressure from families and peers to remain in their region, or even within the immediate area. Cost and tuition fees were factors and appeared to be especially strong factors for girls. Four schools referred to a range of strategies that they were using to break the 'must stay local' habit, although the success of these had been mixed.
68. In some of the schools where there was a predominance of families from low-income, White British backgrounds, low expectations were cited as a factor. Some of the students had little inclination to attend university and, when they did apply, they did not believe they had the ability or social standing to attend more prestigious universities. A typical response from students who did not apply to Russell Group universities was: 'I would never have fitted in.' In one case, this was after a student had spoken to some undergraduates at the Oxbridge stand of a careers fair and felt that they dismissed her because of the way she looked. Almost half the schools visited sought to tackle this through partnerships with local universities to break down barriers and increase understanding. Such initiatives were highly valued by most of the schools and

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<sup>22</sup> Two of the schools visited did not provide these data. One school provided proportions rather than the actual numbers and the data were not useable.

<sup>23</sup> All but one school provided useable 2012 data.

students who attended the events, although four schools reported that they had had limited impact.

69. Some students were put off by the view that attending university would entail incurring debt at a time when economic circumstances mean that jobs are hard to come by. However, this concern was allayed when students were made aware of the financial support available.

### **Advice and guidance**

70. The schools visited did not always provide early, or effective, careers guidance to students to show, for example, the likely pay progression in 'top jobs'. The absence of such guidance was compounded by a lack of effective information to increase students' understanding of grants, loans, and the cost and benefits of attending university. Early and strong support for first-time entrants to university, including financial advice to students and parents, led to more positive outcomes.
71. Some schools showed a lack of up-to-date, in-school intelligence about universities, especially in relation to universities outside their region. Current knowledge of the entry requirements for different courses was weak in some of the schools.
72. However, this was not the picture in all the schools. In a third of those visited, well-qualified, knowledgeable and experienced staff provided high-quality support and guidance. Well-established links with a range of universities, achieved through participating in a variety of events such as 'taster' sessions, visits to the university campus and information sessions from university staff, led to increased and successful applications to prestigious universities.

The school provided good support in guiding students when they were making choices. This enabled the students to make informed decisions about which subjects to study. Academic courses were given high priority and students were guided towards these options. The school engaged itself with students about university choices and options, and information was timely. Productive links were established with universities to promote higher education. The majority of students were encouraged to apply to top universities. Students received good support when they were completing their UCAS forms and personal statements.

73. All the schools indicated that they were ambitious for their most able students but some regarded going to any university as the indicator of success, rather than aiming for their students to attend more prestigious universities. In fact, some schools disagreed that it was appropriate to push students towards such universities, feeling that it was more appropriate to select a university that appeared 'right' for the individual student. Not all of the most able students

spoken to were clear about what they wanted to do, where they wanted to go, and what support was available to help them succeed with their plans.

74. Most of the 11 to 16 age-range schools visited were insufficiently focused on university entrance, although some organised trips to universities for 'tasters'. These schools did not provide students with sufficiently detailed advice and guidance on all the post-16 options available to them. This was a finding in another report by Ofsted, *Moving through the system*, where partiality was identified as a particular problem.<sup>24</sup> In addition, these schools did not track students' destinations effectively, post-16 and post-18.

### **What worked well in ensuring high rates of progression to universities?**

75. In the best schools visited:

- a planned programme for raising students' awareness of university education was delivered early and regularly promoted; this helped to increase the number of university applications
- engagement with students, and their parents and carers, about the next steps in their educational career began as soon as students started at the school
- highly informed staff provided support and guidance, which helped students to make the right decisions about academic subject choices and informed them fully about the content and requirements of degree courses
- early support was provided about applying to UCAS, completing personal statements, and understanding the financial implications and benefits of attending university
- students visited a range of universities, which broadened the horizons and aspirations of the most able
- ex-students who were attending university were used as role models to encourage current students.

The school provided outstanding guidance for the most able students wishing to apply to university, including the Russell Group of universities. The school placed a strong emphasis from an early age on the personal development of its most able students as a prerequisite for their gaining admission to university. It provided a rich, imaginative range of opportunities to develop students' skills, confidence, independence, and enthusiasm for learning. Older students demonstrated these values and qualities well and transmitted them convincingly to younger ones.

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<sup>24</sup> *Moving through the system – information, advice and guidance* (080273), Ofsted, 2010; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080273](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080273).

The school's planned programme for raising awareness about university education started at a very early age. It was delivered effectively throughout the time the student was at school and provided students systematically with the skills and knowledge they required to make informed choices. Sixth form students spoke highly of the support the school offered them so that they could apply to university successfully; they commented that 'nothing is too much trouble for the staff'.

The school forged a number of effective links and partnerships that supported this process well. These provided students with excellent opportunities to raise their awareness of their choices and opportunities, and how best to access them. These included advice on sources of financial support and, where appropriate, practical financial help. In this way the school was successfully removing barriers to higher education.

Highly effective links with parents promoted and increased their understanding of issues related to higher education. The school had high rates of success with students gaining admission to university, including Russell Group universities. Equally strong status was accorded by the school to students who chose apprenticeships as a more suitable pathway, including a small number who gained notable success in securing prestigious national apprenticeships.

## Notes

During March 2013, 31 of Her Majesty's Inspectors visited 41 non-selective secondary schools and academies across England. Three selective schools were also visited as part of the survey to provide comparison, but evidence from these visits and data have not been used in this report. Schools were selected from all eight Ofsted regions and were a mixture of size and type and from different geographical contexts. Nearly all the schools visited had a broadly average intake, although different year groups had different proportions of higher- and lower-attaining pupils.

In a separate exercise, HMI considered evidence from lesson observations from 109 section 5 inspections of secondary schools, which took place in the academic year 2012/13. HMI scrutinised this evidence to check whether support and differentiation for higher-attaining pupils were good or better in those lessons, and the evidence indicated that this was the case in about one fifth of lessons.

Twenty-seven of the 41 schools visited were 11 to 18 secondary schools, two were 11 to 19 schools, 11 were 11 to 16 schools and one admitted students at Year 9. Of the 41 visited, 18 schools were academy converters and 23 were other types of secondary school.

The survey's two key questions were underpinned by several supplementary questions.

- Are the most able students in non-selective secondary schools achieving as well as they should?
  - Are comprehensive schools challenging bright students in the way that the independent sector and selective system do?
  - Do schools track progression effectively enough? Do they know how their most able students are doing? What enrichment programme is offered to the most able students and what is its impact?
  - What is the effect of mixed ability classes on the most able students?
  - What is the impact of early entry at GCSE on the most able students?
- Why is there such disparity in admissions to Russell Group universities between a small number of mainly independent schools and the majority of comprehensive schools?
  - What is the quality of careers advice and its impact on A-level students, particularly in terms of their successful application to top universities? Are students receiving good advice and support on how to complete their UCAS forms/personal statements?
  - Are the most able students from disadvantaged backgrounds as likely as the most able students from more affluent families to progress to top universities, and if not why?
  - What are successful state schools doing to increase application success rates and what lessons can be learnt?

In order to answer the key and supplementary questions, the survey focused on five key elements which were:

- achievement of the most able students throughout each school
- transfer, transition and induction into secondary school
- the quality of teaching and learning, and the quality of the assessment of the most able students
- the curriculum and extension activities offered to the most able students
- the support and guidance provided for the most able students, particularly when they were making subject choices and preparing for university.

Inspectors spent one day in each school. They held discussions with school leaders, other staff and students, and investigated analyses of the school's current data. Similar questions were asked of different groups to ensure a broad range of reliable evidence.



Ofsted also sought the views of some key external organisations and individuals. For example, account was taken of 93 responses made by parents and carers to a questionnaire Ofsted placed on the website of the National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE).

## Annex: Providers visited

Ofsted is particularly grateful to the participating schools for the support shown to Her Majesty's Inspectors during the visits. The contribution made by each school's senior leaders, middle leaders and students enabled Ofsted to publish this report and its recommendations.

### Secondary schools

All Saints Catholic College  
 Beis Yaakov High School  
 Blackfen School for Girls  
 Bury St Edmunds County Upper School  
 Caldew School  
 East Barnet School  
 Fulford School  
 Hamble Community Sports College  
 Hanham High School  
 Harris Academy Chafford Hundred  
 Headlands School and Community Science College  
 Helston Community College  
 Herschel Grammar School\*  
 John Spence Community High School  
 Marlborough School  
 Montgomery High School – A Language College and Full Service School  
 New Mills School Business & Enterprise College  
 Old Buckenham High School  
 Our Lady's Convent Roman Catholic High School  
 Priesthorpe School  
 Priory Community School  
 Queen Elizabeth School  
 Richard Lander School  
 Selby High School Specialist School for the Arts and Science

### Local authority

Tameside  
 Salford  
 Bexley  
 Suffolk  
 Cumbria  
 Barnet  
 York  
 Hampshire  
 South Gloucestershire  
 Thurrock  
 East Riding of Yorkshire  
 Cornwall  
 Slough  
 North Tyneside  
 Hertfordshire  
 Blackpool  
 Derbyshire  
 Norfolk  
 Hackney  
 Leeds  
 North Somerset  
 Cumbria  
 Cornwall  
 North Yorkshire

St Bede's Catholic Comprehensive School and Byron College	Durham
St Bonaventure's RC School	Newham
St Joseph's Catholic College	Bradford
St Katherine's School	North Somerset
St Peter's Catholic High School and Sixth Form Centre	Gloucestershire
Sutton Coldfield Grammar School for Girls*	Birmingham
Swanshurst School	Birmingham
The Bolsover School	Derbyshire
The Ellen Wilkinson School for Girls	Ealing
The Henrietta Barnett School*	Barnet
The King's Church of England School	Wolverhampton
The Marlborough Church of England School	Oxfordshire
The Meadows Community School	Derbyshire
The Sele School	Hertfordshire
The Thomas Adams School, Wem	Shropshire
Torpoint Community College	Cornwall
Walton Girls' High School & Sixth Form	Lincolnshire
Wednesfield High School, A Specialist Engineering College	Wolverhampton
Westhoughton High School	Bolton
Wrockwardine Wood Arts College	Telford and Wrekin

\* Denotes a selective school – evidence and data from visits to these schools were not used in the report.