Research Project | 2019

Perspectives and prospects: The educational ambitions and intentions of young white British males from five disadvantaged areas in N.W. England.

This report describes a qualitative study that seeks to explore the educational ambitions and motivations of young white British males from five geographical areas of educational and economic disadvantage in North West England. The study draws on the insights of learners at two distinct transition points in their educational journeys. The first of these relates to school year 10, as pupils work towards their GCSEs. The second focuses on year 12, as post-16 options are embarked upon and attention is turned to longer-term plans.

The research builds on findings from *Bucking the Trend* . This sought the insights and reflections of 14 white British males from low participation neighbourhoods in Stoke on Trent, Mid Staffordshire and Crewe, all of whom had progressed to university. Amongst this study's discoveries was that, in many instances, higher education intentions could be traced back to a learner's earlier years. Prominent in this respect were their initial years in secondary school, notably around the time that GCSEs were commencing. The transitional experience of moving into post-16 education - comprising the first year of advanced level study - proved to be another pivotal time.

This new study explores the impact of influences in greater depth and more extensively, and from its findings presents a series of recommendations. It is hoped that these recommendations will help to guide the work of outreach practitioners and others in NW England - and further afield - who are working to enhance the progression prospects of this particular group of under-represented young people.

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The Cumbria Collaborative Outreach Programme have funded a number of research projects. Through the projects we aim to enable our partnership and wider stakeholders to learn more about our NCOP target Cumbrian learner cohort. Research projects are developed to capture 'learner voice', inform our evolving Theory of Change and to increasingly improve the effectiveness of our outreach interventions.

OfS Uni Connect Programme

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This report describes a qualitative study that seeks to explore the educational ambitions and motivations of young white British males from five geographical areas of educational and economic disadvantage in North West England. The study draws on the insights of learners at two distinct transition points in their educational journeys. The first of these relates to school year 10, as pupils work towards their GCSEs. The second focuses on year 12, as post-16 options are embarked upon and attention is turned to longer-term plans.

The research builds on findings from *Bucking the Trend* - a study commissioned by the Higher Horizon's NNCO. This sought the insights and reflections of 14 white British males from low participation neighbourhoods in Stoke on Trent, Mid Staffordshire and Crewe, all of whom had progressed to university. Amongst this study's discoveries was that, in many instances, higher education intentions could be traced back to a learner's earlier years. Prominent in this respect were their initial years in secondary school, notably around the time that GCSEs were commencing. The transitional experience of moving into post-16 education - comprising the first year of advanced level study - proved to be another pivotal time. *Bucking the Trend* also drew attention to the role of local influences - and influencers - on the decision-making process and, ultimately, on the learning trajectories taken by those surveyed.

This new study explores the impact of these influences in greater depth and more extensively, and from its findings presents a series of recommendations. It is hoped that these recommendations will help to guide the work of outreach practitioners and others in NW England - and further afield - who are working to enhance the progression prospects of this particular group of under-represented young people.

3. Key observations

3.1. Intentions

Post-18 plans

Many young men from the target cohort (especially year 10s) are unlikely to be considering HE as an option.

However, most harbour career interests and ambitions.

3.2. Challenges

Educational engagement

Young men from the target cohort may experience:

- Difficulties in managing GCSE workloads and in developing effective coping strategies
- Challenges in managing the transition to level 3 study, especially where a change of institution is involved.

For at least some from this group, the vocational and work-based post-16 choices made could make HE progression less probable.

Some young men from the target cohort hold positive views of education (and school), and what it can offer.

Financial costs of HE

For many young men from the target cohort the perceived cost of HE can act as a significant impediment to HE progression and, potentially, in considering HE as a viable option.

However, for some The financial costs associated with HE are considered worthwhile.

Comparative costs of HE

For some young men from the target cohort the local labour market - and the prospect of earning money - are a powerful draw.

However, amongst others HE is viewed as offering the chance to enhance their employment prospects and earning potential.

The apprenticeship option is viewed favourably by many from this cohort, since it is considered to combine the attractions of employment with training, whilst the cost of full-time HE (including the debts likely to be incurred) can be avoided.

Opportunity costs of HE

For some young men in this cohort the opportunity costs associated with the university option - and what will be sacrificed - are considered too high.

However, for others the benefits are judged to outweigh such costs.

3.3. Influencers

Parents

For many of the young men in this cohort parental experience of HE - and the consequent ability of parents to provide insights and draw on first-hand knowledge of university - will be limited.

However, in some instances those with no parental history of HE may still have parents who are supportive of their educational ambitions in general and of their progression to HE in particular.

Other family members and local networks

The neighbourhoods many of these young men come from - and interact with - are likely to contain comparatively few residents with first-hand experience of university.

In some instances, other family members (besides parents) and those in their social networks can act as HE role models and provide examples of those who have been to university.

Peers

Peers and friendship groups can influence levels of school engagement amongst these young men, in both a negative and positive way.

They can also impact on their post-16 study choices and HE ambitions.

Teachers

Teaching professionals can influence levels of classroom and subject engagement amongst these young men and their next steps thinking, including that related to higher education.

4. Recommendations

4.1. Classroom practices

Recommendation 1

Recognise, support and encourage effective classroom and teaching practices that:

- Use a variety of approaches in delivering the curriculum
- Communicate an enthusiasm for the subject and include activities that encourage learning to be enjoyable
- Involve explaining and exploring the *real world* relevance of what is being studied
- Enable teachers to learn about their students' interests and ambitions
- Involve teachers providing biographical details of the educational pathways they took and insights into their university experiences.

4.2. School-wide activities

Recommendation 2

Identify and work with students' career ambitions, as well as their subject interests, in providing a reason and rationale to study and progress.

Recommendations 3-4

Explore ways of encouraging and supporting school-hosted events involving local FE colleges and universities.

- These intervention can help in raising awareness of next step options (including HE).

Seek to support the work of school and college-based careers advisors. Careers guidance (including that offered early in secondary/high school) can have a significant impact in encouraging school engagement, as well as in motivating students to think about the role that further and high education can play.

Recommendation 5

In recognising the challenges that the transition to post-16 study can present (especially where a change of institution is involved), explore ways in which more information, advice and guidance on post-16 options can be provided, including offering insights into the demands and character of post-16 study and training.

Recommendation 6

Identify and deploy (school, college, university) alumni from comparable backgrounds to provide (relatable) accounts of their learner journeys and insights into the reasons for the decisions they made, including those associated with opting for a higher education.

Recommendation 7

Support and encourage the use of guest speakers in graduate-level occupations who can talk about their educational experiences and journeys, and the value of higher-level study and training.

Recommendation 8

Given that it is a widely considered option - especially amongst the cohort of learners this study is concerned with - consider ways in which students can be informed of work-based pathways, and higher and degree level apprenticeships, including through hearing from a range of employers and training providers.

4.3. Outreach interventions

Recommendations 9-11

Recognise:

- And support the role that undergraduates can play in offering relatable accounts of university
- The value of subject tasters in supporting attainment, as well as providing information and guidance about HE level study. Seek to ensure the subjects offered align with learner interests
- The value of HE campus-based events and seek to ensure these provide realistic insights and experiences of higher education.

Recommendations 12-13

Deploy second and third year undergraduates on outreach interventions. These individuals can draw on more extensive experience of HE (than those new to university-level study), including the challenges they have encountered and how these have been overcome.

Work with alumni (particularly those from comparable WP backgrounds) who can provide first-hand experience of the benefits of gaining a university-level education, and who can talk about the educational and career routes they took.

Recommendations 14-16

Explore ways to provide those from this cohort (and others) with information and advice on the:

- Comparative costs and benefits of HE
- Financial support available at university for those from lower income households and WP backgrounds.

Consider ways in which this information can also be provided to the parents and carers of these young people.

Recommendation 17

Consider the provision of HE-level lectures and seminars that align with the subject areas sixth formers and level 3 college students are pursuing, and that can provide an insight into where their subjects can lead and the key skills needed at HE level.

Recommendation 18

Recognise the importance of outreach activities that have a more enduring impact, including those comprising a series of (progressive) interventions.

Similarly, consider ways in which more young men from the target cohort can participate in *immersive* HE experiences, such as summer schools.

4.3. Further research

Recommendations 19-20

Explore ways to advance current understanding of this cohort and build on the findings from this study.

This could include:

- Conducting a supplementary research study by revisiting former focus group participants a year or so after the original meetings were held. Participants would now be in a new academic year and the follow-up discussions could encourage them to reflect on their experiences since, and if and how their plans and ambitions have evolved (and what the influences on this decision-making process have been)

- Gathering together the same groups of young men would also provide an opportunity for them to comment on the findings and interpretations to derived from the original research they contributed to, as well as capture their assessment of the recommendations to arise from this study.

- Running follow-up interviews with the outreach practitioners and teaching professionals who contributed to the original study, with the aim of gathering their feedback on the findings that have emerged and their assessment (and interpretations) of the recommendations made.

In addition, consider the value of - and ways in which it might be possible - to capture a more complete picture of the learner journeys made by members of this particular cohort (potentially, by running focus groups with those from year 7 upwards).

4.5. Dissemination of findings

Recommendation 21

Consider methods of disseminating the findings of this study and explore how the recommendations made could be translated into practice.

This could include offering interactive workshops with outreach practitioners at local area level

- Arising from this is the option of capturing and sharing the ideas to emerge from each set of workshops, and of then following progress with implementing these ideas. By this means, a set of good practice (evidence-based) case studies could be produced that would be of value to the wider sector.

5. Introduction

Comparatively few young males from poorer backgrounds progress to university. This is especially the case with white British males, sometimes described as 'white working class men', and it has attracted a considerable amount of attention as the following headlines indicate:

- 'What puts white working-class boys off university?' *The Guardian*, March 2016
- 'Universities to target more working class white boys', *BBC News*, Feb 2016
- 'White working-class boys in England 'need more help' to go to university', *The Guardian,* May 2018
- 'Education secretary demands action on low number of 'white British disadvantaged boys' going to university', *The Independent.* October, 2018.

Moreover, it constitutes a strategic priority for many engaged in widening HE access. One of the key areas the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) was asked to address from the time of its establishment was the 'particular challenge of the gaps in progression between men and women' (HEFCE, 2016). It is also recognised as an area of focus for individual institutions. In developing their 2018-19 access agreements, universities were asked by the Office for Fair Access to address how they will 'enhance support for white males from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds'. And it continues to be a priority for those engaging in widening institutional access. The Office for Students 2019-20 guidance on Access and Participation Plans identifies 'white males from lower socio-economic backgrounds' amongst the 'under-represented groups' for which higher education providers are encouraged to set 'stretching [access] targets'.

Accompanying these calls for action has been a widely recognised need for a greater understanding of this particular access challenge. Webster and Atherton's (2016, 2) survey of NEON members conducted in the Spring of 2016 found a general consensus that 'more research is [required] to understand the needs of this group', and that 'detailed knowledge about why this group had low attendance rates in HE is essential to planning effective support work.'

Similarly, NCOP consortia have been urged to focus their evaluations on 'understanding what works with regard to supporting specific groups'. Amongst the specified groups are 'white working-class boys' (Office for Students, 2018). The importance of identifying effective tactics and strategies was also expressed by the outreach practitioners surveyed by Atherton and Mazhari (2019, 4) who see encouraging 'HE participation of white students from lower socio-economic groups' as 'their biggest challenge'. Meanwhile Hillman and Robinson (2016, 8) indicate the scale of this task, in emphasising the 'shortage of ideas for tackling [the] under-representation of young men, particularly', it is added, 'white, work-class' males.

This paper reports on the findings of a qualitative study, which was funded (and supported) by five NCOP consortia based in the North West of England, and that set out to explore the educational ambitions and motivations of young white British males from five areas of educational and economic disadvantage across this region. To do this, it drew on the insights of learners at two important transition points in their educational 'journeys':

- Year 10 - as pupils commence their GCSEs
- Year 12 - as post-16 options are embarked upon and attention is turned to longer-term plans.

In its approach and ambitions, this investigation was informed by a previous study conducted by the same researcher and report author, which was commissioned and supported by Higher Horizon NNCO. This

gathered the reflections of 14 white British males from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in Stoke on Trent, Mid Staffordshire and Crewe, all of whom had progressed to university. Amongst its keys findings was that HE intentions could often be traced back to a learner's earlier years, notably when GCSEs were being chosen, whilst the transitional experience of moving into post-16 education could also prove to be a pivotal time in the decision-making process. Moreover, the study identified the key role of local influences - and influencers - on the learning trajectories taken by these young men.[1]

However, this study had a number of limitations in that it was retrospective in the perspectives taken, being dependent upon on the sometimes quite distant recall of participants as they looked back on the educational journeys they had taken. It was also concerned with those from this cohort who had 'bucked the trend' and progressed to HE, whilst its geographical coverage was restricted to a modest number of low participation neighbourhoods in the West Midlands. The methods and approach adopted for this new study, which centres on capturing the views and experiences of a larger sample of young men from a wider geographical area at two key transition points, should overcome these limitations. In doing so, it is hoped to provide new insights and ideas for how best to support these learners in their educational progression.

[1] For more information see N. Raven (2017), *Bucking the trend: raising HE progression rates amongst first generation, economically disadvantaged, white males*. Higher Horizons Collaborative Outreach Network. http://higherhorizons.co.uk/app/uploads/2017/08/Bucking-The-Trend-Higher-Horizons-2017-FINAL.pdf.

6. The literature

6.1. Contemporary concerns about an enduring outreach challenge

The study addresses an area of long-standing concern to those involved with higher education in general and widening access in particular. Over a decade ago, Action on Access observed that the low (HE) participation rates of working class boys' were 'a particular feature of under-representation in higher education' (Jones, 2006, 7). Meanwhile, in a report published in 2008 the National Audit Office described how 'men from lower socio-economic backgrounds and, in particular those from white ethnic backgrounds', were 'significantly under-represented' in higher education. There was a consequent need for an 'improvement' in their 'representation' (National Audit Office. 2008, 14; see also Raven, 2018).[2]

More recent years have witnessed a resurgence in these concerns. In 2016, UCAS confirmed that 'white working-class boys are the least likely to go to university' (UCAS. 2016, 3). In commenting on this finding, their Chief Executive argued that such young people 'have no less intrinsic potential to benefit from higher education than their peers'. Consequently, it was observed that 'these inequalities [represent a] huge waste of potential' (see also Raven, 2017, 10).

At a similar time, the need for collective action was evident in a request that those seeking to take part in the new National Collaborative Outreach Programme consider the progression of males 'from disadvantaged backgrounds' and, in particular, 'white boys who are able but unlikely to progress' to HE (HEFCE. 2016a, 2 and 19). The same calls to action are still to be heard. In citing research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Education Secretary in 2018 challenged 'universities and the wider system' to 'change' the fact that 'white British disadvantaged boys are the least likely of any large ethnic group to go to university' (Atherton and Mazhari, 2019, 9). However, accompany these calls have been requests for a greater understanding of the underlying reasons for this most enduring and, for 'those delivering this work', 'biggest' of access challenges (Atherton and Mazhari, 2019, 4).

6.2. A range of possible explanation

A consideration of the literature offers a number of potential explanations for the comparatively low progression rates of white British males from widening participation backgrounds.

Family and peers

Gorard and Smith (2007, 143) discuss 'patterns of participation rooted in famil[ies]'. Similarly, in giving evidence to a House of Commons (2014, 29) committee Professor Becky Francis argued that working class families are unlikely to have 'the information and the understanding' required to realise educational aspirations'. Baars et. al. (2016, 34) also talk about how a 'lack of experience and knowledge of higher education' within the families of 'white working class boys' can impact on their patterns of progression (see also Raven, 2018).

The influence of peers has also been discussed by a number of commentators. Baars et. al. (2016, 13 and 34) talk about the important role that 'peer networks' with limited understanding of HE can have on 'white working class boys' perceptions of university'. Similarly, McLellan discusses the impact on 'aspirations' and

[2] This chapter is based on the literature review contained in Raven (2017) and developed in Raven (2018), although a number of additional references have been added, amongst including a number of more recent publications.

'motivations for attainment' of 'social networks' amongst white working class boys that have 'little educational experience' (House of Commons, 2014, 30).

Schooling

A number of studies have identified the impact that schools and teachers can have (House of Commons, 2014; Connor et al. 2001). Hillman and Robinson (2016, 29) quote evidence from a study by the OECD which found that 'boys typically work less hard at school' and are 'more likely than girls to regard school as a waste of time'. Elsewhere, witnesses quoted in a House of Commons report (2014, 32) made reference to the perceived irrelevance of the curriculum as a factor in disengagement' amongst white working class children, whilst Evans argues that 'white working class boys are often pressured to uphold a stereotypical tough 'street' reputation, which competes with a positive attitude towards schooling' (House of Commons, 2014, 35).

Neighbourhoods

Taking a slightly broader perspective, Reed, Gates and Last (2007, 14) consider how neighbourhoods can inform views of educational and economic success. In this respect, they reference 'local narratives [of] pathways into adulthood that do not depend on educational success.' Similarly, Grant (2013, 124) discusses neighbourhood influences that can prevent young people from thinking 'beyond their estates' and towards higher education. Meanwhile, research by the Southern Universities Network (2017, 2) draws attention to the comparatively few 'examples of HE success' found in the low participation districts that many young men from white working class backgrounds are likely to come from. Consequently, it is argued, 'the risk' of this option 'may seem elevated as they are not surrounded by [those] that have taken the [HE] gamble and won.'

Wider social and cultural influences

Finally, a number of commentators have drawn attention to wider social and cultural forces influencing the decision making process. Woodfield (2012) references evidence suggesting that young men may be more attracted to the world of work than their female counterparts. Consequently, university may be judged to constitute a greater risk and a disruption to employment trajectories for men than women. Similarly, Baars et. al. (2016, 34) suggest that 'white working class boys and their parents are more likely to prioritise swift entry into paid work over further study'.

At the same time, university may be viewed as a distant, alien and costly option. Drawing on evidence from interviews with four white male working class students, Hoskins (2012, 238-240) discusses the challenge HE represents in terms of a very different set of 'cultural norms and values'. Whilst Hillman and Robinson (2016. 44) argue that white disadvantaged young people are more likely than others to 'believe that university wasn't for people like them'. Similarly, a study by the Southern Universities Network (2017, 42) suggest that, faced with 'regular messages in the media about the financial costs of university', learners from working class backgrounds may perceive the risk to be prohibitively high, given the low income households many derive from.

7. Report structure

Table 7.1. provides an overview of this report, identifying each of the sections and themes that will be addressed. Its structure reflects the key areas explored with interviewees and the focus group participants. Having outlined the parameters of the study and the practicalities involved in conducting it, as well as detailing the WP credentials of the young men involved, consideration is given to their post-18 intentions, as perceived by the outreach officers and teaching professionals supporting and educating them, as well as the young men themselves. In reflecting current participation trends, HE was absent from many post-18 plans, although not all.

The next two sections seek to explain these findings, initially by exploring participants' experiences and attitudes to learning, and then by considering their perceptions of higher education. In keeping with the character of the conversations held with these young men, this is done by analysing the reservations they have with this option through the lens of different costs. First in this respect consideration is given to their concerns as they relate to the financial costs of higher-level study, and not just headline fees but various other expenses likely to be incurred. Comparative costs - notably the attractions of securing employment and earning money - are then explored, before attention is turned to the broader opportunity costs of HE study: a concept that takes into account the social and cultural sacrifices associated with this option.

The influences on these perceptions are addressed in section five. Consistent with the literature and findings from *Bucking the Trend*, consideration is first given to the role of parents, whilst also recognising the part that can be played by other family members and key contacts. The influence of peers is then explored before the role that teachers can have is examined. For each of these areas, as well as for sections 2, 3 and 4, the views of interviewees are considered alongside those of focus group participants, with attention also given to any alternative perspectives that emerged from the discussions with these young men.

Having examined the challenges associated with progression, section 6 looks at the practices and activities that interviewees and focus group participants judged to have been effective at raising HE awareness and interest. Here, consideration is given to classroom practices and wider school-based activities, as well as outreach interventions, with the final component of this section looking at the suggestions offered by interviewees and participants for additional initiatives that would further help to achieve these objectives. Section 7 then provides a summary of the key findings and seeks to align current and suggested interventions with specified challenges, whilst the final section comprises the conclusions and accompanying reflections.

Table 7.1. Report structure

Section	Theme	Details
1	Study details (Chapter 9)	Scale of the study
		Practicalities
		WP credentials of participants
2	Post-18 intentions (Chapter 10)	Absence - and presence - of HE in post-18 plans
3	Educational engagement (Chapter 11)	Experiences and attitudes to learning
4	Perceptions of HE	Financial costs

	(Chapters 12-14)	Comparative costs
		Opportunity costs
5	Influencers (Chapters 15-18)	Parents
		Other family members and social networks
		Peers
		Teachers
6	Tactics (Chapters 19- 22)	Classroom practices
		School-wide activities
		Outreach interventions (experienced)
		Outreach ideas
7	Overview (Chapter 23)	Summary of findings
		Aligning tactics with challenges
		Comparing the recommendations made
8	Conclusions and reflections (Chapters 24 and 25)	Conclusions
		Reflections

8. Methods and approach

8.1 Desk research

The first phase of this study concerned a scoping exercise. This involved liaising with outreach managers in each of the five NCOP partnerships supporting the project, with the objective of finalising the project brief and determining the schools and colleges to be involved in the study. This initial stage was also concerned with identify key contacts in each participating school and college, and in preparing an ethics application, along with a participant and parent/guardian consent form and information sheet, as well as a briefing paper for outreach practitioners and teaching professionals. Ethical approval for conducting the research was granted in March 2018.

In addition, this early phase of the investigation involved a preliminary survey of published reports and articles relevant to the subject area. The findings from this literature review also helped to guide the themes that were to be explored in the focus group discussions, as well as informing the questions directed at teaching professionals and outreach practitioners whose insights were also gathered as part of the study.

8.2. Primary research

The insights of outreach practitioners and teaching professionals

The primary research began by conducting interviews with outreach practitioners and teaching professionals. The former comprised individuals who had knowledge of the schools and local areas from which participants derived, whilst the teaching professionals were the key contacts in each of the participating schools and colleges. These tended to be either heads of year 10, sixth form leads, or those with career guidance responsibilities.

Besides providing background insights into the schools and the character of their catchment areas, the key themes addressed in the semi-structured conversations used in this component of the study included exploring whether interviewees considered young white British working class males to constitute a distinct cohort and, if they did, the challenges encountered by them, in terms of their educational engagement and post-16 and post -18 progression. The perceived reasons for these challenges were also explored, as were the interventions (school-initiated activities, as well as outreach activities) these young men would have been offered and, in some instances, taken up, whilst their assessment of the effectiveness of these measures was also gathered.

In addition, interviewees offered their thoughts on new activities they consider could further support these young men in their progression. Finally, in being scheduled ahead of the focus group discussions, both sets of interviewees were asked what questions they would like these young men to be asked. Where it proved possible, their suggestions were incorporated into the set of planned questions.

The learner perspective

As indicated, the research method employed to gather the views of the young men was the focus group,

which has a number of strengths for a study of this nature. It enables ideas to emerge from a group of learners, captures the views and insights of participants in their own words, and can be used to determine levels of consensus (and divergence) in the views being expressed.

Moreover, the suitability of focus groups when seeking the insights of young people -including in terms of the interventions they may have received - is confirmed by Gibbs (1997). Indeed, it is observed that 'focus groups are particularly useful when there are power differences between participants and decision-makers or professionals, when the everyday use of language and [the] culture of particular groups is of interest', and when seeking to 'evaluate a particular programme of activities' (Gibbs, 1997, n.p.). In addition, as Breen (2006, 466) notes, 'focus-group discussions' are particularly 'appropriate for the generation of new ideas formed within a social context.'

In terms of areas of investigation, the focus groups discussions held with both year 10 and 12 participants sought to address the following themes:

- Post-16 and post-18 intentions (and the role of family, peers, school and other local influences)
- Perceptions of HE, including its role and relevance, what studying at HE would entail, its accessibility (from a socio-cultural perspective), and the competencies considered necessary for success in higher education
- Career ambitions and perceptions of the local labour market, and the draw (or otherwise) of local employment
- Current subject choices (at level 2 or 3) and the rationale for these
- Their experience of school and assessment of their school performance
- Levels of school and classroom engagement, and the identification practices and activities considered helpful in motivating them to engage and progress
- Recollections and assessment of any outreach interventions received
- Ideas for further support, in terms of classroom and school-wide provision, as well as outreach initiatives.

Focus groups participants

Whilst there is some debate concerning definitions (Havergal, 2019), the young men who took part in this study were white males of British origin from the NCOP cohort who had been identified as having the potential to progress to HE but, for whatever the reasons, may not do so. For year 10 learners, the guidance of a teaching professional in each of the participating schools was sought in relation to having the capability to progress. Year 12 participants were selected from those who had completed their GCSEs and embarked upon level-3 study. Beyond this, in seeking suitable participants school contacts were asked to ensure those selected would be prepared to engage in discussion and volunteer their insights (thereby representing a purposive - information rich - sample).

9. Study details

9.1. Scale of the study

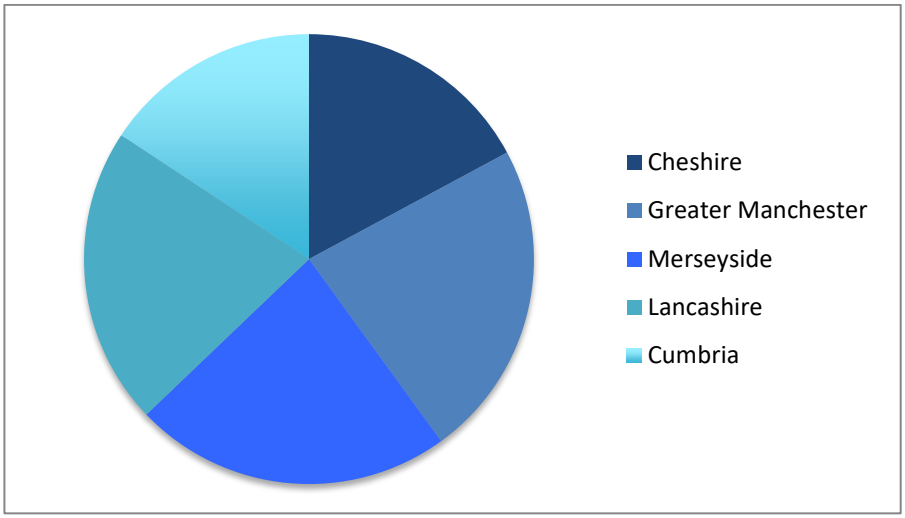
Interviewees

As planned an outreach practitioner from each of the five participating areas was interviewed. Indeed, in some partnerships - including those where two different schools/colleges were involved and came under the remit of different officers - two practitioners took part in this phase of the study, bring the total to nine interviewees. Likewise, a teaching professional (and, in one case, two professionals) were interviewed from each of the participating institutions (totalling eight interviewees).

Focus group participants

Learners from seven schools and colleges took part in the study. In two areas where year 10 participants were from a 11-16 school, their year 12 counterparts derived from a local *feeder* college. Two focus groups - one for year 10s and one for year 12s - were held in each of the districts. In total, 70 young men took part in these discussions (36 year 10s and 34 year 12s), with the number of participants being evenly distributed across the five different areas, as illustrated in Figure 9.1.

Figure 9.1. Distribution of focus group participants by area



9.2. Practicalities

Focus group scheduling, attendance and participation

Initial concerns about being able to schedule focus group discussions, given busy school timetables and the greater autonomy of college-based students, proved largely unfounded. The support provided by key contacts ensured that this aspect of the study was well managed. The same also applied to early fears of low levels of attendance and engagement in discussions, given that those targeted were from a group that

were often challenging to recruit onto outreach activities. As indicated above, the average number of focus group participants was seven. In addition, high levels of engagement were a feature of all 10 groups, with discussions running for between 45 minutes to a little over an hour.

Focus group experience

Moreover, feedback from a number of the teaching professionals after the focus groups had taken place suggested those who took part had found the experience a positive and, in a number of instances, useful one. These contacts were also asked why they thought the young men had responded in this way, with their replies referencing an interest and curiosity, of feeling special in being selected, and of being treated as 'young adults' whose opinions were seen to matter:

- The boys said they found it an enjoyable process
- The feedback from both groups was very positive
- They were selected by us but not forced to do the interviews
- Being selected will have made them inquisitive as to what it was about. Their natural curiosity would have meant them wanting to take part
- They felt special being selected to give their opinions
- They liked the fact they were treated like young adults not children and were offered refreshments. They liked the informal aspect of it
- They wanted to do it again!

Participant identification

Concerns about being able to identify groups of young men that met the study's participant criteria also proved unfounded. They were a widely recognised cohort amongst practitioners and teaching professionals, and one often associated with challenges in terms of their educational engagement and progression, as the following quotes from interviewees illustrate:

- Boys don't do as well as girls. Our boys underperform
- We want to be the school to solve the underachievement of white working class boys
- *Are you surprised by the study's focus is WWC males?* No, not at all. [We are] aware of the issues. This group slips through the net!
- There is a need to target boys, especially in year 10 because that is when low aspirations take hold.

9.3. WP credentials of focus group participants

The NCOP cohort

As noted, all focus group participants were white males from the NCOP cohort. This reflected the fact that each of the participating institutions possessed a catchment area that included one or more target wards. However, whilst they derived from areas of low and lower than expected HE progression, the participating schools and colleges drew on districts that were varied in terms of their economic and social histories. This had been intended, since one of the study's initial objectives had been to explore the potential influence of local factors on the educational ambitions of the young men surveyed. The accounts given by outreach

practitioners and teaching professionals provided insights into the low participation districts from which these young men derived.

Merseyside

Metropolitan borough with high levels of employment but of a predominantly routine nature

Some 55 per cent of pupils in the school located in Merseyside were from the NCOP cohort, whilst its catchment area was described by both outreach practitioners and the teacher professional as a 'predominantly white working class' district, and one that tended to be 'viewed as deprived, in terms of socio-economic issues'. Manufacturing and 'factory' work were identified as the largest sources of employment, whilst many of those in the local population had been in the area for a number of generations. It was also considered to be an 'underperforming area in terms of educational achievement'.

Cheshire

An old industrial centre

An 11-16 high school and a 16-18 college were the two institutions selected for Cheshire. In the case of the former, some 80 per cent of year 10s were said to be from the NCOP cohort, whilst the teaching contact for this high school observed that 'a lot' of learners are 'pupil premium and on free school meals'. More generally, this interviewee described the district in which many pupils resided as 'very socially deprived', with high level of unemployment. Confirming this, the outreach practitioner whose remit encompassed the school talked about a working class catchment area, with many parents in 'blue collar, manual' occupations and with few having experienced higher education. The population was also considered to be fairly static, with many unlikely to have ventured far beyond the locality, and with generations having lived in the same area. The 16-18 college, which provided the year 12 focus group participants, was located in the same town. Whilst it possessed a bigger catchment area than the school, it also drew on some 'very deprived' neighbourhoods according to the teaching professional interviewed. Around a third of its intake were judged to be from the NCOP cohort.

Greater Manchester

A metropolitan borough that has witnessed economic decay in recent decades

Two institutions - an 11-16 school and a further education college - were selected for focus group participants from the Greater Manchester area. The former possessed around 100 NCOP learners in its population of just over 850 learners and was described by the teaching contact as an 'old fashioned working class school', with few parents in professional occupations. Whilst mixed, its catchment included a white working class district, along with one of 'predominantly Asian heritage', as well as a more middle class area. According to the teaching contact at the local FE college, more than 90 per cent of the schools' pupils progressed to their college. Whilst drawing on students from a larger area than the school, the college's catchment also included 'pockets of deprivation' and groups of what were described as 'non-traditional HE progressors.'

Lancashire

An old coastal community

The 11-18 school from which both year 10 and 12 focus group participants derived was located in a modest-size community close to the coast. According to one for the two outreach practitioners interviewed, just over one-third of its pupils were from the NCOP cohort, whilst over 95 per cent of its intake where of white British origin. Its catchment area was considered to be 'quite limited' geographically. The second outreach practitioner described the local wards they were most familiar with as made up of families that have no 'HE experience.' The area in general was considered to be fairly deprived. Consistent with this assessment, the teaching practitioner talked about limited local employment opportunities, although it was noted that a large engineering company was to be found in the wider vicinity, with a power station situated further along the coast, both of which provided high skilled jobs. Confirming the close knit nature of the local community, the same interviewee added that many families tended 'not to travel very far away'.

CUMBRIA

A market town with limited local employment opportunities

An 11-18 school also featured as the provider of year 10 and 12 participants for **CUMBRIA**. Located in a market town, the school's catchment included the immediate locality of the town as well as a large and predominantly rural hinterland. Although the outreach officer interviewed noted that the school itself was not located in a target ward, it drew from a number of these wards, and where 'attitudes to education' were considered to be 'representative' of the low participation rates that characterised them. Whilst some of these neighbourhoods were made up of small family run farms, others, it was noted by the two teaching professionals interviewed, were found in the vicinity of the town, where factories provided a significant amount of local employment.

Other WP credentials

Besides meeting the criteria specified for the study, during focus group discussions many of the young men also alluded to being from families with no history in higher education, and, should they decided to do so, would be the first generation to progress:

- Year 10s: 'My mum and dad didn't go', 'I would be first'
- Year 12s: 'None of our family have been', 'my dad didn't go to uni, nor my mum'

However, in some instances references were made to older siblings that had gone:

- Year 10s: 'My sister is the first one in our family to go to university', [my] 'brother [did] but [he] dropped out'
- Year 12s: 'I've got a sister at uni but she is the first one'

A few suggested that their parents had been:

- Year 10s: 'mum went', 'my dad went to university and studied law'
- Year 12s: 'I think my mum went - she did nursing'; 'my mum went to university but she couldn't finish it because she had a kid'.

10. Post-18 intentions

10.1. The practitioner perspective

HE is not a widely shared goal, especially amongst year 10s

The first area to be considered in the interviews with teaching professionals and outreach practitioners concerned their perceptions of the educational ambitions of the white working class males they taught or sought to support. Amongst both sets of interviewees - and from across the five case study areas - there was a general view that many of these young men had fairly limited educational ambitions and that HE was not a widely shared goal.

In this respect, the teaching professional from Merseyside suggested that 'perhaps 25 per cent' of their school's pupils were 'likely to go to uni.' 'A lot of our kids', it was added, 'don't know. [They] haven't really thought about their futures [and are] not focused on what [they] need to do'. Similarly, in commenting on their year 10s, the teaching professional for the Greater Manchester school suggested that 'university is not viewed by many as a destination or goal. Most think college and then a job, or college and apprenticeship, rather than university.' One of the outreach practitioners for the same area also considered that young men from this locality were likely to be 'looking for employment rather than higher education'. Along comparable lines, their outreach counterpart for Cheshire recalled a conversation they had with the head of year 10 for this area's case study school, who observed that 'quite a lot of students don't actually tend to go to university.'

Similar responses were received from the Lancashire outreach practitioners. The 'students' they were familiar with were 'not looking to go to university', whilst the school's catchment was described as comprising 'a low aspiration area'. Asked about the typical post-18 trajectory' of the area's students, the reply was that it is a 'tourist area', so 'hospitality [and] catering' feature amongst destinations, although it was added that the 'majority go into construction'. Similarly, the teaching professional for the case study school in this region was asked where the young men they were teaching would see themselves going when they reach 18. The response was that it 'varies from one extreme to another', although some, it was added, 'will go to uni'.

However, a number of interviewees also talked about the potential differences in planned destinations between year 10s and 12s. The teaching professional for the participating Cheshire college suggested that 'around 70 per cent' of their sixth formers will progress to HE, a figure likely to include some young men from poorer white backgrounds. Similarly, in **CUMBRIA**, the outreach practitioner observed that those in year 12 had made a conscious decision to progress to sixth form (and level 3 study), which, given the school's large catchment area, can mean travelling some distances. This, it was argued, suggests 'a different way of thinking about education than that found amongst many of the school's year 10s, 'who have to be there'.

10.2. Participants' perspective

In number of respects, the interpretations made by interviewees matched the feedback from participants when this subject was considered during the focus group discussions.

Absence of university in the plans of many year 10s

University did not feature in many of the year 10s' post-18 plans. Instead, for those from Merseyside responses included 'get[ting] a job' and securing 'an apprenticeship', with some others expressing uncertainty: 'don't know' and 'not sure'. Apprenticeships were also mentioned by those in the CUMBRIA focus group, with one young man talking about wanting to go to 'college and try and get something out of there, and [of then] getting a job'. Amongst the aims of their counterparts in Cheshire was to 'get into a college and do an apprenticeship in construction', and 'to go to college and take an engineering apprenticeship'. Similarly, year 10s in Greater Manchester talked about the desire to 'get a job'.

These findings accord with a survey of NCOP learners conducted for the Office for Students (2018, 19), which found that 'white, working-class learners, in particular young men, are less likely to aspire to higher education.' Instead, it was observed, 'they are more likely to want to move into the labour market quickly and are more attracted to full-time work or apprenticeship routes that offer opportunities to earn and learn'.

For some, HE was an intended destination

This said, HE was mentioned in a number of the year 10s' post 18 plans. Asked what they intended to do when they reached 18, one young man in the Merseyside group responding by stating 'start uni'. Similarly, included in the feedback from year 10s in Cheshire was the aim of going 'to university' to 'do sport, because I want to be a PE teacher or something involved in sport like a physio'. Amongst responses from those in Greater Manchester was that of wanting 'to go to university'. 'Sixth form, university [and] get a degree' also featured in replies from year 10 focus group participants in Lancashire, whilst HE was amongst the destinations referenced by members of the CUMBRIA group. This included 'sixth form and university', as well as the alterative of 'college then university'.

Uncertainties about the prospects of progressing

Whilst some other year 10s referenced HE, a number did so with a degree of uncertainty. One of the young men in the Greater Manchester group talked about 'may be' going to 'university'. Similarly, some of those in the Lancashire group were considering whether to 'do an apprenticeship or uni', with one debating whether to go directly into the 'marines, or go to uni and get a degree first, and then go in as an officer'. Another member of the same group also hinted at keeping their options open, in suggesting that they would 'eventually go to uni'. These findings align with those from a study by the Southern Universities Network (2017, 1), which found that 'males from low HE participation areas were less convinced in terms of their interest in HE at the pre -16 stage of education'.

A more frequently discussed destination amongst year 12s, although not all

As anticipated by interviewees, HE was more frequently discussed as a destination by year 12s. The intention amongst most of those in the Greater Manchester group was to go on to university. A number of those in the Merseyside group expressed a desire to study at HE, although in two instances this would be after a gap year. Similarly, most of the year 12s in the Lancashire group talked about 'hoping to go to university', and of 'go[ing] to university and then into a job', whilst the same was also true for a number of participants from CUMBRIA.

Yet, not all year 12s had university in mind. Amongst the Merseyside participants, reference was made to a preference for securing 'an apprenticeship', along with the 'possibility of going straight into a job'. Another participant from the same group discussed 'want[ing] to get a job and start earning money' and 'then', it was added, 'think about what I want to do as a career.' The same was also true for some for the year 12s from Lancashire, where mention was made to gaining 'an apprenticeship', as well as the intention of 'probably just get[ting] a job.' Similarly, amongst responses in the CUMBRIA focus group was the aim of 'doing something like being an electrician', whilst for another participant the prospect of doing more education after 18 had little appeal.

In addition, some year 12s expressed uncertainty about what they would be doing after year 13. One Lancashire participant acknowledged that 'I'm stuck between university or getting a job'. Another noted that

‘part of me wants to go onto college and do a little bit more, but part of me wants to go on to uni and do a lot more. I’m stuck at the moment between those two’, whilst a third member of the same group observed that ‘I’m still debating between uni or getting a job.’

10.3. Careers

Definite ambitions

Despite a number not intending to progress to HE, or uncertain about doing so, most participants had clear career goals. Accordingly, amongst the ambitions voiced by year 10s in Greater Manchester were those of wanting to be an ‘electrician’, of going into ‘plumbing’, or of becoming a ‘chef’ and, potentially, ‘own[ing] my own restaurant’, whilst other members of this group talked variously about becoming a ‘games designer’, an ‘engineer’, and a ‘flight attendant’. Similarly, most of the year 10s in Lancashire expressed unambiguous career intentions, including ‘barbering’, ‘engineering’ and working in ‘building services’, with another participant wanting to become a ‘police officer’. Amongst the ambitions expressed by those in **CUMBRIA** was to become a ‘carpenter’, ‘architect’, ‘music teacher’, and ‘mechanical engineer’.

Indeed, year 10s as well as year 12s who expressed uncertainty were in a noticeable minority. However, even amongst these, their comments suggested a sense of optimism, as characterised by the response from one of the Greater Manchester participants: ‘I don’t know what I want to do yet because there are so many options’. These findings accord with those reported by the Southern Universities Network (2017, 1), which found that amongst the cohort they surveyed that ‘males from low HE participation areas appear more motivated by finding a career that suits their interests and skills’ than in the university option. Similarly, the teachers interviewed by Raven (2019, 55-56) talked about young men from these backgrounds ‘often’ harbouring career ambitions but not necessarily knowing how to achieve these.

Observations

Many young men from the target cohort (especially year 10s) are unlikely to be considering HE as an option.

However, most harbour career interests and ambitions.

11. Educational engagement

11.1. The practitioner perspective

One of the key reasons suggested by interviewees for the uncertainties expressed by many of these young men over HE as a possible destination - and why it was not mention by more - related to challenges associated with their educational engagement.

A lack of confidence to go further

In this respect, the teaching professional from Merseyside talked about a 'lack confidence' amongst many of these young men 'to go further'. Similarly, the one of the outreach practitioners for Cheshire referred to the issue of self-esteem. This, it was noted, is evident in some of the responses young men provide on event 'evaluations' when giving reasons why they do not want to go to university. The do not think they are 'not good enough', it was added. The 'have an outlook that they are not academic and a negative view of what academia is.'

Self-doubts

Interviewees also argued that similar sentiments - including doubts that HE is for them -could still be found amongst year 12s. One of the Greater Manchester outreach practitioners discussed a number of those at the college they supported as having 'low aspirations in terms of post-18 education and training'. A comparable comment was made by the teaching professional from the same area, who described their school's catchment as one associated with 'low [educational] aspirations'.

Not suffering from over-achievement anxiety, and possessing limited academic ambitions

Elsewhere, one of the Lancashire outreach practitioners talked about 'students' from the target group who tended 'not to look to go to university'. This assessment was corroborated by a second outreach practitioner who observed that 'most of the students I have worked with are not suffering from over achievement anxiety. [They are] not worried about the 8s and 9s. They are worried about 6s and 7s in GCSEs. They are worried about getting enough to get them onto the next step of whatever they want to do.' Many, it was agreed, have limited academic ambitions.

Attitudes to learning

Exploring the subject further, the same interviewee suggested that for boys there is 'some point in their mid-teens [when] their aspirations are dealt a server blow'. 'May be', it was added, 'they realise exams are hard and they are not getting the qualifications they were expecting.' This 'probably' happens 'around year 10 or 11', and they come to the conclusion that 'I can't be anything anymore. That happens more generally with lads than with girls. I don't know what the catalyst is but I do think lads go from happy, carefree, mischievous and hard working to being miserable in the classroom.'

Whilst recognising that this did not apply to all, this assessment aligns with comments made by the teaching professional from the participating Lancashire school, who described the 'low confidence' many young men had in their 'academic abilities', and a tendency for them 'not to try if they experience failure'. Similarly, the teaching professionals in **CUMBRIA** described how white males in their school from lower socio-economic backgrounds did 'not attain as well' as other groups, 'because', it was argued, 'their attitude to learning is not as good as slightly stressed white working class girls'. These findings chime with the views expressed by some of the teachers interviewed by Raven (2019, 54-55) in a study based in the East Midlands. Here reference was made to 'a tendency for those in year 10 and 11 to become more disengaged' from education and 'resigned to not doing very well'.

11.2. The participants' perspective

In confirming the assessments made by interviewees, a number of focus participants talked about the challenges they were experiencing in engaging with education.

Year 10s

The work has got harder

Amongst year 10s, those from Cheshire discussed finding their current school year harder than the previous one, with more homework and with a greater 'focus on revision'. This year, it was observed, we have had to 'be prepared for the hard stuff!' Their counterparts in Merseyside also took the view that there had been a noticeable jump from year 9 to 10, and one that required them having to 'work harder'. Similarly, for year 10s in Lancashire 'work [had] got progressively harder'. Whilst some in this focus group had 'get used to it', this was not a universally shared experience. 'As the work has got harder', one young man observed, 'you can't be bothered to do it.'

I feel like I am going to fail

In addition, one of the participants from the same year 10 Lancashire focus group observed that, 'if you feel like you can't do something and then feel embarrassed to ask a teacher, you sit there and get really moody and feel like you are going to fail. I [then] go quiet', it was added, 'and then I don't say nowt and it affects what I do at home and when I go to work - everything. You build everything up and get really annoyed.'

Stressful, with males more up-tight about their emotions

Exploring the subject further, another participant from the same group suggested a difference between girls and boys. 'I don't mean to be sexist but males tend to be like a bit more up-tight about their emotions. If they are struggling, they don't tend to tell people. [Its] pride.' Elsewhere from same group came the reply that 'I'm finding it stressful. Sometimes it can be easy, [but] sometimes it can be really hard. I just get stressed.' Asked what was causing their anxiety, reference was made to 'the testing. It's unnecessary being constantly judged on your target grades'. Similarly, when asked how they were getting on, some of the year 10s from the Greater Manchester group replied that they were feeling 'stressed'.

Year 12s

The work is a lot more involved

A number of year 12 participants expressed similar concerns. Those in the Cheshire group argued that the 'work you have to do' in year 12 is 'a lot more involved'. This was confirmed by those in the group doing straight A-Levels, as well as those taking BTECs, or a combination of the two. Elaborating, reference was made to finding it 'a lot harder' to 'work on your own', which, it was argued, is what studying at this level demanded: you 'need to do your own research, exam practise and all that'.

Likewise, those in the year 12 Lancashire focus group observed that their move from year 11 represented 'quite a step up'. Asked why, reference was made to 'the difficulty. With GCSE you can understand it within a few days, but with A-Level it takes a week to understand one topic, and you only have a certain amount of time' available for this. 'It seems like you have a lot to learn in a very short period of time.' Their counterparts in CUMBRIA expressed very similar sentiments. Here reference was made to 'teachers expect[ing] you to achieve more'.

Some have dropped out

Moreover, members of the year 12 focus group in Cheshire observed that some of their peers had dropped out of education. Indeed, one participant noted 'I nearly ended up quitting this year. I found myself wanting to quit college at the beginning of the year and didn't show up to lessons.' Another recalled dropping out of their previous college to 'come here and do other topics'. In this respect, reference was made to not coping with the 'deadlines'. It was also suggested that 'people drop out [because] they don't have a plan for the future. They don't really know what they want to do'.

Those in the year Lancashire focus group were also asked if people had dropped out. 'About half-way through the year', it was observed, 'there were quite a few people dropping out - about January time. Not that many people came back'. In explaining the possible reasons for this, 'they were', it was suggested, 'the sort of people [that were] not doing enough'. These impressions align with the findings from a series of interviews with teachers conducted by Raven (2019, 56) in the East Midlands. Here reference was made to 'a tendency for more white males from lower socio-economic groups to drop out' of post-16 study.

Deciding against sixth form, with some now 'doing nothing'

Members of the **CUMBRIA** focus group were in agreement that quite a lot of males had decide not to continue into their school's sixth form. 'May be', it was suggested, 'men associate themselves with like more labour jobs', such as 'engineering, bricklaying and joinery'. Reference was also made to some who had 'left at end of year 11' and were now 'do[ing] nothing - [just] sitting at home'. These individuals, it was considered, were more likely to be males. Consistent with these impressions, the study by the Southern Universities Network (2017, 1) found that 'white working class males in Southampton' were more likely than other groups to 'opt for choices at the age of 16 which make their progression to HE less likely'. In this respect, reference was made to a preference for FE or work-based provision.

11.3. Positive perspectives amongst participants

Yet, discussions with both year 10s and 12s also revealed some more positive views of school and education.

Year 10s

It gives you options

Amongst year 10s in the Cheshire focus group there was a view that GCSEs needed to be taken seriously because, as one participant explained, 'I don't want to be older and have no money to buy essentials. I want to get a job that will get me more money so I can get more stuff and buy some people stuff'. Asked what advice they would offer to young men like themselves who are very capable but did not care about their GCSEs, the response was that 'if you get good GCSEs and you can't get the job you want, you can get another job you like'. Getting a good set of GCSE, it was agreed, gives you options.

It's our future

In acknowledged that they were taking year 10 seriously, those in the Greater Manchester group observed that this was 'because it's our future', although it was also added that it is 'the law' that we have to be in school. Exploring their motivations further, reference was made 'to get[ting] a good job and a good future.' 'Hopefully', one participant added, I will 'get high-paying jobs so that I can look after [my] family and mum and dad.' In addition, there was a desire to 'be successful and', it was argued, 'GCSEs are the first path you have to take.'

Employers go for higher educated people

Elsewhere, some of the year 10s focus group participants in Merseyside talked about GCSEs being needed in order to go on to 'college, university and employment'. However, some were also aware of 'people who don't have GCSEs and have got better jobs than' those who have such qualifications. Finally, in explaining why they were taking GCSEs seriously, those in the **CUMBRIA** focus group observed that 'if [you] get terrible GCSEs, [it] cuts off options' and it becomes 'harder to get a job'. Employers, it was argued, 'go for the higher educated people'. However, one participant observed that 'I have heard [you] don't have to get the best GCSE results to get a good job'.

Year 12s

You have chosen the subjects you want to do

Similar explanations were offered by a number of year 12 participants when accounting for their educational engagement. Those in Greater Manchester made reference to wanting to secure good jobs, earn a good wage, and support their families. However, it was also noted that whilst 'at school you were forced to do subjects you didn't want to do, at college you have chosen the subjects you want to do and work harder to get the qualification because that is what you want to do.' In contrast, 'people fail' at advanced level 'because they haven't found what they are interested in'. Some of the reasons for this, it was suggested, lay with 'high schools [that] are forcing subjects onto people to make them more academically suitable to A-levels when they are just not interested'.

Doing well will lead to a higher job

Participants in the Lancashire focus group were asked how they were managing the move to level 3 study. In response, references were also made to 'an interest in the subject'. 'I know it sounds stupid', one member added, but 'a lot of the students that dropped out took two subjects that they wanted to but had to take another that they weren't so interested in. If they aren't going to be bothered in that work, then they will drop out.' There was also the matter of having the right 'attitude'. 'We', one participant argued, 'have the mindset to keep going and not give up at the first hurdle'. 'If you do well in you're A-levels', it was added, 'it will lead to a higher job, better pay, [and a] wider variety of jobs you can have. I think some people don't actually realise what they could have at the end. They don't see the difference between an everyday job and actually having a profession at the end. They are quite blind to earning so much an hour to actually going on to be a teacher or a doctor, something you need to work for.'

Observations

Young men from the target cohort may experience:

- Difficulties in managing GCSE workloads and in developing effective coping strategies
- Challenges in managing the transition to level 3 study, especially where a change of institution is involved.

For at least some from this group, the vocational and work-based post-16 choices made could make HE progression less probable.

Some young men from the target cohort hold positive views of education (and school), and what it can offer.

12. Financial costs of HE

For interviewees, one of key challenges and potential deterrents to HE for young white British males from disadvantaged areas concerned the cost associated with this option.

12.1. Practitioners and professionals

Too expensive and wanting to avoid accumulating huge debts

The teaching professional from Merseyside talked about there being a 'lot of scaremongering [about] debt'. Financially, these young men 'might be scared off', especially, it was added, if they are from 'low income backgrounds'. Likewise, the teaching professional in the Greater Manchester school that provided year 10 participants noted that university is not viewed by many as a destination or goal [because] it is often considered too expensive - they can't afford the fees'. A similar assessment was made by the two teaching professionals from CUMBRIA who suggested that 'HE is not necessarily what they want to do, possibly because of [the] cost [involved] and not wanting [to accumulate a] huge amount of debt'.

The cost of higher education also featured amongst the reasons offered by a number of focus group participants for deciding against this option, or expressing reservations about HE as possible destination.

12.2. Participants (year 10 and 12)

The cost is overwhelming, I don't really think it is worth it

One of the year 10 participants in the Greater Manchester focus group observed that whilst 'you gain more at university, the cost is overwhelming [and there is] the chance of being in debt as a result'. Consequently, it was added, 'I just don't think it's worth it, especially if you don't end up with the job that you wanted.' Another member of the same group expressed similar concerns. 'I do want to go. I do and don't at the same time because it is a lot of money. I know if you want to be a doctor, or something like that, then you have to go to university but I don't really think it's worth it.' Arguably, the perceptions of cost also contributed to some of the responses this group gave to the question of what kinds of people go to university. Here reference was made to 'rich, smart people', and 'those that can afford it.' Similarly, whilst it was acknowledged by another member of this group that 'anyone can go', this observation was qualified by adding that 'it's easier for people who are rich'.

Some people come from poor backgrounds and no one will be able to support them

Similar concerns were expressed by a number of participants in other year 10 focus groups, including those from Lancashire. The 'expense', one participant argued, is 'one of the biggest deterrents to going to university. Some people might not be able to afford it. Some people come from poor backgrounds and no one will be able to support them'. This concern was shared by others in the group, with another member adding 'I think that's why most people go to college because they can't afford university, even if they [have] got the grades'.

Other costs: you have to pay for everything you do

Another member of the same year 10 Lancashire group judged that they were '50-50' about going to university. In explaining their uncertainty, reference was made to the other costs associated with this option

besides fees. 'You have to pay for everything you do and then if you have student accommodation you have to pay for that, if you are not near home. [You also have to] pay for food, clothes, bills, everything, and it's all that on top. For some people, it could come across as a bit too much, and that's why they might not have the opportunity - they might have the skill but not the opportunity to show the skills'. Asked if that was likely to be the case for some of their friends, the response was affirmative. 'I think most people won't have enough money. They wouldn't be able to afford to pay the university the amount there and then'.

It puts me off - the cost of it

Financial costs as a potential barrier to HE progression were also discussed by a number of year 12 participants. Those in Cheshire talked about 'people [being] scared about taking out student loans and worried that they might not be able to pay it off.' Part of the problem, it was argued, is that 'quite a few people don't understand them'. Similarly, one of the year 12s focus group members in Lancashire acknowledged that 'it puts me off - the cost of it'. Moreover - and reiterating a point raised by some of the year 10 participants - it was added that it is 'not just the cost of university but living as well'.

12.3. Positive perspectives amongst participants

Despite many expressing concerns, a number of participants from focus groups across the five areas considered the costs associated with the HE option to be worth it.

Year 10s

Wanting to do well for my family

For one member of the year 10 focus group in Lancashire, the costs of HE were less significant than their desire to progress onto HE in order 'to do well for my family'. Another participant observed 'I want to support my mum when she is older. She has supported me all these years and I want to give her something back'. A third young man from the same group noted that 'if we get a degree then you get a better job, which means more money doesn't it'.

Year 12s

Earn more

Positive views on the value of HE were also expressed by a number of year 12s from across the various focus groups. One Cheshire participant observed that 'most people who go to uni will be earning more. I think it all works out in the end.' Similarly, amongst some of those surveyed as part of the Southern Universities Network (2017, 33-34) study, was a recognition that university could enable 'access to (well - paid) employment'.

Observations

For many young men from the target cohort the perceived cost of HE can act as a significant impediment to HE progression and, potentially, in considering HE as a viable option.

However, for some the financial costs associated with HE are considered worthwhile.

13. Comparative costs of HE

13.1. Practitioners

The prospects of earning money

Another challenge to the progression of young men from this cohort was discussed by a number of the interviewees. This concerned the comparative attractions of the local labour market and the prospect of earning money. One of the outreach practitioners from Cheshire recalled a conversation they had with head teacher at the school from which year 10 participants derived. Whilst it was observed that 'a lot of students go on college and could then progress to uni, they preferred [instead] to get money as soon as possible'.

Locally available employment that does not require a higher education

Similar claims were made by one of the Greater Manchester teaching professionals. In their estimations, the low levels of HE participation that were to be found in a number of the school's catchment areas reflected the availability of local jobs that did not require a higher qualification. Similarly, the teaching professional in Lancashire talked about young men who, on hearing about university fees, opted for gaining employment and earning money. The two teaching professionals in CUMBRIA also talked about groups of boys in their school who are 'not interested in pushing [their] academic ability as far as it can go, because they want to put food on the table at end of day.' These perceptions are consistent with the claims made by some of the teachers interviewed by Raven (2019, 57). Even amongst second year A-level students, interviewees argued that 'white males' from economically disadvantaged areas were more likely than those from 'other group' to express an intention to seek employment rather than progress to HE.

13.2. Participants (Y10 and 12)

You don't need a university education unless it is for certain jobs

The desire to enter the labour market and start earning money also featured in a number of focus group discussions. In exploring why they were generally not considering university, members of the Greater Manchester year 10 group talked of a desire to 'make money' when they 'leave school'. In addition, whilst HE was not ruled out by one focus group member, it was not viewed as the preferred option. 'I would consider taking my education further if I needed to, in order to get a better job and a better salary, but I want to make money young. When you're actually at a job you have something to really work for, and at the end of the day you get a pay-cheque and you can buy something'. This claim was accompanied by the observation that 'I think you don't actually need [a university education] unless you need it for a certain job'.

13.3. Positive perspectives amongst participants

Year 12s

Improved job prospects

Whilst the attractions of the local labour market featured in many of the focus group discussions, some participants offered a different perspective. A number of the year 12s in the Cheshire group advocated the HE option in terms of the improved job prospects that could result. 'If you go to university', one group

member observed, ‘you have a better chance of doing the job you want to do’. Similar comments were identified amongst those surveyed by the Southern Universities Network (2017,33-34), including the view that a university-level education can mean access to ‘top level jobs and more choices in where you want to work’.

Favouring the apprenticeship route

For some, including a number of the year 12 participants in Merseyside and Lancashire, the attractions of employment, coupled with concerns about the cost of full-time HE, led them to favour the apprenticeship option. One of those in the former group observed that ‘with an apprenticeship you are still learning while earning money and getting experience in a job at the same time.’ Moreover, it was argued that an apprenticeship can represent ‘a guaranteed job’. Similarly, some of the Lancashire focus group participants observed that ‘if you enjoy your apprenticeship, there is a very high chance that you will get a job’ and, it was added, ‘you walk away without any debt’.

Observations

For some young men from the target cohort the local labour market - and the prospects of earning money - are a powerful draw.

However, amongst others HE is viewed as offering the chance to enhance their employment prospects and earning potential.

The apprenticeship option is viewed favourably by many from this cohort, since it is considered to combine the attractions of employment with training, whilst the cost of full-time HE (including the debts likely to be incurred) can be avoided.

14. Opportunity costs of HE

14.1. Participants

Moving away and the risk of coming out with nothing

Whilst the sacrifices associated with opting for university study were not prominant in the interviews with teaching professionals and outreach practitioners, they did feature in a number of focus group discussions. This included the conversations held with year 10s from Merseyside. Not only was university seen to cost a lot of money and was likely to involve 'mov[ing] away', there was also a risk of 'coming out with nothing', and the possibility that it would, consequently, have been 'a waste of time'. The issue- and emotional cost - of being separated 'from home and family' was also a concern voiced by some of the young men surveyed by Southern Universities Network (2017, 33-34). Here reference was made to the prospect of 'spending too much time away from family and friends'.

You could have been promoted in the time

The same year 10 group from Merseyside also argued that by in opting for university study, you will 'come out with no work experience'. Moreover, it was considered to 'take ages' to complete a degree, and that 'by the time you' you do, you could 'have a job and [have been] promoted'. There was also risk that you will 'get depressed', since this option could entail 'too much stress'.

Do a massive degree and can't get a job, paying all that money and not enjoying it

A comparable set of concerns and arguments were made in by some of the year 10 members of the Lancashire focus group. One participant discussed the risk of doing 'a massive degree at university', and of putting 'all my money, time and effort into it', and then going 'out into the real world' and not being able to secure a job'. Not only would this have been a questionable use of their time, they would also 'have no way of possibly paying my degree off' and, potentially, of having I 'to rely on other people to pay it off.' Similarly, one of the year 12s focus group members from Lancashire acknowledged that whilst 'the cost of [university] puts me off', this was accompanied by being 'scared of not enjoying it'. In this respect, it was observed that if they 'paid all that money' and then did not enjoy the experience, it would, in their assessment, have been 'a waste'.

Consistent with these findings, Baars et. al. (2016, 34) talk about the 'concerns' held by 'white working class boys about receiving a return on their investment'. Similarly, amongst those surveyed for the Southern Universities Network (2017, 1) 'HE [was] perceived as a risky strategy', with the prospect voiced by some of those surveyed for this study of 'paying all that money and not enjoying it', and having to 'dedicate' 'a lot time to one thing' with the possibility that 'you might be stuck in that profession'. Moreover, rather like some of the comments received by focus group members for the present study, this report also quoted young men who talked about the potential of getting into 'debt and' then being unable to secure employment (Southern Universities Network, 2017, 33-34).

14.2. Positive perspectives amongst participants

Year 10s

A lot better than high school and a new experience

However, for a number of focus group participations the benefits associated with higher education outweighed any scarifies. For some of the year 10s from Cheshire, university was considered likely to be 'a lot better than high school'. Those who 'teach you would be more friendly', whilst the experience would be 'helpful in getting your confidence up'. It would be 'challenging' but also 'motivating, because', it was added, 'you are working towards graduating'. Moreover, the same individuals talked positively about the 'new experiences' that studying at university would offer.

Year 12s

A step into the real world

Along similar lines, some of the year 12s participants in the Cheshire focus group discussed how university would provide 'a good opportunity to get experience of living away from home.' Their counterparts in Greater Manchester also talked about the HE option representing 'a step into the real world', and providing 'a bit more independence'. This including having a choice of going 'to which ever [lectures] you want', whilst 'living somewhere else' and 'in your own flat with friends' was 'another step' towards independence and a further opportunity that university study afforded.

Observations

For some young men in this cohort the opportunity costs associated with the university option - and what will be sacrificed - are considered too high.

However, for others the benefits are judged to outweigh such costs.

15. Influencers: parents

15.1. Practitioners and professionals

A lack of direction and understanding from home

For the both teaching professionals and outreach practitioners, one of the key influences on the aims and ambitions of these young men were their parents. Having suggested that many are undecided on their educational futures, or unconvinced about HE as an option, the teaching professional from Merseyside argued that this was, is in part at least, the consequence of a 'lack of direction from home'. 'Parents', it was suggested, do 'not understand what they need to do in regards to next steps. If they haven't done it themselves, they can't give any guidance.'

University is not for them

The same interviewee also concurred that university may be viewed as something that 'is not for them'. 'If you come from a family which have only been bricklayers, there is a culture that you are not going to [go to university]. This is what we do in this family.' Similarly, one of the teaching professionals in Greater Manchester observed that 'these students are from working class backgrounds' where the view that university is not for them 'is instilled [in them] from a very early age.' Similar comments were made by some of the teachers interviewed by Raven (2019, 59). Here the view was expressed that some working class families may find the idea of their sons going to university quite 'frightening', since it could mean that they 'walk away from here and [do] not recognise us anymore because [university] is a different world'.

Limited parental support

One of the outreach practitioners from Cheshire suggested that the view that they 'are not good enough and not academic', which was held by a number of the young men they had encountered, derived from their parents. Likewise, one of the teaching professionals from the same area argued that the lack of confidence in education that was often displayed by these young men was, in part, the result of limited 'parental support.' In this respect, reference was made to occasions where parents had been called to inform them that 'we are offering free Saturdays' but where the response had been 'we want to go shopping'. 'The battle', it was added, 'is getting parents on board.'

Do not necessarily have the parental experience (in HE) to pass down

Comparable observations were made by teaching professionals in Lancashire and CUMBRIA. The interviewee from the first of these areas argued that parental influence accounted for the fact that a number of the young men they worked with did not have especially high educational aspirations. Their disinterest in education, it was argued, is reflected in the low number of mothers and fathers attending year 10 parents' evenings.

Similarly, the teaching professionals in CUMBRIA argued that the reason why higher education was not being considered by more was 'partly because of family history'. They are 'first generation' students who do 'not necessarily have that parental experience to pass down, in terms of HE'. These explanations align with those made by Baars et. al. (2016, 34). In arguing that such young men are 'more likely to hold negative perceptions of university-based study than their more advantaged peers', reference is made to 'a lack of experience and knowledge of higher education within' their families. Similarly, the teachers interviewed by Raven (2019, 58) discussed parents 'who may have struggled in school and may', consequently, not recognise 'the value of education.'

The need to contribute to household incomes

The need to gain employment and contribute to household incomes, rather than pursue a higher education, was also referenced by a number of interviewees. One of the teaching professionals in Greater Manchester observed that 'sometimes these students need to get a manual job straight after school to help start contributing to their parent's at home and to help with bills.'

Lack of role models

Interviewees also discussed a lack of role models of those who had progressed to university. In this respect, the teaching professionals from **CUMBRIA** observed that many of the young men from these backgrounds they taught come from a 'male dominated factory town', in which 'granddad worked in the factory, dad did, and', it was added, many consider they will as well.

15.2. Participants

Cultivating interests not associated with HE

Parental influence also featured in discussions with focus group participants. In some respects, their comments were consistent with those of interviewees, although often viewed in terms of cultivating interests that were not associated with HE. Accordingly, one of the year 10 participants in the Cheshire focus group talked about how their interest in entering the building trade on leaving school had derived from their father. 'My dad is a construction worker and I ask him what he does and [he] tells me.'

Sceptical of the benefits

However, in some instances this influence could extend to advice against HE. One of the year 12 participants from Cheshire described how their 'dad wanted me to go into an apprenticeship rather than college or uni', adding that 'our family are like the ones that you turn to'. This response initiated a more general discussion on this subject amongst group members, with a second participant observing that families may not 'understanding what it is about, because they have not gone through it.' Consequently, it was added, 'they are' likely to be 'sceptical'.

Exploring this further, another participant from the same group observed that 'I think it's a big risk, especially if you are the first in your family. They want to know why you want to go to uni and then come back having dropped out and [having amassed] massive debts and things like that. I think it would be a bit more comforting knowing other people had gone before me.' It was also observed by those from this group that 'people who might want to go to university don't necessarily have the family or anyone to ask about what it's like, or what they went through when they went'.

15.3. Alternative views on being first generation

Parental encouragement to be successful

However, in their discussions a number of focus group participants identified the fact that parents who had not benefitted from a university education could also be encouraging in terms of educational engagement. One of the young men from the year 10 Greater Manchester group observed that 'I just don't want to disappoint my mum because when I'm older I want to buy my mum a house. She looked after me, so I'll look after her.' Another added that 'my parents don't have very good jobs but they're trying to motivate me

to work harder so I can have a more successful life than they did.' Asked what messages they were communicating to encourage him to work, this young man observed 'if I'm not revising, they'll make me revise. If I don't do homework, they'll ground me or something. They have different ways of making me do the work. They show me the benefits, so I'll want to do it.'

You will be proud afterwards

Discussions in the year 12 from Lancashire explored the positive impact that being first generation could have on their HE intentions. One participant commented that 'I think it gives you an incentive, because you are proud afterwards. You know, you are the first one to get a degree. It's like a big honour.' In this respect, Atherton and Mazhari (2019) point to evidence that suggests that parents and carers from lower socio-economic groups do not lack educational aspirations.

Observations

For many of the young men in this cohort parental experience of HE - and the consequent ability of parents to provide insights and draw on first-hand knowledge of university - will be limited.

However, in some instances, those with no parental history of HE may still have parents who are supportive of their educational ambitions in general and of their progression to HE in particular.

16. Influencers: other family members and local networks

16.1. Practitioners and professionals

Limited experiences of the world beyond their neighbourhood

For some practitioners the neighbourhoods in which many of these young men lived could also influence their educational ambitions. Here, reference was made to that those they would encounter on a regular basis being less likely to have HE experience. In this respect, one of the outreach practitioners for Cheshire suggested that the catchment area of both the case study school and college included districts where few residents had been to university, and that were characterised by families who had been in the locality for generations.

It is very difficult to chase after what you don't know

A similar assessment was made by one of the Lancashire outreach practitioners of the areas in which many of the focus group participants lived. 'You have got a mostly static population. A lot of people I worked with are third and fourth generation living' here. Whilst it was acknowledged that this might not translate into young people wanting to stay in the area, it did mean that 'they will not know what else is available'. And', it was added, 'it is very difficult to chase after what you don't know.' This, it was agreed, would include university. 'For an awful lot of them', university would be outside their realms of experience.

Unlikely to come into contact with people from HE

This assessment was shared by the teaching professional from Lancashire case study school. Whilst the nearest university was not a great distance away, 'many [have] been there for families and', it was added, tend 'not travel very far from the area'. Consequently, the young people do 'not get to go to many places' and are 'unlikely to come into contact with people from HE very much.' Comparable views were expressed by the school and sixth form teachers from the East Midlands interviewed by Raven (2019, 58). In this respect, one interviewee talked about 'parents from these neighbourhoods' tending to 'socialise with each other and hav[ing] the same outlook'.

16.2. Participants

The influence of local contacts as well as extended family members was also discussed by a number of focus group participants. In a few cases, they included those whose influence could be viewed as encouraging them to pursue non-HE options. One year 10 participant from **CUMBRIA** who wanted to become a carpenter talked about his 'granddad' who 'was a carpenter and had 'taught' him 'loads of stuff about it'. However, most of the examples offered referred to those whose experiences had encouraged participants to consider HE.

16.3. Positive perspectives amongst participants

Older siblings and cousins

Some of the year 12 focus group participants from **CUMBRIA** talked about the influence of older siblings and cousins. In this respect, one observed that 'I have two older sisters who have done that kind of thing and I know it is a good way of getting into a higher job - going to university'. Similarly, another member of this group acknowledge that 'I have a few cousins who are older and they have been through university. [They say they were the] best years of their lives.'

Grandparents and family contacts

Elsewhere, one of the year 10s from **CUMBRIA** talked about how their 'grandmother' was going to go 'into teaching but found herself pregnant. I want to pick up where she left off'. Members of the same group offered various examples of where wider family networks had helped to provide insights into what HE-level study would offer and involve. One participant who wanted to become an architect observed that 'my dad works [with] someone who is an architect and when they've shown [me] some of his work - it is just cool'.

Observations

The neighbourhoods many of these young men come from - and interact with - are likely to contain comparatively few residents with first-hand experience of university.

In some instances, other family members (besides parents) and those in their social networks can act as HE role models and provide examples of those who have been to university.

17. Influencers: peers

17.1. Practitioners and professionals

Peer pressure, and the negative impact on outreach engagement

The influence of peers on educational ambitions in general, and those associated with HE in particular, were also discussed by interviewees. Peer pressure could, as the teaching professional from Merseyside observed, have a negative effect, especially on 'those that have the ability but not the aspirations'. Similarly, one of the teaching professionals from Cheshire argued that for some young men it is not seen as 'cool to want to do more at school'. Indeed, it was argued that 'friendships play a large part in whether they engage with [outreach] projects' or not. Some, it was suggested, 'try to impress girls by being too cool to engage'.

17.2. Participants

If you are with a group of friends that are not working very hard it can have an impact

The same subject was also discussed by a number of focus group participants. Amongst year 10s from Lancashire there was recognition that friendship groups could have 'an influence' on what you do. Similarly, year 10s in Greater Manchester observed that 'if you're with a group of friends that are not working very hard', it can have an impact. It was also observed that 'it's very difficult to' change your friends. Indeed, one participant remarked that 'I wouldn't leave my friends because I've known them since primary school, so there are close connections.'

17.3. Positive perspectives amongst participants

They do play a role in thinking about university

However, members from this same year 10 Greater Manchester group also argued that friends could have a positive impact. 'If you're with friends who are working hard, you will work hard as well because you don't want to do badly, so you keep pushing yourself.' Similarly, a number of those in the year 12 group from CUMBRIA confirmed that friends had played a part in their decision to stay on into the sixth form and why some were now thinking about university. 'I think they do have a factor', one member of this group observed. 'It gives you more confidence in how you react to lessons. Like, if you feel comfortable knowing someone there you are good friends with, it gives you motivation'. It was also noted that 'if you are with your friends in year 11 and they are going onto sixth form, you go with them. It's a bit of a comfort.'

Observations

Peers and friendship groups can influence levels of school engagement amongst these young men, in both a negative and positive way.

They can also impact on their post-16 study choices and HE ambitions.

18. Influencers: teachers

18.1. Practitioners and professionals

Strong personalities but limited impact

Another potential influence on HE motivations and intentions were teachers. Although they were not prominent in many of the discussions with interviewees, some did mention the impact teachers could have. In this respect, the teaching professional from Merseyside talked about the influence of teachers with strong personalities. Elsewhere, another interviewee discussed those able to cultivate 'respect and discipline'. However, the Lancashire teaching professional suggested that the influence of teachers in supporting HE ambitions was likely to be limited because 'often [students] do not realise [their] teachers have been to university'.

18.2. Participants

Discouraging effect

Whilst most of the discussions on this topic with focus group participants were directed at the positive influence that teaching professionals could have on engagement and ambitions, this was not always the case. Amongst those offering a different perspective was a year 12 participant who suggested that teachers could also have a discouraging impact. Asked if teachers had been influential in their post 16 and post 18 thinking, it was suggested that some had the 'opposite of influencing you. You don't want to experience it again. You want to do something completely different'.

18.3. Positive perspectives amongst participants

Enthusiastic about what they do

A number of participants across the different focus groups acknowledged the positive role that teachers could play. One year 10 participant from **CUMBRIA** who wanted to become a music teacher talked about how the teachers in their school's music department helped nurture his interest. Indeed, it was argued that 'they are all amazing' because they are 'enthusiastic about what they do'.

Made me enjoy the subject

Similarly, two year 12 participants from Greater Manchester both identified the same chemistry teacher as being influential in their decision to take the subject at A-level - and a subject both intended to pursue at university. 'He got the respect of the kids', one observed, 'because he gave off this feeling that he knew what he was doing and he made everyone understand. He was good at getting things across.' Exploring this further, it was added that 'his lessons made me enjoy chemistry a lot more than I did before I had him as a teacher. I went into his lessons thinking that I was going to be interested in what he was teaching us.' The classroom practices considered effective at influencing next step thinking, especially that related to HE, are explored in the next chapter.

Observations

Teaching professionals can influence levels of classroom and subject engagement amongst these young men and their next steps thinking, including that related to higher education.

19. Tactics: classroom practices

Having considered the challenges to HE progression faced by these young men, and the influences on the decision-making process, discussions with teaching professionals and outreach practitioners turned to current practices considered effective at raising awareness and interest in HE as a post-18 destination, as well as their ideas for additional activities and interventions that could further support this objective. For interviewees, especially teaching professionals, the initial area of influence explored was that of the classroom and the types of teaching practice that could have a positive impact.

19.1. Practitioners and professionals

Competitions, the use of silence and extra support

In terms of practices that could be effective at engaging boys in general and those from white working class backgrounds in particular, the Merseyside teaching professional discussed classroom activities that involved 'low stakes and multiple tests' and had a 'competitive element' to them. Meanwhile, the teaching professionals in CUMBRIA talked about the 'power of silence' in lessons as a way of 'consolidating learning', whilst one of the interviewees from Cheshire discussed those teachers 'who go that extra mile', including in providing additional sessions and weekend work'.

19.2. Participants

Show enthusiasm and care about their subject

Focus group participants were also asked what classroom practices helped nurture their engagement and raise their awareness and interest in post-18 study. Year 12s in the Cheshire group talked of teachers 'who care about the subject', which, it was added, 'kind of makes you feel more enthusiastic about it.' Exploring this further - and in thinking back to teachers who were able to cultivate subject interest - reference was made to those who had 'a passion for it' and which had the effect of 'boost[ing] you'.

Practical sessions and group work

The year 10s group from Greater Manchester talked about doing 'practicals' and group work, rather than individual work, because, it was added, it's more interactive. 'Group work' was also highlighted by years 10s from Cheshire, since it was judged to help generate interest in what was being taught. The same young men also talked about introducing 'games' into lessons, because if 'you have fun while you are learning, you are going to take it on more'.

Interacting with the class and mixing teaching methods

Various focus groups discussed teachers who were prepared to interact with their classes. For year 10s in Greater Manchester, this included 'walk[ing] round and see[ing] how you're getting on and advising you'. Similarly, year 10s in Lancashire talked about teachers who 'go up to tables to speak to [you] about the work. So, you feel like you matter in that subject and the teacher cares about where you go, and they are not just teaching because they get paid to.' Also discussed by some year 12 groups, including those in Cheshire, were teachers 'who interact with students' and get 'involved with the class, rather than just sit[ting] there and throw[ing] knowledge at you', or whose lessons involve 'cop[ying] off the board'.

Approachable, willing to answer questions and take time to explain

Participants in a number of group also talked positively about teachers who were approachable. Year 10s from Cheshire discussed those who 'want to answer all your questions'. Elaborating, it was observed that 'if you ask them, they will explain to you there and then'. Similarly, year 10s in Merseyside highlighted 'teachers who go through things and do not moan at you if get it wrong'. A comparable observation was made by members of the year 12s group from Cheshire, who argued that 'being approachable' was 'a big thing', which, in a classroom setting means that 'if you have a problem with a topic, you feel a lot easier talking to them'. Although, it was added that with 'certain teachers you just don't feel like you can talk to them.'

Demonstrate a sense of humour

The need to possess and demonstrate a sense of humour was also widely referenced. Year 10s in Lancashire talked of teachers who, whilst they can be 'strict, can also take a joke', and who 'get the fun side' as well as 'the work side'. Elaborating, it was argued that they 'can't be too strict because that gets [students] too stressed and ends up with them failing.' Similarly, year 12s in Cheshire talked of those teachers whose humour helped to build a rapport with their students.

Show the wider relevance of what is being taught

Year 12s in Greater Manchester emphasised the importance of showing the wider relevance of what is being taught. Illustrating how this could be done, one focus group member talked about their maths teacher who, in responding to the question of 'why are we doing trigonometry, went they use this to put walls up', which, it was added, made the class realise 'oh that's like used in that trade'. Consistent with these observations, Raven (2019, 60) reports on the practice adopted by some of the teachers he interviewed in the East Midlands of 'embedding employability into the curriculum'. This involved 'incorporating into lessons elements of what students need to be thinking about for their next steps', and encouraging them 'to explore the skills that will be required to progress'.

Make efforts to know their students

Various groups also talked positively about those teachers who got to know their students. Some of the year 10 focus group participants from **CUMBRIA** discussed the practice adopted by one of their teachers of asking each pupil to 'say three random things about' themselves, including their 'hobbies and stuff'. The aim, it was suggested, was to find out about your interests. Linked to this, year 10s in Lancashire talked of teachers who were able to 'link' what was being taught in class 'to something that you enjoy'. That way, it was added, 'they will spark an interest in you'.

Show an interest in their students' career ambition

In terms of next steps, some for the year 10s from Cheshire talked positively of a music teacher who provided insights into what they could do with their music GCSE. 'He is like, you don't have to follow a career in the music industry. You can do background stuff like a sound engineer or rigging'. This was judged to constitute

helpful guidance, with one participant noting that 'it motivates me to get the GCSEs'. Similarly, year 12s in Merseyside discussed 'teachers [who] ask you want you want to do and push you towards [that goal]. So if you want to do physical therapy, [this teacher] will guide you and tell you what you need to get. If I want to do physical design [he] will just give me little ideas on what I have to do'.

Provide biographical insights, including their HE experiences

The value of teachers providing biographical insights was also discussed in positive terms by various groups. One year 10 participant from **CUMBRIA** who had expressed an interest in becoming an engineering, made reference his 'engineering teacher', who talks 'about his past life and how he was an engineer'. Another noted how their 'geography teacher [talks] about how she climbs mountains and', it was added 'it is interesting to see what other people do'. Similarly, year 10s in Merseyside described those teachers who are prepared to talk about their 'own experiences' and provide insights into what they did when they were younger. Likewise, the year 12s from Cheshire discussed a 'psychology teacher' who provided them with 'information about what they had done'.

In number of cases, teachers were observed to have provided insights into their university experiences. The year 12s from Merseyside referenced one of their 'science teachers' who 'will share her experiences of uni and what she has done.' This, one participant observed, 'motivates me a way'. Elaborating, it was noted that the teacher had informed them about 'the actual ins and outs of uni', and of 'living on your own, [and of] being more independent'.

The same group discussed another of their teachers who tells 'us about his life in university'. This included 'reiterating the point that it is not just fun. You have a lot of work to do. It is not easy, you have to stay on top of your deadlines'. 'They are', it was added, 'giving you an insight [through] conversation'. In addition, reference was made to one particular teacher who 'has been in our position. He knows what it is like to live in a deprived area. He knows what you are going through, so he helps you', which, it was added, includes 'showing his path [and] how he got to where he is'.

19.3. Participant ideas

Wider adoption of effective practices, including providing insights into their HE experiences

One idea volunteered by participants was that all teachers should adopt the kinds of practices and behaviours outlined above. In this respect, there was a general consensus amongst the year 12s from Cheshire that teachers should informing students about their experiences. 'I think it would be good', one participant observed, 'if teachers told you what they did every now and then'. Illustrating the value of doing so, another focus group member noted that if 'a university came in and told us something, you could compare it with what your teacher said. Ah - that's not quite the same. May be I should ask about it. Or, yes - that sounds about right.'

Listening to individual students and providing feedback

Exploring other ideas for classroom practice, year 12s from Cheshire discussed the value of teachers having 'one-to-one sessions with students, where they can ask you how things are going at home, and how you are finding the course'. This, it was added, would enable them to 'get to know you, and [you, in turn would] get more motivated to do that subject.' In addition, and in terms of progression support, the same group placed emphasis on teachers taking time to 'tell [us] how to improve when you get something wrong, like an exam paper or homework'. Along comparable lines, some of the teaching professionals interviewed by Raven (2019, 61) discussed an initiative they had started to introduce, which was aimed at 'recognising and capturing learner interests. Knowing something about the young person', one interviewee for this study observed, means that 'you know' who to approach when a suitable university outreach opportunity comes along.'

Recommendation 1

Recognise, support and encourage effective classroom and teaching practices that:

- Use a variety of approaches in delivering the curriculum
- Communicate an enthusiasm for the subject and include activities that encourage learning to be enjoyable
- Involve explaining and exploring the *real world* relevance of what is being studied
- Enable teachers to learn about their students' interests and ambitions
- Involve teachers providing biographical details of the educational pathways they took and insights into their university experiences.

20. Tactics: school-wide activities

20.1. Practitioners and professionals

Looking beyond the classroom, outreach practitioners and teaching professionals talked about various school-wide initiatives they considered to be effective in raising the HE awareness and interests of this particular cohort of learners.

Guidance on the UCAS application process, and university trips

For teaching professionals in Cheshire, this included inviting HE contacts to talk through the UCAS application process and provide guidance on preparing personal statements. Elsewhere, Lancashire outreach practitioners discussed visits organised by schools to local universities as well as places of work. These, it was observed, provide pupils with an insight into 'what is out there'. One of the teaching professionals from the same area also emphasised the 'importan[ce] of getting them out to look at places.'

Life skills sessions that relate to employment and what is needed to get into particular jobs

Also considered valuable in helping meet the challenge of low confidence and low educational ambitions were weekly 'life skills sessions'. These, the Lancashire teaching professional observed, 'relate to employment and what is needed to get into particular jobs.' The same sessions also address 'money [related] stuff'. In addition, this interviewee talked about the value of presentations from externals, with the example provided of a talk given by the RAF, which 'got them engaged'.

Careers advice and guidance, including support in preparing applications

One of the teaching professionals from Greater Manchester talked about the effectiveness of their school's careers guidance provision in addressing the issue of 'low aspirations'. This, included support for preparing applications and writing letters. Reference was also made to the introduction of 'a senior prefect scheme for year 10s', which required them to write letters of application and to be doing well in their school work. In discussing interventions that are effective in schools, the college-based teaching professional from the same area talked about 'portraits in high schools of former students who have achieved'. This, it was argued, 'goes down well in the schools.'

20.2. Ideas for additional activities

More information and advice on apprenticeship, including those at higher and degree level

Exploring potential activities, one of the Greater Manchester teaching professionals noted the excitement that had recently been generated amongst students over higher and degree apprenticeships. Such work-based provision, it was suggested, 'could be a way' to encourage 'a new generation', including young white British males from poorer backgrounds, 'to progress'. However, it was argued that levels of awareness of the work-based route into higher-level learning were currently limited. A similar observation was made by one of the Cheshire teaching professionals who talked about the possibility of 'developing an event' that would provide students with more information on the 'degree apprenticeship' option.

20.3. Participants

Focus group participants also discussed the school-initiated activities they had experienced and which they judged to have been beneficial.

School hosted FE and HE fairs, and hearing from college students

Year 10s in the Cheshire focus group talked about their school bringing in 'universities and colleges'. The event in question was viewed in positive terms, having enabled them to 'go round asking [representatives from these institutions] what do you do and all that'. A similar initiative was recalled by year 12 students from the same area. This involved college students visiting their high school. Asked if it had been useful, the responses were affirmative, with one participant arguing that it had 'definitely [been] helpful, as you got to hear the students with an outside view. Sometimes', it was added, 'I think colleges try and sell their courses better than others. So, you want to see the perspective from an actual student'. In concurring with this assessment, another member from the same focus group observed 'students just tell you how it is'. In contrast, reference was made to having 'assemblies with the heads of colleges and people from different departments. They come in with fancy PowerPoints and tell you about the features in the [college], but you don't get a sense of having boots on the ground.'

School careers advisors

Also praised by the same year 12 group was their old high school's 'specialised careers advisor'. 'She had her own office. We could go in any time and see her, and she would make sure that you were doing what you wanted to do'. Reference was also made to the school hosting 'regular careers fairs and stuff like that.'

The year 12 focus group from Merseyside also talked very positively about their school's careers advisor. The support she provided started in year 10 when, it was recalled, 'she sat down and talked to us about what we want to be in the future', which, it was noted, included providing information on the qualifications 'you need' if you want 'to do this.' 'I think', one participant observed, that 'it was during that conversation that it clicked - this is serious!' Exploring what the process involved, reference was made to fact that she:

> Just sits down with pupils and asks them what they want to do - what's your aspiration. I want to be a vet, something like that. And then she will tell you what qualifications you need to get [and] if you need to go to university. When I was speaking to her, I don't know. She'd say 'ok, what are your hobbies, and she [would] pick up the phone to universities and ask what courses do you do for this person.
>
> [She was] good at organising what you want, what you need - the detail. Not just you can go to university but you can go to Liverpool Uni and do this course, and you need those three qualifications. She builds up a pathway for us.'

In addition, it was observed that she would follow up the discussions: 'even when you are not expecting it, there will be an email'.

Two further groups were also positive about their role that their careers advisors had played. One of these - another year 12 group, this time from **CUMBRIA** - observed that 'if you go and see them, they will do what they can to make you aware of opportunities.' This support also included talks in assemblies, in which 'they showed us where you can go after sixth form'.

The other group to mentioned the careers support they received were the year 10s from Greater Manchester. Asked if they felt prepared for their next step, which, in their case would mean moving to a different institution, reference was made to the fact that 'when you see your careers advisor they give you a pack and a list of what you need to do and what colleges are appropriate for what you want to do. They take up what you say'. Various members in this group also talked about receiving 'one-to-one [and] small group guidance', which were judged to have been useful. They had provided an opportunity to ask 'them questions and they would help you and advise you what you can do to get into the job that you want, what our interests were, and did [you] want to take any of those interests further in your life, and what course we want to do and what level we need to take them at.'

Apprenticeship guidance

Some of the young men from the same Greater Manchester year 10 group also discussed attending a meeting on work-based options, which was viewed in favourable terms. This involved a 'person [coming] in and [telling] us about apprenticeships - what they are and what you can get from them' - and, it was added, 'we were told a site that we could go on to and search for different key words for jobs, and it came up with loads of lists of different apprenticeships that we could do'.

20.4. Ideas for additional school-wide activities

Focus group participants also offered a number of suggestions for additional school initiated activities that could help support their educational progression.

More guidance on post-16 options, including hearing from level 3 students

Various groups discussed the need for more guidance on their post-16 options, especially, although not exclusively, for those who were going to be moving educational institutions at the end of year 11. The year 10 group in Cheshire talked about 'more people (from colleges) coming in and speaking about it'. Whilst this could include presentations in 'assemblies', it could also involve events held in the school hall and attended by those who are studying at these colleges. Indeed, college students were preferred to college staff who, one participant admitted, 'I would not tend to listen but', it was added, 'if it is someone around our age, or someone who has just finished college, then I'd listen to them more because you can understand them more. It is just easier to relate to'.

Regarding the kinds of information these students should be providing, reference was made to telling us 'what they have done, how they have achieved what they have done, [and] the path they have took to get them' there. There was also a need to provide a realistic account of their experiences. 'There is no point in telling someone it is great when it is not going to be. [And] telling someone you are going to get there with

no effort at all.' Instead, it was argued that 'if you show someone you have to put in the hard work and it leads somewhere' this can help motivate them.

Mock level 3 timetables

Elsewhere, the year 12 group from Greater Manchester discussed the value of providing those yet to make the move to post-16 study with 'a mock timetable to show you what the day-to-day would be like. I don't think', it was added, 'we ever got really told what a [typical college] day would be like, so we didn't really know what to expect'.

Level 3 subject tasters

For the year 12 group from Cheshire emphasis was placed on the provision of level 3 subject tasters. Whilst some idea of what post-16 subjects would be like had been offered in year 11, there was a perceived need for 'a lot more transparency on courses.' To illustrate, one participant noted that 'the area of law I want to do, isn't in the A-Level syllabus but I wasn't told that before.' It was also argued that more information would help minimise drop out. One way of achieving this, it was added, could be to offer 'taster days' which would provide students with a chance to experience the courses 'they want to do', so [they] can be more informed on them by the time' they move to sixth form or college.

Early information and advice about post-16 options

Questioned about when schools should start providing information and advice about post-16 options, the general view from the same year 12 group was in year 9 'when you are choosing your options'. Asked what this early guidance should comprise, reference was made to providing information on 'what college is going to be like, what it offers and how to do well in college'. However, it was also argued that 'there should be other options [presented] rather than just A-levels' and that these should include BTECs and apprenticeships. Looking back, one participant observed, 'they did not really explain the difference between the three. They said you can do vocational, A-level, or apprenticeships, but they didn't really outline what an apprenticeship, vocational [programme] or A-levels would be like'.

Consistent with the feedback received from some of the other groups that commented on this theme, the general consensus amongst these participants was that the best guides would be college students and, in particular, 'year 2 students, because they [will have] settled in over the first year'. Moreover, they should be 'from a range of A-levels, apprenticeships and vocational' programmes. It was also argued they need to include people who have almost finished their level 3 courses, 'because they have gone through it all. They can tell you what it is like all the way through.' These insights, it was added, should come from 'students who have lower grades than an A, [because] we want to hear from those who have encountered challenges and how they have coped with challenges'.

Along similar lines, the year 12 group from **CUMBRIA** talked about the value of being informed about 'other [post-16] options' and of 'making people aware of other things', even when a school possessed a sixth form. In this respect, one focus group member observed 'I do sort of regret going to sixth form. If you went to the college, there is a course that is worth like the equivalent to a few A-levels, and then [you can] do one specific thing, rather than 'choose three which might not be relevant to what you want to do.'

On-going level 3 support

The need for additional support once level 3 courses had commenced was advocated by the year 12 group from Cheshire. Some members of this group admitted that they lacked motivation. 'A lot of us really, really want to do well but we haven't got the motivation.' In response, the suggestion was made to having 'review

days twice a month' when 'your tutors looking at your progress'. Whilst 'people would [not] like that, it would be a heads up to see where you are at'. If any problems were identified, 'you could go to somebody for support'. Linked to this was the idea of 'teachers leading catch-up or booster classes', and the provision of additional support on 'exam techniques and enrichment [sessions] for each subject'.

More guidance on work-based options at higher and degree level, hearing from employers

Looking further ahead, the 12 group from **CUMBRIA** talked about the support they had so far received from the school concerning their next post-18 steps. This included 'talks about uni'. However, it was suggested that more guidance on other options was needed, notably 'higher apprenticeships', since, it was argued, 'apprenticeships [are] quite big here'. Whilst information on this option could be delivered through 'assemblies', reference was made to 'bringing more employers in talk to you about that, because', one participant observed, 'I find it quite useful when someone in a factory over there comes and tells you what they do and how you can apply for an apprenticeship.' Exploring this further, emphasis was placed on hearing from 'someone who has worked at that business. Someone', it was added, 'who has had experience of that sector.'

Recommendation 2

Identify and work with students' career ambitions, as well as their subject interests, in providing a reason and rationale to study and progress.

Recommendations 3-4

Explore ways of encouraging and supporting school-hosted events involving local FE colleges and universities.

- These intervention can help in raising awareness of next step options (including HE).

Seek to support the work of school and college-based careers advisors. Careers guidance (including that offered early in secondary/high school) can have a significant impact in encouraging school engagement, as well as in motivating students to think about the role that further and high education can play.

Recommendation 5

In recognising the challenges that the transition to post-16 study can present (especially where a change of institution is involved), explore ways in which more information, advice and guidance on post-16 options can be provided, including offering insights into the demands and character of post-16 study and training.

Recommendation 6

Identify and deploy (school, college, university) alumni from comparable backgrounds to provide (relatable) accounts of their learner journeys and insights into the reasons for the decisions they made, including those associated opting for a higher education.

Recommendation 7

Support and encourage the use of guest speakers in graduate-level occupations who can talk about their educational experiences and journeys, and the value of higher-level study and training.

Recommendation 8

Given that it is a widely considered option - especially amongst the cohort of learners this study is concerned with - consider ways in which students can be informed of work-based pathways, and higher and degree level apprenticeships, including through hearing from a range of employers and training providers.

21. Tactics: outreach interventions

21.1. The practitioner perspective

A dedicated initiative

Practitioners and teaching professionals provided details of the outreach interventions the young men involved in the study were likely to have been offered and, at least in some instances, to have taken part in. According to interviewees, those in the year 10 focus group from Merseyside were involved in a project dedicated to this particular cohort, which encompassed a 'range of activities', including university and college visits, and which was aimed at raising their HE aspirations and motivations. By contrast, less had been done with year 12s, although they were likely to have attended a one-day event held in the school which covered a range of HE related workshops, including one concerned with student finance.

Campus-based sports day, a business challenge and mentoring

Prominent amongst the outreach activities some of the year 10s in Cheshire were likely to have experienced was a campus-based sports day. Reference was also made to a business challenge, the first part of which took place in school, whilst the second element, representing the finals, was hosted at a nearby rugby club. Meanwhile, some of their year 12 counterparts would have been involved in a mentoring scheme, which matched them according to subject area with 'graduates or people in industry'. In addition, it was noted that they would have received various HE talks, as well as some one-to-one support for completing their UCAS applications.

Summer residentials, drama performances and university-hosted maths events

A residential summer school was identified by interviews as one of the outreach initiatives some of the year 10 participants in Greater Manchester were likely to have attended. A year or so earlier, the same cohort would have received a performance from a drama group addressing post-18 options, along with a talk on HE. More recently, it was noted that some were likely to have attended a maths event at a local university, been involved in a mentoring programme with undergraduates, and taken part in a team building residential event in north Wales. In contrast, fewer outreach interventions had been offered to their year 12 college counterparts.

Aspirations raising days, science festivals, entrepreneurial skills events

Year 10 and 12 focus group participants in Lancashire were, according to interviewees, likely to have been involved a various interventions. For year 10s, these included an 'aspiration day' focused on exploring how they could develop themselves and utilise the opportunities offered to them. Other interventions mentioned comprised a university hosted science festival and the chance to participate in a 'junior university' event. The main activity for year 12s was identified as being a residential scheduled for the summer, which would include sessions on the development of business as well as academic skills.

Finally, outreach practitioners in **CUMBRIA** mentioned an e-mentoring scheme for year 10s, whilst year 12s were scheduled to receive an intervention dedicated to 'financial literacy and entrepreneurial skills'. Reference was also made to an 'FE trip' designed to raise their awareness of other educational institutions that, from a transport perspective, would be accessible to them.

21.2. An assessment of the most effective interventions

Residentials

Given the range of activities described, interviewees were asked which interventions they considered were most effective at engaging with and having a positive impact on this particular cohort. The Merseyside teaching professional talked about the impact on educational aspirations of university visits, including residential events. Similarly, their counterpart in Lancashire highlighted the potential impact of an up-coming residential, which, it was observed, will include some of those involved in the year 10 focus group discussions.

Mentoring and interventions that focus on career ambitions

For outreach practitioner from CUMBRIA, a mentoring programme aimed at offering coaching support was considered particularly effective with year 12s. Meanwhile, the teaching professional in Cheshire who was based in the school which provided year 10 participants discussed the particular value of interventions that were interactive in nature. Off-site activities were also highlight by this interviewee, whilst it was argued that the key messages that such events needed to communicate should relate to careers rather than university being an end in itself.

21.3. Participants' perspective

Visits by university students

One of the interventions a number of focus groups described experiencing were visits to their schools and colleges by current university students. Year 12s form Merseyside talked about 'students coming into the school to talk about university as an option'. These were considered to be effective in that 'they give us more understanding'. Similar visits were also commended by the year 10s from Greater Manchester. 'Hearing from people who are there', it was noted, can be given 'the positives and negatives of going' and, by doing so, 'might make you re-think your options'.

However, these visits were also judged to have their limitations. Whilst the year 12 group from Merseyside acknowledged that 'you can be told' about university, it was added that 'it doesn't put a certain image in your head. If we were to go to the actual university to see what it is like, that would have more effect on us. You can actually see what [is] going on'.

Subject tasters

Another set of outreach events highlighted by focus group participants were subject tasters. The year 12 group from CUMBRIA comment on those they had recently experienced. Whilst for some the talks and workshops were consider to have been 'good' and of relevance to their interests, there was a widely held view that the subject options available had not been varied enough. Here reference was made to 'a narrow list of what we could do', with one participant observing that 'there was nothing like business', which was what this individual was interested in. Asked what would have been more useful, it was suggested that 'they could have asked what everyone would like to do' ahead of event and then offered tasters in those areas.

The value of subject-based interventions, such as masterclasses, in supporting attainment is widely recognised. However, as the authors of the Southern Universities Network (2017, 62) report acknowledge,

'outreach providers need to carefully consider how they can employ resources' at target groups such as 'male learners'. The evidence presented here suggests the need to ensure that what is offered aligns with learner interests, especially when directed at level 3 students.

University visits

The most widely referenced outreach intervention amongst focus group participants was the campus visit. These events received a considerable amount of positive comment. Asked about their experience of the various visits they had been on, year 10s in Merseyside talked about them being 'eye opening', with 'people tell[ing] you different things that might get you interested'. Similarly, their year 12 counterparts from same school suggested that university trips work because 'you are able to get a feel' and 'more understanding'. Indeed, it was argued that 'they work in both ways. They can get people saying yes' and others saying 'that's not for me. Not everyone', it was added, 'wants to go to uni, so it can make people think, yes that's not for me', which, it was observed, is 'just as important'.

In addition, members from the same year 12 group argued that such trips 'make you realise what you want to go for and what pathway you want to go down, and whether you want to live at home or the halls'. Asked whether they answer questions concerned with why bother going to university, the response was 'yes. Because when you go, they give you a talk - this is what uni is like. This is what you will be expected to do - and if you can't follow those expectations, there is no point in trying'. Especially important, on such occasions, it was added, was hearing from students and gathering their 'first-hand experience'.

However, whilst widely praised these intervention were also judged to have their limitations. In this respect, the year 10s from Merseyside argued that they do 'not show you what it is actually like. [They] only show you the best bits and not what [it is] properly like'. The same criticism was made by their year 12 counterparts, who talked about receiving a sanitised version of what university is like. 'It is better', it was suggested, 'if you go for a full day and sit in on an actual class and get to see what is going on, instead of an empty classroom'. In addition, it was argued that it would be more useful to 'tour round the university while people are there', rather than 'if you go round in you big group from school'. That, it was added, 'is not what uni is like'.

A similar set of observations were made by the year 12 group in Lancashire. Whilst it was considered 'great to do taster days', it was added that 'they don't actually demonstrate the qualities of university. They show you what they want you to see, as opposed to the reality [and] keep the bits away they don't want you to see.' The was a need to see 'both', in order 'to make an informed decision.'

Recommendations 9-11

Recognise:

- And support the role that undergraduates can play in offering relatable accounts of university
- The value of subject tasters in supporting attainment, as well as providing information and guidance about HE level study. Seek to ensure the subjects offered align with learner interests
- The value of HE campus-based events and seek to ensure these provide realistic insights and experiences of higher education.

22. Tactics: outreach ideas

22.1. Practitioners and professionals

Highly aspirational stuff, including guest speakers

Having considered the current outreach offer available to the young men represented by those involved in the focus groups, interviews were asked to explore what other interventions could help generate awareness and interest in HE as an option. For the Merseyside teaching professional the provision of more 'highly aspirational stuff' was highlighted. Here the example was offered of guest speakers to the school, especially those from the professions, who could talk about their careers and who would encourage their audience to 'think why put the effort it'. A comparable tactic had been found to be effective in two of the post-16 institutions featured in the East Midlands study by Raven (2019, 61). Here the teaching contacts interviewed talked about 'bringing in employers and motivational speakers to raise aspirations and help learners see the purpose of being here.

Interactive projects with tangible outcomes

For Lancashire interviewees ideas focused on interactive projects in which those taking part could see a tangible purpose and outcome. To illustrate this, reference was made to a project that would involve participants writing their own training programme or building something, such as a radio-controlled vehicle that could then be tested and assessed over an obstacle course. Such interventions, it was added, could tap into their 'enthusiasm and passions'.

Role models, mentoring schemes and long-term initiatives

One of the Lancashire outreach practitioners also talked about the greater use of role models - 'so they can see people from their area that have gone on to do amazing things with their lives that they have not thought of'. Similarly, the CUMBRIA outreach practitioner talked about the potential of developing mentoring schemes with graduates from the local area and school who would come back and offer one-to-one sessions exploring with participants what they can do and how they might get there. Accompanying this, was a perceived need for 'trips outside the county', including 'residentials', that would help to 'foster [a] sense [that there is] more than this town'. Finally, outreach practitioners in Cheshire argued that there was a need for longer-term projects that could build the self-esteem of these young men and nurture a confidence in their own abilities. This suggestion aligns with the 'understanding' described by Atherton and Mazhari (2019, 24) 'that work with this group of students needed to be sustained'.

22.2. Participant perspective

Hearing from more undergraduates, including those half-way through their HE studies

Focus group participants also discussed their ideas for outreach activities that would help support their education progression, including, potentially, that associated with higher-level study. A number of groups talked about wanting more HE students to visits their schools and colleges and, as the year 12s group from Cheshire voiced, describe 'what university life is actually like'. Indeed, for this group the insights of current undergraduates could help to overcome one of the challenges faced by those who have not got anyone in their family to tell them what it is like. Exploring this further, the suggestion was made that 'when a university comes in [to the school], invite not just the students but the parents as well. Then may be they can [also] get a better understanding of what it is actually like'.

The year 10 group from the same area also discussed the value of hearing from students. These were preferred to university staff because 'students have more experience of what it was like for them.' In this respect, it was agreed that it would be very helpful to know the challenges they encountered and how they have overcome these. There was also the view that the best students to hear from would be those 'in the middle' of their time at university 'because you can get what they have been doing and what they can do in the future.'

Hearing from students who can offer different perspectives, as well as recent graduates

Two other groups made a comparable case. The year 12s from Greater Manchester emphasised hearing from university students because 'they are more likely to give a balanced view'. In elaborating, it was argued that it would be helpful to hear from 'a range' of students, in terms of subjects being studied and the year groups they were in. This should 'include some from near the start, to say what it starts off like, some from the middle, to tell you how to get used to it, and some from the end, telling you what the whole experience is like'. The value in hearing from someone who had 'gone right through the process' lay, it was argued, in them being able to 'give ideas of things they wish they had done, [and] tell you what they would have done better'.

A comparable case was made by year 12s from Lancashire, although here the emphasis was on hearing from 'ex [university] students'. They would be able to give you an idea of 'if it was worth it. You could see where they are now and what they have got from it'. Linked to this it can be noted that one of the recommendations made in the report produced by the Southern Universities Network (2017, 61) was for white working class male learners to gain an insight into the 'full breadth of HE learning opportunities available', since this would 'allow them to explore how provision might offer them a suitable pathway'. The same study also argued that 'learners were interested in talking to individuals who could help them find out more', including undergraduates (Southern Universities Network, 2017, 1).

Interventions for younger year groups

Another response to the question of what universities should do to raise awareness and interest in HE amongst local young men, derived from the year 12 group in Cheshire. More activities, it was argued, should be focused on younger learners 'because if more people were thinking about university from the start of high school, or even before, they would be more likely to consider it as an option'. Exploring this further, reference was made to starting to engage young people from year 7 onwards.

Impartial guidance on the comparative benefits and costs of HE

One of the members of the same Cheshire group observed that 'sometimes people who learn trades, like electricians, out earn people who go to university'. Consequently, there was a 'need' to be provided with 'accurate information on [our] prospects', and the comparative benefits of 'going into different sectors', in order to determine whether university 'will of value to you'.

Information on the financial support available

On a related matter, year 10s in Lancashire emphasised the need to know more about the financial support that would be available at university for those from lower income households. Currently, it was argued, 'we don't learn about stuff like that'. However, it was agreed that being aware of this could have a 'significant' influence on their post-18 choices. Parents, it was observed, also needed to be informed about the financial

support available. These claims chime with the argument made in the Southern Universities Network (2017, 62) report which argued that 'white working class male learners need access to impartial information about HE opportunities, including the costs and the benefits to them as an individual'.

Sector visits and hearing from those in employment who come from similar backgrounds

One method for gathering such insights and intelligence was suggested by the year 10s from Merseyside. Members of this group discussed having an opportunity to visit those working in the sectors they were interest in, and of meeting people who had 'started off low' and progressed, including those who 'now have their own business' and who could 'tell you what they have done'. It would be particularly helpful, it was agreed, to hear from those who had come from a similar background to them because 'they have the [same] financial' experience.

Mock lectures and immersive HE experiences

Having identified the need to learn about the reality of life at university, year 12s from Lancashire suggested two ways in which this could be achieved. The first concerned being given the opportunity to 'do mock lectures on subjects that you are studying in the sixth form'. Complementing and, potentially, building on this activity was the idea of being left at university 'for a week', during which time you would 'study a course, so you can fully experience it'. This, it was added, would include 'attend[ing] lectures and seminars'.

A (progressive) series of interventions

Finally, drawing on their experience of outreach initiatives a more general recommendation was made by year 12s from Merseyside. There was a common view amongst members of this group that *one-off* events were insufficient. Instead, there was a need for a series of interventions, otherwise they would fade from the memory. Amongst these activities, it was added, should by those that immerse you in university and can, consequently, have a lasting effect.

Recommendations 12-13

Deploy second and third year undergraduates on outreach interventions. These individuals can draw on more extensive experience of HE (than those new to university-level study), including the challenges they have encountered and how these have been overcome.

Work with alumni (particularly those from comparable WP backgrounds) who can provide first-hand experience of the benefits of gaining a university-level education, and who can talk about the educational and career routes they took.

Recommendations 14-16

Explore ways to provide those from this cohort (and others) with information and advice on the:

- Comparative costs and benefits of HE
- Financial support available at university for those from lower income households and WP backgrounds.

Consider ways in which this information can also be provided to the parents and carers of these young people.

Recommendation 17

Consider the provision of HE-level lectures and seminars that align with the subject areas sixth formers and level 3 college students are pursuing, and that can provide an insight into where their subjects can lead and the key skills needed at HE level.

Recommendation 18

Recognise the importance of outreach activities that have a more enduring impact, including those comprising a series of (progressive) interventions.

Similarly, consider ways in which more young men from the target cohort can participate in *immersive* HE experiences, such as summer schools.

23. Overview

23.1. Summary of key findings

Table 23.1. provides a summary of the key findings from this study, in terms of the challenges to HE progression faced by white working class males, along with the influences on their decision making process. It also highlights current practices and interventions that are judged to have a positive impact on the educational motivations and HE ambitions of these young men, and identifies ideas for additional initiatives that could work to strengthen this effect. These findings derive from two distinct perspectives: those of the 17 outreach practitioners and teaching professionals interviewed for this study, and those of the 70 young men who participated in the focus groups.

Table 23.1. helps to illustrate the points of continuity between the perspectives of these two groups. However, it also draws attention to differences and what the insights of these students adds to our understanding. These include the opportunity costs of HE, which featured prominently in a number of focus group discussions. They also comprise the alternative views held by a significant number of these young men, in terms of their experiences and perceptions of education, the role of key influencers, and the advantages they attach to the HE option. The identification and consideration of differing viewpoints supports the arguments outlined by Atherton and Mazhari (2019, 5) that 'white males are not a homogeneous group', including in their motivations and ambitions, and in the support received from key influencers.

Table 23.1. Summary of findings: challenges, influences and tactics

Theme	Subject	Practitioner and professionals' perspective	Students' perspective	
			Consistent with practitioners	Alternative
Challenges	Educational progression	▪ A lack of confidence to go further ▪ Not suffering from over-achievement anxiety Implications for HE: 'it will be like school'.	▪ Work has got harder ▪ The work is a lot more involved ▪ I feel like I am going to fail ▪ It is stressful ▪ Some have dropped out, decided against sixth form, or are now 'doing nothing'.	▪ It gives you options ▪ It's our future ▪ Can choose subjects you want to do ▪ Wanting to do well for my family Implications for HE: it will be a 'lot better than high school'.
	Financial costs	▪ Considered too expensive ▪ Not wanting to accumulate huge debts.	▪ The cost is overwhelming ▪ I don't really think it's worth it ▪ Some people come from poor backgrounds - no one will be able to support them ▪ You have to pay for everything ▪ It puts me off - the cost of it.	▪ You will earn more.

	Comparative costs	▪ Attractions of the labour market and chance to earn money ▪ Locally available employment that does not require a higher education.	▪ Wanting to make money on leaving school ▪ You don't need a university education unless it is for certain jobs.	▪ Doing well leads to a higher job ▪ Employers go for higher educated people.
	Opportunity costs		▪ Moving away from home ▪ Risk of coming out with nothing ▪ Could have been promoted in the time ▪ Gaining a degree but not securing a job ▪ Paying all that money and not enjoying it.	▪ A new experience ▪ Helpful in getting your confidence up ▪ Challenging and motivating ▪ Gain experience of living away from home ▪ A step into the real world.
Influencers	**Parents**	▪ Lack of direction and understanding from home ▪ University is not for us ▪ Limited parental support ▪ Not having parental experience (in HE) to pass down ▪ Need to contribute to the household income ▪ Lack of role models.	▪ Cultivating non-HE interests ▪ Sceptical of the benefits.	▪ Parental encouragement to be 'more successful' ▪ To be proud afterwards.
	Other family members and local networks	▪ Unlikely to encounter those with HE experience ▪ Limited experiences of the world beyond their neighbourhood -	▪ Extended family members encouraging take up of occupations that do not require a higher education.	▪ Older siblings and cousins who have been through university saying they were the best years of their lives ▪ Grandparents and family contacts who have HE

		very difficult to chase after what you don't know.		experience and provide examples to follow.
	Peers	▪ Peer pressure and the negative effect on outreach engagement.	▪ Impact on work ethic.	▪ Friends who encourage HE thinking.
	Teachers	▪ Need strong personalities but generally have limited impact.	▪ Can have a discourage effect.	▪ Wanting to become a teacher ▪ Wanting to purse their subject at advanced level and in HE.
Tactics: what works and could work	**Classroom (current)**	▪ Competitions ▪ Use of silence ▪ Extra support.	Teachers who: ▪ Show enthusiasm and care about their subject ▪ Use practical sessions and group work ▪ Interact with the class ▪ Are approachable and willing to answer questions, and to explain ▪ Have a sense of humour and recognise the fun side of learning ▪ Show the wider relevance of what is taught ▪ Take time to learn about their students ▪ Are interested in their students' career ambitions ▪ Provide biographical insights, including their HE experiences.	
	Classroom (ideas)		▪ Wide adoption of the above practices, including teachers	

			providing insights into their HE experiences ▪ Listening to students and providing feedback on how to improve (and progress)	
	School-wide (current)	▪ HE visitors offering guidance on the UCAS application process ▪ Visits to places of work ▪ University trips that offer insights into 'what is out there' ▪ Life skills sessions that relate to employment and what is needed to secure particular jobs ▪ Careers advice and guidance, including in preparing applications and writing letters.	▪ School hosted university and college fairs, involving undergraduates ▪ Support provided by school careers advisors ▪ Apprenticeship workshops.	
	School-wide (ideas)	▪ More information and advice on apprenticeships, including those at higher and degree level.	▪ Earlier guidance on post-16 options, including hearing from L3 students ▪ Mock L3 timetables and subject tasters ▪ On-going L3 support ▪ More advice on work-based options at higher and degree level ▪ Hearing from employers, including on apprenticeship opportunities.	
	Outreach (current)	▪ Residentials ▪ Mentoring ▪ Interventions focusing on career ambitions.	▪ Visits by university students ▪ Subject tasters ▪ University visits.	

	Outreach (ideas)	▪ Highly aspirational stuff, including talks by guest speakers
		▪ Interactive projects with tangible outcomes
		▪ Role models
		▪ Mentoring schemes
		▪ Long-term initiatives.
			▪ Hearing from:
			  ○ A range of undergraduates who can offer different perspectives, including those half-way through their studies
			  ○ Recent graduates
			▪ More interventions for younger learners
			▪ Impartial guidance on the comparative costs and benefits of HE
			▪ Information on financial support available
			▪ Sector visits
			▪ Hearing from those with comparable backgrounds now in graduate employment
			▪ Mock HE lectures in L3 subjects studied
			▪ Immersive HE experiences
			▪ A (progressive) series of interventions.	

23.2. Aligning tactics to challenges

Table 23.2. reproduces the findings detailed in Table 23.1. but re-arranges them with the aim of presenting the challenges alongside the corresponding responses. In doing so, account is taken of the HE-related reservations and concerns expressed by many focus group participants, whilst also utilising the alternative viewpoints voiced by other group members. The latter are presented as key messages that might be communicated via the practices and activities outlined, which include current initiatives considered to be effective, as well as the suggestions made by interviewees and focus group participants for new interventions.

In addition, by setting classroom practices alongside school-wide initiatives and outreach interventions, Table 23.2. presents the idea that these have the potential to be used in combination, and that what is done in the classroom and at a school/college level could support outreach work. In turn, outreach interventions could reinforce what happens in schools and classrooms. For instance, the insights teachers provide into their own educational journeys and HE experiences could complement the messages delivered by guest speakers to the school and what is learned from undergraduates and mentors during their school visits or on campus-based interventions. Similarly, classroom practices that identify student interests could inform careers guidance sessions and university-delivered subject tasters.

This suggestion is consistent with the view that a partnership approach is needed for outreach to be effective in general and for progress to be made with the access challenge associated with white working class males in particular. In this regard, Atherton and Mazhari (2019, 23) quote an outreach lead who observes that ‘university outreach activity alone is unlikely to affect the change necessary’ and that partnership work with schools, businesses and others is necessary ‘to affect deep rooted change’. Similarly, in their report the Southern Universities Network (2017, 61) suggests that ‘outreach provision that supports schools and colleges to building confident learners may be effective in increasing progression’. Along comparable lines, Baars et. al. (2016, 35) argue that ‘WP practitioners should work with teachers to support white working class boys to consider higher education and realise the future relevance of their primary and secondary education’ (see also Webster and Atherton, 2016, 2). Table 23.2. suggests ways in which this could be achieved at three different levels.

Table 23.2. Aligning tactics to challenges

Challenges	Details		Responses		
	Practitioners and professionals	Students	Classroom	School-wide	Outreach
Educational engagement	▪ Lack of confidence to go further ▪ Not suffering from over-achievement anxiety. Implications for outreach: 'it will be like school'.	▪ Y10s: work has got harder, feel like I am going to fail, it's stressful ▪ Y12s: work is a lot more involved, some have dropped out, decided against 6th form, or are now 'doing nothing'.	Practices that involve: ▪ Teachers communicating their subject enthusiasms and the reasons for these ▪ Interactive sessions and group work ▪ Acknowledging the concerns, interests and career ambitions of individual student ▪ Teachers providing biographical insights, inc. their career routes and HE experiences.	▪ Early and continued careers guidance ▪ School hosted university and college fairs ▪ Guest speakers, including employers and those from comparable backgrounds to the young men ▪ Visits to places of work ▪ Life skills sessions that relate to employment and what is needed to get into particular jobs.	▪ Visits by a range of UGs and recent graduates that provide insights into their HE experiences and illustrate the relevance of the HE option ▪ Subject tasters that align with student interests ▪ Interventions for younger learners ▪ Mock HE lectures in L3 subjects being studied ▪ Immersive HE experiences (including summer schools and residentials) Key messages:

					▪ Doing well (pre and post-16) gives you options ▪ It's my future ▪ Chance to choose subjects want to do (post-16) ▪ Wanting to do well for my family.
Financial costs	▪ Considered too expensive ▪ Wishing to avoid huge debts.	▪ Cost is overwhelming ▪ Don't think it's worth it ▪ No one will be able to support those from poorer background ▪ Have to pay for everything.		▪ Impartial guidance on the costs and benefits of HE	▪ Information (and guidance) on the financial support available in HE ▪ Hearing from a range of UGs, including those half-way through their studies ▪ Hearing from graduates now in employment and from similar backgrounds Key messages relating to: earning potential (grad premium).

Comparative costs	▪ Attractions of earning money ▪ Local employment that does not requiring HE.	▪ Wanting to start earning ▪ HE is only needed for certain jobs.	Practices that provide biographical insights, including career routes taken by teachers and their rationale for pursuing HE.	▪ School hosted careers fairs that include colleges and universities ▪ Support provided by school careers advisors.	▪ Information (and guidance) on the financial support available in HE ▪ Hearing from a range of UGs, including those half-way through their studies ▪ Hearing from recent graduates and those now in employment, including those from similar backgrounds ▪ HE subject tasters that align with the student interests of students. Key messages: ▪ Employers go for higher educated people ▪ It 'pays' in the long run ▪ Earning potential (graduate premium).
Opportunity costs		▪ Risk of coming out with nothing ▪ Could have been promoted		▪ Early and continued careers guidance ▪ Information, advice and guidance on apprenticeships,	▪ Engaging with a range of undergraduates who can offer different perspectives, including

		▪ Gaining a degree but not securing a job (or graduate - level post) ▪ Paying all that money and not enjoying it.		including those at higher and degree level ▪ Apprenticeship workshops ▪ Guest speakers, including employers and those from comparable backgrounds.	those half-way through their HE studies ▪ Hearing from recent graduates and those now in employment and from similar backgrounds ▪ Sector visits Key messages: ▪ A new experience ▪ Challenging and motivating ▪ Gain experience of living away from home ▪ A step into the real world.

23.3. Comparing the recommendations made in two reports

Table 23.3. summarises the recommendations to have emerged from this investigation and compares them with those relating to the same areas that were made in *Bucking the Trend*. Conducted by the same author and researcher and carried out in 2016/17, this study's findings were derived from the insights offered by 14 white British males from educationally deprived wards in Stoke on Trent, Mid Staffordshire and Crewe who had progressed onto HE-level study. Whilst its approach is distinct from that taken in the current study, many the findings and recommendations are consistent across the two investigations. These include the importance of identifying and working with student interests, communicating the value of HE in enhancing employment prospects and career ambitions, and hearing from and engaging with those from the same local backgrounds who have benefitted a higher education. Arguably, these points of continuity - and the fact that many of the same findings have emerged from two studies that have adopted quite different perspectives (and qualitative methodologies) - helps to underpin the validity of the recommendations made here.

However - and as hoped - the approach adopted here, which sought the insights of a larger sample of young men from a wider range of educationally deprived districts, and at the time that they were experiencing two key transition points in their learner journeys, has added further detail. Consequently, a number of the recommendations made in this study were able to build on those offered in *Bucking the Trend*. For instance, alongside communicating the value of HE is the suggestion that the opportunity cost of this option for this particular cohort of learners should be recognised and addressed. Likewise, whilst the earlier study talked about working with teachers and tutors to explore how they can use their own stories of progression to inform and encourage these young men, the current study draws attention to a range classroom practices that can be adopted by teaching professionals more generally in order to inform and nurture HE interests.

Table 23.3. Comparing this study's recommendations with those made in *Bucking the Trend*

Bucking the Trend	Perspectives and Prospects
▪ Identify and nurture subject interests, and communicating the opportunity that HE study offers to pursue these interests.	▪ Recognise the value of subject tasters in supporting attainment, as well as providing information and guidance about HE level study. Seek to ensure the subjects offered align with learner interests. ▪ Consider the provision of HE-level lectures and seminars that align with the subject areas sixth formers and level 3 college students are pursuing, and that can provide an insight into where their subjects can lead and the key skills needed at HE level.
▪ Communicate the value of HE as a means of enhancing employment prospects and achieving career ambitions.	▪ Identify and work with students' career ambitions, as well as their interests, in providing a reason and rationale to study and progress. ▪ Seek to support the work of school and college-based careers advisors. They can have a significant impact in encouraging school engagement and motivating students to think about the role that HE can play. ▪ Consider ways in which students can be informed of work-based pathways and higher and degree level apprenticeships, including through hearing from a range of employers and training providers.
▪ Equip learners with an appreciation and understanding of the support (academic, pastoral and financial) available at HE	▪ Provide information and advice on the comparative benefits of HE, and the financial support available at university, to those from lower income households ▪ Consider ways in which this information can also be provided to parents and carers
▪ Work with teachers and tutors to explore the role that teaching professionals can play as role models - in telling their stories of progression and articulating their subject interests	▪ Recognise, support and encourage effective classroom practices that include teaching providing biographical insights into their educational pathways and university experiences (*BTT* highlight the role that individual teachers and tutors can play. *Perspectives and Prospects* suggests a range of common practices capable of having a positive impact)
▪ Deploy current male undergraduates from comparable backgrounds who, in recounting their stories of progression, can offer examples of what is achievable and, potentially, act as role models.	▪ Consider the deployment of second and third year undergraduates on outreach interventions. They can draw on more extensive experience of HE (than those new to university study), including the challenges they have encountered and how these were overcome.
▪ Engage men from the locality who are now in graduate-level employment and who can talk about their experiences and demonstrate the potential and value of HE-level study especially	▪ Working with alumni (particularly those from comparable WP backgrounds) who can provide first-hand experience of the benefits of gaining a university-level education, and who can talk about the educational and career routes they took. ▪ Support and encourage the use of guest speakers in graduate-level occupations who can talk about their

male teachers from similar (relatable)	educational experiences and journeys, and the value of higher-level training.
	▪ Harness the learner voice - seek to gather further insights from this cohort, including their intentions a year after the original meetings were held.

24. Conclusions

Comparatively few young white British males from poorer backgrounds progress to university level study. The need to address this discrepancy represents a current priority for those engaged in widening higher education participation. Whilst significant concerns exist in relation to the success of those from this cohort who do progress, emphasis is on access, given the scale of this group's under-representation in HE. Consequently, facilitating and supporting the progression of more white working class males - as they are sometimes described - into university is an identified area of focus for the National Collaborative Outreach Programme. Whilst action in this field is an imperative, there is an underlying need to better understand the nature of this challenge.

This report - and the research that underpins it - is a response of five NCOP area partnerships to this concern. The approach adopted for this investigation draws on a previous study conducted by this author, which was commissioned by one of these five partnerships. Based on evidence from a sample of young men from educationally deprived areas who had progressed to HE, *Bucking the Trend* identified that for this cohort the decision making process as it relates to higher education could be traced back to an early phase in their education. However, being retrospective in nature it relied upon the recall of those surveyed, whilst also drawing on the accounts of young men from a limited geographical area. The study reported here was, in part, a respond to these limitations, in gathering the insights of a larger sample of those from comparable backgrounds from across the NW of England, and at two key phases in their learner journeys when, for many, the decisions about their educational futures were being made.

Consistent with the findings from *Bucking the Trend*, this new study found a range of influencers on the decisions these young men were making, including parents, older siblings and extended family members, as well as friends and others in their social networks and, in some cases, certain teachers. Whilst the temptation might be to seek to identify a primary influence(r), the findings suggest that a combination of influences could shape intentions. Although many of those surveyed were not intending to progress, some did describe HE as an objective. Moreover, despite residing in target wards - and often possessing no family histories in HE - these influences could work to encourage and support their educational aspirations: a finding that resonates with some of those made in *Bucking the Trend*. More generally, virtually all who were surveyed expressed career ambitions.

To understand these ambitions and intentions, attention then turned to exploring the perspectives that were informing the decision making process. First to be considered in this regard were the educational experiences of these young men. In a number of respects, the insights they provided - in terms of the challenges encountered - were consistent with the impressions and interpretations given by the teaching professionals and outreach practitioners who taught and supported them, whilst adding further depth and detail to what these interviewees were able to offer. However, in number instances their accounts revealed more positive outlooks. The high degree of self-awareness shown by these young men during this phase of the discussions was also present when exploring their perceptions of higher education. For many, concerns over the financial costs of this option were prominent in these conversations. This included a recognition

that the financial burden could extend beyond headline fees. However, discussions also indicated an awareness of the comparative costs of HE, given the possibilities and attractions of the local labour market and of earning money. Indeed, it can be argued that such considerations are especially pertinent in some of the low wage and low skilled areas these young men were likely to be familiar with.

Finally, discussions indicated that the wider opportunity costs of HE were also informing their thinking. Here, references were made to the social, cultural and material sacrifices that this option could entail, including the *price* of moving away from close knit communities and, potentially, sacrificing job progression. Yet, whilst widely acknowledged, for a number of those surveyed the benefits of higher education were viewed as out-weighing such costs. However, the challenge - certainly amongst the younger of the two year groups surveyed - is that this emerged as the minority view. The implications of this finding can be anticipated. Left to their own devices, comparatively few are likely to progress and those that do will continue to buck the general trend. This said, the same conversations also identified a number of current practices that can help to influence mindsets and modify perceptions, as well as a range of additional interventions that may help to further inform the decision making process.

Some of these practices and activities can be viewed as technical in nature, including the provision of more information on post-16 and post-18 options, whilst others are of a more structural character, such as ensuring access to careers guidance staff. However, arguably the most significant may prove to be those that address mindsets and attitudes, including the deployment of relatable role models and provision of *immersive* HE experiences. Equally evident from the enduring nature of this challenge is that outreach alone may not be enough. Arguably, there is a need for a partnership approach and one that is co-ordinated, with classroom practices supporting wider-school initiatives, which, in turn, complement the outreach offer.

What also emerges from this study is the importance of listening to - and learning from - these young men. They have views and ideas and, as their engagement and involvement in the focus groups demonstrated, are keen to express them. Discussion groups of this nature may offer one such format but, whatever the medium, there is considerable value in exploring the potential for two-way and on-going conversations that facilitate feedback and go beyond evaluation-related questions to enable these young men to take on the role of partners in the development of outreach initiatives rather not merely participants.

25. Reflections

In assessing the study's findings, consideration needs to be given to the research methods and approach adopted. In this respect, 70 learners - which was the number of young men surveyed - constitutes a fairly modest sample. Consequently, questions may arise over how representative of the wider population of this group of learners were the views expressed by focus group participants. Moreover, there is the possibility that what they say in such discussions may be different to what they do and, more generally, there is the question of how 'reliable' are their accounts.

Regarding the former concern, it can be noted that a point of *saturation* was reached during discussions, when very similar things were starting to be heard between the different groups of year 10s as well as year 12s (Saunders et.al. 2018). In many respects, there was also much consistency between the perspectives of those young men and the views expressed by the outreach practitioners and teaching professionals interviewed, who were able to draw on their experience of working with and supporting these learners, often over many years.

Regarding the two latter concerns, there are reasons to be confident that the accounts provided are genuine. A number of recognised practices were adopted to maximise reliability. Participants were informed in the information sheets circulated at the very start of the study, and at the commencement of focus group discussions, that their anonymity would be assured and that their contributions would be of considerable value. Checks on internal consistency - what they were saying in one part of the discussion were consistent with what was expressed later on - were also conducted. In addition, there were occasions when 'talk back' was witnessed: when the facilitator's summaries were interrupted, corrected or elaborated upon (Arksey and Knight, 1999). More generally, participants seemed engaged and open, and prepared and happy to talk and discuss their experiences (as confirmed by the post focus group feedback received from teaching contacts. See section 9.2).

This said, there are inevitable limitations on what can be gathered from a single, hour-long discussion, in terms of the extent to which particular themes can be explored, as well as the range of subject areas investigated. Consequently, there would be value in returning to the same participants to explore their progress since the original discussions were held, and if -and how - their views have changed during the intervening period. This would also provide an opportunity to consider additional themes. For instance, in gathering a greater understanding of their social networks and the influences of these, and in seeking further insights into the neighbourhoods they come from and how they perceive them. Much the same would also be applicable to the teaching professionals and outreach practitioners surveyed at the start of this project. In particular, follow-up interviews could gather their feedback on the findings that have emerged and their assessment (and interpretations) of the recommendations to arise.

Beyond this, much could potentially be learned from applying the same methodological approach to a broader range of year groups, commencing with young men with the same widening participation characteristics in school year seven, and continuing with those from years eight to 13. This way a more complete picture and understanding of the learner journey taken by those from this particular cohort could be captured.

Finally, there remains a 'knowledge transfer' challenge, which is common to many research studies. This is concerned with how to ensure the findings from studies such as this are disseminated and the recommendations they make translated into practice. A conference presentation of this study's initial findings was delivered in April 2019. However, it can be suggested that consideration might be given to the running of interactive workshops with outreach practitioners at local area level. Arising from this is the option of capturing and sharing the ideas to emerge from each set of local workshops, and of then following progress with implementing the ideas generated in each meeting. By this means, a set of good practice (evidence-based) case studies could be produced for the benefit of the wider sector.

Recommendations 19-20

Explore ways to advance current understanding of this cohort and build on the findings from this study.

This could include:

- Conducting a supplementary research study by revisiting former focus group participants a year or so after the original meetings were held. Participants would now be in a new academic year and the follow-up discussions could encourage them to reflect on their experiences since, and if and how their plans and ambitions have evolved (and what the influences on this decision-making process have been).
- Gathering together the same groups of young men would also provide an opportunity for them to comment on the findings and interpretations to derived from the original research they contributed to, as well as capturing their assessment of the recommendations to arise from this study
- Running follow-up interviews with the outreach practitioners and teaching professionals who contributed to the original study, with the aim of gathering their feedback on the findings that have emerged and their assessment (and interpretations) of the recommendations to arise.

In addition, consider the value of - and ways in which it might be possible - to capture a more complete picture of the learner journeys made by members of this particular cohort (potentially, by running focus groups with those from year 7 upwards).

Recommendation 21

Consider methods of disseminating the findings of this study and explore how the recommendations made could be translated into practice.

This could include offering interactive workshops with outreach practitioners at local area level

- Arising from this is the option of capturing and sharing the ideas to emerge from each set of workshops, and of then following progress with implementing these ideas. By this means, a set of good practice (evidence-based) case studies could be produced that would be of value to the wider sector.

26. Acknowledgements

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