Bucking the trend: raising HE progression rates amongst first generation, economically disadvantaged white males

Neil Raven

CONTENTS

1. FOREWORD

As widening participation (WP) practitioners based in North Staffordshire, working with partner universities and with young people from across our region for a number of years, we have always tended to *think* we know what the barriers to higher education are for white working class boys—heck, one half of us is one—and both of us have our roots in the working class communities of Stoke-on-Trent.

A frustration has always been that regardless of what we *think*, we have never had the time or funds to look at our locality and do some real research. When we took over the management of the HEFCE funded Higher Horizons scheme (part of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach), we had the chance to ring-fence some money for some research with Dr Neil Raven—a leader in the field of WP research. We had the chance to see if what we *thought* was actually accurate.

Stoke-on-Trent and the surrounding areas are typical post-industrial regions. In our grandparents' time, there were jobs for life in the pits (where Ant's family worked) and the pots (Hannah's family), regardless of what qualifications you left school with, and there was no need to move out of the town you grew up in to find one. Today, the ceramics industry is newly resurgent with 7,000 ceramics jobs currently based in North Staffordshire, or 60% of the national market share. But that is still a huge reduction on the 62,000 employed by Royal Doulton, Wedgwood et al. in 1968. The 50,000 jobs that were provided by our 50 coal mines don't exist now. The last deep mine closed in 1998, just down the hill from the University we are now based at. Yet, we hear that parents and others who remember the old industry are still advising our young men to 'get out and get a job'. University, they *think,* is not for them.

The truth is that as a region—and as a people—we were at the centre of the last industrial revolution and we need to ensure that we are at the centre of the next, whatever that may look like post-Brexit. Education must be a part of that. Our bright, able and creative young men will be applying for jobs that don't yet exist, and we must encourage them to be as qualified and as ready for the world of work as possible.

It was in this context that we *thought* it would be a good idea to identify between 12-15 young men who were current university students and to conduct semi-formal interviews, seeking to find out how they 'bucked the trend' and went to university. The 14 young men Dr Raven interviewed were all from quintiles 1 and 2 using POLAR3 analysis—local areas

where few progress onto university. They were the first in their family to attend university, and they grew up in the post-industrial areas of Stoke-on-Trent, Crewe or South Staffordshire.

I *think* that what we *thought* did come across through Dr Raven's research, but there was more: some trends and patterns we had not considered. We hope that you will find the information and recommendations contained within relevant, timely and useful for your own regions. We are certainly looking forward to developing our own improved interventions for this cohort.

We would like to thank Dr Neil Raven for conducting this research in an incredibly meticulous and thorough manner, and the young men who he interviewed for sharing honest accounts and giving their time to this important piece of research.

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2. SUMMARY

A significant widening access challenge for the Network and the wider sector concerns the progression to higher education [HE] of young men from widening participation backgrounds, especially, although not exclusively, white British men (sometimes referred to as white working class boys).

Yet, whilst under-represented some from this cohort do *buck the trend* and progress to HE. In doing so, these individuals represent a potentially valuable, although often untapped, source of insights into the forces inhibiting as well as enabling HE participation. This study investigates these forces. It does so by using a form of semi-structured, in-depth interview that has proved particularly effective at gathering such insights. Employing this interview technique, the study draws on the evidence gathered from a sample of men with widening participation backgrounds who have progressed to one of three local universities: Keele, Staffordshire and Chester. From these findings a series of recommendations are compiled.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1. Messages

What needs to be communicated

- Ensure boys from working class families and educationally deprived areas are aware of local HE opportunities (given the propensity of learners from these backgrounds who do progress to HE to opt for a nearby university)
- Working with level three deliverers, raise awareness and provide support that will:
  - Facilitate successful transition from Key Stage 4 (GCSEs) to KS5 study
  - Inform learners of post-18 progression opportunities and how they align with KS5 options
  - Prepare level three learners for the nature and demands of HE-level study (including correcting popular misconceptions and misunderstandings of what HE study involves)
- Working with schools and colleges:
  - Encourage the identification and nurturing of subject interests amongst learners
  - Communicate the range of courses available at HE and the opportunity that university-level study offers to pursue particular subject interests
  - Encourage teachers and tutors who support WP learners to take account of student interests (as well as their WP credentials) when promoting and recruiting for outreach interventions
  - Establish mechanisms that enable teachers and tutors to inform the developers and delivers of outreach interventions of learner interests
  - Communicate the value of HE as a means to enhancing employment prospects and achieving career ambitions
  - Demonstrate the range of transferrable and life skills that HE-level study can offer
  - Raise learner (and parent/guardian) understanding of HE finance and funding, including the idea that the outlay associated with HE study may be viewed as an investment.

3.2. Medium

How these messages can be communicated

Outreach interventions to:

- Recognise and work with learner interests
- Commence at an early age (with interventions targeted at young year groups being interactive in nature)
- Enable learners to mix with students from other schools and colleges (thereby demonstrating that learners from comparable backgrounds can progress, and that friendships can be forged)
- Explain how HE is delivered and how university-level study is different to that associated with KS4 and KS5
- Alert and signpost learners to the sources of (academic and pastoral) support available at HE
- Work with parents and guardians, especially those with no HE experience, to promote an understanding of:
  - HE and what it can offer
  - The routes into HE and the application process
  - The ways in which young people who are interested in HE-level study can be supported in their educational ambitions at home
- Offer regular one-to-one meetings that help to align learner interests and passions with educational opportunities and career possibilities
- That combine to offer a series of progressive interventions, that:
  - Start by raising HE awareness and interest, then
  - Consider the relevance and value HE, before they
  - Address the practicalities of applying, and then
  - Equip learners with an appreciation and understanding of the support (academic, pastoral and financial) available at HE
- Work with teachers and tutors—including the provision of opportunities for professional development—to explore the role that teaching professionals can play as role models and in telling their stories of progression and articulating their subject interests.

3.3. Messengers

Who should communicate these messages

- Men from comparable backgrounds to these learners who have returned to education after a period of employment and who are able to provide personal accounts of their motivations for opting for HE
- 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
- 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
- Teachers as graduates—especially male teachers from similar (relatable) backgrounds—who can communicate their subject interests and enthusiasms, and talk about their learner journeys.

3.4. Enhancing our understanding

Continuing to develop the message and how it is best communicated

Further research to better understand:

- The wider impact that men from working class backgrounds who have progressed to HE can have on:
    - o Their families, including younger siblings
    - o Their peers and members of their social network
    - o Their neighbourhoods

    In their capacity as role models as well as potential *disruptors* to dominant local narratives that exclude HE from accounts of the transition to adulthood

- The influencers—and influences—that inform the decisions made by KS5 WP learners (including boys from educationally deprived areas) to reject the HE option
- The impact of particular interventions and combinations of interventions on the initial as well as longer-term choices made by this group of learners
- The most effective methods for capturing the voice of these learners as a way of informing future outreach activity.

4. INTRODUCTION

A significant widening access challenge for the Network and the wider sector concerns the progression to higher education [HE] of young men from widening participation backgrounds, especially, although not exclusively, white British men (sometimes referred to as white working class boys). Concerns over the gender gap in high education [HE] participation are not new. The 'low (HE) participation rates of working class boys' was highlighted as 'a particular feature of under-representation in higher education' in an Action on Access study of 2006 (Action on Access were 'the national co-ordination team for widening participation in higher education', Jones, 2006, 7). A year later, the need to address this issue was voiced in HEFCE *Council Briefing* (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2007, 10), in which the gender gap was described as a 'significant challenge' for the sector. During the same year the issue of HE progression amongst boys from lower socio-economic backgrounds saw the establishment of an Aimhigher project with the objective of better understanding the HE challenges these young men faced (Young, 2007; Raven, 2012, 2008a, 2008b, 2011, 2014).

Yet, whilst it may be argued that progress has been made in a number of areas of widening participation during the intervening period, this particular outreach challenge has not been resolved. Indeed, in terms of its scale it has become more pronounced. The most recent set of data released by the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS, 2016a, 21) reveals the largest recorded percentage points difference in progression rates between 18 year old women (returning an entry rate across the UK of 36.8 per cent) and men (with a corresponding figure of 27.2 per cent). 'Young women', the accompanying commentary states, 'are [now] 35 per cent more likely to enter than men', with the difference in entry rates between men and women equat[ing] to 37,000 fewer 18 year old men entering higher education this year than would be the case if men had the same entry rate as women' (UCAS. 2016a, 21). However, these headline figures mask the particularly low rates of progression returned by white boys from poorer backgrounds (Office for Fair Access [OFFA] and HEFCE, 2014, 8, and 17-20). Indeed, UCAS's Chief Executive confirmed that 'white working-class boys are the least likely to go to university' (UCAS. 2016b, n.p.).

A need to address this enduring but also escalating outreach challenge was acknowledged in OFFA and HEFCE's (2014, 22) *National Strategy*, whilst in recent guidance to the sector OFFA (2016, 2-3) express an expectation that university outreach targets will address

'access for white working class boys'. Moreover, the new National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), which is charged with meeting the Government's objective of doubling the number of young people from widening participation [WP] backgrounds progressing to HE by 2020, has as one of its focuses the need to address the 'particular challenge of the gaps in progression between men and women' (HEFCE, 2016a. 9). Here consortia of universities, colleges, schools and other stakeholders are asked to detail activities they will develop 'to tackle' this issue (HEFCE, 2016a. 20).

Yet, whilst it can be argued that action is required, there is also an accompanying and perhaps more pressing need for further research to better understand this access challenge and to inform outreach initiatives (Raven, forthcoming). This study attempts to contribute to this evidence-base. It does so by drawing on the experiences and insights of a purposive (information rich) sample of young, white British men from educationally deprived neighbourhoods who managed to 'buck the trend' and progress to HE (Coyne, 1997, 624; Teddlie and Yu, 2007, 77).

Amongst the explanations that have been advanced for the comparatively low progression rates of young men from WP backgrounds is the impact on educational aspirations and intentions of the areas these learners come from. In selecting interviewees from one of three old industrial districts within the Network that are also associated with low HE participation rates—comprising Stoke-on-Trent, Mid Staffordshire and Crewe—this study will consider the impact of the locality on educational trajectories. However, in line with the wider literature a range of other potential influences will also be explored, including those associated with family, friends and peers, and school and college, as well as the impact of any outreach interventions these young men might have experienced.

5. METHODS AND APPROACH

5.1. Desk research

The first phase of this study involved desk research. Published reports and articles were consulted with the objective of identifying the range of explanations that have sought to account for the low participation rates of young men from WP backgrounds. Initial analysis identified a typology of explanations based upon where the emphasis is placed: from learner identity and family influence to the role of schools and colleges (teachers and tutors) and the impact of the local area and wider socio-economic forces.

To add context, and gain an understanding of the areas from which volunteers derived, semi-structured interviews were held with practitioners familiar with these localities. The conversations explored the socio-economic character of these districts, as well as local trends in HE participation and the progression challenges faced by young people, especially boys from the poorer parts of these communities.

5.2. Life story interviews

The desk research, along with the insights provided by practitioners then informed the questions used in the interviews conducted with the student volunteers. The specific method adopted for this was the life story interview (UK Data Service, 2015). This provides the interviewee with an opportunity to reflect on their educational career from an early age and to identify the influences that have shaped their educational trajectories to the present. The approach places emphasis on interviewee-directed discussion, with the broad theme or subject introduced and the interviewee invited to reflect on it. Although new to WP, this approach was previously tested using a pilot study (Raven, 2015 and 2016).

Whilst participant-focused, interviews were semi-structured to allow for cross-case comparisons and enable the identification of potential patterns and commonalities, as well as distinctions and differences. In this respect, each interview comprised four elements:

i. Context

An explanation of the research project and process, including:

- The nature of the interview (semi-structured and participant-driven) and what it will cover

- Reiteration of the confidentiality and anonymity arrangements, and confirmation of the duration of the interview and the expected finish time
- Checking the interviewee is still happy to be involved and confirming the option of not answering particular questions, and the prerogative of the interviewee to withdraw from the process at any time and for whatever reason
- Checking the interviewee is happy for the interview to be taped and confirming what will happen with the recording (including storage arrangements and subsequent deletion of the recording)
- Checking the interviewee is comfortable and happy to commence the interview.

ii. Introductory section

The gathering of background information:

- Current year of study
- Subject(s) being studied at university and how the interviewee is finding the HE experience
- Employment/further study intentions after completing their current HE programme
- Where they are from—the geographical area and character of that area
- Overview of their route/learner journey to university
- General reflections on how their learner journey compares with their peers from school/college and the local area.

iii. Main section

Educational history—pre and post 16, with the aim of identifying decision-making moments, including a consideration of:

- Key influences (experiences) and influencers (individuals) on educational progression, including the decision to progress to HE
- Exploration and reflections on any outreach interventions participated in and other HE-related activities experienced
- Experience of the transition to university and reflections of any HE transition measures/support received
- Ideas for interventions/activities that would support the HE progression of young men from similar areas and backgrounds to their own.

iv. Closing section

Gathering any additional information and confirming the data collected can still be used

- Checking if there are any further comments or additional information the interviewee would like to provide in relation to the subjects and themes covered
- Checking that they are still happy for the information provided—and their words—to be used anonymously in the study and any subsequent reports or academic articles
- Seeking confirmation that they are happy to be contacted by email, should clarification of any particular points explored in the interview be required
- Establishing if they would like to learn more about the study and the results
- Reviewing the interviewee's experience of the interview
- Thanking them for their time and the insights provided.

5.3. Identification of volunteers

Working with the Network's Head and Senior Officer an approach and set of protocols were developed for identifying and selecting potential interviewees who met the study's criteria.

The hope was to recruit up to 15 young men from across the three areas of Stoke-on-Trent, Crewe and Mid Staffordshire. This sample size is consistent with a number of other studies that have used qualitative interviews to better understand the learner journeys of those from widening participation (first generation) backgrounds (Ahmed Shafi and Rose, 2014; Edwards, 2013; Webber, 2014). It was also considered sufficient to allow for the identification of any trends and commonalities influencing local rates of progression. From the researcher's experience, the sample size was also considered to be manageable in terms of the time and resources that have been allocated for data collection and analysis (Raven, 2015).

The young men the study sought to recruit were to be of white British origin and from local areas associated with low HE participation (Department for Business, Innovation and Enterprise, 2015; HEFCE, 2016b). These areas were identified using POLAR3 (HEFCE, 2015). POLAR—which stands for Participation Of Local Areas—is a measure of widening participation developed by HEFCE and is an indicator of educational disadvantage used widely across the HE sector, including in the Higher Education Statistics Agency's WP performance indicators (HESA, 2016). Applying this measure, every census ward across England is placed into one of five quintiles, according to the proportion of young people in

that local area progressing to HE by the age of 19. Those wards falling into quintiles 1 and 2 represent the areas of lowest HE participation, and this study aimed to recruit volunteers from the three areas who came from these low participation wards. These wards can be identified by means of postcode. The outreach teams in each partner university had access to student home postcodes from their university application forms, and either had look-up tables that enable the matching of postcode to POLAR quintile, or made use of HEFCE's interactive mapping tool to do so.

5.4. Recruitment

Interviewees were recruited through an email request sent out to students who met the research project's criteria. The email was posted by outreach contacts in each partner university. This outlined that the project was seeking male undergraduates who grew up in one of the three areas under consideration, with the objective of better understanding the learner journeys made by those who derive from a key group of students. The information provided by these volunteers, it was noted, would help to improve current outreach work and inform new activities.

The email also outlined what would be involved for those who volunteer and, should they be interested in participating, the date by which they should reply to the email. It was also accompanied by a project information sheet and consent form. The project researcher then liaised with volunteers to identify a suitable time to conduct the interview.

In the event, 14 young men who met the research criteria were interviewed. Interviews took place between July and September 2016 and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. They were either conducted face-to-face at Keele University, or on the phone. In both cases, use was made of an electronic recording devise to capture the conversation. To preserve the anonymity of interviewees, their names have been changed in the discussion that follows, whilst any personal details that could identify them have been excluded from this study.

6. THE INTERVIEWEES

Fourteen volunteers who met the research study's criteria were interviewed during the summer and early autumn of 2016. They comprised a mixture of undergraduates and postgraduates. Seven had completed the first year of their undergraduate studies; two had finished their second year; and two the third year. Two further interviewees had embarked upon PhDs, with a third having recently finished their doctorate. The subjects studied by these interviewees included biology, chemistry, physics, bio-medicine, pharmacy, psychology and counselling, mechanical engineering, motor sport technology, accounting and finance, sports journalism, law, criminal investigation, and history. One was studying at the University of Chester, seven were based at Staffordshire University, and six at Keele University.

In terms of their backgrounds, two were from Stafford, eight from Stoke and its adjoining towns, three from Newcastle-under-Lyme and one from central Crewe. A number of the interviewees offered accounts of the neighbourhoods they were from. Seb described the area he came from as 'working class', as did Tim. Similarly, the neighbourhood Dave had been raised in, and where his family still lived, was judged to be 'working-class and poor' comprising 'terraced houses like Coronation Street' and with 'a lot of people working in industry or unemployed'. The area Ian grew up in was recalled as being characterised by 'a lot of disillusionment and alienation', whilst the neighbourhood that Liam lived in was described as a 'difficult area'.

With the exception of Nick, whose mother had studied at a former polytechnic, none of the volunteers had parents who had been to university and considered that they would be the first generation in their family to go to university, although two referred to older siblings who had progressed to HE ahead of them.

7. THE DECISION TO STAY 'LOCAL'

Whilst the criteria used to select volunteers meant that all 14 had grown up in one of three local areas under consideration and then progressed to a nearby university, what also emerged from the interviews was that the decision to 'stay local' was a considered one. In part it reflected the availability of suitable courses offered by nearby providers. However, it also reflected strong ties to the locality. These associations were mentioned by a number of the interviewees. Asked why he opted for one of the case study universities, Nigel's answer was that it was local. Similarly, Matt observed that his 'situation' meant that he 'couldn't really leave Stoke'. Providing a little more insight, Tony described a wish 'to stick around here', adding that it would have been 'tough for [my] parents if [I was to] leave', whilst Ben talked about saving money from his student loan if he opted for a local university, alongside not wanting to 'mess up' the relationship he had with his girlfriend. Luke offered further detail on his decision making process when considering more geographically distant HE options:

> I started getting more alarmed about whether I would be able to do it. Do I want to be going hundreds of miles away to university, do I want to uproot my life and move somewhere just to do something I might not enjoy, which is why I also looked at the local university. I could then stay at home and commute to university and, if it didn't work out, then I wouldn't have to pack up all my stuff again and move back home. I suppose it was the easier option.

Luke also added that 'my family has been really important growing up and I've always said I don't just want to up and leave my family'. Similarly, in reflecting on his decision Ian observed:

> I did the one thing that I recognise now that most people do when they come from Stoke, or a city like Stoke, is they're better there. I got this great offer from [a more distant university], which is a city that I absolutely admired, it was a place I always wanted to go to and I viewed in the future that I would live there. But then I sat down and thought about it and realised that I'd got the support networks here in Stoke, I know the city well. Do I really want the upheaval and change? I'm going from work into academia. I should really just take baby steps. I didn't want to take giant strides at that moment, so I ended up [studying at one of the three nearby universities].

However, encouraged by tutors in his sixth form college one of the interviewees did, initially, enrol at a more distant university. Whilst he completed the first two years of his four-year degree, Dave had to withdraw at the end of his third year because 'basically I ran out of money and couldn't afford to carry on'. He returned to Stoke, 'got two or three jobs, and when I was in a better financial situation went back to' his degree but, this time, with the Open University [OU]. He subsequently enrolled on a PhD at one of the nearby universities.

The practitioners interviewed also noted the tendency for young people from the three areas considered in this study to remain in the local area. Here reference was made to a 'culture of staying local', which was informed in part at least by parents and often grandparents having grown up in the same areas and, when traditional industries were more prominent, having worked locally too. The tendency of young people from lower socio-economic groups to stay in the area they grew up in has also been identified in a number of studies, including Grant's (2013) exploration of working class learners in Leicester, which identified the influence of 'strong ties and loyalty to families'. Similarly, Reed, Gates and Last (2007, 14) discuss how the influence of the locality and personal networks can exert a 'powerful force field'. Similarly, drawing on the work of Skeggs, Morrison (2010, 73) discusses the idea that working class identity is defined through geographical and spatial fixity'.

8. PATHWAYS INTO HE

8.1. A non-linear route

The straight, linear route into HE—involving gaining the requisite number of GCSEs, then moving onto sixth form or college and AS-A levels, before entering university at the age of 18/19—was not prominent amongst the learner journeys taken by interviewees.

In a number of cases, interviewees had progressed to university as mature students. Liam had decided to enrol on an accounting degree after working in a bookmakers and recognising that he could become an accountant. Ian started his degree at 25, having previously had a number of jobs, including working in various local factories. Some, including Dave whose journey was outlined earlier, already had HE experience when they enrolled at one of the case study universities. This also included Peter, who had previously completed a BA and had then become a teacher before deciding to 'do something where' his passion lay, which led him to embark on a social sciences degree.

For the other interviewees, the commencement of university-level study had begun at the age 19—a year or so later than many young people who enter HE. However, their more circuitous routes to university do not appear to have been the consequence of failing to achieve the required set of GCSEs. Instead, their 'non-linear' journeys occurred despite success at key stage 4. In this regard, their experiences differ from many young people from similar backgrounds. Indeed, the 'real and persistent' issue of 'white working class underachievement in education'—and especially the 'educational performance' of boys—has been the subject of a recent House of Commons Education Committee investigation (2014, 3).

Instead, for most the explanation lay with disruptions to their level 3 studies. Nick's experience of starting his AS-levels at one institution before re-taking them at a second college was not unique. After gaining some 11 A-Cs at GCSE, Nigel acknowledged that the 'step up' to A-levels proved to be 'quite [a] difficult transition'. By his own admission, he did not do so well in his AS-levels, and 'after that took a year out of college' before deciding to retake his year 12. Whilst he recognised that he 'could have carried on', the initial AS year had impacted on his 'confidence and stuff'.

Ben described a similar experience of not doing 'as well' as he had hoped and at the end of his first year deciding to go to a 'different college and start again with AS [levels].' Whilst he 'floated through' his GCSEs, gained 8 As and A*s and 'did not even revise for the exams', he

'struggled' with A-levels. Whilst his teachers were 'saying put some more work in and you'll get an A', he admitted that he 'never did' apply himself in the way they advised. This said, Ben recalled not being 'alone' in his reaction, observing that a number of his male friends responded in the same way. 'If boys are naturally intelligent', he suggested, 'they do not revise [whilst] girls will'.

Elsewhere, Luke described taking a 'gap year' after completing his A2s. This was 'to give me extra time to decide if [university] was what I wanted'. He also felt uncertain whether he would 'make the entry requirements'. In this respect, he observed 'I was debating whether university was for me or not and, based on my grades, I probably wasn't clever enough to go and that there were other options available. I think it was just sort of I don't want to be committed to something for so long if [I was] not going to enjoy it and it's not going to be worthwhile'. However, Luke also noted that during 'that [gap] year I decided to give it a go'. For another interviewee, a change of institution was underpinned by a change of pathway. Having initially enrolled on a plumbing course, Tim decided against carrying on after completing his first year and, instead, embarked on an extended BTEC diploma.

8.2. Implications and interpretations

With a number progressing to HE sometime after the age of 19, the volunteers in this study would be amongst those contributing to local HE *cold spot* rankings, where young participation rates are lower than expected given GCSE attainment (HEFCE, 2016b). Related to this point, some did make reference to peers going onto college, taking A-levels and then deciding against HE. The interviewees' 'slower' journeys to HE could be viewed as a case of these individuals needing a little more time to mature. However, some offered a fairly critical assessment. In this respect, Tim talked about a wish to have gone to university earlier and of not having his life 'put back a year'. Similarly, Ben reflected that, if he had his time again, he probably would have gone to his second college 'straight away', whilst looking back to his gap year Luke acknowledged that 'sometimes I wish I had gone straight to university.'

8.3. The timing of the decision to opt for HE

In addition, interviewees talked about when the idea of progressing to university had first emerged. In a number of instances the decision to apply had been a recent one. Nick

observed that he was not initially thinking about HE when he took his A-levels. Instead, he 'wanted to take an apprenticeship'. Similarly, Matt noted that he 'applied to go to [university] about two weeks before UCAS closed'. For some, the decision was informed by good A-level results. Tim's decision to go to university occurred early in his second year at college. Prior to that, he did not have plans but with his 'really good marks' it became an option. For Nigel the decision to return to college and go onto HE was made 'half-way through' his year in employment after dropping out of his original college.

Whilst for Luke the route though GCSEs and into sixth form was a well recognised one, he had less of an idea about post-18 options:

> I guess I always knew I wanted to go to college because that's what you did. You went to high school, you did your GCSEs and then you went off to college. That was almost the standard thing to do but when I was in college I wasn't 100 per cent sure if I wanted to go to university. I thought if I could get in I'd give it a go.

Indeed, it was this uncertainty that initiated the idea of taking 'a gap year', and which provided Luke with 'extra time to decide if it was what I wanted.' Similarly, Chris noted that the intention to progress to A-levels was clear from his time in high school but the next step after that—to university—had not been explored. Indeed, he recalled that it was 'near the end of year 12 when I started thinking I'd only got one year of stability [when] I knew what I was doing, so I should really start thinking about what I'm going to be doing afterwards.'

However, in other cases the intention to progress to university was a long-held objective. For Mike the idea of going to university dated back to 'year 10 and [age] 14-15'. Similarly, Dave traced his HE ambitions to year 9, adding 'that was the logical next step after A-level.' Likewise, Richard recalled wanting to go to university 'from about the start of high school' and year 7. 'I didn't know a lot about university then. I just knew that if I wanted to do medicine or anything around that area then university was the path I was going to take.'

9. BUCKING THE TREND

9.1. Neighbourhoods interviewees were from

In discussing the neighbourhoods they were from, interviewees expressed little surprise that these areas were associated with low rates of HE progression. Chris observed that amongst 'the people I'm still in contact with from school, a few have gone on to university but not a lot'. Similarly, Richard considered that the low progression rates associated with the area of his childhood and adolescence 'definitely' echoed his experiences. Likewise, in referring to the neighbourhood he had grown up in, Tim suggested that the tendency for people to leave school and go straight into jobs was 'quite prominent'. This, it was added, was the case with his peers. Prior to the requirement that education and training be continued until the age of 18 (GOV.UK, 2015), Tim observed that many of his contemporaries 'left school at 16 and [went] into employment.' In contrast, he was aware of only a 'very, very small' number going onto university. Elsewhere, Tony talked about a 'lot leaving high school or sixth form' to pursue employment. Similarly, Ben suggested that 'only a handful of people' he knew had gone onto university. This included some who had gained A-levels but did 'not want to go to university'. Echoing this assessment, Mike talked of a 'lot of people' he had known who 'had aspirations to go but never ended up going'.

The comments made by the practitioners interviewed confirmed the impression offered by these young men that in progressing to HE they were *bucking* local trends. Indeed, one of the practitioners acknowledged that the educational attainment of white working class boys was a local issue, and talked of the frustration caused by the persistently 'low [educational] performance' recorded amongst members of this group, despite 'lots of initiatives' that had attempted to address it. The insights of interviewees also appear to corroborate the observations made by Baars et al. (2016, 34). Whilst they note that 'much of the variation in entry to higher education by social class, ethnicity and gender' can be explained by 'inequalities in educational attainment', they add that 'white working class boys with good school grades are still less likely to progress to HE than their high attaining peers from other ethnic groups and social classes'. In consequence, they argue that 'the problem runs deeper than low educational attainment', and suggest the existence of 'a range of additional factors prevent[ing] white working class boys from progressing to HE'.

9.2. Explanations for low rates of local progression

Consistent with Baars et al.'s (2016) observations, the interviewees in this study volunteered

a number of explanations for the low rates of local progression associated with their neighbourhoods. In this respect, Tony suggested the existence of a 'culture of not bothering with university', where the question will be posed 'what is the point of the debt'. Exploring this further, Tony talked about the tendency for many young people to have gained part-time jobs by the time they enter sixth form. This can lead to them 'doing more hours' in employment and, as a result, 'trading in education' for work. Indeed, he suggested that they may 'get to a point [where they] just drop out and do not go to college anymore.' A comparable observation was made by Mike, who talked about those who had 'got part-time jobs in college and carried on' with that employment, adding that some jobs, such as those associated with 'a lot of supermarkets, offer quite quick progression'. Elsewhere, Chris referred to an emphasis in the sixth form he went to on 'professionalism and looking the part. While they're not saying don't go to university—they're quite encouraging for you to go to university—I think they [are] preparing [you more] for a professional career'. This, it was added, was also the case with those who had opted for A-levels. Echoing this assessment, one of the practitioners discussed the expectation found in some sixth forms that 'you come here to do your A-levels, not progress to HE'.

Whilst also not being surprised by the low progression rates of the area he grew up in, Dave added that 'I suppose it's looked on as expensive and pointless, and people getting above their station in life'. In discussing this further, Dave recalled talking 'to people I went to school with', who would ask 'why I had gone to university'. This would be accompanied with the question 'couldn't [you] get a job?' They would also suggest that 'there's no point going there, you're just sitting around all day dossing.' There were, it was added, 'a lot of negative opinions on doing it. They still seem to think you're going to end up in the same jobs, working in a supermarket [and] stacking shelves, so why bother.'

This assessment chimes with the observations made by the practitioners. Here there was agreement that some young peoples' attitudes to education reflected their understanding of the local economy and an outlook that questioned the value of further study if the local labour market does not recognise higher-level skills. This, it was noted, can also reflect the views of parents. 'There isn't as much belief that the jobs are out there and that they are available for these young people to take'.

Along similar lines, Ian talked of 'the ideal route from your school years into adulthood and working life' being perceived locally as involving leaving school and pursuing 'some form of an apprenticeship', or going 'straight into a factory.' Here reference was made to the 'high value associated with gaining a trade. 'If I'm an engineer or a qualified electrician, I'll always

have a job'. In contrast, it was added:

> The kind of idea of academia and of further and higher education were terrains
> that were unfamiliar to the people in the community that I grew up in, and with
> that uncertainty came this idea that there was no value in it because it was
> untested waters you see. There was nobody to give you any advice on that
> sphere and as nobody had pursued it, so it must be of very little value.

Drawing on his own experience, Ian recalled that whilst his parents 'had aspirations for me, they saw them within the parameters of the community in which we lived—it's very insular'.

Consistent with Ian's account, one of the practitioners described how, historically, 'parents and grandparents had got apprenticeships from the age of 16 and had been able to progress' within that trade. However, 'now those big apprenticeships are not there, [the question is asked] what's out there for someone who wants that work'. Similarly, another practitioner talked about parents who took the view that 'I left school at 16 and worked my way up, so why can't you' but, in making such an assertion, it was observed, they do not 'understand that this may not be possible now'. It was also suggested that 'there is still a generation of parents who see the man's role to go out and earn money. [There is] less emphasis on pushing females down [the] employment route. I have heard a lot of times the comment that if you have not got a job by 17, enrol in the army'. Such an assessment also aligns with the evidence considered by Woodfield (2011, 12), which suggests that 'boys might be more attracted to entering the world of work after the end of compulsory education' than their female counterparts. Baars et al. (2016, 34) also discuss the tendency amongst some boys from this group to 'prioritise swift entry into paid work over further study'.

In addition, and in describing the complicated geography of Stoke-on-Trent with its six small epicentres (shaped, in part, by the area's industrial history), two of the practitioners talked about the continued existence of 'little communities found across the city, and of accompanying local mentalities'. The influence of the locality on determining educational trajectories was also discussed by Alison Wolf in evidence provided to a House of Commons Select Committee investigation (2014, 38). There are 'parts of this country', it was observed, where the 'economy still bear[s] the scars of the end of manufacturing and industrial employment', and where 'a lot of the careers and jobs that were the bedrock of white working class family life for many decades and generations have vanished and have not been well replaced'. Similarly, Reed, Gates and Last (2007, 14) discuss how 'local environments' can inform views of education and economic success', and talk of dominant

'local narratives' relating to 'pathways into adulthood that do not depend on educational success'.

10. KEY FACTORS IN PROGRESSION

From the interviews it was possible to discern a range of factors that help to explain why these individuals progressed to university, despite confirmation that few of their peers had done so. For a number of these interviewees various personal challenges had to be negotiated before they entered HE.

10.1. Personal challenges

In some cases these challenges were associated with particular family circumstances. During his A-levels, Matt described how his 'mum went through quite a bad spell of depression. After my first year of college I actually wanted to quit just so that I could work because we were about to lose the house.' Asked about the decision to continue with his education despite these difficulties, the response hinted at Matt's determination. 'You do find that some people who come from really bad situations get defeated by it and accept it, whereas [with] others it will be the other end of the scale and there's never anything in-between'.

Similarly, Dave had to abandon his university studies during the third year of his four-year degree because 'I had no money at the time and my parents were paying for my accommodation and there was no more funding available'. In doing this, he 'felt horrendous and a complete failure because I didn't finish it. I felt like I'd gone away and failed, and everyone was laughing at me.' He also recalled 'people saying you're back here, you're no better than the rest of us. It was a massive come down'. Yet, sixth months later Dave talked of deciding on 'a plan that I would have to go to work to fund [my degree], and so I put things into place to get a job in order to get the money'. Ultimately, he was able to complete his undergraduate studies with the Open University. Asked about this determination, he replied: 'because I never wanted to do anything else. That's all I wanted to do ever. Why throw it away? [It represented] over a decade of work.'

Elsewhere, a number of interviewees recalled having to confront and deal with peer pressure. 'Looking back', Mike remembered 'getting close' to being 'depressed' whilst in secondary school, as a 'lot of people' that had been 'close to' him in earlier years 'became more distant'. This, it was recalled, 'really started to get to me' and [I] didn't feel I fitted in at all'. Yet, ultimately, he was able to over come this. Similarly, Richard described encountering

peer pressure in response to doing well in secondary school, referring a 'backlash' around year 7. However, he reasoned:

> I wasn't doing anything wrong, even though it was obviously annoying to other people. When you do start to mature, around your mid-teens, you start to realise that none of that matters. You just have to push on anyway. Once you realise that attitude of trying too hard isn't wrong, even though it seems like it is in some people's mentality, then you can push on and start doing what you want to achieve. After year 7, I sort of stopped caring about people's comments. I sort of played along with the joke, which kind of helped.

In addition, interviewees talked about the challenges of moving to sixth-form college and not doing as well as they had hoped during their first year of advanced level study. Ben recalled feeling like he did 'not fit in to the college' throughout his first year, and of not doing 'as well' in his end of year exams as he had expected. The challenge of adapting to advanced-level study was also acknowledged by Luke who, similarly, received 'poor results' at the end of his first year. In Ben's case, the decision was made to change colleges and retake his AS levels. Luke's response was that 'I knew I hadn't put the effort in and it hit me a bit that, actually, if I do want to get into university then I would have to pull my finger out and work harder to get where I wanted.'

Elsewhere, the commitment to pursue higher-level study using their own initiative was discussed by some of the mature learners, including Ian. At the age of 25 Ian recalled a determination 'to find a way back into education'. This involved 'walk[ing] into [the local university] on a whim and ask[ing] if there was somebody I could speak to from the [subject area], just to gauge the possibility of coming to university and how I would possibly do it.' The next day, he met with the head of department and was set 'two essay questions. In 10 days I wrote those essays and handed them back in at reception and the next day [the head of department] called me up and said that I was in'.

10.2. Interests

One of the key explanations for how these young men overcame such challenges lies with an often long-held subject interest. For Matt an 'interest in medicine' dated back to 'year 6', and the age of 11. 'Throughout the whole of high school it was in my mind that if I wanted to do medicine, I knew what I needed to achieve'. This enduring interest was underpinned by the fact that 'I was pretty good at science and I just kind of picked up an interest at that age

and it hasn't gone since'. In exploring the origins of this enthusiasm, Matt talked about being 'naturally inquisitive and interested in learning', and recalled 'watching documentaries and [finding] the topics fascinating', adding that from 'about year 6 it was more science-related' areas that draw him and that lead to a particular interest in medicine. Similarly, Tony talked about his 'long-held interest' in engineering, recalling that he had 'fiddled with cars [since he was] very, very young'.

In number of instances these interests evolved over time. Ben recalled that 'in childhood [he] wanted to be vet' but by 'college' his focus had changed to physics. When he started school Mike also 'wanted to go into veterinary science but realised that I wanted to help people so then changed my mind to medicine'. Chris described the link between such subject interests and HE progression. Asked about the key factors that informed his decision to go to university, his reply was the chance it provided to 'learn even more about psychology'.

Similarly, Tim talked about being able to do a degree in an 'interest of mine', whilst Nigel recalled how his enduring enthusiasm for science was sustained even after he had withdrawn from sixth form college. Indeed, it was as a result of 'reading science books' in his 'spare time' during the year after he had dropped out of college that he decided to enrol on a biology access course. Peter offered a comparable account. The 'driving force' behind his decision to return to education and apply to university was the 'need to constantly be learning', and his tendency to be 'constantly reading'. HE offered the chance to apply these practices to an area he was passionate about

In some instances, these interests were recognised from an early age as being linked to a career that would require a higher education. In this respect, Dave talked about 'always want[ing] to do chemistry. As a career direction that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to go to university, do a PhD afterwards and possibly go into teaching after that. It's been a long ambition'. Whilst the role that subject interest can play in facilitating educational engagement and progression has not been widely explored, these findings do chime with those of Morrison (2007, 76), whose study of two students from WP backgrounds describes their 'love of learning as a powerful pull factor' behind their HE ambitions.

10.3. The value of HE

For a number of interviewees a strong belief in the value of HE, as a way of advancing and improving their circumstances, also proved an important driver. The financial and career benefits of HE study were particularly noticeable in the accounts offered by older

interviewees who drew upon their work-place experiences.

In describing his decision to return to learning as a mature student, Peter recalled a sense of 'not getting anywhere' and feeling he was 'trending water at [the age of] 35-36', and of wanting to 'better myself' and to be able to reach 'the end of the month [without] owing money'. The prospect of 'financial security', coupled with a 'dream to work with kids', saw him enrol on a degree. Liam offered a similar account. He recalled the desire to pursue a degree as a way 'to better myself' at a time when the job he had was not paying 'great wages' yet requiring 'long hours'. A further impetus was the he had 'got married'. This combination of influences was sufficient for him to conclude that 'enough is enough', at which point 'HE beckoned'.

Elsewhere, Tony recalled the impact of taking up an engineering internship after completing his GCSEs. During this time it 'became apparent' that he would 'not progress' in engineering 'without a degree'. This, realisation, it was noted, 'added a purpose to my A-levels'. Similarly, Matt described how, in his desire to becoming a solicitor, he came to see 'university as an investment'. Likewise, Ian talked about recognising that he 'needed to get back' into education, and university in particular, 'in order to get somewhere. My aspiration', it was added, 'was that I would go into teaching'.

These accounts resonate with Connor et al.'s. (2001) study. This suggests that the main motivating factor amongst those from lower socio-economic backgrounds for entering HE is the belief that a university qualification will enhance career prospects and earning potential. Similarly, Davies et al. (2014, 820) found a 'substantial positive association between [the] intention to go to university and expectations about the size of the graduate premium. Students with high expectations of a graduate premium', it is argued, 'are more likely to intend to go to college after taking account of expected grades, home background, ethnicity and type of school attended'.

10.4. Parental influence

Most interviewees discussed the positive influence of parents on their decision to progress to university, even though they were from families with no history in HE. This, it can be noted, contrasts with more general evidence that suggests a strong correlation between parental background and the propensity to progress to HE. In this respect, Gorard and Smith (2007, 143 and 149-50) note that 'students with parents in manual and unskilled occupations' that would not have required a higher education are more 'likely to want to leave school having

had enough and perhaps having been offered a job. Patterns of participation', they summarise, tend to 'run in families'.

In some instances, this positive influence was the outcome of interviewees seeing their parents struggling. Liam recalled times when 'mum and dad had no money' and of watching 'mum struggle'. Whilst he could follow suit and 'keep doing dead-end jobs' he 'wanted something else'. Similarly, Matt talked about having the 'exposure [to] my Dad being [a caretaker] at hospital' and, in response, of thinking 'sod that!'. In elaborating Matt added, 'I think you're influenced by things in life, so if you come from a poor area you either have people saying that's for me, or I'm not having that. You can be influenced by saying either I want that or I don't want that!'

Elsewhere, interviewees discussed their parents' example and the positive role model effect this could have. Asked where his focus to study derived from, Ben replied that it is 'probably my parents', adding that they told me 'don't rest on your laurels', whilst he recalled how his father would encourage him to 'work in the garden', saying 'come on we have more day light [left]'. His father, it was added, is a 'determined person and having him as a role model' nurtured a 'work ethic' and the desire to not waste time. Similarly, Tony talked about the inspiration he took from his father who returned to study as a mature student. 'Dad', he recalled, 'graduated in [my] GCSE year'. Tony's 'granddad had been a butcher and had told his father he would not get anywhere'. Yet, 'father gained a degree, [which is] quite inspirational'. Indeed, for Tony his father represented a role model, in how he 'knuckled down [to do] uni work in the evenings'.

In addition, some interviewees talked about their parents wanting them to do better and to take advantage of the opportunities they never had. Here Tim noted that, although his 'parents did not go to uni', they wished that they 'had that option'. Consequently, they 'encourage [me to] do [my] best'. Similarly, Mike discussed how his father advised him not to 'end up in a trade'. Whilst he 'still doesn't understand how uni works', he offered 'gentle encouragement to go', telling Mike that he was 'clever enough to be something better than working with my hands'. Likewise, Matt recalled that his 'mum always wanted me to go to university. I know [that] when she was in her mid-thirties she was offered a secondment to do [a] degree [but] she never did and she does regret it.' Similarly, Luke was encouraged to work harder by his parents after a 'rocky start to sixth form'. In this context Luke spoke about his father applying to university but 'he decided it wasn't for him and his parents didn't offer any support and told him that if he went he was on his own. He said he didn't want that for me. He wanted me to have that option and to have that support'. Likewise, in seeking their

views on university, Chris noted how his parents 'would reminisce on what they had wanted to do and how different it had become' and, in doing so it was added, making that 'contrast' with the opportunities he now had.

In some cases, interviewees provided examples of the practical support parents gave. Chris remembered how his parents incorporated university visits into family 'days out'. His parents, it was added, were 'quite excited about it, taking me round and seeing if I liked [it], and [asking] would I consider moving there if I [did].' Elsewhere, Dave recalled the 'understanding and support' he received from his parents in the 'space' provided at home when he was completing his OU degree. Whilst 'neither of them were university educated—so they had no real concept of it or what it entailed—mum supported me and said they'd make the necessary changes and help me, since, obviously, I would be working from home'.

Consistent with these findings, Connor et al. (2001, 39-41) describe the positive impact that families can have on their children's HE ambitions. Here reference is made to families being 'generally supportive', even when there is 'no family history' in HE. Indeed, they argue that it is 'almost vital for potential entrants from lower social class groups to have at least one family member who is supportive of their aims to continue onto HE.' Whilst Connor et al. (2001, 39-41) suggest ways in which support can be offered, including 'general encouragement', 'providing information and guidance, helping with confidence, [and] intervening in the decision-making' process', the evidence from the interviewees provides insights into what this could mean in practice.

10.5. Influence of other family members

Some interviewees also described the positive influence that siblings and extended family members could have. For Matt this was 'a brother who is 4 years older and who did a degree'. The impact of this old brother was in 'seeing him go to university and seeing that it was possible'. In addition, Matt acknowledge that there was also 'that competitive thing that I wanted to do better than him.' However, he was also clear about the extent of his brother's influence, noting that 'if he hadn't gone to university I don't think that would have changed anything'. Similarly, Richard talked about the example set by his older sister. 'She was very good at science and seeing how well [she] did made me feel that I had to achieve [and] wanted to do that well.' In Richard's case the influence of his older sibling appears to have been greater. 'I think the one thing that did push me on was my sister. I had to do as well as

her or better.'

A few interviewees also described the influence of extended family members. Dave recalled a cousin who 'did two years in physics' at university. Although they were not close and the cousin 'dropped out', Dave recalled 'textbooks [lying] around' and of 'going through the *New Scientist* when I was little. I suppose looking through science books did put a seed in my head'. Elsewhere, Ben described visiting an uncle when he was around 10 years old. This uncle worked in a [European] university and 'took us around the campus', including going into a lecturer theatre'. This was something, Ben added, 'I had never been in before'. In recalling the impression this had on him, he remarked that it 'seemed a really cool place to go to or work at'. As a consequence of this experience, by the time he entered high school Ben had some insight into what university was like.

In addition, for Liam, who entered HE as a mature student, a key influence in the decision to apply for a degree was his 'young daughter'. Here it was observed that he could not 'preach [about education] unless [I had] gone to college and university'. The motivation of returning to education was the desire to have a 'better life when [I] knew [I was going to] have a daughter'.

10.6. The role of teachers

i. Primary school

Particular teachers featured in a number of accounts of key influencers. In some instances, these included primary school teachers. Dave recalled the impact of a year 6 teacher who was a chemist and proved influential in firing Dave's interest in the subject. Although 'he didn't bring much chemistry to the classroom, in a previous career [he] had worked on a kind of Persil but they had to recall because it rotted people's clothes!' This teacher, it was acknowledged, must have had a lasting impression since, Dave observed, he was still able to recall what he had said.

ii. High school

However, most of the accounts offered by the interviewees referenced the impact of secondary and high school teachers. Richard talked about a teacher in year 7 and 8 who told his parents at a parents' evening how he was 'forever putting [his] hand up' in order to answer questions in class, recalling that he was pleased to learn of this fact 'because it

showed I was taking an interest'. Richard also discussed a biology teacher who first taught him in year 7. This individual, it was noted, 'returned as our biology teacher in year 10'. In terms of impact, Richard remembered him 'asking me what my forecasted grades were. I told him they were forecasted as As'. In response, this teacher remarked that 'because of [my] background, we need to change them. I was pleased that he believed I could achieve higher'. The influence of this teacher, it was added, also lay in the fact that he also became one of 'my A-level teachers', and that his teaching style helped to nurture Richard's interest in the subject. This, it was recalled, involved encouraging the class to 'read [about] the subject outside school'.

Another interviewee described the influence of a maths teacher they encountered from the start of their time in secondary school. 'When I was at university in about my second year', Matt recalled 'thinking back to school [and to] one of the parents' evenings. I remember Miss Jones pleading in front of me, and my mum, for me to do a maths degree'. Reflecting on this, it was observed that 'I think she saw someone that was smart and put the work in, and she put the work back. When you've got some teachers that are genuinely passionate, it leaves a lasting thing on you'.

Elsewhere, Dave talked about 'a fantastic chemistry teacher in high school [who] saw that I was interested in chemistry and involved me in the teaching, [including] writing equations on the board'. This, it was observed, 'gave me confidence in chemistry and what I was doing. That I was good at it and somebody else thought I was'. However, this teacher's influence was also related to the fact that he 'spoke about his career before he became a teacher, and that sort of gave me an interest because he'd talk about what he did'. In addition, Dave observed:

> He was local. He came from Stoke and studied chemistry at the polytechnic before it became a university, so he seemed like one of us. He spoke with a broad Stoke accent. Everything he was talking about was local, so he was talking about when he did his exams in [a neighbouring town] and when he worked at a coal mine just up the road. He was normal—he was someone from Stoke. Nothing was too unachievable. You could relate to everything, you could do it.

In assessing the influence of this individual, Dave had no doubt that he had a major impact. Similarly, Mike discussed the influence of the head of year in his secondary school, who followed 'us [as head of year] all the way through school'. Consequently, 'I got to know him fairly well'. At a time when Mike did not feel that he fitted in at school, this teacher was

prepared to 'sit and chat every lunchtime. [He] became a lifesaver so to speak'. Indeed, Mike observed that 'he got me enrolled on quite a few schemes with the school', and with the confidence he gained Mike 'ended up being deputy head boy' and acquiring a large number of GCSEs. Reflecting on what he consider he had gained from these conversations, Mike talked about the 'determination to actually do what I wanted to and make the most of what was available to me, and more than anything to have the confidence to go and talk to people, [which I would] not have done beforehand'.

Along similar lines, Chris spoke about the positive impact of a careers advisor during year 11. Whilst appointments with this teacher were 'mandatory', they provided an opportunity to 'discuss our future'. This advisor, Chris recalled, 'was very adamant that I should go down the academic route'. As a result 'I had it in my head that that was the right choice to make'. The advisor's approach during these meetings was also remarked upon. He was 'a very friendly guy, very encouraging rather than demanding that I take a particular route. He was advising us by asking what we wanted and then showing us ways of how to get there, and asking if we really wanted to do this or was there something else we wanted to explore. He was very approachable and person-centred.' Assessing his impact, Chris observed, 'I felt really good because it's always nice to receive that sort of praise, to hear that you're doing well and that you should continue down the path.' Reflecting further, Chris added, 'I think a couple of individual teachers were a bit too pushy but the careers advisor was encouraging me to do well rather than telling me what I should do'.

This said, in some instances a lasting effect could occur from quite brief encounters. Tony recalled the impact of two fairly short conversations, which, nevertheless, were to resonate. One involved a conversation with his head teacher when he was aged around 15 and at the time of his GCSEs. When this teacher discovered that Tony did not want to go to university 'he berated me quite a lot, [saying] you're a clever lad stop being an idiot', and adding that 'if I don't go to uni, he'd be really disappointed with me'. This, it was noted, struck a cord. Previously, Tony had 'struggled with confidence' and had been 'coasting along' but that 'stopped because of that conversation'. A second conversation, around the same time with his science teacher reinforced the message. She told me to 'pull my finger out, and that I was talented'. This, it was added, was couched in fairly direct terms but, Tony reflected, 'I needed it'.

iii. Sixth form and college

In addition, some interviewees discussed the positive influence of their college tutors. Luke recalled the impact of one of his sixth form teachers. This individual, it was noted, 'wanted you to do as well as you [could], instead of just scraping by, which was what I had been doing up until then'. In assessing their influence, Luke concluded that:

> I probably wouldn't have done as well in [the subject] and without that result I probably wouldn't have got to university. She was the one who told me I could get to university if I worked hard. She did sort of almost believe in me. When I said I wasn't clever enough and couldn't do it, she said I could and here's some proof that you can do it, you just need to work for it.

Luke also discussed this teacher's approach to teaching that helped to ensure his progress. 'If I said I didn't understand something, she'd re-phrase the question or go about it in a different way so that I could do it'.

Similarly, Nick recalled the advice and support he had been given by a maths teacher who took time to explain everything about his (level three) maths course, as well as the idea of university applications' and what 'would be useful here, there and everywhere'. Whilst, 'he didn't make me go for the final decision', Nick observed that 'he was very supportive in getting me along with my education and was simply trying to make me make my own decisions instead of the college making the decision for me'.

However, in some instances these encounters could be of short duration. Tim recalled the role of a 'careers person' in guiding him onto an extended BTEC diploma. Whilst their meeting lasted only '10-15' minutes, this was considered to have been 'very influential'. It was through talking about the diploma and drawing up a 'list' of options the qualification could open up, including 'jobs and trades' as well as 'the possibility of uni'—a list that seemed 'endless' and just 'carried on and on'—that Tim decided to enrol on the course. This tutor's influence, it was added, was made all the greater because she had 'done the diploma herself', so was able to talk about 'where she could have gone and what she did do'.

In at least one case the influence occurred towards the end of level three study. Matt reflected on the impact of one of his sixth form college tutors, who helped him to submit his university application just 'two weeks before UCAS closed'. This tutor 'had been to university and to [a local university], and when he spoke about his memories from there you could still

see a glimmer in his eye, and he was the first person I went to when I'd decided to go to university. He helped me massively with personal statements, talking about finances and university in general'.

The idea that 'exceptional teachers' may help to account for the HE progression of interviewees was anticipated by two of the practitioners. Similarly, Connor et al. (2001, 38-39) identify teachers, along with FE college tutors, as potential influencers on the HE progression of those from under-represented backgrounds. Here reference is made to the latter providing 'support, encouragement [and] advice', as well as 'help' in the 'decision making' process. Whilst in their assessment, teachers are 'seen as good sources of information on HE', Connor et al. (2001, 38-39) suggest that there is 'little evidence [for their] influence and inspirational qualities'. However, the insights of the men interviewed for this study indicates that high school teachers, and in one or two instances primary school staff as well, could also be highly influential.

10.7. Other influencers

i. Friends

Interviewees also talked about a number of other influences on their decision to opt for HE. These included friends and peers. For Tim, one key influence was a girlfriend who talked about her intentions to go to university and the route she was going to take to get there. Elsewhere, Chris discussed the positive influence of his peers at college in raising his initial awareness of HE as an option. 'They were talking about what they wanted to study at university'. As result, Chris observed, 'I became interested in it as an option'. Nick also referenced the encouragement provided by his friends when he faced having to abandon his studies at the end of his first year in sixth form. These friends, it was recalled, 'told me not to worry at [a time when] I didn't know what I was going to do'. Similarly, Nigel reflected on how his best friend proved to be 'very encouraging' about the option of university during the year after he had dropping out of college. This friend, it was noted, was already at university and encouraged Nigel in his decision to 'go back to college'.

Conner et al. (2001, 41-42) identify the existence of 'friends with experience of HE' as a source of potential encouragement 'about the benefits of going'. Similarly, in their study of the influence of social networks on the HE intentions of students from WP backgrounds who had the qualifications to progress, Fuller et al. (2008, 15) emphasise the importance that 'the role of friendships' play in the 'educational decision making' process.

ii. Graduates

A number of interviewees also talked about encounters with graduates that proved influential in the HE decision-making process. It was as a consequence of talking to 'those with engineering degrees' during his engineering internship at the end of year 11 that it 'became apparent' to Tony that he would 'not progress without a degree', and that 'university is essential if [you want to] go into engineering'. Such conservations, it was observed, 'added a purpose to A-levels'. Indeed, Tony argued that it was 'up for debate' whether he would have gone to university had it not been for his internship experience.

Similarly, Luke discussed the influence of the graduates he encountered during the year after he had left college following AS results that were less than he had expected. He recalled going into this year with doubts about his next steps but during this period he became clear about what he was going to do. Whilst these were 'people that I didn't talk to massively', they did discuss 'their experiences' of university and, in the process, were able to offer advice. What particularly struck Luke was their suggestion that 'you're best doing something rather than thinking it's not for you and not doing it, and then looking back and regretting' that decision. Nigel also talked about the influence of the graduates he met whilst working 'in administration within the NHS'. These individuals were 'very encouraging'. Whilst the work they were doing as 'researchers' proved 'inspiring', because they were involved in a 'trial and new discovery', Nigel also recalled the 'professional way' they 'conducted themselves'. As consequence of this experience, he 'realised' that he needed 'to use [my] time better' and, as result, he returned to education, embarking on an access course.

Along comparable lines, Nick recalled feedback received from the 'head technician' at the end of a week's work experience after completing his A-levels and at time when he was seeking apprenticeships. This individual 'told me that, although I was perfect for the apprenticeship, I shouldn't apply for it because the level I was currently working at was too high'. Asked about the impact of this conversation, Nick described it as constituting a 'massive curve ball, which nearly knocked me off the route I wanted to take'. His initial reaction was 'more confusion than anything else, because I never did really well in my AS and A-levels, so I thought I probably couldn't get in'. However, after a while 'I thought to myself I'd get out there and go and apply to some universities'. Upon reflection, Nick observed that he is now 'really grateful' for that advice.

10.8. Outreach interventions

In their accounts, some of the interviewees also talked of participating in outreach activities and the impact these had. In some cases interviewees focused on the effect of early interventions. Nigel recalled trips taken in primary school and at the start of high school. These included a year 7 visit to a local university, which comprised 'rockets and stuff and a volcano type thing [which was] made to explode'. Looking back, these events were significant in raising Nigel's interest in science. It 'kind of amazes you and gives you a picture of what you can do, what is possible from science, and what possibilities there are for what science could do'. In sum, it was noted, they 'make you think why you should try at school'. In exploring why these events had a lasting impact, emphasis was placed on the fact that they provided a chance to participate rather than simply listen.

Similarly, Tim discussed a year 10 university visit he was involved in as part of a PE class, where pupils worked with sports students on a project. Whilst he was unable to recall the details, it was observed that, given his long-held interest in sport, 'something about it may have remained in [my] head.' At a similar stage in his education, Mike remembered a year 10 school assembly when 'Keele came in and did something on university'. In seeking to recall more detail, Mike suggested that this was 'something fairly interactive' that illustrated the connection between careers and university, and which involved going 'through loads of careers you can do'. Asked about its impact, he suggested that this event corresponded to the time when the idea of university began to emerge. 'I think as much as anything [it raised my] awareness and aspirations. This is something you can do. That [was the] first time [it] came into my consciousness and that kind of got me looking properly'.

Elsewhere, Matt recalled participating in a year 10 or 11 summer school. This comprised 'a week or a weekend at [university]', where 'you stop over and get experience'. Asked about its influence, Matt observed 'I think that something like a summer school is a massive help'. Similarly, Chris discussed attending 'a year 12 summer camp'. This involved 'doing three-day's [of] taster sessions' at a local university, supported by student ambassadors. It also included 'lectures and reading in the library', as well as 'playing on the astro turf pitches'. In terms of its impact, Chris replied 'I think it helped me to sort of reassure myself that living at university was a pretty good thing to do and actually going to lessons, and how it all was compared to a school. It just seemed really good. It made me want to be a student in a way'. In exploring its effect further, he added, 'I think I probably would have still applied but I would probably have been a bit more indecisive as to whether I wanted to go or if I wanted to go and stay at home. I think before the summer camp I was a bit apprehensive about what the

social nature of it might be but because it was such a good time and making friends and that sort of stuff, it bolstered my self-esteem a bit'. Indeed, he added, 'I made a couple of friends there that I'm still in contact with'. These findings, it can be noted, accord with the assessment from some of the practitioners interviewed that outreach interventions were likely to feature in interviewees' accounts of the factors that had informed and encouraged them to consider HE.

However, interviewees also discussed the limited impact that some outreach activities had. Ben recalled that 'we did have the odd day in year 10 and 11 when [a] university would come in on fair days, but they just had tables and stalls'. Whilst already clear about his 'goal' at this stage, they did offer 'encouragement that what I was thinking was right.' Similarly, whilst his year 10-11 summer school experience was valuable, Matt noted that it did not convince him that he should go to university. 'Probably at the time I thought I'd love to do this but you don't really make a choice at that age, do you? You change a lot between year 10 and year 13. You do the week away at [a university] and see how good university is' but, he added, whilst it is important to raise awareness, at some point the question of how relevant university would be to one's ambitions needs to be addressed.

Beyond this, not all interviewees participated in outreach activities. Ian observed that 'we didn't have anybody come in and give us a talk on it. We never had anybody that came in like we have now with widening participation—nothing like that.' Indeed, he added, 'I don't even remember anybody coming to the school from a university.'

11. THE MESSAGES

11.1. Correcting perceptions

From the conversations it was also possible to identify a set of messages about HE that interviewees considered should be communicated to those from similar backgrounds to themselves. Amongst these was the need to counter stories of local young people going to university, returning with large debts and taking jobs they could have acquired without a degree. Here Peter observed 'you hear Jonny [went] to university [but is] now working in Tesco'. That account, it was argued 'needs to be attacked'. Similarly, in considering what universities, colleges and schools can do to help support and guide young people who were unlikely to consider HE as an option, Luke talked of 'the expectation that you have to be quite clever— [a] straight A/B student—to get there'. Perhaps, it was argued, 'if universities could reassure people that they don't have to be the perfect student to get onto their courses, a lot more people would potentially consider it as a viable option'.

There was also a need to correct the impression that university would be just like school and college. As a mature student, Liam described the 'challenge of learning to learn again', and of 'teaching myself how to be a student', since university proved to be 'not like school' in that 'what you put in is what you get out'. Similarly, Nick recalled thinking, as many of his friends did, that university would be like high school, comprising a 'set timetable, full days, [and] not so much free time'. However, the reality was very different. Here Nick talked about the 'independence' and free time associated with HE-level study, as well as the opportunity to 'study what you are really interested in'. Considering the kinds of message that should be communicated, he argued that young people should not 'be scared of university, it's completely different to how school is. You have a lot more independence and you are an independent learner'. Indeed, Nick added that had he known 'it wasn't going to be like high school or college, I would probably have applied at the end of AS-levels.'

Tim made a comparable set of observations. The initial thought of 'being in education' until he was 22 had put him off university. In particular, Tim discussed his concern that going to university would mean the delayed 'arrival of independence, including financial independence', because he would have to 'rely on other people'. However, in the event what he had thought would be a negative 'ended up being the biggest positive', since university provided an 'opportunity to learn new things, to do different things, and to be educated in a different town'. Indeed, Tim recalled what his BTEC tutor has said about how she had 'changed as a person' going to university, and how it offered a 'good transition' into

adulthood. Similarly, in considering what advice he would offer to his younger self about HE, Peter talked about the independence gained from going to university and the importance of acquiring a range of life skills, including learning to fend for oneself. Consistent with these findings, Baars et al. (2016, 16) reference focus group research that revealed a perception amongst young men from lower socio-economic backgrounds that university would resemble school and be associated with 'long lectures' and 'lots of reading' (Raven, 2008a, 2-3).

11.2. A chance to pursue interests

From a number of the conversations one of the key messages to emerge concerned the opportunity HE offered to pursue subject interests. Here Matt observed that a significant difference between university and school-level study 'was I got to choose what I did and that's the big thing with college and university. You don't have to do it but if you do then it's your choice and you study what you're interested in'. Similarly, Nick talked about university being 'more focused around what I wanted to do' than AS and A-levels, adding that 'I will put the effort in if I'm interested in the subject'.

In exploring what universities should do to facilitate a recognition of this, Tony emphasised the need to communicate the range of subjects offered. What had dissuaded a number of his peers from considering HE was not so much being unaware of the existence of university but, rather, a lack of 'knowledge about the breadth of courses' available. Here reference was made to the view that 'to get into engineering you have to be an apprentice'. Luke made a similar observation in suggesting that universities should be 'more open' about the range of courses they offer. If they were, he argued:

> I think more people might be interested, or at least consider it as a viable path for them. If you're studying something that really drives you, and you have a passion for that, then you're going to work a lot harder for it and you're going to be more open to the learning, if that makes sense. So it becomes almost like a hobby rather than studying.

However, Luke also suggested that prospective learners needed to be active in the process, by looking 'a bit longer, deeper and harder about what is out there'.

Developing this line of thinking, Nigel discussed the value of teachers who are involved in organising university 'trips', taking 'account of a student's interests'. Similarly, exploring the role of universities in helping to nurture such interests, Tim talked about the need to offer

events that align with the enthusiasms of young people. 'If they are interested in engineering', it was observed, 'offer something in engineering'. In terms of delivery, Ben recalled his own experience of visiting his uncle's university to emphasise the value of 'seeing things', of 'actually being there', and of taking in the 'sights and smells'. In addition, both Ben and Ian discussed the importance of identifying young people's interests in the first place and, in Ian's words, for high schools to then support ways in which pupils can use 'their interests and channel them' and 'shoehorn them in' to what is being taught.

Linked to this, was the need to demonstrate where a young person's interests could take them. In this respect, Chris talked about showing 'paths' and 'routes', and making young people aware that GCSEs were the first step. Whilst the route to A-levels was fairly familiar, it was argued that less is known about the next educational steps after A-level, and that this lack of knowledge needed to be addressed (UCAS, 2016c).

11.3. The benefits of HE study

In addition, a number of the interviewees talked about the value of communicating a range of other benefits that HE can offer. Here Matt emphasised the need to view a degree as a 'stepping stone' into employment, arguing that for many from 'lower income' backgrounds the biggest draw of a university education may be the career opportunities that a degree can afford. Indeed, in discussing the view that a university education provides a means to fulfilling a career ambition, Matt noted that 'if you've got someone that's worried about debt then the easiest way to justify that is to [view] the debt [as] working. Degrees aren't something to just brag about. [They are] something you need for [a] career'. Indeed, it was argued that the message should be 'here's an opportunity to have the best three years of your life but the cherry on the top is that it will allow you to go anywhere you want.' Exploring this further, Matt added, 'a degree isn't just a three-year educational experience, it's going to keep on giving, so the initial debt will be worth it in the long-run'.

These observations, it can be argued, are consistent with Moore et al.'s (2013, iv) work, which discusses the need to highlight the enhanced career prospects a higher education can offer. Similarly, Baars et al. (2016, 35) argue for the 'value of university degree subjects' to be emphasised, especially when engaging with 'white working class boys [who] are more likely to be concerned about the relevance of a university degree to their future earnings and job prospects'. In keeping with these recommendations and the feedback from interviewees, one of the practitioners argued that a key factor likely to separate those local boys who

progress to HE from their peers who do not is that the former have a long-term goal in mind. 'I personally think finding out what they want to do and getting a destination clear in their heads, and then knowing what they need to do in order to succeed in that, is really important.' In consequence, it was suggested that there is a need to find ways of 'helping them to see if they do X and then they do Y, they can get to Z. They then see [HE] rather than this leap of faith' as something that can get the 'results that will open more doors' for them.

12. THE MEDIUM

12.1. University visits and summer schools

Interviewees also hinted at the best mechanisms, or activities, for communicating these messages. They included university staff visiting schools. In this respect, Matt observed that 'you hear about universities and how well universities do but until you get there you do feel a bit detached from them because it's hard for them to reach out to all schools'. In response, he suggested the value of 'local universities' visiting 'less privileged schools' as a way of 'spurring children on'. The same interviewee also discussed school trips to university. Similarly, Chris talked about the benefits that could arise from 'summer camp' participation. 'One of the better ways to encourage [young] people to consider university', he argued, were interventions 'where you're not just getting told about what university entails [but] you're actually going there and experiencing it and getting excited about it'.

12.2. Mentoring and one-to-one IAG conversations

In addition, a number of interviewees talked of the value of mentoring and one-to-one meetings. Regarding the former, Ian discussed the recent school-based mentoring work he had been involved in. The positive impact this work could have, it was argued, lay in 'recognising' the interests learners have, which 'might be music, it might be film, it might be literature, or it might be something else altogether', and, in recalling his own time at school, of then acknowledging and recognising the value of these interests and how they 'could be used constructively in conjunction with the work' learners are doing in class. Also drawing on his own experiences, Nick discussed the benefits arising from one-to-one conversations with careers advisors and others about pathways into further and higher education, and about 'the courses and what subjects would and would not be beneficial to your chosen career'. Such conversations, it was argued, should start early, 'possibly even before you choose your GCSE options'.

12.3. A series of interventions

A number of interviewees alluded to the importance of providing a series of interventions. For Chris, this reflected his own experience where initial guidance on his next steps had been offered by a teacher during year 10 and 11. This was followed by conversations with his sixth form tutors, alongside family visits to a number of universities. Similarly, Matt talked

about an initial need 'at primary school and low high school' to make 'university this big exciting thing'. However, 'once you're in year 10 and year 11, you've got to use conversations about what career do you want, where do you want to be in life and does university fit in with that, or can university fit in with that, or, if you haven't got a clue, what can [a higher education] give you not just at university but beyond'. Accompanying this was a need for guidance about 'what university costs' and the availability of loans, alongside support in finding 'a degree that provides a career'.

Also reflecting on his experience, Chris talked about the benefits of on-going conversations that would begin by exploring what 'you want to do' and would then provide information and guidance, and equipping learners with a plan of 'what they need to do to take that path'. In this respect, Chris recalled the guidance he had received and how it proved *'encouraging in terms of getting into focus what you're interested in and trying to mould that into what you want to do later on', and with matching 'what [you're] interested in with a career'.

Consistent with the ideas offered by interviewees were the initiatives suggested by some of the practitioners. Here reference was made to the potential value of mentoring, as well as 'tours of big [local] employers' that recruit graduates. Such visits, it was added, could provide an opportunity for young people to 'meet those' who are now employed by these businesses and who could 'talk through their stories'. Similarly, in their review of WP research, Moore et al. (2013, iii) emphasise the need for interventions to start early and to then be sustained. In addition, 'certain types of intensive interventions [that] seem to be particularly effective' were identified, notably summer schools and mentoring, both of which were mentioned by the interviewees. Moore et al. (2013, iv) also discuss the need for outreach 'interventions to be personalised and [to] address priority information needs, including HE finance, [the] HE application process and employment opportunities.'

13. THE MESSENGERS

13.1. Teachers and graduates

The interviews also explored who might be best to deliver these messages at such events and on such occasions. Tim identified teachers that learners 'get on particularly well with', including those whose subjects students are 'interested in'. For Nick, the best communicator was 'someone who [had] gone through the higher education system already', or, in exploring this idea further, 'somebody who hasn't had the chance to have that experience and wished they had done because', it was added, 'that comes from the bottom of their heart'. Recalling his own experience, Luke observed the value of 'talking to people who had been to university' and how, for him, that proved 'a big help'.

Along similar lines, Dave discussed the potentially positive impact of engaging 'people who actually do jobs in, like, chemistry, pharmacy and engineering', and who 'have come from my background but just happen to have gone to university in the meantime'. Drawing on his own experience of encountering such a teacher, Dave added, one can relate to these individuals, and that what they have to say can counter questions raised around 'what's the point' of university. They could also show that 'somebody from Stoke' who 'didn't have airs and graces' could progress. Similarly, one of the practitioners talked about the potential value of graduates who return to the local area and the 'role model' effect they can have. Indeed, there was judged to be a need for such individuals given this practitioner's 'feeling that a lot of people move to university and then don't come back.' In seeking to tackle this trend, reference was made to a local university-initiated scheme that sought to encourage graduates from the locality to 'stay local' as teachers and role models more generally.

13.2. Men from comparable backgrounds

For Liam the best deliverers were considered to be individuals from backgrounds similar to his own and who would 'remind me of me', in contrast, it was added, to someone 'in a suit and in their 40s'. Developing this line of thinking, Dave talked about the possibility of 'sending [university] students back to their own high schools or primary schools, so the pupils could see the people they could have gone to school with, the ones from just up the road.' Indeed, three of the interviewees drew on their own experience of being student ambassadors. Reflecting on his role as an ambassador, Matt acknowledged that 'I suppose I'm the best poster for it, I did a law degree, I got very good grades, I got a job from it and I did it without the financial backing of a rich family'.

Elsewhere, Ian described going into schools and colleges 'to tell my story, to talk to kids and make them see that it doesn't matter how incapable you're made to feel or you believe yourself to be, at some point you can turn things around'. The impact of such interactions could, he assessed, be significant. 'They identify with me more so than they do the teachers in the classroom, and they have this great respect for you because you came from the same place that they did, or the place that they are, and they recognise that you serve as proof that there is a way out'. In terms of what might be said during such interactions, Ian talk about how:

> The kids respond really well to autobiography. When you go into a classroom and you tell them a story and you can contextualise things for them and you give them something to cling to, that makes them recognise that there are similarities between you and them, and there are things that they are doing in their lives that mirror the things you went through. It makes them feel not so confined, not so hemmed in, like you can feel really claustrophobic in these cities, especially in a place like Stoke. It's not a massive city.

Along similar lines, and drawing on his experience of being an ambassador, Mike discussed the impact that 'having students go into schools and do sessions and [build] interactive relationships' with young people could have in nurturing their confidence as well as in developing 'the right attitude to go out to [university] open days' with.

In supporting these ideas and experiences, Moore et al. (2013, iv) discuss the positive contribution that HE students can play in the 'delivery of IAG interventions' to young people from WP backgrounds. Similarly, Connor et al. (2001, 3) advocate the wider use of mentors or 'HE champions' in helping 'those potential students who have little contact with people who have recent HE experience'. They also discuss the potential benefits of 'ex-students' being 'invited back' to their old schools and colleges to talk to current students about what it is like to be a university student'. From the evidence considered by Connor et al. (2001, 3), it was observed that the 'realistic information' these university student are able to offer 'seemed to be extremely important, especially amongst those who had only begun to think about HE relatively recently, and who had no family or friends who had attended'. In addition, Baars et al. (2016, 35) identify student mentors as offering an 'effective method' to 'expose pupils to concrete aspects of higher education [and in] demonstrating its benefits and its accessibility'.

14. THE WIDER IMPACT

Although not discussed by all interviewees, references were made by some to the 'positive' impact their HE experiences were having on others. These included younger siblings. Here Luke noted that 'my sister's doing a gap year now but she's applying to university and I think she's got a couple of offers'. Asked whether he thought his sister had been influenced by what he had done, it was acknowledged that this could have been the case.

Elsewhere, Chris talked about his father deciding to enrol on a university course, and discussed the role he sometimes played in supporting his father with his studies. 'If he's struggling on an essay, he'll ask me to go through it with him, or certain things like the on-line sessions', adding that 'I always encourage him to talk to the lecturers about any problems that he may be having or that might arise'. Chris also recognised that his experience and influence could have had quite a positive impact, observing that 'I think it helps [my father] a bit and gives him a bit of an advantage'.

Beyond this, Mike acknowledged the wider impact his progression to university had generated. On gaining a university place, he recalled the response back home, with his father being 'really proud' and that it was the 'talk of the street for three to four weeks', since he was the 'first person in the street to go' to university. Even now, Mike added, 'when I go back home and bump into people in the street, [they] ask how everything is going'. In noting that his 'brother ended up going and then all my friends from across the road ended up going a few years later', he acknowledged that his example may have 'opened up that option when' it was perhaps 'not necessarily there before'. He also noted that being local and living at home may have helped raise awareness, assisted by the fact that he was 'always bumping into people and chatting about what I am doing'.

15. THE TRANSITION TO HE

15.1. Challenges

A number of interviewees discussed their experience of the transition to HE-level study. For some this did not prove a challenging experience. Indeed, Ben found it a relatively easy transition, and talked about enjoying the experience and the 'change of environment' it offered. Similarly, Tony had not encountered any real problems. This, it was added, was probably helped by knowing a 'few others' who had gone, including his 'best mate'.

However, some of the interviewees did find the transition more difficult. Tim talked of university being a 'lot different from college' and of taking a 'lot of adapting to'. Similarly, Dave discussed the 'massive culture shock' he experienced on arriving at his first university that was some distance from home. Most challenging was the style of delivery. The learning 'was totally different. You had handouts and you had to make notes'. Beyond this, 'it was the lack of interaction with the lecturers' that proved especially difficult. 'They were serious academics and they stood at the front of the lecture hall and talked and then left the room, and then another one came in and talked for 50 minutes and left the room'. It was, he observed, 'so different from the classroom situation' he was familiar with and something he 'never really got used to'. Similarly, Ian observed of his time as an undergraduate that 'I don't think that I ever felt like I fitted in'.

These experiences, it can be suggested, accord with Hosking's (2012, 245) study, which discusses how learners from WP backgrounds can feel 'out of place and at odds' with HE at times, and of 'feeling unsure how to act', whilst also finding it 'difficult to know what [is] required by tutors'. Similarly, Webber (2014, 99) talks about the challenges that 'non-traditional students' may encounter as they 'cross borders of class', in terms of differences in established practices and behaviours.

15.2. Tactics and interventions

This said, some of the interviewees discussed approaches that had facilitated their transition. Nigel talked about the step from his access course onto his degree being helped by an approach to studying he had developed during his year away from college. In particular, this involved applying time management techniques to study and of 'making notes', including before attending lectures. Whilst the transition to HE 'took a while', not least because as a mature student there was the 'challenge of learning to learn again', Liam

discussed the support he had received from his personal tutor. Similarly, Mike recalled finding the transition 'ok', partly because the sixth form college he had gone to 'set me up [for] lecturers', and partly because a week at the start of his first term had been devoted to 'getting to know each other'. During this period, he recalled going on a 'treasure hunt around campus'. Although it was 'pouring with rain, three people [he] met' during that week he had remained 'friends with'. Indeed, it was observed that the whole experience was 'really good' and 'really got me into university'. These insights, it can be argued, echo the importance placed on activities that help to 'develop a sense of [institutional] belonging', especially amongst those who might find the transition to HE especially challenging (OFFA and HEFCE, 2014, 56; Thomas, 2012).

16. CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

16.1. Conclusions

Comparatively few young men from widening participation backgrounds, especially those of white British origin, progress to HE. Whilst this trend attracted considerable attention more than a decade ago, it is likely to have a rather longer ancestry and, more significantly for those seeking to widen access today, this participation gap remains. Indeed, the latest progression data suggests the situation has become more acute in recent years. Under such circumstances, calls for action—with greater targeting and an increase in levels of outreach activity—are understandable. However, it can be argued that attention should also be directed at better understanding this most enduring of access challenges. This study has attempted to contribute to the evidence base. It has done so by drawing on the experiences of a sample of learners from this group who have 'bucked' the general trend amongst their peers and progressed to HE. This has been achieved by deploying life story interviews: a qualitative research method which is relatively new to the field but one that has shown great promise (Raven, 2015 and 2016) and that for this project proved able to provide a wealth of insights.

What initially strikes one from a cursory examination of the data generated is the apparent role of serendipity, or happenstance, in the progression of these individuals (the convergence of seemingly random forces and influences). This may help to explain why so few young men from lower socio-economic backgrounds take the HE route. However, from a more detailed consideration of the evidence certain patterns emerge. All interviewees opted for a 'local' university. Whilst this reflects the sampling approach taken—those selected had grown up in one of three local areas and then progressed to one of three local universities—what also emerged from the interviews was that the decision to 'stay local' was a carefully consider one. In part, it reflected the availability of suitable courses offered by nearby providers. However, it also reflected the individual's ties to their locality, including the view that it would prove too much of a wrench on their families if they were to venture further afield. The cost-saving side of staying 'local' also featured in a number of accounts.

The straight linear route into HE—involving gaining the required number of GCSEs and then moving onto college and level three study before entering university by the age of 18—was not prominent amongst the learner journeys described by interviewees. However, the 'less linear' paths taken by a number of these men were not, generally, the consequence of poor key stage four outcomes. Instead, their 'delayed' entry into HE occurred despite their

good results. Residing in low participation areas and progressing to HE sometime after the age of 18/19, these learners would be amongst those contributing to local cold spot rankings (where rates of young progression are less than expected). Whilst their 'slower' journeys to university could be viewed as a case of these young men needing a little more time to mature, some offered a fairly critical assessment, with reference made to time 'wasted'. The reasons for their non-linear progression included unfavourable perceptions of HE and the decision to, initially at least, embark upon a different pathway, including into employment. For some the transition to advanced-level study also proved a challenging one, leading to a withdrawal from their initial programmes of study, or the decision to start again, often at a different institution. However, it should also be recognised that behind these general tendencies lay stories of encountering and negotiating a range of personal challenges.

Yet, despite such difficulties the young men featured in this study did progress to university, and here it was possible to discern a number of influencing factors. What became apparent from the conversations with all 14 interviewees was a determination to progress. What also emerged strongly were tendencies to draw upon their own initiative in searching and investigating the HE option. Moreover, all interviewees talked of a particular subject interest that, in most instances, could be traced back to an early age, with some demonstrating resilience in maintaining this interest to learn when peers had other views. In many cases, these early interests were to align with the subjects interviewees came to study in HE. Indeed, HE was seen as providing an opportunity to pursue these interests.

Interviewees also shared a strong belief in the value of HE as a way of advancing and improving their situations. The financial returns and career gains from higher-level study were prominent in a number of accounts. These were sometimes discussed in the context of the deprived and low wage areas they had come from and the 'leave school and go into work or get a trade' trajectories they considered to characterise these areas. The long-term financial and career benefits of HE study were particularly noticeable amongst older interviewees who had returned to study as mature students and who expressed a desire not to go back to poorly paid jobs.

Most also talked of parents who were supportive of their higher education ambitions, even though they were from families with no history in HE. Instead, they spoke about learning from their parents' experiences, watching them struggle, and admiring and wanting to adopt their work ethic. Some also talked about parents wanting them to do better and to take advantage of the opportunities they were denied. The support parents offered had less to do with guidance on next steps, since there was a lack of first-hand experience, and more to do

with general encouragement and expressing a pride in their son's achievements.

Although parental support featured prominently in many accounts, other positive influences were also discussed. These included the role of other family members and relatives along with friends, whilst in most cases references were made to the central role played by particular teachers and tutors, both in raising and supporting their general educational aims and ambitions, as well as those related to HE in particular. Other sources of support, encouragement and advice included the graduates some encountered, often in the workplace, whilst for some of these young men outreach interventions, including university visits, were described as having a positive impact, most notably in raising awareness and interest, and helping to overcome concerns about 'fitting in'. Whilst different accounts placed emphasis of different influences, in none did the decision to progress appear to be the outcome of a signal occurrence. Rather, it was the consequence of a series of factors, often starting at a relatively young age but continuing, or being reinforced, by subsequent experiences.

In the context of their own stories, the interviewees also explored how the challenges to progression encountered by those from comparable backgrounds to their own might be tackled. First to emerge from these conversations were a number of key messages. These included:

- The importance of communicating 'the HE experience', including the independence it offers and the acquisition of life skills it bestows, as well as demonstrating the differences between learning at school and college, and studying at HE
- The need to counter stories of locals going to HE, returning with large debts, and taking jobs they could have acquired without a degree
- The breadth of subjects offered at HE and the opportunities to find options that align with often long-held interests and enthusiasms, and
- The enhanced career prospects that a higher education can offer.

From the interviews it was also possible to identify the most effective 'mechanisms' for communicating such messages, including university visits and summer schools, as well as mentoring and one-to-one information and advice sessions and, accompanying these, the importance of providing a series of interventions that move from raising awareness and interest, to demonstrating relevance and supporting the process of progress itself. Finally,

reference was made to who the best messengers would be. Prominent here was the view that these should be individuals like them, who had come from comparable backgrounds and experienced similar challenges, and whose stories of progression could provide relatable examples of what could be achieved and how it can be achieved. This said, the HE challenge did not always stop once their university applications had been accepted. For some, the transition to HE study proved difficult as a new environment and new ways of doing things were encountered. Yet, their stories show a continued determination to overcome these challenges, whilst also affording insights into approaches and sources of support that helped to ensure their success once at university.

16.2. Reflections

Whilst comparatively new to the field of widening participation, the life story interviews that formed the principal research method deployed in this study were able to generate a wealth of information. Their application can be time consuming but what this approach is capable of producing, arguably, makes the time invested worthwhile. Moreover, as a participant-directed approach to research and evaluation it is also capable of accessing the learner-voice.

Yet, it should also be recognised that a study of this nature has its limitations. Whilst the sample size was consistent with that used by a number of other research studies, and may rank amongst some of the larger samples gathered, it is based on one particular set of perspectives—those from the minority who did progress. Purposive sampling of this nature is a recognised and widely accepted approach. However, the insights of those from comparable backgrounds who, in deciding against HE, represent the majority, remain largely undocumented. Although there are practical challenges in accessing such learners, since they are unlikely to be at an educational establishment, one option—potentially for a future investigation—would be to identify WP young men in year 13 who have the potential to progress but have decided against doing so. The picture could then be enriched if a comparator group, comprising those who had completed their UCAS applications and were intending to enter HE, were also surveyed.

17. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

18. REFERENCES

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