

Overcoming the barriers to working-class students' participation in higher education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Background to the research

This report covers the main findings from a small-scale research study funded by the *Sussex Learning Network*. The objective was to provide more contextualised understandings of the factors that feed into working class students' participation in higher education (HE). While there has been considerable growth in the HE sector over more than two decades, young people from working class backgrounds continue to be under-represented in the most high status universities, degree courses and occupations. Despite their centrality to this agenda, the term working class is rarely used. Widening participation programmes tend to focus on first generation students or those living in and/or attending a school in a Low Participation Neighbourhood (LPN).¹ At school level there is a focus on disadvantage, linked to Pupil Premium funding.² Such proxy measures are readily quantifiable but do not always provide an accurate basis for intervention. Against the context of a shifting HE landscape with concomitant risks and opportunities, the research provides timely insights into the factors feeding into the HE decision-making of young people meeting the criteria for intervention. It also draws out those aspects of identified good practice that might provide a basis for future intervention.

Summary of main findings

Four state secondary schools in the South-East of England, each with their own sixth form provision, participated in the research. Data were gathered from staff, young people eligible for widening participation intervention and a small number of their parents. Additional data were collected via a one day consultative research seminar held at the University of Sussex.

1. The four schools and their local contexts

"If you went to different schools I think you would get a different picture" (Town, 1)

Staff in all four schools discussed local demographics that were considered influential. These fed into differences in involvement in widening participation activity that highlighted issues of knowledge and capacity:

➤ Town school

- Located in a low-income, working class area
- The most socially disadvantaged and ethnically diverse of the four schools
- Established links with several universities and able to select from a range of activities
- One young person recently the first to progress to Oxbridge.

¹ Linked to rates of progression to university in the locality

² Pupil Premium eligibility is linked to both current and prior status and covers the following: eligibility for Free School Meals; being a Looked After Child; having a parent in the armed forces.

➤ **Rural school**

- Predominantly middle class intake
- Some young people eligible for Pupil Premium and a greater number of parents with no HE experience
- Highest performing of the four schools but fewer young people progressing to HE than expected.
- Little history of widening participation activity but now working with one university

➤ **Urban school**

- Relatively vibrant area but concerns raised about the impact of austerity on the local White working class population
- Intake described as varied but the school with the second highest rate of Free School Meals eligibility
- Widening participation activities started later than at Town and Coastal schools and there was an interest in mainstreaming this agenda institutionally
- Two Pupil Premium students recently gained places at Oxbridge but only one taken this up

➤ **Coastal school**

- Relatively affluent area but some cases of significant and enduring hardship
- Parents considered to be typically self-made and without HE experience.
- History of widening participation activity around an influential lead figure
- Concerns about a perceived lack of mobility just as at Rural school but one young person from a widening participation background had recently turned down a place at Oxbridge to study overseas

2. Targeting young people for widening participation intervention

“Who should be targeted as a WP student was such an emotive question” (Seminar participant)

The research confirms that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to targeting young people for widening participation intervention and that the characteristics of both the school and its locality are relevant.

- The decision-making associated with selection for inclusion in widening participation programmes is both influential and constrained.
- The targeting of the most resource intensive activities needs to be informed by nuanced and explicit understandings of both disadvantage and need.
- That some eligible young people are able to access multiple experiences but others none raises fundamental questions of equity.

❖ **The challenges associated with managing access to interventions**

The widening participation lead in a school has an important part to play in managing access to interventions via the predetermined criteria set by multiple providers. Nevertheless there is some scope to manage access via an institutional approach. The role clearly entails the sensitive management of relationships with other staff, external providers, young people and parents. There is a risk of creating a hierarchy of need and also the potential for subjective bias.

❖ **Working with different understandings of need**

Although the assumption underpinning widening participation interventions is that they will address some form of disadvantage there are important differences in how this is understood. School staff were found to be generally critical of criteria perceived to be lacking in nuance and this was thought to contribute to some young people being over-targeted at the expense of others. More structural readings of disadvantage were comparatively rare; some staff emphasised the need to 'raise aspiration' in the home, an emphasis that resonates with formal approaches.

❖ **Reflections on the limitations of key criteria**

Discussions of the criteria being used to target young people for intervention highlighted this is an emotive and contentious subject. There were identifiable institutional differences in how the different criteria were applied. Those that were externally imposed were sometimes perceived as an additional barrier rather than as a protective filter. Whether the criteria for intervention should be explicitly stated was debated, reflecting sensibilities not shared by all.

- At schools like Town the vast majority of young people come from households with no experience of HE. However, Coastal and Rural schools also considered themselves to have more young people with no family experience of HE than could be supported.
- Staff noted that there can be a difference between the school profile and its intake and that those located in more advantaged areas might actually be drawing in young people from much less advantaged households.
- There is a risk that relying solely on institutional eligibility for intervention will lead to insufficient attention being paid to individual eligibility. It was noted that both of these can change over time.
- Assessments of potential were used to bridge the gaps between supply and demand
- Young people eligible for support via Pupil Premium funding were clearly a major focus across all four schools. This policy was not necessarily being linked to widening participation activities although there was some sense of this now being important to do.

❖ **The social class identifications of school staff**

At interview almost half of school staff voluntarily self-identified as being from a working class background. These accounts highlighted difficulties with finance and fitting in while also confirming

that some working class students may experience less linear routes to HE and simply take more time to get there. It was clear that such staff have the potential to be a powerful additional resource.

3. Factors influencing young people's HE decision-making

"I hadn't really thought about studying at university but I found [the visit to one] really interesting" (Year 10/11 student, Coastal School)

The factors identified by the young people as important in their HE decision-making were broadly similar across the four schools with cost being a central concern.

❖ Sources of knowledge drawn on by young people taking part in the focus groups

The young people collectively were able to draw on a wide range of sources of knowledge. Some had gained this knowledge via first-hand experiences of university obtained through summer schools or encounters with undergraduates inside school settings. Others relied heavily on experiences gleaned from siblings and other relatives although not all had access to these. The role of the school in informing young people about university options was very apparent with some naming the institutional widening participation lead as the key reference point.

❖ Young people's perspectives on factors influential in their HE decision-making

There were clear differences in the factors identified across the different age groups, reflecting age-related norms in approaches to intervention.

- Overall the **Year 8/9s** had less experience of HE than those in later years with those at Rural and Urban schools in particular finding it difficult to talk about university due to a lack of knowledge. These groups:
 - Identified the main reason for going to university as being to improve your job prospects and earn more money
 - Were strongly influenced by whether their parents had been to university and *not* having been was sometimes a positive rather than a negative stimulus
 - Were unclear about the financial implications of HE but had a general impression that university was expensive and potentially unaffordable
 - Had some concerns about living away from home
- The **Year 10/11s** had more developed ideas around the benefits of HE than the Year 8/9s and some additional concerns:
 - There was more awareness of university as a holistic experience and part of a journey to adulthood
 - Parents' views were reported as being more on the negative side: not wanting them to go

- Concerns around cost and whether university was necessary for future employment were important
 - There was a notable increased concern about whether they would obtain the required grades and whether they would ‘fit in’
 - There were references to the stress and pressure of study
 - Those at Rural school appeared to have less first-hand knowledge, raising concerns more like those of the Year 8/9s in other settings.
- It was not possible to arrange a group with the **Year 12/13s** at Town school but those at the other three schools discussed university in a more detailed and sophisticated way than the younger groups:
- Finance was still a major factor but they seemed to have a deeper understanding about the nature of the debt, the realistic costs and how graduates went about repayments.
 - They were positive about the prospect of more independence and leaving home but harboured increasing concerns about whether or not they would fit in, particularly at Rural School

❖ **Parents’ perspectives on factors affecting young people’s decision making**

Parents’ perspectives on HE as represented in their own interviews were broadly positive about the importance of university opportunities although they were clearly to some extent affected by a sense of risk. Ensuring that parents have earlier access to the information that they will need to make informed judgements around its potential value constitutes an important intervention strategy. The idea of working at the level of the household is important as several young people talked about divided views within the family.

4. Good practice in promoting HE to young people from working class backgrounds

“I think a teacher that you know and trust and like and respect telling you that you can go to University is really powerful.” (Urban, 1)

There was a consensus that one-off interventions are unlikely to be sufficient to make a real difference. Good practice should also focus on extending the reach and sustainability of this agenda. This includes providing improved opportunities to share and dissect good practice.

❖ **Ensuring access to a diverse range of first-hand experiences in university settings**

Providing access to first-hand experiences *in university settings* appeared to be a particularly important strategy. Good practice includes ensuring that those who lack the resources to gain this exposure independently are identified and supported. Residential experiences targeted at those most

in need are important and need to be distributed more evenly to maximise their benefits. Non-residential activities delivered on university campuses provide a less expensive alternative, with those that contain a learning component delivering additional benefits.

❖ **Providing opportunities to learn from firsthand experiences inside school contexts**

Ensuring opportunities to learn from first-hand experiences *within the school setting* constitutes another form of good practice. This can include drawing on young people in the immediate environment of the school who are capable of sharing their experiences of HE but also those of staff.

❖ **Making space for sequential interventions**

Input from both staff and young people identified a relative vacuum of support during the crucial early secondary school years followed by the competing pressures of high stakes examinations in Year 11. Good practice therefore includes intervening early and sequentially as a means of ensuring that young people are able to make strategic decisions at key transition points from well-informed positions.

❖ **Ensuring access to age appropriate information and personalised careers guidance**

The school focus group discussions conveyed a sense of young people - particularly those in earlier years - wanting to find out more about university but wrestling with a lack of access to age-appropriate information. Good practice includes communicating key information in a timely, accessible, jargon-free and supported way. While this can be done in schools through career-focused lessons, staff need to be aware of the risk of making stereotyped recommendations. It is particularly important to meet these needs in cases where the requisite knowledge and/or support is not available within the home.

❖ **Broadening understandings of student diversity**

STEM interventions were identified as having contributed to the improved representation and attainment of girls in science subjects at Town school. More intersectional understandings of disadvantage are important if widening participation interventions are to address the declining numbers of young males in HE and the fact that young people from some BME backgrounds experience poorer outcomes once there.

❖ **Developing more inclusive approaches to interventions**

There was a strong thread of support for interventions with the potential to draw in more students such as whole year group assemblies. Targeting widening participation activities to young people more broadly acknowledges the porousness of boundaries around disadvantage and eligibility entitlement and how individuals can move in and out of these categories without any real change in support needs. It also addresses the concern that in some contexts there are more eligible young people than can be individually targeted.

❖ **Fostering a whole school approach**

The central importance to young people's imagined futures of positive, supportive staff in whom they can trust emerged strongly. A member of staff at Urban school recognised that a whole-school approach cannot be embedded in routine classroom practices without first addressing stereotypical and limiting preconceptions around disadvantage. Positive messages about HE can also be embedded in the fabric of the building (eg. through corridor posters showing the HE course choices made by previous students). Such approaches have the benefit of being low cost and are particularly valuable in contexts where those meeting intervention criteria are not a minority.

5. Wider changes to address barriers to participation in HE

“There's going to be the need for a sort of greater finesse, and greater honesty” (Urban, 3)

There is a need for better alignment between current policy agendas and approaches at practice level. The cost of HE within the context of current economic hardship is a particular concern. A further problem is the squeezing out of space for intervention as a consequence of top down pressures on schools.

❖ **Better support for those experiencing economic hardship**

A key issue is the disjuncture between a perceived need to raise the aspirations of young people and parents from low income backgrounds to embrace the unproblematised good of higher education, juxtaposed with their well-reasoned and pervasive anxieties about cost and employability.. Although the decision to progress to university is generally presented as being an individual one, it affects the whole household. Those who elect to live at home may be following an economically sound strategy even though it restricts them to a university in the locality. The need to provide sufficient support to be able to stay on and complete sixth form study was noted.

❖ **More nuanced understandings of 'success'**

Parents' understandings of HE are being shaped by informal encounters with university students returning to take what jobs they can within their local communities. The versions of 'success' that are presented to young people need therefore to align more closely with the graduate labour market, informed by a more honest assessment of the links that continue to exist between this, the type of university attended and individual advantages in the form of wealth, connections, access to internships etc. Staff noted that young people from less advantaged backgrounds were more likely to drop-out or find university a less pleasant experience than anticipated.

❖ Redressing the effects of top down education policies

Staff from across all schools relayed the tension between the demands of the school curriculum and opportunities to go off site. Where such activities overlapped with other agendas or were provided free of cost it was clearly easier to obtain institutional approval.

❖ Changing understandings of disadvantage

There is a continuing need to problematise the rationales underpinning current interventions that focus on the amelioration of disadvantage as this would help to ensure their efficacy and fairness. The evident disjuncture between the insights and experiences of key staff in schools and formal policies at institutional and societal levels suggests a need to engage much more directly with these expert perspectives.

❖ Ensuring staff have access to professional development opportunities

There is an urgent need for robust training and support to ensure staff are resourced with the understandings necessary to challenge limiting, individualised constructions of disadvantage and potential. Such professional development opportunities could also break the relative isolation of staff working with sole responsibility for this remit at school level. They also need to be extended to those staff who are not currently on board with this agenda. They could be used to address a tendency to benchmark potential by prior attainment as this is detrimental to those young people who develop at different rates.

❖ Supporting more nuanced approaches to targeting

The limitations that were highlighted in relation to proxy indicators of disadvantage reflect serious underlying concerns about approaches to targeting in an increasingly measurement oriented culture that is shaped by the understandings of evidence embedded at policy level. Despite the acknowledged 'bluntness' of current approaches and the risks associated with over-reliance on single indicators, the use of more flexible selection strategies also carries risks. These therefore need to be linked to more complex judgements around need and benefit.

Conclusions

The research points strongly to the value of schools taking ownership of widening participation activity as part of their own strategic agenda to improve opportunities for young people from the most economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. These young people exist in all schools and are all deserving of attention. A key message is that this is inherently a collaborative enterprise that depends on diverse groups of stakeholders working together. While the research aimed to inform local practices, these are closely intertwined with developments historically and nationally. The research contained some positive messages about the changes associated with widening

participation interventions over time. In the light of these benefits it is important to continue exploring how to maximise their distribution - across schools, under-represented groups, 'deserving' individuals, localities and time.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that school leaders take ownership of a more mainstreamed widening participation agenda in order to support this work at a more strategic level.
2. Investment in professional development opportunities is required to better support the widening participation lead within schools and encourage the sharing of their expertise.
3. Widening participation teams need to acknowledge the case for working differently across school contexts. This includes ensuring that those in more advantaged areas have access to sufficient support to work with young people meeting widening participation criteria in such settings. Where there is investment in direct interventions, these need to be appropriately targeted at the level of the individual.
4. Although the competing interests and different profiles of universities make collaboration more difficult, co-ordinated approaches where responsibilities are distributed across geographical areas seem most likely to avoid 'black holes' and maximise reach.
5. Schools should monitor and record the access that all individual young people from disadvantaged groups within their institution have to widening participation interventions in order to ensure that these opportunities are equitably distributed but also to facilitate the identification of young people whose support needs have yet to be met.
6. Readily accessible and more nuanced information on the costs of HE needs to be made available to all young people and parents in all settings at an early stage. Such input needs to directly engage with very real fears about debt and insecurity in the graduate labour market. Such input needs to be informed by an understanding that the potential benefits of participation in HE are not evenly distributed across the sector or different social groups.
7. Messages about the value of HE need to better reflect the non-linear pathways sometimes experienced by working class students, building on an understanding that some young people require more time and different forms of support.
8. There is a need to provide more positive support for young people making an informed decision to study close to home and universities need to facilitate their integration.
9. There is a need to invest in careers services, resources and quality training for staff working with this remit. Such provision needs to be impartial, accessible and not restrictive or tokenistic.

10. There is a general awareness that information about HE is out there but more needs to be done for young people to see its relevance to them. Universities should consider developing sections of their websites in more age-appropriate formats.
11. Universities and/or schools should consider providing a funding stream to support young people who do not have access to either independent or school level resources sufficient to be able to attend open/applicant days.
12. There is a need to provide free one day workshops for teachers and trainee teachers that cover the widening participation agenda and how everyone can contribute to advancing this, while also challenging misconceptions and stereotypes around the nature of disadvantage.
13. School staff who identify as being the first generation to access HE should be trained to *coach* young people from similar backgrounds and given time to fulfil this remit. Universities where state school applicants are in the minority need also to address the risk that young people are sometimes put off by a lack of social competence amongst some more advantaged students in such settings.
14. Given that young people with no family history of HE have little sense of how learning at a university differs from learning at school, it is important to provide a realistic sense of HE study prior to the point of entry.
15. Recognising that there a wealth of available knowledge and experience, the perspectives of all stakeholders should feed into the development of future interventions around this agenda.