

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

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## FINAL REPORT

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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	2
<i>Introduction and aims</i>	5
<i>Background to the research</i>	6
<i>Research design, methods and details of participants</i>	8
Limitations	10
Data analysis	10
<i>Discussion of findings</i>	11
1. <i>The four schools and their local contexts</i>	11
a) Town	11
b) Rural	12
c) Urban	13
d) Coastal	14
Conclusions	15
2. <i>Targeting young people for widening participation intervention</i>	16
a) The challenges associated with managing access to interventions	16
b) Working with different understandings of need	18
c) Reflections on the limitations of key criteria	21
i. LPNs	22
ii. First generation to enter HE	22
iii. Pupil Premium	23
Conclusions	23
d) The social class identifications of school staff	24
Conclusions	25
3. <i>Factors influencing young people's HE decision-making</i>	26
a) Sources of knowledge drawn on by young people taking part in the focus groups	26
b) Young people's perspectives on factors influential in their HE decision- making	27
i. An overview of the concerns raised across all age groups	28
ii. Key themes from the Year 8/9 focus groups	29
iii. Key themes from the Year 10/11 focus groups	30
iv. Key themes from the Year 12/13 focus groups	31
Conclusions	32
c) Parents' perspectives on factors affecting young people's decision making	32
Conclusions	35

4.	<i>Good practice in promoting HE to young people from working class backgrounds</i>	36
a)	Ensuring access to a diverse range of first-hand experiences in university settings	37
b)	Providing opportunities to learn from first-hand experiences inside school contexts	38
c)	Making space for sequential interventions	39
d)	Ensuring access to age appropriate information and personalised careers guidance	39
f)	Developing more inclusive approaches to interventions	40
g)	Fostering a whole school approach	41
	Conclusions	42
5.	<i>The need for wider changes to address barriers to participation in HE</i>	42
a)	Better support for those experiencing economic hardship	42
b)	More nuanced understandings of 'success'	45
c)	Redressing the effects of top down education policies	46
d)	Changing understandings of disadvantage	47
e)	Ensuring staff have access to professional development opportunities	47
	Conclusions	48
	<i>Final reflections and specific recommendations</i>	48
	Final thoughts	50

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

*"It's a long way to go from here but we did it." (Coastal, Staff 4)*

## **Introduction and aims**

There is currently a strong focus on developing more evidence informed approaches to widening participation intervention. This report covers the main findings from a small-scale study funded by the *Sussex Learning Network* that builds on an existing collaboration with widening participation staff based at the Universities of Brighton, Chichester, Sussex and Northbrook College. The specific objectives for the research developed out of an initial exploratory discussion with the funders. The immediate objective was to provide more localised understandings of the factors that feed into working class students' participation in higher education (HE) in order to inform the approaches adopted within widening participation work locally. An additional objective was to contribute to the wider national debate around the under-representation of White working class students in HE. The research was therefore developed to address the following five research questions:

1. What characteristics are associated with the identification of a young person as working class? How do additional factors such as gender and local context affect these identifications?
2. To what extent are the limitations of proxy indicators of social class addressed through the approaches adopted within widening participation activity?
3. What factors are considered to be most influential in the decision-making of young people from working class backgrounds when it comes to their university participation?
4. What is recognised as constituting good practice when it comes to promoting university as an option for young people from working class backgrounds?
5. What wider changes are considered to be necessary to address the under-representation of young people from working class backgrounds within HE?

Four state secondary schools in the South-East of England, each with their own sixth form provision, were approached to participate in the research. The research therefore benefited from the established expertise and commitment of staff working in these schools. Data were also gathered from young people meeting the criteria for widening participation intervention at these same schools. Conducted in two stages, additional data were later collected from purposively selected staff working in a wide range of roles relevant to widening participation locally via a one day consultative research seminar held at the University of Sussex.

A major challenge for the research was that the term working class is rarely used in the context of widening participation intervention where a range of quantifiable proxy indicators are preferred. This

reflects not only the complexity of the construct but also an awareness of its sensitivity. Mindful of the ethical dimensions associated with making such classifications the research sought to avoid having a working class identity imposed on participants (the young people and their parents) by others (school staff, at the request of the researchers). Unexpectedly, almost half of school staff interviewed self-identified as having come from a working class background during the course of the research, highlighting the continuing relevance of the construct to educational trajectories and experiences.

The report begins with a more detailed discussion of the background to the research. This is followed by a brief overview of the research design and further details of the participants. The findings are then discussed under five broad headings. It begins with an introduction to each school and its local context as these are interlinked with their approaches to widening participation intervention. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the approaches adopted when selecting young people for inclusion in such interventions that also highlights a range of key challenges. Data collected from the focus groups with young people and their parents are then used to explore the factors identified as influential in their HE decision-making. Concerns around costs and parental support emerged as central to these. The discussion of findings concludes with sections addressing the forms of good practice identified during the course of the research and the broader implications of the study for those interested in advancing this agenda. These issues are further explored in a final section that includes specific recommendations for future policy and practice.

## **Background to the research**

In England there are continuing concerns about the need to provide improved opportunities for social mobility to groups still under-represented in HE despite long-standing efforts to ameliorate such inequalities. At the level of national policy there has been a particular focus on young people from working class backgrounds and their access to the most academically selective universities. While there has been considerable growth in the HE sector over more than two decades, the benefits of massification have not been evenly distributed and those with fewer economic and social resources (access to *capitals*) continue to be under-represented in the most high status universities, degree courses and occupations. The introduction of new higher fees in 2010, together with the end of the national *Aimhigher* widening participation programme in 2011 has generated new concerns around the possible mechanisms of exclusion of the least socio-economically advantaged young people from the full benefits of higher education opportunities. Such concerns have led to a continuing commitment to make widening participation activity available to those being educated in state schools and identified as being in some way disadvantaged, with much of this work being led by widening participation teams based in local universities.

The barriers faced by working class students that feed into high levels of social stratification within the HE sector can in part be explained by the continuing dominance of those educated in the independent sector and a fear of the associated costs. A range of other academic/institutional factors have been identified as potentially important, including: the need to make particular subject choices at GCSE and A level; examination performance; the resources available to support pre-entry work; the profile of local universities. At the same time, within state schools there has been a decline in the availability of careers guidance. Despite the multiplicity of factors at play, a highly individualised meritocratic discourse that focuses on aspiration, academic 'potential' and effort continues to be influential. Against the context of a shifting HE landscape with concomitant risks and opportunities, the *Overcoming barriers to working class students' participation in higher education* research provides a timely investigation of the many factors feeding into the HE decision-making of young people with no family history of HE.

Despite the expressed aim of improving the life chances of young people from working class backgrounds via improved access to HE, the term 'working class' is not commonly used outside policy and media discourse. The more commonly used term at school level is 'disadvantage' where it is closely linked to measures of low household income and eligibility for Pupil Premium funding<sup>1</sup>. This is a high profile national policy agenda with a specific focus on narrowing gaps in attainment. Within widening participation programmes, however, eligibility for intervention tends to be linked to living in and/or attending a school in a Low Participation Neighbourhood (LPN)<sup>2</sup> or being the first generation to take up a university place. Such proxy indicators have the benefits of being both available and quantifiable but they have been substantially critiqued for failing to provide a sufficiently accurate basis for intervention. For example, more 'disadvantaged' people live outside LPNs than inside them and their assumed accuracy contributes to an increased risk of: *Universities reporting positive changes in recruitment from LPNs, without seeing any significant difference in the actual situations of the young people entering, in terms of family income, or social class* (Harrison and McCaig, 2014 p.812<sup>3</sup>). There is then a clear need for improved understanding of what constitutes good practice in both delivering and targeting such interventions in order to maximise the benefits of the current substantial investment in this agenda. In paying particular attention to the complex interaction occurring between institutions (schools and universities) and their local contexts, the research aims to inform the development of more nuanced and inclusive approaches to widening participation intervention at all levels.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

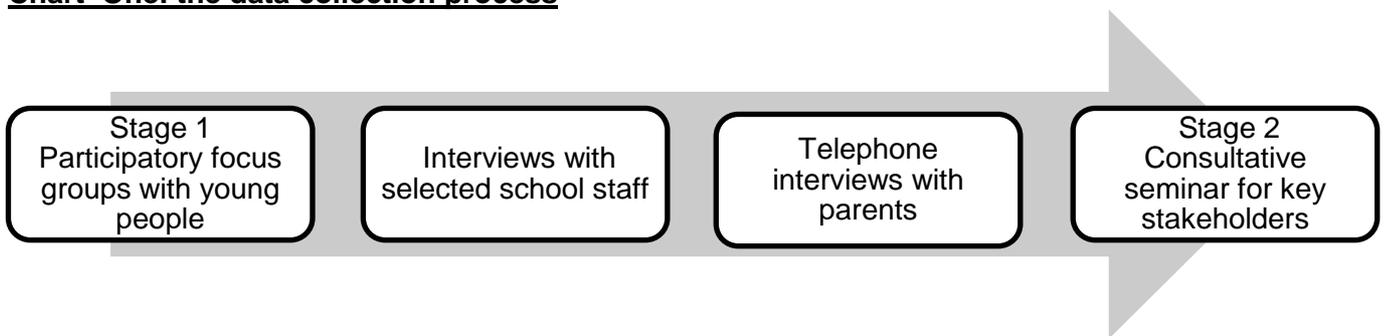
<sup>2</sup> Linked to rates of progression to university in the locality

<sup>3</sup> Harrison, N. & McCaig, C. (2015) An ecological fallacy in higher education policy: the use, overuse and misuse of 'low participation neighbourhoods', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39:6, 793-817

## Research design, methods and details of participants

The research was conducted over a six month period from July-December 2016. Prior to the research, four state schools catering for young people aged 11-18 were approached as suitable sites for data collection. They were also purposively selected with a view to maximising the diversity of the working class communities involved. Although characterized as Rural, Urban, Town and Coastal schools for the purposes of this research it should be noted that there is overlap between these categories and, as will be shown in later discussions of the data, schools located in similar areas may differ in important ways. In order to provide access to the widest possible range of perspectives a two-stage approach to data collection was adopted as shown in chart one:

**Chart One: the data collection process**



Research participants at stage one included the following three groups: school staff, young people and a small number of parents<sup>4</sup>. School staff were purposively selected to provide access to the following four groups:

- School-based widening participation leads
- Pupil Premium Co-ordinators
- Support staff with long-standing links to the local community
- Representatives of senior leadership teams

The young people were identified by school widening participation leads on the basis of meeting the following commonly used criteria:

- Having no known experience of university within the family
- Having an academic profile that suggests gaining entry to an academically selective university would be an option

The intention was to conduct three focus groups in each school setting, drawing on the perspectives of young people aged approximately 13 (Year 8/9), 15 (Year 10/11) and 17 (Year 12/13) with a view to better understanding how knowledge and interest in HE develops as young people progress

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<sup>4</sup> Although the term parent is used throughout this report it is important to be aware that some young people will be living with other carers.

through the school. The widening participation lead was asked to provide access to a gender balanced group if possible and to limit the numbers to between six and ten (making a maximum of 30 in each setting, 120 across the whole). The groups were designed to benefit the young people involved while also providing the necessary data to address the research questions. The focus group discussions addressed the following areas: sources of knowledge about university; reasons to go or not; what other forms of support might be useful in ensuring fairer opportunities for all to access HE. Interviews with school staff covered similar areas but also discussion of the targeting criteria used and the barriers perceived to be faced by working class students interested in progressing to HE and the changes that might be needed to better address these. In the small number of cases where parents indicated that they would also be willing to contribute to the research they were approached to take part in a short telephone interview that covered areas similar to those outlined above. In total there were 94 participants at Stage One from across all participant groups: young people ( $n=74$ ); parents ( $n=4$ ); school staff ( $n=16$ ).

Data collection at Stage Two involved a consultative research seminar held at the University of Sussex on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2016. This was attended by 20 invited participants, selected to provide a wide range of perspectives and areas of expertise. The participants all had a specific interest in widening participation to HE and/or social class. They included a diverse mix of academics, researchers, teacher trainers, university support staff, widening participation staff and teachers based in schools. The seminar was structured around a series of focused activities that provided facilitated discussion of the emergent findings from stage one alongside an opportunity to further probe key areas. At the end of the event participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire that invited open responses to three prompts:

1. Which aspects of today's discussions have you found most thought provoking and why?
2. Based on our discussion today, are there things that you would like to see done differently within policy and/or practice?
3. Please use this space to share any further thoughts on the research or its implications.

In total, 12 questionnaire responses were returned out of a possible 20.

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the University of Sussex in June 2016. Ethical considerations were given careful consideration throughout and shaped decisions about how to approach and involve all participant groups. It was decided to interview school staff individually (although in one case participants elected to be interviewed jointly) and with permission, to audio-record these interviews for subsequent transcription. In order to put the young people involved in the research at greater ease it was decided not to audio-record the focus groups but to encourage the young people to contribute responses in the form of notes on large sheets of paper as they talked. Where possible a second member of the research team made additional verbatim notes.

## Limitations

School scheduling constraints prevented us from carrying out data collection in all four participating schools during the summer term 2016 as planned. It was therefore necessary to carry out data collection in two schools early in the autumn term. However given that the data collection at participating schools fell just on either side of the summer holidays, the young people involved across the four sites nevertheless represented similar age perspectives, so we did not feel this compromised the integrity of the data collection process. At one school our research visit coincided with the period after mock examinations and it proved impossible to gather a group of year 12/13 students together at a later date.

A member of staff elected to be present during the groups held at both Rural and Coastal schools. While the widening participation lead was provided with guidance on how to select young people for inclusion in the research, the complexities of definition and targeting in this area meant that in practice the experiences and resources of the young people participating in the focus groups were considerably varied in terms of parental education, socio-economic background and knowledge of higher education opportunities. However rather than being disadvantageous, we saw this emergent trend as representing a research insight in terms of the challenges associated with defining entitlement to widening participation intervention activities and targeting support to those who need it most. It was not feasible to collect data on whether individual young people lived in particular postcodes or were eligible for Pupil Premium support although some evidently were. Additionally, while we asked schools to aim at gender balance in identifying participatory focus group participants, this was not always achievable in practice.

Lastly in terms of limitations, we had initially proposed parent focus groups but the processes adopted by school staff when putting together the focus groups, combined with low numbers led us to substitute these for individual telephone interviews timed at the parents' convenience. This was not perceived to represent a deficit in the data obtained and in fact may have added to the level of insight obtained through offering parents a private opportunity to discuss what could feel sensitive issues around family resources and social class position.

## Data analysis

The data from phase one were analysed first, informing the identification of key issues and questions for targeted discussion and activities at stage two. All data were subsequently re-examined. They were considered in relation to the specific areas identified by the funder while leaving scope to consider other areas that the analysis highlighted as important. This process included consideration of each source of data separately but also comparisons across settings and groups as well as across the whole. This process included the use of Nvivo qualitative data analysis software.

## Discussion of findings

This section provides a discussion of the main findings to emerge from the research under the following five headings:

1. The four schools and their local contexts
2. Targeting young people for widening participation intervention
3. Factors influencing young people's HE decision-making
4. Good practice in promoting HE to young people from working class backgrounds
5. Wider changes needed to address the barriers to working class participation in HE

Where possible, differences relating to local contexts have been highlighted.

### 1. The four schools and their local contexts

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

This section provides an overview of four schools participating in the research and their involvement with widening participation intervention. A key rationale for the research was to support consideration of whether more context specific approaches might be beneficial. This is not to suggest that there is currently a 'one-size-fits-all' approach within widening participation practice and there are currently a plethora of interventions delivered by a large number of organisations. One of the tasks undertaken by school-based widening participation staff is therefore to familiarise themselves with the range of interventions available, the specific selection criteria in operation and to filter access to these, often in the face of resource and time constraints. The four 11-18 schools approached as suitable sites for inclusion in this study were selected to provide access to a diverse range of local contexts. As we had a specific interest in how young people's HE decision-making might develop over time, schools with their own attached sixth forms provided more suitable research sites than Further Education or sixth form colleges. These are very different types of institution and present different challenges when it comes to delivering widening participation interventions. Consistent with the demographics in this region, White British students were in the majority in all four schools.

#### a) Town

Town school was described as being located in a low income, working class area. It was the most ethnically diverse of the four schools and not necessarily a first choice destination, drawing heavily on *“the poorer estates”* (Town, 3) in its immediate locality. One member of staff described it as having: *A constant core of White British kids... and then this transient bit that tends to change with fluctuating political whims of the world”* (Town, 4). Relationships with the local community were now said to be closer than in the past. Young people attending the school were considered to have access to

employment opportunities locally, one member of staff contrasting this with a previous school where there had been high levels of intergenerational unemployment: *Here you get much more of a sense of them wanting to work and achieve and families finding it quite hard generally to afford things* (Town, 1). In terms of *Attainment 8*<sup>5</sup> Town school was performing just below the national average at the time of the research. Town school was the most socially disadvantaged of the four schools, having the highest proportion of young people eligible for Free School Meals and more than the national average. In 2015, the GCSE performance gap between ‘disadvantaged’<sup>6</sup> pupils and others was relatively small but there were concerns about the poorer performance of White British students and the attendance of Pupil Premium students. Rates of staying on in education and employment were lower than those at the other three schools. A member of staff described the school as being: *The first school I ever worked at where I had students in the sixth form leaving school to work because their parents didn’t have any money* (Town, 4).

Town school had well established links with the widening participation teams operating out of several local universities and there was a legacy of work in STEM<sup>7</sup> in particular. The member of staff leading widening participation work was frequently referred to as being central to this agenda, but some others as yet to get on board. In the past there was said to have been “*a bit of a scattergun approach*” (Town, 2) to intervention but this now started early with some young people being involved from Year 7. Activities where there were financial costs attached were considered to be less accessible than those provided by universities for free. In general there appeared to be more widening participation activity on offer at Town than at the other three schools and more scope to exercise choice: *We kind of dip in and out of what we need which is great for us* (Town, 2). The sixth form was relatively small and considered to be less academically selective than others in the locality: *If you’re coming here... you’ve got to overcome that perception of having failed just because you only got a B* (Town, 3). One young person had recently become the first to progress to Oxbridge. The widening participation lead also noted that: *We’ve got a couple of students the last couple of years who because of what we’ve done through widening participation have gone to university who might not have gone.*

#### **b) Rural**

Rural school was described as having a predominantly middle class intake and as being not very diverse. It was noted that there were nevertheless some families for whom lack of money was an issue and also parents without knowledge of HE: *A significant number of our students would be first generation scholars* (Rural, 3). Just as at Town school there were said to be both parents who had attended the school themselves and young people with limited experience of travel outside the

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<sup>5</sup> The most recent national performance indicator at age 16

<sup>6</sup> Those eligible for Pupil Premium funding

<sup>7</sup> Interventions focusing on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

immediate area. In terms of *Attainment 8* Rural school was the highest performing of the four schools and above the national average. Rural school was also the least socially disadvantaged, having the smallest proportion of young people eligible for Free School Meals across all four schools. In 2015, the GCSE performance gap between 'disadvantaged' pupils and others was relatively large but not substantially different to that at other schools taking part in the research. Just as at Town school there were concerns about the attendance of Pupil Premium students but there was also an active interest in improving their representation in the sixth form.

Rural school had less history of involvement with widening participation interventions than the other three schools but was now involved with one local university. It was suggested that greater access to some of the more experiential widening participation activities would be helpful. Rural school's more limited access to widening participation activity - both current and historic - can be linked in part to its not meeting the institutional criteria used by many widening participation organisations. The sixth form at Rural school was said to be popular and it was the largest of the three schools. Careers advice was reported to be good but it was noted that despite attaining well, fewer young people were progressing to HE than might be expected: *We have a lot that go into employment and apprenticeships rather than on to university [which is] something that in the last 12 months we've begun to unpick* (Rural, 3).

### c) Urban

Urban school was described as having a broad intake and being: *Very much an all sorts sort of school* (Urban, 2). Although the majority of students were from White British backgrounds staff there were also working to support identified BME groups. Despite the perceived vibrancy of the area, it was suggested that there was a risk of the White working class population: *Getting a little bit lost... and not feeling part of their [locality] anymore* (Urban 4). The wider context of austerity was noted, with cuts in youth services and Sure Start programmes identified as being potentially detrimental to historically disadvantaged communities. A member of staff described having benefited from these kinds of interventions while growing up in this same area. Young people at the school did not necessarily come from the closest estates, one member of staff contrasting this with her experiences at another local school where: *There was much more of a sense of community and the students all knew each other and knew each other's families and there was a kind of shared understanding* (Urban, 4). In terms of *Attainment 8* Urban school was performing in line with the national average at the time of the research. The proportion of young people eligible for Free School Meals was the second highest across the four schools. In 2015, the GCSE performance gap between 'disadvantaged' pupils and others was larger than at the other schools participating in the research and like at other schools a focus for intervention. However, it should also be noted that overall attainment by this measure was higher.

There was a history of widening participation activity at Urban school and they were currently working with more than one local university. Nevertheless intervention started later than at both Town and Coastal schools. At management level there was an interest in distributing responsibility for widening participation across all staff as part of a strategy to embed this across the school: *Some are doing some really good work... hopefully the pay back will be that all of the departments will be... taking widening participation on.* Numbers attending the sixth form were relatively small. While two Pupil Premium students were said to have recently gained places at Oxbridge, concerns about 'fit' were such in the end only one had taken this up: *They'd gone for their sort of taster day and they felt that, "I don't fit in in this culture, the other students are not from my background, not from my experience, and I just feel out of my depth"* (Urban 4).

#### d) Coastal

Coastal school was described as being different to other schools by virtue of its coastal location and populated by: *People who haven't gone into higher education but are affluent because they run their own business* (Coastal, 2). This it was suggested contributed to: *A slightly different attitude, less interest in education and its financial value than perhaps in other areas* (Coastal, 2). Despite the relative prosperity of the area it was noted that there were also cases of significant and enduring hardship: *Some of our children we give vouchers for the Food Bank, for example, we've got children who are as hard up as that* (Coastal, 2). As at both Town and Rural schools, there was an observed lack of mobility: *We have a lot of people that stay in the community* (Coastal, 3). In terms of academic progress, Coastal school was performing above the national average when measured by *Attainment 8*. The proportion of young people eligible for Free School Meals was the second lowest across the four schools. In 2015, the GCSE performance gap between 'disadvantaged' pupils and others was not dissimilar to that at Rural school.

There was an established history of widening participation activity at Coastal school. It was said to benefit from being located in relative proximity to several local universities but it was now working with a smaller number of these as the criteria for intervention had changed. It continued, however, to be involved in a wide range of activities and was actively exploiting opportunities, both within and beyond the local area. Just as at Town school, intervention was identified as starting in Year 7 and the lead for widening participation activity as a pivotal figure. Increasing numbers of young people were said to be progressing from the sixth form to university. This included one young person who had recently turned down the offer of a place at a highly selective English university to study in America: *That was quite special ... her story has inspired [name of young person in focus group] who I took to Cambridge* (Coastal, 4).

## Conclusions

The research highlighted differences between the four schools linked to quite considerable variation in their intakes. This suggested that the relationship between a school and its locality is complex and affected by a multiplicity of factors. References to schools where staff had worked previously added to the strong sense that the interaction between a school and its local context is important but diverse. Although the term working class resonated differently across the four school contexts, staff were nevertheless able to link particular schools to particular demographics and these were recognised as being influential: *It's not what I would term a middle class school at all* (Town 1). To some extent Town school exhibited the characteristics of a 'typical' *Aimhigher* school, with need being spread more uniformly across the whole school. In contrast, Rural and Coastal schools were serving less obviously disadvantaged communities yet staff were nevertheless clear that there were identifiable pockets of need where widening participation intervention could make a real difference.

Clear differences were also found in terms of how the widening participation agenda was being approached across the four schools. Schools like Town and Coastal were clearly benefitting from a legacy of involvement and collaboration that now centered very closely on an individual tasked with leading widening participation work in the setting. The approaches adopted within these schools highlighted the time that it takes to build this kind of knowledge and capacity. At Urban school while there was a similar history of collaboration and involvement it was recognised - as at Town school - that this had yet to be embedded. Rural school was somewhat different having only more recently developed links with a local university. Staff in all four schools were nevertheless working around a common agenda to promote university to young people identified as having no family history of this. It was also clear that there were young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage in all four schools and that all four were actively pursuing interventions to address this around the Pupil Premium agenda. Staff in two schools talked anecdotally about individual young people eligible for Pupil Premium funding who had successfully gained places at academically selective universities in the recent past. These cases appeared to be recognised as being somewhat remarkable:

One Pupil Premium boy who was at Oxbridge said that he was getting quite a lot of, "*Oh, haven't you done well*", by his sort of peers... because he'd come from a comprehensive and it was all very, you know, "*Oh, you're very lucky to be here*", and this feeling of that it was luck rather than his ability or talent that had got him there... and he said that used to wind him up a lot, he used to challenge that...And he'd say, "*I obviously stood out*". (Urban, 4)

There is clearly more to the widening participation agenda than its immediate beneficiaries as the attitudes and practices that they encounter profoundly shape their trajectories both in to and through

HE. The next section provides a more detailed discussion of the approaches taken to the selection of young people for inclusion in widening participation interventions in the four schools.

## 2. Targeting young people for widening participation intervention

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

This section focuses on the approaches to targeting young people for widening participation intervention adopted within the four schools. It begins with an overview of the difficulties associated with managing access to these. Recognising that disadvantage is a multidimensional construct to which different people bring different understandings, this section also focuses on staff awareness of the limitations of the most commonly used criteria. It also notes a tendency amongst some staff to focus on barriers within the home rather external factors. This section concludes with a discussion of the social class identifications made by staff during the interview process. These highlighted the continuing relevance of understandings of social class to the widening participation agenda.

### a) The challenges associated with managing access to interventions

Consistent with the aim of opening up opportunities to those who are otherwise disadvantaged, access to widening participation activities is managed by gatekeepers working in a wide range of roles and contexts. The research suggested that the widening participation lead in a school has an important part to play in managing access to interventions, with some being appointed with this specific remit and others being senior leaders holding additional responsibilities. Widening participation interventions have predetermined access criteria and some young people are able to meet the criteria for intervention set by multiple providers:

Most of her summer last year she was somewhere, she had a summer school at Cambridge, she did Nuffield foundation placement and then went out to the States with that (Coastal 4)

It was noted during the consultative seminar that there is a risk of creating a hierarchy of need, one seminar participant reflecting on: *The challenges in selecting young people to access WP initiatives and striking a balance between meeting the [needs of the] most needy and avoiding a competitive discourse around disadvantage.* There is also no guarantee that even those working collaboratively will set the same threshold for intervention and the rationales underpinning different approaches may not be clear:

I've told them the numbers of students we have who are first generation in each year group. We don't meet their criteria, yet they work with [other local schools] (Coastal 4).

The emotions generated around these debates led another to emphasise the need for: *Training with teachers around their role as 'gatekeepers' - the responsibility of this* (Seminar participant a).

Despite the acknowledged importance of external agenda setting the research suggested that there was still scope within each school setting to manage access via an institutional approach. Discussion in the consultative seminar relayed concerns around how such decisions are made and they were considered likely to be too open to subjective bias. At Town school interventions were said to be targeted at the most academically able and it was noted that competition with higher performing schools in the locality contributed to these being in relatively short supply. In contrast, staff at both Coastal and Rural schools - where interestingly the numbers of eligible young people were lower - focused on a gap in supply and demand that led to a degree of discomfort being expressed about the need to 'select out.' It was also clear that a range of different strategies were being used for this purpose:

I'd already got 80 names that qualified and I said, "*Well I can't play god, if they are all eligible and meet the criteria they all have to have the opportunity to go.*" So life is a competition. If I've got more students to take up the number of places available for anything it's first come, first served. (Coastal, 4)

And:

So we've taken those that we feel academically could do that. That has caused some problems because... there are more than 60 people in a 200 year group that could possibly do that higher education journey and I'm quite uncomfortable about selecting students. (Rural, 1)

There are inherent risks in using prior attainment to filter access to widening participation interventions given that the academic 'potential' of young people from working class backgrounds is not always recognised or developed. At one school, the need to reconcile demand with supply had encouraged young people to be matched to different universities on the basis of their future ambitions. An account provided by another staff member highlighted the potential for such early decisions to shape future university trajectories:

I would fit all of your brackets... I chose to stay somewhere close... I didn't have the opportunity to travel to another university. I went there on a campus visit with my school so therefore I applied there. (Coastal 3)

Overall, the study highlighted the importance of how access to widening participation activities is managed at school level. It was clear that these process involved different levels of internal and external resource but also different individual and institutional priorities. The role clearly entailed the sensitive management of relationships - with other staff, external providers, young people and parents: *There's a poor lad in sixth form... but his dad will not sign the paperwork* (Coastal, 4). In some cases there was more opportunity to access opportunities than others but this appeared to be linked to more than the overall levels of disadvantage in the school and its locality.

#### **b) Working with different understandings of need**

The assumption underpinning widening participation interventions is that they will address some form of disadvantage yet the research suggested that there were important differences in understandings of this construct. A member of staff at Rural school noted that there are "*different barriers for different students*" and that these differ from school to school. Similarly, the young people taking part in the Year 10/11 focus group at Rural school commented that "*everyone is different and has different needs*" while also noting that everyone should have the same opportunities to visit different universities. Participants in the consultative seminar also recognised different strata of need, highlighting the multidimensionality of the construct:

I think that it is still necessary to target these opportunities at students who have to negotiate their access to university with material and social disadvantage, in terms of low income, geographical dislocation from services and lack of access to cultural knowledge of university. (Seminar participant a)

Understandings of the relationship between economic and other factors are complex and it was clearly difficult to tease out the precise mechanisms by which such forms of disadvantage operate and how they might be developed into workable indicators:

Obviously Pupil Premium a lot of that is based on free school meals. So we are looking at income as a family. But whether that holds students back. I guess just general absence rates mean they don't achieve what they can do. (Town, 1)

And:

I suppose what I'm less certain about is whether that's defined by class. How would you target your resources? As I say, we tend to look at the economics of the family I suppose really... We provide food and uniform for some children when necessary, and I suppose those children are right on our radar and some of those are clever children and I suppose we would target those. (Coastal, 2)

Recognising the complexity of the issues, staff were generally critical of criteria perceived to be lacking in sufficient nuance. They were thought to contribute to some young people being over-targeted for professional attention at the expense of others perceived to have similar levels of need:

There's this huge margin who just miss out on support and I think that's the main concern really. That's the main area, the children whose parents don't just qualify for free school meals, but really struggle to make ends meet. (Urban, 2)

And:

The trouble with all of these, they're all blunt instruments, aren't they? We have plenty of parents who don't earn as much of that but are on the wrong Tax Credit to claim free school meals... whatever I choose I suppose is difficult, isn't it? (Coastal, 2)

Nevertheless there was a clear understanding that to work with more multidimensional understandings of disadvantage would be time consuming and somewhat impractical:

That other level of disadvantage that isn't recorded because they haven't ticked this box and this box and this box, how do we know? And I suppose that's a tricky one. I suppose it's about getting to know your students, getting to know your families and targeting through that but that's a longer process I guess isn't it? (Urban, 1)

While staff recognised the importance of the Pupil Premium agenda, rather than making connections with this staff tended to link the under-representation of young people from working class backgrounds in HE to factors within families:

I know that with all of the work that we do with the Universities, they try and dispel a lot of those myths of you don't have to be a rich person to go to University, it is available for everybody, you can have it, you can do it... So they are being given that information but it

might be from home that the kind of blocks are being put - or not necessarily blocks - but not being the full-on support. (Coastal, 2)

More structural readings of disadvantage were comparatively rare:

Of course until [the elitist system] disappears you are never going to have the meritocracy you aspire to have. (Urban 3)

Nevertheless, there was a consensus that schools could and should take a lead in changing attitudes perceived as limiting:

I think it's the responsibility of us as sort of school leaders in the positions that we're in to work with families at home and not just the students... we're educating the parents as well to say, Look, this can happen, they should be thinking about going to uni. (Rural, 2)

That some staff emphasised the need to 'raise aspiration' in the home is perhaps not that surprising given that this resonated with formal institutional approaches. The value of critical work around families' experiences of belonging in educational contexts and how particular groups may feel estranged from these was more widely pointed towards, though not explicit:

What is interesting of course is who takes [educational opportunities] up... Because the white British don't, you have to push the White British to take it up. (Town, 4)

Another possible response is to explore opportunities for the school to work more proactively to engage and welcome parents who may not feel comfortable or valued in school. Such approaches might also call for a focus on factors internal rather than external to schools:

It's teacher aspirations and I think it's a culture and it's an ethos and it's what you breathe into a sixth form, and getting parents in and sharing that belief with the parents. Most parents want to be proud of their kids, don't they? (Urban, 1)

The need to resist dominant individualised educational discourses of aspiration, resilience, grit, and risk-taking also emerged strongly in the consultative seminar for stakeholders. Such resistance is important if the risks inherent in HE participation are to be better understood and more attention paid to how these differ for young people from different social groups.

### c) Reflections on the limitations of key criteria

Feedback from the consultative seminar held at stage two suggested that the issue of selection and targeting was the one that had captured participants' attention: *The aspect that has got me thinking most is about the identification of our WP cohort* (Seminar participant g). For some school staff interviewed at stage one, the externally imposed selection criteria appeared sometimes to be experienced as an additional barrier rather than a protective filter:

It does frustrate me sometimes that there's not as much flexibility on some of the criteria... if they're not first generation and haven't got certain extenuating circumstances it comes up as a no. (Coastal 4)

And:

I've had some students who have applied for about six different summer schools but again they don't meet the widening participation criteria necessarily... they can get in onto paid courses. (Rural, 3)

Some staff also expressed concerns around how to explain the criteria for intervention:

I have that dilemma quite often about how to explain to the children that they've been chosen for this intervention or do we need to be a bit more explicit and say, *"Actually, you've been chosen because nobody in your family's been to University"*, or, *"You've been chosen because your parents are on a low income"*, I don't know, it's an ethical dilemma in terms of the kids' awareness. (Urban, 4)

At Urban school there was an ongoing debate around whether disadvantage criteria should be more explicitly stated, reflecting sensibilities amongst some staff that were not necessarily shared by young people as indicated in this account of a meeting with a school governor:

[The young person] said, *"You know, I got chosen because I'm from a poor background."* And it was really interesting... I thought I might challenge her and say, *"You're not from a poor background, your background's very wealthy in lots of ways"*...we've never labelled that programme as anything to do with class (Urban, 4)

At Town school parents' access to widening participation interventions was explained in relation to rates of HE progression in the locality and this was not considered to be similarly sensitive. The following sections provide further insights into issues raised by the three most commonly used criteria for widening participation intervention.

### **i. LPNs**

Schools located in areas where local rates of progression to HE are low are often targeted for widening participation interventions. Staff interviewed for this research noted that there is a difference between the school profile and its intake. Consequently schools located in more advantaged areas might actually be drawing in young people from much less advantaged households:

Certainly one of the schools I worked at in West London ... It was leafy West London and everyone thought, "*Oh how lovely.*" 60% of the kids came from 400 metres down the road which was the next local authority and huge areas of deprivation. (Urban 1)

And:

I don't know whether they're just looking at our school's postcode which, as I say, puts us into an affluent society that progression is good but our kids aren't from that postcode (Coastal, 4)

Targeting at institutional level rests upon assumptions about the nature of the relationship between an institution and its local context that may be flawed. There is also the risk that relying solely on institutional eligibility for intervention will lead to insufficient attention being paid to individual eligibility. That both of these can change over time was also noted during the course of the research.

### **ii. First generation to enter HE**

Many widening participation interventions include a requirement that participants be the first generation to access HE. The forms of disadvantage associated with this were explored during the course of an interview at Rural school, a context where a lack of knowledge of HE was considered to be masked by its location in an area of relative affluence:

There is a definite advantage to those whose parents have been to university and even more if they went to Oxford or Cambridge in terms of preparation for those young people. So you know that they're doing the right reading and they're having the discussions that are going to help them at interview and those kind of ... the wider skills to feel confident I suppose going into the university environment. (Rural, 3)

At schools like Town the vast majority of young people were considered to come from households with no experience of HE. However, schools like Coastal and Rural also considered themselves to have far more young people without any family experience of HE than could be supported:

We have a lot of parents who work in professional jobs but didn't necessarily go to university. So that's interesting that, yes, there are students from a traditionally working class background

but there are an awful lot who aren't and yet still haven't got that experience of university.  
(Rural, 3)

Despite an evident reluctance to create hierarchies of need, the absence of more universal forms of intervention entails a balancing up of the relative advantages of different groups. Consequently staff - in universities, schools and other third sector organisations - are required to make informed and potentially difficult judgements around the weight to be given to specific factors and needs.

### iii. Pupil Premium

Young people eligible for support via Pupil Premium funding were clearly a major focus across all four schools, with staff in two explaining that they had adopted a schoolwide policy of asking questions and marking the books of these students first. This policy was not necessarily being linked to widening participation activities, however, although there was some sense of this now being identified as potentially important to do:

Over the past year/18 months that's become more important in that we're actually tracking how... many of our Pupil Premium students are getting those opportunities to go (Coastal 4)

And:

I think what we need to do now is look at some of the Pupil Premium students who maybe aren't achieving academically possibly through just lack of support outside the classroom and... then we might see a higher performance within the classroom. So, yes, that's something that we definitely need to look at next year. (Town, 2)

It was nevertheless noted across schools that Pupil Premium interventions need to be bespoke because they need to be built around individual needs that change from year to year: *There's no blueprint... it doesn't matter if you're at a similar type of [school]... two affluent areas for example it's so different for every school* (Rural, 2).

### Conclusions

Discussions of the criteria being used to target young people for intervention suggested that this is both an emotive and a contentious subject. There were identifiable institutional differences in how these criteria were applied but also how they were perceived. The complexity of the issues raised suggested the need to ensure that all staff involved in such interventions have opportunities to share and debate good practice around selection. The next section moves beyond these proxy indicators to consider the underlying presence of social class within these debates.

#### d) The social class identifications of school staff

Although the term working class is sometimes used at policy level and frequently in the media it is not generally used to identify young people for widening participation interventions even though they are the group being targeted under this agenda. School staff were able to utilise the construct to explore this agenda when specifically asked to do so but there were evident uncertainties about the usefulness of doing so:

I don't like the term to be honest. I mean what is working class really? In schools, we don't use working class at all. It's disadvantaged or Pupil Premium. (Urban, 1)

And:

I suppose my personal view is that class is becoming an outmoded definition. I think just because somebody's financially hard up, doesn't necessarily mean they're working class and so I would think that a better definition perhaps is family income. But we have Teaching Assistants here who are low income whose children are on free school meals but who have a degree. They're not working class but they don't have very much money. (Coastal 2)

Despite the ambivalence to social class as an indicator a surprising number of school staff interviewed (7/16) went on to self-identify as being from a working class background. These accounts reinforced the importance of recognising how different social class locations shape young people's journeys to and through HE. In particular they highlighted difficult emotions and less linear pathways, challenging the more homogenous representations of HE-related mobility that underpin political discourse:

I went out to work and eventually went on to do a degree, I did an OU degree. It's making them realise that actually if it's not the right time for them, there might be a time and not to switch off to it. So it's a lifelong learning type of message that we need to get across. (Town, 1)

And:

I didn't go until 23, because I didn't think University was for me. I went into the world of work and although I had a good set of GCSEs and a good set of A Levels and could have gone to Uni, I got into Uni when I was 18, and then I decided I couldn't go, I was too nervous, anxious, didn't fancy moving away from home. (Urban, 4)

In addition to suggesting that some working class students may simply take more time before committing to HE, these accounts highlighted difficulties with finance and fitting in. Staff who come

from within these communities and can empathise with such feelings constitute a powerful resource as recognised at Town school where efforts were already being made to share one staff member's experiences more widely:

[The teacher] can actually say to them, "*Well I did actually, I grew up in [one of the poorest local estates] and I went to university and I've got my doctorate*"...I've asked her if she can write me a biography and have a picture done so that we can put it... on our [notice] board... to inspire them that you can come from [name of location] and move on further, you can do these things. (Town, 3)

Some schools were also inviting young people who had recently left to come in and share their 'non-traditional' journeys through school and HE and into employment. One reason why this was considered important was because it offered an alternative perspective on education:

In one particular session we had students who really were not the greatest students when they were here... Some of our kids have some pretty heavy stuff going on in their lives that just mean that actually being here is an achievement... So they do need to know that, yes, it's not always just a straight path for everybody you can still make it. (Coastal 4)

What is particularly important about such first-hand accounts is not only that they explicitly acknowledge and value different social class identities, potentials and trajectories but that they challenge limiting constructions of disadvantage.

## Conclusions

It is clear that there are a range of challenges associated with managing access to widening participation interventions and while the problems are relatively well rehearsed, the solutions remain relatively opaque. A fundamental problem is resolving the dilemma inherent in the statement: *I think it needs to be targeted but open to all* (Urban, 1). The research clearly suggested that there is no 'one size fits all' approach and that the characteristics of both the school and its locality are relevant. It is also clear that when it comes navigating these challenges there are both risks and opportunities and that the decisions made are as influential as they are constrained. Those activities that are the most resource intensive need to be more carefully targeted, informed by more nuanced and explicit understandings of both disadvantage and need. Selection at its most fundamental level involves exclusion as well as inclusion and it is therefore important to keep asking: *Which children do we miss by having set criteria about who qualifies for WP?* (Seminar participant b). That some young people are able to access multiple experiences but others none raises fundamental issues of equity and suggests the importance of promoting a more strategic overview.

### 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, Coastal School)*

This section begins with a discussion of the sources of knowledge that young people draw on when making decisions about whether to progress to university. It goes on to discuss a range of factors identified as being influential in their HE related decision-making, drawing on data gathered via the focus groups held in each school. These highlighted age-related differences consistent with dominant patterns of age-related intervention. A small number of the young people identified themselves during the course of the group discussion as having additional learning needs, prompting questions around the kinds of support available to them at university. This suggested the importance of the individual and the personal alongside more commonly arising concerns. Parents were clearly important in young people's decision making and the perspectives of parents are therefore discussed in a final section that includes a specific focus on the financial cost of HE as this also emerged as a key factor.

#### **a) Sources of knowledge drawn on by young people taking part in the focus groups**

When asked to discuss the sources of HE related knowledge available to them the young people collectively were able to draw on a wide range of sources. It was clear that both visits out to universities and the in-reach activities of student ambassadors and other university representatives going in to schools were the most influential in developing their knowledge and understanding of the experience of university. This included reference to summer schools, university open days, specific science related subject days, talks from university students and visits to higher education fairs. However, organised events were not the only ways in which the young people had developed their knowledge. For example more informal tours or exposure to universities emerged from these Year 12/13s at Urban School:

- *Went on a tour – asked them – not an open day*
- *Been to uni with the National Citizenship Service*
- *Open Days – not actually been to any though – not going to any until I get some offers – there are virtual Open Days.*

Some young people demonstrated considerable initiative. For example a Year 12/13 pupil at Urban School revealed that she persuaded her mother to spend an extra day on a family birthday outing at a university town so that she could look around the university: *My Mum helped me cos she was the one who found out about having tours.*

Perhaps unsurprisingly most of the young people were aware of the plethora of information available via the internet including the UCAS website and Prospects careers website as well as university websites and good university guides. However, many fewer mentions were made of print based

sources such as prospectuses, books and libraries or mass media representations. A member of staff interviewed suggested that some young people were exercising very high levels of initiative when dealing with the available sources of information:

We went to [name of university] for a day about options and choices and at one point they got all these prospectuses out from different universities and said, “*Okay, we need you to think about the course you want to do at uni. Write it down and write down where you might be able to do that course*” and [X] had two A4 sheets landscape... she’d got about fourteen different subjects that she couldn’t decide at that point what she wanted to do and she was researching them all. (Coastal, 4)

Although young people might be expected to be relatively active consumers of social media there were few references to this.

The role of the school in informing young people about university options was very apparent in all the focus groups with some naming a particular member of staff as a key reference point. However, the curriculum including PSHE and citizenship lessons as well as careers advisers were also mentioned. When teachers talked about their university experiences this was clearly influential and personalised the experience.

Some young people evidently relied heavily on experiences gleaned from close contact with siblings and other relatives:

- *My aunt’s an English major and another one’s done teaching* (Year 12/13, Coastal)
- *Went to open days with my brother* (Year 12/13, Coastal)
- *My uncle’s been there and now works with lots of computers, doing better than he could have done* (Year 8/9, Coastal).

However, by no means all of the young people had access to these kinds of extended family networks.

#### **b) Young people’s perspectives on factors influential in their HE decision- making**

This section discusses factors that the young people who took part in the focus groups across the four settings identified as important to their HE decision-making. Although these were quite wide ranging, some common themes emerged and there were also some contradictory positions, testifying to the importance of attending more closely to the diversity of young people’s views and experiences. While clear differences were identified across the different age groups, the views expressed across the four school contexts were much more similar. It is also important to note that young people’s HE decision-making is an extended process, linked to key points in time:

I try to get across to them that they don't just think about the next step but think about that step and then work back and make sure that your next step is the one that's right to get there (Coastal, 4)

Awareness of the formative nature of HE related learning opportunities - and also of how future opportunities can be restricted by decisions made at earlier points - reinforces the importance of adopting a life cycle approach to widening participation intervention. This was advocated for by staff across all settings:

I think it has been very much that traditional model of, *'Let's take all the year nine students out, whose parents haven't been to University, take them to University for the day'* and it just gets dropped there, and personally I don't think that that has had an enormous impact in places I've worked. I think it's very nice, it's a nice day out and it gives them some aspiration, but year nine, you're thirteen/fourteen - 18 is a long way off. I think that needs to be drip, drip, drip the whole time (Urban, 1)

A key issue identified during the course of the research was how early to engage young people in order to maximise the possibility for them to envisage university as a realistic part of their imagined futures.

#### **i. An overview of the concerns raised across all age groups**

Key factors that seemed to be persuading young people that to go on to university would be beneficial were largely focused on the increased opportunities in the job market, a better career and the potential to earn more money. There was a strong feeling that while some careers might require a degree, there were plenty of jobs that you could pursue where a degree was not necessary and that you can start earning earlier rather than getting in to debt. Others seemed to comment positively about alternative options to university, one saying that: *Maybe they want something else that uni doesn't offer them* (Year 8/9, Urban). It was noted that some young people would find vocational and apprenticeship options more attractive. The cost of university was identified as being a major factor in all the focus groups although older year groups had a more comprehensive understanding of the costs and debt incurred and also about how it would be paid off. While there were some comments about university being a great experience and that it would give you the chance to continue to study an interesting subject and gain further qualifications, in general these benefits received far less attention, particularly among the younger participants.

First-hand university engagement opportunities emerged as particularly influential in informing young people's university decisions and by no means all had yet had access to these. Those who had

participated in summer schools identified these as having been particularly valuable: *Summer school gave me a lot of knowledge about things I didn't know about uni and made me want to look in to the thing a lot more* (Year 10/11, Coastal). Non-residential experiences while providing more limited opportunities to acquire first-hand insights were also valued and staff accounts also suggested that these could be highly influential: *I said why are you doing a degree in Chemistry [name of student] and she said, Miss I loved it when we went to the university* (Urban, 2).

Second-hand knowledge of university obtained through networks of family and friends also appeared to factor in the young people's orientation towards HE but again not all had access to these. Some talked enthusiastically about the encouragement of having family members including siblings, step-parents, aunts and uncles who had attended university. Some described having visited universities as part of their older siblings' application processes. In this sense, the focus on increasing HE participation in families where this has not existed does appear to have some traction. These experiences appeared to have provided an important taste of what university is like, a source of information, and encouragement. Such informal engagement is of the type that young people from more advantaged backgrounds enjoy and can provide vital validation that HE is possible for people 'like them' where more formal opportunities may fail to do so.

Advice from parents also featured prominently in the young people's accounts of factors contributing to their decision-making. This included both encouragement to go to university for the experience and opportunities, or to forego it for other options because of various concerns around the perceived risks of taking on debt or moving away from the family. Some young people described having been advised by parents against university and/or parents not seeing the point of it. Whichever approach parents espoused, what was salient was the pivotal importance of this to the decision making processes of these young people, especially the younger students.

## **ii. Key themes from the Year 8/9 focus groups**

The focus groups with the Year 8/9s clearly identified the main reason for going to university as being to improve your job prospects and earn more money: *Better qualifications for more advanced jobs* (Year 8/9, Rural). They were also strongly influenced by whether their parents had been to university or not and importantly this could be a positive rather than a negative factor: *My parents did not go to university so they thought it would be a good idea to go as they never got that opportunity* (Year 8/9, Coastal). Some parents had advised their children not to worry about costs and one had offered to share these: *My Mum wants me to do well so she might pay for it and if I do well I can pay part of it back* (Year 8/9, Coastal). In contrast to these forms of parental encouragement, there were others who felt positively dissuaded:

- *Your parents advise you not to go* (Year 8/9, Urban)
- *Parents are worried about costs, not being able to pay for me to go* (Year 8/9, Coastal).

The financial implications and concept of debt were not clearly formed at this age though, it was just an impression that university was expensive and this was referred to frequently and sometimes in relation to voicing parental concerns.

The other concern particularly for younger students related to living away from home, leaving friends and family and feeling homesick. Unsurprisingly this age group had less knowledge and experience of HE than those in later years. Some indicated never having been to a university while others found it difficult to talk about university as they did not know much about it. The problem of leaving intervention late is that attitudes are forming earlier and it was noted by staff that some young people in Year 11 have by then decided that education - let alone HE - is not for them. The focus groups with the Year 8/9s suggested that some of those from first generation backgrounds may already be assuming that they will not be able to go to university because they cannot afford to pay. While all of the participating schools had a schedule that would provide more reassuring information about university finance in good time for university application, the potential impact on their decision-making and attainment by school years spent assuming that a university pathway is not a possible part of their futures, must be considered: *Sometimes if you're catching them too late, their ideas are already instilled. It's difficult to sort of turn that around* (Coastal, 1).

### iii. Key themes from the Year 10/11 focus groups

While some ideas about university and some key influences such as finance remained important in the Year 10/11 groups there were notable differences and nuances in their understandings of the university experience. They talked about the advantages of university in terms of getting better jobs and higher pay but by this age they were also starting to talk about university as being '*a great experience*' and '*fun*' as well as meeting new people and '*opening doors to more options in life*' (Year 10, Town). The concept of university as more than an expensive route to a better job had emerged alongside an awareness of a more holistic experience that was part of a journey to adulthood. While they still talked about parental influences these were more on the negative side of parents not wanting you to go. There was also a notable increased concern about whether they would get the grades required to go on to university, an understandable anxiety given the increased pressures on exam preparation at this point. Some concerns also start to emerge at this age on whether they would 'fit in' at university as well as references to the stress and pressure of study.

Interestingly, some of the young people at Rural school were identified as having little or no knowledge of HE and as having similar concerns to Year 8/9s in other settings about being away from home;

they also did not make reference to any university visits although a member of staff noted that a number had been given access to one such opportunity. In contrast, young people from Coastal School had clearly had experience of visits to universities (some five or six times) and summer schools and this had led them to ask more sophisticated questions about university such as: *I would like to find out different variations of courses available at different universities*. Some had also broadened their options in to thinking about studying abroad (USA or Canada) and applying for scholarships.

#### iv. Key themes from the Year 12/13 focus groups

It is important to note that it was not possible to talk with Year 12/13s at Town school and that their perspectives would have been valuable. Those taking part in the Year 12/13 focus groups at the other three schools were clearly able to talk in a more detailed and sophisticated way about university life and study than younger groups. One group nevertheless said that they would like to have had more input about both finance and the university application process. This perhaps reflects the point that the focus groups took place just before the UCAS cycle really commenced. The Year 12/13s were also able to talk in more depth about the actual process of decision-making being closer to the point where such decisions would actually be made. Finance was still a major factor in their considerations about whether to go to university or not: *Why do some people want to be in 9K of debt when you can earn that in a year?* (Year 12/13, Coastal School). Overall they seemed to have a deeper understanding about the nature of the debt, the realistic costs and how graduates went about repayments. Many were able to have informed conversations about how the financial implications of university would affect them and the earnings threshold at which they would start having to pay back the loan. Some of those at Urban school were talking about the debt as not so important:

- *Manageable*
- *I don't think the debt really matters*
- *Not the same as a normal loan – not like loan sharks*
- *Working and living at home will be less*

The young people at Coastal School discussed the relation of the debts incurred to the increased salary a graduate had the potential to earn but concluded that there were no guarantees of increased income.

As with Year 10/11 students, the Year 12/13s at Urban school were also talking about the whole experience of university:

- *Best experience of your life*
- *Nightlife*
- *You meet a lot of people and some of them might be your colleagues in future.*

These comments reflected a deeper understanding of the cultural *capital* that they might be buying into:

- *You will socialise with people in a better class*
- *Different degrees will give you different values in different countries.*

While Year 12/13 students were positive about the prospect of more independence and leaving home, they also harboured increasing concerns about whether they would fit in to the university environment or not and this came in particular from Rural School. There were concerns that no-one in their family had gone to university before so it was unknown territory; they were worried about discrimination, one student specifically in relation to sexuality but others in relation to disabilities and mental health. They wanted to know more about the support available at university and some were keen to stay close to home.

### **Conclusions**

The financial implications of spending three years at university are clearly central to some of the concerns and anxieties of the young people in this research but also to their parents who remain influential in the decision-making process. Older students in the research generally had a much more informed understanding of what the loan consisted of, how it would be repaid and some of the financial help available to them. However, some attitudes to debt had become more philosophical or even cavalier by this stage with some students not really seeing the debt as significant in any way and we should consider what messages about debt might be appropriate for widening participation teams to communicate as well as how and when these messages are most relevant. The younger students tended to view university in quite a functional way as an extension of education (albeit a costly one) that might lead to better job or career prospects but by Years 12/13 students were beginning to understand a much broader concept of what going to university might mean culturally and socially as well as academically. Older students were also discussing the range of options available to them and talked about vocational options and apprenticeships, jobs for which a degree was not necessary and noting that there might be positive alternatives to spending three years in HE. Ensuring that young people have an informed choice and can make decisions based on accurate and relevant information should be at the heart of future planning discussions.

#### **c) Parents' perspectives on factors affecting young people's decision making**

In contrast to some staff perceptions of parents from non-HE backgrounds, 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 as also seen in the focus groups with the young people. Not having experienced university themselves, parents were also clear about the value of having information and guidance for both their children and themselves. Parents located university decision-making within the contemporary context of what they perceived as an increasingly precarious economic and employment landscape. For some this manifested in a

belief in the particular need for a higher education in response to such challenges, while others saw this as a reason not to go to university. One parent also saw university enrichment activities as not directly relevant to their children, linking this to not having the 'correct' intellectual profile even though this was something that the school themselves considered prior to making such opportunities available:

I don't personally think any of my children are bright enough for it to be worth them going to university. I won't discourage them but I don't think it will help them get a better job. They might get better qualifications but that's all (Parent 1)

The move to a loans-based higher education funding regime recurred as a central theme throughout the narratives of young people, parents, staff and seminar participants, around the university participation of young people from less advantaged families. The key concerns were around lack of information, debt, and the perceived prospect that the financial investment in higher education would not yield a worthwhile return in terms of subsequent earning potential. It was noted at both Coastal and Rural schools that having financial resources does not necessarily come with knowledge of HE and staff discussed a need to change families' perceptions of what is possible by expanding their horizons from as early as Year 7:

It's trying to show them that actually students could maybe do something a bit different and maybe move out of the area and not end up in the same jobs in [school location]... it's trying to make sure students and parents are aware there's a bit more out there. (Rural 1)

As young people are being asked to consider university ever earlier, ensuring that parents have earlier access to the information they will need to make informed judgements around its potential value constitutes an important intervention strategy. While by Year 12/13 the young people had well-developed understandings of the way in which loans for HE operate, the parent of a younger student signalled clearly that she did not yet have access to this knowledge and that she did not yet know where it might be obtained:

I don't really have a clue about all the funding. That's something I'll have to look at to try and understand myself... I wouldn't have any idea where to go for support if I wanted to find out more about it (Parent, 1)

The idea of working at the level of the household is important as several young people talked about divided views within the family, with one parent being opposed to the idea of university and the other

not. Such opposition is important as it allows university participation to be constructed as a threat to the security of the young person - and the household - rather than as an opportunity:

If their parents aren't in a position to help them financially, it's difficult. I'd be worried about my children coming out of uni with a hefty debt round their necks which will then affect their income and possibility of buying a home. (Parent 1)

Staff felt that examples of direct opposition were comparatively rare but an underlying pattern of ambivalence and concern was certainly there in the accounts of both staff and young people. The sense that there has been a shift in the wider climate surrounding widening participation and that there is a direct link with higher direct costs was reflected by staff across all four schools:

I would say there's probably a stronger link to financial ability and fear of debt and an increasing view that student debt won't be paid off. I would say that that's probably a bigger issue for children now than it was. I would say a few years ago when the fees were say £3,000, finance was less scary and so the barriers then perhaps were expectations and experience. (Coastal 2)

And:

I think the huge hike in tuition fees is another disadvantage. I think lots of people are now querying that value for money. (Urban, 1)

Parents' anxieties around HE extend beyond the costs, however, and as might be expected encompass a wide range of emotions alongside more practical concerns. A strong sense of intergenerational interdependence was also suggested:

We do have as I say a number of children where they feel responsible for other family members and to move away and do something might be quite difficult. (Coastal 2)

Evidence of this interdependence as a factor affecting HE decision-making emerged particularly strongly during the course of the Year 12/13 focus group at Rural school. Here the young people described anxieties motivated by a strong sense of the young people's vulnerabilities, linked to discussions about the need to stay close to home that centered strongly on parents' desire to ensure on-going safety and care.

## Conclusions

It is clear that the factors feeding into the HE decision-making of young people are complex and individual. Nevertheless there are some common underlying areas of influence. Concerns about fees arose across all settings and it is important to remember that these concerns are rational. For parents who have very little economic resource the prospect of the 'debt' in the broader context of austerity and job insecurity is not that surprising and it is clear that this contributes to young people making quite careful cost benefit analyses:

The worry that they'll go to University and then they won't get a job after anyway... people who think they'll go down a different route, even to a job that perhaps you might need a degree for, or you'd want a degree for to go in at a higher level, they've gone back to thinking that they'll work their way up because to get a job is really important. (Urban 4)

Anxieties arising from higher costs could also be seen in the accounts provided by staff, both those who had themselves been upwardly mobile and those who had not:

You come out with £45,000 debt before you've stepped your foot through the door of your first job. It will impact on your mortgage and everything else. It's going to be more of a worry for low income families than it is for those that don't have to worry about it... My daughter is [studying subject name] knowing that she's got something like £50, no not even that, to spend on food this term. I don't have enough money to be able to go: "*That's okay, I'll top it off.*" (Town, 1)

Such concerns appear to be feeding into a focus on HE not as a life changing educational experience but as a financial transaction where costs, risks and opportunities have to be carefully weighed. These calculations are clearly being made from very different social and economic positions: *I've also got friends who have just paid for all their children's university up front* (Town 1). Members of staff across the schools were aware of cost as a factor negatively affecting the HE decision-making of both young people and their parents:

They're worried about making the wrong decision and very often finance comes up. They talk about this debt. '*It's a very expensive mistake Miss,*' said one child. (Urban, 2)

A member of staff at one school had clearly done all the correct things to mitigate the risk as might be expected of a 'good' (middle class) parent yet still had a child make a 'wrong' decision:

I know from my own experience with two... to get the right course, we went to between them probably twelve different unis and we got it wrong for one of them, she came away after six weeks. (Rural 1)

The hesitations that characterised the accounts provided by school staff clearly suggest that we have moved to a time when universal assurances around HE as a secure way to a better future no longer hold purchase. Higher levels of security accrue to those who focus on ‘facilitating’ subjects and access to Russell Group universities but this is the model least likely to be accessed by young people like those who contributed to this research. To add to the complexity, the data suggested that there had been a shift from a sole focus on HE to the more equal promotion of employment based routes such as apprenticeships. However, similar questions need to be asked about the inclusivity and accessibility of these alternatives:

Big firms like [name of city firm] offer Apprenticeship or opportunities, don’t they, but they’re salaried and they’re highly competitive. But we had one student go on to do that instead of University. Obviously they’re the most able but there is a different route through to get a degree that doesn’t require you necessarily to go to University in the more standard way. (Coastal, 2)

#### **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)*

This section focuses on the insights into good practice that emerged during the course of the study. It identifies two broad areas: interventions that are low cost and more widely accessible and those that require more careful targeting to protect scarce resource. There was also a consensus that one off interventions are unlikely to be sufficient to make a real difference. Any assessment of good practice therefore needs to be informed by the need to adopt a lifecycle approach, entailing sequential interventions delivered from an earlier age, as suggested in all four schools:

Here with year sevens we play star student which is a floor game generally just about progression routes and qualification levels and things and it covers both apprenticeships and degrees and things just to keep it within their head. Year eight, yes, we do get assemblies they have an assembly about it and student ambassadors come in. So we drip feed a little bit among seven and eight before then obviously we starting working with them wholesale in year nine (Coastal, 4)

At its most basic level good practice can simply entail ensuring that information about university as a possible option is communicated more widely and more informally to all young people and all staff within school settings, extending the reach and sustainability of this agenda while also addressing gaps in knowledge and practices. These key areas of identified good practice are explored in more detail in the following sections.

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

Given that widening participation interventions aim to work in many cases with young people who would be first generation HE it is not surprising to find that providing access to first-hand experiences in university settings appeared to be a particularly important strategy. Such opportunities can take a wide range of forms. For example, the focus group discussions indicated how beneficially the young people in Year12/13 experienced opportunities to find out about university through engagement events such as open days via staff and student talks and questions. It was noted that not One element of good practice is then to ensure that those who lack the independent resources to make such visits are supported in other ways:

The day is free but it's the finance... I'm a mini bus driver... this was the first time we'd done [name of high status university] because that was a six o'clock leave and it was a long day but I just thought why not, let's just go and do it. (Coastal, 4)

Residential experiences were recognised as being particularly intense and formative. Good practice with regard to summer schools involves not only ensuring that these are targeted at those most in need but also more evenly distributed to maximise their reach. Non-residential activities delivered on university campuses for those in earlier years provide a less expensive and important alternative and those that also contain a learning component can deliver benefits across several domains:

I really enjoyed it! I hadn't really thought about studying at that university but I found it really interesting. We did physics experiments. (Year 10/11, Coastal)

There was a consensus across all settings and participant groups that such first-hand opportunities were invaluable as well as an evident desire and need for more of these. That the Year 8/9 students in Rural School were particularly interested in having more such opportunities reflects an age related knowledge gap but also potentially an issue of context.

### **b) Providing opportunities to learn from first-hand experiences inside school contexts**

Ensuring opportunities to learn from first-hand experiences *within the school setting* constitutes another important form of good practice. Typically such interactions involve external stakeholders, with staff from university widening participation teams being available at parents' evenings and student ambassadors coming in to talk in assembly or act as mentors. However, good practice in this area also involves schools drawing proactively on their own independent, internal resources eg: by developing a network of alumni as commonly suggested by staff interviewed for this study. They were clear, however, that to reach some less advantaged young people such accounts needed to be 'warts and all'. Clearly schools located in different communities have differential access to this kind of external resource, compounding their difficulties:

This is the sort of family that we get, the poorer kind of families and the ones that haven't been to university and things. (Town, 4)

Access to the local community is also contingent on the mindset of the school, with historic practices having implications for the present

For a long time we were a very disjointed part of the community... we wouldn't have this meeting, you'd have no chance getting in... there weren't trips... we were just... they come in, we shut the doors and do things and then we let them out again... It's created this environment now where we're battling against this idea of trying to get parents to come in and participate with us, because they're like: *'Well you never wanted us to participate before.'*

Schools with sixth forms have an advantage in being able to provide ready access to young people in their immediate environment capable of sharing their experiences as they embark on their HE journeys and it was noted that these have the potential to inform and inspire others: *I got interested in study abroad from someone in the sixth form who got a scholarship to do it (Year 10/11, Coastal)*. At Rural school there was an aspiration to match Pupil Premium students in the sixth form with others in younger age groups. Another way in which first-hand opportunities can be shared is via the experiences of school staff who have themselves come from working class backgrounds, particularly those who have grown up in the same locality. The under-representation of BME staff in such roles was discussed during the course of the consultative seminar. Ensuring greater staff diversity at all levels within educational institutions of all types is then a further aspect of good practice, offering young people the widest possible range of positive role models and sources of support:

We need to present young people with a range of diverse faces in talking about university to show opportunities are for people like them. Getting WP teams to be more diverse in the lectures - but in a non-tokenistic way - so, so difficult. (Seminar participant I)

The power of role models was clearly suggested by a Year 12/13 student at Urban School who was working with an external mentor: *Having someone who's successful telling you this is what I've become having been to uni is a little bit inspiring.*

### **c) Making space for sequential interventions**

The research suggested that it can be difficult to carve out sufficient space for widening participation amongst the pressures of crowded curricula and other demands on teacher time. 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 leadership practices that prioritise widening participation intervention as a means of progressively developing potential:

It's getting it into the calendar so there's an expectation that you will have whatever input is relevant for your age and stage each year all the way through... here with our change of head there is more of a sense of trying to look at things across the whole. (Rural, 3)

There was a consensus across all schools on the importance of providing an early start to introducing young people to considering the possibility of university as a means of ensuring that young people are able to make strategic decisions at key transition points from well-informed positions.

### **d) 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 sources and being left unable to find the information they needed. Good practice therefore entails communicating key information in a timely, accessible, jargon-free and supported way, in order to facilitate young people's on-going educational engagement and decision-making from an early age. While this can be done through more career-focused lessons in school, drawing on available careers software, staff need to be aware of the risk of making stereotyped recommendations. The young people also highlighted a need for: *More time to research what GCSEs and A levels you need for particular courses and more support with that* (Year 10/11, Coastal). It is particularly important to meet these needs in cases where the requisite knowledge and/or support cannot be accessed within the home.

### e) Broadening understandings of student diversity

An intersectional approach recognises that identities are complex and that inequalities relating to social class are better understood when also linked to other aspects of identity. Given the specific focus of the research on young people from working class backgrounds it is perhaps not so surprising that there was relatively little discussion of factors such as gender and ethnicity. However, more intersectional understandings are important if widening participation interventions are to address the declining numbers of young males in HE and the fact that young people from BME backgrounds often experience poorer outcomes once there. STEM interventions were identified as having contributed to the improved representation of girls in science subjects, suggesting that it is possible to successfully embed gender specific agendas that lead to improvements: *Not just in the quantity of students choosing us as an option but the quality of students as well* (Town, 2). The focus groups with young people also suggested the importance of embedding broader understandings of diversity as a means of better addressing individual need. This includes ensuring that there are clear messages around universities being sites where there is tolerance for LGBT and access to support for mental health needs or *'when you are down.'*

### f) Developing more inclusive approaches to interventions

The adoption of wider approaches to intervention helps to ensure that young people in need of support do not slip through the net. While input from all constituent groups acknowledged the need to target limited resources to those most in need, there was also a strong thread of support for interventions that can draw in more students. This resonated with consultative seminar recommendations to: *Open up more WP activities for all students ... to have a less 'narrow' approach to WP* (Seminar participant d). Some universities were described as having moved towards more inclusive opportunities. An example of good practice included a self-selection model whereby *all* Year 12 students at one university's partner institutions were emailed a link to a widening participation activity application form. This broadened the reach of the intervention to more eligible young people while also bypassing the problem of parental authorisation being refused and forms becoming lost.

A further benefit of more inclusive approaches to intervention is that it avoids any stigma deriving from the singling out those deemed to be in particular need of 'topping up' with educational *capital*. The consultative seminar discussion identified concerns around Pupil Premium students being taken out and plonked in a group away from their non-Pupil Premium friends where they do not engage and do not always benefit. Targeting widening participation activities to young people more broadly further 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.

#### g) 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: *I wouldn't know half the things I know without the support of* [name of WP lead] (Year 12/13, Coastal). This reliance on a key individual while positive carries potential risks eg: if they become the sole repository for information and leave. A member of staff at Urban school identified the need for a whole school approach:

I've said to [name of WP lead] *'You lead this, you can't do it all on your own.'* That's a fulltime job ... So trying to engage other leaders with it and having them take some ownership for each little bit... so that all of our children get that opportunity to access that. (Urban, 1)

This member of staff recognised that it is not possible to embed or communicate a whole school approach without also challenging understandings of disadvantage that are grounded in limiting preconceptions:

I think sometimes we're a bit dumbed down by *'Because they're working class or disadvantaged the parents don't want them to'* and I think that's nonsense. I think if you're telling the parents often enough, *'Your kid can do this,'* then the natural sense of pride comes through, doesn't it, and most parents will do anything they can to get them there. But I think you've got to have the parents believe it. (Urban, 1)

Once all staff share a sense of collective responsibility this member of staff suggested that interventions could become part of routine practices:

You would put a comment every now and then that this would be University standard writing or to be at University standard of writing, you need to... So it was just dripping that in, the context for them really that you can take this forward. (Urban, 1)

It was noted at both Urban and Rural schools that support might be being provided in some curriculum areas but not others and this mainstreaming of the agenda has the potential to address this also. A more diverse range of positive messages about HE can also be embedded in the fabric of the building:

We often have posters up in the sixth form, about pupils that have gone on and where they've gone... sometimes we don't know all the courses that are available and there are so many courses out there that would be so enjoyable... we discuss this with pupils in the corridors. They sit, they look and they go, *'Oh what is Oceanography?'* and it asks a question, it provokes a discussion (Urban, 2)

Such approaches have the benefits of being both low cost and accessible to all. This broadening of responsibility is potentially particularly valuable in those disadvantaged contexts where almost all meet the criteria for intervention.

## **Conclusions**

While the need for greater inclusivity in interventions emerged as a salient theme, good practice was also identified as developing a bespoke rather than a generic 'one-size-fits-all' approach. While some interventions are time consuming and expensive, others have very few resource implications and provide an opportunity to extend the reach of the widening participation agenda in a highly sustainable way. This is important given the wider context of economic austerity within which schools in particular are working. While many interventions are led by external providers it is also clear that school staff can take ownership of this agenda where there is commitment, imagination and institutional support. Recognising that widening participation is a site of great complexity, where there are opportunities, constraints and sometimes competing agendas, improved opportunities to share and dissect good practice also constitute an important aspect of good practice.

## **5. The need for 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)*

This section considers the broader context of the research and the wider changes that might be needed to overcome the barriers to HE encountered by young people from working class backgrounds. It begins by locating the specific concerns raised about the cost of HE within the context of current economic hardship, including the shortage of support for those in the sixth form, some of whom were reported to be in part time employment while studying in order to contribute to household finances. A further identified problem is the squeezing out of opportunities for widening participation intervention as a consequence of top down pressures on schools. Reflecting on a measurement culture that relies heavily on 'blunt' instruments, this section also identifies a training gap linked to differences in understandings of both disadvantage and success.

### **a) Better support for those experiencing economic hardship**

A key emergent issue in the research was 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. Some staff acknowledged the relationship of young people's HE decision-making to more structural factors in policy and economic resources:

I would say it's probably driven by economics rather than attitudes. So we do have children who are helping support families as well and so it was more beneficial for the family for them to go to work than to go to University. We do have some working class children who don't stay on and complete the sixth form because actually financially that's really difficult for the families, particularly with the loss of the EMA. That has made a difference, that funding. So although some of them are eligible for the bursary and they apply for that, actually the loss of the EMA funding I would say has made a difference. (Coastal, 2)

The need to provide sufficient support for young people to stay on and complete sixth form studies was also noted at Town school. Such recognition informs the role of more policy-focused as opposed to individual aspiration raising approaches to widening participation. Failure to address issues at this level will inevitably impact on progression to HE as sixth form study is an immediate precursor to this. While the Pupil Premium agenda ensures that some public and institutional resource is available to support such young people, individual bursaries for sixth formers are harder to come by in a context where there are also broader concerns about families struggling to make ends meet: *Nowadays it seems that all parents have to work in order to be able to afford anything at all* (Town, 1). It was suggested at Town school that widening participation activity provides access to a funding stream much valued in in the broader context of austerity and that where these costs are passed down to the poorest families they are less likely to take part.

Although a young person's decision to progress to university is generally presented as being an individual one, the research clearly suggested that it affects the whole household and there were several examples of this economic inter-dependence in the data:

We suffer with students doing way more than ten to fifteen hours of work a week - way more - and I understand when you speak to the children they need to pay towards rent or bills at home (Coastal 3)

Ensuring the viability of a young person's financial situation once at university is therefore a *further* rather than an initial consideration. While staff across all four settings were clear that schools have an important role to play in ensuring that parents have all the necessary information, knowledge without the commitment of additional resource will not necessarily be enough:

Whether we will see the gap between the middle class and the working class student - whether there will be fewer students from poorer backgrounds going to university without [the] other support that's needed, or whether they'd be more likely to drop out of university once they're there - that worries me. (Rural, 3)

It was noted by members of staff at both Urban and Rural schools that they had themselves benefitted from hardship bursaries once at university but that they had not previously known about these and it is not clear that such additional support continues to be available other than in cases of acute short term hardship. Those young people who decide to stay at home may in fact be following an increasingly economically sound strategy although it clearly restricts young people to institutions within their locality, potentially placing limits on their access to high status universities and degrees. The research certainly suggested that there has been a shift in attitudes to higher education that is likely to have a disproportionate impact on the least economically advantaged:

My children will suffer for university because I don't work and we are on benefits. I won't be able to support them in any way so everything will have to go on a loan...In an ideal world it would be nice if the university education was available to anyone who wanted it. I know there would be a knock on effect on council taxes. If it was still free I would encourage them to go. Or means test it on the families. (Parent 1)

As suggested by this parent, decisions about at what level to fund HE are political choices made from social positions that do not necessarily reflect the perspectives of those in greatest need. In all the focus groups with young people there was a concern about finance, whether as a blanket worry (Year 8/9) or linked to a more sophisticated understanding of the student loan system (Year 12/13). This was perceived by the young people to be both a barrier and source of inequity: [You] *should not get in just cos you have money* (Year 10/11, Town). When asked about the kinds of support and encouragement that should be given to young people interested in going to university, there were comments in most of the focus groups about the need for more financial support:

- *Money from parents to help you pay for classes* (Year 9/10, Coastal)
- *Money support from the universities* (Year 12/13, Coastal)
- *Support to lower income families* (Year 12/13, Rural).

All of this points to the importance of better recognising the multiple economic considerations that feed into young people's representation and participation in HE.

## b) More nuanced understandings of 'success'

The notions of 'success' that underpin the widening participation agenda are clearly crucial as they need to align with the opportunities and messages that young people from working class backgrounds and attending schools like those in this study are exposed to. It was clear that parents' understandings of HE are not simply ill-informed but being shaped by informal encounters with university students returning to take what jobs they can within their local communities:

*I know from lots of parents that I speak to, it's like, 'They don't need University, because actually we've got a graduate working with us in [name of supermarket], so I'm not going to have him go to University and waste £50,000 to come out and get a job that he could have got at 16 or 18' (Urban, 4)*

The versions of 'success' that are presented 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. Currently the vision emanating at policy level is narrow and normative, with attention being fixed on improving access to Russell group universities and increasing the uptake in a relatively narrow range of facilitating A level subjects. Such approaches do not align well with the diversity of the young people met across the four schools whose interests and capabilities seemed to span a much broader range. Some might well go on to a Foundation year and it is important for such young people not only to know about such options but also for these not to be presented or experienced as a second rate pathway. The questions that were raised at the consultative seminar about the cost and status of Foundation courses are important given the concerns already identified around three year degrees.

Concerns around disadvantaged young people's participation in HE also extended beyond the point of securing entry and it was noted that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were perhaps more likely to achieve the targeted success of commencing university, only to either subsequently drop-out, or struggle through while finding it a less pleasant and comfortable experience than they had been encouraged to anticipate:

*There's a boy [X] who... was working at [name of supermarket] before he went and then came back and I think he'd done the first year, and he just said it wasn't for him. (Urban, 4)*

And:

*I was first generation university myself... I actually hated it, but I went through it and did it... Do we communicate the aspiration well enough? I don't think so. It's still seen as elitist by*

many and groups who try to define so beautifully in our ivory towers are the people that you know, still don't get it, and still don't understand it. (Urban, 3)

Such accounts highlight the importance of the university experience in its broadest sense but also the need to better prepare young people for lives where greater educational and social independence will be required. Insights from the consultative seminar discussion advocated for promoting more diverse images of success and greater resistance to the dominant language of 'marketisation':

I wonder whether aspiration raising in schools has become too focused on HE... looking at the individual and their specific talents and needs and supporting them to fulfil their potential seems to have been lost. (Seminar participant c)

School staff showed similar awareness of the need to provide young people with information around alternatives to university but it was clear that these were also being shaped by the political agendas of the day. There was strong sense that where there a young person has a vocation, a vocational degree provides a less risky progression pathway through HE to young people who lack access to other academic, cultural and social *capitals*.

### **c) Redressing the effects of top down education policies**

One important area informing recommendations for supporting widening participation intervention that emerged only in the perspectives of school staff was that of curriculum priorities. The participating schools were diverse in many ways and on some relevant issues staff at the different schools relayed diverse perspectives. Yet staff from across the schools relayed the tension between the demands of the school curriculum and squeezing out of opportunities to go off site that affected widening participation outreach engagement. The impediment to engaging with widening participation activity caused by the demands of schools needing to meet very specific academic requirements - including those directly related to the Pupil Premium agenda - were appraised by some staff more critically than others:

The curriculum doesn't allow it, because it's so, you know, getting students out of school now for a trip or for anything, it becomes really difficult because of lost learning time, because of the focus on academic progress. (Urban, 4)

Where such activities overlapped with other agendas it was clearly easier to obtain institutional approval. One member of staff described how an activity that had been refused one year went on to be approved the next:

Of the eight I think six were Pupil Premium, four of them on free school meals sort of thing and I said, *'These are the students who would like to go, six are PP this and that, it would be a good idea.'* *'Yes, go.'* So it ticks a box for school but it also got the kids to go and actually for the one girl she'd never been to London.

There are two important points to note here, firstly the narrowing and coercive effects of such top down approaches but also the potential undermining of related agendas that can occur when they cannot be easily reconciled.

#### **d) Changing understandings of disadvantage**

While individual schools and widening participation organisations to a large extent determine their own agendas when it comes to widening participation, there is an overarching assumption that such approaches are unified around a common concern to address disadvantage. Given this, an important finding in the research was around the notable difference in understandings of this, differences that were reflected to some extent in varying approaches to selecting young people for intervention. This highlighted a need to continue problematising the underpinning concerns and rationales in order to ensure the efficacy and fairness of interventions. One related emergent issue was the risk that low expectations of Pupil Premium students might affect their representation in widening participation interventions. Nevertheless interviews across school contexts evidenced commitment to the schools' central proactive role in informing disadvantaged young people's decision-making, including working proactively with parents. This demonstrates a particularly informed perspective shaped by expertise and commitment, based on but not restricted to, those with either personal experience or formal roles in widening participation. A disjuncture between these insights and formal policies and practices at institutional and societal levels suggests a need to engage more directly with the expert perspectives of such staff.

#### **e) Ensuring staff have access to professional development opportunities**

There remains a persistent need for robust training and support to ensure staff in all roles are resourced with the understandings and empathy needed to ensure that all young people are supported in reaching their potential and challenge limiting and individualised constructions of disadvantage. Consultative seminar discussion was strongly divided around the benefits and dangers associated with allowing school staff, some of whom occupy non-teaching positions, greater authority in allocating opportunities. It was felt to require a level of reflexivity that requires access to training opportunities unlikely to be available within school settings and also unlikely to be available during initial training. Such professional development opportunities can serve to break the relative isolation experienced by staff working with sole responsibility for this remit at school level as noted by one seminar participant: *Very useful/insightful as a lone WP worker in my institution, good to share with*

*likeminded professionals*. Such opportunities need to extend to staff not already on board with the agenda and to provide access to the full range of experiences and perspectives: *One of the most valuable things about today was having people working with students at different stages* (Seminar participant a). Such development opportunities could also be used to address the tendency to benchmark academic potential by measures of prior attainment given that this is detrimental to young people who develop at different rates or whose learning has been limited by educational and/or social factors.

#### **f) Supporting more nuanced approaches to targeting**

Perhaps the most important issue to come out of the research were the concerns about widening participation activities finding their way to those who need them most. The limitations that were highlighted in relation to the proxy indicators of disadvantage reflect serious underlying concerns about approaches to selection 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 to targeting and the risks associated with over-reliance on single indicators, the use of more flexible strategies also carries risks. These therefore need to be linked to more complex judgements around need and benefit.

#### **Conclusions**

This section has highlighted the need for better alignment between current policy agendas and the approaches adopted at practice level in order to ensure that approaches to widening participation intervention are both co-ordinated and holistic. It was noted by a member of staff interviewed at stage one that there is a risk of bringing insufficiently reflexive understandings to work that is interlinked with dominant social class positions and interests. Staff also identified a gap between the challenges and complexities noted at the micro level and the perceived over-simplifications and disconnections at macro level. They nevertheless retained a strong commitment to overcoming barriers to HE and to widening participation activities.

### **Final reflections and specific recommendations**

A key message is that widening participation is inherently a collaborative enterprise that depends on diverse groups of stakeholders working together. While the research aimed to inform local practices in particular, it is clear that these are intertwined with developments both historically and nationally. The four schools emerged as distinctive, with approaches to widening participation in each setting being shaped by a broad range of factors. These included understandings of disadvantage that were linked in part to the local context and in part to more personal experiences. These understandings are not simple or uniform and they are charged with implicit classed dimensions. One important

function of this research has been to provide an opportunity to reflect explicitly on their implications. That it is difficult to hold such conversations needs to be acknowledged and it is important to note there were similar difficulties around the Pupil Premium with some staff arguing for more openness around the criteria.

One of the important messages from the consultative seminar was the need *not* to focus solely on the testing micro level questions around recruitment practices, important though these are, but to also focus on issues of power and representation:

It has raised a number of thinking points, the main one being how we identify cohorts. As well as how we develop working class young people to take risks, to develop resilience and to step out of their comfort zones. Representation has also been a key factor - who represents the working class voice as well as other groups such as minority groups. (Seminar Participant i)

The following recommendations are therefore intended to promote reflection across a range of levels and roles, with a view to building on identified good practice:

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.

### Final thoughts

This research has been broad in its focus and aims and it has shed light on a wide range of issues that warrant further thought. Although strongly grounded in the local there are more far reaching implications and it is noted that there are also some important contradictions, tensions and sources of ambivalence. On the one hand the research points strongly to the value of schools taking ownership of widening participation work as part of their own strategic agendas in order to improve opportunities

for young people from the most economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. It is clear that such young people exist in all schools and that they are all deserving of attention.

The point made at Town school that “*for a long time we were only a building in the community, we weren't part of the community*” is something that staff in universities can usefully reflect further on. One participant at Urban school also observed that a previous school had been on the doorstep of a university that had historically been the place where the working classes “*went to work, not somewhere they went to study*” and that it was the on-going collaboration with the university that had changed this. The research therefore contained some very positive messages about the changes already made by widening participation interventions over time and indeed it was a sense of wanting to ‘give something back’ that motivated school staff to commit resource to support this research. 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. These factors shape schools in diverse ways and while an awareness of this is now to some extent being reflected in more contextualised approaches to HE admissions, it would be a mistake to see this as a full enough response to these complexities.