



# Supporting White Boys from Working Class Backgrounds in West Yorkshire Research Report



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# Introduction



# Research Objectives

## BACKGROUND AND BRIEF



This research focuses on the educational landscape and opportunities for progression into Higher Education (HE) for white working class boys.

Go Higher West Yorkshire (GHWY) would like to develop an understanding of how the Uni Connect consortia can better support white boys from working class backgrounds to progress to Higher Education.

GHWY would also like to gain a greater understanding of the educational opportunities for these young people at school/college in Key Stage 4 and progressing into Further and Higher Education.

## EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

Key evaluation objectives include:

1. Review the opportunities and outreach provided by Further and Higher Education providers;
2. Deepen understanding of how GHWY can most effectively support white boys from working class backgrounds through HE outreach activity;
3. Develop understanding of the potential barriers to HE progression for these young people;
4. Develop insights into the role of parents and carers in supporting decision making and educational choices;
5. Develop resources and activity to better support white working class boys on their educational journey;
6. Develop insights into the social and cultural context in which these young people operate, in order to more effectively engage these young people and prevent disengagement;
7. Share learning with local school, college and Higher Education partners, as well as contributing to the national evidence-base via other partnerships and the OfS.

## KEY QUESTIONS

The key questions include:

- a. What subjects/courses do these young people study at school/college, and how are these choices offered and made?
- b. What are the potential barriers to HE progression for these young people and how might HE institutions address these?
- c. When these young people do go on to Further and Higher Education, is this at the same rate as their peers, and what factors influence this?
- d. How can pre-entry activity support the retention and success of these young people when they do progress to Higher Education?

The following questions will also be considered:

- e. What understanding do these young people have of their future educational options and choices?
- f. What type of outreach is already happening between Higher Education and schools/colleges and can impacts be determined from this? If so, what learning can be gained here?

# Methodology

A combination of quantitative and qualitative, primary and secondary methodologies were used to investigate the research objectives, including:

## **Background Literature Review (page 6)**

An extensive review of existing background literature around the subject of white boys from working class backgrounds, their experiences and challenges in education.

## **Secondary Data Analysis of UCAS (p11), HESA (p13) and CFE (p16) Data**

A review and summary of key findings from UCAS' End of Cycle Reports and associated HE application data; HESA enrolment data and CFE student survey data from West Yorkshire.

## **Primary Research Interviews and Discussions with White Boys from Working Class Backgrounds (p22)**

A combination of one-to-one interviews and discussion groups with 18 learners from POLAR4 Quintiles 1-2 in West Yorkshire in December 2020.

- 12 FE learners
- 6 KS4 learners

8 of the 18 learners took part in one of two 30-minute **introductory 'workshops'** prior to the research discussions, to introduce the research and researcher, and provide an opportunity to ask any questions and to build a sense of comfort among participants.

## **Follow-up Interviews**

A short follow-up interview was completed with five of the FE learners listed above in February 2021, around two months after initial interviews.

## **Primary Research Interviews with Stakeholders (p56)**

One-to-one interviews with 6 staff/stakeholders who were experienced in working with white boys from working class backgrounds.

- Director of Higher Education Development (FE College)
- Higher Education Progression Officer (FE College)
- Head of English (Secondary School)
- English Teacher (Secondary School)
- Higher Education Progression Officer (Secondary School)
- Outreach Project Officer for Go Higher West Yorkshire (GHWY)

# Background & Literature Review

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Over the last decade, low numbers of white working class male students becoming educationally successful has been cited as a challenge by successive UK Governments. Following a 2014 report by the House of Commons Education Committee into white working class educational underachievement in education, a renewed focus on the educational success of the white working class included an increased scrutiny on access to Higher Education (HE). In their Higher Education Green Paper (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015), the Conservative Government made specific reference to the disproportionately low numbers of white working class males attending UK universities. In 2018, when discussing the disparity in access to HE for the group at the Resolution Foundation, the then Education Secretary Damian Hinds reasserted the issue as an area of political interest, stating that *“the latest statistics on destinations of sixth form and college students have shown that disadvantaged white pupils are less likely to be studying in higher education the next year than disadvantaged pupils of any other ethnic groups”*.

More recently, policy discourse has broadened to include a more holistic view of ‘left behind neighbourhoods’, with the formation of an All-Party Parliamentary Group (2020) to interrogate the socio-economic challenges facing deindustrialised working class communities. A sustained centring of the issue as one of political importance has prompted activity in the arenas of HE policy and practice. Publications from institutions such as the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI; Hillman and Robinson, 2016) and the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON; Atherton and Mazhari, 2019), have endeavoured to examine the contributory mechanisms facilitating comparatively low numbers of white working class students entering into HE.

The 2019 NEON research evidenced the scope of disparity in access to HE for male students from a white working class background. Drawing on data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, the report highlighted that progression rates for white working class males within the 2016-17 university admissions cycle was just 12.2% and 17.6% for females nationally; significantly lower than that of students from other ethnic groups. The report also provided evidence to suggest that 70% of white students from neighbourhoods with low participation rates attended post-92 universities, and that just 20% of UK Higher Education Providers explicitly cited white working class students within Access and Participation Plans which were submitted to the Office for Students (p.28).

The NEON commentary contributes to a wider discourse whereby the white working class has been identified by policy makers as ‘lacking in aspiration\*’ and experiencing restricted social mobility. In a paper authored by the House of Commons Education Committee (2014), experts were brought together in an attempt address the underlying causes of educational underachievement for white working class students.

Titled *Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children*, the paper consulted teachers, local councils and academics researching the issue, in an attempt to unearth the underlying causes of the group’s educational underachievement. Findings from the consultation highlighted the comparative underperformance of white working class children in the English educational system, and suggested areas in which the Government could start to develop policy to address the disparity.

Following the publication of the report, the Conservative Government released the Higher Education Green Paper *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* (2015), in which white working class males were mentioned with specific reference to participation in HE: *“Only around 10% of white British men from the most disadvantaged backgrounds go into higher education; they are five times less likely to go into higher education than the most advantaged white men. Participation by this group is also significantly lower than participation by the most disadvantaged from BME backgrounds: the participation rates for men of black Caribbean heritage are over 20%; for men of Indian heritage they are nearly 50%; and for men of Chinese heritage they are over 60%.”* (p.38)

Highlighting that the likelihood of white working class males participating in HE was five times lower than those from other ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, the paper prompted a number of Non-Governmental and Third Sector organisations to consider ways in which the issue could be addressed.

In 2016, the think tank HEPI produced a report entitled *Boys to Men: The underachievement of young men in higher education – and how to start tackling it* (Hillman and Robinson, 2016). Within the report, factors which were perceived to contribute to a gap in educational achievement with reference to white working class males were presented: *This is not just a matter of gender. Ethnicity makes a difference too. Leicester City Council told the House of Commons Education Select Committee of their experience that in parts of Leicester, ‘the white working class culture is characterised by low aspirations and negative attitudes to education’ in a way not seen with other ethnic groups* (p.31)

The report highlighted the causes of underachievement as multi-faceted, with a range of contributory elements such as gender and ethnicity working together to create a culture characterised by ‘low aspiration’ which, it was argued, uniquely applied to the white working class group.

\*The ‘low aspiration model’ is critiqued in more detail from page 35 of the current report.

Alongside this, the report also outlined differences between boys and girls in their approach to learning. Using data from *The Programme for International Student Assessment*, the report implied that the following reasons could be attributed to the relative underachievement of males in education:

- Boys are more likely than girls to play video games.
  - Boys are more likely than girls to spend time on computers and the internet.
  - Boys are less likely than girls to read outside of school for enjoyment.
  - Boys are less likely than girls to enjoy activities connected with reading.
  - Boys are more likely than girls to play chess and program computers.
  - Boys are less likely than girls to do homework.
  - Boys are more likely than girls to have negative attitudes towards school.
  - Boys are more likely than girls to arrive late for school.
  - Boys are less likely than girls to engage in school-related work out of intrinsic motivation.
- (p.30-31)

Later in the report, recommendations were made pertaining to interventions that Government and educational institutions could make to address the problem. Most of the initiatives included in the document were of a strategic nature such as rebalancing HE funding toward outreach activity with white working class males (p.43), and aligning pedagogic practice in schools to take into account gender differences in learning (p.47). However, there were also more immediately practicable approaches outlined such as involving more male role models in all university widening participation activities (p.44), as well as events focused specifically at males' parents such as a 'Take our Sons to University Day' (p.43).

As highlighted above, political activity pertaining to the educational challenges facing white working class communities in the past decade has been well documented. It has highlighted the group's educational underachievement, and their significantly reduced likelihood of HE participation. Recent investigations into the issue have presented it as one which is both unique to this cohort, and complex in nature.

Indeed, part of this complexity lies in the description of 'white' working class boys as a single cohort and the apparent distinction of this cohort on the basis of ethnicity. Distinction between this cohort and other non-white groups is useful, given the specific challenges experienced by BAME learners in education (see Go Higher West Yorkshire's 2021 report on *Understanding and Meeting the Needs of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Learners in West Yorkshire*); however this is not to say that white working class boys are a homogenous group (indeed, the current report emphasises that they are not). As well as wide range of personal, social and educational factors that may impact boys' likelihood to progress into HE, geography is also a factor. Disadvantaged learners from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to live in cities and larger towns with local access to HE providers and other opportunities, while those in coastal and rural areas that are further away from HE providers are more likely to identify as white\*. While there is a benefit to exploring and describing the challenges of white working class boys as a cohort for analysis purposes, this is not to say that their ethnicity itself is a driving factor in these challenges.

\* <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest#ethnic-groups-by-type-of-location-urban-or-rural>

Further background literature exploring boys' aspirations (p35), expectations of masculinity (p39), working class identity (p43) and barriers to HE (p49) is included in more detail throughout the current report alongside learners' own feedback on related topics discussed within our primary research. Rather than the negotiation of transitions to HE being a choice which was clean and simple, the extensive research demonstrates their complex, relational nature. It is highlighted that these challenges exist within an industrial legacy which is misaligned with the demands of a modern economy, having significant consequences for those attempting to navigate a route into well paid work. The work of Ingram (2018) in particular, through its innovative mobilisation of Bourdieu's conceptual framework, demonstrated the psycho-social implications of class-based inequality for participants deemed to be 'educationally successful'.

The findings presented illustrate the importance of the study of mobilising conceptual and methodological tools capable of capturing educational experiences which are relational, structurally contingent and geographically situated. The examination reiterates the insufficiency of 'aspirational deficit' (Spohrer, 2011) as a device to adequately explain the embedded, historical implications of inequality for the development of white working class boys' future educational expectations.

Although research on the educational transitions of boys in working class communities demonstrates a misalignment between the facets of their identity linked to an industrial legacy, and those required to become 'successful' in a de-industrialised, neoliberal society, the focus of such research was not exclusively directed toward the negotiation of future expectations for HE participation. Indeed, there was a gap in the literature when it came to inequality and future educational decision-making with a specific focus on white working class boys. It is this gap that the current research seeks to provide insight, by exploring the educational landscape and opportunities for progression into Higher Education (HE) for white working class boys, from their perspective, and how Go Higher West Yorkshire can better support them in that progress.

However, within the research referenced in the current report, there is a plethora of academic endeavour related to educational decision-making and class-based inequality in a broader sense. Such literature attempts to move beyond simplistic, individualised notions of educational 'choice', instead focusing on the impact of inequality in the process of framing access to HE as possible. The concept of *contingent* and *embedded choosers* presented by Ball, Reay and David (2002), provide a mechanism by which to articulate such experiences of inequality in educational decision-making. Through the use of such an explanatory tool, a means is provided to explore the historic implications of structural inequality in future educational decision-making for working class students.

The constituent sections of the background literature review have a clear underlying theme, that to capture the multifaceted nature of inequalities facing white working class boys in the negotiation of their future expectations, an understanding is required which encompasses the influence of their social, geographic and temporal location. The current research aims to provide insight, based on the experiences and feedback of white boys from working class backgrounds, and stakeholders that work with them, within this context.

A full list of references used within the background literature review for this report can be found on page 82.



# Secondary Data Analysis



# Secondary Data Analysis

## UCAS Application Data

The Universities and Colleges Admissions Services (UCAS) is the body that operates the application process for UK HEPs. Each year, UCAS collects and shares data and insights around the volume of HE applications and acceptances via different routes in the form of an End of Cycle Report and supplementary data. The End of 2020 Application Cycle was reported via two main insight reports; ‘What happened to the COVID cohort?’ (December 2020) and ‘Where next? What influences the choices school leavers make?’ (March 2021), as well as a number of data reports split by various demographics.

‘What happened to the COVID cohort?’, as its name suggests, focuses on the impacts of COVID-19 on HE applications. It describes how ‘the impact of COVID on students, especially those from a lower socio-economic background, was one of the biggest concerns the education sector faced this year, with many fearing that the progress seen over the past decade would be reversed’. However, despite these fears and the challenges surrounding COVID-19, it was found that ‘more students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds across the UK entered HE in 2020 than ever before. This was reflected even in the most selective universities and courses.’ UCAS suggest a number of factors behind this trend including; prospective student perceptions of Higher Education as a ‘stable option’ during a turbulent time for the labour market, an increased number of students meeting entry requirements based on ‘centre assessment grades’ than on their original exam results and government-increased capacity across HE.

Despite indications of progress in 2020 (overall entry rate rose to a record 37%; record numbers of acceptances from the lowest participation areas, increased acceptances for underrepresented students at higher tariff universities), UCAS suggests that the upcoming class of 2021 may be more severely impacted by gaps in their education and progression support over the past year and will need to play ‘catch up’. Coupled with a rising 18 year old population (around 90,000 additional applicants are expected by 2025), without growth in HE places, it is expected that competition will increase, with those from underrepresented backgrounds being more likely to miss out in years to come.

The report also highlights an increase in the number of university students declaring mental health issues. It is unclear whether this increase is due to the impacts of COVID-19 itself or a product of the increased acceptances of students from underrepresented backgrounds, as described above, but with the continuing mental health challenges associated with the ongoing COVID-19 situation, this should remain an area of focus. The challenges of COVID-19 as experienced by white boys from working class backgrounds in our current research are discussed in the supplementary ‘Impacts of COVID-19’ report which Cosmos completed on behalf of Go Higher West Yorkshire.

Source: ‘What happened to the COVID cohort?’ UCAS, 2020

‘Where next? What influences the choices school leavers make?’ (March 2021) explores student choice and motivation across the student journey. Some key insights from this report are listed below, many of which echo with the findings of Cosmos’ primary research with white boys and support the importance of Widening Participation activity by Go Higher West Yorkshire and the Uni Connect programme:

- Underrepresented students are more likely to consider HE later than other students, which can limit their choices, especially for more selective subjects and higher tariff providers. This suggests that careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) should be embedded earlier in education
- 83% of students decided on their degree subject before their university, highlighting the important role of subject-specific outreach.
- Decisions are most influenced by enjoyment, but employability is increasingly important post-COVID: Over 50% of students report that high graduate employment rates have become more important to them since the start of the pandemic
- One in five students report they could not study an HE subject that interested them because they did not have the relevant subjects for entry – with medicine the most commonly cited. Students should be made aware of how choices made in school can affect later options.
- Parents and carers play an important role in supporting a young person’s decision-making, and one in four students cite parents or carers as their ‘biggest help’ when determining their choice of degree course. However, only 6% say they chose their degree subject because their parents or carers wanted them to, with this more likely to be a factor for medicine students (10%)
- Two in five students believe more information and advice would have led to them making better choices, and almost one in three students report not receiving any information about apprenticeships from their school. This again highlights a need for earlier, broader, and personalised careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG)

Source: *Where next? What influences the choices school leavers make?* UCAS, 2021

In addition to the insights reported above, UCAS also provides a range of supplementary data split by various demographics. From this data we can see that offer rates for boys students and men as a whole are higher than for other ethnic groups and women respectively. Higher comparative offer rates for boys students are exacerbated when looking at higher tariff providers, however the advantage gap between men and women has effectively disappeared among these providers in recent years. Lower POLAR4 quintiles are inevitably less likely to receive offers than students from other locations, with this difference being much more pronounced among higher tariff providers.

Source: <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-resources-2020/2020-entry-ucas-undergraduate-reports-sex-area-background-and-ethnic-group>

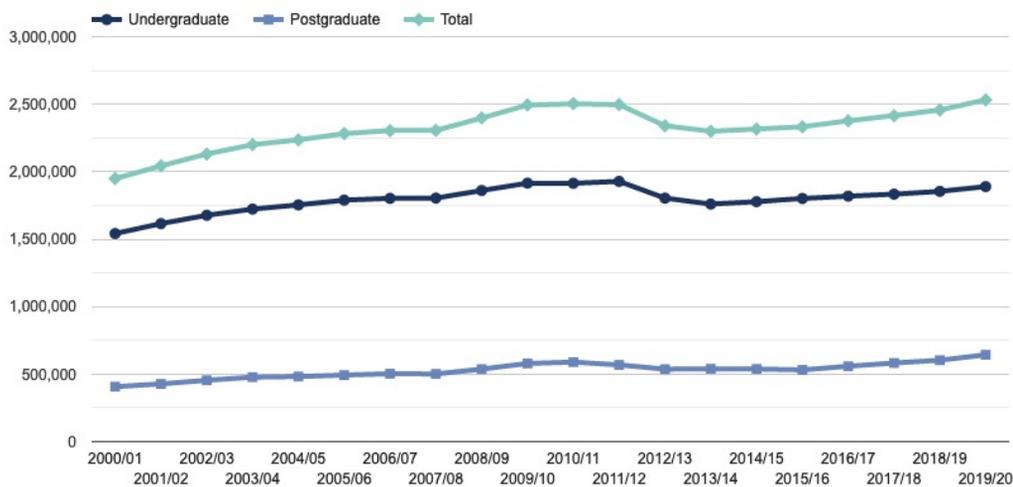
# Secondary Data Analysis

## HESA Student Data

HESA, the Higher Education Statistics Agency, collect and disseminate annual statistics about the enrolment of students in Higher Education Institutions across the UK. Data up to academic year 2020/21 show that total student enrolment in HE (including Undergraduate and Postgraduate study specifically and combined) has increased steadily over the last twenty years, with the exception of a dip between 2011/12 and 2013/14 following the rise in tuition fees to £9000 per year.

### Students by level of study

Academic years 2000/01 to 2019/20



White students make up around three quarters of new enrolments in HE, though this figure has decreased slightly in recent years with increased representation of BAME students. The total proportion of male students has remained consistent at 43% for the last four years.

### HE student enrolments by personal characteristics

Academic years 2015/16 to 2019/20

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
<b>Ethnicity</b>					
White	77%	77%	76%	75%	74%
Black	7%	8%	8%	8%	8%
Asian	10%	11%	11%	11%	12%
Mixed	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%
Other	1%	2%	2%	2%	2%
<b>Sex</b>					
Female	56%	57%	57%	57%	57%
Male	44%	43%	43%	43%	43%
Other	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Source: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he>

Students from POLAR4 quintiles 1-2 account for 12% of HE enrolments in the latest three years, however just 29% of these are white boys (3% of total enrolments), with girls from low participation neighbourhoods being much more likely than boys to enrol in HE. HEPs in Yorkshire and The Humber have a slightly higher than average proportion of white boys from POLAR4 quintiles 1-2, at 4%, with HEPs in the North East and Wales having the highest proportion at 5%.

#### Composition of HE Enrolments from POLAR4 Quintiles 1-2 (12% of all HE enrolments)

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Total (latest three years*)
White	78%	77%	76%	77%
Female	48%	48%	48%	48%
Male	30%	29%	28%	29%
Other	0%	0%	0%	0%
BAME	21%	21%	22%	21%
Female	12%	12%	13%	12%
Male	9%	9%	9%	9%
Other	0%	0%	0%	0%

#### Proportion of White Boys from POLAR4 Quintiles 1-2 in UK HEPS (as a proportion of total enrolments at HEPS).

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Total (latest three years*)
<b>Total UK</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>3%</b>
East Midlands	4%	4%	4%	4%
East of England	3%	3%	3%	3%
London	1%	1%	1%	1%
North East	6%	6%	5%	5%
North West	4%	4%	4%	4%
Scotland	2%	2%	2%	2%
South East	3%	3%	3%	3%
South West	3%	4%	4%	4%
Wales	5%	5%	5%	5%
West Midlands	3%	3%	3%	3%
<b>Yorkshire &amp; The Humber</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>4%</b>
The University of Bradford	2%	2%	2%	2%
The University of Huddersfield	4%	4%	4%	4%
The University of Hull	7%	7%	7%	7%
Leeds Arts University	3%	2%	3%	3%
Leeds Beckett University	5%	5%	5%	5%
Leeds Conservatoire	NA	NA	6%	6%
The University of Leeds	2%	2%	2%	2%
Leeds Trinity University	5%	5%	5%	5%
Sheffield Hallam University	6%	6%	7%	6%
The University of Sheffield	3%	3%	3%	3%
York St John University	4%	5%	5%	5%
The University of York	3%	3%	3%	3%

Sources: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-study/characteristics> as well as additional data requested from HESA/Jisc. \*2018/19 was the latest year for which specific data for this analysis was available at the time of the request. Note that table totals shown may not add up to 100% due to rounding of percentages and omission of 'other', 'unknown' and non-applicable student data.

According to HESA enrolment data, the most common subjects in HE for white boys from POLAR4 quintiles 1-2 are Computer Science, Biological Sciences, Business & administrative studies and Engineering & Technology. White boys from quintiles 1-2 are notably much more likely to study Computer Science or Engineering & Technology than other students. BAME boys from quintiles 1-2 show a similar high representation among Computer Science and Engineering & Technology, suggesting that the increased representation of boys among these subjects is a factor of gender rather than Ethnicity.

White boys from quintiles 1-2 are notably less likely to study Education or subjects allied to Medicine. The under-representation of white boys from quintiles 1-2 in these subjects is specific to boys, as white girls from similar backgrounds are more likely to study these subjects than other students. The under-representation of white boys from quintiles 1-2 in subjects allied to medicine appears to be particular to this group, as BAME boys from relevant backgrounds study this subject in proportions closer to the national average than to white boys.

#### Enrolment in HE courses by selected student demographics, 2016/17-2018/19\*

Subject of study (Subject area)	Total UK	Total POLAR4 Quintiles 1-2	White Boys Quintiles 1-2	White Girls Quintiles 1-2	BAME Boys Quintiles 1-2
(1) Medicine & dentistry	3%	1%	1%	1%	3%
(2) Subjects allied to medicine	14%	17%	7%	22%	12%
(3) Biological sciences	11%	12%	12%	13%	9%
(4) Veterinary science	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
(5) Agriculture & related subjects	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%
(6) Physical sciences	4%	4%	6%	3%	3%
(7) Mathematical sciences	2%	1%	3%	1%	2%
(8) Computer science	5%	5%	12%	1%	10%
(9) Engineering & technology	6%	5%	11%	1%	14%
(A) Architecture, building & planning	2%	2%	3%	1%	3%
(B) Social studies	10%	10%	7%	12%	8%
(C) Law	4%	4%	3%	4%	4%
(D) Business & administrative studies	12%	10%	11%	7%	20%
(E) Mass communications & documentation	2%	2%	3%	2%	2%
(F) Languages	4%	4%	3%	5%	1%
(G) Historical & philosophical studies	4%	3%	4%	3%	1%
(H) Creative arts & design	8%	8%	9%	9%	4%
(I) Education	7%	8%	5%	11%	2%
(J) Combined	2%	2%	2%	2%	1%

Sources: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-study/characteristics> as well as additional data requested from HESA/Jisc. \*2018/19 was the latest year for which specific data for this analysis was available at the time of the request. Note that table totals shown may not add up to 100% due to rounding of percentages and omission of 'other', 'unknown' and non-applicable student data.

# Secondary Data Analysis

## CFE Student Survey Data

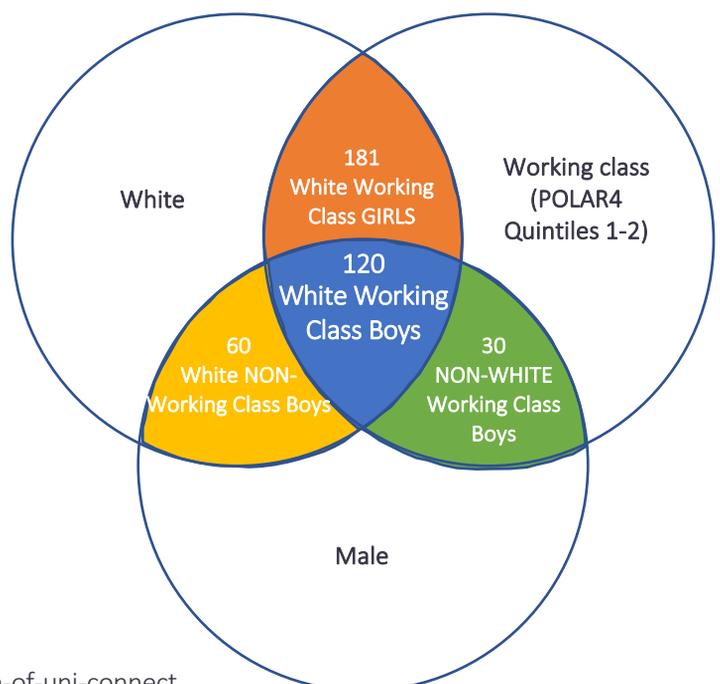
During Phase 1 of the Uni Connect Programme, CFE Research worked in partnership with Sheffield Hallam University, the Behavioural Insights Team and economists from the University of Sheffield and LSE to undertake a formative and impact evaluation of the Uni Connect programme<sup>1</sup>. The Phase 1 report for the Office for Students was published in October 2019. CFE is continuing with the impact evaluation in Phase 2 which runs until autumn 2021.

A central methodology within the CFE evaluation of Uni Connect is a survey administered to pupils from Years 9 to 13 across the UK, facilitated by Uni Connect hubs/partnerships across each region.

The survey focuses on four key themes in measuring pupils' propensity toward Higher Education: **Knowledge of HE**, **Attitudes towards HE**, **Aspirations**, **Intention toward HE** (likelihood of application). A number of specific questions relate to each of these themes, which are covered in the subsequent pages.

As well as feeding into the national evaluation of Uni Connect, CFE provides access to regional partnerships like Go Higher West Yorkshire to analyse survey data from their region as they see fit. As part of the current research, Cosmos analysed CFE survey data from the West Yorkshire region with a particular view to compare knowledge, attitudes, aspirations and intentions towards HE by ethnicity. The following pages show the findings from this analysis, based on **614 surveys from CFE Wave 2 across West Yorkshire**.

**120 White Working Class Boys** were identified according to their ethnicity, gender and POLAR4 Quintile status (POLAR4 Quintiles 1-2 being categorised as 'Working class' for the purpose of this analysis). Ratings of Knowledge, Attitudes, Aspirations and Intentions were compared against **three comparator groups** by altering one of the three defining variables, as illustrated right:



Source:

1. [cfe.org.uk/work/national-evaluation-of-uni-connect](https://cfe.org.uk/work/national-evaluation-of-uni-connect)

## Knowledge of Higher Education

White working class boys express greater levels of knowledge compared to the non-working class equivalent, in 7/10 knowledge attributes.

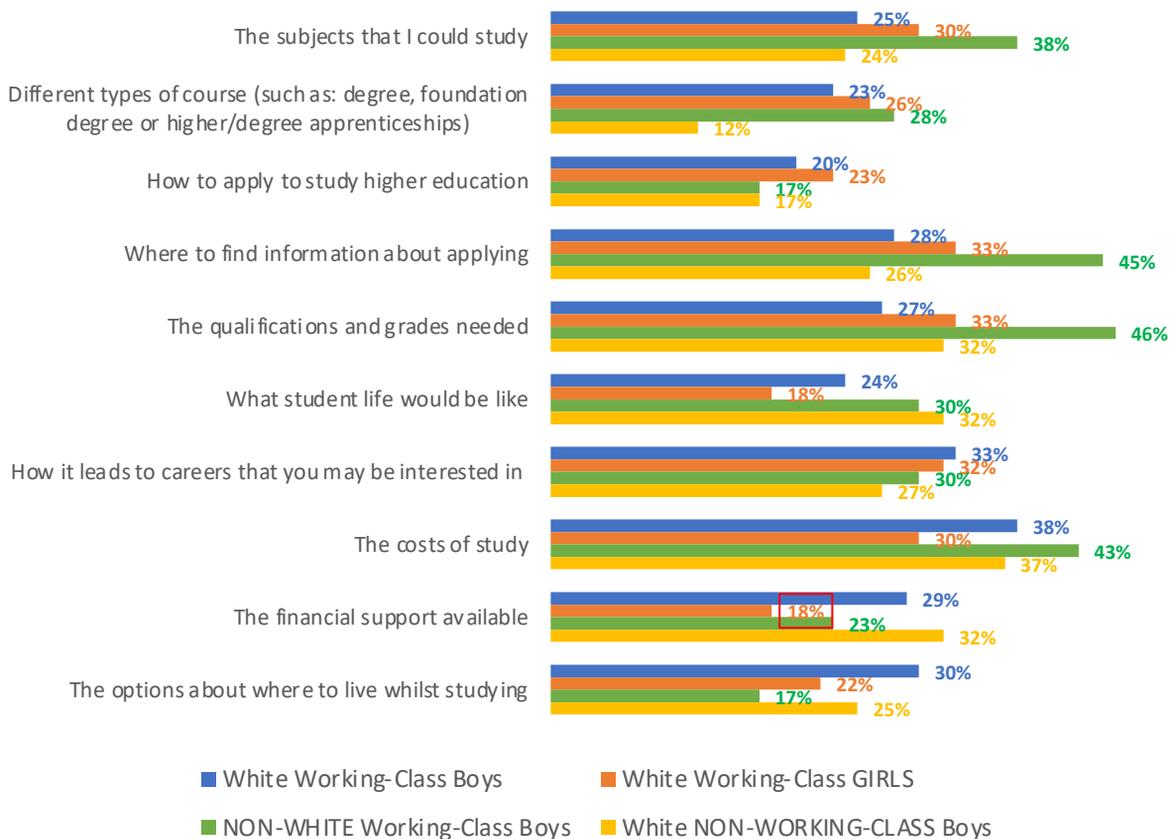
Comparison between white working class boys and girls is mixed, each scoring higher than the other on 5/10 knowledge statements. However, boys express significantly greater knowledge of 'financial support'.

Non-white boys are the group which most consistently express greater levels of knowledge than white working class boys on 7/10 statements.

'Options of where to live while studying' is the statement on which white working class boys express the greatest levels of knowledge compared to other groups, while 'the qualifications and grades needed' is the statement on which they most notably trail all comparator groups.

### CFE Knowledge Statements compared across Ethnicities

*How much do you know about the following aspects of applying to higher education? % "A lot"*



## Attitudes towards Higher Education

Unlike Knowledge, white working class boys express notably lower Attitudes than non-working class boys, on 6/10 Attitude statements – significantly so with regards to ‘it would improve my social life’.

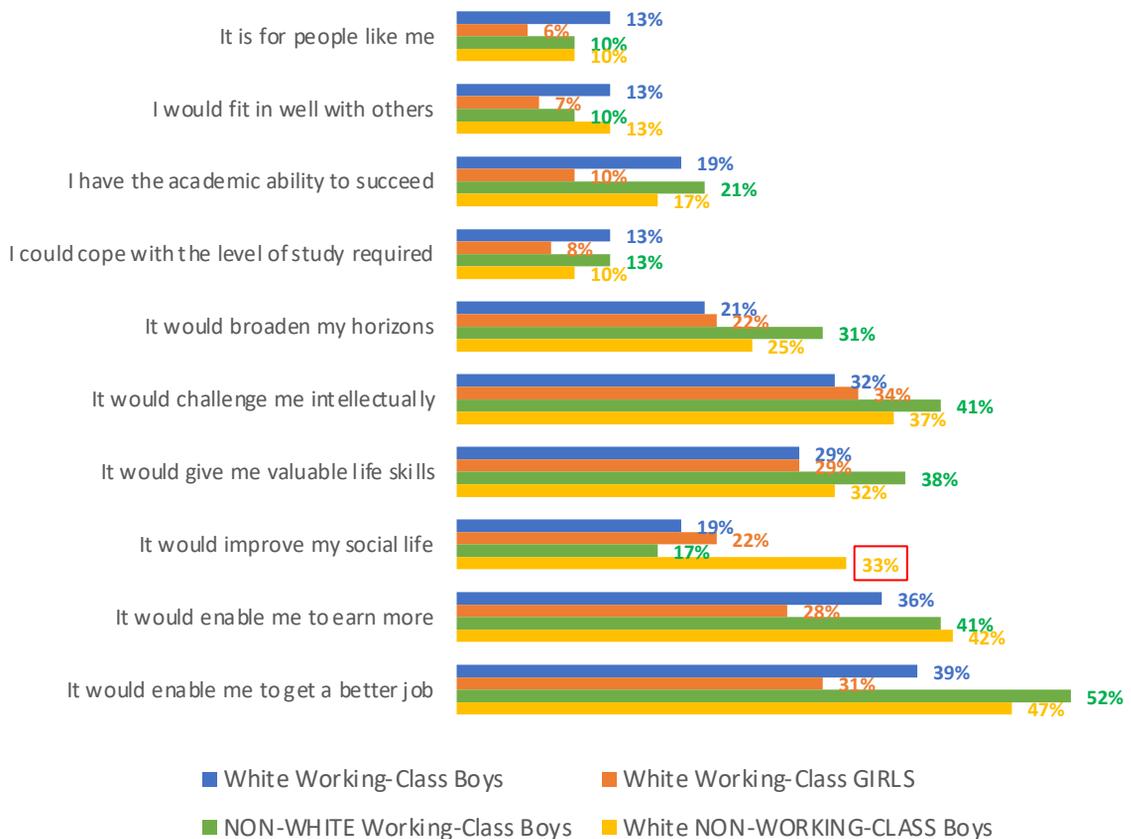
Comparison between white working class boys and girls, is again mixed, with Boys expressing more favourable attitudes on 6 statements and girls on 4 statements.

Again, non-white working class boys score consistently higher, on 7/10 Attitude statements.

Interestingly, white working class boys compare favourably to other groups on the statements ‘it is for people like me’, ‘I would fit in’ and ‘I could cope with study’. The attitude statements on which white working class boys most notably score lower than comparator groups are ‘it would broaden my horizons,’ ‘it would challenge me intellectually,’ ‘it would give me valuable life skills’ and ‘it would improve my social life’.

### CFE Attitude Statements compared across Ethnicities

*How much do you agree with the following statements about higher education? % “Strongly Agree”*



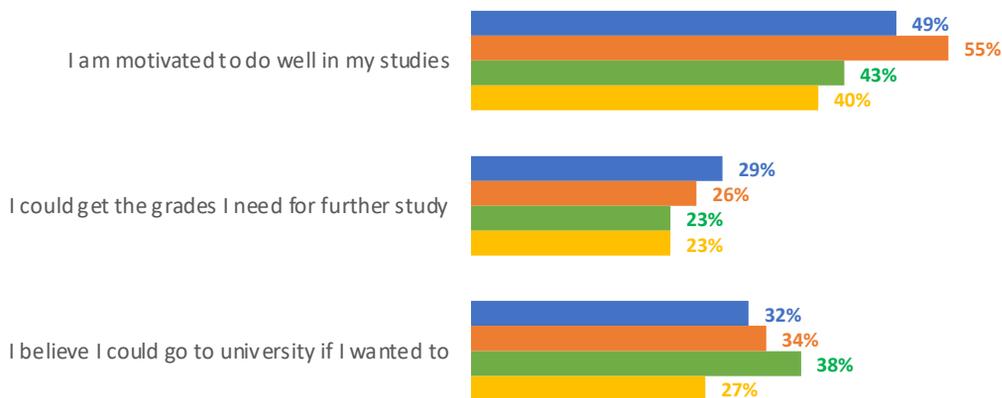
## Aspirations & Intentions

White working class boys express greater confidence in their ability ‘get the grades I need’ than any other comparator group. They also express greater levels of ‘motivation’ than non-white boys and non-working class boys (lower only than white working class girls). However, their belief that ‘I could go to university if I wanted to’ is less than girls or non-white boys (but higher than non-working class boys).

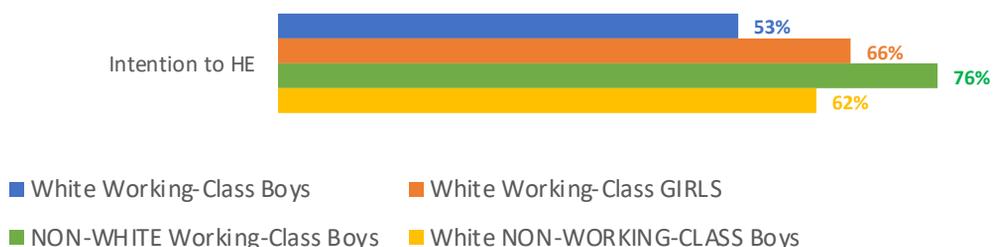
Despite mixed to favourable ratings of Knowledge, Attitude and Aspiration statements, white working class boys express the lowest levels of Intention toward HE among the comparison groups.

### CFE Aspiration & Intention Statements compared across Ethnicities

*How much do you agree with the following statements about your aspiration for the future? % “Strongly Agree”*

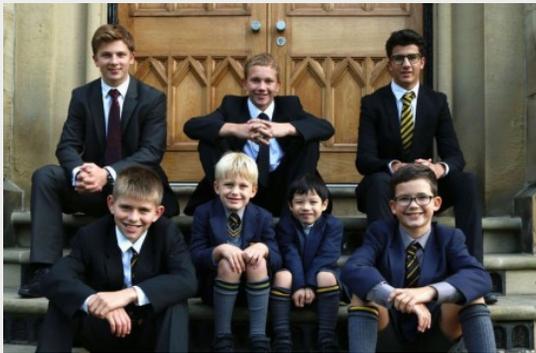


*How likely are you to apply to higher education at age 18 or 19? % “Fairly likely, Very likely or Definitely Will”*



## Key Findings from CFE Student Surveys (West Yorkshire)

- White working class boys show mixed performance relative to comparator groups across Knowledge, Attitude and Aspiration statements
- White working class boys express greater levels of knowledge compared to the non-working class equivalent, in 7/10 Knowledge attributes. However this trend is almost reversed with regards to Attitudes, where non-working class boys score higher on 6/10 statements - significantly so in regards to 'it would improve my social life'
- Comparison between white working class boys and girls is mixed, each scoring higher than the other on 5/10 Knowledge statements and boys scoring higher on 6/10 Attitude statements. Boys express significantly greater knowledge of 'financial support' than girls
- Non-white boys are the group which most consistently score higher than white working class boys, with higher scores on 7/10 Knowledge statements and 7/10 Attitude statements
- White working class boys express greater confidence in their ability 'get the grades I need' than any other comparator group. However, it is unclear how appropriate this confidence is when white working class boys notably trail all comparator groups on Knowledge of 'the qualifications and grades needed'
- White working class boys also express greater levels of 'motivation' than Non-white boys and non-working class boys (lower only than white working class girls). However, their belief that 'I could go to university if I wanted to' is less than girls or Non-white boys (but higher than non-working class boys).
- White working class boys compare favourably to other groups on confidence-related Attitudes statements such as 'it is for people like me', 'I would fit in' and 'I could cope with study'. However, white working class boys most notably trail comparator groups on Attitude statements related to benefits of HE such as 'it would broaden my horizons,' 'it would challenge me intellectually', 'it would give me valuable life skills' and 'it would improve my social life'.
- Despite mixed to favourable ratings of Knowledge, Attitude and Aspiration statements, white working class boys express the lowest levels of Intention toward HE among the comparison groups. The previous findings suggest that is most likely due to a lack of interest in the benefits of HE more so than any lack of confidence or suitability



# Primary Research



# Learner Interviews & Discussion Groups

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The primary research element of the current investigation consisted primarily of online discussion groups or one-to-one interviews with **White British Male FE and KS4 learners**. **All participants resided in West Yorkshire** and were identified as ‘working class’ in the context of the current research according to their home postcode being in **POLAR4 Quintile 1 or 2**.

Discussion groups – involving a maximum of five learners per group – were our favoured methodology; enabling us to gather feedback from a number of learners at one time, benefit from the flow of ideas that occurs in the group context and to gain a sense of any commonalities or differences among individuals. However, due to difficulties with recruitment (target students proved difficult to reach during COVID-19 lockdowns), only three such group discussions were conducted (two FE and one KS4). In total, for the first phase of our primary research, **8 learners took part in an online discussion group, while 10 completed a one-to-one interview**. Those learners who took part in discussion groups did so along learners of the same level of study (i.e., KS4 or FE) only, to facilitate the discussion of shared experiences within each group. In total we spoke to **12 FE learners and 6 KS4 learners**.

The questions and topics discussed were the same for all learners across both the groups and one-to-one formats, using a pre-scripted semi-structured discussion guide. All discussions and interviews were led by a trained qualitative researcher, who was experienced in working with children and topics around education. Interviews and discussions took around one hour on average (with one-to-one interviews typically being slightly shorter and discussion groups being slightly longer) and all learners received a reward for taking part.

Prior to research discussions/interviews, learners were invited to one of two 30-minute **introductory workshops** to introduce the research and researcher, to provide an opportunity to ask any questions and to build a sense of comfort among participants in advance of the discussions, and to help overcome any potential uncertainty and facilitate smooth discussions when it came to the research. 8 of 18 learners who ultimately took part in the research previously attended an introductory workshop. All but one learner who took part in an introductory workshop continued to take part in the research.

In the following section, we discuss the key themes and insights emerging from our discussions with learners. **Please note that the findings described in this section relate to qualitative discussions with a relatively small sample of white boys, and that these may have been more engaged with education (hence their willingness to take part) than others**. There may also be a range of backgrounds, and home and family circumstances, amongst the learners, even within the specified POLAR4 quintiles 1 and 2.

## General Feelings about Education

White boys we spoke to generally had **mostly positive views and experiences of education**. **Friends and social aspects** were most commonly cited as the among the most positive aspects of school or college life, followed by enjoyment of **subjects of interest**. While many students described their experience of education as "mixed", none suggested that it was more negative than positive. This would appear to be in contrast to the broader trends among boys from working class backgrounds, who are often seen as disengaged with or having negative attitudes towards education, according to stakeholders (p57) and much of the literature around these learners (see literature review from p6).

However, three boys mentioned **bullying** as something that they had experienced and was a negative aspect of their school life. While this had impacted their experience negatively, it didn't generally impact on their overall perspectives around education or its benefits. Other negative aspects mentioned (by one participant each) included inconsistent teaching, subjects they don't enjoy, "waking up early" and time pressure.

Students generally expressed a **practical perspective about the importance of education** and the benefit of further study compared to employment. The majority of students said that the choice to continue studying or start work earlier depended on the individual, their abilities and aspirations; that earlier employment may be better for earning money, but further study may be better for longer-term development. Only a couple of students each suggested a clear preference or perceived value of either further study or earlier employment.

There was a consistent theme, mentioned by the majority of FE students, that **"college is better than school"**. Common reasons for this included a greater focus on subjects of interest, fellow students being more focused and better behaved than school and more friendly, mutually respectful relationships with teachers. FE students generally expressed more positive perspectives of education as a whole compared to KS4 students – as expected given that those with more negative views would be less likely to proceed to FE. One student we spoke to, who went to a sixth-form attached to their school, expressed a wish that they had applied to an external college as many students from school had continued there but were not as focused as him.

*I've enjoyed all my education so far. I'm definitely preferring college though, because you pick three subjects or more and you focus on them. So there's only three and you get to put everything you've got into that. Whereas with GCSEs, there's a lot more. And I guess that could be good for some people. But I like putting my attention to one main primary thing.*

*FE learner*

*The advantage of college compared to high school is I can see a direct correlation from what I'm learning to what I'm going to be needing to know. Whereas a lot of times in maths and science I used to sit and think 'yeah I need to learn this because it's going to be in my exam but after that what's the point?' But now it's very much focussed on what we need to know and how we need to know, and we can understand it.*

*FE learner*

*I think in high school there's a lot of judgement and pressure from peers and I think in college there's a lot less of that.*

*FE learner*

*The social aspect of education is one of the best parts. Especially now in college, I'm studying with friends who have the same interests as me so it makes the experience more enjoyable.*

*FE learner*

## Experiences with other Students

As described above, **friendships** with other students were the most commonly cited positive aspect of school and college life. However, fellow students could also be a negative or challenging aspect of education, particularly for the three students we spoke to who had experienced **bullying**. A few boys also referred to school being an environment with considerable **pressure** and **judgement** from peers. Again, FE students suggested that experiences with fellow students were **more positive at college**, due to better focus and behaviour, than at school.

## Experiences with Teachers

As with education in general, boys described **mostly positive experiences with teachers**. While acknowledging that their relationships with different teachers varied – and that they got on better with some teachers than others – no boys suggested that their experiences were more negative than positive.

Boys generally suggested that their teachers were supportive and indeed many reported positive **examples of direct support** from teachers with regards to **advice around their future plans**, most often from **teachers of students' preferred subjects**.

Boys reported no clear experiences of being "put down" or "made to feel bad" (as asked by the interviewer) but a few did suggest that there were teachers who put them under **excessive pressure**, particularly around coursework and exams.

Again, FE students suggested that they had **better relationships with teachers in college** than at school, as they felt more respected, treated as an adult and able to have more informal conversations.

““

*My head of year was really supportive and it wasn't just the academic stuff but also my emotional side. It was great to talk to him, he'd just tell me life advice really not necessarily educational advice.*

*FE learner*

””

““

*In secondary having so many teachers, I did strike a bond with a couple but because you had so many it was hard. But obviously in college, it's a lot less and it's easier to start the bond. They know how you react, how to improve your moods etc.*

*FE learner*

””

““

*When teachers say, 'you've got to do this within the next day', that's a lot of pressure. I feel like teachers think that they're the only important subject because they give you a lot of stuff to do and it all just makes you feel pressured.*

*FE learner*

””

““

*There was one teacher who was always saying 'this many days until GCSES...' and that really didn't help. Even now, when I saw him and told him what I'm studying at sixth form he said 'oh that's a big one, be careful'.*

*FE learner*

””

## Parental Influence

Boys generally described a **positive influence and interest from parents** around their education. This would typically involve fairly regular **conversations about everyday school or college life** as well as occasional **discussions about future options and subject choices**, as and when needed. This would appear to contrast with broader trends among working class parents, according to stakeholders, who in their experience felt parents are often disengaged with or have negative attitudes towards education, (p61).

**A handful of boys described parents having more of an active role** in their education than others, including influencing career choices (following similar pathways), preparing their revision timetable and a more collaborative decision-making process around future options and subject choice. One boy, who went to a private grammar school, had a particularly motivating mother (from a working class background). However, all boys suggested that their choices were ultimately their own and that their parents were supportive, rather than pressuring.

There was **little evidence any negative influence** that parents may have on the education or future choices of the boys we spoke to. Only one boy said that their mum "doesn't want me to go to university", after his sister had dropped out of university due to excessive pressure. Two boys mentioned that their parents would prefer them to stay close to home if they were to go to university.



*We talk every once in a while to think about my options. I've been asked before multiple times, if I really want to do this when I'm older, if I want to carry on this career, do I enjoy it, do I find it easy or hard. I feel supported and they don't put me under any pressure.*

*FE learner*



## Future Intentions

White boys we spoke to generally expressed **positive future intentions**. This would appear to contradict discourse around ‘aspirational deficit’ and be in line with more recent research, as discussed in the background literature (from page 35). **Over half of FE students planned to go to university**, while another two were considering this option. **Two planned to do an apprenticeship**, while another three were considering this option.

**All but one KS4 students planned to go to college**, with the remaining one considering this option – though half were not sure what to do after that. One planned to go to university, with another two considering this option. One planned to do an apprenticeship, with another one considering this option.

These positive intentions toward future education expressed by the boys we spoke to would appear to be exceptions to the broader trend among white boys from working class backgrounds, who according to stakeholders, are often less inclined to continue in education (p62).

“ *I definitely want to go to uni. I'd like to get the qualifications to put me in a good position. It's full steam ahead. I've always thought it'll be uni, nothing else. That's it. And then see after that.* ”  
*FE learner*

“ *I'd say I want to go to uni. I feel like getting out of Leeds and going somewhere where there's more potential, like London, for example. There's a lot more potential down there, like unis are a lot higher level. I definitely have uni in my mind.* ”  
*FE learner*

“ I’m at Yorkshire cricket college studying a level three sport BTEC extended diploma. I also work for Leeds United as a data analyst for the women’s team. I’ve applied for university, sport and exercise science. it’s very much you either landing a job with luck or you work yourself to the bone and prove you’re the best and then get there that way so it’s just the way it has to be for me. I massively over plan so I have had it planned since about fourteen. ”  
FE learner

“ I’m definitely interested in uni. It’s something I’m considering still. I guess it depends on the opportunities. I’d like to get out there and show people what I can do in terms of my art. So maybe trying to look straight for a job. But I definitely consider going to university. I think both have their disadvantages and advantages. I think I’m going to get closer and see how I feel about it. ”  
FE learner

“ I’ve applied to college but just to have it as an option. At this point I’m not sure yet whether I want to go to college or do something more practical. ”  
KS4 learner

“ I’d prefer to start working sooner than to get a better education. You usually end up getting more money early on and afford to get better things as you go, instead of being on the loose end until you get a proper job. ”  
KS4 learner

## Subject Choice

White boys we spoke to express a **wide variety of subject choices** and interests. The **most commonly chosen subjects were sport, business and science** subjects, followed by geography. Other subjects included English, history, music, Spanish, law, technology, engineering, computing, sociology and travel & tourism. (Computing, Science, Business and Engineering are among the most common subjects studied by white boys from working class backgrounds in HE according to HESA data, p15).

The majority of boys we spoke to were studying academic subjects and enjoyed at least some of these. Only one FE student we spoke to was studying a plumbing course at college.

Three boys studied art, with one of these (currently in FE) wanting to go into fashion. One boy studied drama, while another (currently studying engineering, sociology and applied science at college) had recently decided to pursue a career in acting and was taking acting classes in his own time.

While the majority of boys suggested (when asked) that **some subjects (e.g. PE, IT) may be typically seen as being more "for boys" and others (e.g. health & social care, textiles) being "for girls"**, they suggested that **this had not influenced their own subject choices**. Only a couple of students suggested that negative perceptions or reactions might "put off" some boys from choosing subjects that were typically seen as predominantly female but said that this hadn't affected them. The one current drama student (who was one of only a few boys in his class) said that he had received some negative reactions and insults from other students in relation to this choice, but that this hadn't affected him negatively as he enjoyed the subject and was confident in his own choice. The boys we spoke to would appear to be exceptions in this regard to broader trends around masculine subject choice described by stakeholders (p63) and the findings of Ward (2015), described on p40 of the current report.

While subject choice often overlapped with or led into a preferred career, boys' choice of subjects, and associated careers, were primarily driven by **enjoyment and interest**. KS4 students expressed little consideration of future careers in their GCSE choices, being driven entirely by interest.

“ “ *I study geography, physics, maths and further maths. Since I was a kid, maths had been my favourite subject and then the past year or two, I just enjoyed physics more and more. I feel like I've always been relatively good at geography, so there's bit of a difference in there. I want to do physics at uni and further on.*

*FE learner*

” ”

“ “ *I'm studying a level one plumbing at Leeds Building College. I've been told by multiple people about it, friends, family members. it just stood out to me. I thought that's something I'd enjoy so decided to take it on.*

*FE learner*

” ”

“ “ *I'm at Leeds Art College doing a diploma in art and design to then go into fashion because ever since I was young I just being interested in clothes. I was in the building college but I just felt like being an electrician is just not for me so I made the switch.*

*FE learner*

” ”

“ “ *I originally chose engineering because I wanted to go into that career - I love vehicles and cars. I'm still studying that as a sort of back-up, but now I've decided I actually want to be an actor. That's something I'm doing in my own time, with online acting lessons and my own reading. It's something I've always wanted to do but always put on the back seat. In the first lockdown I just decided I need to chase it now because I'm going to be an adult soon.*

*FE learner*

” ”

## University Perceptions\*

White boys we spoke to expressed mostly **positive perceptions of university**. "Education" and **degree/qualifications** were the most commonly cited benefit of university, followed by **social aspects** and **life experience**. A few students each also referred to **career benefits** associated with university as well as **independence/living away from home**. This would appear to be in contrast to the broader trends among boys from working class backgrounds, who according to stakeholders (p65) and previous research by Archer, Pratt and Phillips (2001), described on p49 of the current report, often see little value or benefit in HE.

The most commonly cited negative aspect or challenge of university (in keeping with reports from stakeholders, p65), mentioned by around half of boys we spoke to (including some of those who planned on going to university as well as those who didn't), was the **financial cost or debt** associated with university. The second most common negative aspect or challenge, mentioned by around one third of boys, was the **"stress"** associated with study at university.

Despite these challenges, boys we spoke to were **generally optimistic** about their chances of going to university and succeeding there. While many boys suggested (when asked) that there may be more of a tendency towards students from university coming from "wealthier backgrounds" (as reflected in the earlier secondary data analysis, from p14), they generally thought that there would also be many students from similar working class backgrounds as themselves. Boys we spoke to were generally **confident that they would fit in and feel comfortable** at university.

\*Note: While this research explores how to support learners in progressing to higher education generally (inclusive of other non-university HEPs), universities were central to our discussions with participants who did not directly refer to any other form of HEP.



*I think university opens you up to a whole bunch of new things, new people and new friendships that will last a while, from what I've heard from people I know. And depending on where you go, I think that could influence you as a person and your preferences. But I think the education is the most important part of it, because the qualifications are really important for certain jobs.*

*FE learner*





*I think there's a mix of people at university. It's really just whoever has the ability to go there. There's no agenda or a certain person who has to go there.*

*FE learner*



*The negative things - I think it's nine thousand pounds a year to go to university. If you're working class, you can't afford that as well as the student accommodation. The good side of university is a good education – it does allow you to progress into better careers and just gives you that better knowledge and you can be what you want to be.*

*FE learner*



*I think it would be tough if you don't have, like, some money already saved for your accommodation kind of thing. Because having to pay for accommodation would be tough if you can't find a job or you don't already have something to fall back on. With all the work you've got to do, all the equipment to buy, all the books you'll need... maybe some people can't afford it.*

*FE learner*



*University is the pre-adult stage where it's like a trial-and-error where you really learn to be an adult and take care of yourself. I think it's very independent. You have to do things off your own back. I would benefit from support but with resilience I think I could do it.*

*KS4 learner*



## Apprenticeships

Two FE students we spoke to planned to do an apprenticeship, while another three were considering this option. One KS4 student planned to do an apprenticeship, with another one considering this option.

Earning money and experience were the common benefits mentioned by those who were interested in pursuing apprenticeships. Boys generally expressed a reasonable understanding of apprenticeships. Those who preferred to go to university generally appeared to do so with a reasonable understanding of apprenticeships and an informed decision to go to university instead, typically driven by their subject choice.

Stakeholders suggested that apprenticeships were a common choice for boys from working class backgrounds but that obtaining and succeeding in apprenticeships may be more difficult than many boys realised (p67).

*I'm looking at an apprenticeship more than university, mainly because you can get money and experience in what you want to do.*  
FE learner

*Right now I'm leaning more toward an apprenticeship but I'm going to wait to see my GCSE grades in the summer. I might be able to get a job with my stepdad working as an apprentice.*  
KS4 learner

*I've been looking at apprenticeships as a sort of back-up in case I can't go to university like I want to. It's not my preferred choice so I've not looked too much into it.*  
FE learner

## Background Literature: The ‘Low Aspiration’ Model

As mentioned in the literature review at the start of this report, much of the discourse relating to disparity in outcomes for white boys from working class backgrounds has involved assumptions pertaining to an ‘aspirational deficit’ among these groups. Such a view has been prevalent within certain reports from influential policy bodies (Hillman and Robinson, 2016, p.31), and amongst senior figures within the public sector. In a BBC news article from June 2018, it was reported that Amanda Spielman, head of OFSTED, described a ‘problem’ with white working class communities ‘lacking aspiration and drive’ toward educational success (Burns, 2018).

Such sentiments have been a regular feature of discourse from successive governments, suggesting that individuals from working class backgrounds experience a poverty of aspiration. Within such language it is implied that working class students lack the capability to hold ambitions aligned with educational success and study within HE. A trajectory which through political discourse has been presented as that which is deemed to be most legitimate.

Our primary research – particularly the previous sections around boys’ future intentions, subject choice and university perceptions – suggest that such assumptions may not be accurate. Boys we spoke to frequently expressed positive intentions to progress, across a range of subject areas, and recognised the value of higher education. In recent years, research conducted by a number of academics has also challenged the discourse around ‘low aspirations’.

Building from research conducted by Croll (2008), a study was carried out with school age students in an attempt to glean an understanding of the spheres of influence on their aspirations (Archer, DeWitt and Wong, 2014). After analysis of the results, researchers found that *“young people in our study generally had ‘high’ aspirations for professional, managerial and technical careers. There was little evidence of ‘poverty of aspiration’, with young people from all social backgrounds”* (2014, p.66). Instead of an aspirational deficit constraining social mobility, the research found that the main challenge for this group of young people was having a means by which to achieve them: *“‘raising aspirations’ is an unfair social enterprise – impelling all children to prizes that (due to the way the game is set up), only the privileged few can attain. We call instead for a policy to focus on ‘levelling the playing field’”* (2014, p.77).

Findings from the research suggested that the rhetoric of Government toward a poverty of aspiration may be flawed and, as a result, an agenda geared toward a raising of individual aspiration was unfair. Instead, the findings suggested that working class students involved in the study were less likely to achieve their aspirations due to the structural inequalities that they faced, namely a lack of access to resources, that would facilitate the accomplishment of their goals. Indeed, in a toolkit produced by the Education Endowment Foundation (2018), they comment that interventions linked to aspiration raising have ‘very low or no impact’ and are ‘based on very limited evidence’.

In a statement to the House of Commons Education Select Committee as part of the *Underachievement in Education of White Working Class Children* report (2014), Professor David Gillborn warned that *“It is easy to fall into a kind of deficit analysis: an assumption that, if a group is underachieving there must be a problem with the group, whereas we have an awful lot of research showing that schools tend to treat groups in systematically different ways.”* (p.103)

In research conducted by St Clair et al. (2013) investigating student aspiration as a conduit in which to accomplish career goals, the findings implied that a high level of aspiration was necessary for social mobility, but not sufficient in isolation: *“It was not unusual for somebody to want to be a lawyer and attend university, but only be taking three GCSE examinations when eight would be necessary for the next stage of study. The lack of knowledge of pathways to achieve aspirations was an important issue.”* (p.735)

This sentiment was mirrored by evidence presented by Dr Francis to the House of Commons Education Select Committee in 2014: *“There is a lot of evidence that working class families have high aspirations. What they do not have is the information and the understanding as to how you might mobilise that aspiration effectively for outcomes for your children. Money makes a big difference here (...) but also an understanding of the rules of the game.”* (p.29)

Alongside the EEF toolkit (2018), a growing body of research evidence suggests that within the context of widening university access, a sole focus on raising aspiration within educational practice is often an ineffectual tool (Harrison and Waller, 2018; Spohrer, 2016; Spohrer, 2015; Croll and Attwood, 2013). It is also acknowledged as one which does little to address the complex structural barriers which many students from groups who are currently underrepresented within HE may face.

Instead, the above research suggests, scaffolds need to be put into place around aspiration in order for working class students to make what Ball, Reay and David describe as the *contingent choice* of going to university (2002). Such a choice, the authors suggest, lies outside of their lived experiences, and is one in which they have little access to the relevant cultural, social and economic resources required to be successful. In a 2018 paper on student aspiration by Harrison and Waller it is suggested that instead, a framework of practice which considers the complex negotiation of structural forces which intersect to form future expectations, rather than isolated activity with the aim of increasing aspiration toward HE participation, is required.

In summary, recent research suggests that the under-representation of working class boys in HE is due not to a lack of aspirations, but challenges in achieving them. The potential challenges for boys in achieving their aspirations, as evidenced by the current research, are discussed from page 45.

## Experiences of Boys in Education (compared to Girls)

Almost half of the boys we spoke to suggested (when asked) that **girls receive favourable treatment** from teachers in school – though this would be less the case in college. Boys suggested that they often received more "strict" or "harsh" treatment from teachers than girls receive for equivalent behaviour; teachers were **more likely to scold or punish boys** than girls for the same behaviour. Participants felt that **boys were often expected to misbehave** and were more likely to be blamed or punished for any perceived misbehaviour, while teachers were more likely to ignore or excuse similar behaviour from girls.

It was also suggested that teachers were more likely to be **more sympathetic or supportive toward girls** who may be struggling, while they were less likely to provide the same support to boys who may need it – perhaps perceiving that their difficulties were due to their own poor behaviour or focus than any actual academic challenge. However, boys suggested that the tendencies described above **varied by teacher**, with some teachers (particularly female teachers) being more likely to favour girls, and others less so.

**Mental health** was mentioned by a few learners as something that boys may be more likely to struggle with, or less likely to ask for support with if they did, mainly due to **social expectations** that boys (or men) shouldn't show their emotions and that they should "get on with it". One student in particular described having struggled with this significantly throughout their life and education, that they have learned to be "straight-faced" and suppress their emotions, to the detriment of their mental health.

Generally, students suggested that both **boys and girls need the same kinds of support** with regards to their education and progression, but that **boys may be less likely to be proactive or to take up such support opportunities** – they may need greater encouragement to access any support available.

“ I’ve always grown up with the idea of being a manly man, that emotions are weak, and so I barely showed my emotion through high school. I was bullied and depressed. I had counselling but I still didn’t fully open up. It’s something that boys should be really helped with because they don’t want to show themselves and appear weak. That’s what leads to suicide in men who can’t open up.  
FE learner ”

“ I think boys suffer more with mental health. If a boy suffers from something like depression, they’re just taught to like man up. I think boys suffer from mental health just as much as girls, but they they do not receive the help because they’re not supposed to speak out about it. If they can’t speak out they can’t really be supported and they’re just suffering. I do think boys are less likely to seek help because they’ll always think that, no one is going to help me because I’m just a man.  
FE learner ”

“ In general, boys would be less likely to use opportunities and sources of help than girls. I think it’s just how it is, I think it’s quite hard for schools to change that, but it’s worth trying. They could encourage it more, talk about it more. I think more talks about what’s available would it would provoke them to use the support more.  
FE learner ”

## Background Literature: Working Class Boys and Masculinity in Education

In an effort to move beyond the simplistic notions of aspirational deficit (p7) and better understand the structural forces which intersect to influence the future expectations of white working class boys, the following section considers some of the research exploring how social class and gender expectations affect boys in education, including how the implications historical socio-economic changes have left an imprint on the 'collective memories' (Reay, 2009) of working class young men.

Widely considered a seminal text in the recent history of the sociology of education, Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour* (1977) shines a light on the transition of white working class young men at a school in the Black Country from school to work in the late 1970's. Gathering data at the institution over a two-year period, Willis' ethnographic approach utilised participant observation, informal interviews, group discussions and diaries to interrogate the social conditions facilitating the 'lads' trajectory through education and into working class occupations. Within the text, Willis presents elements of 'the lads' culture as laying the foundation for a transition into a working class job as a 'breadwinner', a role which has been widely associated with working class masculinity (Kelan, 2008). Through engagement in practices which constituted 'having a laff' including drinking, smoking, disrupting lessons and messing around, Willis argued that 'the lads' gained status by their investment in an anti-school subculture. 'The lads' positioned those who deviated from investment in the anti-school subculture as 'ear oles' which Willis argues *'itself connotes the passivity and absurdity of the school conformist for 'the lads''* (p.14). For Willis, 'the lads' disdain of the 'ear oles' was *'not so much they support the teachers, rather they support the idea of teachers'* (p.13). Within 'the lads' subculture, alternative behaviours which were viewed to be conforming to those of the institution, were positioned as effeminate and undesirable. Instead, Willis argues that 'the lads' valorised the forms of working class masculinity which would be legitimated in the working class job that awaited them in an industrialised region of the West Midlands in the 1970's.

More recent academic endeavour has suggested that there is much plurality in the way in which males in school demonstrate masculinity. Such demonstrations of masculinity commonly associated with the role of working class males as 'breadwinner' has been critiqued, with research problematising the casual sexism commonly associated with it as a form a *'hegemonic industrial working class masculinity'* (Kenway and Kraack, 2004). Research by Steven Roberts (2013; 2018) suggests that men enact masculinities in different ways which depend not only on their social characteristics, but also on the dynamics of their surroundings. Conducting the study with 24 young males, around 75% of which could be viewed as working class, Roberts' research (2013) brings into question the body of literature which presents a simplified 'breadwinner' version of masculinity. In a contemporary context, Roberts argues that masculinities present within this particular group are more likely shaped by opportunities present in the service sector, appearing to adapt their identity to fit in with their location in a service driven economy.

Instead, Mac an Ghail and Haywood (2011) argue in a paper on masculinity that a method of analysis drawing on subjectivities is needed. In the text, the authors argue that inequalities faced by the white working class have slipped off the radar for a significant amount of time, and now that they are back on, the analysis of the group as victims of material-based subordination has little power to offer explanation. It is implied that because working class idioms have become disconnected with industrialisation, and class practices are more led by consumption, forms such as alcohol, football, violence and aggressive sexualities have become emblems for a lack of self-management from this particular group. The authors go on to assert that because the new position of the working class man embodies such a complex array of psychological and sociological pre-dispositions, an exploration of simultaneous articulations of a broad array of differences is needed.

In a more contemporary piece of ethnographic research taking place in the Welsh Valleys, Ward's (2015) explores the impact of societal change on young working class males' performances of masculinity in an area which, similar to the Black Country, had experienced significant socio-economic change; shining a light on how the young working class male participants navigated insecurity and change as they made their transition to adulthood. Drawing on qualitative data collected over a period of two and half years, Ward's typology split the participants into analytic categories of 'The Valley Boiz' (who displayed 'industrial' masculinity akin to that described by Willis, 1977), 'The Geeks' (who displayed a more 'studious' masculinity, including interests in technology and reading) and 'The Emos' (who displayed 'alternative' masculinities through their engagement with a subcultural scene. Whilst at first glance such a typology may appear reminiscent of those created in earlier research by Willis (1977) and Brown (1987), Ward's study captures a plurality and complexity within the participants' data, charting the consequences of substantial socio-economic change imposed upon the region. Within the experience of the young, working class men, Ward describes tensions and contradictions which were a constant companion of the participants' educational experiences. 'The Valley Boiz', it is argued, displayed some behaviours which contested stereotypical forms of working class masculinity, whilst 'The Geeks' at times displayed '*cracks in their studious front*' (p.19). Such cracks, Ward asserts, were illustrative of the difficulties faced by 'The Geeks' in their effort to become geographically and socially mobile and attend '*university as working class academic achievers*' (p.19).

In relation to the current study, Ward's research is especially useful in highlighting the tensions between forms of working class masculinity, and those required for Higher Education progression in a globalised, neoliberal society. Permeated with tensions and contradictions, Ward illustrates that negotiations of masculinity, and with them future expectations, are complex and bound within the socio-historic experience of a working class community.

While the pathways available to boys today may be different to those in Willis' (1977) study, certain challenges remain in navigating expectations of masculinity (from parents, teachers, themselves, and one another), potentially to the detriment of their mental health and access to support they might need to progress (p53).

## 'Working Class' Identity

Understandings of and identification with the concept of 'working class' varied considerably among the boys that we spoke to. The majority of boys expressed some understanding of working class and agreed that they themselves were working class, although their descriptions of what this meant and confidence with which they stated their identification with this label varied. Around five boys seemed to express relatively strong levels of identification with being 'working class' and were confident to describe themselves as fitting this label. Three boys expressed little or no understanding of the term or that this wasn't something they had thought about.

Most boys explained 'working class' as referring in some way to income or wealth, that working class people earned or had less money than "middle class" or "upper class" people. Several boys suggested that 'working class' referred to "average" people, with a few suggesting that working class people were neither wealthy nor particularly poor.

A handful of boys described 'working class' as being "poor", in poverty or financially struggling to pay for essentials, while a few drew a distinction between a "lower working class" and "upper" or "normal" working class who were reasonably comfortable and able to afford everyday things. A couple of boys referred to themselves as "middle class" based on their relative level of comfort and family income/educational background (though these met the same POLAR4 criteria as other students we spoke to). A couple of boys referred to 'working class' simply as people who "work hard", rather than being tied to any economic measure.

The variation of responses among learners toward the questions illustrate some of the complexities of working-class identity as discussed in the literature review (from p6 and the following section).

““

*I'm familiar with working class. I think it's just a standard family. Like, they're not poor, but they don't have a lot of money around, it's just average.*

*FE learner*

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““

*I'd say working class is just the average person – not someone who's rich, not someone who's got next to nothing. It's just the standard person you'd see about.*

*FE learner*

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““

*I think there's two sides to the working class of people – those who can put food on the table and those who are on the bread line. I think being in the upper part of the working class to go to university.*

*FE learner*

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*Working class is people from a disadvantaged background who don't have a lot of money and work like 7-8 hours a day for minimum wage or low pay, or may be on benefits. I'd say I'm middle class because I live in a house where we can pay the rent without problems and both my parents have well-paying jobs and I go to a pretty good school.*

*KS4 learner*

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## Background Literature: Working Class Identity

In the earlier section on *Working Class Boys and Masculinity in Education* (p39), we considered how boys may be impacted by expectations of masculinity. In this next section, we consider the form and impact of boys' identification with being 'working class', in the context of their education and future plans.

In the earlier section, we referenced Willis' (1977) description of *lads* and associations of masculinity with being the *breadwinner*, while acknowledging that societal expectations of working class masculinity may have changed considerably since then. Willis himself later acknowledged how his 1977 research *caught 'the lads' in Learning to Labour at the end of what was perhaps the last golden period of working class cultural coherence and power in a fully employed Britain'* (Willis, 2000, p.86) Following Willis' study the social and economic conditions of the region shifted dramatically, a shift which, as documented by Willis himself (1988), significantly changed the landscape of opportunity for working class employment within the region.

It is also argued that through Willis' focus on 'the lads' there was little exploration of the 'ear oles' as a group who, it could be argued, set their sights on education and employment more commonly associated with the middle-class students. It has also been argued that the typology of the students into 'the lads' or 'the ear oles' created an either/or binary which Brown (1987) argues was guilty of determinism. Brown argues that the invisible majority of ordinary working class students were those who *'neither left their names engraved in honours boards, nor gouged them into the top of classroom desks'* (p.1). For Brown *"the very fact that ordinary kids have been regarded by teachers and indeed by other pupils as ordinary has tended not to make them an intrinsically appealing object of sociological enquiry, and there has been little demand for such studies from teachers because they have not, at least until recently, been seen to be a cause for concern."* (p.3)

It was this gap in the experience of working class students, in the midst of a Thatcherite government and an agenda of new vocationalism, on which Brown wished to shine a light. As such, students who wished to be studying *'for CSEs rather than O Levels'* and *'intended to leave school at 16 in the hopes of finding a 'tidy' (good) working class job'* (p.39) were a core focus of the study. Presenting a critical engagement with *Learning to Labour*, Brown's study explores how working class boys who were neither anti-authoritarian, nor committed to the pursuit of a middle-class career, negotiated their future expectations. Brown's work offers an insight into the formation of expectations for young men who were overlooked in previous research, the insight offered is temporally contingent. As Brown himself contends, the balance between practices of resistance and accommodation struck by the students invested in 'getting on' depended on securing local employment within the region. Opportunities which, it could be argued, in a contemporary deindustrialised socio-economic context, have diminished significantly.

In research pertaining to the educational transitions of boys in working class communities, a tension is evident; one which lies between an economic imperative to engage in certain practices to become socially mobile, and the perception of such practices by boys in working class communities. It is this tension between being working class and becoming educationally successful which Ingram's (2018) text sets out to explore.

In a sophisticated examination of the working class boys' negotiations of the transition between the differing fields, the author builds a typology, illustrating in detail how such a 'habitus tug' is felt by participants while they attempt to negotiate and reconcile their identity within differing institutions, schemes of perception and dispositions that are deemed to be most legitimate.

Similar to the research of Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001), Ingram frames the research in a manner which draws together the social and psychological implications of such disjuncture. Drawing on the example of a participant named Brendy (2018, p.164), Ingram illustrates how an investment in the potential benefits of educational success as a tool in which to become socially mobile, poses the risk of undesirable consequences for a working class student's wellbeing and sense of belonging.

Through the research explored above, it is clear the educational transitions of boys in working class communities are far from clean and simple. Instead, the research of Willis (1977), Brown (1987), Ward (2015) and Ingram (2018) highlight their relational, structurally contingent nature. The evidence presented suggests that such transitions are negotiated in constant dialogue with social, cultural and economic resources which are both available, and deemed to be most legitimate, within a student's particular set of social conditions. It has also been highlighted that since the late 1970's, such conditions have been subject to significant change.

As Reay argues (2009), an industrial legacy has left an imprint on the 'collective memories' of working class communities. An imprint which, it could be argued, is a source of tension and conflict in the pursuit of an educationally successful, socially mobile trajectory. When reflected upon in relation to discourses around HE participation, such findings also illustrate the insufficiency of individualised notions of 'aspirational deficit' (Spohrer, 2011), as an explanatory tool.

While self-identification with the term 'working class' was not necessarily strong among the boys we spoke to in current research (p41), their educational experiences remain within a working class context and are likely to have been shaped by this. Indeed, the common suggestion among our participants that 'working class' described "average people" chimes with Brown's (1987) description of 'ordinary boys'. Like those in Brown's study, the boys we spoke to had hopes for 'getting on' in education and life. In the next section, we report the challenges learners' themselves described in achieving those aims.

## 'Working Class' Challenges

White boys we spoke to generally believed that 'working class' children could be just as successful as children from wealthier backgrounds, however many suggested that they would have to "work harder" in order to do so.

**Resources** including textbooks, computers and subject-specific equipment were the most commonly cited challenge facing working class children in education. Boys suggested that working class children, or particularly poorer children and families, might struggle to afford the resources needed to progress with their school or college work at the same pace as others, that they might lag behind others and suffer academically as a result. The boys we spoke to generally did not experience such difficulties themselves – except for a couple of boys who didn't have computers at home during the first COVID-19 lockdown – but many had seen such disadvantages among some of their peers. **Transport** was another expense that a couple of boys mentioned may be difficult for poorer students.

**"Connections"** were also among the most common disadvantage cited for working class children compared to wealthier children. Boys suggested wealthier children would be more likely to have family or other useful connections that would support them in their career. A couple of boys suggested that, for wealthier children, *it's not what you know but who you know*, and that children from wealthier backgrounds would be more likely to succeed simply as a product of these connections. It was suggested that this placed a greater significance and pressure on working class boys to do their best in education and achieve the best grades and qualifications that they could, that these would be essential if they were to achieve, whereas wealthier children may have more **opportunities and support available** to them regardless of their academic achievement or failure. These challenges described by boys we spoke to would be very much in line with the work of Ball, Reay and David (2002), described from p36 of the current report, around what they and others would call 'social capital'.

“ I think statistically wealthier children probably get a better education because they can afford resources. For example, a particular book that we might need, a working class person might not be able to afford it while a wealthier child could get it earlier without blinking an eye.

FE learner

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“ I think grades and academic success are more important for working class kids. For wealthier kids, if you don't do so well, it's not as dangerous or significant. For people from wealthier backgrounds, it's not what you know but who you know. Wealthy people might know more people and have more paths available.

FE learner

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“ My stepdad came from a council estate where people were telling him he's thick and never going to get out of there, and now he's earning good money and lives in a really nice house. If you have that drive and ambition for something, and work hard enough, then you can achieve.

FE learner

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“ I think if anyone puts the effort in, they can get where they want and they can get wherever they can. It's just about the effort you put in and if you don't revise for your GCSEs you're not going to get anywhere. If you revise all the time, you're going to have good grades.

FE learner

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"Mindset" was also among the most common themes in which boys suggested working class children may be at a disadvantage – the word used by a number of learners themselves, in conjunction with **motivation and self-belief**. Boys suggested that working class children may have low expectations of themselves or lack the determination to improve, whereas children from wealthier backgrounds would be more likely to be expected to succeed and driven to do so as a result. It was also suggested that children from poorer backgrounds may be lacking in the same **examples of success (role models), available to wealthier children**, and were less likely to achieve as a result. However, the boys we spoke to generally did have high aspirations for themselves, pointing to something of a mismatch between how they viewed themselves and how they perceived the more abstract category of 'working class children', where their responses tended to reflect an internalisation of a deficit perspective.

A few boys again referred to **"mental health"** as a challenge that may affect working class children more than others. This was associated with **challenges at home** that might make it more difficult to focus on school or college, that may be more prevalent among poorer families, while boys suggested that bullying may be more common among working class children. Another boy also suggested that **physical health** may also be worse among poorer children. However, these observations were not necessarily reflected in their own reported experiences.

Finally, two boys suggested that working class children would likely attend poorer schools with **lesser quality teaching** than would be provided to wealthier children and better quality schools. It was suggested that some teachers may not be motivated to teach children from poorer backgrounds, earning less money than they would at a better school, and that the quality of teaching provided to working class children would therefore be limited.

Further barriers for working class children are described in the following background literature section (p49).

“ *I think it's a lot to do with mindset. I think the people at my (grammar) school sort of just have it from growing up because higher education is discussed a lot within their family. But I think you don't necessarily need that, if you just have the right mindset, you can get as far as you want. Working class people could do just as well, it's just that education is not as promoted, so then they don't see the appeal and the need for it and don't take up the right sort of attitude towards it. They sort of ruin it for themselves in a way.*

*FE learner*

*I think it mainly comes down to maturity in a way. So if you know that it might be slightly biased and the odds are against you, you can either complain about it and just not go anywhere. Or you can you can say, yeah, I know that I'm not a favourite and just get your head down. I'm in favour of the latter. And it's common knowledge to know that life isn't going to go your way all the time. You just have to have to admit that it's not going to always work out. So I don't see any reason in complaining all the time. You have to have to work for it.*

*FE learner*

*Working class kids might come into school with a negative attitude, they might behave badly. They don't get as much support early on because they're just seen as bad kids when really they just haven't had anyone to teach them right from wrong.*

*KS4 learner*

*I think poorer people might suffer more with mental health because there might be personal things getting them down, which could affect their education because they're not focused on school.*

*FE learner*

## Background Literature: Barriers to Higher Education for Working Class Students

To gain a greater depth of understanding into how experiences of class-based inequality play out within an individual's conception of the possible for their future education, the following section reviews literature which has attempted to move beyond simplistic, individualised notions of educational decision-making. Focusing on the impact of inequality within such a process, the studies shine a light on the sometimes difficult, complex negotiations individuals undertake to frame continued educational credentialization as achievable.

Investigating the link between occupational choice and student socio-economic status, Croll (2008) draws on data from the British Household Panel Survey to explore the implications of socio-economic inequality in occupational choice. Within the study, Croll asserts that whilst individuals from non-privileged backgrounds who were neither ambitious nor educationally successful were very unlikely to achieve well paid employment, young people from 'advantaged' backgrounds with the same level of ambition had, in a substantial minority of cases, obtained desirable jobs (p.264).

For Croll, successful navigation of a socially and mobile educational trajectory was only partially linked to an individual ambition toward such careers. Instead, the author highlights the ability of a significant minority of middle-class respondents to draw upon alternative economic, social and cultural resources to protect against undesirable occupational outcomes. Resources which individuals from less affluent, working class backgrounds have restricted access, as described above. Boys who took part in the current research pointed to "connections" and opportunities being available to wealthier children that were unavailable to them (p45), that would be very much in line with Croll's research.

To glean a depth of understanding into how such structurally contingent inequalities play out in regard to future educational decision-making, Archer, Pratt and Phillips (2001) collected data from an ethnically diverse group of 64 respondents who were not currently participating or planning to participate in HE. The research contends that HE participation was assessed by the interviewees in terms of its effectiveness as a route to security, both in terms of graduate employment; *'Degree study was seen as a high-risk strategy with no certainty of secure employment at the end'* (p.437), and while undertaking study, *'the actual experience of being a student in itself is seen as insecure, particularly the impoverished lifestyle and financial hardship involved, the threat of loans and the risk of getting into debt'* (p.437).

As well as framing continued educational engagement as a risk to financial security, Archer also highlights a perception of risk in relation to the respondents' working class identities. The author argues that for some, HE participation could instigate a shift to the inhabitation of a middle-class arena where the working class 'masculinity capital' held by participants is deemed to hold less legitimacy.

A qualitative study conducted by Burke (2007) investigates how men self-regulate in their struggle to be seen as deserving of continued engagement within education. From the thirty-eight in-depth interviews which were conducted as part of the study, laziness emerged as a characteristic which was discursively constructed as one which was essentially male. Respondents viewed laziness as posing a significant threat to their educational attainment, highlighting it as a characteristic of other male students on the course who were not achieving academically. Some of the boys who took part in the current research, who described challenges around “mindset” and motivation among working class learners (p47) made similar suggestions.

In a study conducted with twenty-four young people in Kent, Steven Roberts (2013) set out to capture the ‘ordinary’ experiences of students participating in compulsory education. Rather than an anti-school subculture being prevalent amongst the group of male students in working class communities highlighted in early educational research (Willis, 1977; Mac an Ghail, 1994), the study suggested that a degree of ambivalence characterised the educational experience of the respondents. Whilst students participating in the study saw at least some effort at school to be of social and moral worth and never became completely alienated, eventually they moved into low level work which was unrelated to their educational engagement. Participation in education was not seen by the participants as something that would be of a significance to their future, rather it was something that people were simply required to do. As such, ambivalence with regard to the young men’s participation in education, which promoted neither a sense of resistance, nor particular enjoyment, was the defining characteristic of this group’s experience.

In Nicola Ingram’s (2009) study of institutional habitus in two Northern Irish schools, a potential disjuncture between the identity of the white working class students, and that privileged by the school as most legitimate, is presented. Ingram contends that working class students within the institution faced a *‘lack of recognition of their cultural background and can come under pressure to conform to middle-class attitudes and dispositions through discourse on ‘appropriate’ language, behaviour and taste’* (p.432). The findings of this research suggest that the dispositions deemed most appropriate within a school, and those held by white working class students did not always operate in synchronicity. Ingram highlights a possible conflict between the perceived legitimacy of social and cultural capital held by white working class students, and the largely middle-class capitals valued by the educational institution.

Such findings are mirrored in the monograph *Urban Youth and Schooling: the experiences and identities of educationally at risk young people* (Archer, Hollingworth and Mendick, 2010). The authors describe that for the students involved, *‘educational failure was a constant threat and they were genuinely unsure as to how they might fare in the examination’* (2010, p.96). Such anxiety, it was contended, meant that many of the working class students decided to ‘wait and see’ with regard to their future, making plans only in the short term and being reluctant to seek advice about potential pathways. *“This placed them at a disadvantage because they lacked the relevant knowledge, information and cultural capital about how to navigate the educational system and tended to lose out when it came to playing the aspirations game.”* (2010, p.96)

By way of comparison, research by Davey (2012) illustrates that within a more middle-class context, the cultural contexts of home and school are in much closer alignment. Within the middle-class environment of the institution, the assumption of progression to an elite university was taken for granted. Through their investment in practices aligned to the *institutional doxa*, Davey presents the middle-class parents as *'fish in water'* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.127), with dispositions aligning to those of the institution. As such, they were able to make full use of available mechanisms to accrue and mobilise capital, thereby increasing the chances of their offspring gaining entry to a prestigious university.

In a 2002 paper on decision-making by working class students from minority ethnic backgrounds, Ball et.al examined the process whereby participants drew on social, cultural and economic resource to inform future educational choices. Rather than future HE decision-making being an individualised endeavour with aspiration as a key determinant, the authors present the process as one which took place in relational engagement with the social, historical and familial context in which it was made. Through their exploration of the data, the authors present a typology of HE decision-making (2002, p.337). Ball, Reay and David describe the notion of HE participation as either an embedded or a contingent choice depending on the forms of relevant social, cultural and economic capital made available to the individual choice-maker

Those largely working class individuals with little access to relevant forms of capital are described by the authors as contingent choosers for whom *"going to university involves them becoming a person different from the rest their family and many of their peers, in eschewing a 'normal biography' and at the same time risking a sense of feeling themselves 'out of place'"* (p.352). It is argued that such individuals were not endowed with access to the forms of capital required to easily plan an educational trajectory in alignment with HE participation. Should a contingent chooser engage inactivity to accrue capital toward such an ambition, it was argued that they also risked possible alienation by following a course which deviated from that of their friends and family members.

For middle-class students, continuing to university is presented as a 'natural progression'. Due to their own educational experiences, parents of *embedded choosers* were likely to frame HE participation strongly, actively engaging in supporting the process of university 'choice-making'. Whilst for *contingent choosers* there was a focus on short-term planning similar to that described earlier (Archer, Hollingworth and Mendick, 2010), embedded choosers were able to confidently plan for long-term outcomes due to the advantages bestowed by their privileged access to relevant capital. *"Essentially, the 'contingent'/'embedded' division is class based. For those represented here as 'contingent choosers', the decision to attend university and obtain a degree has a specific class 'meaning', in addition to, and interwoven with its implications for ethnic identity."* (p.352)

It is clear from the studies discussed above that the social, cultural and economic resources made available for working class students to accrue and mobilise in pursuit of a socially mobile educational trajectory significantly impacts their educational decision-making. It is also clear that tensions between working class identities and middle-class educational institutions can negatively influence chances of working class students accruing the social and cultural resources deemed to be ‘most legitimate’ for successful entry to university.

In an attempt to provide a greater depth of understanding into how the relationship between working class students and those individuals who they are closest to influences the framing of possible educational futures, Fuller, Heath and Johnston (2011) turn the lens of focus to the role of social networks. Conducting the study within a qualitative methodological framework which encompassed core participants’ family and friends, the authors explored ‘*the extent to which network dispositions and attitudes are reproduced across and within generations*’ (Fuller, Heath and Johnston, 2011, p.140). Taking such an approach added a temporal dimension to the study, encompassing experiences of educational transitions made at different times and within differing socio-economic contexts.

Similar to the findings of Ward’s research (2015) examining the educational transitions of young men in a de-industrialised Welsh town, through their engagement with the social network Fuller et.al articulate the impact of socio-economic change on HE decision-making. As many of the participants made their educational transitions at a time when the UK labour market looked markedly different, the authors argue that the members of the participants’ network were left ill equipped to provide advice and guidance about educational trajectory aligned to HE participation in a contemporary context. Such analysis aligns with a lack of ‘role models’ as highlighted by boys who took part in the current research.

The research argues that for many working class students forming future intentions for education and work, committing to an educational future aligned with HE participation can be a risky enterprise. Such a perception of risk, it is argued, is not born from an individualised ‘aspirational deficit’, but rather the effects of structurally embedded inequality which have restricted the framing of HE participation to an abstract possibility for many working class students. It is argued that, for many students, engaging in activity aligned with HE participation involves the negotiation of a multiplicity of tensions and contradictions which are experienced in relational engagement with their social, geographic and temporal context.

Many of the ‘working class challenges’ suggested by boys in the current research (e.g., connections, mindset, role models, p45) align quite closely, albeit in boys’ own terms, with much of the research in this area. In the next section, we begin to discuss some of the support boys have already experienced and could benefit from to help them to overcome those challenges.

## Supporting Progression

White boys we spoke to could generally recall at least one or two, if not more, forms of activity or support they had received to help them prepare for or decide their future options, with most boys suggesting some positive impacts of at least some of this support.

As mentioned previously (p25), **teachers** – particularly those of students' preferred subjects – were perhaps the most common source of advice and support around future options. This was particularly common at college, where boys described having more relaxed and informal relationships with teachers than at school, where they could easily approach their subject teacher for advice from someone who had experience in the subject and path that they were interested in.

Around a third of the boys we spoke to mentioned **careers advisors** in their school or college that they had spoken to and generally benefited from their advice in helping to identify and clarify potential pathways, however they didn't describe particularly close relationships with these – typically preferring to turn to their subject teacher. One first-year FE student mentioned having a "personal progression mentor" in their college but that they had yet to have much interaction with them besides occasionally "checking in" on the students' own HE/future research, though they expected to have more interaction with them in future.

Many students referred to a variety of **careers and apprenticeship fairs** as well as **assemblies or workshops** in their school or college. The reported success or impact of these activities varied, however the consistent theme in determining this appears to be a sense of relevance to the individual and their interests i.e., boys typically engaged with and benefited from activities that were relevant to the subject(s) they were interested in, and typically did not if this was not the case.

There were only a handful of "trips" mentioned by boys we spoke to, with three of these being trips to universities – with these appearing to benefit those who had been. Though HE campus visits were rarely experienced by the boys we spoke to as part of the current research, a number of boys expressed a need for more information about university, including what university life is like. **HE campus visits** could be a beneficial vehicle through which to meet this need and were clearly identified as the most common positively impacting form of activity experienced by Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students in Cosmos' recent (2021) research for Go Higher West Yorkshire exploring the experiences and needs of those students.

While **university** was the most common topic around which (six) white boys requested more information and support (only one boy asked for more support with apprenticeships), the most common themes as to what *type* of support boys needed were that this should be more **tailored/relevant** and offer a greater **variety**. Again, these link to the previous point (p53) around white boys seeking support and information that is relevant to them and their preferred subject(s) – something which appears to be relatively lacking for many boys, particularly those with less popular subject interests.

A considerable number of boys (five) also suggested a need for greater **emotional or mental health support** from schools and colleges, to help them deal with the stresses of studying – particularly post-COVID-19. Finally, two boys referred to a need for "**relatable**" people, from similar backgrounds as themselves, from which they could receive advice or motivation.

“ *With music we went on a day trip to University of York. I was looking around campus and saw all these kids hanging out with each other. There's so much freedom. It's a nice place to have your final years of education and still have fun and live.* ”

*KS4 learner*

“ *My high school was predominantly a sports college high school. So all the extracurricular things were with a lot of sports which I didn't mind. But I feel like if the school had a lot more varied options available, that would help us decide. At college now there are a lot of trips related to what we're studying, which is quite cool. They do them randomly as well so we might just come in one day and be off to this gallery or this museum. It's just another way to learn, which I really enjoy.*

*FE learner*

”

“ *I'd like to go to a university to see what it's like. Kind of have a whole day of doing lessons at university for a small time, to get experience and feel more positive about it.*

*KS4 learner*

”

“ *I want someone who I can talk to to check that I'm making the right choices. I just went with what I researched online. As much as my parents wanted to help, they didn't know the difference between universities.*

*FE learner*

”

“ *I think also students relate better to people like teachers who are similar to them, from a working class background. Teachers who can relate to the students.*

*FE learner*

”

# Stakeholder Interviews

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In addition to our primary research with learners, we also conducted one-to-one interviews with **six staff/stakeholders from two institutions in West Yorkshire** who were experienced in working with white boys from working class backgrounds:

## *Stakeholders from a Local FE College*

- Director of Higher Education Development
- Higher Education Progression Officer

## *Stakeholders from a local Secondary School*

- Head of English
- English Teacher
- Higher Education Progression Officer

## *Stakeholder from Go Higher West Yorkshire*

- Outreach Project Officer for Go Higher West Yorkshire (who had previously worked at the same secondary school as the stakeholders above)

Collectively, stakeholders had over fifty years of experience working in education, in these roles and others, within the region. Both the school and college resided within predominantly white working class communities. Stakeholders themselves were also white (though ‘class’ was not specified).

The stakeholder interviews covered many of the same topics as those discussed with learners, around the experiences and challenges of white boys from working class backgrounds, only this time from a staff/stakeholder perspective. **Stakeholders’ perspectives were quite different to those of the boys we spoke to**, in many ways. While the boys we spoke to (p22) generally expressed positive perceptions of education, positive intentions towards higher education and positive support from parents regarding those prospects, stakeholders suggested that these were not common among white boys from working class backgrounds more generally and that indeed the opposite was often the case – that parental expectations impacted attitudes towards education and progression negatively. This supports the suggestion that the boys who took part in our qualitative research discussions were more engaged than other boys from working class backgrounds. In the following section, we discuss the key themes and insights emerging from our stakeholder interviews and how they compare with learners.

## Engagement and Attitudes towards Education

While the boys we spoke to in our learner discussions (starting p22) were generally relatively well engaged with education, stakeholders suggested that this was not typically the case with many white boys from working class backgrounds. Stakeholders suggested that many white boys are **disengaged**, as evidenced by **poor attendance and behaviour** compared to other groups. It was suggested by stakeholders that many white boys **see little value in education and particularly academic subjects** and traditional classroom learning. However, they were often **more engaged with more practical and vocational learning**.



*I definitely think there are a lot of white working class males who are quite disengaged with education. Obviously there are some that do really well but those are a relatively small proportion. I think there are a lot who don't really see the value of education and don't really want to be there. They are often students with the lowest attendance and bad behaviour as well.*

*I think there is an issue with them seeing the progression of the traditional formal English and maths subjects and seeing how they apply in real life. That's why a lot of students don't get the GCSEs in school, but they can sometimes do well in college doing functional skills – because it's taught in a way that can help them see how they can use them in everyday life and in the jobs they will be looking to go into.*

*They enjoy the fact that being in college can offer them something vocational and they enjoy the fact that the learning doesn't always look like a classroom - it might be a workshop or a building site or something very different from being sat in front of books listening to someone lecturing them.*

*Higher Education Progression Officer (FE College)*



## Relationships with Teachers

Stakeholders suggested that white boys' relationships with teachers could often be **challenging**, due to their (suggested) general disengagement with and lack of perceived value in education – as described in the previous section. However, they expressed that positive relationships could be achieved and indeed were **largely positive in the institutions represented** – depending on a number of factors as described below.

The most common theme expressed among stakeholders that was said to determine the success of relationships between white boys and teachers was for teachers to be motivated by and demonstrate **genuine care** for their learners. White boys and their schools also benefited from an **empowering approach** to children from working class backgrounds and a consistent **expectation to do your best, with no excuses**, regardless of your background or circumstances. The institutions we spoke to appeared to have successfully cultivated such a culture among their teachers and learners, to both their benefit. Stakeholders suggested that learners in these institutions were given the best opportunity possible to succeed and would fare better than many children from similar socioeconomic backgrounds elsewhere, and that **staff were generally happy** in their work – happier perhaps than at some other, “better” (more affluent) schools.

**Staff retention and continuity** was mentioned as an important factor in enabling learners to develop relationships with consistent teachers and faces around the school, that may not be the case elsewhere. Learners were also said to relate better to **teachers from similar backgrounds** as themselves, of which there were plenty in the institutions represented.

Despite this, and in line with learners' perspectives (p25), stakeholders acknowledged that some teachers may struggle to develop positive relationships with some students. Interestingly, one stakeholder said that this may sometimes be due to well-intentioned teachers trying to “solve the world” for these learners – which the boys themselves don't want. While in other cases it may be a lack of patience from particular staff members that can lead to a “vicious cycle” with challenging learners.

“ *The aspirations of the staff there and the general ethos is that there are absolutely ‘no excuses’. The school in general has that attitude – that your background doesn’t matter. Even if your parents didn’t finish their secondary education – that’s not an excuse and it’s not an option for you. The school is very focused on the idea that ‘it’s not where you come from, it’s where you end up’. And so that experience, I think, is very positive for students.* ”

*Outreach Project Officer*

“ *Quite a few staff are from that background themselves, so they feel a personal commitment and can relate to the issues that students are facing. They feel a commitment to invest in those students. I’ve seen that from the senior leadership, to support and career staff and teachers as well.* ”

*Higher Education Progression Officer (FE College)*

“ *Sometimes there are personality clashes. Sometimes we have teachers who try and solve the world for these pupils - it comes from a caring point of view, but it suffocates those pupils and doesn’t give them what they want. And on the other hand, we have teachers who have no patience, who are like ‘you’re misbehaving, I don’t care why you’re misbehaving, just get out’ and that kind of thing. That becomes a vicious cycle and we’re not always able to solve that. Sometimes the only option is to move that kid.* ”

*Head of English (Secondary School)*

## Order and Discipline

Relating to the previous section around relationships between boys and teachers (p58), stakeholders referred to the importance of order and discipline in creating a **consistent and productive school environment** to give boys the best chance to succeed. It was suggested that while boys may not like what may be perceived at the time as strict rules or punishment, the consistent application of such an approach helped to facilitate a level of understanding, expectations and mutual respect between learners and staff.

This was said to be particularly important for children from working class or underrepresented backgrounds, some of whom may (it was suggested) experience a certain degree of **chaos at home**, that may benefit from a sense of order and safety in the school environment. One English Teacher in particular spoke at length about the importance of discipline and consistency for such children (quoted below).

“ *It's military in a loose way. The senior leadership team are really tight and the expectations of the staff are that we're all the same in how we treat the kids. Routine is key and the expectations are across the board and nobody gets away with it. I think that is really key for these kids that come from quite haphazard, chaotic backgrounds to have that routine and rigidity in their learning. They have to know what we're looking for them to do and the repercussions if they don't. They can't play the system.*

*There aren't many serious behaviour issues at our school because when there are, they're dealt with strongly. When I compare it to a middle class school I taught at previously the difference is huge – the kids at that school could get away with whatever they wanted – they are entitled. The staff there were very unhappy, and that was supposed to be an outstanding school, whereas the staff here are very, very happy.*

*English Teacher (Secondary School)*



## Role of Parents

While the boys we spoke to generally described positive involvement and influence of their parents (p27), stakeholders suggested that this was not always the case for other white boys from working class backgrounds. Stakeholders suggested that white working class or low income parents were often **difficult to engage via current communication methods** and may be less involved than wealthier parents or those from other ethnic backgrounds. It was suggested that this may be partly influenced by **parents' past experiences** with their own education – that they themselves may have had negative experiences in school, or with teachers, or may have **devalued education**.

While it was acknowledged that **parents want the best for their children**, it was suggested that many parents **don't know what that "best" may be** or that they may even limit children's potential by their own expectations. **Financial and social factors** were also suggested to impact negatively on boy's aspirations.

**“ We don't have the same level of engagement at parents evenings and things like as I have seen in more affluent areas. They might be single parents or they can't attend because they're working odd hours. And often if you ring home, there's no engagement. When you've got nobody at home pushing them or taking an interest, boys are going to go for the soft option. No child is going to be interested in school if nobody at home is pushing them. English Teacher (Secondary School) ”**

## Future Intentions

While the majority of boys we spoke to planned to progress to HE (p28), stakeholders suggested that this was not always the case for other white boys from working class backgrounds. Following on from the previous section, stakeholders suggested that **parental and social expectations** may be a key factor in limiting boys' likelihood to continue in education. It was suggested that boys from working class background are typically **expected to work** as soon as possible and **earn money**, (acting as a 'breadwinner', as Kelan (2008) describes on p39 of the report) and that further study was often seen to detract from that goal. One stakeholder pointed out that boys may experience more **pressure to show an "output"** than girls and that they may be **"pigeon-holed"** into practical courses (quoted below).

While some boys in the institutions represented by stakeholders do go on to HE, these are in the minority. Boys in these institutions mostly intend to start work as early as possible, often in **practical trades** and often **alongside family** members, including apprenticeships (see p67). Stakeholders suggested that boys from working class backgrounds often have a **strong attachment to their local community** and that even those who may otherwise be interested in continuing in education would be **unwilling to travel**, even relatively short distances, and therefore rule this out as an option.

“ *There may be courses that are appropriate for some students that might benefit them in the long run. But then they are pushed into construction or BTEC sports, and sometimes it's like 'well what are we going to do with that course, if it's not right for them and not what they want to do?' Some students do want to be hands on and they're not interested in being stuck in the classroom. But I can think of a few examples of students that were really interested in a specific subject area but maybe weren't going to get what they needed to get a level three course. They might have been able to do a level two course, but they weren't really encouraged to do that. They were kind of pigeonholed.*

*Outreach Project Officer*



## Subject Choice

Unlike boys we spoke to, whose interest in a range of subjects was primarily driven by enjoyment (p30), stakeholders suggested that subject choice among white boys from working class backgrounds more broadly was significantly **gendered**. Stakeholders suggested that most boys tended to pursue what may be seen as "**typically masculine**" subjects – mostly **practical subjects** – and that very few boys chose to study "female" subjects such as health & social care, textiles or performing arts. Again, it was suggested that this was mostly due to **social expectations** of boys and men that were **deeply embedded** within working class communities in particular. As well as **family**, boys may be influenced by **friends** and unwilling to express interest in subjects that may be seen to be outside the norm and are often inclined to go for "**soft options**".

Such social pressures are in line with those described by Ward (2015), on p40 of the current report. Ward (2015) explores the impact that a de-industrialised society has on the behaviour of young males from working class backgrounds. Ward addresses how, in such contexts, choice of academic or vocational subjects impacted upon the participants' masculine subjectivities. Tensions between a specific version of hegemonic masculinity tied to the industrial past of the locality and efforts to become more socially mobile are pervasive and contradictory in their nature. Highlighting that modern negotiations of masculinity are complex, with tension between being working class and becoming educationally successful.

“ *They tend to go for the hands on subjects like electronics and DT. Some go for computing, but only towards the games. I think this stems from aspirations at home, that their parents aren't professionals. When we were talking to lawyers, doctors, teaching, banking, they don't have those role models at home. They've got nobody pushing them saying, 'you can be a lawyer, you can do whatever you want to do'. They tend to go for the soft, easy options. Quite often they'll pick what their friends pick, which I think is less common in higher socio economic background where the kids are more motivated to do the best they can. Girls also tend to go more for what they're good at, whereas boys will pick more what would potentially be a soft option.*

*English Teacher (Secondary School)*



*They are looking down the lines of vocation, really, subjects that are valued by their family and community. I know it's a cliché, to say 'get a trade son' and everything like that, but it's true. It's what young boys are told. So subjects such as motor vehicle construction, engineering, tend to be dominated by white working class boys. And performance and arts, you still get working class boys doing those but proportionally much less.*

*Yeah, I think a high percentage of the thinking behind the decisions is what conversations they have with other people and how they define themselves, they want to be able to tell friends and family that I'm doing a certain thing because they know that will be received favourably. And they know they won't have to answer any questions about, 'where the bloody hell is that going to get you, waste of time'. That's definitely a consideration.*  
*Higher Education Progression Officer (FE College)*



*We get a lot of interest when in things like bricklaying, plumbing, electrician, the classic trades. They'll know somebody who's an electrician or a plumber or a bricklayer or something like that. Maybe they did a couple of days over summer to help out their mate's dad or something like that. A lot of it comes down to that the old school mining background of 'work hard, get your hands mucky' type of jobs.*

*Higher Education Progression Officer (Secondary School)*



## Higher Education Perceptions

While the majority of boys we spoke to had mostly positive perceptions of HE (p32), stakeholders suggested that this was not usually the case for most white boys from working class backgrounds. As with the boys we spoke to, stakeholders cited **financial cost/debt** as the most commonly perceived negative aspect of HE. While many of the boys we spoke to still intended to go to HE in spite of this challenge, stakeholders suggested that this was too big a barrier for the majority of white boys from working class backgrounds and their families, and that HE was simply seen as **not worth it**, and that the boys felt they would be better off going into employment. A couple of stakeholders also suggested that there was a perception among many working class people that HE was for "middle class" people, rather than them. This is in line with previous research by Archer, Pratt and Phillips (2001), described on p49 of the current report, that suggests that *"degree study was seen as a high-risk strategy with no certainty of secure employment at the end"* and that, *"the actual experience of being a student in itself is seen as insecure, particularly the impoverished lifestyle and financial hardship involved, the threat of loans and the risk of getting into debt"*.



*There's a lot of stigma around the debt. There's a lot of misunderstanding around student loans and finance. They think university education just isn't worth it. Even if it is obtainable that it's not worth going through many years of study and accruing debt to ultimately copy other people that they know that have gone through university and not got a graduate level job beyond what you could do through an apprenticeship or working in an organisation for an amount of time. University is seen as a luxury that isn't really advancing people's opportunities. There's a difference between white and ethnic minority attitudes in that they often see it as means to an end, whereas white working class boys tend to think I need to earn money now, I can't afford any debt.*

*Higher Education Progression Officer (FE College)*



“ Some of your more traditional Oxbridge and red brick universities are still very middle class, stiff collared, and they're presented in that point of view. Even when I went to university that was around. And if you went to a met, you weren't as good as someone who went to a red brick. Maybe that has changed or maybe it hasn't. But the kids still pick up on some of those ideas. I think. You have some who want to go to university because they've got a good idea. But some of them don't think it's even an option. Some of them are scared of the debt. Some of them don't think they're good enough for it. A lot of them, especially the boys that we're talking about, just see it as a completely alien world, that's not for them.  
Head of English (Secondary School)



“ No matter how much education we do around student finance and loans, that amount of money to a working class family just seems too much. A lot of working class families put a lot of value on 'value'. Is it value for money? Is it worth spending sixty thousand pounds to get that degree? They don't see it. We can try and explain, you probably won't pay it all back anyway, but they still wonder what am I getting out of it? Working class people want to be careful with their money. Am I getting value for my money here? A lot of people just don't see it like that.  
Outreach Project Officer



## Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships were seen by stakeholders as a commonly preferred pathway for many white boys from working class backgrounds with whom they work. However, a couple of stakeholders suggested that gaining apprenticeships may be more difficult and competitive than many boys think, and that they may require guidance to gain the skills to obtain and be successful in apprenticeships.



*A lot of the white working class boys are going to get an apprenticeship with an uncle or a father, who owns their own business. That's the line they go down because they see that. But on the other hand, I think some of them just do it because they see it as a more hands-on subject. I do think some of them take them thinking they're practical subjects, so they won't have to do as much writing or work. Some will probably just do it because it's seen as a masculine role. Our working class boys probably feel those stereotypes and expectations much more than others. They come from a very close-knit community and sometimes closed-minded community. Our job is to show them that there's more out there than just going to work for their uncle's business.*

*Head of English (Secondary School)*



*A lot of students want apprenticeships, but they might not be skilled enough to get an apprenticeship. They end up doing a BTEC course and not taking the apprenticeship route, because they can't get a placement. That's a big problem with apprenticeships. It's hard enough for them to apply to college and we're expecting them to somehow be able to go and look for a placement, contact an employer, give them a CV, have a job interview. Many of them aren't skilled up enough to be able to do that.*

*Outreach Project Officer*



## Supporting Progression

Stakeholders referred to a variety of activity that was being delivered by or with schools and colleges in order to support learners in their progression, and particularly those from working class or underrepresented backgrounds.

While there was very little mention of **HE campus visits** among the boys we spoke to (p54), several stakeholders referred to the importance and benefit of such trips in opening learners up to the opportunities available to them and changing any negative perceptions about HE they may have.

*“ We're definitely getting students onto HE campuses as early as possible in their educational journey, from primary school. I think it's that familiarity with what a university is and what university does. And the messages are reinforced around finance and funding from a very early age. In my previous job, I spoke to children in year five and six about university finance, and the message that going to university isn't about affording it or not, it's about whether you want to go. I think that's a huge thing in terms of their mindset.*

*Higher Education Progression Officer (FE College)*

*“ We have some smaller groups that are made up of a disadvantaged cohort who we spend a lot of time getting out on trips to the universities and to colleges. But again, that's just the pupils of 'class' disadvantage on paper. So I do think that a lot of kids are excluded from that. Some of our white working class boys might not be class disadvantaged on paper, so they won't necessarily get that chance to go. So I do think we could open it up a little bit more, but a lot of that comes down to funding and time*

*Head of English (Secondary School)*

Several stakeholders expressed the importance of giving boys from working class backgrounds access to relatable **role models**, echoing comments provided by learners themselves (p47).

Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of **parental engagement** in order to break down barriers and expectations among working class families.

“ *I think role models are hugely important, making sure that young people they can see their own experience in others, that they can feel they can have conversations with. Some students can feel that a bit of a power structure there with staff, whereas they're different with a young student in higher education. They've got a peer there and they can relax without getting told off.* ”

*Higher Education Progression Officer (Secondary School)*

The Director of HE Development at the FE college we spoke to talked in length about the benefits of "**safety nets**" and an "**alternative curriculum**" structure in college to keep FE learners who were struggling, often those from working class backgrounds, in education.

“ *We've made sure we've got an alternative curriculum. Some of the students, certainly in this category, will be coming to the college and may be really struggling to meet the requirements of the particular programme that they're on. And rather than them just falling out of college and becoming NEET, we've been able to offer them other elements of the curriculum. That's meant there are safety nets for students, so they don't fall out of the vocational course and onto nothing. They fall into something that holds them and keeps them with us in a different way until things have turned around that enable them to re-enter the more mainstream part of the curriculum. I'm sure our approach will benefit some of the working class boys from that group.* ”

*Director of HE Development (FE College)*



# Recommendations



# Recommendations

## Support & Action Required

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Throughout our primary research with learners and stakeholders, a number of challenges for white boys from working class backgrounds were raised, as discussed throughout this report so far. What follows is a summary of the common and key challenges raised and some suggested solutions; derived from a combination of our conversations with the participants themselves as well as Cosmos' own suggestions as to how some challenges may be addressed. This is based on our understanding of white boys from our primary research as well as broader work in the education and Widening Participation sectors.

Note that our recommendations do not imply that efforts to address these support needs are not already under way; indeed most if not all of these points are likely to already be targeted to varying degrees of focus and success. Similarly, our recommendations do not necessarily specify who may be responsible for addressing these needs (whether that be schools, authorities, Uni Connect partnerships like Go Higher West Yorkshire, or any combination of these). Our recommendations simply highlight the most important needs for white boys as identified through our research and suggest that these be in central focus.

The recommendations, as described on the following pages, are:

- Promoting Engagement - Emphasising the 'Value' of Education and Progression
- Education around Student Finance and Return on Investment
- Building Mindset, Motivation and Self-Belief
- Tailored and Relevant Support and Activity
- Relatable Role Models
- Supporting Subject Choice
- Support with Apprenticeships and Non-University Routes
- Connections with Employers
- Supporting Mental Health
- Building Personal Confidence, Dealing with Social Pressures
- Dealing with Academic Pressure
- Support with Resources
- Parental Engagement
- Equipping Teachers to Support Boys from Working Class Backgrounds

A more concise, visual summary of the recommendations can be found in the Summary Report.

## Promoting Engagement - Emphasising the 'Value' of Education and Progression

Based on feedback from learners and stakeholders, boys' engagement with education and progression options is largely determined by their perceptions of 'value' – they are typically unlikely to engage with subjects or activity that they are uninterested in or don't see as worthwhile. This also applies to future pathways, including the choice as to whether or not to go to HE, which many boys simply see as not worthwhile. In order to promote higher education as an option for boys from working class backgrounds, it is recommended that the 'value' of education and higher education, in terms of future career and earning benefits, is clearly conveyed. Boys could also benefit from exposure to HE campuses to help to break down perceived barriers in who might study there and encourage them that they can succeed there.

## Education around Student Finance and Return on Investment

Relating to the previous point about the perceived value of higher education, by far the biggest barrier for boys in considering HE is their **concerns about student debt**. Educating boys (and parents) about the financial aspects of HE – how student finance works, how debt can be managed and the **long-term financial benefits** of HE and increased earnings – as thoroughly and early as possible, is recommended to encourage more boys from working class backgrounds to consider higher education as a viable and worthwhile option.

## Building Mindset, Motivation and Self-Belief

Though the report does not imply that working class boys are lacking the necessary "mindset" to progress, learners themselves used this word to describe what they felt was a common disadvantage that many 'other' working class boys may have, compared to children from wealthier backgrounds. Boys suggested that children from wealthier backgrounds would be more likely to be expected to succeed and driven to do so as a result, whereas children from poorer backgrounds may be lacking in role models who could provide examples of success and help them to build motivation and self-belief, and were less likely to achieve as a result.

Mindset, motivation and self-belief are not binary qualities that individuals either have or don't have, but ones that can be continuously developed. Building and maintaining a successful mindset can be improved through; activities and content specifically designed to develop these mental traits, a culture of high expectations and "no excuses" within schools (exemplified by those represented in our stakeholder interviews, p58), building confidence through praise and rewarding success, and exposure to relatable role models and success stories from similar backgrounds. This is not to imply that boys are lacking in aspirations (indeed many of those we spoke to held high aspirations), but that they would benefit from support and encouragement to help them achieve them.

## Tailored and Relevant Support and Activity

Whatever support and activity is offered to boys to help them in their education and progression, it is key that this is tailored as much as possible and relevant to their interests, including their favoured subjects or careers. Boys are unlikely to engage with any activity or support that they do not see as relevant to them and so any activities or support that fail to make this relevance apparent are likely to be wasted for this group.

## Relatable Role Models

A consistent theme among both learners and stakeholders that we spoke to was the need for role models who boys from working class backgrounds could relate to; from similar backgrounds to themselves, who had overcome similar challenges and gone on to succeed – whether that be in higher education or elsewhere. Boys are far more likely to engage with any content or support delivered by such people than they are from teachers who they do not relate to. Appropriate role models or mentors, if suitably trained and utilised, could potentially serve a number of functions described in this section including; discussing the benefits of higher education, building a positive mindset and being someone to talk to to alleviate mental health challenges.

## Supporting Subject Choice

While boys we spoke to described a variety of subject choices, mainly motivated by enjoyment, stakeholders suggested that subject choices for boys from working class backgrounds more widely were largely influenced by gender stereotypes and social expectations, with boys often expected to pursue practical courses and traditionally masculine careers. In either case, the key themes of ‘value’ and ‘relevance’ again apply. It is recommended that the value (i.e. in boys’ perceptions, potential career paths and earnings) of various subjects are presented to boys in order to help them to make informed choices, and that they are supported to consider different subject options as early as possible in order to facilitate the feeling of relevance that is key to boys’ engagement and motivation throughout their education.

## Support with Apprenticeships and Non-University Routes

Apprenticeships in practical areas are a common choice for boys from working class backgrounds. However, boys may underestimate the challenges involved in gaining such apprenticeships, particularly in communities in which these are highly sought-after. Appropriate information and support in pursuing apprenticeships and non-academic options, including CV writing and interview skills, emphasising their importance, is key to providing boys with the best opportunities.

## Connections with Employers

Relating to the point above, and an area in which many boys we spoke to suggested that they may be lacking compared to those from wealthier backgrounds, is connections to potential employers. While some boys may benefit from family members working in practical trades, these are likely to be within a limited range of career options, if any, and not applicable to many boys, particularly those who may have other subject interests. It is recommended that boys are provided with as many opportunities as possible to interact with employers in a variety of areas, to find out what they are looking for, to learn what skills are needed and to gain work experience where possible.

## Supporting Mental Health

Mental health was a key concern raised by both learners and stakeholders and commonly acknowledged to be a particular challenge for boys, due to social expectations and tendencies to avoid showing emotions, and especially those from underrepresented backgrounds and difficult home lives. These challenges are likely to be further exacerbated for many in the wake of COVID-19. Mental health should be a key focus for all young people, but can be a particular challenge for boys from working class backgrounds, as described, who may be less likely than others to take up any support that is provided. It is recommended that schools seek to promote a culture of openness and sharing between students and staff, that awareness is raised and stigmas reduced around mental health issues and that boys in particular are shown and reminded that support is available for them if and when they should need it.

## **Building Personal Confidence, Dealing with Social Pressures**

Relating to the previous point around mental health, and other aspects of education and progression including subject and career choice, a key area for development that may serve to address other challenges is building boys' sense of personal confidence. Learners and stakeholders point out that school can be a challenging time for boys with regards to peer pressure, judgement and even bullying. Boys face considerable pressure to fit in and to follow the expectations of their friends and family, often to the detriment of their own education and progression. Activities specifically designed to build confidence and resilience, as well as one-to-one support from staff (relatable role models or mentors) that encourages boys' confidence in their own identity, interests and choices could help them to make better decisions as well as improving their mental health, engagement and academic outcomes.

## **Dealing with Academic Pressure**

Relating to the previous points around mental health, a common challenge for boys from working class backgrounds is feelings of pressure surrounding exams and school work, that many can shy away from. Activities and one-to-one support that help boys to deal with pressure could have multiple benefits around their wellbeing, engagement and outcomes.

## **Support with Resources**

One of the most consistently mentioned disadvantages that boys from working class backgrounds may have compared to children from wealthier backgrounds is access to resources such as computers, textbooks and subject-specific equipment. While this may be beyond the remit of Go Higher West Yorkshire to improve, it is still worth highlighting it within this section of the report as a key challenge for working class boys to remain aware of. Any actions that institutions or authorities can take to help bridge such gaps between children of different backgrounds and degrees of underrepresentation, to find ways to navigate around these challenges or to give extra support, opportunities or access to resources for those who may not have them at home, is generally recommended.

## Parental Engagement

As well as addressing the challenges described for boys themselves, continued efforts should be made to engage with, inform and maximise the potential positive influence of parents of those children from working class backgrounds. As many stakeholders described, any efforts to support learners in their progress are likely to be limited in their success if their parents are not on board with those efforts. As with the boys themselves, information for parents should focus on the value of education; the potential career paths and earnings available from various subject and progression choices.

## Equipping Teachers to Support Boys from Working Class Backgrounds

Finally, in addition to parents and the boys themselves, teachers, school and college staff inevitably play a pivotal role in addressing the needs of boys from working class backgrounds and need to be effectively trained and supported to do so. One English Teacher in particular (quoted on the following page) spoke in length about the important role teachers can play in either overturning or perpetuating many of the challenges affecting boys including gender and class expectations and supporting mental health. This includes listening to what learners want and need and questioning assumptions that teachers themselves may have. While many teachers do very well in these areas, it is important that all teachers are informed about and reflect upon these challenges and how best to deal with them, on an ongoing basis, and that schools and institutions support them to do so.

“*Teachers should show more care and be trained to better understand how students feel. Instead of just saying ‘I know how you feel’, why not say ‘I don’t know how you feel but I would like to know’. It’s like they’re reading off a card. Don’t just read off a card – show you actually care and you might get a better reaction.*

*FE learner*



*There's chaos in some of these kids lives. We have kids whose parents are in jail, we've got kids who don't even have heating on in their homes in winter, and it's a completely different mentality. There are definitely more mental health issues surrounding working class kids and it stems from social media as well, because they're exposed to so much more competition on social media around what is the norm but it's absolutely not the norm at all.*

*Teachers need to have the training to identify these issues, because you can't teach a kid who's in mental health crisis. Even though we have training in schools every year on signs of mental health, abuse, neglect... it's not enough. There needs to be some formal training – teacher training level, I think. Certainly at university, when they do their postgraduate certificate of education, there's certainly not enough training on mental health and that impacts greatly into white working class backgrounds. The amount of time they spend training on mental health in the classroom is minimal.*

*But there needs to be more training on working with kids from white working class backgrounds, kids from lower economic demographics. Teachers need to be completely equipped with things like what they say, how they say it, where they should say it... You would expect that kind of thing to be common sense, but it really isn't and I think it's something that should be hammered home because it allows them to become better teachers.*

*We all have these constructs in our heads and stereotypes which we can't avoid because they're around us all the time as we're growing up and even into adulthood. We need to be able to break those constructs down and the only way we're going to do that is through education of teachers, that's where it needs to start.*

*English Teacher (Secondary School)*





# Appendix



# ABOUT COSMOS

## Organisation Summary

Cosmos Engagement Ltd. is an organisation that has significant experience and expertise delivering research & evaluation services and outreach initiatives for the education sector.

We are currently working with a range of Uni Connect consortiums to deliver evaluation programmes and targeted outreach initiatives in specific Uni Connect wards.

## Conducting Research & Evaluation in an Educational setting

The following examples show the breadth of our experience in delivering research & evaluation programmes in an educational setting:

**Evaluation & Impact Programmes, Uni Connect** | Evaluation & Impact programmes for Uni Connect consortiums, constituting a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods with learners, stakeholders & parents/carers. We are experienced in completing qualitative projects with young learners within an educational setting. We have experience in developing in-depth case studies, and conducting 1:1 interviews (F2F or telephone), discussion groups, intercepts (short on-the-spot interviews) and vox pops.

Specific examples of qualitative projects include conducting short interviews with young learners whilst in-situ attending a three-day, Uni Connect funded, English Literature Festival. 117 interviews were conducted, with the findings and insight fed in to the analysis of the results for the attitudinal survey. In addition, we also filmed vox pops (short filmed videos) of learners immediately after an initiative has been completed, the output of these were used to develop impact case studies for a specific school.

**The Director of Research & Strategy, Sarah Dirrane**, has vast experience evaluating access and outreach programmes within a HE setting – inc. tracking attitudinal shifts, changes in behaviour pre and post initiative. Sarah also led the Research & Intelligence Team at a large HEP for 5 years and was responsible for delivering a large portfolio of strategic research projects, which comprised primary and secondary approaches; from qualitative projects capturing the student voice to synthesising, reconciling and analysing large students datasets –inc. UCAS & HESA datasets.

**Collaborative working** | We are accustomed to working effectively across, and collaborating with, a number of stakeholders within an educational setting. This includes working on an Evaluation Programme that involved liaising with stakeholders across a number of schools, colleges and HEPs in order to set up and deliver the evaluation of a specific initiative. This required liaisons with practitioners and teachers on the ground, and the access and Uni Connect teams at the HEP simultaneously.

## Understanding of Widening Participation, Outreach & access to HE

**Working Experience** | Both the Managing Director, Sean Dirrane, and Director of Research & Strategy, Sarah Dirrane, have worked in the Higher Education and public sectors for 17+ years. Sean is also an experienced Widening Participation practitioner and manager, whilst Sarah has experience on the strategic evaluation of access and outreach initiatives.

**Development of 19-20 Access and Participation Plan** | Sarah has led on the strategic development and delivery of the 19-20 Access and Participation Plan for a HEP. The plan was developed in conjunction with a number of departments at the university and Sarah was responsible for ensuring that the plan met and addressed the new regulatory guidance released by the Office for Students (OfS). Sarah attended the OfS conference and extensively reviewed the new guidance documents, mapping them back to previous Access Agreement submissions. Hence, Sarah has a sound understanding of the wider context, national aims and objectives of access work going forward and which groups are most under-represented nationally and at what point in the student journey – access, success or progression.

**Engagement & Outreach Work** | The engagement strand to the organisation delivers a range of outreach initiatives for a number of Uni Connects, Local Authorities and HEP to raise aspirations, awareness of HE options in conjunction with building young learners' confidence and ability to set and achieve their educational goals. A specific bespoke project, Marginal Gains Programme, has been designed to engage with young white males from economically disadvantaged background to improve their progression rates – which is key Uni Connect national objective.

## OUR EXPERIENCE

### WORKING WITH & RESEARCHING WHITE WORKING CLASS COMMUNITIES WITHIN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

In our experience, white working class boys are far more complex than often expected. Hence, we fully understand the need to prioritise the need to build rapport to enable us to 'dig deep' when conducting research with this target group. This will help GHWY uncover rich nuanced insights that will inform how to best support them to progress to HE and to understand the educational opportunities of WWC boys.

The vast majority of our HE research programmes include exploring gender and NCOP / Uni Connect status as separate comparator groups to their counterparts. Hence, we have built a large knowledge-bank of how the WWC community behaves within the context of the HE sector. We also have extensive experience of delivering educational programmes to WWC boys through our Engagement team. Through this work, we have:

WWC  
BOYS  
EXPERTISE



WORKED  
WITH OVER  
3000  
UNIQUE  
LEARNERS



OVER  
4500  
ENGAGEMENTS  
WITH WWC  
BOYS



**Cosmos Engagement** | Our Engagement team delivers development, skills-based and educational-based programmes for the education and social care sectors. Through this work, we have amassed extensive experience of working with white working class boys. Managing Director, Sean Durrane, and engagement staff have developed our flagship programme, Marginal Gains, which is delivered nationally. This is a highly targeted programme designed to support NCOP networks / Uni Connect Hubs, HEPs, schools/colleges to engage with this cohort, with the overall aim of encouraging young people to progress in education. Through the delivery of this programme and the associated research we have conducted in this area, we have a well-rounded understanding of this group. Thanks to our approach and our team of relatable role models, we have received excellent feedback from hard-to-reach students and their teachers.

**SUN Uni Connect Engagement Research Report** | Upon completion of our Marginal Gains programme - specifically targeted at white working class boys - commissioned through the SUN Uni Connect Hub, we produced a full activity evaluation report. We evaluated the programme against the intended Uni Connect objectives, NERUPI themes and Gatsby Benchmarks. This research encompassed 167 learners across 7 schools, equating to over 500 contact hours with white working class boys. The methodology of our evaluation included quantitative data from pre & post surveys, open-ended questions to provide qualitative learner voice data, and follow up in-depth tele-depth interviews with stakeholders from each school.

### METHODS EXPERIENCE

We are experienced in delivering a large portfolio of research methodologies, from complex quantitative modelling projects to immersive qualitative case studies. We use a wide range of both qualitative and quantitative approaches, often as part of the same project, to meet the objectives set by the brief. For qualitative methods in particular, we have a broad offering including, ethnography, 1:1 depths, online diaries, discussion groups, triads, co-creation workshops and participatory and longitudinal methods.

**Case study - Impact Qualitative Case Studies** | We developed a number of qualitative case studies to establish the extent to which a local programme had supported positive student outcomes (12 students) and partnership working (what is working well and key challenges) within seven urban and rural schools and colleges. The case studies employed a 360-degree approach, which included feedback from students, their parents and carers and school and college representatives. This included F2F and telephone interviews, online diaries and video case studies. The research explored the distance travelled by students in terms of where they were before and after they had participated in the programme. Findings provided positive insights into the impact of the programme and to what extent the programme objectives were achieved. We were invited to present the case studies at the client's annual conference to key internal and external stakeholders. The full suite of case studies, including the report and video outputs can be accessed [here](#).

# PROJECT TEAM

We would like to specially acknowledge the project team who have made significant contributions in the delivery and execution of the research project – with special thanks to Go Higher West Yorkshire who commissioned the research project



Sarah Dirrane | Director, Research & Strategy

- ✓ **Trained researcher** – Masters in Research Methodology at University of Leeds
- ✓ Experienced in delivering **multi-method research programmes** across both qualitative & quantitative research methods
- ✓ Led on **evaluation & Impact programme** for Uni Connect consortiums and access/outreach initiatives
- ✓ Delivered research & evaluation services in the **education, HE and public sectors**
- ✓ **Developed Access & Participation Plans** – deep understanding of the wider access and outreach context
- ✓ **Knowledge & understanding of the HE sector** – led the research & Intelligence Team for 5 years at a large HEP



Dean Biddulph | Senior Research Manager

- ✓ Experienced research manager, having successfully managed a large number of HE research programmes – inc. qualitative and quantitative
- ✓ Adept in carrying out both qualitative and quantitative methods, including in-depth telephone interviews and immersive longitudinal qualitative case studies
- ✓ Knowledge of the HE sector and the complexities of HE structures, inc. disseminating findings to those at senior level and negotiating access to students via. school partners
- ✓ Experience across a range of sectors and high profile clients

Taiwo Oguyninka | Project Officer



- ✓ Experience in the education sector, centred around culture and art.
- ✓ Experience with organisations exploring education and access to Higher Education as a means of combatting systemic inequalities.
- ✓ Designed and delivered past projects focused on the impact of co-curricular activities in supporting quality of education and helping to close the awarding and retention gap.

Dr Alex Blower | Associate



- ✓ Specialist and significant experience in the area of White Males from Working Class backgrounds, having completed his PhD thesis in this area
- ✓ Significant contributor / author of the literature review

Sean Dirrane | Managing Director



- ✓ **Significant knowledge** of the HE sector
- ✓ 10-year career at Leeds Beckett University, **Widening Participation Practitioner & WP Manager: Research & Evaluation**
- ✓ **Engagement & Training** - specialist in the Education and Social Care sectors
- ✓ Works with a range of WP audiences and has relevant and extensive experience **working with school & college stakeholders**
- ✓ **Works closely with a number of Uni Connects** delivering work which is highly focussed on supporting and developing disadvantaged and marginalised groups, primary focusing on supporting young underrepresented men through the Marginal Gains programme
- ✓ Has also developed a number of other initiatives working with the Social Care sector and Uni Connect networks

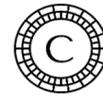
## Extensive experience working in the Uni Connect space...

Our clients include...



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