

**The underrepresentation
of white working class
boys in higher education**

The role of widening participation

**Sam Baars, Ellie Mulcahy
and Eleanor Bernardes**



This report was written by the education and youth development ‘think and action tank’ LKMco. LKMco is a social enterprise – we believe that society has a duty to ensure children and young people receive the support they need in order to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood. We work towards this vision by helping education and youth organisations develop, evaluate and improve their work with young people. We then carry out academic and policy research and advocacy that is grounded in our experience.

www.lkmco.org.uk @LKMco info@lkmco.org



Sam Baars is Director of Research at LKMco. He has particular interests in youth research, area-based inequalities and social science impact, and has experience using a range of quantitative and qualitative methods, from film-based work in schools to rapid research reviews and large-scale survey analysis. Sam believes that robust, innovative social research is the key to tackling the barriers that prevent some young people from making fulfilling transitions to adulthood, and he channels this belief into a range of research projects at LKMco. Sam holds a PhD in Social Change from the University of Manchester.



Ellie Mulcahy is a Junior Associate at LKMco and holds a PGCE with a specialism in the early years. She previously worked as a reception teacher in a school in Ramsgate, Kent, having joined the founding cohort of the Teach First Early Years programme. Ellie has worked alongside Teach First to develop the Early Years Programme and support programme participants and more recently as a freelance researcher for Teach First and the Behavioural Insights Team. During her time as a teacher, Ellie also worked with ‘Limited Resource Teacher Training’, to develop teacher training in rural Tanzania, widening her understanding of teaching and learning throughout the world.



Eleanor Bernardes is an Associate at LKMco. She began teaching in 2002 and worked, most recently, at the RSA Academy in Tipton. There she held the role of Literacy Coordinator with responsibility for improving Key Stage Three outcomes across the curriculum. She was awarded a distinction for her MA in Educational Leadership in which she assessed the impact of a literacy intervention. During her time in schools, Eleanor was team Leader for ‘Opening Minds’, helping to design and implement an innovative new curriculum. She was also closely involved with the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) and completed a secondment with the IBO to develop the IB Career-related Certificate (IBCC).

Foreword

The focus on white working class boys' access to higher education has been growing in recent years. This is a positive development and I welcome renewed political and policy attention to this pressing area of underrepresentation. Recent publications including the 2016 report from the Higher Education Policy Institute have furthered our understanding of the patterns and barriers to higher education for white working class students and proposed innovative policy solutions.

However, many of us in the widening participation community have always felt that there is a missing piece of the puzzle. Those responsible for trying to effect change need to understand what has worked and what might work in order to tackle white working class underrepresentation in the coming years. This report seeks to enable evidence-led practice by bringing together the perspectives of academics, policy makers, teachers and practitioners. Their combined insights unpick the issue of white working class boys' underrepresentation in higher education with thoughtfulness, tact and rigour.

Research of this nature is essential in helping our practitioner community carry out effective widening participation activities. I hope it is of help to you and look forward to seeing the development of new initiatives in the coming years. Thank you to Sam Baars and his research team at LKMco. I also thank all who have contributed to this report by participating in our roundtable, case studies and academic steering group. It was a pleasure to work with you.

Anne-Marie Canning

Director of Widening Participation
King's College London

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Executive summary

This report explores why white working class boys are underrepresented in higher education and what widening participation practitioners can do to tackle the problem. The report responds to the government's call, in February 2016, for universities to specifically target white working class boys in order to increase their participation in higher education, as part of a wider drive to improve the social mobility of disadvantaged groups.

The report aims to provide widening participation practitioners with a comprehensive overview of white working class boys' underrepresentation in higher education, from its causes to its potential solutions. In order to do so the report draws together findings from a literature review, an academic and practitioner roundtable and a set of university case studies, allowing insights from academic research and the perspectives of practitioners from primary through to HE to be brought together in one place.

The report considers six main questions:

1 How are 'white working class' boys defined?

Despite the new government requirement to specifically target white working class boys, higher education institutions do not have an agreed definition of this group to work with. A range of measures are in use, but these are either imperfect proxies, do not have robust data to back them up, or fail to go beyond narrow, formal definitions of class which do not pick up on the nuances of identity and culture. It is also not clear whether HEIs should be targeting all white working class boys or white British working class boys, who arguably face the greatest hurdles to entering higher education.

2 Why are white working class boys underrepresented in higher education?

White working class boys are the lowest performing group at the end of compulsory education. However, their relatively low educational attainment does not fully explain their underrepresentation in higher education. Financial barriers act as a deterrent to entry, but for white working class boys the fear that a university degree is a poor form of investment is a greater barrier than the upfront cost of studying. White working class families are less familiar with the realities and benefits of higher education, and tend not to see it as a likely option for their children, even if they do aspire for them to achieve it. This makes it harder for white working class boys to access informal information and role models who can describe the 'lived experience' of higher education and communicate its tangible benefits. This may underpin white working class boys' generally more negative perceptions of university, particularly when it is compared to alternative FE and HE routes which carry less financial risk. Finally, white working class boys are less likely to have access to the forms of cultural capital that are required at interview and when writing a personal statement – they therefore face significant barriers during admissions.

3 Is the problem more acute in elite institutions?

Elite institutions have consistently failed to meet benchmark entry requirements for disadvantaged pupils, who face barriers at both the application and admissions stage. The 'elite' status of these institutions can be both a draw and a deterrent for white working class boys, and so these boys need to be aware of the range of institutions to which they can apply, without inferring that elite options are 'not

for them.’ Ultimately, the underrepresentation of white working class boys in higher education will not be solved by focusing on the barriers present at a small handful of institutions, despite their profile.

4 Is there a similar problem in alternative forms of HE?

White working class boys are well represented in FE-level apprenticeships but very few use these as a springboard into a Higher Apprenticeship or university-based HE. Widening participation is less well established in non-university HE, which may make it harder for white working class boys to access degree-level apprenticeships and competitive school leaver programmes. Ultimately the scale of non-university HE is limited compared to degree-based routes and so, in its present form, it does not offer a panacea to the problem of white working class boys’ underrepresentation. Even if Higher Apprenticeships were significantly expanded, however, this would not address inequalities in entry to university.

5 What are the most effective ways in which widening participation practitioners can tackle the problem?

Parents and carers play a critical role in supporting white working class boys’ decisions to enter HE. However, they are less likely than middle class parents to have knowledge and experience of HE. WP must therefore ensure that parents and carers are informed about all aspects of HE – from the benefits of academic study to the costs and conditions of student living. Early intervention is crucial to ensure that white working class boys are prepared for, and open to the idea of, entering HE. WP practitioners should therefore aim to work closely with teachers, at both primary and secondary, by developing student-to-pupil mentoring programmes. Given the appeal but limited scale of work-based learning, universities should redouble their efforts to communicate the practical and vocational relevance of academic study, and to ensure that white working class boys are aware of the part-time and distance learning routes through which higher education can be completed.

6 What challenges and barriers do they face?

The absence of a clear definition of ‘white working class’ means WP practitioners cannot easily target their activities and coordinate their responses to this problem. While universities have access to data on parental occupation, this data lacks sufficient coverage and can lose its validity over time. Meanwhile, common proxies such as eligibility for Free School Meals are not effective substitutes for true ‘class’ measures. When WP practitioners are able to specifically target white working class boys, labeling groups in this way can sometimes be contentious. A key challenge for WP in this area is to intervene at a sufficiently early stage in boys’ educational careers: shifting perceptions of HE and ensuring the necessary levels of educational attainment require involvement from the earliest days of primary school. Closer to home, particular features of the way in which universities conduct their admissions, such as the use of interviews and personal statements, pose a significant barrier to white working class boys who tend not to have access to the cultural capital required to successfully navigate these formalities.

The single most significant barrier to tackling the underrepresentation of white working class boys in HE is the lack of an agreed definition of this target group, backed up by robust data. Given that effective solutions to the underrepresentation of white working class boys in HE will aim to intervene early and work closely with other practitioners in the education system, a common definition of the target group is a prerequisite for action. In the meantime WP practitioners should heed the concerns of white working class families relating to the practical relevance of university study and the return they are likely to see on their investment, by ensuring they have access to information about the range of courses, institutions and study routes available.

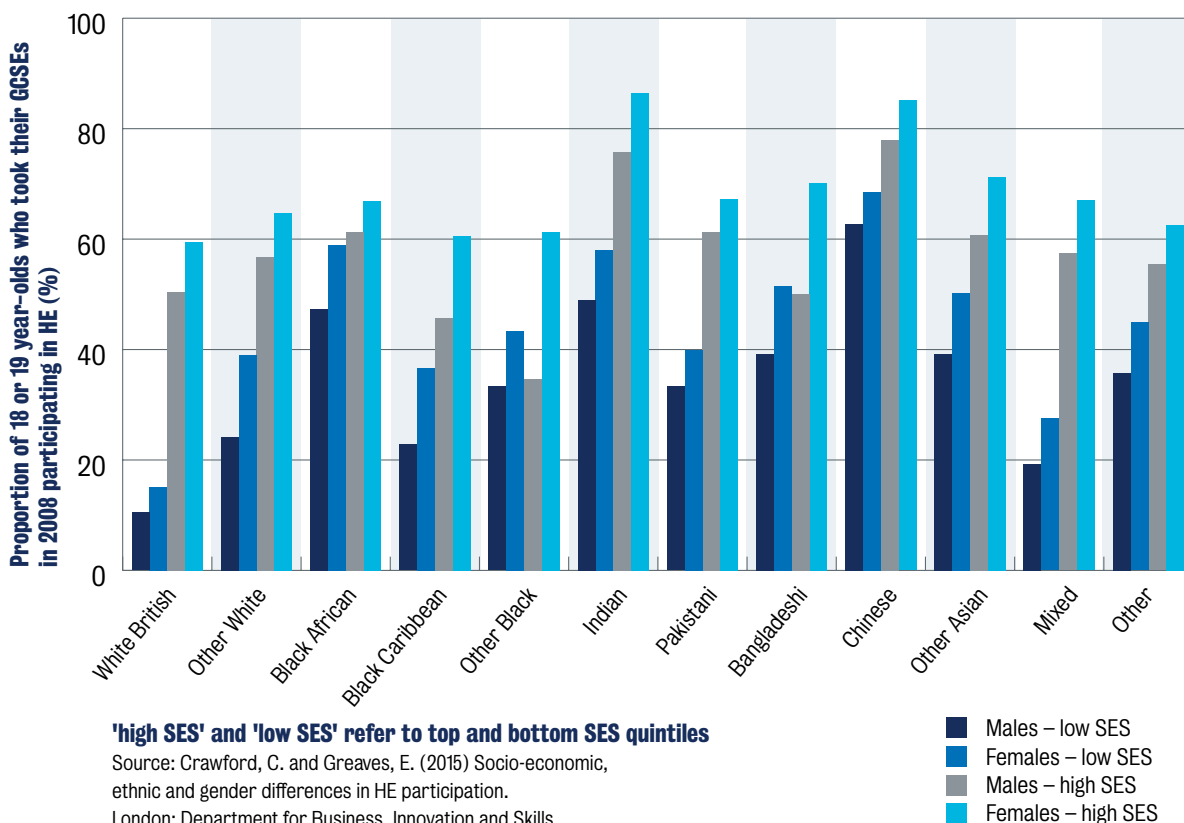
Introduction

Only 10% of the most disadvantaged white British males progress to higher education (HE). Not only is this significantly less than the most advantaged white males, it is also significantly less than the progression to HE of disadvantaged males from other ethnic backgrounds (Hillman and Robinson 2016). Almost twenty years after the Dearing Report highlighted the underrepresentation of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in HE, and emphasised the role of widening participation in addressing the problem, this report considers:

- How to define white working class boys
- Why they are less likely to enter higher education
- The degree to which they are underrepresented in elite institutions and alternative routes through higher education
- The challenges and barriers faced by widening participation practitioners in tackling the problem
- How widening participation practitioners can work best with white working class boys

Widening participation practitioners seek not only to increase access and entry to HE amongst under-represented groups, but also to ensure that the type of HE chosen best fits their needs and that they enter HE ready to thrive (Moore et al., 2013). Initiatives that promote positive outcomes in HE are of equal importance to those that promote entry, but this report focuses on the issue of access: why white working class boys are underrepresented in higher education and what widening participation practitioners can do to tackle the problem.

HE participation by gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status



Methodology

This report draws together findings from three strands of research: a literature review overseen by an academic steering group, an academic and practitioner roundtable, and four university case studies. This approach highlights different perspectives on the issue of white working class boys' underrepresentation in higher education, from academics to practitioners; from teachers in schools to Widening Participation practitioners in universities. Each strand of the research is based on the same set of research questions, around which the report is structured. This approach allowed different perspectives to be compared and contrasted: in some areas the literature review, roundtable and case studies generated overlapping findings; in others, tensions and disagreements arose. An exploration of these areas of agreement disagreement allowed a clear set of barriers, challenges and best practices to emerge.

Literature review

The report is underpinned by an examination of over fifty items of existing literature relating to white working class boys' underrepresentation in higher education. The review included academic publications, government reports and reports from organisations working in the higher education sector and beyond. The literature review was overseen by an academic steering group with extensive experience in the field:

- Kalwant Bhopal, Professor of Education and Social Justice, University of Southampton and Visiting Professor, King's College London
- Dr Mary-Claire Travers, King's College London

Academic and practitioner roundtable

LKMco convened a roundtable discussion, hosted by King's College London on 2nd June 2016. The roundtable invited academics and practitioners to discuss and debate their perspectives on the underrepresentation of white working class boys in higher education and to share challenges, barriers and examples of effective practice. Where possible, individuals who expressed an interest but could not attend were followed up with a phone interview. The roundtable was chaired by Eleanor Bernardes, Associate, LKMco, and attended by the following participants:

- Sam Baars, Director of Research, LKMco
- Tamara Baleanu, Programme Development Manager, The Access Project
- Anne-Marie Canning, Director of Widening Participation, King's College London
- Oliver Cardinali, Policy and Public Affairs Officer, Sutton Trust
- Beth Craigie, Widening Participation Coordinator/KCLSU, King's College London
- Martin Cresswell, Senior Transitional Adviser, London Borough of Camden (phone interview)
- Julian Crockford, Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit Manager, The University of Sheffield
- Neil Croll, Acting Head of Widening Participation, The University of Glasgow
- Clifton Evers, Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies, Newcastle University
- Anthony Fitzpatrick, Progression Manager, St Paul's Way Trust School
- Anne-Marie Henderson, Widening Participation Officer (Care Leavers), King's College London

- Nik Higgins, Raising Aspirations Programme Coordinator, BSix Sixth Form College
- Rachel Hodgson, Project Co-ordinator, North East Raising Aspiration Partnership
- Simon Pedley, Access and Gifted & Talented Champion, Ormiston Academies Trust
- Hannah Pollard, Admissions Progression Officer, University of Bath
- Huw Powell, Headteacher, Mary Immaculate Catholic High School
- Susie Whigham, National Programme Director, The Scholars Programme, The Brilliant Club

University case studies

In order to capture concrete examples of Widening Participation targeted at white working class boys, four mini case studies were conducted with universities that appear to have a high proportion of white working class boys in their student population. Case studies were targeted at these institutions on the basis that they have experience working with this group; we did not assume that the high proportion of white working class boys in their student population was necessarily indicative of the effectiveness of their WP programme.

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) were used to rank HEIs according to the following characteristics of their 2014/15 student population:

- The proportion of male students
- The proportion of students classified as 'White'
- The proportion of students from NS-SEC groups 4, 5, 6 and 7*

Each HEI was then assigned a 'combined rank' in order to provide a broad indication of the proportion of white working class boys in their student population. We sought to achieve regional and national spread with our case studies, with more weight placed on the English context due to its larger student population. Our final set of case studies were conducted with:

- University of Wales Trinity Saint David
- Teesside University
- University of Lincoln
- University of the Highlands and Islands

Case studies consisted of a 20-minute phone interview with a senior member of the Widening Participation team with strategic responsibility for WP, alongside analysis of university documentation in some instances.

* Our analysis is based on data from HESA tables T1a and T3, which do not use comparable samples. Moreover, this procedure does not specifically identify white working class boys; merely the proportion of each separate characteristic in the student population. With limited public data on the proportions of white working class boys in HEIs' student populations, this method offers a simple approximation for the purposes of targeting the case studies.

Defining ‘white working class’

Despite being widely discussed in the literature, the term ‘white working class’ is not consistently defined. ‘White’ is a broad categorisation of ethnicity which encompasses *White British* (who form the majority of the group) as well as subgroups including *Irish, Gypsy/Roma* and *other white*. Despite this variation within the ‘White’ ethnic group, Nik Higgins argued that the term ‘white working class’ tends to be used to refer to White British young people rather than all ‘White’ working class ethnic groups. This can mask important distinctions between the perceptions of higher education held by British and non-British white working class young people:

‘There’s a similarity [between different white working class groups] in perhaps their level of disinformation about higher education... and they face a similar challenge in terms of attainment... but there’s a dissimilarity in terms of their perceptions of [higher education] institutions... the challenge is slightly nuanced, and the way you tailor your outreach work is really important.’

Definitions of ‘working class’ differ within the literature and broadly relate to one or more of the following criteria (Goodman and Gregg, 2010; Sharples et al. 2011; Mongon and Chapman, 2008; Cassen and Kingdon, 2007):

- Free school meal (FSM) eligibility
- Parental occupation
- Household income (either the lowest quintile or below 60% of the median)
- Parental uptake of state benefits
- Groups experiencing limited social mobility

Likewise, the practitioners at our roundtable cited the following range of additional measures they use to identify white working class boys:

- Home postcode and Index of Multiple Deprivation scores
- Receipt of Education Maintenance Allowance (in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland)
- Attendance at a low progression school

It is clear that ‘white working class’ boys are defined and identified in numerous different ways, both in research and practice. As we argue at the end of this report, this poses challenges for HEIs seeking a reliable way of targeting this group of young people, and the use of proxies such as Free School Meals and Pupil Premium eligibility has significant limitations. The range of definitions of ‘white working class’ is also a barrier to compiling robust statistics on the performance of different HEIs in this particular area of widening participation. With no centrally agreed definition, HEIs are currently left to adopt their own methods of identifying white working class boys. King’s College London recently adopted a definition of ‘white working class’ developed by Lambeth Council (Lewis and Demie, 2015). According to this definition white working class pupils are of White British declaration and have the following characteristics:

- Parents are in skilled and semi-routine occupations
- Parents depend on the welfare state for their income
- All pupils eligible for free school meals or pupil premium

As Anne-Marie Canning explained at the roundtable “we wanted to use a local definition that teachers felt comfortable with and could identify with.” ‘Operational’ definitions such as this are geared towards identifying white working class pupils using measures that are available in standard datasets such as the School Census, tax and benefit records. While these definitions capture important features of the notion of ‘white working class’, such as its roots in particular types of occupational status and particular material conditions in the home, the literature makes clear that a full definition of being a white, working class boy includes particular attitudes, behaviours and locally-rooted culture that cannot be captured by survey and administrative data alone (Nayak, 2003; Burke, 2006; Bright, 2011; Stahl, 2012). Nik Higgins and Clifton Evers described this as a difference between ‘formal definitions’ and ‘self-perceptions’ of what it means to be ‘white working class’. As we explore later in the report, these broader notions of ‘white working class’ offer additional explanations as to why white working class boys are underrepresented in HE, going beyond accounts based in educational attainment, material conditions and aspirations.

Summary

- The term ‘white working class’ is not consistently defined in the literature.
 - ‘White working class’ is often used to implicitly refer to white British working class young people rather than those belonging to other ‘white’ ethnicities. This may mask important differences in the two groups’ perceptions of, and access to, HE.
 - A wide array of proxies for ‘working class’ are used in research and practice, including free school meal eligibility, parental occupation, household income, parental uptake of state benefits, area-level deprivation, receipt of Education Maintenance Allowance and attendance at a low progression school. These multiple definitions result in a lack of consistency and comparability between the white working class target groups that different HEIs are working with.
 - Definitions of ‘white working class’ based solely on administrative and survey data fail to capture the attitudes, behaviours and cultures that define the experience of being ‘white working class’.
-

2 Why are white working class boys less likely to enter HE?

2.1 Educational attainment

White working class pupils are the lowest performing group in our education system (Strand 2014). The gap in performance between white working class pupils and their peers from other ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic groups exists at age five and widens throughout compulsory education. Although there is a social class gradient in educational attainment for pupils from all ethnic groups, the effect of socioeconomic status (SES) is particularly pronounced for white British pupils (Strand, 2014; Mongon and Chapman, 2008) and, among white working class pupils it is boys who fair marginally worse than girls (Tackney et al. 2011, Strand 2014: 17). Given that HE is intended to be selective on the basis of prior attainment (Gorard, 2006) the weak educational attainment of white working class boys would appear to be an obvious contributor to their underrepresentation in HE. However, research suggests that low SES impacts on future life chances, including participation in HE, even when prior educational attainment is high (Marshall, 2002). Low educational attainment alone cannot therefore account entirely for the underrepresentation of white working class boys in HE (Crawford and Greaves 2015).

2.2 Financial costs and returns

HE has a financial cost and, without additional support or allowances, this cost is proportionally greater for families on lower incomes. The purpose of financial support such as loans, grants and bursaries is to mitigate this cost and allow fair participation (Moore et al., 2013). However, the literature and our roundtable offered a mixed assessment of the impact of financial costs and returns on white working class boys' participation in higher education.

2.2.1 Fees, debt and financial support

The introduction of £9,000 tuition fees in 2012/13 caused a reduction in entry rates for that academic year, accounted for by increases in the previous year due to students choosing not to defer entry to avoid the newly increased fees. Since then, entry rates have risen steadily in line with previous trends. Entry rates by disadvantaged pupils have also risen, marginally closing the gap between these pupils and their advantaged counterparts. In general terms, therefore, it appears that working class students have not been deterred by increased fees (Hillman and Robinson, 2016). The Scottish context provides a useful point of comparison. Although the absence of tuition fees in Scotland removes the up-front financial barrier faced by other UK students, the difference in participation between those from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds is higher in Scotland than the rest of the UK, indicating that there are additional barriers, beyond fees, to disadvantaged students' participation (Hunter Blackburn et al. 2016).

The abolition of fees in Scotland was accompanied by cuts to grants and reduced funding for outreach programmes. Scotland is the only nation in the UK where disadvantaged students face higher debts than their advantaged peers, as disadvantaged students will receive higher maintenance loans and less financial support from parents. Hunter and Blackburn at al. (2016) argue that as England moves towards a system that favours loans over grants, disadvantaged pupils will accumulate more debt to repay after graduating despite receiving more financial support during their time at university. Although evidence shows receipt of a bursary increases retention amongst low-income students (West et al., 2009), the

literature suggests that low SES students are not more likely to take up places at institutions offering high bursaries (Moore et al., 2013). Meanwhile, although debt aversion is more prominent amongst low SES pupils and parents white pupils in general are less likely to be debt averse and see finance as a barrier to HE participation compared to other ethnicities (Callender and Jackson, 2008).

2.2.2 Return on investment and the value of a degree

The literature suggests that white working class boys are primarily concerned about whether they will see a return on their investment, rather than the direct financial cost of HE (Bowes et al. 2015). Forsyth and Furlong (2003) find that low income students are more likely to take up a Higher National Diploma (HND) or Further Education (FE) course rather than a full degree, and Anne-Marie Canning suggested that non HE-based routes into the labour market can appeal to white working class boys because the financial benefits of these routes are realised more immediately than those that accrue from a higher education course. As Tamara Baleanu argued, the benefits of higher education will always be weighed up against the alternatives that young people are considering, and for white working class boys the value of a degree is normally less familiar, and less valued, than a practical route into a skilled trade.

Likewise, Simon Pedley explained that local economic contexts can further reinforce perceptions that higher education is not necessary in order to secure skilled, well-paid employment:

'In places around the south coast, Norfolk, the Isle of Wight, there are fairly successful small business owners working primarily in agriculture. And in those instances it's a lot more difficult to persuade students from traditionally working class backgrounds... that university is a sensible use of their time and money when everyone they know is working in a small business and their dad says 'don't worry about it – you can come and work with me, I'll sort you out with a job.'

Huw Powell argued that white working class boys at his school are exposed to two messages, via the media and peer networks, that have a particularly strong influence on their perceptions of university. Firstly, they are aware of high profile cases of entrepreneurs who have not gone to university, or who have not completed their courses, and have still gone on to achieve success in the labour market. Secondly, they have friends who have gone away to university and returned to the same low-paid jobs they were doing before they left for their studies, only now saddled with debt. As Anthony Fitzpatrick argued, the positive financial benefits of higher education are simply not always visible to young people:

'One of the really important things for white working class students... is to be able to see what the earning potential of their next step is... very often, particularly for white working class males who aren't from a university background, they simply cannot see how it's a worthwhile trajectory to pick A-levels and go down that academic route, because it's not visible to them at all.'

The literature suggests that, on average, university represents a lower financial return for men than for women because male non-graduates can earn significantly more than female non-graduates (Walker & Zu, 2013; Hillman and Robinson, 2016). Non-graduate employment opportunities are more attractive to boys and this attitude is more prevalent amongst white boys from disadvantaged backgrounds compared to their black and minority ethnic counterparts (Bowes et al. 2015; Hillman and Robinson, 2016). Bowes et al. (2015) find that low SES white males are more likely to hold the view that 'the best jobs do not necessarily go to university graduates'. Likewise, parents of white disadvantaged pupils are more likely to hold the belief that leaving education at 16 or 18 does not limit career opportunities, compared to parents of other ethnicities and advantaged pupils (Bowes et al. 2015).

In summary, financial barriers to white working class boys' participation in higher education go beyond initial costs, indebtedness and the level of bursary and grant support available. It appears that

uncertainty relating to the return on the investment of a university degree may play a more important role here. As Moore et al. (2013) argue, greater access to information about fees and loans and an emphasis on costs as an investment should play an important role in WP activities.

2.3 Aspirations and expectations

Current government policy presents ‘low aspirations’ as a key barrier to educational attainment and social mobility (Baker et al. 2014), with pupils from low SES backgrounds identified in a 2013 speech by Prime Minister David Cameron as being particularly at risk of ‘aiming low’ and not seeing HE as a desirable trajectory after leaving school (Wintour, 2013).

The literature draws two important distinctions in relation to young people’s educational aspirations. Firstly, the literature separates ‘aspirations’ which identify what young people want to happen in the future from ‘expectations’ which identify what young people believe will happen in the future. Secondly, the literature separates young people’s own aspirations and expectations from those that their parents hold for their children. These distinctions provide important insights into the true nature of white working class boys’ aspirations for HE.

When children are born 97% of all parents want them to go to university, but when these children reach 14, 53% of low-income parents and 81% of high-income parents believe the child will go to university (Education Committee Report, 2013), suggesting that ‘low parental expectations’ rather than ‘low aspirations’ may be a barrier to HE participation. Other studies suggest more significant differences in high- and low-SES parental aspirations. Goodman and Gregg (2010) find that 37% of low-SES mothers wanted their 9 year-old to go to university compared to 81% of high-SES mothers. Huw Powell explained that parental aspirations and expectations played a significant role in influencing perceptions of higher education amongst white working class boys at his school:

‘The real challenge is trying to crack... parental aspirations and parental expectations. And that, in some sense, is almost a cap really, for some youngsters, about where they can go and what they can do – it’s a real challenge for schools.’

Strand (2014) finds that low-SES white pupils are less likely to aspire to continue education beyond school; a trend which is not present amongst ethnic minority pupils, suggesting ‘low aspirations’ for HE may be a factor behind white working class pupils’ lower participation rates. Meanwhile, McCulloch (2016) finds that young people’s ‘aspiration trajectories’ – the level of their aspirations over time – tend to be stratified by socioeconomic status, with low-SES pupils less likely to voice or maintain aspirations to attend HE. He also finds an association between these aspiration trajectories and admission to HE, although this is weaker than the link between educational aspirations and educational attainment. Finally, Khattab (2015) finds that high parental expectations significantly contribute to their child’s likelihood of applying for university, but that it is an alignment between a pupil’s own aspirations, expectations and attainment that play the most significant role in determining whether or not they apply.

The literature suggests young people’s aspirations and expectations – and those of their parents – may be important factors behind their decision to apply to university. Existing research in this area tends not to draw conclusions relating specifically to white working class boys, but it does suggest that young people’s socioeconomic background is associated with their likelihood to aspire or expect to go to university.

2.4 Values, culture, perceptions and decision-making

Existing research highlights the importance of young people's decision-making processes in relation to HE. The literature highlights differences in the assumptions, information and value judgments that underpin the decisions of young people from middle class and working class backgrounds, and also identifies particular ways in which white working class boys' decision-making may make them less likely to progress to HE.

2.4.1 Access to information and role models

Middle and working class families have access to different forms of 'cultural capital' – sets of ideas, tastes, preferences and tendencies to act in particular ways in particular situations. Middle class parents are likely to be able to pass on forms of capital that increase their child's success in education, whereas working class parents may lack the privilege of this knowledge (Reay et al., 2001; Archer et al., 2002). Forms of capital include an understanding of the traits and attributes desired by university admissions and the intellectual and linguistic skills needed to negotiate the complex application and admission systems, (Zimdars et al., 2009). Furthermore, pupils with a university-educated parent are able to access a more realistic and detailed understanding of what higher education consists of (Reay et al., 2001; Bowes et al. 2015). Working class pupils are therefore disadvantaged as the choice-making process is less familiar and more difficult to navigate (Maguire et al., 2000). Forsyth and Furlong (2003) found that working class pupils experienced cultural barriers at every stage of the decision-making process regarding whether or not to enter HE. These barriers included discouragement from local people, including teachers, when discussing elite university options, career advice that emphasised employment over education and a lack of familiarity with systems such as applying for loans and accommodation.

Huw Powell reflected on the dramatic shift in knowledge and perceptions of HE that can take place when a young person has access to a role model with experience of going to university, drawn from his experience of running a project with 14-16 year-olds:

'None of their parents had gone to university, but where they had the odd sister or cousin [who had attended] their view of university was absolutely transformed.'

As well as acting as sources of information, role models can also function as 'signals' or 'indicators'. For instance, Beth Craigie described the visible shift in pupils' perceptions of higher education that can take place when they arrive on campus and see students who are "just like them." However, Clifton Evers cautioned against relying too heavily on white, male role models as this can encourage boys to see white, working class men as their only available source of support. As Julian Crockford argued, "pupils don't want to see a carefully constructed version of themselves to aspire to, they want someone who embodies the qualities that they want to aspire to", whether or not that person is from their demographic or socioeconomic background.

2.4.2 Preferences for information

Other research has centred on how individuals have different preferences for information type and source dependent on their social class and gender. Hillman and Robinson (2015) show that men make less use of official sources of information than women. When asked about their use of a range of information sources such as university websites, prospectuses, formal open days and talking to current students, a higher percentage of women than men stated that they used these information sources. Meanwhile, research suggests that working class pupils value 'hot', informal information whereas middle class pupils prefer 'cold', formal information, although the research base is inconclusive as to whether this is a matter of preference or access (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Greenbank, 2006; 2008). Taken together, the literature suggests that males make less informed decisions about their choice of university than

females, and perhaps even their decision to enter HE. Relying on informal information may create misconceptions about HE that result in a decision not to apply, or to apply to an inappropriate institution or course (Hillman and Robinson, 2015).

2.4.3 Perceptions of HE

Individuals may perceive HE differently depending on their class. The cultural attitudes that prevail in a young person's environment shape their perceptions. Given that HE is less highly regarded in working class culture (Raven, 2008; HEFCE, 2008) this may lead working class pupils to have negative perceptions of HE which act as barriers to entry. These negative perceptions may also be reinforced by misconceptions which may be more common amongst those with less exposure to university graduates, such as working class pupils (HEA, 2009). However, a number of practitioners at the roundtable argued that negative perceptions of HE are a particular problem for white British working class boys, and that other white working class groups – such as those from Eastern European countries who have moved to the UK – have positive perceptions of HE which are reinforced by those of their parents.

Focus group studies with working class boys reveal that they associate HE with 'long lectures', 'lots of reading' and 'school work', with no individuals referencing HE as enjoyable or associated with practical vocations, (Raven, 2008; HEFCE, 2008). These young people are therefore more likely to seek out employment or alternative routes to practical vocations, instead of viewing university as a positive prospect. Roundtable participants highlighted the tensions between encouraging a more 'informal' perspective on higher education, for instance by placing emphasis on the sporting and social activities available, and the need to ensure white working class boys have an 'accurate' sense of the what independent study, lengthy dissertations and lectures involve. As Susie Whigham explained:

'If you want to get into one of the top universities, you probably will have to thrive in that kind of environment.'

Likewise, Neil Croll argued that widening participation activities need to expose white working class boys to the full experience of being at university, from sitting in lectures to participating in seminars and completing academic assignments, rather than simply "bringing them in for a nice wee visit, which doesn't really achieve anything."

Research suggests that HE is associated with 'femininity' and 'middle classness' (Cohen & Haddock, 1994). As Oliver Cardinali argued, "university is considered a middle class pursuit." As a result, both in educational discourse and in working class perceptions, higher education is seen as incompatible with working class culture, especially for males (Quinn et al., 2005). As Nik Higgins recounted from his experience of working with white working class pupils:

'Trying to engage [white working class boys] with university outreach activities, with extra seminars and lectures tends to be more difficult with boys than it is with girls, and I think some of that is that they feel there's something a little bit feminising, or not as masculine, with that kind of engagement, and that's been a hard thing to crack.'

The literature also identifies working class pupils' need to apply 'strategies' such as concealing their working class identity to navigate the university environment (Loveday, 2014). Working class groups are more likely to view HE as 'risky' or fear the potential loss of identity, immediate earning prospects and longer-term employment security, rather than viewing HE in terms of 'benefit' or 'gain', (Reay, 2001). White working class boys' attachment to place is an important factor here, which can stand at odds with the imperative to move away from home in order to study (Stahl and Baars, 2016). As Anne-Marie Canning explained:

'The model of what it means to go to university is: you go to university and you don't come home. And actually for a lot of kids they want to go home, and their ties to home are a positive thing not a negative thing. And I don't think our model of outreach necessarily always speaks to that.'

Even when white working class boys have access to a local university, Neil Croll explained that this can solve the 'access problem' but worsen the 'retention problem', as boys attempt to maintain both a university and family life and often struggle to do so successfully.

Summary

- White working class boys are the lowest performing group in our education system. This is a considerable barrier to entry into HE, but it does not fully explain their underrepresentation.
- The financial cost of university is a significant barrier to white working class boys' participation. However, this barrier primarily concerns the perceived financial return of a university degree rather than the upfront cost of studying.
- Working class parents and pupils are less likely to aspire to go to university compared to their middle class counterparts, due in large part to a desire to enter the labour market as quickly as possible. Crucially, however, when they do hold aspirations to enter HE they are less likely to believe these aspirations will be achieved.
- Working class pupils have less access to certain forms of 'cultural capital' that facilitate access to HE – such as travel and work experience – which can serve as a barrier when attending an interview or writing a personal statement.
- White working class boys are also less likely to have access to role models who have participated in HE and who can provide them with information about their experiences.
- This barrier is reinforced by research suggesting that working class boys appear to prefer 'informal' information from their peer and family networks over 'official' sources of information. This makes it less likely that working class boys can make informed decisions about HE.
- Research suggests that white working class boys are more likely to hold negative perceptions and misconceptions about university compared to boys from other class and ethnic backgrounds. However, these negative perceptions are held mostly by white British pupils rather than other white pupils.

Is the problem more acute in elite institutions?

Historically the underrepresentation of working class students in higher education has been more pronounced in ‘elite’ institutions such as Oxford, Cambridge and the Russell Group universities. Between 1996 and 2006 only 13% of university entrants categorised as ‘manual class’ went to a Russell Group university, compared to 35% of ‘higher professional class’ university entrants (Boliver, 2013). The difference was less pronounced in ‘other old’ (non–Russell Group) universities, with 17% and 23% of ‘manual’ and ‘higher professional’ class entrants respectively, and was reversed in ‘new’ universities where 70% of ‘manual class’ students chose to study, compared to only 42% of ‘higher professional’ class students (Boliver, 2013). Research by the Sutton Trust in 2007 revealed stark inequalities in admission to elite universities, with 100 ‘elite’ schools (3% of the 3700 schools with post-16 education) providing a third of entrants to Oxbridge between 2002 and 2007.

Research indicates that elite universities have consistently failed to meet equality targets and benchmarks in recent years. For 13 years prior to 2012, Oxford and Cambridge failed to meet the benchmark entry rates for under-represented groups, including those from state schools, lower social classes and low participation backgrounds. Six Russell Group universities also failed to reach the benchmark for applicants from state schools and lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Bolton, 2014). The four Scottish ancient universities have the same level of underrepresentation of disadvantaged students as the Russell Group (SMCPC, 2015).

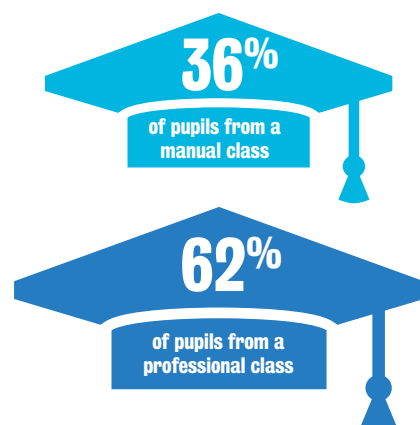
Elite universities are potentially significant vehicles for social mobility due to the earnings premium they bestow on their graduates (Britton et al. 2016). Equality of access to these institutions is therefore a key focus of WP. However, the literature is disputed as to whether the underrepresentation of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds is due to an application deficit or discrimination within admissions. An examination of application and admission data found that barriers exist at both the application and admission stages in relation to state school pupils’ likelihood of gaining a place at a Russell Group institution (Boliver 2013).

3.1 Inequality in applications

The literature makes clear that working class pupils are less likely to apply to the most prestigious institutions. Between 1996 and 2006, 36% of UCAS applicants from a manual class background applied to at least one Russell Group university, compared to 62% of students from a higher professional/managerial class background (Boliver, 2013). Read et al. (2003) find that ‘non-traditional’ students are likely to choose universities where they feel they will ‘fit in’ and are therefore less likely to choose elite institutions.

Sani (2008) and Reay et al. (2009) suggest that the incompatibility of a ‘high status’ university and a ‘low status’ socioeconomic background can create insecurity

Likelihood of applying to a Russell Group university from different class backgrounds



and uncertainty for working class students attending or applying to the most prestigious institutions. Huw Powell argued that university rankings contribute to this problem. While the high status of elite universities may be attractive to middle class pupils, it acts as a deterrent to white working class boys in his school – even those who were likely to achieve the grades necessary for entry:

'[These] young people are aware of the competition between universities, and they are aware of what you might call 'prestigious universities'... but the problem was that the more prestigious a university presented itself as, the less likely they were to want to go there.'

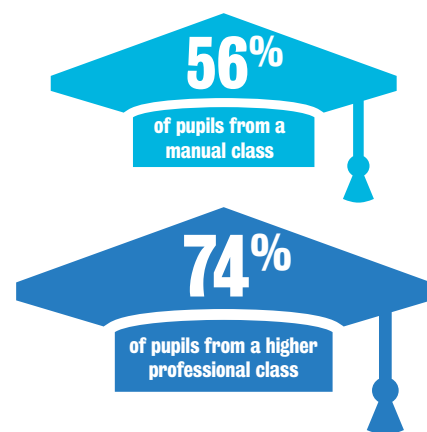
Conversely, Anne-Marie Canning argued that the status hierarchy between different institutions can have the opposite effect, leading white working class boys to consider elite institutions as the only route through higher education that is worth the risk and cost. This mirrors conclusions from research by Reay (2001) which finds that where working class students view HE as a means of 'escaping' their current situation they viewed elite universities as more likely to provide this escape (Reay, 2001). This can lead white working class boys to overlook opportunities at other institutions and limit their chances of gaining a university place.

3.2 Inequality in admissions

In order to determine whether inequality is also created through biased admissions processes the existing research base examines the likelihood that applicants from different backgrounds receive offers. Boliver's examination of admission rates found that 56% of pupils from a manual class background who applied to a Russell group university received an offer, compared to 74% of those pupils from a higher professional class. However, when A-level attainment and so-called 'facilitating subjects' are controlled for the disparity between working class and middle class offer rates is no longer significant (Boliver, 2013), indicating that inequalities in admission to high status institutions may be due to school

type, subject choice and attainment rather than socioeconomic background per se. As Tamara Baleanu argued, "for white working class boys it's the grades that stop them, really, at the end of the day. They don't get into those Russell Group universities because they don't get the three As." Zimdars finds that the difference in likelihood of admission to Oxford based on parental occupation is not significant despite showing a disparity, with 30% of working class pupils admitted compared to 44% of pupils from a 'two professionals' family. Zimdars caveats that this may be due to the high level of self-selection in working class pupils, (Zimdars et al., 2009), reflecting Huw Powell's observation that perceptions of elite status may act as a deterrent to white working class boys.

Likelihood of receiving an offer from a Russell Group university from different class backgrounds



Summary

- Elite universities have consistently failed to meet benchmark entry requirements for state school pupils, pupils from working class backgrounds and pupils from low participation areas.
- White working class boys experience barriers to entry at both the application and admission stages at these institutions. These barriers are weaker for white working class boys with high attainment and good grades in 'facilitating subjects', but inequality remains even when these factors are considered.
- Some working class pupils see elite universities as the only institutions which can offer them a viable return on their investment. However, other see the 'high status' of elite institutions as being incompatible with their working class background.

4

Is there a similar problem in relation to apprenticeships and other forms of HE?

A university-based degree is not the only route through higher education. Higher Apprenticeships offer a work-based alternative, with Level 6 apprenticeships equivalent to a bachelor degree. Meanwhile Advanced Apprenticeships, which are a Level 3 qualification equivalent to A levels, can provide a route into HE, either apprenticeship- or university-based.

White working class boys appear to be well represented amongst those undertaking FE-level apprenticeships. A 2012 BIS report on the demographics of 5,000 current and completed FE/advanced apprentices found that the majority, 35%, were from 'skilled working class' backgrounds and 28% were from 'working class' or 'non-working' backgrounds. Only 8% were from middle class backgrounds (BIS, 2012). The same survey found an almost even split between male and female apprentices (47% male to 53% female). Outcomes also appear to favour white working class pupils: they are more likely than their peers from other ethnic groups to gain an apprenticeship after a pre-apprenticeship course, and are more likely to secure employment on completion of an apprenticeship (DCSF/DIUS, 2008).

These trends in participation are underpinned by clear differences in both parents' and pupils' aspirations according to gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background. Bowes et al. (2015) find that in year 9, 29% of disadvantaged white pupils aspire to leave full time education for an apprenticeship or a full time job, compared to between 2% and 6% for all other ethnicities. Meanwhile 26% of parents of white disadvantaged pupils aim for their child to begin an apprenticeship or full-time work at 16, compared to between 2% and 6% of parents of disadvantaged pupils from other ethnicities. These aspirations differ on the basis of gender: 35% of parents of white disadvantaged boys aimed for their son to begin an apprenticeship at age 16, compared to 16% of parents of white disadvantaged girls. Parents' and pupils' attitudes towards apprenticeships therefore seem to differ widely on the basis of gender and ethnicity.

Pupils aspiring to leave FT education for an apprenticeship



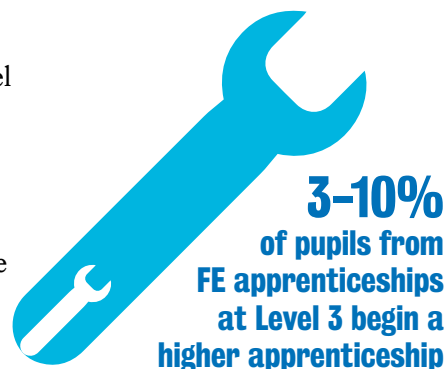
The literature suggests that these differences stem from financial pressures and the perceived importance of practical skills. Parents of disadvantaged white young people valued 'having good practical skills and training' over 'academic results' in terms of future employment opportunities, a trend that reversed in parents of advantaged white young people (Bowes et al., 2015). The decision to undertake FE and HE routes which combine work and study can also be understood when considering the material pressures faced by working class families (Fuller and Ulwin, 2003). Tamara Baleanu argued that Higher Apprenticeships help to overcome the perceived financial risks attached to higher education:

'What [white working class boys] like about them is that they earn money... they can see the return on their investment really quickly.'

Meanwhile Oliver Cardinali argued that Higher Apprenticeships may appeal to white working class boys because they demonstrate that “higher education doesn’t have to mean leaving your identity behind.”

Apprenticeships have clear appeal and uptake amongst white working class boys, at least at FE level. However, research suggests that FE-level apprenticeships are seldom used as route into HE-level apprenticeships.

A BIS study finds that only between 3% and 10% of pupils that completed their FE apprenticeship at level 3 began a higher apprenticeship, though more were considering doing so in the future (BIS, 2012). Meanwhile Moore et al. (2013) find that very few FE-level apprentices go on to HE (6%) and of those who do, the majority come from high HE participation areas.



Although white working class boys appear to be well represented amongst those undertaking FE-level apprenticeships, it is therefore less likely that they are as well represented in the Higher Apprenticeship space. Data on apprenticeship takeup also focuses primarily on FE-level apprenticeships, making it difficult to assess white working class boys’ takeup of work-based higher education. Furthermore, as Anthony Fitzpatrick argued, Widening Participation is not yet as widespread in the apprenticeship space as it is in university-based higher education; a point reiterated by Anne-Marie Canning in relation to School Leaver programmes, which are increasingly seen by white working class boys as a more desirable route into higher education than both degrees and apprenticeships.

The existing literature suggests that apprenticeships are a more effective means of engaging white working class boys with further education than with higher education. Transfer rates from FE- to HE-level apprenticeships are low, and Widening Participation activity is limited in this space. Even if uptake of Higher Apprenticeships was to be expanded, this model of higher education faces further challenges related to its status. These challenges are discussed in Section 6.3.

Summary

- White working class boys are well represented in FE-level apprenticeships. Both parents and pupils value this route due to the focus on practical skills and the ability to earn whilst learning.
- However, transfer rates from FE-level apprenticeships into HE, both apprenticeship- and university-based, are low.
- Widening Participation activities are also less widespread in the apprenticeship space.
- Higher Apprenticeships and School Leaver programmes have limited capacity to address the underrepresentation of white working class boys in HE due to the scale of these routes compared to university-based HE.

5 What are WP practitioners doing to tackle the problem?

5.1 Overview of the widening participation landscape

WP activities include a range of support at different stages of an individual's journey through HE. These include:

- Outreach and progression schemes
- Information, advice and guidance
- Interventions to support retention and student success
- Financial support
- Flexible provision
- Employer involvement and the promotion of employability (Moore et al., 2013)

WP programmes and initiatives take various forms in schools, colleges, universities and other educational providers. Summer schools, information initiatives, student ambassador outreach, HE-focused workshops and application support are common WP activities.

In 2009, HEFCE instituted a requirement for universities to provide a Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (WPSA) to ensure they are committed to WP. The report also gave an overview of the progress achieved by WP initiatives since The Dearing Report, with participation by pupils from the most disadvantaged areas increasing by 50% between 1994 and 2009. However, HEFCE noted that the improvement in participation amongst pupils from low socioeconomic groups was primarily amongst the female cohort (HEFCE, 2008) and consequently white working class boys are now a target group. Though many institutions mention males and socioeconomic target groups in their 2016/17 access agreements, apart from initial teacher training courses only two institutions set statistical targets for recruitment of males (Hillman and Robinson, 2016). Given the lack of documented WP activities which specifically target white working class boys, this section of the report identifies the key features of best practice with this target group.

5.2 What are the key features of best practice?

5.2.1 Engaging parents and teachers

Not all activities and interventions to tackle the underrepresentation of white working class boys are within the reach and responsibility of widening participation practitioners. A whole system approach is therefore required. Parents, teachers and staff across the university should be informed, involved and included in order to support white working class boys' entry and outcomes. As Hannah Pollard suggests:

'It is important that we adopt a whole university approach to WP to ensure that students from all target groups don't just successfully enter university, but also thrive, graduate and go on to have a successful career. Students from groups such as white working class boys either dropping out of university or graduating and undertaking a job they could have obtained without a degree only reinforces the existing negative perceptions of going to university. To try and tackle this, our WP

team is drawing together staff from across the university, for example, admissions, academic departments, the SU, careers service, so that the priorities of outreach practitioners are shared. This helps to make sure that once students from target groups such as white working class boys enter university, they continue to have a positive and beneficial experience.'

Teachers are key influencers of pupils' understanding of the options available to them. Moore (2013) identifies the importance of teachers being well informed: many teachers lack a clear understanding of the barriers to HE faced by white working class boys and, when they do, are not always able to provide sufficiently high quality Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) to pupils. Anne-Marie Henderson argued that as the majority of teachers are female and middle class they may struggle to appreciate the context and issues faced by white working class boys. Both ITT and CPD could play a role in raising teacher awareness and equipping teachers with skills to raise participation in HE. However, Oliver Cardinali warned against placing pressure on the already time-constrained period of ITT.

As parental attitudes are often influential in pupils' decision making they are an important target audience for WP activities (Moore, 2013). Even when parents have limited influence over decision-making they can still be important sources of information (Moorgan, 2001). Parents and carers should be given accessible information about HE options, especially when they have not experienced HE themselves. A possible way to engage parents and pupils simultaneously is through Hillman and Robinson's (2016) suggestion of *Take your sons to university day*, a concept built on *Take your daughter to work day*. These visits provide an opportunity for boys to receive tailored academic and non-academic information.

Case study

The University of Lincoln: working with parents and teachers

An interview with Lesley Bunn, Head of Marketing & Student Recruitment

Lesley Bunn identified the rising profile of white working class boys as a WP target group:

'We've always known that this is one of the groups that needed more assistance or more profile... the national collaborative outreach programme from HEFCE is specifically asking us to target white working class boys.'

The relatively large proportion of white working class boys in the university's student population is partly due to local demographics but also to the university's active WP strategy.

The university identifies parents as a key target group for its WP activities, as many parents' aspirations for their children are not geared towards gaining a university education. This is exacerbated by the ready availability of low skill, high pay employment opportunities in the local tourism and other industries, which often do not require higher education qualifications:

'When we talk about barriers, parents and parental perceptions are key... sometimes going out and getting a job is the only aspiration that parents have for their children. It's a huge thing to get over.'

Providing parent social evenings in the local area, parental information zones at open days and opportunities for parents to speak with staff and students allows the university to inform parents and promote the value of HE. Parents often question staff in depth about the long-term value of undertaking a degree, but also the day-to-day reality of life on campus for their son or daughter:

'They are very conscious of the cost so they're looking for value for money... they want to guarantee that their son or daughter will go out to work and get a good graduate job: 'What do your students do? What jobs do they get?' We give them factual information on employability... They are also incredibly interested in accommodation; how safe and secure and affordable it is.'

Alongside their engagement activities with parents, Lincoln's WP initiatives also involve working with teaching staff in local schools. They have recently introduced teacher CPD, recognising that the process of readying students for university must begin early. The teacher CPD sessions, delivered to 60 teachers this year, prepare teachers for identifying WP target pupils and promoting HE:

'[The training] exposes teachers to national interventions and to working with students from WP backgrounds: how to identify those students and what's going to be the best way of working with them to make sure they achieve their potential and are successful.'

5.2.2 Communicating the relevance of higher education

White working class boys need to be better informed of the breadth of subjects available to study at university and their links to a variety of career types. Simon Pedley highlighted a deficit in working class students' knowledge of the degree courses available and recommended seminars and programmes with year 10 and 11 students which:

'Expose students to subjects they wouldn't normally come across. It's a big difference for students from predominantly middle class areas, they're aware of subjects like economics and politics and philosophy that they could study.'

Given that subject and course relevance are key considerations for white working class boys, particularly in relation to the 'earning potential' of specific study routes, WP has a clear role to play in promoting the awareness of the range and career relevance of the programmes on offer at university. This should also include promoting different types of study route that white working class boys may not be aware of, such as part-time and distance learning. WP should also seek to increase access to work-based and vocational routes into HE which may allow students to earn alongside their studies. Conversely, the vocational aspects of highly academic subjects should also be promoted in order to create a more positive perception of learning focused on 'doing' (HEFCE, Raven 2008, Allen, 2008). For instance Nik Higgins highlighted the success of outreach programmes which allow pupils the opportunity to experience a vocational aspect of an academically challenging subject such as engineering.

5.2.3 Information, Advice and Guidance

Increasing engagement is considered a key starting point by WP practitioners. As Beth Craigie explained:

'Engaging young people is the most important thing. Then obviously building upon that, giving them study skills and information, making them feel comfortable in the [HE] environment.'

WP must consider which methods of communication and contact are likely to engage white working class boys. Web-based information, peer interactions and sport are identified as channels of information that white working class boys engage well with. For instance Rachel Hodgson cited the success of

outreach programmes in the North East that use boxing, rugby and ‘traditional working-class sports’ to engage white working class boys. She found that university visits that combine sporting activities with further information about university life and degree study allowed white working class boys to experience university in a way which is familiar and positive. However, Anne-Marie Canning argued that “not all working class boys enjoy sport” and that universities should look to engage this group with a range of outreach models, citing the example of a King’s project based on online gaming. As identified in Section 6.2, attempts to engage white working class boys with particular forms of activity need to avoid stereotyping.

Another method of connecting with white working class boys to provide information, advice and guidance on HE is through mentors who have themselves participated in HE and who can provide information alongside practical support with applications (Raven, 2008). Delivering IAG through mentors is a successful method of ensuring young people are well informed (Moore, 2013), and helps to break down stereotypes and misconceptions about HE. Clifton Evers suggests that mentoring should take a long-term approach in which pupils have the same mentor before and after entry to university. This continuity improves the success of the mentoring relationship and the quality of support provided. However, as identified in Section 2.4.1, whilst using relatable role models can be beneficial it is important not to reinforce the idea that white working class boys can only call on other white, working class, male role models for support.

The form, type and pace at which IAG is delivered are as important as the channel of communication. In her review of best practice in WP, Moore (2013) concludes that the most successful IAG programmes fulfil the following criteria:

- Start early, at least in year 7 but possibly in primary school, and intensify during periods of transition
- Provide personalised information.
- Address priority information needs such as HE finance, HE applications, entry requirements and employment opportunities.
- Provide ‘hot’ informal information which is best transmitted through social interactions, rather than more formal ‘cold’ information.

5.2.4 Promoting the range and flexibility of higher education

As highlighted in Section 3.1, some WP practitioners focus primarily on encouraging entry to elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge as the profile and status of these institutions can act as an incentive for white working class boys. Ormiston Academy Trust runs a WP programme that works with students from years 7 to 11, with activities tailored to suit the different needs and challenges of each age group. As Simon Pedley summarised:

‘We spent time looking at what does an Oxford undergraduate look like...and how do we come up with a programme that turns a student...into that?’

However, Pedley also considered the ethical implications of trying to “turn [a pupil] into something they’re not” and therefore, it is perhaps the institutions themselves that need to make changes to their culture rather than the students. As Julian Crockford argued:

‘The way we are constructing is quite a rigid, banded entity and we fall back on the deficit model of ‘we need white working class boys to fit into what we do’...rather than universities themselves thinking about what the internal, institutional barriers and how we are not accommodating the needs of those learners.’

Controversially, Anthony Fitzpatrick insists we need to minimise talk of Oxbridge in the WP debate:

'They're two small universities targeting a specific type of student. They're a very small part of what needs to be done here and there is an instant switch-off from white working class boys when we focus here...with students with low aspirations, you will lose a large proportion of them [by focusing on Oxbridge specifically]'

Case study

Teesside University: students as mentors and role models

An interview with Abbie English, Student Recruitment and Admissions Manager

Nearly 10% of Teesside's full-time undergraduate population is made up of white working class boys. Abbie English explained that the University attracts white working class boys from across the country:

'About thirty-five per cent of [our male, white working class students] aren't actually from our immediate doorstep. The... figures that we're looking at suggest that yes, there is an element of [geography], but they are coming from elsewhere in the country as well.'

Teesside University has been involved in widening participation since before the advent of access agreements and initiatives such as Aim Higher, although an increase in specific projects targeting white working class boys are a relatively new addition to their WP activities.

One of the key elements of the university's work with white working class boys is the use of mentors and role models, echoing a common theme in the literature and our roundtable. This mentoring strategy has taken two forms.

Firstly, the university facilitates mentor-style relationships in local schools. Recently they have supported a programme which pairs Year 12 and Year 8 boys from white working class backgrounds who have been identified by their teachers as becoming disengaged from school:

'[The school] paired [each year eight student] up with a year twelve mentor from their own sixth form... We held a team-building activity here on campus for them where... we worked with them on things like the climbing wall and various other activities to look at building trust and working with each other so that the year twelves could start to build that relationship with the year eights.'

Secondly, the university is broadening its cohort of student ambassadors to create relatable role models for white working class boys who may be considering higher education:

'We recruit about ninety student ambassadors a year from our current undergrad cohort and what we've been keen to do over the last few years is to diversify the kind of students that we recruit onto that programme... providing positive role models who can kind of demonstrate and can be relatable in terms of, you know, 'I came from the same sort of area and look what I'm doing'.'

In this way, Teesside is aiming to capitalise on the experiences of those white working class boys who have successfully entered higher education and can promote it to others.

As highlighted in Section 5.2.2, the key to engaging white working class boys in higher education is emphasising the range and flexibility of degree-level study. Elite universities should always be presented as a viable option, and their status may help to motivate and engage some white working class boys, but WP practitioners should focus on communicating the breadth of institutions that can provide higher education opportunities.

Summary

Despite the government's focus on widening participation to white working class boys, few HEIs formally document the WP activities they are targeting specifically at this group. The literature, roundtable and case studies identify the following features of best practice:

- Parents and carers should be recognised as a key influence and WP should provide them with information on the value of university as well as details such as accommodation and day-to-day life on campus.
- WP should develop CPD for teachers on identifying WP target groups and promoting HE to these pupils.
- The relevance and value of university degree subjects should be emphasised through careers education and exposure to a wide range of subjects. The vocational aspects of academic subjects should also be exposed and championed.
- Information, Advice and Guidance should be readily accessible and delivered through a range of methods that appeal to white working class boys' existing interests, whilst avoiding stereotyping.

WP should balance the promotion of elite institutions with the need to ensure that white working class boys are aware of the range of higher education institutions and course offers available.

- Role models and mentors can effectively promote HE and support pupils in their decisionmaking. Mentoring schemes work best over the long term and can take a variety of forms including partnership with local schools and student-to-student mentoring.
-

6.1 Data and definitions

One of the most significant challenges to addressing the underrepresentation of white working class boys in HE is the lack of an agreed definition and means of reliably identifying this group. As Section 1 of the report highlighted, of the range of measures and proxies of social class available to practitioners, using an occupational classification such as NS-SEC is arguably the most reliable means of specifying a young person's class background. However, as Harrison and Hatt argue, “difficulties with collecting information from pupils, lack of direct access to parents and data protection issues all conspire to make it very difficult for... widening participation managers to use data on the occupational background of young people's parents as the basis for selection” (2010: 67).

Even when reliable NS-SEC data on parental occupation are available, Neil Croll highlighted that relying on parental occupation as a measure of a young person's social class poses a particular problem for Looked After Children, who may be from a working class background but not live with working class carers. They may therefore be overlooked in the data and not properly targeted by HEIs. Likewise, Huw Powell drew attention to the diversity of school communities, and how white working class boys might appear as a minority ‘contingent’ or form the majority of pupils at a given school. This has important consequences for the use of school- and area-level proxies such as levels of FSM, POLAR and IDACI classifications to identify individual pupils from particular backgrounds: when they are in the minority they may be overlooked. Similarly, Simon Pedley flagged up the dangers of using Free School Meals or Pupil Premium eligibility at the individual level as a proxy for being white working class: in some schools these groups will overlap significantly, but in others – particularly in the capital – they may not.

As highlighted in Section 1, the ethnic dimension of being ‘white working class’ also demands closer attention. Very little of the existing literature disaggregates White British working class boys and non-British ‘white’ working class boys when considering the underrepresentation of this group in higher education. However, our roundtable participants suggested that there are important distinctions between White British and other ‘white’ working class boys in relation to their values, attainment and perceptions of higher education, which pose very distinct challenges for Widening Participation practitioners. As Anne-Marie Canning argued:

‘I think it's the ‘Britishness’ and I think that's really important. There is something about values; there's something about community, expectations and aspirations that is so critical.’

6.2 Targeting and labelling

Some practitioners explained that targeting white working class boys can be controversial. Three main challenges exist here:

Firstly, as Clifton Evers explained, defining a young person as ‘white working class’ labels them in a way they may not be comfortable or agree with. For example, Rachel Hodgson described how white working class communities in the North East rejected notions they were ‘disadvantaged’ and that they needed

additional support due to a deficit on their part. Susie Whigham explained that in the Brilliant Club's experience, this sense of 'stigma' is sometimes stronger amongst parents than their children, and that successful programmes therefore need to have a 'universal' element that works with families as well as with individual pupils. Anne-Marie Canning and Clifton Evers both highlighted how WP practitioners face the challenge of avoiding stereotyping white working class boys whilst making use of generalised information about their interests and preferences in order to engage them with HE.

Secondly, as Anne-Marie Canning explained, HEIs can themselves find it uncomfortable targeting programmes specifically at white working class boys:

'We found that people were quite uncomfortable with the idea of running a targeted activity with this group, in a way that we've not encountered, for example... targeting young Black African men... we had quite a lot of people saying "this isn't going to be a white-only event, is it?"'

Thirdly, some practitioners voiced a fear that targeting white working class boys can lead to other marginalised groups being overlooked, mirroring arguments put forward in the academic literature. For instance Francis (2006) argues that socioeconomic circumstances remain the greatest barrier to participation, and white working class girls risk being overlooked, despite performing only marginally better at school. Neil Croll highlighted the challenge of targeting males specifically as many outreach and IAG programmes are school-based and schools are reluctant for practitioners to focus solely on boys at the exclusion of girls.

Despite these concerns, some practitioners felt the need to explicitly target white working class British young people and to use this terminology. As Martin Cresswell argued in relation to the White British Achievement in Camden project:

'We debated it... but it was a deliberate decision to target white working class boys, and to use that terminology to describe them. We wanted to be transparent about the issues facing this group because that's what the data was telling us... we wanted to use that data to raise awareness amongst parents and to challenge schools to take targeted action.'

6.3 The status of alternative routes

While degree-level apprenticeships help to overcome some of the barriers to white working class boys' access to higher education, for instance by providing a much faster return on investment, some roundtable participants felt that these 'alternative' routes through higher education presented particular challenges. Anne-Marie Canning warned that there was variable uptake of Higher Apprenticeships amongst elite institutions, and that "if we're also focusing on getting white working class kids through onto the highly selective institutions, [degree-level apprenticeships] aren't going to be a panacea at that end unfortunately."

Meanwhile, Anthony Fitzpatrick argued that Higher Apprenticeships are an imperfect solution to the access problem for white working class boys because they do not share the same status as a degree:

'The vocational route is still very much seen, nationally, as second best, even if it's something that's incredibly highly selective.'

Crucially, he argued that while white working class boys are attracted to this alternative route through higher education and see it as 'less risky', many believe it to be a 'second rate' option that is not as prestigious as a university degree. As Simon Pedley argued:

‘Until schools in middle class areas are telling their students ‘Apprenticeships are a good and valid thing to do’ I’d be very uneasy about students being given different advice simply because they are white and working class.’

Roundtable practitioners also voiced fears that vocational routes through higher education do not offer the transferability of a degree and are not as resilient to economic and labour market upheaval as they tend to relate to specific industries, although Oliver Cardinali argued that Higher Apprenticeships can be found in a range of industries, including those in the service sector. Ultimately however, promoting Higher Apprenticeships as a solution to the access problem for white working class boys may simply mask deeper underlying problems, such as the underachievement of white working class boys through the earlier stages of the education system. As Nik Higgins argued, looking to Higher Apprenticeships as a means of solving the underrepresentation of white working class boys in higher education “just seems like grafting another level of vocational training on top of an existing problem, rather than trying to really ruthlessly drill down to the root problem.”

6.4 Admissions

A number of the practitioners at the roundtable voiced concerns that efforts to tackle the underrepresentation of white working class boys in higher education tend to focus on ‘supply side’ features of boys themselves, such as low aspirations and poor educational attainment, rather than the ‘demand side’ features of higher education institutions such as their structure, governance and admissions policies. Oliver Cardinali identified three specific practices, widely used in university admissions, which undermine white working class boys’ prospects of entering higher education:

- Personal statements, which discriminate in favour of those with particular form of cultural capital and with greater access to life experiences such as internships and opportunities to travel
- Interviews, which are recognised as being open to unconscious bias which does not recognise the potential of disadvantaged groups such as white working class boys (University Alliance, 2016)
- Admissions based on predicted grades, which tend to underestimate white working class boys’ educational attainment and leave them short of entry requirements

Neil Croll argued that these barriers can be partially overcome by running personal statement workshops, ensuring interviews are limited to admissions to professional degrees and are conducted in a standardised way. Meanwhile, Hannah Pollard emphasised the importance of universities using contextual data in order to make admissions fairer:

‘It is important to ensure that there is some flexibility built into the admissions system so that a student who meets particular ‘widening participation’ criteria (such as living in a post-code where few people progress to university, or attending a school that is very weak) is assessed within their context. For instance, are a student’s predicted grades particularly low in relation to their AS levels and therefore have they been under-predicted? Are their GCSEs actually very strong in the context of a very low performing school? Is their personal statement lacking in examples of their interest in the subject, such as work experience, purely due to lack of opportunity?’

Simon Pedley argued that widening participation activities geared towards improving young people’s personal statements or interview technique should avoid merely ‘teaching to the test’. Instead, these outcomes should be achieved by working with schools and pupils in the longer term to develop clubs, resources and curricula that enrich pupils’ knowledge and confidence and therefore make a more meaningful contribution to their education.

Case study

University of the Highlands and Islands: facilitating progression from FE to HE

An interview with Kevin Sinclair, Student Engagement Manager

The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) is made up of 13 colleges and research centres. The widening participation team at UHI attribute much of the success of their WP activities to the way in which these local centres facilitate students' progression from FE courses to HE.

UHI undertakes a range of WP initiatives which aim specifically to facilitate progression from FE to HE:

- Providing FE feeder courses which have proven popular with white working class boys
- Partnerships with local colleges
- Links with the Scottish Wider Access Programme, the biggest provider of adult re-entry in Scotland
- School outreach and IAG
- Invites to university open days which provide intensive IAG
- University level courses for sixth form pupils

Kevin Sinclair explained how the delivery of university modules to over 300 school pupils over the last two years has allowed WP target groups, such as white working class boys, to demonstrate they are capable of degree-level study and earn pre-entry credits in the process:

'At the end of the year they have 30 or 60 credits towards a degree here...or some other university. They've had a taste of studying at university, they know what it's like it's not so scary any more, they know they can do it because they've done it for a few modules.'

UHI faces particular geographical barriers when attempting to deliver WP activities directly with schools and FE colleges, given its remote location. The university also faces difficulties targeting its pre-entry university 'feeder' courses at white working class boys due to the stigma this can attract. In order to overcome these barriers UHI has a strong network of partner colleges which provide their access courses. These colleges have direct, daily access to the white working class boys being targeted by UHI's outreach programmes, and are also in a position to ensure they gain the FE qualifications necessary to progress to HE.

6.5 Early and multi-agency intervention

There is widespread recognition among widening participation practitioners that tackling the underrepresentation of disadvantaged groups such as white working class boys requires early intervention, long before pupils begin to make choices about their post-16 options. As Susie Whigham argued:

'People talk about intervening early... and we shouldn't underestimate just how early that needs to be. If you think about those learning behaviours and values, that's by age 2 – that translates into delayed gratification, resilience, inner confidence.'

Tamara Baleanu described "a definite chronology in terms of both the barriers and the solutions to them." White working class boys are underrepresented in higher education due to a range of interrelated factors that can multiply and reinforce each other over time – from low expectations to low educational attainment and a lack of reliable information about higher education. Some of these factors can be addressed by widening participation practitioners, but many of them, such as the educational attainment

gap, rely on earlier intervention by other agencies:

'These are different types of obstacles... some of them will be solved at school level, some of them will be solved by other agencies that need to be brought into the conversation and have been missing conspicuously. Some of them will be solved by the widening participation/university outreach side, but it's useful to distinguish between them.'

Finally, Rachel Hodgson argued that interventions should be used as an opportunity to celebrate success rather than expose 'deficits'. When targeting white working class boys and their parents, who may have little confidence dealing with higher education institutions, this may involve a series of initial 'small steps', such as acknowledging the significance of attending an outreach event in the first instance. This foundation of success can then be built upon to gradually increase their exposure to university and their confidence in applying.

Case study

University of Wales Trinity Saint David: early intervention

An interview with Eve Warburton, Executive Widening Participation and Community Engagement Officer

Trinity Saint David has recently created a widening access target for white working class boys that comes into effect in 2017/18. Eve Warburton emphasised the difficulty the university faces in defining this group, which is particularly challenging given the variety of settings they operate in:

'We have three campuses, one of them is very rural, one of them is a market town and one of them is urban so we were saying that actually your definition of working class boys, depends on who you are speaking to [and] depends on where you are.'

Despite these difficulties a programme of activities has been designed to target white working class boys which was designed and delivered by the University's Reaching Wider officer, Trystan Rees.

The first activity aimed at reaching their new admissions target was a 'curriculum enhancement day'. The Children's Poet Laureate for Wales, Martin Dawes, and two academics from Trinity Saint David, worked with a group of boys, in their own school, around the theme of World War II poetry and letters. The activity aimed to enhance pupils' skills and confidence in relation to English literature, as well as their wider engagement with their studies.

Secondly, Trinity Saint David has started a drive to recruit male, undergraduate ambassadors to work on their outreach programmes. The aim is to normalise the idea of university education amongst children who are likely to have had little contact with the world of higher education. The ambassadors visit local schools, as well as inviting class groups to visit them on campus to see what day-to-day life as an undergraduate looks like.

'I want them to see boys studying... in all subjects. I want them to see that as normal.'

Despite their potential importance in shaping white working class boys' likelihood of entering higher education, Eve Warburton acknowledged that measuring the impact of early interventions of this type is particularly challenging.

6.6 Knowing what works

Robust evaluations of the outcomes of WP activities targeted at white working class boys are necessary in order to establish best practice. However, drawing links between programmes and outcomes is difficult due to the wide range of factors involved in a young person's decision to enter HE. Tracking HE participants and non-participants remains difficult and analysis of entry and achievement statistics do not provide rich enough detail to explain trends (HEFCE, 2009; Moore, 2013). Assessing the impact of WP initiatives is also difficult because measures of 'success' are disputed and ill defined. Although this report focuses on best practice in increasing entry rates to higher education, WP practitioners must also consider the longer-term outcomes of students from under represented groups at university, going beyond entry to consider retention and academic outcomes. As working class students are more likely to face difficulties that result in 'drop out' (Yorke and Longdon, 2008), a focus on entry rates alone is insufficient to judge the success of WP activities with this target group (Jones, 2008; Quinn et al., 2005).

Summary

WP practitioners face the following set of challenges when targeting their activities at white working class boys:

- The lack of a clear definition of 'white working class' means the identification of this group is unreliable and varies widely between different institutions. The use of proxies such as free school meal eligibility and area-based classifications result in some white working class boys being overlooked. WP practitioners must also be aware that White British working class boys and those from non-British backgrounds may require very different forms of support to access HE.
- Targeting and labeling white working class boys is a contentious process. Some boys will disagree with this label or will be reluctant to be targeted for 'special treatment'. Furthermore, practitioners must avoid stereotyping white working class boys when drawing up their interventions, and may face criticism for targeting one group at the potential expense of others.
- Whilst degree level apprenticeships may provide a valuable and appealing alternative form of HE for white working class boys, these vocational forms of HE are limited in scale and cannot, on their own, solve the participation problem. Furthermore, many elite institutions do not provide Higher Apprenticeships and they are less transferable than a degree.
- The structure, governance and admissions policies of many universities do not provide space for white working class boys to demonstrate their potential. The use of personal statements which focus on opportunities which are more readily available to middle class pupils, the prevalence of interview bias and high grade entry requirements are all significant barriers to white working class boys' access to HE.
- Many WP initiatives intervene at too late a stage to address the numerous challenges white working class boys face during their educational careers. WP activities need to target pupils early in order to ensure they achieve well at school, are informed about their FE and HE options and why higher education is relevant to their future plans. Effective interventions must also work with multiple agencies, including parents and teachers.
- Measuring the impact of WP initiatives aimed at white working class boys is problematic due to the lack of a clearly defined target group. WP practitioners must also be clear about the outcomes they are aiming to achieve, from entry through to retention and academic attainment.

7 Conclusions and recommendations

White working class boys are significantly underrepresented in higher education. Only 10% of the most disadvantaged white boys participate in HE, significantly below the participation rates of disadvantaged white girls, disadvantaged boys from other ethnic groups and their peers from more advantaged backgrounds (Hillman and Robinson, 2016). The government's recent shift in focus towards the status of white working class boys in higher education is therefore well founded. However, there is a pressing need for a more detailed understanding of the underlying causes of the problem, the most effective forms of widening participation practice and the barriers and challenges that WP practitioners face in this area.

7.1 What factors lie behind white working class boys' underrepresentation in HE?

Although inequalities in educational attainment explain much of the variation in entry to higher education by social class, ethnicity and gender, white working class boys with good school grades are still less likely to progress to HE than their high attaining peers from other ethnic groups and social classes. The problem therefore runs deeper than low educational attainment, and a range of additional factors prevent white working class boys from progressing to HE:

Aspirations and expectations

White working class boys and their parents are more likely to prioritise swift entry into paid work over further study. Although it is unhelpful to characterise these as 'low' aspirations, they do often stand at odds with progression to HE and the commitment to defer earnings.

Financial costs and returns

Similarly, financial barriers to white working class boys' participation in HE appear to revolve around concerns about receiving a return on their investment, rather than the upfront costs of studying.

Values, culture, perceptions and decision-making

However, the most significant set of factors behind white working class boys' underrepresentation in HE relate to information, perceptions and decision-making processes. White working class boys have less access to forms of cultural capital that facilitate access to HE. They are also more likely to hold negative perceptions of university-based study than their more advantaged peers. Meanwhile, a lack of experience and knowledge of higher education within family and peer networks is exacerbated by a propensity to seek 'informal' guidance rather than looking to official sources of information outside of their personal networks.

7.2 What is the scale of the problem in elite institutions and alternative forms of HE?

The problem is more pronounced in elite institutions, where barriers exist at both application and

admission, although the divergence in offer rates between middle class and working class pupils is largely accounted for by prior attainment and facilitating subjects. Moreover, while apprenticeships offer an alternative work-based route through higher education, these opportunities are far more limited in number than university-based degrees, and the high uptake of FE-level apprenticeships by white working class boys does not appear to follow through into Higher Apprenticeships or other forms of HE, with fewer than 1 in 10 pupils progressing from an FE-level apprenticeship to a university degree. Elite institutions and higher apprenticeships both occupy a small section of the higher education territory in the UK, and focusing attention on these areas offers only marginal progress towards solving the problem of white working class boys' underrepresentation in HE.

7.3 Recommendations for action

Drawing together insights from the literature, roundtable and case studies, the report highlights a range of Widening Participation activities which have the potential to effect change in this area. Key features of effective practice appear to be:

Engaging parents and teachers

Parents are a key influence on white working class boys' views about their future educational options. Even when parents aspire for their children to enter HE, it is difficult for them to support this aspiration without any personal experience of university education to draw on. WP activities should not underestimate the value of informing parents about the day-to-day reality and longer-term benefits of higher education. Meanwhile WP practitioners should work with teachers to support white working class boys to consider higher education and realise the future relevance of their primary and secondary education. Early intervention is key, and must involve engagement in earlier phases of education.

Communicating the relevance of higher education

White working class boys are more likely to be concerned about the relevance of a university degree to their future earnings and job prospects. The relevance and value of university degree subjects should be emphasised through careers education and exposure to a wide range of subjects, for instance by working with teachers on primary and secondary curriculum enhancement. The vocational aspects of academic subjects should also be exposed and championed.

Information, advice and guidance

Given that white working class boys are less likely to use formal sources of information when making decisions about higher education, WP practitioners should think creatively about the ways in which they can reach this target group with Information, Advice and Guidance. An effective method is to use student mentors as part of long-term mentoring programmes which gradually expose pupils to concrete aspects of higher education, demonstrating its benefits and its accessibility to white working class boys.

7.4 What challenges need to be overcome?

WP practitioners face a wide range of challenges and barriers to increasing the participation of white working class boys in HE, from defining the problem to redesigning their own admissions procedures and working with other agencies.

Defining and targeting

A recurring theme running through the literature, case studies and roundtable discussion is the lack of an agreed definition of 'white working class' boys and the difficulties of targeting and labeling pupils on the basis of their class and ethnicity. At present, practitioners use a range of proxy measures of pupils' social

class or rely on NS-SEC data whose reliability is questionable. In order to honour the government's commitment to tackling the underrepresentation of white working class boys in higher education, it is crucial that HEIs are supported to reach a centrally-agreed definition of the problem based on robust data.

Admissions policies

Widely-used admissions practices such as personal statements and interviews are identified as key barriers to white working class boys, who are less likely to have access to the specific forms of cultural capital they require.

The need to act early

WP activities need to target pupils early in order to ensure they achieve well at school, are informed about their FE and HE options and know why higher education is relevant to their future plans. Effective interventions must also work with multiple agencies, including parents and teachers. University-based WP practitioners may not always be best placed to deliver early interventions, but they may be in a suitable position to coordinate programmes with local schools.

Knowing what works

Given the lack of clarity regarding the definition of the 'white working class' male target group and the range of outcomes that WP activities seek to achieve – from access to retention to academic achievement – WP practitioners face a series of challenges when it comes to measuring the impact of their programmes and learning from best practice elsewhere.

Ultimately, the issue of data and definitions presents itself as the single most recurrent challenge to tackling the underrepresentation of white working class boys in higher education. Agreeing a common definition of the problem, underpinned by robust and reliable data, is a necessity if WP practitioners are to successfully target, coordinate and evaluate their efforts. In the meantime, WP practitioners should ensure that parents and pupils are informed about the day-to-day realities of university study, the range and flexibility of higher education routes and their long-term and more immediate practical benefits.

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This report was written by the education and youth development 'think and action tank' **LKMco**. We believe society has a duty to ensure children and young people receive the support they need in order to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood. We work towards this vision by helping education and youth organisations develop, evaluate and improve their work with young people. We then carry out academic and policy research and advocacy that is grounded in our experience.

www.lkmco.org.uk
@LKMco
info@lkmco.org
+44(0)7793 37045

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[@kclwp](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/wp)
outreach@kcl.ac.uk
020 7848 4132