An investigation into the factors determining low participation rates in three areas of Suffolk and Norfolk

November 2016

Neil Raven
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3. Summary

One of the key widening access challenges faced in Suffolk and Norfolk concerns raising progression rates in areas associated with low higher education [HE] participation. This study examines the influences and influencers impacting upon the HE progression of widening participation [WP] learners from a sample of such districts. The identification of these areas was informed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s (HEFCE, 2016a) classification of census wards by POLAR 3 quintile, including analysis based upon expected levels of participation given key stage 4 (GCSE) attainment (HEFCE, 2016b). It was also guided by discussions with the Suffolk and Norfolk Collaborative Outreach (SNCO) Steering Group. All three districts correspond to the catchment areas of three schools/academies from which much of the qualitative evidence that underpins this study - including insights from outreach practitioners, careers guidance professionals and teachers, as well as learners - was derived. Whilst the scoping phase of this study, which involved selection of these areas, pre-dates the announcement of HEFCE’s (2016c) National Collaborative Outreach Programme, most of the neighbourhoods comprising the catchments areas of these schools were designated as ‘target wards’ (HEFC, 2016d).

By understanding the factors that determine HE participation from these areas, the aim of this research is to identify approaches and interventions likely to have greatest impact in raising local progression rates, including to partner institutions, and from these to present a series of recommendations. Given the focus on areas that combine low and lower than expected levels of participation once GCSE scores are recognised, it is also hoped that the findings from this study will be of value to the work of the new National Collaborative Outreach Programme.

Recommendations

1. Continuity: what works already

A number of outreach and enrichment activities were identified by university and college practitioners, teaching professionals and learners (including those from the WP cohort considered to be less engaged in school and less inclined to harbour HE intentions) as being effective at raising HE awareness and understanding, as well as aspirations to progress onto higher-level study. HE partners should continue to deliver these interventions, which are:

- **HE visits** that provide an opportunity for learners to ‘witness and experience [a university] environment’
- **Summer schools/residential visits**, that offer a chance for a more ‘immersive’ experience of university
- **Mentoring** of learners by undergraduates
- **School champions/students in school schemes**, where regular and scheduled school visits are made by undergraduates trained to offer a variety of WP-related activities
- **Family visits** to universities that engage and inform parents and guardians, whilst also providing an outreach experience for their children
- **School-based HE talks** (including those held in assemblies), aimed at raising HE awareness.
2. Change: how current provision can be enhanced

Evidence gathered from the interviews and surveys indicated ways in which current activities deemed to be effective could be enhanced. These are detailed below. Providers should address these when planning the delivery of such activities.

- **HE visits**
  - The opportunity for participants to take home or back to school a reminder of the event and what they achieved (for instance, something produced in a workshop or a certificate of participation)
  - The inclusion of activities that provide an opportunity for participants to see a range of facilities and that also offer an insight into the ‘student experience’ (including witnessing a lecture, seeing student accommodation and learning about undergraduate workloads and timetables, as well as gaining an insight into the nature and variety of the student clubs and societies available)
  - The chance to talk with current undergraduates and gather their views on the HE option, including its costs and benefits. Where feasible, these should include undergraduates from similar backgrounds
  - A consideration of the career opportunities associated with gaining a university education
  - The provision of subject taster sessions that align with learner interests

- **Summer schools**
  - Parental engagement, including the opportunity for parents and guardians to attend elements of the event that offer them insights into HE and that include the provision of information on finance and funding
  - Targeting to ensure the learners selected are likely to benefit most from attendance, notably those with academic potential but who are undecided/currently disinclined from pursuing HE-level study

- **Mentoring/school champions**
  - Ensuring undergraduate commitment to all scheduled sessions/visits
  - The involvement of mentors/champions in other outreach activities, notably university visits by the learners/schools they are working with (thereby offering a familiar face and an element of continuity)
  - Interactions to include the opportunity for learners to discover the reasons for mentors/champions choosing HE

- **Family visits**
  - Provision of transport to facilitate attendance
  - The use of social media to promote these events

- **School-based HE talks**
  - Including pictures/film of the campus and facilities (including accommodation)
  - Providing information on finance
  - Offering insights into the range of courses offered, alongside methods of delivery and information on the duration of courses
3. Looking ahead: what could work

Practitioners, teaching professionals and learners offered a range of ideas for new outreach activities that could help to facilitate progression amongst those from WP backgrounds.

- **School alumni.** Recruiting former pupils who have ‘bucked the trend’ and are now undergraduates (potentially, at local universities) to talk with pupils about the learner journeys they took, and to illustrate from first-hand accounts the possibilities of HE progression and what HE study can offer.

- **Local graduates.** Schools and colleges supported by local HE providers to identify and engage young adults from the local area who are now in graduate level employment, with the aim of producing case studies and recruiting individuals prepared to talk about their experiences to learners.

- **School-based HE tasters.** Events that provide a range of university-related workshops in the classroom and that have the advantage of engaging a larger number of pupils than would attend a campus-based event, including learners reluctant to participate in such visits.

- **Parental provision.** HE focused workshops/short courses for parents designed to help them support their child’s school work, and that provide information about next steps and educational/career pathways, including those that involve the acquisition of HE level skills. These might also include university taster courses, given the low adult HE participation rates associated with many target wards.

- **Teacher support.** Support for teaching professionals, including guidance on alternative (work-based and applied routes into HE) and updates on HE finance. This support to also acknowledge their potential as role models, especially in areas where encounters with degree holders and those in professional occupations are likely to be very infrequent.

4. Key success factors: improving the chances of future success

Finally, from the same discussions it was possible to identify a set of principles that underpin the success of current interventions and, looking ahead, may guide the development of future activities.

- **Institutional collaboration.** The establishment and maintenance of effective working relations between schools/colleges and universities, including the identification of key school contacts who recognise the benefits of outreach and are able to support and facilitate learner participation.

- **Enhanced targeting of outreach participants.** In addition to meeting various WP criteria, learner needs should also be considered, including levels of HE awareness and educational intentions, as well as subject and career interests.

- **Career benefits.** The inclusion of information and insights into the employment opportunities and career prospects associated with gaining an HE level qualification in general and in relation to the subject areas that learners have interests in. Where appropriate, this would include working with graduates and employers.
- **A progressive set of interventions.** The provision of a series of interventions that complement and build upon each other. Potentially, commencing in school years 6/7, and involving events aimed at raising awareness and interest, with subsequent activities seeking to provide more detailed information and guidance (age and stage appropriate), including on subjects of interest, student finance, the university application process, and graduate level employment and career opportunities.

- **The learner perspective.** Gathering the insights of targeted learners. This should capture feedback on recently attended interventions, as well as the more enduring impact of these activities (longitudinal surveys). Seeking the views of learners on future intervention that would be of value to the decision making process should also be explored.
5. Introduction

A wide range of explanations have been advanced for the comparatively low rates of progression experienced by widening participation [WP] learners who, nevertheless, have the academic potential to go on to HE-level study. They include the role of key influencers, or individuals, amongst them parents and guardians, and teachers and tutors, as well as peers. They also include the impact of influences, or particular experiences, on the decision-making process, including early educational encounters, the nature and extent of careers-related information, advice and guidance, and the impact of outreach interventions and other HE-related activities (for instance, HE fairs). Attention has also been directed towards the effect of the locality on educational trajectories, including the state of the local economy and labour market, and the influence of local cultures, as well as the role of distance from, and geographical accessibility to, the nearest provider of higher education.

By focusing on three areas across the two counties that comprise the Suffolk and Norfolk Collaborative Outreach Network, this study seeks to learn more about the factors determining levels of HE progression. Besides being associated with comparatively low participation rates, these three areas were chosen because they provide a cross-section of settlement types, with one representing an urban neighbourhood, the second a small town and the third a coastal community. In each case, the insights and views of university and college outreach practitioners with experience of working in these areas were sought, alongside those of teaching professionals in three secondary state schools with catchment areas that encompass these neighbourhoods. Complementing the practitioner and teacher perspectives, the experiences of local learners were also gathered.

The original research study aimed to capture the insights of learners during school year 9, when key decisions around GCSE and their equivalents were being made and when ideas on educational futures are being considered. A follow-up study, commissioned to run alongside the main investigation, sought the views of year 12 and 13 students at a later phase in their learner journeys, when plans to progress to HE - or not - were being determined. Whilst this means that analysis of progression is based on intentions rather than destinations, it was recognised that significant logistical challenges exist in gathering the views of those who have left the education system and who are unlikely to be registered (and therefore identifiable) at the Network’s partner institutions. This said, in a number of instances the intentions of the sixth formers surveyed were underpinned by actions, in terms of submitting university applications or, alternatively, in seeking employment or other forms of training.

Whilst much of the evidence considered in this investigation is qualitative and derived from staff interviews and learner focus groups, the study also draws on a range of quantitative sources. These include progression statistics provided by a number of the Network’s partner colleges and universities, the datasets behind HEFCE’s (2016a, 2016b) POLAR and Gap analyses, and labour market information provided by the Office for National Statistics’ (ONS, 2016a) NOMIS records system.
6. Methods and approach

As outlined in the original project proposal, the initial phase of work for this study involved desk research. Published reports and articles along with official data releases were consulted with the objective of identifying recent national and regional trends in HE progression amongst those from widening participation backgrounds, as well as exploring explanations for these trends. More detailed analysis of the census wards that made up the catchment areas of each selected school was then conducted. For this, evidence was gathered from Higher Education Funding Council for England’s (HEFCE, 2016a) study of young participation rates along with its analysis of gaps in participation (HFECE, 2016b), and the data that underpins both studies. In addition, the Government’s school profiles (GOV.UK. 2016a) and the Department for Education’s school performance and destinations tables (GOV.UK. 2016b) were consulted, alongside the Office for National Statistics’ (ONS, 2016a) labour market datasets (NOMIS) relating to occupational structures and educational attainment, and which can be accessed at small area level.

The qualitative phase commenced with a survey of practitioners in the Network’s partner institutions with access and progression remits and who had experience of working with learners from the selected schools. Semi-structured telephone interviews were used for this purpose and supplemented by follow-up emails. In addition to considering evidence of progression rates to their institutions, these conversations examined practitioners’ perceptions of the challenges faced by learners from these areas, as well as the approaches their institutions had adopted to enhance progression and an assessment of the effectiveness of such measures. This was followed by a survey of key contacts in the three case study schools, including principals, assistant heads and those with career guidance responsibilities. Semi-structured telephone interviews were also used for this purpose. As with the outreach practitioner interviews, these considered levels of HE progression amongst learners, especially those from WP backgrounds, the challenges they faced and the approaches that had been adopted to enhance educational engagement and progression, along with an assessment of their impact.

To capture the learner-perspective, year 9 pupils in the three schools were surveyed. In each case, two focus groups were run. The first consisted of learners considered by teaching professionals to be able and engaged in education and likely to progress; the second comprised those viewed as able but under-performing, less engaged and less likely to progress. The objective of running two distinct sets of focus groups was to identify differences in educational attitudes and influences, along with possible variations in educational and career aspirations and levels of HE awareness. It was also hoped that these discussions would identify interventions and activities that had been influential in their decision-making, or, looking ahead, could prove beneficial.

To complement the year 9-perspective, year 12 and 13 students were also surveyed. As with their younger counterparts, two cohorts associated with each of the case study schools were identified. The first were those who intended to progress to HE-level study, with the second comprising learners who were not planning to progress despite pursuing level 3 courses that meant they would acquire the qualifications necessary to do so. For each set of learners, the key areas explored in these conversations included attitudes to learning and education, educational and career aspirations, and awareness of HE and opportunities for educational progression. Also considered were the reasons for the respective choice of HE or not and their assessment of any outreach interventions they had received, alongside their ideas for the kinds of support and activities that could help inform the decision making process. Table 6.1 provides a summary of the stages and components involved in the research conducted for this study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Original description</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Desk Research</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>Current explanations and theories</td>
<td>Completed. Included: 20+ academic papers and official reports etc</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Scoping | Identification of 3 case study schools/areas (informed by HEFCE’s participation maps, determined by Network partners) | Three schools/academies selected:  
- Chantry, Ipswich - urban  
- Thetford, Norfolk – small town/rural  
- Great Yarmouth High School, Norfolk – coastal |
| **Primary Research** | | |
| Initial quantitative examination of areas/wards of selected schools | Drawing on HEFCE’s geographical examination of census wards by POLAR quintile | Completed.  
- Key sources inc: HEFCE, young participation and gaps in participation maps and stats; HEFCE, disadvantaged target wards; OFSTED school profiles; DFE school performance tables; DFE, destinations of KS4 and KS5 pupils, 2014  
- In addition, progression data relating to learners from the case study schools was gathered from a number of the Network’s partner HEIs as well as from the schools themselves. |
| Additional quantitative analysis of areas and wards | Not included in the original project proposal | Analysis of labour market information, drawing on the ONS Nomis data sets. |
| Survey of practitioners in partner institutions | Semi-structured telephone interviews with practitioners who have knowledge of working with learners from the selected areas/schools (est. total: 6). | 8 practitioners were interviewed |
| Survey of WP contacts in case study schools | Semi-structured telephone interviews (est. total up to 6) | 9 practitioners interviewed, including heads and vice principals, as well as careers advisors. |
| Survey of year 9 learners | Two groups of learners from each school. The first comprising those likely to progress; the second those unlikely to do so. | In total, 35 learners were surveyed. |
| Survey of HE students | Life-story/reflective interviews with a small sample of HE students from case study schools. | This did not prove feasible. |
| Survey of level 3 learners | Focus groups with Y12/Y13 students from the case study schools, with learners comprising those intending to progress to HE, and those who do not intend to progress (although having the potential to do so). | In total, 34 level three learners were surveyed. |
7. Background to the study

Three schools/academies from across the Network comprised the case study institutions. Starting in the centre of the region, and representing the circumstances that might be encountered in a small inland town, was Thetford Academy. An 11-18 state school with some 1,000 pupils (GOV.UK, 2016a), Thetford’s catchment area comprised the census wards of Thetford Abbey, Saxon and Castle, along with Thetford Guildhall (HEFCE, 2016a). To the south, the second school selected was Chantry Academy, an 11-16 state school with around 650 pupils (GOV.UK, 2016a). Located to south of the river Orwell, Chantry’s catchment area focused on the Gipping, Bridge, Stoke Park, Sprites and Pinewood census wards (HEFCE, 2016a). The third school, situated on the Norfolk coast, was Great Yarmouth High. An 11-16 establishment with over 800 pupils (GOV.UK, 2016a), the school’s catchment area comprised Yarmouth North, Central and Northgate, Nelson, and South Town and Cobholm census wards (HEFCE, 2016a). Since the latter two schools did not have sixth forms, the year 12/13 learner perspective was gathered from a sample of former pupils who had moved on to one of the local colleges that recruited learners from each school. In the case of Chantry this was Suffolk New College, for Great Yarmouth High it was East Norfolk Sixth Form College.

Besides representing a cross-section of settlement types found in the region, and from the south, central and north-western parts of the Network, the selection of these schools was informed by the fact that a significant proportion of their student population were from WP backgrounds. Two of the key indicators of deprivation used by schools relate to the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals and, whilst it operated, the numbers attracting pupil premium funding (Ofsted, 2013). In detailing the proportion of pupils in each of the schools eligible for these, Tables 7.1 and 7.2 confirm that all three had a comparatively large percentage of their student populations from low-income households.

**Table 7.1. Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals in case study schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Thetford Academy</th>
<th>Chantry Academy</th>
<th>Great Yarmouth High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage (national av: 29.4%)</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
<td>54.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Table 7.2. Pupil premium final allocations in case study schools, 2015-16**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School/Academy</th>
<th>Number of pupils</th>
<th>Number eligible</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thetford</td>
<td>1,016</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>33.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chantry</td>
<td>657</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>44.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Yarmouth</td>
<td>837</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>53.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East of England</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Whilst the correlation between family income and HE participation is not a direct one and has been debated, most of the wards comprising the catchment areas for each school were associated with low levels of HE participation according to the most recent, POLAR 3, data returns (HEFCE, 2015a, 2015b). Based on HEFCE’s (2016e) maps of ‘young participation by secondary school area’, Maps 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3 code the catchment area of each case study school according to the young participation rates each ward returned. Wards recording the
lowest rates, and belonging to POLAR 3 quintile 1, are coloured red, whilst at the other end of this spectrum those in quintile 5 - recording the highest rates - are shaded in dark blue. In each case, low participation wards predominate, with one ward related to Thetford Academy and one for Chantry returning a slightly higher (quintile 2) level of young participation.

Map 7.1. HE progression rates of catchment area wards: Thetford Academy

![Map of Thetford Academy catchment areas](image)

Source: HEFCE. (2016e). Young participation by secondary school areas
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/secondary/

Map 7.2. HE progression rates of catchment area wards: Chantry Academy

![Map of Chantry Academy catchment areas](image)

Source: HEFCE. (2016e). Young participation by secondary school areas
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/secondary/
Map 7.3. HE progression rates of catchment area wards: Great Yarmouth High School

Table 7.3. How the progressing rates of case study catchment wards compare with the other geographical areas (POLAR3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>Variation (percentage point difference)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chantry Academy</td>
<td>Bridge</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gipping</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sprites</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stoke Park</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pinewood</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thetford Academy</td>
<td>Thetford Guildhall</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thetford Abbey</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thetford Castle</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Yarmouth High School</td>
<td>Central and Northgate</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yarmouth North</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Town and Cobholm</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Notes: for Breckland, the percentage progressing was 25.76; for Ipswich it was 25.46 and for Great Yarmouth 19.62. For Babergh, the authority where Pinewood is located in, it was 36.63. For the local education authority of Suffolk the progress rate was 32.36 and for Norfolk it was 27.42. The corresponding figure for Eastern England was 38.8, and for England 34.2.
Based on the same POLAR 3 data, Table 7.3 compares the participation rates of the case study wards with those returned for the districts each ward is located in, as well as for their respective counties, the East of England region and the country more generally. This comparative analysis shows that these wards have significantly lower rates of progression than the local areas in which they are located. Indeed, most are more than five percentage points below the district average, with some more than 10 percentage points adrift. The gap is even larger when compared to the average for their respective education authorities (of Suffolk and Norfolk). Indeed, the difference is into double figures for all except Pinewood and Thetford Guildhall and Castle. The same is also true at regional and national level. In sum, the catchment areas of the three case study schools returned very low rates of participation.

In addition, most of these catchment areas were associated with lower than expected rates of HE progression, once account is taken of GCSE attainment (HEFCE, 2016b). Maps 7.4, 7.5 and 7.6 present the catchment wards for each case study school according to their gap quintile. This analysis adopts the same colour coding scheme as that used for the POLAR 3 maps, with red shading used to depict areas where the negative gap between the observed and the expected rates of progression is at its greatest. In contrast, dark blue signifies areas where the proportion of young people progressing to HE exceeds expected levels by the largest margins. With the exception of one area (Thetford Castle), all the other catchment wards featured were classified either in gap quintile 1 or, in three instances, gap quintile 2.

Map 7.4. Gaps in HE progression by catchment ward: Thetford Academy

Source: HEFCE. (2016e). Young participation by secondary school areas
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/secondary/
Map 7.5. Gaps in HE progression by catchment ward: Chantry Academy

Source: HEFCE. (2016e). Young participation by secondary school areas http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/secondary/

Map 7.6. Gaps in HE progression by catchment ward: Great Yarmouth High School

Source: HEFCE. (2016e). Young participation by secondary school areas http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/secondary/
Table 7.4. Performance of catchment wards by POLAR3 and Gap analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>YPR (POLAR3)**</th>
<th>Gap Analysis***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Quintile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thetford Academy</td>
<td>Saxon*</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guildhall*</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Castle</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chantry Academy</td>
<td>Gipping*</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bridge*</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stoke Park*</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sprites*</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pinewood</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Yarmouth High</td>
<td>Yarmouth North*</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Central &amp; Northgate*</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nelson*</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Town &amp; Cobholm</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: * NCOP Target wards. ** Based on all schools, 2005/6-2010/11. *** Based on state schools, 2006/7-2011/12.


Whilst in its initial formulation, this study pre-dates the release of HEFCE's analysis for the new National Collaborative Outreach Programme [NCOP], nine out of the 13 catchment wards featured in this study were to be identified as NCOP ‘target wards’ (HEFCE, 2016d). These are defined as areas where low rates of HE participation are accompanied by lower than expected rates once KS4 attainment is taken into account. Map 7.7 identifies the target wards located in the Network’s two counties. With the majority of their catchment areas representing such wards, it is hoped that this study's analysis, findings and recommendations will be of value to the work of the new NCOP consortium.

Whilst associated with low and lower than expected rates of progression, evidence from the case study schools and feeder colleges on the destination of their learners provides examples that confirm young people from these areas are going onto university level study. This included 24 of the 64 former Great Yarmouth High School students who left East Norfolk Sixth Form College in 2016, and seven of the 87 learners to have left Chantry Academy in 2014/15.

The practitioners interviewed were also able to draw on instances and, in some cases, provide estimates of the numbers progressing. A teaching professional at Thetford Academy suggested that in 2015 some 30-40 year 13s had gone on to university out of a cohort of around 80 learners. Some were also progressing to local HE providers. In 2015/16, the University Campus Suffolk [UCS], now the University of Suffolk, enrolled three former Chantry Academy students, the same number had also embarked on HE courses at UCS in 2014/15, along with two from Great Yarmouth High School. Similarly, in 2015/16 five Thetford Academy students enrolled at the University of East Anglia, with another four entering at the start of the current academic year (2016/17). Whilst only representing a few examples,¹ such instances underpinned the

¹ Since the last educational institution, which could be a feeder college, is detailed on UCAS forms, these figures are likely to mask the real numbers, especially where the school does not have a sixth form, as with Chantry and Great Yarmouth High.
importance of ensuring that in discussions with practitioners, teaching professionals and learners, account was taken of those who do progress, or intend to progress, and what can be deduced from their experiences.

Map 7.7. Target wards in Suffolk and Norfolk

8. Explanations for low progression

8.1. Prior attainment

One of the key areas discussed with outreach practitioners, teaching professions and learners concerned the reasons for the low rates of HE progression encountered in the case study areas. Prior attainment, especially at Key Stage 4 (notably GCSEs), featured in a number of accounts. Here one teaching professional commented that ‘progression to level three requires good Maths and English results’. Similarly, another teaching professional observed that in gaining ‘C grades’ many have their options ‘limited to going for vocational courses’, where progression rates to HE level study are traditionally lower (Chappell, 2011, HEFCE, 2015c).

Elsewhere, a college-based teaching professional observed that a ‘lot of students from local high schools’ who go onto the college need to ‘re-sit their GCSEs’ - a requirement that adds to their workloads and could, potentially, impact on their level 3 attainment (Hodgson and Spours, 2013, Payne, 2001). Along similar lines, an outreach practitioner cautioned that ‘by the time they get to GCSEs, it could be too late, [since] GCSE results will influence what [students] can do later’. To illustrate this point it was noted that good GCSEs are required if ambitions to study medicine are not to be abandoned at an early stage.

However, as another teaching professional observed, in many instances the attainment challenge pre-dates GCSEs. Here reference was made to their academy ‘receiving significant numbers of learners who come in with low prior attainment’, making the task of gaining the requisite number of GCSEs for progression to level 3 study that much harder. In discussing this point, reference was also made to the association between lower levels of educational attainment, including at GCSE, and a young person’s socio-economic background (Department of Education, 2012, House of Commons Education Committee, 2014). It can be suggested that the figures presented in Table 8.1 should be viewed from this perspective.

Table 8.1. Percentage of pupils achieving 5+ A*-C GCSEs (or equivalent), including English and maths, in case study schools, 2013-15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School/Academy</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thetford</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chantry</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Yarmouth</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England - All Schools</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


8.2. Educational aspirations

For a number of interviewees a key factor considered likely to impact on pre-16 educational attainment, along with subsequent educational trajectories, concerned levels of learner confidence. Indeed, for one of teaching professionals ‘getting the kids to believe that they are bright and clever enough to go to university’ represented ‘one of our biggest problems’. Here reference was made to a widely heard viewpoint that ‘people like me don’t go to university’. A lack of confidence was also commented upon by another teaching professional at the same case study institution, who observed meeting ‘young people that have clear ideas of what they would like to do when they leave school but, when discussing it, they don’t think it will happen and are very negative about achieving their goals.’ A similar set of concerns associated with aspirations and expectations amongst learners from non-traditional backgrounds were explored in a House of Commons Education Committee report (2014, 27-29).

Discussing the same issue, one of the outreach practitioners talked about how a lack of confidence, and an accompanying lack of aspiration, could manifest itself and how the resulting behaviours compared with those exhibited by many of the young people they encountered from
independent schools. The ‘difference in attitude is obvious. Those [from independent schools] strive and mock each other for not doing as well as each other and are properly competing against each other to get better grades, whereas it's the polar opposite in these other schools.’ Exploring this further, it was suggested that amongst some learners there could be a stigma associated with doing well and ‘showing an active interest’ in education. When asked about their aspirations and expectations such learners, it was noted, tended to avoid ‘eye contact, shrug their shoulders, and then laugh and joke about it. It’s more of a topic to avoid than discuss.’

A teaching professional at another case study school talked about an observable decline in ambition as learners got older. ‘They may start in year 6 excited but this will often fade’ and in its place will emerge ‘the attitude that if they do not try they will not fail’. It was also suggested that some young people ‘don’t seem to have very think skulls. A lot already believe the door is closed to them [in terms of] academic and economic’ achievement’. Here reference was made to ‘self sabotage’ and of not ‘believ[ing] anything will change’. The issue of resilience, which may underpin this assessment, has also been discussed in a number of recent studies of non-traditional students (Weber, 2014, 99). Two other teaching professionals linked these attitudes and resultant behaviours to the localities from which the young people derived, with one voicing that ‘historically, people from [this area] don’t go to university’. Taking a post-16 college perspective, another interviewee agreed with the view that these attitudes can follow learners out of school and into the sixth form, where comparatively high dropout rates were said to occur (Bradley and Lenton, 2007, Payne, 2001). It was also suggested that if these learners negotiate sixth form and progress to HE, they are still more likely to drop out.

8.3. Awareness and understanding

For a number of interviewees the paucity of confidence and a lack of ambition were the consequence of a limited awareness and understanding of higher education. One college practitioner expressed this as a ‘fear of the unknown, [since] not many of them will know anybody who has been to university.’ A similar point was made by one of the teaching professionals. Although they might have an idea of GCSEs as a ‘stepping-stone to college, [they] have little knowledge of what they will be doing and why’.

Whilst their responses were varied, a lack of understanding, especially amongst the year 9 focus group participants who were starting to disengage from education and their sixth form counterparts who had decided against HE, was evident in their replies to a number of questions. One year 9 group appeared to know little about what they could do at university, besides the possibility of getting into ‘debt for quite a while’ if you are unable to secure a ‘good job’. Amongst the sixth formers, HE was viewed in similarly negative terms, involving ‘moving away from home and being in lectures all day’. It was also considered to entail ‘lots of study’ at a level that was ‘more intense [and] a lot harder’ than that experienced at college. Reference was also made to ‘people having mental break downs [because of] how hard university life is’, and that ‘you are on your own and thrown in at the deep end, without parents or friends’ for support. Workload and the ability to ‘cope with academic pressure’, were identified by Connor et al. (2001, 1) as being amongst the concerns expressed by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds when discussing HE as an option. Members of the same focus group also drew on examples of individuals they knew who has gone to university ‘spent all their money, got a degree and came back after and could not find a job’, or, in another example offered, settled into a job that they ‘could have got into without having to go to university’.

Participants in another sixth form focus group who were not intending to go on to university discussed the prospect of ‘debt’ and expressed the view that they had experienced ‘enough education’. Again, reference was made to knowing individuals who, although ‘intelligent’ and had gone to university, had not benefited from it. In addition, it was observed that university would claim ‘four years’ that you can ‘not get back’; years, it was added, during which you could have been ‘earning money’. Instead, a number of the participants talked about the attraction of ‘doing something productive’, which would involve gaining paid employment. These arguments
are consistent with the findings of Connor et al (2001, 1), who suggest that the principal ‘reasons why [those] from lower socio-economic backgrounds decide against HE study’ are a desire to ‘start employment, earn money and be independent at an earlier age’, whilst, conversely, concerns over ‘the cost of study’ act as a disincentive.

8.3. Family histories

Limited parental understanding of HE

A lack of family history in higher education was also identified by interviewees as a key factor in influencing attitudes towards education in general and university study in particular, and, in the long run, impacting on levels of HE participation. One teaching professional recalled taking to ‘a group of 21 kids’ who were to attend a university event, and noted that ‘when I asked who would be the first to go to university, they all put their hands up. So even though we’ve turned the achievement around in quite a short space of time, you’ve still got generations of work to do here with families that don’t understand what universities are about.’ This assessment is consistent with that of Gorard and Smith (2007, 150), who argue that, ‘for whatever reasons, patterns of participation (and non-participation) run in families to some extent’.

Some of the possible reasons were indicated by one of the outreach practitioners who observed that in schools like the three case study institutions ‘there’s definitely a lack of understanding from parents’. Exploring the impact of a lack of family history in HE, this practitioner suggested that ‘it’s not that the parents aren’t supportive, it’s just that they don’t understand - it’s a confidence thing’. It was also argued that these parents may not ‘know many people who have been to university either, so [their children] don’t have the pressure on them that children whose parents went to university have.’

Similarly, one of the college practitioners suggested that, in some instances, parents hold the view that university is ‘not for them [but] for other people’. A comparable ‘sense’ that HE is ‘not for us’ was discussed by Gorard and Smith (2007, 153). From this perspective, university could be seen as alien and, because of a lack of first or even second-hand experience - in terms of other family members and friends - something they could not relate to. According to a further practitioner, this would also mean that such parents were unlikely to possess the ‘tools [required] to support their children’, whilst another interviewee suggested that it could mean that questions would be asked about ‘what jobs would you go into with a degree anyway!’ These assessments align with discussions about the role of cultural capital and a familiarity, or otherwise, with the mannerisms and behavioural norms associated with university, along with ‘knowledge of the educational system’ (Webber, 2014, 93, Hoskins, 2012).

Parental experience of education

In their discussions, two college practitioners suggested that for those parents with little experience of post-16 education this lack of understanding could also impact on their attitudes and responses to earlier phases in a child’s learner journey, including ‘the transition from high school to college, and from college to sixth form’. Here reference was made to ‘parents not engaging with schools’. One of the teaching professionals expressed a similar view in discussing the possibility that parents may not have had ‘good experiences’ themselves, so will disengage when it comes to the education of their children. The same point was made by an interviewee at another case study school, who observed that ‘one of the biggest [challenges] are parents and grandparents who went to [this] school in the 90s when it had a bit of a reputation and when the view was that because you come from [this area] you are not going to get out’. It was also added that many parents are unfamiliar with the ‘legal requirements’ associated with post-16 training and education (GOV.UK, 2015).

In exploring the same subject another college practitioner drew a comparison with the experiences of young people in families where parents had been to university and were now in white-collar employment. This interviewee’s role had included working with a ‘former grammar school [located] in an affluent area’. Here ‘parents will tend to be professional people [who have]
very often been to university and will chat about that, or [they will] have friends and relatives in professional jobs’. Consequently, it was argued, their children will ‘get inspired by professional people’ resulting in an ‘expectation’ that they will, in turn, go on to university. Shafi and Rose (2014, 221) discuss the links between a parent’s involvement in their child’s schooling and levels parental education. ‘Educated parents’, it is argued, ‘are more likely to be aware of, and have access to, information which they can then provide to their children in the form of greater opportunities’.

Parental career paths

A number of interviewees also talked about the possibility that the career paths taken by parents with no history of HE could influence the educational and employment intentions of their children. In discussing the situation in Great Yarmouth, one outreach practitioner observed that ‘being on the coast, it’s going to be construction, working on the wind farms and following in the family tradition.’ This was also considered to be the case for Thetford, where a teaching professional observed that ‘lots of the parents work in the supermarket or work in the factories overnight, all within walking distance, and when I go into Tesco’s now I see a lot of the students that I taught have got a job there. Young people are very easily influenced by their parents.’ In exploring this point further, it was noted that ‘there’s been a history of a lot of non-skilled trades and you leave school and get a job, and I think a lot of parents believe this is still the way’. A comparable point was made by one of the outreach practitioners in their assessment of the same area. ‘A lot of parents have said that if they can get a job and start earning, then what’s the point, especially if they have contacts in the working environment who can help them on their way.’ Indeed, the links between parental occupations and the intentions of their children could, on occasions, be even more direct. In this respect, another teaching professional described how ‘lots of students go on to work with their parents’, whilst adding ‘the amount of times I hear a student saying ‘it’s ok if I fail, I can work with my dad selling cars’. In making this decision, it was suggested, they are ‘choosing money over studying’.

Family concerns over debt

For a number of practitioners parental concerns over debt were considered to have a significant influence on the attitudes and outlook of their children. Indeed, it was argued that for many ‘the biggest worry is debt’, with one teaching professional suggesting that many parents will argue that, ‘if they can earn more money without getting into debt by going to university, why encourage young people to do so’. The same interviewee observed ‘would young people want to go to HE when parents are saying “do you want that amount of debt around your neck”’. People have a fear of getting into debt. They don’t see it as debt you can ignore. They see it as a huge negative.’ Another teaching professional explored the impact of these views on the children. ‘Most young people [from the area] do not think they would get student loans. [Instead, they] think that they would have to pay to get there from mum and dad’s pocket. [This] would suggest parents do not know enough about university either.’ It was also argued that these ‘views get [increasingly] negative as [students] get older and learn more about the working world from family and friends, especially in terms of how much money they can earn.’ Indeed, various interviewees talked about parents misunderstanding the issue of debt. One teaching professional commented on ‘the confusing things that they read or hear on the radio about finance and debt’, adding that ‘a lot of them read the Daily Mail or the Sun and believe it's going to saddle them with debt for life and don’t want them to do it.’ Similarly, an outreach practitioner talked about ‘lots of myths around finance and the affordability of HE’. Here the example was offered of giving a ‘finance talk to [a group of] parents’, who, on hearing what was available, ‘looked at each other and said “I didn’t realise that”’. However, another interviewee noted the challenge of engage parents who will tend to ‘close up when you speak about university’. Consistent with these assessments, concerns over debt featured in discussions with a number of the learner focus groups. The reply offered by one sixth form participant to the question of why they were hesitant about going to university was fairly typical, if quite forthright: because ‘university costs a hell of a lot of money!’
The challenge of engaging with parents

The challenge of engaging with many parents from WP backgrounds, both in terms of schoolwork and outreach, was referenced by a number of interviewees. One teaching professional noted that the school’s ‘contact with parents’, and parents’ ‘involvement with the school’, can ‘drop off after year 7’. This, it was added, is also around the time that ‘pupil engagement can [begin] to tail off’. From an outreach perspective, another interviewee commented on how ‘difficult’ it was for them to ‘put on events and engage with parents, because, inevitably, the attendance is very, very low’, adding that ‘parents have a lot more sway over a child who is unsure’. A colleague from the same institution echoed this viewpoint: ‘we can get into schools and speak to pupils but parents are the biggest barriers. If parents don’t engage, [we] can’t do anything. The big thing [for us is] being able to talk to them.’

The influence of parents on the educational outcomes of their children is discussed by Dismore (2009), whilst the findings from this study are consistent with those of Grant (2013, 124), who found that low rates of progression in Leicester were linked to the ‘strong ties and loyalty’ many learners had to their families. Likewise, Gorard and Smith (2007, 143) observe that ‘students with parents in manual and unskilled occupations are more likely to want to leave school, having “had enough” and perhaps having been offered a job’. In contrast, Davies et al. (2014, 804) found a ‘substantial positive association between [a young person’s] intention to go to university and [their] parents’ education.

8.4. Complexity of the association between family background and educational outcomes

Family circumstances

Further discussions with interviewees revealed that the impact of family circumstances on educational trajectories could often be more complex than merely the result of parents being unable to draw upon first-hand experiences of HE. Here one of teaching professional observed that amongst the WP cohort would be ‘quite a few young people who are looking after sick or disabled parents or even younger siblings, or older siblings for that matter, and would find it tricky to move away from home’. Another interviewee noted that their school has to deal with a high number of students ‘with needs’ and who are ‘at risk’. In addition, an outreach practitioner recalled coming ‘across a case where a pupil’ at one of the case study schools ‘who [would] qualify for disability allowance at university, was banned from discussing the idea because the family would lose their benefits if she went to university.’ This, it was added, has ‘happened on a number of occasions where families are dependent on a particular source of income’.

Instances of support

Discussions also revealed the need for caution in associating a lack of family history in HE with views hostile to, or merely indifferent to, university study. Whilst they were considered a minority, one teaching professional talked about encountering ‘students who get a little push from their parents’ and quoted from one learner who observed that ‘mum doesn't want me ending up like her’. A college practitioner made a similar point in arguing that ‘family structure’ provides an explanation for why some young people from WP backgrounds progress to HE and others do not. Here, the example was offered of a young man who was struggling with confidence, did ‘not feel [they would] fit into HE’, and whose ‘GCSE profile was not great’. Yet, they went on to university. This student ‘received support and encouragement from his dad who wanted him to do well’ and who had ‘aspirations for his son’. ‘If I spoke to [his] father’, it was added, ‘he would respond’. The contrast was then made with another parent who would adopt ‘avoidance tactics’ rather than engage with the college and work with the practitioner. Similarly, an interviewee at another of the case study schools suggested that one of the reasons why some students were less likely to drop out of sixth form college lay with parental engagement and whether parents offered ‘encouragement [to study] at home’.

23
The positive influence that parents could exert was confirmed and illustrated in feedback received from some the year 9 learners, notably amongst those engaged in their schoolwork and harbouring university ambitions. One participant observed that ‘my parents didn’t do what they wanted to do when they were younger and so told me to do what I want to do.’ In explaining their ambition to go onto university another learner from the same group commented that ‘my mum and dad said that if you want to do something you enjoy, you’ve got to work for it. Try your hardest and try and achieve what you want.’ Similar comments were made by members a year 9 focus group in a different case study school whose members also wanted to progress to HE. Asked how they would feel about being the first in their family to go to university, one observed that ‘it scares me a little bit because I can’t go to any one in my family about it, but then it is also good. I will be the first one to get that life opportunity.’ The concept of opportunity was mentioned by another participant, who noted that higher education offered an ‘opportunity’ their parents ‘never had’. Comparable feedback was received from year 9 focus group participants in the third case study school, with one young person observing that ‘my mum and dad never went to university, and pushed me to be the first in my family.’ Another participant talked about parents who ‘egged me on to be first in the family’. Asked how they did this, reference was made to them ‘just kind of like tell [me] to go. My step sister’, it was added, ‘dropped out [and my] mum doesn’t want that [but] wants [me to] go to university’.

Whilst parents might lack direct experience, participants talked about other sources of information that had proved valuable. Here one discussed an ambition to work with animals, observing that ‘my mum’s friend is a doctor and she told me about it. I like animals and I just want to help them’. Another member of the same group who was keen to become a pharmacist talked about having an aunt who was a nurse.

Some sixth form focus group participants, a number of whom had already applied to university, made similar observations about parental encouragement and support. Asked why they wanted to ‘break the mould’ and be the first in their family to go to university, one observed that ‘my mum doesn’t work and dad doesn’t have a very good job, and I want to have a better job. I don’t want to follow in their footsteps. I would like to be more comfortable than they are’. Both parents, it was added, ‘want me to follow this route and [have] supported me’. Another member of the same focus group talked of being ‘sort of pushed. My mum is in position where she can send a child to university. She definitely wants to, may be for bragging rights, and thinks I will have a better future. Her parents were not in a position to send her to university’. Similarly, another participant observed that whilst their ‘parents [are] not high up professionals, their idea is for [me to] take advantage and go to university’.

These findings are consistent with those of Connor et al. (2001, 41). Whilst their study recognised that most potential entrants had some family or friends with experience of HE, many without these associations had families that were still supportive. In this respect, it was argued that ‘it seems almost vital for potential entrants from lower social groups to have at least one family member who was supportive of their aims to continue onto higher education.’

8.5. Peer pressure

A number of the interviewees discussed the impact that peers could exercise on the educational attitudes and ambitions of their counterparts. One teaching professional talked of the influence of friendship groups and a culture of ‘I hate school’. An interviewee from a different case study school observed how, in seeing ‘that all their friends are not going’, some young people will decide to ‘stay’ in the local area and forgo HE as well. In this respect, Connor et al. (2001, 42) discuss the ‘negative influence’ that can be ‘exerted by peers’ on educational attitudes and engagement. Fuller et al. (2008) also discuss the role of friends as well as family on the HE decision-making process.

This said, one interviewee talked about how peer pressure could work in the opposite direction as well, noting that if one young person ‘is determined [to do well and progress], they can sometimes pull the others along with them’. Elsewhere, an outreach practitioner discussed how peer pressure could impact upon behaviour at careers fairs. ‘You’ll occasionally get groups of
lads just looking to grab whatever free items they can get off the table and move on, and there’ll be their quiet friend in the background who will go along with it’. However, sometimes these quite individuals will overcome such influences and ‘pop up on their own 10 minutes later and say I’m really interested in games design, could you tell me a bit about that please’.

8.6. Local ties and associations

A number of interviewees discussed the influence that the local area, and local ties and associations, could have on educational intentions. Here reference was made by one teaching professional to their school having ‘a lot of young people who are frightened to go out of Thetford. They don’t want to live away from home.’ A comparable observation was made by one of the outreach practitioners who talked of the large psychological step involved in contemplating HE. ‘A lot of students have not been out of their hometown or village before and the prospect of coming to Norwich is a very big step. The idea of distance is a difficult one for them to come to grips with.’ Commenting on the situation in another area, a college practitioner observed that many young people from the district ‘don’t aim high [and are] happy to stay in Ipswich [and] don’t want to leave’.

Some of the interviewees suggested that such attitudes could be traced back to views held by parents. ‘I’ve met parents from rural schools’, one practitioner observed, ‘who have never been out of their town, so there are people who just stay where they are and take up what’s available’. Another practitioner talked about a ‘small town mentality’ and a resulting reluctance ‘to leave Ipswich’. Illustrating the point, reference was made to the influence of ‘a father who does that 9-5’ and of their children who would be ‘happy’ doing the same. A different outreach practitioner talked about the inter-generational ties some families have to their areas. ‘People who’ve grown up in a town with their uncles, aunts and grandparents find it very daunting to think about moving.’ Elsewhere, a teaching professional expressed surprise over ‘how many students don’t venture out of Thetford. Some do not see their futures out of this town because they have generations of family here’. For one of the case study areas, these tendencies were likely to be reinforced by geography. Here reference was made to Great Yarmouth being rather ‘isolated’ and ‘cut off on all sides’. Consequently, it was added by this interviewee, ‘people live in the same areas, grow up and stay, and have a localised mentality’. Another interviewee offered a very similar assessment of the same area in talking about ‘quite a closed community [with] strong bonds’, and where the predominant view was to remain local.

In their feedback, some of the year 9 focus group learners, especially those not considering HE, or who were unconvinced of its merits, talked about distance as a limiting factor on their plans. In response to the idea of studying at the University of Essex in Colchester, UEA in Norwich, or Oxford, a number talked of these institutions being too far, even for a visit. Exploring their reasons for this, these universities were considered to be ‘too far away from family’ and that from such a distance family help, especially ‘advice and financial support’, would unfeasible. Yet, some focus group members recognised that, whilst such a prospect might appear too daunting ‘right now’, it could be ‘different when you’re older’.

Transport and geographical mobility

For a number of practitioners, transport costs could reinforce the propensity of young people to remain in the local area. In discussing the situation in Great Yarmouth, one teaching professional observed that, whilst transport links are ‘good’, there are cost implications for travel. The same point was made in relation to Thetford, with an interviewee noting that ‘in my experience of teaching A-levels at Thetford, not many of the children can drive, so they have to rely on some kind of public transport, which will be expensive and this comes back to the money side of things’. Linked to these observations, Gorard and Smith (2007, 149) argue that those who are least ‘geographically mobile’ and ‘who remain in one area, sometimes over several generations’, are less likely to ‘participate in education’ as (18 plus) adults.
A lack of local role models with HE experience

Interviewees also outlined the implications for a young person’s employment prospects of staying in the local area. In describing Great Yarmouth, one teaching professional suggested that it is ‘traditionally a low economic area’ that has experienced limited industrial ‘investment’. Similarly, Chantry’s catchment area was summarised as being ‘associated with manual [labour] and [those] not employed’, whilst the districts around Thetford were described as being traditionally associated with ‘a lot of unskilled work’. Linked to these observations, reference was made to a lack of local ‘role models’ who have been to university and of catchment areas comprising few ‘people that have studied to degree level’. The absence of local degree holders was also alluded to in one of the sixth form focus groups, where participants confirmed that they rarely encountered people who had gone to university.

Evidence from an earlier iteration of the POLAR classification scheme (POLAR 2) confirms a history of low participation amongst those areas in each of the school catchments that were identified as ‘target wards’ from analysis of the more recent POLAR 3 datasets (Table 8.2). POLAR 2 is based on the progression rates of learners ‘who were aged 18 between 2000 and 2004’. In contrast, POLAR 3 draws on those young people who reached 18 between 2005 and 2009. Table 8.2 also reveals that these same wards were associated with low levels of HE participation amongst their adult populations (QAHE). This classification, which also uses five quintiles, is ‘based on the proportion of people aged 16-74 with HE qualifications from the 2001 census’ (HEFCE, 2015a, HEFCE, 2011).

Table 8.2. Classification of target wards by POLAR 2 and adult participation quintiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>NCOP Target Wards</th>
<th>QYPR</th>
<th>QAHE</th>
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<td>Thetford-Guildhall</td>
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<td>Thetford-Saxon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chantry Academy</td>
<td>Bridge</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gipping</td>
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<td>2</td>
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Sources: HEFCE, 2015a, POLAR – Participation of Local Areas
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/POLAR/POLAR3.data/ HEFCE, 2011, Updated young participation area classification (POLAR2),

Evidence from an analysis of the Office for National Statistics’ NOMIS datasets, and detailed in Tables 8.3 to 8.5, confirms that comparatively few of the population aged 16 and over in these three study areas possessed level 4 or above qualifications. In each case, with the exception of Pinewood on the outskirts of Ipswich, all returned percentages below those found in their respective districts, as well as their home county and the wider region.

A consideration of the ratios of HE qualified to non-HE qualified residents based on the same analysis supports claims that encounters with locals who had experienced a university education were likely to be infrequent. Whilst across Suffolk and Norfolk around 1 in 4 adults had gained a higher-level qualification, the ratios in some of Chantry and Thetford’s wards were as low as 1 in 10, whilst in three of Great Yarmouth High School’s they were less than 1 in 11.
Table 8.3. Percentage of the population with HE qualifications: Chantry Academy catchment area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Wards</th>
<th>Other wards</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bridge</td>
<td>Gipping</td>
<td>Sprites</td>
<td>Stoke Park</td>
<td>Pinewood</td>
<td>Ipswich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.78</td>
<td>17.01</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>13.09</td>
<td>25.33</td>
<td>20.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 8.4. Percentage of the population with HE qualifications: Thetford Academy catchment area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Wards</th>
<th>Other wards</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guildhall</td>
<td>Saxon</td>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>Castle</td>
<td>Breckland</td>
<td>Norfolk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.15</td>
<td>11.01</td>
<td>9.72</td>
<td>15.67</td>
<td>18.65</td>
<td>21.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 8.5. Percentage of the population with HE qualifications: Great Yarmouth High School catchment area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target wards</th>
<th>Other wards</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Northgate</td>
<td>Nelson</td>
<td>Yarmouth North</td>
<td>Southtown and Cobholm</td>
<td>Great Yarmouth</td>
<td>Norfolk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.64</td>
<td>8.72</td>
<td>10.74</td>
<td>9.81</td>
<td>14.21</td>
<td>21.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


A paucity of local residents in professional occupations

The small number of local residents in professional occupations that would have required a university education was also discussed. Indeed, one teaching professional described parts of their school's catchment area as returning some of the lowest percentages of local residents in 'professional jobs' to be found in the country. Talking about a different case study district, another interviewee commented on the absence of a 'batch' of local young people who had gone to university and progressed in their careers. In dismissing the idea of HE, it was observed that learners would draw on examples that highlighted the 'pointlessness of it', and refer to graduates who had returned to 'work in local restaurants and in roles they could have got aged 16-17 and without [incurring] debts'.

Analysis of the NOMIS datasets helps confirm claims that few of the residents in the case study districts held professional or managerial roles. Tables 8.6, 8.7 and 8.8 use the NS-SEC classification scheme to place the local population of each school catchment area into one of three occupational groups. Classes 1-3 comprise ‘managerial, administrative and professional occupations’, as well as those in clerical and service roles, whilst classes 4-8 consist of ‘small employers’ and those in ‘lower supervisory and technical’ roles, as well as ‘semi-routine and routine occupations’ and the unemployed. Details of the proportion of local students aged 16 and over are also included (ONS, n.d.).
All the catchment wards, with the exception of Pinewood, returned a lower proportion of adults in higher-level occupation (classes 1-3) than were recorded in the surrounding districts, their respective counties and the country more widely. In most instances the percentage points difference was in double figures when set against wider county level returns. In a number of cases, a comparable gap was also found between these wards and the surrounding ones that comprised the district they were located in. For one of Chantry Academy’s catchment wards, along with two of Thetford’s and two of Great Yarmouth High School’s, the difference was more than nine percentage points. In contrast, each, with the same exception of Pinewood, recorded a comparatively large proportion of residents in classes 4-8. Indeed, in most of these wards more than two-thirds of the adult population were in lower-level occupational groups compared with the more even split found at county and national level (for a more detailed analysis of the wards comprising Chantry’s catchment area see CREATE (n.d.)).
Table 8.6. Distribution of population 16-64 by NS-SEC grouping: Chantry Academy wards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Classes 1-3</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Classes 4-8</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>County</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge</td>
<td>33.42</td>
<td>-5.86</td>
<td>-9.96</td>
<td>-10.32</td>
<td>61.38</td>
<td>6.83</td>
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<td>13.28</td>
<td>-0.97</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>-2.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gipping</td>
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<td>-6.94</td>
<td>-11.05</td>
<td>-11.40</td>
<td>61.63</td>
<td>7.08</td>
<td>10.03</td>
<td>13.54</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>-2.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sprites</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>-9.28</td>
<td>-13.39</td>
<td>-13.74</td>
<td>65.26</td>
<td>10.71</td>
<td>13.66</td>
<td>17.17</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>-1.43</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoke Park</td>
<td>35.07</td>
<td>-4.21</td>
<td>-8.32</td>
<td>-8.67</td>
<td>59.78</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>8.18</td>
<td>11.68</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>-1.02</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinewood</td>
<td>53.48</td>
<td>14.20</td>
<td>10.09</td>
<td>9.74</td>
<td>41.86</td>
<td>-12.68</td>
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<td>-6.23</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>-1.52</td>
<td>-0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ipswich</td>
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<td>-4.46</td>
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<td>6.45</td>
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<td>1.15</td>
<td>-1.99</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffolk</td>
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<td>51.60</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>3.15</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>43.74</td>
<td></td>
<td>48.09</td>
<td>8.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
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<td>-6.52</td>
<td>-6.88</td>
<td>57.98</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>9.89</td>
<td>5.16</td>
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<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average target wards</td>
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<td>-11.03</td>
<td>62.01</td>
<td>7.47</td>
<td>10.41</td>
<td>13.92</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>-0.89</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 8.7 Distribution of population 16-64 by NS-SEC grouping: Thetford Academy wards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Classes 1-3</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Classes 4-8</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>County</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thetford-Guildhall</td>
<td>38.32</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
<td>-2.03</td>
<td>-5.42</td>
<td>56.90</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>8.80</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>-1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thetford-Saxon</td>
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<td>-10.50</td>
<td>-12.18</td>
<td>-15.57</td>
<td>65.96</td>
<td>9.14</td>
<td>12.26</td>
<td>17.87</td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thetford-Abbey</td>
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<td>-15.00</td>
<td>-16.68</td>
<td>-20.06</td>
<td>70.38</td>
<td>13.56</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>22.28</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thetford-Castle</td>
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<td>-8.52</td>
<td>-11.91</td>
<td>63.76</td>
<td>6.95</td>
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<td>15.67</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breckland</td>
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<td>-5.06</td>
<td>56.82</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>8.73</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>-1.44</td>
<td>-3.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norfolk</td>
<td>40.36</td>
<td>-3.38</td>
<td>53.70</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>5.94</td>
<td></td>
<td>-2.23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>43.74</td>
<td></td>
<td>48.09</td>
<td>8.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>30.50</td>
<td>-8.17</td>
<td>-9.85</td>
<td>-13.24</td>
<td>64.25</td>
<td>7.43</td>
<td>10.55</td>
<td>16.16</td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>-0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average target wards</td>
<td>33.25</td>
<td>-5.43</td>
<td>-7.11</td>
<td>-10.49</td>
<td>61.43</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>7.73</td>
<td>13.34</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>-0.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Office for National Statistics, NOMIS (2014), NS-SeC by economic activity,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Classes 1-3</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Classes 4-8</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Classes 4-8</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central and Northgate</td>
<td>22.52</td>
<td>-9.83</td>
<td>17.83</td>
<td>-2.18</td>
<td>23.40</td>
<td>5.99</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>9.02</td>
<td>17.70</td>
<td>23.40</td>
<td>5.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nelson</td>
<td>18.31</td>
<td>-14.04</td>
<td>75.60</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>21.90</td>
<td>7.74</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>-2.08</td>
<td>19.91</td>
<td>13.70</td>
<td>21.90</td>
<td>7.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarmouth North</td>
<td>26.99</td>
<td>-5.37</td>
<td>67.40</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>13.60</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>-2.56</td>
<td>6.91</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>13.60</td>
<td>4.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>43.74</td>
<td>-48.09</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average target wards</td>
<td>22.61</td>
<td>-9.74</td>
<td>17.75</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>21.13</td>
<td>71.10</td>
<td>8.64</td>
<td>71.10</td>
<td>23.01</td>
<td>17.40</td>
<td>23.01</td>
<td>17.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It can be suggested that local economies associated with low skills may be well equipped to provide employment opportunities for new school and college leavers. In this respect, one of the outreach practitioners talked about the attraction and comparative ease with which young people in such areas could ‘get a job and earn money’. Underpinning this assessment, another interviewee acknowledged the presence in their locality of unskilled service sector jobs. Elsewhere, the example was provided of a young man who, having embarked upon a ‘mixed programme of BTECs’, was offered a job and ‘decided not to complete his qualifications’, even though ‘the college were going to give him time to finish’. Ultimately, ‘the power of cash [had proved] stronger than the long-term’ option - something, it was suggested, that appears ‘particularly true in this area’. Indeed, the same interviewee talked about encountering local councillors who had expressing reservations about young people pursuing subjects they did not consider vocational or they judged to have limited economic value.

Such findings are consistent with those of Gorard and Smith (2007, 149), who argue that ‘where people are born and brought up shapes their social expectations’. Those they suggest ‘who have lived in the most economically disadvantaged areas are the least likely to participate in lifelong learning. This may be partly to do with [the] relative social capital of those differing areas, or differences in actual local opportunities to learn.’ Similarly, in a HEFCE funded study (2007) of four parliamentary constituencies associated with low levels of HE participation, Reed, Gates and Last (2007, 14) discussed the impact of dominant ‘local narratives’ concerned with ‘pathways into adulthood’ that do not involve HE. Young people in such areas, it is argued, are also less likely to ‘encounter’ instances of ‘educational or economic success’.

Whilst analysis of the occupational structure associated with the catchment areas of the three case study schools confirms the predominance of less skilled employment, the presence of higher-level professionals, even though they appear comparatively under-represented, suggests local labour markets that are more complex than simple accounts of low skill-low wage economies. Accordingly, some of the teaching professionals suggested that the decisions being made by young people not to acquire higher level skills and, instead, to seek more immediate employment, could be based on a misreading of the local labour market. In this respect, one interviewee discussed the existence of ‘graduate level jobs’ around Great Yarmouth ‘associated with chemical analysis and geology’. A failure to recognise these, it was suggested, indicated ‘a misunderstanding of other sectors’. Similarly, another of the teaching professionals discussed how Thetford’s economy was evolving as the town acquired more professional service roles and attracted ‘big employers offing technical’ jobs.

8.7. Information, advice and guidance in schools

Closely associated with these observations, interviewees talked of the challenges caused by the limited careers guidance received by many learners. Here a college practitioner observed that when asked about their post-16 options a group of young people on a taster day at their institution ‘looked at me and didn’t have a clue’. In explaining this, reference was made to the loss of ‘the Connexions [service] and the cutting of funding by the Government’. A second practitioner also talked about the demise of Connexions as an ‘arbitrator’, whilst another discussed how the number of guidance officers in their county had fallen in recent years ‘from 23 to nine’. The pressure on teaching staff to fill the resulting void was also discussed, as was the challenge teachers face in ‘getting up to speed with all the changes that are happening in HE and HE finance’.

Elsewhere it was noted that, having taken the academic route, some teaching staff might be unfamiliar with applied subject areas, or technical and work-based routes into HE. Similarly, reference was made to the limited amount of information FE tutors who had gained their expertise through work rather than the acquisition of a degree, could offer to their students. In not wanting to make mistakes or mislead learners, these tutors, it was suggested, were likely to avoid talking about their students’ next educational steps altogether. Associated with these findings, the Careers and Enterprise Company (2016) placed New Anglia, comprising Norfolk and Suffolk, amongst those areas of the country where the need for careers support was judged to be at its greatest.
9. Current interventions considered effective

During the interviews and focus groups, teaching professionals and outreach practitioners as well as learners discussed a number of current outreach interventions they judged to be effective.

9.1. HE visits

University visits featured in a number of conversations and were considered to be especially effective at raising HE awareness and aspirations, particularly amongst younger learners.

From a provider’s perspective, one outreach practitioner talked about such interventions offering learners - especially ‘those in the harder to [reach] coastal and rural areas’ - an ‘opportunity to experience getting away from their towns, [whilst] giving them the [chance] to be a little more worldly’ and, in the process, ‘building their levels of confidence’. Here reference was made to countering ‘the idea [that] they’re not worthy’. The benefits arising from such visits were also extolled by some of the teaching professionals. One suggested that HE trips could be particularly effective at correcting the view that university will simply be ‘just like school but bigger’. ‘Seeing the accommodation’, it was added, ‘and realising that they can come and go as they please, is a bit of an eye-opener. They have no idea what campus life is like and think they have to stay there.’ Another teaching professional concluded that the biggest impact universities could have on helping to raise her learner’s aspirations, and their subsequent progression, was through a campus visit where they would be given the chance ‘to witness and experience the environment’.

Campus visits were also discussed in a number of the year 9 focus groups, most notably amongst those with HE intentions. One group recalled a trip that took place when they were in year 6. This, it was observed, was ‘quite overwhelming’ and had ‘quite an impact’. Indeed, for a number of these young people the decision to go to university was considered to date from year 6 ‘when we went to see the university’. To ‘visit a university’ was also identified by two other year 9 focus groups as an effective way to help them decide about university as an option. Here a contrast was made with the provision of university and college prospectuses. A ‘lot of courses’, it was observed, look ‘very similar’. In contrast, it was the ‘environment’ they wanted to learner more about, and to do so from an early age. Indeed, year 6 was mentioned as ‘not being too early’ for such an experience. The idea of a university visit also appealed to some of the less engaged year 9 learners. Asked what would have an impact on their thinking, reference was made to ‘seeing [it] for ourselves’.

In subsequent feedback, participants in the focus group who considered their year 6 visit to have had ‘quite an impact’ discussed what they had enjoyed about the event. Mention was made to the fact that the ‘lecturers’ delivering the ‘taster’ sessions made ‘us feel welcome’, whilst the ‘student ambassadors show[ing] us around made us [feel] reassured’. Indeed, the friendly reception they received helped to overcome ‘any fears we had’. Participants also discussed the highlights of their visit. These included being shown the library, ‘seeing different kinds of lessons’ and attending a lecture with ‘everyone listening to one person in front’. This experience, it was noted, proved to be ‘very different’ from being in ‘class’. However, the most memorable part was widely considered to have been the ‘graduation at the end’, which provided an insight into what a university education can ‘lead up to’.

Evidence from one of the sixth form focus groups suggests that such visits can also have a positive impact on older learners. For one participant a trip made with a year 12 class had the effect of ‘really [making] me want to go’ to university. This visit, it was added, provided an opportunity to attend a ‘lecture with people who were actually in one of the classes’. It also included ‘a tour of the university’ and the ‘halls where you stay’, as well as ‘a talk about university life’. However, for this individual the two most important elements comprised the chance to talk with current students and to learn more about finance and career prospects,
since these were ‘things’ they were ‘still worried about’. Listening to this account, one of the other focus group participants who had not been on such a visit expressed a desire to go, since it would provide them with ‘more of an understanding’. It was also observed how ‘those who had been before had changed their minds about going’ to university. However, another member of this group added a note of caution. They had been on a visit, which, on the whole, had worked well in providing them with insights into university life and the different subjects on offer. Yet, the experience had not ‘really interested’ them, since it did not cover the subjects and career they wanted to pursue. A more subject-specific visit, it was argued, would have had a greater impact.

Developments

Some of the interviewees also offered ideas for how HE visits could be developed. One practitioner talked about how the use of ‘take-aways’ could help to maximise their impact. ‘I would love the opportunity’, it was observed, ‘for students to come onto campus and to do a workshop and produce something that they could take away for that reflection point’. Exploring this further, it was argued that having something to take away could ‘remind [them] of [the] opportunity’ that HE offered. Indeed, it could be shown in an assembly, or class and be ‘something they [would be proud] of’. Raven (2015, 2016) discusses a similar set of ideas for enhancing the longer-term impact of outreach interventions. These included opportunities for learners to discuss their visits, and what they had discovered, on their return to the classroom. Elsewhere, one of the teaching professionals suggested that parents also ‘need to go on these trips’. Some, it was added, ‘have not been out of the area’. The opportunity to ‘bring your parents’ would enable them to see that ‘ordinary [young] people’ can make it to university.

Focus group learners also had thoughts on what would help to maximise the effectiveness of university visits. Amongst those in the year 9 focus groups, reference was made to the opportunity to see ‘the things you can do there, what they offer, the labs and stuff, and the extra-curricular clubs and societies’. The same group also talked about seeing ‘a typical student timetable [including] what hours they work and what holidays they have’, as well as having an opportunity to ‘talk to some current students’. Here reference was made to asking them why ‘university was the best choice for them’, and to discovering whether it ‘would it be good for us’ as well. The chance to visit more than one university was also voiced, since ‘a comparison of universities would be a good idea’. A second group from the same institution, comprising those less engaged and certain about HE as an option, expressed similar ideas. Here, emphasis was placed on the chance to experience what it would be like as a student, with one participant adding that ‘I want to see how people struggle. If they don’t like the lectures, what do they do?’ There was also a general agreement amongst members of this group that it would be valuable to hear from those who have been to university and were now in jobs, and to discover what they did at university, what they thought of it and whether it proved useful to them.

The opportunity to chat with, and ask questions of, current university students was also emphasised by another year 9 focus group. Here reference was made to ‘doing classes with them and having something to remember’. Members of the second focus group run at the same school, and comprising those less engaged and more undecided about their educational futures, also had ideas of what they would like an event where ‘[we] see for ourselves’ to entail. This included the chance to show ‘us round classrooms, the campus, [and] the bedrooms’, as well as the ‘sports facilities’. Members of this group also talked about the need for such events to relate to their interests and that they should have an opportunity to ask questions about what subjects are offered, how many years would they ‘stay’ at university, how ‘helpful’ a university education would be, and what the costs are. Elsewhere, participants in another year 9 focus group discussed the importance of seeing the work that undergraduates had produced, rather than just being told about it. The same group argued that parents should ‘go round’ as well.

Similarly, some of the sixth form learners offered ideas for what visits should include. There was a need, one group argued, for these events to take account of their subject interests, and to provide insights into ‘how much work we would be doing and what your day [as an undergraduate] would be like’. Another group emphasised the value of being informed about the differences in academic demands between advanced and HE level study, including the amount
of independent learning. The importance of the student perspective was also discussed, with members of one focus groups suggesting that they would particularly like to hear from those who had chosen the courses they were interested in, and who were from ‘similar backgrounds’. Here the contrast was made with someone from a very wealthy background who had been able to ‘pay for their course straight away’, since ‘that would not be what we will have to deal with’. Beyond this, emphasis was placed on being informed about ‘how to handle your money and what support you can get financially’, as well as ‘telling us how far’, from a career perspective, a university education ‘can actually get you!’ A similar set of observations were made by members of the second sixth form focus group at the same institution, with the additional suggestion made of being informed about employment opportunities, both whilst at university and as a consequence of gaining a university qualification.

9.2. Summer schools

A specific type of intervention described in positive terms by a number of practitioners and teaching professionals, as well as learners, were summer schools. The chance to stay ‘in a university setting’ for a number of days, one practitioner observed, can have a noticeable impact. Learners can ‘gain a lot of independence being away from their families’, whilst also making ‘a lot of friends, which’, it was added, can be a really big influence because they then know people who are planning to go to university’. In addition, it was suggested that the opportunity such an event offers to ‘showcase all the [institution’s] equipment can be quite beneficial’, whilst ‘student ambassadors’ can help to ‘set minds at ease’, especially where ‘our students’ have come from similar backgrounds and may ‘have been to the same schools and have knowledge of the same teachers.’ A number of the teaching professionals also recognised the potential of summer schools, with one talking about a desire to take their learners ‘to a university away from the area for a couple of days’, so that they might have a chance to immerse themselves in a university experience.

Supporting claims for their impact, participants from two of the sixth from focus groups who were intending to go onto HE-level study talked about their earlier summer school experiences constituting ‘one of the biggest influences’ and something that had left a lasting impression. More specifically, these events had provided an opportunity ‘to be away from home’, ‘stay where [students] stay’, ‘socialise’, and ‘get up and do academic work’. In sum, they had afforded ‘a proper idea of what university life would be like’.

Asked what activities universities could offer that would help to inform their decision-making, participants in a number of the year 9 focus groups also mentioned a residential university experience. Here one group talked about the chance to ‘stay over night’ and experience what it is like being a student. It was suggested that this opportunity would help to quell some of the worries they might have about going to university. Consistent with these findings, Moore et al. (2013, iii) in their review of the literature identify the summer school as appearing to be a ‘particularly effective’ outreach intervention.

Developments

Interviewees also discussed ways in which current summer school provision could be enhanced. One outreach practitioner talked about improving the targeting of participants. Amongst learners who currently attend such events, it was observed, will be ‘those that are going to go to university anyway, so we’re preaching to the converted in a way’. In response, emphasis was now being placed on trying to ‘target those students that are sitting on the fence’. Elsewhere, the value of including parents was highlighted. In some instances this was already being done. Two outreach practitioners discussed inviting parents to the celebration event held on the last day of their summer school. This offered them a chance to see their children being awarded certificates for their achievement, go on a tour of the campus and receive a ‘finance talk’.
9.3. Mentoring

Mentoring of school pupils by university students was also identified as an effective outreach activity. Here a teaching professional talked about mentoring being ‘one of the projects that has worked particularly well, with an undergraduate who comes in and works with [selected learners] for an hour a week over a 10-week period’. The help they were able to offer related to ‘homework, [the] setting [of] targets and the development of revision skills, as well as providing mentees with the chance to learn about student life’. ‘All this’, it was observed, ‘can be really effective’. A teaching professional in another case study school expressed similar sentiments, observing that ‘the most effective interventions for our students tend to be those that include one to one components’. Our ‘students’ it was added, are ‘often shy and reserved’ and have a view that because they are ‘from [the local area] they can’t achieve anything’.

Participants in two of the year 9 focus groups who had received this invention also discussed the impact of mentoring. Asked how they knew about the different post-16 pathways open to them, one reported that ‘my mentor told me’. Echoing the teaching professional’s description, participants in the second group talked about being mentored over a 10-week period. It was also added by one of these learners that their mentor helped them with what they had been ‘struggling with’, and that the experience had ‘made me want to go to university’. Such findings are consistent with those of Dismore (2009), who discusses the benefits of learning mentors, whilst mentoring is also named by Moore et al. (2013, iii) as an example of an effective widening participation activity. Similarly, Grant (2014, 128) advocates the use of ‘mentor-based schemes’ in his study of Leicester.

9.4. School champions

School champions were also mentioned by practitioners and teaching professionals. Indeed, one outreach practitioner suggested that deploying a suitably trained ‘student ambassador’ in school once a week to engage and inform learners could have a considerable impact, not least because they could support a variety of activities. Here reference was made to running lunchtime career stands, conducting revision sessions, participating in assemblies and offering help to ‘C/D boarder-line’ learners during lesson time’. Through more informal discussions with pupils, they could also help ‘dispel some of those myths’ associated with HE. Amongst older learners, it was added, school champions were able to ‘go through college prospectus, so they are better informed and have less to worry [about]’. Confirming the success of this scheme was teacher feedback, which, the practitioner noted, had been ‘really good’, with reference made to the ‘pupils [being] really engaged’ and, ‘on the whole, really positive’ about it. Indeed, this assessment was supported by some of the teaching professionals whose schools were involved in the scheme. One noted hearing ‘a lot more chatter and engagement’ as a result of the champion’s work, and highlighted the ‘role of the champion in an English class [which has been] really effective’, since they are able to offer a ‘different perspective to that of [the] teacher and teaching assistant’.

Year 9 learners based in one of the schools that had received this intervention also mentioned the scheme. Here participants talked of a ‘student ambassador’ who comes in and tells ‘us [about] different courses at university and college’ and who, it was generally considered, had been very helpful, including in ‘offering good insights [into what I can do] when I am older’. Indeed, the greater use of HE champions ‘to help potential students who have little contact with people who have recent HE experience’ is one recommendation to emerge from Connor et al.’s study (2001, 3).

Developments

Further discussions with one of the outreach practitioners identified ways in which the scheme could be further developed. The objective was discussed of ensuring student champions are able to be in the school ‘one day a week, and throughout as much of the school year as possible’. This would enable them to work with every pupil at least once a year, since, it was
added, one intervention is less likely to have an impact than a series of them. Reference was also made to the benefits of school champions being involved in other outreach activities. Having someone at a summer school that the pupils already know can be ‘quite powerful’ and mean the experience is ‘less scary’. Learners from one of the year 9 focus groups also offered ideas for what they would like students who visit their school to tell them. This included ‘giv[ing] us an idea of what [university] is actually like, why they chose it, and why it was good for them’. In terms of who the ideal student champion would be, mention was made to someone who had taken a course that would align with the interests of learners.

9.5. Family events

Some outreach practitioners also mentioned the effectiveness of campus-based family events at raising awareness and interest in higher education, including amongst parents. In terms of content, these events include campus tours and activities for learners, along with talks for parents ‘about different routes into university and finance, and the types of support [students] can [receive] when they get here’. Whilst parental feedback from such events was considered to be very positive, there remained a challenge of reaching parents who ‘don’t understand the value [of HE] and aren’t convinced to attend’, with one of the practitioners suggesting ‘those that do come along are the ones that are going to encourage their children to go to university anyway’.

The discussions with these practitioners also explored how such challenges might be met. Here reference was made to ‘putting on some form of transport to make it even easier for people to attend, offering a free lunch to get them through the door’, and promoting the event on Facebook, since, it was noted, ‘the majority of users now are adults’ and potential parents.

9.6. HE talks in assemblies

Learners in one of the year 9 focus groups talked positively about the university talks they had received in their assemblies. These involved ‘people from university coming in to talk about the future’. They were judged to have been ‘very useful’ and to have provided insights into ‘the different things you could do [and] the help you can get.’ The same learners also offered ideas for other components that could be included in such events, and that would be useful for them in thinking about HE. These included providing information on ‘what courses they offer’, whilst also presenting learners with an idea of what the campus and the student accommodation looks like. In addition, reference was made to being informed about ‘the costs, in terms of tuition fees [and] living expenses’.
10. New intervention ideas

10.1. School alumni in HE

Discussions with interviewees also explored ideas for new outreach activities. One of these, which was school-focused and had already commenced in one institution, concerned inviting alumni who had ‘bucked the trend’ and progressed to HE, to talk to current learners about their experiences. The key message of these talks, it was noted, would be ‘I did it, it’s fun, so why can’t you?’ The same interviewee also discussed the potential impact such talks can have, observing that learners ‘don’t believe it from us, there’s a lot of suspicion around’, so ‘contact with people other than teachers is very powerful.’

10.2. Engaging with those in graduate level employment

Along comparable lines, an interviewee at another case study school talked about the ‘positive’ role model ‘impact’ someone from the locality who had gone through HE and was now in graduate-level employment could have. Such individuals could communicate that ‘it was worth doing and that this has set them up, in terms of skills etc’. Similarly, one of the college practitioners talked about the potential value of drawing on case studies of learners now in employment, ‘and [who are] a little more established than a young person who has just graduated’, to illustrate how the cost of HE study could in the long-run be worthwhile.

The idea of deploying undergraduates as well as graduates resonates with the findings of Moore et al. (2013), who discuss the part that HE students can play as role models in the provision of information and advice. Similarly, Connor et al. (2001) advocate the use of former school students who have progressed to HE, since their examples and experiences could afford more relevant and timely insights into HE finance.

10.3. HE tasters in school

Another college practitioner talked about the potential of running HE taster events in school. These would have the advantage over events held on campus of engaging learners likely to rule themselves out of participating in HE visits. Whilst they could take place in the classroom, university-type sessions could be provided, including those offering insights into the careers a higher education can lead to. A similar suggestion was made by another college practitioner who suggested that, with around 1,600 learners, there were certain advantages to universities visiting their college ‘instead of getting kids to go to university’. The same practitioner also ventured the idea of universities offering courses in which credit towards university entry could be gained. These, it was suggested, would help start their learners’ ‘transition to university’ whilst they were still ‘at the college’.

10.4. Short courses for parents

Another teaching professional talked about offering short courses for parents on subjects such as ‘how to support your student with their homework’, as well as providing information about university. A similar programme, it was noted, had been run in the past and had proved successful in helping parents to realise ‘what education is like when it works’. A comparable idea was mooted by one of the college practitioners, who, in suggesting that more could be done with their institution’s facilities, talked about offering starter courses for local parents which could give ‘them a taste of the benefits and types of activities they could do’ at university. Here reference was made to the paucity of ‘evening classes and adult education in the local area’. In observing that amongst their mature learners were those from low participation neighbourhoods, another of college practitioner talked about the value of informing these individuals about future HE options. The potential of this activity was that the HE message could
get back to the children of these mature learners. In turn, Morrison’s (2010) study suggests that parents from widening participation backgrounds who become mature learners can have a positive impact on the aspirations and educational intentions of their offspring.

10.5. Support for teachers

Some of the outreach practitioners also discussed the provision of professional development events for teachers. In some instances schemes had already been established. In this respect, one practitioner talked about providing workshops for teachers so that they ‘can speak to their students with real confidence about their future [HE] possibilities’. In planning these sessions, it was added, ‘we try to choose a time of year when teachers are less busy’. In terms of the kinds of information provided, it was noted that ‘they often want to see where their students are going to and what the changes have been on campus’. Newsletters were also used ‘to update them on such things’.

10.6. Teachers as role models

Elsewhere, one of the interviewees talked about the potential of teachers to act as role models. ‘A lot of [pupils] don’t realise that their teachers have all been [to university]. We talk about some of the degree options and that there are 37,000 courses you can do, and then you say all the teachers have been since they had to go to university in order to teach you and they say ‘really!’ This is possibly because the teachers do not mention this fact’, but if they did, it was implied, this could have a positive impact, especially in areas where encounters with graduates and those in graduate-level employment are likely to be rare. The role model influence that teachers could have was also discussed by a member of one of the sixth form focus groups, who talked about the ‘advice’ and suggestions provided by their science teacher on ‘what to do next’. This teacher was someone ‘you can be a friend with’ and, it was added, had done the same degree that ‘I want to do’. In this respect, Connor et al. (2001) talk about teachers representing a good source of information on HE. Similarly, another college practitioner discussed the value of running a professional development session on HE options and opportunities for FE tutors who had not experienced university study themselves. This idea chimes with Connor et al.’s (2001, 3) observation that ‘college tutors could be a key group of positive influencers’ on the HE decision making process.
11. Factors determining success

From the interviews and surveys it was also possible to identify some of the factors underpinning the success of outreach interventions, and which might want to be considered in the development of new initiatives.

11.1. Teacher support and ‘buy in’

Given competing demands on their time and the pivotal role they play, the need to develop an effective working relationship with teachers was highlighted. Here one outreach practitioner discussed the benefits of providing a calendar of activities, potentially developed in collaboration with school contacts, to facilitate planning and, where interventions are more subject-specific, align with the delivery of the curriculum. In addition, the importance of having a named ‘key contact’ in school, and someone all WP matters could be directed towards, was also emphasised, as was the value of inviting such contacts to experience the interventions being offered, so that the benefits might be witnessed first-hand. This, it was added, should include showing how, in content, outreach activities can relate and support aspects of the curriculum. Here the example was offered of using ‘a spectroscopy machine’ in Chemistry. Whilst it was impossible to take this large and sophisticated instrument into the classroom, year 12 learners could visit the university and see how it works and include the findings in their schoolwork.

11.2. Targeting participants

The establishment of sound working relations with contacts in school may also facilitate the effective targeting of outreach participants. In this respect, practitioners talked about ensuring those attending not only met WP criteria but were also likely to benefit from interventions. Here reference was made to ‘those who [despite their potential to progress] might have no idea what they want to do, are really worried, [and] have no idea what’s available to them’. Interviewees also talked about ‘tailoring activities to the interests’ of particular learner groups. Members of one of the year 9 focus groups confirmed the benefit of aligning the content of an intervention to their interests. In reviewing an event that had generally been useful, participants discussed attending workshops in subject areas they had little interest in.

11.3. Early engagement

The need to begin to raise learners’ awareness and interest in HE from an early age was mentioned by a number of interviewees. Early interventions, one college practitioner considered, were important in helping learners ‘see the wider world’ and in ‘exploring’ their options. They could also help encourage students to think about the possibilities of further study and a career that could take them beyond their immediate vicinity. Feedback from some of the focus groups lends support to this proposition. Here participants talked about early interventions that could help to inform their GCSE options and that would also communicate the relevance of GCSEs to level 3 options and beyond. Indeed, one group emphasised the value of ‘putting the idea of university in learners’ heads from year 7’ and before GCSE options were made, since, it was added, in ‘year 9 and 10’ the focus will be on ‘exams rather than your future’. Elsewhere, as previously discussed, focus group participants talked about the positive and lasting impact a year 6 HE visit had on their educational ambitions and aspirations.

11.4. Links to employment and careers

A number of interviewees identified the importance of showing learners how the acquisition of a higher education could enhance their employment opportunities and career prospects. Here emphasis was placed on illustrating the ‘kinds of jobs graduates’ in particular disciplines can ‘go
into’, which, it was suggested, can be a ‘big challenge when they’re the first ones in their family’, and when the subjects being discussed are not obviously vocational. There was also a need to address the ‘kinds of skills are they going to be learning that can be transferable.’ Elsewhere, reference was made to communicating the message that ‘the acquisition of a higher education qualification [can] enable [learners] to go anywhere’ and, as another teaching professional observed, HE ‘offers’ not just the ‘chance to gain a ‘degree’ but is also about ‘independence, budgeting, expanding one’s horizons and networking’.

Consistent with this assessment, many focus group participants identified improved career prospects as the principal reason why they were considering HE. Here, reference was made to gaining the qualifications for the ‘job you want to do’, and that ‘a degree [can] get [you] a better job’. Beyond this, learners talked about acquiring a wider range of transferrable skills by going to university, including ‘learning how to manage yourself, managing finance, meeting new people from different cultures, and living somewhere else’. In addition, one participant mentioned the self-confidence that would come from proving they were ‘capable’ of university study, since they would be the first in their family to go.

11.5. Collaboration

Allied to the previous point, some of the interviewees talked about the potential benefits of cross-institutional collaborations with employers. Such associations could provide young people with an opportunity to gain ‘industrial experience’. They could also demonstrate to learners, as well as their parents, ‘the pathways that link further and higher education to particular industries’. Underpinning this, participants in one of the sixth form focus groups talked about the work experience they had gained during their level 3 BTEC programmes. This had helped inform their career options and confirmed the need to gain university-level qualifications. Similarly, practitioners talked about the positive effect that could arise from young people hearing from those who were now using the skills and training gained at university in the workplace. These, it was added, are the kinds of people ‘they would [generally] not be in contact with’, and who could ‘give them the thrill of being able to do another three years of what you want to do’ at university. Consistent with these findings, Connor et al. (2001) argue that ‘amongst those from lower socio-economic backgrounds the main motivating factor in entering HE is the belief that a university qualification will improve their career prospects and earning potential.

11.6. Progressive sets of interventions

Whilst far from being a new concept, outreach practitioners confirmed the value and importance of providing a set of interventions that, in their contents and objectives, complement and build upon each other. Here, one practitioner talked about their institution’s outreach programme being designed to engage with learners from year 7 to 13, with the aim of ensuring one ‘interaction a year’, and building up to a point where ‘you can talk to them more seriously about university because they know why it’s going to benefit them’. A comparable point was made by a second practitioner who talked about running a series of events, which could help ‘encourage [learners] to move onto the next phase of their journey’.

Focus group learners also discussed the value of participating in more than one outreach activity. Asked whether a university visit they had attended in year 6 would be enough to support the decision making process, one year 9 group argued that further interventions would be valuable. Whilst this initial visit had given them a ‘sense’ of what university would be like, additional activities could help inform them about ‘courses’ and the ‘things’ one could ‘go [on] to do’. Members in two of the sixth form focus groups expressed similar sentiments, with one participant describing how attending regular outreach events from year 7 onwards had enabled them to ‘grow up with the idea of university’. Others talked about early visits providing them with a chance to see the university, whilst ‘follow-ups’ had enabled them to ‘concentrate on the academic side’. Reference was also made to the benefit of learning more about ‘university
finance, bursaries and funding’ on ‘every trip’. By ‘explaining it every time’, it is observed, ‘it sinks in’. Indeed, this understanding had enabled one participant to explain things to their parents and to convincing their parents that the ‘terms are really good’. In this respect, Moore et al. (2013) talk about the advantages of consistent and sustained interventions that start at an early age.

11.7. Building the evidence base

Looking ahead, a number of interviewees talked about the value of ensuring that the insights of learners are captured, not just in terms of their evaluation of particular interventions but over the longer-run and commencing in ‘year 8 and 9’. Whilst this would enable the assessment of a programme of activities, it could also help inform the types of intervention developed to support this group of learners as they progress through their schooling. In addition, it was agreed that the practice of seeking outreach participants’ views and insights could, itself, have a positive impact, since such learners may be less likely to engage ordinarily in conversations about higher education and their career ambitions.
12. Conclusions

This investigation has used a case study approach based upon a detailed analysis of three districts to better understand why some areas across Suffolk and Norfolk have comparatively low rates of higher education participation. The selection of these areas sought to ensure that consideration was given to a spectrum of the region’s settlement types: from a small market town and a coastal community to a city suburb, and from the region’s southern tip to its centre and on to its north-eastern corner. Besides seeking a representative selection of districts, the study also sought a purposive (information rich) sample. A sample that would enable the insights of teaching professionals in schools with catchment areas encompassing each of these districts to be collected, and that would capture the experiences of outreach practitioners familiar with these localities, as well as the views of young people from these neighbourhoods at two key transition points in their learner journeys: when GCSE were being selected and during key stage five, when intentions to pursue - or forgo - higher-level study were being finalised.

Whilst distinctions and differences between the three case study areas were discernable in the evidence gathered, many of the underlying reasons for their comparatively low rates of HE progression were shared. In all three, the outreach challenge was identified as having roots that pre-date GCSE attainment and that extend beyond the realm of the individual learner to the influence of the family. In this respect, the low levels of young participation recorded in all three areas date back to an earlier iteration of HEFCE’s POLAR classification scheme. Whilst parental influence featured strongly in accounts gathered from outreach practitioners, teachers and learners, the influence of peers and friendship groups were also recognised, as was the impact of the local community. These findings echo those of previous studies that have discussed the presence of a dominant local discourse that does not relate to HE, and of established trajectories into adulthood that focus on employment rather than higher-level study.

Underpinning these findings was analysis of the labour market associated with each area. This revealed comparatively few degree holders amongst the adult population. Similarly, few local residents were recorded with professional or managerial occupations where level 4 plus qualifications were likely to have been required, and whose presence might have afforded examples of the benefits of higher education. Moreover, the demise of independent careers guidance may signal the loss of one mechanism for contesting dominant local narratives and accepted pathways into adulthood.

Yet, despite these challenges instances of progression were evident - both in terms of the offer and acceptance data provided by the Network’s partners and in the evidence derived from practitioner interviews and learner surveys. Amongst the latter were young people who expressed ambitions to progress, some of whom had underpinned these intentions with the submission of university applications. From the interview and survey evidence it was also possible to identify a range of existing outreach interventions judged effective in raising awareness and aspirations, as well as prompting actions. Whilst caution is needed when assessing the validity of such judgements, their efficacy is strengthened when the assessments of intervention delivers are corroborated by the schools and learners receiving them, and when these recipients are able to offer critical evaluation and suggest possibilities for further intervention development.

Whilst the scoping and selection of the case study areas pre-dates HEFCE’s analysis for the National Collaborative Outreach Programme, the fact that most of the catchment areas featured in this investigation are amongst this new initiative’s target wards should help to ensure the relevance of this study’s recommendations.
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