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Widening Participation Post-16: Who Participates?
A case study of the Aim for Oxford programme.

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Abstract

Widening participation programmes at highly selective universities select their participants according to a variety of individual, area-level, and school-based indicators. Academic selection criteria also play a key role in selection at high tariff institutions, especially in post-16 widening participation work. When contextual indicators are used ineffectively, there is a significant chance that only the most advantaged of ‘disadvantaged’ young people will have the opportunity to participate in widening participation schemes. The purpose of this study is to understand the life experiences associated with commonly used contextual indicators and explore what young people who have applied to the Aim for Oxford widening participation programme believe to have advantaged and disadvantaged them in their education. Twenty-seven young people completed a questionnaire delving into more detail about their contextual background and ten participated in semi-structured interviews to consider how they believe highly selective universities should select students onto their widening participation programmes. The study found that young people valued being selected onto widening participation programmes for their own merits as opposed to their adverse circumstances, feeling patronised by the idea of selection to meet “quotas.” Yet, the young people also recognised the role that their contextual background has played in their ambitions towards and expectations of accessing higher education. Synthesising the young people’s views, this study concludes with five recommendations for widening participation practice when selecting students, including: the use of multiple contextual indicators; prioritisation of students who might have ‘isolated knowledge’ through concurrent familial and school-based circumstances; avoidance of area-based metrics; more explicit consideration of individual circumstances not captured by indicators; and consideration of academic attainment in the context of the young person’s school.

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List of Abbreviations

A4O	Aim for Oxford
APP	Access and Participation Plan
BAME	Black and minority ethnicities
BLM	Black Lives Matter
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
FSM	Free School Meals
FSMEver6	Free School Meals in the last six years
HE	Higher education
HMRC	Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs
IDACI	Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index
IMD	Indices of Multiple Deprivation
KS4/5	Key Stage 4, Key Stage 5
LAC	Local authority care
NE	North East
NPD	National Pupil Database
NS-SEC	National Statistics Socio-economic classification
OfS	Office for Students
POLAR	Participation of Local Areas
PP	Pupil Premium
SED	Socioeconomically disadvantaged
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SES	Socioeconomic status
WP	Widening participation

Glossary

Acorn	Acorn is a postcode classifier which categorises areas into one of six categories according to demography, socioeconomic status, and consumer behaviour (Acorn, 2020). In widening participation work, category one is interpreted as the most socioeconomically advantaged areas and five as the most deprived.
IDACI	The Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index, a component of the Income Deprivation Domain, indicates the number of children under 16 who live in low-income families (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019a).
IMD	The Index of Multiple Deprivation is the official indicator of relative deprivation in England, measuring seven aspects of an individual's living conditions with different weightings, namely: income (22.5%), employment (22.5%), health deprivation and disability (13.5%), education skills training (13.5%), crime (9.3%), barriers to housing and services (9.3%), and living environment (9.3%) (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019b).
NS-SEC	The National Statistics Socio-economic classification is a tool that indicates the socioeconomic status of an occupation according to employment conditions and relations (Office for National Statistics, 2016).
POLAR	Participation of Local Areas is an indicator measuring the proportion of young people in neighbourhoods across the UK who go onto higher education. Quintile one represents the lowest participation areas, while quintile five represents the highest (Office for Students, 2020a).

Introduction

Widening access to higher education (HE) is a topical debate among UK universities, as well as those abroad. Following the increase in the tuition fee cap (Higher Education and Research Act, 2017), all English HE institutions charging above the basic tuition fee rate must submit an approved access and participation plan (APP) to the Office for Students (OfS), which should aim to “improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education” (Office for Students, 2020b: 3). While this statement sets out the intent and obligation to “improve equality of opportunity”, the question remains: improve equality of opportunity for whom?

There are a vast number of underrepresented groups in HE and these groups are not the same across all HE institutions. This dissertation will focus on underrepresented groups at highly selective universities, including those in the Russell Group, and especially at the University of Oxford. Access, outreach, and widening participation (WP) programmes are all deemed to play a critical role in improving equality of opportunity. For example, the APP for the University of Oxford (2019a) includes six pre-admission WP programmes in its strategic measures to meet the University’s targets, alongside the college consortia model which hosts a number of other access activities. Across this range, programmes have their own specific objectives: Target Oxbridge, for instance, aims to increase the number of students of African and/or Caribbean heritage successfully applying to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge; UNIQ, Oxford’s flagship access programme, seeks to increase the number of students from low-participation and socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED) neighbourhoods taking up a place at Oxford (University of Oxford, 2019a). With different objectives, the programmes have different selection criteria for their participants and different emphases on contextual factors. The question that must be asked, however, is how can WP programmes ensure that students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds – who also meet their specific demographic focus - are not precluded from these programmes?

The Aim for Oxford (A4O) programme, run in collaboration by St Anne’s College and Christ Church, Oxford, will act as a case study to explore this question. A4O is part of the University’s new collaborative outreach strategy, assigning consortia of colleges to regions in the UK (University of Oxford, 2020b). The two-year long programme, now in its inaugural year, is open to students in Year 12 who attend a state school or college in the North East of England

(NE). A4O gives students access to four academic taster lectures and admissions sessions, resource support for supercurricular activities, regular contact with outreach officers at St Anne's and Christ Church, a week-long residential summer school (online for 2020, due to COVID-19), as well as a programme of Year 13 admissions and transition support for those who decide to apply to Oxford (St Anne's College, 2019).

A4O is an example of a programme which has specific access targets: to increase the number of highly able students from state schools in the NE successfully applying to the University of Oxford. Students from the NE are an underrepresented group at Oxford, making up 2.1% of the University's undergraduate body despite accounting for 4.1% of the UK population (University of Oxford, 2020c). The programme has identified, however, that not all students in the NE are likely to be equally underrepresented. While detailed statistics breaking down the population of students from the NE admitted to Oxford are unavailable, other data analyses demonstrate how individuals with certain advantages in otherwise underrepresented groups may in fact be over-represented. For example, 29% of students in receipt of the highest level of support from Oxford's bursary system, with household incomes below £16,000 per year, were educated in the independent sector (University of Oxford, 2015a); relative to the school sector population of 16-18 year olds in the UK (85% are state-educated), privately-educated students are over represented among this otherwise underrepresented group (Independent Schools Council, 2019).

There are many hypotheses about why a high proportion of those with household incomes below £16,000 were educated in the independent sector. Cynical reasoning might point to loopholes in student finance systems being exploited: parents not declaring foreign incomes or an omission of support from another parent/guardian if parents are separated. Such suggestions are hypothetical, not evidence-based, and unlikely to account for more than a minority of cases. More justified reasoning might be that some school-led WP activity is successful: students from low-income backgrounds are receiving scholarships and bursaries in order to attend independent schools and, with this support, go on to be admitted to the University of Oxford. This work is laudable; however, since this particular small group of students are already being successfully supported by schools, it suggests that universities need not prioritise WP work with independently-educated students who belong to otherwise disadvantaged groups. For clarity, most, if not all, WP work is conducted solely in the state sector. However, this case

serves to make a broader point: multiple or comprehensive indicators of disadvantage are required in WP work to ensure that it is not only the most advantaged individuals within a disadvantaged group that are selected onto access programmes.

A4O uses multiple indicators of disadvantage, as well as academic criteria, to select students onto their programme, as shown in Table 1 below.

Academic selection criteria	Contextual factors
To make a successful application, your GCSE results should show strong academic potential (preference for grades 7/ 8/ 9)	We will also take into account other criteria, including if at least one of these applies to you: • Your POLAR postcode score is 1 or 2 • Your Acorn postcode score is 4 or 5 • You have been eligible for Free School Meals • Your parents did not go to university • You are from an ethnic minority background which is underrepresented at Oxford • You have been, or currently are, in care • You are a young carer

Table 1: Academic and contextual selection criteria for A4O (St Anne's College, 2019).

Extensive literature reviews, especially Gorard et al. (2019), have analysed the most productive means of identifying disadvantage for universities who conduct contextualised admissions, with free school meals (FSM) eligibility the indicator of choice. However, WP programmes are in a privileged position to obtain more select data from students, not confined by systems required to account for tens of thousands of applicants. Drawing on debates across WP literature and practice, this dissertation seeks to explore the following research questions:

1. What information is captured from the indicators used to select post-16 students onto A4O?
2. What do A4O applicants view as important selection criteria for WP programmes at highly selective universities?

To answer these research questions, a mixed methods design was used. All participants on A4O and students who were unsuccessful in their application to the programme but decided to remain in contact through a mailing list were invited to take part in an online questionnaire. This questionnaire gathered data about their context, especially their socioeconomic background, as well as qualitative responses on what they believe has advantaged or

disadvantaged them in their education and what they think WP programmes should consider during selection. Participants' applications, teacher references and their ranking in the selection process were collected by matching their questionnaire responses to their A4O application data. Questionnaire responses and this secondary data were used to identify a range of students to conduct online interviews with, to elicit further information about their contextual background and their views on selection in WP programmes.

There is an assumption in this dissertation that the aim of a WP programme is to broaden access to SED students. However, it is important to recognise that this is not always the primary aim of all programmes. Especially in post-16 access at highly selective universities, university recruitment can be a significant element of WP programmes and, as such, academic criteria can, at times, take priority over contextual factors. In such cases, students with strong academic records and who meet baseline WP criteria – such as, attending a state school or living in a low-participation neighbourhood – may be prioritised over students with even marginally lower academic profiles who may have experienced more disadvantage. Such approaches to selection may preclude disadvantaged students from receiving support to access the universities at which they are underrepresented. As Storan and Allen (2005: 3) note, it is necessary to distinguish between recruitment initiatives and WP activities given “the former has not resulted in the latter”; WP refers to “activities and interventions aimed at creating an HE system that includes all who can benefit from it – people who might not otherwise view learning as an option, or who may be discouraged by social, cultural, economic or institutional barriers.” By including participants who were not selected for A4O in this study, responses may throw light on the impact on young people of being rejected from WP programmes.

Literature Review

WP is conceived in many different ways by those researching, practising, and participating in its activities. According to Burke (2002: 1), what unifies this concept with diverse theoretical and philosophical underpinnings is the understanding that “current policies and practices have undermined the commitment to combat the social inequalities that are institutionalised and reproduced within the academic world.” In its broadest terms, WP research could be defined as research with “concern for the relationship between HE and social justice” (Kettley, 2007: 333).

Differences in the academic attainment of young people belonging to different socioeconomic groups is a key driver in access inequality; as Boliver et al. (2015) state, there is minimal difference in the admission of students with different socioeconomic status (SES) to highly selective universities after adjusting for prior attainment. In their Annual Admissions Statistical Report, the University of Oxford (2020c) compared the demography of their student population with the population of students nationally achieving at least three A grades at A-level. This comparator implies that the University’s access targets are to ensure their student population is in-line with the proportion of 18 year olds nationally achieving these minimum entry grades. Such exclusion of students with lower grades – and vocational qualifications – is justified by the University as necessary, to ensure students are equipped to succeed in one of Oxford’s “academically demanding, fast-moving, and intensive” courses (University of Oxford, 2019a: 3). The University does recognise that “severe personal disadvantage and educational disruption” may mean affected students with the academic potential to succeed at Oxford might not meet the University’s high tariff entry; following the launch of a foundation year at Lady Margaret Hall in 2016, Foundation Oxford is being introduced across the University to allow entry, with an additional year, to an increasing but small number of students by 2023 (University of Oxford, 2019a: 2).

Such general exclusions, however, have attracted criticism. The Higher Education Funding Council England’s (HEFCE, 2015) analysis of 2013-14 graduate outcomes identified that 70% of students who entered HE with three C grades at A-level achieved an upper-second or first class result – a ‘good’ degree. While this is lower than the proportion of Oxford students graduating with a ‘good’ degree (95% of Oxford undergraduates achieve a 1st or 2.i), Rainford (2017) argues that “taking A-level results as a selector may not be fully indicative of potential”,

with attainment prior to Key Stage 5 (KS5) an even less effective predictor of academic potential (Sammons et al., 2014). Reducing the potential net of students for WP and access schemes to those with high prior attainment may in fact be reproducing inequalities: “the work to enable access is framed by the notion of who would be a potential future recruit shaped by institutional understandings of the ideal type of student for elite universities”, pushing a number of access schemes out of the sphere of WP and into university recruitment (Rainford, 2017: 49). As Harrison and Waller (2018) argue, it is not that WP programmes need to raise young people’s aspirations, but rather they should work to change young people’s perceptions of their ‘possible selves’ (Markus and Nurius, 1986), transforming their aspirations into expectations. Reinforcing a pre-conceived ideal student for elite universities is unlikely to illustrate to young people that a diverse range of ‘possible selves’ might do well in HE. Russell Group universities’ balancing of prior academic attainment and contextual factors in their selection of students onto WP programmes will be discussed further below.

Russell Group Universities: Flagship Post-16 WP Programmes

A review of the flagship post-16 WP programmes at English Russell Group universities was conducted to assess the nature of different provisions, the primary target group(s) programmes seek to engage, and the academic and contextual criteria universities use to select students onto their programmes. An overview of this review is shown in Table 2 below, with a more detailed summation included in Appendix A.

	Extenuating circumstances	Other individual indicator	Disability	Young carer	Estranged from family	LAC	BAME	Parental occupation	Household income	ISMEver6/PP/16-19 Bursary	First-gen to HE	Other school indicator	School HE progression	School attainment	School FSM	Other area-based indicator	IMD	Acorn	POLAR
Birmingham	✓		✓			✓			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓					✓
Bristol						✓				✓	✓								✓
Cambridge		✓				✓	✓			✓			✓	✓					✓
Durham					✓	✓				✓	✓		✓	✓				✓	✓
Exeter			✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓					✓			✓
Imperial				✓		✓			✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓			✓
KCL			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓							
Leeds	✓					✓			✓	✓	✓			✓					✓
Liverpool	✓			✓		✓				✓	✓	✓					✓		✓
LSE		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	
Manchester						✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
Newcastle		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓			✓
Nottingham			✓			✓			✓					✓					✓
Oxford	✓			✓		✓				✓								✓	✓
Queen Mary	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Sheffield	✓			✓	✓	✓				✓									✓
Southampton	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓			✓					
UCL	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓					
Warwick	✓		✓	✓		✓				✓	✓			✓					✓
York	✓			✓		✓	✓			✓	✓								✓

Table 2: Overview of contextual indicators used for flagship widening post-16 WP programmes at English Russell Group universities.

There are a range of interventions Russell Group universities offer as part of their flagship programmes: from summer schools and academic enrichment sessions to admissions support and study skills. Alongside these elements, a number of institutions incorporate a contextualised admissions scheme into their programmes: 14 out of the 20 English Russell Group universities offer at least some students who take part in their flagship post-16

programmes guaranteed interviews, unconditional offers, and/or reduced-grade offers. A further three universities offer a contextualised admissions process separate to their flagship Year 12 WP programmes. Imperial College London only have a reduced grade offer for WP candidates for Medicine, while all other courses guarantee an interview or a minimum grade offer for WP students if they have the predicted grades and demonstrated motivation to study the subject. The universities of Oxford and Cambridge stand out as the only two English Russell Group universities not offering a contextualised admissions scheme. Foundation Oxford, with its inaugural offer-round starting in the 2020/21 UCAS cycle, illustrates the University's move to incorporate this method of WP, although not as a component part of their post-16 access schemes like 70% of English Russell Group universities currently do (University of Oxford, 2019a).

The widespread incorporation of contextual offers by these highly selective universities suggests an awareness of the fact that requiring high academic attainment is a significant barrier for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Boliver et al. (2019a: 6) have purported that “bold” contextualised admissions policies will be required if the OfS's targets of parity in the representation of different SES groups at elite universities is to be met by 2038. In their review of the evidence base, Boliver et al. (2019a: 6) balance the supposed ‘risks’ of contextualised admissions against the opportunities; the researchers conclude that the risk of students admitted with lower entry grades failing to graduate is “modest” relative to the benefits of such approaches for WP and can be “ameliorated” should universities increase on-course support for these students. However, for such interventions to be effective, it is essential for these programmes to have a clearly defined way of selecting their target group. For the OfS, the target group in these momentous access targets are those from low participation neighbourhoods, indicated by POLAR4. Conversely, Boliver and colleagues (2019b) refer to those eligible for FSM as disadvantaged learners in their analysis of A-level results. The authors note that 87% of students eligible for FSM at age 15 do not live in a POLAR4 quintile 1 postcode area, the OfS definition of disadvantage. This distinction in the use of area-based versus individual indicators in WP is a site of considerable debate.

Selection onto WP Programmes

Gorard et al.'s (2019) systematic review of factors used to select students onto contextualised admissions programmes provides an extensive outline of the different indicators used and the reliability, advantages, and disadvantages of each measure. The review concludes that, despite

some limitations, FSM eligibility is the most effective indicator of disadvantage for use in contextualised admission, citing the measure as one that is clearly and legally defined, requires the submission of evidence to verify eligibility, and is a statistic available on the National Pupil Database (NPD) with historic records as well. Even more useful would be the number of years a student has been eligible for FSM to more accurately assess relative poverty (Gorard et al., 2019).

In their review, Gorard et al. (2019) emphasise that evaluating different indicators used for selection in contextualised admissions is not an endorsement of such schemes. The researchers heavily criticise any idea that contextualised admissions “are necessarily the way forward for WP” (Gorard et al., 2019: 120). Contextualised admissions do not solve “the most serious problems of access” for “the 60% or so of the original [disadvantaged] cohort for whom HE is not an option”; the researchers contest that “true WP would at least try to include them as well” (Gorard et al., 2019: 120-121). These values-based statements could perhaps be extended to all post-16 WP activities. As Hale (2006: 98) states, “a level playing field is a necessary but not sufficient condition of a fair match.” The crux of the problem in WP lies in the younger years.

It is right to acknowledge the limitations of post-16 activity: WP activities in the last two years of compulsory education or training are not going to revolutionise equality in access to Britain’s most selective universities. However, there are opportunities for post-16 WP programmes to fine tune their selection processes through use of indicators not widely available for contextualised admissions schemes. Without having to account for tens of thousands of applicants through UCAS, university WP programmes could use more precise indicators of disadvantage that are not systematically verified and thus would be unreliable if used for larger schemes or require an overhaul of UCAS’s data collection and validation methods. The following sections will survey the evidence base for currently-used indicators of area-level, school-based, and individual disadvantage, with a particular view to assess what each indicator measures and the usability of each indicator for post-16 WP programmes. Selected indicators will primarily be identified from Gorard et al.’s (2019) systematic review, as well as the indicators used in English Russell Group universities’ flagship post-16 WP programmes as outlined in Appendix A.

Area-Based Measures

There are two broad categories of area-based measures used for selection onto university WP programmes: those which measure the proportion of young people in a particular area who go onto HE (principally, POLAR3 and POLAR4), and those which indicate the SES of the locality (including Acorn, IMD, and IDACI) (Gorard et al., 2019).

POLAR is the indicator of choice for the OfS, used to measure the state of access inequality in England and to hold universities to account as part of their APPs. Smart (2019), Principal Analyst for the OfS, claims that POLAR is a “hugely valuable resource for universities”, arguing that limitations of the indicator are no different to those of other indicators such as IMD or FSM. Smart (2019) contests that POLAR is a direct response to the access aims the OfS was set up to address: to ensure institutions take “measures to attract applications from prospective students who are members of groups which, at the time when the plan is approved, are underrepresented in HE” (Higher Education and Research Act, 2017). A perhaps surprising claim by Smart (2019) is that since this legislation only references underrepresented groups, the OfS are not required to look at “other measures of deprivation and disadvantage.” This statement establishes a clear distinction between the values of the OfS compared to those of the WP researchers cited above: the OfS’s argument grounded in the technicalities of legislation sharply contrasts to Gorard et al.’s (2019: 121) reference to “true WP” at least attempting to include the most disadvantaged learners for whom HE is, currently, not even a consideration.

Aside from different understandings of the ‘spirit’ of WP work, Smart (2019) ignores the limitations of POLAR in meeting this legislative requirement. Harrison and McCaig (2015) found that households in each NS-SEC group are spread across each POLAR quintile, with a sizeable minority (30%) of individuals who live in POLAR3 quintile 5 – the highest-participation neighbourhoods - working in ‘lower’ NS-SEC occupations. In addition, in POLAR3 quintile 1 – the lowest-participation areas - 29% of individuals from the 2001 census were working in ‘higher’ NS-SEC professions. There is a significant opportunity for false positives and false negatives to occur if POLAR is used to identify those underrepresented and disadvantaged in accessing HE: it is an “ecological fallacy” to assume that ‘you are where you live’ (Harrison and McCaig, 2015: 794). There is a conceptual problem with what Smart (2009) claims POLAR is being used to measure: in taking underrepresentation in HE away from its

roots in social disadvantage (Kettley, 2007), the OfS have ended up with a far too broadly defined group for a single indicator to purposively measure. While Smart (2019) does acknowledge that POLAR should “always be used in conjunction with other data and information when it comes to decisions about individual students”, Harrison and McCaig (2015) point to the significant weight POLAR holds for universities given its governmental backing, especially in terms of funding. Thus, it appears incongruent for the OfS to pedestal this area-based measure and also claim to support “equality of opportunity” for all (Higher Education and Research Act, 2017).

IMD, IDACI, and Acorn are the next most commonly used area-based indicators of disadvantage by Russell Group universities. Unlike POLAR, IMD, IDACI, and Acorn categorise neighbourhoods according to SES. In their evaluation of the indicators, Gorard et al. (2019) praise the greater specificity of Acorn and IMD, both defining areas on smaller population and geographical bases than POLAR, and for their incorporation of a variety of data. IMD, for example, has a weighting system of seven elements, including income (22.5%), education (13.5%), and living environment (9.3%) (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019b). However, these postcode-based indicators suffer the same disadvantages of POLAR in terms of the risk of false positives or negatives. Gorard et al. (2019) give the example of a high-income family living on the outskirts of an otherwise deprived neighbourhood ranking the same in terms of disadvantage as a low-income family living in a small property in the centre of the deprived area. For instance, St Hugh’s College, University of Oxford, fits in Acorn category 4K, since it is primarily student accommodation, despite being in a wealthy neighbourhood; Acorn category 4 is one of the classifications used to select students onto WP programmes, as shown in Appendix A. This trivial example highlights the problems of using a homogenising indicator in WP given that a student living at St Hugh’s College, Oxford would be categorised as ‘disadvantaged’ by this metric.

Importantly, POLAR, Acorn, and IMD are not data collected and accessible to schools, nor on the NPD; the use of these postcode indicators by WP programmes does not, therefore, align to how schools identify their disadvantaged students. IDACI is automatically collected on the NPD, however Gorard et al. (2019) point to an important criticism of IDACI, applicable to all area-based measures. 11-13% of IDACI data are missing from the NPD and it is likely that students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are among those (for example, children in

local authority care (LAC) and young people from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities). The only way to identify disadvantaged young people missing from this measure “would be to use other factors indicating disadvantage for each specific individual, but if these are known then there is little point in using *any* area-aggregated measure as well” (Gorard et al., 2019: 108).

In 2016, the Social Mobility Advisory Group recommended the use of a shared ‘basket of indicators’ across the WP sector to target students, “using both population-based and individual indicators” (Universities UK, 2016: 15). If individual indicators are to be incorporated into this basket, there appears to be little justification for the use of area-based measures, except to satisfy the OfS’s requirements. Affirming Boliver et al.’s (2019b) findings, this review of the literature suggests that while area-based measures may be of interest from a strategic overview, the indicators in question are ill-fitted for use in selection onto WP programmes.

School Measures

Type of school is among the most universal selection criterion for the Russell Group flagship WP programmes. All initiatives included in Appendix A, except for the Newcastle PARTNERS scheme, require students to be attending a state school, with K+, Pathways to Law, and UCL’s residential summer school specifying non-selective state schools as a further selection criterion. As Montacute and Cullinane (2018) report, 21% of independent school pupils and 16% of students at grammar schools apply to Oxford and Cambridge compared to 5% of their state comprehensive school counterparts. Gorard et al. (2019) claim that the state versus private school divide is not useful as a contextual indicator as the minority of children in receipt of full bursaries, or who attend independent special schools, would be excluded from WP work. The researchers state that creating this distinction undermines private school policies which aim to admit SED students, “unless a child from a poor family is no longer considered to be disadvantaged if at private school (which reverses the usual logic)” (Gorard et al., 2019: 110). However, as detailed in the introduction, privately-educated pupils, even those belonging to otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds, are not an underrepresented group in HE, with support provided from their school likely negating the need for additional pre-admission university support as well.

School percentage of FSM, GCSE and A-level attainment, and progression rate to HE were the other school-based indicators of disadvantage seen in Appendix A. Crawford (2014) finds that pupils attending schools in the lowest quintile of FSM eligibility are over five times more likely to attend a highly selective university compared to pupils attending schools in the highest quintile. Largely, this can be accounted for by differences in attainment: two-thirds of pupils in the most advantaged quintile of schools have achieved 5 A*-C at GCSE, compared to a quarter of students at schools in the most disadvantaged quintile and, after taking this into account, there is no significant difference in students' entry to HE (Crawford, 2014). If such school-based measures are to be used whilst still upholding high academic selection criteria, as the vast majority of WP programmes included in Appendix A do, this suggests school-based FSM indicators are unlikely to widen participation to the most disadvantaged young people. This argument is supported in Frempong et al.'s (2012) analysis of progression to postsecondary education in a Canadian context. The researchers found that students from SED backgrounds who attended schools with a high proportion of SED students were especially vulnerable to not being able to access degree-level education. Their multilevel model revealed that "a substantial portion of the socioeconomic effects operate through their influence on other pre-postsecondary factors, such as high school academic achievement" (Frempong et al., 2012: 30). This further emphasises that if university access programmes maintain their high levels of academic selection criteria, use of these school-based contextual indicators is unlikely to widen participation to young people most affected by going to a disadvantaged or underperforming school.

Individual Indicators

A variety of individual indicators are used among the Russell Group flagship WP programmes. The most common indicators were experience of LAC or estrangement, eligibility for or receipt of FSM, the 16-19 bursary or school discretionary payments, low household income, first-generation to HE, young carer, disability, belonging to an underrepresented ethnic group, or extenuating circumstances. Individual indicators such as these are able to specifically identify a young person's experience of disadvantage and reduce the chances of false negatives and false positives compared to area-based measures. However, challenges arise in understanding the extent of disadvantage an individual suffers and validating applicants' reported eligibility (Gorard et al., 2019).

Care-experienced young people are perhaps the most underrepresented group in HE, with only 13% of young care leavers going on to HE (Harrison, 2019; Department for Education 2020a). The educational disruption, trauma, lack of confidence, variations in local authority knowledge of HE, and challenges this group faces in transitioning to adult life places them as a high priority for WP work (Harrison, 2019; The Who Cares? Trust, 2012; Lewis et al., 2015; Department for Education and Skills, 2006). While the Education Act (2004) legislates the responsibility of local authorities to enhance looked-after children's educational outcomes, accessing HE and especially highly selective universities remains a significant challenge, not least due to this group's lower academic attainment (Harrison, 2019). It is pleasing that WP programmes such as K+ welcome applications from care-experienced young people even if they do not meet other WP or academic selection criteria. The Stand Alone charity has highlighted that young people estranged from their families may have experienced many of the same trauma and challenges as care-leavers but lack statutory support (Unite Foundation and Stand Alone, 2015). Despite the difficulties in validating data on whether a student is estranged – precisely because they lack statutory support – nine of the 20 Russell Group flagship WP programmes include being estranged as a contextual indicator, while others may incorporate this group amongst those with extenuating circumstances. Given the significant trauma and educational disruption young people belonging to these groups are likely to have faced, false positives are unlikely to occur, indicating the strength of these indicators in identifying disadvantage (Gorard et al., 2019). Students who are false negatives may have the opportunity to explain extenuating circumstances, which eight of the 20 WP schemes in Appendix A explicitly invite young people to include.

Eligibility for, or receipt of, FSM was the most widely used SES indicator, with 17 out of the 20 flagship schemes considering the measure. To be eligible for FSM, a child's household must be in receipt of certain means-tested benefits (Department for Education, 2020b). As Hobbs and Vignoles's (2010) *a priori* research hypothesis suggests, one would assume the poorest children are eligible for FSM. However, the researchers found that while children from low income households were more likely to be eligible for FSM than those from high income families, not all children who are eligible for FSM are among the lowest income households. One explanation for this is that the benefits these families receive may increase their income above the lowest threshold (Hobbs and Vignoles, 2010). Furthermore, children in low-income families are excluded from eligibility whilst in receipt of Working Tax Credits. Farthing (2012)

estimated that 700,000 school-aged children living below the poverty line are not eligible for FSM and thus would not be eligible to meet this WP criterion despite experiencing similar socioeconomic disadvantages as young people eligible for FSM. Indeed, Bradshaw (2013: 7) claims that, given most children in poverty live with at least one working adult, “defining poverty in terms of worklessness therefore makes no sense.”

The use of FSMEver6, to indicate children in receipt of FSM at any point in the last six years, attempts to overcome the issue Noden and West (2009) termed the ‘hidden poor’ - children eligible for FSM previously, but not at the point of data collection – and Gorard et al. (2019) argue that the number of years a child has been eligible for FSM is a better proxy for socioeconomic disadvantage than FSM eligibility alone. While advocating for the strength of FSM as a means of identifying disadvantaged children, Gorard (2012) does acknowledge that some state-educated children not eligible for FSM and children for whom data is missing may form a “super-deprived” group that require recognition. In addition, not all children that are eligible claim FSM. The 16-19 Discretionary Bursary scheme faces similar issues to FSM, perhaps with the potential for greater variability given the role individual schools play in determining which of their students are eligible. Household income is one means of including SED children who are excluded from FSM and 16-19 Discretionary Bursary payments in WP contextual criteria. Although Boliver et al. (2019b) claim HMRC or the DWP can verify data, Gorard et al. (2019) point to the challenge of acquiring verification for self-reported household income data, and Bradshaw (2013) argues low income needs to be tied to material deprivation in order to indicate poverty: the same household income may have different implications for different families, depending on the number of children, assets, and the area they live in, amongst other factors. These implications may explain why the University of Nottingham’s Post-16: Ambition programme has a household income indicator of £35,000, while in London, Imperial’s STEM Potential sets an income threshold at £50,000. This suggests SES factors need to work jointly to be most effective in capturing disadvantage. In this regard, first-generation student status combined with NS-SEC data would provide a more holistic portrayal of a student’s SES than either indicator alone, as is required in the Newcastle PARTNERS programme.

Seven of the 20 Russell Group flagship WP programmes include belonging to certain underrepresented ethnic groups as a contextual factor for selection. Boliver (2015) notes the

discrepancies in HE participation among different ethnic groups, writing that although certain minority ethnic groups are more likely to attend university than white British students, other BAME groups are significantly underrepresented and under-offered at highly selective universities, both with and without controlling for A-level results. Black Caribbean, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Gypsy, Roma, or Traveller minority ethnic groups are most under-offered and underrepresented at Russell Group universities (Boliver, 2015). There is debate regarding the extent to which ethnicity itself is a reason for underrepresentation or if it is caused by correlated factors (Gorard et al., 2019). Boliver (2013: 358) identifies “differential treatment” in the admissions process as the cause of under-offering to these ethnic minority groups, while barriers in making applications is the prime cause of “unfairness” for SED students. Strand (2011) identified that differences in academic progress for Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Black African groups compared to white British could be accounted for by SES; Black Caribbean students, however, form a distinct group, making less progress than white British students with no other factors accounting for this difference.

While debate continues over the multiple reasons for the underrepresentation of certain ethnic groups in Russell Group universities, it is clear that not all minority ethnic groups (for example, British Chinese students) are underrepresented (Boliver, 2015). The generic inclusion of coming from a BAME background, as in the Next Step York and Newcastle PARTNERS programmes, is not supported in the literature and empirical research as a suitable WP indicator and homogenises the experiences of all ethnic minority groups rather than recognising the distinctly different likelihoods individual ethnic minority groups have in accessing highly selective universities.

The final commonly used individual indicator for WP is disability, featuring in the contextual criteria for nine out of the 20 flagship WP programmes. Gorard et al. (2019) provide an extensive discussion of the importance of WP for students with disabilities and also the issues that arise in using this factor as part of contextual selection. Clarke et al. (2015) note that children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) status make less progress across all stages of schooling than those without SEND and have lower attainment on average. However, disability status, reliant on self-identification, incorporates a range of different educational experiences: the experience of a student with a visual impairment is going to be different to that of a student with a mental health condition or an individual with multiple

disabilities or learning difficulties. Gorard et al. (2019) suggest disaggregating this indicator, but significant further research would be required to complete this task and would likely draw controversy. The researchers take particular issue with a dyslexia diagnosis as a disability flag, citing Tomlinson's (2012) argument that middle-class parents may attempt to access diagnoses for their children in order to gain further resources for their children in the current competitive educational climate. This provides further evidence to suggest that multiple contextual indicators are required to ensure the most disadvantaged children in each individual contextual group are not excluded on the basis that their experience of intersectional disadvantages is likely to result in multiple barriers to academic achievement and access to highly selective HE.

Listening to Young People's Voices in WP

There is little qualitative research on what young people aged under 18 view as important for WP programmes to consider in their selection of students. However, there is a more substantial body of research conducted with university students from WP backgrounds. Whilst this dissertation seeks to address this gap in the literature with school-aged students, an overview of previous empirical qualitative studies involving older young people is still illuminating.

Martin and Jackson (2002) undertook research with care-leavers who have achieved educational 'success'. These 'high achievers' drew on their time living in foster homes and residential care to not only reflect on which experiences they think assisted them in their progression to HE, but also to advocate for change for young people currently in care. The researchers identified that emotional and practical support from social services, schools, and universities was central to what the young people believe needs to be codified to ensure consistency. The negative discrimination young people in care face, especially those with lower ability, is enormously detrimental to success (Martin and Jackson, 2002). For care-leavers, institutional backing, from schools, universities, and the care system, is essential. Crucially, the participants advocated that all young people should be supported in applying to HE, not just those with perceived high ability or high prior attainment.

Reay et al. (2009) draw on the experiences of nine working-class students at an elite UK university to critique Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. From listening to the students' voices, the researchers identified that while students' habitus did adapt to the new, unfamiliar environment of an elite university, they also longed to retain core aspects of their working-

class identity. The young people experienced being a ‘fish out of water’ in both their secondary education and their time at university, but for paradoxical reasons: at secondary school, the students felt like they did not fit in easily due to their high academic achievement, which was not the norm; at university, while they matched their peers academically, the alienation came from their belonging to different social backgrounds to the majority (Reay et al. 2009). All of the students participating in this research were first-generation to university and had parents working in lower-class occupations. However, it is likely that there were many variations in the students’ backgrounds beyond these two factors, and this suggests that young people from a variety of underrepresented backgrounds are likely to face a core set of similar barriers in progressing to HE. Indeed, in their research with 129 students at HE institutions in both England and Ireland, Finnegan and Merrill (2017) identified a similar core set of concerns working-class students had about university, and differences occurring when class intersects with other identities such as race and gender. It is important to remember, however, that the views of students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds – those who have faced multiple barriers in the progression to HE – are likely to be underrepresented in this research, given the few students from these backgrounds attending university in the first place. This is one reason why it is important to hear the voices of young people before they make the application to university.

Clark et al.’s (2015) research is an example of a qualitative study involving young people under the age of 18 on a university WP programme. With their focus on tuition fee reform, the researchers identified that the commercialisation of the HE sector has affected young people’s university decision making processes. Not only are universities increasingly concentrating the focus of their WP programmes on student recruitment, young people themselves are being more consumer-minded and vocationally-orientated in their university application decisions (Clark et al., 2015). If the aim of WP programmes remains to encourage young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds to consider and successfully apply to HE, it is important that these programmes consider how to work collaboratively in approach, rather than contribute to narrowing students’ choices stemming from perceptions of fixed university hierarchies and subject choices (Clark et al., 2015). Otherwise, WP programmes may lose sight of their philosophical objectives and fall victim to commercial markets.

Summary

It is important not to assume that all WP programmes have the same objectives. As seen above, the aims of the OfS do not align with what Gorard et al. (2019: 121) identify as “true WP.” Each of the various indicators evaluated in this literature review, currently used in flagship WP programmes run by England’s Russell Group universities, have advantages and limitations and capture a variety of different experiences young people may have encountered. By synthesising this literature it has been identified that it is often the most disadvantaged young people who are at risk of being excluded from WP programmes due to the limitations of single indicators, especially when WP programmes require students to have high prior attainment. This review has highlighted that area-based measures of disadvantage are largely rendered meaningless when used in conjunction with individual indicators, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds would be identified through these individual metrics regardless of their area categorisation. It appears that multiple individual indicators are required for WP programmes to include young people facing several barriers in the progression to HE as a matter of course, rather than as a matter of extenuating circumstance. It remains to be heard, however, what young people themselves view as having advantaged and disadvantaged them in their progression through education towards HE.

Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a mixed methods design, using qualitative data from interviews (n = 10) to further explore the quantitative data and qualitative responses to a questionnaire (n = 27) with applicants from A4O to answer the following two research questions:

1. What information is captured from the indicators used to select post-16 students onto A4O?
2. What do A4O applicants view as important selection criteria for WP programmes at highly selective universities?

A mixed methods design allowed data to be examined from the view most commonly taken in WP activity (quantitative data on students' SES and educational background) and account young people's perspectives and experiences which may not be captured by widely used metrics. Thus, an exploratory sequential design was implemented (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2018). However, following Bazeley (2018: 70), there is no strict typology of this mixed methods study; rather, the design was emergent and responsive to the information obtained, exploiting the "integrative potential" of the data. As such, while the data analysis was predominantly sequential, there were also convergent elements to the design through comparing the narrative of a student's experiences with their educational background and SES suggested by the quantitative data (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

Sampling

The sample of students was drawn from applicants to A4O (n = 169). All students who were on A4O were invited to take part in this study (n = 43), alongside all students who unsuccessfully applied to the programme but agreed to be on a mailing list of relevant events that might be of interest to them (n = 26). These students were emailed an invitation to take part, with the participant information sheet and consent form attached, and a link to the online questionnaire in March 2020. There were 36 responses to the questionnaire by 32 participants (four participants completed the questionnaire twice). In the case of dual completions, on two occasions the second response was taken into account alongside the first completion as the participants elaborated on data provided the first time. Three responses were sufficiently incomplete to be discounted (not providing any data or a name to consent to participation), leaving a sample of 29 questionnaire responses by 27 participants. All participants were

currently in Year 12 and attending a state school or college in the NE, a pre-requisite to applying to A4O. By participating in the questionnaire, students gave consent for the researcher to access their A4O application and teacher's reference.

Of the students who completed the questionnaire, two thirds had been successful in gaining a place on the programme. Two thirds of students are also participants on other WP programmes. 77.8% of respondents are female and 74.1% of participants are White British, while only 3.7% are from an ethnic background underrepresented in HE (Black Caribbean, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Gypsy/Roma Traveller background). This is a distinct underrepresentation of the 14% of successful applicants on A4O who belong to an underrepresented ethnic group and a notable limitation of this study that will be discussed in greater detail below. Two thirds of respondents live in a POLAR3 quintile 1 or 2 postcode and over half (55.5%) live in an Acorn category 4 or 5 neighbourhood. 44.4% of participants have been eligible for FSM, 33.3% within the last six years; 46.2% of these students had been eligible for FSM for more than three years in their life, although a notable proportion (30.8%) were unsure how long they had cumulatively been eligible in their life. 40.7% have no parental history of HE, 14.8% have experience of LAC, and 7.4% are young carers. A quarter of respondents declared a disability. A table summarising their quantitative data responses is included in Appendix B.

Purposive sampling was the intended method to select students to interview, with the objective of gathering data from "information rich cases" (Patton, 2015: 53). Participants were separated into the shortlisting category that had been assigned to their original A4O application; a description of the shortlisting categories is shown in Table 3. Participants were then ranked according to their responses in each shortlisting category to ensure a diverse array of interviewees based on the factors included in the literature review above and extenuating circumstances. For example, in shortlisting category one, George was ranked first as a student who had experience of LAC, but also has a parent who is a retired headteacher, which he stated as a protective factor, and a household income above £25,000 per year. This suggests George might have different experiences to most students with experience of LAC, and it would be of interest to understand further his experiences of educational advantage and disadvantage in the group perhaps most underrepresented in HE. Following this, Amina was ranked next as the only student to explicitly mention the impact of coming from an ethnic minority background on her HE ambitions, as one of the few participants in this study from an ethnically

underrepresented background in HE (Pakistani). Olivia was next ranked as a student whose quantitative data was broadly representative of students in shortlisting category one.

Shortlisting Category	Description	Number of A4O applications	Number of questionnaire responses
1*	Student has significant extenuating circumstances detailed in their application (e.g. safeguarding concerns, school in special measures throughout both GCSEs and A-level, etc.), and normally also meets at least one indicator of individual disadvantage.	3	3
1	Student meets at least two individual indicators of disadvantage OR has experience of LAC. Student has at least five GCSEs at grade 7 or above.	27	11
2a*	Student has ever been eligible for FSM, OR meets one other individual indicator of disadvantage AND has a postcode in POLAR3 quintile 1 or 2 AND Acorn category 4 or 5. Student has at least five GCSEs at grade 7 or above.	18	4
2a	Student meets one individual indicator of disadvantage. Student has at least five GCSEs at grade 7 or above.	33	4
2b	Student meets at least two individual indicators of disadvantage. Student does not have five GCSEs at grade 7 or above.	5	2
3a*	Student does not meet any individual indicators of disadvantage, but has some extenuating circumstances which are notable but not exceptional (e.g. bereavement). Student has at least five GCSEs at grade 7 or above.	2	0
3a	Student does not meet any individual indicators of disadvantage. Student has at least five GCSEs at grade 7 or above.	40	3
3b	Student meets one individual indicator of disadvantage. Student does not have five GCSEs at grade 7 or above.	2	0
4	Student does not meet any individual indicators of disadvantage. Student does not have five GCSEs at grade 7 or above.	0	0
5	Student not eligible for the programme (i.e. does not attend a state school in the NE).	39	0

Table 3: Shortlisting categories used to select students onto A4O, including the number of applications and the number of participant questionnaire responses in each category.

After students at the top of their shortlisting category rankings were invited to participate in interviews, if they did not take up the invitation, students lower down the ranking were then invited to take their place. Unfortunately, with interviews taking place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in June 2020, uptake for digital interviews was low, and ultimately all participants except two in category one were invited to interview. The intended purposive sampling technique was necessarily altered to convenience sampling. No students from ethnic groups underrepresented in HE identified by Boliver (2015) participated in interviews and there was an underrepresentation of students from BAME backgrounds compared to the questionnaire responses. Therefore, this study is unlikely to have uncovered young people's

experiences of the relation between race and accessing HE; this is a notable limitation of this study that requires further research.

Unfortunately, no students in the most disadvantaged 1* category responded to the invitation to interview. It is important to recognise the burden that is often placed on individuals from minority backgrounds to participate in research and, whilst attempts were made to reduce this burden by, for instance, being flexible with interview times, it is clear that more could be done to value and encourage participation from these most underrepresented groups. With this research taking place in the midst of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, young people from black ethnic backgrounds are likely to have been most burdened in participation.

Of the 10 students who participated in interviews, seven had successfully applied to A4O, six of whom and a further two unsuccessful participants have participated in another WP programme. Three male students participated, four students have been eligible for FSM in the last six years, four have no parental history of HE, and four disclosed a disability. Three interviewees have experience of LAC and one interviewee is a young carer. The interviewees attended nine different schools/colleges, five of which had average post-16 attainment and five had an average percentage of students eligible for FSM. It is clear that it is impossible to disaggregate the effects of the different indicators of disadvantage given nearly every student has a complex network of factors in play. A summary of the backgrounds of the interviewees is shown in Table 4 below.

Pseudonym	Application status	Other WP programmes	Ethnicity	Disability	Doxbridge school trip	Post-16 school attainment	Post-16 school FSM	Pre-16 school attainment	Pre-16 school FSM	POLAR3	Acorn	LAC	Young Carer	FSMEve6	Tax credits	Household income	Parental HE
George	1 (S)	Yes	White British	No	Yes	2	2	2	2	3	1	Yes	No	No	No	4	Yes
Liam	1 (S)	Yes	White British	SpLD	No	2	2	2	2	2	2	Yes	No	Yes	4	2	Yes
Amelia	1 (S)	Yes	White British	Yes (?)	No	3	1	3	1	5	3	Yes	No	No ¹	1	2	No ¹
Katherine	1 (S)	Yes	White British	No	No	1	2	1	2	1	4	No	No	Yes	?	1	Yes
Hannah	1 (S)	Yes	Black Other	No	Yes	3	2	2	2	1	5	No	No	?	?	?	No
Megan	2a* (S)	Yes	White British	No	Yes	3	2	2	2	2	5	No	Yes	?	4	2	Yes
Maya	2a (S)	No	White British	No	Yes	2	3	1	2	2	3	No	No	No	No	5	No
Aria	2a (U)	No	Indian	SpLD	No	2	1	3	1	5	1	No	No	No	No	5	Yes
Grace	2b (U)	Yes	White British	MH	Yes	1	NA	1	3	3	5	No	?	Yes	4	2	No
Freddie	3a (U)	Yes	White British	No	No	2	2	2	2	4	3	No	No	No	3	4	No

Table 4: Quantitative data showing the backgrounds of interview participants. Application status: 1, 2a, 2a, 2b, 3a refers to shortlisting category (see Table 3), (S) = successful application to A4O, (U) = unsuccessful application. Disability: MH = mental health condition, SpLD = specific learning difficulty, yes (?) = disability not categorised. School attainment (KS4 and KS5 results) and FSM: 1 = below average, 2 = average, 3 = above average, NA = student attends sixth form college. Tax credits: 1 = universal credit, 2 = working tax credit, 3 = child tax credit, 4 = multiple tax credits. Household income: 1 = below £7,400, 2 = £7,400 - £16,000, 4 = £25,000 - £45,000, 5 = above £45,000. ? = unsure.*

Instrument: Questionnaire

A bespoke online questionnaire (Appendix C) was created for this study. The questionnaire consisted of 31 items in two parts: the first, 23 items collecting quantitative data on students' SES and educational background; the second, six open questions asking students what they believe has advantaged or disadvantaged them in their education and what they believe is important for universities to take into account when selecting students onto WP programmes, and two further closed questions on the impact of A4O and their future ambitions.

¹ Amelia selected 'yes' to these questions on her questionnaire. However, during the interview she spoke at length about her parents not having experience of HE nor taking up FSM, even though she believes she might have been eligible. Therefore, it is assumed that 'no' is what she intended to answer to these questionnaire questions. This highlights potential limitations to the questionnaire in ensuring concentration is maintained, questions are clear, and participants answer accurately.

Decisions on which contextual indicators to include in the first part of the questionnaire were made based on the results from Gorard et al.'s (2019) systematic review, which highlighted the range of indicators used across UK WP programmes. Question wording was taken, where possible, from the UCAS application, given its wide and recurrent dissemination, improving the reliability of the questions, also allowing results from this questionnaire to be compared to larger data sets (Johnson and Christensen, 2020). At times, more specific questions not on the UCAS questionnaire were created to yield more refined data. For example, students were asked their household income and whether their parents/carers were in receipt of Universal Credit, Working Tax Credits, and/or Child Tax Credit. The purpose of these additional questions was to attempt to identify students who might be living on or below the poverty line but not eligible for FSM.

De Vaus (2014) writes on the limitations of asking closed questions, restricting participants' responses and, importantly for these research questions, limiting insight into participants' circumstances. Two qualitative questions in the second part of this questionnaire sought to overcome these limitations. In asking the students 'what circumstances, if any, do you believe to have had a positive/negative impact on your education and future opportunity to attend a highly selective university?', there was opportunity for students to write additional experiences they believe to have impacted their education not captured through quantitative measures, and/or to highlight which quantitative measures are most relevant to them. Students were explicitly told in the instructions to this second part to not feel limited to the contextual indicators used in the first part of the questionnaire in their responses; however, it must be noted that the ordering of the questionnaire might have affected students' responses in this way. Writing on the burden placed on participants completing questionnaires, Krosnick and Presser (2010) outline the process individuals go through when participating. Open questions require participants to articulate their response in standardised language which researchers are able to interpret, likely burdening participants with SpLDs and EAL in particular. For closed questions, participants are required to map their recalled knowledge onto the options available to them. However, for the contextual indicators used in this questionnaire, closed questions were likely to be less burdensome for participants and thus were asked first to encourage a higher response rate, despite the limitation of potentially influencing students' qualitative responses.

The questionnaire was piloted on 11 Year 12 students taking part in a Materials Science Taster Day at the University of Oxford in February 2020. While this event was not restricted to students who met WP criteria, they were in the same age range as this study's sample and the students were also interested in attending highly selective universities. The pilot process assisted in refining questions: for example, the question 'are there any circumstances you believe to have had a positive/negative impact on your education and future opportunity to attend a highly selective university?' was altered to 'what circumstances, if any,...' to encourage students to elaborate on their answers. This pilot testing thus allowed further tailoring of questions to ensure suitability for the sample population and appropriateness for the research questions being asked, a key way of establishing a high level of construct validity (Gehlbach and Brinkworth, 2011).

The response rate to the questionnaire was 39.1%. Five of the 27 respondents did not provide answers to the second, qualitative, section of the questionnaire. It was noted that a mistake was made in the response options to the question on household income as the £16,001 - £24,999 bracket was missing. While only two students selected 'unsure' for the household income question and all other students selected one of the available options, it is recognised that this error, not picked up in review or piloting processes, may have affected the validity of responses to this question.

Interviews

Semi-structured online (audio only) or telephone interviews were conducted with 10 participants. The interview guide (Appendix D) split questions into two sections: the first, exploring participants', their families', and their schools' perceptions of A4O; the second, asking more directly about participants' views about selection practices in WP.

The interview guide consisted of 12 questions. 11 of these questions were asked to all participants, leaving one question in the middle of the interview flexible and dependent on data from their questionnaire. For example, three students who had experience of LAC were asked if they would like to elaborate on their experiences and how this may or may not have affected their potential to attend a highly selective university in the future. Grace was invited to speak about the extenuating circumstances she mentioned in her questionnaire response, Aria was asked about her SpLD, Katherine the impact of having to do part-time work and coming from

a low-income background, Hannah her views towards ethnicity as a selection criterion, and Megan her experiences as a young carer. In the first part of the interview, participants were asked to remember and recall their feelings when they first heard of A4O. These more open and exploratory questions sought to encourage the participants to detail their journey through this experience, and to invite the interviewer to experience this journey with them (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). This style of interview guide created the opportunity to “pursu[e] a line of discussion opened up by the interviewee” through their qualitative questionnaire responses, and the flexibility to explore interviewees’ experiences further by asking follow-up questions to their responses (Edwards and Holland, 2013: 29).

The location and format of interviews both influence the power and relational dynamics between the interviewer and participants (Elwood and Martin, 2010). The interviews were originally intended to take place in each participant’s school, a place the participant is familiar with and the researcher not, and a place with other trusted adults for the participant should they become distressed for any reason or a safeguarding matter arise. In aiming to conduct research in these settings, the participant would be encouraged to take an active role in the interview from the outset, for example guiding the interviewer to the classroom where the interview would take place (Hoffman, 2007; Stubbs and Murphy, 2020). However, due to COVID-19, the interviews necessarily took place online or over the telephone.

For safeguarding reasons, to protect the participants and the interviewer, interviews were limited to audio-only online calls on Microsoft Teams, with a telephone being used as back-up if technical difficulties arose, as was the case in two interviews. The process for dealing with technical difficulties – using the chat function if audio became unclear and, if required, expecting to receive a phone call from an unknown caller ID to their mobile – was explained at the beginning of each interview. Novick (2008) details the potential limitations of telephone interviews compared to face-to-face: primarily, the lack of clues and cues from body language or gestures, alongside less opportunity for reassuring vocalisms. However, Novick (2008) also contests the default assumption that this medium is always detrimental to data collection. Irvine et al. (2012: 101) did note minor challenges in clarity of question and response in telephone compared to face-to-face interviews, but argue that the challenges of communication and understanding in this remote format are “over-stated.” To overcome the issue of participants being less confident in the adequacy of their responses, which Irvine et al. (2012) did note as

an effect of a telephone medium, techniques such as using silence and rewording and repeating back the participant's response to check understanding were used to encourage active participation. The potential benefits of this remote format should not be underestimated: the participants were in a familiar location in their own homes, had greater flexibility to select a time suitable to their schedule, and were becoming increasingly used to this form of communication during the COVID-19 pandemic as a 'new normal'. It must be acknowledged, however, that four interviews were missed by participants, and only two of those successfully re-scheduled, which may have been less likely to occur in a face-to-face format.

The ten interviews ranged from 15 minutes to one hour in length. As has been suggested above, the point of saturation was not met for this data collection; the researcher was not able to recruit participants across every shortlisting category and there was a notable underrepresentation of students belonging to ethnic groups underrepresented in HE.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the University of Oxford's Central Research Ethics Committee (Appendix E). Participants' anonymity was protected by the use of pseudonyms and their school characteristics generalised into categories of 'above average', 'average', and 'below average' rather than being named or exact statistics being quoted. Confidential information was stored appropriately on OneDrive for Business and interviews conducted securely over Microsoft Teams or via telephone.

Participants were sent the information sheet and consent form (Appendix E) prior to deciding whether to complete the questionnaire. The participant information sheet and consent form were sent again to all those invited to interview, with minor alterations given the move to a digital interview format, and participants were asked at the beginning of the interview if they had read the form, giving them an opportunity to ask any questions they might have, before checking again that they were still happy to take part. The participants were also informed at the beginning of the interview that the only circumstance when confidentiality would be broken was if the researcher or their supervisor was concerned about their own or others' safety or wellbeing; the students were informed that if such a situation were to arise, the researcher would disclose this information to their school, to ensure that support could be provided beyond the end of the interview. No such situation arose.

Care was taken over the decision as to whether to conduct video or audio-only interviews. None of the University of Oxford's guidance on internet-based research (2019b), competent youths (2020d), and safeguarding (2015b), nor the British Educational Research Association's (2018) guidelines have a policy or specific suggestions regarding this matter. While video interviews may have had more opportunity to counter some of the limitations of virtual interviewing detailed in Irvine et al.'s (2012) article, the decision was made to follow current school and college practices regarding online safeguarding. St Anne's College and Christ Church, Oxford did not allow students to have cameras on whilst participating in any digital A4O sessions and thus the decision was made to refrain from video interviews to safeguard both the participants and the researcher.

It is necessary to recognise the implicit and explicit power dynamics in play during an interview. As the researcher was both the interviewer and also a member of staff on A4O, involved in the process of advertising and selecting students onto the programme, the power differential was noticeable, especially given the age of the participants. Prior professional relationships with certain students on the programme aided building a rapport during the interview; there was a notable difference between the ease of the interviewee-interviewer relationship between those who were and were not successful in gaining a place onto A4O. As Miller (2017) has stated, power relations do not only affect the interview 'itself', but are in continuous play from initial contact at the beginning of the study until its conclusion and beyond. Alongside these formal roles affecting power dynamics, Miller and Glassner (2016) recognise that an individual's personal characteristics – for instance, their race, gender, age, SES, ability or disability, sexuality, etc. – all affect interview dynamics differently depending on the context. It is important to note that whilst attempts were made to explicitly clarify that this research will form no part of any future interactions participants may have with the University of Oxford, a specific point in the consent form and participant information sheet, the status of a student researcher and Outreach Officer at the University of Oxford may have caused a lack of trust in this statement for some participants and could not only affect the data obtained, but also decisions on whether to participate in the study.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated from the quantitative data provided, with more in depth statistical analysis limited by the small sample size.

Thematic analysis was undertaken on interview data. The analysis was carried out according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of the process. First, familiarity with data was developed through re-listening to interview recordings and reviewing notes made during the interviews. As Walford (2001) contests, there is no requirement to transcribe every interview in full, or at all. Rather, as Elliott (2018) states, decisions over transcription should be taken with research questions in mind and given that narrative analysis is not central to this dissertation, full transcription was not essential; relevant sections were transcribed in steps five and six of this thematic analysis.

Second, initial codes for the data were systematically formulated. Initial codes were first derived from the notes made during each interview. The recordings were then re-listened to and the initial codes derived from the notes were coded directly onto the audio recordings at relevant time stamps. New initial codes were also added during the re-listening process and some codes formulated from the notes were deleted if it was not felt appropriate to place them onto any of the data during the re-listening process. Over 100 initial codes were formulated from the data, a relatively large number compared to Creswell's (2015: 155) recommendation of "about 30 to 50 codes." However, as Rapley (2011) argues, too few codes could result in homogenising the data through labels. The approach was taken in this study to prioritise detail at the initial coding stage and categorise codes at the next stage of the process. Some simultaneous coding occurred, with one piece of data assigned multiple codes at times, to reference the interaction between different ideas within one statement (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994).

Third, themes were established from the initial codes and, fourth, the fit of the themes to both the initial codes and the data were reviewed to create a thematic map for the data and codes. Again, some codes were assigned to multiple categories to illustrate the relationship one idea might hold to multiple larger frameworks. For instance, a student might draw on their own 'extenuating circumstances disclosure' and also suggest that 'extenuating circumstances disclosure' should be a consideration in WP selection criteria, illustrating the interaction between a participant's own experiences and their recommendations for WP practice. Fifth, themes were clarified, named, and defined after an iterative process of matching and reviewing data and themes. A list of the initial codes categorised by theme is included in Appendix F.

Last, the narrative of the analysis was created to report findings, selecting themes and data to quote and draw on. Codes were not counted, but the number of cases where a code was present was taken into account to assess the prevalence of the ideas across the whole data set (Elliott, 2018). However, this was an initial means of interpreting the data, in part helping to identify codes with minimal references, to ensure they were not automatically discounted as “unimportant, inconsequential, and unrelated” (Saldaña, 2016: 25). As Elliott (2018) states, an iterative process of data coding is a key method of improving the reliability of the coding and reducing the obscuration of the researcher’s bias by continually referring back to the initial data throughout the analytical process. References back to the initial data occurred at all stages of this thematic analysis, including during the final stage of narrative creation, to ensure that participants’ ideas remained central to the findings and subsequent discussion in this study.

Findings

Participants' questionnaire responses and, predominantly although not exclusively, the first half of the interview provided details of their contextual backgrounds. The sample size of respondents means that quantitative data gathered from questionnaires is too small to analyse beyond providing descriptive statistics detailed in the methodology above. However, indicator eligibility gathered from participants' questionnaire responses was considered alongside participants' qualitative descriptions of their context, and this is the focus of the first half of this findings section. Research literature will be drawn on during this section to discuss participants' insights. The second half of these findings will focus on this study's second research question, assimilating what participants believe is important for WP programmes to consider in their selection of students.

Part 1 – what information is captured from the indicators used to select post-16 students onto A40?

Family Context

Indicators of students' family context and background include: living and relational (experience of LAC, family estrangement, young carer status), financial (FSM, 16-19 bursary, household income, tax credits), and educational and occupational (parental HE, parental occupation).

Despite all meeting the indicator of LAC, the experiences of the three interviewed participants who met this criterion were diverse. George and Amelia were both adopted at a young age, around two and three years old respectively. George, in particular, spoke about the idea of an adopted norm: he has no memory of his time in care and questioned, "why is being a care leaver so singled out [in WP selection criteria]?" George pointed to the fact that he rarely meets other WP "quotas" except having experience of LAC; his mother is a retired head teacher and, as such, he is not a first-generation student, his family has a professional background, and is not low-income. For George, his experience of LAC is "not something that is like at the forefront of [his] mind, [he has] just always been brought up with the family [he has] got." George's experiences are contrary to Gorard et al.'s (2019) validation of the LAC indicator as one where false positives are very unlikely to occur. Indeed, George describes both a sense of distance from other participants on WP programmes, and a feeling of guilt, given his family's higher SES:

I just feel like really different in the sense of like a lot of people on these [WP] programmes... I feel like I'm kind of cheating the system in all honesty because, you know, I don't meet all these other quotas, but then I feel kind of guilty because, you know like, my care experience isn't one that's sort of bad at all... I just feel like a normal average kid, but I've sort of got this care label attached to me... I feel like potentially there are other barriers, but not this one.

Like George, Amelia speaks of her positive experience of the care system and adoption. However, she places a greater emphasis on the role of care experience in her current circumstances. Amelia argues that her history of LAC has made her “more ambitious” as she is able to see the life she could have had had she not had such a positive adoption experience. She describes her parents' unconditional support for her interests and future goals, and the influence of their work ethic:

[My parents] have had to work extremely hard for all their ambitions and I think that was really enforced on me from when I was a young age, that you can do anything as long as you're motivated enough to work hard.

Unlike George, Amelia does meet other WP indicators: she is a first-generation student, comes from a low-income background, and has a disability. However, these are perhaps more aligned with the “other barriers” George argues might have disadvantaged him in accessing HE, as opposed to the indicator of LAC itself.

Liam is a participant with current experience of LAC. Like George and Amelia, he also speaks positively of his experience, claiming that it provided him more “stability” and, as with Amelia, “made [him] more aspirational... because [he has] seen what [he] could have went and what [he] can be.” In his interview, however, Liam did reference a personal and family history which presented significant barriers in his education: due to his ADHD, Liam has been supported by Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services from the age of six, and his behaviour led to many temporary school exclusions. Like George, however, Liam points to some discomfort with the label of LAC: he does not want “special treatment”, he believes “other people have had it a lot harder than [him]” and “wants to be judged for [his] abilities and how actually good [he is], rather than if [he has] been in care.” Yet, Liam also points to a perhaps principle reason why a history of care experience is a significant indicator, as also outlined in Harrison et al. (2019):

Usually people are in care for a reason, and no matter why you're in care, going into care's a pretty traumatic experience in itself, and it's bound to leave some emotional damage that'd probably inhibit your education for a bit because your mind will be elsewhere.

These three young people's perspectives highlight the diversity of life experiences that come under perhaps the least controversial indicator used in WP, featuring in every Russell Group university's flagship WP programme selection criteria. The young people with experience of LAC who are likely to be considering WP programmes at these high tariff institutions are already set apart from the majority of those with experience of LAC given their high prior attainment at GCSE. None of the care-experienced young people in this study have suggested removing LAC as an indicator, but it is also important to recognise the effect of 'labelling' these students, a matter that will be discussed further in part two of these findings.

While Amelia reports the encouraging and supportive role her parents have played, she also describes that since neither of her parents attended university, university has not always been actively encouraged. Passive parental support was a theme present in eight out of the ten interviews, and thus was by no means exclusive to first-generation students. Indeed, Maya, a first-generation student, was the only participant to report an active parental push for going to university, with her parents researching and encouraging her to apply to various WP schemes. Although not described as actively researching, George and Katherine, both continuing-generation students, highlighted one of each of their parents pushed for them to go to a prestigious university specifically. In addition, all students, except Liam, whose parent(s) have been to university reported a long-term goal of going to university, appearing from an early age. Megan and Katherine did not just have an aspiration of going to university, but rather an expectation: Katherine views university as "just part of [her] life plan", while Megan states university is an experience that she "always thought [she] would have." This contrasts to the four first-generation students, of whom only Maya and Amelia mentioned having a long-term goal of going to university. While the difference in numbers is small, the prominence of the theme of long-term university ambition and, in some cases, expectation was also greater with continuing-generation students.

First-generation student Freddie describes an experience of having isolated knowledge when it comes to applying to university, unable to draw on familial – in terms of parents or siblings – or school support. First-generation participants' family influences in their thinking about HE

appear more uniform compared to the indicator of LAC. In general, but with exception, first-generation students appear to not have the same long-term expectation of going to university as continuing-generation students and, as Freddie describes, first-generation students have the potential to be in a position where they are the only person in their immediate network with knowledge of the university process. Liam describes his mother's experience of attending a post-1992 institution as being "in a different league" to Oxford, while Aria references her mother attending university in a different country as limiting the usefulness of her parents' HE experience. For continuing-generation student Katherine, first-generation student status is one of the least useful factors she thinks WP programmes need to consider. However, there does appear to remain a clear theme of students with familial experience of HE having clearer aspirations, expectations, and knowledge of attending university. This aligns with Harrison and Waller's (2018) article, which argues that it is not disadvantaged young people's aspirations that need raising, but rather their views of their 'possible selves' (Markus and Nurius, 1986) need changing, to close the gap between their aspirations and expectations.

The final theme that related to participants' family context is that of financial challenges. Only two participants spoke in detail about their family's financial circumstances and the barriers their situation presents in terms of entering HE. Amelia is an example of a student whose family's financial situation may be missed by current widely-used indicators. Despite having a household income of less than £16,000 per year, she was not in receipt of FSM, although she is in receipt of the 16-19 bursary. Prior to finding out about university bursaries, when her family thought about university "it was Newcastle because I could live at home and it would minimise costs." If, following Gorard et al. (2019), FSM was the indicator of choice, Amelia's challenging financial situation would not be considered during the process of selection, particularly significant given Amelia states it was "always the financial element of university that put [her] off a little bit." It was only after attending A4O sessions, where she learnt about the financial support universities offer, that "it made it a lot less scary to think about... [now] it was more the focus on the degree itself than the stresses that come with it."

Katherine, one of the three students interviewed who has been eligible for FSM, describes the cost of her family's financial situation in time. Alongside her schoolwork, Katherine works part-time. The benefit of this, for Katherine, is that she is able to afford some resources for her education which she was cautious of asking her mother for when she was younger. However,

Katherine describes that while she can now afford to buy these new items, she has less time to use them or for them to be effective. For example, “if I want to buy myself a desk, I’ll need to then work to get the money, which then means I don’t have as much time to do schoolwork.” This indirect cost of disadvantage, in time and wellbeing, is similar to that described by Megan as part of her experiences as a young carer:

The title [of young carer] itself isn’t... the thing that sets education back a bit, it’s more what comes along with it, and the other things you have to think about rather than schoolwork and getting the best grades because, at the end of the day, you’d rather be happy and healthy and have your family than be at a top university.

Here again, Megan points to the feeling George and Liam described of being ‘labelled’ with a status she believes does not comprehensively describe the nature of her experiences. Indeed, all these young people’s experiences are not limited to those who are eligible to be identified with such a label. Katherine, for example, describes a similar emotional and time impact of coming from a low-income background that Megan faces as a young carer. These findings perhaps suggest that it is time for WP selection criteria to move away from their sole use of status eligibility, and towards experience, which does not require students to meet, at times, limiting eligibility criteria by which they may prefer not to be defined. The implications of these findings for WP selection criteria will be drawn out further in the discussion section.

School Context

School featured prominently in many of the young people’s accounts of their experiences, both for positive and negative reasons. Six of the ten interview participants described their school as having a significant and positive impact on their attitudes towards HE and their opportunity to attend a highly selective university. Broadly, the participants’ reasoning for their significance divided into two themes: support through a relationship with a significant teacher and/or a school culture of going onto HE.

Both Liam and Grace spoke in detail about the role significant teachers have played in their lives and their attitudes and motivations towards HE. For Liam, this was a music teacher, his relationship with whom developed through extra-curricular activities. This teacher not only increased Liam’s self-belief, she also signposted Liam to various WP schemes, and Liam describes knowing his teacher went to university and seeing her passion and enthusiasm for her subject made him think “anything is possible if you put your mind to it.” For Liam, this

teacher has been pivotal in his school life and subsequently his future ambitions: this teacher “believed in me... I never would have thought Oxford would have been a possibility for me.” The role of this teacher is similar to that of the ‘guardian angel’ a third of participants in Martin and Jackson’s (2002: 128) study described, someone “like an educational godparent, outside of the care system, who would take on this task as a voluntary activity and form a special relationship with an individual young person over many years.” Like Liam, Grace also spoke of a special teacher who motivated her “throughout the secondary school years”, encouraged her to take any opportunities available to her, and also signposted her towards A4O. The pastoral, academic, and practical roles these special teachers play is clearly highly valued by the young people.

Significantly, seven participants spoke of a general culture of going onto HE in their school, perhaps acting as a factor protecting participants from the potential double disadvantage Frempong et al. (2012) identified of going to school with a high proportion of SED students if the student is SED themselves. The influence of this school culture can be seen with one school in particular which has the highest number of successful applicants to A4O, taking up nine of the 40 places on the programme, which has students from 19 different NE state schools and colleges. The two participants interviewed from this school recognised and appreciated the school’s input. Hannah described the ethos of the school, that “it doesn’t matter about who you are, if you know you can try and do it, you should do it. It’s not about your personality or your background, if you want to do it you can do it.” Megan, having family experience of HE already, speaks of the practical role of the school, specifically through exclusive support in applying to Oxbridge for around 20-30 students, signposting to WP schemes, broadening their knowledge and awareness of different universities, courses, and the application process, and facilitating relationships with universities.

Five participants spoke of their school’s Oxbridge support for an exclusive group of students, largely involving being sent emails of opportunities that may be of interest to them. Four of the participants’ schools had been visited during the September that A4O applications opened, illustrating their school’s engagement with the University of Oxford. However, five of the participants stated that attending a state school meant that they were less likely to go to Oxford than students attending “posh” or private schools. George describes a feeling of shock when attending a different Oxbridge WP scheme where other students on the programme spoke of

their school having “Oxbridge admissions tutors” or other more specific forms of support. This experience left him “sitting thinking I don’t have any of this, like what does this mean, what is an Oxbridge admissions tutor?... Schools have them?” Aria and Freddie drew similar comparisons to specific ‘training’ students, especially those attending independent schools, might get.

It is interesting to hear these participants’ feelings towards their school experience in comparison to their perception of others, especially given that many of these students’ schools had been visited by or had some interaction with Oxbridge in recent years. Montacute and Cullinane (2018) highlighted that eight UK schools had more acceptances to Oxbridge than approximately three quarters of all remaining secondary schools and colleges in the UK, which had fewer than two acceptances in the previous three years. This vastly unequal admission from certain UK schools and colleges appears to have created the perception for students that their school having the occasional Oxbridge acceptance is unusual, rather than the position that the vast majority of students at UK schools and colleges are in.

For both Freddie and George, school should be the first and primary factor that WP schemes consider in their selection criteria. Schools have the opportunity to either alleviate some difficulties for a student who would otherwise have isolated knowledge of applying to HE, or increase a student’s isolation should they not facilitate building relationships with universities. In particular, Freddie and George suggested that a local knowledge of schools is required to determine the extent to which a school facilitates, passively supports, or stunts students’ progression to HE. Such an objective would necessitate diversifying the backgrounds of university WP staff and engaging with local schools and communities in the creation of their regionally-specific WP strategies. Furthermore, to prevent simply the most advantaged young people in a disadvantaged school accessing WP programmes, as Crawford’s (2014) study warns this risk, school criteria would need to be assessed in tandem with individual indicators, as Freddie recommends as part of identifying students with isolated knowledge.

Area Context

Associations between coming from the NE and disadvantage in accessing HE, especially highly selective universities with “posh people down south” [Katherine], featured in five of the ten interviews with participants. George, a “firm believer in the North-South divide”, spoke of

the importance of case studies of current state-educated students from the NE, as did Freddie, indicating that for these students their region was core to their identity and thus essential for universities to consider when widening access. Similarly, Megan speaks of her anxiety about A4O easing when she realised that all participants would be from NE state schools, making the programme “not as daunting as [she] first thought.” This affinity to their region may be like one of the core identities university students from WP backgrounds in Reay et al.’s (2009) study wished to retain once coming to an elite university.

The issue of false positives and false negatives in WP selection was highlighted prominently during discussions of postcode indicators by seven participants. These participants all drew attention to a case of either themselves, a friend, or a hypothetical situation where they could see a student from a personally disadvantaged background living in a generally more affluent area being rejected from a WP programme, or vice versa. These personal experiences affirm Harrison and McCaig’s (2015: 794) statistical findings that it is an “ecological fallacy” to assume that ‘you are where you live.’ George, for example, spoke of a friend who lives on a council estate but does not meet specific postcode criteria, which is contrary to her perception of the area she lives in. The high weighting some WP schemes place on postcode measures appears counter-productive to these young people, as George states : “her postcode was just like nah, you don’t fall into this category, but then from her experience, no, I don’t know anybody that goes to university here.”

Of the six participants who said postcode might have a role to play in WP selection, only Aria spoke of postcode metrics in a solely positive light. Maya spoke of the importance of combining household income with postcode “because not everyone in a deprived postcode would actually be classed as deprived”, while George, Amelia, and Katherine said that postcode matters in some respects since those in a deprived postcode might have less access to good schools and other services. These young people seem to be acutely aware, however, of the problems and potential unfairness of using postcode metrics and where they do see value in their use this is due to their relationship to other indicators which might disadvantage a young person’s access to HE. This appears to be the same conclusion Gorard et al. (2019) found: if area-based measures require the use of individual indicators to accurately assess disadvantage “there is little point in using *any* area-aggregated measure as well” (Gorard et al., 2019: 108).

Societal Factors

Other societal factors including race and gender were discussed only briefly by participants during these interviews. As noted in the methodology section above, a notable limitation to this study was the failure to recruit interview participants from the underrepresented ethnic groups in HE identified in Boliver (2015), and thus the lived experiences of young people from these backgrounds is not present in this study. There were brief discussions of race and ethnicity in WP selection with three of the participants. When asked about her views towards underrepresented ethnic group being a selection criterion for WP programmes, Hannah, the only black participant interviewed, felt uncomfortable, describing it as “hard to talk about.” While thinking that “it’s really hard for some backgrounds to get the opportunity, so I think it’s fair to bring equality and stuff like that”, she also felt that “it’s a really complex situation, so yeah, I’m not too sure about that.” Here, it is important to recognise the power dynamics between the white researcher, which Hannah is likely to have been aware of, and the participant which might have contributed to Hannah’s discomfort in speaking about this matter, alongside the context of this interview in the midst of the BLM protests (Miller and Glassner, 2016). Two of Hannah’s white peers on the programme, George and Megan, spoke of the importance of universities including students from underrepresented ethnic backgrounds, especially in light of these global events.

In the interviews, gender was only mentioned by Megan. She described her perception of Oxford as one of “men in suits”, perhaps linked to her view of only students from “posh schools” going on to Oxford, including boys’ schools like Eton and Harrow.

Individual Circumstances

Additional individual factors in this study fell into two broad categories: first, disability, and second, traumatic events and mental health concerns. Four interview participants declared a disability: Liam and Aria with SpLDs, Amelia with fibromyalgia, and Grace with a mental health condition. Following his transformative experience in foster care, Liam did not mention any current impact of his ADHD, although the considerable challenges he previously faced with his condition are noted in the family context section above. Both Amelia and Aria described situations in their schools, and especially to do with exams, where only limited

reasonable adjustments were made. Amelia was diagnosed too late to receive the extra time she was entitled to in her GCSE exams, leading to lower grades than she expected; Aria described challenges due to teachers knowing little, if anything, about Irlen's Syndrome, after her private diagnosis. Amelia also described the impact learning difficulties have had on her friends' exam results: her friends are "very academic, but they do struggle in lessons" and subsequently have lower exam results not representative of their abilities. This aligns with Clarke et al.'s (2015) findings that students with SEND status have, on average, lower academic attainment. For both Aria and Amelia, disabilities and SpLDs are important considerations, perhaps especially for those diagnosed more recently in their exam years and where schools were unable to put reasonable adjustments in place in time to have a positive impact for the student.

Grace was the only participant to disclose a mental health disability which she described in the context of a traumatic incident during the academic year in which she sat her GCSEs. For Grace, the process of managing this trauma and engaging in therapeutic interventions impacted her exam results; prior to this incident, Grace described achieving 7s and 8s in her GCSE schoolwork, whilst by the time it came to her exams, despite still attaining admirable results, she did not attain any grades above a 6.

Whilst Grace disclosed these extenuating circumstances and her disability in this study, these were not disclosed in any part of her A4O application, nor did her teacher submit a reference and thus take up the opportunity to elicit any further context for her lower grades. Her shortlisting category at the time of selection would have been different had she disclosed these extenuating circumstances, with her application put into a category with an asterisk, all of which were given more detailed consideration if they did not meet the standard academic criteria. When asked about whether WP programmes should take these circumstances into account and, if so, how, Grace suggested the option of explicitly providing students the opportunity to disclose. Furthermore, she suggested providing an option in the early stages of the application process where participants could state 'yes', 'no', or 'unsure' to a question asking them if they believe they have experienced any extenuating circumstances which might have impacted their education. This allows WP providers to recognise where lower grades might have a particular reason behind them and, where appropriate, sensitively engage with the applicant and/or their teacher to provide confirmation and elicit any further details that may

be strictly necessary. Such an option would also ensure applicants need not disclose potentially traumatic experiences where they do not feel comfortable to do so. This same option would also allow applicants like Amelia to indicate the lack of reasonable adjustments they experienced during exams, if they felt appropriate.

Furthermore, while not featuring as a disability, the theme of mental health was present in four other participants' interviews. The qualitative contextual element to applications that Grace suggested would allow those with adverse experiences, which specific indicators do not recognise sufficiently or at all, to signpost towards or disclose their circumstances if they felt appropriate. Aria described a difficult family situation that affected her for the duration of Year 10, but she did not feel it is "exceptional." She thus suggested an opportunity to describe any circumstances which might have affected her education, rather than providing the label of 'exceptional' or 'extenuating' which might discourage students with contextual imposter syndrome from disclosing. In any case, nine out of the ten participants stated that lower GCSE grades should be considered for those with extenuating circumstances. George was the only participant who did not explicitly mention lowering GCSE requirements for those with extenuating circumstances, but believed the academic requirements for the programme should be looser for all participants. Further discussion of academic entry requirements to WP programmes will be discussed in the next section.

Summary

This section has described the circumstances of the participants in the context of the indicators currently used to select students onto WP programmes. Participants have provided further context, detailing some of the experiences young people meeting specific WP criteria face in their lives, as well as highlighting personal situations that current indicators fail to recognise. Broadly, continuing-generation students appeared to have, with exception, a consistent advantage in terms of aspiration and expectation over first-generation students, while postcode indicators suggested the highest number of inaccurate assumptions. As to be expected, there was considerable diversity in the life experiences of participants meeting the same indicators and it is suggested that it is, perhaps, time for WP programmes to move away from the use of eligibility status indicators and towards selection by specific experiences which would disadvantage a student in accessing HE. This suggestion will be discussed further in the discussion below.

Part 2 – What do A4O applicants view as important selection criteria for WP programmes at highly selective universities?

When asked how they would select students onto A4O, four of the ten participants said they thought the current selection process for the programme worked well. Aria stated that the A4O application “covered a lot of different points” and she believes “all those points were useful”; similarly, Hannah praised the inclusion of “different people, and different backgrounds” through multiple contextual indicators in selection, with these same sentiments shared by Katherine. Amelia liked the fact that she got to “write why [she] thought [she] should be on [A4O]”, in addition to contextual elements of the application. An additional three participants stated that they would use multiple contextual indicators if they were in charge of selecting students onto A4O.

Despite a high level of agreement for the consideration of multiple indicators of disadvantage, participants did present conflicting points of views across a number of themes that might be considered in selection: principally, the place of prior academic attainment led to a debate between whether WP programmes should be for students who would make the most of the programme versus those who need it the most, recognising that these categories are not mutually exclusive.

Seven participants stated that WP programmes need to be realistic in their selection of students, with both Amelia and Freddie going further to say that it would be unfair to give false hope by selecting students without a realistic chance of going on to study at Oxford. There was a strong theme present of participants not wanting to be patronised by WP programmes; as Liam stated, he wanted “to be judged for [his] abilities and how actually good [he is], rather than if [he has] been in care.” George, Liam, and Megan felt as if universities did WP programmes in order to meet “quotas”, and selected students accordingly. Indeed, five participants shared a feeling of mistrust of Oxbridge in their interviews. The notion of labelling and quotas also came across in the theme of ‘the disadvantaged advantage’. Five participants spoke about the advantage of meeting a specific indicator because it meant that they were eligible for a number of WP programmes, rather than talking of their experiences that meant they met the indicator as disadvantaging them in their education. When discussing postcode indicators, Maya explains: “Well, I’m in a deprived postcode, so obviously it benefits me. But I know people that don’t live in a deprived postcode that are worse off than me.” Similarly, Grace states, “from where I

live, I guess, that would probably, it would be a positive because I'd guess it'd be put down as a disadvantaged area, so I guess that would help my application a bit." Indeed, Megan goes further to argue:

There seems to be lots of opportunities for people that are quite well off and there's increasing opportunities for people in more deprived areas with all this postcode business. But then the people in the middle, they don't seem to have opportunities because they don't fit the postcode criteria and they don't have the opportunities that would come with having a lot of money and being able to pay for schemes and things.

The young people in this study are acutely aware of the politics influencing how WP schemes select students onto their programmes and the potential unfairness of using indicators without more consideration of individual circumstances. Despite this, eight participants did describe a boost to their self-esteem as a result of being selected onto A4O or another WP programme. During the first A4O session, participants were congratulated on their success of getting onto the programme and told the ratio of applicants to successful places. The competitiveness of selection appeared to contribute towards participants' growth in confidence, as Maya describes:

Maya: I didn't realise it was that competitive

Researcher: And how did it make you feel when you realised it was?

Maya: Ah, I was really good about it, I was like ah yeah, I have actually done quite well here.

A scheme-wide lowering of academic entry criteria or reduction in the competitiveness of the WP scheme would have the potential to take away from some of the benefits the participants identified in boosting their self-esteem. Only one participant, George, explicitly mentioned that he did not value exclusivity in selection: "no matter who you are, you should be able to apply for this... I just want everyone to be able to do [WP schemes]." Whereas, most participants felt valued by being selected for their academic achievements as opposed to their contextual background. In recognising the potential limitations of using GCSE grades as the sole method of academic selection, participants recommended a number of alternatives. Katherine suggested selecting participants who performed in the top X percentage of their school; Liam favoured incorporating a student's academic progress into selection, looking at how highly they achieved compared to their targeted or predicted GCSE grades; Maya and George recommended considering students who were just below the boundary of the academic entry criteria, especially if they had extenuating circumstances; and Megan, Aria, Maya, George, Grace, and Amelia all recommended assessing applicants' soft skills, such as work ethic,

motivation, or personality through either a ‘thinking test’ [Megan] or other forms of qualitative assessment, such as interviews, essay submissions or portfolios, or a paragraph demonstrating their interest and motivation as part of the application process. The latter suggestion is an element of the A4O application currently. Two participants, Megan and Grace, highlighted the potential for bias in some qualitative application elements, including teachers’ references, and this concern will be considered further in the discussion below.

Summary

The exact suggested methods of selection varied according to each student and their primary factor for selection, if given, also varied according to their specific circumstances. Freddie and George, for instance, believed school should be the most important selection factor given their experience of schools which, they believe, have provided minimal support and encouragement in their HE ambitions, and they both suggested that there are worse schools than theirs. However, with exception, the core themes of participants’ selection suggestions included: first, use of multiple indicators of contextual disadvantage; second, recognition of individual circumstances and looser academic requirements for students with extenuating circumstances; and third, maintenance of a process of academic selection, through prior attainment and/or other qualitative assessments of academic ability.

Discussion

The young people's suggestions above both reflect, and highlight gaps in, the research literature on WP identification and selection processes. Current WP literature and research almost exclusively involves consideration and critique of existing indicators of disadvantage or underrepresentation. For example, the most recent and comprehensive systematic review on WP selection, Gorard et al. (2019), was designed solely to critique existing indicators as opposed to identify other means of selection. As a systematic review, this is undoubtedly due to the fact that all English Russell Group flagship WP programmes select according to quantitative indicators rather than other means of identifying social disadvantage (see Appendix A). However, what the young people in this study have suggested is going beyond indicators and metrics, and towards other means of contextual and academic assessment. It is perhaps due to the qualitative methods used in this mixed methods study that this gap in the literature has been identified since, as stated in the literature review above, there are very few qualitative WP studies on selection criteria involving young people under 18 at the time of post-16 intervention.

In aiming to identify the most suitable contextual indicator for use in WP, Gorard et al. (2019) assessed both the reliability of indicators and the relevance of indicators to the purpose of WP. George's, Amelia's, and Liam's perspectives shared above would suggest that LAC should still be prioritised in WP selection, but perhaps be considered in context with other WP factors, whilst appreciating Liam's important recognition of the emotional trauma a child or young person with any care experience will have faced. Length of time in care and age of adoption, if ever, are also considerations when assessing educational disruption. As Harrison et al. (2019: 12) state, "care leavers have a significantly lower-than-average propensity to participate in HE even accounting for differences in attainment and challenges associated with childhood trauma." It is clear that disadvantage associated with experience of LAC is multifaceted and this should be taken into account in WP application processes.

The problems Gorard et al. (2019) identified with postcode measurements, in particular their hypothetical examples of high-income families living on the outskirts of deprived areas, aligned with the experiences of the young people in this study. The participants also appeared to support Smart's (2019) statement on behalf of the OfS, that postcode indicators should be used in tandem with other indicators, and the young people came to the same recommendations

as the Social Mobility Advisory Group in advocating for the use of multiple area and individual indicators to select students (Universities UK, 2016).

However, the inaccuracy of and unfairness in using postcode indicators felt by the young people is far from considered in Smart's (2019) assessment of the POLAR measure. Whilst Smart (2019) contests that POLAR is a "hugely valuable resource for universities", the theme of the 'disadvantaged advantage' appears to contradict such value; in most cases, rather than speaking of their postcode as a disadvantage in this study, participants spoke of them as an advantage since they would therefore be able to access WP schemes. Of course, this 'advantage' may speak to the value assigned by young people to WP schemes. However, with the exception of George and his LAC status, it is notable that this 'disadvantaged advantage' was only spoken about in the case of postcode rather than individual indicators. Through their own experiences and anecdotes, participants not only confirmed that it is an "ecological fallacy" to assume that 'you are where you live', but spoke to the importance of ensuring WP schemes, and the OfS, give more consideration to individual context in their selection criteria (Harrison and McCaig, 2015: 794).

The boost in self-esteem eight young people in this study identified as a result of being selected onto a WP programme should not be underestimated. If postcode metrics are the primary method a WP scheme uses to select participants, as is the case for the University of Oxford's UNIQ summer school, questions must be asked about whom these schemes benefit the most. In cases where students are also ranked according to their GCSE attainment, such a system will undoubtedly prioritise the most advantaged of 'disadvantaged' applicants. Whilst this study has confirmed findings in previous literature (Boliver et al., 2019b; Gorard et al., 2019; Harrison and McCaig, 2015) that there is little value in using postcode indicators, it is recognised POLAR is still the indicator of choice for the OfS, which is likely to affect university WP practice given the power the OfS hold over universities. Thus, if postcode metrics are to be used, this study would suggest that they should only be considered jointly with and after individual indicators of disadvantage have been met.

The young people went further than the suggestions provided by the Social Mobility Advisory Group to suggested that those with isolated knowledge of the HE application process should be considered first in WP selection (Universities UK, 2016). Freddie, for example, promoted

the idea of students having to meet both personal indicators of disadvantage, in particular first-generation status, and school-based indicators of disadvantage, especially a limited school history of highly selective HE entrance, as one means of identifying a student who may have isolated knowledge. This recommendation brings up philosophical dilemmas in WP work. In particular, it directly contests Gorard et al.'s views towards the state versus private school divide; for Gorard et al. (2019: 110), this distinction is arbitrary, "unless a child from a poor family is no longer considered to be disadvantaged if at private school." For Freddie, the purpose of WP programmes is to provide support in the university application process for those who are not able to receive guidance elsewhere; for Gorard et al. (2019), the purpose of WP is to increase the number of SED students entering all tiers of HE. While aligned, these purposes are not always the same. In either case, the findings of this study would support the prioritisation of first-generation student status in WP selection criteria, in tandem with other individual SES indicators, similar to Bradshaw's (2013) argument that both material and income indicators need to be considered when identifying child poverty.

Participants' suggestions of moving towards additional qualitative means of identifying disadvantage or extenuating circumstances is not considered in the existing literature surveyed above. Indeed, this new approach would require further study and reflection. For example, how well would a qualitative contextual element align with the purpose and values of WP, if improving "equality of opportunity" for all is personal as opposed to systemic (Kettley, 2007)? How would universities be able to use such qualitative data to strategise their WP work and ensure it is approved by the regulator (Higher Education and Research Act, 2017)? How would universities be able to ensure a qualitative contextual element does not lead to an elite of state schools training their students on what experiences to draw upon, while others encourage omission rather than disclosure? These questions go beyond the confines of this dissertation. However, it would be of interest to formulate and trial the use of a questionnaire on adverse experiences in accessing HE to select students to overcome some of the methodological and design limitations of all current contextual indicators that Gorard et al. (2019) reviewed in their research. An adverse experiences in accessing HE inventory, which may include quantitative and qualitative items, would also have the potential to increase the diversity of adverse experiences considered in WP selection criteria. It may also reduce opportunity for false positives and negatives in selection that are perhaps especially likely to occur with young

people with high prior attainment. Furthermore, this approach may reduce the effects of ‘labelling’ on young people’s self-concepts.

While this new approach would require significant further consideration and trial, an element of the young people’s suggestions - more consideration of individual circumstances - would not require substantial change to implement in the interim. Only eight of the flagship post-16 WP programmes explicitly state that they consider extenuating circumstances in their application process. This approach could be adopted more widely and also in a more sensitive manner. As Grace suggested, applicants could be asked whether they believe there are any additional circumstances which have negatively impacted on their education or opportunity to attend a highly selective university, with the opportunity to disclose any details at that point or later in the application process through the means that is most comfortable for them. The current approach on A4O, for example, relies on teachers’ references and this may disadvantage students at schools where teachers have less time, resource, and experience. Explicitly giving this opportunity to students returns power into their control and allows them to have a say in what they believe might have adversely affected their educational opportunities, rather than applying labels onto their experience through use of quantitative indicators alone.

The final of the participants’ recommendations to consider is the role of academic attainment in WP selection. The young people overwhelmingly supported the role of academic attainment in the selection process of WP programmes, as all post-16 Russell Group flagship WP programmes currently require and, in all but exceptional circumstances, would not support the lowering of entry grades for accessing HE. Despite this, the reason a number of participants cited for not lowering academic requirements was to ensure programmes are realistic and do not give students false hope that they could be admitted to an institution it is unlikely they would be. In particular, Amelia stated that the challenge of the academic content of A4O itself means it might be detrimental to a young person’s confidence if they were admitted onto the programme without sufficiently high prior attainment. However, this reasoning is not supported in Boliver et al.’s (2019a: 6) study, which suggests the risk of admitting students with lower grades is “modest” compared to the potential opportunity. A number of participants did argue that GCSE grades might not be the best or only way to identify academic ability, supporting Rainford’s (2017) and Sammons et al.’s (2014) conclusions that attainment at KS5

and below is not a conclusive indicator of academic potential. The consideration of students' academic progress, as Liam suggested, or the ranking of a student in relation to their school or college, as Katherine recommended, may provide opportunities to reduce the reproduction of inequalities caused by ranking of raw prior attainment whilst maintaining the academically selective element to the application process that the young people valued. Alternative academic selection through means of interviews, personal statements, and 'thinking tests' would require much further study and would likely have the potential to re-produce inequalities seen in the current Oxford admissions process (see Baird et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Widening access to HE has been the site of topical debate and, as a requirement of all universities with higher fees status, is an integral concern to English universities. Whilst not a principle consideration for this study, praise for the experience of participating in WP programmes was a theme present throughout all of the participants' interviews where they have been involved in such programmes. This endorsement of and, in the words of Megan, "gratitude" for, WP programmes demonstrates the importance of ensuring that selection in WP serves the students for whom the programmes were established. If WP is to retain its purpose of ensuring "equality of opportunity" for all, the most disadvantaged young people must be at the core of all selection decisions. As Gorard et al. (2019) state, "true WP" would at least consider those students for whom HE is currently not an option.

The young people involved in this study have highlighted how current WP selection processes *feel*, an omission from the largely quantitative studies in the existing body of literature. Particularly striking was the entrenched mistrust in Oxbridge, reinforced by indicator-based eligibility criteria which 'labels' young people in a way they may not recognise themselves. The young people in this study did not want to be patronised; they wanted to be selected for their own merit. The boost in self-esteem and confidence as a result of being selected onto a WP programme is a clear benefit that is key for these schemes to retain.

A number of suggestions for the improvement of the WP selection process have been considered. Some, require further study. In particular, it has been noted in this study that there has been insufficient representation of young people from ethnic groups underrepresented in HE; further study must ensure consideration for the participation of these young people is incorporated into the research design to remove barriers in participation. Existing WP literature focuses on critiquing indicators or metrics in current use in WP to identify disadvantage and underrepresentation. An adverse experiences in accessing HE questionnaire, which looks at young people's experiences of advantage and disadvantage rather than various statuses, would be a marked move away from current methods of selection. A systematic approach to instrument creation, piloting, and analysis of use would be required to identify the opportunities and drawbacks of this novel approach. In particular, the indicator must be evaluated to ensure individuals disadvantaged by systemic oppression remain a core focus for WP schemes.

The participants in this study offered several suggestions for WP selection processes. Combining the views of the young people and consultation with relevant literature, this study has five key recommendations for WP practice to work towards the most effective means of selecting SED students if the aim of the WP programme is - among other more specific factors – to increase the number of SED young people attending highly selective universities:

1. Use multiple indicators of disadvantage to identify students.
2. Seek to identify students who are likely to experience ‘isolated knowledge’ through concurrent evaluation of individual, especially first-generation student status, and school-based indicators.
3. While their use is not recommended, if postcode metrics are to be used, they should only be considered after individual indicators of disadvantage have been met.
4. Provide an explicit opportunity for young people to disclose additional circumstances that they believe to have disadvantaged them in their education and opportunity to access a highly selective university. Students should be given the opportunity to disclose at multiple points in the application process through multiple methods.
5. Ensure academic entry criteria are considered in the context of the young person’s school’s attainment, and consider looser grade requirements for students with exceptional circumstances.

These recommendations are not new for WP; all of these suggestions feature in some flagship post-16 WP programmes at English Russell Group universities and recommendations one and three in particular have been repeatedly advocated for in existing literature (for example, Boliver et al., 2019a; Bradshaw, 2013; Gorard et al., 2019; Harrison and McCaig, 2015; Universities UK, 2016). However, these recommendations point not only to the use of multiple indicators, but also to the exclusion of particular indicators. If the multiple indicators selected for use have a significant opportunity for false positives or negatives, such as area-based measures, students from the most advantaged ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds will undoubtedly be prioritised, if academic selection criteria are also used. As a result, young people most likely to have ‘isolated knowledge’ or who may have experienced the greatest personal and systematic disadvantage would be excluded from the very programmes that seek to encourage their participation. While it is important to recognise that not all WP programmes have the

same objective, to do a disservice to the most disadvantaged and underrepresented young people would be a clear violation of the tenets of “true WP.”

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Appendices

Appendix A: Flagship post-16 WP programmes at English Russell Group universities.

University	Flagship Post-16 WP Programme	Summary of Intervention	Demographic Focus	Academic Selection Factors	Contextual Selection Factors
University of Birmingham	Pathways to Birmingham	A range of interventions including regional and national summer schools, mentoring support, support for vocational courses, and contextualised admissions.	Primary focus is students in the West Midlands (with the exception of one national summer school).	Achieved GCSE grades required for the future course they are applying to. GCSE grades and predicted A-level grades will be taken into account during selection due to the competitive nature of the programme.	Students must meet at least one of these three steps: 1) Attend a Pathways to Birmingham partner school and have attended a UK state school during KS4. 2) Experience of LAC OR meet at least three measures: • school/college academic performance below national average at KS4/5 • POLAR quintile 1 or 2 postcode area • first-generation to HE • household income below £42, 875 • disability and in receipt of PIP • estranged from both parents/guardians. 3) Two criteria met from step 2 AND one of the following: • POLAR quintile 1 postcode area • significant extenuating circumstances • young carer • FSMEver6.
University of Bristol	Access to Bristol	Academic taster sessions, student support sessions, contextualised admissions, on-course bursary.	Students living within one hour of Bristol city centre.	GCSE requirements for each subject stream.	Priority given to students who meet all or most of the following criteria: • first-generation to HE • POLAR quintile 1 or 2 postcode area • are or have been eligible for FSM • three months or more in LAC.
University of Cambridge	Sutton Trust Summer School (amongst other flagship initiatives)	Week-long summer schools across a variety of different subject areas.	State-educated students across the UK.	At least 5 grades 7-9 at GCSE. Some subjects have additional GCSE or A-level requirements.	First priority is given to students who have experienced LAC. Students are then prioritised according to the following criteria, generally with the more criteria met the higher priority, however not all criteria are weighted equally: • FSMEver6 • underrepresented ethnic groups (Black African and/or Caribbean, Pakistani or Bangladeshi, Roma, Gypsy or Traveller) • students whose education has been disrupted (e.g.

					due to health issues, family bereavement or estrangement, young carer or parent, asylum seeker or refugee, multiple school moves) • low participation POLAR4 postcode • school has low progression to high tariff HE institutions or performance below the national average.
Durham University	Supported Progression	Academic enrichment sessions, academic project, residentials, parent/carer session, and contextualised admissions.	Students living in the North East of England/within 50 miles or one hour's travel to Durham city.	At least 8 GCSEs at grade 6 or above, including 3 at grade 7 or above, and strong attainment in subjects relevant to their prospective degree.	Students must: 1. live in POLAR4 quintile 1 OR POLAR4 quintile 2 AND Acorn 4 or 5 postcode areas 2. be in receipt of FSM, pupil premium, or other school payments related to financial hardship. Students may be prioritised if they meet any of these additional criteria: • experience of LAC • estrangement • other significant educational disruption • first-generation to HE • attend a school/college with below average academic attainment or has low progression rates to HE.
University of Exeter	University of Exeter Scholars	Academic enrichment sessions (university-based and field trips), summer school (for students based outside of the South West), transition support, contextualised admissions, travel bursaries, and a pre-freshers reward package.	Two strands to the programme: one national and one for students based in the South West of England.	8 GCSEs at grades 9-4, including English and Maths.	Students must meet one of the following criteria: • live in a low participation or low income post-code area • FSM eligible • in receipt of a school discretionary bursary • first-generation to HE • experience of LAC • young carer • have a disability • estranged from family.
Imperial College London	STEM Potential (amongst other initiatives)	Academic enrichment, mentoring, and admissions support.	Students interested in STEM.	Be studying at least two science/mathematics A-levels, at least 6 GCSEs at grades 7-9, grade 6 in English Language, and predicted to achieve at least	Students meeting more of these factors will be a higher priority for selection: • FSM or pupil premium eligible • household income below £50,000 per year • first-generation to HE • LAC experience

				two A grades at A-level.	- school with below average attainment or a high percentage of FSM - young carer - low participation or socioeconomically deprived neighbourhood.
King's College London	K+	Two-year long sustained contact programme providing academic enrichment, admissions support, social activities, contextualised admissions, and an on-course bursary.	Students attending a non-selective state school in Greater London.	8 GCSEs at grades 9-4, including English and Maths, with at least 5 at grades 6-9 (or 7-9 if applying to the dentistry or healthcare streams).	Students must be first-generation to HE, however applications will also be considered and prioritised if students belong to the following groups even if academic criteria are not met: - experience of LAC - estranged from family - young carer - disabled - from Gypsy/ Roma/ Traveller backgrounds.
University of Leeds	Access to Leeds	Transition study support, priority for on-course scholarships, contextualised admissions.	Students less likely to attend university.	Taking Level 3 qualifications such as A-levels or BTECs relevant to the course applied to.	Students must meet two of the following criteria: - household income below £25,000 per year - in receipt of 16-19 bursary - previously eligible for FSM during GCSE years - first-generation to HE - school has below average attainment 8 score - extenuating circumstances - low participation neighbourhood - experience of LAC.
University of Liverpool	The Liverpool Scholars Programme	Academic enrichment, study skills, admissions support, contextualised admissions, on-course bursary.	Students at partner schools in Greater Merseyside.	5 GCSEs (or equivalent) at grade 6-9, English and Mathematics at grade 4 or above.	Students must meet all of the following criteria: - attend a Widening Participation and Outreach Partner School in Greater Merseyside - be a home/EU student by the time they apply to HE. Students must also meet at least two of the following criteria OR have experienced LAC OR be a young carer: - live in a POLAR quintile 1 or 2 postcode area - live in an IMD 30% most deprived postcode area - first-generation to HE - be in receipt of a 16-19 bursary, pupil premium, or discretionary payments from school/college - FSMEver6. Extenuating circumstances will also be considered if criteria are not met.

London School of Economics & Political Science	LSE CHOICE	Summer school and academic masterclasses.	Students attending state schools in London.	An excellent GCSE profile of mainly grades 5-9 and predicted to achieve A*-B at A-level.	Applicants are prioritised according to the following criteria: • school/college performance below the national average and/or has a high percentage of FSM • FSM Ever6 or pupil premium eligible • first-generation to HE • parents working in low SEC jobs or in receipt of means-tested benefits • young carer • POLAR quintile 1 or 2 postcode • Acorn LMOPQ groups • IMD or IDACI quintiles 1 or 2 • Disability • underrepresented ethnic group (especially Black African, Black Caribbean, Bangladeshi, Pakistani) • white working class background • from a Gypsy, Roma or Traveller community • experience LAC or estranged from family • forced migrants • children of military families.
University of Manchester	Access Manchester	A range of initiatives, including contextualised admissions, admissions support, on-course bursary, academic project, study skills, and course specific programmes such as Pathways to Law, pre-university social sciences course, and Preston Widening Access Programme for Medicine.	Three programmes for students living in Greater Manchester and two for students across the UK.	At least 5 GCSEs at grades 6-9, English and Mathematics at grade 4 or above (and 2 GCSEs at grade 7-9 for Pathways to Law).	Manchester Access Programme: first generation to HE. Manchester Distance Access Programme: low participation neighbourhood. Pre-University Social Sciences Course - students must meet at least one of the following criteria: • low participation neighbourhood • first-generation to HE • eligible for 16-19 Bursary or pupil premium or discretionary payments at school/college • FSM eligible • experienced LAC. Pathways to Law: non-selective state school, first-gen to HE, with further preference given to students meeting the following criteria: • attend a school with lower progression to HE or higher rate of FSM • experience of LAC.

Newcastle University	PARTNERS programme	Summer school, admissions support, contextualised admissions, study skills, transition support.	Supported entry route to HE.	Predicted grades within one grade of a PARTNERS university offer (which are up to 3 grades lower than a standard offer).	Students must meet one (or more) of the following criteria: • school attainment below national average or over 50% of students are in receipt of FSM • low participation or socioeconomically deprived neighbourhood • eligible for FSM, pupil premium, or school discretionary payments • in receipt of certain PIP payments • experience of LAC for at least 3 months • young carer • estranged from family • BME AND attend a state school • military family • from a Gypsy, Roma or Traveller community • refugee or asylum seeker • first-gen AND parental SEC 4-8.
University of Nottingham	Ambition: post-16	Academic enrichment, study skills, admissions support, contextualised admissions, on-course bursary.	Students attending a state school in the Midlands.	7 GCSEs at grades 5-9, including English and Mathematics	To achieve 'full' membership and be eligible for the on-course bursary, students must meet at least two of the of the following criteria: • household income below £35,000 per year • low participation neighbourhood • below average school performance (average point score entry below 33.66) • disability • experience of LAC.
University of Oxford	UNIQ	Summer school.	Low participation postcode areas and neighbourhoods that are socioeconomically deprived.	At least 6 GCSEs, with a preference for grades 8-9. Students' academic attainment will be considered in the context of their school. Some courses have specific GCSE grade and A-level subject requirements.	Students must attend a UK state school. Students are prioritised according to: • POLAR quintiles and Acorn categories (students with similar academic potential living in POLAR quintile 1/Acorn 5 areas are prioritised above students who live in POLAR quintile 2/Acorn 4 areas). FSM eligibility, LAC experience, and young carer are also taken into account. Extenuating circumstances will be considered when academic criteria are not met.
Queen Mary, University of London	Realising Opportunities	Study skills, academic project, A-level revision support, contextualised admissions.	Students attending partner schools in Greater London.	At least 5 GCSEs at grade 6-9, with English and Mathematics at grade 4 or above.	Students must attend a partner school and must meet at least two of the following criteria: • low participation or socioeconomically deprived neighbourhood • first-generation to HE

					- entitled to 16-19 bursary, school/college discretionary payments or pupil premium - FSMEver6 - attend a school with below average KS4 or KS5 results or higher than average FSM. Students who have experienced LAC or are young carers do not have to meet two of the above criteria. Students meeting the highest number of additional criteria will be prioritised. Extenuating circumstances that resulted in disruption to education will be considered in lieu of the additional criteria and will be considered if students do not meet the academic criteria (e.g. estranged from family or significant family issues, disability or health condition, from Gypsy, Roma or Traveller communities, refugees, from military family).
University of Sheffield	The Discover Programme	Academic enrichment, admissions support, online A-level tutoring, summer school, contextualised admissions.	Students attending state schools in South Yorkshire.	Studying for at least 3 A-levels. Some subject strands require students to be taking particular A-levels. At least 5 GCSEs at grade 6-9, with English and Mathematics at grade 4 or above.	Students must be first-generation to HE AND meet one of the following criteria: - experience of LAC - disability - young carer - estranged from family - low participation neighbourhood - extenuating circumstances.
University of Southampton	Access to Southampton	Academic enrichment, e-mentoring, transition and study skills support, on-course bursary, contextualised admissions.	Students across the UK.	"You should have the potential to study at the University of Southampton."	Students must meet at least one of the following criteria: - first-generation to HE - in receipt of 16-19 bursary or FSM during GCSEs - secondary school has below average attainment 8 score - experience of LAC - estranged from family - young carer - POLAR quintile 1 or 2 postcode - IMD lowest 20% postcode.

University College London	Residential Summer Schools (amongst other initiatives)	Summer school.	Students outside of London/ POLAR quintile 1 postcode areas.	At least 5 GCSEs at grade 6-9, likely to achieve at least ABB at A-level, and taking at least two A-levels from UCL's list of preferred subjects.	50% of places are reserved for male students who meet the eligibility criteria. Students are awarded a point for each of the following criteria they meet and places are awarded based on a student's total score: • attend a non-selective state school • school has below average GCSE or A-level attainment • first-generation to HE • parents have non-professional occupations • currently eligible for FSM • low-participation or socioeconomically deprived neighbourhood • force migrants • young carer • estranged from family • experience of LAC • disability • underrepresented ethnic and gender groups (Black African and Black Caribbean students, White British students who meet our family background/neighbourhood criteria and students from Gypsy and Traveller communities).
University of Warwick	Warwick Scholars	A-level tutoring, mentoring, A-level revision, academic enrichment, residential, contextualised admissions, 50% tuition fee reduction, on-course bursary.	Students attending a school/college within 30 miles of the University of Warwick.	At least 5 GCSEs at grade 6-9, with English and Mathematics at grade 4 or above and meet all of the academic and subject requirements of the course they are applying for.	Students must meet at least two of the following criteria and students will be prioritised if they meet multiple criteria: • have experienced LAC for at least 3 months (in which case they don't need to meet further criteria), or live in supported accommodation • FSMEver6 • first-generation to HE • attend a school with below average KS4 performance or bottom 40% KS5 performance • POLAR Quintile 1 postcode area or IMD bottom 20% • extenuating circumstances that have impacted education (e.g. young carer, long standing illness requiring time out from education, disability or SpLD).

University of York	Next Step York (amongst other initiatives)	E-mentoring, academic project, residential.	Students attending partner schools.	At least 8 GCSEs at grade 9-4, including English and Mathematics, with at least 5 at grade 9-6	Students must have experienced LAC or meet at least two of the following criteria: • low participation neighbourhood • first-generation to HE • 16-19 bursary or entitled to other discretionary payments • eligible for FSM in secondary school • BAME • from Roma, Gypsy or Traveller communities • from a military family • disability or long-term health condition • young carer. Students are prioritised by the number of criteria they meet. Students not meeting these criteria but with extenuating circumstances that may have affected their education are welcome to apply. Encourage applications from students seeking asylum or granted refugee status but due to funding these places may be limited.
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Appendix B: Quantitative questionnaire responses

Pseudonym	Application status	Other WF programmes	Ethnicity	Disability	Doxbridge school trip	Post-16 school attainment	Post-16 school FSMEver6	Pre-16 school attainment	Pre-16 school FSMEver6	POLAR3	Acorn	LAC	Young Carer	FSMEver6	Tax credits	Household income	Parental HE
Teegan	1* (S)	Yes	White British	Yes (?)	No	1	NA	2	2	1	5	No	Yes	Yes	?	2	No
Savannah	1* (S)	Yes	Black African	No	No	1	NA	1	3	1	5	No	No	Yes	4	1	Yes
Adam	1* (S)	Yes	White British	No	No	1	2	1	2	4	3	No	No	Yes	3	4	No
George	1 (S)	Yes	White British	No	Yes	2	2	2	2	3	1	Yes	No	No	No	4	Yes
Liam	1 (S)	Yes	White British	SpLD	No	2	2	2	2	2	2	Yes	No	Yes	4	2	Yes
Amelia	1 (S)	Yes	White British	Yes (?)	No	3	1	3	1	5	3	Yes	No	No ²	1	2	No ²
Katherine	1 (S)	Yes	White British	No	No	1	2	1	2	1	4	No	No	Yes	?	1	Yes
Hannah	1 (S)	Yes	Black Other	No	Yes	3	2	2	2	1	5	No	No	?	?	?	No
Olivia	1 (S)	Yes	White British	No	No	3	1	3	1	1	5	No	No	Yes	4	2	No
Amina	1 (S)	Yes	Asian Pakistani	?	Yes	3	2	2	2	2	3	No	No	No	4	2	No
Elizabeth	1 (S)	No	Black African	No	No	3	1	3	1	2	3	No	No	?	No	4	Yes
Athena	1 (S)	?	White British	No	Yes	3	2	2	2	1	5	Yes*	No	Yes	2	?	Yes
Amy	1 (S)	?	White British	No	Yes	3	2	2	2	2	4	No	No	Yes	4	2	Yes
Taylor	1 (S)	Yes	White British	No	No	3	2	2	2	1	4	No	No	No	?	4	No
Megan	2a* (S)	Yes	White British	No	Yes	3	2	2	2	2	5	No	Yes	?	4	2	Yes
Kellie	2a* (S)	Yes	White British	No	Yes	1	1	1	1	2	4	No	No	No	3	4	Yes
Amanda	2a* (S)	No	White/Black Caribbean	MH	Yes	1	NA	2	2	P	4	No	?	No	3	4	Yes
Eden	2a* (U)	Yes	Asian Other	No	Yes	3	2	2	2	3	5	No	No	No	No	4	Yes
Maya	2a (S)	No	White British	No	Yes	2	3	1	2	2	3	No	No	No	No	5	No

² Amelia selected 'yes' to these questions on her questionnaire. However, during the interview she spoke at length about her parents not having experience of HE nor taking up FSM, even though she believes she might have been eligible. Therefore, it is assumed that 'no' is what she intended to answer to these questionnaire questions. This highlights potential limitations to the questionnaire in ensuring concentration is maintained, questions are clear, and participants answer accurately.

Pseudonym	Application status	Other WP programmes	Ethnicity	Disability	Doxbridge school trip	Post-16 school attainment	Post-16 school FSMEver6	Pre-16 school attainment	Pre-16 school FSMEver6	POLAR3	Acorn	LAC	Young Carer	FSMEver6	Tax credits	Household income	Parental HE
Chloe	2a (U)	Yes	White British	No	No	3	1	3	1	1	3	No	No	No	No	5	No
Sean	2a (U)	No	White British	No	No	1	1	2	1	2	4	No	No	No	?	2	Yes
Aria	2a (U)	No	Indian	SpLD	No	3	1	3	1	5	1	No	No	No	No	5	Yes
Grace	2b (U)	Yes	White British	MH	Yes	1	NA	1	3	3	5	No	?	Yes	4	2	No
Edward	2b (U)	Yes	White British	No	Yes	1	NA	1	3	1	5	No	No	Yes	4	2	No
Freddie	3a (U)	Yes	White British	No	No	2	2	2	2	4	3	No	No	No	3	4	No
Ava	3a (U)	No	White British	MH	No	3	1	3	1	5	1	No	No	No	No	5	Yes
Charlotte	3a (U)	No	White British	No	Yes	3	2	2	2	3	1	No	No	No	No	5	Yes

Key

Application status: 1, 2a*, 2a, 2b, 3a refers to shortlisting category (see Table 3 in main text), (S) = successful application to Aim for Oxford, (U) = unsuccessful application to Aim for Oxford.

Disability: MH = mental health condition, SpLD = specific learning difficulty, yes (?) = disability not categorised.

School attainment (KS4 and KS5 results) and school FSMEver6: 1 = below average, 2 = average, 3 = above average, NA = student attends sixth form college, P = private school.

LAC: Yes = experience of LAC for more than three months, Yes* = experience of LAC for less than three months, No = never experienced LAC.

Tax credits: 1 = universal credit, 2 = working tax credit, 3 = child tax credit, 4 = multiple tax credits.

Household income: 1 = below £7,400, 2 = £7,400 - £16,000, 4 = £25,000 - £45,000, 5 = above £45,000.

? = unsure.

Appendix C: Questionnaire

Before you complete this questionnaire, it is important to gain your consent for the researcher to use your responses as outlined on the Participant Information Sheet sent via email. Please read the following consent form and, if you wish to consent and proceed in this study, enter your name and the date below.

This research aims to evaluate different indicators of disadvantage used in the Aim for Oxford outreach programme run by St Anne's College and Christ Church, Oxford.

- 1. I have read and understood the information about this study. I have considered all the risks involved with this research. I have had an opportunity to ask questions, and any questions have been answered satisfactorily.*
- 2. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without consequence and without having to give reason. If I decide to withdraw from this study, I will email the researcher ([REDACTED] at [REDACTED]@education.ox.ac.uk).*
- 3. I understand that research data collected in this study may be accessed by designated individuals (i.e. the researcher's supervisor) relevant to this study at the University of Oxford. I understand how my data will be stored and what will happen to my data at the end of the project. I understand that taking part in this research will bear no implications to any future interactions I have with the University of Oxford and will not impact any application I may make to the University of Oxford or its colleges*
- 4. I understand that this data will remain confidential except where there is a legal obligation to disclose information (e.g. if the researcher or their supervisor is concerned about a participant's or others' safety).*
- 5. I am aware of who to contact should I have questions or concerns during or following my participation in this study.*
- 6. I understand that this project has been reviewed by and received ethical clearance through the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.*
- 7. I agree to participate in this study.*

Full Name

Date

End of Block: Participant Consent

Start of Block: Personal Information

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. Please note that your answers from this questionnaire will be anonymised. Your name is only being asked in order for the researcher to connect your responses to your Aim for Oxford application; as soon as this has been done, your responses will immediately be anonymised by replacing your name with a unique identifier. Your email address is being asked should the researcher have any follow up questions or invite you to take part in an interview. There is no obligation for you to respond to any follow up emails or take part in any interviews and you are welcome to withdraw from this research at any time without giving reason.

First Name

Last Name

Email address

Was your application to the Aim for Oxford programme successful?

☐ Yes

☐ No

End of Block: Personal Information

Start of Block: Contextual Indicators

The following questions relate to your personal, familial, and educational contexts. Please answer these questions to the best of your knowledge by selecting the most appropriate option.

What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Other _____
-

Do you consider your gender status to disadvantage you in making a university application for the subject(s) you are interested in?

Have you successfully applied to another university access or widening participation programme? For example, you might be a student on Durham's Supported Progression scheme, the Realising Opportunities programme, the UNIQ Summer School, the Sutton Trust Summer School, the Social Mobility Foundation Aspiring Professionals Programme, etc.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure
-

If you answered yes to the last question, please detail which programme(s) you are part of:

Have you ever been on a school trip to Oxford, Cambridge, or Durham University?

- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Unsure
-

Which ethnic group do you belong to?

- ☐ White
 - ☐ Gypsy, Traveller, or Irish Traveller
 - ☐ Black - Caribbean
 - ☐ Black - African
 - ☐ Black - Other
 - ☐ Asian - Indian
 - ☐ Asian - Pakistani
 - ☐ Asian - Chinese
 - ☐ Asian - Other
 - ☐ White/Black Caribbean
 - ☐ White/Black African
 - ☐ White and Asian
 - ☐ Other Mixed
 - ☐ Arab
 - ☐ Other
 - ☐ Unknown
-

Is English your first language?

- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Unsure
-

Are you an asylum seeker?

- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Unsure
 - ☐ Prefer not to say
-

Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

- ☐ No disability
- ☐ I have a social communication impairment such as Autistic Spectrum Disorder
- ☐ I am blind or have a serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses
- ☐ I am deaf or have a serious hearing impairment
- ☐ I have a long standing illness or health condition such as cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease, or epilepsy
- ☐ I have a mental health condition such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder
- ☐ I have a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or AD(H)D
- ☐ I have a physical impairment or mobility issues, such as difficulty using my arms or I use a wheelchair or crutches
- ☐ I have a disability, impairment or medical condition that is not listed above
- ☐ I have two or more impairments and/or disabling medical conditions
- ☐ Unsure

What is your current school or college? Please provide the full name of the school/college, and the area where the school/college is based. For example: St James's School, Ryton.

What school did you attend when you completed your GCSEs? Please provide the full name of the school, and the area where the school is based. For example: The Blue School, Blyth.

What is your current full postcode? For example, NE4 7SA.

Have you ever been in Local Authority Care? This includes:

- being in local authority care and living with foster carers or in a children's home
- being 'looked after' at home under a home supervision order in Scotland

Please note this does not refer to being a carer for a relative.

- ☐ Yes - for more than 3 months
- ☐ Yes - for less than 3 months
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure
-

Are you a young carer? For example, you might help to look after a relative with a disability, illness, mental health condition, or drug or alcohol problem.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure
-

Have you ever been eligible for Free School Meals?

- ☐ Yes - in the last 6 years
 - ☐ Yes - but not in the last 6 years
 - ☐ No - I have never been eligible for Free School Meals
 - ☐ Unsure
-

If you have been eligible for Free Schools Meals, how long were you eligible for? Please calculate this cumulatively. For example, you may have been eligible for Free School Meals for the duration of Year 5, not eligible in Year 6-8, eligible again in Year 9 for six months, and not eligible thereafter. In this example, you would have been eligible for Free Schools Meals for 1-2 years.

- ☐ Less than one year
 - ☐ 1-2 years
 - ☐ 3-4 years
 - ☐ 5-6 years
 - ☐ 7 or more years
 - ☐ Unsure
-

Have you ever been eligible for pupil premium? You will have been eligible for pupil premium if you received free school meals at any point in the last six years, were adopted or left local authority care, are currently in local authority care, or have had a parent in the armed forces in the past six years

- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Unsure
-

Are you currently eligible for a 16-19 bursary from your school or college?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure
-

Are either of your parents/guardians in receipt of any of the benefits listed below? Please select as many as apply.

- ☐ Universal Credit
- ☐ Working Tax Credit
- ☐ Child Tax Credit
- ☐ None of the above
- ☐ Unsure
-

What is your household income per year?

- ☐ Less than £7,400
- ☐ £7,400 - £16,000
- ☐ £25,000 - £45,000
- ☐ More than £45,001
- ☐ Unsure
-

Do any of your parents, step-parents, or guardians have any higher education qualifications, such as a degree, diploma or certificate of higher education?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

Have either of your parents studied at the University of Oxford or the University of Cambridge?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

Please give the job title of your parent, step-parent, or guardian who earns the most. If they are retired or unemployed, please give their most recent job title. For example, primary school teacher, structural engineer, car mechanic, small shop owner, childminder, retail store manager, etc. Please give as much detail as possible.

End of Block: Contextual Indicators

Start of Block: Personal Perspectives on Progression to Higher Education

The following questions ask you to consider what you believe to have had a positive or negative impact towards any opportunity or desire to attend a highly selective university in the future that you may or may not have. Highly selective universities might be, for example, leading research-intensive universities, such as those in the Russell Group (more information about Russell Group universities is available here: <https://russellgroup.ac.uk>).

These questions also seek to understand what you believe universities need to consider when they are selecting students to attend their widening participation programmes. Please do not feel limited by the contextual indicators you have been asked about above - you may have different ideas about what widening participation programmes should consider when selecting their student. Please provide as much detail in answers as you feel comfortable.

What circumstances, if any, do you believe to have had a negative impact on your education and future opportunity to attend a highly selective university?

What circumstances, if any, do you believe to have had a positive impact on your education and future opportunity to attend a highly selective university?

What factors do you believe are most important for programmes like Aim for Oxford to take into account when selecting candidates to take part in these outreach initiatives? What factors do you think are least important?

Has the outcome of your application to Aim for Oxford affected your views, whether positive or negative, towards the University of Oxford or other Russell Group universities?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Unsure

Please explain your answer to the last question.

What motivated you to apply to the Aim for Oxford programme?

Did you have any reservations about applying to the Aim for Oxford programme?

Currently, how likely are you to apply to the University of Oxford?

- ☐ Very likely
- ☐ Likely
- ☐ Unsure
- ☐ Unlikely - but I am likely to apply to another Russell Group university
- ☐ Unlikely - and I am NOT likely to apply to another Russell Group university
- ☐ Very unlikely - but I am likely to apply to another Russell Group university
- ☐ Very unlikely - and I am NOT likely to apply to another Russell Group university
- ☐ Unsure

End of Block: Personal Perspectives on Progression to Higher Education

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview and for completing the questionnaire – it is really appreciated and it is so valuable to have your voice in this research on how we select young people onto widening participation programmes at highly selective universities. This interview should last around 30 minutes and in that time we'll be talking about your views on and personal experiences of educational advantage and disadvantage. Have you had a chance to read the participant information sheet and consent form? Do you have any questions? Are you still happy to take part in this interview?

Things to run through:

- Technical difficulties – phone number, chat function, call them back.
- Audio recording.
- Confidentiality and safeguarding.

Aim for Oxford: first impressions

1. Thinking back to when you first heard about the Aim for Oxford programme, what were your first impressions of the programme?
2. What role has your school(s) played in your thinking about higher education? What was your school's impression of the Aim for Oxford programme?
3. What role has your family played in your thinking about higher education? What was your family's impression of the Aim for Oxford programme?
4. Thinking about your first impressions of Aim for Oxford and how you feel now, what impact has there been for you, if any, of being selected/rejected onto the Aim for Oxford programme?

Selection onto widening participation programmes

5. Aim for Oxford is an example of a university outreach and widening participation programme. What do you understand the role of a widening participation programme to be?
6. Some universities use postcode areas as a way to decide whether to select students onto widening participation programmes. What do you think about this?
7. Question specific to the main reason they are being asked to interview:

Megan: Experiences as a young carer.

Amelia: Experience of LAC and support systems.

Katherine: Experiences of coming from a low-income background.

Liam: Experience of LAC and how he "turned his life around."

Aria: Experience of an SpLD.

Maya: Considerations of people's "home situations."

Grace: Extenuating circumstances.

Freddie: Acceptance onto one WP scheme but rejection from Aim for Oxford.

George: Experience of LAC.

8. Are there any other factors which you think positively or negatively affected your decision to start thinking about Oxford and other highly selective universities? Are there any factors which you think widening participation programmes currently think of as important, or are talked about in the news, school or universities, which you think haven't made a difference to your thinking about higher education?

9. Aim for Oxford is an example of a widening participation programme that asks students to have quite high GCSE grade profiles, generally five or more 7s or above at GCSE. What do you think about using this as a selection criterion?

10. We're almost at the end of the interview. Is there anything you'd like to discuss or mention that we haven't talked about already?

11. If you were in charge of the Aim for Oxford programme, how would you select students onto the programme?

12. Thank you so much for participating in this interview. Are there any questions you have or anything you would like to add before we end?

Organisations to signpost if required:

- Childline: 0800 111 <https://www.childline.org.uk>
- Young Minds: <https://youngminds.org.uk>
- The Mix: 0808 808 4994 <https://www.themix.org.uk>
- Shout crisis text line: text SHOUT to 85258
- The Survivors Trust 08088 010 818 <https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org>

Appendix E: CUREC 1a approval letter, CUREC 1a revision approval letter, participant information sheet, and consent form

Dear [REDACTED]

Title: To what extent are widening participation programmes widening participation to highly selective universities?

Ref: ED-C1A-20-039

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been granted.

****Please note that the stated start date on your CUREC form is earlier than this response from DREC. You should not begin any research until this approval is received.****

If your research involves participants whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question (this includes those under 18 and vulnerable adults), then it is advisable to read the following NSPCC professional reporting requirements for cases of suspected abuse http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/questions/reporting_child_abuse_wda74908.html

Should there be any subsequent changes to the project which raise ethical issues not covered in the original application you should submit details to research.office@education.ox.ac.uk for consideration.

Good luck with your research study.

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Member of DREC



Dear [REDACTED]

Many thanks for sending through your revised CUREC form and I am sorry to hear that your research plans have been disrupted.

Title: To what extent are widening participation programmes widening participation to highly selective universities?

Ref: ED-C1A-20-039 (revision)

The revision to the above application has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants. I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been extended.

Good luck with your online data collection!

With best wishes,

[REDACTED]



Oxford University Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens
Oxford
OX2 6PY
Director: Professor Jo-Anne Baird



Researcher: [REDACTED]
MSc Education (Research Design and Methodology)
[REDACTED]@education.ox.ac.uk
Supervisor: t [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@education.ox.ac.uk

**Selection of Young People in Widening Participation Programmes to Highly
Selective Universities
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

1. *What is the purpose of this research?*

This research aims to evaluate different metrics of disadvantage used in the Aim for Oxford outreach programme run by St Anne's College and Christ Church, Oxford, through quantitative analysis of personal data collected through questionnaires and participant's application forms, and interviews with these young people (aged 16-17). Findings will be written up as part of an MSc dissertation in Education (Research Design and Methodology).

3. *Why have I been invited to take part?*

You have been invited to take part in this study as you made an application to the Aim for Oxford programme.

4. *Do I have to take part?*

No. You can ask questions about the research before deciding whether or not to participate. If you do agree to participate, you may withdraw yourself from the study at any time, without giving reason and without any consequence, by advising the researcher of this decision.

4. *What am I required to do?*

If you are happy to take part in the research, you would give consent to the data you submitted in your application to the Aim for Oxford programme (including the teacher's reference) to be analysed anonymously in this study. You would also be invited to fill in a questionnaire which asks about your personal, educational, and family background, your personal experiences and understanding of personal and educational disadvantage, and your views towards going to university and widening participation to university. Based on the responses to the questionnaires, some participants will be invited to take part in an interview to explore your views and responses further.

The questionnaire should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Interviews should take approximately 30 minutes and will be audio recorded for the purpose of transcription by the researcher. There are no follow up interviews.

6. *Are there any potential risks in taking part?*

There are minimal risks involved in taking part in this research. Talking about your personal experiences and understanding of disadvantage may evoke an emotional response; should you experience any distress, the researcher can provide signposts to voluntary support organisations.

Should the researcher have any concerns about your safety or wellbeing during the research, they will have to report these concerns to the child protection and safeguarding team at your school. Any safeguarding concerns will override anonymity of data.

7. *Are there any benefits in taking part?*

Findings of this research will be shared with St Anne's College and Christ Church, Oxford, and thus has the potential to inform these colleges' outreach and widening participation work in the North East region, in particular regarding the selection of applicants to their programmes.

8. *What happens to the data provided?*

The information you provide as part of the study is the **research data**. Any research data from which you can be identified (e.g. your name, audio recording), is known as **personal data**. It does not include data where the identity has been removed (anonymous data). Personal data will not be shared with anyone except the researcher and their supervisor, unless either the research or their supervisor has a safeguarding concern.

The **research data** will be stored confidentially, and all responses will be anonymised immediately after being matched to your Aim for Oxford application data and given a unique participant number. The participant's name matching them to their unique participant number, their **personal data**, will be retained in a separate list until the conclusion of this research in case any safeguarding concerns arise and anonymity needs to, by law, be broken in the participant's best interests. **Research data** will be shared with the researcher's supervisor.

All **research data** will be stored for at least 5 years after publication or public release of the work of the research. Your **personal data** will be retained until the final assessment of the dissertation. After these periods, the data will then be destroyed.

9. *Will the research be published?*

The MSc dissertation will be stored in an online archive which is freely available to read. The research may also be published in a journal article at a later date.

10. *Who has reviewed this study?*

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

11. *Who do I contact if I have a concern about this study or wish to complain?*

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please speak to the researcher [REDACTED]@education.ox.ac.uk] or their supervisor [REDACTED]@education.ox.ac.uk], who will do their best to answer your query. The researcher should acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give

you an indication of how they intend to deal with it. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a complaint, you can contact the Chair of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee, Dr Liam Gearon, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY, liam.gearon@education.ox.ac.uk .

12. Data protection

All your data will be protected in line with GDPR.

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the study.

The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that we perform in the public interest.

Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/compliance/gdpr/individualrights/>.

Oxford University Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens
Oxford
OX2 6PY
Director: Professor Jo-Anne Baird



Researcher: [REDACTED]
MSc Education (Research Design and Methodology)
[REDACTED]@education.ox.ac.uk
Supervisor: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@education.ox.ac.uk

Selection of Young People in Widening Participation to Highly Selective Universities

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

This research aims to evaluate different metrics of disadvantage used in the Aim for Oxford outreach programme run by St Anne's College and Christ Church, Oxford.

1. I have read and understood the information about this study. I have considered all the risks involved with this research. I have had an opportunity to ask questions, and any questions have been answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without consequence and without having to give reason. If I decide to withdraw from this study, I will email the researcher at the address above.
3. I understand that research data collected in this study may be accessed by designated individuals (i.e. the researcher's supervisor) relevant to this study at the University of Oxford. I understand how my data will be stored and what will happen to my data at the end of the project. I understand that taking part in this research will bear no implications to any future interactions I have with the University of Oxford and will not impact any application I may make to the University of Oxford or its colleges.
4. I understand that this data will remain confidential except where there is a legal obligation to disclose information (e.g. if the researcher or their supervisor is concerned about a participant's or others' safety).
5. I am aware of who to contact should I have questions or concerns during or following my participation in this study.
6. I understand that this project has been reviewed by and received ethical clearance through the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.
7. I agree to participate in this study.

(Name and date to indicate consent to be completed on the questionnaire, available here: https://oxfordeducation.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_57kdJLgnPRp9Plr).

Appendix F: List of initial codes categorised by theme

Individual Context

ACEs and trauma
Cost of disadvantage in time
Disability
Extenuating circumstances disclosure
Extenuating circumstances option
Extenuating circumstances pre-16 attainment
Extenuating circumstances other
Extra-curricular activities
Isolated knowledge
Labelling
Lack of reasonable adjustments
Mental health
Other responsibilities – time
Private support
SpLDs

Family Context

Adopted norm
Cost of disadvantage in time
Financial barriers
First-gen
Foster care
FSM or 16-19 Bursary
Household income
Isolated knowledge
LAC history matters
Lack of time for wellbeing
Parental encouragement
Parental HE
Parental immigration
Parental interest
Parental passive support
Parental push
Parental wellbeing support
Parental work ethic
Sibling knowledge
Single parent
Stability
Unconditional parental support
University not necessary
Young carer

Area Context

False negative postcode anecdote
False positive postcode anecdote
Leaving local area
North East
Postcode matters
Postcode too broad
Regional familiarity
Rural-urban postcode divide
Small town
Staying local

School context

Contrasting pre- and post-16 schools
Exclusive school Oxbridge support
Extra-curricular activities
Grades weighted in context
Isolated knowledge
Not dependent on school
Passive school
Posh school
Posh school preparation
Post-16 specialism
School first
School HE culture
School low attainment
School Oxbridge experience
School Oxbridge experience lacking
School peer apathy
School significance
Special teacher
State school
Teacher knowledge
Teacher variation

Societal Factors

Black Lives Matter
Gender disparity
Race matters
Uncomfortable to talk about race
Underrepresented ethnic group mixed feelings

**Perceptions of
Oxbridge/University/WP**

Bewildered
Career drove university
Diversifying population
Elitism and alienation
Elitism in WP
High grades off-putting
Intimidation
Keep prestige
Mistrust of Oxbridge
New opportunity
Not the university's responsibility
Posh school
Posh school preparation
Prestigious institution
Quota
Squeezed middle
St Anne's Year 12 Visit
University image
WP alienates university

Self-concept and Beliefs

Academic high flier
Academic progress
Ambition from disadvantage
Context imposter syndrome
Disadvantaged advantage
Exclusivity
Exclusivity not requirement
Independent research
Intellectual curiosity
Intuition
Isolated knowledge
Long-term HE goal
Lower confidence
Motivation
Personality
Seeing across the divide
Symbol of social mobility
Time management skills
Unexpected
What's the harm?
Work ethic

Impact of WP

Aim for Oxford changed perceptions
Disappointed
Exclusivity
Exclusivity not required
Gratitude
Keep prestige
Not dependent on WP
One WP is enough
Other WP changed perceptions
Other WP opportunities
Quota
Raise aspirations and expectations
Self-esteem boost
St Anne's Year 12 Visit
Unaffected by rejection
WP impact
WP alienates university

Selection Suggestions

Academic merit over context
Academic progress
Advertising
Bias in qualitative application element
Bias in teacher reference
Black Lives Matter
Boundary case consideration
Current application process works well
Demonstrated interest
Extenuating circumstances disclosure
Extenuating circumstances option
Extenuating circumstances pre-16 attainment
Grade exceptions
Grades weighted in context
Individual circumstances
Intellectual curiosity
Interview application
Keep prestige
Labelling
LAC history matters
Make the most of this
Motivation
Multiple indicators
Needs the most
Personality
Portfolio submission

Selection Suggestions (continued)

Postcode matters

Postcode too broad

Prior attainment good

Prior attainment bad

Qualitative application element

Qualitative contextual application
element

Realistic

Recognition of extenuating
circumstances needed

School first

School significance

Squeezed middle

Thinking test

Unfair to give false hope

Uninterested

Work ethic