“I can’t wait, honestly”: How can Year 7 disadvantaged students be encouraged to raise their aspirations for higher education?

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A Research & Development Project

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Abstract

The persistent gap between university entry rates of disadvantaged students and their more-affluent peers, provides the focus for this practitioner research. Both nationally and at School X, fewer disadvantaged students are opting for higher education and this intervention aims to raise students' awareness of university so they may aspire to follow this path in the future. Furthermore, the participants are from Year 7 to ensure this process begins as early as possible and can help inform their Key Stage 4 subject decisions, taken in Year 8. This account begins with an introduction followed by a critical, wide-ranging literature review, examining research around: the benefits of going to university; evidence for a participation gap between disadvantaged students and their more-affluent peers; factors influencing the participation of disadvantaged students in higher education, including an exploration of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory; and the impact of widening participation initiatives. Contrary to some policy-makers and, indeed, my own assumption, the initial small-group interviews did not reveal a 'poverty of aspiration' amongst the 29 participants with the vast majority aspiring to go to university. Rather, an absence of accurate knowledge of higher education was exposed and then addressed through a number of awareness-raising interventions, including a series of workshops, devised and delivered in collaboration with the Education Liaison Officer (ELO) of a local university (University Y). A detailed account of the original methodology (Plan 1) is presented, followed by an alternative plan (Plan 2) created in response to the Covid-19 national 'lockdown'. Findings suggest this collaboration has been successful in raising awareness of university among disadvantaged Year 7 students. Furthermore, the project seems to have capitalised on the already-existing aspirations with one student stating, at the end of the project, "I can't wait, honestly".

Finally, the implications of this research are considered, including the two institutions agreeing to continue this partnership on a long-term, sustained basis and the development of the Key Stage 3 PSHE curriculum.

Key terms: Disadvantaged, Aspiration, Awareness, Higher Education

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Introduction

I believe passionately in the power of education to transform lives for the better. It enables students to develop the self-confidence and independence to make the most of their talents and successfully pursue their ambitions. All young people should have access to such opportunities and this is the fundamental reason why I joined the teaching profession in the first place. As a classroom teacher and Assistant Headteacher at an 11 to 16, mixed, academy (hereafter, referred to as 'School X') I want to play a full part in supporting students, from all backgrounds, to be the very best they can be. Central to this aim is an understanding of educational barriers and the means by which they can be broken down. Gaining a place on the MSc course has enabled me to, not only, explore the research in such areas but also develop practical interventions to address them. In my final year, I wanted to delve into why, both nationally and in School X, fewer students from disadvantaged backgrounds, enter universities, compared with their non-disadvantaged peers.

A 'disadvantaged' student, as set-out by the UK Government, is entitled to a government grant, called the Pupil Premium, to support their education and improve attainment (Department for Education, 2020). Eligible students are those from less affluent backgrounds who claim free school meals (FSM), or have claimed free school meals in the last six years. Students who have left local authority care through a child arrangements order, adoption or special guardianship are also entitled to this support. The Pupil Premium is awarded directly to schools and leaders determine how to spend this most effectively, according the needs of their students.

The national gap between university entry rates of disadvantaged students and their more-affluent peers is highlighted by the Social Mobility Commission (2019) which states:

> Increasing numbers of students from low-income families are entering university by age 19, although they are still much less likely to do so than others (26 per cent versus 43 per cent of better-off peers) (p. 10).

Regarding School X, Department of Education destinations data show the proportion of disadvantaged students going on to study at any education setting, after Year 11, is lower than their non-disadvantaged peers. In 2015, just 78% of disadvantaged students went on to further study compared to 94% of non-disadvantaged students. Furthermore, only 31% of disadvantaged students continued their studies at a Sixth Form College, the more traditional route to university, compared with 63% of their non-disadvantaged peers (Department for Education, 2018). In 2016, 78% of disadvantaged students remained in education, compared with 88% of their non-disadvantaged peers and the proportion of disadvantaged students going on to Sixth Form was 41%, compared with 62% of their more-affluent counterparts (Department for Education, 2019a). In light of this disparity, I decided this issue would be the focus for my Research and Development Project and, further, my particular responsibility on the Senior Leadership Team placed me in a significant position of influence in this area.

I lead the provision of careers information, advice and guidance and a key aspect of my role is ensuring students have the opportunity to find out about the different post-16 routes available to them. Gaining a thorough understanding of options, including apprenticeships, college and higher education empowers them to make well-informed decisions about their own futures and I firmly believe this process should begin as early as possible, in Year 7. This ensures the time needed to

explore these options fully and it is particularly important for this year group as School X has moved to a two-year Key Stage 3 phase, with students deciding on their Key Stage 4 courses in Year 8. Furthermore, early intervention is a key aspect of addressing the relatively low numbers of disadvantaged students participating in higher education, compared with their non-disadvantaged peers (Chowdry et al., 2013).

I decided, a project designed to raise awareness of university could potentially encourage more Year 7 disadvantaged students to aspire for this pathway in the future, resulting in a significant narrowing of the participation gap. Additionally, all 58 disadvantaged students in Year 7 have FSM status and account for a third of the entire cohort, so I wanted to devise an intervention where all could participate, ensuring as wide an impact as possible.

I begin my account with a literature review addressing the following questions:

1. What are the benefits of going to university?
2. Is there a gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students participating in higher education?
3. What factors influence the participation rate of disadvantaged students in higher education?
4. What has been the impact of widening participation initiatives on encouraging disadvantaged students to go to university?

Following the literature review, I present my research questions and describe the methodology designed to address them. The originally-planned methodology (Plan 1) is presented, followed by the alternative plan (Plan 2) devised in response to the national ‘lockdown’, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Key to my approach was the collaboration with the Education Liaison Officer (ELO) of a local university (known,

hereafter, as ‘University Y’). Finally, I present a critical reflection on the project findings before setting out the implications and further research suggestions.

Literature Review

What are the economic benefits of going to university?

I begin this literature review by exploring the benefits of a university education, both for the individual and society as-a-whole. These include: increased earnings; increased employment prospects; and the positive impact on the wider economy.

Increased earnings

There has been much research espousing the economic benefits of going to university. A report by Belfield et al. (2018) for the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed the average man, aged 29, who goes on to university, earned ‘around 25% more than the average man (with five A*-C GCSEs) who did not’. The gap for women was ‘more than 50%’ (p. 5). Further, after age 30, the growth of earnings was faster for men who have attended university compared to those who had not. This chimes with Walker and Zhu (2013) who compared the lifetime earnings of graduates, relative to their counterparts who had gained two or more A-levels but chose not to go on to university. Findings showed male and female graduates earned £168000 and £252000 more than their counterparts, respectively.

However, the argument a degree will result in higher earnings over those without one has not gone unchallenged. A report by Abel et al. (2016) for the Bank of England, showed a significant decline in graduate earnings from 1995 to 2015, relative to people with no qualifications at all. The authors suggested a reason for this apparent decline in earnings premium was an increase in graduate numbers, leading to a decrease in ‘the ability of degrees to correctly identify more talented individuals

and thus the amount of pay which those with degrees can command' (p. 18). In an Australian study by Daly et al. (2015) findings showed graduates, in certain fields, on lower wages, would have earned more by completing high-skilled apprenticeships instead.

Increased employment prospects

The positive impact of higher education on employment prospects has been highlighted in research. Findings from Conlon and Patrignani (2011) suggested an undergraduate degree increased the chance of being employed by approximately 3.3 percent, compared to those who had two or more A-levels but had not gone to university. This is in line with Walker and Zhu (2013) where graduates had steeper age-employment profiles when compared with non-graduates. The reasons for this were the subject of research carried out by Hogarth et al. (2007). In their study, evidence was collected from 74 employers, in England, who had recently employed new graduates. Compared to non-graduates, employers said degree-holders were more likely to: challenge how things are done; come at things from a different perspective; use initiative; use problem-solving skills; be flexible; assimilate knowledge quickly; devise arguments; and bring innovative ideas. These were seen as the skills enabling graduates to progress over non-graduates who were 'often perceived as hitting a wall in their career path' (p. 36). This chimes with Bynner and Egerton (2001) where graduates reported more skill improvement over ten years than people with lower qualifications.

A longitudinal study by Purcell et al. (2008) gathered the views of graduates who had made UCAS applications in the year 2005/6. When asked the reasons why they applied to university, nearly 80% said 'to enable me to get a good job' and over 50% said the main reason was either being part of their long-term career plan or securing

a good job. Furthermore, of those students from 'routine and manual' family occupation backgrounds, 80% said going to university would enable them to get a good job and 77% said it was part of their long-term career plans. In contrast, findings from Tomlinson (2008) showed undergraduates believed having a degree alone was making it more challenging to gain employment due to the 'congested and competitive' labour market. The qualification was still viewed as important for career opportunities but other skills and experiences were needed to 'add value' and provide a competitive advantage.

Positive impact on the wider economy

The positive impact of higher education on the wider economy was explored by Walker and Zhu (2013). Taking account of student loan repayments, tax and other income, the net working life contribution to the UK government, from male graduates, was an estimated £264000 above male non-graduates. The corresponding figure for female graduates was £318000 over that of their non-graduate counterparts. This chimes with Holland et al. (2013) where 15 advanced economies were analysed, from 1982 to 2005. Findings showed, over this time period, approximately 20% of economic growth was a direct result of increased 'graduate skills accumulation'. Additionally, between 1994 and 2005, the proportion of graduates in the workforce increased by 57%, resulting in an increase of UK long-run productivity by 11 – 28%. Indeed, a 1% increase in the proportion of the workforce with a degree, increased long-run productivity by 0.2-0.5%. This is in-line with Hermannsson et al. (2010) where the impact of graduates on the Scottish economy was analysed. The authors assert graduates were responsible for 4.2% of GDP and the 'impact of graduates on regional economies is greater than the expenditure impact of universities when considered on a comparable basis' (p. 2). Innovation and flexibility drive economic

progress and there have been a number of studies analysing the impact of higher education on these key areas. A UK Government report (2020) states, with 'innovative' businesses, in 2016-2018, 15% of employees possessed a science or engineering degree and 18% had a non-science degree. The proportion of graduates was significantly lower in 'non-innovators' with only 5% of the workforce with a science or engineering degree and 11% having a non-science degree (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2020).

What are the non-economic benefits of going to university?

There is a substantial body of research highlighting non-economic benefits of a university education, both for the individual and society. These include: a positive impact on health; a greater propensity for civic engagement activities, such as voting and volunteering; and the satisfaction arising from advancing one's knowledge and understanding.

Positive impact on health

The health benefits of following a university pathway have been extensively explored. The OECD education report (2012) presented data on life expectancy in 15 OECD countries, but not the UK. On average, a 30 year-old male graduate was predicted to have added an additional 51.1 years to their life, compared to 43.1 years for a man who did not go to university. Female graduates, compared to their non-graduate counterparts, showed a narrower gap with 54.7 years and 50.3 years, respectively. This chimes with another OECD report (2010) where findings suggested graduates, aged 25, in the USA, were expected to live an additional 56.6 years, compared to 49.6 years for those without a degree. Studies in the USA have also suggested graduates are more likely to engage in preventative care, such as

regular exercise, flu vaccinations, cholesterol tests, dental check-ups and physical examinations (Fletcher & Frisvold, 2009; Baum et al., 2013).

Further health benefits are explored in a UK study by Bynner et al. (2003). Findings showed graduates were 70-80% more likely to report 'excellent' health, compared to those educated to level 2 or below. Graduates were less likely to become obese, less likely to smoke and more likely to give up smoking, compared with non-graduates. Additionally, Cutler and Lleras-Muney (2010) found, in the UK, those with A-levels were 12% less likely to become smokers and 4% less likely to become obese, compared to those with lower levels of education. This chimes with the US study by de Walque (2004) where findings showed, after 1950, smoking decreased more dramatically and earlier for graduates, compared with other education categories. Excessive alcohol consumption was studied by Kuntsche et al. (2004) where findings suggested a low level of education had led to more 'binge drinkers' in European countries.

Studies have suggested the positive impact of higher education on mental health. An OECD education study (2011) presented data on life satisfaction in the UK. Findings showed, of 25 to 64 year-olds, 76.8% of graduates reported being satisfied with their lives, compared to 65.6% of those who had A-levels but did not go to university. Furthermore, in a study by Bynner et al. (2003) findings suggested graduates were around a third less likely to report depression, compared to those with A-levels but did not go to university. This chimes with Feinstein et al. (2008) where female graduates were 35% less likely to have depression than those with a level 2 education or below. The figure for male graduates was even greater at 55%.

However, there have been studies highlighting a growing concern regarding the mental health of students in universities. A report by Kerr (2013) for the UK National

Union of Students found 20% of university students believed they had a mental health problem and around half of respondents said they had felt ‘depressed’. Findings from Macaskill (2013) showed rates of mental illness matched those of the general population in a large university, in the north of England. However, only 5.1% of these students were receiving treatment, with second-year students reporting the ‘most significant increase in psychiatric symptoms’ (p. 426).

There are a wide range of factors which may contribute to a deterioration in mental health at university. Age is a significant factor as many disorders develop below the age of 24 so university students are a high-risk group (Kessler et al., 2007). Also, going to university coincides with the transition into adulthood which may be a very challenging time for students (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). A number of risk factors may also cause a deterioration in mental health during this significant time (Chemers et al., 2001; Gall et al., 2000). These include: living away from home for the first time; adjusting to new ways of learning; handling finances; and the expectation of making new friends (Stewart-Brown et al., 2000; Scanlon et al., 2007). Factors which reduce the risk of developing mental health problems include high self-esteem, high academic achievement and good social networks provided by friends and family (Macaskill, 2013).

Greater propensity for civic engagement activities

Research suggests UK graduates are more likely to vote. Findings presented in an OECD report (2011) showed, of 25 to 64 year-olds, 81% of graduates voted in elections, compared to 61.2% of people who did not go on to a level 3 education. Further, of those who did have A-levels, but did not go on to university, only 69.3% voted. Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting graduates are more likely to take an interest in the political process and vote because they believe their participation

can make a difference (Ogg, 2006). However, the suggestion that increased levels of education would make it more likely a person would vote in the UK, is challenged by Milligan et al. (2004). Although findings suggested a 'strong and robust' link between levels of education and voter turnout in the USA, this was not found to be the case in the UK.

The impact of higher education on the proportion of volunteers in society has been the subject of a number of studies. Findings from Bynner et al. (2003) suggested graduates, compared to those who gained A-levels but did not go on to university, were more active in communities as volunteers, including members of charities and school parent-teacher associations. In the USA, Brand (2010) suggested graduates were more likely to take part in civic activities. Findings showed 13% of graduates volunteered for community, civic or youth groups, compared with just 5% of non-graduates. In addition, 9% of graduates volunteered for charities and social welfare groups, compared to just 4% of non-graduates.

Satisfaction from advancing one's knowledge and understanding

The Oxford Dictionary defines a university as 'an institution where students study for a degree, and where academic research is done' (The Oxford Dictionary, 2009, p. 1012). Apart from the future economic and health benefits of higher education, universities provide access to a wealth of learning experiences and resources, allowing students to 'delve deeply' into a chosen area of interest. Activities such as lectures, seminars, tutorials and workshops provide access to leading academics and the opportunity to learn from, and with, other students. The intellectual satisfaction arising from mastering and, in many cases, advancing new knowledge and understanding, is seen by many as an end in itself (Dweck, 1986, 2017; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Galloway et al., 1998).

However, in a Purcell (2008) study, when asked the main reason why they wanted to go to university, only 15% of undergraduates said it was because they wanted to study a particular subject, compared to 35% who said 'to enable me to get a new job'. Furthermore, according to Archer et al. (2003) going to university to study a subject you enjoy is a view, more likely, held by middle-class students, compared to their working-class peers.

Is there a gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students participating in higher education?

An important issue is the gap between the higher education participation rates of disadvantaged students and their more-affluent peers. In England, from 2006 to 2019 there has been a substantial rise in the numbers of FSM (free school meal) and non-FSM students going to university - an increase of 9.6% and 10.6%, respectively. However, there is still a significant gap between entry rates of the two groups. In 2019, the proportion of non-FSM, state-school, students going to university was 35.6%, compared to just 18.9% of their FSM counterparts. Despite this gap of 16.7% being a record low, the difference has largely remained unchanged, in absolute terms, over time (UCAS, 2019; Bolton, 2020). Furthermore, in 2018, all regions in England showed a greater proportion of non-FSM students entering university, compared with their FSM counterparts. The narrowest gap between the two groups was in Inner London, at 10%. The largest gap was 26%, in the South East region, where School X is (Department for Education, 2019b).

Entry data for universities of differing 'tariff' levels; high, medium or low can also be analysed. Tariff levels refer to the average entry grades of students admitted to a university so 'high tariff' institutions have undergraduates with higher grades. These universities are generally regarded as 'more prestigious' and 'harder to get into'

(Bolton, 2020, p. 12). Examples of high tariff universities include Oxford, Cambridge and the Russell Group of research-intensive institutions, such as Birmingham and University College London (UCAS, 2019; Bolton, 2020; Crawford et al., 2017). From 2006 to 2019, the gap between state-school FSM and non-FSM entry rates decreased for all tariff levels. However, it remained the case that disadvantaged young people were much less likely to get into high tariff universities with only 3.1% of FSM students gaining a place, compared to 10.4% of their non-FSM peers (Bolton, 2020).

Again, the data can be broken down further to expose regional differences regarding entry rates to high tariff institutions in England. In 2018, both the Inner and Outer London regions had the highest proportion of FSM students entering high tariff universities but, at only 6%, this was still significantly lower than the 13% and 15% of non-FSM students, respectively. The largest gap between the two groups was at 10% and, again, this was in the South East region, where School X is. Here, only 3% of FSM students were accepted at a high tariff university, compared to 13% of their non-FSM peers (Department for Education, 2019b).

What factors influence the participation rate of disadvantaged students in higher education?

I now turn to an exploration of the factors which may influence the participation rate of disadvantaged students in higher education. These include: Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory; the influence of family and friends; student aspirations; the impact of tuition fees and debt; type of secondary school; and prior attainment.

Explaining Educational Inequality - Bourdieu's Cultural Reproduction Theory

In the UK, the history of higher education has been overshadowed by social class inequality (Blackburn & Jarman, 1993; Egerton & Halsey, 1993). There has been extensive research suggesting disadvantaged students do not believe university is a path they can take. Archer (2007) argues, for many young people, university is 'unthinkable' and a 'non-choice' due to their social background, seeing it as unrealistic, unaffordable and unachievable.

The French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu suggests a possible explanation for why disadvantaged students may believe going to university is 'unthinkable'. He asserts differences in entry rates for those from different socio-economic backgrounds can be explained by the relationship between three elements: habitus; field; and capital. Put simply, habitus is the way we act, feel, think and be as a result of how we carry our history within us, how we call upon this history in present-day situations and how we then decide to 'act in certain ways and not others' (Maton, 2012, p. 51). As we are continuously engaged in making our history, this is an active, on-going process, shaped by our life events, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, occupation, nationality, religion and so on. Secondly, the concept of 'field' describes the social context in which an individual's habitus enters, such as politics, the arts, law and education. The field shapes our habitus and, in turn, our habitus shapes our understanding of the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Finally, Bourdieu describes five forms of 'capital': cultural (e.g. taste, forms of knowledge, skills, cultural preferences, language, accent); economic (e.g. assets and money); social (e.g. social networks, family, friends, work connections, religious and cultural heritage); symbolic (e.g. an

individual's credentials, honour, prestige or recognition); and educational (e.g. academic qualifications) (Bourdieu, 1984; Thomson, 2012).

In order to describe the relationship between habitus, field and capital, Bourdieu uses the analogy of playing a game. The field is represented by the game being played and the habitus is a player's 'feel for the game' shaped by their knowledge and understanding of both the rules and strategies for winning – their capital (Bourdieu, 1992). It follows the relationship between the field and one's habitus can be one of varying degrees of 'fit'. Where an individual's habitus matches the logic of the field, they possess the necessary capital to be in-tune with the unwritten 'rules of the game' and underlying practices within the field. Bourdieu's analogy to help convey this notion is the feeling of being like a 'fish in water' where a person feels at ease and comfortable in their particular setting:

> ….when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a "fish in water": it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127).

Conversely, where someone's habitus and field are a mismatch, due to a lack of capital, they may feel the social situation is 'not for the likes of me', causing them to decide not to enter the field at all, or if already there, leave. This notion of being like a 'fish out of water' is central to Bourdieu's explanation for why students from working-class backgrounds are less likely to go to university. Bourdieu asserts that members of the same social class will share 'structurally similar positions' in society, giving rise to 'similar experiences of social relations, processes and structures' (Maton, 2012, p. 52). He also claims the education system, including universities, is used by the 'dominant classes' to promote and perpetuate their particular cultural capital, from generation to generation. By imposing meanings, distinct forms of

expression and ways of thinking, this ‘symbolic violence’ allows the dominant classes to maintain the ‘power relations’ between the two groups, through the exclusion of working-class cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Consequently, people from different socio-economic backgrounds develop different habituses, in relation to the field of university. Those from the middle- and upper-classes are more likely to consider university as ‘the natural thing to do’ as it is part of their class and family ‘tradition’. The cultural and social ‘rules of the game’ have been passed on from generation to generation in a form of ‘cultural reproduction’ so the idea of university does not feel ‘alien’ but the ‘natural’ step to take. Middle-class students gain this cultural capital through a combination of: well-informed, university-educated parents; peers with similar expectations and aspirations; and high achieving schools, leading to a ‘middle-class habitus’ in preparation for elite universities life (Whitty et al., 2015).

Conversely, those from working-class backgrounds do not develop the same ‘feel’ for the university ‘game’ as it is not a traditional route to take. These families struggle to access information and social networks which provide the guidance and opportunities available to their middle-class peers (Ball et al., 2000; Reay et al., 2005). As a result, disadvantaged students may decide university is either ‘not for them’ or may not even think about it at all (Noble & Davies, 2009; Maton, 2012). This chimes with Purcell et al. (2008) where findings showed, of those students from ‘higher managerial and professional’ backgrounds, 47% chose to apply because ‘it is the normal thing for somebody like me’, compared with 23% of those students from ‘routine manual’ backgrounds.

This also chimes with findings from Harwood et al. (2017) where disadvantaged students’ perceptions of university were gathered. In this Australian study, 263

disadvantaged young people, aged 11-24, were interviewed across five states. The participants said their images of a university came from advertisements, television programmes, computer games and films. Further, the students 'overwhelmingly' had negative perceptions of university. When asked to imagine what university is like, responses included: "Intimidating people", "it smells like hospital"; "Heavy books….lots of people"; "Busy, busy, busy"; "Having to rush around"; "No free time"; "I see students walking around getting lost trying to look for their classroom"; "Students lugging around books" and "Huge buildings". In addition, when asked if they talked about university with 'those around them', the students answered 'resoundingly' no. Higher education was not discussed amongst the students, their families or the wider community, leading them to believe such a path was 'unthinkable'.

Those working-class students who do enter the unfamiliar field of a university may experience a 'clash' of habitus and field, giving rise to feelings of uncertainty and insecurity (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Reay et al., 2009; Li, 2013). Furthermore, if these feelings persist, it can make it very difficult for students to succeed (Zimdars et al., 2009). This feeling of being a 'fish out of water' was expressed in a case study by Reay (2017) when a university student, from a working class background, wrote about his first term at a Russell Group university:

> It has been a really scary and stressful first term. I didn't really have a clue what to expect, everything has been tougher than I was expecting, and I still haven't settled in. It doesn't help that there is no one like me here (p. 113).

It appears this student certainly was feeling the uncomfortable 'weight of the water' by not having a 'feel for the game'. This highlights the importance of timely advice

and guidance to provide students with the cultural capital of what to expect so they feel more assured and less anxious when taking their first step into a university.

Bourdieu's theoretical perspectives are not without their critics (Croce, 2015). For example, Archer (2010) claims the habitus is overly deterministic and questions its relevance today as 'times have changed'. She asserts, in advanced, capitalist, democratic countries, 'socialisation practices' and 'the social orientations of the majority' have altered significantly from the late 20th century (p. 272). Others question the claim habitus theory can explain the motivations behind a person's actions, without the person, themselves, being aware of them (Gerrans, 2005). Furthermore, a number of sociologists have criticised Bourdieu's theory, claiming elements of his texts are unclear. Examples of this include Heath et al. (1982) who state they are 'couched in obscure, ill-defined language' (p. 88) and Hammersley et al. (1981) claim Bourdieu is 'often vague, and sometimes inconsistent in his use of terms' (p. 92).

Influence of family and friends

Family support has a significant impact on the likelihood of a student, from a disadvantaged background, entering university (Bowers-Brown, 2006). In a report by Connor et al. (2001) the authors assert it is 'vital' for these students to have at least one family member in support of their aim to attend university. Furthermore, this was more important when students were 'breaking barriers of tradition', associated with social class, as they had to be 'very determined in the face of opposition from their community as-a-whole' (p. 41). This view of being 'atypical' in the community is expressed by a participant, in a Forsyth and Furlong (2003) study:

> I think that (small town) is a really bad place because it does have a kind of mind set where if you do move away and if you do want to go into

> higher education and everything people do think that is just completely sad (p. 219).

Disadvantaged students' families may also expect them to seek employment after completing their school education (Boudon, 1986). A study by Bowers-Brown (2006) suggested this may be associated with the immediate need for an additional income, a fear of getting into debt and the idea of participating in higher education being an 'alien' concept. However, despite this pressure, there are studies showing how disadvantaged students have been able to 'break the mould' and, not only attend university, but thrive. In one such study, Reay et al. (2009) interviewed graduates from working-class backgrounds who had 'almost superhuman' levels of determination, motivation and resilience to achieve success 'against the odds'. The authors suggest these 'strangers in paradise' had managed 'tensions' between habitus and field from an early age, developing the academic dispositions and 'reflexive' habituses needed to succeed in the field of higher education.

Similarly, in Pitman's (2013) study, a graduate from a disadvantaged background, described his determination to go to university from 'a very early age', despite it being 'something completely foreign' to his background:

> I didn't know a lot about universities, but I'd seen them on TV….I thought it looked fantastic….Somehow I got hold of this brochure….I took it home and read it over and over. I knew I was going to university…. (p. 38).

Furthermore, students with relatives and friends who are, or who have been, at university have access to a wealth of information on what it is like there, gaining a greater understanding of what to expect (Archer et al., 2003). In a study by Connor et al. (2001) findings showed these family and friends were very 'encouraging' about their experiences of university and could provide 'down-to-earth' information on 'what it was actually like' being a university student. This passing-on of higher education

knowledge from relatives, friends and neighbours, was termed ‘hot’ or ‘grapevine’ knowledge by Ball and Vincent (1998, p. 377). They argue it is seen as ‘more reliable’ than ‘official’, ‘cold’ information produced by schools and other educational institutions. This chimes with Connor et al. (2001) who suggested students from lower social class backgrounds viewed the opinions of people they trusted as more influential, compared with prospectuses and guides.

A study by Davies et al. (2014) found a ‘substantial’ association between parental education and intention to apply to university. Findings also suggested students who were more committed to applying to university had high expectations of a ‘graduate premium’ due to greater cultural capital and access to information from parents. Furthermore, Demack et al. (2012) found students with ‘highly educated’ parents were more likely to go to a Russell Group university and, furthermore, those who engaged with activities ‘culturally valued’, such as ‘reading for pleasure’ and playing a musical instrument were more likely to be accepted at elite universities, although this was a largely indirect relationship.

In addition, Bowes et al. (2015) examined why disadvantaged students did, or did, not choose to follow a university path. The researchers found, for students who did not go on to university in the UK, it was common for parents, or members of the wider family, to have had ‘little or no’ experience of university. These students were still supported by their families but, instead of being encouraged to go down a particular route, parents would ask them to base their decisions on ‘what they felt they wanted to do’. For those disadvantaged students who did choose to apply to university, it was common for one, or more, parent to have been in an occupation which requires a degree and who thought it would be a valuable experience for their children to have. Where neither parent had been to university, they very much encouraged their children to ‘take up the opportunity they never had’. Friends also

exerted an influence on students who went to university. If their peers went, they too followed this path but the authors note students could 'go against their peers' if the 'motivation and aspirations are strong enough'.

Being the first in a family to want to go to university can make this aim challenging as, although their families may be supportive, they may not have the level of first-hand, 'grapevine' knowledge of university, compared to counterparts who do have this advantage (Ball et al., 2002; Gofen, 2009; Reay et al., 2009; Stephens et al., 2012; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). Further, Purcell et al. (2008) findings showed 34% of students, with parents who went to university, felt their parents had a 'big influence' on their choice of institution, compared with 25% of 'first-generation' students. This is where the school has a key role to play in developing wider participation initiatives, ensuring all students have access to such cultural capital (Connor et al., 2001; Haggis & Pouget, 2002; Harwood et al., 2017). Another point on first-generation, working-class university entrants is, although this may be a source of great happiness for the family, the student may feel a 'burden of responsibility' due to family expectations of success, eventually leading to them 'dropping out' (Quinn, 2004).

The role of parental aspirations in encouraging disadvantaged students to go to university has been the subject of much research. The notion that parents from these backgrounds have low aspirations for their children, has been criticised by Goodall (2017). The author suggests, what is lacking, is not high parental aspirations for their children but the knowledge of how to realise them. During a large study by Hansen et al. (2010), 13244 mothers of 7 year-old children, across the UK, were asked for their views on educational aspiration. Respondents were classified into two groups to reflect Family Income Poverty: 'not in poverty'; and 'in poverty'. When asked if they wanted their children to go to university, an equal

proportion of 96.7% of mothers said they did, in both groups. This chimes with a study by Ule et al. (2015) across eight European countries. The findings showed a majority of parents, from all social groups, had high educational aspirations for their children, recognising 'the all-encompassing importance of a good education'. However, Goodman et al. (2010) suggest parental aspirations 'vary strongly' by socio-economic background. Findings showed 81% of the 'richest' mothers said they hoped their 9 year-old would go to university, compared with just 37% of the 'poorest' mothers. The authors suggest this 'adverse' attitude is one of the most important factors accounting for lower attainment, among disadvantaged students, aged 11.

Student Aspirations

The assumption that disadvantaged students have lower aspirations, compared to their more-affluent peers, has been the grounding for a number of policy-makers in the UK. The drive has been to address this 'poverty of aspiration' so more disadvantaged people go on to university. For example, the UK Government (2003) White Paper on widening participation, states:

> It is especially important that those who come from families without a tradition of going to higher education, and whose aspirations are low, are supported both in achieving their full potential before university, and in aspiring to go on to further study (Department for Education and Skills, p. 69)

Further, Milburn (2009) states 'We have to…find new ways of systematically raising the aspirations of those youngsters and… mentoring programmes can be extended to raise the aspirations of disadvantaged children' (p. 8). Researchers such as Schoon (2006) also suggest lower aspirations among disadvantaged students.

However, this notion has been widely criticised in the sociological literature (Keller & Zavalloni, 1964; Archer et al., 2003; Burke, 2012; Gewirtz, 2001) and the link between socio-economic background, aspiration and attainment has also been questioned (Gorard et al., 2012; Baker et al., 2014). In contrast to the 'poverty of aspiration' thesis, there is an ever-growing body of evidence suggesting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds do have high aspirations for university (Kintrea et al., 2011; St Clair & Benjamin, 2011; Cummings et al., 2012; Harrison & Waller, 2018). In a large UK study by Atherton et al. (2009), 610 Year 7 students, from 27 different schools across three different areas of the country, took part in activities to gather their views on a range of educational and careers issues. Findings showed a high proportion of students, 75%, wanted to go to university with a majority saying it was because it would help ensure particular employment goals. Furthermore, disadvantaged students were 'as likely to want to go to HE' and aim for 'high status jobs' as their more advantaged counterparts.

However, high aspirations alone are not sufficient to ensure disadvantaged students go to university (Campbell & McKendrick, 2017). Indeed, they may be short-lived if students (and their parents) lack the knowledge of how to realise them (Menzies, 2013). This chimes with Cummings et al. (2012) who assert the importance of keeping aspirations 'on track' by making them seem achievable. Furthermore, Bok (2010) suggests disadvantaged students do have aspirations for university but 'may have less developed capacities to realise them'. The author uses the analogy of a play to illustrate the point, with the disadvantaged student being an actor expected to perform with 'no rehearsal' and 'minimal script'.

Recent research suggests young people are well on the way to making choices about future careers before Year 9 of secondary school (Bowes et al., 2015). The researchers suggest this is the time when hopes and motivations are forming, stating

the ‘pre-GCSE timeframe is a key point in establishing a young person’s educational and career aspirations’ (p.62). Goodman et al. (2010) concur with this, highlighting the importance of raising aspirations for university, from primary school onwards. Despite this, findings from Atherton et al. (2009) showed Year 7 students, who wanted to go to university, had little idea of the steps needed to pursue this path. This highlights the importance of early engagement with disadvantaged students, including through university outreach programmes, to help them understand what university is like and what is required to get there (Milburn, 2012; Wilks and Wilson, 2012).

Tuition fees and debt

University tuition fees were introduced across the UK, in 1998. Prior to this, higher education was free at the point of use with means-tested support for living costs. Students were now required to pay an annual, upfront fee of up to £1000 towards the cost of tuition, depending upon family income (Bolton, 2018). Initially, there were concerns of a consequential decrease in the number disadvantaged students choosing to apply to university (Chowdry et al., 2013). However, findings from Ramsden and Brown (2007) showed the relative participation rate of disadvantaged students did not decline but continued to be ‘largely stable’. Suggested explanations for this, put forward by Chowdry et al. (2013) include the fact tuition fees made up a ‘relatively small proportion’ of the total cost of university and students may have been planning ahead, expecting ‘substantial returns on their investment’. In 2006, fees increased to a maximum of £3000 per year and upfront payment was abolished. Instead, the tuition fee loan system was introduced, with repayments made when graduate earnings were over a certain threshold. In 2012 and 2017, fees were raised again to a maximum of £9000 and £9250 per year, respectively, along with an

increase in the repayment threshold. Means-tested maintenance grants, to help disadvantaged students with living costs, were abolished from 2016 and replaced by maintenance loans.

There were concerns the prospect of debt would deter disadvantaged students from applying to university (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Callender & Jackson, 2005; Jones & Thomas, 2005; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). However, despite slight falls in the number of all applications, in 1998, 2006 and 2012, the overall trend has been an increase in university entrants (Hubble and Bolton, 2018). Furthermore, the researchers assert there is no evidence suggesting a negative impact of tuition fees on students from 'low socio-economic groups' with the proportion of university entrants, from these backgrounds, increasing over time. There has also been a sustained increase in the number of entrants from areas of England with historically lower participation rates (Harrison, 2019). This suggests disadvantaged students are not deterred from university by the cost and future debt. Indeed, in an Esson and Ertl (2016) study, potential undergraduates generally accepted the future debt, viewing a degree as a vital investment for securing future employment. This chimes with Harrison et al. (2015) where many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds accepted this debt as it would enable them to 'access higher-level careers'. Further, Harrison (2019) suggests the increased demand for graduate jobs and 2008 global financial crisis have led disadvantaged students to view going to university as an insurance to protect against falling living standards in the future.

In contrast, there is research suggesting tuition fee debt has been a deterrent. In a study by Davies et al. (2008), views of a large sample of school and college students, aged 16 to 20, from two urban areas of the Midlands, were gathered. Almost two-thirds of students, who decided not to apply to university, said 'avoiding debt' had influenced their decision 'much' or 'very much'. Findings from Davies et al.

(2014) suggested students, who were ‘unsure’ about going to university, gathered less information and were ‘much more sceptical’ about the ‘wisdom’ of accruing the associated debt.

Furthermore, analysis does suggest disadvantaged students graduate with a significantly larger debt than their more-affluent counterparts (Pennell & West, 2005). Indeed, as Belfield et al. (2017) point out, the abolition of the maintenance grant means disadvantaged students ‘graduate with more debt’ as they turn to maintenance loans instead. Graduates from the poorest 40% of families left university with average debts of around £57000, compared with £43000 for those from the richest 30% of families. This could be a deciding-factor when it comes to location of study too. Research findings suggest disadvantaged students are more likely to live at home and apply to a local university, compared to their more-affluent counterparts. This may be due to the extra living costs and accompanying debt associated with studying further from home (Mangan et al., 2010; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018).

Regarding financial assistance, many universities offer disadvantaged students opportunities to apply for bursaries and other financial support. However, frequently, unclear information and complex application processes mean students either think they are ineligible or do not apply (Callender, 2009; Callender, 2010; Dearden & Jin, 2014). This highlights the importance of accessible, clear financial support systems. Obviously, any remaining debt, from tuition fee and maintenance loans, is written-off after 30 years but the disparity between this ‘burden’ for disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged graduates is stark.

Type of school

Evidence does certainly suggest the type of school a student attends can be a factor in determining whether or not they gain a place at university. Students from state-funded schools are far less likely to enter universities, compared to counterparts from fee-charging independent schools (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018). In 2018, 65.9% of state-school students entered university, compared to 84.6% of their independent school peers. This gap also appears to be widening at 13.1% and 18.6%, for 2009 and 2018, respectively (Department for Education, 2019b).

A significantly larger proportion of students enter high tariff universities from the independent sector, compared with the state sector. In 2018, only 18.1% of state-school students entered these institutions, compared to 56.9% of those from independent schools. Moreover, this proportion gap, of around the mid- to late-thirties, appears to have persisted over the last decade and even widened with figures for 2009 and 2018 at 35.5% and 38.8%, respectively (Department for Education, 2019b). This is highlighted by Harrison (2019) where he refers to the 'demographic composition' of high tariff universities as having 'barely changed in twenty years', with the increase in number of disadvantaged students entering universities 'focused in lower-status universities' (p.759). An important point to raise here is students at independent schools are generally from the upper/middle classes and there are no FSM students at these institutions. Furthermore, Archer (2007) asserts working-class people have a 'common sense knowledge of the hierarchy of institutions and they 'know' that this hierarchy offers them a 'bum' deal in that only 'crap' universities are open to them'. This chimes with Croxford and Raffe (2015) who state this 'iron law of hierarchy' is 'unchanging, pervasive, and empirically robust' (p.1637).

Prior attainment

Poor achievement in secondary school seems to be the most significant barrier to university for disadvantaged students. Chowdry et al. (2013) tracked approximately one million students in England, aged 11 to 20, by using administrative education data. This enabled them to analyse both institutions attended and attainment, over time. Their findings showed disadvantaged students performed worse than their more-affluent counterparts in both GCSEs and A-levels, confirming 'socio-economic differences emerge relatively early in individuals' lives' (p. 454). This point is echoed by Crawford et al. (2017) who tracked students taking their GCSEs in 2008. Findings showed only 19% of the poorest fifth of state secondary students progressed to university, compared with 56% of the richest fifth of state secondary students – a 37% difference. However, when GCSE attainment was controlled for, so students with similar results were analysed, the socio-economic gap between the participation rates fell to approximately zero. This suggests 'there is no difference' in the likelihood of a poor or rich student, with similar exam results, entering university and, therefore, secondary school attainment can explain 'virtually all' of the observed socio-economic gap in higher education participation (p. 76).

Others suggest the differences begin early. Anders (2012) suggested the large gap between entry rates of students from high- and low-income families, to Russell Group universities, can be attributed to prior attainment as early as age 11, suggesting the gap emerges 'at or before the point of application'. Consequently, lower prior attainment by Year 7 may prevent a disadvantaged student from achieving the entry requirements for a university place later on. This, again, highlights the importance of early intervention to tackle the causes of underachievement.

In contrast, Jackson et al. (2007) state it would be ‘a serious error’ to focus entirely on attainment differences to explain the entry gap between socio-economic groups. They suggest disadvantaged teenagers are less likely to take ‘educationally more ambitious’ options, such as choosing to study A-levels, even when their attainment would make these routes possible. They assert up to half of the decision-making gap is a result of factors other than prior attainment, such as a lack of resources and information. Furthermore, although the role of prior attainment in explaining the gap between entry rates is supported by Jerrim and Vignoles (2015), their findings also suggest parental education ‘strongly predicts’ higher education participation. Consequently, the authors recommend interventions based upon low attainment and parental education.

What has been the impact of widening participation initiatives on encouraging disadvantaged students to go to university?

There have been a number of widening participation initiatives designed to encourage more disadvantaged students to go to university. However, with limited evidence of impact, it is challenging to identify the most effective approaches (Milburn, 2012). Indeed, Torgerson et al. (2015) reviewed national and international research on widening participation programmes and concluded ‘We found no UK-based studies evaluating access strategies and approaches using robust designs to establish effectiveness’ (p. 8). Nonetheless, a number of initiatives have been reviewed, in an attempt to evaluate efficacy, including: The Sutton Trust Summer School Programme; the Aimhigher Programme; and campus visits.

The Sutton Trust Summer School Programme

Since 1997, the free Sutton Trust Summer Schools (STSS) programme has provided the opportunity for Year 12 disadvantaged students to participate in a one-week residential course at 'partner' universities. During their stay, students: experience academic 'taster' sessions; take part in social activities; gain advice on completing UCAS applications; and receive guidance on financial support, including how to apply for bursaries. Eligibility criteria includes: attended a state-funded school; strong academic performance; has received free school meals; would be the first-in-family to attend university; ever been in care; and has received the 16-18 bursary (The Sutton Trust, 2020).

Findings by Hoare and Mann (2011) suggest Summer School attendance provided a 'modest but real boost' to engagement with the university application process. Compared to unsuccessful Summer School applicants who met the criteria, attendees had higher rates of application and entry rates to 'elite' universities. The authors acknowledge the reasons for this are unclear but they suggest it may be due to the dispelling of 'myths and mysteries' surrounding life at university, together with the opportunity to spend a week with a 'congenial, collegial and mutually-energising community of young people' whom they may stay in touch with by becoming undergraduates (p. 84). Further, according to The Sutton Trust, 62% of Summer School students enrol at 'a leading university' and 'our students' are four times more likely to receive offers from 'leading' universities, compared to their peers (The Sutton Trust, 2020).

However, Byrom (2009) questions whether Summer Schools 'attract the people they are charged to help', suggesting schools should identify students who would benefit 'more evidently' from the programme. In this study, 16 students were tracked for 18

months, after attending a Summer School. The participants had, indeed, applied to university but it is suggested they had all considered university as their 'next logical step' well before the Summer School anyway.

Aimhigher Programme

In 2004, Aimhigher was launched as a widening participation initiative co-funded by The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Through 42 partnerships of schools, colleges, universities and local authorities, the aim of the programme was to support disadvantaged students, aged 14 to 19, to progress to university. Partnership budgets ranged from £600,000 to over £3.5 million with activities, including careers guidance, mentoring schemes and summer schools. However, Milburn (2012) suggests the 'quality' of these partnerships varied considerably with some delivering 'inferior' activities. Moreover, Aimhigher was criticised for not providing clear evidence for effective strategies as it failed to 'systematically and robustly' evaluate its programme (Milburn, 2012). Furthermore, the absence of adequate tracking systems prevented Aimhigher from gauging the impact of its activities as they had no way of knowing if a student, who had taken part in an Aimhigher programme, had progressed to university (Doyle & Griffin, 2012). This, together with high administrative costs, led to its abolition in 2011.

Nevertheless, there are a number of examples of Aimhigher's impact on aspiration. In a review of Aimhigher, Doyle and Griffin (2012) assert successes were 'localised' and 'cumulative' but difficult to measure in 'narrow, macro cause and effect terms' (p. 85). A study by Hatt et al. (2008), suggested the majority of teachers from 98 schools in the South West, believed Aimhigher had raised aspirations of students, leading them to 'see themselves as people who could go to university' (p. 136).

Additionally, Hatt et al. (2009) highlighted the positive impact of Aimhigher summer schools, suggesting they replicated university life so effectively as to 'transform participants' learner identities' so they felt confident about 'fitting in', both academically and socially (p. 333). The abolition of Aimhigher led universities to express concern that networks would 'fade' and levels of collaboration would decline (Milburn, 2012).

Campus Visits

In addition to summer schools, the impact of one-day campus visits has been subject to research. In Australia, a study by Fleming and Grace (2015) analysed the views of secondary school students, from 'financially disadvantaged' backgrounds, before and after a day at the University of Canberra. The students were all from Years 8 to 12, with the majority from Year 9 (age 14 or 15). Findings suggested, despite its 'brevity', the 'first-hand' experience of a campus visit enabled the students to 'imagine themselves as university students'. This 'psychological transformation' resulted in students being more likely to 'plan' to go to university in the future (p. 82). However, the authors did acknowledge the reasons for this were unclear. This chimes with Archer et al. (2003) where views of disadvantaged graduates on university open days were analysed. One participant stated 'You have really got to come and feel the atmosphere' (p. 117). These examples of university visits demonstrate the importance of providing the opportunity for students to actually experience a university instead of simply being told about it (Milburn, 2012). This chimes with Atherton et al. (2009) where the majority of Year 7 students said activities where they could 'see or experience future educational pathways' would be most useful (p. 4).

It does seem one-off experiences can have a positive effect in raising aspirations by enabling students to 'imagine' themselves actually being at a university. However, Armstrong and Cairnduff (2012) assert the 'long history' of 'one-off or short-term' activities had 'not resulted in significant change' to the proportion of disadvantaged students choosing a university education (p. 921). The authors argue, instead, for universities and schools to form long-term, meaningful partnerships, with 'deep and serious' engagement. This chimes with Milburn (2012) who suggests university/school partnerships should be 'structured and sustained' instead of 'disparate and superficial' (p. 36). Also, Hatt et al. (2009) assert interventions designed to increase the higher education participation rate should not be 'one-off' experiences but, rather, a 'series of steps' designed to create, personalise, develop and consolidate aspirations. Furthermore, Campbell and McKendrick (2012) suggest 'sustained engagement' with universities can have a 'positive impact' on raising awareness of university for disadvantaged students. Finally, Walker and Mkwananzi (2015) highlight the importance of universities going into schools to ensure disadvantaged students gain an understanding of university life. This was seen as particularly important where students did not have the 'financial resources' to attend open days.

Literature Review Summary

I can now summarise the literature review in relation to the four questions highlighted in my Introduction:

1. What are the benefits of going to university?
2. Is there a gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students participating in higher education?

3. What factors influence the participation rate of disadvantaged students in higher education?
4. What has been the impact of widening participation initiatives on encouraging disadvantaged students to go to university?

Evidence does, generally, suggest there are many benefits from going to university, both for the individual and society as-a-whole. These include; increased earnings; greater employment prospects; better physical and mental health; driving economic growth; and a greater propensity to vote and volunteer. However, although the number of disadvantaged students following this path has increased over time, there is still a persistent gap between the participation rates of these students and their more-affluent peers. Furthermore, the largest gap is in the South-East of England, where School X is. It also remains the case a student from an independent school is far more likely to gain a place at a high tariff institution than one of their state sector counterparts.

I have presented the theoretical perspective of Pierre Bourdieu on Cultural Reproduction Theory as a possible explanation for why disadvantaged students may believe going to university is 'unthinkable'. I have also explored the debate around the notion of a 'poverty of aspiration' among disadvantaged young people, suggesting this focus for policy-makers may be misplaced. Evidence suggests the level of family and friends' education influences the accessibility of university knowledge through social networks. A lack of this 'hot' knowledge (Ball & Vincent, 1998) can prevent the high aspirations of students and their parents from becoming a reality and it can create particular challenges for those who are first-in-family to enter university.

Furthermore, the introduction and subsequent raising of tuition fees does not appear to have resulted in a decrease in the participation rates of disadvantaged students. Indeed, the trend has been an increase in numbers but there is evidence suggesting the prospect of post-graduate debt can be a reason why some disadvantaged students choose not to apply to university. However, with all this taken into account, evidence suggests low prior attainment is the most significant barrier to higher education for disadvantaged students (Chowdry et al. 2013). This is recognised as a school X and national concern which must be addressed if we are to close the participation gap.

I also explored the literature on widening participation initiatives and found little evidence for effective strategies. Experiential activities, such as summer schools and campus visits do seem to have a positive impact on enabling students to imagine themselves actually going to a university but the literature suggests these opportunities, alone, are not enough. Rather, by collaborating together, schools and local universities have the opportunity to develop a longer-term programme of innovative activities, formed through sustained partnerships. Furthermore, the earlier this can begin, in secondary schools, the more effective it could be in raising awareness and aspirations for university, particularly before GCSE option choices are made.

Finally, the review indicates little research has been carried out with Year 7 students so this project provides an excellent opportunity to contribute in this area.

Research Questions

As a result of this literature review, I decided to focus on developing a project designed to raise the awareness of disadvantaged Year 7 students of university. Further, by gaining this insight, I hoped the students would aspire to follow this

pathway in the future. The planning and delivery of this would be carried out in collaboration with the Education Liaison Officer at a local university, University Y and the following research questions would be addressed:

1. What are the perceptions of Year 7 disadvantaged students of university, before the intervention?
2. To what extent do Year 7 disadvantaged students aspire to go to university, before the intervention?
3. Do Year 7 disadvantaged students perceive any barriers to higher education?
4. To what extent can a collaborative project, delivered with a university partner, raise Year 7 disadvantaged students' awareness of, and aspiration for, higher education?

The next section details each step of the methodology employed, including the forms of data collected to address each of the above questions.

Methodology

Introduction and Timeline for Plan 1 and Plan 2

As detailed above, the participants for this project would be Year 7 disadvantaged students and I begin this Methodology sections with an introduction to two plans: Plan 1; and Plan 2.

Plan 1 was the original methodology devised before the national 'lockdown'. I planned to conduct small group interviews, at the start of the project, in order to gather the students' perceptions of university and address research questions 1, 2 and 3. This would be followed by a series of awareness-raising interventions, delivered in collaboration with the Education Liaison Officer (ELO) of a local university (University Y). These included four Awareness workshops, delivered at

School X, and a University Y campus visit. The impact of these interventions, on raising awareness of higher education, would be measured by students completing an Impact Questionnaire after each activity. Following the campus visit, the ELO and I would have delivered a parent/carer workshop to share the students' experience with their families and also use the opportunity to raise parents' awareness of higher education at the same time. Finally, I would have conducted another round of small-group interviews with the students to evaluate the impact of the project on raising their awareness of, and aspiration for, university. Both the Impact questionnaires and final round of interviews would provide the qualitative data to address research question 4.

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, School X and University Y closed on Monday 23rd March 2020, as part of a national 'lockdown'. The initial, small-group interviews and first three workshops had taken place by this point but the other planned activities had to be cancelled. However, I devised an alternative plan, Plan 2, to ensure the project could continue and data could still be collected to address research question 4. This involved the creation of Awareness worksheets which the students could access, complete and submit on-line. As an alternative to the originally-planned campus visit, one of the worksheets included a virtual campus tour activity, where students could explore University Y and other institutions at home. Furthermore, as an alternative to the final round of small-group interviews, students were asked to complete an on-line Project Evaluation Questionnaire so the impact on awareness and aspiration could be measured. Table 1 sets out the timeline for Plans 1 and 2, in relation to my four research questions:

Table 1 – Timeline for Plan 1 and Plan 2

Date	Intervention Event	Data Collection Method	Research Question Addressed
Plan 1 – before the national 'lockdown'			
10th & 11th February	Initial Small-group interviews with Year 7 disadvantaged students	Interviews recorded on mobile phone	1, 2 and 3
12th February	Workshop 1 – 'Introduction to Higher Education'	Impact Questionnaire completed by every student at the end of each workshop	4
26th February	Workshop 2 – 'The Range of Universities and Courses'	Impact Questionnaire	4
11th March	Workshop 3 – 'Exploring Personal Interests'	Impact Questionnaire	4
25th March	Workshop 4 – 'Career Opportunities after University' **(Cancelled)**	Impact Questionnaire	4
29th April	University Y Campus Visit and Meeting Undergraduates **(Cancelled)**	Impact Questionnaire completed by every student at the end of the visit	4
May – date to be confirmed	Parent/Carer Workshop **(Cancelled)**	Impact Questionnaire completed by parents/carers	4
May – date to be confirmed	Final Small-group interviews **(Cancelled)**	Interviews recorded on mobile phone	4
Plan 2 – devised in response to the 'lockdown'			
23rd April	Three Awareness worksheets sent to participants to complete and submit on-line – due on 30th April	Students completed questions and submitted on-line	4
7th May	Project Evaluation Questionnaire sent to participants to complete and submit on-line – due on 13th May	Students completed questions and submitted on-line	4

I will now provide a full account of the methodology employed for Plans 1 and 2, including a justification for each step, detailed ethical considerations, any limitations and the data analysis approach.

Plan 1 Methodology

Securing the partnership with the ELO

An essential element of this practitioner research was the collaboration between myself and the Education Liaison Officer (ELO) of University Y. I identified University Y to approach as it is close to School X and, as I was hoping to build a sustained partnership, this seemed a sensible step. I telephoned the ELO to explain the rationale behind the project and invite him to take part. I was delighted he was enthusiastic, both about the idea of collaboration and developing a long-term relationship with a local secondary school. He was also keen to work with Year 7 students, agreeing on the importance of raising awareness as early as possible to address the participation gap. The ELO explained he could only work with students from disadvantaged backgrounds as this is a key criterion for this type of collaboration with schools. I explained the project would be open to disadvantaged students only and the partnership was secured. We agreed to discuss the plan in a week so the ELO could consider possible activities and check his availability for the coming months.

In our follow-up conversation, we agreed Plan 1 (see Table 1). The findings of the initial small-group interviews would be shared with the ELO to inform the planning of the Awareness workshops. This would ensure any emerging gaps in knowledge and misconceptions of higher education could be addressed. The findings from the workshop questionnaires and final round of small-group interviews would also be

shared with the ELO so we could evaluate the overall effectiveness of the project together.

Gaining project approval

After agreeing the activities with the ELO, I applied for CUREC approval. My application contained full details of the agreed collaboration, including all aspects of the methodology and ethical considerations. I included: project information leaflets, for students and their parents; the formal collaboration request letter for University Y; and the Headteacher letter, seeking permission to carry out the research at School X. When CUREC approval was granted, I arranged a meeting with the Headteacher to discuss the project in detail. He was very positive about the research and agreed all aspects of the methodology. After signing the approval letter, he wished me well and said he was very much looking forward to discussing the findings. Following Headteacher approval, I emailed a formal collaboration request letter to the ELO, containing the agreed project details. He returned a signed copy the same day so the project could now commence.

Sampling

Using Free School Meal Status (FSM) as an indicator of disadvantage

The participants in this research were disadvantaged Year 7 students. In this year group, all 58 Pupil Premium students have Free School Meal (FSM) status. They are eligible for free school meals as their families receive a range of means-tested state benefits, due a lower income. There are several advantages of using FSM status as a measure of disadvantage in England. Firstly, it has been officially collected, every year, since 1989 and, as schools are required to report figures for FSM students, the data is widely available (Goodall, 2017). This long-term data

allows analysts to consider trends at the institutional, local, regional and national level. Further, a number of other countries offer similar models of support for students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, including the USA, France, Italy and Japan. The official procedures regarding entitlement, registering for and taking the meal has provided researchers, in these countries, with a pre-existing, useful and wide-ranging indicator of student disadvantage (Gorard & Huat See, 2013).

A limitation of using such a binary measure as FSM status to measure socio-economic status is it divides students into only two groups (FSM and non-FSM) while deprivation is, clearly, much more nuanced than this (Goodall, 2017). Additionally, through the receipt of other benefits, FSM families may not actually be amongst the poorest in the country (Hobbs and Vignoles, 2010). Nevertheless, taking all this into account, I decided to use FSM status in this project as it is widely used in research and is still judged to be a 'useful and clear stratifying variable' of disadvantage (Gorard, 2012, p. 1003).

Inviting the students to participate

My next step was to discuss the project with the Head of Year 7. I assured her students would not be told of their FSM status during the project. Some, or all, may have been unaware so finding out, via myself, may have given rise to potentially negative consequences.

Next, I requested, via form tutors, to meet all 58 disadvantaged students over two morning registration times. I introduced the project, describing it as an excellent opportunity to find out about university and help them make well-informed decisions in the future. I assured them: they would remain anonymous; the information gathered would be confidential; and they could withdraw from the project at any

stage. I also explained the small-group interviews would be recorded on my iPhone and the recordings would be downloaded onto a laptop, kept securely in my office. Furthermore, I informed the students that the workshops would take place during Wednesday afternoons so they would be required to 'miss' lessons to participate. Finally, I invited any questions before asking students who wished to participate to stay behind while the others were free to go back to their tutor rooms. Out of the 58 potential participants, 30 agreed to take part and I gave them the information leaflet to discuss with their parents/carers at home. I made it clear, should their parents/carers not wish them to participate, the relevant section of the leaflet could be completed and returned to me. In the event, one parent did not wish their child to take part with the signed leaflet returned to me the next day. Consequently, I now had 29 participants - 19 girls and 10 boys.

A limitation of this sampling method is the possibility of inherent bias. By asking students to volunteer for this project, those who put themselves forward may have already had aspirations for (and an awareness of) university. Those lacking this awareness, who could benefit the most, may have decided not to participate. Also, students who were undecided or apprehensive about taking part, may have been swayed by their friends choosing not to. To mitigate the effect of this, I introduced the project in a positive manner, attempting to be as reassuring as possible. By explaining they could withdraw at any time and by holding the workshops and interviews in school time, I hoped more students would feel comfortable about participating.

Deciding upon small-group interviews

Small-group interviews have a number of advantages. They allowed me to gather detailed, rich qualitative data with the opportunity to clarify and explore answers

through follow-up questioning. Allowing students to express themselves fully in an interview, improves the validity of the responses. I could also resolve any misunderstanding and answer any questions, both of which would be more challenging with a questionnaire. Additionally, in an interview, students are expressing themselves orally rather than having to write down their responses. Written responses would have taken longer to gather and may have been challenging for some students, preventing them from presenting their thoughts and ideas fully, compromising validity (Cohen et al., 2018). Another advantage is I could be sure of obtaining a full set of data, as not all students may have fully completed a questionnaire (Cohen et al., 2018). Conducting small-group interviews, rather than interviewing 29 participants, individually, would also save a considerable amount of time.

However, I was very conscious, as the interviewer and a member of the Senior Leadership Team, my position may cause a degree of intimidation for students if the interviews were conducted individually. Consequently, they may have provided responses they believed I expected or wished to hear, rather than an honest answer, reducing validity. Small-group interviews may reduce the potential for this social desirability effect as students may feel more comfortable expressing themselves when joined by their peers. Indeed, Morrison (2013) states 'interviewing children in a group of peers and friends can ease discomfort or nervousness in an interview' (p. 324). Although I took steps to help ensure students felt at ease, my position may still have influenced the responses provided. If, as a result, these were not honest views, the validity of the data would have been compromised.

A potential limitation of small-group interviews concerns the group dynamic. For example, a member, or members, of the group may dominate the discussion, so less assertive students feel reluctant, or miss the chance, to share their thoughts.

Further, students in the group may choose to simply agree with dominant peers rather than sharing their honest ideas, reducing validity. Indeed, Morrison (2013) states, referring to group interviews, 'some may dominate the conversation and some may feel very exposed and vulnerable in front of their peers' (p.324). In contrast, Watts and Ebbutt (1987) suggest 'one dominant person' in the group can be beneficial as, by putting forward opinions, the discussion can start to 'take off'.

In order to create a positive, productive group dynamic, I liaised with the Head of Year 7, requesting her advice on the make-up of each group. Using her extensive knowledge of the individual students and their relationships with one another, she recommended particular groupings to ensure a 'balance' of personalities, leading to students, hopefully, feeling comfortable enough to answer questions freely and honestly.

Conducting the small-group interviews

As mentioned above, the 29 students were placed in interview groups in collaboration with the Head of Year 7 to help ensure a productive group dynamic. There were five groups of five and one group of four:

- Group 1 – two girls, two boys
- Group 2 – three girls, two boys
- Group 3 – four girls, one boy
- Group 4 – three girls, two boys
- Group 5 – three girls, two boys
- Group 6 – four girls, one boy

Each interview lasted 30 minutes and took place in my office, over two days, during lessons. A limitation of this is the negative impacting on learning as students are

missing class. However, I had secured the agreement from the Headteacher to do this and all teachers affected assured me catch-up work would be provided so students would not 'fall behind'. Furthermore, before each interview began, I offered students the opportunity to withdraw from the process and attend the lesson they were missing but none chose to do so. In addition, I felt, if the interviews took place during break or lunch, students would be more reluctant to participate as they would be missing their social time with their friends. Also, if a student had forgotten about the interview, I could locate and collect them more easily in lesson-time, rather than trying to find them on the field, playground or in the canteen. Emails were sent to the subject teachers and tutors on the days of the interviews, reminding students to come to my office at a set time.

Students taking part in group interviews may feel 'apprehensive, self-conscious and stressed, and consequently may perform poorly' (Leshem, 2012, p. 3). To help ensure they felt comfortable, I welcomed the students in a jovial, positive manner and we all sat around a round table in my office. I thanked them for agreeing to take part in the interview and reminded them again of the project details. Furthermore, I explained their responses would help to shape the future workshops so their openness, participation and honesty would be greatly appreciated. It was very important to state this as a key precondition for interview success is the students believing they will benefit from the outcome (Altricher et al., 1993).

Next, I explained the interview would be recorded on my iPhone, reassuring them the recording would be downloaded onto my school laptop which is kept in my lockable desk draw, in my lockable office. I reminded them the responses would be anonymous and confidential and the recordings would be erased at the end of the research. Audio-recording the interviews had many advantages. Firstly, the interview could be conducted in a more conversational, free-flowing, style as I didn't

have to stop to write down the answers provided. If students had seen me writing down responses, they may have felt more self-conscious, affecting their willingness to volunteer answers, compromising validity. Indeed, a number of students said they had forgotten they were being recorded as they were 'getting into' the discussion. This suggests they felt relaxed and able to be honest with responses, increasing validity if the data. Of course, there may have been students who were more apprehensive and self-conscious with a recording taking place but this was not obvious during any of the interviews. Another advantage of audio-recording is the ability to capture every word when transcribing the interviews. I could slow down the recording to ensure the data was accurately recorded. Furthermore, I asked the students to say their names before answering questions and I also said their names if I had any follow-up questions. In this way, I could identify who was saying what when transcribing. I could also pick-up the emphasis, tone and inflection of an answer which may have been missed if I had been writing them down.

Before commencing, I asked if they all understood what I had said and answered any clarification questions. I then gave the students the opportunity to opt-out of the interview and return to their lessons, saying it would be 'absolutely fine' to do so. I was pleased all students decided to continue with the interviews, giving their informed consent to take part (British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical guidelines for educational research, 2011). This ethical approach was fundamental for establishing trust between myself and the students, ensuring they felt able to be as honest as they could be (Menter et al., 2011).

I began each interview by explaining I would be asking a series of questions and there were no right or wrong answers, just their honest thoughts. I explained the ground rules, including everyone would have the chance to answer a question and nobody should talk over someone else. I checked the understanding of each

question and provided clarification, if needed. The questions (Appendix 1) were posed in clear, student-appropriate language, to help students understand what was being asked of them (Krähen-bühl & Blades, 2006). Throughout the interview, I ensured every student had the opportunity to answer each question by asking individuals if they would like to respond. If they did not volunteer a response, I would ask, in an encouraging manner, if they would like to add anything with certainly no 'pressure' for an answer. Students could add anything throughout the interview by putting their hand up but, by asking every individual, this minimised the opportunity for one student to dominate the conversation. Finally, at the end of each interview, I thanked the students for taking part and for providing such carefully considered responses.

Transcribing and content analysis of qualitative data

The interviews were transcribed on the day they took place. The recording app used enabled me to slow down the speed to 0.5X, making the process easier as I could type as the recording played. Further, to avoid interviewer-bias, I recorded the students' own words and not my own interpretation of meaning. When the transcription stage was complete, the content analysis technique of coding was used to analyse the data. As Hycner (1985) recommends, I began by reading and listening to each interview several times to identify common themes of responses, related to my research questions. I could also identify any responses unique to one, or a minority, of the interviews or participants. Additionally, I was open to detecting themes seemingly unrelated to my research, providing insight I had not expected. Having identified the themes, I was then able to analyse the frequency with which these occurred during each interview.

Delivering the Awareness workshops

Following the analysis of the transcripts, I shared the findings with the ELO via a telephone conversation. We discussed the misconceptions and gaps in knowledge, revealed by the interviews to inform the planning of the four Awareness workshops. Each one-hour workshop took place at the same time every fortnight, on a Wednesday afternoon. Unfortunately, this meant students missed the same lesson for each workshop but we were constrained by the availability of the ELO. To mitigate the effect of this limitation, subject teachers ensured catch-up work was set.

The workshops took place in a classroom based at School X. Before each one began, I reminded the students of the importance of making the best possible impression for our visitor and encouraged them to participate as fully as possible to gain the most from this opportunity. They sat at pre-arranged tables, in the same small-interview groupings suggested by the Head of Year 7, to help ensure a positive group dynamic. Additionally, each student and the ELO had a name sticker so everyone could address each other by name. Once settled, I introduced the ELO and he then delivered the session. At the end, all students completed the Impact Questionnaire so the ELO and I could evaluate the impact on raising awareness. This is set-out in the 'Findings and Discussion' section.

Workshop 1 was a general introduction to higher education. The ELO delivered a presentation covering: what a university is; common concerns, including living away from home and student loans; support services available; benefits, including careers opportunities and higher salaries; and the personal benefits, including clubs/societies, making new friends, developing independence and 'the chance to study and work in a field that you love'. Students had many opportunities to actively take part, including answering and asking questions and completing a quiz, at the

end, with a box of chocolates for the winning team. The following day, the ELO emailed to say “I really enjoyed yesterday’s workshop and am very much looking forward to spending more time with your Year 7s”.

In Workshop 2, students used prospectuses to explore the range of universities and courses available. The ELO brought along a wide range for each group to explore and asked the students to find a course beginning with each letter of the alphabet to complete a writing frame – the first team to do this won another box of chocolates. This certainly did help the students to engage with the prospectuses and focus their minds on the task. After this activity, students were free to discover more about any university or course that interested them.

Workshop 3 allowed students to focus more on courses of particular interest to them. To facilitate this, the ELO asked them to complete a personality quiz created by Hodgson (2006). He guided them through a series of questions which led them to a ‘personality type’ with suggested ideas for degree courses. The students then used prospectuses to investigate these courses more fully. A small number of students didn’t feel the personality type and/or courses were for them and so explored their preferences instead. The ELO emphasised the quiz outcome was not always 100% accurate and should be viewed as simply a starting point to encourage self-reflection. There was an element of duplication with Workshop 2 here as students were exploring the prospectuses again but, nevertheless, the different focus justified this approach.

Plan 2 Methodology – alternative approach due to the national Covid-19 ‘lockdown’

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK Government announced a national ‘lockdown’ starting on 23rd March 2020. School and university closures meant it

would not be possible to go ahead with Workshop 4, the University Y campus visit, parent/carer workshop or final small-group interviews. I therefore devised an alternative approach to ensure the project didn't 'go cold'. This involved the creation of Awareness worksheets as an alternative to Workshop 4 and the campus visit. The students accessed, completed and submitted these worksheets on-line. Finally, as an alternative to the final round of small-group interviews, students were asked to complete an on-line Project Evaluation Questionnaire. These tasks provided data addressing Research Question 4.

Awareness Worksheets

As students were no longer coming to school, lessons were being set by teachers and uploaded onto our on-line homework platform. I decided to create three Awareness worksheets, for students to complete, covering key areas of higher education: 'Getting into University' (Appendix 2) focusing on entry requirements; 'The Cost of University' (Appendix 3) focusing on the student loan system; and 'University Life' (Appendix 4) focusing on accommodation, clubs/societies and student support. As an alternative to the campus visit, the 'University Life' worksheet included a link to the University Y website where students could take a virtual tour of the campus and accommodation. They could also use a link to the UCAS 'virtual tours' website to explore other institutions. All three worksheets had questions for students to complete in order to promote engagement with the information. I emailed drafts to the ELO who provided detailed feedback, including suggested amendments.

Before uploading the worksheets to the on-line platform, I discussed them with the Head of Year 7 and she confirmed all participants regularly accessed the on-line platform at home. If this had not been the case, I would have posted the worksheets home, with a stamped-addressed envelope so they could return them. I uploaded all

three worksheets as one task, with the deadline for completion in seven days. I requested the students complete them with their parents/carers as this would promote dialogue at home and provide an alternative to the parent/carer workshop. I also emailed the parents/carers, individually, to inform them of the task and request they support their child to complete the worksheets. By contacting each parent/carer, I hoped to ensure as high a return as possible.

Submission and analysis of the completed worksheets

I only received completed worksheets from 19 out the possible 29 participants. There are a number of possible explanations for this lower than expected return. At this unprecedented time of the pandemic, some students may have been feeling anxious and finding the transition to on-line learning challenging. This task may have been particularly difficult for students who were sharing computers with other family members at home. Indeed, I received emails from parents of two participants, requesting they be withdrawn from the project due to the extra workload. I replied to reassure them and the students that this was 'absolutely fine'. Very sadly, a participant had suffered a bereavement in the family and his mother emailed to inform me he was not feeling able to complete the project worksheets. Clearly, it would have been inappropriate to continue to request the worksheets from the other participants as they may also have been experiencing similar challenges and I certainly did not want to add any further 'pressure'.

Finally, I messaged the students to thank them for completing the task and analysed the worksheets by assessing their answers.

Project Evaluation Questionnaire

The final stage of the project was evaluating the impact on raising awareness of, and aspiration for, university. Originally, I had planned to conduct small-group interviews again to gather this data. However, as this was now not possible, I devised a Project Evaluation Questionnaire for students to complete and submit on-line (Appendix 5).

Originally, I had intended to contact the parents to seek permission to interview each student on the telephone. However, when I telephoned the first parent, she informed me the student felt uncomfortable about talking to a teacher on the telephone, saying she was shy and nervous about doing so. On reflection, I should have anticipated this as it was an unusual request and, if students did feel nervous about talking to me on the telephone, they may not have provided honest, detailed answers, compromising the validity of the data. I reassured the parent this was absolutely fine and, instead, decided to upload the questions to the on-line platform, requesting students complete and submit them in a week's time. Unfortunately, as this was not a small-group interview, I could not ask further questions to explore individual answers more deeply or clarify any misunderstandings students had. However, the open questions posed would hopefully provide rich, valid data as the students could elaborate on their ideas.

Submission and analysis of the Project Evaluation Questionnaire

Of the possible 26 returns from participants, after the three withdrawals, I received a lower return of 16 completed questionnaires. For reasons highlighted above, students may have felt unable to complete these at this time. Again, I did not 'chase' for submissions as this may have exacerbated the situation for both students and parents. Furthermore, these submissions were all from students who had also completed the Awareness worksheets and I would suggest the positive feedback I

provided, after receiving these, helped to ensure the same students completed the questionnaires. I analysed the questionnaire data by carrying out content analysis through coding again. I read through the submissions a number of times to identify any common or individual themes across the data set. I then compared this data with the small-group interview data to measure the impact of the project on raising awareness of university. These findings are presented in the next section.

Findings and Discussion

I now present my findings and discussion, in relation to both the literature review and my research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Year 7 disadvantaged students of university, before the intervention?
2. To what extent do Year 7 disadvantaged students aspire to go to university, before the intervention?
3. Do Year 7 disadvantaged students perceive any barriers to higher education?
4. To what extent can a collaborative project, delivered with a university partner, raise Year 7 disadvantaged students' awareness of, and aspiration for, higher education?

Research Question 1 - What are the perceptions of Year 7 disadvantaged students of university, before the intervention?

Through the content analysis of the small-group interview transcripts, I identified a number of common themes regarding the participants' perceptions of university. The majority of students: believed the main reason for going to university is to 'get a good job'; did not know any family members or friends who had been to university; did not discuss university with family or friends; believed university to be a big, busy and,

frequently, stressful place to be; and had formed their ideas of university from TV and films.

When asked what they thought a university was, the majority of students (23 of the 29) said it is where people go to get a 'better job'. Responses included "You can get better, more professional jobs", "A place to get a better job", "You can get a degree so you can get a better job, I think", "It helps you get the job you want" and "it's the place where you go to choose and study your job you want to do in the future". This chimes with the findings of Purcell et al (2008) where nearly 80% of university applicants said they wanted to go to university to 'get a good job'. Also, in the study by Atherton et al (2009) a majority of Year 7 students said going to university would enable them to secure particular occupations in the future and Harrison et al (2015) found many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds believed going to university would allow them to access 'higher-level careers'.

Only three students mentioned going to university as an opportunity to learn at a higher level and deepen knowledge of a subject. Responses include "I think it's where you learn more. You can learn different stuff there, more than college", "When you choose a subject you want to do and you focus on that subject". Again, this is in-line with the findings of Purcell et al (2008) where only 15% of university applicants said they wanted to go to university to study a particular subject. It also backs-up the assertion by Archer et al (2003) that many working-class students focus on the perceived economic benefits of going to university, rather than studying a subject they enjoy.

The vast majority said they did not know of any family members or friends who were at, or had been to, a university, echoing Bowes et al. (2015). The vast majority also said they did not talk about university with family or friends. When asked where

their ideas of a university came from, the majority said from “adverts”, “TV shows” and, in five cases, “Harry Potter films”, with one student saying “I just picture it as the movies picture it to be”. These findings echo Harwood et al. (2017) and Pitman (2013). When asked to describe university, the responses were very brief and uncertain, suggesting a lack of secure knowledge in this area. The majority of students viewed it as a large, busy and, frequently, stressful place to be, also chiming with Harwood et al (2017). Responses included “It’s a big place and there are massive classrooms”, “I imagine it’s quite a big, big place but that kind of scares me”, “More people, more classes and busier”, “It might be a bit hard”, “There might be a lot of pressure”, “A bit scary with people you don’t know”, “It’s loads of work”, “Stressful”, “It could be stressful because you might get lost”, “Stressful because you might have to live in a room with three other people” and “You probably won’t be able to sleep properly as you’re trying to focus on the next day”. Furthermore, the vast majority of students were unable to name any universities, apart from Oxford and University Y and they confirmed this was only because I had mentioned them.

These findings suggest the majority of students lacked the knowledge of what higher education is actually like. As their family and friends had not been to university, these students were not able to access so-called ‘grapevine knowledge’ (Ball and Vincent, 1998) passed down from people they know who have studied there. The struggle to access this information, compared to their middle-class peers is highlighted by Ball et al. (2000) and Reay et al. (2005). This is a concern as Bowes et al (2015) found it was common, for students who chose not to apply to university, to have family members with little or no experience of higher education. This also chimes with Davies et al. (2014) and Demack et al. (2012). Indeed, in the absence of such knowledge and no discussion about university at home, students were

gaining ideas of higher education through television shows and films instead, which may be inaccurate.

Furthermore, following Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, without the social capital providing this knowledge, students may start to lose interest in university, believing 'this isn't for the likes of me' as their family members haven't been. This is also in-line with Boudon (1974), Bowers-Brown (2006), Noble and Davies (2009) and Maton (2012). Indeed, with no family or friends having followed this path, the students may have developed their negative perceptions, such as university being a stressful place to be, as they search for reasons to explain this lack of family participation. Consequently, students may distance themselves from this path, failing to develop a sufficient understanding of the 'rules of the game', or cultural capital, to see themselves actually applying to, or being successful, at a university. The literature also suggests even if a disadvantaged student does follow the higher education route, insufficient awareness may result in a 'clash' between habitus and field, making it a very uncomfortable, stressful and challenging time. This was highlighted by Reay et al. (2009), Reay (2017), Li (2013), Zimdars et al. (2009) and Forsyth and Furlong (2003).

So, these findings suggest, while Year 7 disadvantaged students do see university as a route to a 'better job', the vast majority were unable to describe a university with confidence or accuracy. A significant factor contributing to this lack of awareness is the lack of social capital enabling the students to benefit from family members passing down their first-hand experience of higher education. Instead, the students had formed their views from watching television and films, including Harry Potter, which can be inaccurate and misleading. Students also perceived university as a large, busy and stressful place to be. This highlights the importance of providing early and effective higher education guidance in schools, as these students may not

be accessing this elsewhere. This will help ensure disadvantaged students have a good understanding or, as Bourdieu puts it, 'feel for the game', enabling them to see their 'future selves' not only going to university but feeling comfortable, confident and able to thrive there too.

Research Question 2 - To what extent do Year 7 disadvantaged students aspire to go to university, before the intervention?

Findings from the small-group interviews showed the majority of students (21 of the 29) wanted to go to university. As highlighted in the Research Question 1 findings, the vast majority said this was because they wanted to get a 'better job' but could not elaborate further. However, one student demonstrated her understanding that higher education was a necessary path for realising her particular career goal, saying "I want to be a dentist and you have to go to university to have that certain job". A minority of five students said they were unsure if they wanted to go to university with comments such as "Probably would but not sure", "I'm not really too sure as it's a few years away so I don't know", "I don't really know" and "I'm in the middle because it depends on what job I do". Furthermore, three students said they did not think they would need to go to university to achieve their employment goal. Their responses included "I want to be a footballer so I don't think I need to go to university", "Honestly, I don't think I would because, when I'm older, I want to be a mechanic or gas man or electricity man" and "I want to be a florist when I'm older so I don't really feel like I need to go to university".

These high aspirations chime with the findings of the Atherton et al (2009) study suggesting a majority of Year 7 students wanted to go to university and, furthermore, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds were 'as likely to want to go to HE' as

their more-affluent peers. This also concurs with research by Kintrea et al. (2011), St Clair and Benjamin (2011), Cummings et al. (2012) and Harrison and Waller (2018). In addition, Archer et al (2003), Burke (2012) and Gewirtz (2001) also challenge the notion that disadvantaged students have lower aspirations for higher education.

However, these findings are in contrast to those of Schoon (2006) and Harwood et al. (2017) which suggest lower aspirations among disadvantaged students. Further, this data challenges the premise, for a number of UK widening participation policy-makers (Milburn, 2009; UK Government, 2003) that the focus should be on raising the aspirations of disadvantaged students. Indeed, before conducting this project, I also subscribed to the 'poverty of aspiration' thesis among disadvantaged students so these findings were particularly illuminating for me. Furthermore, the high aspirations among the participants does not seem to 'fit' with Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory. These students are from disadvantaged backgrounds and yet they did not feel excluded from higher education, seeing university as a path they could indeed take, along with their more-affluent peers. This suggests Bourdieu over-polarises students from differing socio-economic backgrounds. Indeed, Archer (2010) claims the habitus concept (Bourdieu, 1992) is overly deterministic, questioning its relevance today.

Finally, high aspirations is, of course, a positive starting point but, as Menzies (2013), Cummings et al. (2012) and Campbell and McKendrick (2017) suggest, these may be short-lived if the students do not know how to realise them. This highlights the importance of early intervention to raise awareness of higher education as suggested by Bowes et al (2015), Goodman et al (2010), Atherton (2009) and Bok (2010). In short, a lack of awareness seems to be the issue to tackle among disadvantaged students, rather than a 'poverty of aspiration'.

Research Question 3 - Do Year 7 disadvantaged students perceive any barriers to higher education?

Content analysis of the small-group interviews revealed two main themes regarding perceived barriers to higher education: the inability to fund a university education; and failure to achieve the academic entry requirements.

The majority of participants believed a lack of funds would be a barrier to higher education as university is expensive and the fees have to be paid, up-front, by the student or their family members. Responses included “Some people might not have enough money to do it but they really want to go”, “They could be doing very good at school but their parents just don’t have enough money for them to go to university”, “I think you have to pay up-front”, “Some people don’t have enough money to go”, “I think you have to save up money to go”, “It could cost too much” and “some parents save money up for their kids to go to university”. Only two students demonstrated some awareness of student loans with comments such as “Don’t you get a student loan that helps you pay off the stuff?” and “You can get a student loan, I think, but you’d have to pay that off after a while”. As suggested by Davies et al (2008, 2014) this negative perception of the cost of going to university can be a major reason for many students deciding not to apply.

The other perceived barrier to university, arising from these interviews, was students failing to achieve the entry requirements. Comments included “I’m pretty sure, if you fail college, you can’t go to university”, “If you get really bad GCSEs, I think that would be a barrier to getting into university” and “Maybe you don’t do so good in your school or college” and “Don’t you need the right grades to go to university? GCSEs?” Although the majority of participants did have an understanding of the importance of high prior attainment in ensuring a student can enter a university (Chowdry, 2013;

Anders, 2012) none mentioned A-levels or demonstrated an understanding of the academic route from secondary school to university.

So, these findings suggest a lack of awareness of how a university education is funded, including the tuition/maintenance loan system and forms of financial support available, including scholarships and bursaries. There also seemed to be a lack of awareness of the academic route to university. Interestingly, none of the participants suggested either of these potential barriers applied to them. However, I would suggest, as disadvantaged students become more aware of their family's challenging financial situation, they may start to believe a university path is 'unthinkable' if their misconceptions are not addressed. If they continue to believe all fees have to be paid up-front with no understanding of the reality, some students may see higher education as 'out of reach' from the start as they believe their families could not afford it. This, again, highlights the importance of early awareness-raising strategies to help ensure disadvantaged students, and their families, do not disengage with the notion of higher education.

Research Question 4 - To what extent can a collaborative project, delivered with a university partner, raise Year 7 disadvantaged students' awareness of, and aspiration for, higher education?

I will now set out the findings addressing Research Question 4. The impact of the collaboration between myself and the ELO, on raising awareness of university, was measured using data from: the three workshop Impact questionnaires, completed before the 'lockdown'; the on-line Awareness worksheets; and the on-line Project Evaluation Questionnaire.

Findings from the three workshop Impact questionnaires

All three workshops were well-received by the students. All agreed/strongly agreed they: enjoyed the sessions; found them interesting; and believed, as a result of taking part, they had learned more about university. Workshop 1 was the introduction to higher education and the feedback comments suggest the participants enjoyed working with the ELO. They included: “I enjoyed finding out interesting facts about university”; “It was good and fun”; “I really like [ELO name] because he was really nice and I learned a lot more about university”; and “[ELO name] was really helpful and easy to understand”. During Workshop 2, the students explored the range of courses available using prospectuses and the feedback certainly seemed to show the students’ increased awareness of the choice of subjects offered at university. Comments included: “I found out you can study almost anything at university”; “There are lots of different subjects you can study”; and “There is a course for every letter of the alphabet”. Finally, Workshop 3 was the opportunity for students to focus on courses of personal interests, using prospectuses. They also completed a ‘personality quiz’ (Hodgson, 2006) to help them identify courses they may wish to explore. Overall, the majority of students found the quiz useful, with comments such as “The personality quiz helped me think of what courses I could do”, “I learnt about my personality and the courses I could do” and “I can do loads of courses”. The majority of student responses were also positive about the use of prospectuses, including: “The prospectuses gave me a lot of courses that I didn’t know you could study” and “I found many courses I could study in prospectuses”.

I emailed these findings to the ELO and we discussed them on the telephone between each workshop. These findings show a shift in understanding from the

initial, small-group interviews. The students were now talking about university as a place where one can learn about a wide range of subjects, rather than simply saying it's a place to 'get a better job'. Indeed, this was put very well by a participant who said "People mainly go to university to learn about the things they love". The notion of going to university to study a particular subject was highlighted in the findings of Purcell's (2008) study, where only 15% stated that this was the main reason for going. The positive attitude towards prospectuses is in contrast to findings of Ball and Vincent (1998) who suggest students may view such official, 'cold', knowledge as unreliable.

Findings from the on-line Awareness worksheets

As described in the Methodology, due to the 'lockdown' I devised three Awareness worksheets as an alternative to Workshop 4 and the campus visit. Each worksheet focused on a key area of higher education: 'Getting into University' (Appendix 2) including entry requirements; 'The Cost of University' (Appendix 3) including the student loan system; and 'University Life' (Appendix 4) including virtual campus tours, accommodation, clubs/societies and student support.

Unfortunately, only 19 of the 29 participants submitted completed worksheets, with possible explanations explored in the Methodology section. However, of the returns, 100% of the students had completed all the short-answer questions fully and correctly. This suggests a greater awareness of the key areas through effective engagement with the information provided.

The virtual campus tours on Awareness Worksheet 3

Findings suggest the virtual campus tours activity on Awareness Worksheet 3 had increased the students' awareness of the realities of university life. All students explored a range of universities and their comments suggest it was a positive experience. Examples include: "I enjoyed the tour and thought the universities were nice", "University Y has fantastic facilities on campus, loads of courses, large computer rooms and the campus is not far from home", "It was right in the middle of London and had amazing places to study", "I thought it was very big and clean" and "The town centre looks nice and the riverside is a nice place to take walks and hang out with friends".

Findings also suggest the students were actually imagining themselves staying in university accommodation when exploring them on-line. Responses include "I liked that they were en-suite, wouldn't want to share a bathroom", "It's nice but a bit small. I like that they have a desk to study", "The kitchen was really nice", "En-suite rooms are a great place to study alone" and "The University Y accommodation caught my eye with it being more modern with en-suite rooms, larger living area with big, shared kitchen area and BBQ outside". I also asked the students to explore the social-side of university life by looking at the range of clubs and societies available. Again, all students did this, listing a wide range of interests they would like to pursue, including kayaking, rock-climbing, kickboxing, horse-riding, film production and creative-writing.

These findings suggest the virtual tours have raised awareness of university life by helping students to visualise themselves there. This chimes with the findings of Atherton et al (2009) where Year 7 students said the most useful activities were ones where they could 'see or experience future educational pathways'. Furthermore,

they echo the suggestion by Fleming and Grace (2015) and Milburn (2012) that campus visits can enable students to imagine themselves actually being at university by actually experiencing it, instead of simply hearing about it.

Findings from the Project Evaluation Questionnaires

As detailed in the Methodology section, only 16 participants completed the Project Evaluation questionnaires. Nevertheless, findings suggest the project, as-a-whole, did raise their awareness of university. These findings are broken-down by the following questions asked: Do you feel like you know more about university now?; Why do people go to university?; How do students pay for the cost of going to university?; Have you discussed this project with people at home?; Would you like to go to university?; and How would you describe a university to another Year 7 student who wanted to know more about it?

Do you feel like you know more about university now?

All 16 participants said they were more aware of university now as a result of this project. Examples of responses include:

> I know more about university because I have done workshops, homework, researched different universities by going on virtual tours and learned about different courses from their websites. I didn't know anything about university but now I feel well-informed. (Year 7 student)

> I definitely think that I know more about university since we started this project because before, I didn't really know very much about university. (Year 7 student)

Why do people go to university?

Findings from the initial small-group interviews showed the majority of students focused on the topic of jobs alone for this question, with very little mention of the

learning opportunities and qualifications offered at university. However, when asked this on the Project Evaluation Questionnaire, an awareness of learning and qualifications now featured in 15 of the 16 responses, including “To further their knowledge in subjects”, “It’s like focusing on one subject and getting a better understanding of it”, “To specialise in a subject for a future career”, “To study to get a degree” and “To study a particular subject in depth”.

How do students pay for the cost of going to university?

The findings from the small-group interviews showed the vast majority of students had the misconception that university fees are paid up-front, having no knowledge of the tuition fee/maintenance loans system. However, 100% of responses to this question now mentioned student loans, including:

> They get a student loan from the government which they pay back when they have a well-paid job. Money from their wage is taken each month. (Year 7 student)

> You can get this thing called a student loan where the government then pays for you but then you have to pay it back for up to 30 years. (Year 7 student)

This suggests the initial misconception has been addressed with students now demonstrating a greater awareness of how university is funded.

Have you discussed this project with people at home? What do they think about it?

During the small-group interviews, the vast majority of students said they had not talked about university with anyone at home. However, these findings showed this had now changed with 100% of students saying they had discussed university with

family, as a result of this project. Furthermore, they all said their parents felt very positive about them taking part. Responses include “I spoke to my mum and dad and they were happy I was involved”, “They think it’s a good educational experience” and “My parents are so happy I got chosen because they didn’t get to go”. More detailed responses included:

> Yes, they think it is an amazing opportunity to find out about this and that I am lucky to have this information because it is kind of a head start. (Year 7 student)

> I have discussed and worked on the project at home with my mum and dad. They thought it was a very good course with good detail for me to understand the higher education and university steps. (Year 7 student)

It does seem this project has been the stimulus for conversations at home and, as the majority of participants would be first-in-family to go to university, it is important families are able to access such information (Ball et al., 2002; Gofen, 2009; Reay et al., 2009; Stephens et al., 2012; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). As Goodall (2017) suggests, it is not high parental aspirations which are lacking but the knowledge of how to realise them so I hope this project has enabled both students and parents to gain a greater understanding of the path to higher education.

Would you like to go to university?

The vast majority of students said they wanted to go to university at the start of the project, in the small-group interviews and, at the end of it, they still felt the same with 15 of the 16 respondents saying they still wanted to go. One student responded:

> I can't wait, honestly, because I'm interested in so many things and there are courses for everything. (Year 7 student)

Again, this certainly does not suggest a 'poverty of aspiration' among disadvantaged students, echoing the findings of Atherton et al. (2009), Kintrea et al. (2011), St Clair & Benjamin (2011), Cummings et al. (2012) and Harrison & Waller (2018).

<u>How would you describe a university to another Year 7 student who wanted to know more about it?</u>

During the small-group interviews, at the start of this project, the students were asked to describe what they thought a university was like. As detailed earlier in this section, the answers provided were brief and frequently negative. However, at the end of the project, the responses were much more detailed, suggesting the students had gained an increased awareness of university life and the opportunities it brings. The common themes from students are encapsulated in this quote from a participant:

> I would explain to them about the information I've learnt such as grades, courses, accommodation, expenses, university life and student loans. I would tell them they'll have to cook and do their washing for their own benefit. And university is good to further your studies and have a good career. I will tell them to look at what course they want to study and look at the universities that have those courses. And if they want a Lamborghini then they must go to university. (Year 7 student)

This response and the majority of others certainly suggest: a greater awareness of university life, such as the entry requirements, courses, living accommodation and funding; and the reasons for going to university. The responses also suggest the students were able to visualise their future, independent, selves, not only at university but beyond. Compared with the initial small-group interviews, there were

now no negative comments expressed about university and I was pleased to see no mention of perceptions drawn from television or films.

Sharing findings with the ELO

Sharing the findings with the ELO was key when evaluating the effectiveness of the project. The ELO was pleased with the positive impact of the project on raising awareness of university and confirmed he would very much like our collaboration to continue on a long-term, sustained basis. He commented that, often, he only had "quick burst" opportunities to visit schools with one-off workshops or assemblies. However, with this project, he felt he was able to "build those relationships with students over a longer period of time" and have "more meaningful conversations" as they got to know him. The ELO had consented to my quoting him in this report. This chimes with Hatt et al. (2009) Armstrong & Cairnduff (2012), Milburn (2012) and Campbell & McKendrick (2012) who caution against 'one-off' events and, instead, recommend a series of activities as part of a sustained, long-term partnership. The ELO said one thing he would suggest changing, if possible, was the length of the workshops so the students had more time on the activities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the initial aim of this project was to raise the awareness of, and aspirations for, higher education among disadvantaged Year 7 students. This was to be achieved through a series of awareness-raising activities, delivered in collaboration with a local university partner. However, the findings show my initial assumption of a 'poverty of aspiration' among the disadvantaged students seems to have been misplaced with the vast majority wanting to go. Rather, the issue was not about aspiration but awareness, with the initial small-group interviews exposing a number of misconceptions and gaps in knowledge around higher education. On

balance, the findings suggest this project has been successful at raising awareness of university. This is of paramount importance for closing the participation gap between disadvantaged students and their more-affluent peers. Research suggests high aspirations may be short-lived if students have little knowledge of how to realise them and, further, this work should begin as early as possible. I very much hope, by participating in this project, the Year 7 students, who wish to follow this path, have the knowledge and understanding to keep this ambition very much alive. Indeed, it seems to have capitalised on the already existing aspirations as expressed by one student who said, at the end of the project, “I can’t wait, honestly”.

Key to the success of this project was the collaboration with the ELO and, indeed, we have agreed to work together again on a long-term basis. This will include the facilitation of our originally-planned campus visit, when the time is right, so the participants of this project can still gain this valuable experience. This Year 7 project will be delivered again next year but, due to social distancing measures, it may not be possible for the ELO to visit School X. We have already discussed alternative arrangements, including the use of on-line technology so he can deliver the workshops remotely. In the absence of programmes such as Aimhigher, I have successfully formed a long-term partnership with a local university and I will be sharing this work with colleagues in local secondary schools to espouse the benefits of such a collaboration. I hope this will encourage them to also grasp the opportunity to forge a partnership with University Y, or another institution, as I strongly believe such initiatives are key to addressing the participation gap.

Ideally, every Year 7 student, disadvantaged and non-, would have the opportunity to learn about university through such a collaboration and I am very conscious a number of disadvantaged students opted not to take part in this project. I have therefore discussed an alternative with the Head of Personal, Social and Health

Education (PSHE) at School X who will introduce a ‘University’ topic in the Year 7 and 8 schemes of work. This will include lessons based upon the Awareness workshops, worksheets and virtual campus tours delivered as part of this research. Further research in this area could include gathering the perceptions of disadvantaged Year 10 and 11 students on higher education in order to compare them to this study. For example, it would be very interesting to see if the high aspirations observed with this Year 7 group are also reflected in later years and the reasons for this being, or not being, the case. I would also like to see if there are any differences in the perception of higher education between girls and boys in the older year groups.

Of course, higher education is not the only post-16 option for students and, indeed, this path is not for everyone. There are many examples of individuals who have played a full part in their communities and achieved their ambitions without going to university. The emergence of an ‘intellectual snobbery’ must, of course, be avoided and this is why there can be an understandable caution when presenting such evidence. Nevertheless, I would argue, to not present the case, would be to deny disadvantaged students the knowledge and understanding necessary to make an informed decision on their educational trajectories.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Small-group Interview Questions

1. What do you think a university is?
2. Why do people apply to go there?
3. Do you know of any universities and can you name any?
4. Can anyone go to university? Why or why not?
5. Are there any barriers to university? Is there anything that might stop somebody going?
6. How is university funded?
7. Would you like to go to university?
8. Could you go to university if you wanted to?
9. What subject would you like to study at university?
10. What job would you like to have in the future?
11. Do you know anyone who has been to, or is at, university?
12. Do you, or have you ever, talked about university with people at home?
13. What do your friends think about university?
14. Can you describe what you think university is like?

Appendix 2 – Awareness Worksheet 1 'Getting into University'

Getting into University

Please go through this information with your parents/carers and have a go at the questions at the end to check your understanding.

Qualification Levels – please see the attached 'Qualification Levels' diagram

Most qualifications have a difficulty level. The higher the level, the more difficult the qualification is. Generally speaking, you need to gain the preceding level of qualification before gaining the higher level (for example, you need to have completed a Level 3 qualification before progressing onto your first year of university (Level 4).

Getting into university – 3 stages:

Stage 1 Level 2 Qualifications	**Stage 2** Level 3 Qualifications	**Stage 3** Level 4 (and above) Qualifications
School X **(GCSEs)**	College **(A-Levels/equivalent)**	University **(Degree)**

Level 8 is the highest you can go. This involves completing your Doctorate (also known as a PhD) and, if successful, you are awarded the title of 'Doctor' in a particular subject area e.g. Dr Smith. This is why you can have doctors at universities that aren't medical professionals).

Entry Requirements

Entry requirements are the qualifications you need to get into a university and these may vary with each one. It is important to check the entry requirements for any course by looking at the **university prospectus** which you can access on-line or order in the post. To see an example, you can view the University Y prospectus using this link:

University Y prospectus website page

In general, universities agree that students should have:

- At least two A-level (Advanced level) qualifications or equivalent, such as BTECs and diplomas.
- GCSE English and Maths, at **grade 4 or above**.
- Most students, who study A-levels, BTECs or diplomas, will go to either Reigate College or East Surrey College
- To study A-Levels at a college, you need a minimum of five GCSEs at grade 4-9 or above, including English Language.

Reigate College in Reigate, Surrey	**East Surrey College** in Redhill, Surrey
Reigate College: https://www.reigate.ac.uk/	East Surrey College: https://www.esc.ac.uk/

Questions

1. In general, what are the qualifications needed to get into a university? What are the three stages of getting into a university?

2. What grade do you need in GCSE English and Maths?

3. Please visit the websites for Reigate College and East Surrey College to look up different courses and their entry requirements.

4. What is the qualification level of:

- A-levels?
- GCSEs?
- PhD?

5. How can you find out the entry qualifications needed to study a particular course at a particular university? Please click on the link to access the University Y prospectus and have a look at the entry requirements for particular courses.

Appendix 3 – Awareness Worksheet 2 'The Cost of University'

The Cost of University

Please go through this information with your parents/carers and have a go at the questions at the end to check your understanding.

This topic can be scary and confusing, but that's ok (lots of people are in the same boat) and it's simpler than you think once you understand the main building blocks.

Most students will **study at university for three years** to gain their degree qualification.

Students at university have **two main** costs:

- **Tuition fees** (paying for the course they are studying)
- **Living costs** (paying for rent, food, books, travel etc)

There is a lot of financial help from the Government to support students, including:

- **Tuition Fee Loan** (money provided to pay for tuition fees)
- **Maintenance Loan** (money provided to pay for living costs)
- Please see the table below and the **Loan Repayment diagram (attached)** to find out how these loans are paid back

Key Facts	
✓ You **do not** have to pay the fees before you go to university	✓ **You stop repaying either when you've cleared your loan, or when 30 years (from the April after graduation) have passed**, whichever comes first. If you never get a job earning over the threshold, it means you won't have repaid a penny. ✓ It is predicted that most students going to university these days will not repay their entire loan within this 30 year term. ✓ Please see the **Loan Repayment diagram (attached)** which shows how this works.
✓ You start paying the loan back **after you leave** university	✓ **The Maintenance Loan is means-tested** which means the money you receive will depend on the income of your parents/carers. Students from low-income families will get the full loan.
✓ You only start paying the loan back **when you earn over a certain salary** (£26,575 per year from April 2020) ✓ The amount paid every month depends on the salary, not on how much was borrowed.	✓ Students can also apply for extra financial support, including: • **Fee waiver** – lower tuition fees • **Bursary** – help with tuition/living costs • **Scholarship** - help with tuition/living costs

	✓ These are typically offered and arranged directly with respective universities (not the Government) so the deadlines, amounts and eligibilities differ from university to university and from year to year.

Questions

1. How long do most students study at university for?

2. Do university students have to pay their fees before they go to university?

3. What are the two types of loans students can apply for to help with the cost of university? What do these loans help pay for?

4. When do students start to pay these loans back?

5. Will a student start paying the loans back if they earn £24,000 per year?

6. What happens to the amount you have to pay back after 30 years?

7. What are the three types of extra financial support students can apply for?

Appendix 4 – Awareness Worksheet 3 'University Life'

University Life

Please read through this information with your parents/carers and have a go at the activities to help you explore university life.

Remember, there are 167 different universities in the UK but each will offer a different student experience based on a number of factors such as:

1. The university size
2. Location
3. Campus type (inner city or rural)
4. The age of the university (older universities tend to offer more academic and traditional subjects; younger/newer universities tend to offer more practical and non-traditional subjects).
5. Facilities (both academic and non-academic)
6. Accommodation options

Therefore, if you are thinking about university, it's very much a case of thinking about the student experience that **you** want, and finding the university that will offer that.

Student life at University Y

'There's so much more to being a student than simply studying. University is about growing as a person as well as building your knowledge, and University Y offers a huge range of events, activities, places to visit and things to do. No matter what your hobbies and interests are there will be something to suit you, and plenty of opportunities to try something new' (University Y website, 2020).

Please explore the University Y website to find out more about student life and also watch the video clip to hear from the students themselves:

- ✓ Website link (Student life at University Y)
- ✓ Website link (Video)

Open Days and Virtual Tours

When choosing a university, I would very much recommend visiting at an **Open Day** and you can find the dates on each university website. These give you the opportunity to see the place for yourself, meet students and look at the facilities to help you make the **right decision for you**. You can also take an **on-line Virtual Tour** of a university by using the following link -simply click on the university you would like to explore:

https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/what-and-where-study/open-days-and-events/virtual-tours

Please take a Virtual Tour of University Y here: University Y website link

Accommodation

Most universities provide furnished (bed and desk etc.) rooms for first-year students in **halls of residence**, that are safe, comfortable, and good value for money. The rooms may have an en-suite bathroom or there may have shared facilities. The kitchen is usually shared and there may also be a shared lounge.

Living in halls is a great way to get to make friends and can be great fun – you will be living with students from a variety of backgrounds and cultures on different courses.

Please use the link to take a **Virtual Tour** of the halls of residence at University Y: University Y website link

In the second and third year of university, many students move into shared houses with friends.

Of course, you may wish to stay **living with family** if the university is close-by.

Finally and very importantly…

The transition from school/college to university can be scary and difficult, but universities are aware of this and have lots of support measures in place to help you. These can include:

- ✓ Student Fees and Funding Teams
- ✓ Accommodation Teams
- ✓ Careers and Employability Advisors
- ✓ Disability and Mental Health Support Workers
- ✓ Diversity and Inclusion Consultants
- ✓ Academic Support Centres
- ✓ Faith and Spirituality Mentors
- ✓ Health and Well-being Services
- ✓ Mature Learner Support
- ✓ Care Leaver Support
- ✓ Students' Union

Please do explore these when you have a look at university websites.

Questions

1. What would be the important things for you to consider when choosing a university? What would you like it to be like there?

2. Please take a virtual tour of some universities, including University Y, using the link above? Which universities did you explore and what did you think of them?

3. Please take a virtual tour of University Y accommodation using the link above. What do you think of the halls of residence?

4. Which clubs and societies would you like to join if you went to a university?

Appendix 5 – Project Evaluation Questionnaire

1. Do you feel like you know more about university now? Why?
2. Why do people go to university?
3. How do students pay for the cost of going to university?
4. Would you like to go to university? Please explain your answer.
5. Have you discussed this project with people at home? What do they think about it?
6. How would you describe a university to another Year 7 student who wanted to know more about it?