

## **Widening access to higher education for BAME students and students from lower socio-economic groups: A review of literature**

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### **Abstract**

*Despite well documented and persistent inequalities in access to higher education (HE), the evidence base for widening participation activities remains weak. Recent changes to the state regulation of UK HE has renewed pressure on universities and other HE providers to develop effective interventions to tackle these inequalities, but with limited evidence of what works the risk of failure is high. Recent emphasis on robust systematic literature reviews of existing widening participation research has attempted to address this deficit, but typically focusses only on the few existing quantitative studies with an experimental or quasi-experimental design. This literature review is tailored to the needs of widening participation practitioners and aims to synthesise a broader range of evidence with a view to assessing a more comprehensive approach. With a focus on access and outreach for students with lower socio-economic status and for students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups, the authors consider the literature from the UK and further afield in relation to financial support, information, advice and guidance (IAG), mentoring, summer schools, and multi-intervention or 'black box' programmes. Drawing on realist approaches, the authors also consider the contextual conditions which may influence the success (or failure) of these interventions and should therefore be considered in the design and implementation of widening participation activities.*

Keywords: Widening participation; access; outreach; higher education; interventions

### **Introduction**

Access to Higher Education (HE) in the UK is highly stratified and/or hierarchical, with well-documented and persistent inequalities in relation to mature undergraduates (21 and over on entry), people from ethnic groups described as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME), individuals from lower socio-economic groups, care experienced and estranged individuals and students with a disability. In the 2017-18 academic year, there was a gap of 30.9 per cent between the most and least represented groups in HE (Office for Students, 2020). The Office for Students (OfS) asked HE providers to address these inequalities, both recognising the specific inequalities occurring in their own context, but also in relation to national targets around access, success and progression for particular student groups, in their Access and Participation Plans (APPs) (Office for Students, 2019).

This review is aimed at widening participation practitioners and focusses on widening participation for two particular demographic groups: students who identify as BAME and students from lower socio-economic groups. Young people with low socio-economic status (as measured by free school meal status) are less likely to enter HE by age 19 (Department for Education, 2018b). While BAME young people have overall higher rates of progression to HE than White students, BAME students are less likely to enter 'high tariff' institutions, there remains significant differences between different ethnic groups within the BAME category, and intersectional analysis has shown that gender (specifically being male) and lower socio-economic status are associated with lower rates of HE progression for many BAME individuals (Department for Education, 2018b). Working within a broadly realist paradigm, the importance of context in determining the likely success or failure of a particular intervention becomes a significant concern (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). With this in mind, the authors present a brief and critical summary of research exploring contextual factors which may support or inhibit access to HE for the target student groups.

## Methodology

A systematic approach was taken to identify suitable literature for this review. A literature review protocol was devised and utilised by the research team. This employed the PICO model (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome) developed for use in evidence-based reviews (Richardson et al., 1995). To ensure rigour, specified search terms were identified, inclusion criteria employed for abstract screening and data extraction forms used to support consistency in data collection. The literature was identified from key word searches in over 15 online educational databases and websites including ERIC, EThOS, SCOPUS, and Web of Knowledge. Abstracts were screened and included if they were produced between 1990 and 2020, were written in English, available to access online and explicitly stated a relationship to outreach or widening participation and a focus on students with lower socio-economic status and/or BAME backgrounds. After abstract screening, a total of 83 individual items met the requirements for inclusion. Following a further round of preliminary scanning of contents, the authors analysed 58 items. The literature referenced in this document has been identified within the references.

Unlike most existing literature reviews within the field, a broad typology of literature including peer-reviewed academic journal articles, grey literature such as reports and working papers published outside of academia, and doctoral theses were included to capture a broad spectrum of evidence and practices. These consisted of:

- 35 peer-reviewed journal articles
- 19 items of grey literature (reports)
- 4 PhD Theses.

## Results

### ***Financial support including bursaries, scholarships and grants***

In the days of AimHigher (2004-11), the forerunner to the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP: 2017 onwards) now known as UniConnect, financial support was understood to play an important role in widening access to HE amongst students experiencing disadvantage and large sums of money were allocated to access scholarships and bursaries in university Access Agreements (precursors to Access and Participation Plans). However, in recent years evidence has emerged in the UK to suggest that bursaries and scholarships are actually more impactful as a tool for participation and/or retention rather than access since there is often a lack of awareness amongst university applicants about financial support for HE at the point of application or entry (McCaig et al., 2016; Spacey and Sanderson, 2020).

A study for the Sutton Trust in 2008 which explored the perceptions of young people in urban areas of the Midlands discovered that “[b]ursaries only make a difference when they are large” (Davies et al., p.2) and may have the potential to influence the decision making of some groups, such as BAME young people, more than others although this study was based on perceptions and future intentions rather than their actual decisions regarding enrolment:

*“Only six percent of students from families with incomes of above £35,000 reported that bursaries would be a factor in their choosing a university (compared to eleven percent for an approximately ‘average’ student). However, for students from a Black ethnic minority our estimates suggest nearly thirty percent consider bursaries to be important”* (Davies et al., 2008, p.3).

Robinson and Salvestrini’s (2020) recent systematic review of evidence in relation to widening access interventions commissioned by the What Works? Centre for equality in HE, TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes), judges financial support as high cost with little impact on enrolment. TASO thus summarise it is a high cost intervention, with small positive impact on behaviours such as applying to HE, progression, completion, and attainment and note that there is little evidence of impact (TASO, 2020b).

### ***Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)***

IAG is the term used to describe the support that helps prospective students make informed choices about educational opportunities (TASO, 2020c). IAG is usually delivered by widening access practitioners when they visit schools and colleges and is incorporated into campus visits and open days. The literature suggests that IAG is most effective when it is targeted at those individuals who are not currently considering HE as they benefit the most from impartial guidance (Sosu et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2014). While targeted IAG for state school pupils can replace the

missing knowledge that more advantaged young people can obtain through their familial and social networks (Universities UK, 2016; Gao, 2018), other research suggests that some groups such as working class males don't access 'cold knowledge' (e.g. league tables), preferring 'hot, informal information or knowledge' derived from peers (Baars et al., 2016, p.15). Campbell and McKendrick (2017) found that students from deprived backgrounds tended to identify informal information sources (e.g. parents) as more helpful in decision making than formal arrangements such as careers advisors and outreach interventions. They suggest that sustained interventions seemed to be impactful (or were perceived to be by participants) as they increased awareness of university life.

Three studies in this review explored different ways of using IAG to increase access to HE. Sanders et al. (2017) detailed a large-scale RCT study undertaken by the Behavioural Insights Team who use behavioural science to help understand what types of information help young people make decisions about HE. Their study used a 'nudging' approach where targeted young people received a letter or letters from a current university student encouraging them to be more 'aspirational' i.e. apply to a more selective university. Although there was no statistically significant effect on outcomes, they did find that students were more likely to apply to a Russell Group institution and accept an offer. Arguably the young people they targeted were already likely to go to university, but this approach made them think about applying to a more selective institution. Similarly, Castleman and Page's RCT of text messaging as a 'nudging' technique in the USA was found to be effective at keeping students at risk of not taking up their places, on track over the summer, using a series of ten text messages (2015). Both studies noted that these were low cost, high impact interventions. Robinson and Salvestrini's review (2020) of the evidence in relation to IAG found that while low in cost; 'light-touch' interventions (such as provision of leaflets or information online) were unlikely to produce an impact on application or enrolment. However, tailored IAG which starts early (for example, at secondary school) can be effective.

Overall IAG has the best evidence base of all the interventions detailed here since there are a few robust research studies such as the two studies described above (TASO, 2020c).

### ***Mentoring including counselling, coaching and role models***

Many widening access and participation strategies include the use of mentoring, where pupils in secondary schools are mentored on a one-to-one basis usually by a current university student. Often these mentors are from a widening access or similar background themselves, and offer guidance in relation to future career goals, support to develop skills such as confidence and relevant job/study experience or help create a "sense of fit between participants and the university" (Crockford et al., 2017, p.63). However assumptions of "peer-sameness" between mentor and mentee may not be borne out in reality, with student mentors sometimes benefitting more from these interventions than the young people (Taylor, 2008), whilst some researchers have

questioned the effectiveness of peer-to-peer mentoring, reflecting that mentoring from non-parental adults is more effective (See et al., 2012).

Mentoring is also used as an attainment-raising activity, to help pupils improve their academic grades. Attainment at age 16 is a key predictor of participation in HE (Gorard et al., 2006) given the requirement for tariff points to obtain a place on an undergraduate programme. There is therefore a lot of support from the OfS and across the sector for universities delivering attainment raising activities in schools (Universities UK, 2016). Harrison and Waller, for example, advocate for attainment raising as an appropriate target for widening participation interventions (2018). However, the extent to which attainment impacts HE participation is disputed (Baars et al., 2016), and the relationship between attainment and participation is likely to be complex.

There appears to be limited evidence that mentoring may be effective, but the research suggests longer programmes make more impact (Wilson et al., 2014). An evaluation of a mentoring programme for Year 9 students (ages 13-14) which paired them with undergraduate students included twelve mentoring activities over two terms as well as campus tours, enrichment activities, career workshops and presentations to parents. Its purpose was to “expose participants to a range of new spaces, experiences and information that might lead to increased awareness of university life and study, the benefits of higher education and the pathways and supports available” (Lynch et al., 2015, p.6). However, the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires seemed to suggest that fewer mentees intended to go on to HE at the end of the programme than at the start whilst the qualitative data suggested they had more sophisticated understandings of their career options and how to achieve them.

Robinson and Salvestrini (2020) noted that much of the literature exploring the impact of mentoring and role models describes its positive impacts but these are not necessarily translated into increases in enrolments. Torgerson et al. (2014) also undertook a systematic review of access strategies and rated mentoring as one of the two best interventions, based on the strength of the evidence available in relation to academic performance and retention.

### ***Summer Schools***

Summer Schools offer prospective students a taste of university life including the academic side of degree level study as well as an insight into the social side of student living. They can include workshops, taster sessions and social activities (TASO, 2020e) and opportunities to meet with staff and current students. Some Summer Schools include elements of attainment-raising activity or focus on a specific subject or profession. They can help foster a sense of belonging or fit with an institution or HE more widely, through staying in student accommodation or taking part in social activities. In terms of evidence of their effectiveness, Gorard et al.’s systematic review (2006) noted that the research had tended to focus on participants’ perceptions of Summer Schools rather than their effectiveness. Byrom’s study (2009)

which tracked the participants of a Sutton Trust Summer School for eighteen months suggested that attendance may have impacted more on the decision of which university to apply to rather than whether to go at all. Unfortunately, the study did not explore pre- and post-Summer School attitudes and behaviours.

Robinson and Salvestrini (2020) concluded that Summer Schools are a high cost intervention which influence aspirations and confidence but that this does not necessarily translate into enrolment. TASO considers them high cost with a small positive impact on attitudes/aspirations and little evidence in relation to behaviour/outcomes (TASO, 2020e). The evidence base for Summer Schools is 'emerging' and as such TASO has recently commissioned a randomised evaluation of Summer Schools.

### ***Multi-intervention outreach or 'black box' programmes***

A combination of at least two interventions known as multi-intervention outreach or a 'black box' approach may combine at least two interventions including those detailed above – IAG, Summer Schools, mentoring including attainment raising and financial support as part of one programme. Hannon et al. (2017) described a widening participation programme in Ireland to raise aspiration to HE in general rather than to a specific HEI. This 'black box' included mentoring with a university student, visits, IAG and a student-led service project. Targeting low socio-economic status young people, it focused on developing social and cultural capital such as network building and trusting relationships. Using a case study approach in their paper, this qualitative study highlighted that this approach was successful in helping the participants develop the "capabilities identified as important to navigate higher education" (p.1240) but did not explore, purposefully, in order to provide "a counter-narrative to neo-liberal discourse in access to higher education which focuses on volume" (ibid.) whether the young people did go on to higher study, but they had developed "a sense of autonomy in their ability to make choices". This study also highlighted the difficulties facing evaluators in terms of unpicking which elements of multi-intervention outreach make the most difference in terms of impact. This was also evident in a study by Schultz and Sontag-Padilla (2015) of a multi-faceted programme delivered over several years in the USA with black males which included a multitude of elements such as mentoring, financial literacy, tutoring, exam preparation, attainment raising, identity development, communication, community and economic development but because data was not collected from the outset in relation to outcomes, it was very difficult to evaluate.

Robinson and Salvestrini (2020) deduced, from their systematic review of 92 items of widening access literature, that most of the interventions described were black-box interventions and that it was hard to work out which single components were the most effective and/or impactful. Other systematic reviews have noted that there were some statistically significant positive effects for 'black box' interventions but these programmes were developed and tested in the USA (Torgerson et al., 2014); Younger et al., 2019).

TASO rate multi-intervention outreach as high cost, with studies suggesting some small positive impact on aspirations/attitudes but mixed impact on behaviour/outcomes. They also caution that whilst the evidence suggests these kinds of programmes may have more impact than isolated interventions, because of their scale and cost, they must be carefully evaluated to understand which elements are the most effective in relation to widening access and participation (TASO, 2020f).

## **Key ideas about widening access to HE: contextual factors**

### ***The importance of family, community, and place***

Research supports the idea that for many students, links to, and support from, home are critical to enable them to access and complete their university studies (Wainwright et al., 2020). Some students, for example, working class males, may have a greater attachment to place, preferring to remain connected to and return to their homes (Baars et al., 2016). Successful widening access measures may involve working more closely with key influencers. For example, Raven (2018) highlighted the impact of parents and teachers on decision making and recommended providers work with both of these groups while Gao (2018) further underlined the importance of teachers in both the decision to go to university and of which institution to go to. Similarly, Thiele et al. (2017) highlighted that family perceptions of post-school destinations are critical to shaping young people's perceptions of the risks and benefits of attending HE. This is supported by Burke (2011), who also highlights how parental expectations are of demonstrable importance. In a US publication focussed on outreach with Hispanic communities, the influence of peers was a key factor in decision making about tertiary education, and the authors associated low community awareness of HE with low progression rates (Saenz and Ponjuan, 2012).

The geographical context is also increasingly perceived as a key factor in supporting access to HE, suggesting that universities must shape their interventions in response to local characteristics and concerns:

*“The existence of ‘cold spots’ where higher education participation is low illustrates the complex and important relationship between person and place. Effective responses to inequality in higher education must therefore be grounded in localities or regions.”* (Universities UK, 2016, p.5).

### ***Belonging, feeling ‘othered’ and perceptions of risk***

For potential students from groups underrepresented in HE, going to university may be considered risky, since it involves immersive participation in an unfamiliar environment, the acquisition of debt and the postponement of earning opportunities for families and individuals who may be living with financial instability and hardship. Research suggests that the perception of risk is more acute for some groups than others, for example, white working-class males (Baars et al., 2016). The perception

of return on investment is also important, which means that IAG for potential students and their 'key influencers' is likely to have significant benefit.

Working class students may feel like "outsiders on the inside" (Reay, 2018, p.534) and the same may apply to other student groups traditionally underrepresented in HE, for example, BAME students (Cureton and Gravestock, 2019). Some researchers have found that there may be a sense of stigma or shame experienced by being a school pupil or HE student from a low socio-economic status family, and members of this group do not want to be marked out as different (Thiele et al., 2017). This area is not well researched, but some studies suggest there is likely to be value in interventions which seek to foster a sense of belonging amongst potential students from BAME and low socio-economic status backgrounds. There is no consensus within the literature on how best to achieve this but the NERUPI (Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions) framework for designing and evaluating access interventions (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016) explicitly seeks to foster belonging, agency and cultural capital and so the adoption of this framework may be useful when designing or amending widening access interventions.

### ***Aspirations, attitudes, or expectations?***

Although the notion of 'raising aspirations' is commonly employed within widening access and participation, researchers increasingly agree that designing outreach activities with a view to raising aspirations is unhelpful. Studies have suggested that there is little evidence that young people of lower socio-economic status lack aspiration; rather they may have realistic expectations about the challenges they face but little guidance or a lack of role models to help them to overcome those challenges (Baker et al., 2014). This approach may also be a 'deficit model', locating the difficulties facing some student groups as a personal failing rather than a result of structural inequalities (Campbell and McKendrick, 2017). As previously discussed, perceptions of the risk associated with participation in HE for some target groups are based upon real concerns which need to be addressed for an informed choice to be made.

An alternative approach was set out by Harrison and Waller (2018), who distinguished between a young person's concept of their 'possible self' (i.e. their aspirational future) and their perception of their 'probable self' (their likely educational and career journey based upon their own and their family experience). They argue that outreach activity should aim: "to help young people (a) elaborate a rich pool of possible selves, (b) understand how their like-to-be self might be met through HE and (c) also see this as a probable self" (ibid., p.933), for example, through outreach work with families and teachers of the target young people, and by providing high quality IAG. However, they do not provide any evidence of the success of these types of interventions.

## Conclusions

The evidence base for all widening access interventions is limited and sometimes contradictory and there is very little data, particularly from within UK contexts, regarding access and outreach for BAME student groups. There is little causal evidence in relation to widening access interventions and evaluation has often focused on aspiration to enter HE rather than actual enrolment. The effectiveness of the five main widening access interventions reviewed here is summarised as follows:

- Financial support. There is evidence of some small positive impact on progression and completion but little evidence of impact on enrolment. The lack of evidence for financial support as an access measure may be a result of poor IAG regarding financial support for prospective students. There is some evidence that BAME student groups may value bursaries as an access measure to a greater degree than other student groups.
- Mentoring. Mentoring may be 'peer-to-peer' (for example, where existing undergraduate students mentor prospective entrants) or carried out by non-parental adults, for example by a professional working in a field of interest to the mentee. The effectiveness of peer mentoring has been questioned by some researchers. Overall, there is limited evidence that mentoring may be effective, and that longer programmes may make more impact. However, there is currently little direct evidence of impact on enrolment.
- Summer Schools. Summer schools can help foster a sense of belonging or fit with an institution and improve confidence, but this does not necessarily translate into enrolment. Some evidence suggests these are most effective in determining which university the participant attends rather than influencing a decision on whether to apply or enrol. TASO considers the evidence for Summer Schools to be 'emerging'.
- Black box interventions. Multi-intervention outreach also known as 'black box' interventions combines multiple interventions within a programme. Generally, the evidence supports sustained programmes of interventions, but the evidence base is limited in part due to the complex nature of these programmes and the difficulties of effective evaluation.
- IAG. Of all the interventions reviewed, IAG has the strongest evidence base. It appears to be of most benefit when targeted at young people who are not considering HE, though there are notable limitations, for example, young male students from lower socio-economic groups may value informal knowledge (such as that gained through peer networks) more highly than more formal information sources. Tailored IAG which starts early (for example, at secondary school) can be effective, and highly targeted IAG interventions, for example the use of 'nudging' text messages seems to be effective. However, TASO consider IAG has mixed evidence of impacts on either attitude or behaviour.

Overall, there may be some small positive impact on attitudes but the impact upon behaviour is less clear. It can be difficult to understand which elements of these

programmes are the most effective in relation to widening access, and robust evaluation is required to understand this.

The efficacy of these kinds of interventions may be enhanced by consideration of the following contextual factors when widening access programmes are designed, delivered, and evaluated:

- The importance of family, community, and place: recognition of the influence of key players in the lives of young people including their peers, parents, teachers, and other influencers is important when designing effective outreach interventions.
- Belonging, feeling 'othered' and perceptions of risk: there is likely to be value in interventions which seek to foster a sense of belonging amongst potential students from BAME and low socio-economic status backgrounds. Evidence suggests that some target groups of students perceive the risks of entering HE (for example, the financial risk) to outweigh the benefits, and these perceptions should be acknowledged and addressed.
- Aspirations, attitudes or expectations: although the language of aspiration, and a focus on 'raising aspirations' of young people is used in widening access and participation, some researchers argue that this perpetuates a 'deficit model' approach whereby the 'fault' is located with the individual. This may lead to the design of outreach interventions which attempt to change the young person, rather than addressing the barriers which some young people face in accessing HE and may ultimately undermine the effectiveness of the interventions. Widening participation practitioners should consider the use of more positive and empowering approaches, for example, the concept of 'possible selves' (Harrison and Waller, 2018), to inform the design and delivery of outreach.

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