People, places and prospects: a preliminary study

Dr Neil Raven

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2. Foreword

At the beginning of this study, during our first meeting with the young people who agreed to take part, we, as the ThinkHigher staff involved, were given the task of explaining to them what it was that we wanted to know from them, and why. The answer we gave was that while we all have our own experiences, journeys and histories in education, we have no lived experience of what it's like to be their age now, or what it's like to be their age in their particular local communities and contexts.

With that in mind, this project was designed to keep students' voices, views and experiences at its heart. While we set out with some clear themes and parameters in mind, the research was at all times led and directed by the young people themselves. In the end, the issues we focused on most were the issues they told us were the most important. The incredibly rich data they provided reflects their incredible ability and willingness to tell us what we most needed to know, but also their efforts to go out between sessions to seek and reflect on the views of their peers, friends and families.

Our thanks go to Neil Raven, for providing the structure and platform for these young people to give us their thoughts. Above all, our thanks go to the group of young people who gave us their time, and also their willingness to really engage and reflect, as active participants in this process. This is their report first and foremost.

For us as practitioners there are clear messages about the importance of advice and guidance not just about options for post-18 study, but also about the options and knowledge needed to navigate the post-16 landscape. This work highlighted a gap in effective and independent advice and guidance about the full range of options and pathways at this stage for many of our young people. This clearly risks a gap in what we conceive as the "stepping stones" from Key Stage 4 onwards to higher education. It further suggests a key role for Uni Connect partnerships and other providers of widening participation outreach – to provide this guidance to sit alongside attainment raising and aspiration raising to close persistent progression gaps.

We hope you find reading the report as rewarding and fascinating as we found working with the young people who shaped it, and that their voices are heard in a way that reflects their openness and honesty.

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3. Executive summary

3.1. Overview and objectives

A growing body of evidence has been assembled in recent years indicating the influence that early educational experiences can have on a young person's HE progression prospects (Raven, 2018 and 2019). Whilst these influences can be affirmative and support positive post-18 destinations, this is not always the case. Encounters and experiences during formative years can be discouraging and even have the effect of limiting future options.

Whilst applicable to young people from a wide range backgrounds, navigating the education system - and having the knowledge and confidence to advance through it - can be more challenging for those from backgrounds with limited familiarity with post-compulsory (and even post-16) education. Accordingly, amongst those seeking to widen access and enhance opportunities, references are increasingly being made to long-term outreach and the imperative of working with those under 16 (Tazzyman et al. 2018; Office for Students 2018). However, what works and what is needed remain comparatively under-explored. This study aims to investigate these issues by hearing from those most directly affected: the young people outreach initiatives seek to support.

3.2. Methods and approach

A detailed appreciation of the experiences and views of young people requires a highly participatory approach to data gathering. In seeking to achieve this, a series of three online focus group meetings with the same groups of young people were held over a four month period. Whilst the broad themes addressed in these discussions were formulated by the researcher in consultation with members of the Think Higher team, the agenda for each meeting was also guided by the participants and what they wished to discuss.

A second element of the study involved training participants as researchers, and then supporting those amongst the group who wished to survey their peers. Whilst underpinning the study's participatory approach, it was also recognised that this component would help to determine the wider relevance of the evidence gathered from the focus group discussions. It would also ensure that, in addition to being an investigation, the study would help to equip participants with a number of transferrable skills, including those associated with conducting research, and analysing and reporting on the findings.

3.3. Key findings

1. Post-14 transition

Differences between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4

The first transition that focus group participants discussed was the move to post-14 study.

- The main differences with what had been experienced before concerned the increased workload and focus on exams
- In addition, reference was made to encountering new subjects and of having to learn these from scratch.

Impact of pandemic

The impact of the pandemic was also the discussed. Notably, in relation to the 'amount of school missed'. However, participants also talked about the online learning experience.

- Whilst having certain advantages, in terms of the time saved travelling to school and moving between lessons, various limitations were also recognised, including difficulties accessing the internet.

- On balance, focus group members expressed a preference for being in school and the companionship it offered, as well as the support and more timely responses that teachers were able to provide in the classroom setting.

Support received

Year 10 focus group members discussed the support they had received in preparing for the transition to post-14 study. This included an information session on the subjects that could be studied at GCSE level.

Whist reference was made to the help received from individual teachers, this was considered to have been limited. The choice of which subjects to pursue had largely been left to individual students.

However, participants were in agreement that teachers played an important role in the extent to which they engaged with their GCSEs. Here, reference was made to those whose classroom practices made subjects interesting.

- These included teachers who accommodate different learning styles, present opportunities for team work, teach in a 'lively way', and provide additional resources.

The case for more support and what it should involve

Year 10 focus group members were in agreement that additional guidance on GCSE options would be beneficial. This included being provided with more information and advice on:

- What particular GCSE subjects would cover
- What pathways would be available in taking certain subject areas and, it can be suggested, particular subject combinations
- The demands and expectations of studying at this level.

During their conversations, participant also hinted at the potential value to year 8s and 9s of hearing from those who are a little further along their learner journeys.

2. Post-16 transition

Members of the year 11/12 focus group discussed the challenges of moving to level-3 study. These included the:

- Quantity of the material to be covered

- Amount of work expected to be conducted outside 'lesson time'
- More advanced content of what was being studied
- Need to develop new skills, including an ability to see different perspectives.

Those interviewed in the young researchers' study also discussed their anxieties about what advanced-level study would involve.

Institutional move

The second post-16 challenge focus group members highlighted related the move to a new place of study. Whilst the prospect could be an exciting one, reference was also made to concerns about:

- 'Settling in' and getting used to college
- Understanding and coping with being 'independent'
- Financing their studies, including funding the costs of travelling to and from college
- 'Meeting new people and making friends'
- The limited amount of communication between students and their prospective colleges.

Impact of pandemic

In discussing their experiences of preparing for the transition to post-16 study, members of the year 11/12 focus group drew attention to the impact of the pandemic. This included:

- The loss of a careers event that had, in previous years, provided 'an opportunity to speak to people from college'
- The challenge of adapting to a new institution caused by lockdowns during the first year at college.

Support received

Year 11/12 focus group participants talked about the informal and formal forms of support they had received in preparing for the transition to post-16 study. These included:

- Drawing on the experience of older siblings
- Meetings with careers advisors (although in at least one instance these occurred after college applications had been submitted)
- A school-hosted careers event attended by different colleges
- An introductory video presentation provided by a local sixth form.

The case for more support

There was general agreement amongst those in the year 11/12 group that the level of post-16 support they and their peers had received was insufficient and a cause of anxiety.

In establishing the case for addition support, reference was made to receiving comparatively more information and advice about post-18 options, including HE. Yet, moving to college was judged to

represent 'the first big step up', and the first time young people will be 'taking learning into [their] own hands.'

What is needed

In terms of additional post-16 support, focus group participants discussed the provision of:

- Insights into the reality of college study, and what the first day at college will involve
- Advice on what chosen courses will cover, and how they will be taught and assessed
- Guidance on what independent study will entail
- Information on the costs of college study, including those associated with travel and purchasing text books
- Support with understanding the language and terms used by colleges.

Interventions ideas

Having identified the types of information, guidance and supporting needed for successful transition to post-16 study, year 11/12 focus group members considered the forms that this should take. Here, reference was made to:

- Ensuring young people are able to access timely careers and next steps guidance whilst at school
- Talks about funding post-16/college based study
- Information sessions on how subjects will be delivered and what study timetables will look like
- Workshops on the skills that will be required at college and in pursing level-3 courses, including those associated with time management and independent study
- Regular correspondence between colleges and future students
- Arrangements for future students to hear from - and ask questions of - the teachers and tutors who will be delivering college and sixth form courses
- In-person college visits
- Meetings attended by students who have been accepted onto the same courses
- Advice on what students can do 'over the summer to prepare' for the transition to post-16 study.

The messengers

Year 11/12 focus group participants considered who should be providing information and insights into post-16 study options.

Whilst careers advisors and college tutors were discussed, emphasis was placed on the value of hearing from current college students, with reference was made to:

- Those on advanced-level programmes talking to secondary school students about their day-to-day life in college and sixth form
- The provision of Q and A sessions that provide school students with a chance to speak with those already at college.

Whilst the value of hearing from those in different year groups was recognised, there was agreement that it would be of particular value to engage with students who are in their first year of college and studying subjects that school students are interested in pursuing at advanced-level.

A sense of the kinds of messages that current college students might be able to provide was hinted at when participants considered the advice they would offer to their younger selves.

- Here, emphasis was placed on the importance of 'not [being] afraid to ask questions', or to interact with people, including 'your teachers and the students around you,' and to being reassured that, 'with time', 'you'll be more comfortable' with college.

The role of Think Higher

Focus group members discussed the part that Think Higher could play in supporting post-16 transitions. Here, reference was made to the partnership:

- Developing its role as an intermediary between school students and their prospective colleges, including in forwarding questions to college contacts and sharing their responses
- Providing professional development opportunities for teachers, in terms of post-16 information and advice.

Year 11/12 focus group members also discussed which year groups post-16 support should be directed towards. There was general agreement that this needs to start in year 9 or 10, and to then be sustained.

3. Post-18 transition

HE ambitions and rationale

Across both focus groups, participants talked about a desire to go to university.

- The main reason offered related to the achievement of career goals through gaining 'better qualifications.'
- However, there was some recognition that those who go to university may also be motivated by the social side of university life.

What it takes to progress, and who goes to university

In terms of gaining a university place, those surveyed in the year 10 young researchers' study emphasised the need to be determined and prepared to preserver in order to secure the grades needed.

In discussing the same subject with the year 11/12 group, emphasis was placed on the ability to adjust to - and cope with - greater independence.

Influencers

Both focus groups discussed those who had influenced their post-18 ambitions. Amongst the 'informal' sources of information were friends and family.

Regarding more formal sources, a number talked about the influence of teachers, including in fostering subject interests. Although this was qualified by the claim that teachers are not always aware of 'the impact they can have.'

Reference was also made to:

- The positive influence on post-18 ambitions of the careers guidance some had received
- Careers events held before the pandemic which had included representatives from universities
- A year 7 careers week with 'workshops about university'
- A year 7 one-day event 'focusing on university.'

The case for additional support

Whilst various practices and interventions - notably careers fairs - were commended, focus group members discussed the value of more support, in terms of guiding and informing their post-18 options in general and those regarding HE in particular.

The case for additional support included the argument that those from non-traditional backgrounds may be placed at a disadvantage because of the limited amount of (familial) advice and guidance available to them.

What is needed

Focus group members discussed the additional support needed in relation to post-18 educational and career ambitions, with reference made to:

- Information on the 'routeways' into careers of interest, and advice on the qualifications required to progress
- In-person visits to places of work, as well as colleges and universities
- Hearing from professionals who can offer insights 'into their roles' and the pathways they took, along with those at college and university who can provide information and advice on the training involved
- Advice and guidance on the university application process
- A peer support scheme that would bring together pupils interested in the same subject areas and sectors
- Greater involvement from teaching professionals, including providing advice on the progression routes that will enable young people to realise their ambitions. Although the need for teachers to be aware of - and understand - different pathways was also referenced (which suggests a potential role for Think Higher in providing teacher CPD).

How outreach should be delivered

Whilst focus group participants acknowledged the advantages of online outreach, including in terms of the time saved in travelling to events, the benefits of 'going out and meeting people in real life situations', and of receiving classroom visits, were judged to be greater.

Target groups

The conversations with both sets of focus groups participants explored the question of who should receive outreach interventions.

As with the discussions over the timing of post-16 support, there was a consensus that this needs to be provided early. In particular, reference was made to engaging with those in school years 8 and 9. This would:

- Give students 'longer to think about' their options
- Help them in considering 'what they want to do for their GCSEs'
- Enable them to better 'understand why' they are studying particular subjects and see 'where [these] can take them'

Emphasis was also placed on the importance of providing a series of interventions tailored to particular year groups, which could start in years 8 and 9 and 'carry on through to year 11' and beyond.

4. Review

The researcher's perspective

Since they are comparatively new to the field of widening participation, consideration was given to assessing the effectiveness of online focus groups. The evidence gathered in this study reveals that:

- Good levels of student involvement and participation were achieved
- The data generated was of a high quality.

In addition, a review meeting with those involved in co-facilitating the discussions highlighted the benefit of working with smaller numbers than would typically comprise an in-person focus group.

- Here, mention was made to the greater influence that each of the students taking part could have on the character and direction of the conversations.

However, the challenges associated with the type of online discussions held for this study were also recognised:

- Facilitators were able to exercise less control over each participant's home environment than would be the case in a supervised classroom setting. Although in practice there was little evidence of participants being distracted by their surroundings during the discussions.

Approaches adopted in supporting participant engagement

Two particular approaches were adopted during this series of focus group discussions held for this study that proved successful in supporting participant engagement.

- The first concerned allocating time at the end of the initial and second round of meetings to gathering participants' views on the content of the next meeting's agenda.

- The second involved the use of a word document placed on screen share so that all participants could see it. Used to capture the key points made during the discussions, this proved effective in helping to focus the conversations and encouraging participants to respond to what their fellow focus group members had said. It also provided a useful supplementary record of the discussion.

Potential developments in the methods and approaches adopted

From the experience gained during this project, suggestions were made for how the type of online discussions that featured in this study could be developed. Notably that:

- The quality of the experience and the data generated could be enhanced in cases where participants are willing to switch their cameras on (thus, enabling the facilitator, and other focus group members, to recognise and work with non-verbal cues). From an ethics and safeguarding perspective, a school or college setting would be a more suitable venue.

- Whilst the use of a shared word document as a prompt and supplementary record of what was discussed proved useful, there is, arguably, greater potential in using some form of interactive presentation software. This would enable participants to type their own comments and observations, and for these to be shared with others.

Participants' assessment of the focus group discussions

During the final round of meetings, participants were asked to critically assess their focus group experience. The responses were consistently positive, with reference made to:

- The opportunity the discussion groups presented to 'talk to other people, [and] have other people to bounce ideas off'
- Being 'able to channel something that I've always wanted to be able to say', and being 'listened to'
- The acquisition of new skills, including learning 'how to express myself' and 'thinking on my feet.'

Participants' perspective on the young researchers' study

Those who took part in the young researcher study also commented on this component of the project. Here, participants talked about 'a new experience' and an opportunity 'be able to do something myself.' They also described the skills that had been developed in the process, including how to:

- Pose and answer questions
- Communicate and engage with a 'wide range of people'.

Further consultation

Looking ahead, a supplementary component of this study is being planned. This will gather participants' assessment of how accurately the recommendations presented in this report capture their views and concerns. The feedback provided in this interactive session will then be used to revise these recommendations.

- For participants, this additional element will enable them to witness a complete research cycle - from data gathering to report preparation
- It will also underpin the participatory objectives of the project, and afford a case study in the co-development of outreach initiatives.

In terms of the response of focus groups members to this plan, all expressed an interest in participating, with reference made to seeing 'what our voice has done', of having 'our voices heard again', and of knowing that what was said has not been 'twisted'.

Further research

The findings from this study highlight the value of further research. In particular, a qualitative exploration into the role of place on HE participation rates.

This would align with the focus of a number of recent reports which draw attention to 'geographical inequalities' in university access (OfS, 2021d and 2021e). However, these reports are primarily quantitative in nature and do not consider the learner perspective.

The methods and approaches developed for this study have the potential to be applied to this topic and, in the process, advance our understanding of - and response to - the role of place on young peoples' progression prospects.

3.4. Recommendations

Informed by the study's findings, a number of recommendations are made. These are themed and summarised in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Summary of recommendations

Theme	Recommendation
Post-14 transition	*Provision (recommendations 1 to 5)* Consider IAG sessions on: - The subjects available at GCSE level - What they will cover - The demands and expectations of studying at this level - The pathways open to those pursuing particular subjects and subject combinations. In exploring such provision, consider how the insights and experiences of those who are further along their learner journeys could be utilised.
Post-16 transition	*Provision (recommendations 6 to 13)* Explore the option of providing: - Talks about funding post-16/college based study - Information sessions on how subjects will be delivered and what study timetables will look like - Workshops on the skills that will be required at college and in pursing level-3 programmes, including those associated with time-management and independent study - Guidance to colleges on the importance of establishing a regular correspondence with their future students - Opportunities for future students to hear from - and ask questions of - the teachers and tutors who will be delivering college and sixth form courses

	• In-person college visits • Meetings between students who have been accepted onto the same level 3 programmes but who come from different schools • Advice on what students can do 'over the summer to prepare' for the transition to post-16 study.
	The messengers (recommendation 14) In addition to the support provided by careers advisors and college tutors, consider engaging with those on advanced-level programmes who can talk to secondary school students about their day-to-day life in college and sixth form, and answer their questions about post-16 study. In particular, assess the value of drawing on the experiences and insights of those in their first year of college and who are studying subjects that school students are also interested in pursuing at advanced level.
	The role of Think Higher (recommendations 15 to 17) Consider how Think Higher could provide further support for the transition to post-16 study, including: • Developing its role as an intermediary between school students and their prospective colleges, including by forwarding questions to college contacts and sharing their responses • Providing professional development opportunities for teachers, in terms of post-16 information and advice. Assess the potential to offer a sustained programme of post-16 support that starts with those in school years 9 and 10.
Post-18 transition	*Provision (recommendations 18 to 23)* Consider IAG and outreach interventions that provide: • Guidance on the 'routeways' into careers of interest (including information and advice on the qualifications required to progress) • In-person visits to places of work, as well as colleges and universities • Opportunities for young people to hear from professionals who can provide insights into 'their roles' and the pathways they took • Advice on the university application process • A chance for pupils interested in the same subject areas and sectors to meet (a form of peer support scheme) • CPD training for teaching professionals, with the aim of ensuring they are aware of - and understand - the different pathways into HE-level study and training.
	Delivery of outreach (recommendation 24) Whilst acknowledging the benefits - and role - that online support can provide, take account of the advantages of interventions that enable young people to gain first-hand experience of campuses and to meet people in-person.
	Target groups (recommendations 25 and 26) Recognise the value of interventions that work with those at an early stage in their learner journeys (from year 8/9 onwards), including their capacity to: • Provide students with more time to explore their options • 'Understand why' they are studying particular subjects, and the further and higher level study opportunities these subject choices can offer.
Further research	*New insights (recommendation 27)* Consider the potential of conducting further research. • In particular, explore the option of a qualitative investigation that utilises the methods and approaches developed in this study to explore the role of place on HE participation rates from the perspectives of the young people involved.

4. Introduction

4.1. Overview

A growing body of evidence has been assembled in recent years indicating the influence that early educational experiences can have on a young person's HE progression prospects (Raven, 2018 and 2019). Whilst these influences can be affirmative and support positive post-18 destinations, this is not always the case. Encounters and experiences during formative years can be discouraging and even have the effect of limiting future options.

4.2. Aims

Whilst applicable to young people from a wide range backgrounds, navigating the system - and having the knowledge and confidence to advance through it - can be more challenging for those from backgrounds with limited familiarity with post-compulsory (and even post-16) education. Accordingly, amongst those seeking to widen access and enhance opportunities, references are increasingly being made to long-term outreach and the imperative of working with those under 16 (Tazzyman et al. 2018; Office for Students 2018b). However, what works and what is needed remain comparatively under explored. This study aims to investigate these issues by hearing from those most directly affected: the young people outreach initiatives seek to engage and support.

Moreover, with the fieldwork conducted during the summer term of 2021 this investigation took place against the backdrop of more than 12 months of educational disruption wrought by the pandemic. Accordingly, this study also represents an early investigation into the consequences of the pandemic on young people's educational experiences and ambitions. In this respect, evidence suggests that those from less advantaged backgrounds are likely to have been most adversely impacted by lockdown and school closures (Atherton, 2020; Lucas et al., 2020; Montacute, 2020; Raven, 2020a and 2020b).

4.3. Approach

A detailed appreciation of the experiences and views of young people requires a highly participatory approach to data gathering. In seeking to achieve this, a series of three focus group meetings with the same groups of young people were held over a four month period. Whilst the broad themes addressed in these discussions were formulated by the researcher in consultation with members of the Think Higher team, the agenda for each meeting was also guided by the participants and what they wished to discuss.

A second element of the study involved training participants as researchers, and then supporting those amongst the group who wished to survey their peers. As with the focus group agendas, the subjects of these investigations were informed by the young researchers themselves. Whilst underpinning the study's participatory approach, it was also recognised that this component would help to determine the wider relevance of the evidence gathered from the focus group discussions. It would also ensure that, in addition to being a research investigation, the study would help to equip participants with a number of key transferrable skills, including those associated with conducting research, and analysing and reporting on the findings.

4.4. Research objectives

To achieve the study's aims, a series of intermediate steps were taken. These comprised the:

- Identification of three Think Higher partner schools from which research participants would derive
- Recruitment of two groups of 4-5 young people (volunteers) from school years 10, 11 and 12
- Selection and testing of a suitable and safe online platform (Microsoft Teams) for conducting these discussion groups
- Scheduling and running of the three focus group meetings (held between April and July 2021)
- Delivering a training workshop for those participants interested in being young researchers
- Transcription of focus group discussions
- Data analysis, including coding and the identification of themes.

Their successful completion would enable a project report to be prepared, as well as the drafting of an academic paper and practitioner-based blog post.

4.5. Regulatory context

As a Uni Connect commissioned investigation that aims to be of value to practitioners, it can be observed that the study's approach, as well as its objectives and intended outcomes, align with a number of current sector and regulator concerns.

Recognising educational journeys and the importance of early interventions

Recent years have seen an increasing emphasis placed on adopting a long-term view of - and approach to - outreach (Tazzyman et al. 2018, 55; Office for Students [OfS], 2018b, 3). This includes supporting progression to further as well as higher education (OfS, 2021a., 16), and recognising that 'educational journeys' start in early secondary school ('from year 9') and go through to the end of compulsory education and training (in school/college year 13) (OfS, 2021a, 37; see also OfS, 2021b., 5, and OfS, 2021c., 3).

Understanding gaps in provision and using evidence to determine the support offered

Guidance for phase 3 of the Uni Connect programme discusses the need for partnerships to better understand the gaps in 'local IAG and outreach' provision 'for under-represented groups'. It also highlights the importance of taking 'account of evidence' in determin[ing] which interventions and activities are likely to be most effective' in supporting progression (OfS, 2021a, 25-26, and 63).

Acknowledging the impact pandemic and encouraging Uni Connect partnerships to respond

The same guidance documents acknowledge that the pandemic is likely to have had a particularly detrimental impact on 'those from more socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and ethnic minority communities' (OfS. 2021a, 16; OfS. 2021b, 12). In response, partnerships are urged to 'try to meet and support student needs', including by 'adapting their delivery to online and/or blended learning' (OfS. 2021a, 16, see also OfS, 2021b, 12).

The need to know more about the impact of the pandemic and how outreach should be delivered

However, the OfS (2021c, 22) guidance also recognises (implicitly at least) that the effects of the pandemic on those from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds are yet to be fully understand (OfS, 2021c, 22). It also discusses the need to better 'understand' the impact of particular 'mode[s] of delivery', in responding to the conditions imposed by the pandemic.

Supporting partnership research

Finally, the OfS's (2021b, 32) guidance acknowledges the 'value' of research in informing local outreach activities. In particular, partnerships are encouraged to ensure such activity is 'relevant', 'unique' and 'accessible'. In response, it can be observed that the focus for much of the discussion conducted in this section of the report has concerned the issue of relevance. In addition, the approach adopted is quite distinct and should provide findings that contribute to our understanding. Moreover, the intended outcomes (see section 4.4.) include measures to ensure that the resulting 'insights' will be made 'available' to 'other partnerships, the OfS and the wider sector' (OfS, 2021b, 32).

5. Methods and approaches

5.1. Design and collection methods

Focus groups

The study used focus groups to gather the views and insights of learners. Previous work by the researcher had highlighted their effectiveness in this regard (Raven, 2021a, 2021b and 2020b). They are also recognised as a method that can facilitate a participatory approach to data collection, since they are designed to encourage participant interaction and enable those taking part to respond to the contributions made by their fellow discussants. By supporting high levels of engagement, participants can also inform the direction of the conversations (Nicolls, 2009; Smithson, 2000).

A longitudinal approach

Whilst focus groups can be deployed to capture data at a single point in time, they can also be used in longitudinal studies where the insights of the same research participants are gathered on a number of occasions. Although not many WP studies have employed focus groups in this capacity, those that have highlight their potential to generate rich, detailed insights and to capture changes in participants' experiences and views (Raven, 2020b). In part, this is because the approach is able to facilitate a high degree of trust and rapport between the researcher and research participants. It also enables topics to be revisited, and participants to reflect and build on their previous contributions. Accordingly, the intention for this study was to use focus groups in this way and to meet with the same groups of young people on three separate occasions.

Given the limited third party access to schools and Uni Connect learners at the time that the field work was being conducted - and in recognising the emphasis that schools would be placing on the curriculum - the focus group were convened outside school hours. Moreover, it was decided to hold these online using a safe and ethically approved platform (Mircosoft Teams). In part, this was a response to the pandemic. However, logistical considerations also influenced this decision since participants would be from more than one institution. Although they have not been widely used - and certainly not in the field of widening access - various studies have suggested that focus groups can be effectively conducted online (Kite and Phongsavan, 2017; Daniels et al. 2019). A recent study by the researcher confirmed their potential in this respect (Raven, 2021c).

Young researchers' component

During the planning stage, the idea was developed of including a young researchers' component. This would provide a further mechanism for engaging participants and helping to ensure the study was participatory and learner-focused. It would also equip participants with a number of transferrable skills. In addition, it was hoped that the findings would help to establish the extent to which the views and experiences described by focus group members were consistent with those of their peers. Whilst few studies in WP have adopted this approach, the work of Lomax (2012) highlights the potential for young people to take on the role of researchers, including interviewing their peers, and for the data generated to provide valuable and distinct perspectives.

5.2. Recruitment and sampling

Given the qualitative and longitudinal nature of the investigation, and the intention of gathering the learner perspective and of training and supporting participants as young researchers, it was recognised that the sample size would need to be small. To achieve this, the aim was to recruit up to six participants from year 10 and a comparable number of year 12s.

A purposive (information rich) sampling strategy was considered the most appropriate to use, since participants needed to be from amongst the Uni Connect cohort. That is, from neighbourhoods where few, and fewer than expected, 18/19 year olds participate in higher level education and training. In particular, the intention was to seek volunteers from this cohort who were attending schools that Think Higher work with, and that are based in Warwickshire and have catchment areas encompassing the Uni Connect programme's target wards.

5.3. The practice

In practice, six young people were recruited from three schools. Three were from year 10, with one from year 11 and two from year 12. Given that their next step would be in pursuing level 3 study, the year 11 participant joined the year 12 group. Also, as planned, three sets of discussions were held with each group. The first of these took place in mid-April, the second towards the end of May and the third in early July. All were held in the evening. To enable their engagement, participants were provided by Think Higher with tablet computers for the duration of the project.

Complementing the focus groups, a young researcher training workshop was held in late May. This evening event was attended by all six participants. To facilitate engagement, use was made of an interactive presentation software package which enabled participants to respond to questions set by the facilitator, and pose their own questions. In terms of the subjects participants wanted to investigate, the year 10 group opted for exploring the post-18 educational and career ambitions of their peers, whilst the year 11/12 group were interested in learning more about the challenges associated with progressing to post-16 study. In recognising that not all participants might want to take part in this element of the study - or be able to do so - the option of reflecting on their own experiences, and contributing to the discussion in that way, was highlighted.

In the event, one member from each of the focus groups was involved in this component of the study. In terms of sample sizes, the year 10 researcher gathered the views of three of their peers, comprising two year 10s and one year 9 student, whilst the researcher from the year 11/12 group based their study on data collected from five students, two of whom were in year 10, two in year 11 and one pursuing post-16 studies at a local college. The rationale offered for this sample was to gather the perspectives of students in three year groups and at three different stages in their learner journeys. Both interviewed their research participants and captured responses in fieldnotes. To support their work, an additional online session was arranged which they used to talk through their initial findings ahead of presenting them during the final round of focus group meetings.

5.4. Key themes

Whilst the aim was for the subjects addressed in the focus group discussions - and the topics considered in the young researcher's investigations - to be informed by the participants and what they judged to be important, certain key themes were explored. These comprised participants' experiences and views on:

- The past 12-18 months of study, including the impact of the pandemic and lockdowns on their educational engagement and next steps - and post-18 - plans
- The range and nature of school/college provided support (information, advice and guidance)
- Any outreach interventions and support received
- Additional IAG and outreach activities that could further support their next steps and post-18 plans.

To build up a more detailed understanding of perceptions, and to encourage and capture their reflections, these themes, and a number of others identified by participants, were revisited over the course of the three focus group meetings.

In addition, given the use of online focus groups, which have not been widely deployed in WP, and the inclusion of a young researchers' element, the participants' experiences of taking part in this study were also gathered.

5.5. Data collection

The data generated in the focus group discussions, including from the verbal reports provide by the young researchers, was captured on audio files. Only accessed by the researcher and a data transcriber from the Think Higher team, these were stored on password protected and encrypted files. It should also be noted that, to protect their anonymity, the names of focus group participants, and those of any individuals mentioned during the discussions, as well as the identify of their schools, do not feature in this report. Nor will they appear in the publications arising from this study.

5.6. Data analysis

Data analysis commenced with reading the focus group transcripts. This provided an opportunity to identify initial themes. Codes were then allocated to copies of each transcript (numbering six, with one prepared for each of the discussions). These were developed during subsequent readings of the transcripts. A new word document was then created with the themes and sub-themes copied into it. This was used to revise and refining the themes, and to develop an accompanying structure (narrative). Initially, the themes were allocated to two tables. One related to the year 10 discussions, including findings from the young researcher's study, whilst the other concerned the year 11/12 discussions and researcher findings. These were then combined into a new (master) table, which was used to further refine and order the themes and sub-themes (summarised in Table 5.1), with excerpts from the interview transcripts being added to each of the themes. The contents of this master table forms the basis of the next four chapters.

Table 5. 1. Themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme
Post-14 transition	Comparing GCSEs with earlier years
	The impact of the pandemic and lockdowns
	Support received
	The case for additional support
	The support needed
Post-16 transition	Transition to level 3 study
	Moving to a different institution
	The impact of the pandemic and lockdowns
	Support received

	The case for additional support	
	The support needed	
Post-18 transition	HE ambitions	
	Perceptions of HE	
	Informal influencers	
	Formal sources of support received	
	The case for additional support	
	The support needed	

6. Post-14 transition

6.1. Differences between KS3 and KS4.

The first transition that focus group participants discussed was the more to GCSEs and post-14 (Key Stage 4) study. One of the main differences with what had been experienced before concerned the increased workload. 'We have more content to cover now', one focus group member remarked. However, it was also noted that the work is 'now going towards an exam.' Another participant talked about the experience of 'moving up classes. You'd go from a bottom set, easy stuff, and then the next thing you know [you are] in the top set [where] you're learning more difficult subjects.'

In addition, reference was made to encountering new subjects. Whilst it was noted that some subjects, 'like geography and art, and the core subjects, we were doing all the way from year 7', others, 'like business, we didn't do in the earlier years of secondary school.' This, it was added, has meant 'learn[ing] the basics and then build on it.'

> The first transition that focus group participants discussed was the move to post-14 study.
>
> - The main differences with what had been experienced before concerned the increased workload and focus on exams
> - Reference was also made to encountering new subjects and of having to learn these from scratch.

6.2. Impact of pandemic

The impact of the pandemic was also the discussed by the year 10 group. One of the first observations made related to the 'difficult' situation caused by 'the amount of school we've missed'. Whilst it was noted that 'we are back in school' now, reference was made to the online learning experienced during lockdown. One focus group member recalled that 'we would have to log in and follow our timetable for five hours of the day, [and] for the whole week, and whatever teacher we have in class would be there.'

For some, online learning was recognised as having certain advantages. 'I preferred the online', one participant remarked, 'because if we had more content to catch up with, we didn't have the time that it took to get to and from school, and walk between lessons. So we had more time to do the learning and catch up on any missed learning.' However, the disadvantages of online delivery were also highlighted. 'It's not always reliable with Wi-Fi', one focus group member argued, 'and you can't guarantee that you'll always be there.' This assessment was confirmed by a second participant. 'It's just a little harder' than being in school 'due to Wi-Fi, [and the] computer problems that you might have.'

In general, focus group members expressed a preference for being in school. 'I personally prefer the school atmosphere. You don't feel lonely', observed one participants. A similarly view was expressed by a second. 'I'd probably rather be in school. When it first started, I was happy about the online. At that point, I'd rather be online but now that we've gone back I'd rather be back at school.' Besides the companionship, the other advantages of being in school included greater support and more timely help. 'There's more support for people that need it during the lessons', it was observed, 'because the

teachers are there and you can just speak to them, rather than type and wait for them to see your answer.'

> Focus group members discussed the impact of the pandemic. Notably, in relation to the 'amount of school missed'. However, participants also talked about their online learning experience.
>
> - Whilst having certain advantages, in terms of the time saved travelling to school and moving between lessons, various limitations were also recognised, including difficulties accessing the internet.
>
> - On balance, focus group members expressed a preference for being in school and the companionship it offered, and well as the support and more timely responses that teachers were able to offer in the classroom setting.

6.3. Support received

Whilst participants talked about the differences encountered between pre- and post-16 study, reference was also made to the support they had received in preparation for the transition. One focus group member discussed an information session they had attended which had provided insights into what GCSE would be like. 'We all got brought into group sessions [where they told] us about the subjects.' In addition, references were made to the support received from individual teachers. 'I got a little bit of good advice from a few teachers', one member recalled. Although this was considered fairly limited in extent. Indeed, there was general agreement that the choice of which subjects to pursue had largely been left to the individual.

However, whilst teachers may not have had a significant role in preparing students for their post-14 options and study, participants were in agreement that teachers played an important role in the extent to which they engaged with the subjects being pursing at GCSE. Here, reference was made to those whose classroom practices make subjects interesting. These included teachers who are aware of different learning styles and ensure all understand what has been covered, along with those who provide opportunities for group work, which, it was argued, can give students more confidence in their abilities. Similarly, mention was made to those who teach in 'a really lively way, and', as a consequence, 'make you want to learn.' Moreover, some teachers it was observed 'go out of their way' in creating additional resources, like 'knowledge organisers' which address 'every topic that we cover from year 9, 10 and 11.' Likewise, another participant talked about those who prepared 'revision booklets' which, it was added, were especially helpful for students who had limited internet access during lockdown.'

> Year 10 focus group members discussed the support they had received in preparing for the transition to post-14 study. This included an information session on the subjects that could be studied at GCSE level.
>
> Whist reference was made to the help received from individual teachers, this was considered to have been limited. The choice of which subjects to pursue had largely been left to individual students.
>
> However, participants were in agreement that teachers played an important role in the extent to which they engaged with their GCSEs. Here, reference was made to those whose classroom practices made subjects interesting.

> - These included teachers who accommodate different learning styles, present opportunities for group work, teach in a 'lively way', and provide additional resources.

6.4. The case for more support and what it should involve

In arguing that they did not receive a great deal of guidance on their GCSEs options, there was agreement amongst focus group members that additional support would be beneficial. Here reference was made to being provided with more insights into what particular GCSE subjects would cover and where they could lead, as well as the demands and expectations of studying at this level.

In addition, participants discussed the advice they considered would be helpful to those about to embark upon their GCSEs. Emphasis was placed on taking the subjects 'you like and enjoy', and can see yourself 'progressing in'. Similarly, reference was made to doing subjects you're interested in, because , it was added, 'you're more likely to get a higher grade if you try harder in a subject that you like, rather than being bored in a subject that you don't enjoy.' Accompanying this was the suggestion that you should 'not copying what your friends opt for' since you are likely to 'meet new people' and, in this way, have an opportunity to 'broaden your contacts and the people you know, rather than stick with the same [people].' Whilst not stated, it can be suggested that the readiness and ability of focus group members to offer suggestions regarding post-14 transition hints at the potential value to those in year 8 and 9 of hearing from older students who are a little further along their learner journeys.

> Year 10 focus group members were in agreement that additional guidance on GCSE options would be beneficial. This included being provided with more information and advice on:
>
> - What particular GCSE subjects would cover
> - What pathways would be available in taking certain subject areas and, it can be suggested, subject combinations
> - The demands and expectations of studying at this level.
>
> During their conversations, participant also hinted at the potential value to year 8s and 9s of hearing from those who are a little further along their learner journeys.

> **Recommendations 1 to 5.**
>
> In response to the need for more post-14 support, consider the provision of IAG sessions on:
>
> - The subjects available at GCSE level
> - What they will cover
> - The demands and expectations of studying at this level
> - The pathways open to those pursuing particular subjects and subject combinations.
>
> In exploring such provision, consider how the insights and experiences of those who are further along their learner journeys could be utilised.

7. Post-16 transition

Members of the year 11/12 focus group identified two key post-16 challenges faced. The first concerned the step up from level 2 to 3, whilst the second related to the move from school to college which all three had encountered, or were about experience.

7.1. Subject level

Content

Considering the former challenge, one participant observed that 'although you are doing [fewer] subjects, there is still a lot of content to cover.' This assessment was confirmed by a second focus group member. 'They told us at the start of the year how much work they expect us to put into each subject outside of lesson time. That', it was observed, 'was a little bit of a shock.'

Standards

In terms of the standards associated with level 3 study, one focus group member remarked that 'it kind of feels like you have to do a lot more to get a good [mark]. There's some extra work in some subjects that you have to do alone which isn't necessarily a bad thing but it's different.' Elaborating, it was added, 'I was worried about the content being a lot more advanced compared to GCSE' and that 'everything would get a lot more difficult than it previously was, and it would be really difficult to get to grips with that.' Accordingly, advanced level study required the development of new skills, including an ability to see different perspectives and to discuss and weigh up arguments. In addition, one needed to be 'a lot more independent' than in year 10 and 11 which, it was acknowledged, had proved 'a bit difficult to get used to'.

Study demands

Similar anxieties were expressed by those interviewed by the year 11/12 focus group member for the young researchers' component of the study. Interviewees were reported to be 'really concerned about' what advanced-level study would involve. However, the researcher also talked about differences in levels of apprehension between those planning to purse A-levels and their counterparts who were intending to take level 3 BTECs or similar. The latter, it was argued, were less concerned because 'a lot of students take BTECs already when they do their GCSEs.' Consequently, level 3 BTECs were not considered likely to generate 'such a huge overload.' In contrast, those who were wanting to do A-Levels 'felt there were more challenges' likely to be involved, that 'they don't know enough about the subjects, [and that] there wasn't enough information given to them'. The overriding message coming 'from staff at school', as well as from online sources and those they had heard from in college, was that 'it's going to be a lot of hard work.' In corroborating this assessment, another focus group member agreed that most of the guidance they had received centred on the need to be prepared for a lot of work.

> Members of the year 11/12 focus group discussed the challenges of moving to level-3 study. These included the:
>
> - Quantity of the material to be covered
> - Amount of work expected to be conducted outside 'lesson time'
> - More advanced content of what was being studied
> - Need to develop new skills, including an ability to see different perspectives.
>
> Those interviewed in the young researchers' study also discussed their anxieties about what advanced-level study would involve.

7.2. Institutional move

More immediate and more concerning

For the focus group participant who was coming to end of year 11, the main challenge concerned 'moving from where I am to a different place', rather than the transition to advanced level study. Although this assessment was qualified by the view that, 'once you are settled in' the challenge is likely to become 'more about the actual content you are learning.' The significance of the challenge associated with of moving institution was confirmed by another member of the same year 11/12 focus group. Looking back, 'there [was] a lot of worry about how settling in would go and meeting new people.' Elaborating, it was recalled that 'I was worried because none of my friends from secondary school did any of the subjects I was doing, and I was worried I wouldn't be able to talk to anyone in those lessons and see my friends around the college.' Exploring what they meant when talking about 'settling in', reference was made to 'getting used to being in college and being more independent. You have,' it was added, 'a lot more time in college. There is less lesson time so you have more time to do revision in a library, and you have to plan your time to do your own independent work, and make notes and things.'

Limited awareness of the levels of independence that would be involved

Both members of the year 11/12 group who had made the move to a new institution confirmed that they had not been informed, or prepared, for the 'extent' of independence they encountered. In experiencing a similar lack of information, the group's year 11 member observed that 'we want to know about what it actually entails. They say you do a lot more independent work but what do [they] mean by that?' To illustrate the point, reference was made to having been 'taken in a small group by my school to a local college. The staff [were saying] you do lots of independent work but that's all you are told. You are not told what independent work is and what it involves.' The same concerns, it was added, were felt by their peers. 'When I've spoken to other students in my year, they've been a bit confused about what exactly we are doing. You are literally just told you will have more independence. You're not told what work you will do and how it's formatted.'

Financial concerns

Another area of anxiety and uncertainty related to finance. 'We don't get told about finance', one focus group member argued. And, in particular, how you will 'afford your bus pass' and how you will acquire one if it is needed. They underestimate the fact that you want to have more information.' This

was confirmed by another participants. 'Having that support and being told' about independent work and 'financing your travels, or whatever else is needed', would, it was argued, 'help a lot.'

Meeting new people

One of the year 11/12 focus group participants also highlighted their concerns about the prospect of 'making friends'. This, it was added, could be 'really difficult because there's nothing before you transition from secondary to college.' Moreover, the findings reported from the year 11/12 young researcher element of the study appear to be consistent with this assessment. In particular, the limited communications between students and their prospective colleges was highlighted, with reference made to some feeling that they were in a state of 'limbo'. One of the other focus participants recalled experiencing similar challenges. 'There wasn't too much information given to us by our secondary school and,' it was added, 'there wasn't much given to us by the college either.'

7.3. Assessing the comparative challenges

Whilst it presented a challenge, the year 11/12 focus group members also talked about being excited about moving to college. One remembered feeling 'nervous' whilst at the same time 'looking forward to going'. Similarly, those surveyed for the young researcher study talked of their enthusiasm about moving to a new institution despite feeling apprehensive. In contrast, there was less excitement about embarking on advanced level study, although the opportunity to focus on subjects of choice was referenced.

> The second post-16 challenge focus group members highlighted related the move to a new place of study. Whilst the prospect could be an exciting one, reference was also made to concerns about:
>
> - 'Settling in' and getting used to college
> - Understanding and coping with being 'independent'
> - Financing their studies, including funding the costs of travelling to and from college
> - 'Meeting new people and making friends'
> - The limited amount of communication between students and their prospective colleges.

7.4. Impact of pandemic

In discussing their experiences of preparing for the transition to post-16 study, members of the year 11/12 focus group drew attention to impact of the pandemic. The year 11 member talked about how their school 'used to do a careers event and everyone had an opportunity to speak to people from the college' but 'because of Covid we haven't really been able to do that' and, it was added, 'we haven't really had much actual information about how colleges work.' Recalling their year 11 experience, another participant observed that 'there wasn't really too much preparation [the school] could do because there was quite an abrupt ending to the year.' A similar account was provided by the third member of the group. The move to college, it was observed, 'was sort of forced upon us' because of 'how quickly I finished school last year'. Indeed, subsequent lockdowns during their first year in college had meant that the challenge of adapting to a new institution had persisted. 'It was only six or seven weeks ago that everybody was in college together, so that was like the start of college.'

In discussing their experiences of preparing for the transition to post-16 study, members of the year 11/12 focus group drew attention to the impact of the pandemic. This included:

- The loss of a careers event that had, in previous years, provided 'an opportunity to speak to people from college'
- The challenge of adapting to a new institution caused by lockdowns during the first year at college.

7.5. Support received

The year 11/12 focus group participants also talked about the various sources of support they had received in preparing for the transition to post-16 study. One participant highlighted the benefit of having an older siblings who has 'been through six form'. However, it was acknowledged that 'I am lucky [because] I had a sister who went there but a lot of people don't have that.' A second member of the same group discussed the meetings they had with their careers advisor. However, these 'took place after I'd applied for the college that I go to currently, so it wasn't really too much of a help because I'd already had my applications in and that was already sorted.' The same participant was more positive about a careers event that had been hosted by their school. This, it was recalled, 'was helpful because you could question different colleges about the courses you were interested in.' One of the members of the group also discussed a video provided by the local sixth form. This covered individual subject areas and included 'an introduction from their head of the sixth form and a [recording] from their learning support and admissions team', although it was added, 'that was it', in terms of the information provided.

Year 11/12 focus group participants talked about the informal and formal forms of support they had received in preparing for the transition to post-16 study. These included:

- Drawing on the experience of older siblings
- Meetings with careers advisors (although in at least one instance these occurred after college applications had been submitted)
- A school-hosted careers event attended by different colleges
- An introductory video presentation provided by a local sixth form.

7.6. The case for more support

Insufficient levels of current support

There was a general consensus amongst those in the year 11/12 group that the level of support they and their peers had received was not sufficient. Indeed, one member contended that most of what they had learned about their next, post-16 options had been the result of their own work. 'I'm a big researcher, which helps. The school', it was added, 'isn't very supportive.' A similar comment was made by a second participant. Asked if they had felt prepared for the move from year 11 to 12, their response was that 'there wasn't a lot of support for us.'

Concerns and anxieties caused

Participants were asked if it mattered that current levels of support were considered to be inadequate. The general view that it was a concern. 'It can', one focus group member replied:

> Put you off the idea of going to college and it make it more of a hassle, rather than a next step that's exciting. It's more of I've got to figure all of these things out, and you have no information, and it gets to the point where you're scared about your first day. Instead of feeling a little bit nervous about it, you are really stressed because you have no idea what's going on. It makes it quite negative.

This assessment was shared by the other two participants. Not knowing how you are 'going to get to college [and] pay for transport', and how many 'hours of revision every week' you will need to do, 'doesn't', it was argued, 'weigh in nicely with the stress that's on you and the fact that you are anxious because you are starting a brand new college.' Indeed, one of the focus group members confirmed that a lack of information, and the associated anxiety about next - post-16 - steps, can have a lasting impact on 'some people'.

The comparative case for more support

The same year 11/12 focus group participants also made the case for more support in comparative terms. Here, a contrast was offered with the level information and advice received about their post-18 options, and especially those associated with HE. 'They seem to think that college isn't such a big step up', one member suggested. 'Whereas that's the first time where you are taking learning into your own hands and yet you are told [that] university is the big step up [when] actually, when you look at it, it's college that's the first big step up that we want to know about.' The same view was shared by another member of the group. 'We had a mandatory careers meeting', it was recalled, 'but it felt more like looking at our plans in uni rather than college'. Moreover, the careers event we attended, it was added, 'was strongly geared towards university. There were one or two people from college and sixth form but they were considerably outnumbered by about 10 universities.'

> There was general agreement amongst those in the year 11/12 group that the level of post-16 support they and their peers had received was insufficient and a cause of anxiety.
>
> In establishing the case for addition support, reference was made to receiving comparatively more information and advice about their post-18 options, including HE. Yet, moving to college was judged to represent 'the first big step up', and the first time young people will be 'taking learning into [their] own hands.'

7.7. What is needed

The reality of studying at college

Having established a case for more support with the post-16 transition, the discussions turned to what information, advice and guidance is needed. Here, emphasis was placed on providing insights into the reality of post-16 study. 'College is a brilliant experience', one of the year 11/12 focus group members observed, but:

There are still downsides and I don't think the negatives of college are addressed enough. You've got teachers towards the end of the year saying go to college, you're going to do great, you're going to power through that, but they don't address you'll probably have points in time you are going to feel down, or you're not progressing as much as you want to. They don't make you aware of things you're going to feel. You're already feeling it at GCSE but college is a different experience. It's an experience you haven't had yet but you're going to have. So, I think the downsides of college should be made aware to students a lot more.

Insights into the subjects covered

Focus group members thoughts on what schools or colleges could do to help prepare young people for the realities of college life and study were then explored. 'A lot of the time', it was observed, 'they just focus on the grades you need to get into college. It's never Ok well this is what I need support with, will they be able to give me this.' And, it was added, 'what facilities do they have that mean I want to go there,' and what do their courses 'cover, how [are they] taught, [and] how are you assessed.' Similar concerns were, it was added, expressed by those interviewed in the young researchers' study. One interviewee, it was recalled, 'said they're prepared to do more work' but that they did not know 'what it will be like.' The value of such insights was confirmed by the other two members of this focus group, with one observing that they had not been told about the 'sub-topics' that would be covered on their courses.

Understanding what independent study entails

The same group also emphasised the 'need to know more about what independent study is' and would entail, 'because', it was added, 'independent work really to us sounds just like homework. We need to know more about what it's going to be like'. Corroborating this claim, another member of the group recalled that it was only after being at their new college for a week that they discovered 'you need to be revising a long time outside of college on top of doing any homework. Why,' it was noted, 'didn't [they] tell me this at the beginning?'. Had they done so 'I could have prepared and figured out a routine?' Having selected a college and course, focus group members highlighted the value of being provided with information on 'what you have to do on your first day and where your classes' will be held.

The financial costs of college study

In addition, the year 11/12 group discussed the need to be more informed about the financial costs of college study. 'A lot of students', it was argued, 'are worried about the fact that they haven't really spoken about it. They don't tell you the costs and the books you will need to study from. They will have individual costs and they don't tell you about that' either.

The language used by colleges

Finally, and drawing on their findings from the young researcher interviews, one of the focus group members talked about the need for colleges to be aware of a tendency to revert to language that those still at school may not be unfamiliar with. 'Colleges often use weird terminology that we have no idea what they are on about. They'll use different words that mean something completely and

utterly different to us. Sometimes the way that they phrase things isn't very clear. So we need to know what they are actually on about'.

> In terms of additional post-16 support, focus group participants discussed the provision of:
>
> - Insights into the reality of college study, and what the first day at college will involve
> - Advice on what chosen courses will cover, and how they will be taught and assessed
> - Guidance on what independent study will entail
> - Information on the costs of college study, including those associated with travel and purchasing text books
> - Support with understanding the language and terms used by colleges.

7.8. Interventions ideas

Having identified the types of information, guidance and support that is needed in the transition to post-16 study, year 11/12 focus group members considered the forms that this should take.

Access to careers guidance

One of the first suggestions concerned ensuring young people were able to access careers guidance. Whilst their school provided students with one careers consultation, any additional meetings, the year 11 group member noted, required them to be pro-active. 'We have to go through our head of year, and get [them] to agree that we need to go and speak to our careers advisor'. It can, it was added, be really hard to gain access to someone who you can talk to about what you are 'struggling with' and say 'this is what I need to be able to cope with the transition' to college.

Talks about finance and the delivery of the curriculum

Drawing on the evidence gathered in their young researcher study, one of the year 11/12 focus group members discussed the request from those surveyed to be offered 'more talks about the move to college', which, it was noted, should include information on finance and how one can access financial support if this is needed. In addition, reference was made to the value of learning more about 'class sizes [and] how classes are run, and how the timetable work[s].' These, it was suggested, could be provided by 'career advisors or the admissions teams' from local colleges.

Study skills workshops

Another suggestion to emerge from the younger researchers' study concerned the provision of workshops on the skills that will be required at college and in pursing level 3 study. In particular, those associated with time-management were highlighted, as well as provision that would offer 'tips on how to get better' at managing one's time. A comparable point was made by one of the focus group members in relation to the greater independence associated with college study and being advice on how to manage this. Whilst it was noted that 'independence could be a bit negative, it can,' it was added, 'also be a positive because you can have a lot of time to yourself to plan things out and set your own pace with revision and stuff.'

More communication between colleges and their future students

A further suggestion revolved around the desire for colleges to communicate 'more often' with future students, and for guidance to be provided by those able to answer specific questions. 'When you want to ask a question', it was argued, it can be 'difficult because you don't always know who to contact.' You are given the email for admissions but you are not going to send them an email about your course or about the actual college. So you never really know who to contact and then when you do it's just very awkward because you don't really know who they are.' Developing this argument, the idea was mooted of being able to hear from - and ask questions of - the teachers and tutors who will be delivering college and sixth form courses. Indeed, one of the suggestions made by those interviewed for the young researchers' study was to be provided with an opportunity 'before you start' college to 'email the course leaders [with] any questions that you've got.'

College visits

The value of college visits was also highlighted, although it was acknowledge that such visits may have been offered had it not been for the pandemic. However, the consequence of not being able to 'look around' was that 'it's very difficult to know where you've got to go.' 'There are people', the year 11 member of the year 11/12 focus group observed, 'who have applied to one of the colleges near me and they don't even know where it is, or what it looks like. Surely we should know what it looks like considering we are going to be spending the next two years there.' Visits, it was added, 'give you an idea of where you are going to be and help you visualise where it is.'

Whilst participants understood the difficulties that arranging in-person visits have presented during the pandemic, the potential for online tours was also discussed. Although college provided videos can be helpful, and offer an insight of what the college will be like, there was a shared view amongst group members that online provision has its limits compared with in-person experiences. In this respect, one participant recalled the value of a college visit they made during year 11 and how useful it had been to 'have a look around', and to gain a sense of 'what it's actually going to be like', and of 'knowing and understanding the environment you' will be studying in. This, it was argued, cannot be replicated online. The importance of visits, and of not replying on what is seen on the screen, was emphasised by another group member: 'just so that you don't have one little image of what it's going to be like'. Visiting a college enables 'you get to see it all.' In corroborating this claim, the third member of the group added that 'it is highly beneficial to have that in-person visual of wherever you are going to further your education. It's alright to see pictures and videos but it's nothing compared to actually experiencing it yourself.'

Meeting other prospective college students and course preparation

One suggestion raised in the final year 11/12 focus group meeting was for colleges to provide an opportunity (in person or virtually) for those accepted onto their programmes to meet. Reflecting their recent college 'tour', the year 11 member observed that 'we didn't necessarily speak because we didn't know each other. There was a point when we did, and that felt really nice, but you didn't really have enough time to talk to each other properly. [Offering] something before we start, where we could all come together and talk to people who could be in our classes', would, it was argued, make the transition easier. Besides meeting others about to embark on their college studies, it would be helpful, it was argued by members of the same group, to be informed about 'what to expect' from your chosen course. This should include advice on what students can do 'over the summer to prepare'

for the transition to post-16 study, as well as guidance on the nature and amount of work that will be expected of them.

Having identified the types of information, guidance and supporting needed for successful transition to post-16 study, year 11/12 focus group members considered the forms that this should take. Here, reference was made to:

- Ensuring young people are able to access timely careers and next steps guidance whilst at school
- Talks about funding post-16/college based study
- Information sessions on how subjects will be delivered and what study timetables will look like
- Workshops on the skills that will be required at college and in pursing level 3 courses, including those associated with time-management and independent study
- Regular correspondence between colleges and their future students
- Arrangements for future students to hear from - and ask questions of - the teachers and tutors who will be delivering college and sixth form courses
- In-person college visits
- Meetings attended by students who have been accepted onto the same courses
- Advice on what students can do 'over the summer to prepare' for the transition to post-16 study.

Recommendations 6 to 13.

In response to the need for additional post-16 support, explore the option of providing:

- Talks about funding post-16/college based study
- Information sessions on how subjects will be delivered and what study timetables will look like
- Workshops on the skills that will be required at college and in pursing level 3 programmes, including those associated with time management and independent study
- Guidance to colleges on the importance of establishing a regular correspondence with their future students
- Opportunities for future students to hear from - and ask questions of - the teachers and tutors who will be delivering college and sixth form courses
- In-person college visits
- Meetings between students who have been accepted onto the same level 3 courses but who come from different schools
- Advice on what students can do 'over the summer to prepare' for the transition to post-16 study.

7.9. The messengers

Year 11/12 focus group participants also considered who should be providing information and insights into post-16 study options. Whilst careers advisors and college tutors were referenced, emphasis was placed on the value of hearing from current college students.

College students

Focus group members discussed the benefit of 'getting A-Level students to talk to secondary school students about their day-to-day life in college or sixth form', including providing insights into 'how they deal with their subjects. I think', it was added, 'secondary school students would find it nicer to hear from people who are actually going through it, rather than people who are overseeing it.' A similar finding was reported in the young researcher study. Here, mention was made to 'having a Q and A session, so that students could have a chance to speak to' those already at college, and of doing so in 'quite an informal kind of way.' In supporting this suggestion, one for the year 11/12 members remarked that 'I definitely would have found it useful talking to students.'

First and second year students

Asked what kinds of students it would be best to hear from, members of the same focus group were in agreement regarding the value of engaging with those 'who are in their first year'. Whilst it was recognised that second year students can be more 'difficult to relate to because they've gone through their first year', the benefits of also hearing from those in year two of their advanced level studies was also acknowledged. 'It helps us see the comparison between initially starting and then the development of going from your first year to your second year', one focus group member remarked. Moreover, 'if you can see how people from the first year have changed and become more confident within their second year, it would soften any impact that's caused from the initial anxiety of transferring.'

Those studying subjects of interest to participants

In addition, the year 11/12 focus group participants recognised the value of hearing from those who are studying the subjects that school students are interested in pursuing at post-16 level. 'Speaking to them', one member observed, 'means that you get a better idea of your course. If I was speaking to somebody who was doing science, they would have a complete and utterly different experience to me', it was added. In agreeing with this observation, another participant argued that 'I definitely think it would be useful to have somebody talk about the subjects you want to study.' Similarly, the third member of the group added that 'it is nice to know the experiences from someone who is studying a subject you are planning to study.'

However, it was also recognised that it would still be helpful to hear from those in college who are taking different subjects. 'Having any sort of conversation, and being able to question any student, is going to be beneficial', one participant observed. Another concurred, noting that 'if you can just have any student voice within the college telling you the general aspects of what it would be like, then that at least would be beneficial.' However, reference was also made to the value of hearing from those in a range of subject areas. That way, it was suggested, you can gain a more detailed and varied idea of what college will be like.

A sense of the kinds of generic messages that current college students might be able to provide was hinted at when participants considered the advice they would offer to their younger selves. Here emphasis was placed on the importance of 'not [being] afraid to ask questions. A lot of the time', it was observed, 'you don't realise that the question you ask will probably be the same question another person might ask. It's just that they also think it's a stupid question.'

Another associated piece of advice was to let these young people know that 'it's not bad to express your opinions, or tell people that you are feeling worried about your transition, because you can't be helped unless you actually do tell people that they are your worries.' Similarly, emphasise was placed on reassuring prospective post-16 students not to be 'afraid to interact with people, including your teachers. When you first go you are going to feel really awkward around everybody but,' it was added, 'as soon as you start talking and asking questions, and you get to know people, you start to feel a lot calm[er].' More generally, it was important to be assured that 'you'll get more comfortable with it, and you'll feel a lot better about college in general, and [with time] you'll think about how you were feeling the first couple of weeks and be like why was I so nervous all the time about everything? It gets a lot easier,' it was added, 'the longer you are there.'

Year 11/12 focus group participants considered who should be providing information and insights into post-16 study options.

Whilst careers advisors and college tutors were discussed, emphasis was placed on the value of hearing from current college students, with reference was made to:

- Those on advanced-level programmes talking to secondary school students about their day-to-day life in college and sixth form
- The provision of Q and A sessions that provide school students with a chance to speak with those already at college.

Whilst the benefit of hearing from those in different year groups was recognised, there was agreement that it would be of particular value to engage with students who are in their first year of college and studying subjects that school students are also interested in pursuing at advanced-level.

A sense of the kinds of generic messages that current college students might be able to provide was hinted at when participants considered the advice they would offer to their younger selves.

- Here, emphasis was placed on the importance of 'not [being] afraid to ask questions', or to interact with people, including 'your teachers,' and to being reassured that, 'with time, you'll [feel] more comfortable' with college.

Recommendation 14.

In addition to the support provided by careers advisors and college tutors, consider engaging with those on advanced-level programmes who can talk to secondary school students about their day-to-day life in college and sixth form, and answer their questions about post-16 study.

In particular, assess the value of drawing on the experiences and insights of those in their first year of college and who are studying subjects that school students are also interested in pursuing at advanced level.

7.10. The role of Think Higher

An intermediary

Year 11/12 focus group members also discussed the role that Think Higher has played and, looking ahead, could play in supporting post-16 transitions. 'I found it really useful this year', one member observed, to have 'a guidance meeting where we could ask questions about our next steps. There were questions that I felt really awkward about asking myself but', it was added, Think Higher were able to 'pass [them] onto the college and then I got an email back with my answer to that. So I think just being available for us to talk to and being able to ask questions is really good.'

Developing this line of thinking, reference was made to the potential for Think Higher to take on a more active role as an intermediary between school students and their prospective colleges. 'We have', one participant observed, 'a careers advisor but they mainly focus on getting college application[s] in. So it's more about having people who can generally contact college for you. Because a lot of the time it's you've got a question but you don't really want to say it yourself.' More generally, focus group members discussed the potential for Think Higher to support young people with college options, 'on top of the university stuff' they do, since, the year 11 member added, college will be 'my next step.'

CPD for teachers

A further potential role for Think Higher in terms of supporting post-16 transitions was implied rather than suggested by focus group members in their discussions about the information offered by teachers. Teachers, it was argued, could play a greater role if they were able to provide more information about the courses available, 'how to apply to college' and the finances involved, as well as 'the general day-to-day running of college and what college is about.' However that, it was argued, 'would involve staff having a little bit more knowledge about it because we found that a lot of staff don't necessarily know too much about it.' In response to these observations, it can be suggested that Think Higher could have a significant part to play in providing professional development opportunities for teachers, in terms of post-16 as well as post-18 information and advice.

Target groups

The year 11/12 focus group members also discussed which year groups post-16 support should be directed towards. There was general agreement that this needs to be provided early. Currently, what is offered tends, it was argued, to be focused on year 11s. However, participants talked about the challenges this had caused. The year 11 member discussed how they had 'applied for a college that only now I have realised [is not] where I want to go. I hadn't been told the information that I needed to know' before applying. A similar observation was made by another participant who recalled that the presentation given by their college did not take place until 'towards the end of year 11. I think', it was added, 'it would be better if it was done towards the beginning because, realistically speaking, you should start considering college then, rather than later.' Likewise, the third member of the group observed that if information and advice about post-16 options is not provided until 'the end of year 11, you are kind of being dropped just straight into college.' Consequently, there was a need to 'do it more gradually', and to start earlier. That way 'people would probably find [it] a lot more useful and feel a lot better about doing college.'

Asked when students should start to receive information about their post-16 options, the shared view was that year 10 would not be too early. Support in that year would, it was argued, provide students with the information needed to start applying when they move into year 11. Indeed, in discussing their findings from the young researcher's study, one of the focus group members suggested that some initial support and awareness raising around post-16 options could be offered to those in younger year groups. As justification, reference was made to receiving talks about university in year 7. 'If you can talk about university that early on, then surely you can [also] talk about college earlier on.' More generally, it was agreed that, once it starts to be provided, support needs to be sustained rather than being offering a single, standalone intervention. It might start in year 9 or 10, one member remarked, but 'it needs to be refreshed'.

Focus group members discussed the part that Think Higher could play in supporting post-16 transitions. Here, reference was made to the partnership:

- Developing its role as an intermediary between school students and their prospective colleges, including in forwarding questions to college contacts and sharing their responses
- Providing professional development opportunities for teachers, in terms of post-16 information and advice.

Year 11/12 focus group members also discussed which year groups post-16 support should be directed towards. There was general agreement that this needs to start in year 9 or 10, and to then be sustained.

Recommendations 15 to 17.

Consider how Think Higher could provide further support for the transition to post-16 study, including:

- Developing its role as an intermediary between school students and their prospective colleges, including by forwarding questions to college contacts and sharing their responses
- Providing professional development opportunities for teachers, in terms of post-16 information and advice.

Assess the potential to offer a sustained programme of post-16 support that starts with those in school years 9 and 10.

8. Post-18 transition

8.1. HE ambitions and who goes

Across both focus groups, participants talked about a desire to go to university. Similar ambitions were expressed amongst those surveyed in the year 10 young researchers' study. The main reason offered related to the achievement of career goals. In this respect, university was seen as a way of gaining a 'better qualification' and securing the 'job [you] want to do'. Moreover, the early interest in pursuing HE amongst those surveyed in the researchers' study was consistent with the accounts offered by two of the year 11/12 focus group members. Indeed, one described wanting 'to go to university' from the time they were 'in year 8.' However, for the third participant the decision to pursue a higher education had only been made during the previous 10 months. Such timing, it can be suggested, is consistent with wider findings that suggest those from non-traditional backgrounds often decide on HE later than many of their peers (Raven, 2018). This finding would underpin the value of providing post-16 as well as pre-16 outreach support.

The year 11/12 group also had views on the kinds of people who go onto university level study. This, it was argued, will include people who want to be educated and need a higher education qualification to secure the jobs they seek. However, it was also recognised that some will be motivated by the social side of university life, and the chance to join 'societies' and make new friends.

> Across both focus groups, participants talked about a desire to go to university.
>
> - The main reason offered related to the achievement of career goals through gaining 'better qualifications.'
> - However, there was some recognition that those who go to university may also be motivated by the social side of university life.

8.2. What it takes to progress, and who goes to university

Hard work and dedication

Those surveyed in the year 10 young researchers' study were asked what would be needed in order for them to progress to university. Interviewees, it was reported, talked about the need to 'study harder to get the grades' required, and 'to be determined' and prepared to preserver. Reference was also made to the importance of 'work[ing] well as a team', being 'dedicated to what you want to do', and having 'confidence.' Whilst it was a little unclear what interviewees had meant by the latter term, it was suggested that it could refer to being prepared to 'speak in front of other[s] and meet new people.'

Asked if enjoyment might be involved in progressing to HE, one of the year 10 focus group members acknowledged that university 'probably will be fun but', it was added, 'you can't get [there] until you have put in the work to have enough time or freedom to have fun.' This was also the view of those surveyed for the year 10 young researchers' study. In addition, members of the year 10 focus group emphasised the need to secure 'good' grades in their GCSE and A Levels'. Again, similar views were reported by the young researcher, with their interviewees talking about the need to secure qualifications in order to gain a university place.

Coping with independence

In discussing the same subject with the year 11/12 group, emphasis was placed on the ability to adjust to - and cope with - greater independence. Whilst the move from school to college constituted a 'big step', it was argued that going to university amounted to a 'giant leap'. This would involve becoming 'completely independent, being treated as an adult and dealing with the pressure' associated with independence.

> In terms of gaining a university place, those surveyed in the year 10 young researchers' study emphasised the need to be determined and prepared to preserver in order to secure the grades needed.
>
> In discussing the same subject with the year 11/12 group, emphasis was placed on the ability to adjust to - and cope with - greater independence.

8.3. Influencers

Informal sources of IAG

Both focus groups discussed those who had influenced their post-18 ambitions. Amongst what might be described as the more informal sources of information were friends and family. For one of the year 10 participants, this included an aunt who, like them, wanted to become a lawyer and who helped foster the idea of going into law. The prominence of friends and family, including as role models and sources of 'inspiration and advice', was also reported in the findings from the year 10 young researchers' study. The range of informal influences was slightly broader for the year 11/12 focus group participants, with one member recalling the role of the cadets on their career ambitions.

Formal sources of support

Teachers

Whilst not referenced by all focus group participants, some talked about the influence of teachers. 'A few' teachers, one year 10 member recallled, had help to encourage their subject interests, including by 'provid[ing] extra resources and extra time to catch up if you've missed anything'. Similarly, two members of the 11/12 group argued that teachers can have quite an effect on levels of subject interest. 'We do see them', it was noted, 'in a role as somebody who has a lot of answers, so we take on, a lot of the time, what they say.' Although this was qualified by the observation that 'sometimes teachers don't realise the impact they can have on this kind of thing.'

Careers guidance

The year 10 group also discussed the positive influence on their post-18 ambitions of the careers guidance they had received. Two participants highlighted a set of career-related sessions they had attended. Each was devoted to a different sector, amongst them 'law' and 'technology', and included information on the careers available and 'skills needed'. These, it was added, had been delivered online but were commended for being interactive and providing a chance to 'listen to industry professionals [who] were answering questions that you wouldn't get the answers to normally'. They

also featured quizzes 'to test your understanding afterwards.' These sessions, it was concluded, had proved useful but could have been improved if it had been possible to have 'gone out and met real life people.' Moreover, the time allocated to the 'live' online chats meant that not all questions were answered, which, it was suggested, might not have been the case if there been an opportunity to 'go out [and] sit at a table' with experts.

However, it also became clear from the year 10 group discussion that this level of support was not necessarily provided by all schools. In this respect, one participant suggested that it would have been helpful if their school had been able to offer a comparable intervention. Similarly, whilst two participants talked about the opportunity to speak to careers advisors in year 10, the other focus group member observed that in 'my school we don't really talk about careers as much.'

Careers fairs

Both focus group talked about the careers events they had attended before the pandemic. For two of the year 10s, covid had meant that their school's annual careers fair had not been able to run. However, the was general agreement amongst participants that when they had been available these events had proved useful. One member recalled that attending this event had been 'helpful' in giving 'me an understanding' of career options. Here, emphasis was placed on the value of being able to participant 'from early on, rather than waiting until my [GCSE] choices', and then 'being rushed and panicked' into a decision. Similarly, one of the year 11/12 focus group members recalled in positive terms the careers event they had attended soon after starting secondary school. This had featured representatives from various universities. In addition, reference was made to a careers week held in year 7 that had included 'workshops about university and how to prepare yourself for it', as well as a 'whole day [event] focusing on university.'

> Both focus groups discussed those who had influenced their post-18 ambitions. Amongst the 'informal' sources of information were friends and family.
>
> Regarding more formal sources, a number talked about the influence of teachers, including in fostering subject interests. Although this was qualified by the claim that teachers are not always aware of 'the impact they can have.'
>
> Reference was also made to:
>
> - The positive influence on post-18 ambitions of the careers guidance some had received
> - Careers events held before the pandemic which had included representatives from universities
> - A year 7 careers week with 'workshops about university'
> - A year 7 one-day event 'focusing on university.'

8.4. The case for additional support

Whilst various practices and interventions - notably careers fairs - were commended, focus group members discussed the value of being provided with more support, in terms of guiding and informing their post-18 options in general and those regarding HE in particular. This claim, it can be suggested, is supported by some of the rather restricted perceptions of HE voiced by participants. These included a focus on the hard work and the dedication required to secure a place at university, and of then

needing to be able to manage high levels of independence, as well as the view that those who progress to HE are primarily concerned with securing particular jobs.

A further case for additional support was made by one of the year 11/12 focus group members. Those from non-traditional backgrounds may be placed at a disadvantage, it was contested, because of the limited amount of information available to them. Elaborating, it was argued that one's 'family situation' can impact on how 'easily some of us can get the information.' I think that in some of the 'more affluent areas of the town there is support from family, where 'parents are like, yeah go ahead and go do that.' In contrast, it was observed, 'it took me three years just to convince' them that I wanted 'to go to university. It just feels like sometimes when there's no support you feel like you can't do it, so you're not going to do it.'

Whilst various practices and interventions - notably careers fairs - were commended, focus group members discussed the value of more support, in terms of guiding and informing their post-18 options in general and those regarding HE in particular.

The case for additional support included the argument that those from non-traditional backgrounds may be placed at a disadvantage because of the limited amount of (familial) information and guidance available to them.

8.5. What is needed

Guidance on educational and career pathways

One of the first suggestions for additional support made by the year 10 group was for information and guidance on the 'routeways' into careers of interest. Exploring this idea further, reference was made to learning about the qualifications, as well as the 'experience and skills needed'. Similarly, the importance of being provided with information and advice on the qualifications required to progress was a finding reported in the year 10 young researchers' study.

In-person visits

How this information and these insights could best be conveyed was also discussed by the year 10 group. Whilst virtual experiences were helpful, emphasis was placed on the opportunity to 'go outside', experience things 'in real life', and visit places of work, as well as colleges and universities. Such encounters would, it was argued, enable participants to 'be hands on with the equipment that [they will] need to learn', whilst also enabling them to 'speak' at length to the hosts of such events.

Hearing from professionals and those with experience of FE and HE

Although the value of 'school trips' was highlighted, year 10 participants also talked about the opportunity to meet - including as school visitors - those who have pursued careers that would be of interest to students. Here, the examples were offered of 'professionals' from 'the technology sector, medicine, law and science,' as well as 'people from universities across the country.' They could, it was agreed, 'tell you what it is like in that job and that role, and how they got there.' Meanwhile, hearing from those at college and university would provide insights into the training involved. This would

enable 'you to know which path you want to take', including the option of 'leav[ing] education and going straight into the field of work, or [pursuing an] apprenticeship.'

Guidance on the university application process

One particular area where more next-steps support was needed emerged from the year 11/12 young researchers' study. Although interviewees acknowledged that some valuable information about university had been provided, they remained uncertainty about the university application process.

Peer support scheme

Whilst emphasis was placed on hearing from outsiders, one specific suggestion made by a year 10 focus group member that received support from other participants concerned developing a peer support scheme. This, it was argued, could bring together pupils interested in the same subject areas and sectors. In doing so, it would provide pupils with an opportunity to discuss options with those who are in 'the same position as you.'

Role of teaching professionals

Members of the year 11/12 group talked about the greater role that teaching professionals could play in supporting post-18 educational and career goals. This, it was argued, should include 'listening' to young people's ambitions and providing guidance on the routes that can be taken to realise these. Moreover, there was a need to be informed about the range of routes available. 'A lot of people', it was noted, 'have this perception that you have to go and get A-levels to go to university and, when you look at it, that's not always the case.'

However, there was a concern amongst the same focus group members that whilst 'a few' teachers may be familiar with the different routes into HE, most 'are not educated' on the pathways available. To remedy this, participants hinted at the potential for some form of CPD for teaching staff, which, it was suggested, might include familiarising them with the 'resources out there', and taking part in careers events along with their students, as well as encouraging them to ask their 'students what they think could help them see the different things that their students are thinking' about. Although not mentioned by focus group members, it can suggested that Think Higher may be able to provide additional support in ensuring teaching professionals are aware of the different routes into university level study, and are aware of the range of programmes HE providers offer.

> Focus group members discussed the additional support needed in relation to post-18 educational and career ambitions, with reference made to:
>
> - Information on the 'routeways' into careers of interest, and advice on the qualifications required to progress
> - In-person visits to places of work, as well as colleges and universities
> - Hearing from professionals can offer insights 'in their roles' and the pathways they took, along with those at college and university who can provide information and advice on the training involved
> - Advice and guidance on the university application process
> - A peer support scheme that would bring together pupils interested in the same subject areas and sectors

- Greater involvement from teaching professionals, including providing guidance on the progression routes that will enable young people to realise their ambitions. Although the need for teachers to be aware of - and understand - different pathways was also referenced (which suggests a potential role for Think Higher in providing teacher CPD).

Recommendations 18 to 23.

In response to the need for addition support in helping students to realise their post-18 educational and career ambitions, consider IAG and outreach interventions that provide:

- Guidance on the 'routeways' into careers of interest (including information and advice on the qualifications required to progress)
- In-person visits to places of work, as well as colleges and universities
- Opportunities for young people to hear from professionals would can provide insights into 'their roles' and the pathways they took
- Advice and guidance on the university application process
- A chance for pupils interested in the same subject areas and sectors to meet (a form of peer support scheme)
- CPD training for teaching professionals, with the aim of ensuring they are aware of - and understand - the different pathways into HE level study and training.

8.6.. How outreach should be delivered

Comparative advantages of real life experiences

Although Think Higher was recognised as already playing a vital role in providing information, guidance and insights into HE, the year 10 focus group participants reported that their overriding experience of outreach had been online, via Teams. When informed that interventions could, if conditions permitted, also be offered in person, reference was made to the value of 'going out and meeting people in real life situations' and of receiving classroom visits. Such encounters, it was argued, 'would be less superficial.' Moreover, with online support 'you're not really connecting with people that much' and that it is easier to be distracted.

However, the advantages of online outreach were also acknowledged. 'You don't', it was observed, 'have to travel to the place.' Instead, 'you can just sit there, load up onto the experience, and just start and get in the mindset to complete it, rather than having to go out for a certain time, come back and [start] again.' However, on balanced first-hand experiences were preferred. 'Real life talking to people is still better', it was concluded.

Whilst focus group participants acknowledged the advantages of online outreach, including in terms of the time saved in travelling to events, the benefits of 'going out and meeting people in real life situations', and of receiving classroom visits, were judged to be greater.

> **Recommendation 24.**
>
> Whilst acknowledging the benefits - and role - that online support can provide, take account of the advantages of interventions that enable young people to gain first-hand experience of campuses and to meet people in-person.

8.7. Target groups

The need to engage young learners

The conversations with both sets of focus groups participants, especially the year 10s, also explored the question of who should receive outreach interventions. As with the discussions over the timing of post-16 support, there was a consensus that this needs to be provided early. In particular, reference was made to engaging with those in years 8 and 9. This would give students 'longer to think about' their options. It would also help them in considering 'what they want to do for their GCSEs.' In addition, emphasis was placed on the importance of providing a series of interventions which could start in year 8 and 9, and 'carry on through to year 11' and beyond.

The value of on-going support

The rationale offered for 'on-going' support was also discussed by the year 10s. This included the possibility that ambitions might change and develop over time. In addition, it viewed as a way of helping students 'to progress further with their learning, because then they have an understanding' of where their efforts can lead and 'what options they have.' Such support could also help students 'understand why' they are studying particular subjects and see 'where [these] can take them' and, as a consequence, 'be inspired to try harder.'

Moreover, participants agreed that the nature of the support offered should be tailored to particular year groups. In this respect, year 8s (and possibly year 9s) should be informed about the 'different pathways' available to them 'after GCSEs.' There was also a need to encourage younger year groups to identify their interests and explore how these could link into the subjects they take and the careers they are considering. Asked how those offering support might learn about learner interests, year 10 focus group members talked about organising a 'fun quiz' that would encourage them to answer questions about what they like doing and would like to do in the future.

> The conversations with both sets of focus groups participants explored the question of who should receive outreach interventions.
>
> As with the discussions over the timing of post-16 support, there was a consensus that this should be provided early. In particular, reference was made to engaging with those in school years 8 and 9. This would:
>
> - Give students 'longer to think about' their options
> - Help them in considering 'what they want to do for their GCSEs'
> - Enable them to better 'understand why' they are studying particular subjects and see 'where [these] can take them'

Emphasis was also placed on the importance of providing a series of interventions tailored to particular year groups, which could start in year 8 and 9 and 'carry on through to year 11' and beyond.

Recommendation 25 and 26.

Recognise the value of interventions that work with those at an early stage in their learner journeys (from year 8/9 onwards), including their capacity to:

- Provide students with more time to explore their options
- 'Understand why' they are studying particular subjects, and the further and higher level study opportunities these subject choices can offer.

9. Review

9.1. The researcher's perspective

Student engagement and quality of the conversations

As part of the research process, fieldnotes capturing the researcher's reflections on the group discussions were kept. A particular focus of these notes was in assessing the effectiveness of running discussion groups online, given the comparative novelty of using this medium in widening participation. The comments made indicate that high levels of student involvement and participation were achieved. Corroborating these impressions, it can be noted that each of the discussions comfortably exceeded the originally planned 45 minutes to an hour allocation. Indeed, the average running time was nearer 90 minutes, with each meeting generating a considerable amount of detailed data (with transcripts from each of the discussions totalling between 6,000 to 9,000 words). Moreover, whilst during the first round one participant preferred to comment via the chat facility, this individual felt comfortable enough to engage in the verbal discussions during the next two sets of meetings.

The fieldnotes also commented on the quality of the data generated. Here, reference was made to occasions during the first set of discussions, as well as subsequent rounds, when participants qualified the observations made by the facilitator and elaborated on what had been summarised. Similarly, there were instances where focus group members took a lead by asking each other questions. Likewise, the quality of participant involvement was comment upon by the three members of the Think Higher teams who helped to facilitator and monitor the discussions, and who were involved in a review meeting that took place after the first round of discussions. In addition, the benefits of working with smaller numbers than would typically comprise an in-person focus group were also commented upon during this review meeting. Here, mention was made to the greater influence that each of those taking part could have on the character and direction of the conversations.

Challenges of conducting focus groups online

However, the challenges associated with online discussions were also recognised in this review meeting. As facilitators, it was noted that we have less control over each participant's environment. This was especially the case with this study, since focus group members were engaging in the discussions from their homes, rather than in a supervised classroom setting. However, overall there was little evidence of participants being distracted by their surroundings during these discussions. Indeed, the one incident of a participant being relatively less engaged occurred during the second round. This appeared to have more to do with the timing of the session rather than any external distractions, since the meeting coincided with the completion of a set of school tests.

> Since they are comparatively new to the field of widening participation, consideration was given to assessing the effectiveness of online focus groups. The evidence gathered in this study reveals that:
>
> - Good levels of student involvement and participation were achieved
> - The data generated was of a high quality.
>
> In addition, a review meeting with those involved in co-facilitating the discussions highlighted the benefit of working with smaller numbers than would typically comprise an in-person focus group.

> - Here, mention was made to the greater influence that each of the students taking part could have on the character and direction of the conversations.
>
> However, the challenges associated with the type of online discussions held for this study were also recognised.
>
> - Facilitators were able to exercise less control over each participant's home environment than would be the case in a supervised classroom setting. Although in practice there was little evidence of participants being distracted by their surroundings during the discussions.

9.2. Approaches adopted in supporting participant engagement

Two particular approaches were adopted during the course of this series of discussions that proved successful in supporting participant engagement. The first concerned allocating time at the end of the initial and second round of meetings to gathering participants' views on the content of the next meeting's agenda. In addition, participants were encouraged to engage in some preparation ahead of the next round of discussions, notably in terms of reflecting on their experiences and perceptions. For instance, towards the close of the first meeting of the year 10 group participants were asked to consider the kinds of careers support that would be of benefit to those in school years 8 and 9. Similarly, and reflecting the nature of the initial set of discussions, the year 11/12 group were encouraged to 'have a real think about who has influenced you in terms of your ambitions, including the idea of going to university.'

The second approach, introduced during the second round of discussions, involved the use of a word document placed on screen share, so that all participants could see it. Comprising a set of headers and managed by one of the co-facilitators, this was used to capture the key points made during the discussions. In practice, it proved effective in helping to focus discussion and encouraging participants to respond to what their fellow focus group members had said. It also provided a useful supplementary record of the discussion

> Two particular approaches were adopted during this series of discussions that proved successful in supporting participant engagement.
>
> - The first concerned allocating time at the end of the initial and second round of meetings to gathering participants' views on the content of the next meeting's agenda.
>
> - The second involved the use of a word document placed on screen share so that all participants could see it. Used to capture the key points made during the discussions, this proved effective in helping to focus the conversations and encouraging participants to respond to what their fellow focus group members had said. It also provided a useful supplementary record of the discussion.

9.3. Potential developments in methods and approach

Finally, the fieldnotes made reference to how the type of online discussions featured in this study could be developed. In seeking to be learner- and participant-led, focus group members were given the option of engaging in the discussions with their cameras either on or off. All opted for the latter. Whilst this was the preferred and respected choice, it did mean that the discussions were facilitated without access to non-verbal cues. Generally, this worked well but there were some occasions where, as the main facilitator, it was difficult to determine the importance or emphasis participants were placing on what they were saying, or, as outlined above, whether their attention may have been straying. Consequently, the quality of the experience and the data generated could potentially be enhanced in instances where participants are willing to switch their cameras on. From an ethics and safeguarding perspective, a school or college setting may be more conducive to this option, although some platforms do enable the blurring of backgrounds, or the selection of artificial ones. In addition, whilst the use of a shared word document as a prompt and supplementary record of what was discussed proved useful, there is, arguably, greater potential in using some form of interactive presentation software that enables participants to type their own comments and observations, and for these to be shared with others.

From the experience gained during this project, suggestions were made for ways in which the type of online discussion featured in this study could be developed. Notably that:

- The quality of the experience and the data generated could be enhanced in cases where participants are willing to switch their cameras on (thus, enabling the facilitator, and other focus group members, to recognise and work with non-verbal cues). From an ethics and safeguarding perspective, a school or college setting would be a more suitable venue.

- Whilst the use of a shared word document as a prompt and supplementary record of what was discussed proved useful, there is, arguably, greater potential in using some form of interactive presentation software. This would enable participants to type their own comments and observations, and for these to be shared with others.

9.4. Participants' assessment of the focus group discussions

Opportunity to discuss and think

During the final round of meetings, participants were asked to critically assess their focus group experience. The responses were consistently positive. 'It's been good', one focus group member observed. 'It's definitely made me think about what I wish had been done differently in the move from GCSEs to A-levels, and what sort of things we could do to help future A-Level students make their transition easier.' In particular, reference was made to the opportunity the discussion groups presented to 'talk to other people [and] have other people to bounce ideas off.' This, it was added, 'definitely helps you to think more in-depth about the things you need to talk about.' Agreeing with this assessment, a second participant observed that 'I have loved this experience because I've finally been able to channel something that I've always wanted to be able to say, and now I can, [and] I've been listened to.'

New skills

Focus group members also identified various gains arising from participating in the discussions. Judging the process to have 'been beneficial', one participants described learning 'new skills', as well as having the opportunity to 'meet new people.' A second participant observed that 'I [have] learned about how to express myself because I've never really been listened to before, and so I've learned to express my opinion and being OK to be open about it.' Similarly, a third focus group member commented that 'there's been a lot of having to think on my feet about certain things and that's definitely a very useful skill to have, so that's something I'll take away from this.'

Online or in-person

Whilst running the focus groups online was judged to have been successful, one of the participants talked about a preference for in-person discussions. This, it was added, was because 'you don't get to see everyone's reactions [when] it's over a computer screen. Even if you can see their faces, you can't see their non-verbal cues - their body language - can you?'

> During the final round of meetings, participants were asked to critically assess their focus group experience. The responses were consistently positive, with reference made to:
>
> - The opportunity the discussion groups presented to 'talk to other people, [and] have other people to bounce ideas off'
> - Being 'able to channel something that I've always wanted to be able to say', and being 'listened to'
> - The acquisition of new skills, including learning 'how to express myself' and 'thinking on my feet.'

9.5. Participants perspective on the young researchers' study

A new experience and new skills

The two participants who took part in the young researcher study also commented on this experience. Both provided very positive feedback. The year 10 researcher talked about enjoying what was 'a new experience that we haven't had the chance to do and complete before.' Similarly, the researcher from the older group remarked that it has been 'really good', and highlighted the opportunity it had afforded to 'be able to do something myself'.

Both also discussed the skills that they had developed as a result. These included 'interviewing skills'. 'I know how to ask questions', the year 10 researcher remarked, 'as well as how to answer them now.' The transferability of these skills was also discussed. 'Being able to ask questions give[s] you more confidence when you need to answer them because you've been in that position before, so you know you've been on both sides.' In addition, reference was made to developing communication skills as a result of engaging with a 'wider range of people'. Moreover, the process had given them 'a wider view and perspective. I've combined the opinions' of others, it was noted, 'with my own to create a new opinion.'

Both of the young researchers also explored how, having experienced the process, they would do things differently if the chance arose again. Here, reference was made by the year 10 researcher to asking 'a wider range of people', and seeking the opinions of a larger sample of 'may be six or seven' interviewees. It was also suggested that a more direct question could have been asked about what interviewees plan to do after leaving school and college.

Research benefits

The discussion with the year 11/12 focus group researcher highlighted one of the benefits that it had been hoped the young researcher approach would afford. The 'students I spoke to were really happy that another student was actually asking them, not just some random person', it was observed. Exploring why being asked questions by a peer would have made a difference, reference was made to the ease with which trust and rapport could be built. Being 'their age [means that] you're going through it with them and you can mutually understand each other to some extent.' In elaborating, it was added that 'you know something about them and you're not having to suss them out the first time you meet them, and figure out who they are.'

Those who took part in the young researcher study also commented on this component of the project. Here participants talked about 'a new experience' and an opportunity 'be able to do something myself.' They also described the skills that had been developed in the process, including how to:

- Pose and answer questions
- Communicate and engage with a 'wide range of people'.

9.6. Further consultation

From discussions between the project researcher and members of the Think Higher team, the idea of a supplementary phase to this study emerged. The aim of this would be to gather participants' assessment on how accurately the recommendations emerging from this investigation capture their views and concerns. The feedback provided in this interactive session could then be used to finalise the recommendations presented in this report.

Moreover, this supplementary element would enable focus group participants to witness a complete 'research cycle' - from data gathering to report preparation. It would also help to underpin the participatory objectives of the project and afford a case study in the co-development of outreach initiatives. In this respect, a number of recent studies, including one support by the OfS (Bowes et al. 2019, 4 and 43), have emphasised the importance of placing 'learner voices at the heart of planning and delivery', and of providing learners with 'the opportunity to contribute their views to shape the design, implementation and delivery of a programme for young people.' Although such guidance does not provide details of how to engage learners in this way, Walker and Logan (2008, 12) identify 'discussion forums' as one method. Accordingly, the proposal that has been develop for this supplementary study will involve both sets of focus group participants coming together online to review and comment on the study's draft recommendations.

During the closing stages of the third round of focus group meetings participants were asked for their views on this idea. All expressed an interest in participating. In this respect, one of the year 11/12 members observed that 'I think it's a good idea. I think it would be nice to see what our voice has

done.' Similarly, another participant noted that a meeting of this nature would ensure that 'we get our voices heard again and', it was added, 'we know it's not being twisted.'

Looking ahead, a supplementary component of this study is being planned. This will gather participants' assessment of how accurately the recommendations presented in this report capture their views and concerns. The feedback provided in this interactive session will then be used to revise these recommendations.

- For participants, this additional element will enable them to witness a complete research cycle - from data gathering to report preparation
- It will also underpin the participatory objectives of the project, and afford a case study in the co-development of outreach initiatives.

In terms of the response of focus groups members to this plan, all expressed an interest in participating, with reference made to seeing 'what our voice has done', of having 'our voices heard again', and of knowing that what was said has not been 'twisted'.

10. Conclusions and reflections

There has been a tendency amongst those concerned with widening access to concentrate on progression from advanced level study to HE. Indeed, this is reflected in the comparative allocation of resources committed to post-16 outreach by many universities, as reported in their APPs (Raven, 2021d). However, whilst understandable, such a focus overlooks earlier phases of educational transition. The decisions made at these junctures do much to determine the short as well as the longer-term educational journeys these young people take and, ultimately, their prospects for HE progression.

This study sought to recognise these next steps. It did so by seeking the perspectives of those from amongst the Uni Connect cohort. Whilst not unique in taking this stance, what helps to distinguish this study is the highly participatory approach it adopted. This involved running a series of focus group meetings with the same set of young people over a four month period, which were supported and supplemented by the research some of these students conducted with their peers. It is hoped that this report, and the findings it presents, has been able to reflect the quality of the data generated.

What is certain is that these young people's accounts do much to confirm the importance of these transition points in the minds of those experiencing them, and the influences and influencers on the decisions they make. They also provide insights into what has proved effective in supporting their next steps progression and, of perhaps even greater importance for WP practitioners, what could work in providing additional support and enhancing young people's chances of remaining engaged in education, reaching their full potential, and having the opportunity to participant in - and benefit from - a higher education.

In particular, the conversations with these young people focused on three transition points: the move to GCSEs (Key Stage 4), the progression to advanced-level study (KS5), and the move out of compulsory education, including into some form of HE-level education and training. To those involved, each represented a real and significant next step, and one they recognised could have lasting consequences. For each transition point, various sources of support - both formal and informal - were referenced. Whilst participants questioned the effectiveness of some of these, others were commended. However, gaps in support were also identified. Moreover, in a number of instances the challenges associated with transition appear to have been exacerbated by the pandemic and consequent lockdowns.

For all three transition points, the case for further support was made, along with ideas for the form this should take and how it should be delivered, as well as by whom. Whilst the role of Think Higher was praised, suggestions were also made for how the partnership could further help to address these gaps, in terms of IAG and outreach provision. Although the ideas for additional support were distinct for each transition point, certain common themes also emerged. Notably, the benefits of hearing from individuals on the next rung of the educational ladder, the importance of being able to interact and engage with those offering guidance and support - rather than be passive recipients of information - and the need to be informed of the realities of what the next step will be like, and what will be required to succeed at this new level.

Whilst the conversations with these young people underpinned the importance of each transition point, it can be argued that the evidence presented highlights the significance of the move from pre to post-16 education, and the consequent need to pay particular attention to this in terms of the IAG and outreach response. For those involved in this investigation, as well as the individuals interviewed for the year 11/12 young researchers' study, this involved both the step-up to advanced level study

and the move to a new institution. Both presented challenges. However, the latter appeared to pose the more immediate and significant concern.

Indeed, there are reasons to believe that the experience of moving institution is likely to be shared by a disproportionate number of those from less affluent backgrounds. The neighbourhoods that Uni Connect work with may well be amongst those less likely to possess schools with sixth forms and whose young residents will, consequently, be required to move to a new place of education and training. In this respect, FE colleges are known to possess higher proportions of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds than school sixth forms (Baldwin et al. 2020; Hill, 2015). Moreover, whilst WP practitioners are familiar with the notion of no family history in HE and the implications that this can have on the kinds of information, advice and support parents and carers are able to offer, less consideration has been given to the concept as it relates to post-16 education. Yet, many of the parents of the young people Uni Connect seek to work with are likely to have left formal education at 16. In this regard, the legal requirement to remain in education and training until the age of 18 was introduced comparatively recently (Department for Education 2016, 5).

However, it also needs to be recognised that these are speculations. More research is required. Not least qualitative explorations that will enable us to learn more about the impact of place and background on HE participation rates. Indeed, recent commentaries by the OfS (2021ds and 2021e) have drawn attention to this topic, with reports highlighting the impact of geography on whether young people 'go to university' or not. However, these reports are primarily quantitative in nature and do not consider the learner perspective. It can be argued that the methods and approaches developed for this study have the potential to applied to this topic and, in the process, to advance our understanding of - and response to - the role of place on young people's progression prospects.

> The findings from this study highlight the value of further research. In particular, a qualitative exploration into the role of place on HE participation rates.
>
> This would align with the focus of a number of recent reports which draw attention to 'geographical inequalities' in university access (OfS, 2021d and 2021e). However, these reports are primarily quantitative in nature and do not consider the learner perspective.
>
> The methods and approaches developed for this study have the potential to be applied to this topic and, in the process, advance our understanding of - and response to - the role of place on young peoples' progression prospects.

> **Recommendation 27.**
>
> Consider the potential of conducting further research.
>
> - In particular, explore the option of a qualitative investigation that utilises the methods and approaches developed in this study to explore the role of place on HE participation rates from the perspectives of the young people involved.

11. Acknowledgements

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