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RESEARCH BRIEF

About a Boy: The challenges in widening access to higher education for white males from disadvantaged backgrounds

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NATIONAL EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES
NETWORK

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NEON Research Briefs

This is the first in a series of NEON research briefs to be produced over the next year.

Executive Summary

Improving the progression to higher education of white males from disadvantaged backgrounds has been highlighted as an important area that government and policy makers are encouraging those delivering widening access to higher education (HE) outreach work to focus upon. The National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) undertook a survey with its members in Spring 2016 to gauge their response to this challenge and the government's recent policy directive. The survey of a sample of 25 members found that:

- **Existing outreach base is low, but developing :** Just over 20% of organisations are actually working specifically with this group and these initiatives are unable, at this time, to offer evidence of success. But nearly 60% are developing/intending to develop projects.
- **More research is needed to understand the needs of this group:** The majority of organisations felt that having the detailed knowledge about why this group had low attendance rates in HE essential to planning effective support work.
- **Cross sector working is essential to targeting effectively:** It is difficult practically to target this group for specific 'boys only' interventions and also often to ensure that they are represented significantly within wider project cohorts. The key to address this the active engagement of schools working in partnership with HE.
- **How do we go beyond sport?** Of the 5 projects described 3 involve sport and are particularly football focused. Sport can be a very effective way of building engagement with white, working class disadvantaged boys but there is also a need for projects that use other mechanisms to engage with the group.
- **Outreach alone cannot fix this.** There was a strong view amongst the organisations at the front line of achieving this policy directive that the reasons underlying this issue are deep rooted and cultural, requiring multi-agency action which HEIs alone cannot fix.

There are a number of pressing challenges access to HE practitioners face if their work is to have the impact on this issue they want it to. NEON will be creating a 'NEON White Males from Disadvantaged Backgrounds Access to Higher Education Task Force' to support them and invites policymakers and sector bodies to join this group.

The National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) was founded in early 2012 as the professional organisation to support those involved in widening access to higher education (HE) and social mobility. At the heart of NEON is a cross-sector approach bringing together HE institutions (HEIs), schools, colleges, the voluntary sector, professional bodies and employers. NEON has over 80 organisational members. To find out more about NEON please go to: www.educationopportunities.co.uk.

1. Background

In the letter of guidance to the Director of Fair Access (Feb 2016), the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, and the Minister of State for Universities and Science called for greater attention to be focussed on access for young white males from disadvantaged backgrounds. Recent evidence from UCAS suggests that less than 10% of young white males in receipt of free school meals are progressing to HE as opposed to over 40% of Asian females in receipt of free school meals (UCAS 2015). The basis of this disparity in progression can be found in the achievements of young white males from disadvantaged backgrounds in the school system. The 2014 Commons Education Selection Committee publication, '*Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children*', found that only 32.3% of white British pupils known to be eligible for free school meals (FSM) achieve five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C (including English and Mathematics). This is in comparison to 64.5% of white British pupils not eligible for FSM.

2. NEON Members Survey

In order to gauge the level of work that already exists in this area NEON members were asked to complete an online survey. In total, 25 members responded to the survey. The types of organisations that responded are outlined below. The sample draws from all the types of organisation who are delivering widening access to HE outreach work in England.

Type of organisation	Number of responses
Charity	3
Million+ Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)	3
National Networks of Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) Partnerships	5
Other HEIs	8
Russell Group HEIs	2
University Alliance HEIs	4
TOTAL	25

3. Headline findings from the survey

What do you see as the major challenges in achieving the government priority?

Answer	% agreeing
Ability to target learners from this background	70
Understanding the particular requirements of this group	70
Working in partnership with schools/colleges to support this group	40
Ability of HEIs to affect a more deep rooted problem	75

4. Key Findings

- **Existing outreach base is low, but developing**

The targeting of young white males from disadvantaged backgrounds is a relatively new and developing area of widening access work. Out of the 25 members surveyed 6 are already working with the target group. A further 14 are intending to develop new delivery based projects. Six are intending to develop new research to better understand how to work with this group whilst only 3 said they did not envisage the increased focus would result in a significant change to the way they currently work whilst 15 stated that they would be focussing existing projects to concentrate on the target group. Out of the existing projects working with the cohort that members reported, the majority are relatively recent initiatives that are in their infancy and, at present, are unable to demonstrate any significant impact.

In terms of the type of projects organisations are delivering or planning to, there are two case studies in Appendix 1 below. As described below sport is a feature but also working with student ambassadors is seen as important.

'We know that the boys are heavily influenced by student ambassadors so use white male ambassadors as much as possible within our projects when working with this group. These ambassadors spend additional time in school in a mentoring position to strengthen the relationships.'

'We have noted that less than 10% of our Student Ambassadors are from a white working class background and will encourage applications from white males.'

- **More research is needed to understand the needs of this group**

Nearly three quarters of the respondents felt there was a need for more research to fully understand the issue and meet the needs of the particular target group.

"With regard to understanding the requirements of this group there is a lack of research about working with white working class boys as a distinct group, meaning our model has been based quite heavily on the anecdotal experiences of teachers working with this group."

There is a strong commitment from the organisations who responded in the survey to evidence based practice. But there are real challenges here:

'It is becoming increasingly clear that WP student groups have different cultural identities that are not addressed usually by mainstream HEI policy and/or activity. Understanding the needs of white males will be the main challenge to facilitating a successful student journey.'

'I think more research needs to be undertaken to understand why this particular group does not progress to HE, other than attainment (this is already well-documented) and therefore activities can be more suitably tailored to address these barriers.'

While the organisations involved in outreach are committed to being evidence based, they are facing challenging delivery targets and as is argued here, an advancing policy agenda. They need support in this area of understanding.

Finally, there is a clear question here of **what is the most effective form of intervention: targeting specific projects for this group only or integrating more of this group into projects engaging other groups of young people?** There is a real need for well evaluated projects and cross –sector dialogue to ascertain the most feasible approach here.

- **How do we go beyond sport?**

Of the projects that were described, 4 of the 6 concentrated on using sport to support the progression of this group to HE. Sport is undoubtedly an important and proven way that can be used in order to engage with this particular cohort. There are examples of members working with both professional football and rugby league clubs on this agenda.

'We have also worked collaboratively with other HEIs and external groups such as Leeds Rugby to maximise recruitment and gain access to participants through an alternative route other than school.'

'We (Kingston University) are involved in an Access to Higher Education Football project with Fulham FC, Charlton FC and Greenwich University and believe this will be particularly effective in raising aspirations amongst white working class boys'.

Not all young males engage in or follow sports. Jones et al. (2011) point out that nearly 24% of boys, aged 11-15, do not take part in any sport outside of school lessons with just over a further 26% participating in three hours or less. Other popular areas amongst boys (and girls), included computing, film and reading and widening access should utilise a broad range of areas in seeking to engage them. One member who is involved in an initiative around fashion outlines this issue:

"When we do get boys on the course they tend to be very talented. We need to address the class culture in the United Kingdom today in which working class white boys feel outcast from creative forms of education. These creative outlets may be perceived as bourgeois and luxurious. I also question what it means to be a man in contemporary society and how stereotypical masculine duties and characteristics may deter young men from participating in supposedly effeminate arts."

- **Cross sector working will be essential to target interventions effectively.**

There are considerable challenges in targeting this particular group.

'The challenges are that the issue is complex. As a starter: one issue is the government's use of the term 'white working class' and associating this with disadvantage. Those from LPN and low-income families may or may not consider themselves as working class and there will be many 'working class' people who are not living in LPNs or be on low income'.

Schools, colleges and higher education institutions do not share a common definition of disadvantage. Schools and colleges tend to focus on eligibility for pupil premium funding or free school meals. Higher education institutions in the main use post code data relating this to the HEFCE 'POLAR' measure and/or student finance eligibility. Schools are at times reluctant to target one particular group of pupils to take part in interventions. Often teachers within schools will not be aware of the pupils' backgrounds and status but will look to target on ability and behaviour.

"Targeting implies differential access to activities/events and schools may sometimes be reluctant to support this approach as they prefer opportunities for all their students."

Even when schools can be encouraged to target activities, members felt there could still possibly be reluctance to exclude certain groups:

"Schools may be keen to engage in projects targeted at boys but will be reluctant to single out only their white disadvantaged boys' especially as 'white disadvantaged girls' don't fare particularly well either."

Strong partnerships with schools and colleges to effectively change the situation are essential:

"The engagement of schools/colleges is crucial to the success of such outreach work which requires effective targeting in order to have an impact, a sustained approach. With schools having to deal with so many priorities and changes, it is important that WP outreach initiatives can support their priorities."

The fragmentation of the wider framework within which outreach work occurs will also hamper any progress here.

'It may also be naive for government to think - if it does - that HEIs alone can address the issues of low participation of WWCB in HE. There has been a significant lack of careers advisers, in-school outreach managers and lack of willingness to release learners since the demise of Aimhigher. In line with this, schools don't often now know who their WWCB are, since the loss of "Aimhigher Lists", and so successful targeting will become an increasing difficulty.'

- Outreach work is only one part of the solution

"White males from disadvantaged backgrounds have perhaps the clearest anticipated progression path (not to go on to higher education). For them, it requires an even greater act of will to decide to defy that anticipation."

Outreach work has been well established in the higher education sector now for well over a decade. HEIs, and other organisations, have been working hard with their local communities to help disadvantaged learners see higher education as a viable option that would lead to improvements in life chances. But the reasons why relatively few young men from predominantly white communities do not progress to HE are complex and entrenched in social and cultural factors.

'(White, disadvantaged males) have unquestioned ability to achieve at HE. The main barriers are bar far cultural barriers. The attitude that lads from Stoke "should be out earning a crust at 16 - what do you want to waste your time on university for?" from parents and influencers is palatable. The peer pressure to enter a male working environment is incredible - 'Earn money, go the pub on a Friday'. These are very evident to see in conversations that we had. It is a deeply rooted working class ... attitude.'

The progression to HE of these learners is nested in a wider set of social and economic problems:

'The most recent child poverty and social mobility commission report suggests there are still high levels of disadvantage and inequality across groups in society related to housing, access to healthcare and obviously education. We can try and address the education issues however I think it is quite a big ask for widening participation practitioners to try and solve deeper rooted issues within society linked to poverty which may inevitably be barriers to education.'

As one respondent stated:

"The government priority is too blunt in its aims. We are working to sharpen our own aims and objectives and make a real difference for the benefit of the young people instead of a quick win for the benefit of the government."

5. Meeting this challenge

It is clear that NEON members are strongly committed to improving the progression to HE of young males from disadvantaged backgrounds, but there are a number of separate but connected challenges that they face if they are to maximise the potential of the work they do. It is essential that they are supported by policymakers here, and that policymakers understand the challenges practitioners face. NEON will be creating a '**NEON White Males from Disadvantaged Backgrounds Access to Higher Education Task Force**' to support practitioners. We invite policymakers and sector bodies to join this group. It is anticipated that the task force will address:

- Strategic engagement of schools/colleges and the Department of Education with this issue.
- Strategic engagement of HEIs (building on some of the recommendations of the recent Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) report for example).
- Improving the evidence base on why working class boys are not progressing to HE and the routes they are taking instead.
- The need for policy consistency in access to HE – recent funded initiatives like the National Collaborative Outreach Project (NCOP) encourage working with learners at year 10 and above.
- Exchange of practice and collaborative development of interventions
- Engagement of other organisations e.g. sporting and cultural bodies who engage, and have the potential to engage, this group.

Improving access for **white males from disadvantaged backgrounds is a long term challenge**. It is essential that outreach practitioners are placed at the centre of how this challenge is addressed.

Appendix 1: Case Studies

University of East Anglia – Sport for Boys (SfB)

The programme uses sport as a tool to engage participants with education and raise aspirations. It provides the boys with an opportunity to try two new sports. Year 7 boys from Norfolk schools spend a day on the University campus. SfB introduces participants to life at university through, a campus tour, the chance to partake in two of four sport sessions (fencing, archery, rock-climbing and judo) and one or two taster academic sessions related to sport. Participants are accompanied by our student ambassadors ensuring informal discussions about student life. Through interactions in subsequent years with other activities such as Summer Schools, this project hopes to encourage more young white males into university.

In 2015, 40% of boys knew ‘very little’ about university before attending SfB and 54% didn’t know anyone who had studied at university. 63% of participants said SfB had made them ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ more likely to go into HE. Before the day 28% were ‘seriously thinking about HE’ before SfB, but this increased to 70% planning to go into HE after the event. Of the students who ‘didn’t think university was for me’ before the event, 59% said that SfB had made them more likely to go.

Greater Manchester Higher/Brightside

Greater Manchester Higher (GM NNCO) is running a project in partnership with mentoring charity Brightside, aiming to address the barriers faced by white males from disadvantaged backgrounds that prevent them from achieving their potential, in terms of academic attainment and accessing higher education and work-related experiences.

This project links white working class boys in year 10 with an industry mentor. Mentors use their personal experience, knowledge and skills to raise their mentees’ aspirations and motivation, encourage them to consider and explore their education and career options, and build their confidence. In addition, the year 10 students will be given a position of responsibility within their school, working with younger students. This will help them to reflect on their own behaviour and motivation, and encourage them to lead by example.

The project is followed up by a campus visit to one of our partner universities which involves interactive activities from different practical subject areas.

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