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# **Risks, Aspirations, and Transitions: Working class students in UK higher education**

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# Presentation Overview

- Literature
- Pre-entry methodology
- Post-entry methodology
- Findings and Recommendations

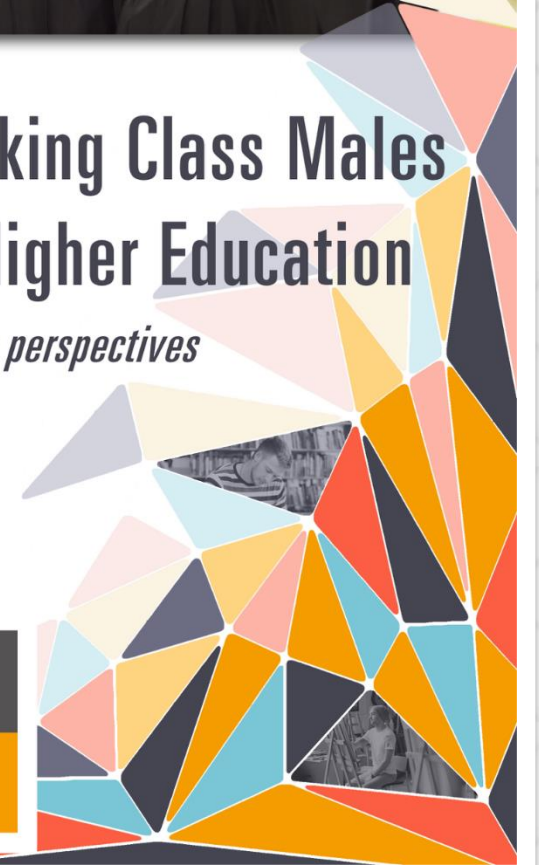


## White Working Class Males in British Higher Education

*Pre and post-entry perspectives*

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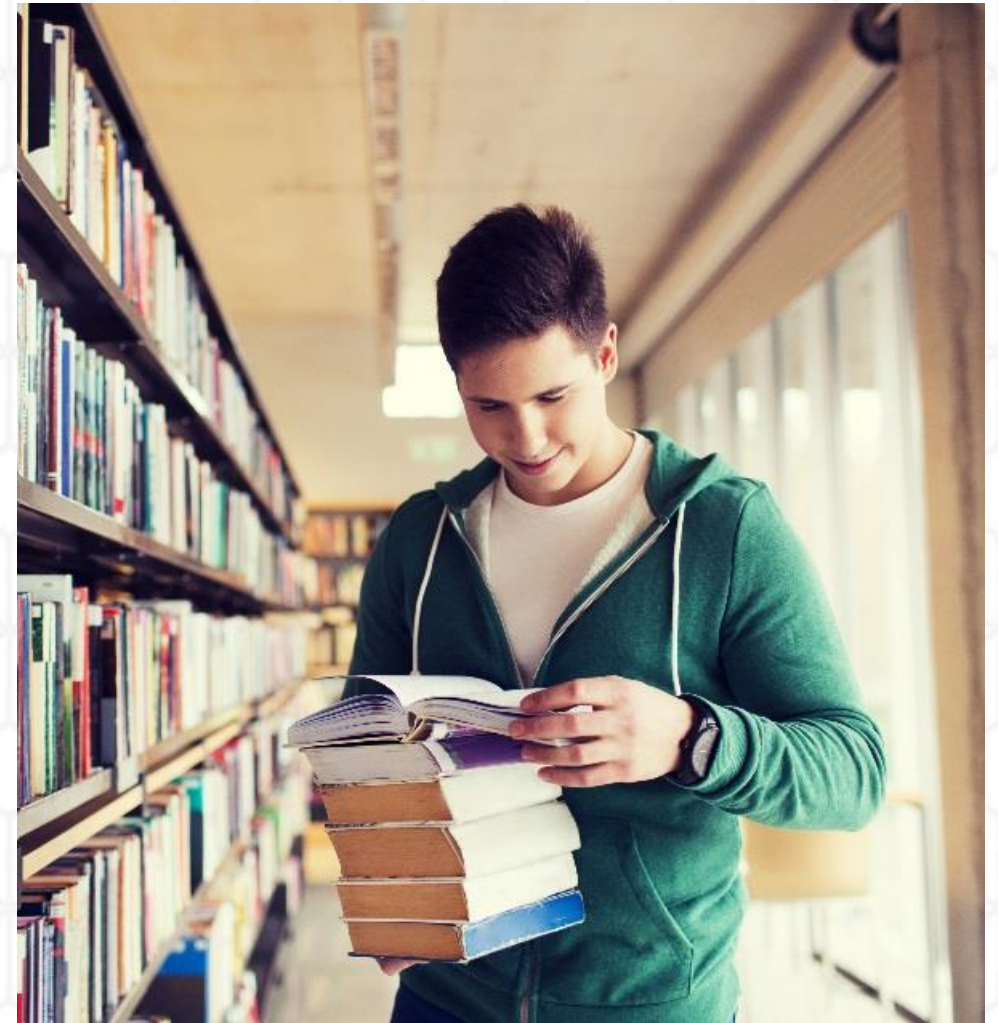
# Literature Review

- Research suggests that working class students may be more “debt averse” and less likely to see the value of university.
- Students from the least advantaged backgrounds are 14% less likely to receive a 1st or a 2:1 compared to students from more advantaged backgrounds.
- White students overall are 15% more likely to receive a 1<sup>st</sup> or a 2:1 compared to their BAME peers.
- Research suggests that working class students were less likely to be employed in as high paying jobs as their middle class peers after completing their degrees.



# Pre-entry research: Methodology

- Scope – Southampton, Learners aged 14-19
- Analysis of KS4 and KS5 destination data
- Review of literature
- Survey of young male learners (ages 14-19)
  - 157 respondents across approx. 6 school/colleges
- 6 focus groups (51 learners ages 14-19)
  - School, FE college, 6th Form



# Post-entry research: Methodology

- Scope – University of Portsmouth, current undergraduates
- Review of literature
- Survey: 678 first year participants (12% response rate)
  - Male, White, UK, First generation, traditional age (97)
- Focus groups: 3 focus groups; 20 participants

## Overall Survey Demographic Data

Gender	
Male	297 (44%)
Female	368 (54%)
Other/Prefer not to say	13 (2%)
Nationality	
UK	600 (88.5%)
EU	47 (7%)
Non-EU	31 (4.5%)
Race/Ethnicity	
White	507 (75%)
BME	148 (22%)
Prefer not to say	23 (3%)
Age	
Traditional Age (17-19)	484 (71%)
Mature (20+)	194 (29%)
First Generation	374 (55%)

# Pre-entry: Targeting white, working class males

Targeting learners for the study was complex. The study highlighted:

- Collection and use of parental occupational data not well received by schools/colleges.
- Use of FSM data is possibly the most straightforward approach in schools but still need flexibility as some might miss out.
- Use of FSM data is not possible across the board in the post-16 sector and therefore an alternative proxy appears to be eligibility for a college bursary.
- Targeted provision requires clear rationale & well thought through communications.
- The choices being made by white working class males (in Southampton) at age 16 mean they are more likely to be NEET and more likely to be in FE or work based provision. Therefore targeting at provider/course level is also required.



# Post-entry: Targeting white, working class males

A universally accepted definition of “working class” does not exist and choosing which measures to use to identify “working class” students is contested (Soria and Bultmann, 2014). There are a number of ways to try to identify working class student populations, each with their own challenges:

- First generation students
- Postcode
- Parental occupations
- Qualification for bursaries
- Self-definition



# Pre-entry: Challenging 'low-aspiration' discourses

- Majority held positive attitudes to education.
- Keen to engage in new or different types of learning.
- See link between studying and success and view working hard at school/college as a positive characteristic.
- Show more interest in a wider variety of HE pathways, rather than the 'tried and tested' full time route.
- Financial gain is not the most important motivator, they want to progress into careers that suits their interests and skills.
- Many have concerns about their ability to cope with HE, both academically and on a personal and social level and therefore the issue appears one of low confidence.





# Post-entry: Challenging 'low-aspiration' discourses

- The findings from the post entry research suggest that this population of underrepresented students may be more aspirational than their peers.
- A number of scholars have challenged the 'low aspiration/no aspiration' discourses (Grant, 2016; Stahl, 2016; Burke, 2011; Spohrer, 2011).
- This is not to suggest that WP should eliminate all strategies focused on raising aspirations. However, additional strategies should be developed for outreach and recruitment of students who are already aspirational.



# Pre-entry: Risk and decision-making

- Risk of studying in HE is high for this group of learners and other routes may appear a safer option.
- Making a decision about university is stressful and they seem aware that information provided is not always impartial and often limited for vocational learners.
- Discussions with parents show they feel this risk keenly and possibly negative messages about university in the media and within their local community heightens the unease.

*Degree courses 'not value for money', say many students (BBC)*

*Increase in students' dissatisfaction with 'poor value for money courses' (WHICH)*

*What do you do with millions of extra graduates? (BBC)*

*Thousands of graduates working in jobs that don't require any qualifications (THE INDEPENDENT)*



# Post-entry: Risk and decision-making

Findings from the post-entry data suggest that white, working class males consider the choice to pursue higher education a risk that may not be worth taking, which is aligned with the pre-entry findings, as well as with findings from previous studies focused on working class students (Jones, 2016; Archer, Pratt, and Phillips, 2001; Reay, 2001; Archer and Hutchings, 2000).

**Participant:** *Throughout my entire life I've been told 'Don't get a degree, don't go get a degree. It's a lot of debt. You don't need that debt. Don't get a degree'.*

**Researcher:** *From whom?*

**Participant:** *My parents, teachers at school, teachers at college.*

*People who are doing apprenticeships, they obviously want to earn money first and they know that uni's not worth doing.*



# Pre-entry: Supporting attainment

- Data suggests this group are not reaching their full potential at KS4 and KS5.
- This impacts on options available, their perception of their own ability and perceptions of others.
- Attainment raising outcomes are valid for outreach.



# Post-entry: Supporting attainment

In HE, there are attainment gaps between working class and middle class students (Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2015; HEFCE, 2014). Developing strategies to support students in order to address unequal participation, progression, persistence, and degree outcomes is essential for WP teams and for outreach and recruitment practitioners – the longer the gaps persist, then the more difficult it will become to recruit underrepresented students, like white, working class males.

*Prevalent discussions about transitions to HE position working-class students as needy, in the sense of personally inadequate and unable to cope with the rigours of transition. In rejecting this position, we should talk more of rights: the right to enter university successfully and succeed. This is a common right of all students, but structural disadvantage ensures that many students require support if they are to take up this entitlement (Quinn, 2010, p. 125).*

# Pre-entry: Supporting transitions

- Evidence is that white working class males are making choices about their future learning that are not consistent with secure progression to HE.
- Males appears particularly vulnerable to making a positive transition at post 16, with a higher likelihood of being outside of education.
- Although attainment levels are likely to impact on patterns of progression the research also suggests males are attracted more to the work based or vocational route.
- White working class males concerned over their ability to transition into HE.





# Post-entry: Supporting transitions

- Students in this study expressed concerns about transitioning into university.
- Focus group participants identified the concerns they had about making the transition to university as one of the risks they considered when deciding whether or not to pursue higher education.
- Supporting students as they transition into higher education has an impact on student engagement, participation, and success (Hampshire, 2016; MacGregor, 2016; Gale and Parker, 2014; Lehmann, 2014)

*A less talked-about area of that is the transitions and just cutting yourself off from friends and family for a long period of time, to pursue study.*

*Fear of not making friends. <laughs> You just get here and you're just on your own and it's quite a long time, and especially as it's a completely new process.*

# Pre-entry: Outreach and age

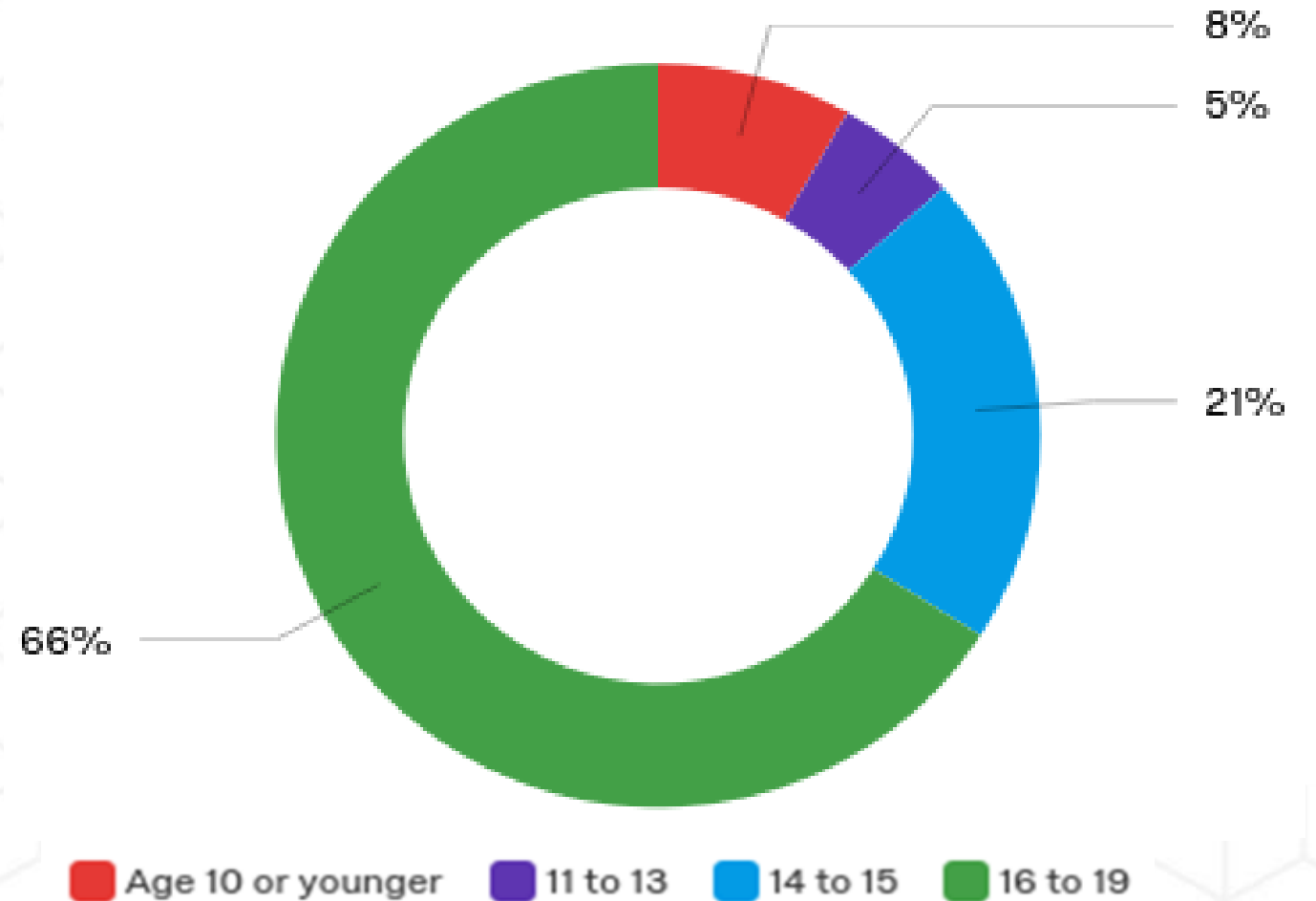
- Research suggests that white males from disadvantaged backgrounds are less sure about HE at pre-16 level.
- Once they reach post-16 they show similar levels of interest in HE to their more advantaged peers.
- Learners need access to early outreach to ensure that HE is considered as a potential opportunity.
- Choices made at 14 have the potential to impact on HE progression and therefore work prior to KS3 is crucial.
- Once in a post-16 setting support that builds confidence levels, maximises attainment and converts interest into an informed application is important.



# Post-entry: Outreach and age

Findings suggest that white, working class males become certain about their decision to apply to university much later than their peers and, for this research population, their decision is much later than recent UCAS data suggests (UCAS, 2016).

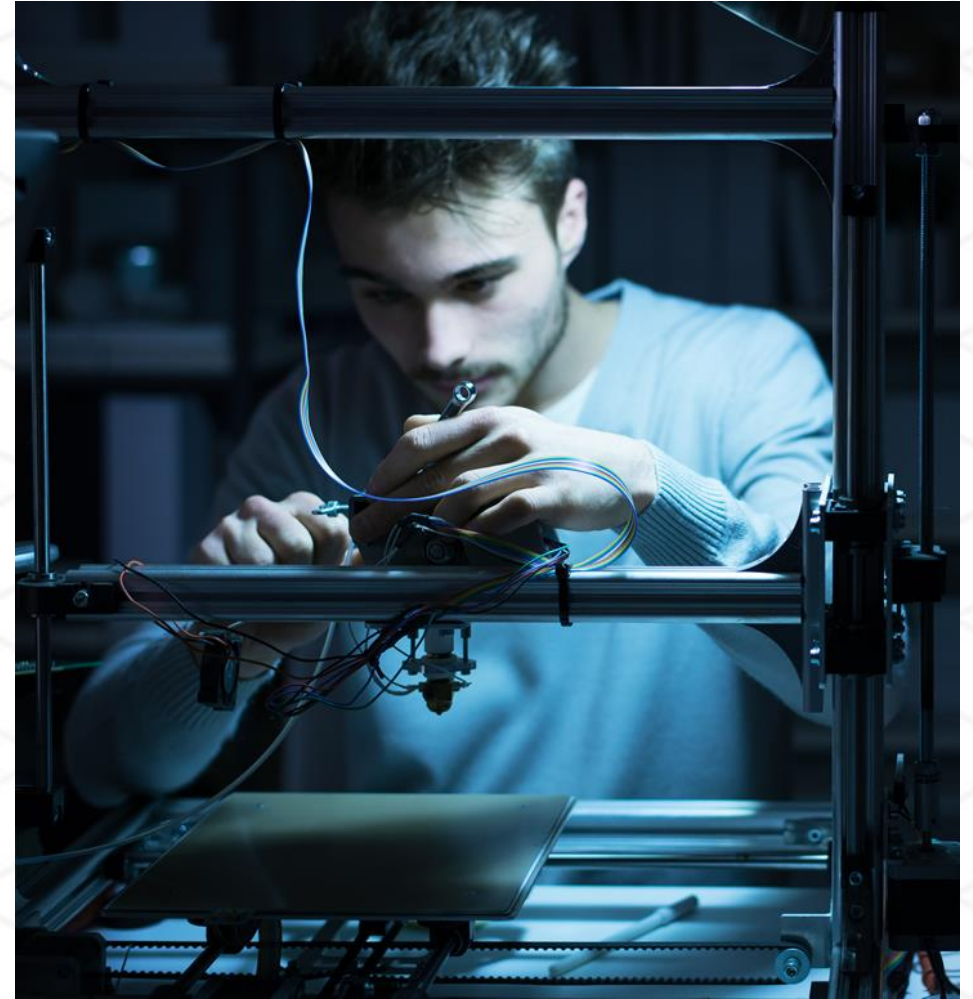
What age were you when you felt sure that you would apply to university?





# Pre-entry: Personalised/Tailored outreach

- HE isn't the norm and it doesn't feel like the norm to this groups of learners.
- Some were concerned about own ability to cope in HE.
- This often related to individual circumstances.
- Varying levels of knowledge about HE, many felt poorly informed but there was a desire to build on existing knowledge.
- Older learners wanted to make decisions independent of their parents.
- Access to support/IAG varied between school/college and provision.
- Learners were interested in bespoke or personalised outreach.



# Post-entry: Personalised/Tailored outreach

- Findings from the post-entry data suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to outreach and recruitment may be inadequate.
- White, working class male students are not a homogeneous group and recruitment strategies should reflect this.
- Develop strategies for the different career certainty levels of prospective students.
- Build strong collaborations with the career services team and seek their feedback on outreach strategies that are careers and employability focused.



# Thank you! Questions?



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Gagnon, J. and Higham, L. (2017). *White Working Class Males in British Higher Education: Pre and post-entry perspectives*. Southern Universities Network. Retrieved from

<https://www.sunoutreach.org/unique-research-project-explores-the-higher-education-barriers-of-white-working-class-boys/>



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