neon

The Future of Student Outcomes

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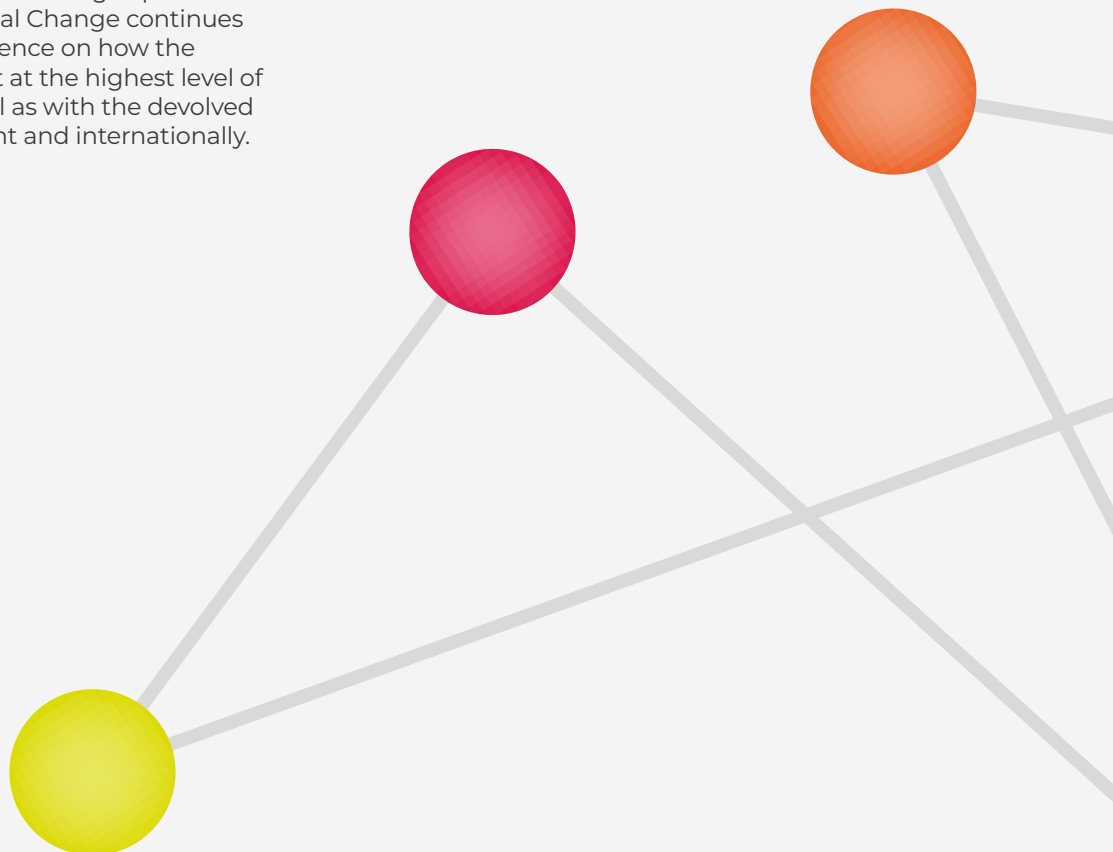Micro-Social Change

The National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) is the professional organisation for widening access to higher education in England. Founded in 2012 NEON provides professional development opportunities for its 130 organisational and nearly 1000 individual members and undertakes advocacy on behalf of the students it serves.

For more information on NEON please go to: www.educationopportunities.co.uk.

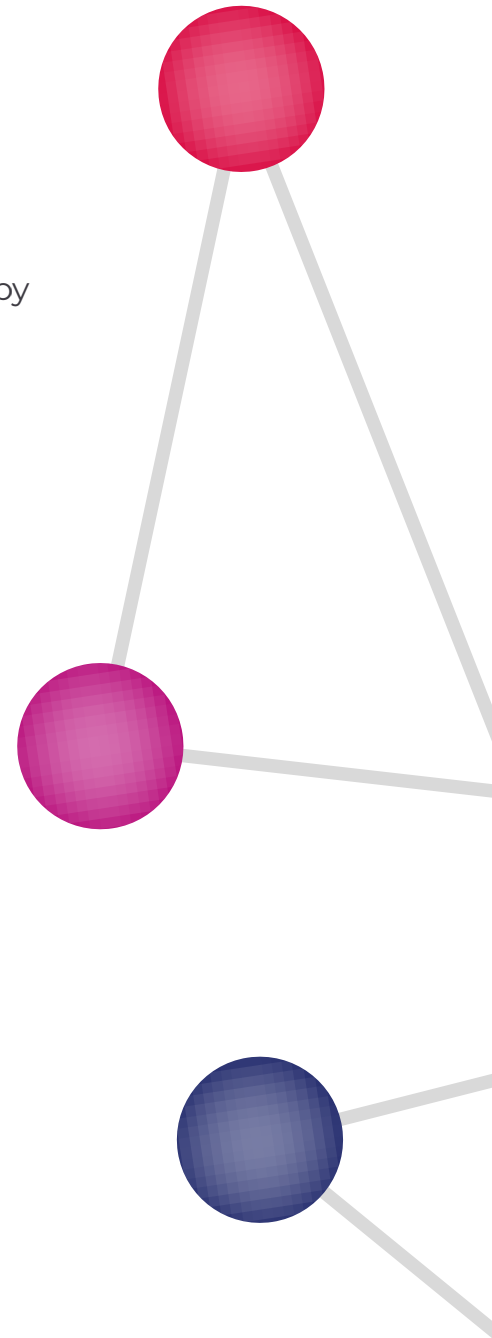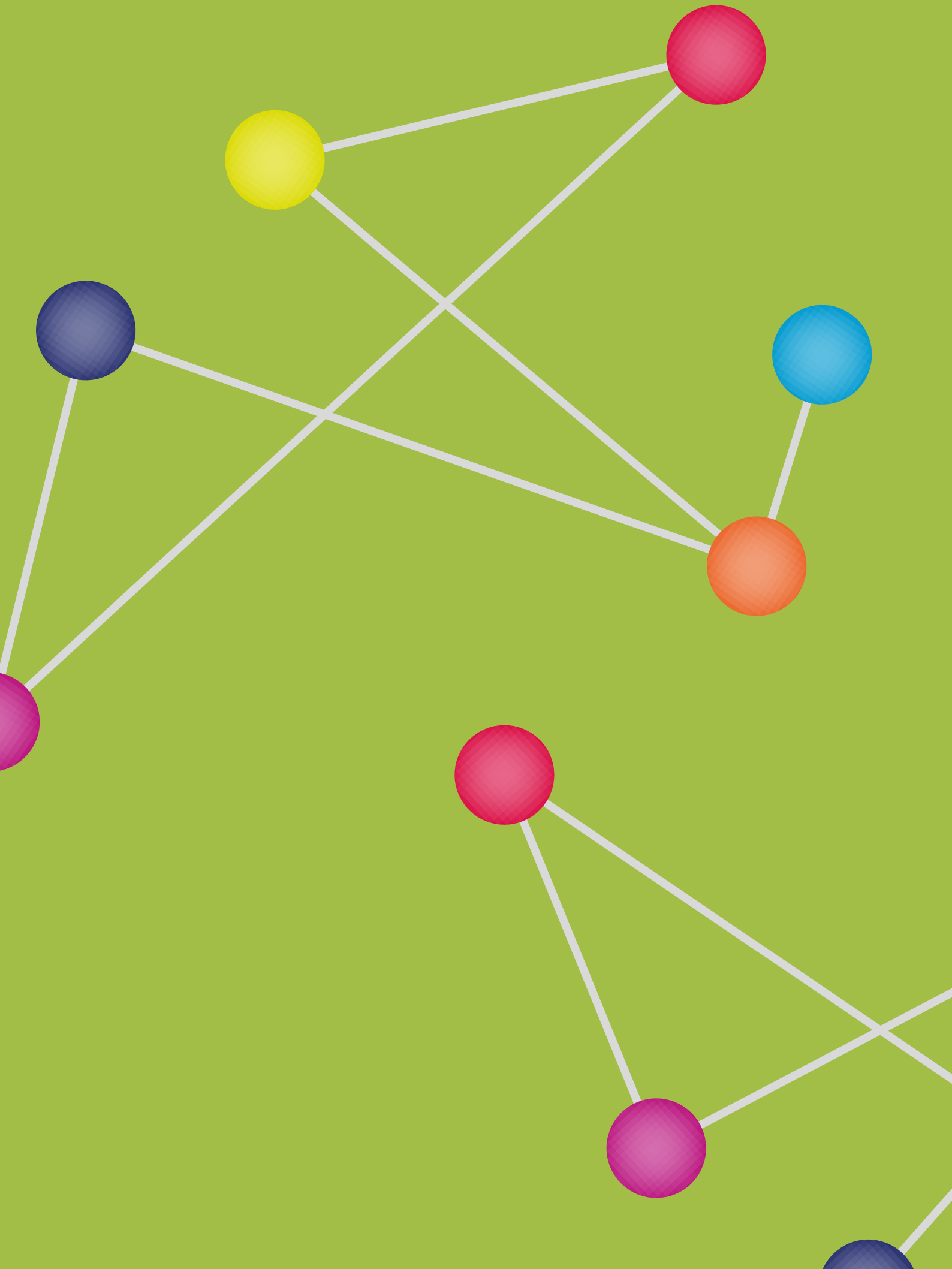To contact NEON please email: Graeme.atherton@londonhigher.ac.uk

The Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) is the world-leading interdisciplinary research centre at the University of Essex and has been producing policy-relevant social and economic research for over 30 years. In 2017 the University was awarded the Queen's Anniversary Prize for the work of ISER for its 'authoritative social and economic research to inform the policies of governments for the improvements of people's lives.' The work of ISER's flagship ESRC Research Centre on Micro-Social Change continues to provide important new evidence on how the world is changing, with impact at the highest level of policymaking in the UK, as well as with the devolved governments, local government and internationally.

Contents

Introduction

As the participation rate for younger students entering higher education has increased over the last ten years and the cost to both learners and government has also increased, there has been heightened attention placed on student outcomes. It has also become apparent that these outcomes differ significantly by socio-economic background, ethnic group and between disabled and non-disabled students. Data from the Office for Students shows that in 2018-19, there was a difference of 22.1 percentage points between the proportion of white and black students getting a 1st or 2:1.[1] The Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data set shows that students from free school meal (FSM) backgrounds earn on average nearly £3000 less than those from non-FSM backgrounds 5 years after graduation.[2]

These differences have led to efforts from across the higher education sector to introduce new initiatives and approaches to supporting learners that can address these inequalities. This publication brings together some of the leading examples of this work illustrating what can be done when innovation is harnessed and supported. This work includes summaries of projects to address gaps in degree attainment as well as ideas on how to improve undergraduate degree outcomes. It also features an example of how to improve outcomes for learners in South Africa where only 50% of students graduate.[3] However, while addressing inequalities in outcomes is possible the scale of the challenge should not be under-estimated. Alongside these examples of practice, this publication highlights the structural problems both within higher education, the tertiary system and the labour market which require fundamental change if progress is to be achieved. As Vicky Blake writing on the issues facing academic staff in terms of job security and working conditions states:

'Given the deep, sustainable work needed to dismantle the roots of educational and societal inequality, there is a damaging irony in the short-term nature of the contracts and funds offered to the staff who do that work'.

As this publication shows, if students from all backgrounds are to achieve their potential when they enter higher education the work of those striving to make change within the sector will need to be coupled with policy changes that genuinely commit to reducing inequality in outcomes. The conclusions of this publication draws on the work of the contributors to outline what such a policy approach may look like.

1. To learn more go to - https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/participation-performance-measures/gap-in-degree-outcomes-1sts-or-21s-between-white-students-and-black-students/
2. To learn more go to - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/790223/Main_text.pdf
3. Factsheet: How many South African Students graduate: https://africacheck.org/factsheets/factsheet-many-south-african-students-graduate/
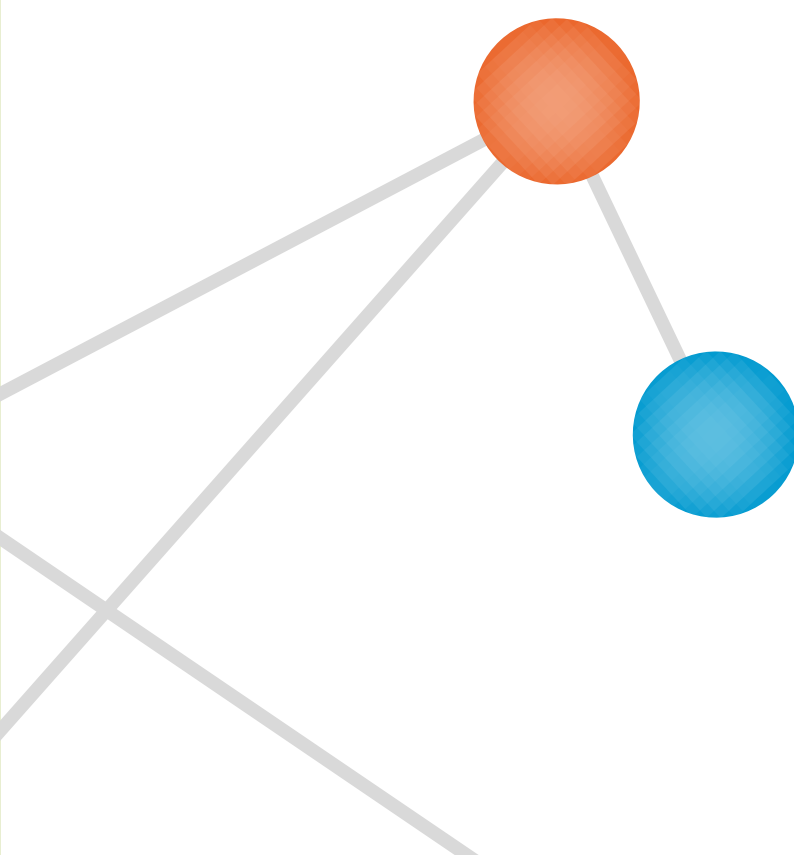
1. Addressing Attainment Gaps at the University of Derby

Government data[4] indicates that there has been an increase in the percentage of state school pupils aged 18 years gaining a place in higher education for all ethnicities since the mid-2000s. From 2006 to 2018 it was Black students who showed the greatest increase (19.6%) in participation and White students the smallest increase (7.7%). However, while the participation rates of Black students have increased there exists a differences in the number of graduates achieving a First or 2.1 degree between White and Black students – a gap of 23.1% in 2017/18[5]. This gap has reduced over recent years. It remains the case though, that the gap between Black and White students is greater than that between the latter and any other ethnic group. When considered together in 2017/18, the proportion of UK Domiciled Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) graduates gaining a good honours degree was 13.2% lower than the proportion of UK domiciled White graduates gaining a good honours degree. Whilst there is some progress here, the data shows the gap has decreased by 0.4% since 2016-17 much more work needs to be done to fully eliminate these differences.

The Office for Students (OfS) has set an ambitious target to eliminate the gap in attainment between White and Black students. The target is:

'To eliminate the unexplained gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between white students and black students by 2024-25, and to eliminate the absolute gap (the gap caused by both structural and unexplained factors) by 2030-31.'[6]

At the University of Derby, there is a long-established commitment to providing a high quality, inclusive and accessible learning experience for all our students, whatever their background or mode of study. Our student population is very diverse, and widening access and improving social mobility are at the heart of our institutional mission and core strategic objectives.

Over the years, an institutional approach has been adopted to inclusive practice, comprising various activities, interventions, strategies and policies to support diverse groups of learners. Examples include the golden threading of inclusive practice through institutional academic staff development programme that is accessed by academic and professional services staff who teach/support some element of student learning; themed workshops and events; creation of a set of online resources on inclusive practice that are freely available to all academic staff; and the setting and monitoring (via line managers) of an institutional requirement for all staff to attend at least one equality and diversity workshop relevant to their role, on an annual basis. Most recently, an online tool and quality assurance mechanism has been introduced that enables systematic scrutiny of degree attainment by each protected student characteristic for all our undergraduate programmes. Regular monitoring of this data allows programme teams to determine the impact of their pedagogic approach, , curriculum design, assessment and academic support on degree attainment amongst different demographic groupings.

4. To examine this data in detail please go to: https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/apprenticeships-further-and-higher-education/entry-rates-into-higher-education/latest.
5. To examine this data in detail please go to: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/participation-performance-measures/gap-in-degree-outcomes-1sts-or-21s-between-white-students-and-black-students/
6. To learn more go to: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/participation-performance-measures/gap-in-degree-outcomes-1sts-or-21s-between-white-students-and-black-students/

This institutional approach has been supported by specific initiatives undertaken within the institution but also in partnership with others. In 2012 a HEFCE-funded institutional research project: *Student Attainment Project* (*SAP 1*) was launched that aimed to close the BAME Good Honours attainment gap. This project was then followed by *Student Attainment Project 2* (*SAP 2*), which aimed to scale up this approach to deploy, and then evaluate the impact of a range of interventions across the University of Derby and two other partner institutions: University of West London & Solent University from 2017 to 2019. Through this project different approaches to learning, teaching and assessment impact upon degree attainment for learners from different demographic groups have been explored.

Initiatives that were trialled as part of SAP 2 included a *'Fit to Submit' Assignment Checklist*, which provided students with a checklist to help them identify and remove common errors from their work prior to submission; *'Top Tips for Academic Writing,'* which provided students with advice and guidance on this important aspect of academic practice; resources designed to encourage students to build their confidence; and an activity for students to complete to support their understanding of assignment requirements. Within each institution, programme teams were able to access their chosen resource(s), and adapt and contextualise them to their subject discipline and student cohort.

Key findings emanating from the research were that there were no magic bullets in terms of an intervention that will definitely eliminate or reduce an attainment gap. The academic approach needs to be tailored to the student profile; and the success of the interventions is significantly impacted by the degree of student engagement. Outcomes from the research are now being used by each higher education provider to enhance their institutional approaches to eliminating their attainment gaps.

Professor Ruth Ayres
Pro Vice - Chancellor Education, Aston University

2. Changing Mindsets at the University of Portsmouth

The Aim of the Intervention

The primary target group for this intervention was POLAR3, Quintile1 (P3/Q1) widening participation and BME students, where a recognised attainment gap exists, with expected benefits for other groups at risk of stereotype threat and unconscious bias (e.g. based on gender, age, disability). Four partners joined the University of Portsmouth in the delivery of this project: University of the Arts London (UAL), University of Brighton, University of Sussex and the University of Winchester. Each embedded the intervention within student induction (student peer led workshops) and staff development sessions in a selection of academic schools/colleges.

The Approach

Changing Mindsets was an innovative intervention initially developed by the University of Portsmouth (UoP), for schools.[7] It is a student workshop and staff training based intervention (avoiding a student deficit model) that builds a growth mindset i.e. the belief that ability develops through effort, persistence and by embracing challenge in staff and students. This has been found to have motivational impacts on learners' motivation and on staff expectations of learners and to reduce attainment gaps by reducing stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is the risk of conforming to a stereotype about a social group to which you belong and the impact has been most notably documented in academic performance.

In addition, the project drew on the work of Professor Patricia Devine (University of Wisconsin) who has run successful interventions to tackle prejudice within an HE setting by working with staff to tackle unconscious bias and habit-breaking. Breaking bias habits has been shown through research to be possible, but, as with all habits, breaking bias habits requires motivation and sustained effort over time[8] (Devine et al, 2017). These elements were combined to form the Changing Mindsets intervention.

Did it work?

- Amongst those students who completed both a pre and post survey there was a significant reduction in stereotype thinking in students attending the Changing Mindsets workshop.
- The pre-cohort data collected across the project indicate that the attainment gaps cannot be explained by a student's tariff on entry (qualifications) into university, which is aligned with findings from previous attainment gap research.[9]
- Staff and students who have growth mindsets are more likely to want to create inclusion and to overcome bias. Within the pre-survey data for both staff and students, there are statistically significant positive correlations between growth mindsets and creating inclusion and overcoming bias scores.
- Staff and students with fixed mindsets are more likely to hold stereotype beliefs. Within the pre-survey data for both staff and students, there are statistically significant negative correlations between growth mindsets and stereotypical beliefs.
- Most staff and student survey participants indicated that they are committed to speaking out against hate and to making all students feel welcome and part of the campus community. However, nearly all staff and students who completed the survey also admit to unintentionally stereotypical thoughts.

We are yet to assess course outcomes, comparing the attainment gaps in the courses that took part in the intervention with those that did not and comparing before the intervention with after.

7. Further information on the project can be found here: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/changing-mindsets/
8. Forscher, P. S., Mitamura, C., Dix, E. L., Cox, W. T. L., & Devine, P. G. (2017). Breaking the prejudice habit: Mechanisms, timecourse, and longevity. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 72,* 133–146
9. Mountford-Zimdars et al, (2015) *Causes of differences in student outcomes* Bristol:HEFCE
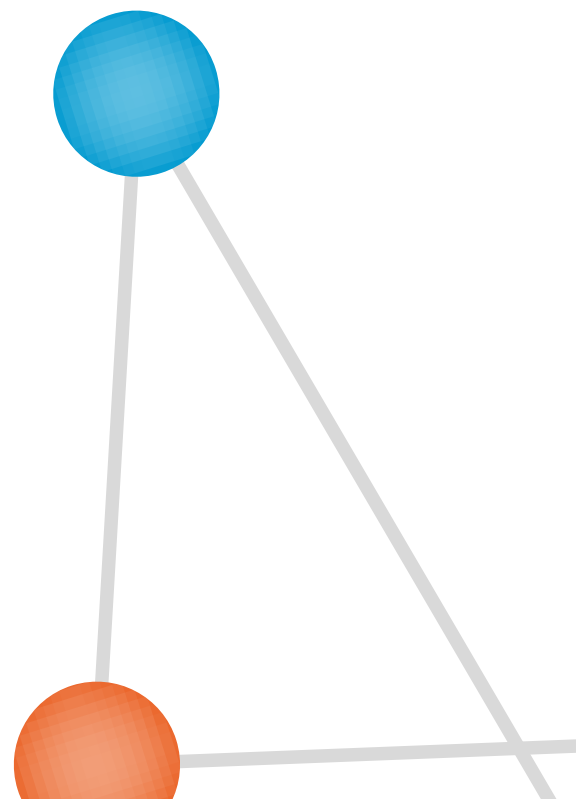
What did we learn?

What we have learned is that moving forward it is critical for educators, HE leaders and policy makers to

1. ***Encourage, embed and enable (with provision of fit for purpose tools) detailed analysis of data at a micro level.*** Our work showed that institutional and even school/department based average attainment gaps may hide substantial variations and outliers. Across the project partnership, findings within the pre-cohort data (five-year average attainment gaps for the schools and programmes participating in the intervention) vary widely, including lows of three percent and highs of more than 30 percent.

2. ***Avoid mythologies based on assumption and stereotype.*** As above we found that without detailed scrutiny of local data there was a persistence of mythology to justify attainment gaps that limited engagement with interventions and positive action (e.g. the low tariff and BTEC myths). Using data analysis to explore staff and leaders hypothesis and eradicate myths can support action, the design of relevant intervention, that appropriately direct resource and encourage staff and student engagement.

3. ***Design and run interventions in partnership.*** The staff student partnership was extremely powerful in our project leading to a sense of identifying and working to solve the issues together. This had three key benefits - 1) avoiding a deficit model (e.g. how do we fix the student), 2) tackling the issue at a cultural level and 3) It creates a powerful space for difficult conversations about a complex issue that cannot be understood and tackled without those conversations.

4. ***Don't overlook the need to change cognition (e.g. beliefs about the nature of ability) in our work to close the attainment gaps.*** Without the right motivation positive action cannot happen. Sometime we tend of focus on policy and action planning without putting the first step in place; changing the cognition that will motivate people to enact the plan.

5. ***Ensure a theoretically and research underpinned set of principles for intervention.*** By providing a principles framework for the intervention different subject areas/institutions can tailor delivery and materials to their own culture and needs while staying aligned to the principles, thus maintaining the fidelity of the intervention when up-scaling it. Students and staff leading sessions need to understand the theoretical underpinnings, not just be taught the content to deliver in workshops. The latter can lead to misinterpretation and miscommunication of the principles, e.g. in response to questions.

6. ***Intervention would be better used as core staff training and a student induction activity, not an optional activity*** in order for change to be sustained and significant across a school/department culture and eventually an institutional culture.

7.

Conclusion

We very much concur with the sentiments of the project advisor Professor Patricia Devine in that it seems that implicit, unconscious, or unintentional bias training alone is not the whole solution to lasting change. As she stated, in a 2018 interview with PBS, the national broadcast news station in the United States:

"Like any other habit [that someone wants to break], they are going to have to put effort into it over time. It's not something that happens all at once. There is not a quick fix or a silver bullet. But we can empower people to make the change and we can provide them with assistance in the process to overcome these unintentional biases".

The Changing Mindsets intervention includes evidence based cognition and strategies to create the motivation and skills for change in individuals but institutions need to make a commitment to change so that individuals are empowered to develop their motivation and sustain their efforts.

Professor Sherria Hoskins,
Executive Dean, Faculty of Science and Health, University of Portsmouth

Dr Jessica Gagnon,
Senior Research Fellow, University of Portsmouth

3. Access without a reasonable chance of success, is not access at all: a case study at the University of Cape Town (South Africa)

South Africa's higher education has increased admission of marginalised, black, often rural or working-class students rapidly, but sadly the throughput rate is alarmingly disparate and divided. This bodes the question about what it means to accept students with varying and different schooling and life experiences to higher education and sincerely know they will have a reasonable chance of success. This is particularly pertinent since the coronavirus pandemic as higher education has now shifted to a strong focus on online or blended styles of learning with all its concomitant issues related to disparity.

Most marginalised South African university students come from impoverished, rural, or working- class backgrounds; they are first-generation university students, with English as their second or third language. These students find themselves in the same classes as students from economically and academically privileged backgrounds at an 'elite' university such as University of Cape Town.

Our work at the University of Cape Town

Reconfiguring the teaching and learning environment in the Education Development Unit (approximately 1 300 marginalised students per year) at the University of Cape Town, has made a significant impact on academic results. First-year results in the academic development programme have mostly outperformed those in 'mainstream' classes. While they still have a way to go in terms of improving performance in the senior years, the graduation rate (approximately 78%) is increasing and is far above the national average of 31% in five years for the Business/Management sector in higher education. There has also been an increase in the numbers and percentage pass rates of those who meet the high qualification criteria for entrance to professional examinations like the Chartered Accountant and Actuarial Science Board Examinations.

The playing fields are not equal

Many students experience a crisis that relates to academic, linguistic, and affective difficulties and issues. Many of the academic difficulties often relate to "not been prepared for the higher education demands of independent study or for analytical engagement at cognitively demanding levels" (Pym & Kapp 2013:276)[10]. Remote learning has magnified the reality of inequality. Structural divisions around class, race, gender, urban-rural, finances, resources, digital and social conditions are particularly acute. This nuanced time in 2020 challenges the often-binary approach regarding marginalised students.

A focus on students

The EDU model has focused on a strong 'value-added' environment and moved away from a deficit model where 'disadvantaged' students need to get 'up to speed' and become assimilated in the dominant norms, culture and 'ways of being' of the institution. Assimilation and notions of deficit are easy to reproduce in systems that focus on conserving systems rather than scrutinizing practice (Pym 2017)[11].

The programme acknowledges the primacy of the social and interactive aspects of learning and the importance of student experience. Social cultural theory explains how social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition, mental functioning, and well-being (Vygotsky 1978)[12]. This means consciously fostering a sense of belonging, actively nurturing social connectedness and building a sense of community and inclusion. These are critical ways of developing higher order thinking skills and are essential to all learning. This means that at this time of isolation, risk, and vulnerability (given higher education's focus on online learning), we particularly need to provide a range of engagements, virtual student groupings and interactive learning experiences.

The work of the Education Development Unit also focuses on impacting and changing the faculty's practices to the advantage of all students. The model provides supportive conditions for students throughout their degree, not just for an initial period or 'add on' support. It focuses on both pre-empting crises and building capacity with the rich diversity and resources in the class. There is:

10. Pym, J & Kapp, R. (2013) Harnessing agency: towards a learning model for undergraduate students. *Studies in Higher Education,* Vol 38, No. 2, March 2013, 272-284.
11. Pym, J. (2017) Voice, Identity, and Belonging: Making a Difference. In *Walker, M & Wilson-Strydom (Eds), M. Socially Just Pedagogies, Capabilities and Quality in Higher Education.* London: Pelgrave Macmillan. 177 – 200.
12. Vygotsky, L. (1978) *Mind and society.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

"....an acknowledgement of students' fears and doubts, but also challenges them. We see it as crucial not to romanticise or reify the beliefs, attitudes and ways of behaving that students bring with them which may impede their processes of developing a sense of belonging and of connecting to the new discourses"
(Pym & Kapp 2013, 281).

"Many of the students enter with goals that have been pre-determined for them by their families or by institutional constraints. It is part of our task to help them to work reflexively, to reflect on current priorities and develop future goals that are meaningful to them"
(ibid, 281).

By drawing on students as a resource in the teaching and learning process, we have learnt a great deal about how they have coped in the past and how to work collectively to help them negotiate boundaries and shift practices. The programme has highlighted the need to engage with notions of 'under preparedness' and 'disadvantage' in a more nuanced, responsive manner. The broader challenge is to embrace these ideals at an institutional level and reframe the learning environment for all students.

A focus on systems

Achieving equity in the higher education system can never only be about a 'student focus'. For all students to optimise their potential in higher education, work is needed at both the micro and macro level to shift organisational thinking, practices and bring about long-term systemic change. Students in the Education Development Unit remain Commerce Faculty and University of Cape Town students. The overall quality of the curriculum design and the teaching and learning environment makes a great difference to these students' experience, chance of success and their development. A broad range and variety of initiatives at structural levels have been introduced to get people thinking about *who, what, why and how* we are teaching and learning, as well as getting people interested and excited about the students' academic development and their broad growth. These initiatives include the Commerce Education Group where academics meet every two weeks, present topics pertaining to their teaching and learning contexts, as well as involving leadership in debates, various engagements and presentations pertaining to teaching and learning.

A range of initiatives deployed at a broader level include:
- tag teaching (where experienced academics team up with each other, visit their respective classrooms, observe, reflect and help hone and shift teaching practices and the learning environment],
- mentoring of new academics,
- tutor training,
- the monitoring of all vulnerable students,
- inclusion of student development services in the formal curriculum,
- policy work in relationship to Financial Aid,
- Admissions and Readmissions Policy,
- Teaching and Learning Charters,
- Language Policy.

Conclusion

For the foreseeable future, online and/or blended learning will be a reality for most South African higher education students, including when most students return to campus. So, what could this mean?

Our challenge is to take the present momentum to create thoughtfulness about *holistic and broad focus on student needs and development*, as well as focusing on our *policies and practices to create systemic change that plans in new ways for inclusion of all students*. This is an active choice rather than accommodating diversity and being reactive to the present crisis. It provides the opportunity to move beyond affirmation to creating transformative moments. This means being agile and flexible as we start building a culture of anticipating and working with change and continue to pioneer this complex, changing and growing social just pedagogical work in different ways that cannot be captured by traditional approaches to learning.

Emeritus Associate Professor June Pym
Education Advisor, South African Institute of Chartered Accounting, College of Accounting: University of Cape Town, Ikusasa Student Financial Aid (ISFAP), South Africa

4. The impact of precarious employment on widening access initiatives

Institutions can draw on a growing body of research and resources to improve their widening access initiatives[13]. Scarce attention has been paid though to the impact of precarious employment practices in this area. Given the deep, sustainable work needed to dismantle the roots of educational and societal inequality, there is a damaging irony in the short-term nature of the contracts and funds offered to the staff who do that work.

Responding to the 'State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain' from the Social Mobility Commission[14] the Vice Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University Chris Husbands wrote that 'widening access to higher education and providing opportunities for our students to succeed regardless of their background is deep in our culture'.[15] Many such statements are found on institutional websites and Access and Participation Plans. Practitioners know these mission statements are easier to declare than to comprehensively demonstrate. Can we trust those who make them if they are not willing to underwrite such enterprises with at least the same levels of job security as traditional forms of academic research and teaching?

Funding cuts, conditionality, and uncertainty present immediate problems. It is not easy to evidence the long-term impact of widening access 'interventions' and projects, and it is widely recognised that the current evaluation methodology requires significant, thoughtful improvement. This in turn requires sustained investment in staff development and retention. A simple increase in funding will not be enough.

Effective programmes of access go beyond simple provision and consumption of Information, Advice and Guidance. Student life-cycle and whole-institution approaches continue to gain recognition as exemplars of practice. Success relies significantly on the ability of practitioners to get to know and understand their students, to co-create tailored support, and to build projects on the basis of sound evidence. Fair workload capacity and room for reflection are vital. Here we spy the elephant in the room, well known to anyone who has ever worked on a fixed-term contract, or tried to manage a project with longer-term goals, predicated on short term, often precarious funding.

The degree of precarity written into widening access work is rendered invisible by substandard data collection practices. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) do not routinely, systematically, or accurately collect workforce data at a detailed enough level on the use of casualised contracts. More research is required in order to break down how much of this activity is provided by hourly paid, fixed term, or outsourced staff, and to determine the effects. At a whole-institution level, data on the use of casualised contracts are patchy, with gaps in statutory collection partially uncovered by manual data requests made by external organisations such as the <u>University and College Union</u>[16] HESA's methodology is problematic because it aggregates so-called 'atypical' contracts into FTE, which masks the true extent of precarious employment[17]. Many universities do not collect data on the use of worker contracts unless directly challenged to provide this information. Increasing collaboration with third sector and other external organisations will further complicate any data on continuity and turnover in this area of work.

Direct student contact on widening access programmes is often provided and facilitated by casualised, hourly paid staff, who may not always be supported, integrated, or recognised as 'full' members of university staff. The fixed term nature of NCOP funding, widespread prevalence of short term contracts, and tricky budgeting requirements warn us not to dismiss these risks or to assume that 'only' student ambassadors hold such casualised contracts.

The prevalence of fixed- term funding in widening access and outreach work jeopardises the retention of expertise and talent in the sector and can limit willingness to experiment and risks exacerbating mutually reinforcing forms of inequality among staff and students. Committed investment in staff development can foster institutional memory that supports rather than inhibits innovation. Where casualisation and staff turnover are high, expertise is regularly lost. Frequent departures of staff seeking greater job security risks loss of innovation and damage to relationships with students at individual and cohort level.

We need renewed vision to challenge institutions to prioritise a secure, embedded approach to funding long-term, tailored and supportive widening access work. As an early step, more in-depth research is required to assess the level and impact of institutional reliance on casualised staff in widening access and outreach at every stage and depth of 'intervention'.

Vicky Blake
President, University College Union (UCU)
Widening Participation Officer, University of Leeds

13. To examine such evidence please go to: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405114904/https://www.offa.org.uk/publications/analysis-data-and-progress-reports/

14. Social Mobility Commission (2017) State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/662744/State_of_the_Nation_2017_-_Social_Mobility_in_Great_Britain.pdf

15. Husbands, C. *State of the Nation: universities can help address UK's appalling social mobility* https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/state-nation-universities-can-help-address-uks-appalling-social-mobility

16. Chakrabortty, A, & Weale, S (2016) Universities accused of 'importing Sports Direct model' for lecturers' pay – Guardian 16th November 2016 - https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/16/universities-accused-of-importing-sports-direct-model-for-lecturers-pay

17. White, J. (2016) *Precarious work is no longer atypical in academia* - https://wonkhe.com/blogs/analysis-atypical-academics-and-precarious-work/

5. The Importance of Further Education

The *Further Education in England: Transforming Lives & Communities* research project, commissioned by the University College Union (UCU), provides evidence of how further education is vital in transforming lives and communities in 21st century Britain[18]. To provide a frame of reference, the study provides learners, teachers, family members and their communities with the opportunity to tell their stories, linking the distinctness of further education to the impact it has on individuals, society and the economy, and strongly drawing out the role of the teacher in making a difference to quality teaching and learning.

Improving the teaching and learning experiences of under-represented groups of students demands a re-think of their relationship with education so far. The juxtaposition of being poor and having little social capital to support them to break out of their conditions, can mean many of the learners feel anxious and have low self-esteem. Their identities as learners may have been spoilt by their schooling, instilling in them a belief that they are stupid and unable to learn. An understanding of this on the part of the teacher is the starting point for transformation.

The narratives in our study have revealed the contradictions, complexities and ambivalences students experience in their daily lives and how they try to make sense of them from their structural positioning as learners in a society based on inequality of opportunity and choice. As illustrated by the voices of the participants, the learners had to re-discover agency in their learning process and this triggered transformation.

The challenge for teachers and policy makers is, therefore, to establish the conditions in which learners are empowered to take agency within the field of education and to connect their educational experience to new plans for the future. This has implications for curriculum and for funding. The curriculum needs to connect at an important level with learners' lives and experiences. The emphasis on funding achievement has to change as has the rigid timeframe for completing qualifications. Students learn at different rates and funding has to support small step progression. Some learners from our project have been facilitated by colleges to take a series of small steps and achievements leading to full engagement with a mainstream qualification. Claire, for example, found in her Access course a new world in which for the first time she was listened to and was able also to find her own voice. This facilitated her with hope and confidence to progress onto a Higher Education teacher training programme in Further Education.

Her adult learning trajectory led to her positioning herself differently in a world she could see from a fresh perspective. This change in her view of herself in relation to the world was integral to her transformation and to her success as a learner.[19]

Challenging inequalities in learners' lives and communities, adult and 16-19 education at its best reflects a transformative critical pedagogy and provides a curriculum, that is culturally relevant, learner driven, and socially empowering.

Professor Vicky Duckworth
Edge Hill University College

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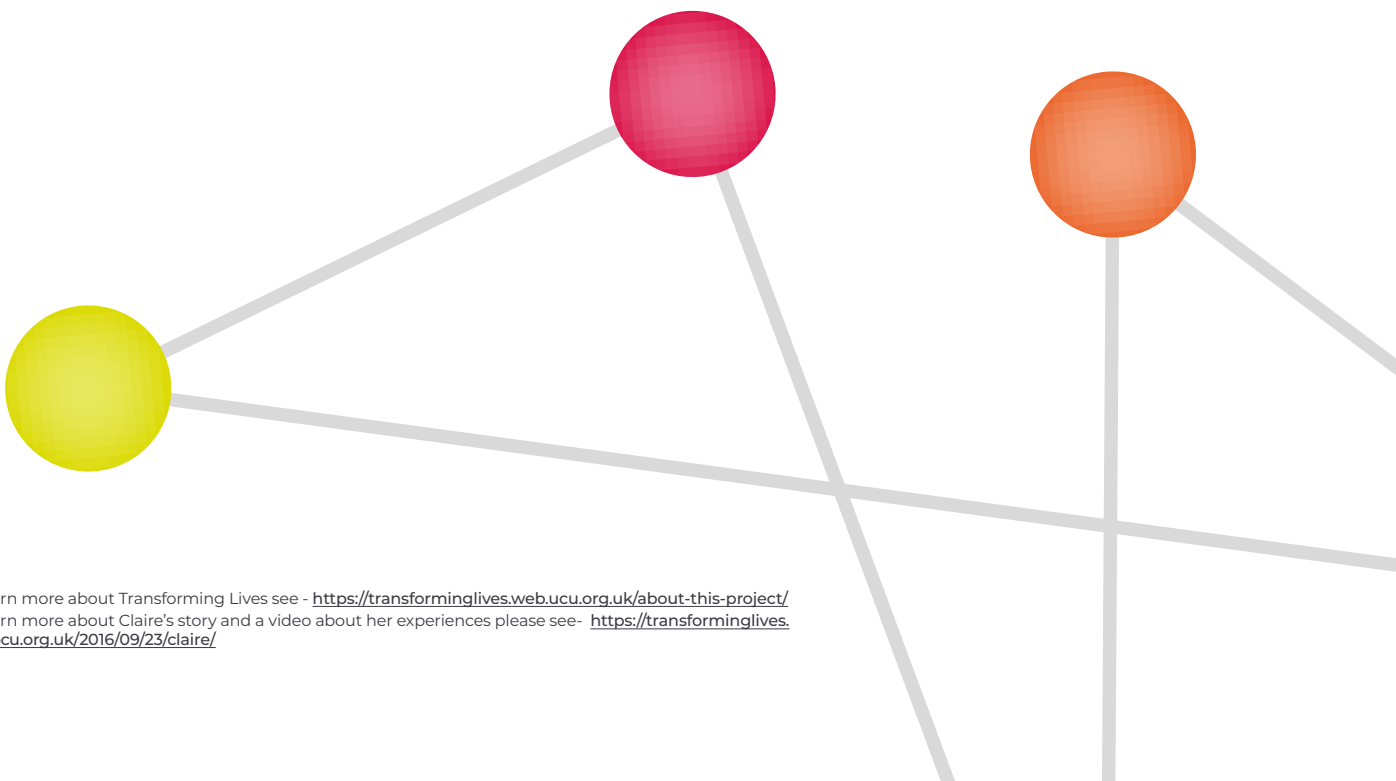
18. To learn more about Transforming Lives see - https://transforminglives.web.ucu.org.uk/about-this-project/
19. To learn more about Claire's story and a video about her experiences please see- https://transforminglives.web.ucu.org.uk/2016/09/23/claire/

6. The long shadow of student loans on academic and labour market outcomes

In recent years, the policy debate about Higher Education funding has mainly focused on ensuring quality of provision in a growing Higher Education sector, and equity of access for students from lower-income backgrounds. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labour market opportunities of young people will probably shift some of the attention towards mature students re-entering full-time education. But what is still missing from this debate is a proper understanding of what students think about the current funding system, and the effects this might have on their choices, from working part-time while studying to future career decisions.

In common with Australia, New Zealand and several other countries, England has developed an income-contingent loan (ICL) system. This shifts students' tuition and living costs from the taxpayer onto graduates. In contrast to a mortgage-style system, repayments are proportional to earnings above a certain level and debt is forgiven after a certain time period, currently 30 years in the English system. As part of the 'BOOST2018' study, which followed a cohort of undergraduates over three years, with colleagues at the Institute for Social and Economic Research, I surveyed Home students about their understanding of and preferences over the existing student loan system. Our findings had three important lessons.[20]

The first is that most students don't understand the terms and conditions of the current student loans system. This means for example that students typically expect a lower debt on graduation and lower monthly repayment burden than they will actually face. For example only 19% correctly identified the interest rate levied during their studies (inflation plus 3%) from a list of four options. Only 29% identified the correct proportion of earnings (above the £25,000 threshold) that would be taken as repayment (9%), with 46% expecting a lower rate and 10% indicating they "don't know". When asked to rank their preferences across alternative versions of the system, a significant number voted for a different schedule of repayments but swiftly reverted to the status-quo after being shown the financial implications of the alternative.

20. Delavande, A., Del Bono, E., and Holford, A., (2018) 'Student preferences over fees, grants and loans', MiSoC Report, ISER, University of Essex, accessible at: https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/files/misoc/reports/explainers/student-fees-preferences-report.pdf

The second lesson is that the level of maintenance support currently provided is widely felt by students to be insufficient, but once properly informed about the repayment implications of alternatives, many would prefer to borrow less rather than more. Maintenance support for living costs during university contributes about around 40% of the stock of debt in recent English cohorts, and more for those from lower-income households. Without reintroducing maintenance grants, reduced borrowing could only be achieved with either higher contributions from parents (which is capped by household income), or spending more hours in paid employment while studying. This might be very difficult at present, as students are traditionally employed in the hospitality sector, which is now struggling in the wake of the COVID pandemic. The effects of part-time work on student outcomes are also to be taken into account. Crowding out of study time or attendance potentially hinders all students' academic performance, but students with professional or higher income parents are usually more likely to be able to offset this disadvantage by finding work experience relevant to their desired career.

The third message from our study is that despite there being no possibility of default or bankruptcy in the current system, students perceive a heavy psychological burden in relation to both their stock of debt on graduation and to the possibility that their debt will keep growing because of interest rate surcharges. Evidence from the United States shows this aversion to debt distorts students' and graduates' job searches and career choices. They shift towards jobs which maximise immediate financial returns, rather than longer-term career prospects, or make wider contributions to society.[21]

The Augar Review of Post-18 Education and Funding was charged with making recommendations for how to reform the current system for new undergraduates in a way which would uphold the principles that "those who benefit from post 18 education contribute to its cost", that repayments are "progressive", and funding arrangements are "transparent and do not act as barriers to choice or provision".

The effects of the proposed changes would be mixed in these regards. The suggested reintroduction of maintenance grants for low-income students, so as to minimize any additional loan required, would be a welcome step. It would improve equality of opportunity by socio-economic status and ensure similar levels of nominal debt at graduation for new cohorts. While the proposed headline cut in fees to £7,500 will certainly be welcomed by students, we need to make sure that the reduction in universities' income from this source would not affect the quality of research-led education on offer, or the range of outreach activities that remove barriers to access and progression.

The Review also proposed to reduce the repayment threshold by £2,000 (to £23,000 per annum) and extend the repayment period from 30 to 40 years. The effects of these changes would be to increase inequality in the repayment burden faced by the graduate labour force of tomorrow. The highest earners will contribute less and middle and lower earners - including those in many "key worker" occupations such as teachers and nurses - will contribute more.

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21.   Field, E., (2009). 'Educational debt burden and career choice: Evidence from a financial aid experiment at NYU Law School'. American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 1 (1), 1-21.
Minicozzi, A., (2005). 'The short term effect of education debt on job decisions', Economics of Education Review 24, 417-430.
Rothstein, J., Rouse, C., (2011), 'Constrained after college: Student loans and early-career occupational choices', Journal of Public Economics 95, 149-163.

7. Improving Postgraduate Outcomes

When it comes to outcomes, as one would expect, postgraduate qualifications outdo first degrees. Compared to first-degree graduates, on average postgraduate degree holders can expect higher earnings, lower risk of unemployment, better occupational destinations and more opportunity to use their knowledge and skills at work. For some jobs, including working as an academic, a postgraduate qualification is virtually a prerequisite.

There is considerable risk, then, that progress in the continued efforts to widen participation to first degrees will be cancelled out if there is unequal access to postgraduate study. Research my colleagues and I have undertaken shows there are continuing inequalities at postgraduate level. Women, those from certain minority ethnic groups and students from working-class backgrounds are less likely to progress to masters and PhD study[22]. While the size and precise patterns of these inequalities vary across measures and levels, in places they are stark. Black Caribbean graduates progress immediately to PhD at around only one-seventh of the rate of White British graduates. Male graduates from higher professional/managerial households are twice as likely as female graduates from higher professional/managerial backgrounds to progress to a research degree, who are in turn twice as likely as working-class female graduates to make that transition.

Our research indicates that the institution students attend for their first degree is an important mediator of progression to postgraduate study. Postgraduate students are not distributed across universities in the same way as undergraduates. Instead, they are concentrated in those institutions which are informally accorded higher status. Similarly, among new graduates there are large differences in rates of progression to postgraduate study across different sets of institutions. Students from working-class backgrounds attending Russell Group institutions tend to have small (though not identical) chances of progressing to postgraduate study as other graduates. But of course, there are comparatively fewer working-class graduates from those universities. The risk therefore is that for some, the path to postgraduate study is closed off on first degree entry. There is also the possibility that postgraduate study is used for credential 'repair', where a graduate perceives their first degree is not 'good enough'. Our latest research shows that even among students with first-class honours, working-class graduates who move university for master's study are only half as likely to enter the most prestigious 'Golden Triangle' institutions (Oxbridge plus University College London, King's College London, London School of Economics and Imperial College) as those from higher professional/managerial backgrounds.

22. Wakeling, P. and Hampden-Thompson, G. (2013) *Transition to higher degrees across the UK: An analysis of national, international and individual differences.* York: Higher Education Academy

But what to do? Unlike for undergraduate access, widening participation to postgraduate study is not covered by Access and Participation Plans, rarely enjoys dedicated staffing in institutions and has little in the way of evidence-based practice to draw on.

We could start with better data. With no national application system for postgraduates, we don't currently know whether inequalities in postgraduate access are due to students from certain backgrounds not applying in the first place, or whether they are applying but don't take up a place, for whatever reason. While some background data is collected about postgraduates (e.g. gender and ethnicity), there is almost no data about their socio-economic characteristics and most of what we know is limited to the minority of graduates who enter postgraduate study immediately after their first degree. Defining socio-economic background gets trickier for postgraduates. That trickiness does not justify abandoning all measurement though. A practical way forward would be for institutions to ask new postgraduate students about their parents' education, the type of school they attended aged 16, and their home postcode on first entering undergraduate study. Institutions then need to use this data, alongside other data about gender, ethnicity, age, disability and previous institution to identify who is missing from their postgraduate student body.

Funding is a necessary, if not entirely sufficient element of any widening postgraduate participation policy. Our newest research is showing that the English master's loan policy has helped to narrow participation gaps for working-class and BAME graduates. But worries remain, especially as fees in certain universities inflate rapidly beyond the maximum loan amount. With no means-testing, there is a real risk that the policy's gains will be rapidly annulled.

Postgraduate qualifications are of growing importance in higher education and for graduate employment. To avoid undermining undergraduate access, they must be included in our national conversation about access, participation and success.

Professor Paul Wakeling
Head of Department of Education, University of York

8. Educating Eliza: Social Mobility and Employability

The next time you're in London's Covent Garden, prise yourself away from the jugglers, acrobats and human statues and head over to the porch of old St Paul's Church. For it was here in 1912 that the playwright George Bernard Shaw imagined Eliza Doolittle, a down at heel flower seller, encountering Henry Higgins, a professor of new and exciting science known as 'phonetics.'

When first performed, Shaw's play *Pygmalion'* sent shockwaves through late-Edwardian society. It wasn't that the plot was suspect (critics ever since have complained about the absence of a romantic ending). What unsettled the establishment was Higgins' claim that with time and elocution lessons he could pass Eliza off as a duchess or 'Mayfair lady' (in cockney: *"my fair lady"* – hence the title of the musical). For if all it takes to leapfrog centuries of social classification is a posh accent and acting lessons, then what's stopping anyone from joining the upper classes? No wonder the critics panned it.

You won't hear much about accents or deportment in today's graduate job market. Apparently in some sectors (the media, politics) a cut-glass accent can even be detrimental to progression. In today's Mayfair boardrooms it's Eliza who would be giving the elocution lessons. Western economies have instead been investing large-scale in higher education. In the past decade, thousands of 'widening participation' initiatives have been undertaken to encourage young people from under-represented backgrounds to enrol for degrees. Levels of participation have increased dramatically. In the UK, participation currently stands at just under 50 per cent, up from 41 per cent a decade ago[23]. Once the preserve of the social elite, university education has been almost completely democratised: available to more people in more places than ever before. Being a student has become the UK's largest single 'occupation,' more populous even than the NHS.

Not only are more students than ever university from working-class backgrounds, they are more likely to be female. Women currently make up fifty-six per cent of all university students[24]. What would Eliza Doolittle be doing today? Chances are, she would be studying for a degree programme.

23. Department of Education (2019) *Participation Rates in Higher Education: 2006 to 2018* - https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-rates-in-higher-education-2006-to-2018
24. HESA (2019)Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2017/18 - Student numbers and characteristics https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/17-01-2019/sb252-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers

Whether she would be enrolled in a 'selective' university, is another question. Despite more students than ever going to university, compared to their better-off peers, students who were eligible for free school meals are still underrepresented. They are also less likely to enter the more selective universities. Just five per cent of students from free school meal homes enter selective universities, compared to twelve per cent of those from more prosperous backgrounds[25]. Disadvantaged students are also more likely to drop out from their courses[26].

But it's in the graduate job market where the influence of social class is re-exerted.

In *'The Class Ceiling: Why it pays to be privileged,'* authors Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison[27] explored the issue of class within various professions and sectors. They found that even within prestigious and competitive industries a 'class pay gap' exists between graduates from different social groups, with those from working-class backgrounds earning as much as sixteen per cent less than middle-class colleagues. Employers don't set out to openly discriminate; it's the prevailing cultural class assumptions, which inadvertently advantage those from certain backgrounds. Citing the example of a meeting they observed in a London TV production firm, Friedman and Laurison write:

'At [6TV's] gladiatorial commissioning meetings, where programme ideas get thrashed out, the most coveted skill is a kind of highbrow banter. You can proclaim, as one commissioner does, that "We're talking about TV … it's not Hegel!" but you still have to know who Hegel is and to know how to get a laugh out of bringing up his name.'

Crucially, in such environments, *'Wordplay, wit, highbrow references, and above all, the display of lightly worn intelligence deployed to raise a knowing chuckle, are the real currency of the professional elite.'*

Can universities prepare students to succeed in these environments - environments in which having a degree is a given, along with 'soft skills,' 'digital literacy,' and work experience. I believe we can.

First, we need to ensure that the experience of higher education is as challenging and as experience enhancing as possible. Some of this can be delivered in the curriculum; some of it by professional services and students' unions. At the University of Liverpool, we are about to launch a new Student Success Framework based on four inter-linked pillars of academic advice, student experience teams, peer mentors and students themselves. Because unless students take responsibility for their own development, nothing real or lasting will be achieved.

Second, we need to revamp our careers services, which by focusing on 'recruitability' (how to get a job) all too often ignore the importance of fostering 'employability' (how to get a job, keep a job, and thrive in a job). Employable graduates understand and recognise the importance of hidden factors such as networking, self-management, and on-going development. Effective careers services have the knowledge and insights to help students understand how job markets really work, not how they're supposed to work. Concepts such as 'cultural' and 'social' capital are just as relevant for chemists and medics as they are sociologists.

Finally, we need to have the confidence to challenge employers about their own class-based assumptions. If they are to thrive in a world of Artificial Intelligence, robotics and digitisation, employers will need graduates from all social backgrounds. Soon, the only competitive advantage businesses will have left to distinguish them from their competitors will be the quality of their customer service; everything else will be accessible via an algorithm. Great customer service requires people who are authentic and comfortable in their own skin. Role-playing someone else's life seldom ends well. As Eliza tells Higgins:

"I sold flowers. I didn't sell myself. Now you've made a lady of me I'm not fit to sell anything else."

Dr Paul Redmond
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25. Department of Education (2020) *Widening participation in higher education*
     https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education
26. HESA (2019) *Non-continuation: UK Performance Indicators 2017/18*
     https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/07-03-2019/non-continuation-tables
27. Friednman, S, and Laurison, D. (2019) *The Class Ceiling: Why it pays to be privileged*, Bristol: Policy Press
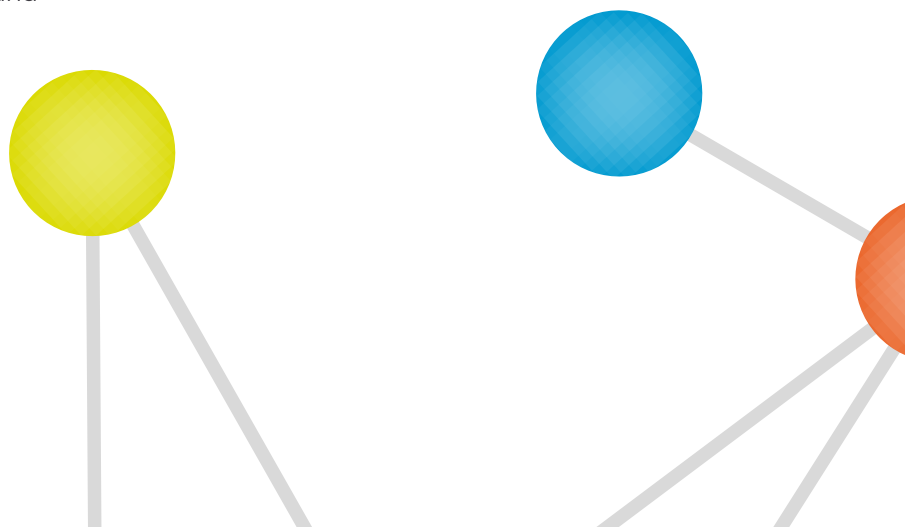
9. Getting in must also mean getting on

Of Boris Johnson's cabinet in 2019 64% have attended fee-paying schools. This compares to 30% who attended such schools under Theresa May.[28] So much for social mobility getting better. As a country, we excel at producing reports that outline the scale of the problem but with little effect on progress.

Nearly a decade ago the Sutton Trust published its access to the professions analysis showing how poorly represented the state-school educated are in society's top jobs. A decade later, the privately educated still dominate top jobs in law, politics, the media and, to a lesser extent, business.

Yet there are signs that employers and universities are responding to the challenge. In the last five years the proportion of graduate recruiters focused on the issue has tripled to over 70%[29]. Universities now spend over £700 million on widening access.

The legal sector may have furthest to go in improving the background of their intakes, but they have led the way in developing innovative recruitment practices. Blind screening, contextualised data and meaningful outreach programmes are part of most magic circle recruitment strategies. And to be fair to employers, it will take time for meaningful change to be reflected in a firm's demographics. With some law firms hiring as much as 25% of an intake due to contextualised data, intakes are changing.

28. Sutton Trust (2020) Sutton Trust Cabinet Analysis 2020 https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/sutton-trust-cabinet-analysis-2020/
29. Inside Student Recruitment, ISE, September 2019

For universities, the OfS is becoming more focused on outcomes, announcing plans to ensure institutions help students from disadvantaged backgrounds progress into 'successful and rewarding careers'. Money is not really the problem, outcomes are. This is a step change as previously universities were monitored on their activities and funding.

Herein lies the opportunity we must grasp. With employers and universities focused on driving change, maybe we can make a step change in outcomes.

Firstly, by connecting widening access teams, careers teams and employers, we can create a continuous chain to support disadvantaged students through the education cycle and into employment. To do this we shouldn't be shy to identify and target students that need assistance. Too often I hear barriers to action. 'We have to offer the same support to all students' say some; 'recruiters can't positively discriminate' say others.

Work experience provides a fantastic opportunity for students to learn about the workplace and demonstrate their potential. But it's not just unpaid internships that are a problem. Funding from employers and institutions needs to help those that struggle with accommodation and travel issues. Running a small organisation with limited funds is also a barrier, so, targeted correctly, helping organisations hire interns with financial incentives can be a positive step. If only the government could see their way to offering small, medium enterprises (SME) employers tax incentives to offer work experience.

Employers also need to intervene more in the selection process. Just allowing a broader range of students into the applicant pool does not necessarily change the nature of a graduate intake. Some employers recognise that students from widening access backgrounds need additional coaching through the assessment process and offer this to applicants attending interviews and assessment centres. I know of an employer who is exploring the possibility of a candidate choosing the psychometric test they feel most comfortable with to overcome test bias.

There is no quick fix to our social mobility problem. Unlike in the 1950s and 1960s the number of 'middle-class' jobs is not increasing to structurally lift large numbers into better careers – technology in the workplace may make the opposite true. Increasing access alone will not fix the UK's social mobility problem, neither will employers who rely solely on blind screening and data analysis. Only long-term effort and investment by educators and employers will ensure that it's an individual's talent and potential that defines their success.

Stephen Isherwood
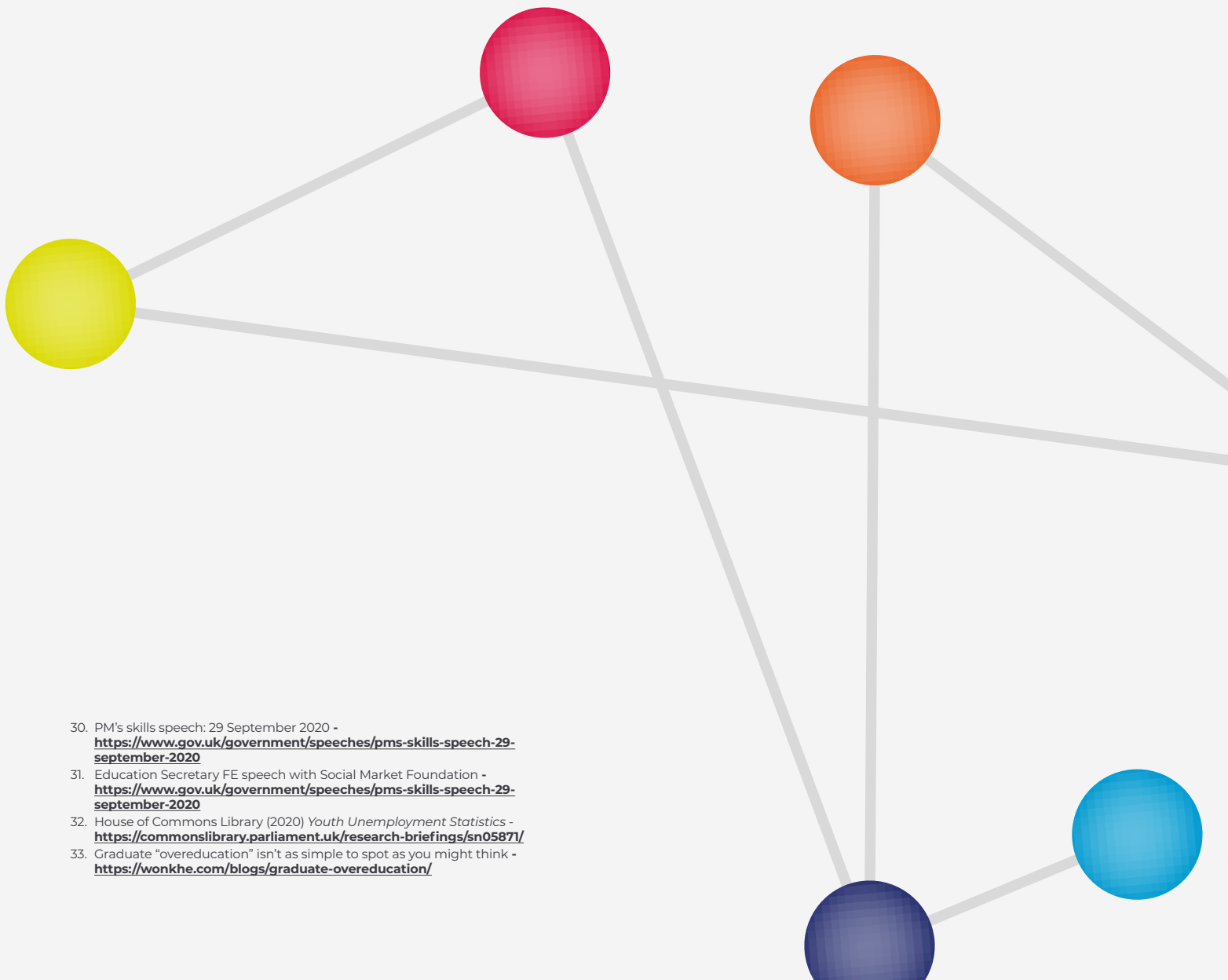Chief Executive, Institute of Student Employers

Conclusions:
Policies for improving student outcomes

The present government has focused intently on the issue of student outcomes. There has been a genuine concern, expressed by a number of ministers including the Prime Minister, that too many students are not achieving the outcomes that they should be doing.[30] Their earnings are too low and they are in jobs that do not require degrees. The cause of this problem is the alleged 'low quality' of certain HE courses. The solution posited by some Ministers is to reduce the numbers of students who progress to higher education and rather encourage young people to take vocational qualifications that take a shorter time to complete. These qualifications should be at Level 4/5 rather than at undergraduate level; be concentrated in areas of present labour market demand and be delivered by Further Education Colleges (FECs).[31]

This focus in improving outcomes is not unwelcome. As the title of June Pym's article above points out so succinctly, 'access without a reasonable chance of success is not success at all'. Nor is the focus on supporting the development of vocational skills. But improving outcomes by reducing participation in higher education is inappropriate. The majority of young people 18-24 still do not go onto higher education. There are also nearly 15% of this group who are unemployed and 40% are not qualified to Level 3. There is clearly still significant room to continue to expand HE whilst supporting greater participation in Level 4/5 vocational qualifications. In particular, there is huge potential to expand HE participation in the areas and amongst the groups where progression rates are still shockingly low.

30. PM's skills speech: 29 September 2020 - **https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-skills-speech-29-september-2020**
31. Education Secretary FE speech with Social Market Foundation - **https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-skills-speech-29-september-2020**
32. House of Commons Library (2020) *Youth Unemployment Statistics* - **https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn05871/**
33. Graduate "overeducation" isn't as simple to spot as you might think - **https://wonkhe.com/blogs/graduate-overeducation/**

A different approach to the issue of improving student outcomes is required. One which concentrates on the student groups where outcomes need improving rather than courses, where the actual evidence shows that quality and outcomes are actually harder to define[33]. The ideas presented in this report present a potential foundation for such an approach to addressing disparities in outcomes that goes beyond a narrow focus on participation levels and course quality. Based on the evidence presented in this report this approach could have 10 key features:

1. Support higher education institutions (HEIs) to adopt an institutional approach to improving student attainment with a 'golden thread' that links staff development, systematic scrutiny of degree attainment by each protected student characteristic for all programmes and monitoring of data to determine effectives practices.
2. Work actively to address and change mythologies regarding what certain students are or can achieve that are based on myth and stereotype. Build such work into core staff training and student induction, do not make it an optional activity. .
3. Establish a 'value-added' learning an teaching environment that rejects a deficit model where 'disadvantaged' students need to get 'up to speed' and become assimilated in the dominant norms, culture and 'ways of being' of the institution.
4. Address the 'precarity' of staff who work to support access and participation of under-represented groups starting with better collection of data on the extent to which these staff are hourly paid, fixed term or outsourced, and then give such staff the security they need.
5. Create conditions where curriculum can be developed that is culturally relevant and connects with learners' lives and experiences and then deliver this curriculum in less rigid and more flexible ways.

6. Recognize the impact that the heavy psychological burden of debt can have on post-HE career choices and look to minimize this by improving maintenance support and reducing the cost of HE at both under-graduate and also post-graduate level.
7. Revamp careers services moving away from 'recruitability' (how to get a job) toward fostering 'employability' (how to get a job, keep a job, and thrive in a job).
8. Collect better data on the gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background of post-graduate students and then ensure that the inclusive practices in terms of institutional commitment, staff development, addressing of stereotypes and rejection of deficit are deployed equally with post-graduate as they are with under-graduate students.
9. Develop and then invest in a national student work experience framework that moves beyond the present myriad of internships (unpaid/paid) and small scale schemes aiming to provide all under-graduate students with the work experience that can develop their employment potential.
10. Work with employers to address their assumptions and stereotypes about students from particular backgrounds and champion the introduction of a broader range of recruitment practices which better identifies the strengths of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, different ethnic groups and those with disabilities.

The actions above are by no means a complete package of measures to improve student outcomes. They represent however a set of actions which could go a long way to supporting more higher education students to achieve their potential.

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