

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, HC 279

Thursday 7 January 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 7 January 2021.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Fleur Anderson; Apsana Begum; Jonathan Gullis; Tom Hunt; Kim Johnson; Ian Mearns; Christian Wakeford.

Questions 247 - 293

Witnesses

I: Professor Liz Barnes, Vice Chancellor, Staffordshire University; Chris Millward, Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students; Rae Tooth, Chief Executive, Villiers Park Educational Trust; Dr Graeme Atherton, Director, National Education Opportunities Network; and Karen Spencer MBE, Principal, Harlow College.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Liz Barnes, Chris Millward, Rae Tooth, Dr Graeme Atherton and Karen Spencer.

Q247 **Chair:** Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the first Education Committee session of the new year.

This is a longstanding inquiry we are doing into the attainment of white working-class boys and girls, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. We will be asking some questions about Covid at the beginning of this session. We will be discussing Covid and school closures next week with Ministers from the Department for Education as well.

If I could start with my favourite college principal—and I am biased—Karen, please?

Karen Spencer: I am Karen Spencer, principal and chief executive of Harlow College in Essex, a general further education college. Good morning, everybody.

Rae Tooth: I am Rae Tooth with the ridiculous name. I am chief executive of Villiers Park Educational Trust. We are a charity that works directly with disadvantaged young people aged 14 to 19, supporting them in education.

Chair: I should say that I have been to visit you. I do not think it was when you were there.

Rae Tooth: It was before me.

Chair: It is a great place.

Dr Atherton: I am Graeme Atherton, director of NEON, the National Education Opportunities Network. We are a professional organisation supporting access to education by under-represented groups in the UK. We have over 100 members and around 90 universities as members of NEON.

Chris Millward: I am Chris Millward, director of fair access and participation at the Office for Students, which is the higher education regulator.

Professor Barnes: Hello. I am Liz Barnes, vice chancellor of Staffordshire University. The main campus is based in Stoke-on-Trent. I am also co-chair of the opportunity area in Stoke-on-Trent.

Q248 **Chair:** To start off, please, could you explain how Covid has affected your organisations and the educational attainment of pupils and students? What impact has it had on their mental health and wellbeing, and how much lost learning do you think there has been?



Professor Barnes: It is quite a complex picture in higher education. Moving to online learning, the transition is not too difficult in that blended learning is not unusual in higher education. All of our staff have the technology required and our students are used to using the technology.

In terms of impacts, 47% of our students come back from backgrounds with multiple indices of disadvantage, so they are likely not to have study spaces at home. They might be single parents or carers. Over 50% are mature students. The pressures on our students are very high.

To give you an example of something we are doing right now through this latest lockdown, we have received additional funding, which was welcome, to help us in managing the pressures on students. We are investing first and foremost in Chromebooks for our students' children. The computers they use for their studies are required for their children's studies. Enabling them to continue studying is important.

It also impacts particularly on students with placements. As a good example, our paramedic students were taken out of placements back in October. All placements closed down. It is difficult then to manage the learning. They have a set of competencies they have to achieve.

The mental health impact is high. We have over 100 students who live on campus as their only home, so staying at Christmas is not unusual. These are students who have maybe come from care or the YMCA and have lived on the streets. The impact on the mental health of all our students is high. We have had to put in extra support.

We have learned through this lockdown how to provide both online and face-to-face. We have learned that some of the online support for early signs and awareness of mental health issues is helpful. We have an AI coach, which has been incredibly helpful through this period. The use of technology is important within all of this. It is complex in terms of how it impacts across the student body.

Q249 **Chair:** You said mental health issues have gone up. Do you have the data on that at all?

Professor Barnes: I can get it. I don't have it to hand, but I am quite happy to provide it afterwards.

Q250 **Chair:** So you do have the data. Do you have a rough idea?

Professor Barnes: I do not as a percentage. We are currently providing mental health awareness training and suicide awareness training for all of our staff and many of our students. That has always been a big part of what we do, but we have increased it quite significantly. Investment in CPD has been important here.

Chair: Thank you. Chris?

Chris Millward: There are two dimensions to this, from our perspective. One is the implications for access to higher education, which links closely



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back to what is happening in schools and colleges, and then also student success.

From the perspective of access, the key concern for us has been that the approach to assessment does not disadvantage students who historically have been disadvantaged in relation to access to higher education. That was a priority last year and it will be a priority next year. In the longer term, there is a set of questions about the implications of lost learning for the attainment gap and what effect that could have on access to higher education.

Universities have an important part to play in addressing that through the outreach they do with schools. We have been working with them individually and with outreach partnerships to make sure that carries on in the current conditions, whether that is blended or online, and that it is shaped to meet the particular needs of the current environment.

Q251 Chair: Are you gathering the data of what has gone on over the past year in terms of attainment, particularly for the disadvantaged, and also mental health?

Chris Millward: On attainment in schools, we are linked into the various reports that have been done by organisations like the Education Endowment Foundation and colleagues in the LSE.

Q252 Chair: Also, what is going on in higher education? Has attainment dropped? What are the mental health impacts? Are you gathering the data for this and trying to assess what is going on across the board?

Chris Millward: In higher education we are conducting polling with students. We conducted polling over the summer. We have just conducted some new polling looking particularly at the impact of digital learning and blended learning on different groups of students. We have been able to identify the key problems.

We are also monitoring dropout rates to see if that is having an impact. We are monitoring notifications from students to see if that is telling us about problems in particular institutions.

We do not yet have indicators about the effect on attainment in higher education. It is too early to say that. On mental health and wellbeing, we know there are increased demands.

Q253 Chair: What are the figures on dropouts and mental health?

Chris Millward: We are not seeing any greater dropouts at this point. On mental health, we are seeing increased demand and we have put in an extra national service, Student Space, which can help referrals to universities online.

Q254 Chair: Do you have any data on the impact on mental health or not yet?

Chris Millward: I do not have clear data at this point.



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Q255 **Chair:** When you do, will you send it to the Committee, please?

Chris Millward: Yes.

Q256 **Chair:** Thank you. Karen, what has been the impact on your students—I know you have done a lot of blended learning—and on dropout rates, attainment, mental health and the things I have been raising with the other witnesses?

Karen Spencer: If I talk generally about the further education sector, then I can talk a little bit about Harlow as well.

Generally in further education, students' experiences have been variable with blended learning and online learning and still continue to be so. It is very much institution based as to whether they had a digital and blended learning strategy. There is patchy practice across the country. That was evidenced in reports done by Ofsted into digital learning in the first lockdown.

At Harlow, because we have had a strong digital strategy for the last seven years, we have been giving devices to all our full-time students. We give them iPads when they start at the college. We have worked through all those things that would lead to digital exclusion, such as broadband access, access to devices, how to use technology. We believe that has left our students in a much stronger position than other students across the country.

My first point would be that consistent and equitable access to technology is needed and a strong strategy for investment. We have invested out of our own pockets to do that. The evidence regarding the state of the further education sector in terms of funding is well noted previously. Anything that can get funds to support technology is much needed.

For the individual students themselves, I agree with others. It is too early to assess the impact on attainment. We have seen retention maintained. We have seen students engage as effectively as possible in the process, but we monitor retention and engagement daily because we know, particularly when we go into a long lockdown period, students will get very weary because our staff are also weary. We know we have to be on that all the time.

In terms of mental health, we have seen strong engagement with services that have been provided, and we have had excellent support from Mind in Essex and programmes organised through our local county council. I cannot fault the education service in Essex for the support it is trying to provide in very difficult circumstances to schools and colleges.

Q257 **Chair:** Do you have figures from your own college about mental health?

Karen Spencer: We look at mental health in a range of different ways. We have students who have registered disabilities or learning differences



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that may be mental health conditions, and then we have students who are reporting impacts on their mental health.

We did a survey during induction in the first term. Our students were reporting overall satisfaction with the processes we have in place but from memory—and I can check the figure—over 60% said this was having some sort of impact on their mental health.

But there is a significant difference in how you classify mental health. When you are looking for data, I would ask you to be clear about whether you mean a diagnosed condition or somebody saying, "This is impacting on me." If you are looking at other organisations around the room, knowing how they collect and classify data will give you a much stronger picture of what is going on. I can get more detailed figures.

We certainly are also seeing an impact on our staff's mental health, too, as well as on our students' mental health. Of our staff who go to the occupational health service, 70% go for mental health and wellbeing reasons.

Q258 **Chair:** Thank you. Graeme?

Dr Atherton: Our organisation is a membership organisation and we represent universities across the country. In terms of the general question, as Chris pointed out, our members are continuing to deliver outreach work as universities with schools and colleges to support progression into higher education in an online way. That work is continuing. Our members are finding that work difficult to deliver with access to schools and colleges being a challenge as they are under great pressure to catch up with the learning lost in the first lockdown.

One of the concerns is the support for the learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who our members support in applying and considering higher education this year. There has not just been a learning loss but there has been an information, advice and guidance loss as well for learners, which has not been focused on so much, particularly when it comes to making higher education and other choices. We are continually talking to our members about what they are learning and the work they are doing with schools and colleges.

On technology, Karen alluded earlier to distributing hardware. Karen also talked about supporting students and others in how to use that hardware and how to take best advantage of it. We have had some feedback from our members that they have been involved in distributing Chromebooks and computers to families of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, but that is not necessarily sufficient. In some cases, parents and others need real support in utilising, learning and supporting pupils in the home. Giving them a computer is fine, but unless they have support in how to plan lessons, how to home school and all those things, then the machine itself, particularly in certain families and contexts, will not have the impact it might have.



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On the issue of mental health, we do not collect any information on that issue but we do have a number of working groups and forums looking at areas of outreach work with schools and learners. One is a group that works with disabled students. Particularly with that group we can now collect more information on the challenges they are facing.

Finally, on the data point and learning loss, we did some research around September with about 1,000 young people from four areas of the country at year 12/13. We tried to capture their perspectives not just on progression to higher education but also on the impacts of the first lockdown. We can share some of that data with the group outside of this meeting.

Rae Tooth: In terms of the young people we are working with, at the moment we are working directly with them primarily via the Zoom digital interface and through telephone contact. We know that 20% of the young people we work with do not have access to the internet at home. They may have one mobile phone within the household, which makes any of that working with them incredibly challenging. For those students, we are working by phone.

Across the breadth of those disadvantaged young people we are working with, we see poor-quality learning environments at home. That is about the practical space they have, access to technology and also the spike in hunger poverty we are seeing. Often, it is around not having family members around who are good at creating psychological spaces in which learning can happen. The parents do not have the skills, because they have never been given the skills, to enquire with their young people to help them develop their thinking and remain motivated. There are some issues around how we move home learning environments on.

On moving to digital learning, I remain in awe of the work that schools have done to make sure they are moving at pace to digital delivery. We lack a nuanced understanding about what effective digital pedagogy looks like. By way of an example, when you are teaching a class in the classroom, you know when your class has finished a task, when somebody looks stuck or when people are messing around in the corner. When you are doing online delivery, you have none of that feedback from your class and so you are not able to pick up the students you are losing along the way. What is reported back to us from our students is that when they get lost, there is no one to pick that up, it is very difficult to ask questions and so they disengage. This is not to blame teachers. It is a suggestion that we need to rethink what effective pedagogy looks like through that medium.

The data on that holds out in terms of dropout rates in higher education and further education taught wholly through online mediums. There are some real challenges there for us.

On mental health, we have had a noticeable spike not just in students with diagnoses but also in the general sense of high levels of anxiety



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about learning and about people's lives generally and the impact of isolation.

Chair: Thank you. We have divided this into a few sections. I am going to pass over to my colleagues in a minute to chair the individual sections. Maybe not all of you need to answer every question, but we wanted those opening answers. Please keep your answers as concise as possible, even though I know there is a lot to say.

Q259 Christian Wakeford: This is an open question to the witnesses. A big headline last year was on the introduction of the catch-up premium. Now we are going back into lockdown and that is further delaying a lot of intervention that is needed to target these disadvantaged groups so that they can access some of the courses and programmes available to them.

There has been talk about a catch-up to the catch-up premium or, to quote the Chair, a "rocket boost" for the catch-up premium. From your perspective, what more intervention may be needed now that we are going into a third lockdown, considering that a lot of pupils and students are still unable to access the education that they would get in the classroom?

Karen Spencer: Further education is not always included in these catch-up premiums. Therefore, given that we take the majority of the students who have fallen much further behind than in schools, that needs careful consideration. At the same time, any system that is put in needs to be flexible. The model for further education was based on the school model, which was about giving one-to-one or small-group tuition to two or three people. That does not necessarily work in a very different sector and in different practical disciplines. Any investment needs to have flexibility, but it needs to be across the sectors as well, not just focused on schools.

Rae Tooth: Making sure there is some focus on building stamina and learning skills rather than just subject content is absolutely essential here.

Q260 Apsana Begum: I have a quick question for Rae and anybody else on the panel. You mentioned the role of parents in the pandemic. Our Committee has taken a bit of evidence about the variable factor of family relationships in the learning of white working-class pupils. Is there anything you can share from the experiences of parenting or family relationships among white working-class pupils that have been brought to light through Covid?

Rae Tooth: We are in the process of introducing a specific programme to support parents. We always have direct conversations with parents as well as with young people. The key questions that come back from the parents we work with are: first, about mental health and wellbeing; secondly, about how to motivate kids when you have your hands full; and, thirdly, about how to talk about subjects you know nothing about. It is quite scary to support your kids in learning maths when you cannot do the sums yourself and you do not understand it. How do you do that



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well? We are now offering specific support to parents to help them develop those skills.

Dr Atherton: Building on what Rae has said, our members are doing similar things to what Rae is doing. There are some practical questions as well. How do you plan a day for young people to learn? If you work in education, these are things that you know how to do, but there are not materials that speak to members of this group in a way that they should be spoken to and can relate to.

We are not even using television as a medium to communicate on these issues. We are looking at the internet. The BBC is doing a lot of great stuff through Bitesize if you have a smart television. Why is television not being used here as a way of communicating to the group? That is the best way of getting something practical across so that they understand how to support their children. It is not happening at the moment. It is being middle-class to working-class dialogue.

Chair: I have long argued that there should be an education channel on television.

Professor Barnes: Speaking with my opportunity area hat on, one of our projects has been to provide activities and food for children initially in the school holidays. That has extended to providing meals for families during lockdown, and that is continuing.

We also added in providing STEM activities. As we delivered meals and STEM activities to families, we also checked up on wellbeing and alerted schools where we were concerned about a family and their ability to support the children in their learning. That is an example of something we could do to keep an eye on families and also provide those activities. Families were at a loss on how to support the learning that was coming in from schools.

Q261 **Jonathan Gullis:** Apologies to all the panellists and those watching for the hair style. Baby was up quite late last night and early this morning, so I have not had time to sort out the mop that is on top.

Also, for the record, Professor Liz Barnes is someone I know well. She is co-chair of the Stoke-on-Trent opportunity area and vice chancellor of Staffordshire University, so I know her very well.

We have heard a lot about the educational underachievement of disadvantaged white pupils. We are trying to understand the causes of that. Is it family instability? Is it the geography and where people are based? Are there are a whole host of other issues that are leading to this educational underachievement, particularly compared with students from BAME disadvantaged backgrounds?

Chris Millward: Geography is very important. We can see places in which multiple generations have experienced disadvantage and have potentially lost faith in education as a way of getting out of that. We can



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see clearly how educational issues link with other issues such as health, jobs and so on. A key issue for me is that education policy is joined up with other areas of policy in the response to all this. Place is a key issue.

Professor Barnes: Tied with place, where you are born does have an impact. From some of the work we have done looking at disadvantaged young people, it starts from being a baby. Do they go to their NHS check-ups? From the work we have been doing on absenteeism, we have said that we could probably identify as babies those children who would be constantly absent from school later in life.

There is also the issue of employment at the end, which impacts on performance in school. If you are in an area with a low-wage economy, low job availability and high worklessness, it has an impact on children's education.

The key is to work across sectors to look at the impact of place in its broadest sense. We can see lots of stages through life that impact on outcomes. It has been said that children entering school at the age of five are approximately 11 months behind in their learning already if they come from a disadvantaged background, and that continues through. Students I have spoken to who have suffered an awful lot through their school lives, their cognitive ability is strong but they were never able to engage with school in a productive way. It was often related to their family backgrounds.

Karen Spencer: I would echo what others have said about place. I want to add that often we find there is a postcode lottery. If you can afford to buy an expensive house in an expensive area, then you can go to a better school. I am paraphrasing slightly but largely, when you look at it, all the things to do with inequality—health, jobs—sit around that. Therefore, we can keep talking about the fact that schools could do better, but in my background as a mathematician I did a lot of work on added value. A lot of the research shows that, if you have a critical mass of high-attaining young people in a class, you influence more significantly the bottom end and the tail of your class and the middle. If you are in an environment where there is low aspiration and middle to low attainment, unless you have that input from higher attainers, it is significantly more difficult to pull up attainment as a whole. Therefore, I would be looking at the postcode lottery and the inequalities within the school system that sit around things.

I also agree with the facts on things like parenting. You can tell from a relatively young age who will engage with the system. We have removed a lot of wraparound services that helped in terms of health, youth work and a whole host of things that scaffolded young people through from birth to progressing into jobs. As others have said, you have to bring multiple services together.

Rae Tooth: I have a slightly different perspective. Some research that came out of the University of Oxford relatively recently looked at



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community understanding of education and disadvantage. There is now some evidence that BAME communities have an understanding of the disadvantage that they face, particularly in the work space, and so are now more likely to make use of opportunities available to them than their white counterparts, who do not have that understanding of the disadvantage they face and so are less likely to take on those opportunities for top-ups. It is not really a top-up; it is that extension, that stretch. That is a quite interesting cultural shift that needs to be considered as well.

Dr Atherton: To build on the other witnesses, when we think about this group and their levels of educational achievement, it is a diverse group, first. There are those whom we see as underachieving from white working-class backgrounds who perhaps are in challenging circumstances. There are some who may not have high levels of income but are not in particularly challenging circumstances.

Education is not perceived in the same way. Building on what Rae said, it is not that families do not want their children to do well at school. They do, but it does not hold the same priority as it does for certain other groups in society.

Within that context, even the phrase "disadvantaged" has to be thought about. Many groups do not see themselves as disadvantaged and do not see themselves as necessarily underachieving. They see themselves as progressing through school and progressing into employment that they, hopefully, would see in their community as employment of an acceptable nature. We are grappling with some deep-rooted perspectives about education, language and advantage. We talk about it here and, when we engage with those we support, that language and perspective often look rather different.

Jonathan Gullis: That is interesting, Graeme. You are right. Using the word "disadvantaged" is the wrong terminology. How do kids see themselves? Where I am in Stoke-on-Trent, a lot of kids look around and they see other kids in a similar situation and just say, "That is life in Stoke." They would not see themselves as disadvantaged because they would not necessarily know what London is like. They may not have travelled that far. I know Liz has done work in the past on tracking the movements of pupils. A sad thing for our area is that people do not branch out of north Staffordshire very much, and so they do not have that.

Q262 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel members. Why are black males disproportionately excluded from school in comparison with white males, and what are the long-term effects of this?

Karen Spencer: It is an incredibly complex issue, which relies on cultural understandings. I worked in London before I worked in Harlow in two quite different and diverse communities. The place I worked in London was in Kingston-upon-Thames. The college I worked at had over



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50% of its students from BAME backgrounds. I was used to working in a culturally diverse, rich environment. I have come to Harlow, which is significantly different.

A lot of people assume that boisterous, loud behaviour is misbehaviour. Often our teaching profession can be very monocultural and we do not always recognise that people have different backgrounds and exhibit different behaviours, and that might impact on our perceptions, rules and processes.

It is an incredibly complex issue and I know it is something that educators in the further education sector have been discussing in a lot of detail. When we have our panels for exclusions, disciplinaries and so on, are they representative of our student body? Do we have people there who understand the perspective of the students?

I remember, fairly early on in my teaching career, working with a young black male who had been excluded from six different organisations. When I got to the bottom of it, he was living on his own as a 17-year-old, trying to look after his 13-year-old and eight-year-old brother and sister with virtually no money. He felt that any system did not support him, so he railed against that. To get him to a stage where he could talk to me about that, expose it and have us support him took at least a year with us not having to exclude him for behaviours that a school would have excluded him for. I met him a few years later and he was a fully qualified electrician and earning a good wage.

It is the intense support and understanding you need. Often systems tend to want to remove somebody because it is easier than working through with them.

Q263 Christian Wakeford: Liz, you started touching on early intervention if we have not targeted children who are already behind by the age of five. Looking predominantly at the impact of Covid on those early-years settings, with more parents having been furloughed, been made redundant or had cuts in salaries so they are no longer able to afford early-years education, what thought is there as to the educational opportunities for these young children? Is there any assessment of how this is affecting them at this point so we can try to address some of these issues? A catch-up premium is not necessarily appropriate for a toddler, but we need to be doing something much more targeted to mitigate the longer-term issues.

Professor Barnes: I am not aware of any specific evaluation yet of the impact at a school level. The nurseries are still open. In fact, within our OA, most of the investment has gone on early years. A major project that has just been backed, working jointly with our local authority, is called Family by Family. It is about looking at how one family can work with another that lives in similar circumstances and help them through.



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I will follow up on your question and I will ask our schools whether they have any specifics of the impact on our learners. We know from the qualitative feedback that we are seeing a significant impact on learning because they are not getting the support at home that others might get because families do not know how to provide it.

Jonathan Gullis: While Committee members and I may have different views on the Gove reforms back in 2010, there certainly now needs to be a deep dive into learning environments outside the school gates and that is going to be the biggest challenge. Covid has certainly exposed that.

Q264 **Apsana Begum:** There are some who would say there is no such thing as white privilege. What is it about the educational experiences of white communities that make them distinct from, say, the experiences of ethnic minority communities that are also disadvantaged?

Chris Millward: I start by coming back to place. If you look at the distribution of populations, ethnic communities are more likely to be in urban areas, particularly London and, indeed, patterns of progression in higher education are stronger in those areas. There are differences in where populations are located.

If you look at the patterns of attainment and particularly progression into higher education for the white group as a whole, the key issue is the gap. White students who are not on free school meals have very high rates of participation in higher education, so we need to boil down to the particular group within the white British population where there is lower attainment and lower progression. That comes back to that multigenerational experience in particular places.

Jonathan Gullis: That is interesting, Chris. Again using Stoke as an example—sorry to bore the panel with this—in our area, when you were 14 to 16, you followed your mum and dad into the pot bank or into the pits. That mentality, certainly in post-industrial towns and cities across the United Kingdom, particularly in the Midlands and in the North, probably still exists to a certain extent.

Dr Atherton: Apsana's question is an excellent question. The point is that there are distinctions that are not distinctions in terms of educational experience. We have divisions and differences across geographies, as Chris pointed out, but we have many areas of the country where young people and children of different ethnic backgrounds are educated in school together. They are in classes together. They have experiences together.

Coming outside of the classroom, we are also looking at socioeconomic groups. If we look at issues with socioeconomic groups, the data shows that those in lower income groupings, percentage-wise, are more likely to be from certain non-white ethnic backgrounds than they are to be from white ethnic backgrounds. We are not looking at a total distinction here.



Possibly it comes back to what we spoke about earlier, and to what Jonathan alluded to, on some of the approaches to education that we find in different ethnic groupings. I am keen to emphasise that we should not get into a dialogue regarding seeing certain white groups as not wanting their young people to progress or not wanting their children to do well at school, but it has taken on a high priority and has a high priority culturally—and for practical reasons as well—in certain different ethnic groups where the opportunities outside of education are perceived to be so high.

As Jonathan pointed out, correctly or not, there is the perception in certain communities that if you do not do well at school there will be opportunities for you afterwards. I work in London particularly, where certain different schools, authorities and ethnic groups find that that perception is perhaps not as developed or does not exist in certain groups, where the idea is that if you do not do well at school then there will not be opportunities available for you.

We must also think about the similarities in educational experiences in schooling as well. It is not total differences.

Q265 Apsana Begum: Thanks, Chris and Graeme. I was quite interested in what you said about external factors. Chris, you described the post-industrial areas. Looking at an inner-London constituency like mine, a borough that has the highest levels of child poverty in the entire country, the experiences of a Bangladeshi child may be slightly different from the experiences of a white working-class child, but they are both in the “disadvantaged” bracket.

I was trying to delve a bit more into whether there are external factors—for example, some areas have more socioeconomic investment—that are shaping the experiences or whether it is something else. Is it what Jonathan described, the children going into the same occupations at an earlier age and into employment in particular types of manual work and so forth? Are those the factors? I am trying to go a little bit more into that. Any points on that would be helpful.

Jonathan Gullis: Apsana, we will make sure we get you some answers to that. I am going to quickly throw it out there and then I am going to get Tom and Fleur, and then we can sum up at the end.

Liz, the question for you specifically—and I will come to you later—is: as the co-chair of an opportunity area, how important is a place-based approach to supporting disadvantaged white pupils? I will get Tom and Fleur to come in, and then I will take the answers.

Tom Hunt: The issue with place is that, to an extent, when you are looking at why white working-class pupils underperform academically compared with pupils from different groups who are also from low-income backgrounds, you need to look at the same place. You need to take one particular area and compare those groups within that one area. Then you



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get to the nub and you begin to get the answers.

The point that Rae mentioned on white disadvantaged pupils maybe not being aware of their disadvantage is interesting. To what extent is this perhaps because there has not been a focus on them? Maybe there has been a focus on other groups and not on them. Perhaps this situation is not helped if, in popular culture and in the media, a lot of these pupils who come from deprived backgrounds are told that they are privileged when in fact they are not. There are different understandings and perceptions of what people mean by "white privilege," but ultimately people can take different messages about what that means. If we are trying to increase awareness and understanding of what disadvantage is to certain people and individuals, perhaps terminology like that is not particularly helpful.

Fleur Anderson: I have two questions. One is building on what we have been saying about place. Is there a difference between rural and urban working class? That has been mentioned about place. Should we be looking into the particular experiences and barriers faced by rural white working class that are different?

My other question is quite different and builds on what Liz was saying about early-years provision, the fact that there was Sure Start and a real amount of investment in early-years provision that was then stopped. That cohort has now come through. Have you seen the impact of having Sure Start on what happened later on in life for that cohort?

Jonathan Gullis: If I ask Graeme to reply to Apsana in 30 seconds, Liz to reply to me in 30 seconds, Karen to reply to Fleur and then Rae to Tom, it will mean that everyone will have an answer and we can be done.

Dr Atherton: To Apsana's point, inner-London constituencies are very distinct. In terms of Bangladeshi people, there are still distinct differences in the outside educational experiences of different groupings and those from different backgrounds. I certainly agree with that. Overall, London pupils achieve well despite the background they come from. It is getting back to the point that Karen made earlier about critical masses of achievement and also, back to Fleur's point, different ambitions and perspectives. There are things one sees in London, opportunities and availabilities, that are perhaps not available in other parts of the country.

Professor Barnes: To pick up on Fleur's point, a place-based focus and local solutions are important because you understand the environment and the impact.

Another important thing that has come through the opportunity area is something that I said earlier. It is important that you get all the different services around the table to deal with the challenges because education cannot resolve this on its own. This is an opportunity to think about how you approach it within your local environment. The national solutions will not work if you put them into different areas.



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Jonathan Gullis: Very much a Hilary Cottam style of approach. I am a late convert to *Radical Help*. I am all over it.

Rae Tooth: That was my Christmas present from my mum. It is a great book.

Tom, you were asking about whether some of that language around privilege is unhelpful. As we all know, privilege is context specific. When I talk directly to the young people we are working with, we rarely talk about disadvantage. We talk about how they are future leaders and they need to understand what their ambitions are and where they want to go. We will help them build routes to get there. It is through the process of ongoing conversations that they thrash that out and find the details of what actually drives them to remove themselves from any of those pressures they have within their home or community contexts.

Karen Spencer: Fleur was asking about the differences between rural versus urban. I echo what others have said about a place-based approach. If you are in a rural area and you lack transport and access to facilities, then clearly you are going to be disadvantaged. Any system that you put in place needs to recognise wraparound services based on the place that you are in.

Also, you can't assume that a community in one rural area or urban area is the same as a community in another rural area or urban area at the other end of the country. There are very distinct differences. For example, we have already alluded to the difference in Stoke. I come from Yorkshire. I am in Essex now. I have worked in Surrey and in London. All of those places have very different and distinct views of disadvantage and approach. Therefore, we need a system that recognises that difference.

Q266 **Chair:** Rae, you said earlier that those from ethnic communities often know how to access the information that is needed given the situations in which they find themselves. Why would white working-class disadvantaged families not know how to do that?

Rae Tooth: It is not that they do not have the information; it is that they do not take up those opportunities.

Q267 **Chair:** Why wouldn't they? If you have two cohorts that are disadvantaged, why are BAME families taking it up and white working-class families not?

Rae Tooth: I am generalising massively by talking about them as whole groups, but the research shows that, when you work with BAME communities, what they understand of the world is that they are disadvantaged and that to succeed they have to outperform their white counterparts. They see that what they see as white privilege means they have to be as good as and then better, so they take every opportunity they have to build on their experience, knowledge and skills so that they can demonstrate they are better in order to get to the same point as their white counterparts.



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Q268 **Chair:** Are you saying that aspiration in disadvantaged white working-class families is not as strong?

Rae Tooth: They do not understand themselves to be disadvantaged, so they do not think they need to add on that extension.

Q269 **Chair:** What evidence do you have to show that they do not understand themselves to be disadvantaged?

Rae Tooth: That research was done by Oxford and Bristol Universities, which I can send to you. That is probably the easiest thing to do. Academics are much more articulate than I am.

Q270 **Chair:** Specifically white disadvantaged boys and girls and families, you are saying, do not see themselves as disadvantaged?

Rae Tooth: So they do not see the need to engage in the opportunities that are available to them.

Q271 **Chair:** Could you send that to the Committee, please?

Rae Tooth: Yes, I can.

Chair: Thank you. We are going to come on to my favourite subject, which is going to be chaired by Christian Wakeford.

Q272 **Christian Wakeford:** Thank you, Chair. Like you said, you are certainly a torchbearer for apprenticeships and vocational education. I am quite passionate about it myself, hence having two apprentices in my office. I will start with a couple of questions and then open it up to the Committee.

For white working-class disadvantaged pupils, there appear to be barriers, like you were touching on, Rae, to accessing both further education and vocational education such as apprenticeships. To what extent do you think they exist, and how will they be overcome? Is there a lack of awareness about some of these courses because schools are not promoting them? Is it behavioural? Is it cultural? Why do these barriers exist, and how can they be overcome?

Rae Tooth: This is a huge, complex issue. If I pick the thing that is at the forefront of my mind right now, particularly when we are talking about place, in rural and coastal communities the opportunity to be placed in good quality apprenticeships with employers is difficult because they have to leave home. That works in terms of access to apprenticeships and also in terms of that journey to finding high-level skilled employment.

When we are talking about BAME communities, they tend to be urban-based and they stay within their family and community while they are making that leap in social ladders, whereas white working-class families that come from rural and peripheral communities to cities have to physically move themselves out of and away from their communities and their support networks. That is a significant challenge, particularly if they



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also have responsibilities within their home as a carer of siblings or parents.

Dr Atherton: With regards to apprenticeships, there are some issues with the information, advice and guidance available to young people in schools in regard to apprenticeship opportunities. When you see gaps in information, advice and guidance provision, you will then foresee those who cannot access it elsewhere—that is in the home so much—as those who will experience great disadvantage. That certainly would apply in terms of this group.

Also, the opportunities available for apprenticeships have to fit with the future aspirations of those who wish to enter apprenticeships. Sometimes that cognisance and that fit might not be there. Rae talked about this being an issue of geography, and it could be an issue of occupational preference as well. Again, if we are talking about certain groupings, possibly if you look at certain career trajectories, in the sorts of groups we are talking about there may be a view that those trajectories could be easily achieved through direct entry into the labour market or through other mechanisms rather than having to go through apprenticeships. They might be seen, in comparison to direct labour market entry, as not as attractive because wages could be lower. There are a number of factors there we need to account for.

Particularly with apprenticeships, it is about how we support students to understand the benefits of apprenticeships, the availability of apprenticeships and what they are through the schooling process from prior to year 7, to be fair. If we think about future aspirations and career choice, they are formed at primary level and we do not have much scaffolding and support through the school system for that.

Chris Millward: I will talk about degree apprenticeships, which are what we are most closely involved with. We are seeing that they have increased substantially in the offer and have become an attractive offer, so the people who are best informed and best connected are taking up those opportunities. That, interestingly, also includes quite a lot of adult and mature students. It is good that mature students are engaged with degree apprenticeships, but that may be diminishing opportunities for others. Overall, we need more degree apprenticeships.

We might also want to think about whether they are in the kinds of professions that the groups of people you are concerned with here will take the path towards and whether we can make sure there is progression from lower levels of apprenticeship up to degree apprenticeship, which would probably require further education and higher education to work together.

Professor Barnes: Careers advice and guidance is important here. Many apprenticeships are through employers, and the signposting for apprenticeships is much more difficult and much more complex. Sheffield has a good example of working together to signpost apprenticeships.



Another big challenge is that you need GCSE maths and English for apprenticeships. You can study it alongside, although many prefer any entrant to have passed GCSE maths and English because, at the end of the apprenticeship, they could face the challenge that they have not passed maths and English and therefore cannot pass their apprenticeship. That is a barrier because a lot of disadvantaged children do not have the maths and English GCSE, which is crucial here.

For your information, we now have upwards of 2,000 higher and degree apprenticeships, and 44% of them are from POLAR quintiles 1 and 2.

Karen Spencer: For many of our families who have young people considering apprenticeships, if they lose their benefits or something that allows them to assist in feeding their families, et cetera, they are not going to go for an apprenticeship. That is one thing that happens very definitely and is a piece of feedback we get all the time from parents who are sitting in that free school meals band.

I agree with what others have said about geography. I was also going to pick up on the maths and English point. Many employers filter young people by maths and English, so you filter out an awful lot of young people by doing that.

If I was to look at the education system as a whole and at disadvantage as a whole, I would look at maths and English as a whole. We have made an assumption throughout our discussion that parents can read and understand the information we are giving them. I don't think a lot of the white underachieving groups I am working with, the parents, have the skills to read some of the information that I am sending them. We have a fundamental cyclical issue that goes right the way through the system, from early years through to primary, secondary and further education, and I think we have to have a much stronger connected strategy for maths and English.

Q273 Christian Wakeford: In regards to careers advice, we have discussed previously in Committee, especially when we heard from some apprenticeship ambassadors last year, that one of the glaring omissions is that they were not aware of apprenticeships; it was through their own research. In an ideal world, in every school corridor there would be posters promoting apprenticeships, but part of the problem is that the model of going into teaching is predominantly that you go to university, then a postgrad course, and then go into it, so it is a lack of understanding of apprenticeships from teachers. To what extent do you think that fundamentally changing the model and having an apprenticeship route into teaching might be appropriate? What more can all settings in the education sector do to start promoting apprenticeships much more?

Professor Barnes: The education of careers advisers in schools about apprenticeships is really important so that they understand how they work. What was the second point of your question?



Christian Wakeford: About the route into teaching and the general lack of awareness.

Professor Barnes: To be honest, why not? Certainly, we are looking at everything we can to increase the number of teachers coming in locally in Stoke-on-Trent because, if we can grow our own locally, they are more likely to stay. Specialist teachers is a real challenge to us, so an apprenticeship route would work. We have just introduced them for many NHS roles, so I totally agree that it would work and it would be a good way of bringing others in. We need to do a lot more work to upskill careers teachers to understand apprenticeships and to direct students through that route.

Dr Atherton: I would support the view that different routes into teaching is very important but, as Liz is emphasising, we cannot avoid the fact that we really need a systematic, funded careers service with careers professionals who have the knowledge to give this advice. Teachers are there predominantly to teach a subject. You cannot look to fit careers advice in the margins around your subject teaching.

As was pointed out earlier, routes into apprenticeships might inevitably be a lot more complex because of the range of opportunities, the employment aspects, the placement aspects. If you want young people in schools to understand that, you need people in schools who have that knowledge and who have the time and space. Curriculum space needs to be provided as well. There isn't space in the curriculum to give that kind of careers advice. You need to be able to do that if you are going to raise that awareness around apprenticeships, which I am sure we all want to do.

Karen Spencer: On careers information, advice and guidance, we find very patchy access in the further education sector to young people from a whole set of backgrounds. It is largely dictated by whether the school has a sixth form, not whether it is in the best interest of schools. Despite the Baker clause, I think a lot of lip service has been paid to careers information, advice and guidance. Therefore, to me, it is about getting access so you can give proper guidance and information.

Q274 **Ian Mearns:** Karen, you are singing from the same hymn sheet that I have been singing from for quite some time. I think that your point about adherence to the Baker clause is entirely appropriate.

Going back to Graeme's point, I do not think it is enough to have teachers who are doing careers advice and guidance as part of other duties. We need to have independent and impartial careers advice workers so that youngsters can get impartial advice that is about the interests of the young person and not about the interests of the institution they are in at the time.

I have a real concern, particularly with youngsters who are more vulnerable and who are less inclined to be academic learners, that if they get inappropriate, weak or thin careers advice, they can quite often end



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up on courses that are totally inappropriate to their needs and end up dropping out. Of course, there are not many second chances in the system these days. Does anybody want to comment on that in general?

Dr Atherton: I entirely agree with you about independent and impartial advice. Again, this needs to be a long-term commitment as well, because we have a lot of careers advisers in this country but they have become quite disparate now and the training has become quite disparate for these professionals. As you said, if we do not get this right, we see the students not developing the support they need.

Then, of course, this relates back to their learning. We cannot take away from the fact that your learning and motivation is related to what you see after schooling. If you have a scenario where you have young people who are perhaps not doing as well as they would like to be doing, the lack of advice for what they want to do relates back to their learning, so it affects their attainment as well. We have seen that the relationship between attainment, advice and support kicks in. Then you see, of course, the scenarios that you were pointing out, Ian. On the importance of careers advice, it seems to me we have been talking about this in various groupings for years and years, but it really does need to be addressed.

Christian Wakeford: That seems to be a very popular question, Ian, because we have all the panel wanting to answer.

Chair: Very briefly, if you can, all of you. Thank you.

Karen Spencer: Many schools and colleges thought they were better off when we had the Connexions service, which was independent and needed investment in training for consistency but actually, on reflection, was a better service.

Professor Barnes: We need to go further than just telling students about these things; they need to experience it. The old model where children in school could spend days or half days in college undertaking practical subjects such as plumbing and woodwork gave them an opportunity to understand a route through, and they would soon learn about apprenticeships. The Higher Horizons project supports disadvantaged people to visit different kinds of universities. It is really important that a potential student walks on to the campus and gets a feel for it, so we need to have more of that, getting them out and about as well as talking to them about the future.

Rae Tooth: One of the things that I think is essential for this particular group is supporting them to build multiple options for what their futures might look like. That also means making sure there are multiple pathways through education. There is a distinct difference between advantaged and disadvantaged that, when you come to an obstacle and you cannot go any further, advantaged students will have ways to work around that and find something aligned to their original ambition.



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Disadvantaged students will not, and that is the point at which they become disaffected and drop out.

Chris Millward: The higher education admissions system, the UCAS system, is very powerful, very well understood, very mature. Young people and teachers know how to navigate it, and IAG is part of that. I think there will be quite a lot of discussion about further reform to admissions over the next year or two, and we should be thinking about how alternative routes can be as simple and as well understood as the UCAS system.

Q275 **Chair:** Can't you have, as was suggested many times in the past—No. 10 was previously thinking about it—UCAS combined with further education and skills?

Chris Millward: One of the things that needs to be considered is how the system could open up different routes. There are particular issues with jobs and apprenticeships and how you admit to those involving the employer, but in the consultation I think there will be an admissions reform next year. We need to think about how you embrace those routes.

Karen Spencer: I have sat around the table with Rob on a number of occasions to discuss online portals to apply for further education. I think it is distinctly different from higher education, where students are travelling at a distance. The complexity of doing something local would just add an extra burden to individual colleges and schools. Apprenticeships we already have a national system for, but I don't disagree with Chris: it is incredibly complex when you also involve an employer and when many employers in this country are SMEs.

Q276 **Tom Hunt:** More generally, a problem I see locally is that there is not really an ecosystem I think an ecosystem approach could be more beneficial. What I mean is that there seem to be siloes wherever I look. It seems to be primary schools, secondary schools, FE colleges, the university—if there is a university—local business, the LEP, local government, whatever. It does not always seem like they talk together enough. I know there is a fair bit of dialogue, but it is a question of whether there is enough dialogue and whether there should be much more influence when it comes to local growth sectors in an area and whether that is feeding through into a local curriculum offer, maybe even more careers days, local businesses going into schools at an earlier age to highlight opportunities.

It seems to me that, regardless of whether we want children to go down an academic route or a technical route, go to university or go to an FE college or do an apprenticeship, they need to have that core level of academic achievement, certainly in English and maths. Maybe the problem is that, if all they are hearing and all they are seeing is, "The academic pathway, the academic pathway," and they do not really think that is for them and there is not a good quality alternative, they might just give up on the whole thing. That might be an explainer as to why



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they are not particularly well performing when it comes to GCSEs and A-levels, because they think, “What’s the point? University is not for me, it is not a route I want to go down” and there is not enough attention given to the other route. What do you think about that, as well as the ecosystem point and whether there is enough of an ecosystem approach at the moment?

Christian Wakeford: I have Liz, Karen and Rae wanting to come in, so I will go through in that order, please.

Chair: All of you in a nutshell, because we have to go to the next session.

Professor Barnes: I think the joined-up approach is really important. We sponsor a MAT. It has 20 schools as part of it and we work closely with them. We also work with a number of FE colleges, and we are talking about models such as when FE colleges offer a student a place it also guarantees them progression into university, but it might also be the other route through to apprenticeships that may be through to university as well. The more we can link and include employers in this—and we offer mentorship. Our students are now mentoring school children, and children and young people in colleges, and we have been asked to extend that down to year 7s in schools. The more we can connect up, have the role modelling and help pathways and routes through careers, all the better.

Karen Spencer: I would agree on the joined-up approach. I think we have become too fragmented in different bits of the sector and overly complex, but obviously to unpick that is incredibly difficult when you have MATs that are going across the country, colleges that go across geographies, and so on.

We need to have a wholesale review of the curriculum so that we have a connected strategy that goes across ages and stages and is not designed from the top down. Our curriculum—I do a lot with maths education—has largely been designed by university academics who are designing for the top 5%, and everything else filters down from that. I think we need to design from the bottom upwards for different pathways and provide some of those opportunities that Liz mentioned earlier of doing something different in your school education.

Rae Tooth: It seems to me that we are very much embedded in a hierarchical education system where HE is at the top and primary school is at the bottom, and FE seems to sit below HE, even though I don’t think that it should, and it is seen as different. The young people that we are talking about often need second chances because of the context that they are growing up in. If we could conceptualise education, rather than as a pathway and a journey that you go through, as a pool that you can dip in and out of when you need it so that you are accessing the appropriate knowledge and skills that you need for the context you are in, we would



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be much better serving those communities that we know have very complex lives.

Q277 Chair: Can I pick up on what Chris said about more so-called professional classes or middle classes doing degree apprenticeships? There are two sides of that coin. We need people to see that degree apprenticeships are prestigious, because those groups tend just to want to do the academic route. You create a cascade. If you show that degree apprenticeships are prestigious, you encourage it all the way through, right down to level 2.

Secondly, although the bureaucracy around degree apprenticeships is far too great, a lot more could be done in other subjects so it does not just become doing management apprenticeships. If careers advice significantly encouraged students to do degree apprenticeships and explained to them what they were, you would get a much more rapid uptake. Could you briefly comment on that, Chris, or any of the other witnesses?

Chris Millward: On the first point, yes, it is the case that if the best connected and best informed people who lead to the highest status jobs in public life take these routes, then that will have its own effect. It will encourage more people to take them, more providers will offer them, and it will grow. I am sure that is right, but I do think there is a fair access issue about degree apprenticeships and we need to make sure they are diverse.

On the second, I think there have been improvements to the bureaucracy, some good work on issues like how degrees and end-point assessments link together, but there probably is more we could do on that.

Q278 Chair: Personally, I think you should have targets for universities and there should be sticks and carrots to make sure they are being offered with employers. Tom spoke about siloes. Warwick University, which links up with FE, UTCs and schools, is an exact example of the opposite of a silo. That should be a model for many other universities to follow.

Dr Atherton: The work we did 18 months ago speaking to parents and young people about degree apprenticeships shows there is also work to do in understanding what they are at that level. Is it degree apprenticeship or is it apprenticeship degree? We call them degree apprenticeships but are these degrees that have apprenticeships within them, or are they perceived as apprenticeships that have a degree component? That might seem a technical point but, in terms of the perception for all those who want to take these courses, it is quite an important one. As well as the targets and other things you describe, there is work to be done on how we frame and define these qualifications with regards to those who wish to participate in them.

Finally, in school, it is kind of who will take them. Yes, there are those who take apprenticeships who would take a degree, but are we looking at those who do a degree who would do apprenticeships? In schooling they



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are seen as different cohorts, so again it is some of that targeting in school about who should participate and take these courses.

Q279 **Chair:** When I go to schools and ask the kids, they do not even know. They have never even heard of it. They have no idea that you can go to part-time university, work at an employer and earn while you learn and have no student debt. They have no idea that such an option even exists.

Professor Barnes: Exactly right, and if you look at Rolls-Royce and Balfour Beatty, they would now rather take apprentices than an intern, but they tend to get the middle class at the moment. We have to do more to open it up more widely, which is about increasing understanding of the apprenticeship routes.

Just to pick up Graeme's point, if you try to do a degree and add on an apprenticeship it does not work very well. You really have to take it another way and build an apprenticeship within which they will receive a degree, which gives them the currency they need for their future. It has improved in terms of how to get more apprenticeships up and running, but we still need more standards. That can take a long time sometimes, and there are certainly some gaps.

Karen Spencer: We are looking at this from a very academic point of view again. Many of the white working-class young people I work with are moving into trades when they do apprenticeships. They are qualified at level 2. If they have their qualification in plumbing, electrical, parts of construction, they can go to level 3, but they can earn a very good income and don't see themselves as disadvantaged working in that trade. There is not an obvious route they would follow that takes them to level 4, 5 or 6. We are looking at things that should be recognising people as master craftspeople as though they are an academic discipline, so I think that needs careful thought.

Q280 **Kim Johnson:** Panel, we have debated why disadvantaged white kids are less likely to access higher education, and you have made an important point about maths and English. What is the impact of this, and do you know what the drop-off rates are? What proportion go to higher-tier universities compared with other groups?

Professor Barnes: We have the data on proportions of students going through from different groups. I have some in front of me, but I will not go right through it. I can certainly provide it afterwards, but there is lots of data.

What we have found is that we have been able to close the gaps in the achievement of students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, but to do that means providing a lot of wraparound services. What we also provide is a course called Step Up, particularly for mature students. Many of our students come in because they were not set up to progress straight from school into university. It is a 12-week course before they



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arrive that helps them to get up to speed and understand what learning looks like and how to make the most of their opportunity.

The other thing we have to remember within this is that, if you take students from these kinds of backgrounds, despite their cognitive ability there will be all sorts of reasons why they might find it difficult to progress through. The more we can move towards a flexible model where you can accumulate credits and drop in and out of higher education and further education, the better. At the moment it looks as if there is a push about retention and it is really important to retain students. Actually, it is really important that sometimes we acknowledge it makes sense for a student to step off and step back on, and that is fine. To close these gaps, it takes a lot of additional support, both before for transitioning and during study.

Q281 Kim Johnson: I would imagine it also takes more financial resources to be able to provide that level of wraparound care.

Professor Barnes: Yes, of course, in terms of the support staff that you need and academic time and input.

Dr Atherton: We produced a report in 2019 that looked at the data from UCAS, looked at participation in higher education by white students from lower participation neighbourhoods and looked at that picture nationally. We found, as you would probably suspect, that there were massive differences by types of institution and individual institution in the numbers of students participating in higher education in these different institutions. We have that report and we can send it on to you.

On the broader question, I agree with what Liz said. In terms of these big differences, I know institutions differ greatly, but there are some in the sector who are doing what you would describe as the heavy lifting in terms of this kind of participation. There isn't a great deal of dialogue across the sector between, say, those institutions that are admitting relatively higher numbers of students from this sort of background and those who are admitting lower numbers of students. For instance, in the report it is further education colleges delivering HE that have the highest percentages of white students from low-participation neighbourhoods, yet we are not in a place in our system because of the hierarchies within it, which I think Rae alluded to, where we would see perhaps—and we should be—more selective institutions speaking very interactively with their colleagues in the sector in FE about how they are managing to attract more white students from low-participation neighbourhoods. We know there are differences here. Institutions differ greatly, but there could be greater dialogue, which possibly could address some of these issues.

Kim Johnson: Hopefully that is something that can happen.

Q282 Tom Hunt: We are talking about access to higher education for this group of students. Any sense that any child has that university is not for



them, that higher education is not for them, clearly needs to be challenged robustly and the opportunities need to be provided. We also need to be clear that many will decide they do not want to go to university, and they may be making a wise decision, because it might not be the right thing for them. I personally have a view that potentially, in the past few years, we have had a number of people go to university and it has not really worked for them. They have accumulated a huge amount of student debt. They have not necessarily got a good job at the end of it that makes the investment worthwhile, and that is the elephant in the room as I see it.

Obviously, with degree apprenticeships and things like that, that could change dramatically. It might just be that, yes, we should remove any barriers to anyone feeling that university might not be for them, but it might be that they are making the right decision. The focus here always needs to be about making sure that they have a good pathway to good quality education, whether that good quality education is higher education, an academic pathway or technical education, whether that is apprenticeships or whatever else it is.

Chris Millward: Attainment in school is a key factor in terms of whether you go to higher education and which institution you go to. That is going to be driving a lot of what we see in the patterns here but, of course, there is an issue about going when you are young or going later in life. To respond to Tom's point, it may not be right for you to go into higher education first time round when you are 18 or 19, but you might be quite ready for it when you are 25 or 30. That is the key area for us to come back to. I would be looking for how we enable more opportunities later in life, particularly for those who may not have the grades first time round.

Q283 **Fleur Anderson:** Could I ask Chris—maybe other panellists have opinions on this—specifically to drill down into applications to the higher education part of this? You just said that attainment is the main factor, and obviously it is. What is your opinion on how much the actual applying, that system, is a barrier to access, particularly for the cohort of white working-class young people that we are talking about? Have you tried out different things? What is your thinking about how that could be done? As we alluded to earlier, combining that with degree apprenticeships and having a wholesale system of applications for what you do after school instead of, as we are now, separating out and maybe creating that hierarchy, which might be a barrier itself.

I have had three kids go through university and I found it a very daunting system. I found it very difficult to write the personal statement, to understand what was going on. It cost a lot of money to go off to open days for universities, which were great when I got there but that seemed to be quite a barrier as well. What is your thinking about that in the Office for Students? What have you tried, and what recommendations could we be making in this inquiry?



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Chris Millward: Your question is very much of the moment because there is a lot of scrutiny—Graeme, among others, has written about this—on how the admissions system works. That brings together issues like the value or otherwise of a personal statement and who thrives from that, predicted grades—and I think you could say the group you are interested in perhaps don't do well out of predicted grades—and then the degree to which perhaps families with the sharpest elbows thrive through clearing if there are a lot of decisions made at that time. I think there will be good scrutiny of the admissions system next year, and an appetite for reform.

From my point of view, I am concerned about the degree to which some students may not be predicted the grades they could get. That is a serious issue, but I do not think shifting the timing of admissions is a magic bullet in itself. I am interested in what decisions universities make about potential. They should be assessing not just achievement but also potential, and that needs a really good look at the context in which grades have been achieved and the distance travelled.

Kim Johnson: Thanks, Chris. I have Liz, Graeme and then Karen wanting to come in on this. If you could keep it quite succinct, that would be great, thank you.

Professor Barnes: To pick up Tom's point, I totally agree that students should not go to university unless it is the right route for them. If I look at Stoke-on-Trent now and the impact of the pandemic, our greatest concern is retaining young people in education between 16 and 18. It is a major challenge for us, and that is where I would like to see attention.

In terms of supporting students on their journey into higher education, it can be quite daunting. What is really important here is Higher Horizons. Higher Horizons is about to come to an end, but it provides support. It may be extended; hopefully, it will be. It provides support to disadvantaged students to help them through this process. We have seen that with that scheme we have increased the number of students we have intervened with from 20%-odd going through to university to nearly 45%. That is us sitting with them, working through, taking them to universities and helping them with that.

For students who perform less well, the foundation courses that universities offer are really important to some of these students. They are the ones Chris mentioned, who might have the potential but somewhere they have fallen back in school. They then have a year to manage that transition, studying at level 3 but working in the university, working with the same sort of academic programme. They do really well and I could provide all sorts of case studies of students who have done that.

The other one not to forget is HE and FE. Some of the students we have with our partners who are studying in FE colleges are there because they do not have the confidence to walk into a university but they do have the confidence to try HE within their local FE college with which they are familiar. I think it is about all those different routes again.



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Dr Atherton: Briefly on Tom's point, I agree again that not all young people will want to go to higher education, nor should they be forced to go to higher education in any way, but the problem is that thousands of young people from the backgrounds we are talking about never really had the chance to make that choice. They never had the knowledge. They never had the support to do so. I guess that what we are trying to do is get to a position to make that effective choice.

On the point of what is offered in schools, again this idea that the only option offered to young people in schools is going to HE and you are told you have to go to university, that is a Stoke point, actually. We did a focus group session with learners and professionals in Stoke only a couple of months ago looking at higher education opportunities and progression. We spoke to young people there, and they said to us that in their schools they were not told anything about HE. Everybody was not going to go to HE. Their problem was they wanted to get to sixth form where they were with kids like them who wanted to go to university. It is not the case that all schools are telling people they have to go to university.

On Fleur's point about the admissions system, as Chris said, I have written quite a bit on this area. The point about the admissions system is it is very robust. It is a good system in many ways, but it was designed when 5% of the cohort of young people went to HE. Now around 35% to 40% at least go to HE, so you need to look at a different kind of system to an extent.

I agree with Chris. There is no silver bullet in terms of predicted grades. Essentially, our argument is you have to think about the system in a different way. Admission does not just begin when you start doing your form. Choice making begins well before that. It relates back to our careers information, advice and guidance point. You need to have a system that relates and links when young people start to make choices to when they apply. That is what the system of admissions should be about, not just when people get to the point of filling in a UCAS form. Again, many people see that. I talked to UCAS yesterday. It is keen to be more involved in these areas. That system needs to evolve to that point, and part of that needs to be around predicted grades. It needs to be around when you apply. They are all part of that question, but it is a bigger question about the kind of system you need for an era when lots more young people go to HE.

Karen Spencer: I think we are focusing on the wrong level of the system. If we want more people to progress to level 4, we have to assess where the gap is. The gap is actually at level 3. What we have is a lot of people with skills at level 2 and below, and if you are in work poverty you are not able to access flexible level 3 provision without paying for it. There may be some changes coming in the future, but from what I can see it will not be flexible, bite-sized provision. Therefore, you have to be able to afford not to work, to go and study fulltime largely, so you end up



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with this cyclical problem of parents in low-paid, in-work poverty, whose skills are at level 2. You are never going to push the whole family through to a higher level unless you focus your attention on the level 3 space. We are talking as though level 4, 5 and 6 is the magic bullet, and it isn't. The gap is at level 3.

Q284 Kim Johnson: An interesting point, thanks, Karen. My next question is to Chris. The OFS is aware there is low participation in higher education, as we have just discussed. Do you intend to set specific targets, given the low participation in this group? What needs to be done to encourage universities to tackle this issue?

Chris Millward: We have agreed targets with all universities and colleges that have an access and participation plan, much of which is focused on place, so coming back to where we started from in this discussion. We very strongly look at low-participation neighbourhoods. These are areas with an average of around 85 young people where they are in the bottom quintile in terms of progression. The targets we negotiated focused on those places. Given, as we have discussed, that white British students on free school meals or who have other forms of low socioeconomic status are among the lowest participation groups, they are very strongly represented in those areas.

We know this needs to evolve, so we are developing new data and new measures that enable you to align the place with other aspects of status, whether that is gender or free school meals. We are creating a measure that would enable that to be deployed. As plans evolve into the future, we will be looking at how that kind of thing could come into play as well.

Q285 Kim Johnson: To what extent can higher and further education providers change outcomes for this group? If a key barrier to progression is experience of compulsory education, how can providers, including colleges and universities, work with schools, communities and families to improve participation in further and higher education for this group?

Rae Tooth: Oh, what a question. There are so many moving parts. One of the challenges we have at the moment is our entry point to working with young people. Simply, we are working with young people and we are working with them through schools. We do not have an holistic way of working with young people within their families and their broader communities. If I really want to improve outcomes, I need to have buy-in and engagement not only from schools, who sometimes find it difficult to engage because universities, schools, FE colleges and families are all talking completely different languages about the same issues.

How do we bring all those people together, and how do I have the capacity, as somebody who is delivering this work, to make sure that I am having conversations with all those different points along the line and not lose the young person? That is incredibly difficult because schools, colleges and universities are all under pressure with different targets. Parents also have very clear aspirations for their children. It is really hard



to make sure that the child's voice comes through loud in that, so that they are working towards their own aspirations. It is only when they are working towards their own aspirations that they are really motivated, and motivation, as we know, is key to them being successful even when it gets difficult.

Kim Johnson: Great answer, thanks.

Dr Atherton: Our members are delivering a lot of outreach work and, of course, they are doing distinct projects focused on improving the outcomes for white young people from the lower socioeconomic groups. At the moment, we have a project; we have 11 of our members doing different initiatives, which range from focusing, through sport, creative arts and STEM work, out-of-school and in-school sessions using students and academics, to try to support this greater knowledge of higher education, to try to support them to raise their attainment. There are lots of different kinds of work that universities are delivering; this is the optimistic point.

However, this is something that we have struggled with for a long time. There needs to be a stronger message from the Department for Education to schools about the validity and need to work with higher education. I have been doing this for 20 years, and the questions I ask now are the ones I asked in 2000. How do we fit this work into the context of the school curriculum? We are investing lots of money through access agreements, through APPs, through Uni Connect. A lot of impacts are happening, but still it is always about how we fit it into what schools do.

If you want higher education to make a contribution, it can make a contribution. If you want to do that, you have to think more about how we can find positions within schools and colleges for that to happen. At the moment it is massive, and it has been for years. People who have worked for me and who I have worked with—there is a huge amount of dead weight loss—are organising activities to work in schools when schools are really busy and don't have the capacity to do so. It does not stop us doing the work because it has a great impact on learners. We have lots of evidence it does, despite what people may say, but we need that strategic commitment from the Department through schooling to see this as a priority area of work, not something that again, in the bigger picture, says this is at the margin.

Kim Johnson: Graeme, you raised an important point earlier that advice, information and guidance is often lacking in schools in order to provide people with that information.

Professor Barnes: One of the key legacies of our opportunity area is the working together. It is really important that FE, HE and the schools are working together to look for collective solutions. Also, tied to that, we have a KPI in our university to increase the proportion of disadvantaged people from Stoke-on-Trent going to university. At the moment, it is



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anywhere between 18% and 28%, which is very, very low.

The other part we need to look at is our economy. We need jobs at the other end if we want to get disadvantaged people through university. We also have a KPI to increase the number of high-skilled jobs within our area. Again, that is working with our LEP, with the OA, and also thinking about self-employment. You have to do all that together, and we should not forget the role of employers within this agenda.

Karen Spencer: You need an overarching strategy for education as a whole that has some long-term investment that goes with it. I listened to all the acronyms Graeme gave. A number of them were very familiar, but for schools and colleges it is an incredibly complex picture to work with. A project for this sort of participation runs for seven months and then it stops, and then we roll out a new one. Some sustained investment in the things that we think are important would get greater buy-in right across the whole sector. That would be my big message.

Kim Johnson: Those are all my questions, and I just wanted to thank you all for your contributions today.

Q286 **Chair:** Thank you very much, everybody. It is really helpful. Could I end with one final question? We touched on this a little in the earlier part of our discussion. How much of the low attainment of white working-class boys and girls from disadvantaged backgrounds is possibly due to either culture or family circumstances?

Rae Tooth: How much is really difficult to quantify, but what we do know is that there are very high instances of lived trauma experience in families from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Chair: Specifically white working-class boys and girls?

Rae Tooth: Yes. In terms of their cultural and home life experience, trauma becomes a significant barrier to their learning. Karen was talking about that, the value of what is happening at level 3. We have also talked about the need to get GCSEs in English and maths. If we are not embedding trauma-informed pedagogy into our schools, it has a very significant detrimental impact on those very early outcomes. If I was going to do one thing to improve it, it would be to do that.

Karen Spencer: For the majority of our young people who are white working class and do not attain level 3, their parents are stuck at level 1 and level 2 themselves. For me, it is about proper investment in lifelong learning and flexibility for people to upskill, but you have to be able to do that with leverages in terms of funding. I would build into things like the universal credit system and the benefit system the right to study at the same time as claiming your benefit for a longer time period. I think you have to tackle the parental—

Q287 **Chair:** Can I challenge you on that? We know that other ethnic groups have the same benefits problem, yet most of them outperform.



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Karen Spencer: Some of it comes back to the points that were made earlier about understanding whether you are disadvantaged or not. I think it was Rae who made the point. A number of the parents we work with do not believe they are disadvantaged by the fact that they haven't got their maths, they haven't got their English and they were not very good at school. There is definitely something in Essex, which I believe is known as the Essex phenomenon, where people are quite proud of not having educational outcomes. Therefore, it is much more complex about whether you believe you yourself are disadvantaged. That would be my challenge to that point.

Dr Atherton: I would agree with the points made earlier, particularly by Karen. In terms of your question, Rob, I would first like to emphasise that the idea young parents from white working-class backgrounds lack aspirations for their young people, they don't. They don't lack aspiration. They don't not want their kids generally to do well at school. That is not the case, if you are talking about culture. They might not have the tools to do so. They might not go to the extra level of commitment that other families do, but it does not mean they do not want them to do well.

If you want those parents, and this is probably the key thing, to be more engaged, don't start with the assumption that they do not want them to do well. How do you get that greater level of engagement? How do you offer them practical support to do so? It is lifelong learning, like Karen said. It is about raising their educational achievements, but it is also thinking about how we can start to speak to those groups on their own terms in very different ways than we do at the moment, in community ways. It is not happening in that way at the moment.

Q288 **Chair:** Yes, but what does that mean in practice?

Dr Atherton: In practice, I would talk about—

Chair: You say engage in different ways. What does that mean? Give me an example.

Dr Atherton: Think about people from those communities who have done well in education. Some people have done well. Some people have progressed and done well and come from the same background. Why don't we speak to those groups? Let's speak to those professionals, let's speak to those students. Let's get them back engaged with their communities. Everybody does not do well; there is a majority who do not. So let's flip the question a bit. Let's talk a bit more not about why it is that some are not doing well, why are some doing well? What did they do that was different?

Chris Millward: I am absolutely persuaded by the multigenerational dimension of this and where Karen was coming from. The role of families, engaging parents in the activities we do with them, is absolutely crucial. Then mature student education is going to be key because of the multiplier effect you get from that.



Professor Barnes: I am not specifically saying this about white families; it is about disadvantage generally. If we know that when children go to school they are already 11 months behind, that shows the family has a significant impact on their lifetime chances, so we know we have to intervene there.

At the other end, the unexplained gap has been described as being about a third of outcomes that cannot be explained and seems to fit with family. If you look at the latest mental health survey that was carried out among young people, it found that the greatest impact on young people's mental health was their family life by a quite significant amount. The impact of school was much lower, so there is something about going back to how families impact. It is a point that is being made. If you have a family that have had worklessness for generation after generation, they do not know how to push forward. We need to understand more about their barriers and their constraints and work with them. The family scheme is probably a good place.

Q289 **Chair:** It is not just lifelong learning, it is early intervention, family hubs and identifying those families that are most facing difficulties from literally day one?

Professor Barnes: Absolutely.

Q290 **Tom Hunt:** I do not think there is really any suggestion that there is this huge group of parents out there who do not care about their kids. I think what has been suggested is perhaps that, through generations, there has been a perception regarding education and whether a certain kind of education is a platform for getting ahead. I do not think anyone is suggesting there is a huge group of parents out there who do not care about their kids; I think it is a suggestion that perhaps there is a certain group of parents who might not necessarily see education and schooling in a positive light for a variety of different reasons.

Liz has just touched on some interesting points, and so did the Chair, about family hubs. In a previous session we were talking about why it is that disadvantaged white pupils may do worse academically than other groups. One suggested in the Muslim community, for example, the role of the mosque within the local community and more community infrastructure. That was an interesting point raised in a previous session, and it might influence perceptions of education and be more of a culturally extended family network and so on. What are your thoughts on that?

Rae Tooth: Robert asked a question about how you practically do that, engage with families, and it is something that we do at Villiers Park. As part of our programme, we meet with every parent once a term. At the moment, we are having phone calls with parents as well. I would say the only way to do it is face-to-face contact. It is building long-term, sustained relationships between single members of staff and those parents. Those conversations have to be about working as an ally to



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families, to understand the whole of the family situation and not just our organisation's aspirations for their child, and again to help those parents to develop skills in talking about mental health and wellbeing, motivation and study skills, but also to give them space to talk about the fears that they have for their children.

The barrier that I see for parents in terms of really pushing their kids is in the conversations I have with them about their genuine fears of, "I don't know what university is like," or, "I don't know what employment is like when you leave this particular place that our family live in, and I'm frightened that when my kids stumble, which they will do, I won't know how to catch them." I have had that conversation more times than I can count, and the only way you address it is through good quality relationships with parents.

Q291 Kim Johnson: In our session in October, Professor Matthew Goodwin linked family breakdown to educational attainment. My question is: 17% of black households are lone parent families compared with 4%, so is that going to have a significant impact on that cohort?

Chair: If I am not mistaken, the lower attainment of white working-class boys and Afro-Caribbean families is very similar, at similar levels, compared with other BME groups. Does anyone want to comment on that at all? No. We will pick it up, Kim.

What are the sorts of targets for white working-class boys in terms of universities? We know boys underperform even worse than girls in this.

Chris Millward: Half of access and participation plans refer to white working-class or equivalent, and most of that has a focus on boys. There is a very strong theme on that within plans. We make that—

Chair: But as I understand it, a low number of access plans have targets for this group.

Chris Millward: The targets are very much focused on areas, so low-participation neighbourhoods, which as I have said link strongly to the groups that have least representation. But we are developing the measures so we can align area with other measures, and then there will be scope to have more targets in areas like this.

Q292 Chair: Wouldn't it be better just to target it at the cohorts rather than the place?

Chris Millward: I believe in place for the reasons we started with. I think place is significant, but I agree that you need to align that with other measures and we should become more sophisticated over time.

Professor Barnes: The challenge is to try to get a balance between disadvantaged white girls and disadvantaged white boys going into university. We are one of the few universities where we have more white disadvantaged boys than girls, and it is because of our subject area. We have the highest number of computing students in the country, but



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something to look at with that, and we have not talked about it at all, is that disadvantaged families often lead to disability. If we look particularly at students on the spectrum, of our computing students we think that 70% are on the autism spectrum. I think it was Rae who said to me that there is apparently some link between autism and disadvantage. Therefore, that might need addressing if we want to redress the imbalance that we are seeing at the moment, particularly for white disadvantaged boys.

Q293 **Chair:** That is a very important point. If you could help get the statistics for that, it would be quite interesting to see. I do not know if you do any of that at the OFS, Chris.

Chris Millward: Yes, we have a lot of statistics on progression. We are happy to share whatever you need.

Chair: In terms of disabilities, autism or whatever it may be, it would be quite interesting if you could possibly send them to us.

Okay, that is it, I think. Thank you very much, all of you. We really appreciate it, and it will really inform our report. I wish you all well and good health. Thank you for what you are doing in your respective institutions to try to keep our young people learning at every opportunity, even with the lockdown. Thank you.