Rewriting the Future, Phase 3: Report 2022

Perspectives of marginalised groups on HE and progression in education, including social and cultural contexts

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Introduction

Rewriting the Future has been undertaken in three phases from 2018 to the end of 2021. This report details the work carried out in 2020-2021, which has built upon the research conducted previously.

The key aim of the earlier research (See Appendix 1 for full 2019 report) was to enable young people to imagine alternative futures and thereby identify specific barriers and enablers for continued educational engagement. Crook and Satchwell conducted qualitative research with a range of groups of young people in parts of Lancashire, including Skelmersdale and Leyland. Using creative methods, we collected young people's perspectives on their learning journeys, highlighting aspirations, attitudes and challenges. This led to a set of findings which in turn led to the development of interactive resources to explore educational experiences and future aspirations with further groups of marginalised young people.

Alongside this work for FutureU in 2019-2020, Crook and Satchwell conducted research with school pupils to explore careers provision and create a student researcher model of evaluation with young people in schools in Blackpool (funded by LCC). Some of the findings are relevant to FutureU's work and the report is attached as Appendix 2. Other recent research with young people suggests the importance of intergenerational relationships in all work involving children and young people. For example, Crook and Larkins (CCYPP 2021) conducted research with looked after children and young people (LAC) to inform the NICE guideline [NG205] published 20th October 2021. Evidence for how learning is supported for LAC is relevant to Rewriting the Future.

Data collection in all stages of Rewriting the Future has been a co-created process of working with young people to establish questions relevant to them in exploring educational aspirations, engagement and progression. This involves utilising participatory methods that enable young people to express their perspectives and ideas in ways which encourage identification of the issues, reflection and potential solutions (Freire, 1970). We use accessible methods that promote inclusion and expression with young people from varied and often marginalised backgrounds by sharing their multiple stories in complex institutions such as schools (Fine 2008). Participatory group activities allow the researchers to research 'with' rather than 'on' young people, and responses are recorded in different ways to produce rich data, allowing for the exploration of themes through different lenses.

Aim of this research

The aims of this phase of the research were to:

- Develop an understanding of the potential barriers to Higher Education (HE) faced by marginalised groups of young people aged 11-19 in Lancashire and enablers for their continued education engagement
- Learn more about the attitudes and experiences of marginalised groups in Lancashire towards HE and progression, including their social and cultural context

These aims extend the previous work of Rewriting the Future which identified some specific barriers and enablers for continuing education. The current phase intended to develop a greater understanding of these barriers as experienced by specific groups of young people who are particularly under-represented in Higher Education. The groups we aimed to work with were those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND); young people with experience of being in the care system; Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic young people (BAME); and those from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities (GRT). All these groups have been identified as being under-represented in HE but there is little understanding of the reasons why. This research aimed to explore individual journeys and group perceptions through small-scale qualitative research in Lancashire. The research met with challenges due to the Coronavirus pandemic which significantly reduced accessibility for the research. The original methods were therefore adapted somewhat as detailed in the Methods section below.

Context and literature review

The literature review in the 2019 report outlined the somewhat narrow interpretation of progression and aspiration for young people in education, and the Phase 1 and 2 research undertaken expanded the conceptualisation of how children and young people see their futures. The literature review here focuses on existing understanding of why certain groups are underrepresented in HE; it also places this within the wider context of a westernised construction of childhood and the concept of marginalisation, which are essential for understanding why certain policies and practices persist which themselves may be related to the outcomes of young people's education.

Childhood, apart from a period of rapid biological human growth, is a socially constructed phenomenon that is 'neither a natural or universal feature of human groups' (James and Prout, 2015, p.7). There are variations of childhood across the UK, just as there are around the world, but generally these are defined by comparing child to adult to provide a point of reference and often ignoring the inter-relationships between each. A psychological model of childhood, based mainly on the work of Piaget, considers development and progress toward adult 'completeness' (Qvortrup, 2005, p.5) through a series of standardised and age-related expectations that do not reflect huge variations in children's experiences yet have come to define educational stages (Qvortrup, 2005; Wyness, 2000). By mapping social to physical growth, and ages to stages, the world's richer nations have produced a state of reinforced dependency for children and young people, to an increasingly higher age, that may also limit development of inert capacities for participation and thus social inclusion (Woodhead, 2015). Neoliberal focus on the economy has promoted further standardisation of education, with emphasis on academic qualification rather than inclusion, that may also contribute to notions

of dependent children and young people compared to productive adults. These can render as deficit and requiring individual intervention those who for various reasons are unable to maintain the ideal educational trajectory, drawing attention away from the intergenerational relationships that maintain inequalities and the systems used to manage young people's lives that reproduce these (Smyth, 2006; Woodhead, 2015). Constructing children and young people as dependent and less capable and subservient to adults opens up opportunities for power abuse, reinforcing a need for protection that has necessitated the formulation of special rights for children. And yet:

> *"...protectionism and control has produced an inverse relationship: the more we talk about children, the less likely children themselves seem to be part of these dialogues" (Wyness, 2000, p.29).*

In the UK, whilst mandatory education or training for young people has now been extended to age 18, and there have been big increases in those attending HE beyond this, the relative independence afforded to young adults from age 16 has reduced considerably. Children and young people, like parent carers, are deemed non-contributors to the state, as economic liabilities because of their comparative lack of earnings, ignoring the essential roles that they perform in schools, families and communities (Cunningham, 1995). This is particularly significant in disadvantaged households where parents are now financially responsible for their children for longer and families are held accountable for problems rather than unequal distribution of resources by the state (Qvortrup, 2015). Employment law not only reduces their perceived contribution and earning potential (with lower rates of minimum wage until aged 24), but also reinforces ideas of dependence and lack of capacity (Wyness, 2006). This is important in understanding subsequent differences in participation – rather than having increasingly more influence over their own lives in the adolescent years, young people's influence has been greatly reduced as educational processes increasingly shape what they can and cannot do. This introduces additional tensions in education systems that continue to support standardisation rather than responding to the changing situations of the growing numbers of young people that they must accommodate. These tensions may be particularly marked where young people's situations deviate from the 'ideal' childhoods around which education is conceived.

Much literature exists about disadvantage and inequalities in higher education and some of this has focused on underrepresentation of specific marginalised groups (Arday et al., 2021). Educational marginalisation is defined as a failure to ensure the presence, participation and achievement of learners (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006). There is a dearth of literature about marginalisation as a specific phenomenon and how specific marginalised communities are excluded by the processes inherent in engaging with higher education (Harrison and Atherton, 2021). Harrison and Atherton (2021) have recently developed a conceptual model, 'Dimensions of marginalisation', identifying four areas of marginalisation inherent when specific groups access higher education. Rather than placing the focus on marginalised groups, this model examines structures of marginalisation. It can be applied when thinking about why those marginalised groups in society cannot or do not access higher education and can in some way explain underrepresentation. The four dimensions are: Marginalisation by society, Marginalisation by systems, Marginalisation in time/space, and Marginalisation by relevance.
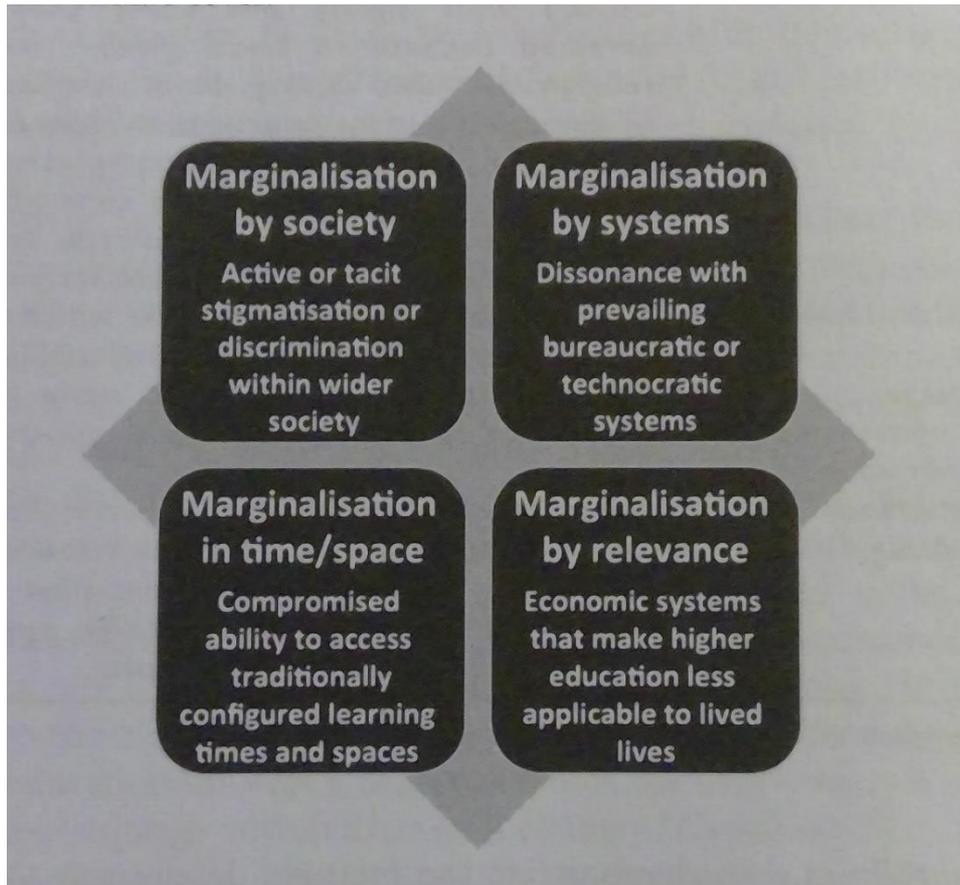
Fig 1: Dimensions of Marginalisation (Harrison and Atherton, 2021)

The four dimensions allow examination of barriers to HE at a macro level in order to inform changes in policy and/or practice.   When thinking about the focus of this research, a key dimension to consider is 'Marginalisation by systems' whereby higher education systems are built for those considered the 'typical student' and minority groups are a 'bolt-on' rather than being ensconced within the entire higher education process. Students from marginalised groups must fit into a system that may not consider their highly individualised needs. Furthermore, 'Marginalisation by relevance' may also go some way to explain underrepresentation by some groups, as this dimension considers that engaging with higher education may be counter to the culture or traditions of certain marginalised groups. Harrison (2021) asks 'it's offered to them, but is it relevant to them?'

Diane Reay (1998, 2006, 2010) and Stephen Ball (2002) examine students' choices of higher education, including ethnic minority students, and reveal a complex picture of access which relates to institutional habitus, interwoven with 'the contribution of social networks, and less tangible factors such as confidence, certainty and a sense of entitlement' (Reay 1998, p. 522). The institutional habitus of schools affects how school students see their own possible futures. Institutional habitus varies from school to school but can also vary according to the experiences of different students within the same school. This can mean that those with characteristics of SEND, BAME or GRT are less likely to be expected to attend HE, and therefore are less supported to do so. This can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy (Blease 1983; Miller and Satchwell 2006) whereby some young people themselves do not aspire to attend

university. The concept of habitus is useful in that it explains how structural conditions affect and reproduce the outcomes of marginalised young people.

The next section of this literature review discusses engagement with higher education by specific marginalised groups as detailed in the aims of this research. For the purpose of this research the groups identified are discussed individually and while this may be convenient for us, 'labelling' of specific groups as different is often viewed as detrimental to those labelled (Hebding and Glick, 1987). Messiou (2017) also suggests that focusing on specific marginalised groups in research may not be appropriate, as categorisation may conceal individual challenges faced by those labelled, potentially increasing the subjective marginalisation felt. As highlighted in an earlier paragraph, it may be the structures of higher education which make the groups identified for inclusion in this research feel marginalised, rather than the socio-cultural context from which they originate. Thus, while convenient for this research, labelling of marginalised groups may not be helpful in addressing the overall problem of underrepresentation and engagement in higher education.

Williams et al (2020) report on the lack of participation in Higher Education by care-experienced young people. Their research indicates that significantly fewer young people with experience of care have expectations of attending university, and even those who did expect to attend when asked in Year 9, were found not to be in HE by the time they were aged 20. This was the case even when other factors such as SEND, history of exclusions and family benefits or income were considered. The attainment gap for care-experienced young people increases over time (Cotton et al 2014; Sebba et al 2015), thereby reducing the likelihood of them attending university. Further, for those who do attend, 'around 38% are likely to withdraw from their course and not return (Harrison, 2017) compared to 6.3% of non-care' (Williams et al 2020). All of this indicates a distinct lack of relevant support and diminished expectations of progression for care-experienced students (Jay et al 2017). It also suggests the importance of engaging with students earlier in their school careers so that those who intend to go to university can be supported to do so.

Research on GRT engagement with Higher Education is scant. A recent review of GRT underrepresentation highlights the following issues:

- Cultural barriers including: mobility; language and system knowledge; norms, aspirations and expectations; and cultural identity.
- Material barriers including: poverty; inadequate housing and homelessness; and access to healthcare and the prevalence of special educational needs.
- Prejudice and discrimination including: discriminatory attitudes and media prejudice; schools' response to discrimination; self-exclusion from mainstream education as a result of discrimination; and discrimination in HE (Mulcahy et al 2017, p.8).

In addition, there is often reluctance to self-identify as GRT due to prejudice and victimisation, which can mean that those who do enter HE are not necessarily recognised, and children of school age may be overlooked as requiring additional support. The use of the term GRT itself incorporates a range of different communities, and opportunities to ascribe to more nuanced ethnicities in school documentation is recommended by Mulcahy et al (2017, p.19), e.g. by separating out 'Gypsy' and 'Roma'. In this sense we are guilty of perpetuating the elision of

different cultures throughout this report by apparently referring to GRT as one group. This is partly due to the lack of this kind of information about the participants in our study and the absence of literature which differentiates these ethnicities in relation to HE.

Low levels of GRT engagement are associated with low completion rates of compulsory education. It is estimated that the majority of GRT children engage with primary education, but these numbers dwindle in secondary school (Loxley and Finnegan, 2021). Given that advice on progression routes is often provided at high school and Further Education providers, the GRT community are often not party to this information. Higher Education is contained within a structured model associated with mainstream society. Returning to the phenomenon of marginalisation, marginalisation by relevance is significant for the GRT community (Harrison and Atherton. 2021). Some GRT community members may exclude themselves or their children from the complete compulsory education experience, which in turn may exclude them from accessing Higher Education. While this may seem a very simplistic explanation, for the GRT community, Higher Education may not be regarded as 'valuable' to their everyday life in socio-economic terms. This, unfortunately, is a complex form of marginalisation for HE to address. The current model of HE is driven by market factors and courses offered must appeal to a wide audience; highly individualised courses that may appeal to marginalised communities may not be viable financially for HE. Harrison and Atherton (2021) suggest that ways to encourage participation of communities such as GRT may be to co-construct the content of courses by focusing on issues of importance to them. Innovative curricula where the knowledge that is valued by such communities is included are important, as is how and where teaching and learning take place. Moving into community teaching and learning may be one solution for HE institutions.

Runswick-Cole and Hodge (2009) challenge the label of 'special educational needs' and advocate for the use of 'educational rights'. This is in line with the Reggio Emilia approach to education (Edwards et al 1993), where children are viewed as having 'special rights' rather than 'special needs' and schooling encompasses a wide range of means of expression such as art, drama and story-making. If viewed in this way, access to HE can be seen as a 'right' for those with SEND rather than in terms of adjustments that might be made by HEIs to accommodate their 'needs'.

Nonetheless, the terms SEND and HE are an unusual collocation in the literature, with research more commonly focused on inclusion in school or transition into work or college (Hanson et al 2017; Wagner and Blackorby 1996). Examination of autistic identity (e.g. MacLeod et al 2013) in higher education students explores the usefulness (or not) of a diagnostic label and draws attention to the relative 'privilege' of the students they have interviewed in that they have entered HE. The social construction of conditions such as autism (also examined in Satchwell and Davidge 2018) can dictate attitudes and perceptions of others and therefore limit achievement and progression in education. Similarly, in a qualitative study with looked after children and young people (LACYP), Mannay et al (2017) identify the potentially damaging effects of labelling children as such, where 'children and young people are permitted and even encouraged not to succeed academically due to their complex and disrupted home circumstances' (p.683). This affects their sense of belonging at school, as described in a later report: 'As one female (age 12) poignantly states 'I'm fine is the biggest lie we tell. It means you won't understand and you can't understand' (Jones et al

2020). Indeed, 'othering' (e.g. Jensen 2011) can be seen as a significant problematic factor in how marginalised groups are perceived and positioned. This in itself could be a reason for the lack of literature around SEND, GRT, LACYP and Higher Education: they simply are not seen as inhabiting the same space.

While some of the research cited here includes qualitative examination of the experiences of school students, the majority of available data relates to statistics on attendance and progression (Robinson et al 2018). As discussed above, there are problems with labelling students; yet there are also issues of not identifying students at most risk of exclusion and discrimination. Issues of identity arose in our own research in that the labels assigned to 'marginalised' groups are not always useful to the individuals themselves.

The research reported here aimed to hear perspectives directly from children and young people from marginalised groups, to understand their conceptualisations of higher education and what may or may not enable them to take part. The methods we used reflect the principles of inclusion and participation and prioritise the perspectives of young people themselves.

Methods

In line with a co-production approach (Banks et al 2019), the methods in this project were co-developed with an advisory group of students from UCLan. Eight students from courses in Education and Games Design agreed to take part. Their routes into HE had been non-traditional and representative of the widening participation agenda; they were therefore positioned as authentic and valued advisors. The purpose of the group was to advise on the suitability of potential approaches, to identify questions we might be missing based on their more recent experiences of progression to HE, and where the students were happy to do so, to contribute further data to the research itself.

The research for this project followed on from previous phases and built on our existing findings. To create a segue from one phase to the next, we appropriated the young people's concept of being 'like an onion with many layers' and some of their individual stories to create a fictionalised journey through education. Working with a UCLan Masters in Animation student and the steering group of UCLan students, we co-created the depiction of a young girl called Lydia. The character faced several challenges in her personal and home life, which impacted negatively on her education, followed by support mechanisms which helped. The aim was to use the animation as a stimulus for discussion with young people about their educational journeys, broadening the interpretation of such a journey to include factors besides their educational perceived ability and attainment. The findings that family, finance, school support mechanisms, social life, peers and significant adults all influenced individual outcomes were incorporated into the short film. Briefly, Lydia experiences a bereavement, financial hardship, and friendship problems, but discovers a potential path to further study and a career in nursing by seeking advice from a qualified nurse (father of a friend) and school librarian.
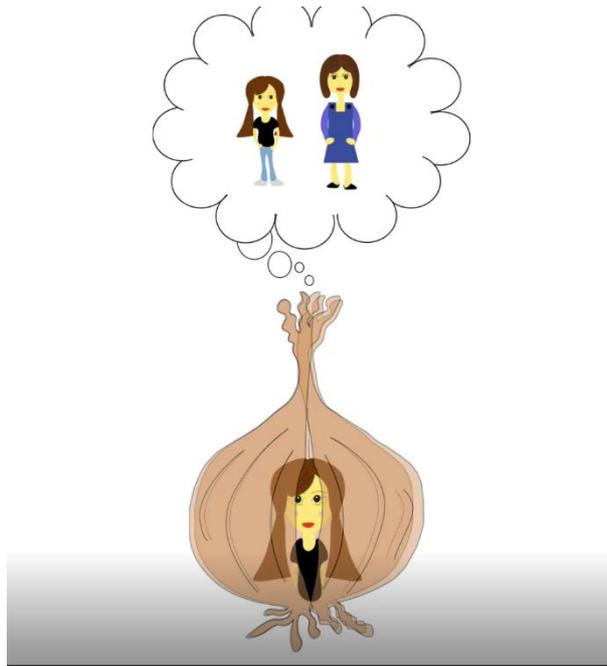
Fig 2: Image from the film

A second development was to create a board game based on the previous findings. The aim of the game is to instigate dialogue around the themes involved in decisions about young people's educational engagement and progression that had been identified in the analysis in the first phase. The game takes the idea of educational journeys being varied for different young people, and the potential for many challenges or enabling factors to either help or hinder these journeys. It uses the idea of stepping stones and multiple routes as a basis for the graphics, and after experimenting with ways of visually representing the themes involved, distinctive abstract symbols were used to illustrate these. The game was developed with Bev Bush, senior lecturer in games design at UCLan, with regular feedback and testing by the advisory group, using draft e-versions on Teams (due to COVID restrictions) and draft paper versions with a group of volunteers. For example, the advisory group addressed the following design tasks:

For both sets of cards we need to decide whether to have pre-printed scenarios and questions or whether to ask young people to write their own. Or a combination of both.

Activity 1
• Look at the selection of helpful cards.
• What do you think of the scenarios?
• What do they make you think of?
• Do they act as helpful tips?

For both sets of cards we need to decide whether to have pre-printed scenarios and questions or whether to ask young people to write their own. Or a combination of both.

Activity 2
- This time, instead of thinking about scenarios, choose a blank theme card.
- Can you think of a time when someone or something was helpful for your education journey and to think about your future?
- Think who, what, where, when, how?
- Write this in the chat.

For both sets of cards we need to decide whether to have pre-printed scenarios and questions or whether to ask young people to write their own. Or a combination of both.

Activity 1
- Look at the selection of helpful cards.
- What do you think of the scenarios?
- What do they make you think of?
- Do they act as helpful tips?

The game involves dice and a series of stepping-stones leading towards the centre of the board, with each counter beginning from a different position giving each player a different level of advantage. This was a deliberate strategy to encourage thought about what led to that original state of advantage or disadvantage for individual young people. The board game includes chance cards and myth-buster cards, which are drawn according to where the counters landed. The aim was to highlight potential challenges and enablers which might delay or speed up the journey to higher education. The myth-buster cards were designed to instigate discussion about access to HE, including financial information, accommodation, friendships, locations, course types, qualifications etc., all of which had arisen as issues of concern identified by participants in the earlier research phases and through the advisory group members' experiences. Although in the early stages we considered using blank cards on which school students could add their own questions, in practice many of the current university students did not think that younger children would necessarily have considered the sorts of things that they might need to know and instead wanted to include things that they wished they had known about earlier. Examples of the content of the Chance cards are in Appendix 4. The final version board game was printed and packaged to be used face to face in schools.

The game had two purposes - initially as a stimulus for the research and discussion in this Phase, and then ultimately to form a resource that could be used in schools by teaching or

careers staff to engage young people in discussion about their futures beyond the end of the project.
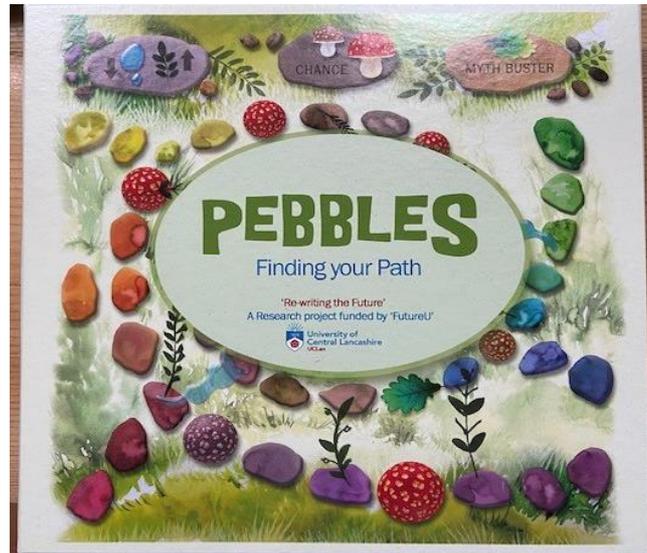

Fig 3: The board game: Pebbles: Finding your path

The methods were built around these two resources, aiming to talk to both groups and individuals in schools about their expectations, aspirations, beliefs, attitudes and cultural or familial values in relation to their futures. Once schools reopened after COVID restrictions, we were able to visit three schools, conducting workshops with a total of 14 young people in groups of 3, 5 and 6. The students were identified by teachers as being from the target fifth quintile communities and groups known to experience further marginalisation through being of BAME or GRT heritage, having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) or care experienced.

The animation and game were supplemented by a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix 3) which we used in the dialogue groups where young people did not spontaneously offer data related to the research questions and themes. Dialogue was audio recorded, transcribed and anonymised before analysis. The young people also completed A3 sheets headed 'Barriers' and 'Enablers (what helps)'.

We conducted 4 individual interviews of around 45 minutes, using the interview schedule, with UCLan students in the advisory group who had entered HE from 'non-traditional backgrounds' (HEFCE, 2000; Moore et al., 2013) to further refine understanding of significant themes before beginning the work in schools. A 90-minute interview was conducted with an experienced GRT liaison officer to supplement our understanding of factors impacting on educational progression for this group. All interviews were also transcribed and analysed. The workshop data were supplemented with notes and recordings from the advisory group meetings, which were transcribed, in part, by the researchers. Data were analysed both separately and together by the three researchers who compared and combined their initial coding to draw out significant themes.

Recruitment

Thirteen schools were approached but were reluctant to take part due to continuing local restrictions and further school closures during the winter and spring of 2021. Schools were understandably reluctant for students to take part in online research given the time young people were already spending on these platforms. Following re-opening, five further schools were approached including those who had indicated an interest previously to participate in the research through youth workers at the schools; replies were received from three and subsequently data was collected from a group of young people in each of these settings. The sample in all three schools contained a wide age range from 11 years to 16 years. The schools were provided with a list of the specific groups detailed in the research proposal. It was impossible to identify if all the groups of participants were covered within the group due to pupil/ school confidentiality but included in the groups were BAME young people and SEND young people.

The Student Advisory Group was recruited through UCLan teaching staff contacts. Our initial attempts at recruiting individuals via Student Services were unsuccessful. Even though Student Services included a recruitment message in communications sent out to all students, we received no expressions of interest through this route. Therefore, we moved to engaging students through specific contacts and the final group included students from three courses and included undergraduates and postgraduates. Nine students came to an initial session to introduce the research and themes; participant information and informed consent sheets were sent via email and six students agreed to become members of the advisory group. Two were female first year undergraduates, three were male undergraduates and one male postgraduate. Most of the members of the group had overcome barriers to engage with higher education. One of the female students was a mature student, having re-engaged with education after several years working in the beauty industry. Diagnosed with dyslexia at school, her engagement with education was limited until she re-engaged with level 2 qualifications following a period volunteering and working on a zero-hour contract at a local school. Two of the group were BAME young people; one of whom had reengaged with education after initially pursuing a different path.

Ethical Considerations

The research followed UCLan (2020) and BERA ethical guidelines (2018) and was given full approval by the UCLan BAHSS ethics Committee. Policies for working ethically with young people created by the Centre for Children and Young People's Participation were also followed, including those for working online.

For recruiting UCLan students to the Advisory Group, informed consent was gained from the students taking part prior to participating in the steering group meetings and the interviews. As both took place online digital signatures were accepted.

For students in schools, parental consent was obtained for all young people under the age of 16 in the schools visited. Non return of parental consent from three students meant that these were unable to take part. Young people had the option to withdraw at any time. One young person at one school decided to withdraw prior to the discussion, because he preferred to attend PE and the researchers were reluctant to detain him. Refreshments were provided at the schools.

Data Collection

To offset the problems with data collection in schools during the early part of 2021, interviews were conducted online with four UCLan students to discuss their educational journeys and progression to HE. The interview schedule was developed from the themes from Phase 2 and further refinement of questions came from conversations with the advisory group. These interviews enabled us to gain further insights from students who had succeeded in entering HE, often against the odds.

Between July and November 2021, we were able to undertake some data collection in schools following loosening of COVID restrictions. The intention was to visit all schools twice. This was accomplished with the first school where data was collected in two stages. However, due to the difficulties in accessing schools and timetabling, the other two schools were visited once, and the data collection protocol was adapted to account for this. Schools two and three were visited on the same day. Following feedback from students in school two and due to time limitations, the game was adapted in school three, where the myth-buster and chance cards were distributed between the participants and discussed.

Although a school we worked in was identified as one serving GRT communities, it was not possible to identify individual children as GRT. To aid our insights into this community, an interview of 90 minutes was conducted with an experienced community education liaison worker and transcribed.

Limitations

The involvement of GRT children was just one of the limitations experienced in carrying out this phase of the research. Another group which was not identified in the sample was that of care-experienced young people, since we had no access to the personal information of the participants and the discussions during data collection did not reveal this information. In normal circumstances the research team would have accessed additional groups such as Barnardo's or LCC participation groups, which specifically include disabled and care-

experienced young people. Without time and access constraints, we would also have pursued individual interviews with young people, which are generally more revealing and in-depth than we were able to manage in small group work. Some of the more personal individual stories in our findings therefore relate to older students who had overcome the barriers and were able to help us identify what the challenges had been. Overall, therefore, the sample was not as (knowingly) diverse or as large as intended due to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Analysis Framework

The analysis framework for phase 3 of Rewriting the Future builds on the themes identified in the earlier phases and provides an effective way to identify other emerging themes. Themes we already know are important to young people include: Identity, Friendship, Family, Talents, Personal Qualities, Adults who listen, Adults who have made a difference, Social networks, Balance, Finance, information/knowledge, Place, and Opportunities for Talking. Much of this is relational, and important therefore is the extent to which young people's participation in discussions and decisions that affect their future occurs in spaces where the positive relationships that young people believe make a difference can develop.

The themes from the previous phases can be grouped as in Table 1.

Overarching themes	Factors identified in Phase 1 and 2
Individual characteristics	identity, personal qualities, talents
Relationships	friendship, peers, social networks, opportunities for talking
Significant/influencing others	adults who listen, adults who have made a difference
Structural/contextual issues	finance, balance, place, access to information/knowledge

Table 1: Themes from Phases 1 and 2

It is important to note that these four elements from our earlier research intersect with one another and include both challenges and enablers depending on contextual factors. For example, a young person may consider their own personal qualities in either negative or positive ways, which may or may not concur with the views of significant others who might influence the path they take through education. Similarly, in Phase 2 we found examples of family finances being perceived as both an enabler and barrier to progression in education. Participants suggested that they wanted to return to education to improve their family's financial situation; while other students felt they did not want to get into debt. These perceptions could be influenced by both cultural and personal perspectives and may impact on decisions made about entering HE. For some participants family support was critical for mental and emotional well-being; while for another young person family expectations drove them to a university course which they left before the end of the first year.

Relevant to this analysis is research conducted by Satchwell and Crook (2020) with school students across schools in Blackpool exploring careers education. Young people highlighted relationships as presenting challenges and emphasised how good relationships with significant people such as a trusted careers advisor, teacher or neighbour who can genuinely support the young person to take on challenges are needed. In terms of curriculum and information, how they participated was important. Although the young people shared a few

examples of 'Learning Together' about careers, many opportunities such as careers conventions or events appeared to rely on individual students identifying who they should talk to, what they should ask and how the opportunity might be useful to them. There was little opportunity to draw out students' experiences outside school. How these results resonate with the Phase 3 analysis provides additional discussion material.

All these examples indicate the complexity of trying to identify universal barriers and enablers as how these intertwine and inter-relate is also important. Our discussion explores this complexity further. The following sections identify and discuss the specific findings from Phase 3.

Findings

Additional factors emerged from the analysis of data in Phase 3, arrived at through line-by-line analysis of the data collected in 2020-2021. These factors were disability, gender, media influence, mental health, culture, other significant people, non-curricular opportunities, and alternative trajectories, and these have been categorised with the elements where they appeared to influence young people most. For example, disability was most often raised in terms of young people's own or others' perceptions, but much less so in terms of accessing knowledge and understanding. Previous factors from earlier phases were also reinforced in Phase 3. Combining and reconfiguring the findings led to identifying the elements and contributing factors that can affect engagement and progression in the table below.

Elements that affect engagement and progression (either negatively or positively)	Factors identified in Phases 1, 2 and 3
Perceptions of young people (by self and others)	identity, personal qualities, talents, disability, gender, mental health
Relationships with others	friendships, peers, social networks, family, teachers, other significant people
Influential sources	adults who listen, adults who have made a difference, older siblings, role models, media (e.g. TV documentaries, dramas or social media), careers advisors
Structural/contextual issues	finance, balance, place, culture, curriculum, non-curricular opportunities
Knowledge and understanding	opportunities for talking, access to information/knowledge, alternative trajectories

The following examples from Phase 3 data illustrate each of these elements and how the various factors are intertwined with one another.

1. Perceptions of young people (by self and others)

The ways in which young people perceive themselves can be influenced by how they are seen by others. And these perceptions can have significant impact on the educational journeys

they experience and/or choose. The following examples from our data illustrate the potential impact of how young people are perceived.

Chloe, a student who had begun a university course as a mature student, explained that she had been encouraged by her father, who himself had been a mature student while she was at school, but her school experience severely diminished her confidence:

'I used to have to go to like special classes erm (.) I was told I was dyslexic (.) which I am dyslexic … and then I got put back into normal classes and I felt, I didn't understand a lot of the time what was being asked of me (.) I were really nervous, I didn't feel comfortable to put my hand up and ask questions (.) so, I kind of just slipped through the net … the teachers seemed to go to smarter children, that's how it seemed at the time. I think I was difficult to teach.'

Her own view of her own capability was influenced by the views collected from school. This was compounded by the treatment of one particular teacher in primary school:

'I had one teacher, oh my god, I think it were year three (.) year two, and she used to belittle me for getting things wrong (.) so, I think that's where a lot of my confidence, I think it just sort of went at the beginning'.

This was followed by bullying at high school, so that *'towards the end of year eight, year nine I did sort of like give up'*. She went on to explain that her mother's perception of her then took a hold:

'I'm sure she didn't mean any harm by this, but my Mum always said to me, 'ooh Chloe, you're just like me, you're not going to' erm (.) she didn't say you're not going to go far in life, but … I don't remember doing any homework because I used to get home and I didn't want to do it obviously but then there were no encouragement (.) because again from my Mum, who were working full time and obviously you know (.) it were probably too hard for her, so, yeah I just wasn't encouraged … Whereas, both my brothers had tutors to get ready for their GCSEs, it was never even an option for me.'

This perception of Chloe as non-academic persisted, and through a school work experience placement she began working in a hairdressers, which enabled her to gain back some of her confidence: *'something felt right, I felt like a person if you will, and I felt useful.'* But even encouragement from her close family could not initially shift her perception of herself in relation to higher education.

'my Dad used to say to me, 'you know you can do university, Chloe, why don't you, and I would go 'I can't do it' (.) but my husband as well was a mature student and (.) he said to me, 'you know you've got it you can so do it', and I was scared of it you know I just thought I can't do it'

It is clear to see from this example that issues of disability or specific learning difficulties (dyslexia), gender (brothers receiving tutors), and relationships with parents, teachers and peers, all contributed to Chloe's sense of identity and agency. It is interesting to note that the

two people encouraging her to apply to university were male. Yet gender and cultural expectations arose again later in life when Chloe eventually considered the possibility of going to university. While her husband studied at university she was staying at home with their young family:

'It sounds awful … They didn't stop me, but it was a reason. I may have done something sooner if circumstances had of been different. So, yes obviously family life kind of got in the way really.'

Chloe's story illustrates multiple factors which contribute to 'perceptions of young people' which can have lasting or even permanent effects on the routes young people take. As established earlier, children can readily be unhelpfully identified according to categories. Individual children can also inhabit perceptions of their abilities or tendencies and may unquestioningly accept the routes through education assumed for them by others.

While Chloe's experience at school was largely a negative influence, another young woman, Humera, mentioned the positive influence of her primary school headteacher when she returned to the school in the hope of becoming a teaching assistant: '*she basically started to highlight all of these qualities that I hadn't seen in myself, so that was like, I could actually do it'*. Encouragement from respected or liked adults was mentioned by several participants, emphasising the importance of positive relationships with others.

The expert interviewee on GRT young people gave a rare example of a young woman who had been to university: '*She said it was the teachers at primary school that were just brilliant. And you didn't always get that in those days. It was like, well, they're travellers. They can sit in the corner and work.'*

Another issue contributing to the sense of self and perceptions introduced by young people we spoke to was mental health. This had not explicitly arisen in Phase 2, but maintenance of good mental health was discussed by many of the participants in Phase 3. They suggested that key to maintaining good mental health was finding a balance between current studying and life outside education. The invisibility of poor mental health was flagged as a barrier to achieving success in exams at school, and the students also discussed the importance of being kind and not assuming people are well.

'Massively I would say you know erm (.) people, at the end of the day, people just struggle through daily life a lot of them and it's like (.) nobody says anything because of the (.) you know (.) people just have issues and many people are just scared to show those issues because it's like (.) a lot of pressure from, you know, your friends, your family just to (.) you know tough it up (.) and get on with it erm (.) so just having someone to talk to, even if it's just talking to them you don't have to say (.) 'oh I'm feeling depressed. Oh, I'm feeling (.) anxiety' or feeling this or feeling that.'

They linked mental health problems to underachieving that might have consequences later:

'It's mental health so it'll bring down performance which will lead to lower grades.'

'Which will limit her options later on.'

'Because even when you're forty-five looking for a job they still ask for your GCSE grades so if you have low ones of them then it's going to be harder for you to find a job.'

Young people themselves recognised the importance of being accepting of others and not making assumptions about them. For example, discussing autism they said:

'Sometimes like some people with autism they don't go completely dumb as people think, some of them go really smart and some of them end up being scientists (.) I think it was like Bill Gates had autism or something'

'When I'm in school I can hear people like (.) being rude to each other, saying you're stupid by asking if you're autistic or something (.) but being autistic isn't being stupid (.) it's just not understanding social cues.'

Children referred to their own talents in relation to the routes they had chosen to take. For example, one girl said she wanted to be a chef because it combined artistic talent with technical or mathematical ability. Another wanted to pursue outdoor adventure sports because '*I already do climbing and kayaking and I'm hoping to get coaching in climbing and then coaching in kayaking, canoeing and sea kayaking as well*'. Another boy in a different school excused himself from our session because it was important that he attend his PE lesson, because the rugby team was being picked. He told us he intended to join the army when he left school. These revelations were alongside children discussing the subjects they liked and disliked – examined further below under Structural and Contextual Issues. In line with our previous research, those children who did not identify their own talents were less likely to envisage a future for themselves that included studying specific subjects.

2. Relationships with Others

Being part of and having a positive sustained experience within an interest group or team helped young people to recognise their own abilities and was also influential for some in developing aspirations and making decisions about their educational trajectory, for example:

'I've done Scouts for around nearly ten years now, so that's kind of very much shaped what I've done and what interests me, so that kind of sparked my interest in outdoor adventure sports but it also helped with team building, independence, volunteering and things like that.'

These groups also appear to enable young people to see themselves as active in shaping their lives and futures, through being able to access opportunities such as travel and finding ways to finance them:

'you also get to do things like international trips so tomorrow I'm doing a meet-up for an international trip that I'm going on because we're going on two and that helps with not only meeting up with people from around Lancashire, but also meeting other people from around the world so it's kind of that understanding of other people. … I'm going to Iceland later

this year, and then I'm going to Switzerland next year... the trip itself was supposed to be in two weeks and Iceland was supposed to have been October half-term last year but we have been doing fundraising as much as we can.'

Close family ties were particularly important for a number of the young people with disabilities who participated in our research. For example:

'I want to do the same as my brother...so, go to...well I don't mind what college I go to, but do some sort of Sports Coaching Performance kind of course...I play football so.. I'm quite, we're all quite a football family ...I want to go to uni as well to like, you know, further educate me on it.'

Relationships were at the heart of whether interest groups and clubs were a positive experience for young people. One year 11 had tried the same scout group as mentioned earlier:

'I tried Cubs and Scouts and that was the same, I was there for like two weeks... I didn't like any of them, so I stopped going and now I mainly just play online with people I meet online and play games and that's what I enjoy doing mostly'

As this quote shows, there are different ways in which children can meet with like-minded others to share their interests and socialise. Opportunities to attend groups can be affected by many issues, including parental support, finance, and social networks, meaning that not all children benefit in the same way. While some young people told us of multiple sports activities and groups they were members of, others mostly stayed at home. A limitation of our research methods was that the reasons for lack of participation were not often voiced due to the group rather than individual forum. Given that this reflects the usual setting for school-based discussions, there are also implications for the need for individuals to be able to express their views and experiences in a comfortable space.

The animated story we showed at the beginning of the workshops included the protagonist suffering from bullying and a lack of a friendship group. The children we worked with picked up on the importance of peer friendship and support in the ensuing discussion: e.g.

'Like, say if people aren't really nice to you (.) kind of like Lydia (.) but if people aren't really nice to you, then you don't really want to spend time in school (.) so, then you try and get off school (.) try and say that you're ill.'

The category of relationships with others relates to that of influential sources, as the quality of relationships – like the quality of other aspects of life – can be highly influential in terms of young people's decision-making.

3. Influential Sources

There was a sense that being part of and taking part in group or sport team activities influenced young people's outlook and this in turn helped build their own motivation to

pursue their aspirations, even when they knew this would be challenging. One year 11 visually impaired student described how through her experience as a football coach, she saw changes in people that taking part enabled:

'one of the kids broke their leg so it was quite a big change, and then they came back and now they're at their top level again' 'or like kids who have had parents who have passed away, and all of their personality and everything has changed, and football is kind of their outlet where they can go and (.) I don't know, be themselves again.'

In sharing stories about adversity, children understand that they are not alone in facing and overcoming challenges, including those to their educational journeys.

Family members' or other significant people's experiences also influenced student aspirations:

'my brother's planning to do a PhD in Chemistry like I am and he's at [name] University ...he was originally doing what's it called Natural Sciences but then he didn't like most of it so he switched to Chemistry.'

Another young man was modelling his future on the path pursued by his brother. He explained that he looked up to his brother because he was 'clever', 'cool' and apparently successful in pursuing a career in games design.

One 12-year-old boy wanted to follow in his father's footsteps and had provisionally mapped out a route for himself to achieve this:

'I was thinking maybe if (.) because my dad's self-employed, maybe helping him for a few years (.) but whilst I'm doing that go to night school maybe to get something (.) get architecture to become a builder.'

Often parents are mentioned as significant not just as role models, but in advising their children about the potential future trajectories. Talking to lots of people to gain a balanced perspective was considered important:

'I definitely recommend talking to whoever you can: anybody, your parents, your lecturers, your friends. You know talking it through, not thinking that you're going to sit alone and make all these decisions on your own and then you get there and you're like whoops I absolutely hate what I'm doing. I didn't talk to anybody. You know, it's like thinking it through and talking it through would be really good'

Other people students mentioned as significant in helping with decision-making about future educational directions were siblings, other family members, teachers, sports coaches and those already employed in careers that participants aspired to.

One participant was grateful for the advice and support provided by one of his teachers, recognising the impact that this had on his development:

'Erm (.) well in high school I did have a Mathematics teacher (.) erm who just went above and beyond in his job, like he wasn't just my teacher, he was also my friend if that makes sense (.) like he was there for me (.) and he was there to hear and help me with any troubles I had ... whether it was work-related or outside of school, he was there to support me (.) and I guess if he wasn't there, I'd probably be a lot different as a person.'

Students with SEND also mentioned family members and other significant adults as important influences. One visually impaired girl mentioned how her 'Nana' had been supportive and influential in helping her maintain balance in her life. One boy described how the friends he played online gaming with help him:

'because when I play with them and it's been like five hours, they just tell me to go offline and stop playing and stuff and go and revise and stuff and do homework and stuff... so they make sure I do the stuff that I need to for school whilst I have the time to game with them.'

Influence could also involve supporting students to get in touch with university staff to find more detailed information or so that there are familiar faces once a student accesses a course and campus. For example:

'like I knew where I was going like around the campus and err I knew I had people to rely on if I ever struggled, … and [if I] struggled with anything I had people who I could talk to.'

Various forms of media were also identified as influential in young people's choices and decisions. Social media was used as an information gaining tool for discovering detail about universities and what they have to offer as well as information about career paths. Young people at the schools suggested that certain social media had influenced their career choice, for example:

'...there's just like little stories that I've watched (.) you get little TikTok ones like 15 second clips (.) and they're really interesting so yeah.'

Several young people cited TV documentaries and dramas as influencing the choice of topic they intended to study. For example, criminology, engineering, mental health nursing and architecture were mentioned by Year 11 students as potential courses in HE. These are subjects which they would not have studied at school, but they had found out about them through other media.

'Hmm (.) there's no one really but I just like (.) you know like the Criminology and stuff like that and just reading things (.) that's what got me into it I think (.) It's like, you know like movies that you watch, the detective ones a bit like (.) what they call that team? FBI or (.) yeah.'

Students in year 7 and 8 also acknowledged the potential impact of television shows on their educational choices:

*'People on TV could influence what you want to do for say like your GCSEs
(.) because there's like TV shows about science (.) and there's TV shows
about like how doctors are (.) like Gray's Anatomy and all that lot (.) and
like people want to do that job just so that they can be like that TV show or
their idol (.) so, sometimes celebrities have like a hand in what you do'*

Young people also referred to social media as having a negative effect on them in terms of the pressures of conforming to certain norms and expectations. For some students this pressure linked to the issue of mental health and self-esteem.

4. Structural and Contextual Issues

Although students suggested they had some **choice of GCSE subjects** at school, they also described how this was limited by structural issues. For example, one student chose iMedia but was allocated a place on a Health course instead. He felt he had no choice but to comply because his parents said he 'had to.' However, a higher achieving student in the same school raised an objection to her allocated options at school and these were changed to what she wanted to do. Other students discussed that they found the English curriculum 'boring' as the literature being studied was not up to date.

Students also raised concerns over the suitability of the curriculum for independent living. For example, understanding about taxes:

*'We don't learn anything about things like that erm in school.. it's all just
the work that's put on the curriculum so like how does this work? And the
people who don't have the parents to go to will kind of be stuck because
they don't know what they're doing.'*

*'I'd like to learn about taxes because it's to do with numbers and I like
Maths however, I don't understand how they're done ...and how are we
meant to know when we have to do stuff like taxes? How are we meant to
do it if we don't know it?'*

Relevance was an important theme, even where a student had taken a subject that appears to be associated with their interests. For example, one year 11 girl who wants to do adventure sports described how:

*'in PE you don't do anything to do with the kind of sports that I enjoy and I
do so... it's kind of, I learn about different sports but it's not the sports that
I want to pursue in a career ... so, that kind of slightly gets in the way but
not really but things like studying erm actual sports-related stuff and
Health and Fitness and how sports affects the body and the mind.'*

How some subjects or activities appear to be considered more important was also an issue in terms of enabling spaces through which to talk about aspirations and educational trajectories. For example, a conversation turned to Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE) and after the young people described how the subject was often shunted to alternative days, and how little time was allocated, when asked if it was taken seriously, they

replied no. Probing the reasons for this suggested that because it was not an exam subject it was also less relevant:

> *'I don't take it very seriously. I just sit there not doing anything to be honest with you. I don't understand why it's necessary, so I listen to it... but I just don't understand the point in us doing full on work for it.'*

This was despite the fact that young people identified topics within PSHE as important to their futures.

Whilst **examination subjects** were given priority, further concerns were raised about the structure of the GCSE exams themselves:

> *'I don't think the way they do GCSEs should be the correct way, because you could have one off day and that entire GCSE is off because you've had an off day (.) you could be getting 9s in every one of your marks but on your actual GCSE you could have an off day and get a 5.'*

Pressure of schooling was raised several times by the students. This directly related to HE aspirations in that they connected the requirement for good grades to attend university with exams and tests: 'I think I cried during my last Maths test.'

Non-curricular activities featured across all the young people's experiences. These were important to bringing balance to their lives but also in generating the motivation and choices of their educational trajectory. For example, the year 11 girl who wanted to do adventure sports only came to this conclusion because she had experienced a range of activities and crucially positive feedback from others in her time as a Scout. She suggested that there are inequalities between school opportunities, especially between state and private sector. For example, in talking about friends at private school in Blackpool she suggested:

> *'Well don't you usually do more stuff that regular schools wouldn't? So, like one of my friends goes to a private school and she does all of this army stuff. I know we have like CCF here but it's like more than what we do'*

Place was an issue raised by several participants, including those who would not consider moving away from home and those who would.

> *'I was looking to do the Outdoor Adventure Sport at [College name] but I kind of decided against that because there's no point if I can get the same qualifications by doing courses closer to home. So, I'd probably do Physical Education. I want to do French because that's something and I want to live in France when I'm older so I may as well.'*

For some, whether students moved away from home or not was linked to **culture**; for example, GRT and South Asian communities might have more expectation that even if young people do go to university, they should remain close to home. For example: '*Because I still study at my local mosque in the evening, UCLan was best*'. For others it was linked to **confidence**: '*it was just a bit of intimidation factor that made me want to stay at [home town]*'

or finance: '*I'm not going to move out of my house because then it would be cheaper because I don't really want to pay for accommodation*'.

This factor of **finance** was raised by participants in all phases of the project. There was very mixed understanding when it came to discussing the financial aspects of attending university: some students had little or no concept of the student loan system, and some saw the whole idea of university being out of their reach for financial reasons.

> '*It depends because you don't know how long it will take to pay it off. So, you don't want to end up in debt most of your life*'

> '*Especially with university and things, you have to pay for like (.) I don't know if you have to pay for accommodation, but you'll have to pay for like food and things like that (.) and if you are partying, you'll have to save money for that.*'

One student specifically linked the concept of the student loan with her Muslim family.

> '*during when I was in college I was (.) I would say not like really strong but I was like (.) I was a little bit more interested in like my religion than they were even though they were still Muslim and there's like this big emphasis on interest and taking loans with interest (.) so that's why I was a little (.) erm (.) a little bit hesitant on going to university but they still encouraged me, they did say that it's really difficult to do it any other way and they tried to show me the other sides to it, and other opinions from scholars (.) so yeah in that sense they were encouraging in a positive way.*'

In this case, her family was understanding despite their negative perspective on taking out a loan. Debt aversion and the need for loan systems to access parental financial accounts is also cited as a barrier for GRT young people entering HE (Mulcahy et al 2017). We might assume therefore that beliefs and attitudes about money could be an issue for other students from particular cultures. It is not simply a lack of understanding of the student loan system, but moral or ethical standpoints that can affect decisions to attend university.

Cultural issues include attitudes and beliefs about education. The expert on GRT communities explained that there are some very traditional GRT families in Lancashire – whereas attitudes can be different in other part of the country and particularly in London 'where a lot of things are happening' and there may be more belief in the value of staying in education. In parts of Lancashire the expectation is that children go to primary school to learn essential literacy and numeracy skills but thereafter there is wariness of the education system and of the dangers of cultural dilution through mainstream schooling at secondary age. Children are often withdrawn from school and boys then join their fathers and work alongside them. Girls may be educated at home to avoid mixing outside of their own communities. GRT culture:

> '*is quite gender based in that the men are expected to be the breadwinner, and it's part of who they are, that they bring in a good living, and that they support the family and the wife. And the wife is a homemaker. And, I mean, people say they've got dirty homes and houses. It's absolutely*

rubbish, they're immaculate, you know. … That's what's expected, so it's harder for the girls.'

As discussed above, gender was also an issue for Chloe, and was intertwined with her perception of herself. In addition, structural issues including socioeconomic status meant that Chloe's mother was absent through having to work. Financial support became an important factor for Chloe bringing up her own children, and she, unlike her mother, saw university as a route to financial stability for herself, her partner and her children. Chloe was keen to break the cycle she had experienced at school:

'when they went to school, as soon as they got their homework, we used to sit down and do the homework (.) and I'd give that time to them because I wanted them to have a different educational experience to what I had.'

She wanted them to 'have options' in later life: '*you know, it's so difficult to buy houses and everything nowadays isn't it?*' and saw education as a route out of financial struggle:

'I'm trying to talk to them about becoming like vets and dentists and doctors (.) lawyers. My son actually said he wanted to be erm (.) what was it, some sort of lawyer anyway and I'm like that is a brilliant job (.) the money in that honestly yes (.) let's go down that route [laughing]'

This could be interpreted as an ambition to change the culture of her family *and* its socioeconomic status: to allow her children to benefit from her belief that progression in education and upward mobility are entwined.

5. Knowledge and Understanding

Our research methods were based on the premise that it is important to begin conversations with young people about their aspirations and educational journeys by enabling discussion through methods other than speech, especially where young people do not know each other or the facilitators. We encouraged young people to draw and note what matters to them in their futures and these often revealed much about potential barriers:

Visually impaired student

Music
Guitar.
Piano.
Rock

Sports
Mountaineering.
Climbing.
Kayaking.

Pupil Leadership
Student Council.
Anti-Bullying.
Projects.

Activism and Volunteering
Animal welfare
LGBTQ+ Rights
Emergency Services
Environmental
Mental health
Civil Rights.

Theatre

D of E and Scouts.
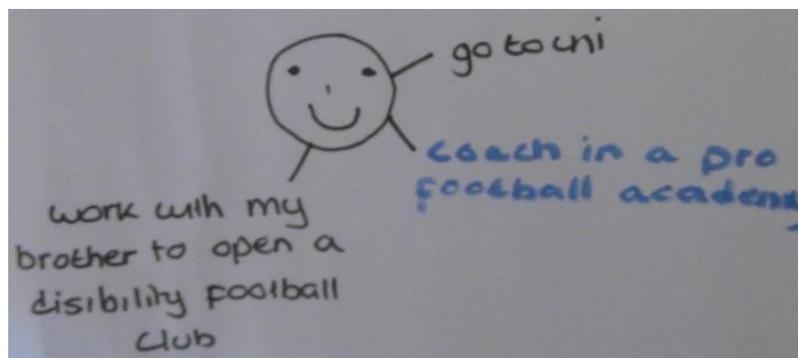
Female student

The theme of knowledge and understanding runs through the sections above, but also relates specifically to reliable sources of information, advice and encouragement. Because the young people had mixed messages from different sources, e.g. about student loans, student accommodation, subjects you can study, etc., they did not necessarily know which to believe or trust. The board game designed as part of this project addresses many of the potential sources of misunderstanding through the 'myth buster' cards, which encourage young people to ask and discuss the questions. If facilitated by a knowledgeable adult, the conversations can be informative and help to guide students' choices about their futures.

Key perceived barriers to continuing in post-compulsory education highlighted in discussions were: not achieving the grades required to continue in education; not making the correct decisions regarding GCSEs or A levels and therefore not being able to study your chosen course; and changing your mind about your career and not having the correct qualifications to follow a new direction. One of the common beliefs we encountered was that 'you need A grades'. This was coupled with a lack of awareness of alternative trajectories, not realising that the traditional route (via the A level or BTEC route) is not the only way to achieve their educational or career aspirations. When participants from the advisory group discussed their educational journeys and how they had come to engage with higher education, their prior experiences demonstrated that they knew that there are different routes into higher education. Thematically, this finding is intertwined with 'influential others' as discussion and advice regarding progression in education was provided by people such as employers, lecturers, college tutors and people already employed in their chosen industry. One mature student had not achieved many qualifications at school and initially followed a more practical career direction. Following advice from an educationalist at a school where she was volunteering, she re-engaged with education.

Participants in schools discussed what they thought might happen if they did not achieve good grades. Rather than presuming they could not continue with their education, students suggested they would re-take exams to achieve the required grade but there were concerns about funding this. Interestingly, at one school an innovative approach to discussing educational journeys had been introduced:

'There was a thing a while ago where all teachers show the different ways how they got to the career they have now and show the different paths they could use. It's not just one set way you have to use'

This was a useful insight for the young people as they were able to relate to people they knew and the different journeys they had taken. Being able to discuss their ambitions with a range of adults was important to several young people: *'Just talking to different people to get a different perspective and outlook on what you want to do and how to get there'*.

Discussion

The issues drawn attention to in our analysis of the data illustrate the ways in which all factors that can be conceived of as barriers or challenges are interconnected, and it is difficult to separate them out. Nevertheless, for marginalised groups such as those we have consulted and attempted to represent through this research, certain key points emerge.

Elements that affect engagement and progression (either negatively or positively)	
Perceptions of young people (by self and others)	identity, personal qualities, talents, disability, gender, mental health
Relationships with others	friendships, peers, social networks, family, teachers, other significant people
Influential sources	adults who listen, adults who have made a difference, older siblings, role models, media (e.g. TV documentaries, dramas and social media), careers advisors, teachers
Structural/contextual issues	finance, balance, place, culture, curriculum, non-curriculum opportunities
Knowledge and understanding	opportunities for talking, access to information/knowledge, alternative trajectories

The impact of others' perception and young people's own perceptions of themselves was significant throughout our research. Examples include Chloe and Humera discussed above, both of whom experienced a shift in perceptions after talking with influential adults, which led to them both entering HE. Our research identified that perceptions can be significantly affected by a range of assumptions about gender, (dis)ability, mental health, and individual characteristics. Perceptions are also affected by categorisation of young people according to 'groups' including those we set out to engage with: Care-experienced, BAME, GRT and SEND. As identified by Mannay et al (2017) these categories can lead to assumptions and unhelpful attitudes and behaviours: 'Treatment of LACYP as exceptional, and in need of extra resources, compounds the problem of educational disadvantage by stigmatising these individuals and sometimes diminishing their expectations for themselves' (p. 696).

These p*erceptions of young people* discussed above and how they are positioned in relation to adults and to one another through negative comparisons, also underpins how children are marginalised by society. For example, Mulcahy et al (2017) identify that the experiences of GRT young people cannot be easily extricated from how they are perceived, assumptions that are made, and how they are treated, both in and out of education. Deficit positioning of

certain groups through the discourse around them leads to assumptions and prejudice. For example, Mulcahy et al (2017, p.9) point out that children working alongside their families can be perceived either as 'child labour' or as a valuable opportunity to learn business skills.

Relationships with peers, teachers, and groups outside of school can influence educational trajectories. Relationships with teachers and their expectations can be a crucial element in the educational success or failure of students from marginalised groups (Rose and Shevlin, 2004). Sometimes relationships that are developed may conflict with one another – e.g. a teacher vs a parent, as discussed in the findings. Dimensions of marginalisation identified by Harrison and Atherton (2021) are useful in understanding how the factors identified in our research contribute to marginalisation in relation to Higher Education. But these dimensions are also about the relationships that in turn affect how societies and their systems are structured, including education.

Sources of influence are not simply from careers advisors or parents, but may be from media sources, siblings or people outside of the family or school. These influences should be discussed with young people to encourage a balanced and informed outlook on their future education. Making time for such discussion is important in building the relationships that appear to enable progression and this resonates with Satchwell and Crook's (2020) work on student led evaluation that suggested a regular and embedded model could motivate students to think about their individual needs and work with others to identify how they can get the most from careers events by developing their own questions and tools for research. The curriculum itself can be a source of frustration and negativity in relation to certain subjects, e.g. students who 'hate maths' or 'hate Shakespeare'. While this cannot be addressed without significant reform, the concept of relevance should be kept in mind for teaching and learning. Children are more likely to progress to HE if they have enjoyed school and if they see education as relevant to their own futures. However, children saw little relevance in many of their school subjects and how they were assessed. Even core subjects like Maths and English are seen by students as 'irrelevant' when they do not address life skills which they felt they needed, such as how to manage finance. This has the effect of potentially disengaging them from schooling more generally or, in other words, further marginalisation by relevance. The need for learners to recognise and understand the purpose and relevance in all aspects of education has long been identified as critical to successful engagement (e.g. Ivanic et al 2009; Albrecht and Karabenick 2018). The notion of attending university also appeared 'irrelevant' to several of our participants, for example for those who intended to join the forces, join a family trade, or start their own business.

Children need access to a range of sources of information and a range of possibilities for their futures. Those young people who had identified for themselves specific courses they wanted to study were clearly much more motivated than those who had not.

Marginalisation in time/space relates to the inability of people to attend HE at designated time and places. While for Harrison and Atherton (2021) this is more to do with barriers for people at the point of entering HE, it also relates to expectations that development occurs in a linear age-related fashion and that educational milestones are achieved at specific points. Therefore, our finding of the need to consider *alternative trajectories* links to this dimension of marginalisation. Many children and young people, for numerous reasons including health,

disability, caring responsibilities, transient lifestyles, do not fit into the expected pathway through primary, secondary and further education. An awareness of alternatives to the conventional route can be raised through sharing alternative trajectories experienced by individuals through positive examples. The issue of non-conventional routes through education will be explored further in the next phase of our research, which will focus on mature students.

Marginalisation by systems relates to bureaucratic or technocratic systems which can discriminate against certain groups. We take this conceptualisation of systems further in our analysis, to include neoliberal and performance-related structures which additionally impose barriers. For example, the competitive nature of schooling and hierarchies of universities can impose additional barriers for many children, e.g. the resistance to testing at school and notions that only some universities are worth attending. Access to Higher Education involves being knowledgeable about systems of progression and applying to universities. Not all families have access to the cultural and social capital required for navigating these systems (Moskal 2014), particularly when no-one in their family has previously been to university. Similarly, without family or social networks, care-leavers or 'estranged students' are disadvantaged when trying to access HE (Bland and Shaw 2015).

Marginalisation in all these forms affects the outcomes available to children and young people, despite recommendations of the Children Act, Education Act and the SEND Code of Practice. Without participatory processes being a part of schooling the labelling of children and assumptions made about their schooling and outcomes will continue to be made. We suggest that discussions with children should be facilitated to take into account their home circumstances and backgrounds, but without letting those dominate in terms of what is expected of those children.

Lundy (2007) suggests that for young people to be able to participate in meaningful ways about matters that affect their lives, there are four aspects that must be addressed:
- **SPACE:** Children and young people must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view.
- **VOICE:** Children and young people must be facilitated to express their view.
- **AUDIENCE:** The view must be listened to.
- **INFLUENCE:** The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

It has become apparent through this project that the opportunities for children to participate and influence their educational journeys vary across different schools. Safe and inclusive opportunities for children and young people to express their views are under tension when time is dominated by the demands of the national curriculum and exam syllabuses, emphasis on knowledge acquisition which require quiet, orderly classes rather than exploratory methods, and numbers of children and young people requiring individual attention in state-maintained classrooms (Maisuria 2005). However, young people value opportunities to explore and express their views and this is a right afforded by the United Nations in the Convention of the Rights of the Child and introduced into legislation through the Children Act (2004), whereby LEAs and schools are required not only to protect but also promote the welfare of children (Reid 2005). The methods used in this study required relatively little time to enable young people to share their views openly. This is always best achieved with adults

and other students with whom young people have positive relationships and have achieved a level of trust. For example, the group of students in one school who were from different year groups and did not know each other at all, were reticent to play the board game or share their views and ideas, which we believe was due to their lack of familiarity with one another and with the researchers.

An example of participation and co-production regarding young people's future trajectories is the student-led evaluation of careers services commissioned by Lancashire County Council (Satchwell and Crook 2020), which created a model for young people themselves to evaluate the careers services and opportunities they received in school. Co-production was key to this commissioned work, and we suggest that without the direct involvement of children in schemes designed to help them to progress, assumptions about children's trajectories can continue to be made. Bassot, Barnes and Chant (2014) suggest young people should be at the centre of career development design, delivery and evaluation. However, careers education is also an integral aspect of the information that young people require to make informed decisions about progression to HE. We suggest that rather than replicating individual and institutional habitus, different futures could be opened up to children from a young age. The board game developed in this project has been designed to help facilitate discussion amongst children about the way they see their futures by offering alternative ways of thinking about themselves and options open to them. The study demonstrates a need for further exploration of appropriate methods that could also usefully inform the FutureU outreach programme and evaluation.

Conclusions

In this phase of Rewriting the Future, we have built on the findings of previous phases to create two resources – an animated film and a board game – which have then been used as stimuli for further research with marginalised groups. These have proved to be useful methods for the research and have been well-received by school students. We would therefore recommend them to be used as tools for developing understanding and knowledge about education systems and access to HE, as well as facilitating discussion around multiple issues including social, emotional, health, disability, family, cultural and financial aspects of progression in education.

The themes: **Perceptions of young people (by self and others); Relationships with others; Influential sources; Structural/contextual issues; and Knowledge and understanding**, each contain numerous factors. Significantly it is the *nature* and *quality* of children's experiences of these factors which can affect whether they are barriers or enablers. For example, as the stories have demonstrated, there is a fine line between a label which leads to dedicated and distinctive support, and a label which designates children to a particular future without even consulting them. Influential adults and relationships with others can be either supportive or dominating, encouraging or misleading.

Our findings have been broadly categorised under a series of headings, but a substantial finding is how interconnected the various themes are, and how a holistic approach is required when working with children and young people to discuss their futures. Whereas school students we worked with often thought first of qualifications and grades when considering university, our methods began from the starting point of imagining futures for themselves

and exploring the range of routes available to them. Through considering the routes we were also able to identify potential challenges along the way, as well as enablers. As discussed, challenges and enablers took a range of forms, but one of the most significant observations was how the discussion itself enabled worries, assumptions, concerns and beliefs to come out into the open and to give access to alternative points of view. Through the 'mythbusters' and 'chance' cards in the game, and through discussion about the story of Lydia in the film, the researchers were able to discuss more challenging or complex aspects of education in an informal, fun, yet enlightening way for the students to learn more about their own possible futures.

We suggest that the relative lack of literature around HE and young people with SEND, those of GRT heritage, or Care-leavers, reflects widely held assumptions about capabilities and aspirations of young people. Our research with marginalised children has helped to identify some of the barriers and enablers but has also shown that the way they are perceived by themselves and by others can have a profound impact on the outcomes available to them. Open and honest discussions with a variety of different people in a range of settings will help to shine a light on the talents and individual characteristics of children, while also demonstrating that there are alternative ways of perceiving themselves and their futures.

Recommendations

The research leads to several recommendations for practitioners in school, for those interested in encouraging young people into HE, and for FutureU.

- Discussion of education and careers should be promoted and incorporated into schooling from an early age. There is evidence that children's perspectives on their own possible futures can be determined early in life, which can have limiting – or enlightening - effects.

- Careers and educational progression could take place in a range of ways and settings during schooling and not only in PSHE lessons. At the same time, the status of PSHE could be restored through positioning it as an essential subject which addresses issues relevant to independent living and the security of children's futures.

- It is important to ensure that the curriculum and its applications are current and relevant to the children in the class. Engendering an interest in education and its uses has an effect on how relevant they see Higher Education.

- Labelling or categorising children in ways that will not help them to progress should be avoided. This is a complex recommendation, which requires a good understanding of the barriers and facilitators that will aid all children, and specific considerations that apply to some.

- Training for teachers, teaching assistants and careers advisors should incorporate consideration of all aspects of children's lives, both inside and outside of school. The more open and inclusive discussions are, the more likely children are to have a balanced understanding of their relationship to HE.

- Good practice appreciated by children in schools included: one-to-one conversations with careers advisors to explore options and possible further and higher education routes; the sharing of adults' stories of their own individual careers. Both of these events provide open fora for hearing about both conventional and non-conventional educational and career routes.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Re-writing the Future: Exploring young people's stories of education and engagement

RtF Project Report May 2019 final CS.d

Appendix 2 – Student-led Evaluation of Careers Opportunities in Schools

Student Led Evaluation Final Rep

Appendix 3 – Data collection strategy 2020-2021

The intended data collection strategy in the schools was:

Visit One
- How might my education help me achieve my hopes and dreams?
  Young people drew themselves and the sort of person they hoped to be. They surrounded their drawings with things they hoped to do or achieve.
- Following this activity, a short animation about barriers and enablers to education was shown to the students. The animation was developed from some work undertaken with people in West Lancashire and an animator at UCLan made a short story from their experiences. The animation was used to generate discussion about educational journeys and barriers and enablers to this. The young people recorded these on two sheets of paper (barriers in red and enablers in green) and anything else that they thought of during the ensuing discussion.

Visit Two
- During visit two the board game which had been designed with the students at UCLan was played. The intention with the game was to facilitate discussion on what it might mean to continue with education following college and barriers and enablers to engaging with HE. The facilitator suggested that the game could be stopped at any point in order to continue discussion around specific areas if needed.

- During the game, further discussion was encouraged by asking additional questions which had been developed from the themes in Phase 2 and discussion with the steering group.
- Finally, the facilitator summarised the discussions that had taken place and asked for suggestions from the young people about themes that came up.

The above data collection strategy was implemented in the first school visited. The revised plan for the two schools where one visit was undertaken is detailed below:

- The short animation was used to generate discussion about educational journeys and potential barriers and enablers. The young people recorded these on two sheets of paper (barriers in red and enablers in green) and anything else that they thought of during the ensuing discussion.
- The board game was then played to facilitate discussion on what it might mean to continue with education following college and barriers and enablers to engaging with HE. The facilitator suggested that the game could be stopped at any point in order to continue discussion around specific areas if needed.
- During the game, further discussion was encouraged by asking additional questions which had been developed from the themes in Phase 2 and discussion with the steering group.

Appendix 4 - Examples of game card content

Your teachers give you some regular time to talk about your life plans

Take 1 step forward

You climb a very big hill and enjoy being able to see for miles

Take 1 step forward

Your uncle is a lecturer in art and gives you some really helpful advice about university

Take 1 step forward

You dream of travelling one day

Take 1 step forward

You have some family overseas and you decide you will save up and go and visit them when you are 18

Take 1 step forward

Your older brother messed about at school but then he went back to college and has now started university

Take 1 step forward

Your grandad went to university and is encouraging you to go

Take 1 step forward

A family member sits down and talks with you about how you feel

Take 1 step forward

A family member is always there for you no matter what

Take 1 step forward

You achieved something that was difficult for you today

Take 1 step forward

You get a part-time job

Take 1 step forward

You remember something really nice that happened to you

Take 1 step forward