



PHD

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The geographies of access to elite universities:
Exploring the role of place for English-domiciled entrants

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Bath

Department of Education

October 2022

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For Jude

Abstract

Despite significant government policy attention paid to the importance of where young people grow up in shaping their access to HE, the role of place for elite university progression specifically has been little explored. This thesis makes an important contribution to addressing this knowledge gap, through its detailed exploration of the geographies of access for English-domiciled entrants to elite universities in the UK. An innovative explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. The first, quantitative phase of research, used multilevel modelling to examine elite university progression by local area across England on a granular scale. This was followed by detailed mapping to identify areas of higher and lower than expected progression, with a subsequent, qualitative phase of work involving in-depth case study research in two purposely selected localities, one (in East London) with higher-than-expected progression and the other (in Nottingham) lower-than-expected progression.

While place in itself was not a highly significant factor for entry to elite universities overall, there was a distinct urban-rural patterning to progression identified. Indeed, when raw progression rates by area alone were considered, rural areas typically had higher progression rates to elite universities. However, when the full range of individual characteristics was accounted for, including attainment, socio-economic status, ethnicity and accessibility to elite universities, the converse was true—localities within and surrounding major urban centres were those with the highest progression rates. Importantly, this urban ‘escalator’ effect suggested that urban disadvantaged youth may be advantaged within elite university progression over similar peers in more peripheral places.

Though the East London and Nottingham case studies were given equal value within data collection and analysis, the most important findings emerged primarily within the East London case study and discussion of this case study thus takes precedence in the thesis. Three key themes were identified as playing potentially important roles in explaining higher/lower-than-expected progression. The first related to findings from the East London locality of a shared culture of elite university valorisation across the area’s multiple high-performing schools, enabled through strong framing of university choices to privilege progression to Russell Group institutions. The second was of disadvantaged students’ uneven access to elite university outreach opportunities. The final key finding was of the importance of local economic contexts in shaping the kind of university and career trajectories that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are exposed to. Recommendations are put forward to policymakers and practitioners seeking to address the spatial inequalities in access to elite institutions.

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List of abbreviations

DfE – Department for Education

HE – Higher Education

HESA – Higher Education Statistics Agency

OfS – Office for Students

ONS – Office for National Statistics

Oxbridge – Universities of Oxford and Cambridge

POLAR – Participation of Local Areas classification

SES – Socio-economic status

TUNDRA – Tracking Underrepresentation by Area

UCAS – Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

WP – Widening Participation

1. Introduction

The UK has a highly stratified university system (Boliver, 2015) and mass Higher Education (HE) participation, with more than 50% of young people participating in higher education by age 30¹. The UK is also one of the most economically unequal societies of any advanced economy, with striking spatial disparities in wealth and opportunity across the country (Dorling, 2014; McCann, 2020). Research has demonstrated the important mediating role played by elite universities in reproducing these inequalities, with these institutions dominated by those from more advantaged groups (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018) and functioning as a conduit to the top positions in UK society (Wakeling and Savage, 2015).

Despite longstanding recognition of and research examining barriers in access to elite universities, and growing recognition amongst policymakers of the importance of place for HE access, there are few studies that have focussed on exploring the role of place within HE progression and fewer still that have looked at its role for elite university entry specifically. Using an innovative mixed-methods approach, this thesis sought to address this research gap through an in-depth examination of the geographies of access to the UK's elite universities. To explore patterns in elite university progression, the initial quantitative phase of research examined elite university entry by local area across England, identifying and mapping areas of lower and higher-than-expected participation. The findings informed the choice of two case study localities where subsequent in-depth qualitative research was conducted to build understanding of the generative mechanisms that could explain these patterns.

The following section discusses in greater depth the policy context in which the study was situated. Subsequently, the principal research aims and questions that guided the study are detailed. The final section of this chapter outlines the structure of this thesis presented in the 'alternative' format, providing an overview of each chapter, in addition to brief commentary text which details how the three papers across which the thesis's findings are presented developed and the interlinks between them.

¹ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-measures-in-higher-education>

1.1 Policy context

This section details the policy context in which this research was situated. In the initial sub-section, I describe the rise in government place-based initiatives seeking to address disparities in HE progression. I briefly outline the different methodologies and outreach programmes developed and highlight the absence of any place-based initiatives in England focussed on elite university progression specifically. Within the second sub-section, I draw attention to the role of the UK's highly stratified HE system within the pervasive patterns of elite reproduction present in UK society. I further outline the narrow social mobility discourse championed in recent years - focussed on increased access to elite universities - and how this has been problematised by academics and practitioners. Whilst acknowledging that within such an unequal HE system, those from more privileged backgrounds will likely continue to dominate elite universities and professions, I highlight the progress that has and can still be made in widening access to elite universities, and the ways in which this thesis stands to make an important contribution.

1.1.1 Place-based HE access initiatives

UK government education policy is increasingly recognising the importance of where young people grow up in shaping their life chances, including the kind of educational and labour market opportunities this affords access to. In 2017, the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) – now known as 'Uni Connect'² - was launched, an outreach programme targeting young people aged 13 - 18 which focuses on local areas across England with low HE progression or lower progression than might be expected considering GCSE results (and in some areas, ethnicity). The 'Opportunity Areas' programme³, which targets 12 social mobility 'cold spots' in England and of which one of the aims is increasing access to HE was also launched in 2017. More recently, the Conservative government's 'levelling up' agenda⁴ has brought renewed focus and attention to the UK's regional inequalities, including the spatial disparities in HE access and career opportunities. This has

² <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-and-opportunity-areas>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>

led to renewed funding for the Uni Connect programme (originally scheduled to end in July 2021) to improve HE access in underrepresented areas and help individuals gain the skills needed to support local economic growth (Johnson and Allen, 2021).

Government interest in the role of place in access to HE principally began with the introduction of the Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) classification measure⁵ in 2005 by the Higher Education and Funding Council for England (HEFCE), now part of the Office for Students (OfS). This measure, no longer updated, but still influential within policy targeting (e.g. in the Uni Connect programme) looks at how likely young people are to participate in HE at age 18 or 19 according to the area in which they live. The methodology involves classifying local areas across the UK into five groups, ranging from quintile 1 groups representing localities with the lowest young participation up to quintile 5 areas with the highest participation rates. In 2019, the OfS, released another similar measure to complement use of POLAR, the Tracking Underrepresentation by Area (TUNDRA) measure⁶, which differs from the POLAR methodology in its use of data-linkage to track state school pupils from their GCSE (Key stage 4) cohort at age 16 to university participation at age 18 or 19, as well as its focus on England alone. In addition to their role in government targeting, these measures constitute important resources for widening participation practitioners with linked interactive maps enabling examination of students' likelihood of entry to HE according to where they live. Practitioners can also use a 'postcode look up' tool to identify the POLAR and TUNDRA quintiles associated with a given postcode.⁷

To-date, the increased government interest in the effect of where young people live on progression to HE remains very generalised, and neither the POLAR nor TUNDRA measures enable examination of which areas have lower or higher rates of progression to 'elite' universities. There are equally no government place-based outreach programmes within England⁸ focussed on elite university progression specifically. Given that, as is evidenced within both the POLAR and TUNDRA methodologies, there are large differences

⁵ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-polar-and-adult-he/>

⁶ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-tundra/>

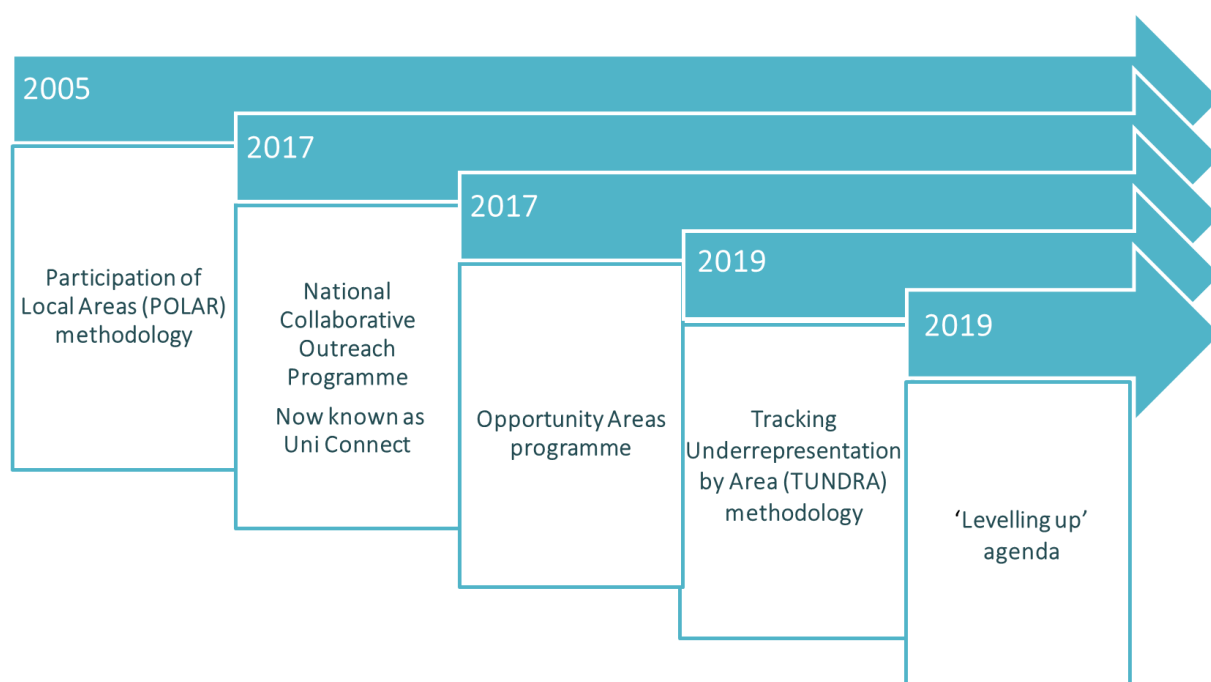
⁷ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/search-by-postcode/>

⁸ In terms of the wider UK, there is a place-based policy initiative – The Seren Network – within Wales, focussed on supporting Welsh state students to access elite universities. More information can be found here: <https://gov.wales/seren-network-overview>.

in young HE participation by area within England, and that, as will be shown within Chapter 2, it is at elite universities where young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are most underrepresented (even when accounting for differences in attainment, see Chowdry et al., 2013), it was reasonable to expect that there would also be significant differences by area with regards to elite university progression specifically. This topic thus offered a pertinent area for further research which this thesis sought to address.

Figure 1-1 provides a timeline of the place-based initiatives discussed.

Figure 1-1: Place-based initiatives timeline



1.1.2 University hierarchies and the narrow social mobility discourse

The UK has a highly stratified university system, with certain universities, notably those of the research-intensive Russell Group, and especially the globally recognised elite institutions of Oxford and Cambridge, seen to be at the top of this hierarchy (Boliver, 2015). Unsurprisingly, students from more advantaged backgrounds tend to be concentrated within

elite institutions (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018). Indeed, whilst the representation of state-educated students at elite universities has improved in recent years (Adams, 2020), these institutions - especially Oxford and Cambridge – have significantly greater proportions of privately educated students than would be representative of the wider student entrant population (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018). Moreover, given that these universities also act as an important conduit to the top positions in British society (Wakeling and Savage, 2015), this is a particularly problematic issue, with these institutions thus playing a highly significant role in perpetuating societal inequalities (Savage, 2015).

The Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission's 'Elitist Britain' (2019) report highlights the UK's striking social and power divides and how these are compounded by attendance at independent schools and later Oxbridge⁹. Indeed, figures from the report show that the most influential positions in society are overwhelmingly dominated by individuals that attended these institutions. For example - given that only 6.4% of UK pupils are privately educated¹⁰ - the report's statistics, including that 65% of senior judges, 59% of permanent secretaries and 44% of newspaper columnists attended independent schools, in addition to the almost identical Oxbridge attendance statistics for these same professions, show the important extent of this issue.

Over the last decade, UK politicians from across the political spectrum have championed a 'fair access' discourse premised on a narrow vision of increased access to elite universities and professions - 'axiomatically an equality of opportunity agenda where the focus is on "levelling up" those who are considered to be falling behind' (Ingram and Gamsu, 2022). This agenda has faced criticism from academics who have questioned the efficacy of this approach in increasing social mobility. Research has shown that even where students from underrepresented backgrounds make it to elite universities and into careers such as those within the elite finance sector, important class and ethnic pay gaps remain (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2019; Friedman and Laurison, 2019). Moreover, it has been argued (e.g. Ingram and Gamsu, 2022) that whilst the minority of disadvantaged individuals that progress to careers like those within elite finance may see their own life chances improve, many of the practices that these firms encourage, such as the privatisation of public services, are contributing to greater social divides. Others have opposed the way in which this narrow social mobility discourse and the widening participation practices it engenders implicitly

⁹ Widely used abbreviation used for the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

¹⁰ Source: <https://www.isc.co.uk/research/>. This figure rises to approximately 18% of post-16 students.

accept and work within the UK's highly stratified university system rather than contributing to a fairer system (McLellan et al., 2016; McLellan et al., 2018; Reay, 2018; Cunningham and Samson, 2021)

Even within government, there has been some recent acknowledgement of the problematic nature of the current narrow social mobility discourse, with the new head of the Social Mobility Commission recently commenting that the social mobility world has become 'too fixated' on getting individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds into elite universities and professions (Social Mobility Commission, 2022). However, there seems to be little genuine political will at large to alter the status quo, with the Social Mobility Commission itself presiding over a 'string of broken promises' (Guardian, 2022). Moreover, the Sutton Trust's recent analysis of the education backgrounds of the new Conservative Prime Minister Liz Truss' first cabinet, which indicates that 68% of whose members were privately educated (the highest proportion since Conservative Prime Minister John Major's 1992 cabinet) and more than a third of whose members attended Oxbridge (with a further third that attended Russell Group institutions), demonstrates the enduring value placed on elite educational pathways by the UK's political leaders (Sutton Trust, 2022).

Whilst the UK's highly stratified university system remains, it is likely that those from more privileged backgrounds will continue to dominate elite universities and professions. Nevertheless, there is still progress that can and is being made. As highlighted within the opening paragraph to this section, the numbers of students from underrepresented groups at elite universities has been steadily increasing (Adams, 2020). This is likely a result of increased widening participation work targeting elite university progression specifically (both that run by individual elite universities and the Russell-Group wide Realising Opportunities programme¹¹, as well as that of third sector organisations like the Sutton Trust¹², Brilliant Club¹³ and The Access Project¹⁴) as well as the rising attainment of certain disadvantaged groups, especially within London and other metropolitan areas (Burgess, 2014; Blanden et al., 2015; Ross et al., 2020). However, as was highlighted within the previous sub-section, despite increasing government recognition of the importance of place for HE progression and disadvantaged students' continuing underrepresentation within elite universities

¹¹ <https://www.realisingopportunities.ac.uk/about/>

¹² <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-programmes/>

¹³ <https://thebrilliantclub.org/>

¹⁴ <https://www.theaccessproject.org.uk/>

(Montacute and Cullinane, 2018), there are currently no place-based policy initiatives within England focussed on elite university progression specifically. Moreover, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, there are few academic studies that have focussed on the role of place for HE access, and even fewer that have considered its impact for elite university progression in any depth.

1.2 Research aims and questions

This policy-driven thesis is the result of work within a pre-defined PhD research project stemming from a broader study - 'Geographical Mobility of UK Higher Education Students'¹⁵ - at the University of Bath. Given the social class and ethnic inequalities in access to elite universities that remain even after accounting for prior attainment (Chowdry et al., 2013; Boliver, 2016), and the under-researched role of geography in explaining these inequalities, the aim of the research project was to explore how place impacts on elite university entry.

The following questions guided the research:

1. *After accounting for individual characteristics and schools, are there geographical differences across England in entry to elite universities?*
 - 1.1. *Which geographical localities send more/fewer students to elite universities than might be expected?*
 - 1.2. *What might explain these geographical patterns of participation?*
2. *How might policymakers and practitioners best address geographical differences in entry to elite universities?*

Guided by a critical realist philosophical stance (Bhaskar, 2008), an innovative explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design was employed (Creswell, 2013). The aim of the first, quantitative phase, was to take a granular look at elite university progression rates by local area across England and to identify and map areas of lower and higher-than-expected participation. The decision to focus on England alone, rather than all UK constituent countries, was due to differences in funding regimes across the countries over the period of the study which may have complicated comparisons between local areas. The aim of the

¹⁵ More information on this programme of research can be found here: [ESRC Future Leaders - Geographical Mobility of UK Higher Education Students — the University of Bath's research portal](#)

subsequent, qualitative phase was to conduct in-depth case study research, including detailed qualitative interviews with young people, teachers, and other relevant stakeholders, in two localities highlighted as of interest in the first quantitative phase.

The research design was aimed at ensuring that the project outputs were highly relevant to policy makers and widening participation practitioners. To this end, the initial quantitative research and mapping were designed to enable patterns of elite university entry nationwide and the observable characteristics of these to be identified, and the subsequent qualitative research, greater understanding of the underlying generative mechanisms shaping areas' under/overrepresentation. Together the findings could then be used to both identify areas with lower-than-expected progression and inform how the entry rates of those living there could be increased.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is presented in the 'alternative' format, with the research findings discussed across three interlinked academic papers (Chapters 4 - 6). They are preceded by the current Introduction chapter (Chapter 1), the Literature review (Chapter 2) and Methodology (Chapter 3) and succeeded by the Conclusion (Chapter 7). An overview of each chapter within the thesis is provided below. Additional commentary text as to how the papers were developed and the interlinks between them is also included.

Chapter 2 contains the study's Literature review. After an initial introductory section, the following four sections examine each of the key areas of literature for this thesis in turn; defining 'elite' within the HE context, the importance of firstly, individual characteristics and secondly, schools for elite HE progression (given the need to account for these factors within analysis of spatial inequalities in access) and finally, the extent to and ways in which the role of place for elite HE progression has been considered by academics and policy makers. The final summary and conclusion section outlines the review's key findings and research gaps identified and how these helped to shape the methodologies used within this thesis and to identify how the study could best contribute to the field.

Chapter 3 presents the study's Methodology. It begins with a short introductory section, followed by in-depth discussion of the critical realist philosophy that guided the study. The

initial quantitative phase of research is then detailed, including description of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data extract and variables used and explanation of the multilevel modelling approach to analysis taken. The following section of the Methodology explains the subsequent qualitative phase of research, first discussing the case study design and research methods employed, before outlining the data analysis process and the decision to include additional secondary data from a related research project to broaden the study's evidence base. The chapter concludes with a section on ethical considerations, including discussion of anonymisation procedures and researcher reflexivity.

Chapter 4, the paper, '*Geographies of elite higher education participation: An urban 'escalator' effect*', draws upon the study's initial quantitative research using a specially requested extract of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for all English-domiciled entrants beginning university in five separate academic years between 2008/09 – 2016/17. Using a series of multilevel models, elite university progression rates by local area were examined, controlling for important individual and contextual-level variables. The area-level residuals from the null and final models were then mapped to observe in which areas young people were more or less likely to progress to elite universities before and after individual and contextual characteristics were controlled for. The paper explores the findings of this modelling and mapping which identified an urban 'escalator' effect within progression and suggested that students from disadvantaged backgrounds living in urban areas have a higher likelihood of progressing to elite universities than similar peers living in more peripheral areas. It draws on the case of London, in which changes within the results of the mapping of area-level residuals from the null and final models was particularly marked, to further explore this urban 'escalator' effect.

The mapping from the final model in the study's quantitative phase was used to select two localities, one with higher-than-expected progression (in East London) and the other (in Nottingham) lower-than-expected progression, for subsequent qualitative case study research. Whilst both case studies were given equal value within the data collection and analysis, discussion of the findings from the East London case study take precedence within the thesis. Paper 2 (Chapter 5) focusses on the East London case study only whilst Paper 3 (Chapter 6) draws on staff discourses from both case studies in addition to data from the wider research programme - 'Geographical Mobility of UK Higher Education Students' - in which the PhD research project originated.

Evidence of a convergence of structural factors facilitating elite university progression within the East London locality and meriting in-depth discussion led to the decision to focus the

second paper, '*A convergence of opportunities: Understanding the high elite university progression of disadvantaged youth in an East London borough*' (**Chapter 5**) on the findings of this case study. The paper examines in turn the four principal factors that emerged as playing potentially significant roles: a shared culture of elite university valorisation across local schools, schools' associated prioritisation of resources and strong framing of university choices to privilege Russell Group progression, students' favourable access to elite university outreach provision, and students' extensive interactions with the capital's elite businesses.

As concerns the final paper, a conversation with my lead supervisor, Dr Michael Donnelly, of the stark differences in opportunity for disadvantaged students evidenced within my East London and Nottingham case studies, gave rise to discussion of similar spatial disparities observed between East London and certain regional interview sites in the fieldwork of the wider research programme - '*Geographical Mobility of UK Higher Education Students*' - from which this pre-defined PhD research project arose. This led to the decision to focus my final paper, '*Spatial division of opportunity: local economic context, elite trajectories, and the widening participation industry*' (**Chapter 6**) on an examination of these spatial disparities, and to use some of the interview data from this wider study to broaden my evidence base for discussion. This paper thus additionally draws on data from Tyneside, Liverpool, Suffolk, and a further locality within East London. The data used from both studies is primarily that of staff interview participants. Discussion focusses on the very different experiences staff had in the different localities with regards to the opportunities they were able to open up to the young people they support and reflection on the impact of this for students' educational and career trajectories.

Chapter 7, the study's Conclusion, draws the thesis to a close. Following an initial introduction section, it proceeds to an examination of the study's key findings and contributions to knowledge, in which the four overarching themes that emerged within the research are considered in turn. The first discussed is the distinct urban-rural patterning to elite university progression identified within the study's initial quantitative phase. The remaining three themes discussed are from the second qualitative phase of work. Of these, the first examined is the role of schools' valorisation of elite university progression and framing of university choices in influencing progression. Subsequently, consideration is given to the uneven access to elite university outreach identified. The final theme discussed is the importance of local economic contexts in shaping the types of HE and career trajectories that disadvantaged students are exposed to. The concluding three sections of the chapter outline the study's important implications for policy makers and widening

participation practitioners and discuss the study's limitations and possible avenues for future research.

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2. Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the four key areas of scholarship relevant to the thesis topic that were examined within the literature review. It begins with discussion of what characteristics make a university 'elite' and which universities have typically been defined 'elite' by researchers within the field. Subsequently, it considers the impact of, firstly, individual characteristics, and secondly, schools, for elite HE access - given the important need to account for these factors when exploring spatial inequalities. It then proceeds to a close examination of research that has looked at the role of place for elite university entry. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature review's key findings, and discussion of how these helped to shape the methodologies used within this research and to define how the study could best contribute to the field.

2.2 Defining 'elite' universities

2.2.1 Academic and social selectivity

A high level of academic selectivity is perhaps the most obvious criterion for what makes a university 'elite'. For example, if we consider the Russell Group of universities, a self-selected group of 24 UK HE institutions¹⁶ that present themselves as 'elite', a typical offer from a constituent university would be 3 A*s (Boliver, 2015). However, several other universities not considered 'elite' also have similar entry requirements (Boliver, 2015), suggesting that this first criterion is perhaps not as clear-cut as it may initially appear.

¹⁶ Russell Group institutions: University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, University of Cambridge, Cardiff University, Durham University, University of Edinburgh, University of Exeter, University of Glasgow, King's College London, Imperial College London, University of Leeds, University of Liverpool, London School of Economics and Political Science, University of Manchester, Newcastle University, University of Nottingham, University of Oxford, Queen Mary University of London, Queen's University Belfast, University of Sheffield, University of Southampton, University College London, University of Warwick and University of York.

Having high entry grades is not the only way in which elite institutions can be selective, however. Indeed, the student makeup of elite institutions shows evidence of prior education selectivity (private vs state) and by association - social class. For example, Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for the 2019/20 academic year indicates that 90.2% of UK-domiciled undergraduate entrants were from a state school background. However, if we look at the undergraduate entrants of Russell Group universities specifically, only two – Queen Mary, University of London and Queen’s University Belfast – had state/private school entrant percentages representative of the overall entrant population (i.e. at least 90.2% of entrants from state school backgrounds) and some had significantly less. Indeed, eight Russell Group institutions, including the UK’s arguably most elite institutions – Oxford and Cambridge – only had between 60-70% state-educated entrants¹⁷.

Though these institutions have often argued (e.g. Butt, 2011; Nicholson, 2013) that this overrepresentation is due to their high entry requirements and that fewer state than private school pupils obtain the necessary grades, this is not the only element of the university application process. Indeed, students must also write a ‘personal statement’¹⁸ and, in some cases, complete an interview. This can place state school pupils at a disadvantage as they frequently lack the same specialist support that pupils at private schools receive to prepare for these (Jones, 2013). Furthermore, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds often lack the same breadth of experiences and ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986) to draw on in their personal statements.

Moreover, this ‘social selection’ does not only occur as a result of disadvantage during the non-academic elements of the admissions process. Indeed, some working-class students, though academically capable, choose not to apply to elite institutions due to their belief that such universities are ‘not for them’ and that they wouldn’t ‘fit in’ there (Reay et al., 2005). Bourdieu (1986) argued that self-limiting beliefs such as these are the result of individual ‘habitus, where a sense of one’s place can lead people to exclude themselves from places from which they feel excluded. For example, in their study of non-traditional applicants to HE, Reay et al. (2001) detailed a conversation with a student who had rejected more elite

¹⁷ In addition to the Universities of Oxford (68.7%) and Cambridge (69.1%), this included the University of Durham (63.5%), University of Edinburgh (63.2%), University of Exeter (64.5%), Imperial College London (67.3%), London School of Economics (67.1%) and University College London (67.6%).

¹⁸ A personal statement is a compulsory part of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) application process in which students are expected to describe their ‘ambitions, skills, and experience’.

universities, such as King's College London, stating 'What's a person like me going to do at a place like that' and saying he would find 'going somewhere like King's daunting'. Savage (2015) has also demonstrated just how pervasive young people's perceptions about elite institutions can be and how attending elite institutions can be associated with having certain 'habitus. Drawing on data from the Paired Peers project¹⁹, he showed how participants drew on perceived markers of social class, such as the clothes and behaviours of students, to distinguish between the two universities in the study – University of Bristol and University of the West of England – and how Russell Group institution, the University of Bristol, was seen as more 'middle class' and 'posh', a view of the university which might put some working-class students off studying there.

Students' individual habitus can also be mediated by the institutional habitus of their schools, as Donnelly (2014) has demonstrated in research within three case study schools as to the hidden messages sent out by schools about Oxbridge. He showed that where schools provided strongly framed messages, making clear who should apply to Oxbridge, pupils with the academic potential to apply were more likely to do so. However, where schools' messages were weakly framed, some young people did not recognise themselves as capable of applying to Oxbridge, despite having the necessary academic ability.

The notion that some students, despite having the necessary grades, choose not to apply to elite institutions finds support in a report by Jerrim (2013) for the Sutton Trust which showed that only 73% of the social-class gap in England in elite university participation can be explained by prior academic achievement. This report does fall short in one notable regard - qualitative enquiry is not used to examine the underlying reasons. Hence whether this gap in elite university participation identified is largely due to the effect of individual or institutional habitus on students' university choices or indeed another cause is not elucidated.

A cursory examination of the UK's A-level attainment statistics is also suggestive that, despite having the necessary grades, a substantial number of English students choose not to apply to elite universities. Taking the University of Cambridge as a case in point, students typically need to obtain 3 A*- A grades at A level (key stage 5) to be considered for entry²⁰.

¹⁹ More information about the Paired Peers project can be found here: <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/projects/paired-peers>

²⁰ University of Cambridge entry requirements: <https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/applying/entrance-requirements>

Department for Education (DfE) statistics for students in England completing key stage 5 in the 2015/16 academic year show that 13.2% of the total 225,732 students obtained 3 A grades or better²¹. 13.2% equates to 29,797 students, yet the University of Cambridge only received applications from 9,201 of those students (30.9% of those who could have considered applying)²². Whilst a similar proportion of students may have applied to the University of Oxford instead (students not being able to apply to both within the same admissions round), these figures are still suggestive of the fact that around a third of high-achieving students that year chose not to apply to the UK's two most 'elite' institutions (Boliver, 2015), despite being in a position to do so. Qualitative enquiry would be required to understand why this may be, but it again raises the question as to what proportion of students considered applying but later chose not to, feeling that such 'elite' institutions were not for them.

2.2.2 An image of prestige

Creating and sustaining an image of 'prestige' appeared as a further important criterion for 'elite' universities. How then do universities that class themselves as elite cultivate and seek to legitimise this image and then reinforce this perception socially? The Russell Group will be used here as a case in point.

The Russell Group is the strongest example of an elite grouping in Britain. As highlighted in the previous sub-section, it is a self-selected group, originally formed in 1994 by 17 research-

²¹ Data available here: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/a-levels-apprenticeships-further-education/students-aged-16-to-18-achieving-3-a-grades-or-better-at-a-level/1.2> Students achieving AAA only would be slightly below the typical minimum requirement for Cambridge of A*AA, however this is the closest comparative measure that can be used, as the DfE's headline statistics only show students obtaining a minimum of AAA. In light of the fact that Cambridge propose contextual admissions, where lower offers can be made in applicable circumstances, this still appears an appropriate comparison to make.

²² Data available here: https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/sites/www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/files/publications/undergrad_admissions_statistics_2016_cycle.pdf

intensive British universities²³ (now numbering 24 institutions²⁴) and which can only be joined by invitation and, for the most recent to join, payment of a substantial fee of £500,000 (Jump, 2013). Cultivating an image of ‘prestige’ has been crucial to the success of the Russell Group and their marketing messages have frequently sought to portray the grouping as being in a league of their own. For example, as Rob Cuthbert, cited in Jump (2013), states, ‘By calling its 2012 report “*Jewels in the Crown*”, the Russell Group showed disregard for the rest of the UK higher education sector [...] The other mission groups take a more inclusive approach by arguing their members are distinctive rather than separate from the rest.’ Examples of the mindset described by Cuthbert can also be seen within the promotional Russell Group Profile²⁵ which contains highly emphatic language. For example, the ‘Welcome’ page alone reveals multiple strong adjectives such as ‘world-class’ and ‘unrivalled’. In addition, superlatives are used at several points to add further emphasis, for example ‘the very best’ and ‘the most distinguished’, the latter being used in a bold statement that Russell Group institutions produce ‘the most distinguished contributors to society’.

Scholarship on elite schools proved insightful in informing further consideration of the ways in which the Russell Group legitimise their ‘prestigious’ status. For example, Courtois (2015) has observed that ‘moral character acts as a principle of distinction and legitimation as [elite] schools pose as the moral vanguards of the nation’. So too it appeared do the institutions of the Russell Group - seeking to use this perceived ‘moral vanguard’ role to strengthen their legitimacy. For example, returning to the Russell Group Profile, the opening section of the ‘Welcome’ page states that Russell Group universities are ‘leading’ institutions that ‘play an important part in the intellectual life of the UK and have huge social, economic and cultural impacts locally, across the UK and around the globe’. Moreover, within a section of bullet points on the institutions’ key characteristics, it is further emphasised that Russell Group universities ‘play a key role in their local communities’.

²³ Original Russell Group members: University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, University of Cambridge, University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, Imperial College London, University of Leeds, University of Liverpool, London School of Economics and Political Science, University of Manchester, Newcastle University, University of Nottingham, University of Oxford, University of Sheffield, University of Southampton, University College London, and University of Warwick.

²⁴ Newer Russell Group members: Cardiff University (joined 1998), Durham University (joined 2012), University of Exeter (joined 2012), King’s College London (joined 1998), Queen Mary University of London (joined 2012), Queen’s University Belfast (joined 2006) and University of York (joined 2012).

²⁵ Russell Group profile: https://russellgroup.ac.uk/media/5523/rg_text_june2017_final.pdf

As Kenway and Fahey (2015) have detailed, the sense of moral superiority and responsibility that many elite schools embody is often linked to their historical background. For example, they note of the social context in Victorian England, a time when increasing numbers of elite schools were established, that

‘Views about the higher orders’ moral responsibility for the lower orders morphed into the philanthropic and other charitable practices associated with the emergent wealthy merchant class.’

This sense of moral responsibility linked to historical background that they describe is also arguably true of certain Russell Group institutions, notably the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, who were instrumental in establishing ‘settlements’ for the poor following the new Poor Law of 1834 (Kenway and Fahey, 2015).

Whilst as illustrated by Kenway and Fahey thus, the drive of elite schools and universities to demonstrate their moral superiority - and thus prestige - is not new, the contemporary political climate has brought increasing urgency to their desire to evidence high moral standards and justify their exclusive status. Indeed, as Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) has noted of elite boarding schools (but which is arguably true of elite institutions across the education spectrum), ‘[they] can no longer remain outside the public gaze and absent from studies and discussions about education, social justice, and inequality’. This is arguably why many elite private schools offer scholarships and bursaries to talented students from less privileged backgrounds, as well as collaborating (for example, offering use of sports grounds) to local state schools. This provides those that run private schools with ‘cover’ when challenged on the privileges their pupils receive as opposed to their state-taught peers. Moreover, in much the same way, this is arguably one of the reasons why Russell Group universities invest so significantly in widening participation programmes and why their running of these programmes is so well-publicised. Thus, when challenged on the overrepresentation of students from private schools at their institutions, they can cite their widening participation programmes as an important way in which they are attempting to address these imbalances.

2.2.3 Definitions within the literature

As concerns the defining of 'elite' universities within academic research, a study by Boliver (2015) which used cluster analysis on a range of publicly available data on UK universities to investigate whether there were distinctive groups of higher and lower status universities offers an interesting starting point for discussion. Boliver's findings demonstrated that pre-1992 institutions (those already established as universities before the binary divide between universities and polytechnics was removed) possessed greater research activity and wealth, as well as higher entrance requirements and numbers of students from advantaged backgrounds, but that their levels of teaching quality were similar to newer (post-1992) institutions. Moreover, her findings also showed that whilst Russell Group members, Oxford and Cambridge, appeared as an elite tier, there were no significant differences between the remaining 22 Russell Group institutions and most other older (pre-1992) universities.

Boliver's assessment that only Oxford and Cambridge could thus be said to form an 'elite' tier, as opposed to the Russell Group more generally, is pertinent for there has been a tendency in previous research examining participation at elite universities in the UK to define 'elite' universities as synonymous with those of the Russell Group. For example, in their study of the role played by geography in access to HE, Manley and Johnston (2014) stated that the Russell Group was the best approximation to elite universities due to their high entry criteria for almost all degree programmes. Wright (2014) similarly elected to use Russell Group institutions as a proxy for elite universities in her study of the determinants of HE participation, making reference to the organisation's mission statement²⁶ and to previous research demonstrating the perceived prestige attached to attending a Russell Group university and the related financial benefits (Hussain et al., 2009).

Whilst Russell Group institutions are thus normally included in relevant research, some government bodies have taken a broader consideration of elite institutions. For example, in their annual student destination data reports, in addition to showing progression to both Oxford and Cambridge and Russell Group institutions separately, the Department for Education (DfE), also provide progression rates to the top third of Higher Education

²⁶ Russell Group mission statement - 'The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector'.

Institutions (HEIs)²⁷. This is suggestive that they do not view the two former groups as the only elite institutions within the UK and brings into question explanations such as that given by Manley and Johnston (2014) that the Russell Group is the best approximation to elite universities due to their high entry criteria.

Some academic research has taken a more detailed approach to defining 'elite' institutions too. For example, in their study of the determinants of HE participation among young people from low socio-economic backgrounds, Chowdry et al. (2013) defined 'elite' universities as any institution which was either within the Russell Group or that had achieved an average score on the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)²⁸ that was higher than the lowest-ranked Russell Group institution. This resulted in a total of 41 institutions, a further 17 institutions²⁹ in addition to those of the Russell Group. This approach to defining elite universities was also adopted by Crawford et al. (2014) (one of the contributing authors to the former paper) in their study of the progress made by high-attaining children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Conversely, Sullivan et al. (2017) elected to add a further two universities to those of the Russell Group to form the 'elite' grouping in their study of the link between social origins and elite pathways, namely the University of Bath and the University of St Andrews. The reason given for their inclusion was that in data on university entry scores between 1989-90 and 2011, both universities consistently featured in the top 30 most selective institutions.

Though not a reason for their inclusion by Sullivan et al. (2017), there is also evidence that, in addition to their high entry requirements, both the University of Bath and the University of St Andrews have high proportions of privately educated students. For example, HESA entry data for the 2019/20 year indicates that the University of St Andrews had a 63.9% state-

²⁷ The DfE calculate the top third of HEIs using the mean Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) A level tariff scores of entrants. In 2017, this included 51 institutions - all 24 Russell Group institutions, plus another 27 universities.
(https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/651015/SFR56_2017_Technical_Note.pdf)

²⁸ Now more commonly known as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) which it was replaced by in 2014.

²⁹ In addition to the Russell Group institutions, this list includes Aston University, University of Bath, Birkbeck College, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of East Anglia, University of Essex, Homerton College, University of Lancaster, University of Reading, Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, Royal Veterinary College, School of Oriental and African Studies, School of Pharmacy, University of Surrey, University of Sussex, University of the Arts London, and University of London.

educated entrant population that year and the University of Bath, 71.9%. This stands in opposition to the 90.2% that would have been expected for a representative population. This finding thus adds further weight to the earlier discussion of elite universities' forms of selectivity and that selectivity is not only academic, but also concerns prior education and by association social class.

2.3 The importance of individual characteristics

This section focusses on research exploring the impacts of three key individual characteristics upon elite HE progression; socio-economic status (SES), ethnicity, and gender. All three of these characteristics have been shown to have important moderating impacts on attainment and students' im/mobility for university study. These factors are both highly important for elite HE progression, given, firstly, the high entry criteria of elite universities, and, secondly, the uneven spatial distribution of elite universities throughout the UK. However, each of these characteristics has also been shown to affect progression to elite universities above and beyond this and discussion here encompasses their other important impacts for progression too. Moreover, what is notable throughout the examination of these characteristics is their deeply intersectional natures.

2.3.1 Socio-economic status

Research has shown that disadvantaged students' typically lower attainment is a highly significant factor within their underrepresentation at elite universities. For example, in the raw analyses within their study of the determinants of HE participation, Chowdry et al. (2013) showed that male and female students from the lowest SES quintile had respectively 31.2 and 31.9 percentage point lower probabilities of progressing to an elite university than their peers in the highest SES quintile. However, once important individual characteristics, most notably attainment, as well as school effects, were accounted for, males and females from the lowest SES quintile were respectively only 2.5 and 4.3 percentage points less likely to progress to an elite HE institution (conditional on HE participation) than students from the highest SES quintile - just 8% and 13% of the raw differences initially identified.

Crawford et al. (2014) have also shown that the lower attainment rates of those from more disadvantaged SES backgrounds is a highly significant driver of their underrepresentation at elite institutions. Their study did however find a more significant remaining socio-economic gap than Chowdry et al. (2013), with pupils from the least deprived backgrounds shown to have a 5.9 percentage point greater likelihood of attending an elite university compared to pupils from the most deprived backgrounds, even once a detailed set of controls was employed.

There is further extensive evidence in the literature showing that students from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to choose to study at a local university than more advantaged peers. Several UK studies have provided evidence to this effect (notably Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Ball et al., 2002b; Callender and Jackson, 2008; Holdsworth, 2009; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018a; White and Lee, 2020) and similar trends have been observed in countries including Australia (Parker et al., 2015), Germany (Spiess and Wrohlich, 2010), The Netherlands (Sa et al., 2006), Canada (Frenette, 2004), and the US (Turley, 2009; Hillman, 2016) too. Perhaps unsurprisingly then - especially given the uneven spatial distribution of elite universities within the UK (Savage, 2015) - distance has been shown to impact on the likelihood of students from lower SES backgrounds in England studying at elite institutions specifically, with students from such backgrounds found to be more likely to choose universities geographically close to them, even if they are of lower status (Gibbons and Vignoles, 2012). Similarly, a study by Mangan et al (2010) considering university entry in two geographic areas, one (Area B) with an elite university proximate and the other (Area A) not, found that high-achieving students in Area B had an 18% increased probability of attending an elite institution in comparison to peers in Area A. This suggests that high-achieving students from lower SES backgrounds in areas with elite universities proximate might have higher propensities to attend them than similar peers with poorer access - a suggestion which the findings of this thesis add weight to.

Finally, with regards to further ways in which socio-economic status has been shown to impact elite HE progression above and beyond its moderating impacts on students' attainment and im/mobility for university, qualitative studies (e.g. Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Reay et al., 2001; Ball et al., 2002a, 2002b) have indicated that a fear of being 'out of place' can put some students from lower SES backgrounds off studying at certain institutions. For example, Reay et al. (2001) detail an interview with a working-class student, Ong, who turned down the offer of a place at Cambridge describing a visit there as 'a complete shock, it was different from anywhere else I have ever been, it was too traditional, too old-fashioned, from another time altogether. I didn't like it at all.'

Boliver (2013) has also hypothesised that some students from lower SES backgrounds may be predicted lower grades than they go on to achieve and suggests that this may be one of the underlying reasons for her study's finding that students from lower SES backgrounds were less likely to apply to elite universities than peers from higher SES backgrounds and private schools, even where they had similar grades. This relates to public policy debates on post-qualification applications, when students apply to university only when their final grades are known – unlike the present UK system when students apply 9 months pre-entry, and nearly a year pre-entry for Oxbridge and Medical/Veterinary courses.

2.3.2 Ethnicity

Several studies (e.g. Gibbons and Vignoles, 2012; Hemsley Brown, 2015; Crawford and Greaves, 2015) have shown that ethnic minority groups tend to be overrepresented at elite universities, even once prior attainment is accounted for. Hemsley-Brown (2015) examined the impact of ethnicity for Russell Group progression using data from over 10,000 respondents to a national student survey and found that Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Chinese students were overrepresented at these institutions. Though she noted that the number of Chinese students in her study was small (2% of respondents), she demonstrated a particularly significant positive association between Chinese nationality and Russell Group attendance. Conversely, though again the sample size was small (2% of respondents), she found that Black students were underrepresented, a finding that has similarly been demonstrated elsewhere (Boliver, 2013; 2018; Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016), although research suggests that in recent years their representation has improved (Arday et al., 2022).

Given the high entry criteria of elite universities, attainment is likely to play a significant role in the overrepresentation of ethnic minority groups at elite universities, with several studies having shown that those from ethnic minority backgrounds tend to achieve higher grades (e.g. Wilson et al., 2011; Burgess et al., 2009). The high attainment of ethnic minority groups has also been suggested as one of the key factors influencing the so-called 'London Effect' - the typically higher academic performance of the capital's pupils compared to peers elsewhere - an effect which is especially marked amongst those from lower SES backgrounds (Burgess, 2014; Blanden et al., 2015). This is further suggestive that ethnic minority students from lower SES backgrounds in London may also be more likely to

progress to elite institutions than similarly disadvantaged peers elsewhere – a suggestion which finds support with this thesis.

Distance is likely to be of importance within the overrepresentation of certain ethnic groups at elite universities too. Bangladeshi and Pakistani students, especially females, have been shown to be more likely to choose universities close to home (Gibbons and Vignoles, 2012) and given that, as Gibbons and Vignoles explain, these ethnic minority groups are also more likely to live closer to a greater number of elite universities, this may well be a factor within their high representation at these universities.

Despite the general overrepresentation of ethnic minority groups at elite universities, important research by Boliver (2016, 2018) using Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) data, has shown that applicants from ethnic minorities are less likely to receive admissions offers from Russell Group universities than white applicants with similar attainment. Whilst her findings partly corroborate received opinion that students from ethnic minorities receive fewer offers due to their greater disposition to select subjects with a high number of applicants, importantly her research has also demonstrated that ethnic inequalities occur more frequently for courses where students from ethnic minorities represent a larger percentage of the applicants. This brings into question a worrying concern that Boliver herself highlights, as to whether some admissions staff could be rejecting a proportion of their applicants from ethnic minorities to achieve a student demographic that is more ethnically representative.

2.3.3 Gender

As indicated previously, attainment is a highly significant factor for entry to elite institutions and girls consistently achieve higher grades at key stage 4 and 5 than boys (Adams, 2021). However, research has suggested that girls' typically higher attainment does not significantly impact the overall gender split at elite universities. For example, drawing on HESA data for 2010-11, Ratcliffe (2013) showed that whilst there were twice as many female undergraduates at some universities, the gender split at Russell Group institutions was more evenly balanced. Likewise, whilst acknowledging their higher entry grades, Hemsley-Brown (2015) also did not identify an advantage among the female students in her study with regards to Russell Group entry.

However, whilst males overall may not be underrepresented at elite institutions – and indeed are overrepresented at some (e.g. Ratcliffe (2013) has shown that males constitute two thirds of undergraduates at Imperial College) – several studies have shown that white working-class males are a particularly underrepresented group both within HE more broadly and more specifically at elite universities. For example, in a study of the impact of socio-economic status, ethnicity and gender for HE participation, Crawford and Greaves (2015) showed that only 10% of white males from the lowest SES quintile entered university in 2008 and that Chinese males within the same quintile were 23.5 percentage points more likely than them to attend a selective institution. Again, research has shown that their underrepresentation is largely due to their low educational attainment (Baars et al., 2016) – white working-class boys are the lowest performing group academically (Strand, 2014) – however this does not entirely account for their low progression rates.

It may be that the financial costs of attending university are a barrier for white working-class males as they are for students from lower SES backgrounds more generally (Callender and Jackson, 2008). However, Bowes et al. (2015) have suggested that a particular concern of white working-class boys is as to whether the cost of a degree is worth their investment. Indeed, Forsyth and Furlong (2003) have shown that students from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to study for a Higher National Diploma (HND) or take a Further Education (FE) course. As Baars et al. (2016) have proposed thus, this is perhaps because the financial benefits of such a route can be realised more quickly than those from a university degree.

2.4 The influence of schools

As highlighted earlier in this chapter, almost all universities typically classed ‘elite’ have greater numbers of privately educated students than would be representative of the university entrant population. Several studies (e.g. Wright, 2014; Gamsu, 2017, 2018; Montacute and Cullinane, 2018; Gamsu and Donnelly, 2021) have similarly highlighted this phenomenon, as well as their high proportions of grammar school pupils. The overrepresentation of privately educated pupils at elite universities has been shown to be especially the case at Oxford and Cambridge and the historic London institutions known collectively as the ‘Golden Triangle’ (Wakeling and Savage, 2015). Such students have also been observed to be particularly overrepresented within the Russell Group institutions of cities like Exeter and Durham which are typically seen by these individuals as more affluent,

desirable locales than the post-industrial cities in which some other Russell Group universities are situated (Gamsu and Donnelly, 2021; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2022).

The generally higher attainment of pupils at private and grammar schools (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018) undoubtedly plays an important role within their overrepresentation at elite universities. However, research has suggested that even once attainment is accounted for, private and grammar schools have significantly higher progression rates. For example, in research using Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) data for the 2010 application cycle and accounting for attainment and other important individual characteristics, Wright (2014) found that young people attending private schools were still three and a half times more likely, and those attending grammar schools nearly three times as likely, to progress to Russell Group institutions than their state-educated peers. It appears likely that the historic and deeply embedded culture and expectations of pupils at private and certain grammar schools to progress to these institutions (Reay et al., 2005; Reeves et al., 2017; Gamsu and Donnelly, 2021, Donnelly and Gamsu, 2022), such as the 'implicit presumption of compatibility to Oxbridge' that Reay et al. (2005) have described, play a key role in explaining these remaining differences in progression.

Whilst such an 'institutional habitus' (Reay et al., 2005) which privileges elite university progression is more typical of private schools, research has also found evidence of similar cultures and associated practices occurring in some state schools and seemingly linked to higher progression rates to institutions like Oxford and Cambridge there too (Oliver and Kettley, 2010; Donnelly 2014, 2015; Taylor et al., 2018). Given the narrow social mobility discourse championed in recent years, focussed on equal opportunities of entry to elite universities and employment positions (Ingram and Gamsu, 2022), and an increasingly marketised state education system in which some schools use their Russell Group progression rates as a marker of distinction (Burgess, 2018, 2021), school cultures that privilege elite university progression may be becoming more prevalent. This could perhaps be especially the case within state schools in areas with a saturated sixth form market or localities with structural characteristics that facilitate the promulgation of such discourses - a suggestion to which the findings of this thesis offer support.

2.5 Academic and policy considerations of place

2.5.1 Introduction

The way in which, firstly, place has been generally distinguished from space and, secondly, the use of different approaches to considering place, have impacted on the way that research into spatial inequalities has been conducted. It is therefore of value here to examine the principal theories on space and place before taking a more in-depth look at relevant research concerning spatial inequalities in access to elite universities.

Cresswell (2015) emphasises the specificity of place and the generality of space, stating that 'when humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way (naming is one such way) it becomes a place.' Turning to a closer definition of place, he notes that there are three main levels at which academics have considered place: a descriptive approach, a social-constructionist approach, and a phenomenological approach.

Theorists employing a descriptive approach to place have taken as a starting point the idea of the world consisting of a set of distinct entities, e.g. Cresswell (2015) states that a writer following this approach may consider 'the geography of the North of England' or 'The soul of San Francisco.' He adds that this approach was initially adopted by regional geographers and was particularly influential within the first half of the twentieth century, but that its use continues in the present day. More recently, geographers influenced by this theory have been primarily interested in the way regions as places have been purposely shaped by political actors to institutionalise specific ideas about regional government and governance (e.g. Paasi, 2002, MacLeod and Jones, 2001).

With regards to the social-constructionist approach, Cresswell (2015) recounts that theorists of this persuasion, whilst still interested in the specificity of places, are more concerned with the social processes underlying them and the acts of exclusion upon which places are constructed. This is an approach that has been championed by Poststructuralists (e.g. Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, DeLanda, 2006), Marxists (e.g. Harvey, 1996) and Feminists (e.g. Massey, 2005) among others. As Cresswell notes, this approach involves explanation of the specific qualities of a place, such as London Docklands or Baltimore Harbour by demonstrating how structures such as patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism, and post-colonialism among others have shaped them.

Finally, as concerns the phenomenological approach, Cresswell (2015) comments that theorists in this field are not particularly concerned by the specificities of places nor the social forces involved in their construction. Instead, they have sought to characterise human existence as necessarily and primordially 'in-place' (e.g. Sack, 1997, Malpas, 1999). As Cresswell explains, 'This approach is less concerned with "places" and more interested in "Place"'. Humanistic geographers (e.g. Tuan, 1974, Sack, 1997) and phenomenological philosophers (e.g. Malpas, 1999, Casey, 1996) have championed this approach.

Of the three main approaches to place described by Cresswell (2015), that which has most influenced the academics working in the field of spatial inequalities in access to Higher Education, is the social-constructionist approach. More precisely, as Donnelly and Evans (2016) explain, 'researchers in the UK [...] have tended to foreground the social and cultural contexts in which young people are situated, and the material, social and cultural resources (or capitals) they draw upon, as explanatory influences/factors.'

2.5.2 Quantitative considerations of place

Focussing on research in the UK context, the literature review identified only one study, a report for the Sutton Trust by Montacute and Cullinane (2018), that set out to examine the role of place (in addition to schools) for progression to elite universities. However - and whilst there is still a relative paucity of research here overall - in recent years there have been a burgeoning number of studies that have considered the role of place for HE access more broadly and that have included some examination of its role within elite HE progression more specifically. Starting with the Montacute and Cullinane (2018) study, this sub-section considers relevant research that has taken primarily quantitative approaches to looking at place. The following sub-section examines research that has employed primarily qualitative approaches to the topic.

In their report for the Sutton Trust, Montacute and Cullinane (2018) used Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) data for three application cycles (2014/15, 2015/16 and 2016/17) to examine applications and acceptances by school type, region, and Local Education authority (LEA) to both Russell Group universities and Oxbridge more specifically. They found considerable regional differences in the proportion of state school HE applicants that gained places at Oxbridge, showing that approximately 1.5% of HE applicants from the South West, South East, East of England and London progressed to these universities, in

contrast to only around 0.8% of applicants from the North and the Midlands. Moreover, using further data obtained in a Freedom of Information request by MP David Lammy, they also showed that certain regions were significantly over-represented within Oxbridge applications. Indeed, they demonstrated that between 2010 - 2015, the University of Cambridge made nearly 50% of its offers to applicants from the South East and London, in comparison to only 15% or less to applicants from the North West, North East, Yorkshire and the Humber and Midlands.

As noted by Montacute and Cullinane in the report, the majority of differences in offers by region observed were as a result of fewer students in those areas applying to Oxbridge. Nevertheless, the authors found significant regional differences in acceptance rates to Oxbridge, showing that 35% of those that applied to the University of Cambridge from the South East gained a place compared to only 30% of those that applied in the North West and just over a quarter of Welsh applicants. With regards to the University of Oxford, they showed that applicants from the North East and East had the highest acceptance rates (27%) compared to only around 20% of students from Wales and the Midlands.

The authors also demonstrated regional differences in acceptances to the broader Russell Group, finding a five-percentage point difference between the region with the highest proportion of acceptances (South West) and those with the lowest proportions (East and West Midlands). Moreover, considering just those who applied to the Russell Group, they showed that students' chances of being successful with their application varied by region with nearly 50% of East of England applicants successfully gaining places, compared to approximately 40% of students from the North East and the West Midlands.

Montacute and Cullinane (2018) also examined and mapped acceptance rates to Russell Group and Oxbridge by Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in England. Their analyses showed that most LEAs had acceptance rates to Russell Group institutions of between 20-30% but that there were LEAs which had rates that were considerably above or below these. In particular, the authors highlighted a band of low Russell Group progression 'running from the areas surrounding Liverpool, through to those around Manchester, across the Pennines to the area above Sheffield, and further east over to the areas in and around Hull' and noted that this is despite this area of the country having the highest number of Russell Group universities outside of the capital. They further observed that the places with the highest acceptance rates to Russell Group institutions tended to be affluent areas in Southern England.

In terms of Oxbridge, the authors indicated that many of the LEAs that had low Russell Group acceptances also had low levels of Oxbridge acceptances, but that the geographical divide was starker for Oxbridge, with some areas in the Midlands and North that had relatively higher Russell Group acceptance levels, having much lower Oxbridge ones compared to areas in the South. Again, they noted that acceptance rates were highest in local authorities in affluent areas in Southern England.

As part of a broader study looking at the geography of access to HE with a focus on the geographical locations of schools (and controlling for school type, catchment area and education environment), Manley and Johnston (2014) included some examination of Russell Group progression specifically within their analyses. Using aggregate school-level data from 2012 and situating schools within regions using a breakdown into 25 areas of the nine standard regions typically used within official statistics on England, the authors demonstrated evidence of a 'North-South' divide within Russell Group university progression. Indeed, they showed that eight Southern regions (London Central, South East C, London South, East of England B, South West A, London East, London West, and South East D) had lower progression rates to these universities than the rest of England, a finding they describe as surprising given that the South of England is typically more affluent than the North, so 'the general expectation would probably be of higher participation rates'.

As part of her doctoral thesis which examined post-16 and university progression in England, Wright (2014) also included some analyses focussed on the determinants of Russell Group progression specifically, using a series of multilevel models to include examination of the importance of the contexts (school, Local Super Output Area (LSOA), census ward, local authority, and region) in which students were situated. Using university entry data from UCAS for all students who applied to study at university during the 2010 application cycle, she showed that even when contextual variables were included, there remained significant unexplained variance at the LSOA, school, and local authority levels, with school-level variance in particular strikingly high. She also observed a regional effect, even once proximity to Russell Group universities was accounted for, finding that young people living in local authorities in North West England had higher odds of progressing to a Russell Group university than young people living in the East, South East, and South West.

Of further interest for the research to be conducted within this thesis, is Wright's mapping of local authority level residuals from her final model, used to examine within which young people were more or less likely to progress to Russell Group universities. Through this, she identified distinct clusters of local authorities with typically higher progression in three areas:

North West, North East and London. Within London, she observed that the local authorities of Barnet, Camden, Westminster, and Hackney had the highest progression. The findings presented in this thesis add further weight to her analyses, and also suggest school-based and regional factors that might explain the generative mechanisms here.

In research focussed on the role of place within HE access more broadly, Donnelly and Gamsu (2018a, 2018b) demonstrated important regional patterns of im/mobility for university study in the UK. In particular, they identified distinctive patterns of immobility in the North West, North East and Wales, patterns that they suggest may stem from a particular attachment to region amongst some young people in these places linked to these areas' industrial heritage and to intergenerational cultural experiences, similar to the findings of qualitative work discussed in the following sub-section (Donnelly and Evans, 2016; Whewall, 2020; Ingram, 2009). Donnelly and Gamsu also contend that their findings highlighted (in a similar vein to Finn and Holton's work - Holton and Finn, 2018; Finn, 2017) that whilst immobility is typically more common amongst those from lower socio-economic and certain ethnic backgrounds, there is no simple binary between middle-class mobility and working-class immobility.

Indeed, Donnelly and Gamsu (2018a, 2018b) found evidence of distinctive patterns of middle-class, as well as working-class immobility - particularly in the North East – and which run counter to the normative middle-class trajectory of moving away for university (Holdsworth, 2009). They also identified a significant number of unexpectedly immobile middle-class students in and around the capital and suggest that the presence of the elite 'Golden Triangle' institutions – a subset of particularly elite institutions within the broader Russell Group, all located in and around the capital (Wakeling and Savage, 2015) - is almost certainly key in explaining this. Indeed, as Wakeling and Savage (2015) have shown, whilst students that attend a Russell Group university tend to have better graduate opportunities in general, attendance at a 'Golden Triangle' university appears to offer a particular graduate premium. As Donnelly and Gamsu (2018b) outline thus, this has important implications for patterns of elite reproduction, as there is a sharp contrast in the likely future social position of students living in London and the South East who are 'strategically immobile' in order to attend a 'golden triangle' university and immobile students within other English regions like the North East who attend a local Russell Group institution.

Given the unequal spatial distribution of elite universities in the UK highlighted above, a few studies (notably Mangan et al., 2010 and Gibbons and Vignoles, 2012) have included consideration of the impact of this distribution for elite university progression and have found

evidence that students living close to elite institutions have typically higher progression rates. As noted earlier within the discussion of the role of individual characteristics for elite university progression, this has important implications for the progression of students from lower socio-economic and certain ethnic backgrounds who are more likely to choose a university close to home (Mangan et al., 2010; Gibbons and Vignoles, 2012; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018a; 2018b). Moreover, further to the discussion of Donnelly and Gamsu's (2018b) and Wakeling and Savage's (2015) findings above, this is potentially also suggestive that, just as their immobile middle-class peers attending Golden Triangle institutions may be advantaged over immobile middle-class peers elsewhere attending their local Russell Group institutions, immobile working-class students in and around London who make it to Golden Triangle universities may be advantaged over immobile working-class peers elsewhere. This thus has potentially important implications for social mobility.

An examination of quantitative approaches to place must also include consideration of the use of data aggregated at the neighbourhood level to examine the role of 'neighbourhood effects' for HE progression - a concept which features strongly in government education policy research and interventions. As Crossley (2017) has noted, studying neighbourhood effects involves comparing the social and economic outcomes for people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods with those in more prosperous neighbourhoods and examining the underlying reasons for this.

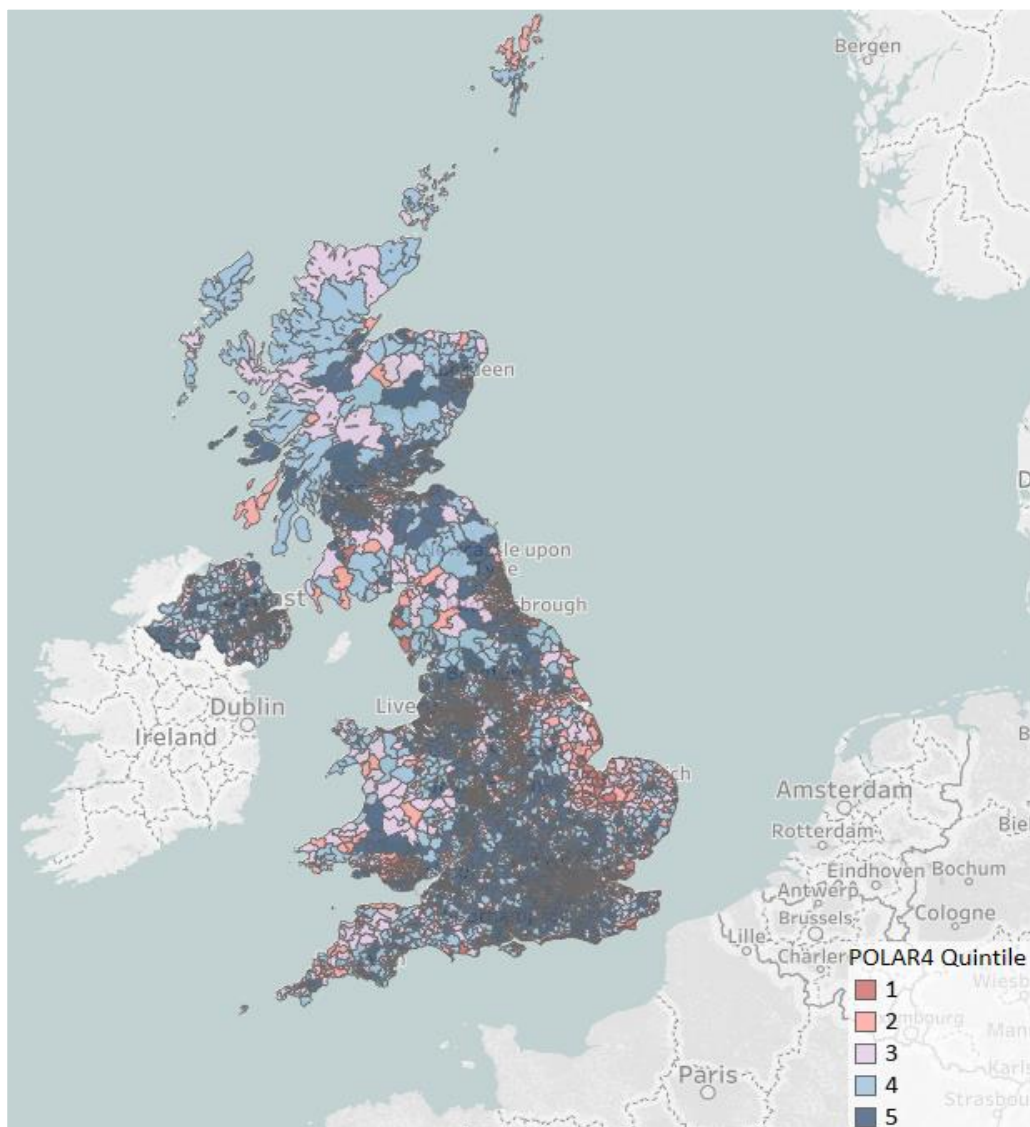
As outlined within Chapter 1, government policy interest in the impact of 'neighbourhood effects' for HE progression started in earnest with the launch of the Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) methodology in 2005. The POLAR classification examines how likely young people are to participate in HE at age 18 or 19 according to the area in which they live³⁰. The methodology now in its fourth iteration – POLAR4 – is no longer due to receive any further updates, however it remains a very influential tool within UK HE policy as it is used to calculate the funding allocated by the Office for Students (OfS) to universities for widening participation activities, such as the Uni Connect programme³¹, and to measure institution performance (Boliver et al., 2022).

Figure 2-1 shows the POLAR map that can be accessed by practitioners.

³⁰ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-polar-and-adult-he/>

³¹ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/>

Figure 2-1: POLAR map



Whilst the concept of ‘neighbourhood effects’ has become highly influential within government HE access policy and interventions, it has faced considerable academic criticism. In an influential paper on ‘neighbourhood effects’, Bauder (2002) contended that the concept is suggestive of the idea that ‘the demographic context of poor neighbourhoods instils ‘dysfunctional’ norms, values and behaviours into individuals and triggers a cycle of social pathology and poverty that few residents escape’. In a similar vein, Slater (2013) has argued that the reason ‘neighbourhood effects’ studies have become so influential is because the concept is ‘seductively simple and, on the surface, very convincing’. He stresses how the concept of neighbourhood effects appeals to politicians attempting to draw

the public's attention away from the unforeseen consequences of their own policies and therefore keen to capitalise on problems caused in and by disadvantaged areas. Indeed, he later asserts that:

'Neighbourhood effects' is therefore more than merely a concept – it is an *instrument of accusation*, a veiled form of class antagonism that conveniently has no place for any concern over what happens *outside* the very neighbourhoods under scrutiny.

Furthermore, several academics (notably Singleton, 2010, Wright, 2014; Boliver et al., 2022) have contested the validity of methodologies such as POLAR based on neighbourhood effects, as in using aggregate data and thus ascribing a single HE participation rate for each area examined, they assume homogeneity within localities, committing the ecological fallacy by imposing a group average onto individuals. The POLAR methodology has also been demonstrated to be particularly unsuitable for identifying areas of disadvantage within London, where housing types and levels of affluence within localities can vary significantly. (Atherton et al., 2019).

2.5.3 Qualitative considerations of place

Qualitative research that has considered the role of place for HE progression has tended to focus on social reproduction theory and the works of Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of 'habitus' (Donnelly and Evans, 2016). Bourdieu (1993) defined 'habitus' as a complex interplay between past and present, a concept that 'refers to something historical, it is linked to individual history'. As Reay (2004) has noted, individual histories are therefore essential in understanding habitus, yet that is not to say that it is fixed – rather an individual's habitus is 'permeable and responsive' to the world around. In the context of HE therefore, 'habitus suggests that young people's university choices are influenced by their childhood experiences and that those with limited cultural capital may face certain psychological constraints within their decision-making processes. This can thus affect which universities or types of university (if any) they would feel comfortable attending, as well as the geographical localities they would consider studying in and their associated physical and social distances.

Discussing their study of non-traditional applicants to HE, Reay et al. (2001) noted that the interview transcripts of working-class students were 'saturated with a localism that was absent from the narratives of more economically privileged students'. For example, the authors included an excerpt of a conversation with a student named Khalid where he states, 'You see City University is walking distance from my home, Westminster is also walking distance, but it's not that short as it is to City University. So, I'm sort of still thinking.' The authors do note that Khalid is perhaps an extreme example but emphasise that most of the working-class students also demonstrated a sense of geographical constraints.

In his doctoral research looking at how place, space, and class shape students' mobility for university, Whewall (2020) similarly argued that the university orientations of students from his case study school in deindustrialised Rotherham, South Yorkshire were geographically constrained. Indeed, he comments that a desire to stay relatively close to home was expressed in almost all interviews and that this further appeared to relate to the 'local habitus' (Ingram, 2009) of the Rotherham area. Ingram (2009) has described 'local habitus' as the 'interpenetration of locality and identity', as something that relates to the present and historical characteristics of a place and the mediating effects that this has on habitus on an individual but also collective level. It is in a sense a co-constitutive habitus between the locality and the individuals that live there. Reflecting on students' desires to attend a university close to home thus, Whewall (2020) described this inclination as not just a desire to be physically proximate, but also to be somewhere socially and culturally proximate too.

As concerns elite universities specifically, Whewall (2020) suggested that one of the reasons why only two of his participants went on to study at Russell Group universities (despite all 10 students applying to at least one university in the grouping as their school strongly encouraged students to apply there) might have been that the pull to stay local was so powerful that it resulted in some students choosing nearby, less prestigious institutions. He further comments that it might also have been that some students applied simply to appease their teachers, rather than having a genuine personal desire to attend one - given the potentially important impacts of individual and local habitus in shaping students' preferences.

Whilst also acknowledging the impact of 'habitus', Donnelly and Evans (2016) found the concept alone inadequate in explaining the HE choices made by the students in their case study areas (Newport and the Rhondda). Indeed, they argue that their findings demonstrated how the level of local attachment felt by their student interviewees resulted in differences in how they qualified their HE choices, with those from the Rhondda who had opted to study

at Welsh universities much more likely to explain, regardless of their social class, that this was due to feelings of attachment to Wales more generally, as well as to their home locality. For this reason, Donnelly and Evans contend that young people should be recognised as being situated within both national and local geographical contexts and stress the importance of exploring the significance of these contexts, not just for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, but for students from all social-class positions. Moreover, it is this justification that they give for finding Bourdieu's habitus inadequate in this context, for it does not account for perceptions of space that remain constant across class levels. The authors argue thus that choosing to adopt such a frame of reference may limit understanding of how national identity and locality are involved in young people's HE decision-making processes.

Of further relevance for the research to be conducted within this thesis, is Donnelly and Evans' reflection that students with a strong attachment to Wales and desire to study there would have limited options in terms of 'elite' universities, with there being only one university – Cardiff University – typically regarded as such given its Russell Group membership and international/national ranking (though Wales has other 'older' institutions such as Bangor and Swansea classed as such within Wales). As the authors themselves further speculate, the HE mobilities of young people in other localities within the UK may also be affected by their level of attachment to their local area. Indeed, students in areas of England such as Devon and Cornwall with a strong local attachment and wishing to study at an 'elite' university would also be similarly constrained, as there is again only one university – the University of Exeter – generally considered 'elite' in terms of national and international rankings and Russell Group membership.

Finally, a research report by Wiseman et al. (2017) for the Department for Education (DfE) using quantitatively framed qualitative research to explore why some areas had higher/lower than expected university participation (considering GCSE attainment and ethnicity) also proved insightful for this study. Using Office for Students (OfS) data³², the authors categorised census wards into deciles depending on their 'participation gap' - the difference between their actual and expected university participation (given attainment and ethnicity). The results of this analysis were then used to select eight localities across England for case study research.

³² This study refers to data from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) by which name the Office for Students was formerly known. This data is no longer available on the OfS website but can still be accessed via the archived HEFCE website: [\[ARCHIVED CONTENT\] Gaps in young participation into higher education - Higher Education Funding Council for England \(nationalarchives.gov.uk\)](https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ARCHIVED_CONTENT/Gaps_in_young_participation_into_higher_education_-_Higher_Education_Funding_Council_for_England)

The authors found a complex range of factors influencing HE participation, which they note appeared to interact in different ways within different places. Notably, they highlight several characteristics found to be typically present in areas where progressing to university tended to be viewed very positively, including interview participants in these areas being more likely to see university as a route to social mobility, as well as there being generally greater visibility of graduate jobs and greater opportunities for young people to encounter a diverse range of professionals. The authors also found evidence of varying advice and guidance on university across areas and schools but did not find a clear link between these and areas' levels of participation in HE. A final finding of interest within the study concerned the results of the authors' accompanying econometric analysis of secondary survey data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), which suggested regional differences amongst young people and parents in the ways in which HE is typically perceived, especially between London and other areas within England. The findings presented in this thesis suggest that several of the factors highlighted by Wiseman et al. (2017) also play significant roles in explaining why some areas have lower and higher than expected progression rates to elite universities specifically, and further highlight important divides between London and other parts of England.

2.6 Summary and conclusions

The literature review examined four areas of scholarship pertinent to the thesis; the characteristics of elite universities and how they have been defined within previous research, the impact of, firstly, individual characteristics and secondly, schools, on elite HE progression (given the need to account for these factors within analyses of spatial inequalities), and crucially for the research topic, the extent to and ways in which the role of place within elite HE progression has been examined.

With regards to research on elite universities, most of the studies detailed used the institutions of the Russell Group as a proxy, although a few (notably, Chowdry et al., 2013; Crawford et al., 2014; and Sullivan et al., 2017) acknowledged that there are other universities that share very similar characteristics and chose to adopt broader definitions. Boliver (2015) questioned whether the institutions of the Russell Group do form an elite tier and concluded from her detailed cluster analysis that only the Oxbridge institutions could be said to form a standout elite group, with the remaining Russell Group institutions instead

forming part of a second broader group of highly ranked institutions along with most other older (pre-1992) institutions.

An examination of the characteristics that universities within 'elite' groupings typically possess revealed two key defining factors, selectivity and prestige. With regards to selectivity, firstly, these institutions are very academically selective. Moreover, this is not only true of Russell Group institutions but arguably of several other institutions within the UK which have similarly high entry requirements (e.g. those within the DfE's list of top third institutions). Secondly, there is evidence of a degree of social selection, for example HESA data for the academic year 2019/20³³ showed that only two of the 24 Russell Group institutions (Queen's University Belfast and Queen Mary), had proportions of state to privately educated students that were representative of the England entrant population (i.e. at least 90.2% state-educated students). This HESA data further showed that other universities that have been considered 'elite' within the literature, for example, the University of St Andrews and the University of Bath which are included within the 'elite' proxy used by Sullivan et al (2017), also have much lower proportions of state-educated students than would be expected (University of St Andrew's = 63.9% and University of Bath = 71.9%).

Concerning 'prestige', elite institutions see themselves as having a leading role to play in society and one of the ways in which they assert this role is through the quality of their research. For example, the Russell Group claims to 'produce more than two-thirds of the world-leading research produced in UK universities'³⁴. There are several other institutions which are arguably elite in this sense too, however. Indeed, Chowdry et al. (2013) and Crawford et al. (2014) identify a further 17 institutions that achieved an average score on the 2001 RAE that was at least as high as that of the lowest-ranked RG institution.

As concerns the impact of socio-economic status, ethnicity, and gender on elite HE progression, the literature review revealed that these are notable firstly for their moderating impacts on attainment - attainment being the single biggest factor influencing elite HE progression (Wright, 2014; Taylor et al., 2018) - but importantly that each also impacts upon progression above and beyond this. Their moderating impacts on students' im/mobility for university - another important factor for progression given the unequal spatial distribution of elite universities (Wakeling and Savage, 2015) - were also shown to be important (Gibbons and Vignoles, 2012; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018a, 2018b). Moreover, the literature review

³³ Data available here: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/widening-participation>

³⁴ <https://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/our-universities/>

highlighted the deeply intersectional nature of these characteristics' impacts for elite HE progression. This appeared to be particularly the case for some groups, for example white working-class boys who are both the lowest performing group academically (Strand, 2014) and the least represented group within higher education (Crawford and Greaves, 2015).

The literature review further revealed schools to play an important role within progression to elite HE institutions. Private and grammar school pupils were shown to be significantly overrepresented at elite institutions (Wright, 2014; Gamsu, 2017, 2018; Montacute and Cullinane, 2018; Gamsu and Donnelly, 2021), especially at 'Golden Triangle' institutions (Wakeling and Savage, 2015) and elite institutions situated within locales seen as more affluent and desirable like Exeter and Durham (Gamsu and Donnelly, 2021; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2022). These pupils' typically higher attainment (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018) plays an important role within their overrepresentation, but even once this is accounted for, private and grammar school pupils still have much higher progression rates (Wright, 2014). In terms of what explains these remaining differences, the deeply embedded cultures and expectations of pupils at private and grammar schools to progress to elite universities (Reay et al., 2005; Reeves et al., 2017; Gamsu and Donnelly, 2021, Donnelly and Gamsu, 2022) are likely key.

The literature review also showed that whilst an 'institutional habitus' (Reay, 2005) privileging elite university progression is more typically found within private schools, similar cultures and associated practices have been observed within some state schools (Oliver and Kettle, 2010; Donnelly 2014, 2015) and linked to higher progression rates to elite universities there too. The review also highlighted the increasingly narrow social mobility discourse championed within the UK (Ingram and Gamsu, 2022) which may mean school cultures privileging elite university progression could be expanding within certain state schools, perhaps especially those in areas with structural conditions which might favour such discourses.

Finally, as concerns place, the literature review identified only one study (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018) that specifically set out to examine how place impacts elite university progression (as opposed to university entry overall). Nevertheless, it identified several recent studies that have looked at the role of place for HE progression more generally and included some consideration of its role for elite HE progression more specifically within this. Montacute and Cullinane's (2018) study, as well as those of Manley and Johnston (2014) and Wright (2014) were found to be insightful in illustrating regional and local authority patterns of Russell Group (and in the case of Montacute and Cullinane, Oxbridge)

progression across England, although they differed in some of the patterning identified. However, as uniquely quantitative studies, they were only able to hypothesise as to the reasons why certain areas were under and overrepresented, they were not able to examine possible underlying generative mechanisms.

Conversely, the qualitative research reviewed, notably that of Donnelly and Evans (2016) and Whewall (2020) was insightful in demonstrating the important impacts that local attachments and desires to study somewhere socially and culturally proximate can have for students' university choices. Given the intensive nature of qualitative research however, both these studies were small-scale, and their findings thus of limited generalisability to other geographic areas. Moreover, whilst the authors of both studies included some reflection on the impacts that these factors might have for elite HE progression in the localities in which the research took place, both were focussed on HE progression more broadly. Similarly, whilst also focussed on HE participation more generally and containing little consideration of how these factors may impact on elite university progression more specifically, Wiseman et al.'s (2017) research report for the DfE was further insightful in highlighting certain characteristics associated with areas with higher/lower than expected HE progression.

The examination of research on the impact of place for HE progression also included consideration of the use of quantitative data aggregated at the neighbourhood level to look at 'neighbourhood effects'. Whilst its use for such purposes is controversial in some academic circles (Bauder, 2002; Slater, 2013), examining the role of neighbourhood effects within HE progression has become increasingly popular within government policy research as outlined within Chapter 1. For example, the Office for Students' POLAR and TUNDRA methodologies both use aggregate data to map areas of high and low HE participation. Moreover, these methodologies are highly influential within policy interventions, for example the POLAR methodology is used in the targeting of the government's nationwide Uni Connect programme. However, the use of aggregate data for this purpose – thus ascribing a single university participation rate to each area examined - has faced considerable academic criticism (notably Singleton, 2010; Wright, 2014; Boliver et al., 2022) as in doing so it assumes homogeneity within areas and commits the ecological fallacy through imposing a group average on individuals. It has also been shown to be particularly problematic in identifying disadvantaged areas within London, where types of housing and levels of affluence within the same local area are often very mixed (Atherton et al., 2019).

In conclusion, this review of extant literature helped shape decisions about the methodologies used in this thesis and enabled the ways in which this research could best

contribute to the field to become apparent. Firstly, given the limitations noted of taking a purely quantitative (unable to explore underlying generative mechanisms) or purely qualitative (necessarily small-scale and reduced generalisability) approach to this topic, the review affirmed the choice of a mixed-methods research approach for the study. The successful mixed-methods approach taken by Wiseman et al. (2017) in their report exploring why some areas have higher/lower than expected university participation provided further validation to the choice of a mixed-methods approach for this research with similar aims but focussed on elite university entry specifically.

Secondly, given the important limitations of using aggregate data highlighted in relation to the Office for Students' POLAR and TUNDRA methodologies, I chose to use individual-level data within the quantitative phase of research and my mapping of elite university progression by local area accounted for important individual-level factors. This also represents an important way in which this thesis's mapping expanded on that conducted by Montacute and Cullinane (2018), who mapped the proportions of Russell Group and Oxbridge acceptances of all HE applicants by Local Education Authorities (LEAs), but again did not control for applicants' individual-level characteristics. Like Montacute and Cullinane, Wright (2014) also mapped progression to Russell Group universities by LEAs and did take account of applicants' individual-level characteristics. However, the mapping in this thesis also expanded on that of Wright in its mapping at the MSOA level - a much smaller geographical hierarchy than LEAs - thus enabling a more granular examination of the role of place for elite HE progression.

Thirdly, as it was shown that using the Russell Group alone as a proxy for 'elite' institutions was problematic given that there are other universities which share very similar characteristics, I chose to adopt a more comprehensive elite construct, outlined within Chapter 3 (Methodology). Whilst Boliver (2015) has argued that only Oxford and Cambridge can be said to form a truly distinctive 'elite' tier of universities, I nonetheless opted to use a broader definition given the considerable academic and policy interest paid to these institutions already. Fourthly, given the importance of schools for elite HE progression demonstrated, I ensured their impact was accounted for within my statistical models. Schools' influence upon students' HE choices also emerged as an important theme within my subsequent case study research and the studies in relation to schools outlined within the literature review were a valuable resource in helping explain my findings.

Finally, the review further highlighted the importance of socio-economic background, ethnicity, and gender for elite HE progression, demonstrating not only their individual

impacts and intersectional natures, but also their important moderating impacts upon attainment and distance travelled – both crucial factors for elite HE progression given the highly academically-selective nature of such universities and the uneven spatial distribution of these institutions in the UK. Accordingly, I chose to use several control variables within the quantitative models used in the first phase of research - outlined within Chapter 3 - to account for the impacts of these characteristics. Consideration was also given to these individual characteristics within the design of the case studies used in the second phase of the study.

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3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the methodology that shaped the research presented within this thesis. As highlighted within Chapter 1, this thesis is the result of work within a pre-defined PhD research project, linked to a wider programme of research at the University of Bath looking at the geographical mobility of UK university students. The objective of the project was to explore how elite university participation varies according to where in England young people grow up and to use the findings to inform recommendations for policy makers and practitioners. The research project proposed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, with an initial quantitative phase of research aimed at identifying areas of higher and lower than expected participation across England followed by subsequent qualitative research in two areas revealed as of interest.

Whilst the above mixed-methods research design was suggested, it was not imposed upon the project. I thus first considered the principal philosophical paradigms used to guide research, to see which best reflected the nature of the phenomenon being examined and the research aims, before choosing an aligned research approach. A critical realist stance – a paradigm which maintains that there is a part of reality that can be directly observed and another which exists separately to our knowledge of it – was chosen. Guided by this paradigm, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach did indeed appear well-suited to the research aims. The next section begins by explaining the choice of critical realism over other paradigms, before briefly outlining critical realist epistemology and ontology and its process of retroductive inference. An examination of how this study sought to apply the four main critical realist research phases proposed by Zachariadis et al. (2013) follows. The chapter then proceeds to detail the study's initial quantitative phase of research followed by a description of the study's subsequent qualitative phase. It concludes with discussion of ethical considerations.

3.2 Critical realist stance

As highlighted within the previous section, a critical realist stance was adopted for this study. This section briefly outlines the other paradigms – positivism, interpretivism-constructivism

and pragmatism – considered, before discussing why critical realism appeared the most suitable paradigm in guiding the research to be conducted.

Positivism, a paradigm which maintains that reality is limited to that which can be directly observed (Walliman, 2006) was rejected on the basis that previous research (e.g. Manley and Johnston, 2014; Wright, 2014) has shown that even when observable characteristics are accounted for, differences in elite university entry remain, suggesting the presence of underlying mechanisms. Indeed, whilst positivism's associated - primarily quantitative - research methods would have been able to identify patterns of elite university progression by local area and the observable characteristics of these, they would not have been able to explain any remaining differences between areas and how these could be addressed. The findings generated would thus have been of limited usefulness for policy makers and practitioners.

Likewise, interpretivism-constructivism, which maintains that reality is socially constructed through the beliefs and actions of individuals (Walliman, 2006), was rejected on the basis that though previous research suggests that there are factors that affect university entry that cannot be scientifically measured (such as individuals' habitus – Bourdieu, 1993), there is also evidence of observable characteristics of areas of higher and lower HE progression (e.g. Manley and Johnston, 2014) that can. Using this paradigm's associated – primarily qualitative – research methods would have meant that the research conducted was necessarily small in scale and that the wider patterns of elite university progression by local area that could be identified through quantitative research and of value for policy makers and practitioners would have been missed. It may also have proved challenging to identify in which localities the qualitative research conducted could be most informative. The findings generated would thus again have been of limited usefulness for policy makers and practitioners.

Pragmatism, a paradigm which sees reality as created through human action and constantly evolving in the aim of solving practical issues (Weaver, 2018) was also considered. Pragmatists seek to use whichever research methods can best address their research aims, often using mixed methods approaches to examine different aspects of a research problem (Cersosimo, 2022). This suggested it could be an appropriate paradigm to guide this study for which a mixed-methods approach appeared well-suited, given the limitations of using only quantitative or only qualitative research in addressing the research aims as highlighted within the discussion of positivism and interpretivism above.

Finally, critical realism was considered. Critical realism, a division of the broader realist philosophy, asserts that there is a part of reality that can be directly observed and a further part that exists separately to our knowledge of it (Bhaskar, 2008). It is a philosophy with which mixed-methods research is also often aligned. For example, critical realists may employ quantitative research to examine the observable characteristics of social phenomena and qualitative research to explore the underlying generative mechanisms influencing these. Critical realism's belief that unobservable structures cause the observable inequalities in society (Matthews and Ross, 2010) suggested it could be well suited to this policy-oriented research.

Whilst both pragmatism and critical realism appeared as valuable paradigms for guiding this research, it was decided to adopt a critical realist rather than pragmatist stance for the study. The reason for this decision was due to critical realism's 'emancipatory dimension' (Baert, 2005) - given its focus on identifying the structures that have created societal inequalities in the aim of effecting social change by countering or altering these (Matthews and Ross, 2010). This therefore made it a particularly suitable paradigm for this research aimed at increasing representation at elite universities and thus helping redress societal inequalities. In the next section, I outline critical realism's epistemology and ontology in greater detail.

3.2.1 Critical realist epistemology and ontology

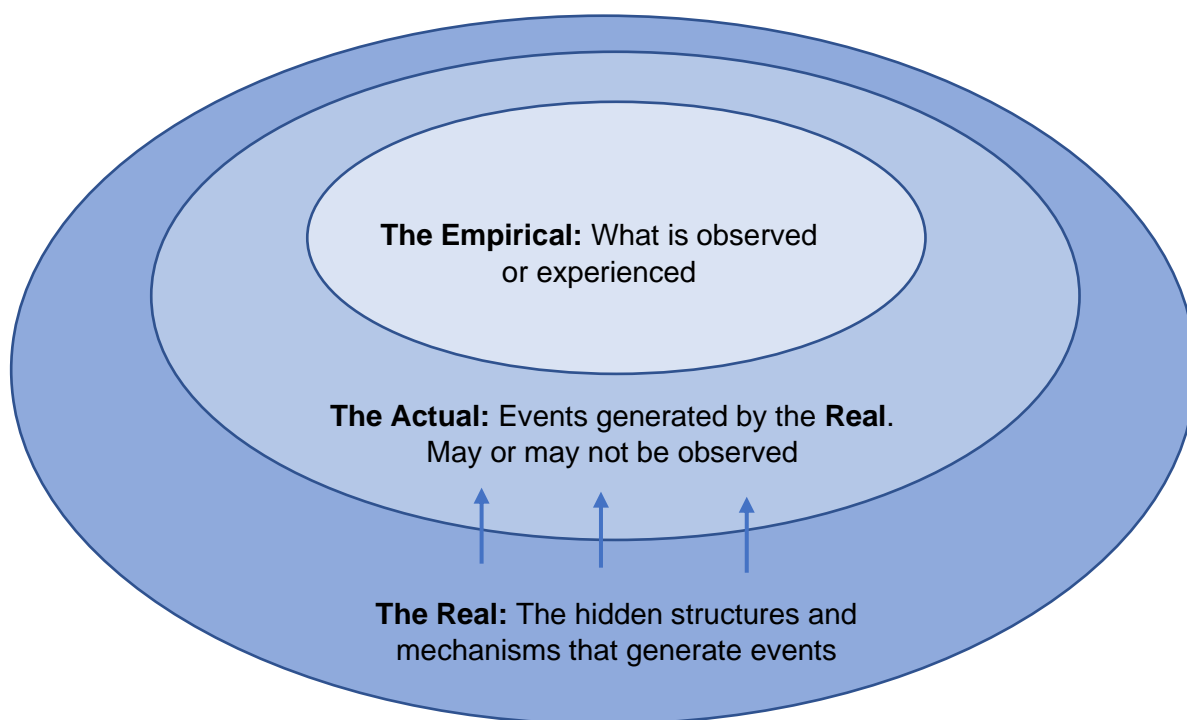
Critical realism originated within the writings of the philosopher Roy Bhaskar and argues that there is a part of reality (the *intransitive* domain) which exists separately to our knowledge and perceptions of it (Archer et al., 1998; Bhaskar, 2008). Conversely, reality as we know it is generated through our experiences, perspectives, and theories (the *transitive* domain) (Zachariadis et al., 2013). By adopting critical realism as epistemological standpoint, I sought to avoid what Bhaskar terms the 'epistemic fallacy', that-is-to-say to avoid confusing the *intransitive* and *transitive*, reducing what we say is 'real' to that which we can know. (Bhaskar, 2008).

In addition to critical realism's epistemological distinction between the transitive and intransitive dimensions of knowledge (Zachariadis et al., 2013), critical realism assumes a stratified ontology of three domains: the Real, the Actual, and the Empirical (Bhaskar, 2008). Thus, though there may be only one 'reality', this does not mean that researchers have immediate access to it or are able to observe and realise all aspects of it (Zachariadis et al.,

2013). The domain of the Real contains objects and structures with causal powers, triggering generative mechanisms which impact upon the domain of the Actual. Although these generative mechanisms may not always be observable empirically, their potentialities continue to exist regardless of whether they are used or not (Bhaskar, 2008). The domain of the Actual, thus, consists of both exercised and unexercised mechanisms and is a subset of the Real. Finally, the domain of the Empirical concerns only those events that can be observed or experienced (Zachariadis et al., 2013).

Figure 3-1 illustrates Critical Realism's stratified ontology.

Figure 3-1: Stratified Ontology of Critical Realism.



(Adapted from Saunders et al., 2019)

3.2.2 Critical realist retrodution

Critical realism maintains that events should be explained by postulating and identifying the underlying generative mechanisms that produced them (Sayer, 1992). This logic of inference is called *retrodution* (Bhaskar, 2008). Taking a retroductive approach has been argued (e.g. Downward and Mearman, 2006, Mingers, 2004, Venkatesh et al., 2013) as well suited to a wide variety of mixed-methods research approaches, where qualitative and quantitative research can be combined to hypothesise and identify the generative mechanisms that cause certain events (Zachariadis et al., 2013). However, regardless of the specific methods used, as Danermark et al. (2002, p155) explain, the common principle that unites these is that “the foundation for our knowledge [produced in the transitive realm] is the empirical domain”.

Figure 3-2 illustrates critical realism’s retroductive approach to knowledge creation.

Figure 3-2: The retroductive approach of critical realism for knowledge creation

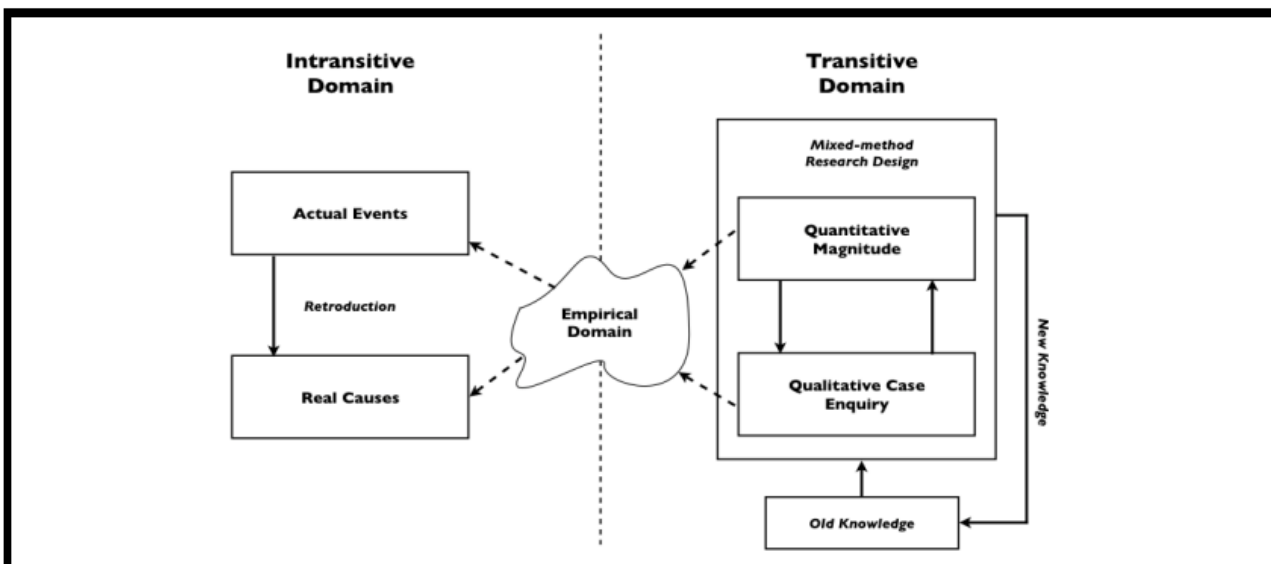


Figure 2. The Retroductive Approach of Critical Realism for Knowledge Creation

(Reproduced from Zachariadis et al. (2013), itself loosely adapted from Downward and Mearman (2006))

3.2.3 Taking a critical realist retroductive approach.

This thesis was guided by the critical realist retroductive methodology outlined by Zachariadis et al (2013), which consists of four main phases.

Phase 1: Description and appreciation of the research situation

As Zachariadis et al. (2013) describe, this first phase is focussed on building understanding of the research context and deciding on the approach to be taken in examining the phenomena to be studied, bearing in mind that it will not be possible to study all possible distinctive constituents of this.

The choice of critical realism as philosophical paradigm provided validation to the proposed mixed methods design of the pre-defined PhD research project in which the work within this thesis was produced. This suggested explanatory sequential design involved initial quantitative analysis to identify and map patterns of elite university progression by local area across England, followed by in-depth qualitative research in two areas highlighted as of interest. Such an approach was thus well aligned with critical realism's belief that there is a part of reality that can be objectively measured and a further part that cannot be directly observed, with the initial quantitative research within this study enabling the observable characteristics of areas of higher/lower entry to elite universities to be identified and the subsequent qualitative research greater understanding of the underlying generative mechanisms shaping the observed patterns.

The proposed research design suggested the use of linked National Pupil Database – Higher Education Statistics Agency (NPD-HESA) data for the initial quantitative phase of research. Nevertheless, other data sets, e.g. Universities and College Admissions Service (UCAS) data were considered for their suitability too. After exploration of other sources, linked NPD-HESA data remained the preferred data source due to the possibility it offered to also account for those finishing key stage 5³⁵ who did not go on to university, as well as its broader range of available fields, especially as concerned school characteristics and individual characteristics like attainment and socio-economic status. Given the final

³⁵ Key Stage 5 refers to the education of students between ages 16-18.

unavailability of linked NPD-HESA data at the time of fieldwork however³⁶, it was decided to proceed with a HESA only data extract, having resolved that those with the required academic attainment to attend an elite university were relatively unlikely to have been unsuccessful in obtaining a university place or to have chosen not to attend university³⁷, and that as such the study's findings shouldn't be substantially impacted. It was also felt that HESA data nevertheless offered ample information for a granular examination of elite university progression.

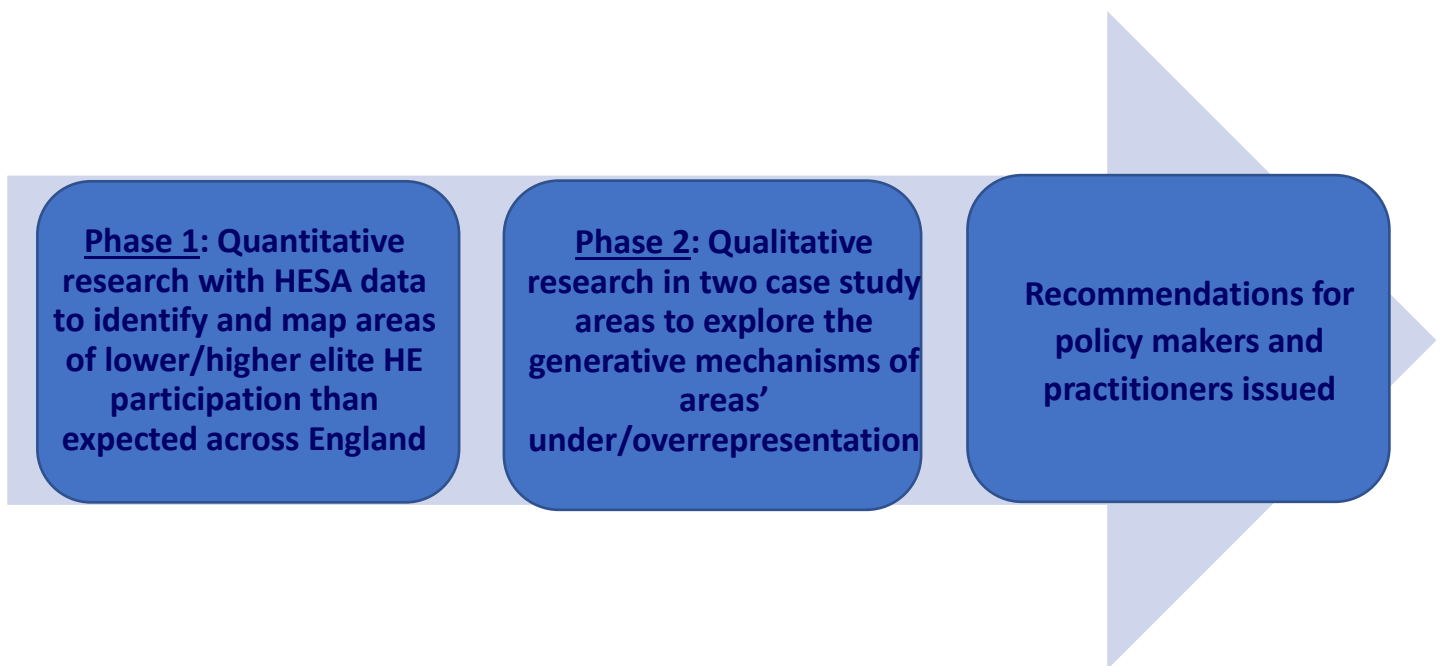
Had the use of linked NPD-HESA data been possible, the study would have necessarily been focussed on England alone, as the NPD only contains data on state-educated pupils in England. Given the study's final use of a HESA only data extract, this opened up the possibility of looking at elite university progression within the UK more broadly. Due to a number of identified differences within the funding regimes of the different UK constituent countries over the period of the study however (e.g. university in Scotland is free for Scottish students but elsewhere they would be liable for tuition fees) I concluded that it would be challenging to draw fair comparisons and decided to keep the study's focus on England alone.

The final explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design used within the thesis is illustrated in Figure 3-3.

³⁶ NPD-HESA data extracts were unavailable for a period of several months between 2018-2019, whilst the Department for Education implemented General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) regulations.

³⁷ It was deemed more probable that they still entered university, but perhaps not a university typically seen as 'elite'.

Figure 3-3: Explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design



In addition to the considerations highlighted above, my appreciation of the research situation further included examination of which universities have been typically considered ‘elite’ and defined as such within previous research. This led to the development of my elite university construct (see sub-section 3.3.3), used as the binary outcome variable within the quantitative phase of study. It also included building understanding of the geographical hierarchies produced by UK statistics bodies, including those typically used within research, and which informed my choice of Middle Super Output Areas (MSOAs) as the measure by which to quantify students’ localities within the study (see sub-section 3.3.2.). Further to this, it included developing an understanding of the individual and school factors that impact on elite university progression, given the importance of accounting for these within my statistical models to mitigate confounding between these and the role of place. These factors are discussed in depth within the Literature review (Chapter 2) and as additionally highlighted there, informed decisions about which control variables to include within the study’s initial quantitative analyses.

Finally, my appreciation of the research situation included important consideration of the policy context in which the study was situated, including the progressive rise in government interest in the role of place for access to HE, the increasingly narrow social mobility discourse apparent in the UK since the 2010s which has seen a move away from broader notions of

access to a focus on equality of access to elite universities and careers (Gamsu and Ingram, 2022), and the current UK government's 'levelling up' agenda which has seen renewed attention paid to the country's regional inequalities, including the spatial disparities in HE progression. These policy developments are outlined in further detail in Chapter 1.

Phase 2: Retroductive analysis

Phase two of the methodology outlined by Zachariadis et al (2013) concerns the actual retroductive analysis of the data and is an iterative phase in which a process of abstraction is engaged in, developing propositions for use in subsequent phases of the study. This phase began with quantitative analysis of the HESA data and was exploratory in nature, starting with a null multilevel model to identify the proportion of the model's variance that could be attributed to the grouping level (MSOAs), followed by the addition of the control variables in a series of increasingly complex models until a final model was reached. As discussed in the previous section, the literature informed which individual factors were included as 'controls', as well as my hypotheses as to which would lead to the biggest reductions in the initial variance attributed to MSOAs. Moreover, during both the process of reaching my final model and following the subsequent mapping, I referred to the literature to help explain my findings. For example, given the higher-than-expected levels of progression in urban centres - especially London - that were revealed by this mapping, I hypothesised in Paper 1 (Chapter 4) that the geography of social class and ethnic identities, a legacy of concerted policy interventions within urban schools, and the proliferation of widening participation activity in urban centres might play important roles.

The hypotheses developed within the initial quantitative phase then helped shape the design of the subsequent qualitative phase of research, for example, in terms of the case study localities I selected (in East London and Nottingham), the decisions I made about who to conduct interviews with, and in the writing of the semi-structured interview guides. Two pilot interviews were conducted (one staff, one student) to assess the suitability of these guides, and in line with the recommendation of Zachariadis et al. (2013) to continually revise the boundaries of the study as necessary, further modifications made to these throughout the course of the interviews depending on the topics that emerged as important. Overall, as Zachariadis et al. (2013) advocate, the full research process involved continual cycles of reflection between the literature, data, and propositions in an attempt to achieve analytical stability about the underlying mechanisms that could help explain the patterns of elite university progression identified.

Phase 3: Assessment and elimination

Phase 3, as Zachariadis et al. (2013) explain, entails bringing together the findings from across the different research methods, to make what Venkatesh et al. (2013) describe as “meta-inferences”. It further involves returning to extant theoretical knowledge to explain how different mechanisms interact under certain conditions and how these contribute to the concrete phenomena observed. To give an example of this process within this research, as noted previously, the mapping within the initial quantitative phase revealed widespread higher-than-expected elite university progression rates within London. Moreover, this patterning was especially notable within East London’s MSOAs which had mostly lower-than-expected progression when raw progression rates alone were considered, but almost universally higher-than-expected progression rates once all control variables were accounted for.

As highlighted above, consulting the literature led to the building of several hypotheses here, including that the area’s high-performing schools and the geography of ethnic identities may play important roles. The ensuing case study research within an East London locality found that one of the likely key underlying mechanisms helping explain the area’s high elite university progression rates was an apparent shared culture of valorising elite university progression across local schools. Returning to the literature again, it appeared that the ethnically diverse demographic of East London and the increasing sense of optimism amongst certain ethnic minority groups here of education offering a meritocratic pathway to social mobility (Butler and Hamnett, 2011) may have facilitated the establishment of such a culture within local schools, providing additional evidence in support of the earlier hypotheses.

Phase 4: Action

As Zachariadis et al (2013) detail, the final phase involves circulating the research findings, to see if the explanations reached are satisfactory to their ‘intended audience’ with background knowledge and expertise (Runde, 1998). In the case of this research, this involved the sharing of findings with the Widening Participation Office at the University of Bath who funded this research, as well as within policy forums and academic conferences. Zachariadis et al. (2013) further note that it involves the development of appropriate programmes of change – in the case of this research, the issuing of recommendations for widening participation policy makers and practitioners (outlined in detail within section 7.3).

3.3 Phase 1 – Quantitative research

This section focusses on the study's initial quantitative phase of research. It begins by outlining the HESA data extract, followed by explanation of the choice of Middle Super Output Areas (MSOAs) as the measure by which to quantify students' localities and used as contextual level within the study's multilevel models. It proceeds to describe the construction of the study's 'top27' outcome variable and to outline the control variables included within the modelling process, including detailed explanation of how a control variable quantifying MSOAs' accessibility to the universities within the 'top27' grouping was created. The approach taken to missing data is then explained and summary statistics provided. Finally, the choice of multilevel modelling as analytical technique is explained, and the modelling and mapping process outlined.

3.3.1 Data

The data used in the initial quantitative phase of the study was a specially requested extract provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), the official agency for the collection of and analysis of data on students enrolled on UK-based HE courses. The extract provided contained data for ~1.7 million English-domiciled entrants starting university in academic years 2008-09, 2010-11, 2012-13, 2014-15 and 2016-17 (of which 833,400³⁸ cases were finally used – see sub-section 3.3.6). Combining data from several cohorts (and including a cohort control measure in the analyses) was chosen to ensure that any conclusions drawn from the research about the determinants of elite HE access were not based on the findings from one or two cohorts alone and which may only be true of those cohorts.

3.3.2 Quantifying students' localities

Given the focus of this thesis on the role of place in explaining inequalities in access to elite universities, it was necessary to select a geographical hierarchy by which to quantify the

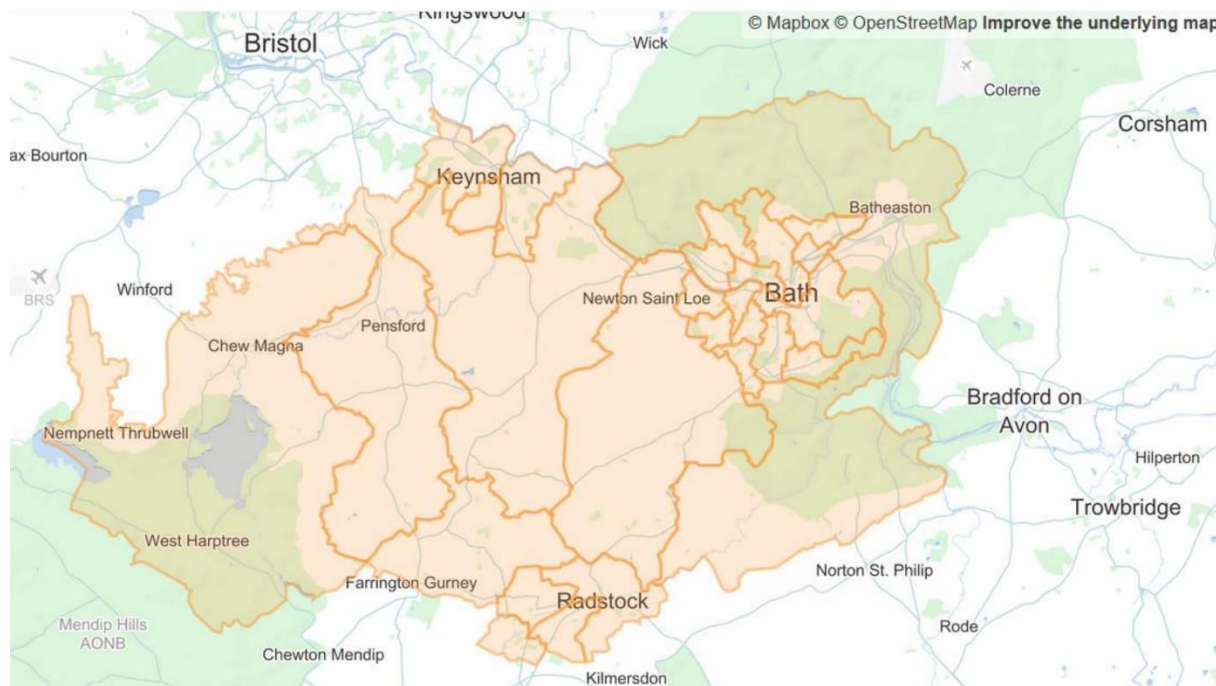
³⁸ Rounded figure in accordance with HESA's guidelines. See section 3.5.1 for more details.

localities of the students within the study and be used as the contextual level within the multilevel models employed for the data analysis (explained in sub-section 3.3.8). The HESA data set offered several possibilities for this. Very small geographical hierarches, such as postcode, were unsuitable due to the sensitive nature of this information as well as the substantial size of the data set to be modelled. Equally, using a much larger hierarchy with a substantial level of aggregation such as 'local authority' was also deemed unsuitable, as university progression rates can vary substantially between different places within the same local authority, especially in large urban centres like London (Atherton et al., 2019), and which could lead to potential confounding.

For this reason, the Middle Super Output Area (MSOA) field, one of the geographical hierarchies defined and used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) during censuses, was chosen. Each MSOA has a population between 5,000 minimum and 15,000 maximum, with a minimum of 2,000 and a maximum of 6,000 households (Office for National Statistics, 2016). This geographical hierarchy, of which there are 6,791 units across England, was thought to be large enough to ensure individuals' anonymity and for its use to be practical, yet small enough to ensure a fine-grained examination of progression whilst also limiting the higher risk of confounding involved with using a larger geographical hierarchy.

Figure 3-4 illustrates the varying physical size of MSOAs (whilst the population of each remains within the specified ONS bounds) using the example of Bath and North East Somerset.

Figure 3-4: Bath and North East Somerset divided by MSOAs



Source: BATH: HACKED (<https://github.com/BathHacked/banes-geographic-data>)

3.3.3 Outcome variable

As discussed within Chapter 2, the study's literature review showed that much of the quantitative research that has considered access to elite universities in the UK (e.g. Manley and Johnston, 2014; Wright, 2014; Boliver, 2016) has used the 24 universities of the research-intensive and academically selective Russell Group as a proxy. However, given the self-selective nature of this grouping and the existence of other universities with very similar characteristics shown, I chose to adopt a broader definition.

In addition to the 24 Russell Group universities thus, also included within my 'elite' grouping were any non-Russell Group universities classed within the top 20 universities of the *Complete University Guide 2020*³⁹ – the longest running and arguably most established ranking system within the UK - when their rankings for both entry standards and research scores are combined. Three further universities - University of St Andrews, University of Bath, and University of Strathclyde – were thus added, creating a 'top27' construct. Students'

³⁹ The most recent rankings of the Complete University Guide are available here: <https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/rankings>

entry to a university within this grouping formed the study's binary outcome variable (1 = yes, 0 = no). A list of all universities included in the 'top27' grouping can be found in the appendices (Appendix 4). Sensitivity analyses were conducted with other 'elite' outcome variables, including a 'top20' construct, to check the robustness of this measure. These indicated that the models were not particularly affected by variations in the definition of 'elite' outcome variable.

3.3.4 Control variables

The study's literature review highlighted the importance of individual characteristics and schools for elite university progression, demonstrating the need to account for these factors through the addition of control variables to mitigate possible confounding. Individual attainment was shown to be the most important factor affecting progression (Chowdry et al., 2013, Crawford et al., 2014, Wright, 2014), so a HESA field measuring students' tariff point scores at Key Stage 5 (A level and equivalent) was included. In addition, as students studying 'facilitating subjects' – defined by the Russell Group as English Literature, History, Geography, Modern and Classical Languages, Maths and Further Maths, Chemistry, Biology and Physics – have been shown to have a higher propensity to attend elite universities (Dilnot, 2018; Montacute and Cullinane, 2018), a variable measuring the number of facilitating subjects studied by students was created. The MSOA-means of both these variables (each calculated as one value per MSOA which did not vary over time) were also included as control variables at the MSOA-level.

Given the literature review's additional highlighting of the impact of socio-economic status on progression (e.g. Reay et al., 2001; Chowdry et al., 2013; Crawford et al., 2014), two relevant HESA fields; one measuring the socio-economic status of students aged 21 or over (else that of their highest-earning parent) and the other if at least one parent has a university education were further included as control variables. The impacts of ethnicity (e.g. Hemsley-Brown, 2015; Crawford and Greaves, 2015; Boliver, 2016) and gender (e.g. Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; Bowes et al., 2015; Baars et al., 2016) on progression were also highlighted by the literature review and HESA fields related to each of these added too.

Finally, HESA fields classifying age, academic year, school type (given the important role played by schools, e.g. Reay et al., 2005; Taylor et al., 2018) and distance travelled

(considering that more than half of young people attend a university less than 55 miles away from their home address - Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018), as well as a measure of each MSOA's relative accessibility to the universities of the 'top27' construct, were also included as control variables. The creation of the latter variable is detailed in the following sub-section.

3.3.5 Creation of a control variable quantifying accessibility

Both the English population and the universities within the elite 'top27' grouping are unevenly distributed spatially (Wakeling and Savage, 2015). As it was deemed likely that physical proximity (or lack of it) to these universities could make some students more (or less) likely to access them (Gibbons and Vignoles, 2012) a control variable quantifying students' accessibility to the universities within the 'top27' grouping was created.

This measure of accessibility was similar to that used by Wright (2014) which in turn developed from one originally conceived by Knox in 1978 (Joseph and Phillips, 1984) to measure geographical differences in access to GP practices. The distances to the 27 universities within the elite grouping were calculated for each of the 6,791 MSOAs, giving a matrix of distances of 183,357 (= 6,791 x 27). In the manner of Wright, the distances between the MSOAs and the universities were defined as those of the straight lines between the centroids of each, identified using their easting and northing coordinates. To calculate the distances, Pythagoras theorem was used as shown in equation 1.

Equation 1

$$\text{Distance} = \sqrt{(\text{Difference of eastings})^2 + (\text{Difference of northings})^2}$$

Or

$$d = \sqrt{((e1 - e2)^2 + (n1 - n2)^2)}$$

The values calculated by the weights matrix for each MSOA were converted to standardised scores to facilitate comparison and linked to each individual within the HESA data set via their MSOA.

This weights matrix enabled the relative access each student had from their locality (MSOA) to the top27 universities, in comparison to peers in other localities, to be measured. This was important for the analyses, for there is clearly a considerable difference between a student living in a major urban conurbation who may have several elite universities within easy access compared to a student in a rural area for whom perhaps only one or two (if any) of the universities within the grouping are within easy reach.

It is important to note that this weights matrix nonetheless had some limitations. One relates to the locations of the universities used which were based on those provided by the Universities & Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and which as Singleton (2010) has noted, are based on the postcodes associated with their main campuses. This could therefore have introduced a level of error into the data from institutions spanning multiple sites. A further limitation relates to the varying physical size of MSOAs and that as a result, the distance from MSOA centroid to each of the top27 universities may not have been a good measure of accessibility for large MSOAs. Another limitation relates to the fact that as the matrix calculated the cumulative distance from each MSOA to the universities of the top27 grouping, two MSOAs could theoretically have had similar values, but this may have disguised for example that one has many top27 universities close and many far (so overall still good access) while in another all top27 institutions are mid-distance (so relatively poorer access).

Acknowledging that there would inevitably be limitations to any accessibility measure used, and, like Wright (2014), the considerable size and scale of the data to be used and thus need for a practical measure, it was decided to proceed with the weights matrix described. Nonetheless, as discussed in Section 7.5 – Suggestions for Future Research, there are some ways in which future research seeking to measure MSOAs' accessibility to elite institutions might look to counter some of the limitations of this method.

3.3.6 Missing data

As is common with administrative data sets, the data provided by HESA had missing values for some fields. As such, it was necessary to carefully look at where this missingness occurred, what missingness assumptions could be assumed and how best to proceed. Closer examination of the data revealed that there was no missingness for either MSOAs or

students' university destinations (used to create the outcome 'top27' variable). There were, however, considerable amounts of missingness ($\approx 30\%$) for some of the control variables, notably tariff points, socio-economic status, and parental university education.

The default method employed for dealing with missing data by most statistical software packages is listwise deletion (Bartlett and Carpenter, 2013). Other conventional methods used include pairwise deletion, treating missing data on nominal variables as another category, dummy variable adjustment and mean imputation (Allison, 2001). All these methods can potentially introduce bias to the findings, with listwise deletion (also known as complete case analysis) typically the least problematic amongst these (Allison, 2001). In addition, in recent years, the more advanced methods of Multiple Imputation (MI) and Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) estimation, which both use observed data to estimate probable values for missing data and can be more effective at reducing bias, have been increasing in popularity (Graham, 2012).

As the most important data for this research – MSOAs and 'top27' attendance - was fully observed, I was able to compare the proportion of the variance attributed to MSOAs in both the original and complete case data sets by running a null multilevel model for each. There was little change between the two, suggesting that proceeding with the complete case data set should not significantly affect the role attributed to MSOAs. Given the potential importance of the control variables in helping explain/highlight possible confounding in some of the variance attributed to MSOAs however, I chose to investigate the missingness on these variables further.

Missingness was investigated in line with the procedures outlined in Bartlett and Carpenter (2013) and focussed on those control variables with the highest levels of missingness – tariff, socio-economic status, and parental university education. This showed that whilst there was evidence of certain control variables being associated with the probability of other control variables being observed (e.g. parental education being associated with the probability of socio-economic status being observed), the outcome variable for the study (top27 attendance) was not an important predictor of missingness on these variables. For example, in an examination of the area (AUC) under the Receiving Operating Curve (ROC) curve in a logistic model run to test its predictive power for the chance of observing socio-economic status by including elite university attendance, there was no change in the AUC between the model containing the study's control variables as covariates and that with top27 attendance added as a covariate. Similar models and examination of the area under the

ROC curve for the chance of observing tariff and parental university education by including top27 attendance, also showed very little change in the AUC.

Whilst these findings suggested that attendance at a top27 university did not have an important independent effect on the likelihood of the control variables tested being observed, in the interests of considering missing data as fully as possible, I intended nonetheless to compare results generated from the complete case dataset with results from the full data set where missing values had been estimated by MI or FIML. Ultimately however it was not possible to use either of these methods. With regards to MI, given the size of my original data set (≈ 1.7 million cases), the amount of missingness on some variables ($\approx 30\%$), and available computing power, this proved a very time-consuming process with one attempt - that was unfortunately curtailed by a university system update - having been run for over a month. With regards to FIML, for multilevel logistic models (those used by this research) this is unfortunately only available in one commercial package - Mplus - a statistical program not freely available to students at the University of Bath. Given that an FIML approach could thus not be used, and that MI proved unfeasible given the time necessitated and delay this would cause to the progression of the research (a process already delayed by several months waiting for the processing of NPD-HESA data requests to be resumed), it was decided to proceed with complete case analysis only.

As discussed above, it appears unlikely that the use of complete case analysis significantly impacted the findings of the quantitative analyses, given that the most important data fields for this study - MSOAs and students' university destinations - were fully observed, that there was little difference in the variance attributed to MSOAs in the original and complete case data sets, and that further investigation of missingness within the control variables suggested that attendance at a 'top27' university was not an important predictor of missingness on these variables. Moreover, given that the complete case data set contained 833,400 cases, it still had considerable statistical power. Further to this, the principal aim of the initial quantitative phase was in identifying localities of interest for in-depth qualitative research. By any consideration thus, this analysis represented a far more informative approach than selecting areas at random or based on other research not expressly conducted for this purpose. For all these reasons, in addition to the concerns of practicality and time constraints, complete case analysis therefore appeared to be the best way to deal with missing data. Nevertheless, the limitations of taking a complete case approach are acknowledged and further discussed in Section 7.4 (Research limitations) of the thesis's concluding chapter.

3.3.7 Summary statistics

Table 3-1 provides an overview of the HESA data extract and variables used, and relevant summary statistics. More detailed description of each of the variables used can be found in Appendix 1.

Table 3-1: Overview of HESA data extract and summary statistics

| Outcome variable | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Attendance at a 'top27' university | Yes (n= 247,835, 29.7%) |
| | No (n= 585,565, 70.3%) |
| Individual-level variables | |
| <i>Level 1: student, n= 833,400</i> | |
| Sex | Male (372,220, 44.7%) |
| | Female (461,105, 55.3%) |
| | Other (75, 0.0%) |
| Socio-economic status | Higher Managerial (217,430, 26.1%) |
| | Lower Managerial (245,115, 29.4%) |
| | Intermediate (104,615, 12.6%) |
| | Small Employers (64,520, 7.7%) |
| | Lower Supervisory (39,245, 4.7%) |
| | Semi-routine (105,410, 12.6%) |
| | Routine (54,250, 6.5%) |
| | Never Worked and Long-term Unemployed (2,815, 0.3%) |
| Attainment (tariff point score) | 0 – 172, mean = 34.9 <i>(Values rescaled from those within original variable so that an increase of 1 = 10 tariff points)</i> |
| Ethnicity | White (644,655, 77.4%) |
| | Black-Caribbean (11,410, 1.4%) |
| | Black-African (32,390, 3.9%) |
| | Other Black (2,040, 0.2%) |
| | Asian-Indian (37,910, 4.5%) |
| | Asian-Pakistani (26,635, 3.2%) |
| | Asian-Bangladeshi (11,485, 1.4%) |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Chinese (7,295, 0.9%) |
| | Other Asian (16,210, 1.9%) |
| | Mixed (33,665, 4.0%) |
| | Other (9,700, 1.2%) |
| Number of facilitating subjects studied | 0 (275,415, 33%) |
| | 1 (209,495, 25.1%) |
| | 2 (186,585, 22.4%) |
| | 3 (135,565, 16.3%) |
| | 4 (25,025, 3.0%) |
| | 5 (1,275, 0.2%) |
| | 6 (37, 0.0%) |
| | 7 (0, *) |
| Parent(s) attended university | Yes (457,680, 54.9%) |
| | No (n=375,720, 45.1%) |
| School type | State (739,535, 88.7%) |
| | Private (93,865, 11.3%) |
| Age | 17 and under (1,245, 0.1%) |
| | 18 (503,545, 60.4%) |
| | 19 (236,400, 28.4%) |
| | 20 (55,015, 6.6%) |
| | 21 or over (37,200, 4.5%) |
| Academic year | 2008/09 (133,565, 16.0%) |
| | 2010/11 (149,775, 18.0%) |
| | 2012/13 (151,440, 18.2%) |
| | 2014/15 (187,650, 22.5%) |
| | 2016/17 (210,965, 25.3%) |
| Distance travelled | 0 – 50, mean = 6.8km (Values rescaled from those within original variable so that an increase of 1 = 10km) |
| Contextual-level variables | |
| <i>Level 2: MSOA, n = 6,791</i> | |
| MSOA-mean tariff score | 25.2 – 45.7, mean = 34.9 (Created using the rescaled tariff point variable) |
| MSOA-mean number of facilitating subjects studied | 0.4 – 2.4, mean = 1.3 |

| | |
|--|---------------------------|
| Accessibility of MSOA (standardised scores) | -1.81 – 1.77, mean = 0.00 |
|--|---------------------------|

Note: In line with HESA's Standard Rounding Methodology all counts of individuals are rounded to the nearest multiple of 5 and any count lower than 2.5 rounded to 0. Percentages based on fewer than 22.5 individuals are suppressed ().*

3.3.8 Multilevel modelling approach

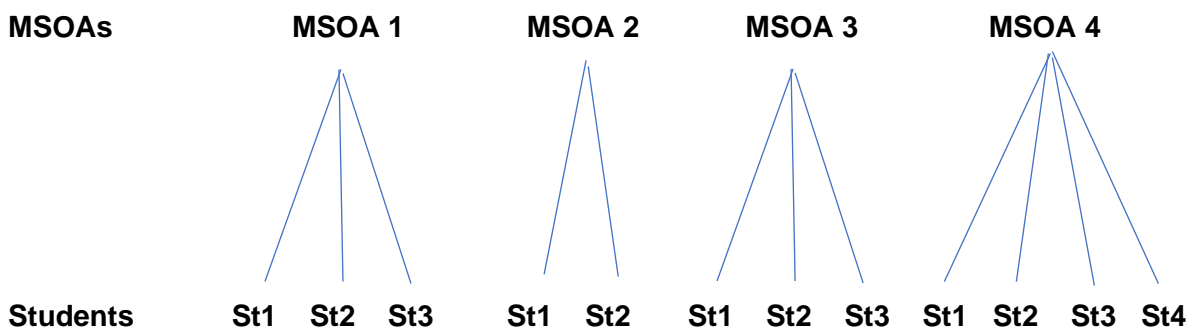
Both fixed-effects models and multilevel modelling were considered for the statistical analyses. Multilevel modelling was finally chosen due to a preference within the researcher's discipline (Education) for multilevel models (Goldstein, 2003) and the study's focus on identifying patterns of access to elite universities rather than looking to pinpoint the precise causal mechanisms operating.

Multilevel modelling is designed for modelling data with a hierarchical structure, enabling the nested nature of such data, for example students within schools or localities, to be accounted for. The reasoning behind the technique is recognition of the fact that two randomly selected individuals within the same group (i.e. in the context of this study, living within the same locality) will tend to be more alike than two individuals selected from different groups and that not accounting for such dependencies could mean that relationships between variables are incorrectly estimated (Steele, n.d.). Moreover, the technique enables researchers to explore the nature of between-group variability and is the key reason why multilevel modelling was chosen for this research which was specifically interested in investigating between-MSOA differences in progression to elite universities.

Indeed, as is discussed in further detail below and in Paper 1 (Chapter 4), multilevel modelling not only enables separation within models of the variance which can be attributed to each level (in the case of the 2-level models used in this study, the individual and MSOA levels) enabling the relative importance of the grouping level (MSOA) for the outcome variable (attendance at a 'top27' university) to be better understood, but importantly also enables identification of how units at the grouping level perform in comparison to others. In the case of this research therefore, it enabled examination of which MSOAs had much higher and lower-than-expected progression to elite universities once all control variables at the individual and MSOA-levels were accounted for.

Figure 3-5 illustrates the multilevel structure of the data used within this study, with students nested within MSOAs.

Figure 3-5: Multilevel modelling structure



(Adapted from a diagram used by the Centre for Multilevel Modelling at the University of Bristol: <https://www.cmm.bris.ac.uk/lemma/mod/lesson/view.php?id=255>)

3.3.9 Modelling strategy

The study's multilevel analyses were carried out using the statistical program, Stata⁴⁰. A series of 2-level (students at level 1, MSOAs at level 2) random-intercept logistic models of increasing complexity were used. The binary outcome variable of the models was attendance at one of the universities within the 'top27' grouping (yes = 1, no = 0).

Modelling began with an initial null model, used to identify the mean rate of attendance at 'top27' universities and the proportion of unexplained variance attributable to MSOAs. The random (MSOA) effects were then estimated and mapped using the Geographic Information System, QGIS⁴¹, to identify the areas with the lowest and highest progression rates. To facilitate the identification of any noticeable patterns of progression nationwide, progression was mapped by decile. Decile 1 areas were those with the lowest progression rates up to decile 10 containing those with the highest.

⁴⁰ <https://www.stata.com/>

⁴¹ <https://www.qgis.org/en/site/>

Subsequently, the individual-level control variables were added, to mitigate issues of possible confounding. Ten variables, grouped within five theoretical domains, were included:

- **Education** (state/private educated, tariff point score, number of facilitating subjects studied)
- **Socio-economic status** (Socio-economic classification of student for those aged 21 and over (else that of their highest-earning parent) and a marker indicating if one or more parents attended university)
- **Social and individual-level factors** (ethnicity, sex, and age)
- **Distance travelled** (measured from student's domicile MSOA to their university)
- **Academic year** (08/09, 10/11, 12/13, 14/15 and 16/17)

Each theoretical grouping of variables was initially tested separately to identify how much of the MSOA-level variance it could help explain, then all groupings added simultaneously. Next, the MSOA-level control variables were each added separately to the model containing all individual-level control variables, to see what proportion of the remaining variance they could explain:

- MSOA-mean tariff score
- MSOA-mean number of facilitating subjects studied
- MSOA accessibility to universities within the 'top27' grouping.

Finally, the MSOA-level control variables were added simultaneously to the model combining all individual-level variables, to create the final model. The random (MSOA) effects were then again estimated and mapped by decile like those of the null model, to observe which MSOAs had the highest and lowest progression rates to top27 universities with all control factors considered. More information on model specifications, including the equation of the final model is provided within Paper 1 (Chapter 4).

3.4 Phase 2 – Qualitative research

This section details the study's second, qualitative phase of research. The initial sub-section, focussed on study design, first describes how the case study sites and interview participants were selected, before reflecting on how the interview participant demographics may have

affected the study's findings. It then proceeds to more detailed discussion of the research methods used, which comprised semi-structured interviews, participant observation, keeping a field diary, and textual analysis of school promotional materials. The second subsection, focussed on data analysis, outlines the interview transcription process and thematic analysis conducted, before explaining the decision to include secondary interview data from the wider research project from which this PhD research project stemmed to complement that of the case studies.

3.4.1 Study design

Following the initial quantitative phase of the study, the subsequent qualitative phase involved case study research in two localities shown to be of interest within the mapping of elite university progression rates, one with higher-than-expected progression and the other, lower-than-expected progression.

Case study selection

A UK-based widening participation organisation referred to with the pseudonym 'Aspire' within this thesis - for whom I previously worked and retain contact with - was approached to support with facilitating the organisation of the two case studies. Aspire works via a centre-based model, with more than 30 centres located in disadvantaged communities across the UK. The first quantitative phase of the research revealed that several of the localities in which the organisation has centres had lower-than-expected elite university progression rates, whilst a few, notably in East London, had higher-than-expected rates. A request was made and granted to carry out the first (higher-than-expected progression) case study at one of the organisation's well-established East London centres, and several centres suggested to Aspire for the second (lower-than-expected progression) case study.

Taking into account how well-established these centres were, and likely staff/student suitability and availability for interview, Aspire proposed that a centre based in Nottingham would be the most suitable of those suggested, and it was agreed to carry out the second case study there. It was felt that comparing my case study locality within East London to that within Nottingham offered the potential for some interesting insights as whilst both localities are urban, their contexts are very different, with the former located within the UK's capital and economic powerhouse, in the well-connected and affluent Southeast, and the latter, in

a small city – consistently found to be one of the poorest English cities on average (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2019) – in the Midlands. Having two urban localities also meant that I would be able to separate out the London effect from a broader urban effect which would not have been the case had I chosen a rural locality. Nonetheless, it is also necessary to acknowledge the limitations of having chosen two urban localities, namely that there might be quite different mechanisms affecting university progression in rural localities, mechanisms that I was thus not able to explore.

Interview participant selection

The principal component of each case study was a set of six semi-structured interviews (12 total) across two interviewee groupings selected through purposive sampling. The student grouping comprised students aged 16-18 with the academic potential to attend an elite university (predicted at least grades ABB at A-level) and the staff grouping, Aspire/partner school staff with significant experience of working with local young people and good knowledge of typical post-18 pathways in the local area. The centre leaders at the Aspire East London and Nottingham centres partnered with were asked to identify their respective six participants: three students, two long-standing Aspire staff members and one well-established staff member from a local partner school. The names and positions of those interviewed within the East London case study are given in Table 3-2 and those interviewed within the Nottingham case study in Table 3-3. Further contextual information about the East London and Nottingham interview participants is provided in Appendix 7. Only the data from the East London staff and student interviewees and the Nottingham staff interviewees is specifically drawn on within the thesis. Contextual information about the Nottingham students is also provided for reference however as these interviews nonetheless provided valuable insight.

Table 3-2: East London interview participants

| East London interview participants | | | |
|---|---------------|------------------|----------------------------|
| Name | Gender | Ethnicity | Position |
| Sophie | F | Mixed | Student at Elm Academy |
| David | M | Black | Student at Elm Academy |
| Mia | F | Asian | Student at Sycamore School |

| | | | |
|---------|---|-------|--|
| Emily | F | Black | Regional Operations Manager (East London) at Aspire |
| Heather | F | White | Head of Operations (London and South East) at Aspire. Previously Regional Operations Manager (East London) |
| Amy | F | White | Director of the University Access Team at Elm Academy |

Table 3-3: Nottingham interview participants

| Nottingham interview participants | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------|-----------|---|
| Name | Gender | Ethnicity | Position |
| Mary | F | Black | Student |
| Tayo | M | Black | Student |
| Gabriel | M | Black | Student |
| Hannah | F | White | Regional Operations Manager (Nottingham) at Aspire. Previously Centre Leader. |
| Niamh | F | White | Centre Leader at Aspire |
| Elaine | F | White | Deputy Head at Rowanberry School |

The two interviewee groupings (students aged 16-18 and Aspire/partner school staff) were chosen for several reasons. Firstly, with regards to the choice of students, it was decided that year 12 and 13 students (typically aged 16 - 18) were the most appropriate age group to interview since students at this stage of education have typically received a substantial amount of information about post-18 work/study options and have already made/are in the process of making a decision as to whether they would like to progress to university. With regards to the choice of Aspire/school staff, it is well acknowledged that schools and the beliefs and expertise of teachers/careers staff can have a significant impact on young people's post-18 choices (e.g. Reay et al., 2005; Oliver and Kettley, 2010; Donnelly, 2014; Taylor et al., 2018) so it appeared important to also capture school practices and staff perspectives. Furthermore, it was felt that long-standing staff, having worked with multiple cohorts and being able to draw on years of experience in the local area, would bring a valuable broad overview of typical post-18 pathways for local students and how these may

have evolved, as well as of the widening participation provision and structures that exist in the case study localities.

Interview participant demographics

It is important to include some reflection on how the demographics of the interview participants may have affected the findings of the study. As interview participants were selected by Aspire staff, it is possible that they made conscious or unconscious decisions to steer me towards certain students/staff, dependent on what they believed I wished to gain from the interviews as well as their own priorities. With regards to the student interviewees, though I requested that those selected had the academic potential to study at an elite university (at least grades ABB at A level), it is possible that staff may have selected some students with lower attainment than this. Moreover, all the student interviewees selected by Aspire staff were from ethnic minority backgrounds. In East London, this was reflective of the wider community in which the case study research was conducted which is very ethnically diverse. Conversely, the case study in Nottingham was conducted in an area with a predominantly White population, so the fact that all my student interviewees were from ethnic minority backgrounds, means there is a greater likelihood that the experiences of the students I spoke with were not necessarily representative of the majority of young people living there. Indeed, as Nottingham Aspire centre leader, Niamh, mentioned to me ahead of the interviews, her selection of students was reflective of the student demographics that use the Aspire centre and the fact that the vast majority of older teenagers that Aspire are able to engage with there (outside of their programmes run in schools) are from minority ethnic backgrounds, usually from families which are part of a close-knit community linked to local churches.

In terms of the staff interviewees, it is notable that they were all female. In the case of Aspire staff, this is again reflective of the organisation which has a majority female staff body. It is not known if this is the case within the two schools - Elm and Rowanberry - from which school staff interviewees were drawn but given that the teaching workforce in England is predominantly female⁴², it is possible. It is unlikely that all the staff interviewees being female has biased the findings in any significant way however, given the focus of staff interviews on the factors that impact local students' decisions about whether to progress to university and where, rather than their own experiences. What is more important to account for in terms of the staff interviewees is how the structuring and practices of their organisations may have

⁴² <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england>

impacted upon their own perspectives. Aspire receives financial backing and support from a wide range of different universities and the organisation thus aims to maintain a neutral stance on university groupings. It was to be expected then that the Aspire practices demonstrated within the discourses of Aspire staff interviewees would not reveal any particular privileging (or equally discouragement) of elite university progression, and that Aspire interviewees might find the overt privileging of these institutions by some schools problematic.

Conversely, given its high-achieving student population, the majority of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the UK's current narrow social mobility discourse privileging elite university progression (Ingram and Gamsu, 2022), a school culture valorising elite university entry was anticipated at Elm Academy. Moreover, as Director of the University Access team there, staff interviewee, Amy, was expected to subscribe to this. This culture of elite university valorisation is a key theme discussed within Paper 2, and whilst it is important to acknowledge that as a highly academically selective institution, Elm Academy could not be said to be representative of all schools in the case study East London locality, it is by no means an exception. Indeed, as highlighted at several points by the Aspire staff interviewees, there are several other similar schools locally. Moreover, in a competitive sixth form market (Burgess, 2018, 2021), the practices of Elm Academy and similar institutions have likely impacted on the practices of other local schools too, suggesting that consideration of its practices is nonetheless informative for understanding the higher-than-expected elite university progression of the area more broadly.

Meanwhile, the discourse of Deputy Head, Elaine, at Rowanberry School in Nottingham, evidenced that this school serves a broad range of different student groups living locally – from those within a local estate that she described as one of the most deprived areas in the country, home to many ex-mining families, to some more 'leafy', middle-class neighbourhoods too. This suggests that her perspectives shared might provide a broader overview of typical student experiences here than are perhaps reflected in some aspects of the Nottingham students' discourses.

Semi-structured interviews

A single interview with each interviewee was conducted by the researcher, with each interview lasting approximately 30-60 minutes in length. Two separate interview guides were used, one for the student interviews (see appendix 13) and the other for those with staff (see appendix 15), with both sets of interview questions focussed on exploring the

factors that impact students' university choices. Whilst the case study was focussed on understanding what might encourage or dissuade students to study at elite institutions, so as not to influence participants' responses, I did not reveal my interest in elite universities specifically. Additionally, the student interview guide questions avoided direct references to elite universities, preferring instead to let the relative (un)importance of university status emerge organically through discussion of students' priorities, or where this did not naturally arise, be gently elicited through discussion of how universities differ from one another. For example, in questions such as 'Can you tell me about how universities may differ from each other?' Where necessary, I also used a map (see appendix 14) with the names and locations of the 'top27' universities plotted to more directly guide students in reflecting as to how these universities may differ from others. Through a combination of these techniques, some (and in some cases, considerable) discussion of the significance of university status for their decision-making was had with all student participants.

The first six interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and microphone during in-person interviews at the East London and Nottingham Aspire centres in January 2020. Due to the COVID pandemic and the implementation of the first UK lockdown in Spring 2020 when fieldwork was still taking place, the remaining interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams in April-June 2020 and audio-only recordings captured using the software.

Participant observation, field diary, and textual analysis of school promotional materials and media/political discourses

Previous participant observation from my role as a Senior Education Worker at Aspire between 2014-2016, based within East London and working with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds aged 7-19 across the area, formed a further important element of the East London case study. Indeed, my experiences from this time provided me with valuable knowledge of the context in which my participants were situated and additional insight into certain phenomena highlighted by my interviewees, such as the 'wealth of [outreach] opportunities' that staff interviewee, Amy, described. Whilst I always strove to ensure reflexivity on my part, it is equally possible that my experiences here may have led me to make certain assumptions about participants, something I further reflect on in sub-section 3.5.2.

I additionally kept a field diary during my fieldwork, noting all relevant information provided to me outside of the interview context about HE (especially elite HE) application practices and processes within both case study localities. The field diary was further used to record

observations about the interviews, including key points noted during these, and more detailed notes made after the conclusion of each. The field diary was equally used for reflective comments, providing a useful record of my ideas and thoughts throughout the research process and their evolution (Matthews and Ross, 2010). Indeed, I ensured I recorded what had gone well within the conducting of/structure of each interview and what could be improved, as well as any ideas I had concerning particular topics I might wish to focus greater attention on within future interviews.

The field diary further included notes made as to the physical environments and resources of the Aspire centres to consider whether these might privilege certain post-18 pathways over others to students. It had been hoped to conduct my two interviews with school staff within their schools so that I could gain some insight into these institutions' physical environments and resources also. Unfortunately, however, due to the UK lockdown as a result of the COVID pandemic at the time in which these interviews took place, both these interviews had to be conducted virtually, so this was not possible. Nevertheless, relevant documents available online, including local school websites and sixth form prospectuses, as well as references to these schools within media/political discourse, were also viewed and analysed. These provided me with additional valuable insights into local school cultures and practices and important findings here were noted within the field diary too.

3.4.2 Data analysis

Transcription

As Bryman (2016) advises, each interview was listened to twice to identify whether all comments were of interest or whether there were some sections that were particularly useful. As some parts of the interviews were much more relevant than others, only the most important sections/quotes were fully transcribed. However, notes summarising the content of all sections of the interviews were made so that, should any subjects in these sections have later become significant, they could easily be returned to and transcribed. Moreover, as Lofland and Lofland (1995) counsel, the transcription and analysis of the qualitative data was an ongoing process, rather than only being commenced once all the interviews had been conducted. This helped avoid the process feeling overwhelming and, as Bryman (2016) notes, enabled awareness of emerging themes, which I was then able to discuss in a more direct way in the remaining interviews.

Once the summary/transcript documents had been produced, anonymised copies were made, so that quotations from the interviews could be used without a disclosure risk. The anonymisation guidelines of the UK Data Service⁴³ were followed in creating these transcripts and included using pseudonyms for any names (e.g. schools, participants etc.) and generic descriptors in the place of potentially identifying contextual information. More information about the anonymisation procedures followed can be found in sub-section 3.5.1 and in the Ethics approvals and Data Management Plan (DMP) contained in Appendix 16.

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the content of the interviews, drawing on the phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Many of the initial broader themes common across interviews, such as 'staying local', 'family', 'school' etc. reflected factors highlighted as of importance for working-class students' university choices within previous research (e.g. Ball et al., 2002a, 2002b; Reay et al., 2005; Donnelly and Evans, 2016; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). Given the specific focus of this study on the role of place for elite university progression, more detailed coding was focussed on the areas of the interviews and emerging themes most relevant to the research topic. Once all codes had been reviewed and combined where appropriate, four higher-level themes were retained, namely 'framing of university choices', 'local economic context', 'resources and partnerships' and 'university engagement'.

The evidence for these themes was primarily found within the discourses of the East London staff and student interview participants and those of Nottingham staff. As a result, the Nottingham student data is not drawn on specifically in either of the two qualitative journal articles within this thesis (Chapters 5 and 6) that outline the case study findings. The discourses of the Nottingham students nevertheless provided valuable insight for both these papers, with the wealth of opportunities for disadvantaged students in East London becoming particularly apparent in contrast to that of their peers there.

⁴³ Anonymisation guidelines available here: <https://ukdataservice.ac.uk/learning-hub/research-data-management/#anonymisation>

Addition of secondary interview data from ‘Geographical Mobility of UK Higher Education Students’ project

In light of the interesting juxtaposition in ‘opportunity’ for students between East London and Nottingham – especially as concerned the type and extent of outreach activities on offer to students and with regards to the opportunities afforded to them by their local economies, I felt this could be a valuable topic for a constituent paper within the thesis. As highlighted in Chapter 1, a conversation with my lead supervisor, Dr Michael Donnelly, led to discussion of similar findings between East London and several regional case study sites in the broader programme of research, ‘Geographical Mobility of UK Higher Education Students’ from which this PhD project stemmed. This culminated in the decision to complement my case study data with relevant interview data from this study to broaden my evidence base for discussion and the writing of Paper 3, *Spatial division of opportunity: local economic context, elite trajectories, and the widening participation industry*’ (Chapter 6).

The ‘Geographical Mobility of UK Higher Education Students’ project examined how young people view the geography of the UK and the role of place within their university choices. It employed a multi-sited case study design, involving more than 200 young people and 20 school staff from across 17 different localities. I chose to use interview data from school/careers staff working in four geographically diverse sites - Tyneside, Liverpool, Suffolk, and East London – which represented divergent experiences in terms of the opportunities staff were able to open up to the young people they worked with.

Table 3-4 provides an overview of the data used.

Table 3-4: Secondary interview data included from ‘Geographical Mobility of UK Higher Education Students’ project

| Locality | School | Interview participant(s) |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Liverpool | Bootlesfield School | Head of sixth form |
| Tyneside | St Aaron’s School | Head of year 12, Head of year 13 |
| Suffolk | Great Mundestoft Sixth Form College | Head of sixth form |

| | | |
|-------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|
| East London | Tower Chapel School | Head of sixth form, Careers officer |
|-------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|

3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical issues were fully considered during the research process. The proposed research design was reviewed by both my department (Education) and by the University of Bath's Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (see appendix 16), and the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association⁴⁴ adhered to throughout the study. I further completed and maintained a Data Management Plan (see appendix 16).

In the following two sub-sections, I outline key ethical considerations and how these were addressed. In the first, I begin by discussing the use of HESA's Standard Rounding Methodology within the quantitative research outputs. I proceed to discussion of the qualitative phase of research and as to how informed consent was obtained, anonymisation of the case study data ensured and interview participants recompensed. In the second sub-section, I discuss how I sought to minimise the risk of harm to my interview participants, especially the student interviewees. I further comment on the reflexive approach I sought to take, of particular importance given my previous employment with Aspire and the assumptions about participants this could have led me to make.

3.5.1 Consent, anonymisation, and interview participant acknowledgement

The use of secondary HESA data in the initial quantitative phase of the study meant that concerns relating to the obtention of and anonymisation of data were assured by HESA prior to my access to the data. I was however contractually obliged to ensure that the research outputs contained within this thesis and its constituent publications applied HESA's Standard Rounding Methodology⁴⁵ to minimise disclosure risks. The following guidelines were thus adhered to:

⁴⁴ [Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, fourth edition \(2018\) | BERA](#)

⁴⁵ [Rounding and suppression to anonymise statistics | HESA](#)

- All numbers are rounded to the nearest multiple of 5
- Any number lower than 2.5 is rounded to 0
- Halves are always rounded upwards (e.g. 2.5 is rounded to 5)
- Percentages based on fewer than 22.5 individuals are suppressed
- Averages based on 7 or fewer individuals are suppressed

(Reproduced from HESA's Standard Rounding Methodology)

Concerning the study's qualitative research phase, before all interviews, an explanation of the study was provided (see appendix 9 for the student information form and appendix 10 for that of staff), and participants had the opportunity to ask any questions to ensure that they were at ease. All participants were asked to complete a consent form (see appendix 11) giving permission for the recording, transcribing and use of the data provided within their interviews. At the request of Aspire, written permission was also sought from the parents/guardians of student participants under age 18 prior to their interviews (see appendix 12). Participants were informed that appropriate anonymisation procedures, following the guidelines of the UK Data Service⁴⁶, would be taken to protect their identities, and that they had the right to ask for some or all their interview data to be removed for up to 2 weeks after the interview, before anonymisation took place. Contact details were provided at the end of each interview for this purpose.

The anonymisation of the case study data employed within this thesis and its constituent publications includes the use of pseudonyms for the widening participation organisation that facilitated the case studies and for the schools involved, as well as for all student and staff interview participants and individuals and organisations named by interviewees (with the exception of universities). The level at which to anonymise localities was also carefully considered. Whilst for the Nottingham case study, narrowing the location further was not necessary, it was important for discussion of the East London findings - with the particular dynamics of this area being considered in depth within the thesis - to be able to give a more precise idea of area than simply using 'London'. It was however recognised that providing detail at too granular a level, for example, naming the East London borough in which the case study was conducted, could jeopardise the anonymity of the widening participation organisation and schools involved. Using the broader 'East London' moniker was deemed

⁴⁶ UK Data Service anonymisation guidelines available here: <https://ukdataservice.ac.uk/learning-hub/research-data-management/#anonymisation>

sufficiently large to protect the anonymity of all organisations, whilst not adversely affecting discussion of the findings.

With regards to acknowledging interview participants, as a recompense for their time volunteered, student interview participants were each given £10 Amazon credit. As a voucher for a relatively small amount of money, it was deemed that this should not adversely coerce students into taking part. Small thank you gifts (e.g. chocolates) were given to Aspire interview participants and centre staff in the East London and Nottingham centres for their generous support with the two case studies. Additionally, running a presentation or Q&A session for students on HE/PhD study was offered to the two partner school staff interviewed as a thank you for their participation. All participants expressed interest in knowing more about the project findings and a summary report for this purpose was prepared and shared. In recognition of their time and valuable insights provided, participants have also been thanked within the acknowledgement section of this thesis, and in its constituent publications.

Further details about how the data from both phases of the study was securely stored, and the ways in which it will be archived or where necessary destroyed (in the case of the HESA data extract and the non-anonymised data from the qualitative study phase) at the end of the study can be found within the study's ethics approvals and Data Management Plan contained in Appendix 16.

3.5.2 Minimising psychological risks of harm and researcher reflexivity

Possible psychological risks of harm related principally to the qualitative research phase, especially my interviews with students. Whilst it was anticipated that the topic of the research should not be an upsetting subject of discussion, to avoid potential value judgements about different universities which could make students question their choices, the study information provided did not reveal my interest in elite universities specifically. Likewise, within the student interview guide, I did not directly reference elite universities, preferring organic discussion of the (un)importance of university status for students where it arose, or gentle elicitation where necessary. I also considered potential power imbalances between myself and participants and how these could be mitigated. For example, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1997) note, dress can impact significantly on the dynamics established

between researcher and researched, so I chose to dress relatively casually for interviews - especially those with students – to help with approachability. In addition, I used my interview guides as a loose structure only, enabling participants to lead discussions where possible, rather than keeping the interviews highly structured. Almost invariably, participants came across as relaxed and comfortable throughout the interviews, and additional discussion - such as about my own university experiences and the wider study – was had with several participants at the end of their interviews, further suggesting they felt at ease.

Given my previous employment with Aspire, the organisation that facilitated the organisation of the two case studies, I also ensured I paid close attention to the need for reflexivity on my part. As highlighted earlier, I worked as a Senior Education Worker based at one of the organisation's East London centres (different to that used for the East London case study) for just over 2 years between 2014 – 2016. As such, I had some prior knowledge – especially as concerned East London – of the student demographics accessing centres, as well as typical student aspirations/post-18 pathways and of the educational cultures at partner schools. Although this provided additional valuable insight, some of which I draw upon within this thesis (notably in Paper 2 - Chapter 5), it also meant that, whilst striving to approach all interviews as neutrally as possible, I potentially took with me certain assumptions about both staff and student participants - assumptions that may have influenced the interviews themselves, as well as my interpretation of the findings.

For this reason, in Paper 2, I clearly acknowledge my positionality for the reader and - whilst I include a few reflections on how my experiences align with certain case study findings - choose to privilege the discourses of my interviewees, using their words wherever possible, rather than my own. My previous work with Aspire also gave rise to the possibility for Aspire staff participants, who were aware of my previous employment with the organisation, to omit information that they assumed I should already know (Mnyaka and Macleod, 2018). I anticipated this problem, asking staff participants ahead of the interview to answer questions as if I was someone with no previous knowledge of Aspire, and did not experience any notable issues here. Indeed, overall, my 'insider' position within the case study proved unproblematic and appeared to confer greater advantages than disadvantages.

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4. Geographies of Elite Higher Education Participation: An Urban ‘Escalator’ Effect

Abstract

Based on analysis of an administrative dataset, which includes granular detail on 800,000 English students over a 10-year period, this paper identifies an urban ‘escalator’ effect in entry to elite universities, with disadvantaged youth in the urban centres of England having higher rates of entry than similarly disadvantaged youth located rurally. Using multi-level modelling, as well as Geographic Information System (GIS) methods, the analyses show that while place in itself is not a major contributory factor in entry to elite universities overall, there is a distinct urban-rural patterning to progression. When raw progression rates by area alone are observed, rural areas typically have higher progression rates to elite universities. However, when the full range of individual differences are accounted for, including attainment, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and accessibility to elite universities, the converse is true – localities within and surrounding major urban centres are those with the highest progression rates. A ‘vortex of influences’ is likely to favour urban disadvantaged youth, including the geography of social class and ethnic identities, a legacy of concerted policy interventions within urban areas, as well as the proliferation of widening participation activity in urban centres.

Keywords

elite universities, geographies of higher education, escalator regions, urban and rural

Introduction

There is growing attention internationally on the importance of geography in shaping higher education destinations. Research has examined interesting spatial questions around how far students tend to move away from home, the spatial distribution of universities within countries, and how these two factors impact on higher education participation. In the USA, Hillman (2016) shows how places with large Hispanic communities and low attainment have the fewest colleges located nearby, what they refer to as 'educational deserts'. For some country contexts, geography is implicated in important ways with race and ethnicity; for example, Indigenous community groups often tend to be geographically concentrated in specific (largely rural) locations. In Australia, based on analysis of a large longitudinal dataset, Parker et al. (2015) found that distance from university impacted significantly on university expectations and entrance, especially for lower socio-economic groups.

In the UK, the role of place is gaining traction in policy debates around social justice and inequalities. The 2016 referendum result to leave the European Union accelerated debate around so-called 'left behind' places, increasing calls for the decentring of political and economic power away from London. In the context of an increasingly place-based character to policy narratives, higher education institutions are similarly held to account in the spatial, as well as social, profile of their intake. Government ministers often call out elite universities on the profile of their intake (e.g. Lammy, 2017), with such criticism increasingly taking a spatial turn. A crucial question here is what role place plays in access to elite universities, after all other known determinants are accounted for (including the spatially uneven distribution of elite universities themselves). Does place impact on progression to elite universities above and beyond social background determinants? How can we measure the significance of any such 'place effects' on progression? Do similarly high-achieving working-class youth differ in their likelihood of progressing to an elite university depending on where in the country they grow up? This paper uses fine-grained administrative data on the individual profiles of five national cohorts of students entering higher education over a ten-year period to address these questions.

There are few studies which have specifically examined the role geography plays in mediating progression to elite universities. There has been some work focussing on the role of distance for students when it comes to making university choices. Mangan et al. (2010) demonstrate the importance of having elite institutions locally situated. In a study considering university entry in two geographic areas, one (Area B) with an elite university proximate and the other (Area A) not, they find that high-achieving students in Area B had an 18% increased

probability of attending an elite institution in comparison to peers in Area A. Likewise, Gibbons and Vignoles (2012) also examine the impact of geography on progression to university, as well as type of university attended, demonstrating that geographical distance has very little impact on whether students pursue higher education, regardless of students' ethnic group or socio-economic class, but that it does have a strong influence on institutional choice. Their findings suggest that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may be more likely to choose an institution close to them, even if it is of lower status. The analysis presented in this paper takes account of these important differences in 'accessibility' to elite universities, examining the importance of place whilst at the same time controlling for distance to elite universities.

The majority of research exploring inequalities in access to elite institutions has focussed on the role of individual characteristics. Indeed, the importance of attainment, socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity in mediating progression to elite universities is well documented (Ball et al., 2002a, 2002b; Reay et al., 2005; Chowdry et al., 2013). Another area of consideration has been the application process to elite universities, with those from lower socio-economic backgrounds found to be much less likely to apply to these universities than students from higher socio-economic backgrounds and private schools, even when in possession of similar grades (Boliver, 2013). Evidence of ethnic bias at some elite universities has also been demonstrated, with students from Black and Asian backgrounds shown to be significantly less likely to receive offers from Russell Group universities compared to students from White backgrounds (Boliver, 2013).

Schools also play an important role in influencing who applies to elite institutions (Reay et al., 2001; Oliver and Kettley, 2010). Attention here has typically been focussed on the 'institutional habitus' of schools, a concept which stems from the application of Bourdieu's (1990) work on individual habitus to institutions, and which suggests that where there is an expectation of students to apply to elite universities, more pupils do so. In contrast, Donnelly (2014) uses Bernstein's (1975) concepts of classification and framing to examine the 'hidden messages' sent out by schools about elite institutions and likewise finds that where messages are strongly framed - i.e. it is made clear to those that have the potential to apply to do so – more students do. Moreover, the knowledge and support required to access elite universities appears unevenly distributed and where schools are more effective at increasing participation, their effect is not uniform. Rather, some schools are better at improving the likelihood of accessing elite universities for females and others for males (Taylor et al., 2018).

The role of place and the widening participation agenda

In the UK, concerted government interest in widening participation to higher education was principally set in train with publication of the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997). Whilst there had been various policy initiatives targeted at underrepresented student groups prior to this (Kettley, 2007), it was this that set in motion an increasing focus on the effect of 'place' (Brown, 2012) and which continues to the present day. For example, in 2017, a large-scale outreach programme, the National Collaborative Outreach Programme - now known as Uni Connect - was launched, focussed on local areas where progression to university is lower than might be expected taking into account GCSE results and ethnicity (Office for Students, 2020).

Focussing on place has become a convenient proxy for social class, allowing university outreach programmes to be targeted at those thought to possess 'low aspirations' without having to acknowledge their social background (Brown, 2012). A series of place-based measures have been developed in recent times, enabling the use of data to judge individual institutions in their effectiveness at broadening the socio-demographic character of their intake. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) – now part of the Office for Students (OfS) - introduced the Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) methodology, which is now commonplace within the higher education sector. This tool - now in its fourth iteration named POLAR4 – enables practitioners to see how likely young people are to participate in higher education at age 18 or 19 according to the area in which they live (Office for Students, 2021). The methodology involves classifying local areas into five quintiles, from quintile 1 (lowest) to quintile 5 (highest) participation. More recently, the OfS has also introduced another similar measure to POLAR – TUNDRA – which differs in that it uses data-linkage methods to track students from age 16 to 18 (Office for Students, 2021). The OfS have also created a 'postcode look-up tool' (Office for Students, 2021) which enables the user to see in which POLAR and TUNDRA quintiles a certain postcode falls, as well as the impact of some individual characteristics on HE progression rates. For example, practitioners can see in which quintile an area is in terms of the gap between expected and actual higher education participation given, firstly, GCSE score and, secondly, GCSE score and ethnicity.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Since this article was published, the OfS have removed the functionality within the postcode look-up tool that enabled users to explore in which quintile areas were given GCSE scores and ethnicity.

The now routine collection and use of such data to measure participation in higher education is not without its drawbacks. Whilst these official measures of higher education participation have generated a wealth of data on rates of overall participation by area, they lack a sufficiently detailed breakdown of individual university destinations. Furthermore, whilst the OfS postcode look-up tool enables the user to see the impact of some individual characteristics on higher education progression rates, the possibilities it currently offers – looking at the impact of GCSE score and ethnicity - remain limited. Moreover, use of the tool highlights the importance of considering these factors, as it reveals that there are often differences as to which quintile an area is in when each of the available characteristics are accounted for. Indeed, the MSOA given as an example by the OfS – that of Frenchay and Great Stoke – is in quintile 5 for POLAR4 (the highest quintile), yet for both 'Gaps GCSE' and 'Gaps GCSE Ethnicity' it is in quintile 1 (the quintile with the biggest gap between expected and actual participation).

Furthermore, a crucial drawback of 'official' place-based widening participation measures stems from the fact that not all deprived areas are similar (Brown, 2012; Donnelly and Evans, 2016; Crossley, 2017; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). Indeed, the varying social and spatial relationships within different communities may have differential impacts on young people's aspirations and hence higher education progression trajectories. Socially disadvantaged young people from minority-ethnic groups, the highest concentrations of which are often to be found in inner-city areas, often have high educational aspirations, driven in part by high expectations from their families (Modood, 2004; Shah et al., 2010). This often stands in contrast to young people living in equally disadvantaged, but more physically and socially isolated locations such as small towns which have borne the brunt of deindustrialisation or large social housing estates on the outskirts of cities (Brown, 2012). Our analyses make an important contribution to this debate by drawing on the case of London, which represents a particular microcosm to observe such 'urban' effects.

Research within economic and social geography has dealt with questions around geographic mobility and intragenerational social mobility in the UK (Savage and Fielding, 1989; Fielding, 1992; Coombes and Charlton, 1992; Champion et al., 2007; Fielding, 2007; Findlay et al., 2009). Savage and Fielding's (1989) concept of an 'escalator region' stems from a paper which examines the higher rates of social mobility into and out of the 'service class' in the South East of England as compared to the rest of the country. The authors argue these findings are indicative of the South East acting as an 'escalator region', which attracts many young people due to the higher chances it offers of social mobility than elsewhere. Other more recent research has disputed whether London really is the 'engine

room' for social mobility within the UK context (Friedman and Macmillan, 2017). The concept of the 'escalator region' has been applied to understand a number of other topics including whether capital city regions act as 'escalator regions' for early-career international migrants (Andersson, 1996; Conradson and Latham, 2005; King et al., 2018), the extent to which second-order cities may emulate the capital as 'escalators' (Champion et al., 2014) and the role of ambition in gaining the most from a move to an 'escalator region' (Gordon, 2015). We draw on these insights from social and economic geography, to consider the role of place in determining elite university destinations, and whether such 'escalator regions' exist within the context of UK higher education.

Data and Methods

The data drawn on here was specially requested from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA); the official agency for data collection and analysis on students enrolled on UK-based HE courses. The extract used contained data for over 800,000 English students beginning university in the academic years 2008/09, 2010/11, 2012/13, 2014/15 and 2016/17. Combining data from several cohorts (and including a cohort control measure) ensures that any conclusions drawn from the analyses are consistent, and not limited to 'one-off' patterns true for only one or two cohorts.

To be able to model patterns of progression to elite universities, it was necessary to first decide how 'elite' universities would be defined. Much of the research looking at access to elite universities (e.g. Manley and Johnston, 2014; Wright, 2014; Boliver, 2016; Sullivan et al., 2017) has used the 24 universities of the academically selective and research-intensive Russell Group as a proxy measure. Recognising the self-selective nature of this grouping and the fact that there are some universities which share very similar characteristics, we cross-referenced these institutions against those at the top of the Guardian, Times Higher Education and Complete University Guide league tables. Given the similarities between these rankings, we chose to use the Complete University Guide (Complete University Guide, 2020), the longest running amongst these tables, and to also include within our elite grouping measure any university within the top 20 when their rankings for both entry standards and research scores are combined. This resulted in the addition of three further universities - University of St Andrews, University of Bath and University of Strathclyde - to create a 'top27' grouping. To check the robustness of this outcome variable, sensitivity analyses were run

with other 'elite' groupings, including a 'top20' measure, which indicated that our results are not particularly affected by variations in the definition of the outcome variable.⁴⁸

Several factors were taken into consideration in determining the most appropriate unit of analysis for measuring geographic place. Very small geographical measures, such as postcode, were not suitable for this study due to the sensitive nature of this information as well as the need for sufficient numbers of individuals within each grouping unit for a multilevel modelling approach to be used. The same was true of the slightly larger Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs), one of the geographical hierarchies defined and used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), and which was initially considered for use, but due to low numbers of individuals in some LSOAs and subsequent issues with model convergence had to be abandoned. Equally, using a much larger hierarchy with a fairly substantial level of aggregation such as 'local authority' was also unsuitable as university progression rates can vary substantially between different areas within the same local authority. For these reasons, the ONS' Middle Super Output Area (MSOA) field, the subsequent geographical hierarchy up from LSOA, and which the POLAR4 methodology also employs, was adopted. Each MSOA, of which there are 6,791 across England, has a population between 5,000 and 15,000, with a minimum of 2,000 and a maximum of 6,000 households (Office for National Statistics, 2016).

An important consideration in determining whether place impacts on entry to elite universities is the degree of 'accessibility' to elite institutions given their uneven geographic spread. As physical proximity (or lack of it) to these universities may make some students more (or less) likely to access them (Mangan et al. 2010; Gibbons and Vignoles, 2012) a control variable quantifying each MSOA's overall accessibility to the universities within the elite grouping was created. This measure of accessibility was similar to that used by Wright (2014), originally developed by Knox in 1978 (described in Joseph and Phillips, 1984) to measure geographical differences in access to GP practices in Britain. Using centroids for both universities and MSOAs, the distances to the 27 universities within the elite grouping were calculated for each of the 6,791 MSOAs giving a matrix of distances of 183,357 (= 6,791 x 27). Students located in MSOAs with the lowest cumulative distance to the 27 universities thus had the highest relative access to these universities in comparison to their peers in other localities and those students in MSOAs with the highest cumulative distance the worst. To incorporate this measure into the modelling, the cumulative distances

⁴⁸ Results of these analyses are available from the corresponding author upon request.

calculated for each MSOA were transformed into Z scores and linked to individuals via their MSOA.

Multilevel modelling recognises that individuals with shared characteristics (i.e. in this context living in the same area) will be more alike than those living in different areas and enables separation within the modelling process of the variance which can be attributed to the individual level and that which can be attributed to the grouping level (in this case, MSOA). Such a modelling approach was therefore well suited to this study which was interested in identifying the impact of where students live on their likelihood to progress to an elite university. The analyses completed used a sequence of 2-level (students at level 1, MSOAs at level 2) random-intercept logistic models of increasing complexity. Initially a null model was used. This enabled identification of the mean rate of attendance at top27 universities, as well as the proportion of the unexplained variance which could be attributed to MSOAs. The random (MSOA-effects) were then estimated and listed to observe which MSOAs had the lowest and highest progression rates to top27 universities before any control variables were considered.

Following this, the MSOA effects were mapped using QGIS to observe which areas had the lowest and highest progression rates. To more easily examine patterns of progression nationally, progression was mapped by decile, with decile 1 representing the areas with the lowest progression up to decile 10 representing the areas with the highest progression.

Control variables were then included, accounting for observable factors known to be important in predicting entry to elite universities, to account for their potentially confounding impacts. Ten control variables, grouped within five theoretical domains, were included:

1. **Education** (state/private school education, tariff point score, number of facilitating subjects studied)
2. **Socio-economic status** (National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) of students aged 21 and over (else that of their highest-earning parent) and a marker indicating if one or more parents has a university education)
3. **Social and individual-level factors** (age, ethnicity and sex)
4. **Distance travelled** (measured from student's domicile MSOA to their university)
5. **Academic year** (08/09, 10/11, 12/13, 14/15 and 16/17)

Initially, each theoretical grouping was modelled separately to see how much of the model's variance it could explain. Next, control variables at the MSOA-level were each added

separately to the model combining all the individual fixed-effects, to see how much of the remaining variance they could explain:

1. MSOA-mean tariff score
2. MSOA-mean number of facilitating subjects studied
3. Accessibility of MSOA to the universities of the elite grouping.

Finally, the MSOA-level variables were then added simultaneously to the model containing all level 1 control variables, to create the final model. The random (MSOA-effects) were then again estimated and listed to observe which MSOAs had the lowest and highest progression rates to top27 universities with all control factors considered, before being mapped by decile like those of the null model. The complete model is a multilevel logistic regression model, with a MSOA-specific random intercept $\zeta_j \sim N(0, \Psi)$. Its specification is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{logit}\{Pr(y_{ij} = 1/X_{pij}, \zeta_j)\} &= \text{logit}\{P_{ij}\} = \ln\left(\frac{P_{ij}}{1 - P_{ij}}\right) = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{pj}X_{pij} \\ \beta_{0j} &= \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{0q}Z_{aj} + \zeta_{0j} \\ \beta_{pj} &= \gamma_{p0} \\ \rightarrow \text{logit}\{Pr(y_{ij} = 1/X_{pij}, \zeta_j)\} &= \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{0q}Z_{aj} + \gamma_{p0}X_{pij} + \zeta_{0j} \end{aligned}$$

Where P_{ij} is the probability of entering an elite university of the i-individual at the j-MSOA. This probability is built by β_{0j} (mean probability at the j-MSOA) and X_{pij} (p-explanatory variables related to individual characteristics). β_{0j} , in turn, comprises γ_{00} (mean probability of all MSOAs) and ζ_{0j} (deviation of the probability of the j-MSOA to the mean probability of all MSOAs). Finally, Z_{aj} comprises the q-variables related to the MSOA level.

Maximum likelihood estimates of the model parameters and their standard errors were obtained using the *xtnlogit* command (e.g. Skrondal & Rabe-Hesketh, 2009) in Stata (2019) with adaptive quadrature. Empirical Bayes predictions of the random effects were obtained using the *predict* command with the *ref* option. These estimates are based on the mode of the posterior distribution of the random effects (see Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal, 2008, pp. 162).

The significance of place in progression to elite universities

Looking at the raw data on elite HE progression rates by MSOA reveals some striking geographical patterning, suggestive of a compounding effect upon individual-level factors of social class, private school attendance etc. For example, 17 of the top 20 MSOAs (see table A1) for elite HEI progression were shown to be London boroughs, most within predominantly affluent areas of West and South West London. Indeed, the top MSOA for progression (Kensington & Chelsea 011) had almost 80% of its students progressing to these universities and standing in stark contrast to the over 300 MSOAs with progression rates of less than 10%, including 2 MSOAs (Wolverhampton 007 and Plymouth 006) where no students at all went on to these universities (see table A2).

Moving on to the multilevel modelling process itself, table 4-1 presents both the null model (which only accounts for MSOA effects) as well as the final model (which controls for all individual and neighbourhood characteristics mentioned above). The between-MSOA variance in the null model is estimated as 0.382. This gives a Variance Partition Coefficient (VPC) estimated using the standard logistic distribution ($\pi^2/3 = 3.29$) of 10.4% ($0.382/(0.382+3.29) = 0.104$). This means that just over 10% of the residual variation in students' likelihood of progressing to an elite university is due to unobserved MSOA characteristics; that-is-to-say characteristics that have not yet been accounted for in the model. A caterpillar plot (figure B1) shows the MSOA effects (residuals) in the null model for the 6,791 MSOAs. For a substantial number of them, the 95% confidence interval does not cross zero. This indicates that the progression of students from these MSOAs to elite universities is either significantly above average (for those MSOAs above the zero line) or significantly below average (for those below the zero line). Turning to the final model, the between-MSOA variance is estimated as 0.147, giving a Variance Partition Coefficient (VPC) of 4.3% ($0.147/(0.147+3.29) = 0.043$). Approximately two-thirds of the unexplained variance at the MSOA-level (in the null model) has thus been accounted for. As would be expected, given the reduction in the unexplained variance at the MSOA-level once control variables have been included, a second caterpillar plot (figure B2) shows that there are now fewer MSOAs whose student progression to elite universities is either significantly above or below average. That said, there remain a significant number of MSOAs which diverge from the general trend, suggesting that they positively or negatively influence progression to elite universities more so than is the case for others overall.

Table 4-1. Associations between individual and MSOA-level factors and attending an elite (top27) university

| Random-intercept logistic models | Elite HE Participation Null model | Elite HE Participation Final model |
|--|---|---------------------------------------|
| Random effects | | |
| Intercept | -1.054 | -4.479 |
| MSOA-level variance | 0.382 | 0.147 |
| Student-level variables (Level 1) | | |
| Tariff | | 0.114 |
| Number of facilitating subjects studied | | 0.654 |
| State school | <i>Reference category: private</i> | |
| | State | -0.985 |
| Socioeconomic class (NS-SEC) | <i>Reference category: Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations</i> | |
| | Lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations | -0.061 |
| | Intermediate occupations | -0.103 |
| | Small employers and own account workers | -0.165 |
| | Lower supervisory and technical occupations | -0.341 |
| | Semi-routine occupations | -0.191 |
| | Routine occupations | -0.309 |
| | Never worked and long-term unemployed | -1.506 |
| Parent(s) attended university | <i>Reference category: no</i> | |
| | Yes | 0.098 |
| Distance travelled to university | | 0.063 |
| Age | | -0.059 |

| | | |
|---|---|------------|
| Ethnicity | <i>Reference category: White</i> | |
| | Black Caribbean | -0.370 |
| | Black African | -0.176 |
| | Other Black | -0.191 |
| | Indian | 0.053 |
| | Pakistani | 0.022 |
| | Bangladeshi | 0.442 |
| | Chinese | 0.226 |
| | Other Asian | 0.001 |
| | Mixed ethnicity | 0.073 |
| | Other ethnicity | -0.033 |
| Gender | <i>Reference category: male</i> | |
| | Female | -0.003 |
| | Other | -0.628 |
| Academic year | <i>Reference category: 2008/09 academic year</i> | |
| | 2010/11 academic year | -0.444 |
| | 2012/13 academic year | -0.653 |
| | 2014/15 academic year | -0.441 |
| | 2016/17 academic year | -0.294 |
| <hr/> | | |
| MSOA-level variables (Level 2) | | |
| | MSOA mean tariff | -0.018 |
| | MSOA mean number of facilitating subjects studied | 0.602 |
| | MSOA accessibility to top27 unis | 0.143 |
| <hr/> | | |
| Variance Partition Coefficient (VPC) | 0.104 | 0.043 |
| <hr/> | | |
| Log likelihood | -483650.99 | -310529.21 |
| <hr/> | | |

The modelling is largely supportive of previous research findings into the factors associated with progression to higher education and elite universities. The group of control variables with the biggest impact were the educational variables which reduced the between-MSOA variance by 50% - suggesting substantial variation of these characteristics across MSOAs. The addition of the socio-economic variables also had a considerable impact, reducing the between-MSOA variance by approximately a third. The addition of distance travelled reduced the between-MSOA variance by approximately 15%, whereas the addition of age, ethnicity and sex had a lesser impact – reducing the between-MSOA variance by just over 5% and academic year even less – by less than 1%. That the most significant reductions in between-MSOA variance would follow the addition of the education and socio-economic control groupings was expected, given that initial descriptive analysis of the data show that school type (state/private), attainment and uptake of facilitating subjects varies substantially between areas and that some areas are more affluent than others, and that these areas will typically have a higher proportion of parents with a university education. Likewise, as universities are unevenly distributed throughout the UK, it was to be expected that the distribution of distance travelled by students across MSOAs would vary considerably. Furthermore, whilst there is variation in terms of ethnicity across MSOAs, with 86% of the population identifying as White in the 2011 census (Office for National Statistics, 2015), it was not unexpected that the distribution of ethnicity across MSOAs did not vary that significantly

An 'urban escalator' effect

This section moves on to map the MSOA residual values to consider whether any spatial patterning exists in the geographic distribution of MSOAs which differ from the average in their effect on progression to elite universities. Figure 4-1 shows the MSOA progression rates by decile from the null model (that-is-to-say the proportions of their students progressing to elite universities) before any control variables are accounted for. The deciles go from light (lowest proportion) to dark (highest proportion) of students progressing to elite universities. Significantly, this mapping of the residuals is suggestive of a rural/urban patterning; with rural areas tending to have higher proportions of their students progressing to elite universities than urban areas. Given that no control variables are accounted for here, this makes sense given that rural areas of the UK tend to be more affluent and lower socio-economic groups, as well as ethnic minorities, tend to live in urban areas. Whilst the East Midlands and East of England regions appear to have slightly higher numbers of MSOAs with lower progression rates, all regions typically have a mix of MSOAs with both higher and lower rates of progression.

Figure 4-1: MSOA progression rates from null model mapped by decile

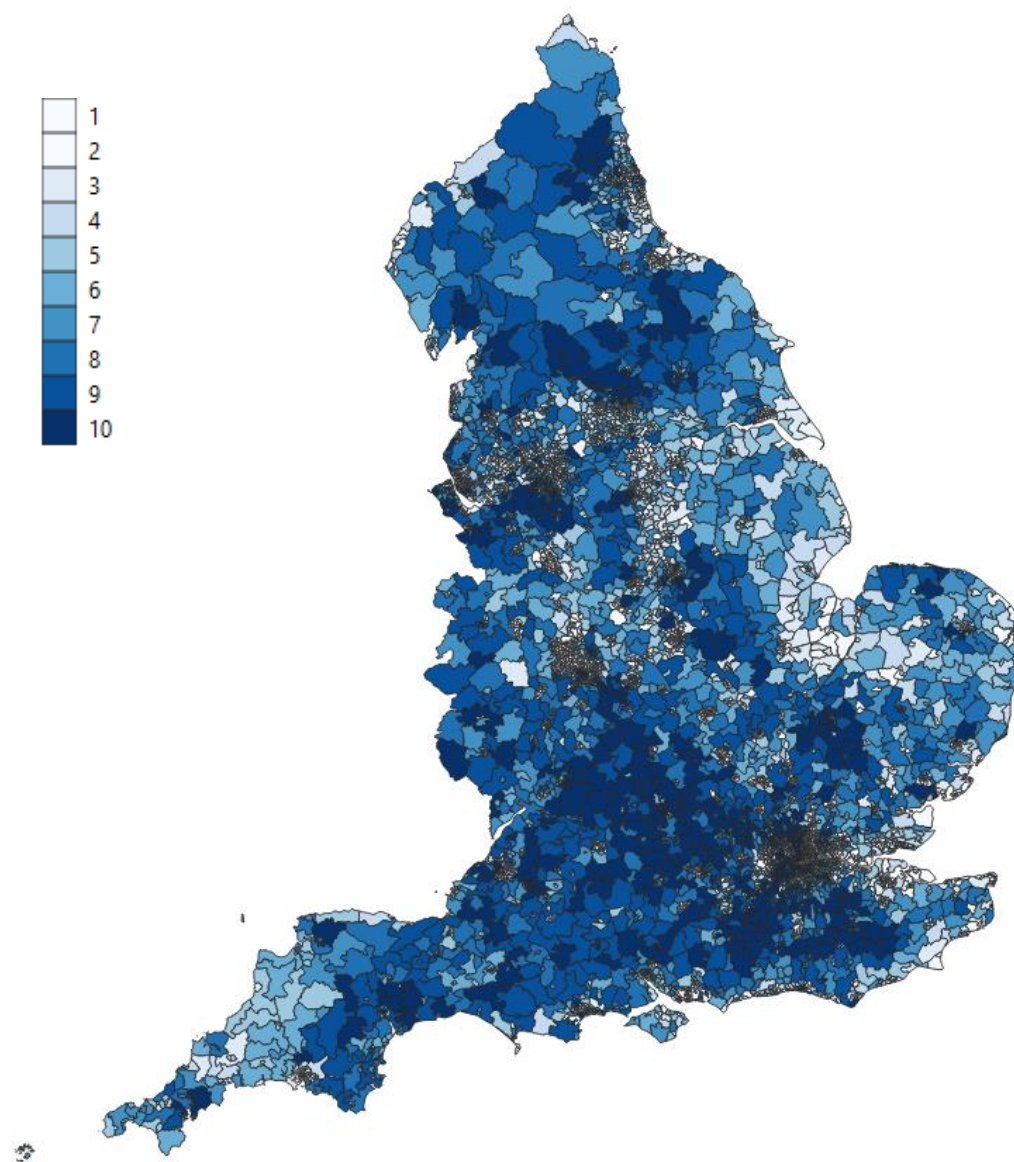
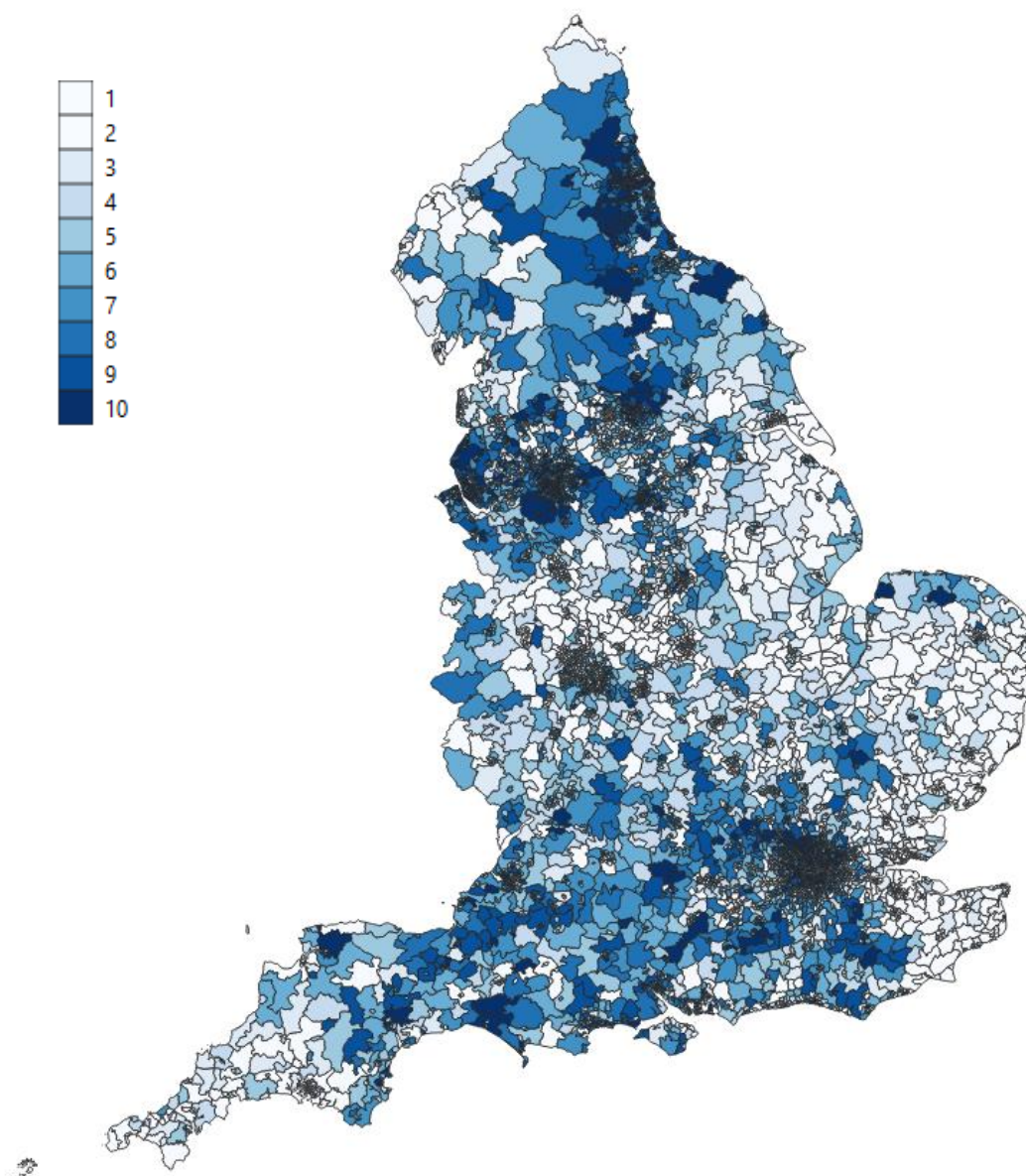


Figure 4-2 shows the MSOA progression rates by decile from the final model (that-is-to-say when control variables are included). Crucially, this map suggests quite a different picture of elite higher education participation than that indicated from the mapping of the null model residuals. Whilst the MSOAs in some rural areas, especially in the North East and South West continue to have higher than expected participation rates, many rural MSOAs now have lower than expected progression rates and urban MSOAs are more likely to have higher participation rates than rural MSOAs. This is suggestive of an ‘urban escalator’ effect in progression to elite universities, where disadvantaged students situated in urban areas are advantaged over similarly disadvantaged students situated rurally.

Figure 4-2: MSOA progression rates from final model mapped by decile



As to why disadvantaged groups in urban areas may have a better chance of accessing elite universities than their rurally located peers, there are likely to be multiple competing explanations at play. Previous research suggests that there is not one standout reason, but rather that large towns and cities contain a vortex of influences which favour urban disadvantaged groups over those located rurally.

On one level, the geography of social class and ethnic identities and the impact this has upon young people's aspirations likely provides one possible explanation. Recent research on the

socio-spatial patterning of social class has suggested a concentration of elite groups within particular urban locations, largely urban centres of the south but also particular 'enclaves' within the north (Cunningham and Savage, 2015). As well as mapping on to elite groups, the geographical patterning of residuals also to some extent maps on to the identification of UK Government 'cold spots' - identified by policymakers as locations where extra investment is targeted to address under-achievement in education. For example, Norwich is one such 'cold spot' identified by the UK Government, which our modelling also suggests underperforms in access to elite universities. There is also some observable connection between overall rates of access to university (as seen within the OfS' POLAR mapping⁴⁹) and the spatial patterning of elite university entry observed here, although our data is restricted to those entering HE, so it is not possible to establish any robust connections here. Further qualitative research is needed to more fully understand and interpret these patterns, and indeed the impact of such targeted place-based policy initiatives. Previous qualitative research suggests that some ethnic minority families (typically represented in higher proportions in urban areas) often have very high aspirations for, and expectations of, their children (Modood, 2004; Shah et al., 2010), which may not always be the case in families and young people living in physically and socially-isolated locations such as small towns suffering the effects of deindustrialisation (Brown, 2012). In a study of male African-Caribbean students studying at Russell Group universities, Dumangane Jr (2017) also suggests that the interplay between ethnic identity and faith can impact positively on propensity to attend an elite institution.

On another level, urban centres have become centres for multiple policy initiatives in recent years, accelerated by successive Governments attempting to make their mark, especially from the New Labour Government onwards. One significant policy initiative has been the introduction of 'academies', state schools which receive funding directly from the Department for Education instead of being under local authority control, established through the Learning and Skills Act 2000. At the outset, the policy was inherently 'urban' in character, targeting failing inner-city schools, using funds from the private sector to pioneer a new type of school structure. 72% of state secondary schools in England are now academies (National Audit Office, 2018) and whilst the academisation of schools was and remains controversial, some academies have achieved marked improvements in attainment compared to their predecessor schools (Bedell, 2008). However, it must also be noted that in terms of exam performance, other evidence suggests the academies programme has had no substantial impact on school performance (Gorard, 2009), but this is not to say academies have had no impact, especially

⁴⁹ The POLAR map of HE participation can be accessed here: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/maps-of-participation-in-higher-education/>

when thinking about outcomes that are less easily measured. Whilst the academies programme is now mainstream across the UK, it is an example of a policy which initially positioned educational disadvantage as an inherently 'urban' problem. Other 'urban' education policies include the Excellence in Cities programme in the early 2000s, designed to improve attainment in urban schools (Kendall et al., 2005), and the London Challenge (2003-2011), a secondary school improvement programme across the capital (Kidson and Norris, 2014). The legacy of these policy initiatives in improving urban youth's academic attainment may play a role in explaining why disadvantaged urban groups may be more likely to access elite universities than their rurally located peers.

Moreover, since the raising of university tuition fees, considerable investment and effort has been made across the higher education sector to widen the demographic of their intake. Outreach work is expensive, and it is likely that individual universities will attempt to maximise the impact of their activities through targeting particular areas where they are most likely to 'capture' a greater number of their target population. Furthermore, in contrast to former government directives which saw institutions obliged to work in partnership with one another (McCaig, 2015), universities are now able to target their outreach activity as they wish, which does not engender collaboration. As a result, universities in urban areas, especially in cities like London where there is a high concentration of providers, are likely to target the same local disadvantaged areas, meaning that these students may benefit disproportionately from outreach activities.

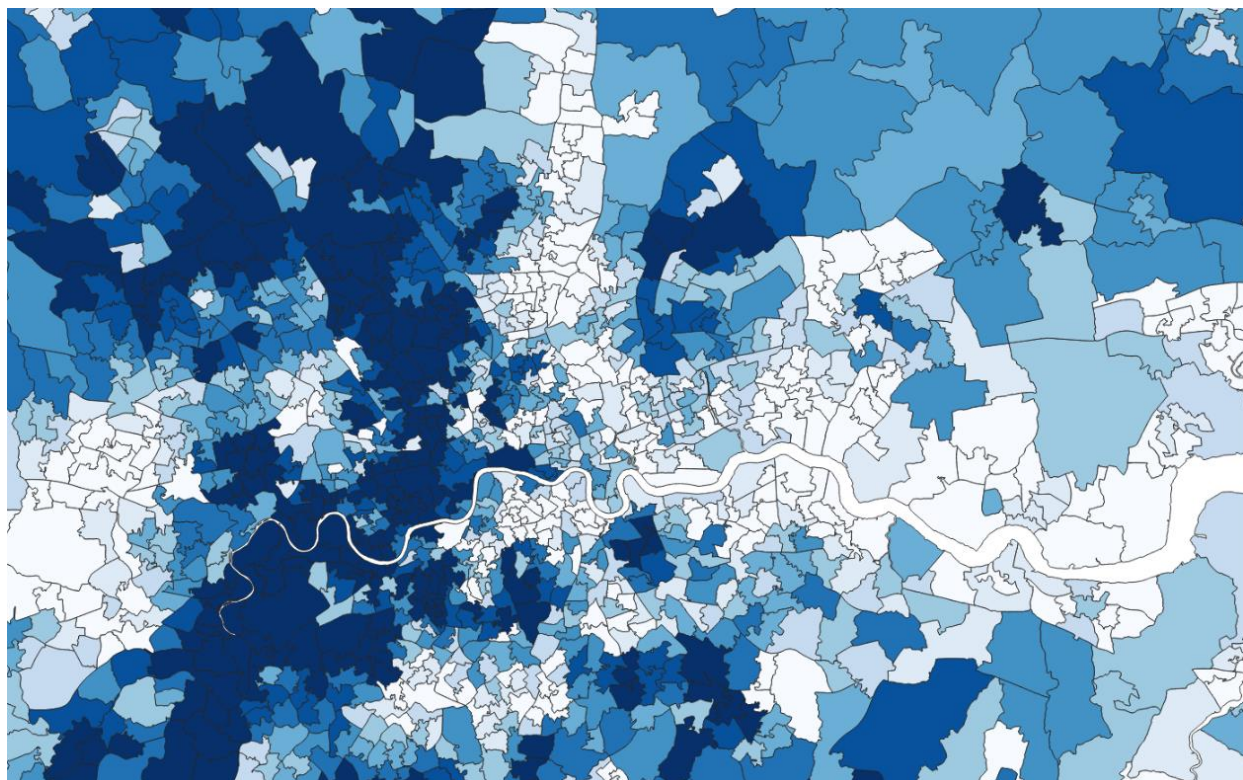
A further possible explanation is that, similar to the idea of a 'school mix effect' (Thrupp, 1999) which suggests that disadvantaged students do better in schools with a more advantaged student body, there may also be a 'geographic mix' effect at play. Indeed, as a report for the Department for Education by Wiseman et al. (2017) suggests, students in more socially diverse areas have a greater likelihood of encountering aspirational 'role models' and being exposed to a wider range of potential career paths. As socially diverse areas are more likely to be urban areas, there is thus reason to suggest that disadvantaged students living in urban locations may benefit disproportionately from these interactions and the impact these may have on aspiring towards attending an elite university.

London as a microcosm of the ‘urban escalator’

London is used here to examine some of these place-based effects more closely. London represents an ideal locality to examine further because it is often considered a ‘microcosm’ of wider UK society with regards to wealth distribution, ethnicity, educational and other dimensions. London, however, stands out in having the largest rich-poor pay gap in the UK, with the richest 1% of earners earning almost 15 times that of the poorest 1%, compared to a pay gap of 8-10 times in most other UK regions (The Equality Trust, 2014).

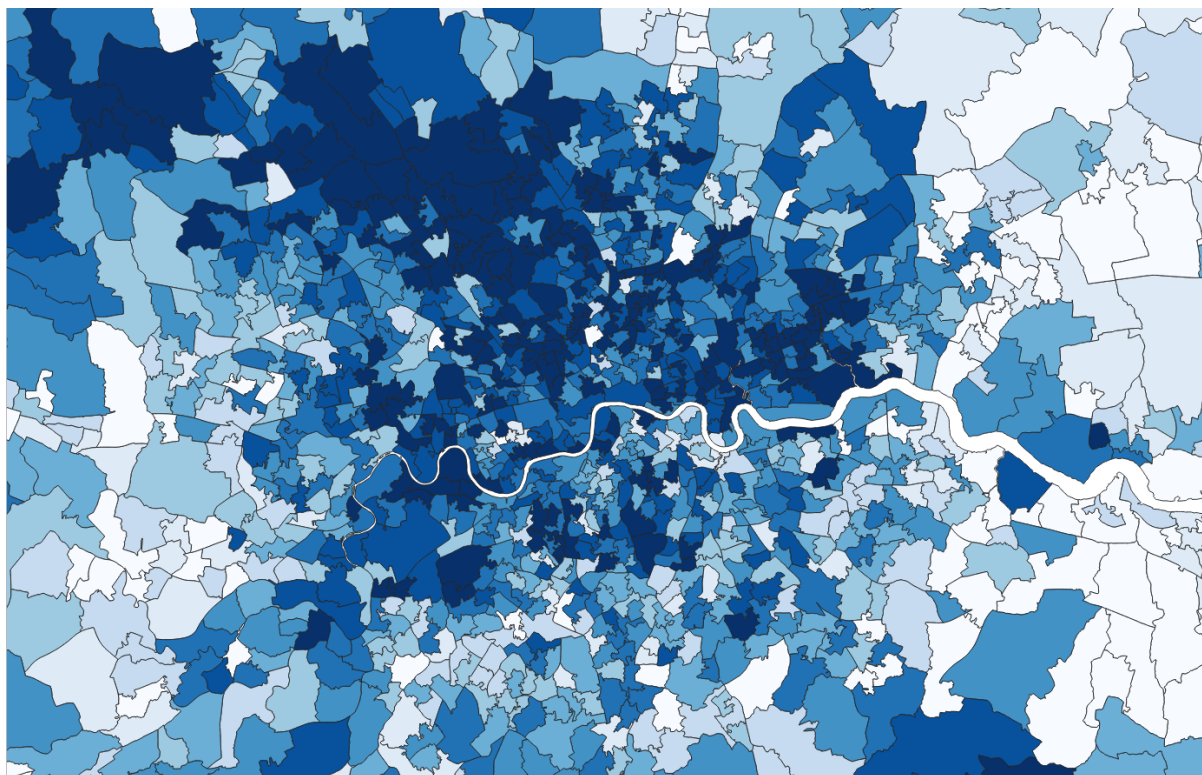
In our own analyses, London represents a kind of microcosm encapsulating the wider ‘urban escalator’ phenomena identified. As highlighted earlier, initial exploration of the raw MSOA progression rates revealed that 17 of the top 20 MSOAs for elite HE progression were London boroughs, most within predominantly affluent areas of West and South West London. Mapping of the MSOA residuals from the null model however, that-is-to-say before the addition of control variables, revealed a different story in more ethnically diverse and typically poorer East London, where the vast majority of MSOAs had low progression rates (figure 4-3).

Figure 4-3: Null model map, zoomed in on London area



However, once all control variables are accounted for in the final model, London's MSOAs, now including those of East London, have almost universally higher than expected progression rates (figure 4-4). As to the possible explanations for the dramatic change seen in the MSOAs of East London, the geography of social class and ethnic identities outlined earlier appears particularly pertinent. Indeed, East London, home to some of the most deprived areas in the UK, including the borough of Tower Hamlets, where more than 25% of children live in income-deprived households (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019), is one of the most ethnically diverse parts of the country and many of the ethnic groups represented in high proportions here – notably those of South Asian backgrounds – have been shown by previous research to have high aspirations for their children (Modood, 2004, Shah et al., 2010). Again, during the years of the London Challenge (2003-2011) and the start of the academisation programme, the attainment of many of London's underperforming schools – such as Hackney-based Mossbourne Community Academy, regularly lauded by politicians (Bedell, 2008) - was transformed. This is thus also likely to have impacted positively on many students' likelihoods of being able to progress to an elite university.

Figure 4-4: Final model map, zoomed in on London area



Third sector widening participation organisations are also much more likely to be based in urban areas (IntoUniversity, 2015), with a particular concentration in London (Gamsu, 2016). Moreover, these London-based third-sector organisations often receive substantial donations from the corporate social responsibility arms of City of London businesses (Gamsu, 2016) and many also provide opportunities such as visits and work experience placements. Engagement with these third-sector organisations and the benefits drawn from their connections is thus also likely to impact positively on disadvantaged students' propensities to progress to elite institutions.

Conclusion

The analyses presented here give a granular account of the importance geography plays in access to elite universities within the UK – contributing to similar research in other country contexts where the importance of geography has been examined. Adding to this international literature, it underlines the importance of attending to geography, especially in spatially diverse countries like the UK. The research holds relevance for other country contexts that have similar spatial diversity, in terms of place-based economic and social inequalities, as well as an uneven spatial distribution of universities themselves. What is clear from these analyses, and evident in other countries (Hillman 2016, Parker et al., 2015), is the importance of controlling for distance from universities, and examining place-based inequalities at fine-grained geographic levels (for example, within large cities, to account for their spatial heterogeneity).

The dataset drawn on here enabled the tracking of individual trajectories into higher education in a granular level of detail, tracing how social, ethnic and educational characteristics interact with geographic locality across successive cohorts. Overall, set against other major competing factors, place has little impact on progression. If anything, this finding speaks to the prevailing significance of social class and ethnicity (and in turn, their mediating influence on levels of attainment) in shaping the socially differentiated nature of progression to different types of university within the UK. That said, our analyses also reveal important caveats to this point, with the average limited role of place not consistent across all geographic localities. An 'urban escalator' is evident in rates of progression to elite universities, likely to be driven by a historical 'vortex of influences' which have provided those in urban centres a distinct advantage. This 'vortex of influences', including 'social mix effects', successive urban-centred policy

interventions, and the urban targeting of university and third-sector outreach activities represent a plausible set of explanations on a number of levels.

Moreover, the study's findings add a further educational dimension to research around regional inequalities and forms of 'regional escalators' that have been identified since Savage and Fielding's (1989) identification of a 'escalator' effect in the labour market. Importantly, they add a further dimension to debates around regional inequalities in education, which go beyond commonplace notions of 'north' and 'south' regional divides. Rather, they underscore a form of geographic inequality based around urban centres, suggestive of a more complex set of spatial determinants within urban areas that may be at play in shaping inequalities.

An important drawback of the place-based measures currently used by the OfS is that they do not account for the diverse nature of deprived areas (Brown, 2012; Donnelly and Evans, 2016; Crossley, 2017; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). Indeed, the differing nature of social and spatial relationships within communities has varying effects on young people's aspirations and higher education trajectories. Socially disadvantaged minority-ethnic families, many of whom live in inner-city areas, often have high expectations of their children, translating to higher educational aspirations ((Modood, 2004; Shah et al., 2010). On the other hand, the converse may be true for families of young people living in equally disadvantaged, yet more physically and socially isolated communities. (Brown, 2012).

The analyses presented within this paper suggest that an over-reliance on area-based measures that do not account for individual characteristics, like the POLAR methodology, puts elite universities at risk of missing disadvantaged students living in areas with otherwise good progression. The use of Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping methods, as used within our own analyses, could enable elite universities to more effectively target underrepresented students, especially disadvantaged students living in rural areas with otherwise good progression rates. Furthermore, as called for elsewhere (e.g. Boliver et al., 2019), more comprehensive use of individual-level metrics such as eligibility for free-school meals and low household income could help elite universities identify disadvantaged students who might otherwise be missed if area-based measures alone, like POLAR, are relied upon.

Finally, if it is true that urban areas are becoming 'congested' by a concentration of widening participation activity, then there is clearly a need for policy-making that brings about a more even spatial distribution. Greater strategic planning by the OfS could also help ensure that no areas - especially rural areas - are missed by elite universities for outreach activities. For example, the regulator could use elite universities' Access and Participation Plans to map which areas have been targeted nationwide and identify areas that have been under or over-targeted. Accordingly, an over-arching system could be developed aimed at providing national

coverage of widening participation activity, allocating each elite university additional under-represented areas (in addition to those areas which universities choose to target themselves) and/or offering universities financial incentives to target priority areas.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA): www.hesa.ac.uk. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study. Data are available from the authors with the permission of HESA.

Ethical guidelines

Ethical clearance for this research was granted by the Social Science Research Ethics Committee at the University of Bath (reference number: S20-026).

Use of HESA data complied with all requirements outlined in their Agreement for the Supply of Information Services.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix A – Raw elite and non-elite progression rates by MSOATable A1 – Top 20 MSOAs for elite HE progression

| MSOA | Ranking | Non-elite HE progression (%) | Elite HE progression (%) |
|----------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Kensington and Chelsea 011 | 1 | 20.9 | 79.1 |
| Kensington and Chelsea 006 | 2 | 21.5 | 78.5 |
| Merton 002 | 3 | 21.8 | 78.2 |
| Oxford 003 | 4 | 22.0 | 78.0 |
| Hammersmith and Fulham 024 | 5 | 22.7 | 77.3 |
| Kensington and Chelsea 007 | 6 | 23.5 | 76.5 |
| Barnet 033 | 7 | 24.6 | 75.4 |
| Ealing 034 | 8 | 24.8 | 75.2 |
| Merton 004 | 9 | 25.4 | 74.6 |
| Wandsworth 015 | 10 | 26.0 | 74.0 |
| Richmond upon Thames 008 | 11 | 26.4 | 73.6 |
| Wandsworth 017 | 12 | 26.4 | 73.6 |
| Cambridge 007 | 13 | 26.9 | 73.1 |
| Westminster 019 | 14 | 27.1 | 72.9 |
| Bristol 015 | 15 | 27.2 | 72.8 |
| Camden 002 | 16 | 27.3 | 72.7 |
| Hounslow 001 | 17 | 27.3 | 72.7 |
| Kensington and Chelsea 020 | 18 | 27.3 | 72.7 |
| Wandsworth 011 | 19 | 27.3 | 72.7 |
| Southwark 031 | 20 | 27.6 | 72.4 |

Table A2 – Bottom 20 MSOAs for elite HE progression

| MSOA | Ranking | Non-elite HE progression (%) | Elite HE progression (%) |
|------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Basildon 019 | 6772 | 96.6 | 3.4 |
| Middlesbrough 003 | 6773 | 97.0 | 3.0 |
| Basildon 015 | 6774 | 97.1 | 2.9 |
| Northampton 017 | 6775 | 97.1 | 2.9 |
| Tamworth 007 | 6776 | 97.1 | 2.9 |
| Walsall 018 | 6777 | 97.1 | 2.9 |
| Great Yarmouth 007 | 6778 | 97.3 | 2.7 |
| Kingston upon Hull 004 | 6779 | 97.3 | 2.7 |
| Portsmouth 002 | 6780 | 97.4 | 2.6 |
| Solihull 006 | 6781 | 97.4 | 2.6 |
| Ipswich 016 | 6782 | 97.6 | 2.4 |
| Leicester 017 | 6783 | 97.6 | 2.4 |
| Leicester 035 | 6784 | 97.6 | 2.4 |
| Kingston upon Hull 003 | 6785 | 97.9 | 2.1 |
| Kingston upon Hull 021 | 6786 | 97.9 | 2.1 |
| Shepway 013 | 6787 | 98.0 | 2.0 |
| Sandwell 014 | 6788 | 98.2 | 1.8 |
| Stoke-on-Trent 016 | 6789 | 98.2 | 1.8 |
| Plymouth 006 | 6790 | 100.0 | 0.0 |
| Wolverhampton 007 | 6791 | 100.0 | 0.0 |

Appendix B – Caterpillar plots of the MSOA effects

Figure B1 – Plot of MSOA effects in the null model on progression to elite universities

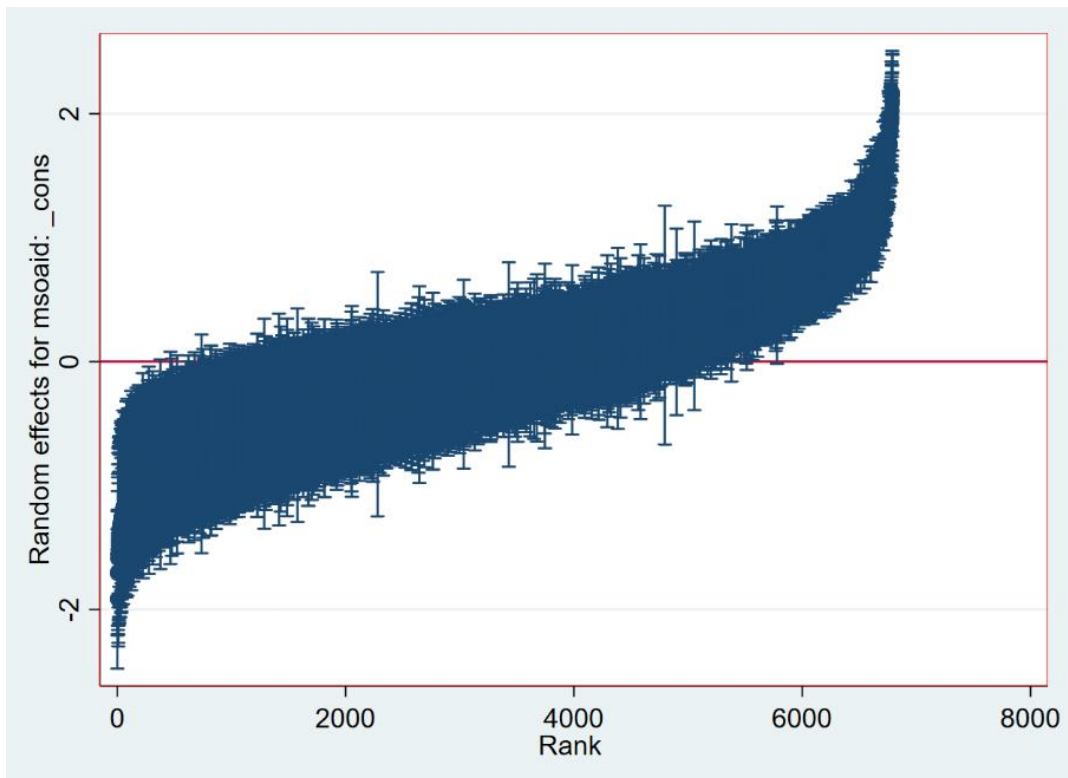
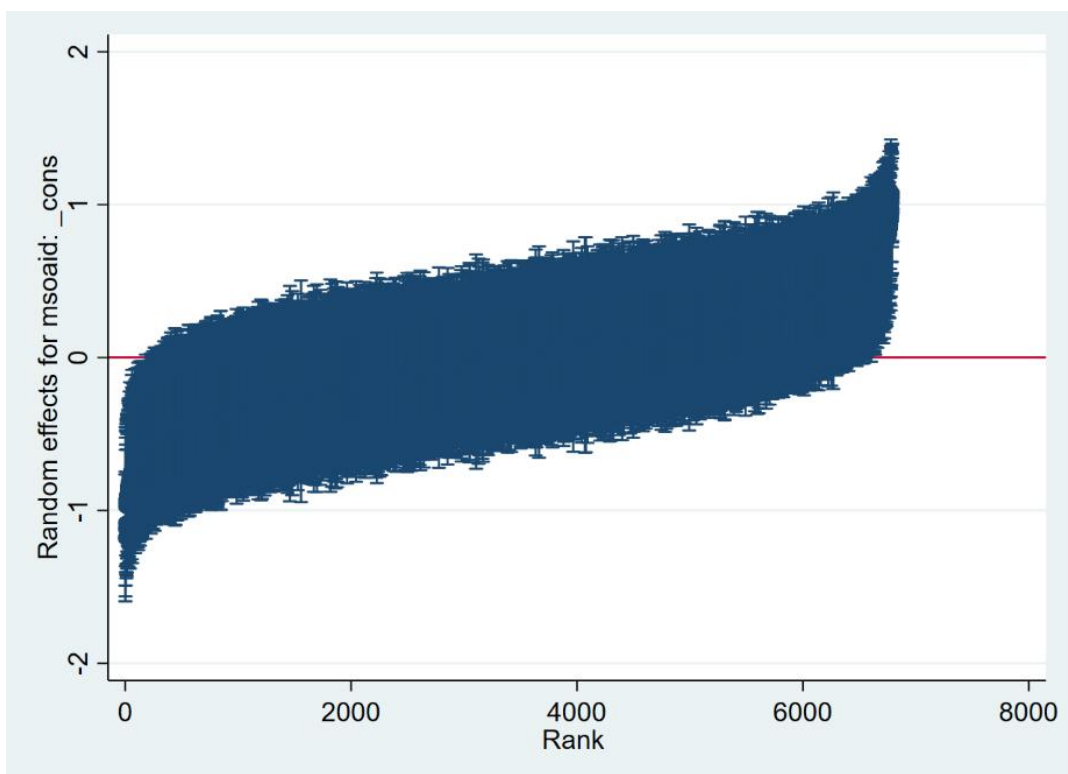


Figure B2 – Plot of MSOA effects in the final model on progression to elite universities



| | | | |
|--|--|--------------------------|--|
| This declaration concerns the article entitled: | | | |
| A convergence of opportunities: Understanding the high elite university progression of disadvantaged youth in an East London borough | | | |
| Publication status (tick one) | | | |
| Draft manuscript | <input type="checkbox"/> | Submitted | <input type="checkbox"/> |
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| | The material has been published with a CC-BY license | <input type="checkbox"/> | The publisher has granted permission to replicate the material included here |
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| Candidate's contribution to the paper (provide details, and also indicate as a percentage) | This paper was sole authored. Joanne Davies fully designed, carried out and analysed the findings of the fieldwork discussed within the paper. She predominantly formulated the ideas expressed (95%) and was solely responsible for the presentation of the data in journal format. | | |
| Statement from Candidate | This paper reports on original research I conducted during the period of my Higher Degree by Research candidature. | | |
| Signed (typed signature) | J Davies | Date | 04/09/22 |

5. A convergence of opportunities: Understanding the high elite university progression of disadvantaged youth in an East London borough

Abstract

There is growing evidence that London's disadvantaged youth have a better chance at progressing to elite universities than their counterparts outside the capital. Drawing on case study research in an East London borough, this paper suggests that the high progression of disadvantaged students here stems from a convergence of structural factors which favour elite university progression. Key amongst these are local schools' valorisation of elite universities and their associated prioritisation of resources and strong framing of university choices to privilege Russell Group progression. Students' apparent advantageous access to the widening participation provision of elite universities and to internship and networking opportunities arising from London's corporate philanthropy also play important roles. The paper advocates for greater strategic planning by the regulator and further partnerships across all sectors of the economy to enable a fairer distribution of widening participation opportunities nationwide. It concludes with a call to reflect on the wisdom of privileging elite university progression at all costs and asks whether we should really be championing such a narrow vision of social mobility in the first place.

Keywords

East London, elite universities, geographies of higher education, school effects, social mobility

Introduction

The UK has some of the highest levels of regional inequality in the industrialised world (McCann, 2019). In the wake of the country's departure from the EU, renewed attention has been drawn to its 'left-behind' areas and addressing regional inequalities – the so-called 'levelling up' agenda – Boris Johnson's government's top policy priority. Within these debates, the economic dominance of London has been well acknowledged. Indeed, research and development funding has been historically concentrated within London and the Southeast (National Audit Office, 2013) and it is no secret that the capital is the country's economic powerhouse, generating almost a quarter of the country's GDP (Office for National Statistics, 2022). The EU referendum further served to highlight a striking geographical political divide within the UK with Scotland, Northern Ireland, and London overwhelming voting to remain, whilst - apart from university cities with strong masses of young people - much of the rest of England voted to leave (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2021). Indeed, above and beyond EU membership itself, the vote drew attention to the country's deeply embedded socio-economic divides and anger at the concentration of power within Westminster, giving public voice to what many in 'left-behind' areas have come to see as a divide between 'London and the rest of us'.

Importantly, there is also evidence to suggest that London stands out for its greater educational opportunities too, with the capital's pupils consistently achieving higher attainment than pupils elsewhere within England. Significantly, this is not just the case for its more advantaged young people but also for those from disadvantaged backgrounds too (Blanden et al., 2015). There is no agreed consensus on what explains this phenomenon known as the 'London Effect'. A report by Burgess (2014) has argued that the capital's ethnic composition entirely accounts for pupils' greater progress on standard measures. Meanwhile, Plaister and Thomson (2019) have replicated the analyses of Burgess with more recent (2018) data and find that while London's ethnic composition plays a leading role, the picture is more nuanced than this, with some ethnic groups within London still outperforming similar peers elsewhere. Others (e.g. Baars et al., 2014) have cited school improvement programmes - notably the London Challenge (2003 - 2011) - as a key factor, a finding disputed by Blanden et al. (2015), who show that the attainment gap in London began to narrow long before these policy initiatives were implemented.

Moreover, as I have shown elsewhere using detailed HE progression data (Davies et al., 2021), even once their higher attainment and individual characteristics are accounted for, the

capital's disadvantaged pupils also have higher progression rates to 'elite' universities than their counterparts elsewhere – of importance for ongoing social mobility debates. This finding was particularly notable in typically poorer parts of East London. What then may explain East London's high elite university progression rates for disadvantaged students despite the barriers students face there? The major contribution of this article is to take an in-depth look at the convergence of opportunities influencing this high progression that were evidenced within detailed case study research in an East London borough. As will be discussed, four principal factors and their interactions became apparent: a shared valorisation of elite universities across local schools, schools' associated prioritisation of resources and strong framing of university choices to privilege Russell Group progression, students' advantageous access to the outreach provision of elite universities and students' extensive interactions with the capital's elite businesses.

Place Matters?

Whilst there has been burgeoning government policy interest in the role of place for HE progression (e.g. the nationwide 'Uni Connect' programme which targets localities with lower-than-expected HE Progression (Office for Students, 2022) and the more recent 'levelling up' agenda), there is a paucity of academic literature here, especially as concerns elite university progression specifically. Much of the academic attention paid to elite university access has focussed on the impacts of socio-economic status, gender, and ethnicity in mediating progression (e.g. Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005; Chowdry et al., 2013). Attention has also been paid to the application process to elite universities with students from lower socio-economic backgrounds found to be less likely to apply than similarly qualified peers from higher socio-economic backgrounds and private schools (Boliver, 2013). Evidence of ethnic bias within admissions to the highly-selective Russell Group – a self-selected grouping of 24 research-intensive universities - has been demonstrated too, with Black and Asian students shown to be less likely to receive offers compared to similarly qualified peers from White backgrounds (Boliver, 2016). In contrast, studies considering university progression more generally (e.g. Shah et al., 2010) have however highlighted the favourable role of ethnicity, suggesting that the high expectations and aspirations of ethnic minority families for their children may help explain their high university progression rates.

Schools have further been recognised as influencing students' likelihood of applying to elite institutions. Academic attention here has typically focussed on schools' institutional and teacher habitus - extending the application of Bourdieu's (1990) work on individual habitus to

schools - and demonstrated that where students are expected and encouraged to apply to elite institutions, more do so (Reay et al., 2005; Oliver and Kettle, 2010). In contrast, Donnelly (2014) has used Bernstein's (1975) concepts of classification and framing to consider the 'hidden messages' that schools send out about elite universities and has similarly found that where messages are strongly framed - making clear to students with the potential to apply to do so - more do apply.

The literature that has considered the impact of where students grow up for elite university progression has tended to focus on the geography of elite universities and the role of distance. Savage (2015) has highlighted the uneven spatial distribution of the UK's elite universities, notably the concentration of those typically seen as having the highest status, the so-called 'Golden Triangle' universities – generally comprising the University of Cambridge, the University of Oxford, Imperial College London, University College London, King's College London, and London School of Economics – in and around London. Additionally, a small number of studies (notably Mangan et al., 2010 and Gibbons and Vignoles, 2012) have demonstrated the typically higher elite university progression rates of students with such universities locally situated.

Concerning the role of place, whilst examining HE progression more broadly, Donnelly and Evans (2016) have shown how feelings of attachment to their local area and to Wales more generally had significant impacts upon the university choices of the Welsh students within their study, showing the importance of accounting for the specificity of place in understanding students' choices. Butler and Hamnett's (2011) seminal work on East London, which describes an increasing feeling of optimism amongst certain ethnic minority groups here of education providing a meritocratic pathway to social mobility, demonstrates the importance of considering the specificity of place for students' university choices within the case study locality too. Indeed, this suggests a population keen to benefit from the unique convergence of opportunities that the capital enables and thus perhaps particularly receptive to the UK's prevalent narrow social mobility discourse which privileges elite university progression (Ingram and Gamsu, 2022). Through its examination of the hitherto underexplored role of place for elite university progression, and - considering how dominant the capital remains - its focus on an East London locality, this paper stands to make a valuable contribution to the field.

Data and methods

The case study data drawn on within this paper comes from a wider research project that looked at the geographies of access to elite universities. The initial quantitative phase of this study, the findings of which have been published elsewhere (Davies et al., 2021), showed East London to have almost universally higher-than-expected elite university progression. This led to the decision to conduct case study research within an East London locality to build a greater understanding of the underlying structural factors – those not able to be accounted for within the quantitative research - that have helped shape its high progression. A nationwide widening participation organisation for whom the author used to work, referred to as 'Aspire' throughout this paper, was approached for support in facilitating the organisation of the case study. Case study research enables the researcher to take a comprehensive and focussed look at the topic of study, thus yielding a rich picture. The detailed methods used within the case study included 1) a set of in-depth interviews, 2) participant observation, and 3) textual analysis of school promotional materials.

The set of in-depth semi-structured interviews formed the primary component of the case study. The selection of interviewees was carried out by Aspire staff working in the chosen East London locality and was purposive; disadvantaged students with the attainment needed to attend an elite university (predicted at least grades ABB at A-level) and staff members (including Aspire staff) working with local students and having good knowledge of their typical post-18 pathways. Six interviewees were selected; three students (two, Sophie and David, attending an academically-selective state sixth form referred to here as 'Elm Academy' and one, Mia, at a state sixth form with more typical entry requirements referred to as 'Sycamore School'), the director, Amy, of the 'University Access team' at Elm Academy and two staff members, Emily and Heather, from Aspire with several years' experience working with young people across East London. All student interviewees were aged 17-18, from Minority Ethnic backgrounds (by chance, but nonetheless reflective of the area's ethnic diversity) and in year 13, the final year of schooling within the UK before progression to university is possible. All were from disadvantaged backgrounds as classed by the criteria of Aspire. Elm Academy, discussed in some detail within the article, is a highly academically selective sixth form with approximately 300 students per year, the majority of whom are from Minority Ethnic backgrounds and roughly half of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds. Its Oxbridge progression rates rival those of top private schools.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the author, one per interviewee and each approximately 30-60 minutes in length. Two separate interview guides were used for students and staff, with both sets of interview questions focussed on students' university choices and the factors impacting their decisions. To avoid influencing interviewees' responses as well as potential value judgements about different universities which could cause students to question their choices, the information provided to participants about the study did not reveal the researcher's interest in elite universities specifically. Likewise, the student interview guide questions did not directly reference elite universities, preferring to allow the relative (un)importance of university status to arise organically in discussion of students' priorities, or in the absence of this, to be gently elicited, for example in questions such as 'Can you tell me about how universities may differ from each other?' The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) conducted to identify common themes across the data. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to protect the anonymity of all interviewees and organisations.

Previous participant observation from working for Aspire within East London for a period of over 2 years between 2014 - 2016 formed a further important component of the case study. From my interactions with multiple East London schools, I observed first-hand the widespread nature of 'University Access' teams such as that of Elm Academy discussed within this article and of the 'wealth of opportunities' open to students here that staff interviewee, Amy, described. Indeed, some schools in the locality I worked in were reluctant to engage with Aspire because they had so many offers of support already and didn't want their students to spend additional time 'off-curriculum' engaging in further enrichment activities. Moreover, the extensive interactions with elite universities and elite local employers evidenced within the discourses of my interviewees were commonplace amongst many of the sixth form students that I encountered. Within this article, I have chosen to privilege the experiences and discourses of my interviewees, rather than my own experiences. My observations from my time working with Aspire have however provided me with important knowledge of the context in which my participants were situated. Whilst I strove to play close attention to the need for reflexivity on my part, it is equally important to acknowledge that I potentially took with me certain assumptions about participants.

The final element of the case study involved textual analysis of school promotional materials and references to local schools within media and political discourse. Due to the COVID lockdown in Spring 2020 when the case study research was conducted, only materials available online were analysed. These included school websites, sixth form prospectuses, newspaper articles and political speeches. In addition to the views and experiences of

interviewees and my own observations, these provided additional important insights into local school cultures and the education and social mobility discourses prevalent within the locality.

A convergence of opportunities

The case study identified a convergence of four key structural factors playing potentially important roles in explaining the locality's high elite university progression rates. These comprised a prevalent culture of valorising elite university progression, schools' associated strong framing of university choices to favour Russell Group progression, students' extensive access to widening participation resources and opportunities with elite universities, and students' interactions with the capital's elite businesses, notably in terms of internships and networking. The following sections of the paper will discuss each of these factors in turn.

Valorisation and championing of elite university progression

There was a seemingly prevalent culture within the area's multiple high-achieving sixth forms of privileging 'success' within the narrow terms of entry to elite universities. This was evidenced in comments from Aspire interviewees about these schools' ostentatious 'celebration' of students that go on to elite universities - especially Oxbridge - and of the near adulation that the latter students receive from peers:

'The students who do get places at Oxford and Cambridge are the ones that are kind of revered above all others... kind of almost like idolised, and the students will look up to them.' (Emily, East London cluster manager at Aspire)

The Press and local community also appeared to play important roles in shaping this culture, by championing local sixth forms' high elite university progression rates and giving them the impetus to strive to maintain their 'prestige':

'I think prestige has something to do with it... the Press will kind of get involved and say, "look at this, this is amazing" or like "this sixth form has been able to achieve this". So, within the area, kind of everyone knows about these high achieving sixth forms.' (Emily, East London cluster manager at Aspire)

The nature of the student bodies at these sixth forms further appeared likely to facilitate the shaping of such a culture. Indeed, as Aspire interviewee, Emily, described, students who may have been considered exceptional at their previous schools now find themselves surrounded by '300 other students who also got straight As at GCSE'. This thus creates an environment in which elite university progression feels both achievable and desirable. Indeed, as Amy, University Access Director at academically high-achieving Elm Academy commented, applying to Oxbridge has become 'normalised':

'At Elm Academy... it's very rare to find a student that doesn't think they're capable of going to Oxbridge or doesn't have that like self-belief... there's just kind of like an atmosphere around Elm Academy, it's kind of normalised, so it's not seen as this really alienating thing to apply...' (Amy, University Access Director at Elm Academy)

Whilst their schools' privileging of elite universities has likely played a key role in shaping their aspirations, the interviews suggested that students' own valorisation of these institutions plays an important role too. Discussing the drive of many local students to study at Russell Group institutions, Aspire interviewee, Emily, said she felt this was fuelled by students' desire to 'maximise as much as [they] can out of [their] secondary school education to go to one of the best institutions in the country'. Moreover, the extent to which students subscribed to the normative social mobility discourse came across strongly within the student interviews too.

Mia was the only student interviewee to explicitly comment on family as being influential for her decision to progress to university and to speak of her progression as being a source of pride for them. However, as Baker (2017) comments of his research within East London looking at young people's aspirations, it is important to consider the underlying impact of the area's social composition for students' decision-making. East London is a very ethnically diverse area, and as Butler and Hamnett (2011) have described - and as I witnessed first-hand through my work with Aspire - there is an increasing feeling of optimism among certain ethnic minority groups here of education providing a meritocratic pathway to social mobility. It is possible then that the high value placed on education by certain ethnic minority families here has helped to shape and facilitate the seemingly prevalent culture within local schools of privileging elite university progression.

An important way in which this culture of elite university valorisation appeared to be maintained was through schools' strong framing of university choices to privilege Russell Group progression. The next section takes a closer examination of this framing.

Schools' framing of university choices to favour Russell Group progression

Research has suggested that where schools explicitly frame certain universities as being those to which students should apply, higher progression rates result (Donnelly, 2014). This section examines the importance of local schools' strong framing to privilege Russell Group progression using Elm Academy as a case in point.

Central within Elm Academy's strong framing of Russell Group universities as the best choice for students is the school's specialist 'University Access' team, a team of four full-time staff members with the express remit of facilitating Russell Group progression, and which provides a level of support for university progression that might be more typically expected of a high fee-paying private school. This extensive support includes running in-house enrichment activities to boost students' subject knowledge and soft skills, organising an annual residential trip to two elite universities for the full year 12 cohort (~300 students), providing highly-personalised university application, admissions test, and interview support (including specialised Oxbridge sessions) and sending a weekly roundup email advertising selected programmes at elite universities and internship opportunities at elite businesses.

Speaking about Elm Academy's decision to establish the University Access team, University Access Director, Amy, explained that it was created to address a perceived gap between students' academic achievement and their progression rates to Russell Group universities:

'[The team] was established to kind of fill the gap that they thought existed... the head of sixth form thought existed at the time... The students that were coming to the sixth form were really highly able and were getting an average of As across their GCSEs... But still before the University Access team, they didn't have much success in getting students into Oxbridge or like top Russell Group universities.'

(Amy, University Access Director at Elm Academy)

Accordingly, in both the internal activities they run and the external activities they choose to advertise, the University Access team privileges Russell Group and equally high-tariff institutions, making explicit to students as to which universities they should be applying. Indeed, the significant extent to which this shapes the universities students get to see was evident in the discourses of Elm Academy student interviewees, Sophie and David, whose discussion of the numerous university programmes they had participated in revealed a notable absence of references to experiences at any less prestigious institutions. In addition, the

nature of the University Access team itself – only employing Oxbridge graduates – also conveys the schools' university preferences, further marking out these institutions to students as the most desirable. It also suggests a level of resource that surpasses that of typical state schools – something that will be discussed within the following section.

Elm Academy's sixth-form prospectus was found to strongly frame the school's preference for Russell Group universities too, to the extent that, as Heather from Aspire commented at one point in her interview, even before they start at the sixth form, students will be 'very aware of that group of universities'. Indeed, the prospectus has several pages dedicated to biographies of students from the preceding year who progressed to Russell Group universities, with more than half of those pictured attending Oxford or Cambridge. It also includes statistics showing that in the preceding year 85% of students progressed to Russell Group universities and more than 50 students to Oxbridge (no mention is made of student numbers progressing to other universities), and comments including that the tailored support of the University Access team has contributed to Elm Academy becoming one of the top schools for progression to the 'prestigious Russell Group' and that Oxbridge is where the school's 'highest achievers' are encouraged to apply.

A comment from student, Sophie, demonstrated that students have clearly taken onboard the school's privileging of Russell Group progression:

'In sixth form the conversation was more about *which* Russell Group are you applying to, not *which university* are you applying to. So, there was that distinction.'

(Sophie, student at Elm Academy)

Furthermore, whilst Elm Academy's prospectus, and the activities that they choose to offer and promote constitute more indirect – albeit powerful - encouragement of Russell Group progression, the school's determination to more directly intervene where they perceive necessary was seemingly revealed in an anecdote shared about the desire of many pupils, particularly Muslim girls, to study at an institution within London. Indeed, University Access Director, Amy, described how in these situations, the school has 'a lot of parent meetings' to persuade these pupils to include Russell Group universities outside of London within their five Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) choices (just in case they don't get into the London Russell Group institutions they apply to) rather than apply to less 'elite' back up institutions within the capital:

'So, we might say, rather than putting [post-1992 London institution] down, why don't you put Bristol or Warwick... And generally, we find that if... they don't get into those other universities in London then they do normally go to that alternative option... So, normally at the point of applying, they'll say "I'll put it down, but I'll never go." But after a year (*laughs*) we normally manage to get through by that point.' (Amy, University Access Director at Elm Academy)

Aspire staff interviewees, Heather and Emily, further highlighted the widespread nature of similar messaging within local schools and the extent to which this is influential upon students, overpowering the desires of some young people to stay close to home. Emily also stressed the powerful peer pressure for students to '[be] able to say to, you know, the people you've been with at school for two years, "oh you know, I'm going to Durham, I'm going to Newcastle" because they know the prestige that comes behind those names'. Indeed, the profound impact that this school and peer pressure can have on students was seemingly evidenced in an anecdote recounted by Emily about how she has worked with several students so determined to progress to a Russell Group university that they will take a gap year to resit their A levels to go to one, even when they have secured places at other 'really good institutions that just happen to not be Russell Group'.

The strong framing evidenced within this section, privileging Russell Group progression and marking other universities out as somehow 'lesser', is clearly highly problematic and symptomatic of the narrow view of social mobility currently championed within the UK. This is an important topic which will be returned to within the paper's conclusion.

Favourable access to elite university outreach and widening participation resources

So far, we have discussed the role of the prevalent culture within local schools of valorising elite university progression, and schools' associated strong framing of university choices to privilege Russell Group progression in helping explain the area's higher-than-expected progression rates. The third key theme to emerge within the case study was evidence that disadvantaged students in East London may have greater access to school widening participation resources and elite university outreach provision than similar peers elsewhere.

The UK's elite universities are unequally spatially distributed throughout the UK, with a particular concentration in and around London (Savage, 2015). As a result, disadvantaged London students are likely to have easier physical access to a greater number of opportunities

at these institutions than similar peers in more isolated locations, a factor that Amy, University Access Director at Elm Academy, felt to be a contributing factor to the school's high elite university progression rates:

'I mean I think the biggest thing is just that in London the students have access. They have like 3 or 4 excellent universities that are offering public lectures every evening on different topics. And Oxford and Cambridge, they're very accessible and they send representatives very often. So just like the wealth of opportunities that they have available I think would be very difficult to replicate in more rural or seaside locations.' (Amy, University Access Director at Elm Academy)

Whilst Amy did not expand on which 'excellent' universities she was referring to, given the school's explicit university preferences, it is likely that she meant the London Russell Group institutions. The student interviews certainly corroborated the 'wealth of opportunities' that she described also, as each was filled with references to study days, lectures, master classes, and summer schools across a minimum of five different elite universities (and in David's case seven), including multiple interactions with London Russell Group universities. Each student had also participated in at least one activity at Oxford or Cambridge (in Mia's case, two Oxford residentials). Moreover, amongst these elite university outreach activities, all students had participated in at least three residential trips each - activities that have been shown to be amongst the most impactful for students (Robinson and Salvestrini, 2020) - and particularly important for those from lower socio-economic and certain ethnic backgrounds who may otherwise have a fear of being 'out of place' in elite university environments and choose not to apply (Ball et al., 2002).

Favourable access to other resources may play a role too. In a report examining the significant improvements in the performance of London's schools in recent years, both financial and recruitment advantages were cited as potential contributing factors (Baars et al., 2014). A comment from Amy, University Access Director at Elm Academy, suggested that such advantages may have indirectly contributed to the school's high elite university progression too. Indeed, being a popular school in an urban location, Elm Academy are fortunate to be able to recruit staff with relative ease, something that can be much more of a challenge for schools in more isolated locations such as coastal towns (e.g. Weale, 2014). As such, the school can avoid expensive supply teacher costs, freeing up part of their budget which is channelled into paying the salaries of the University Access team:

'At Elm Academy we don't have, erm, they never hire... cover teachers. They kind of overstaff in terms of teachers so they don't lose any money in paying for really expensive cover costs. So, a lot of that like budget comes into the access budget and pays for the staff salaries.' (Amy, University Access Director at Elm Academy)

Given that the school's University Access team appears to play a pivotal role within their students' high elite university progression rates, the school being in a position in which they can direct a significant portion of their budget towards financing this team is important. Moreover, Elm Academy is not unique in having such an Access team. Indeed, as Emily, East London cluster manager at Aspire, highlighted within her interview, teams dedicated to outreach and enrichment opportunities are commonplace at the academically high-achieving sixth forms within the local area:

'So, I know that a lot of these sixth forms in particular will have teams who are dedicated to enrichment. So where in a more conventional sixth form, you know you might have maybe one person working on careers or like outreach or just getting those extra opportunities in, I think they really understand the value that resource can have in terms of supporting a student.' (Emily, East London cluster manager at Aspire)

The impact of enrichment activities for elite university progression should not be understated. A key part of the UK university admissions process involves writing a 'personal statement' - a free response essay where students are asked to articulate why they would like to study a particular subject and describe the skills and experience they possess that show their passion for the field (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, n.d.). Students from disadvantaged backgrounds typically have more limited opportunities for gaining 'high-status', pertinent activities to draw upon, a contributing factor to their underrepresentation at elite universities (Jones, 2013). However, what was evident within the discourses of the student interviewees was the high number of very relevant experiences they could each relate. Moreover, it is not just these experiences in themselves which are important for applicants' personal statements, but also how they are articulated within, something which again those from disadvantaged backgrounds more often struggle with as they do not typically receive the in-depth support in writing these that more advantaged peers do (Jones, 2013). However, once again the case study students' discourses revealed extensive, individualised support here, such as the multiple one-to-one personal statement meetings with University Access team staff described by Elm Academy students, Sophie and David.

As we will return to in the conclusion, these resource advantages, especially as concerns local students' apparent greater access to elite university outreach opportunities, may favour the elite university progression of disadvantaged East London students over similar peers elsewhere and suggests that elite universities must act to ensure a more equal distribution of widening participation provision. Moreover, the resource advantages for local disadvantaged students outlined within this section appeared to extend beyond schools and greater access to elite outreach provision, to access to prestigious internship and networking opportunities stemming from the capital's corporate philanthropy. As discussed next, these opportunities likely have a further important impact for local students' high elite university progression.

Internship and networking opportunities with the capital's elite firms

There has been little empirical research looking at the geographical distribution of corporate widening participation initiatives, however research by Gamsu (2016) which has highlighted the involvement of London's elite finance firms in providing financial backing to widening participation charities – themselves also concentrated within the capital – suggests that corporate involvement in widening participation exists on a scale within London that likely far surpasses that seen elsewhere. Wiseman et al. (2017) and Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) have similarly commented on the notable partnerships between East London schools and elite finance businesses highlighted by interview participants in their respective studies. Indeed, elite finance firms, faced with increased scrutiny and public pressure following the 2008 financial crisis and the recent renewed political focus on 'levelling up' opportunities including ensuring equal access to high-status professions, are keen to evidence their commitment to reducing inequalities in access to their institutions (Gamsu, 2016). This has thus necessarily included a focus on widening participation initiatives aimed at improving access amongst those from disadvantaged backgrounds to higher education and perhaps especially elite universities, given that they serve as the de facto pathway to many such careers (Brown et al., 2011).

There are several reasons why a concentration of corporate widening participation activity in East London specifically appears logical. Indeed, whilst there are pockets of greater affluence within East London, it has the largest concentration of financially deprived areas within the capital. It is also physically proximate to the two financial districts of the City and Canary Wharf. Indeed, as a stakeholder comments of the East London borough of Tower Hamlets in Wiseman et al.'s (2017) study, when it comes to widening participation targeting, 'it ticks all [the] boxes'.

A notable finding within the case study, which further aligns with similar findings in Wiseman et al.'s (2017) study, related to the prestigious internship opportunities opened up to local students through their schools' extensive partnerships with elite corporate firms. For example, speaking about the sixth form's requirement that each year 12 student completes a work placement, University Access Director at Elm Academy, Amy, described the partnerships the school cultivates with businesses such as 'top Law firms', to source 'very high quality' placements. Moreover, whilst she caveated that these are not opportunities 'exclusive' to their students, Elm Academy's sixth form prospectus certainly suggests some advantageous affiliations as a dedicated 'Partnerships with Employers' section outlines.

Moreover, the student interviews provided important evidence of how interactions with the capital's elite businesses can impact upon students' university choices, favouring Russell Group progression. For example, Sycamore student, Mia, spoke about her involvement with a widening participation organisation that works with employers to help disadvantaged young people access high quality work placements, and a description of her first interaction with the organisation - held at an elite firm - showed how it enhanced her and fellow attendees' knowledge of the Russell Group:

'They have kind of regular sessions that they have, they hold at firms... And... I think it was a launch, where they gave out this handbook and it was asking about universities and... like there was a game where we had to guess all the Russell Group universities off a list and half of us didn't realise.' (Mia, student at Sycamore School)

Mia went on to complete two internships via this organisation at investment banks in the City and Canary Wharf, opportunities that - in addition to her now fuller understanding of the Russell Group - helped raise her awareness of the expectation of following this pathway if she wished to work within the sector. Indeed, Mia described several networking opportunities and how most of the people she met had PhDs and Oxbridge degrees. Furthermore, while she commented that no-one ever explicitly said to her that she should go to Oxbridge or a Russell Group university, it did make her reflect on her next steps - 'it was kind of like... ok maybe that's where I should go' - demonstrating that even the subtle messaging that such interactions carry can be pervasive.

In addition, the important advantages for students drawn from interactions with these employers extend beyond increased knowledge of the UK higher education system and expected pathways within certain professional sectors to the more concrete benefits

discussed earlier of being able to draw upon these 'high-status' internships within their personal statements to better stand out from the crowd. For example, Elm Academy student, Sophie, had completed two work placements highly applicable to the course she planned to study (Psychology) at a children's mental health charity and in the Human Resources department of a prestigious business organisation.

These internships may not appeal to all students, and we should be cautious of advocating that such work placements are - as Amy implied - of higher 'quality' than others. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that those in 'elite' professions wield the most power in society and that these professions are still overwhelmingly dominated by those from more advantaged backgrounds (Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission, 2019). On the one hand then, the exposure to such professions that disadvantaged students in the case study area appear able to gain, building their awareness of the expected pathways to careers there, and to perhaps feeling - as Mia appeared to - that this is something achievable for them, could be argued as a step in the right direction. However, if it is primarily disadvantaged students in the capital that benefit from these opportunities, then this arguably further compounds the already heightened disadvantage of being from a less advantaged background and living in an area without the resource advantages of London (Davies and Donnelly, forthcoming).

Discussion and Conclusion

London dominates the UK economically (Office for National Statistics, 2022), and this dominance increasingly translates to greater educational opportunities too. Moreover, this is not just the case for the capital's more advantaged youth, but also for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who have consistently higher attainment than similar peers elsewhere (Blanden et al., 2015) and typically greater elite university progression rates, even once their higher attainment is accounted for (Davies et al., 2021). The case study research in an East London borough outlined within this paper was focussed on exploring the underlying structural factors contributing to this phenomenon.

The case study identified a convergence of four key factors likely to play important roles within the high progression of students in the locality, and - it is not unreasonable to assume - that of the broader East London area too. These factors comprised the valorisation of elite universities, schools' associated strong framing of university choices to privilege Russell

Group progression, students' apparent greater access to elite university outreach provision and widening participation resources, and students' interactions with the capital's elite businesses, notably in terms of internship and networking opportunities. Through its close examination of these factors, this paper makes an important contribution to literature looking at access to elite universities, as place has often not been central to this research. Moreover, in reflecting on the potential significance of the intersection of these opportunities with a local population that holds education as an important pathway to social mobility (Butler and Hamnett, 2011), the paper further brings valuable insight into the importance of context and specificity of place for progression.

The 'University Access' teams that several local sixth forms possess, including notably that of Elm Academy which has been discussed in some detail, appear instrumental in shaping students' aspirations to attend elite universities, as well as in facilitating their access to the widening participation opportunities offered by these institutions. However, in addition to this - and to the area's physical proximity to a greater number of these universities - the case study interviews also suggested that local disadvantaged students may be more heavily targeted by elite universities than similar peers elsewhere. Indeed, whilst there has been little empirical research looking at the geographical distribution of elite university outreach provision, the findings of an investigation by the University of Cambridge's independent newspaper, *Varsity*, into this institution's outreach showed that London received significantly greater engagement than many other regions (Lally and Hancock, 2018). This suggests that if other nearby elite universities also operate similarly, disadvantaged students within London could indeed have quantifiably greater access to elite university outreach than similar peers elsewhere. Moreover, local students also appeared to benefit from further structural advantages including likely greater access than similar peers elsewhere to internship and networking opportunities with elite firms, and the direct (able to draw on within personal statements) and indirect (increased knowledge of the UK higher education system and expected pathways within certain professional sectors) ways in which these can advantage students.

The findings suggest that elite universities must do more to ensure a fairer distribution of widening participation opportunities across the UK. As discussed elsewhere (Davies et al., 2021), greater strategic planning by the Office for Students, including using elite universities' Access and Participation Plans to map which areas have been targeted nationwide and identify areas that have been under- or over-targeted, could facilitate this process. There is also a clear need for further partnerships and more collaborative widening participation work across all sectors of the economy to enable a fairer distribution of internship and networking opportunities in professional sectors for all disadvantaged youth.

The valorisation of elite universities evidenced also raises important ethical questions. Both Aspire interviewees expressed concern that the extreme championing of elite university progression by the locality's high-achieving sixth forms means that some students are pushed towards studying at elite institutions when they might prefer to study at another university or indeed to follow an alternative post-18 pathway. This thus calls into question the morality of influencing students' university choices in this way, given that the arguably prejudiced institutional cultures of elite institutions (Reay, 2018) might negatively impact their experiences of university study. Moreover, should schools really be championing such a narrow vision of social mobility in the first place? Research on graduate outcomes suggests that even where those from disadvantaged backgrounds make it to elite universities and careers such as those within the capital's elite finance firms, ethnic and class pay gaps remain (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2019, Friedman and Laurison, 2019). Furthermore, whilst this minority of disadvantaged individuals may nevertheless see their own life chances improve, many of the practices that such companies encourage - including the privatisation of state-owned companies and reduced labour protections - are making society worse for the working-class generally (Ingram and Gamsu, 2022). This thus also serves then to demonstrate how widening participation practices informed by the existing narrow social mobility discourse do not disrupt the structures that maintain inequality, but implicitly accept and work within them, serving to maintain them.

The new chair of the Social Mobility Commission recently acknowledged that the social mobility world has become too fixated with a small minority of people from disadvantaged backgrounds making it to elite universities and professions (Social Mobility Commission, 2022). Given her position as the founder and headteacher of a free school which itself openly privileges Russell Group progression (Michaela, n.d.) it remains to be seen as to whether she and the organisations that she represents will practice what she preaches. Indeed, the pressing question now is as to whether this building recognition will lead to genuine reform and - as increasingly called for elsewhere too (e.g. Ingram and Gamsu, 2022) - a new political conversation about social mobility. The real problem lies in the hierarchical structuring of higher education and society in the first place and true change will only be achieved through systemic change that first dismantles these.

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| Signed (typed signature) | J Davies | Date | 04/09/22 |

6. Spatial division of opportunity: local economic context, elite trajectories, and the widening participation industry

Abstract

The importance of geography in debates around education and labour market inequality is an enduring public policy concern. This paper argues that local economic contexts have a role in shaping the kind of university and career trajectories working-class young people are exposed to. Drawing on multi-sited data on working-class young people in different local contexts across England, it underlines the importance of regional economic development, the geography of elite universities and the spatial patterning of widening participation networks and activity. In the capital, a sophisticated widening participation infrastructure exists - including multiple partnerships between schools and the third and private sectors - which far exceeds the networks and support found elsewhere. Combined with London's high economic capital and elite career pathways, this infrastructure greatly facilitates systems of support designed to drive aspirations to elite universities and careers. Whilst advocating for a fairer distribution of educational opportunities nationwide, we argue that, without acknowledging the origins of spatial imbalances within the UK, any attempt at simply 'spreading out the same' opportunities risks offering a superficial response. If long-term change is to be truly advanced, a more systematic dismantling of how economic functions and social relations are configured spatially must first be achieved.

Keywords

Elite universities, geographies of higher education, widening participation, Doreen Massey, spatial division of labour

Introduction

There is growing scrutiny of the role of geography in shaping elite university progression within the UK. In the past decade, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge have increasingly come under fire (e.g. Lammy, 2017) for the fact that their university places are dominated by students from London and Southeast England. For example, the latest Oxford admissions data shows that 48.3% of all students admitted to Oxford between 2018-2020 were from London and the Southeast, in contrast to only 2.1% of students from the Northeast and 4.5% from the East Midlands⁵⁰.

The spatial structuring of social class within the UK plays an important role within the geographical disparities in elite university entry. London and the Southeast dominate the most powerful indices of advantage – household income, status of social contacts and high cultural capital - within the UK (Savage, 2015) and these advantages are reflected within the region's schools too. Indeed, the UK's independent schools are disproportionately located in London and the Southeast (Bradford and Burdett, 1989) and whilst there are increasing numbers of state-educated students at both Oxford and Cambridge (Baker, 2022), privately-educated students continue to be significantly overrepresented at both, as indeed they are at many of the UK's Russell Group institutions – a self-selected group of 24 high entry tariff, research-intensive institutions (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018). Moreover, of the state-educated pupils that do access elite universities - especially Oxford and Cambridge - London and the Southeast are again overrepresented, with a number of 'elite state schools' in London's suburbs – primarily grammar schools with majority middle-class intakes – shown to have established similar 'symbiotic relationships' with these universities to those of the region's elite independent schools (Gamsu, 2017).

Furthermore, with the UK's elite institutions unequally spatially distributed, and the country's arguably most elite 'Golden Triangle' institutions (Wakeling and Savage, 2015) – typically comprising University College London, London School of Economics, King's College London and Imperial College, in addition to Oxford and Cambridge - located in and around London also, it is a 'logical strategy' for local students with the means to study at these institutions, further contributing to a patterning of middle class and elite reproduction in London and the Southeast (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018b).

⁵⁰ Data available here:

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/AnnualAdmissionsStatisticalReport2021.pdf>

However, whilst the typically greater affluence of London and the Southeast may play the primary role within the UK's geographical disparities in entry to elite universities, there is increasing evidence that students from London and the Southeast also make up disproportionate numbers of their students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Davies et al., 2021). In other words, when disadvantaged students do enter elite universities, they tend to be those coming from London and South-East and not other parts of the country. One key explanatory factor here is pre-university attainment. High attainment is one of the most important factors for progression to elite universities, and pre-university attainment varies significantly across the country (Adams and Nye, 2013). Indeed, the Southeast as a whole tends to perform very well, and in recent years, London in particular has consistently had the highest attainment and progress rates nationwide, a phenomenon dubbed the 'London Effect', and which is most strongly marked amongst its disadvantaged pupils (Ross et al., 2020).

The reasons for the high attainment of disadvantaged pupils in the capital are not clear cut. In the 1990s, London in fact had one of the largest attainment gaps between working-class and more advantaged children, leading to a decision by the UK's New Labour government with its focus on 'Education, Education, Education' to see it as an idealised place to launch a city-wide school improvement programme, the 'London Challenge'. If and to what extent this programme contributed to the turnaround of London's schools is a matter of continued debate, with some (e.g. Burgess, 2014) arguing that it is the capital's ethnic composition that has played the greatest role. However, what is certain is that during this period there was and has remained a significant narrowing of the attainment gap within London.

In particular, East London - long recognised as a place of significant financial deprivation and need (e.g. Butler and Hamnett, 2011) – has developed a reputation for having state schools that are celebrated for apparently 'succeeding against the odds' owing to their disadvantaged intakes and high levels of attainment and elite university progression (Davies, forthcoming). East London's educational 'success' has led to it becoming seen as a sort of 'social mobility utopia' in the minds of politicians across the political spectrum. For example, in 2006, former Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair, cited the previously failing and now high-performing Hackney-based Mossbourne Academy as the 'ideal example' of why he planned to double the number of academy schools – state schools which receive their funding directly from central government - in the UK (Smithers, 2007). The following year, then leader of the Conservative Party, David Cameron, used the same school to launch the party's new school policy (MacLeod, 2007).

Moreover, the area's high-performing state schools continue to be heralded as an example, with the school we refer to as 'Elm Academy' within this article, where some of our East London data is drawn, recently cited by former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, as 'proof' of what he means in terms of unlocking students' potential and 'levelling up'. Indeed, Elm Academy has for several years now had progression rates to Oxbridge rivalling those of the UK's top private schools, with almost 90 students receiving offers for the academic year 2022/23. The significance of this for the geographical disparities seen in the elite university progression of students from disadvantaged backgrounds specifically should not be understated. Indeed, around 15% of Oxford's annual undergraduate intake are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds⁵¹ and approximately 20% at the University of Cambridge⁵² equating to approximately 1,200 students. Given that the majority of the students at Elm Academy would be classed as such, this school alone could make up to 7.5% of this total, and they are just one of several similar schools in East London with high progression rates for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

On one level, the transformation of disadvantaged pupils' attainment in East London and the area's higher than expected elite university progression rates (Davies et al., 2021) are admirable. However, statements from government ministers like those outlined above conveniently ignore the structural factors in London which have helped enable these. A major contribution of this paper is to make the case that local economic context, and specifically the UK's spatially unbalanced economy, can have a significant bearing on widening participation to elite universities and careers. If politicians like Boris Johnson assume that schools like Elm Academy in London can simply be rolled out across the entire country, they are missing the point that it is perhaps the school's location in the dominant Southeast which has facilitated its apparent success (in the narrow terms described). Our paper makes an important contribution to debates on how regional divisions within countries like the UK can be addressed through public policy. Drawing on data from two projects with multi-sited research designs, which both examined the planned post-18 trajectories of working-class young people situated in different local contexts, the paper underlines the importance of regional economic development, the geography of elite universities and the spatial patterning of widening participation networks and activity that has proliferated in recent years. It points to a highly sophisticated widening participation infrastructure that exists within the capital, an infrastructure which - coupled with

⁵¹ Data available here:

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/AnnualAdmissionsStatisticalReport2021.pdf>

⁵² Data available here:

https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/sites/www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/files/publications/ug_admissions_statistics_2020_cycle.pdf

London's high economic capital and elite career pathways - provides the kind of situation which really serves to drive aspirations to elite universities and careers.

Drawing on spatial perspectives, we will also challenge the assumption that schools such as East London's Elm Academy should serve as an example to others across the country and that the extensive opportunities found in London can be spread more evenly across all parts of the UK. We will argue that this conveniently sidesteps the reason why this spatially unbalanced set of conditions exists in the first place. Massey {Massey, 2013, p122} makes this point in relation to the economic division of labour, and specifically the spatial structuring in the organisation of relations of production. Economic functions in the division of labour stand *in relation* to one another and imply positions of dominance and subordination. Decisions about where to locate different economic functions therefore constitutes a spatial ordering of places through the kind of functions which cluster and are carried out in particular localities. Massey argues that a spatial organisation which spatially separates the functions of control and production, is likely to mean the flow of profits from branch plant to headquarters, and thus from one region to another. In a typical contemporary example, this could be the headquarters of a bank located in London with its call centres located in deindustrialised towns outside the Southeast of England. The crucial point is that these places are constructed in relation to one another by the kind of economic functions carried out there, and whether they occupy dominant or subordinate positions in the economic division of labour.

It is from this perspective that we will interpret the spatially uneven set of opportunities and conditions which exist for young people in the UK. The spatial division of labour Massey (2013) describes is likely to have tangible implications in young people's exposure to different economic functions (head office functions versus service and production functions) dependent upon where they live. Indeed, our data show that geographic location has direct impacts on accessing opportunities such as placements in the corporate head office functions of employers and levels of engagement with elite universities. The historic legacies of locating dominant control functions and subordinate labour functions in particular locations will also likely reflect the social composition of those places, argues Massey (2013). But it is not just the social composition, but also a legacy of expectation, stereotyped judgements and perceptions that are internalised and transmitted between multiple generations. It is for this reason that the approach of 'spreading out' the same opportunities fails to recognise what is a deep-seated problem; it doesn't acknowledge the origins of spatial imbalances within the UK, in terms of the spatial division of labour and its lasting legacy. We argue here that instead, a more systematic dismantling of how economic functions and social relations are configured spatially is required if any long-term change is to be advanced.

Data and methods

This paper draws on interview data from two related research projects looking at geographies of education, young people's perceptions of place and spatial mobilities within the UK context. The first, referred to as the 'elite' study, examined the impact of place on progression to elite universities and explored the factors which may help account for the higher/lower-than-expected progression rates of some localities. The initial quantitative phase of this research examined progression rates to elite universities - defined as the 24 Russell Group institutions plus three further universities with similar characteristics (University of Bath, University of St Andrews and University of Strathclyde) - by local area across England. Subsequent mapping revealed a distinct urban-rural pattern to progression, with disadvantaged youth in major urban centres found to have typically higher progression rates than similarly disadvantaged peers in more isolated locations (Davies et al., 2021). The following qualitative phase of the 'elite' study – the data from which will be drawn upon within this article - involved in-depth case study research in two areas, one with higher-than-expected progression (in East London) and the other (in Nottingham) with lower-than-expected progression. The second study, referred to as the 'place' study, examined how young people look upon the geography of the UK and how place plays a part in where they would like to attend university. It was a multi-sited qualitative study across 17 diverse localities in all parts of the UK, including the four UK nations, and each region of England. Data from four of the research sites (East London, Tyneside, Liverpool, and Suffolk) will be drawn upon.

In the 'elite' study, participant recruitment across the two case study sites was facilitated through a widening participation organisation, referred to as 'Aspire', that operates from centres based in disadvantaged communities across the UK. Fieldwork was conducted in early 2020 and comprised in-depth semi-structured interviews focussed on building understanding of students' post-18 pathways and the factors shaping their decision-making processes, participant observation and textual analysis of school promotional materials. Interviewee selection was purposive - working-class students with the academic potential to go to an elite university (predicted at least grades ABB at A-level) and staff members with good knowledge of typical post-18 pathways for local students – and was carried out by Aspire staff. The six student interviewees (three per case study site) were aged 17-18, from Minority Ethnic backgrounds and in years 12 and 13, the final two years of schooling within the UK. The six staff interviewees (three per case study site) consisted of two long-standing Aspire staff members and one staff member from a local partner sixth form with a responsibility for university/careers support per location. As we were particularly interested in the widening

participation provision and structures of different localities, the 'elite' study discourses shared within this paper are primarily those of staff, who offered valuable perspectives drawing upon several years of experience working across each of the localities.

The 'place' study used a multi-sited case study design, with participants selected from schools based across 17 different localities. These localities and schools were chosen on the basis of the proportion of young people who were geographically mobile for university in previous years, as well as an attempt to capture a diversity of the demographic and locational characteristics within the UK's geography. The selected localities included urban, coastal and rural areas across each region of England and within Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They included deindustrialised areas of Northern England, major cities such as Birmingham and Manchester, as well as multiple sites in the capital. Participants were recruited from schools within the localities, with over 200 young people and 20 school staff across the 17 localities involved. The school staff interviewed were those with responsibility for year 12/13 age cohorts (Heads of Year 12 and 13) as well as staff who support young people in their career choices (e.g. Careers Advisors). In this paper, the data we draw on from the 'place' study only includes interviews with staff across four of the case study localities, which are representative of high and low rates of geographic mobility.

The reason we primarily draw on the discourses of school and Aspire staff in this paper is because we are specifically interested in the extent to which staff felt able to draw on support and resources to support their young people. We show how teachers and widening participation staff in different localities had very different experiences in the range of opportunities they were able to open up. The five localities drawn upon within the article represented especially divergent experiences for young people, in terms of the opportunities available and the kind of horizons geography opens up (and closes down). The localities are three deindustrialised areas, two in the north of England (Tyneside and Liverpool) and one in the Midlands (Nottingham), an area of East London which has undergone significant regeneration in recent years, and a remote coastal locality (Suffolk) in the East of England. Whilst impossible to be representative of the diverse geography of the UK, we argue in this paper that these geographic localities are prime examples of significant divergences in the array of opportunities they provide.

Across both the 'elite' and 'place' studies, written informed consent was obtained from participants and the studies were conducted in line with the British Educational Research Association's ethical protocols. For both studies, all interviews were transcribed, and thematic

analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) conducted to identify common themes. Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to protect the anonymity of all interviewees and organisations.

The findings of both the 'elite' and 'place' studies suggested that areas outside London differed markedly from the capital in terms of the opportunities available to students. Discussion of the findings will be divided across three sections, with this initial section focussed on school partnerships and widening participation practices and resources, and the following two sections on, firstly, the differences in university engagement in and outside the capital and, secondly, the importance of local economic contexts in shaping the type of employers students have the opportunity to interact with, as well as the types of careers that young people aspire to.

School partnerships and widening participation practices

Our East London interview data evidenced a highly sophisticated widening participation infrastructure within the capital, including extensive partnerships between schools and the third and private sectors. There are several reasons why the widening participation machinery of the capital is much more developed than elsewhere. Many widening participation organisations, including Aspire, the charity partnered with for the 'elite' study - now one of the UK's largest university-access charities – are headquartered and were initially established here (Gamsu, 2016). London is also home to the UK's two chief financial districts of Canary Wharf and the City, whose elite businesses – keen to rebuild public trust in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis – are increasingly engaged in Corporate Social Responsibility practices (Herzig and Moon, 2012). Such practices include a focus on widening participation initiatives within their local communities, and – given that elite university study is the 'expected' pathway into such careers (e.g. Brown et al., 2011, Donnelly and Gamsu, 2019) – a frequent privileging of elite university progression specifically.

For example, a Careers Officer at Tower Chapel School in East London spoke about a partnership the school has with an elite insurance firm headquartered in the City who give them 'a large amount of funding' for an outreach initiative aimed at encouraging students to leave the local area for university and attend an elite institution. Similar to stakeholder comments in case study research conducted by Wiseman et al. (2017) in an East London

borough, she also made apparent how such support from and links with the area's elite businesses are commonplace for local schools:

'Yeah, so, [East London borough] has been known historically for having really good links between schools and businesses. There's an education business partnership, erm... and they set up these programmes for the schools. Most of the schools in this area do, do similar programmes.' (Careers Officer, Tower Chapel School, East London)

The proximity of East London schools to the capital's two financial districts is more than likely to be why schools like Tower Chapel appear to be especially engaged with these elite businesses. Reflective of the economic spatial division of labour (Massey 2013), a firm's strategy and control functions, operated by their headquarters in London, will likely be targeting what is commonly regarded as a more disadvantaged part of London. The crucial point here is that this choice is made by the control function of a firm's headquarters, who have the power and resources to direct activity. The back-office customer service 'branch-plants' of the firm, located in deindustrialised parts of the UK, will not have this control function and power to the same extent, which is why schools outside of the capital are much less likely to benefit. Moreover, the involvement of these firms in widening participation work is significant because they are firms that occupy dominant positions within the *field* of finance (Bourdieu, 1996).

In part perhaps stemming from this increasing momentum amongst local third and private sector organisations and businesses, our interviews also suggested that local schools highly prioritise the use of staff resources for widening participation. One East London Aspire staff member explained that many of the local sixth forms they work with have teams dedicated to providing in-house widening participation activities, and to sourcing high-quality external opportunities for students:

'So, I know that a lot of these sixth forms in particular will have teams who are dedicated to enrichment. So where in a more conventional sixth form, you know you might have maybe one person working on careers or like outreach or just getting those extra opportunities in, I think they really understand the value that resource can have in terms of supporting a student.' (Cluster Manager, Aspire, East London)

These teams also play a crucial role in cultivating the extensive relationships local schools have with the area's elite businesses:

'It means those teams can go out and you know, strike up corporate partnerships and be able to, you know, get speakers in to talk to them. Erm, so I think it is just, you know, really cultivating that, erm, those connections and kind of put... investing in that area and seeing that pay off. Erm, because it's what will make those students stand out.' (Cluster Manager, Aspire, East London)

Indeed, having such teams means students at these sixth forms receive much more extensive support for university progression than students at state schools elsewhere might typically receive. For example, the University Access Director at Elm Academy in East London explained that the extensive support provided by their four full-time staff member 'University Access' team (all Oxbridge graduates) includes running regular in-house super-curricular activities (activities designed to broaden students' subject knowledge beyond the school curriculum), organising an annual residential trip to two elite universities for the full year 12 cohort (~300 students), providing in-depth personalised university application support, admissions test and interview preparation (including specialised Oxbridge sessions) and sending students a weekly 'roundup' email advertising selected programmes at elite universities and high-status internship opportunities, plus providing any of the additional support and references needed to apply for these. Moreover, comments by one Aspire student interviewee who attends Elm Academy - including that year 12 students are 'constantly' having meetings with staff within this team and that the team was 'involved in every process of post-18 options' - show just how integral this team is to shaping students' time at the sixth form and their future progression.

Outside of the capital there did not seem to be the same momentum to focus school resources on widening participation activities. Data from Great Mundestoft Sixth Form College in Suffolk suggested that student progression to university there was largely supported by the work of one staff member, who was also a full-time teacher. Likewise, one Nottingham Aspire staff member spoke about a partner college, Hawthorn, with a student body of 2000, who have several 'welfare officers and wellbeing officers and student support officers', but only one careers/outreach officer, again suggesting that the latter may be less of a priority for local schools than the former. Moreover, in contrast to the East London based schools involved in the study, there was no evidence of the involvement of elite firms within the widening participation opportunities available to students, or indeed much engagement from the private sector at all.

Again, contrary to East London, where schools such as Elm Academy, appear to do quite a lot of ‘hand-holding’ when it comes to university visits, our data from schools in disadvantaged areas outside the capital, suggested that – although perhaps in part due to typically more limited resources – there was also an expectation of students to show independence and organise their own university visits, as well as taking responsibility for signalling their interest in progressing to an elite university to school staff:

‘So, we’ve got somebody who’s... very knowledgeable on university, Russell Groups, Oxford and Cambridge, trying to support students to get into those kinds of universities. So, we’ve got the support there, but it relies on the students I think having a bit of a lightbulb moment, ‘oh that really looks appealing’ and then stepping away and going and seeing members of staff and really pushing it.’
(Deputy Head, Rowanberry School, Nottingham)

In some cases, this also appeared to reflect a desire to leave students free to make their own choices about if and where to go to university, in contrast to the often-strong privileging of Russell Group universities evident in some East London schools’ framing of university options (Davies, forthcoming). For example, whilst given the funding model of the organisation - involving financial support from a range of university partners – Aspire staff must take care in how they frame different university groupings, the discourse of staff at the organisation’s Nottingham centre also seemed to reflect an individual belief that elite universities should not be more highly valorised than others:

‘I know definitely as an individual I’m very careful because I don’t want to devalue any other universities that [students] might be looking to go to, to say, these ones are better than where you’re thinking of going.’ (Centre Leader, Aspire, Nottingham)

Aside from the University of Nottingham, which was mentioned several times, the discourse of Nottingham school and Aspire staff also suggested a general paucity of engagement from elite universities in local schools. Interview data from Liverpool, Suffolk, and Tyneside suggested similarly infrequent interactions with elite universities also, and typically greater engagement from local post-1992 institutions. This stood in sharp contrast to our interview data from East London, where the discourse of staff and students was filled with references to elite universities. The next section will discuss the differences in university engagement within and outside the capital in more detail.

Engagement from elite universities

The East London student interviews from the 'elite' study contained multiple references to activities and residential programmes at elite universities, with each student having participated in activities at a minimum of five different Russell Group universities, including at least one experience at Cambridge or Oxford. Moreover, amongst these, each had taken part in at least three residential trips, activities that can be particularly impactful for prospective students (Robinson and Salvestrini, 2020), especially those from lower socio-economic and certain ethnic backgrounds who may be less likely to apply to elite universities due to a fear of being 'out of place' (Ball et al., 2002)

This apparent greater access to opportunities with elite universities that disadvantaged students from East London had, finds support in the findings of an investigation by the University of Cambridge's independent newspaper, *Varsity*, that revealed regional disparities in the University's outreach provision (Lally and Hancock, 2018). This research showed that London – with a population of approximately 9 million – is divided into 33 widening participation areas targeted by 17 Cambridge colleges, whereas Wales, with a total population roughly a third of that of London is targeted by just two. Meanwhile, Birmingham with a population of roughly 1.3 million has only one college providing specific outreach provision and the entire Northeast with a population of approximately 2.5 million, just two.

Indeed, our interview data from disadvantaged areas within Nottingham, Suffolk, Tyneside and Liverpool also suggested that these schools' engagement with elite universities, if any, was often limited to their local elite institution and that students rarely benefitted from residential trips to universities further afield. Rather, schools here appeared to have more frequent interactions with local post-1992 institutions who were typically more proactive in engaging with them and in facilitating visits, such as by supporting travel costs. For example, the Head of Sixth Form at Bootlesfield School in Liverpool commented that despite being only a short distance from the school, the University of Liverpool will not support them with travel costs there, yet local post-1992 institution, UCLan, located approximately an hour away in Preston, are happy to pay for coach travel.

From the perspective of post-1992 institutions, it is perhaps strategically important to strongly engage with students within their local geographic contexts, given that they make up the vast majority of their intakes. Indeed, research on student mobility in 2014/15 showed that post-1992 universities recruit the vast majority of their intake locally, whilst Russell Group intakes

are national in their student recruitment. For example, Universities like Newman in Birmingham and Liverpool John Moores in Liverpool were shown to recruit over two thirds of their intake from within a 57-mile radius, whilst that figure was less than 2% for Bristol, Durham and York (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018a). In many ways, post-1992 universities are reliant on their local students, which perhaps explains what we see here in terms of their eagerness to engage with local schools.

The Head of Year 12 at St Aaron's school in Tyneside similarly lamented the fact that they have not been able to take their students to visit certain elite universities because they have not been offered the support to do so, and being in a financially deprived area, students' families are unable to help with costs. Moreover, the teacher reflected on the fact that even if the school were somehow able to fund the transport, for the trip to be of most value to students - not just a 'whistle stop tour' – they would also need to stay overnight, something which again such institutions do not typically offer financial support with:

'I couldn't get any institution to take 30 kids for a day. Erm, the bus was gonna cost a fortune, going to York, so then I'm asking the kids to pay for it, in an economically deprived area to start with. Erm, and then you, we need to think about what, what would be the value of bussing them there and then having a quick whistle stop tour and then being back as well. So, it, I, I like honestly think it would be so good for them to have like an overnight stay somewhere.' (Head of Year 12, St Aaron's School, Tyneside)

Indeed, it appeared that, in our case study areas outside of London, few disadvantaged students were benefitting from residential trips to elite universities. In addition to the difficulty for schools of funding such trips themselves, another reason, as the Head of year 12 at St Aaron's further highlighted, is that even where opportunities exist for students to attend such programmes independently, they are typically aimed only at the very highest achievers. This means that students that could still have the potential to go to these institutions often end up missing out:

'Offers of residentials, they're aimed at the top end all of the time. And there's never that sense of, you know the, these, these B-grade kids getting away and experiencing that. And in... quite often these B-grade kids end up AB kids... It's a bit of a waste, really. (Head of Year 12, St Aaron's School, Tyneside)

Staff interviewees elsewhere also lamented the fact that students who are eligible for such residential programmes often don't want to apply. One issue, as the Deputy Head of Rowanberry School in Nottingham commented, is the timing of many programmes during the summer holidays when some students may have summer jobs or feel in need of a break from study. The Head of Sixth Form at Great Mundestoft Sixth Form college in Suffolk also felt that some students struggle to plan ahead to 'see the wider and bigger end goal' of attending such programmes.

In some places, there also seemed to be a sense of disinterest from elite universities in working with local schools. For example, despite being located only a relatively short distance away, Great Mundestoft Sixth Form College did not appear to benefit from any engagement activities with the University of Cambridge and – perhaps tellingly - has not had any students progress to either Oxbridge institution for the past 4 years. Indeed, the only university mentioned in terms of outreach engagement here was the University of East Anglia (UEA). Even then, it seemed that much of the sixth form's engagement with this university resulted from a proactive Head of Sixth Form, perhaps suggesting that other local schools could have even more infrequent interactions with HE providers:

'Not really, no. That's, it's, it's all down to (...) us. Or me. To get them in, to get the UEA in for example, like "let's go, let's go do this" apart from that there's nothing... I've, I, erm, created this mentoring scheme with the UEA this year to get students from the UEA to mentor [school students]' (Head of Sixth Form, Great Mundestoft Sixth Form College, Suffolk)

Meanwhile, the Deputy Head of Rowanberry School in Nottingham made explicit how, as a result of local students' often limited engagement with elite universities, many students lack awareness of what university groupings like the Russell Group represent and the potential benefits that studying at a constituent institution could bring them. In particular, she felt the problem - at least in terms of awareness - is not so much Oxbridge, as 'everyone gets the kind of Oxford, Cambridge thing' but the broader Russell Group. She suggested that Russell Group institutions perhaps expect a greater level of awareness from students than is realistic to expect, especially for students whose horizons for action to that point may have been quite limited:

'It's expectation, "We're a Russell Group uni, we know what we do". Yes, but we're talking to 17-year-olds here who've never really left Nottingham. *Laughs*. It's a bit of a gulf.' (Deputy Head, Rowanberry School, Nottingham)

With regards to their students, she commented that the reality of this is that most of them are unaware that their local universities - University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent University - have different aims and approaches to teaching and learning, so these differences don't factor into their decision-making. Moreover, she implied that without elite universities like those of the Russell Group more actively engaging with their students, this is unlikely to change as the school doesn't have the resources to 'spend money sending everybody everywhere, left, right and centre' on university visits:

'I mean Nottingham University and Nottingham Trent University, most of our students don't really know the difference, they just know they're both local and if they offer the course, that's where they want to go. So, I guess more of an understanding of... what makes you special and what do you get as a student for being there. Erm. But it does have to be a little bit put on a plate for some of the schools because yeah, we couldn't spend money sending everybody everywhere, left, right and centre.' (Deputy Head, Rowanberry School, Nottingham)

The awareness of university hierarchies and privileging of elite institutions is very much part of middle-class educational trajectories; an experience not shared by lower social class groups (see for example, Reay et al. 2005). But our data show that the geographic location of disadvantaged youth could impact on their chances of being exposed to knowledge and expectations of elite university progression. In addition to location impacting the universities that students from disadvantaged backgrounds typically had most interactions with - with those in locations outside London tending to have greater contact with their local post-1992 institutions - our data also suggested an important impact of place upon the type and frequency of interaction students had with employers, as the next section will discuss.

Local economic contexts

So far, we have discussed the impacts of the spatial division of school widening participation resources and partnerships, and students' uneven access to pre-university opportunities at elite universities, on elite university progression. Reflective of the spatially unbalanced division of labour (Massey 2013), local economic contexts also appeared important in shaping the types of employers that students had visibility of and interactions with – something which has been similarly highlighted by Wiseman et al. (2017) - as well as the types of careers students wished to have themselves.

In East London, there was an acute awareness of being situated in a local economic context that has the control functions of companies that occupy dominant positions within the *fields* of law, finance and commerce. For example, at Tower Chapel School in East London, multiple references were made to a mentoring programme run by a well-known elite finance firm that was local to the school. The school's Careers Officer also spoke about another such firm whose headquarters are near to the school and which forms a palpable representation of professional 'success' to students:

'[Elite finance firm] have their main offices in [East London borough] so a lot of [students] will see that and you know, associate that with success' (Careers Officer, Tower Chapel School, East London).

The significant extent of these businesses' interactions with students and the impact this has on the career pathways that they wish to follow was apparent in the Careers Officer's concern that students can sometimes develop too narrow a focus on such careers to the detriment of others:

Careers Officer: 'If anything, they get too much focus on that's what's success is, doing business.'

Interviewer: 'Really?'

Careers Officer: 'Yeah, I think. But not'

Interviewer: 'Yeah'

Careers Officer: 'so much on careers in humanities or other things.'

(Careers Officer, Tower Chapel School, East London)

Moreover, student interview data also revealed how East London students' interactions with the capital's elite finance businesses can impact on their university choices, favouring elite university progression. For example, speaking about her attendance at a widening participation event held at one such business – arranged by an organisation which supports young people to access professional opportunities - one student at Sycamore School in East London showed how it had enhanced her and fellow attendees' knowledge of the Russell Group of universities:

'I think it was a launch, where they gave out this handbook and it was asking about universities and... like there was a game where we had to guess all the Russell Group universities off a list and half of us didn't realise.' (Student, Sycamore School, East London)

Via this organisation, this student then went on to complete two work placements at financial firms in Canary Wharf and the City, where - in addition to her now fuller understanding of the Russell Group - these placements further raised her awareness of the expectation of following elite study pathways if she wanted to work within the sector:

'At [Investment Firm] ... the majority of them did do PhDs, and like, they were from Oxbridge. So... it was kind of like... ok maybe that's where I should go' (Student, Sycamore School, East London)

Moreover, the significant extent to which such opportunities to interact with elite employers are more easily accessible to disadvantaged young people in London in comparison to similar peers elsewhere, was recently made apparent by the chief executive of this same organisation when addressing the Westminster Education Forum in 2020. Commenting on the partnerships and professional opportunities that they and similar organisations provide, she lamented the fact that far too much of this support is focussed in the places in which employers are heavily concentrated, with some of the young people they support in London having more offers of support 'than they know what to do with', compared to the young people they work with in smaller urban centres.

Indeed, the discourse of our interviewees situated in more marginalised economic contexts often reflected very different, typically less high-status, work opportunities available to students. For example, the Head of Sixth Form at Great Mundestoft Sixth Form College in Suffolk lamented the 'lack of economic opportunities' in Great Mundestoft:

'The only thing around here like we were speaking about yesterday is just the offshore stuff... Renewable, oil and gas. Apart from that, factory-wise you've got Birds Eye, that's just over there, apart from that you've got no massive employers. It's just lots of little shops and things like that. And even like the big main chains down the high street are all going'. (Head of Sixth Form, Great Mundestoft Sixth Form College, Suffolk)

The industry cited by the teacher here contrasts sharply with the kind of economic activity cited by staff in London. This underlines Massey's (2013) point about the spatial division of economic functions, with branch plants like the Birdseye factory in Great Mundestoft separated from the control functions of the headquarters located in London. These branch plants are not likely to provide the kind of opportunities made available by the firm's control function in the capital, as we saw earlier. But there is also a more deep-seated point here in relation to the subtle expectations and perceptions held within the local area as shaped by this historical patterning in the spatial division of economic functions. The Head of Sixth Form at Great Mundestoft Sixth Form College also shared his perceptions about how the area's work opportunities shape students' future pathways and how, whilst their college has a relatively high proportion of students that do go on to university, some students don't see any future for themselves beyond a 'dead-end job':

Head of Sixth Form: 'I would put it quite sort of quite blinkered really in terms of... a lot of people don't see any further than what their parents do... It's just "get a dead-end job, its fine". That's just seen as the norm and its sort of, its, mind you we are the, the, the amount that go to uni is very high from here, like I think its 70 to 80 percent of our students which is phenomenal...'

Interviewer: 'Yeah'

Head of Sixth Form: '...but it's just that 20 percent, which'll stay here and just be your typical Great Mundestoft person, as we call them, that has that dead-end job. Erm, has very little aspirations, are happy to live in a one-up, or whatever it is... apartment. And that's their life for them, they're okay with that.'

(Head of Sixth Form, Great Mundestoft Sixth Form College, Suffolk)

Our interview data from Tyneside and Nottingham similarly reflected the local economic opportunities available to students. Notably, interviewees in both places highlighted increasing interest amongst local students in 'degree apprenticeships', a UK government initiative launched in 2015 of higher education courses which combine work with part-time study, typically at post-1992 institutions⁵³.

⁵³ More information on Degree Apprenticeships can be found here: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8741/CBP-8741.pdf>

The Head of Year 12 at St Aaron's School in Tyneside commented that degree apprenticeships are well-suited to some of the area's local industries and are important in terms of addressing skill shortages in the local economy:

'So, it's a, it's in the pipeline for a lot of different industries but we have got two coming up, one for IT and one for engineering. And that's because there's a shortage of them skills in the Northeast... And 'cause companies are wanting to get involved, the apprenticeship levy for companies, that will make a big difference.' (Head of Year 12, St Aaron's School, Tyneside)

On one level, it is perhaps reasonable to assume teachers will reflect on local employment opportunities, especially given that many young people from less privileged backgrounds will inevitably stay local for university and likely their career. However, the net effect of this is for teachers to ultimately be restricted in the kind of economic opportunities which exist in the locality that they draw students' attention to, and which more likely than not will be opportunities occupying subordinate positions in economic fields of production. The IT and engineering apprenticeship opportunities highlighted by the Head of Year 12 at St Aaron's School in Tyneside are examples of these kinds of service-level opportunities.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has examined the significance of spatial context in framing the educational and career orientations of working-class young people in England. On the one hand, it has demonstrated a convergence of opportunities in East London that strongly privilege elite universities and careers and appear likely to play a role in the area's higher-than-expected elite university progression rates (Davies et al., 2021). These include local schools' prioritisation of financial resources and building of partnerships with external organisations for this aim, significant engagement with elite universities, including typically high-impact residential programmes, and extensive student interactions, including internship, mentoring, and networking opportunities, with locally situated businesses overt in privileging elite university study.

Such experiences do not appear to be shared to the same extent by working-class young people in towns and cities outside the capital. Rather, our interview data from disadvantaged

areas of Nottingham, Liverpool, Suffolk, and Tyneside suggested that schools here are focussed on a wider range of priorities, have typically greater engagement with local post-1992 institutions and benefit from fewer university residential visits, and that students' work-related opportunities and outlooks often mirror their less economically prosperous local contexts.

Some of the underlying reasons why disadvantaged East London students benefit from greater interactions with elite universities and widening participation organisations are structural. Widening participation organisations are disproportionately based within the capital (Gamsu, 2016; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018a) and the UK's elite universities unequally spatially distributed, with a particular concentration in and around London (Wakeling and Savage, 2015). Some steps in the right direction are being taken to address these spatial inequalities. Aspire, the widening participation organisation partnered with for the 'elite' study - and one of the UK's largest university-access charities - are rapidly expanding their regional centres, and other similar organisations are increasing their provision outside of London too. Likewise, government/university initiatives like the Uni Connect programme⁵⁴ – 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners focussed on providing widening participation activities in localities where participation is lower than might be expected - and the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) – which monitors widening participation outreach and recently launched a new dataset and mapping tool enabling practitioners to visualise levels of provision nationwide⁵⁵ - are improving outreach opportunities for those in more remote and underserved communities.

However, despite longstanding awareness and research (e.g. Crawford et al., 2016, Montacute and Cullinane, 2018) showing that it is at elite universities that those from disadvantaged backgrounds and areas are most underrepresented, the Uni Connect and HEAT initiatives are only concerned with university progression/outreach more generally. There is thus a need for an increased focus on elite progression specifically, for example, a sub-programme within Uni Connect bringing together regional partnerships of elite universities and relevant third sector providers to target localities with lower-than-expected elite university progression rates. HEAT's new outreach provision dataset and mapping tool could also be extended so that practitioners focussed on elite university progression can identify areas that have been under/over targeted in this area specifically. Indeed, research revealing the stark

⁵⁴ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/>

⁵⁵ <https://heat.ac.uk/research-and-evidence/currentprojects/>

regional disparities in the University of Cambridge's outreach provision (Lally and Hancock, 2018) amply demonstrates the need for such a tool. Moreover, whilst elite universities are increasingly considering the overall geography of their admissions and entry, given that disadvantaged students within major urban centres - especially London - have higher than expected elite university progression rates (Davies et al., 2021) and that highly academically-selective London state schools like Elm Academy could make up a significant proportion of Oxbridge's economically disadvantaged student intake alone, there is a clear need for elite universities to also look at the specific geography of where their students from disadvantaged backgrounds come from.

Our findings further underline the way the spatial division of labour (Massey, 1995) in countries like the UK plays an important role in shaping the pre-university work opportunities and interactions with employers that young people have available in their local context, and their subsequent educational and career aspirations. Given that London is the site where control functions of major companies are located - companies that occupy dominant positions within their economic field - working-class young people here tend to have greater awareness of such career pathways than similar peers elsewhere. This is perhaps especially true of those from disadvantaged backgrounds living in East London, just a short distance from London's two financial service districts of the City and Canary Wharf, and who the Careers Officer at one East London case study school commented come to see these businesses as synonymous with professional 'success' and often aspire to have similar careers themselves.

Conversely, those in our case study localities of Nottingham and Tyneside highlighted increasing interest amongst their students in 'degree apprenticeships' – something notably absent from the discourse of East London interviewees. For example, the Deputy Head of Rowanberry School in Nottingham commented that there are increasing numbers of degree apprenticeships in the area at 'good, blue-chip type' local companies like Rolls Royce, Boots and Experian. Given the economic hardships that many local working-class families have faced following deindustrialisation, their appeal for students - offering the opportunity to go straight into a stable job, at a long-established and reputable company - is understandable. However, the majority of these will be service-level opportunities, not offering the same status or remuneration as the capital's control functions and thus further perpetuating regional inequalities.

Our findings speak more broadly to how geography impacts and interrupts prospects for social mobility. Indeed, if policy is reliant upon an assumption that opportunities can be spread out more evenly across all parts of the UK, then it fails to acknowledge deep-seated explanations

about why opportunities are unevenly spread in the first place, in terms of the spatial division of labour. Moreover, as we have shown, this spatial division of labour has knock-on effects in terms of how the local economic context shapes the kind of opportunities available to working class young people in different parts of the UK. To truly address this, a more fundamental restructuring of the way economic functions are spatially distributed is required.

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7. Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I set out to build greater understanding of the geographies of access to elite universities for young people growing up in England. Employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach, I used initial quantitative research to take a granular look at elite university progression by local area across England and to map areas of higher and lower than expected participation. This was followed by in-depth qualitative case-study research in two localities, one with higher-than-expected participation (in East London) and the other (in Nottingham), lower-than-expected participation, to gain further insights into why some areas may be over/underrepresented and as to how the participation of underrepresented areas could be increased. Whilst both these case studies were given equal value within the data collection and analysis, the most important findings emerged primarily within the East London case study and discussion of this case study thus took precedence within the thesis.

Given increased UK government interest in the importance of place for access to HE in recent years, this topic offered a pertinent area for study. This was especially true given that current place-based initiatives, e.g. the POLAR and TUNDRA methodologies and the Uni Connect programme, are focussed on HE progression more generally, yet research has repeatedly demonstrated that it is at elite universities that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are most underrepresented (e.g. Crawford et al., 2016, Montacute and Cullinane, 2018), even once prior attainment is accounted for.

Moreover, there is a relative paucity of academic research that has examined the role of place for HE access, and even fewer studies that have considered its role within elite HE access in any depth, with only one study (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018) identified that specifically set out to look at the impact of place (as well as schools) for progression to elite universities. The focus of my thesis on this under-explored topic thus, in addition to its mapping of elite university progression by local area which expands on previous similar work (e.g. Wright, 2014; Montacute and Cullinane, 2018, Continuum, n.d.), and its innovative mixed-methods approach, following this initial mapping with detailed case study research, ensures it makes an important contribution to the field.

In the next section of this chapter, I discuss the four key themes that emerged from this thesis's exploration of the role of place for elite university entry in turn and outline the important

contribution of each to knowledge. In the following section, I consider the policy implications of this highly topical research. Finally, in the concluding two sections, I outline the limitations of the study and suggest directions for future research.

7.2 Contribution to knowledge

7.2.1 Access to elite universities: an urban-rural divide

The study's initial quantitative analyses used Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data across five national cohorts starting university between 2008/09 - 2016/17 to model and map elite university progression by local area across England. As outlined, within Paper 1, '*Geographies of elite higher education participation: An urban 'escalator' effect*' (Chapter 4), the key finding of this initial quantitative phase of research was that whilst place did not appear as a major contributory factor in entry to elite universities overall, there was evidence of a distinct urban–rural patterning to progression. More precisely, when raw progression rates by area alone were observed, rural areas were found to have typically higher progression rates to elite universities. However, when important individual characteristics known to impact on university progression were accounted for, including education, socio-economic status, ethnicity and accessibility to elite universities, this pattern was reversed, with localities within and surrounding major urban centres found to have the highest progression. This phenomenon was especially marked within London, which is examined as a case in point within Paper 1.

The study's quantitative analyses represent an important contribution to knowledge as there are few quantitative studies that have considered the geography of elite university progression for English-domiciled entrants in detail (as opposed to overall HE entry). One important exception to this, as highlighted previously, is a study by Montacute and Cullinane (2018) which examined applications and acceptances to both Russell Group universities and Oxbridge more specifically by school type, region, and Local Education Authority (LEAs). Further to this, Montacute and Cullinane also mapped acceptance rates to both these university groupings by LEAs. Nevertheless, this thesis's consideration of the role of place for elite university progression on a far more granular scale (MSOAs) and its accounting for important individual-level characteristics within its mapping (unlike the former study in which raw progression rates alone are mapped) represents a significant expansion to this work.

Another notable exception is work by Manley and Johnston (2014), who paid attention to the geographical location of schools and the characteristics of these areas within their study of HE access, which included certain analyses on Russell Group progression specifically. Once again however, the research within this thesis expands on that of this study through its use of individual-level data as opposed to the aggregate school-level data used there. Additionally, where comparisons are made across local areas within this thesis, they are done so at the MSOA-level. This offers significant advantages over the 25 regions used within the Manley and Johnston study, where there is a much higher risk of confounding within comparisons, given that this imposes averages on large areas where there is likely much greater diversity in terms of progression rates. Indeed, possibly as a result of the larger areas they use, my findings also challenge some of those identified by Manley and Johnston (2014), notably that London and the Southeast have lower progression rates to elite universities than the rest of England – a finding the authors themselves acknowledge as ‘counter-intuitive’ given the typically higher affluence and attainment of these areas, and these areas’ dominance within Oxbridge progression (Gamsu, 2017; Bennett, 2017; Montacute and Cullinane, 2018).

There is equally a small body of quantitative research (notably Mangan et al., 2010, Gibbons and Vignoles, 2012) which has examined the importance of ‘distance’ for elite university progression and demonstrated that disadvantaged students with elite universities locally situated have a higher likelihood of attending such institutions. My doctoral research makes a further important contribution here, controlling for ‘distance travelled’ by students within the modelling process, and in its finding that this was the third most important control variable grouping (after the groupings of educational and socio-economic variables had been added), reducing the between-MSOA (local area) variance observed by approximately 15%. In addition, similar to that used by Wright (2014), I included a control variable at the MSOA-level within my mapping, measuring each area’s ‘accessibility’ to elite universities, using a weights matrix to calculate the relative access that students within each MSOA had to elite universities in comparison to peers in other localities.

As highlighted in the introduction to this chapter, this thesis’s mapping of elite university progression by local area represents a further key contribution to knowledge, significantly expanding on previous similar work (e.g. Wright, 2014; Montacute and Cullinane, 2018, Continuum, n.d.). Indeed, whilst Wright (2014) and Montacute and Cullinane (2018) have mapped progression to Russell Group (and in the case of, Montacute and Cullinane, Oxbridge) progression by Local Education Authorities (LEAs), this thesis maps progression by local area

on a much more granular scale (MSOAs). Furthermore, whilst Continuum⁵⁶ (a centre for widening participation policy studies based at the University of East London) has produced a map of elite (Russell Group) progression by MSOA also, this map reproduces the OfS' POLAR methodology⁵⁷ and so does not take into account important individual-level characteristics as I do. As such this map is roughly equivalent to the initial null model map produced in this study (with the difference that my 'elite' construct contained a further three universities in addition to those of the Russell Group).

Moreover, as my mapping has shown, not accounting for individual-level characteristics has important implications. Indeed, as highlighted in Paper 1 (Chapter 4), the significant differences between my null model and final model maps suggest that some urban disadvantaged youth may have a higher likelihood of progressing to elite universities than similarly disadvantaged peers elsewhere. For example, whilst the MSOA effects alone – representing the weighted average of the effect of MSOA for all students – do not allow this conclusion unambiguously, higher-than-expected progression was particularly notable in the example given of East London, an area of the capital containing some of the most economically-deprived localities in the country. Should Continuum's map be used by practitioners to target outreach work, they may choose to focus on East London which, when considering average progression rates by area alone as this map and my null model map do, indicates that several localities here have lower progression. However, as my final model map shows, when the individual characteristics of those living here are accounted for, elite university progression in much of East London is higher than would be expected. This suggests that, where faced with limited resources, elite universities might better target a greater proportion of widening participation provision elsewhere.

Finally, as to the underlying causes of the study's observed urban 'escalator' effect, drawing on relevant literature, I argued in Paper 1, '*Geographies of elite higher education participation: An urban 'escalator' effect*' (Chapter 4), that there was likely not one single explanation that could explain the typically higher progression rates of disadvantaged urban youth over similar peers living elsewhere, but rather that large towns and cities contain a vortex of influences likely to play important roles. Amongst these, the geographic mix of social class and ethnic identities, the legacy of school improvement programmes in the early 2000s, and the often urban-centric nature of widening participation programmes were suggested as probable key

⁵⁶ The maps produced by Continuum can be viewed here: <https://www.uel.ac.uk/our-research/research-school-education-communities/continuum/russell-group-polar>

⁵⁷ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/maps-of-participation-in-higher-education/>

factors. These factors, in addition to the individual-level characteristics revealed to be of most importance within the modelling process, shaped the design of my subsequent case study research and analysis.

The following three sub-sections are focussed on key findings from the study's second, qualitative phase of research and the three most important overarching themes that emerged, and which cut across both qualitative papers (papers 2 and 3). Some elements of these align with the hypothesised influences discussed above in Paper 1, whilst others contribute to and build on previous research discussed within the study's literature review, as well as providing additional novel insights.

7.2.2 Valorisation of elite university progression and framing of university choices

The first of the key themes that emerged from the case study research was the significant influence that schools' valorisation of elite university progression can have upon students' progression rates, making an important contribution to related literature here (e.g. Reay et al., 2005; Oliver and Kettley, 2010; Burgess, 2018, 2021). Like Donnelly (2014, 2015) who has drawn upon Bernstein's (1975) concepts of framing to consider the 'hidden messages' that schools send out about elite universities, schools' framing of university options appeared to play a pivotal role within this. This sub-section focusses on the 'higher-than-expected' case study in East London, which was the subject of Paper 2, '*A convergence of opportunities: Understanding the high elite university progression of disadvantaged youth in an East London borough*' (Chapter 5).

In the East London case study, a shared valorisation of elite university progression across the area's multiple high-performing schools of valorising Russell Group – and especially Oxbridge – progression quickly became apparent. For example, in interviewee comments such as how students progressing to Oxbridge are 'revered above all others' (Emily, Aspire East London Cluster Manager) and in discussion of how the area's local high-performing schools are celebrated by the press and their success recognised throughout the locality. The competition between local schools to have the highest elite university progression rates was also raised by interviewees, something which has been similarly highlighted by Burgess (2018, 2021), who has argued that this stems from the UK's increasingly marketised education system in

which schools are obliged to push Russell Group progression to maintain their competitiveness in the local sixth-form market. There is also reason to consider whether there may be a possible London-centric element to the strength of this push towards Russell Group progression and competition between schools to have the highest rates, as in addition to this finding within my East London research, Burgess' ethnographic research (2018, 2021) was conducted across three Greater London schools.

Central to the shaping of this shared culture of elite university valorisation, appeared to be local schools' strong framing of university choices to privilege progression to Russell Group universities. Discussion of this topic was primarily focussed on the practices of Elm Academy - where one of my staff interviewees (Amy) worked as University Access Director and which was attended by two of my student interviewees (Sophie and David) - and which was used as a case in point within Paper 2, '*A convergence of opportunities: Understanding the high elite university progression of disadvantaged youth in an East London borough*' (Chapter 5). However, as additionally noted within Paper 2, both Aspire staff interviewees (Emily and Heather) commented within their interviews that the practices of this institution were typical of the area's high-performing schools.

The discourse of interview participants made evident Elm Academy's strong framing of Russell Group – and especially Oxbridge – progression as the pathway to which students should aspire. For example, Amy, Director of the school's four full-time staff member 'University Access team', explained that this team had an express remit of facilitating Russell Group progression. Moreover, it was clear that this message was explicitly communicated to students as a comment from student, Sophie - 'in sixth form the conversation was more about *which* Russell Group are you applying to, not *which* university are you applying to' – showed. There was also more implicit messaging observed, however. For example, in a further comment from Sophie about how all the staff members within the University Access team were Oxbridge graduates. This served to show how the school's culture of elite university valorisation was ingrained within its very fibre, in a way that might be more typically expected of a private school (Reay et al., 2005). Indeed, the message this sends to students is similar to the 'implicit presumption of compatibility in relation to Oxbridge' that Reay et al. (2005) describe within the private schools within their study as stemming in part from these schools having significant proportions of staff members who attended Oxbridge themselves. Finally, interviewee comments also evidenced the University Access team's careful selection of which activities should feature within the weekly roundup email sent to students – of which any university-led activities appeared to be exclusively those of elite universities – thus shaping which universities students were most likely to engage with.

The case study further included consideration of local schools' promotional materials, in particular a close examination of Elm Academy's sixth form prospectus which contained both explicit and implicit messages that students should aspire to Russell Group universities. For example, there were several explicit statements such as how Elm Academy is one of the 'top' schools for progression to the 'prestigious Russell Group' and that Oxbridge is where the school's 'highest achievers' are encouraged to apply. More implicitly, the school's preference for these universities was communicated through decisions about what was included in the prospectus. For example, there were several pages dedicated to the bios of students from the preceding year who had progressed to Russell Group universities – more than half of whom had progressed to Oxbridge – but none for students who had progressed to other institutions.

As I reflect on in the conclusion section to Paper 2, the valorising of Russell Group progression apparent across the case study locality's high-performing local schools raised some important ethical questions that are worth making explicit. Most notably, who does such a push towards study at such institutions really serve? Whilst on the one hand, East London's high progression rates for disadvantaged students can be seen as admirable (and are certainly something politicians are keen to capitalise upon, for example, former UK prime minister, Boris Johnson, cited Elm Academy as 'proof' of what he means for 'levelling up'), there were concerns raised by some of my staff interviewees - similar to those of Burgess (2018, 2021) - that students can be pushed towards studying at such institutions when another university or indeed alternative post-18 pathway might be a better fit for them. Moreover, this is particularly pertinent given the increasingly poor mental health seen amongst young people (Thorley, 2017). Indeed, at one point in her interview, Elm Academy student, Sophie, explained to me that she wished to study Psychology and to later work to change schools' approaches to dealing with students' mental health issues because of the negative experiences that some of her friends have had. My findings suggest that the pressure that some schools appear to place on students to progress to elite universities - indeed may feel obliged to place given the UK's increasingly marketised education system – may be a contributing factor to poor student mental health. This is a subject that warrants further academic and policy attention.

Moreover, as I further argue within the conclusion to Paper 2, it is questionable as to whether elite university study truly helps enable social mobility in the first place. Research focused on graduate outcomes has shown that even where students from disadvantaged backgrounds make it to elite universities and careers such as those within the capital's elite finance firms – shown within the East London case study to be involved in extensive (if potentially tokenistic) widening participation work there - important ethnic and class pay gaps remain (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2019, Friedman and Laurison, 2019). Furthermore, whilst this minority of

disadvantaged individuals may nevertheless see their own life chances improve, the practices that many of these companies encourage, such as reduced labour protections and the privatisation of state-owned companies, have significant negative impacts upon the working-class more generally (Ingram and Gamsu, 2022). This then thus serves to demonstrate how widening participation practices informed by the existing narrow social mobility discourse do not disrupt the structures that maintain inequality, but rather implicitly accept and work within them, further perpetuating them.

The new chair of the Social Mobility Commission recently acknowledged that the 'social mobility world' has become overly fixated on access to elite universities and careers (SMC, 2022). Given her position as headteacher of a free school serving a disadvantaged area which itself openly privileges Russell Group progression (more than 80% of students there progressed to Russell Group institutions in 2021) whether she and the organisations she represents will practice what they preach remains to be seen. Nevertheless, my findings here make an important contribution to burgeoning awareness of this issue and to calls for a pressing new political conversation about social mobility (Ingram and Gamsu, 2022).

7.2.3 Uneven access to elite university outreach

The second of the key themes that emerged within the case study research conducted within East London and Nottingham related to the way in which each differed in the type and extent of outreach provision that students had access to. Students in East London were shown to have extensive access to a broad range of different opportunities at elite universities. Conversely, in Nottingham, apart from the University of Nottingham, most engagement appeared to be with post-1992 institutions, and to involve a more limited range of experiences. The interesting juxtaposition between these two places in terms of the outreach opportunities available – as well as in terms of the opportunities afforded by their local economies as will be discussed in the following sub-section – led to the decision to complement these data sets with secondary interview data from the 'Geographical Mobility of UK Higher Education Students' project to consider this topic on a wider scale. This culminated in the writing of Paper 3, '*Spatial division of opportunity: local economic context, elite trajectories, and the widening participation industry*' (Chapter 6).

As highlighted within Paper 3, the UK's elite universities are unequally spatially distributed, with a particular concentration in and around London, including all the arguably most

prestigious 'Golden Triangle' universities – the University of Cambridge, the University of Oxford, Imperial College London, University College London, King's College London, and London School of Economics (Wakeling and Savage, 2015). This study's finding that disadvantaged youth within the capital appear to have typically greater access to elite university outreach provision than similar peers elsewhere was thus not entirely unexpected. Despite the potential importance of this for elite university progression, there has been little empirical research to-date looking at the geographic distribution of elite university outreach activities throughout the UK - something I suggest in section 7.5 (Suggestions for future research) should be addressed. However, my findings add to and find support within those of an investigation by Varsity, the University of Cambridge's independent newspaper, into the regional disparities within this university's outreach provision (Lally and Hancock, 2018) which suggests that – if other nearby elite universities also operate similarly – disadvantaged students within London could have significantly greater access to elite university outreach than similar peers elsewhere. Indeed, notable findings from the Varsity investigation included that London - with a population of approximately 9 million – is targeted by 17 Cambridge colleges, whereas Wales, whose population is approximately a third of the capital is targeted by just two. Birmingham (population roughly 1.3 million) meanwhile, was shown to have only one college providing specific outreach provision and the entire Northeast (population roughly 2.5 million) only two.

Moreover, it was not just East London students' inherent greater access to outreach opportunities with elite providers that appeared as important within my case study research there, but also the nature and extent of their interactions with these institutions compared to those of similar peers elsewhere. Indeed, each of the students interviewed within the East London case study had taken part in activities at a minimum of five different elite institutions (in David's case, seven), including at least one activity each at Oxford or Cambridge (in Mia's case, two Oxford residential). Further to this, amongst these elite outreach activities, each had taken part in at least three residential programmes, activities that are amongst the most impactful for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Hoare and Mann, 2012; Robinson and Salvestrini, 2020). Moreover, the discourse of staff interviewees further suggested that the experiences of these students were typical. For example, Amy (University Access Director at Elm Academy in East London) was candid in describing the 'wealth of opportunities' that local students have with elite institutions and how she felt it would be very difficult to replicate that level of opportunity elsewhere, especially in more rural or coastal locations.

Indeed, the picture outside of the capital was markedly different. The discourse of interviewees within the Nottingham case study, and the secondary interview data from Liverpool, Suffolk,

and Tyneside suggested that disadvantaged students here typically have far fewer interactions with elite providers. Rather, apart from the University of Nottingham which was mentioned quite frequently within the Nottingham case study interviews – an anticipated finding given that this university sponsors the Aspire centre partnered with for the case study – local schools within these areas appeared to have greater engagement from and interactions with post-1992 institutions. Once again, this was not an entirely surprising finding, given the unequal spatial distribution of elite universities nationally and there thus being fewer elite universities in proximity to these places. However, the fact that it is often strategically important for post-1992 institutions to engage with students living locally to them appeared of importance too. Indeed, unlike Russell Group universities which tend to attract students from across the UK (and beyond), local students often make up significant parts of the student bodies at post-1992 institutions (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). Moreover, within the UK's increasingly marketised HE landscape (Burgess, 2018, 2021), these institutions must often work harder to recruit students than more 'elite' institutions and may therefore be more willing to support schools with financial barriers such as travel costs. This was apparent for example within a comment from the Head of Sixth Form at Bootlesfield School in Liverpool who recounted that despite being only a short distance away, the University of Liverpool would not support them with travel costs there, whereas post-1992 institution UCLan – located in Preston, approximately an hour away – are happy to provide coach travel.

In particular, given that residential outreach programmes can be amongst the most impactful for students (Hoare and Mann, 2012; Robinson and Salvestrini, 2020), it was notable that, compared to their peers in East London, few disadvantaged students outside of the capital appeared to be benefitting from such opportunities at elite universities. The discourse of staff revealed several important barriers here. As additionally highlighted above, one important barrier appeared to be the funding of travel costs. A further barrier cited by the Head of Year 12 at St Aaron's in Tyneside was that university-run programmes are often aimed only at the very highest achievers. As such, students with slightly lower predicted grades, but that may still have the potential to attend such institutions (and who could arguably benefit more from the boost such programmes could give them) don't get the opportunity to attend. A final important factor cited was that the students eligible for these programmes sometimes don't want to apply, with both the frequent timing of these during the summer holidays when some students have summer jobs or need a break from study (Deputy head of Rowanberry School in Nottingham) and the fact that some students find it difficult to plan ahead to 'see the wider and bigger end goal' of attending these programmes (Head of Sixth Form at Great Mundestoft College in Suffolk) given as problematic.

As a likely result of their extensive interactions with elite universities, student interviewees within the East London case study showed a clear awareness of different university groupings like the Russell Group, of which universities are considered ‘higher status’, and how the type of university you attend can impact upon career opportunities and earnings. Conversely, the Nottingham student interviewees – a likely result of their more limited exposure to elite universities - were much less aware of different university hierarchies. Moreover, moving our interview conversations towards a discussion of university status and the relative (un)importance of this for their university choices often took considerable prompting. These students also showed limited awareness of how the type of university they attended could potentially impact on their future career trajectories. For example, student, Mary, commented that having work experience and being personable were more important for getting a job than having attended a university with ‘higher prestige’. The Deputy Head of Rowanberry School in Nottingham further highlighted this lack of awareness of elite university groupings amongst students at her school, explaining that she felt the problem was not so much awareness of Oxford and Cambridge, which is something that ‘everyone gets’, but of broader elite groupings like the Russell Group. The result - as she saw it - is that most students are unaware that there are any notable differences between their two local universities, the University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent, so ‘if they offer the course, that’s where they want to go’.

Having an awareness of the UK’s stratified university-system is an often-inherent part of middle-class educational trajectories, an experience not typically shared by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Power, 2000; Ball et al., 2002; Power et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2005). My finding that there could also be a significant geographic element to the chances of students from disadvantaged backgrounds having the opportunity to interact with elite universities and to being exposed to knowledge of different university groupings as a result, represents an important contribution to this knowledge base. Moreover, given that the type of university students attend can have a significant impact upon their future career opportunities and earnings (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2019), this has potentially significant implications for widening participation policy and practice as will be discussed in section 7.3 (Policy implications).

7.2.4 The importance of local economic context

The final key theme that emerged within the East London and Nottingham case studies related to the marked differences in opportunities for students afforded by their local economic

contexts and the kinds of labour market destinations alluded to. In East London, the interviews evidenced significant partnerships between schools and London's elite law and finance firms, of importance not only for the material internship, personal development, and networking opportunities that they offered to students, but also for the ways in which they shaped students' knowledge of university hierarchies and expected study pathways for certain careers. Conversely, in Nottingham, interviewee references to employers tended to be in the context of the increasing availability and popularity of apprenticeships – a post-18 pathway notably absent within the discourse of East London interviewees.

The stark differences between the two case study sites in terms of the opportunities they provided to students were discussed in depth within Paper 3, '*Spatial division of opportunity: local economic context, elite trajectories, and the widening participation industry*' (Chapter 6), again complemented by secondary interview data from Suffolk, Tyneside, Liverpool, and East London from the related 'Geographical Mobility of UK Higher Education Students' project, which evidenced a similar stark divide in opportunity between students in and outside of the capital. The finding of this spatial division in opportunity represents a further important contribution of this thesis to knowledge, supporting previous research (e.g. Wiseman et al., 2017; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018) that has highlighted the significant role of local economic contexts for sixth-form students' awareness of and opportunities to interact with graduate employers and how this impacts upon university participation, and expanding on this by additionally demonstrating how local economic contexts may impact on elite university participation specifically.

Massey's spatial division of labour (Massey, 1995, 2013) was instrumental in interpreting the uneven set of opportunities available to young people that was evidenced within both the primary and secondary data sets. Massey's theory relates to the spatial structuring of relations of production within the UK, relations which imply positions of dominance and subordination depending on the functions that are clustered or carried out in specific localities. Massey has argued that such a spatial organisation - in which the functions of control and production are separated - is likely to result in a flow of profits from branch plants to headquarters, and consequently from one region to another. The key point is that places are constructed in relation to one another depending on the type of economic functions performed there and whether these occupy dominant or subordinant positions in the economic division of labour.

Both data sets used suggested that the spatial division of labour described by Massey (1995, 2013) – and localities' dominant or subordinant positions within this – impacted upon young people's likelihood of exposure to different economic functions (e.g. head office versus service

and production functions). For example, the data from East London contained multiple references to the area's elite firms, what Massey refers to as the 'control' functions within economic structures. At the other end of the spectrum, in Suffolk, the area's marginalised economic context was reflected in a comment from the Head of Sixth Form at Great Mundestoft Sixth Form College that there was a 'lack of economic opportunities' in Great Mundestoft - opportunities he summed up as primarily either offshore employment, factory work at Birds Eye or working for a small retailer. The Head of Sixth Form was not necessarily describing a 'lack' of opportunities, but more specifically describing a lack of opportunities within the control functions of the economy, with most local opportunities belonging to the service function of the economy.

The data further made apparent how the types of economic functions young people are exposed to can impact their study and career aspirations. For example, in East London, one Careers Officer spoke about an elite finance firm whose headquarters are located close to their school and which students see as representative of professional 'success', aspiring to have similar careers themselves. Conversely, the Deputy Head of Rowanberry School in Nottingham spoke about the popularity of apprenticeships at her school, students' interest in which may relate to the fact that apprenticeships are a common route to service function work opportunities available locally within the branch plants of companies like Rolls Royce and Experian. In Suffolk, the constrained horizons of some students described by the Head of Great Mundestoft Sixth Form College, who commented that whilst many of the school's students do go on to university, a significant proportion don't aspire to anything more than a 'dead-end job', may be seen to reflect the limited, primarily service function work available there.

Importantly, the East London interview data further demonstrated how students' interactions with elite businesses may increase their likelihood of progressing to elite universities. For example, describing her involvement with a widening participation charity that helps disadvantaged young people access prestigious work placements, student, Mia, spoke about a launch event she attended at an elite finance firm that increased her and fellow attendees' knowledge of Russell Group universities. Moreover, describing her experience of then completing two work placements at similar elite businesses, she further showed how the implicit expectation of elite university study had impacted her university choices as she detailed how the majority of the employees she met had studied at Oxbridge and 'it was kind of like... ok maybe that's where I should go'.

7.3 Policy implications

There have been growing calls (e.g. Boliver et al., 2022) for universities to move away from an over-reliance on measures like the POLAR and TUNDRA methodologies which only measure the average university participation rate of areas, and to make more comprehensive use of individual-level metrics – such as eligibility for free school meals and low household income – in targeting widening participation work. Many universities are already aware that the POLAR and TUNDRA measures can be problematic but are essentially obliged to use these to receive their government funding, and as concerns English HEIs, to be able to charge the maximum tuition fee rate (Boliver et al., 2022). As a result, a significant amount of the widening participation work conducted by UK universities still uses these methodologies, POLAR especially, with likely negative consequences for genuinely widening access (Boliver et al., 2022).

However, whilst greater use of individual-level metrics is relatively easy to implement in some circumstances (e.g. for universities considering applications for summer schools and undergraduate places) and is something that many universities are already doing (Boliver et al., 2022), area-based measures which identify localities where multiple individuals might plausibly benefit from larger scale widening participation initiatives are undeniably useful for policymakers setting national widening access targets and for the practitioners seeking to meet these. Where such area-based measures do need to be used however, what is essential is that – as the modelling and mapping within this thesis has done – they take account of important individual-level factors, thus increasing their reliability.

Others (e.g. Atherton et al., 2019) have called for the creation of a National Widening Participation Cohort, to track the progress of young people from families earning under a certain income threshold from year 9 (age 13-14) to their post-18 progression. On paper, such an approach also promises significant advantages over the use of POLAR and should it be implemented, the findings of this research again suggest that it could be beneficial for this data to be used to not only examine the university progression of these young people more generally, but also to look at their elite university progression specifically. Moreover, given the findings of the mapping conducted within phase 1 of this thesis, that showed that even amongst disadvantaged students, there are localities in which such students may be more ‘advantaged’, it could prove valuable to map the elite university progression rates of this widening participation cohort of students by local area to observe whether there are any noticeable patterns.

One of the key findings of the study's qualitative phase of research was evidence that disadvantaged young people in major urban areas appeared to be disproportionately benefitting from opportunities at elite universities compared to similar peers in smaller towns/cities and rural areas. This thus suggests a need for policy-making that brings about a more even spatial distribution of elite university widening participation activity. The release by the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) of a new dataset⁵⁸ focussed on the coverage of outreach activities nationwide to enable practitioners to see where they can best target delivery is a step in the right direction. However, this data set only includes aggregate counts of activities in schools by three broad groupings of providers; Higher Education Institutions, Uni Connect partnerships and third sector organisations. Moreover, while the accompanying maps are a useful tool to identify areas that may have been over/under targeted in terms of outreach generally, e.g. by seeing if there are clusters of schools which have been heavily targeted, they again do not enable any visualisation of which schools/areas may have been heavily targeted by elite universities specifically. Further development of the HEAT dataset and accompanying maps to allow for the visualisation of elite university outreach coverage across the UK, could prove a valuable tool in addressing students' uneven access.

As highlighted earlier, the strength of the POLAR methodology as a tool for targeting outreach has been questioned (Boliver et al., 2022). In particular, the capital's universities tend to favour the use of other tools (e.g. Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), Index of Deprivation Affecting Children (IDACI) and Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility) within their targeting of widening participation work, as the POLAR methodology is particularly limited in identifying areas of disadvantage within London where housing types and levels of affluence within the same area can often be very mixed (Atherton et al., 2019). Whilst it was outside the scope of this research to further examine this, given this thesis's finding that many areas in typically less-affluent East London had higher than expected progression rates to elite universities, and the fact that most of the outreach provision that these students will have accessed will have been provided by the capital's universities, this poses the question as to whether there may be a relationship between the differential targeting of widening participation work within London and the higher-than-expected elite university progression rates of local disadvantaged students. That-is-to-say, perhaps because these universities may be able to better target disadvantaged students with the potential to attend elite universities, this could go some way to helping explain their higher-than-expected progression rates. As such, there may be some valuable insights for

⁵⁸ The National Outreach Coverage Dataset can be accessed here: <https://heat.ac.uk/research-and-evidence/currentprojects/>

policymakers that could be gained through a closer examination of the widening participation practices of the capital's universities.

Equally however, as the OfS argue, POLAR is a measure of educational disadvantage, not of economic disadvantage (though the two are usually closely linked). In the case of the capital's universities however, it may be that, in primarily targeting areas of economic disadvantage through their use of tools such as IDACI, they are focussing resources on students that do not need their support as greatly as others elsewhere. Indeed, as I discuss within Paper 2, '*A convergence of opportunities: Understanding the high elite university progression of disadvantaged youth in an East London borough*' (Chapter 5), disadvantaged students in London have typically higher attainment than similar peers elsewhere, and - as evidenced by the East London case study - some local schools already provide significant levels of support to their disadvantaged students in terms of university progression, and elite university progression specifically. Therefore, whilst such students may indeed be *economically* disadvantaged, they are arguably not *educationally* disadvantaged. As such there is also reason to suggest that the capital's universities should consider whether some of their resources might be better targeted elsewhere - a subject that warrants further attention from both universities and the regulator. Notably, given that attainment is the most important factor for progression to elite universities (Chowdry et al., 2013), it may be that a greater proportion of their resources could be directed towards early intervention work with primary and secondary school pupils, prioritising the localities and schools in and outside of the capital with the lowest attainment rather than the areas which are the most deprived economically.

Another area of interest for policymakers and practitioners relates to the thesis's finding that disadvantaged sixth form students in East London likely have greater access to 'high-status' work placements and networking opportunities than many similar peers elsewhere due to the extensive partnerships between local schools and the area's elite businesses, notably those of the elite finance sector. Indeed, whilst focussed on graduate rather than pre-university internship opportunities, a report by Cullinane and Montacute (2018) for the Sutton Trust offers support for this finding in its data showing that internship opportunities are largely urban-centric and that the number of employers offering internships was highest within London (62%). Moreover, though the report itself does not explicitly comment on this, many of these London internship opportunities, e.g. those in elite finance firms as I have highlighted, but also many of those in sectors such as politics and leading arts/media organisations will be opportunities not available to anywhere near the same extent elsewhere due to the UK's spatial division of labour (Massey, 1995; 2013).

Cullinane and Montacute's (2018) report for the Sutton Trust further highlights the significant number of unpaid or poorly paid graduate internships still offered in the UK (despite a legal requirement that interns above compulsory school age be paid at least the minimum wage). This suggests that internships open to sixth form students, where employers do not have to pay at least minimum wage, are even less likely to adequately cover interns' costs. This then highlights a further advantage that urban sixth form students from disadvantaged backgrounds - particularly those in London - may have over similarly disadvantaged peers living in more isolated locations, in that they do not have the barrier of accommodation - the biggest cost involved in taking up such opportunities (Cullinane and Montacute, 2018) - that disadvantaged peers living elsewhere would face to take up the same opportunities. Indeed, in Friedman and Laurison's (2019) research, success in graduate careers was found to some extent to be related to the ability to live in London whilst not earning or earning very little - whilst crucial networks are formed, and experience gained at high-status employers located in the capital.

As I argued in the conclusion to Paper 3, to truly address the uneven access to professional opportunities in the UK - from young people's first experiences of work through to individuals being able to fulfil their career ambitions to the greatest extent - a fundamental restructuring of the way economic functions are spatially distributed is required. However, in the short term, there is a clear need for more collaborative work and partnerships between employers, third sector organisations, and schools in more isolated locations. Notably, employers should provide much greater support to disadvantaged sixth form students in more isolated places in accessing work experience/internships. This includes significant increases in the number of work opportunities they offer that fully cover costs so that students are able to be geographically mobile (e.g. Cullinane and Montacute (2018) show that for a London internship interns need a minimum of £1,100 per month to cover all costs), as well as increasing the availability of remote opportunities where possible/desired by students. A few organisations - notably the Social Mobility Foundation - and the employers they work with are already leading the way in offering fully funded internship opportunities to disadvantaged students without such opportunities available locally. However, such initiatives need to be rolled out on a much larger scale to truly even up opportunities for all disadvantaged youth.

Moreover, increasing recognition is needed of the fact that such 'high-status' internship and networking opportunities may impact on students' likelihoods of progressing to elite universities. Indeed, Jones (2013) has evidenced the high number of prestigious work-related activities that independent school pupils typically draw on in their university personal statements and has argued that this is likely a contributing factor to their higher elite university acceptance rates in comparison to similarly qualified state-educated applicants. In a similar

vein thus, it seems possible that disadvantaged urban youth that can draw on activities like prestigious internships within their personal statements may be advantaged in elite university admission over similar peers elsewhere who have not benefitted from such opportunities. This possible advantage suggests that during their admissions processes, universities should be mindful not only of applicants' financial and educational backgrounds, but also of the range of extracurricular opportunities likely available to students depending on where they have grown up. Related to this, whilst elite universities are increasingly paying attention to the geography of their overall applicant and entrant bodies, this thesis's finding that disadvantaged students within major urban centres – especially London – may have higher progression rates than similar peers elsewhere, suggests a need for universities to also examine the specific geography of where their students from disadvantaged backgrounds come from.

Finally, the important differences in progression to elite universities by local area identified within this study, in addition to the absence of any government place-based initiatives in England focussed on elite university progression specifically, suggests that establishing such an initiative could be of significant value. This could potentially take the form of a sub-programme or network within Uni Connect that brings together regional groupings of elite universities, schools, and relevant third sector providers (e.g. the Sutton Trust) to focus more specifically on working with young people in local areas with lower-than-expected elite university progression. The Welsh 'Seren network'⁵⁹, established in 2015, which brings together partnerships of elite universities, state schools and other relevant stakeholders within 12 regional hubs across Wales to support the progression of Welsh students to elite universities, and which has likely contributed to the higher progression rates of Welsh students to elite institutions - notably Oxbridge - in recent years (Jones, 2019), could serve as a model.

7.4 Research Limitations

As outlined in the Methodology chapter, this study had intended to use linked National Pupil Database – Higher Education Statistics Agency (NPD-HESA) data for the initial quantitative research so that all patterns of post-18 participation across England could be observed (i.e. also accounting for those students that did not progress to university). Unfortunately, due to the processing of NPD-HESA data requests being halted for several months when the General

⁵⁹ More information on the Seren Network can be found here: <https://gov.wales/seren-network>

Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) legislation came into effect in 2018, this was not possible, and this research was conducted with Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data only, meaning only entrants to HE were accounted for. Nevertheless, given this study's focus on elite university progression specifically, this is perhaps less of a limitation than it might have been had this study been focussing on university progression more generally, as those with the academic attainment to attend an elite university are relatively unlikely not to have chosen to progress to university at all or to have been unsuccessful with their application, it is more probable that they entered university, but perhaps not necessarily an institution that would typically be considered 'elite'.

As additionally discussed within the Methodology, one potential advantage that the use of HESA-only data could have offered over linked NPD-HESA data for this research, would have been to also look at the elite university progression of students domiciled within the other constituent countries of the UK, in addition to those of England. Given HE funding differences between these countries and England however - for example, studying at university in Scotland is free for Scotland-domiciled students thus the vast majority of Scottish students choose to study there – it would have been challenging to draw fair comparisons. As such, the data provided by HESA for students domiciled within the other UK nations was unfortunately not able to be used.

Given the findings of previous research as to the importance of schools for elite university progression (e.g. Wright, 2014, Taylor et al., 2018), I had initially intended to include schools as a further level within my multilevel models. Unfortunately, however, it was observed that there were multiple inconsistencies within the spelling of school names across the different academic years covered within my data set which meant that some schools had multiple records which could not easily be linked. For example, sometimes school names were given as one word in one academic year (e.g. Maplebank) and in other academic years given as two (e.g. Maple Bank). Moreover, sometimes schools had changed names within the 10-year period covered by the data and their former and latter records had not been linked. As such, it was decided to proceed with 2 level (individual-MSOA) models only and to account for the impact of schools through the addition of a binary control variable at the individual-level indicating students' attendance at either a state or private school.

A further limitation to the quantitative analysis relates to the use of complete case analysis. The reasons for this decision and justification for doing so are discussed in greater detail within the Methodology chapter, but it is important to acknowledge that this meant that approximately half of the initial data for English-domiciled entrants supplied by HESA was not able to be used

within the analyses. As such the patterns of elite university progression observed across England should be seen as indicative only, and the possibility of some bias in the amounts to which the control variables accounted for some of the initial variance attributed to MSOAs acknowledged. Nevertheless, given that the complete case data set used for the analyses contained 833,400 cases, it still had considerable statistical power.

An additional limitation of the quantitative work that should be acknowledged is the fact that the estimated MSOA effects in the study's final model represent a weighted average of the effect of MSOA for all students – they are not purely driven by disadvantaged students. It is probable that disadvantaged students do indeed drive the higher-than-expected progression identified in some areas, as advantaged students are likely to have good access chances regardless of where they live. Moreover, the fact that some of the places shown to have higher-than-expected progression, such as the example of East London given in Paper 1 (Chapter 4) - an area which contains some of the most deprived localities in the country – suggests this. This is further supported by the study's follow-up case study research in an East London locality (outlined in Paper 2 – Chapter 5) too. Nevertheless, the quantitative work alone does not allow this conclusion unambiguously, something that future work could valuably address as will be discussed in the following section (7.5).

In terms of the broader research approach, when adopting an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach, it is normally expected that the participants involved in subsequent qualitative research will have been purposively selected from those involved in the study's initial quantitative research (Creswell, 2018). However, given that the young people from the two local areas chosen for the case studies whose progression was recorded within the HESA data extract used would, by the time of my fieldwork, have either finished their degrees or been studying at universities dispersed across the country, it would not have been practical to recruit from amongst them. This is especially true, given that records within HESA data are anonymised, so such a recruitment approach would have involved approaching elite universities directly to ask if they had any students from the chosen localities who had started university in the academic years included within the data set, and who would be interested in taking part in the research – evidently a more complicated process than organising a case study with young people yet to go to university who were still living in those localities. Nevertheless, it would have increased the study's validity had it been possible to interview young people whose progression data had been amongst that which informed the localities selected for the case studies.

Finally, with regards to the qualitative phase of research, it would have increased the generalisability of the case study findings had a greater range of case study areas and study participants been included in the research. Indeed, I had initially planned to conduct four case studies and interview 24 participants in total; however, I was advised within my confirmation examination that this may be too ambitious given that I also had extensive quantitative research to conduct for the first part of this study. This then relates to one of the key limitations of mixed-methods research in that, given its additional complexity, it can be a time-consuming process and here meant that the qualitative phase of the study was necessarily relatively small in scale. This was however in part addressed by the inclusion of additional secondary interview data from the broader study, 'Geographical Mobility of UK Higher Education Students', from which this PhD project stemmed within Paper 3, *Spatial division of opportunity: local economic context, elite trajectories, and the widening participation industry* (Chapter 6). This enabled a wider and more spatially diverse range of staff perspectives to be drawn upon, broadening the evidence base for the findings discussed here.

7.5 Suggestions for Future Research

There are several ways in which the quantitative work within this thesis could be further developed. This study's exploration of patterns of elite university progression nationwide identified the apparent urban 'escalator' effect discussed in Paper 1 (Chapter 4). It was out of the scope of this PhD to explore this rural/urban divide in greater detail, however future research using more detailed measures of urban-rural, for example, using MSOAs' population density as a proxy for rurality, could help build greater understanding of the extent of this effect.

Exploring the final model residuals in further detail was again outside the scope of this PhD, however future research could prove valuable in expanding understanding of these. For example, by ranking MSOA residuals by their socio-economic characteristics, questions such as whether positive residuals are more likely for areas with a higher average level of affluence and thus as to whether the effect of certain areas is mediated through more advantaged or less advantaged students could be explored. Further research could also look to estimate the final model for students from lower SES backgrounds (and/or non-white ethnicity) only to see if similar results are produced. Another alternative approach could be to focus only on students that have achieved a certain UCAS threshold or to allow for interaction between tariff scores

and MSOA accessibility to identify whether there are different patterns for higher and lower attaining students, as their decision-making processes may vary significantly.

As discussed in sub-section 3.3.5, there were several limitations to the variable used to measure MSOAs' accessibility to the 'top27' universities. Future research seeking to measure MSOAs' accessibility to elite institutions could look to counter some of these limitations. For example, by developing a measure to assess MSOAs' ease of access to at least one elite institution instead or by constructing a measure of how many elite universities are within a certain distance of each MSOA, e.g. within 30km.

Further modelling and mapping with more recent HESA data (from 2017/18 onwards) could prove of interest too, to see if and how patterns of elite university progression may have changed from this study's mapping of data from academic years 2008/09 – 2016/17. In particular, given students' increased likelihood of studying at elite universities where they are locally-situated (Mangan et al., 2010) and recent findings that the COVID pandemic has helped fuel a longer-term trend for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds to study at local universities (Hall and Packham, 2021), there is reason to believe that the uneven access to elite universities - even within disadvantaged groups - that this study has identified, may have been exacerbated.

As discussed within section 7.4 (Research Limitations), this study had planned to use linked National Pupil Database – Higher Education Statistics Agency (NPD-HESA) data so that students not attending university at all could also be accounted for. Unfortunately, due to the delay in availability of this data in 2018, it was necessary to proceed with the study using a HESA-only data extract. Linked NPD-HESA data extracts are once again available however and future studies within this field could benefit from their use.

Turning to the findings of the study's qualitative research, given the suggested importance of the relationships between local schools and the area's elite businesses in helping explain East London's higher-than-expected elite university progression, future research might usefully further explore the extent of these relationships, as well as the implicit and explicit framing of university choices that they imply. The East London case study further suggested a shared culture of valorising Russell Group progression across local schools, a topic which again targeted research might usefully further examine and critically discuss.

The study's qualitative research further highlighted the apparent unequal distribution of elite university outreach – a topic on which there has been little research, and which would benefit

from further study. The Higher Education Access Tracker's (HEAT's) new dataset – the National Outreach Coverage dataset – offers some possibilities for future research here. For example, whilst as discussed earlier in this chapter, it does not currently include any data on elite university outreach provision specifically, there is scope to use this data to map by local area the levels of each of the three types of outreach provision recorded (by HEIs, by Uni Connect partnerships and by third sector organisations) and to explore if and how these relate to areas with lower/higher than expected elite university progression. It could also prove valuable to use this data to map levels of typically high-impact outreach activities such as summer schools by local area to see if any relationships are found between these and areas of lower/higher elite university progression. Should patterns of interest emerge, e.g. areas in which high numbers of students have benefitted from university summer schools being linked to areas with higher-than-expected elite university progression, this could then be used to inform outreach targeting.

Finally, conducting comparable mixed-methods research in other country contexts, especially countries with similar hierarchical university systems to the UK and an uneven spatial distribution of elite universities could make a valuable contribution to the existing knowledge base. Future research could also include further case studies in other areas within England identified as having higher/lower-than-expected elite university progression to increase the generalisability of the thesis's findings.

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Appendices

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Appendix 1: Description of variables used within quantitative analyses

| Variable | Description |
|-----------|--|
| STUDENTID | Student unique identifier. Values from 1 to 833,400 |
| MSOAID | MSOA unique identifier. Values from 1 to 6,791 |
| TOP27 | Elite outcome variable. Binary variable coded 1 for attendance at a university within the 'top27' construct, 0 for all other universities. |
| TARIFF | Continuous variable with values 0 - 172. Values rescaled from those within original HESA field so that an increase of 1 = 10 tariff points. |
| NUMBERFS | Variable giving the number of 'facilitating subjects' studied by students. Facilitating subjects are those classed as such by the Russell Group (English Literature, History, Languages (Classical and Modern), Maths and Further Maths, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, and Geography). Continuous variable with values 0-7. |
| STATE | Binary variable indicating whether a state or private school was attended. Coded 1 for 'state' and 0 for 'private'. |
| SEC | Socio-economic status of parent who earns the most, or student where aged 21 or over. Uses the NS-SEC analytic categories ⁶⁰ Categorical variable. Dummy variables SEC1 – SEC8 created. Reverse coded from the NS-SEC analytic categories, so SEC1 = Never worked and long-term unemployed, SEC2 = Routine occupations, SEC3 = Semi-routine occupations, SEC4 = Lower supervisory and technical occupations, SEC5 = Small employers and own account workers, SEC6 = Intermediate occupations, SEC7 = Lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations and SEC8 = Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations. SEC8 used as reference category. |

⁶⁰<https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/otherclassifications/thenationalstatisticssocioeconomicclassificationnssecrebasedonsoc2010>

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| PARED | Binary variable indicating whether at least one parent has a higher education qualification. Coded 1 for 'yes' and 0 for 'no'. |
| DIST | Continuous variable with values 0 - 50. Values rescaled from those within original variable so that an increase of 1 = 10km. |
| AGE | Continuous variable indicating student's age. Values between 16 - 67. |
| ETHNICITY | Self-described ethnicity. Categorical variable. Dummy variables WHITE (White), BLACK_C (Black - Caribbean), BLACK_A (Black - African), BLACK_O (Black - Other), ASIAN_I (Asian - Indian), ASIAN_P (Asian - Pakistani), ASIAN_B (Asian - Bangladeshi), CHINESE (Chinese), OTHER_A (Asian - Other), MIXED_E (Mixed ethnicity) and OTHER_E (Other ethnicity) created. WHITE used as reference category. |
| SEX | Variable indicating the sex of students. Categorical variable. Dummy variables FEMALE, MALE, AND OTHER_SEX created. MALE used as reference category. |
| ACYEAR | Variable indicating the academic year in which students began university. Categorical variable. Dummy variables AC0809, AC1011, AC1213, AC1415, AND AC1617 created. AC0809 used as reference category. |
| MSOA_MEAN_TARIFF | Variable indicating MSOA mean tariff. Created using the individual TARIFF variable with its re-scaled values. Values between 25.2 – 45.7. |
| MSOA_MEAN_NUMBERFS | Variable indicating MSOA mean number of facilitating subjects. Created using the individual NUMBERFS variable. Values between 0.4 – 2.4. |
| MSOA_TOP27_ACCESS_INDEX | Weights matrix indicating the relative accessibility of a student's MSOA to the universities within the 'top27' construct compared to other MSOAs. Given as standardised scores, values between -1.81 – 1.77. |

Appendix 2: List of Russell Group universities

1. Cardiff University
2. Durham University
3. Imperial College London
4. King's College London
5. London School of Economics &
Political Science
6. Newcastle University
7. Queen Mary, University of London
8. Queen's University Belfast
9. University College London
10. University of Birmingham
11. University of Bristol
12. University of Cambridge
13. University of Edinburgh
14. University of Exeter
15. University of Glasgow
16. University of Leeds
17. University of Liverpool
18. University of Manchester
19. University of Nottingham
20. University of Oxford
21. University of Sheffield
22. University of Southampton
23. University of Warwick
24. University of York

Appendix 3: Creation of elite 'top27' construct

In addition to the 24 Russell Group institutions, also included within my elite construct were non-Russell Group universities classed within the top 20 universities of the Complete University Guide⁶¹ when their rankings for both entry standards and research scores were combined. This resulted in the addition of three further universities (highlighted in green below) and the creation of the 'top27' construct.

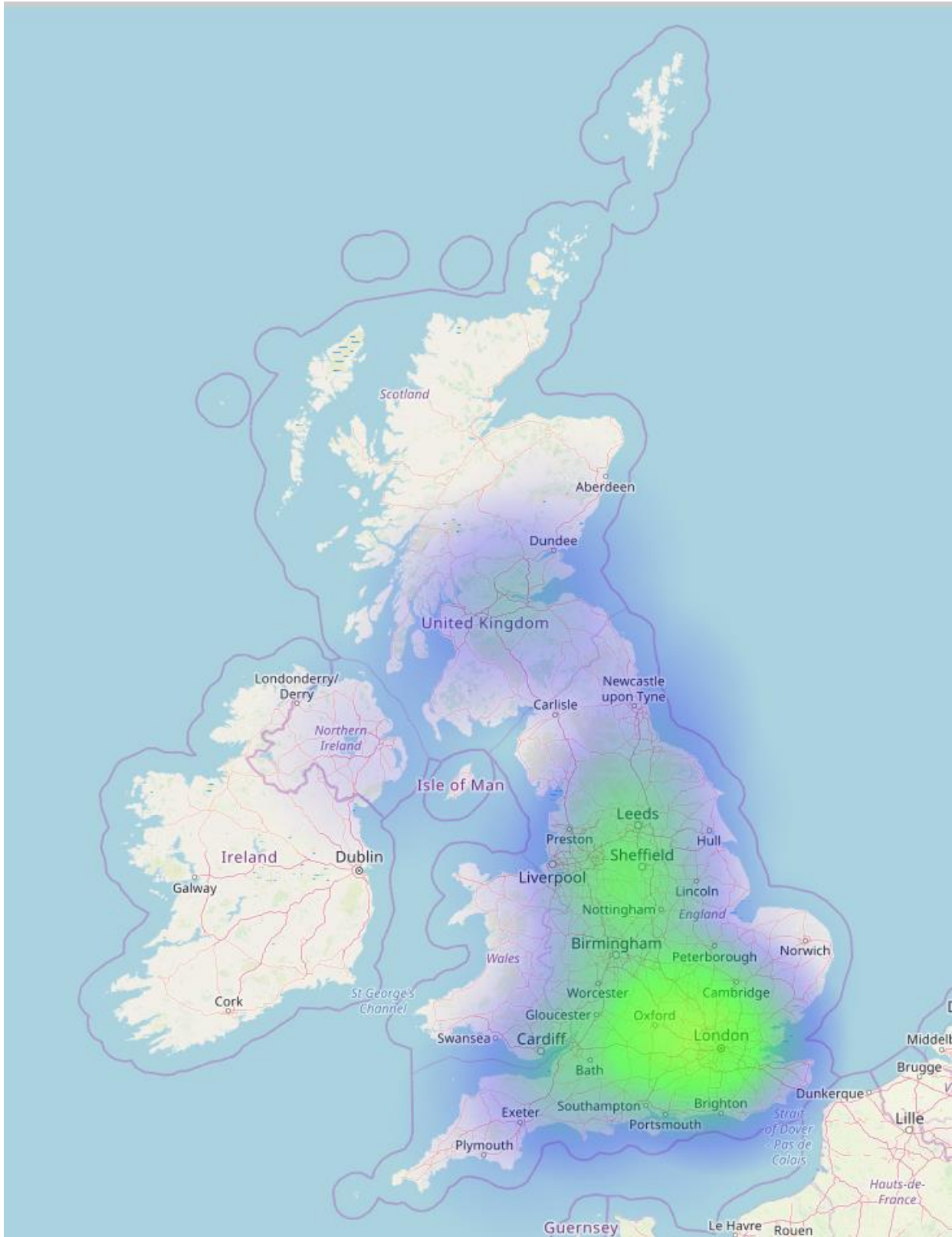
| University | Entry Standards Score | Research Score | Total score | Rank |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------|-------------|------|
| Cambridge | 1 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| Oxford | 2 | 3 | 5 | 1 |
| Imperial | 4 | 1 | 5 | 1 |
| LSE | 8 | 2 | 10 | 4 |
| Edinburgh | 8 | 9 | 17 | 5 |
| UCL | 10 | 7 | 17 | 5 |
| King's College London | 14 | 6 | 20 | 7 |
| Warwick | 14 | 7 | 21 | 8 |
| St Andrews | 3 | 19 | 22 | 9 |
| Bristol | 13 | 9 | 22 | 9 |
| Bath | 11 | 12 | 23 | 11 |
| Durham | 7 | 18 | 25 | 12 |
| Glasgow | 6 | 23 | 29 | 13 |
| Manchester | 17 | 15 | 32 | 14 |
| Cardiff | 28 | 5 | 33 | 15 |
| Leeds | 19 | 19 | 38 | 16 |
| Strathclyde | 5 | 34 | 39 | 17 |
| Southampton | 25 | 16 | 41 | 18 |
| York | 29 | 12 | 41 | 18 |
| Sheffield | 29 | 12 | 41 | 18 |

⁶¹ <https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/rankings?>

Appendix 4: List of universities within top27 construct

1. Cardiff University
2. Durham University
3. Imperial College London
4. King's College London
5. London School of Economics &
Political Science
6. Newcastle University
7. Queen Mary, University of London
8. Queen's University Belfast
9. University College London
10. University of Bath
11. University of Birmingham
12. University of Bristol
13. University of Cambridge
14. University of Edinburgh
15. University of Exeter
16. University of Glasgow
17. University of Leeds
18. University of Liverpool
19. University of Manchester
20. University of Nottingham
21. University of Oxford
22. University of Sheffield
23. University of Southampton
24. University of St Andrews
25. University of Strathclyde
26. University of Warwick
27. University of York

Appendix 6: Accessibility heat map for top27 universities



Appendix 7: University of Bath press release and associated media articles following publication of paper ‘Geographies of elite higher education participation: An urban ‘escalator’ effect’

Appendix 7A: University of Bath Press release

Urban ‘escalator effect’ means disadvantaged rural students risk missing top university places

Disadvantaged students from urban areas are more likely to enter elite UK universities than similar peers from rural communities.

-
- Press release
 - *Published on Thursday 25 March 2021*
 - *Last updated on Friday 26 March 2021*
 - [View more announcements in Communications](#)
-

Bright but disadvantaged students from urban areas are more likely to enter elite UK universities than similar peers from rural communities due to an urban ‘escalator effect’, according to a new study.

Researchers from the University of Bath analysed data from 800,000 English students commencing university in the years 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016.

They found that while in general rural areas had higher overall progression to university than city centres and surrounding areas, when controlling for factors including socio-economic status, age, ethnicity and sex, disadvantaged pupils from rural areas were less likely to progress to one of 27 ‘top’ UK universities.

The authors suggest the difference is due to a ‘vortex of influences’ including ‘social mix effects’ in more diverse urban settings, successive urban-centred policy interventions and the targeting of university and third-sector outreach activities to urban areas. Although the results reaffirmed that social class remains the biggest predictor of progression to a top university, the researchers say the results highlight drawbacks of existing geographic measures used to identify disadvantage, as they do not account for the diverse nature of deprived areas, and therefore universities risk missing disadvantaged students. Instead the

use of more sophisticated measures could help universities target under-represented and disadvantaged students more effectively, and the authors call for a co-ordinated strategic approach to ensure that no areas are missed by universities' widening participation programmes.

The paper is published in the *British Educational Research Journal*.

Jo Davies, who led the research as part of her PhD studies in the Department of Education, said: "There has been a lot of interest and concern about geographic inequalities in education. Our paper shows that whilst social background is still the most important predictor for progressing to an elite university, there may also be further geographic factors compounding access. We believe that the use of Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping methods, as used within our own research, could enable elite universities to target under-represented students more effectively, especially disadvantaged students living in rural areas with otherwise good progression rates."

The research team, from the Department of Education, used data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) of 800,000 English students beginning university in the academic years 2008/09, 2010/11, 2012/ 13, 2014/15 and 2016/17.

They were interested in progression to 27 'top' UK universities, comprising the Russell Group plus the Universities of St Andrews, Bath and Strathclyde, comparing rates from each Middle Super Output Area (MSOA) in England. Each MSOA, of which there are 6,791 across England, has a population between 5,000 and 15,000, with a minimum of 2,000 and a maximum of 6,000 households.

By analysing progression to these elite institutions after controlling for a factors including education (state/private school education, tariff point score, number of facilitating subjects studied), socio-economic status, age, ethnicity, sex, distance travelled and academic year, the urban escalator effect emerged.

The research was funded by a University of Bath Research Studentship Award. The University currently funds seven PhD students as part of its programme of research aiming to uncover ways in which participation in higher education can be widened and to ensure that no student who has the ability and desire to go to onto higher education is prevented from doing so because of their background.

Dr Matt Dickson, who leads the overall programme for the University's Institute for Policy Research, said: "This research is a great example of the importance of analysis that goes beyond a descriptive picture to understand the key factors that perpetuate inequalities in higher education access. Rather than a simple rural-urban divide, the reality is much more complex and this has important implications for higher education policy."

These lessons are already being implemented at the University of Bath. For example, alongside its existing programme of Widening Participation initiatives the University recently entered into a partnership with Villiers Park Educational Trust to support students from neglected rural and coastal communities to access top universities, such as Bath, through activities including coaching and mentoring for students.

Appendix 7B: Guardian article drawing on the findings

Success is less about where you're from, than where you go

[Torsten Bell](#)

Levelling up policies must address the problem of social mobility as much as geography



Analysis suggests poorer city dwellers are more likely to gain a university place than similar students elsewhere. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

Sun 21 Mar 2021 06.45 GMT

Geography is back in fashion. Long seen as the preserve of middle-aged men with elbow patches, it's now centre stage with the prime minister's talk of levelling up poorer regions. The problem with Britain's

elite belatedly returning to geography is that they don't seem to grasp its complexity.

I keep being told the problem facing the “red wall” seats in the north and Midlands that swung to the Conservatives from Labour in 2019 is that all the young people leave for university or work. But young people in those seats are [much less likely to leave](#). It's this lack of mobility that defines England's new political battlegrounds.

[Research](#) on access to elite universities reinforces the complexity. In headline terms, rural areas do best for top university places but that's not the story's end. Once the authors correct for the very different populations of different areas (that is, generally richer in the shires), they find disadvantaged young people in our big cities (such as London's east end) were actually more likely to gain a place than similar students elsewhere.

This tells you two things. First, big cities have more than their share of poor families – overall, Londoners have [below average disposable incomes](#). Second, instead of worrying that the young are leaving, we should ensure disadvantaged youths outside cities have more opportunities so they can decide whether or not to take them up. The lesson? Geography, like life, is complicated.

- *Torsten Bell is chief executive of the [Resolution Foundation](#). Read more at [resolutionfoundation.org](#)*

Appendix 7C: Daily Mail article which references the findings (similar articles published in the Mirror, Times, and Western Daily Press)

Rural school hires etiquette expert William Hanson to help pupils appear more posh and polished in job and university interviews

- **Earl Mortimer College and Sixth Form Centre will host etiquette lessons**
 - **Wants to boost students' chances of success at university and in job interviews**
 - **Photographs from the classes show students balancing books on their heads**
-

By [EMER SCULLY FOR MAILONLINE](#)

PUBLISHED: 13:09 BST, 16 July 2021 | **UPDATED:** 16:18 BST, 16 July 2021

A rural school near the Welsh borders has brought in an etiquette coach to help its students appear more polished and confident.

Earl Mortimer College and Sixth Form Centre in Leominster hope it will boost its students' chances of success at university and in job interviews with a series of lessons in posture, conversation and fashion.

Photographs from the classes show students delicately balancing books on their heads to demonstrate correct posture - which can help people seem more confident.

The school hopes to combat the problem of disadvantaged students from rural areas struggling to get into the top Universities compared to those in cities.

The school brought in specialist company The English Manner whose founder was once a member of the Royal household.



Photographs from the classes at Earl Mortimer College and Sixth Form Centre in Leominster show students delicately balancing books on their heads to demonstrate correct posture - which can help people seem more confident

The tutor taught youngsters how to meet and greet formally, which cutlery to use when fine dining and appropriate conversation topics.



The sessions were run by etiquette author and English Manner director William Hanson

They were also given top tips on how to dress, communicate and conduct themselves including how to leave and enter a room.

Headteacher Alison Banner says the training will help students for life beyond school when it comes to job and university interviews.

She wants students to learn how to appear more polished and confident so they have the necessary skills to succeed later in life.

Disadvantaged students from rural areas are less likely to gain places at the very top universities than those from urban areas, according to a study by the University of Bath published this year.

Mrs Banner said: 'The stats don't lie, students from disadvantaged backgrounds and rural communities are just not getting into the top universities, they are not getting into the top jobs.'

'We are a school which is highly ambitious for our students, we don't want them to have any barriers in fulfilling their potential, to being ambitious and achieving their dreams.'



Max George (pictured), 14, from Leominster, said: 'It was absolutely amazing; it was something that I'd never done before or even thought about. It has really broadened my horizons'

What etiquette lessons will the students learn?

- How to meet and greet formally;
- Which cutlery to use when fine dining;
- Appropriate conversation topics;
- How to dress;
- How to leave and enter a room.

'It may strike people as unfair but without these soft skills students will struggle when they come to job and university interviews so we want to level the playing field for them.

'This is something they never would have experienced before which is great. We want to take them out of their comfort zone. They really enjoyed it.'

The English Manner was founded by etiquette expert Alexandra Messervy who reportedly helped plan a Royal wedding and bought the queen's Christmas presents.

The sessions were run by etiquette author and English Manner director William Hanson.

Max George, 14, from Leominster, said: 'It was absolutely amazing; it was something that I'd never done before or even thought about. It has really broadened my horizons.

'My confidence has really gone up because I now know what to do in different kinds of situations. Like if I meet the Queen now, I'd know exactly how to act and what to do.

'You don't realise just how important all this stuff is until you learn it yourself. It's like this secret language that posh people know and the rest of us are not in on.

'It really helps you to feel like you can belong in any social or business situation.

'Like I will remember this stuff when I go to a university or job interview because now, I know how to act in different types of situations.'

Appendix 8: Contextual information about interview participants

East London student interviewees

| Name | Gender | School attended | Key individuals/influences cited for choice of institutions | Universities applied to | First choice university | University course applied for |
|-------------|---------------|------------------------|---|--|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Sophie | Female | Elm Academy | Elm Academy League table research | Bath, Warwick, Bristol, Nottingham, and Cardiff | Bristol, Warwick, or Bath | Psychology |
| David | Male | Elm Academy | Elm Academy League table research | Warwick, King's, Leeds, Liverpool, and Southampton | Warwick | Chemistry |
| Mia | Female | Sycamore School | Family Professionals met during internship/networking opportunities Friends that attend Elm Academy | Cambridge (not successful), UCL, LSE, Durham, and Bristol | UCL or Durham | Geography |

East London staff interviewees

| Name | Gender | Role | Knowledge of local area/students |
|-------------|---------------|--|--|
| Emily | Female | Regional Operations Manager (East London) at Aspire | 5 years' experience working with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds across East London |
| Heather | Female | Head of Operations (London and South East) at Aspire. Previously Regional Operations Manager (East London) | 10 years' experience working with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds across East London |
| Amy | Female | Director of University Access Team at Elm Academy | Worked within University Access Team at Elm Academy for 4 years. Director for 2.5 years. |

Nottingham student interviewees (Provided for reference. Data not specifically drawn on within the thesis)

| Name | Gender | Key individuals/ influences cited for university choices | Universities applied to | First choice university | University course applied for |
|-------------|---------------|--|--|--|--|
| Mary | Female | Family Impressions of cities/institutions from university visits and the staff met there Social environment/ opportunities | Manchester Met, De Montfort, Birmingham City, Nottingham Trent, and Sheffield Hallam | Manchester Met or De Montfort | Adult Nursing/ Biomedical Sciences |
| Tayo | Male | Family Needed to offer MPharm course Not too far from home | Nottingham, De Montfort, Manchester, Lincoln, and Brighton | Nottingham, Manchester, or De Montfort | Pharmacy |
| Gabriel | Male | Universities that offer desired courses Not too far from home TEF ratings – recommended by brother | Birmingham City (Other choices not specified) | Birmingham City | Digital Media Technology/ Games Programming |

Nottingham staff interviewees

| Name | Gender | Role | Knowledge of local area/students |
|-------------|---------------|---|---|
| Hannah | Female | Regional Operations Manager (Nottingham) at Aspire. Previously Centre Leader. | 10 years' experience working with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds across Nottingham |
| Niamh | Female | Centre Leader at Aspire | 4 years' experience working with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds across Nottingham |
| Elaine | Female | Deputy Head at Rowanberry School | Worked at Rowanberry School for 13 years. |

Appendix 9: Student participant information sheet

STUDENT PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Research study looking at patterns of access to university

Joanne Davies, Department of Education, University of Bath

Thank you for considering taking part in this study. This information sheet outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of what will be involved and your rights as a participant.

1. What is this study about?

This research looks at patterns of access across England to university. Following on from the researcher's first phase of research mapping students' university choices across England, the current study involves interviewing sixth-form students and the staff working with them to understand more about their university choices.

2. How will I be involved?

You will be asked to take part in an interview about your plans when you finish sixth form, including if and where you are considering applying for university and the factors that are important to you in selecting which universities to apply to. The interview should take approximately 30 – 45 minutes.

3. How will my interview data be used?

The interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed. The information provided will be analysed and used within the researcher's PhD thesis. It may also be used within further academic papers or future research.

4. Will my data be kept confidential?

Your confidentiality will be respected at all times. Only the researcher and their two supervisors at the University of Bath will have access to your audio recording. The transcript from your interview will be anonymised, meaning your name and potentially identifying information will not be used in any publications resulting from the study.

The audio file of your interview and the original (non-anonymised) transcript will be given codes and stored separately from any information which could identify you. Both the audio file and original (non-anonymised) transcript will be destroyed on completion of the researcher's PhD thesis. Any hard copies of research information will be kept in locked files. These will be destroyed on completion of the researcher's PhD thesis.

5. Can I withdraw from the study?

You can withdraw from the study at any point, without having to give a reason. If there are any questions during the interview that you would prefer not to answer, you can choose not to answer them. You have up to 2 weeks to ask for some or all your interview data to be removed from the study, before anonymisation of the data takes place.

6. Who has reviewed this study?

This study has been approved by the ethics review panel in the Department of Education at the University of Bath.

7. Data Protection Privacy Notice

The University of Bath's Research Privacy Notice can be accessed here: <https://www.bath.ac.uk/corporate-information/university-of-bath-privacy-notice-for-research-participants/>

8. What if I have a question or query?

If you have any immediate questions about the study, please ask the researcher before proceeding to the consent form. For any questions at a later date, please get in contact via the following email address: j.davies3@bath.ac.uk.

If you are happy to proceed with the study, please sign the attached consent form.

Appendix 10: Staff participant information sheet

STAFF PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Research study looking at patterns of access to university

Joanne Davies, Department of Education, University of Bath

Thank you for considering taking part in this study. This information sheet outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of what will be involved and your rights as a participant, should you agree to participate.

1. What is this study about?

This research looks at patterns of access across England to university. Following on from the researcher's first phase of research mapping students' university choices across England, the current study involves interviewing sixth-form students and the staff working with them to understand more about their university choices.

2. How will I be involved?

You will be asked to take part in an interview about your knowledge of the university choices typically made by the sixth-form students that you work with and what factors appear important to them when deciding if and where to go to university. The interview should take approximately 30 – 45 minutes.

3. How will my interview data be used?

The interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed. The information provided will be analysed and used within the researcher's PhD thesis. It may also be used within further academic papers or future research.

4. Will my data be kept confidential?

Your confidentiality will be respected at all times. Only the researcher and their two supervisors at the University of Bath will have access to your audio recording. The transcript from your interview will be anonymised, meaning your name and potentially identifying information will not be used in any publications resulting from the study.

The audio file of your interview and the original (non-anonymised) transcript will be given codes and stored separately from any information which could identify you. Both the audio file

and original (non-anonymised) transcript will be destroyed on completion of the researcher's PhD thesis. Any hard copies of research information will be kept in locked files. These will be destroyed on completion of the researcher's PhD thesis.

5. Can I withdraw from the study?

You can withdraw from the study at any point, without having to give a reason. If there are any questions during the interview that you would prefer not to answer, you can choose not to answer them. You have up to 2 weeks to ask for some or all your interview data to be removed from the study, before anonymisation of the data takes place.

6. Who has reviewed this study?

This study has been approved by the ethics review panel in the Department of Education at the University of Bath.

7. Data Protection Privacy Notice

The University of Bath's Research Privacy Notice can be accessed here: <https://www.bath.ac.uk/corporate-information/university-of-bath-privacy-notice-for-research-participants/>

8. What if I have a question or query?

If you have any immediate questions about the study, please ask the researcher before proceeding to the consent form. For any questions at a later date, please get in contact via the following email address: j.davies3@bath.ac.uk.

If you are happy to proceed with the study, please sign the attached consent form

Appendix 11: Consent form (for students and staff)

CONSENT FORM

Research study looking at patterns of access to university

Joanne Davies, Department of Education, University of Bath

PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY IS VOLUNTARY

| | |
|--|----------|
| I have read and understood the attached study information. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and satisfactory answers have been provided to these. | NO / YES |
| I voluntarily consent to be a participant in this study. I understand that I can refuse to answer questions and that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without providing a reason. | NO / YES |
| I agree to the interview being audio recorded. | NO / YES |
| I understand that the information I provide in the interview will be used for the researcher's PhD thesis, as well as potential further publications. I understand that the information provided will be anonymised. | NO / YES |
| I agree that my anonymised information can be quoted in research publications. | NO / YES |
| I understand that any identifying personal information will be kept confidential and not shared with anyone other than the researcher's two PhD supervisors. | NO / YES |
| I understand that my audio recording will only be used for research purposes and will be destroyed on completion of the researcher's PhD thesis. | NO / YES |
| I give permission for my anonymised interview transcript to be deposited in a digital data archive so that it may be used for future research purposes. | NO / YES |

Please retain a copy of this consent form for your records.

Participant name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Interviewer name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

For further information, please contact Joanne Davies (j.davies3@bath.ac.uk)

Appendix 12: Consent letter for parents



Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am a PhD researcher in the Department of Education at the University of Bath and a former employee of [Aspire]. My research looks at patterns of access across England to university and as part of my project I will be conducting some interviews with students at [Aspire].

I am interested in speaking with sixth-form students about their plans when they finish college, including if and where they are considering applying for university. [Aspire] staff suggested that your child may be happy to be interviewed.

Interviews will be scheduled at a time convenient for your child and will take place online using a programme called Microsoft Teams. The interview should take between 30 to 45 minutes. The online interview will be audio recorded so that it can be transcribed (written down) and used within my research project. Only myself and my two PhD supervisors at the University of Bath will have access to the recording in order to make the transcript. Any information within this transcript that could potentially be used to identify your child, like their name, friends' names, school etc. will be anonymised to protect their privacy.

Ahead of the interview, your child will receive further information about the study and be asked to fill in a short consent form. This will inform them of their right to stop the interview at any point should they wish. They will also have the right to withdraw their interview data within two weeks of their participation. My contact email can be found at the bottom of this letter and is also given on the participant information form provided to your child for this purpose.

As a thank you for your child's time, I will provide your child with a £10 Amazon voucher which will be provided to them via email.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information about the study.

Yours faithfully,

Joanne Davies

Contact email: j.davies3@bath.ac.uk

CONSENT SLIP - Please email to j.davies3@bath.ac.uk

Child's name: _____

I give permission for my child to be interviewed for the University of Bath's research project into patterns of university access

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 13: Semi-structured interview guide (students)

Hello. Thanks very much for taking the time to speak to me today. The interview should last around an hour maximum but may be quicker. Please feel free to stop me at any point if any of the questions are not clear or there's anything you would prefer not to discuss.

If you are happy for me to, I would also like to record today's interview for use in my research. The recording will only be used by myself and my university supervisors. I also intend to make a transcript (a written record) of the interview which may be included in published work. Any information within this that could potentially be used to identify you, like your name, friends' names, school etc. will be anonymised. Are you happy for me to proceed with the recording? If you would like me to stop the recording at any point during the interview, please do just let me know.

You also have the right to withdraw your interview data at any point after today if you so wish. I will leave you with my contact details after the interview so that you may contact me if needed.

Are you happy for me to now switch on the recorder and proceed with the interview? Thank you.

Opening question

So, I'd like to start by asking you about where you see yourself after sixth form.

1. What are your plans after finishing sixth form?

University choices

It's interesting that you mention wanting to go on to university...

2. When did you decide you would like to go to university? Are there any specific people or events that have shaped your decision to apply? Can you tell me a little more about this?
3. What universities are you planning on applying to? Can you tell me a little more about why you have chosen these universities?

Prompts:

- Course
- Distance
- Finance

- Friends
- Student body
- University culture

4. Would you say that the factors that are important to you in selecting universities are similar to those of your friends/classmates at school? Why/why not?

Exploring high-status institutions

I'd like to chat a little now about the differences between universities if you are happy to.

5. So firstly, can you tell me how universities may differ from each other?
6. How do you think other people see differences between universities?

Bring out map:

7. I have a map here of some UK universities. Can you tell me anything about these universities and in what ways they might be similar or different?

If student mentions their high status/rankings:

8. It's interesting that you mention high-status/rankings as being a similarity between these universities. Was university status/rankings something that was important to you when choosing which universities to apply to? Why/why not?

If student states that the universities pictured are those of the Russell Group:

9. It's interesting that you mention the Russell Group. 24 of the 27 universities pictured are part of this. Can you tell me a little more about the Russell Group? Was selecting a Russell Group university something that was important to you when choosing which universities to apply to? Why/why not?
10. Who or what made you aware of the status of different universities/Russell Group universities? Can you tell me a little more about this?

University visits/support activities

I'm also interested to find out a little more about what (if any) contact you have had with universities so far...

11. Have you visited any universities? Who organised this/these visits? Can you tell me a little more your experience of this/these visits?

12. Have you had any visits from universities here at [Aspire] or at your school? Can you tell me a little more about this/these?

13. What information has your school provided about university options?

Prompts if necessary:

- Visits from former pupils
- Talks from teachers or external visitors
- Personal statement support
- Encouragement towards particular universities or groups of universities. How demonstrated? Specific support provided?

Thoughts on improving access

Finally, I'm interested to hear your thoughts on access to university for students from XXX...

14. Is there anything that you think universities could do to encourage more students from XXX to apply to university? Why/why not?

If have talked about university status/rankings with student:

15. Is there anything that you think high-status universities could do to encourage more students from XXX to apply to them? Why/why not?

Appendix 14: Map for student interviews

Appendix 15: Semi-structured interview guide (staff)

Students' university choices

1. Is university a typical pathway for students from XXX? Why/why not?
2. Are there any universities/groups of universities that students from XXX typically apply to? Why/why not?
3. What factors do you think are most important to students from XXX when selecting universities to apply to? Can you tell me a little more about this?

Exploring high-status institutions

4. Are students from XXX typically aware of the status of different universities? Would they typically be able to name universities that are highly ranked or groupings of high-status universities, like the Russell Group for example?
5. Is university status something that is typically important to students from XXX do you think? Why/why not?
6. Where students are aware of the status of different universities, where have they typically obtained this information? Family/school/friends/Aspire?

Motivations

7. Would you say that studying at university/a high-status university is typically encouraged or expected of students from XXX? Who by? Parents/schools/peers? Why/why not?
8. In your experience, do students from XXX have similar priorities when deciding which universities to apply to or are their reasons diverse? Why/why not?

University visits/support activities

9. Have students from XXX typically visited one or more universities? Who organises this/these visits? Do you think these visits have a significant influence on students and their choices? How or why not?
10. What information does your school/the centre's partner schools typically provide about university options? Do you have any visits from former pupils studying at university?

Talks from teachers or external visitors about university? Personal statement support? Are any particular universities or groups of universities encouraged above others? If so, how is this demonstrated to students?

Thoughts on improving access

11. Why do you think many/not many students from XXX choose to apply to university/choose to apply to high-status universities?
12. Is there anything that you think universities/high-status universities could do to encourage more students from XXX to apply to university? Why/why not?

Appendix 16: Ethics approvals and Data Management Plan (DMP)

Appendix 16A: Departmental Ethics Approval

FORM valid from 26/09/2016

Department of
Education



ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PROPOSED RESEARCH MPhil/PhD

To be completed by the student and approved by the supervisor then submitted for approval by the Director of Studies before any data collection takes place. Before completing the form, students should read the guidelines published by the British Educational Research Association (BERA), which are available in Moodle and at www.bera.ac.uk

Introduction

| | |
|---|---|
| Full name of student: Joanne Davies | Student number: 179412611 |
| Provisional title of your study: The geographies of access to elite universities: A mixed methods exploration of young participation within England. | |
| Justification for your study: Government education policy is increasingly recognising the importance of where young people grow up in shaping their life chances, including their access to higher education. For example, the Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) methodology, first launched in 2005 and now in its fourth iteration, POLAR4, examines how likely young people are to participate in HE at age 18 or 19 according to the area in which they live. A further 'Gaps analysis' tool has enabled analysis of where in England young participation is higher or lower than might be expected in the context of GCSE attainment and has led to the introduction of a national HE access programme, the National Collaborative Outreach Programme, launched in 2017. However, despite increasing evidence that it is at 'elite' universities where students from disadvantaged backgrounds are most underrepresented, government interest in the effect of where young people live on progression to HE remains very generalised and neither the 'POLAR' nor 'Gaps' methodologies enable analysis of which areas in England have lower rates of progression than would be expected to elite institutions specifically. This topic thus offers a pertinent area for further research which this thesis will address. | |

Participants

1. Who are the main participants in your research (such as interviewees, respondents)?

Phase 1 – Quantitative research

An extract from a linked National Pupil Database/Higher Education Statistics Agency (NPD/HESA) data extract will be used. The data set will comprise all state-educated pupils within England completing Key Stage 5 (KS5) between the academic years 2011/12 – 2015/16.

Phase 2 – Qualitative research

Initially 24 interviewees. Four schools/sixth-form colleges will be selected, and six interviewees at each chosen (two from each of the following groups: KS5 students, parents, and teachers/school staff).

Further interviews will be conducted if necessary (e.g. if an interviewee decides to withdraw their information) so that I will have eight interviews in total for each of the target groups given above.

2. How will you find and contact these participants?

Phase 1 – Quantitative research

A request for a linked NPD/HESA extract has been submitted (23/03/18).

Phase 2 – Qualitative research

My quantitative research should enable identification of the localities where participation at elite universities is lower than would be expected. From these, two areas will be chosen for in-depth qualitative research. Two schools within each locality will be selected and gatekeepers at the schools approached to obtain permission.

3. How and from whom will you obtain informed consent and communicate the right to withdraw?

Phase 1 – Quantitative research

The Department for Education (DfE) has legal powers to collect the pupil data within the National Pupil Database and requires schools to notify pupils, parents and staff as to how their personal data are collected and used. Parents and pupils can approach the department to request access to the information that is held about them but are only able to have information withdrawn in specific circumstances – due to inaccuracies or if certain information is a source of distress. The DfE further has the legal power to share this data with certain third parties, including researchers (as in my case) and this is specified within the privacy notices distributed by schools.

Phase 2 – Qualitative research

I will schedule a meeting with the gatekeeper(s) at each of the schools to obtain permission to conduct my research. I will ask the gatekeeper and teachers for advice on which school staff, KS5 students and parents would be best to approach for interviews. I will verbally explain the purpose of my research and the right to withdraw to all interviewees and ask interviewees to complete a written consent form before proceeding with the interview. For all KS5 interviewees under the age of 18, I will also ensure I obtain consent from their parents/guardians. I will ensure interviewees are aware of how long their data will be kept and that they may contact me at any point to request that they withdraw and/or that their data is withdrawn – my contact details will be provided for this purpose.

4. Have you approached any other body or organisation for permission to conduct this research?

No.

The ethical guidelines of the University of Bath, the DfE and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) will be adhered to.

5. At what stages of your research, and in what ways will participants be involved?

Phase 1 - Quantitative research

As the data I will be using has been collected by schools (on behalf of the DfE) and anonymised, I will not have any direct contact with the participants.

Phase 2 – Qualitative research

I will inform and obtain consent from interviewees to produce an audio recording of their interviews which I will then transcribe to ensure no information is accidentally omitted or incorrectly recorded. Should an interviewee wish to receive a copy of their transcription this will be shared with them. If upon receiving their transcription, an interviewee wishes to withdraw or modify something said during the interview, their wishes will be taken into account.

6. Have you considered how to share your findings with participants and how to thank them for their participation?

Phase 1 - Quantitative research

The DfE publish for public access the details of all requests received for linked NPD/HESA extracts on their web pages as well as a summary of the research being carried out – my research will also be included in this.

Phase 2 – Qualitative research

I will ensure I thank all interviewees for their time. As a way to thank the schools for their participation, I will offer to give a presentation or Q & A session on HE/UCAS/University of Bath/studying for a PhD etc., if one or more of these areas can be of interest to their students.

In addition, once my work has been published, I will ensure it is shared with the participating schools as well as with any individual interviewees that have requested to see it.

Deception and exploitation avoidance, confidentiality, privacy and accuracy

7. How will you present the purpose of your research? Do you foresee any problems?

Phase 1 - Quantitative research

In my request for an NPD/HESA extract, I outlined the purpose of my research as well as giving an individual justification for each of the tier 1 & 2 (most sensitive) fields requested. I have not yet received confirmation that all of my field requests have been approved, but do not currently foresee problems, due to the use of less sensitive fields wherever possible (in line with NPD guidelines) and where more sensitive fields have been requested, detailed justification of why these are necessary for the analysis. Should it be the case that any of my requested fields are rejected however, I will look at the use of alternative fields within the data set.

Phase 2 – Qualitative research

Initially, I plan to schedule a meeting with the gatekeeper(s) (likely headteacher(s)) at each of the schools I would like to approach to explain the purpose of my research and request their participation. As

headteachers are frequently under many conflicting time pressures, one initial issue may be scheduling meetings. Should a headteacher agree to a meeting, getting their approval to approach students and staff within the school for interviews may also be an issue, should it be a particularly busy time of year for students (e.g. exam-time) or if students are already involved in a number of other activities. To counter these issues, I will aim to be as flexible as possible with regards to scheduling both meetings and the interviews. For example, should initial email contact with the gatekeeper(s) not be successful, I will attempt to phone the school instead. Furthermore, I will ensure meetings are scheduled at a time suitable for them and if a face-to-face meeting is not convenient, alternatives such as a Skype or phone meeting can be offered instead. Likewise, I will offer as much flexibility as possible with regards to scheduling student and staff interviews – e.g. conducting these at break/lunchtimes if more convenient and avoiding busy exam periods. I will equally offer as much flexibility as possible for the interviews with parents – e.g. working around their job schedules and offering to conduct the interview at their home/workplace if an appropriate space can be used.

Once interviewees have been selected and the research explained, a further potential issue could arise if interviewees are not comfortable with any of the questions asked or later decide that they wish to withdraw their interviews. To counter this, I will ensure that my explanation of the study prior to interview is as detailed as possible and that interviewees have the chance to ask any questions they may have to ensure they are fully at ease. I will also ensure that they are aware that they may ask for their data to be removed at any point.

8. In what ways might your research cause harm (physical or psychological distress or discomfort, or threat to self-esteem) to yourself or others? What will you do to minimise this? Would access to support be available (if appropriate)?

Phase 1 - Quantitative research

As all NPD/HESA data is anonymised and suppressed where very small numbers with a certain characteristic could potentially enable the identification of an individual, the risk of harm to those whose data is contained within the extract should be minimal. Furthermore, as I will be accessing my data via the Office for National Statistics' Secure Research Service all my outputs will be checked before publication by an experienced member of their team to ensure there is no disclosure risk.

Phase 2 – Qualitative research

One or more of the questions within the interview, or the wording of a question(s) could potentially cause harm to interviewees. To minimise the risk of this, I will first show my interview questions to my supervisors and colleagues to obtain their feedback, as well as to the gatekeeper(s) of the schools where the interviews are conducted. I will also ensure I clearly outline the purpose of the study. In addition, I will make participants aware that they may choose not to answer a question if they so wish and that they can ask for any of the information provided (or indeed the whole interview) to be removed from the study at any point.

It is also possible that some interviewees may be uncomfortable with the recording of their interview. Should this be the case, I will reassure them that I will be the only person to listen back to the recording in order to transcribe it. Should they still be uncomfortable with this however, I will politely explain that I am unfortunately therefore not able to continue the interview with them as this is a requirement for each of the interviews I conduct. I will ensure I thank them for their time.

Finally, I will ask the gatekeeper(s) of the school at our meeting where students/parents/staff can be directed for extra support (in the event that the interview causes them any undue distress) and will ensure I signpost to this service. This is likely to be the school's student support/counselling team.

9. What measures are in place to safeguard the identity of participants and locations? Are there special circumstances for consideration e.g. special populations such as children under 16 years?

Phase 1 - Quantitative research

All NPD/HESA data is anonymised to ensure the safeguarding of the children and young people whose data is contained within the database. Furthermore, where very small numbers with a certain characteristic could potentially enable the identification of an individual, this information is suppressed to minimise any risk of harm.

Phase 2 – Qualitative research

In order to safeguard the identity of interviewees and schools, pseudonyms will be used at all times. All young people to be interviewed will be age 16+. There are no further special circumstances for consideration.

10. How will you record information faithfully and accurately?

Phase 1 - Quantitative research

As I will be using an existing data set, I will not be recording the data within it myself. I will however ensure I thoroughly clean the data set before beginning my analyses.

I will be generating a significant number of analyses throughout my research and will ensure these are clearly named and stored within corresponding folders to ensure that they do not become mixed up. I will also ensure I complete each analysis two or more times to verify that the correct information has been inputted.

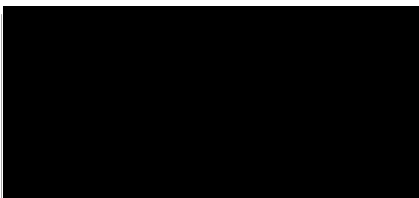

Phase 2 – Qualitative research

All interviews will be audio recorded before being transcribed to ensure no information is accidentally omitted or incorrectly noted. Each transcription will be checked two or more times.

I will also keep a field diary within which I will write immediately after every interview, to keep track of any relevant information exchanged either before or after the interview, as well as detailing any non-verbal cues (e.g. body language) used during the interview that could be of relevance.

11. Any additional information:

N/A

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Student: J Davies | Signature: Date: 04/09/18 |
| Lead supervisor: | Signature:  Date: 19/2018 |
| Director of Studies: | Signature:  Date: 25 September 2018 |

A copy of this form to be placed in [1] the student file, and [2] an Ethics Approval File held by the Director of Studies. The Director of Studies will report annually to the Department's Research Committee on ethical issues of particular interest that have been raised during the year.

Appendix 16B: Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (SSREC) Ethics Approval

SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Application form for full submission for research ethics approval

PLEASE ENSURE THAT YOU READ THE GUIDANCE DOCUMENTS ON THE SSREC WIKI BEFORE COMPLETING THIS FORM:
<https://wiki.bath.ac.uk/display/SSREC/Social+Science+Research+Ethics+Committee+%28SSREC%29+Home>

| | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|--|------------|----------|----------------|--|-----------|--|--------------------------|--|
| Staff | | PhD | X | Masters | | UG | | Other (e.g. MRes) | |
|--------------|--|------------|----------|----------------|--|-----------|--|--------------------------|--|

| | | | | | |
|---|---|--------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|
| ESRC funded project or studentship | | Knowledge Transfer Partnership | | Consultancy | |
| Other funded or unfunded research project | X | Service evaluation/Audit | | Other (Umbrella etc. please specify) | |

| | |
|--|---|
| Project Title | The geographies of access to elite universities |
| Name of applicant/s | Joanne Davies |
| Email for applicant/s | j.davies3@bath.ac.uk |
| Name & contact email for supervisor (for UG / Masters / PhD students) | Dr Michael Donnelly mpd35@bath.ac.uk |
| Department | Education |
| Proposed dates of study | 01/05/20 – 31/05/20 |

| | |
|--|--|
| | |
|--|--|

Secondary data analysis

Does this proposal involve secondary data analysis? This is when you are analysing data that has already been collected by somebody else, i.e. you will have no part in collecting the original data.

YES

NO

N.B. Please attach evidence that of ethical approval for the original study. The Project Description should detail what you intend to do with the data, not how the data were originally collected. It is important to note whether the data you are using have already been anonymised.

Are there ethical implications concerned with the following general issues?

If yes, please provide details below

| | |
|--|--|
| 1. Funding source | (e.g. Are there any implications for disinterested inquiry (i.e. ability to conduct dispassionate, objective, and critical investigation) or for reputational risks?) No. |
| 2. Freedom to publish the results | (e.g. Are there any restrictions raised by contract terms?) No. |
| 3. Future use of findings | (e.g. are there any ethical issues in how the findings will or could be used in the future?) No. |
| 4. Conflicts of Interest | (e.g. Are you involved in any other activities/collaborations/relationships that may result in a conflict of interest with this research?) |

| | |
|--|-----|
| | No. |
|--|-----|

| Information Classification Scheme | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| <p>Confirm that you have completed the information security awareness module (available here: https://moodle.bath.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=56524) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p> | |
| <p>What category of data will you be collecting? (If you are unsure, please look at the guidance available on the SSREC wiki.)</p> | |
| Internal Use | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Restricted | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Highly Restricted | <input type="checkbox"/> |

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 Research Title | The geographies of access to elite universities |
| 2 Background and aims of the research (no more than 300 words) | <p>Previous research has shown that individual characteristics, including notably socio-economic background, ethnicity and gender and their impact most importantly on attainment, as well as independently, affect progression to elite universities. In terms of what explains the inequalities faced by some groups, a much under-researched area is the role of geography.</p> <p>Through quantitative analysis of a Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data extract the participation of 5 cohorts of young people (those progressing to university in academic years 2008/09, 2010/11, 2012/13, 2014/15 and 2016/17) was examined to identify localities where progression to elite universities was lower or higher than expected, even when the impacts of individual characteristics were controlled for. From these localities, two have been selected for in-depth qualitative analysis. Within</p> |

| | |
|--|---|
| | these localities, interviews with sixth-form students and the school/widening participation staff working with them will be carried out to explore the generative mechanisms of under/overrepresentation. |
| 3 Outline the study design and list the methods including any questionnaires/interview schedules (please attach). How much time (roughly) will each method take and how long in total will participants be expected to take part in the study (maximum 300 words) | <p>Mixed-methods design with an initial quantitative phase (complete), followed by a qualitative phase (ongoing).</p> <p>The qualitative research involves one-off semi-structured interviews about university choices with sixth-form students and school/widening participation staff working with them. Each interview is scheduled to last between 30-45 minutes.</p> |
| 4 Who will be recruited to participate in the research? | Sixth-form students (aged 16-18) and school/widening participation staff |
| 5 How many participants will be recruited? Why is this number necessary? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 6 sixth-form students (3 in each case study location) - 6 school/widening participation staff (3 in each case study location) <p>Number of interviews which appeared appropriate to ensure wider applicability of findings and given time constraints.</p> |
| 6 How will participants be recruited? | <p>Participants will be recruited through a widening participation charity, [Aspire] A DBS certificate has been obtained.</p> |
| 7 Are there any potential participants who will be excluded? If so, what are the exclusion criteria? Is there any specific inclusion criteria? | The sixth-form students recruited will be those with the academic potential to attend an elite university. [Aspire] staff members will be asked to approach students whose grades reflect this. |
| 8 Where will the research take place? | <p>The initial interviews conducted took place at two [Aspire] learning centres.</p> <p>Future interviews will take place online via Microsoft Teams.</p> |

| | |
|--|---|
| 9 How will informed consent be obtained from all participants or their parents/guardians prior to individuals entering the study? | <p>A parental consent letter was issued to the parents of interviewees aged under 18 at the request of [Aspire]. The remaining sixth-form interviewees are aged 18 so parental consent will not be needed.</p> <p>All interviewees are also presented with a participant information sheet and consent form which they are asked to complete prior to the interview taking place.</p> |
| 10 If the study aims to actively deceive the participants, please justify and briefly outline how this will be carried out | N/A |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>11 Will participants be made aware they can drop out of the research study at any time without having to give a reason for doing so?</p> <p>Is it clear at what point participants can withdraw their data (e.g. before anonymization)?</p> | <p>The participant information sheet and consent form lets participants know that they can withdraw from the study at any point without having to provide a reason.</p> <p>The participant information sheet also makes clear to participants that they have up to 2 weeks after the interview to withdraw their data from the study before it is anonymised.</p> |
| <p>12 Describe any potential risks to participants (physical, psychological, legal, social) arising from the study. Explain how you will seek to resolve these.</p> | <p>N/A</p> |
| <p>13 Describe any potential benefits of the study for the participants</p> | <p>Students: Opportunity to discuss their university options with an individual independent of their school/family/peers.</p> <p>Staff: Opportunity to contribute to research aimed at widening the access of underrepresented groups to elite universities.</p> |
| <p>14 Describe potential risks to researcher/s and how these will be managed.</p> | <p>The research will not involve risks beyond those normally encountered by the researcher in their life outside research.</p> |

15 How will participants be debriefed? (i.e. feedback of results)

What aftercare will you provide?

Verbal debrief immediately after the interview including:

- Thanking participant again for their time
- Telling participant that their help is much appreciated in learning about the typical university choices made by students in their area and the reasons why.
- Informing participants that the information obtained from the interview will be used to help understand why students make the university choices that they do and how this can be used to help student groups underrepresented at elite universities to have better access to them.
- Chance for interviewees to ask any questions that they may have.
- Re-iterating that participants can get in touch with myself, my PhD supervisors and/or the SSREC by email if they require any further information or have any concerns about the study.

Once the research project has been completed, a short written report (approx. 2-3 pages) providing feedback on the results of the study will also be shared with all interviewees that expressed interest in receiving this (indicated on consent form) by email. Separate reports will be produced for students and staff due to the differing content of the interviews and their differing needs (e.g. for students, the interest is in seeing how their priorities in terms of university options corresponded to those of others interviewed, whereas for [Aspire] staff, the results of the study may help inform how they can support more students to access elite universities).

Aftercare: Participants will be provided with my contact details, those of my PhD supervisors and that of the SSREC, so that they can get in touch at a later stage if they require any further information or have any concerns about the study.

It is not anticipated that participants will feel any discomfort or embarrassment from taking part in the research. However, should participants appear uncomfortable or upset following the interview, they will be directed to an appropriate support service. For students, this may include their school's student support services and/or the support provided by [Aspire]. For [Aspire] staff, this may include signposting them to the NHS mental health helpline web page: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-health-helplines/>

16 How will confidentiality and security of personal data relating to your participants be maintained?

(Please outline your data management plan here based on the UoB Data Management Plan: <https://library.bath.ac.uk/research-data/data-management-plans/university-dmp-templates>)

Compliance

- Informed consent will be obtained from my interviewees for their data to be stored, shared and if it will be used for new purposes.
- Access to data will be restricted to myself and my supervisors.
- Participants will have up to 2 weeks after the interview to withdraw their data from the study before it is anonymised.
- Audio files and non-anonymised transcripts will be kept until my thesis is complete before being securely destroyed.
- Participants' informed consent will be stored for a minimum of 10 years.
- The anonymised interview data will be shared openly via the University's Research Data Archive once my research findings have been published.
- My thesis will contain a data access statement.

Gathering data

- I expect to record 12 interviews - each around 30-45 minutes in length.
- These will be recorded via a digital audio recorder loaned from the university or via the app, Microsoft Teams.
- The raw recordings made by digital audio recorder will be securely deleted before returning the audio-visual equipment.
- The recordings will be stored as MP3 files, approximately 60 MB in size. Each interview will be transcribed within Microsoft Word (.docx files). These files should be approximately 100 KB each.
- The completed consent forms from my interviewees should fit within one ring binder.

Working with data

- All digital records will be stored within my lead supervisor's section of the University's managed data storage (the X Drive) which is backed up daily by Computing Services.
- My participants' consent forms will be stored in a ring binder within a locker located in my office (shared with fellow PhD researchers and accessible only by combination code). In order to ensure a backup, I will also scan the forms and store the digital copies in an encrypted folder in my lead supervisor's section of the X Drive.

- Only my supervisors and I will have access to my lead supervisor's section of the university's X drive, as well as the decryption passwords to encrypted files.
- Only I will have a key to the locker where the hard copies of the interview consent forms will be stored.
- The audio recordings will be stored in separate folders (pseudonyms used) and likewise for the audio transcriptions. Each separate file name will contain the pseudonym of the interviewee, as well as the date of the interview in YYYYMMDD format.
- The backup copies of the consent forms will be saved within a separate folder, with the real names of the interviewees, as well as the date of the interview in YYYYMMDD format. A document within this folder will link up the real names and pseudonyms of all interviewees to be used for reference as needed.
- All folders will be encrypted and accessible only to my supervisors and I.
- I will record any additional notes about my interviews in a Word document to accompany the audio recordings and transcriptions. I will also include information about my anonymisation method (e.g. names replaced by pseudonyms etc.), as well as the templates for my semi-structured interviews, information sheets and consent forms.

Archiving data

- The anonymised transcripts of all interviews will be retained, but the original audio recordings and non-anonymised transcripts will be securely destroyed upon completion of my thesis, in order to avoid the risk of accidental disclosure. I will seek support from the university's Computing Services with regards to their secure disposal.
- The anonymisation of my transcripts will also include that of indirect identifiers and contextual information that could be used to identify an interviewee.
- I will use the University's Research Data Archive to publish my anonymised interview data, where it will be retained for a minimum of ten years.

Sharing data

- The anonymised data from my interviews will be shared openly at the end of my project once my research findings have been published. I will ensure my interviewee consent forms obtain consent from participants for this.

Implementation

| | |
|--|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I will seek advice from my supervisors on wording my consent forms. - I will use the UK Data Service's guidance on anonymisation. - I plan to attend a UK Data Service webinar on the ReShare service. |
| 17 Will the participants be photographed, audio-taped or video-taped? If so, please justify | Participants will be audio-recorded so that transcriptions of their interviews can be made. |
| 18 Is any reimbursement of expenses or other payment to be made to participants? Please explain. | <p>Sixth-form student participants will be given a £10 Amazon voucher as a thank you for their time.</p> <p>As a voucher for a relatively small amount of money, this not should not adversely coerce those who might need money to take part.</p> |
| 19 Any other relevant information? | Researcher is in possession of a DBS certificate. |
| 20 How long will you store <i>personal data</i> (including informed consent)? If you are retaining personal data longer than the end of the study, please justify | <p><i>For example: I am destroying all personal data at the end of the analysis with the exception of the informed consent which I will store for at least 10 years after the study ends in case there is any query or complaint from a participant.</i></p> <p>Personal data will be kept until my thesis is complete before being securely destroyed. The exception to this is participants' informed consent which will be stored for a minimum of 10 years.</p> |

Attach the following (where relevant) including version number and date:

| | | Version | Date |
|---|--|---------|----------|
| 1 | Participant information sheets | 2 | 28/04/20 |
| 2 | Consent forms | 2 | 28/04/20 |
| 3 | Health history questionnaire | | |
| 4 | Poster/promotional material | | |
| 5 | Debrief | | |
| 6 | Copy of questionnaire/ proposed data collection tool (questionnaire; interview schedule/ observation chart/ data record sheet/ participant record sheet) | | |
| 7 | Data management plan | 4 | 29/04/20 |

Signed by: Principal Investigator or Student Supervisor



Date: __16/04/2020_____

By signing and submitting the form, you are agreeing with the following statement:

'I am familiar with the guidelines for ethical practices in research and I have discussed the ethical aspects of the proposed project with my supervisor(s) and/or the other researchers involved in the project. **I am also aware of and will comply with the university policies for storage and processing of human participant data.**'

Signed by: Student or other researchers

_____J Davies_____ Date: _____29/04/20_____

By signing you are agreeing that you take joint responsibility for the application and conduct of the research.

Appendix 16C: Data Management Plan (DMP)

Title: The geographies of access to elite universities: A mixed methods exploration of young participation within England

COMPLIANCE

With what legislative, contractual and policy requirements must the project comply?

Quantitative data (*Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) extract*):

- The data protection requirements outlined by HESA in the *Agreement for the Supply of Information Services* licence will be strictly adhered to, including:

- Access to the data set will be restricted to listed users (myself and my two supervisors).
- Appropriate security measures to process the data will be used. This will include observing the Standard Rounding Methodology used in all HESA publications.
- The data will only be kept for the period of time specified by HESA when access granted, before being securely destroyed
- The data will only be used for the purposes specified in my data request
- The data will not be shared without prior written approval from HESA

- My thesis will contain a data access statement.

Qualitative data:

- Informed consent will be obtained from my interviewees for their data to be stored, shared and if it will be used for new purposes.

- Access to data records will be restricted to myself and my supervisors.

- Participants will have up to 2 weeks after the interview to withdraw their data from the study before it is anonymised.

- Audio files and non-anonymised transcripts will be kept until my thesis is complete before being securely destroyed.

- Participants' informed consent will be stored for a minimum of 10 years.

- The anonymised interview data will be shared openly via the University's Research Data Archive once my research findings have been published.

- My thesis will contain a data access statement.

Sources:**University of Bath Research Data Policy:**

<http://www.bath.ac.uk/research/data/policy/research-data-policy.html>

HESA Rounding and Suppression Policy:

<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/about/regulation/data-protection/rounding-and-suppression-anonymise-statistics>

General Data Protection Regulation:

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2016/679/oj>

GATHERING DATA**What data will the project require?**

The study will be in two parts, the first quantitative and the second qualitative. The quantitative part of the study will use a Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) extract.

Quantitative data:

- The HESA extract will be provided by secure download.
- The data will be modelled within the IBM software programme Stata.

Qualitative data:

- I expect to record 12 interviews - each around 30-45 minutes in length. These will be recorded via a digital audio recorder loaned from the university or via the app, Microsoft Teams. The raw recordings made by digital audio recorder will be securely deleted before returning the audio-visual equipment.
- The recordings will be stored as MP3 files, approximately 60 MB in size. Each interview will be transcribed within Microsoft Word (.docx files). These files should be approximately 100 KB each.
- The completed consent forms from my interviewees should fit within one ring binder.

How will these data be gathered?**Quantitative data:**

- The data used will be an extract of the administrative data collected by HESA on students attending UK universities.
- The data will be modelled within the IBM software Stata and a variety of outputs (e.g. tables, graphs, charts etc.) used to visualise the results.

Qualitative data:

- Interviews will be recorded using a digital audio recorder loaned from the university or via the app, Microsoft Teams. They will then be transcribed into text (.docx files).

What original software, if any, will the project create?

- I do not plan to develop any original software.

WORKING WITH DATA**Where and how will the data be stored?****Quantitative data:**

- The data file will be encrypted and stored within my lead supervisor's section of the University's managed data storage (the X Drive) which is backed up daily by Computing Services. Outputs will also be stored here.

Qualitative data:

- All digital records will be stored within my lead supervisor's section of the University's managed data storage (the X Drive).
- My participants' consent forms will be stored in a ring binder within a locker located in my office (shared with fellow PhD researchers and accessible only by combination code). In order to ensure a backup, I will also scan the forms and store the digital copies in an encrypted folder in my lead supervisor's section of the X Drive.

How will access be controlled?**Quantitative data:**

- Only myself and my supervisors will have access to my lead supervisor's section of the university's X drive, as well as the decryption passwords to encrypted files.

Qualitative data:

- Only my supervisors and I will have access to my lead supervisor's section of the university's X drive, as well as the decryption passwords to encrypted files.
- Only I will have a key to the locker where the hard copies of the interview consent forms will be stored.

How will the data be organised?

Quantitative data:

- I will have a separate folder for each data modelling phase, e.g. 'Null model'
- Within these folders, I will name each new model numerically and sequentially, e.g. for the 'Null model' folder; 'model 1 - Null model', 'model 2 - Null model + attainment', etc.
- As these folders will be stored within my lead supervisor's section of the university's X drive, only my supervisors and I will have access to them.

Qualitative data:

- The audio recordings will be stored in separate folders (pseudonyms used) and likewise for the audio transcriptions. Each separate file name will contain the pseudonym of the interviewee, as well as the date of the interview in YYYYMMDD format.
- The backup copies of the consent forms will be saved within a separate folder, with the real names of the interviewees, as well as the date of the interview in YYYYMMDD format. A document within this folder will link up the real names and pseudonyms of all interviewees to be used for reference as needed.
- All folders will be encrypted and accessible only to my supervisors and I.

What documentation will accompany the data?**Quantitative data:**

- All published outputs will be clearly labelled and will include the unit of measurement used.
- The data modelling process followed will be outlined in detail within my thesis.

Qualitative data:

- I will record any additional notes about my interviews in a Word document to accompany the audio recordings and transcriptions. I will also include information about my anonymisation method (e.g. names replaced by pseudonyms etc.), as well as the templates for my semi-structured interviews, information sheets and consent forms.

ARCHIVING DATA**Which data should be retained long-term? Which will be deleted at the end of the project?****Quantitative data:**

- The data extract will be securely destroyed once my contract with HESA comes to an end.

Qualitative data:

- The anonymised transcripts of all interviews will be retained, but the original audio recordings and non-anonymised transcripts will be securely destroyed upon completion of

my thesis, in order to avoid the risk of accidental disclosure. I will seek support from the university's Computing Services with regards to the secure disposal.

- The anonymisation of my transcripts will also include that of indirect identifiers and contextual information that could be used to identify an interviewee.

How will retained data be preserved? For how long?

- I will use the University's Research Data Archive to publish my anonymised interview data, where it will be retained for a minimum of ten years.

How will any original software be maintained after the project?

N/A

SHARING DATA

Will access be restricted to any retained data? Why, and how?

Quantitative data:

- The HESA data extract must be securely destroyed once my contract with HESA comes to an end.

- The HESA Standard Rounding Methodology will be adhered to in all published outputs.

Qualitative data:

- The anonymised data from my interviews will be shared openly at the end of my project once my research findings have been published. I will ensure my interviewee consent forms obtain consent from participants for this.

IMPLEMENTATION

How will this plan be kept up to date?

- Any additional discussion and updates to the data management plan will be conducted as and when required.

What special resources will this plan require, if any?

- Support has been received from the university's computing services and data librarians and both resources will be used going forward as required.
- For the quantitative data analysis of the HESA extract, ongoing support is provided by HESA.

What training or further information will you need, if any?

Quantitative data:

- I will adhere to HESA's Standard Rounding Methodology, as well as all conditions outlined in the *Agreement for the Supply of Information Services* licence obtained.
- I will seek further advice as required from HESA, as well as the Data Protection team at Bath.

Qualitative data:

- I will seek advice from my supervisors on wording my consent forms.
- I will use the UK Data Service's guidance on anonymisation.
- I plan to attend a UK Data Service webinar on the ReShare service.