Speak and be heard:

Listening to schools' perspectives on widening participation provision

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Table of Contents

Executive summary

Background

The role of widening participation (WP) organisations as external providers of activities to schools has become well-established during the 21st century. These organisations tend to focus on increasing university attendance among low-participation communities, although some have a more specific career-based focus or target particular groups. However while much has been written about the efficacy of such interventions, the school's role has largely been relegated to that of a silent recipient, at most asked to comment on operational or short-term issues. This study, commissioned by Future U, the Lancashire Uni Connect, aims to redress this balance by giving some of these schools a voice in the process; how they perceive the aims of WP activity, what works and what doesn't, and their ideas for how this endeavour could be improved.

Methods

In order to fulfil the above brief, we conducted a series of hour-long interviews with representatives of six schools across Lancashire. Participating schools were recipients of Future U activities, although our discussions were wide-ranging and not limited to the Future U relationship. In order to gather the provider perspective we also conducted interviews with two members of the Future U team.

Findings

We found the following:

- Teachers felt that WP activity should be aimed at showing pupils what a university 'is' and 'does', and how they can fit into that, with this aim encompassing both the how – practical information – and why – the attitudinal side, such as belonging and familiarity.
- School representatives felt that campus visits were a particularly successful intervention; some wanted to see these made available for younger age groups, for a wider selection of pupils, or of multi-day duration.
- It was clear that school representatives had interesting and potentially useful ideas about shaping WP activity. Suggestions included:
  - Ensuring that individuals delivering sessions were relatable to young people, maybe by use of more junior staff members;
  - The introduction of structured WP programmes that would track through a pupil's school journey;
  - More subject-specific activities.
- Selection of participants for WP interventions was repeatedly cited as a source of difficulty. However opinions varied about how to tackle this, with some advocating for no selection whatsoever, while others simply wished for greater flexibility.
- Relatedly, there was an appetite for greater engagement in the process of developing the WP offer, and for the school's voice to be heard in this.
- There was also potential identified for joint development in evaluating the impact and efficacy of WP activities with external providers.
- There were some issues around 'overload' whereby schools were contacted by an unmanageable number of external providers.
- Some participants also had concerns about providers other than Future U, in areas such as their ability to fit in with school routines, the quality of their provision, and their identity and motivations.

- The above two points led to a desire for some sort of 'hub' or 'filter' organisation whereby providers could be vetted or recommended; for some schools, Future U was seen to fulfil this role.
- There was a desire among some school contacts for a more consultative or 'partnership' relationship with WP providers, rather than being purely a recipient of activities. However there are practical limitations to how far this can be taken. Some schools, meanwhile, preferred the current situation due to time constraints.
- The strength of the relationship between school participants and Future U was repeatedly mentioned, and was beneficial from the perspective of communication, problem-solving and reassurance as to the quality of activities.
- The continuing informal dialogue that characterised such close relationships went some way to providing a sense of 'partnership' and in some cases facilitated personalisation of activities.
- However our sample, as noted below, was biased towards those with an existing relationship with Future U.

Recommendations

The above findings leads us to make the following recommendations, some of which are relevant for WP providers generally, some for Future U specifically, and some for schools.

1. Many school contacts are eager to collaborate more with WP providers and to feel more of a sense of 'partnership' with their endeavours. Both parties should consider whether it is possible to make time in busy schedules for some brief periods of joint reflection on what works and what could be improved.
2. Collaboration on evaluating the impacts of WP activity could be beneficial to both schools and providers, and could also contribute to the wider understanding of 'what works'.
3. The school participants in our study suggested the following practical steps that providers could take to improve WP activity:
    a. More campus visits, offered to a wider range of groups including younger ages, and potentially over longer timeframes;
    b. Emphasis on involving younger/more junior members of staff, who pupils may relate to, in activity delivery;
    c. Overarching WP programmes with an ongoing structure that tracks pupils through the school cycle;
    d. A greater range of activities which are related to the school curriculum or are subject-specific.
4. Selection of pupils to participate in WP activity remains a controversial issue, as it has been for the last two decades. Providers who are able to be slightly more flexible about their target cohorts will find it easier to work with schools to deliver sessions. For those whose targets are government-mandated, a continued dialogue with schools will be necessary to smooth over such difficulties.
5. As schools begin to return to normality in 2021/22, it may be that it is beneficial to keep some WP activity online, both from the perspective of easing issues with selection and fitting in better with the school curriculum. However it is important that any permanent move online does not reduce the impact of activities. Consultation between providers and schools will be necessary to find the optimum outcome.
6. Issues of 'overload', together with concerns about the approach of some external WP providers, lead schools to seek a 'hub' or 'filter' organisation that can signpost them and

provide some assurance of quality. Future U already fulfils this role to an extent; it may be beneficial to explore whether it is possible to expand or further publicise this function.

7. Schools have a variety of structures for organising WP provision, and there are benefits to both a centralised and more diffuse model. However they should consider the importance of making a single point of contact available for external providers if they wish to fully benefit from the activities and programmes which are available.

Limitations of this study

When this study was initially conceived, we envisaged that we would visit schools in person and speak to a number of staff within each institution. However the Covid-19 related school closures of early 2021 meant that this became impractical, and we moved to speaking online to one representative from each school. This inevitably means that we were able to gather a less rounded picture of each school than originally intended. In addition to this, it is important to note that all participating schools had a relationship with Future U. We endeavoured to recruit schools in the Lancashire area that did not have such a relationship, but none of our attempts were successful and we were reluctant, given the pandemic circumstances, to make repeated approaches to schools working in stressful situations. It is inevitable, therefore, that our interviewees were at least somewhat well-disposed towards Future U, which may alter the balance of perceptions about its relative merits compared to other providers; it would be interesting in future to repeat this exercise with a more widely-drawn cohort of schools.

Introduction

The emergence of organisations promoting widening participation (WP) in higher education (HE) has been a feature of the educational landscape since the expansion of university attendance promoted by the Blair government in the early 21st century. In the intervening years government-funded versions of these programmes have taken a number of forms, from Aimhigher, through the NCOP[1] to the current Uni Connect programme. Other organisations, including HE institutions and a variety of charities, have also aimed to increase university attendance rates by members of underrepresented communities; some have more specific aims, such as a focus on particular career paths or more specific groups of young people.

This two-decade long endeavour by these organisations has, of course, required the input of another partner: the schools attended by the target group of learners. Schools have been involved in a number of ways, including promoting activities such as summer schools to their pupils, taking part in various types of trips, and hosting activities in their classrooms. Forming a good relationship with schools in low-participation areas is often essential to the success of a WP endeavour.

In recent years there has been a fair amount of evaluation and research into the efficacy of the programmes run by external organisations such as the Uni Connect network. However, beyond surface-level comments on enjoyment or operational difficulties, the school's voice is rarely heard in these publications. The strong impression is often given that these activities are something that is being 'done to' the schools, rather than something that they are partners in, or feel ownership of.

This study sets out to address this deficiency. Working with one of the regional Uni Connect branches – Future U, operating in Lancashire – we spoke to representatives from a series of schools to gather a deeper understanding of how they worked with external WP organisations – the practical aspects, the organisational structures, the operational difficulties – and, just as importantly, how they *want* to work with such bodies. This report deliberately centres the voice of school staff and teachers, with many direct quotations illuminating both the benefits and disjunctions to them of working with external WP providers.

[1] National Collaborative Outreach Programme

Review of existing literature

When we review the academic literature and related reports on WP policy and practice, it quickly becomes apparent that teachers' and schools' voices are rarely heard. They are sometimes, for example, surveyed to discover their views on the effectiveness of a particular programme; however deeper, more reflective discourse involving school staff is largely absent.

A detailed examination reveals three potential sources for gleaning information as to the views of teachers and school leaders about WP provision. Firstly, a small amount of evaluation has been done with teachers in regard to specific WP programmes; here we restrict our review to UK sources within the last 15 years. Secondly, it appears that WP practice in Australia may be ahead of the UK in this regard, and we have found a number of papers from this country which do centre voices from within the school setting more effectively. Finally we look at three recent reports that seem to indicate that the question of how teachers and schools view WP work is beginning to be viewed more seriously within the UK. Let us examine these in turn.

Evaluations of specific programmes over the last 15 years

Several reports into the effectiveness of Aimhigher, in some sense the precursor to the current Uni Connect programme, attempted to make the teacher voice part of the discussion. In their paper *'The best government initiative in recent years'. Teachers' perceptions of the Aimhigher programme in the South West of England*, Hatt and colleagues (Hatt et al., 2008) gathered views about the SW regional Aimhigher programme through use of a questionnaire. As is clear from the title of the paper, respondents were hugely enthusiastic about the programme:

> [Teachers] commented on the increase they had noticed in the numbers applying to university and linked this to participation in Aimhigher: 'Our university applications are now consistently between 65 and 70 [students] when in the past they were 25–40 [students]. Aimhigher has definitely made my UCAS job easier and increased aspirations in a deprived area where university is often not considered.' These comments provided powerful evidence about the ways in which teachers perceived the programme to be contributing both to their own agendas as well as to those of HE providers.

However some points of tension between the teachers' views and the Aimhigher concept emerged, particularly concerning selection of participants. The authors identify a fundamental disconnect here, whereby "The founding principle of Aimhigher – promoting inclusion by focusing on the excluded – was alien to the schools' philosophy." As they explain,

> ...the funders' intention to refine the targeting of the programme so that it focuses tightly on lower socio-economic groups will be challenging. For schools, inclusion means giving everyone access to the curriculum, while Aimhigher aims for social inclusion by focusing on the excluded.

The same group of authors also conducted focus groups with teachers for their study *From Policy to Practice: Pupils' Responses to Widening Participation Initiatives* (Baxter et al., 2007). Although as the title suggests, the main data for this paper was gathered from participating students, there were some interesting insights on teachers' views. In particular, it became clear that teachers were concerned about the impacts on those pupils who were excluded from the Aimhigher project due to not being part of the target group, and were using their own resources in order to be able to include more people. The authors note that

> The teachers' evidence also suggests that Aimhigher policies in the South West do not operate in isolation, but are integrated within the context of the school's priorities and concerns. Aimhigher is combined at school level with equal opportunities or diversity policy to ensure that it complements the school's own mission… Although the integrated approach reflected in these interviews with teachers runs the risk of diluting the focus of Aimhigher, it also shows that the initiative has become embedded in the school in complex ways.

Another paper of interest with a rather different focus is *Taking context seriously: towards explaining policy enactments in the secondary school* (Braun et al., 2011). Here the authors address the question of how the individual school context impacts on the delivery of national educational policy by studying the situation in four case-study schools in the UK. This paper is one of the few to give significant space to the voices of teachers and SLT members in schools; it discusses how factors such as staffing structures, buildings and the values of the school can profoundly impact on the ways in which policies which were envisaged as being implemented in idealised situations roll out on the ground. The authors write:

> By taking context seriously we argue that policies are intimately shaped and influenced by school-specific factors, even though in much central policy making and research, these sorts of constraints, pressures and enablers of policy enactments tend to be neglected… The rich 'underlife' and micropolitics of individual schools means that policies will be differently interpreted (or 'read'), and differently worked into and against current practices, sometimes simultaneously… Policy analyses of schools rarely, if ever, include details of budgets, buildings or staffing in their purviews and contexts are magically dematerialised in the way that schools are represented and 'interpretations' explained. Policy-making and policy-makers tend to assume 'best possible' environments for 'implementation': ideal buildings, students and teachers and even resources.

This commentary demonstrates the importance of understanding how activities operate within the school context; if this is not done, the end result of initiatives can be rather different from those envisaged by policymakers.

Evidence from the Australian school system

Whilst a certain caution is required in translating findings from the Australian school system, which operates in different structures and contexts to that in the UK, it is interesting to note that the school's voice in dealing with outside agencies has, in the past few years, been more visible in the Australian context than elsewhere. Armstrong and Cairnduff, for example (Armstrong & Cairnduff, 2012), studying a WP programme run by the University of Sydney, discuss the importance of partnership in a way that centres the school experience:

> The importance of the deep and serious engagement by universities with their local schools and communities should not be underestimated… we are trying to avoid a 'hair tonic' model of engagement through which universities reach out to schools and communities with messages about the ways we can enhance growth and make them more attractive… To be inclusive, we need to learn from working with others and adopt strategies that are owned within schools and communities, not imposed on them from outside.

Meanwhile Zacharias and Mitchell (Zacharias & Mitchell, 2020), studying a government-led university-school partnership programme, included interviews and focus groups with school principals and staff and found that in remote schools where effective partnership formation was

difficult, it was hard to integrate the programme with school needs. Although the programme was generally strongly supported in both remote and urban locations,

> …this also suffered where engagement was more limited. School leaders reported alignment of widening participation and school objectives, but again in some RRR[2] schools widening participation was more of an add-on than something that contributed meaningfully to school priorities. Only one RRR school in our sample reported a high level of widening participation integration. In contrast, urban project managers had a smaller number of schools to service and all were relatively close to university campus locations. Urban universities were able to forge closer relationships with schools in their cluster and provide more ongoing contact.

Again, this paper illustrates the importance of context and relationships in effective WP activity.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, from the Australian context is *School principals speaking back to widening participation policies in higher education* from Blackmore et al (Blackmore et al., 2017). This study analysed how one programme in a school-university partnership was viewed by the principals of the schools. Seven principals were interviewed, some twice, and made a number of illuminating comments. The principles argued against a 'deficit model' to describe their students:

> Principals recoiled from the 'recognisable' ways of depicting their schools and students, dismissing the notion that their students could be labelled 'disadvantaged', 'underprivileged' and 'lower socio-economic'. They accepted that structural and social disadvantage, such as the local communities' employment possibilities, impacted on their schools and students' prospects, but they did not want this to totally frame, name (and often shame) their school... For principals, the paradox was that in order to access equity-driven programmes such as Access Express, a requirement is that schools and their students are identified and branded as 'disadvantaged' and 'low socio-economic'.

The principals also advocated frequent contacts between school and university mentors, and community partnership building, but accepted that such activities could have their own drawbacks. For example, efforts to build community networks had the potential to drain schools' limited resources so that other areas such as arts and sports enrichment programmes suffered. There were also concerns about the sustainability of such programmes:

> While there was enthusiasm among principals regarding the Access Express programme's capacity to meet a critical need, this optimism was modified by a level of cynicism as to whether the programme would ever be fully institutionalised and sustained: 'This program should actually be funded for a long period of time and that's the sad thing about education. We often can't get consistency for a long period of time at any level because we're so linked to political decision-making.'

Recent reports: teachers, schools and WP

A few recent UK reports indicate that maybe the question of schools' and teachers' roles in WP activity is beginning to be taken more seriously. In *The impact of teachers' practice and attitudes on widening access*, Webster (Webster, 2017) describes a study undertaken for HEFCE to understand why some schools had high levels of participation in HE despite having large numbers of disadvantaged learners. The study took place with a group of nine such schools using questionnaires

[2] Rural, regional and remote

for pupils, teachers and headteachers. Although few conclusions are drawn as to why these schools had higher rates of HE progression, the results from the surveys are illuminating. The surveys note a disconnect between teacher and pupil conceptions of WP in the school:

> Teachers' and pupils' perceptions of their role in widening participation appear to differ. Despite the fact both SMT's and teachers felt lessons were related to HE, pupils, particularly those in year 9, were not able to recognise these relationships.

There was also something of a lack of connection between the attitudes and advice of those in government as to how schools should implement WP programmes, and what was happening on the ground:

> Universities have been encouraged to work with pupils from a young age to encourage them to consider HE yet it appears this practice is not replicated in schools until pupils progress to sixth form studies. This is particularly concerning given the implications of option choices (made in year 9) on the ability to gain entry to certain HE courses at a later date. The research [also] raises questions about the attitudes of schools towards HE. Many of those surveyed felt there were too many graduates already with others supporting the status quo in terms of graduates entering the job market… The study reveals a mismatch between government policy and practice in schools.

Also of interest is a recent publication on behalf of OfS, a *Formative evaluation of Uni Connect phase two: Survey of school and college staff* (Ipsos Mori, 2021). This report is based on an online survey of more than 700 staff in schools and colleges eligible for Uni Connect targeted outreach, conducted in November and December 2020.

The survey asked about why participants engaged with Uni Connect, barriers to engagement, impact of outreach and benefits to learners. Raising aspirations of learners was the most commonly selected motivation for engagement with Uni Connect, viewed as 'very important' by 90% of respondents. The main barrier to engagement, meanwhile, was a lack of time and flexibility in the school timetable.

General IAG[3] activities and campus visits were highly rated in terms of their relevance and impact, and 94% of respondents cited young people's increased knowledge of HE options as a benefit. Almost all had taken part in some sort of monitoring/evaluation of targeted outreach, although three-quarters had experienced some sort of challenge with this. Meanwhile 62% of respondents said that they strongly or slightly agreed with Uni Connect's eligibility criteria, although 95% supported expanding the eligibility criteria. However as the report notes, selection was again an issue:

> There was no overall consensus on other groups of individuals that should be eligible to participate in targeted outreach through Uni Connect. Survey respondents identified almost 30 different groups that the eligibility criteria could be expanded to include, suggesting that schools and colleges would welcome scope to determine who should benefit.

Finally respondents were asked how the current Uni Connect offer could be enhanced. More employer involvement was the most popular option, selected by around three-quarters, while in terms of frequency staff said they would like to participate in subject masterclasses and campus

[3] Information, advice and guidance

visits more often. Although the format of this study did not allow teachers and school staff to express their views in their own words, it provides a useful underpinning for the current study.

A particularly interesting report from the perspective of our current study is Neil Raven's *Views from the chalk-face: Teachers' perceptions of the Uni Connect programme in Staffordshire, Shropshire and Cheshire* (Raven, 2020). The author interviewed teaching professionals from 20 schools working with Higher Horizons, the area's Uni Connect branch, to explore the impact of the network and its outreach support.

The research came to a number of interesting conclusions; challenges raised included identifying the Uni Connect cohort, paperwork and disagreements over definitions of disadvantage, while the Higher Horizons staff were seen as key enablers of opportunities. Other subjects touched on included impacts of outreach activity such as excitement and increased subject interest, together with challenges in evidencing longer-term impact. Campus visits were identified as being particularly effective forms of activity, with participants feeling that more subject-based workshops would be welcome.

Raven's study is useful because it was conducted in a similar context to our current study. However our focus is somewhat different, covering as it does all externally-provided outreach activity rather than focusing solely on Uni Connect provision.

Study objectives

The above review suggests the need for further examination of teachers' and schools' attitudes to externally-provided WP provision in a number of areas, such as the aims of WP provision and how these translate into practice; difficulties that can arise with external providers; and views of the school-provider relationship. Our interviews therefore covered these broad areas; our findings are presented under the following headings:

1. Why and how we undertake WP activity:
    - Views of the aims of such activity;
    - What activities work best in practice;
    - How we should evaluate the impact of such activity;
    - WP activity in an 'ideal world'.
2. Areas of difficulty:
    - How pupils are selected;
    - Provider 'overload' and need for a central contact;
    - Concerns about external providers.
3. Relationships with external providers:
    - How WP activity is organised within the school;
    - Is partnership possible?
    - The importance of personal relationships.

Methods

In order to investigate the themes discussed, we conducted a series of six interviews with staff from schools which interact with Future U's staff and activities. Staff were chosen because they were a primary contact within the school for the Future U team; although none were class teachers, they held a variety of roles with responsibilities in different areas, and most were members of the school's senior leadership team.

The schools selected were geographically distributed across the Future U target area in major conurbations including Blackpool, Blackburn and Preston. Interviews lasted for around an hour and were loosely structured to allow the discussion to follow interesting lines of enquiry. We also conducted interviews with two members of the Future U school engagement team.

All interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams; this study was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Central Lancashire.

Privacy and anonymity

In order to protect the privacy of the participating schools and staff, we have anonymised both the school name and the staff member's name where they are referred to in the document. School staff member names have been anonymised using common English surnames[4] and a list of popular baby names from 1974[5]. Because of the small pool of potential participants, Future U staff have been additionally anonymised by using common unisex names[6].

Impact of Covid-19 restrictions

In the initial proposal for this project, drafted in summer 2020, we had hoped to visit each participating school and interview multiple staff. However the impact of ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, including an extensive period of school closures in early 2021, meant that this ambition had to be scaled back to speaking to just one representative from each institution using online methods.

The study was not intended to be an examination of how WP delivery had fared during the pandemic; inevitably, however, school staff raised this aspect during our conversations, and where relevant some comment on this is made in our report.

Limitations of study

In an ideal world, this study would have included the views of schools who had chosen not to participate in the Future U programme. A number of such schools for whom we had named contacts were, in fact, approached via email on two occasions, but no responses were received. Given the difficulties being faced by schools in operating within Covid guidelines and attempting to reverse the impacts of closures for their pupils, we were unwilling to take any actions to enrol schools that might be seen as an imposition; we therefore took the decision that it would only be possible to include schools that were active Future U participants.

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most_common_surnames_in_Europe#England

[5] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/datasets/babynamesenglandandwalestop100babynameshistoricaldata

[6] https://medium.com/@cherrycanovan/how-unisex-is-your-babys-name-4348002a2ec8

Our participants

In order to preserve the anonymity of our participants, we have given each school and individual a pseudonym. Here is a brief pen-picture of each school-based participant:

Claire Smith [CS] is careers co-ordinator at Eastern High, a school in an urban area of East Lancashire. Eastern High has slightly lower levels of pupils receiving Pupil Premium (PP) than average, and has a higher than average proportion of white British pupils.

Sarah Jones [SJ] is assistant head at Hillside, a school in an urban area of East Lancashire. Hillside has a higher level of pupils receiving PP than average and has a much higher proportion of pupils from BAME backgrounds than average.

Nicola Taylor [NT] is assistant head at City High, a school in an urban area of Central Lancashire. City High has a much higher level of pupils receiving PP than average and has a much higher proportion of pupils from BAME backgrounds than average.

Paul Brown [PB] is careers leader at Moor View, a school in an urban area of East Lancashire. Moor View has a much higher level of pupils receiving PP than average and has a higher proportion of pupils from BAME backgrounds than average.

Mark Williams [MW] is careers leader at Western High, a school in an urban area of West Lancashire. Western High has a much higher level of pupils receiving PP than average and has a higher proportion of pupils from white British backgrounds than average.

Lisa Robinson [LR] is careers co-ordinator at Riverside, a school in a slightly smaller conurbation in North Lancashire. Riverside has a much higher level of pupils receiving PP than average and has a roughly average proportion of pupils from BAME backgrounds.

In addition to our school-based participants, we also interviewed two Future U WP practitioners. As mentioned above we use gender-neutral pseudonyms to further preserve the anonymity of these interviewees:

Morgan Davies [MD] is a member of the Future U team.

Ellis Thompson [ET] is a member of the Future U team.

Results and analysis

Why and how we undertake WP activity

Concept and aims of widening participation activity

School staff's conceptions of the aims of WP can be broadly divided into practical aspects and attitudinal aspects. We will address these in turn.

Practical aspects

Many of the reasons for undertaking WP activity cited by our participants were concerned with addressing the practical barriers that might be experienced by young people, for example in terms of geographical location and financial aspects. "It shouldn't be something that they don't think they can do because of where they live or how much it's going to cost," says PB, while LR raises "the benefits of moving to a different city". Practical sessions on student finance and how loans work were raised several times; as MW notes,

> I think the practical elements such as financial workshops are particularly good because that can be good for breaking down those barriers and showing people that it's not necessarily the hindrance that they might think it is.

Another valuable practical aspect to WP work is informing the young people about how academic ability and performance is related to university attendance. One aspect of this is to encourage harder work at school; as CS notes, "If a child has been on a visit to a university and they've seen an experiment take place and that's really inspired them, that means that that child is more motivated in school," – but primarily this facet is to do with dispelling the myth that only the top academic achievers can progress to university. As LR puts it,

> I think just to make it clear that going to university isn't just for people who are really clever, and get the best marks in school. Traditional academic study. There are so many other qualifications and subjects that you can learn about at university. I think there is still a myth that it's still very much school learning and, if I don't like school, I won't like university.

MW sees this as particularly beneficial "to pupils that don't necessarily see that they've got the potential to go to university, but teachers do see them as having the potential," while for SJ, the middle-ability child is the focus of the school's WP work:

> We know that a lot of our students who are perhaps higher ability, or maybe have more supportive parents in the background, they would have those opportunities to go to visit a university. Maybe they've got brothers and sisters already there, or someone in the family. So, we feel that they get those opportunities from home. And it's our middle ability students that are the focus of ours as a whole school anyway. And those lower ability students that might not get those opportunities to go and see what it's all about. And they might not go to college and then university on the traditional route, it might be something they come back to later on. But they don't know that it's there, if we don't show them it already.

The final practical aspect to highlight in terms of the aims of WP concerns information about courses and career choices. This was the most common practical benefit of WP activity raised by our participants, and was mentioned by all, possibly due to the fact that most had a dual function covering careers as well as WP. In fact, the idea of creating more links between school subjects and the careers that follow from them was one of the most commonly-cited improvements that could be made to WP activity by our cohort, as we will discuss later.

Attitudinal aspects

The most commonly-referenced 'soft' impacts of WP activity were those concerned with showing young people what their opportunities and/or options are, and 'expanding their horizons'. As SJ explains,

> For me, it's making sure that students understand that there are options out there for them. Because quite a lot of our students, for where we sit in our community, they will see that their relatives and close relatives will be maybe working in a takeaway or they will be taxi-drivers or stay-at-home mums. They won't see necessarily what's outside of [conurbation].

PB makes an interesting distinction between the types of 'options' that are shown to young people at different school stages. As he explains,

> When it's lower down the school [in Y9[7]] it's perhaps developing children's awareness of their opportunities that are available for when they do leave school. It might be finding out about the employment field when they leave school, the local area, the Lancashire labour force, figures and statistics for that… Later on in school, Y10 and Y11, it's more about that university is an option for pupils.

Another theme raised by school staff is showing pupils what a university 'is' or 'does', and how they might fit into that. "I think the main thing is inspiring and showing people that [HE] is accessible… for pupils that probably in the first instance would not necessarily consider it as being for them," says MW, "the pupils that have no family background of such experiences." As we will discuss below, campus visits were often cited as the best way of promoting these aims.

Other attitudinal aspects raised by our interviewees included myth-busting:

> I think there is still that myth that, 'University is not for me, I am not thinking about university.' So, people don't even want to find out what it is about, because they think they don't want to go. [LR]

> I don't like using the phrase raising aspirations, but for raising aspirations, but also education of the how to, and breaking down some of the myths that exist still for our students on HE. [NT]

Although NT dislikes the phrase 'raising aspirations', this aim and its close cousin 'inspiration' were also cited by other participants in the study.

Effective activities

When we asked school staff what the most effective WP interventions were, the first response of the majority of respondents was off-site visits. Several felt that campus visits were particularly effective; for example:

> When I can take children out of school and go and visit universities, they're quite powerful. [PB]

> I think campus visits are particularly useful and good because I think it opens people's eyes a little bit more than presentations in school. [MW]

Campus visits were held to be particularly effective because of the broad range of experience that could be conveyed – the accommodation, sports facilities, lecture theatres – but also because they

[7] Y9 indicates year 9; school years are referred to throughout using this convention.

combine enjoyment for the pupils with communicating a subtle sense of possibility and familiarity. LR explains it well:

> [The pupils] think, 'It's great, get a day off school.' But every time they go past a university again then they can say, 'Oh I've been there, I've been there and I've had a look around.' That's something that when it comes to deciding whether you want to go to university, at least you've got a little bit of experience of that.

Some of the school contacts felt that campus visits should be extended, either in terms of who attends or for how long. LR, for example, perceives that trips often happen in sixth form, when pupils have already made their minds up about university; she would like to see more visits "in Y10 and in Y11… so everybody gets a chance to go to have a look at a university".

SJ, meanwhile, feels that the experience could be yet more valuable if it was extended beyond a day trip: "I think it's just about giving more time for more experiences like that to happen. Maybe to have time to go and spend a few days at a university campus, rather than just a visit."

Campus trip are, however, not the only day-trip game in town, with visits to museums, local employers and venues such as law courts all mentioned as valuable, in part because they take pupils out of their normal school environment. As PB explains:

> I have got their undivided attention for that particular workshop. No bell is going to ring after an hour, they're not having to focus on one lesson and then the next. They're out of the school environment so they're as close to a work or a university environment as possible.

CS, meanwhile, gives a vivid description of the impact on young people of visiting a new environment:

> Something that springs to mind is walking into [company name] in the town centre. It's a huge open-plan office. I walked in with about six pupils. They were about to do a work experience there for a couple of weeks. They walked in, and I turned around because I thought they hadn't followed me because it just went completely quiet… they stood there and they were just stunned. They'd never seen an open-plan office of that size before, and they were just really overcome with, 'Oh, my goodness. I didn't know...' They just hadn't seen that before.

Of course there is a limit to the number of trips that schools can conduct during term time, and much WP activity takes the form of in-school workshops or talks. Teachers expressed a variety of views about these, for example preferring those which include a practical activity or produce an 'end product'.

Another important theme that emerged was concerned with the importance of meeting the person or people involved in the session. One condition for a successful engagement is that the session leader can communicate with young people at the right level; however enthusiasm, ability to build a rapport, and relatability were all also cited as important. SJ mentions an unengaging session involving senior figures in a local business, and suggests that it would have been more successful had it involved "the younger people in a company, the people that are closer to their age. That would actually make the biggest impact on them, because they can see themselves in that role in a short period of time."

The "seeing themselves" theme is echoed by PB, who suggests that

> It's that sort of first-hand experience, meeting the people who are representing those organisations or the career people who are employed in those businesses, so children get to see them first-hand and can ask them questions or can talk to them. It's about visiting a place where they may see themselves in a few years' time, so they actually get to see it first-hand.

Impact of WP activity

One interesting point to note is that schools all felt that more could be done to evidence the impact of WP activities. Although varying levels of record-keeping were reported, none of the schools had attempted to use this to investigate which kinds of activities worked best, or how effective their WP programme as a whole was. There was little mention of any sharing of such information between the school and Future U, other than a few post-session evaluation forms.

There were certainly practical issues involved in maintaining such records; some schools, for example, were having difficulty in collecting the required data on destinations of their leavers due to difficulties in obtaining information from bodies such as FE colleges. Others were using tracking tools such as Compass+ to record careers interventions undertaken by each pupil, although none had been using these for long enough to be able to draw any conclusions about whether or not those with a WP angle had been impactful.

Even where some attempt was being made to keep records of activity and track its efficacy, there was a broad view that it would be useful to do more. PB, for example, made the following comment:

> I record it all, what children have done which initiatives. Maybe, yes, I'd need to perhaps follow up with some of those groups more. Those children that we take to some of the universities, we do follow up with those. We have regular meetings with those children but, yes, perhaps we need to do a bit more on that.

He also mentions receiving "nice emails" from ex-pupils:

> They are very grateful for some of the opportunities that I've provided for them. They do remember those, whether it's a workshop in school or whether it's when they went to visit… You know, having a full evaluation with pupils on that but it would be nice, it's a good idea to perhaps do that, to implement that. I might try to do that.

Several respondents mentioned more informal types of monitoring, such as observation and conversation. CS explains:

> So without even speaking to them, we will know that – whether they're more enthusiastic with the work and their grades start to increase. Then, we've got the talking to the pupils and seeing what they find out about it, and evaluating it, maybe having a little questionnaire with them or a chat to them. But there isn't that big long-term look at the overall picture, really.

There was an appetite for our respondents to work jointly with Future U on this aspect; several noted that working together to evidence impact would be "a good idea". Nevertheless, staff were confident that WP and careers activities were having an impact, maybe best encapsulated in this comment from SJ:

> Our children… have started to talk about their futures, their careers, what they want to do. And when you listen to the young people, they have a more varied idea about what they want to go on and do now, we don't just get the doctors, nurses, opticians, that we used to

> get, taxi-drivers. We do get more of a range of different job roles coming out now, and I think that is part of that careers provision that we have put in place… [and] Future U is definitely a part of that.

WP in an ideal world

As part of our interviews with school staff, we asked them to consider what WP provision would look like in an 'ideal world', where there were none of the familiar constraints of finances or timetabling. Some of the ideas suggested are covered elsewhere in this report; the idea of more and longer campus visits has already been discussed, while issues around the selection of pupils are examined in the next section. However it is worth taking some time to look in more detail at some of the other suggestions that our participants made.

A recurrent theme was a desire for more activities that link the school curriculum to university courses and careers. MW, for example, suggests:

> …maybe medicine for example, being able to link in the science departments in school and put on the events that show the benefits of working hard at your science now and what it can lead to in the future, the opportunities, that kind of thing.

Post-options activities focused on subjects that pupils have actually chosen to study, thereby demonstrating a certain level of enjoyment, was another idea. Here is LR's vision of how this might work:

> Maybe within option subjects that people have chosen, because they are interested in it at this stage… They've got some kind of interest in what they are going to find out about at the university, and to see how that could lead to something in the future.

Meanwhile MW suggests that pupils with a specific interest could benefit from such a focus; "If pupils are particularly enjoying English, for example, a subject-specific English thing can work quite well for inspiring them."

Another idea is to impose more of a structure, or significant form, on WP activity. LR suggests that this could be

> …more of a journey throughout a year group, so there would be something every term and maybe some kind of workbook, or something that they would do that built up to – to build a picture over a year group.

She goes on to give more detail; such a scheme could include "something about applications and CVs, and then looking at a mock interview, and then have that building a journey throughout a year group".

Finally in this section, we see repetition of the feeling that consultation with schools should be closer to the heart of how WP activity is organised. In the words of MW and SJ:

> [I wonder] whether [there is] likely to lead to the opportunities for schools to enter into the conversation a little bit more as to what might be on offer? …I think for schools generally it would be a good thing for them to be able to have a bit more of a say in what they want for WP. [MW]

> …if we could sit down and say, 'These are our priorities as a school, this is what we need some help and support with,' then they could help us to look at our school development

plan and to support that, those gaps that we've got as a school. So, I think that would be useful, yes. [SJ]

We will discuss the relationship between WP providers and schools further in a later section of this report.

Discussion

Whilst expression of the aims of WP activity falls into two segments – those concerned with the practical side of things, and those which are more attitudinal – these can, in fact, be seen as two sides of the same coin. Broadly speaking, teachers felt that WP activity should be aimed at showing pupils what a university 'is' and 'does', and how they can fit into that, and this aim encompasses both the how – practical information – and why – the attitudinal side. Important themes emerge around familiarisation, in order to make university seem less daunting/intimidating; a more realistic option for pupils who might not otherwise be confident in taking that leap.

Given the above finding, it is perhaps unsurprising that campus visits (and, indeed, visits in other contexts) were seen as particularly effective by our school contributors. Giving as they do the opportunity for young learners to be immersed in the university environment, they are an efficient way of both transmitting practical information *in situ* and also providing the familiarity that comes from spending time in a setting. The desire of several school participants to extend these, either in terms of duration or numbers of participants, is indicative of the level of importance which is placed upon such experiences.

When we turn to the question of the 'ideal' WP scenario or activity, we see a variety of suggestions covering both structure and content. As well as the extension of campus visits, and changes to selection which are covered in the next section, school staff made recommendations in the following areas:

- The importance of who young people meet, in terms of relatability and effectiveness of communication;
- The need for more structured activity to provide a WP 'journey';
- Development of more activities linked to the school curriculum, or which are subject-specific.

Aside from these specifics, our overarching takeaway is that teachers and school staff have ideas about creative ways of making WP activities more effective, appealing and relevant for their pupils. Furthermore, there is an appetite for closer collaboration between providers and schools on both activity design and implementation, and effectiveness monitoring; we will discuss this further in subsequent sections.

Areas of difficulty

We can pinpoint three major areas of difficulty identified by our school participants: the selection of pupils, concerns about working with external providers, and issues of provider 'overload'. In this section we discuss these in turn.

Selection of target pupils

As might be expected from the evidence of our literature review, one of the most contentious areas for schools when accessing WP provision from external providers is the requirement to select students by certain criteria that comes with that. Of the six schools that we spoke to, four reported significant challenges with this aspect of the process. CS's comments encapsulate the situation:

> …the difficulty can be sometimes… when [an activity is] from external sources, it means that we can only direct an activity to particular young people. For example, if there are children that don't fall into the category set by funding providers, then we're not able to offer that service to everybody, and there can be issues regarding that… it's quite a lot of work as well to get the data together, which can be a bit frustrating… that can be a barrier sometimes, just through, practically, getting the project moving.

Although the issue of selection is common to many WP providers, some of our respondents cited specific difficulties with the way that this is done for Future U. It and other Uni Connect branches have been instructed to use individual postcodes to target activity at children from areas where HE participation is lower than expected. However some schools find that this gives rise to anomalies in who can participate in Uni Connect settings. MW, who works in a school in one of England's most deprived conurbations, and which has around twice the median level of pupil premium take-up, reports that despite this there are only a few Future U target learners enrolled. He describes the difficulty this causes:

> As a school we do have quite a high number of pupil premium, free-school-meal pupils, quite a lot pupils whose parents haven't gone into higher education and that kind of thing. But from a postcode point of view, very few of our pupils hit that criteria, which has caused us barriers to getting involved in as much as we'd like to. So, lots of Future U activities are turned down, not because they're not great activities to get involved with and not because we haven't got pupils that would really benefit from them.

This is an issue which is acknowledged by the Future U team. "I think what's difficult – and I understand this from a school perspective – is that they have their own measures, such as pupil premium, free school meals, etc., that they understand as WP criteria," says MD. "Sometimes it can be difficult with schools, especially ones that have low numbers of target learners because it means that they have to take select students out of their mainstream classes and be quite selective with that. They're not always keen to do that."

In fact several of our participants reported concrete instances where programmes from external providers had been cancelled or unable to run because of difficulties with selection. In some ways, Covid seemed to have exacerbated this situation; CS cites two ways in which this can be the case. The first is where the group has to be selected in such a way that more than one Covid 'bubble' will be involved:

> …it's impossible to be able to go to, say, a group of young people in Y10/Y11, who are at risk of becoming NEET, and maybe will benefit from some WP work. We just can't do it because they're in two different bubbles. You can't pull them out of class. You can't do it.

Another difficulty arose because the school wanted to shift an activity normally done in curriculum time to an after-school slot in order to fit in better with Covid-related timetabling. The activity was for 20 pupils, but as CS explains

> …to get 20 pupils from one year group to come to an after-school club, that's a big ask out of 200 pupils. After-school clubs tend to start from about six or seven pupils, and they build up over time. They go and tell their friends and things like that. It just took that flexibility, and unfortunately, we couldn't run that particular programme. So I'm doing something on my own with them now, with the six pupils who said that they wanted to take part, so I'm still carrying on. But it just seems to be a shame that it's 20 pupils or not [able to run].

The need for flexibility in an effective WP partnership is acknowledge by ET at Future U.

> I think everybody needs to appreciate that the majority of schools and staff in schools that I've encountered are those people that do really care about the learners and are passionate about the job and want the best for the school and the students. I think as, sort of, WP practitioners, we need to be open to being flexible and schools saying to us, 'Yes, we want this activity, but we can't fit you in,' or, 'Can you adjust it so it's shorter or it's tailored to a specific group of learners?' Yes, I guess just being flexible.

MD agrees with this view; in fact when we asked our Future U practitioners for their view of how WP activity could be improved in an ideal word, MD saw being less restricted as far as targeting is concerned as key:

> I think it needs to be less restricted, or the number of schools that each organisation targets needs to be restricted, and what I mean by that is that we have all these schools and we can only offer certain things to certain school. That makes everything more difficult in terms of our communication and the logistics and the difficulty in communicating what it is that we offer… So, perhaps the idea is to come up with a more inclusive WP criteria.

Selection policies for WP activity can lead to some more specific issues in schools, as well as those of a general organisational nature. One such is the prompting of awkward questions among the students about who has been chosen to participate, and why. LR explains:

> When we can target the whole year group, it's much easier for us as a school to say that, 'This is for everyone.' And we don't have to exclude anyone or identify certain people and that starts to ask questions, why is she doing it, and why am I not kind of thing. It does make it much easier… it can be tricky. I mean sometimes the students do know that it is the same people that are being asked to do similar activities. They can probably work it out themselves. But it can be awkward, yes.

MW notes that where small numbers of pupils are eligible for an activity, this effect can be exacerbated, as "it highlights the fact that they're in a marginalised group rather than celebrating the fact, and if they feel they've been picked because they live in a poor area or something like that, then that's not necessarily seen as a positive thing". CS agrees, adding that "It can stereotype children, and I think stigmatise children as well unnecessarily," and consequently "by trying to help them, these categories don't necessarily do that. It can make the situation worse."

At Future U, MD is aware of such issues.

> [The target learners] are not daft. You know, they know that they've been chosen and they want to know why, and sometimes that can be an issue because schools sometimes don't

> explain that to them in a very good way. We had a mentoring session in [school name] not that long ago, and the teacher had told the students they were there because of where they lived, just in this vague way, and they were really bothered by that. We had to do some real, sort of, groundwork initially to explain that and try and defuse that situation because they were quite resistant to the idea that they'd been chosen because of where they lived.

Another issue raised by participants is that of situations where friendship groups are unable to take up opportunities such as trips together because not all of the friends fall into the appropriate category. MW expands on this point:

> …some of the summer schools [have] so few pupils that hit the postcode criteria and they're not a friendship group or anything like that. So, when you offer a summer school to them, they're not a natural group to want to go away together and so they don't take up the opportunity, and that kind of thing. So, that's quite a frustration when there's good quality events on offer... Even if you just did a campus visit for the pupils sat in the postcode area, if one or two of their friends aren't going with them, then our pupils would opt out and choose not to go. That might be different in different schools but I certainly find that pupils are very reluctant to do things by themselves and not in their friendship groups.

From the Future U perspective, ET raises a similar issue – not of needing to find friendship groups, but simply groups that can work well together; if schools have only a few target learners, teachers might say: "'You're saying you can only run mentoring for these targeted learners, but I know them and they won't mash together in a group.' So, with the other schools [with more target learners] …they can still pick and choose who they feel would work well in a group."

Whilst many of our respondents felt that targeting rules for WP activity were an unwelcome constraint in practical terms, some were also philosophically opposed to targeting per se. MW, for example, felt that "In an ideal world we'd like to offer everything to everybody." For both him and CS, the categorisation of some learners as 'target' risked ignoring the needs of other pupils. As CS explains,

> You can have a child from a background where there's plenty of economic, social and cultural capital, who are lonely, who are at risk, maybe are being pushed a lot, maybe pushed into choosing careers options and going to colleges that they don't want to go to.

For NT, a broader school-based targeting is a fairer model; there is a sense of arbitrariness in the 'target learner' model:

> …often if we're just doing pupil premium… or whatever… actually there's many other pupils in our school who are in similar circumstances but may not be accessing pupil premium or free school meals that would then miss out on that opportunity on that basis… For me, the fairest way is looking at the school postcode and progression to higher education. We have lower than average progression rates to higher education and, therefore, all of the pupils that are in our school, for me, should be eligible to then access those programmes.

Concerns with external providers

One interesting point to bring out is that all six of our interviewees independently raised concerns or dissatisfaction at the WP activity offered by providers other than Future U. These concerns fell into a number of broad areas:

Difficulties fitting in with school routines

Some participants cited occasions when activities were produced without enough consideration of how they would fit into the school day. CS relates an example where a large manufacturer was offering an online guided tour around their facilities:

> …but these events are live. Well, yes, it sounds great that this event is live, it's really dynamic and you've got that ability for questions and answers, but in the practical school day, when there are lessons and things going ahead, it's very difficult to have a time where you can have pupils together to be able to engage with this. So I've just had to say no to so many things just because of that.

She notes, however, that some providers are beginning to realise that this type of problem may arise and pre-record content.

Although selection is, as discussed elsewhere in this report, a source of tension for all providers including Future U, it can be a particular issue with other providers who require a very specific target group to be assembled. LR cites the example of an attempt to work with an external organisation on a project to promote healthcare careers to boys, "but we found that it was just going to be too tricky to get all the permissions, and the curriculum time. It was too specific, and too hard to get all the permissions when it was all remote so we said that we couldn't do it."

Concerns about who the provider is, or what their motivations might be

There was a certain level of suspicion evident when it came to some providers of external WP activity. "There are a lot of organisations out there who would love some of the school money," noted PB, while CS has a concern with

> …private companies offering careers advice. I am a little bit wary of, for example, banks that offer careers support and training. I wonder how they're going to use that data that they collect from the students… I'm sure that there are lots of privacy notices and they don't use that data, but I do wonder sometimes just about the ethics with that, really.

On other occasions the issue is as simple as a lack of information about the provider. LR recalls the healthcare careers for boys activity mentioned above; the organisation was working with the NHS, "but when I spoke to our local NHS careers hub, they didn't really know much about them". As noted above, the programme ran into practical difficulties, but this lack of a local connection may well have impacted on the parties' abilities to sort out such issues.

Quality of content, particularly when it comes to pitching the activity at the right level.

The ability to speak to young people in an engaging way was pinpointed as an important facet of WP activity by several respondents, but it is not necessarily easy to get right. SJ gave the example of a session where senior leaders of a large regional business gave a talk to students:

> …for us as adults, we understand how important that is and how much time these people have given up, given that they will be so busy in their roles. So, for them to come and speak to young people is amazing. But I don't necessarily think that the young people really would appreciate that, and that that actually means for them, listening to those people at a young age.

This point relates back to that raised earlier about ensuring that the 'right person' delivers sessions; a more junior member of staff might have been more easy for the pupils to relate to.

More generally, on the issue of pitching sessions correctly, SJ notes that

> I can think of times when we've been to different activities and the children have been sat listening for quite long periods of time, and they don't really listen very well. Especially when it's people they don't really know. That might just be our students, but they find it very difficult to sit and listen for long periods of time.

By contrast, several providers noted that they could trust the quality of Future U provision.

Overload and the need for a 'hub' or 'filter' model of external WP provision

Related to earlier comments suggesting a lack of trust in certain external providers of WP activity is a feeling among some school staff of overwhelm amid a plethora of such offers. CS notes that "my inbox can be quite onerous sometimes," while MW comments that the irregularity of approaches can be more of an issue: "Sometimes it feels like perhaps you go for a period of time and nothing comes along and everything seems to come along at once."

At Future U, ET recognises the phenomenon.

> For some of them, I think they find it a bit overwhelming, and I do think a lot of them get a lot of emails saying, 'We can offer you this, we can offer you this.'… There's all different organisations offering activities, and I think it's finding out what's relevant and beneficial for their learners, and then being able to pull learners out of lessons for that. I think that's a big challenge for schools as well.

Depending on the structures used within the school to manage WP work, approaches from external organisations can be more or less burdensome, particularly if the designated lead has a number of other roles. NT, for example, is pleased to be offered activities but is sometimes not able to respond to everything:

> I think it's good that they're contacting us directly absolutely, [but] I think that given particularly my role in the school and my different areas of remit, often those direct emails might not get picked up or responded to. If I see it come through and I read it I will often try and forward it on to a member of staff for them to look into in more detail and see if it's something we would take part in.

The workload associated with investigating whether participating in offered activities is going to be worthwhile is also an issue. As NT puts it, "How do I best make that judgment as to what's going to work best for the pupils? I think that then involves quite a lot of admin type work of looking into this, 'What does this mean? What does this programme mean?' and it is a lot of information."

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that some of our interviewees are keen to work entirely or largely with Future U on WP activity. Even for those who take a broader view – such as CS, who "will work with any external provider that provides a good service… [I] would welcome any organisation," – a desire comes across for the ability to access some sort of information hub, or maybe a filter, to cut down on the noise and provide a level of quality assurance.

For some schools, Future U *is* this hub – in fact in three of the six schools we interviewed all or most WP activity came through Future U; these schools described themselves as "partnered" with Future U [HL], or saw Future U as "the main agency" [PB].

It is not surprising that schools with a very close relationship with the organisation were more willing to participate in this research; however it is interesting in itself to discover what it is that makes these schools so attracted to the programme, and we will address this further in later sections. But even where schools did not have quite such a tightly-bound relationship with Future U, it tended to

be one of a small number of organisations that the school worked with for WP; NT, for example, explains that "What I do is I try and have a few main providers who I know that I speak to and deal with for most of our activities so that I know I can contact them directly… Future U are one of those providers."

One thing these schools, and others, comment on is Future U's ability to link them up with other providers. Its status as a hub for funding – potentially subject to change, given recent government cuts to the programme – is also frequently commented on. PB, for example, notes that "I'll often dream up various initiatives and think, 'I wonder if Future U might be able to help?' It's all about WP. If I try to plan some visits to universities then Future U will often be there to help with some of the funding."

At Future U, MD would agree with this picture of how the organisation operates. "Schools feel like there's lots of choice, and sometimes they can only engage with so many things. We signpost to a lot of other stuff… I think we try and carve out a niche for ourselves, as all the Uni Connects do, as impartial outreach."

Even where schools do not identify Future U as a hub or first point of contact, a distinct enthusiasm for some such provision emerges. For CS, the recent formation of a Lancashire Careers Hub has the potential to fulfil such a function:

> They have a directory that I can click on and it tells me what's offered, so I can make more of an educated choice. I know what's on there comes from a legitimate source. So that's been really useful, and now, coming out of the pandemic situation, I think that, maybe, providers will go to Lancashire Careers Hub, and then they will act as intermediaries for us. It's needed that middle person to be there.

She notes as well that the hub provides an opportunity for schools to gather information and advice from each other: "We have a network meeting, and if somebody has done something that's worked well in school, we report back. So then other coordinators will think, 'Oh, that worked well for [that school]. We might give it a try.'"

Discussion

An issue that was consistently raised by our school participants was connected with the selection of target pupils. The impacts identified of having programmes for selected/target students only were reported as felt by both those selected and those not; these included:

- the exclusion of other students, including those who participants felt should have met criteria;
- the problem that selection highlighted the disadvantage of certain pupils, leading to stigma;
- the consequences of putting a group of students together who may not gel well as a group and how this can limit the effectiveness of the programme.

However there were a variety of views on how to deal with this; some participants indicated that they would like more ability to be flexible about which pupils are offered certain programmes, while others voiced a more ideological objection to selection of any sort. These issues around selection are not new, as our literature review reveals, and are likely to prove a somewhat intractable problem, certainly for organisations such as Uni Connect which are mandated by the government to deliver programmes to a specific mix of pupils. For other providers, who may follow less rigid specifications, it is worth taking note that views on selection can be strongly felt in schools.

Another difficulty, or range of difficulties, revolves around a variety of concerns with external WP providers *other than* Future U. It may be the case that those schools who would have expressed concerns about the quality of Future U provision have chosen not to participate in this study; however it is noticeable that concerns about other providers were raised by all participants. These concerns fell into three broad categories: misalignment with school routines, lack of information about who a provider is or what their motivations might be, and quality of content.

A final point of difficulty that was raised by several school representatives was an issue of overload – being approached by an unmanageable number of external providers, or not being sure who those providers were or what they were offering. This is likely to be connected to the concerns voiced above about the problems that can arise when working with external providers.

Overload can be more or less of a problem depending on how WP activity is co-ordinated within the school, but a general feeling emerges that some sort of central resource, either to act as a hub to signpost relevant activities, or as a filter for quality, is needed. For some of our schools Future U fulfils this purpose; as above, this is not a surprising finding, as the methods of recruitment for this study inevitably attracted participants with a closer relationship with Future U. However those who did not see Future U in this light also expressed a desire for central provision on this point. It may be worth considering whether this aspect of Future U's role can be developed in future, or whether it could build links with other organisations with the ability to fulfil this function.

Relationships with external providers

Schools and structures

Our participating schools used a variety of structures to organise WP activity, from an entirely centralised model to ones in which many members of staff were responsible for provision.

At one extreme is PB, who organises all WP provision in his school. A lot of his role, he explains, is liaison:

> I'm like the middle man in a lot of those things… Sometimes one workshop will be run by one teacher and then, the week after, the second… is being run by a different teacher. I've often got quite a few teachers that I'm trying to explain the process to but that's what I like… The teachers need to be well-informed of what's going to be happening because they're the main link with the children.

NT, by contrast, sees benefits in their school's model, which distributes WP responsibility in a more diffuse structure:

> What we have tried to do… is to devolve it, because we don't want careers to sit outside of everything else that the school does and to be seen as an add-on… because actually if you are teaching maths and you have students that want to go and study maths at university, then you're the best person to do that work with those students, not me.

The approach is similar in CS's school, where many individual teachers are involved and after-school activities and trips are treated as a part of their curriculum. Although CS says that "I think the curriculum leader or individual teachers would want to have that freedom to do that too with the pupils", she does wonder whether this arrangement is the optimal situation, especially in instances where senior leaders become involved in organising activities, as this can lead to "a bit of a two-tier situation". She adds: "I think the positive thing is for the pupils, when they're thinking, 'Yes, there's loads to do,' when it could also be a little bit confusing, and maybe there could be some things that are being missed as well that people working together... There could be two people doing quite similar things, really. So yes, I think if that's brought together, that would be really useful."

PB, meanwhile, seems content with his situation as "the middle man": "I think you need someone in this sort of role to be able to do that and hopefully link it all together and be there for the visitors as a focus in school, someone that they can email or talk to and they know it's the same person each time who is helping coordinate the activities. Otherwise there's a sort of breakdown and no one knows what everyone else is doing." However it comes with its own stresses, as he explains:

> I need to make sure that the teachers in school are happy with everything that I'm asking them to do… They're in charge of 30 children. I'm then asking them to put their trust in me. I'm putting our trust in this external provider. I need to know that it's going to be good. Otherwise that teacher has got 30 children who aren't engaged, and that can be quite difficult in a school environment… I feel that, when some things don't go right, I've sometimes put the teacher in a difficult position. I don't like that. As much planning as possible, hopefully, makes it alright in the end.

For the provider, as represented by our Future U participants, it is clear that having a single point of contact within a school is greatly preferred. As MD puts it:

> Some schools have specific careers people or progression people or mentoring people or whatever in their school, that's what they do exclusively. Others have, you know, a French

> teacher, a design technology teacher or whoever who's offered a TLR, which is like a bonus bit of responsibility… on top of all the other stuff you do. So, that, obviously, minimises the time that that person in a school has to concentrate and deal with all of the stuff. So, that can be very difficult, and it's hard because, obviously, we know how overwhelmed and overworked teachers are, and an extra thing to do, an extra email to reply to is not always the thing that they focus on. So, I think, yes, it's that point of contact really and the relationship that you can establish with them, and their enthusiasm for it.

Is partnership possible?

Although we have seen that a very close working relationship exists between Future U and certain schools, the question of how this relationship is viewed within the school is a complex one. We were interested to discover whether schools felt a sense of partnership with, or ownership of, Future U, or whether its activities were more something 'done to' the schools, as discussed in the literature review. The responses to this question from our six schools was mixed. For example LR, who began her interview by volunteering that the school was, in her words, "partnered" with Future U, then went on to say that "We would be more of an end user, rather than shaping how it's run."

PB, on the other hand, "definitely" felt a sense of partnership with Future U. "They're always open to our ideas," she said. "I'd like to think that there's a partnership involved there." By contrast, NT described the relationship as "a supplier agreement," and MW notes that "…as far as Future U and WP, basically, we get the opportunity to take advantage of things that are done to us or done for us rather than us saying, 'This is what we want.' "

To what extent it would be practicable to involve schools more as partners with Future U is debatable, although some of our participants felt that it would have distinct benefits. SJ argued that it was important for schools to be involved with the development of WP programmes more generally:

> Because it's for the students, isn't it? We are the ones who know the students, we work with the students every day, so having our input I think is crucial. Because once you've left school, or maybe you're not working in a school, you might not have that same vision really of what the students actually need. But then, equally, I think it's important for us to understand what employers and universities need as well. So, it has to be a two-way street, there has to be good communication, I think, all round.

With Future U specifically in mind, she was keen to forge a closer partnership, noting that she would describe activities as having come *from* Future U rather than as something the school was doing *with* Future U. She would like the opportunity to develop more of a sense of ownership, viewing it as "a nice forward step," given the length of their relationship.

Maybe there is a distinction to be made between 'partnership' – a sense of joint endeavour – and 'ownership', which employs a joint creation. MD thinks that the latter is probably not a realistic characterisation of the possible relationship between schools and Future U:

> Obviously, we run the sessions. So, they're never going to take ownership over what they're doing, but they have facilitated it, and I think there is a positive aspect when they come. If you've got a really good school contact, often they try and be there and take part in things, and when they do that aspect, they get the reward, even if not the ownership of it, because they are responsible for facilitating something that is clearly having a positive impact on learners.

And not every participant was concerned about the idea of a 'supplier' model. NT, for example, is happy with the status quo:

> There are set activities and set programmes that students can access. The providers that I work with do tend to say to me, 'If there's anything else that you think of, or if there's anything else that you would like us to get involved in…' so they do offer that, but with the busy-ness of the school it's often quite difficult to actually sit down and plan those kind of activities that might be additional. As long as what's being offered to us is quality and is useful and beneficial then from my perspective as a school. I am quite happy to have those offered to me.

When it comes to the question of whether schools and Future U have opportunities to sit down and reflect on what has worked well or less well, there was a consensus that these had not arisen. A lack of time was cited by some, while others noted that they had given some operational feedback but nothing deeper. There had, however, been some occasions on which schools had worked with Future U to edit or reshape programmes to fit their needs.

At Future U, ET echoes this depiction. "Although we have this, sort of, set offering of outreach activities, we do have capacity in the team to tailor activities to what schools need. So, often, schools will say, 'Actually, we already do all of this, but this is the gap that we need you to fill. Can you help?' and if we can, obviously, we will."

Interestingly, some examples given by school staff were to do with making online Covid-secure activities fit better within the school routine, suggesting that the pressures of the pandemic might have actually prompted a greater degree of joint working than had previously been the case.

Personal relationships

Although a sense of partnership was not felt by all study participants, the personal relationship that had developed between the school representative and their Future U contact was raised repeatedly and approvingly. Again, it is important to note that participation in this study was in part predicated on the existence of such a relationship, but nevertheless it is worthwhile examining this in more detail as it is clearly a factor in the extent and depth of a school's interactions with Future U.

One facet that emerges is the importance of the length of the relationship that has been built up between the school and Future U. This longevity has worked to build trust, not only that activities provided will be of a consistently high quality, but that Future U is available to help. PB describes:

> I've worked a couple of years with that person, doing various workshops. I know that this works, I've got confidence in that and I know it's going to work in school…The relationship that we've built up over time, that they're an email away and they'll always help wherever necessary.

Interestingly, these strong relationships are just as important when seen from the provider aspect. At Future U, MD says:

> A consistent point of contact is significant. That's one of the issues we often have, is that the person who is in charge of these things in school shifts and change. So, that can be difficult because often we don't know that. So, we end up getting no emails back and then we chase it up with a more generic reception email or something, or headteacher email, and get passed off to a different person. That can be difficult.

Meanwhile when we asked ET what WP would look like in an ideal world, they focused on the optimal relationship with the school contact:

> It would be with someone who doesn't necessarily need to have all the careers knowledge themselves, or understand WP themselves, but really passionate about their students and wanting the best for their students. Being able to tell me, based on their experience for their specific students, not just in general, what they need and the barriers facing their learners and how they think we can help to overcome them.

Having a strong relationship is also helpful when it comes to potentially stressful aspects such as the bureaucracy associated with participating in programmes from external providers; as SJ notes, "We've always worked together really well, there has never been an issue around paperwork… we just get stuff done."

For some of our participants, this ongoing relationship in part obviates the need for a formal joint reflection, as discussed in the previous section. MW describes a freedom "to say, 'This is good but you could do this a bit differently' and that kind of thing". This is echoed by MD at Future U, who espouses the value of a "continual dialogue about what works, what doesn't work, what might work in the future, how we could adapt what we're doing," but adds that such conversations tend to be on an operational level:

> I don't think we reflect on how well our relationship works, if that makes sense. I think we try and be sympathetic to the situation that they're in and understanding of their lack of time and things like that. Yes, so it's more a reflection on the sessions and the activities than it is on the relationship.

CS, meanwhile, finds her contact MD very approachable and values their opinions – "I definitely feel comfortable contacting MD and saying, 'Could we have a chat?' I feel comfortable that [they] would respond well to that," – and wonders whether it is, in fact, her who is in part preventing that joint reflection from happening.

> I think, maybe, I've just come to an acceptance that external providers are all wanting to provide WP activities to pupils. Maybe it's a case of I need to go back to them as well. Maybe I've just seen what's come along and not really gone back to them about things, yes. Yes, I'd say it's something that can be developed.

Discussion

There was a heterogeneity of approaches between our schools as to how WP activity and co-ordination was organised, from highly centralised to highly decentralised models. There can be advantages either way for schools; in the centralised model there is oversight of the full-school approach by one person, who can also act as a primary contact for external providers, while in the more devolved approach, subject-specific WP activity can be arranged by the appropriate department and may be seen by all as an integral part of the educational function, rather than an 'add-on'.

From the point of view of our Future U practitioners, meanwhile, having a central point of contact within a school emerged as a key criterion for a successful relationship. This is clearly not incompatible with a somewhat devolved model, however, as some of the schools which described diffuse WP structures also had strong relationships with the Future U team. There is a question here for school leadership teams about how they can effectively maintain a devolved WP model while making the most of relationships with external providers.

The relationship between the schools that we spoke to and the Future U team, and by extension other providers with whom they work closely, emerges as a complex one. This is evidenced by, for example, the same interviewee describing themselves as "partnered" with Future U but then later the school as an "end user". The question of to what extent schools can feel 'ownership' over Future U and other externally-provided activities is a problematic one, in that ultimately Future U design and run their sessions. Maybe it is better to think of the ideal relationship as one of 'partnership', in which WP activity is seen as a joint endeavour, in which all parties are clear that they are working towards the same goals.

There was certainly evidence of an appetite for closer collaboration between WP organisations and the schools, both in development and design of activities and, as mentioned earlier, in building comprehensive evaluation strategies. It is, however, important to note that not all schools felt such a desire; rather, some were happier in a role purely as recipients of WP activity, feeling that the multiplicity of tasks already facing schools precluded any greater involvement.

Finally, the importance of the quality of the personal relationship between our school participants and their Future U contacts emerged repeatedly during our interviews. The relationship facilitates ease of communication, smooths over difficulties with bureaucracy and provides reassurance on both sides that a quality WP session will be delivered. A continual informal dialogue can in some cases mitigate the need for joint evaluation or consultation that emerges elsewhere in this report, and can also facilitate the personalisation of sessions for the individual school's need. Having said this, it is important to note that this study was conducted with schools where this personal relationship already existed; it would be useful in future to canvass the views of those establishments which had chosen not to work with Future U.

Conclusions and recommendations

It is rare that schools are given the opportunity to comment on WP activity from external providers, despite the significant length of time that such operations, in a variety of forms, have been present in the UK. Where schools' opinions have been sought, this has usually been in the context of evaluating programmes at an operational level, with little attention given to how they might view the overarching aims of WP activity or any suggestions they might have as to how current structures might be improved. In this report, therefore, we aimed to centre the authentic voices of school representatives and allow them space to reflect on the way things are, and how they could or should be.

In terms of how the aims of WP activity are viewed by schools, our participants felt in broad terms that the objective was to show pupils what a university 'is' and 'does'. Further, young people needed to understand how they could fit into the university setting, by being given both practical information and a sense of how they might benefit and the nature of student life.

A few clear messages about the practical aspects of WP activity came through; in a finding that echoes that of Raven, many school participants pinpointed campus visits as a particularly useful type of intervention, with some feeling that their use could be extended either in terms of who attends or the duration of the visits. Issues of selection of who could participate in activities, meanwhile, were raised repeatedly by respondents, although views varied as to how to improve this situation.

One thing that was clear from our discussions was that school representatives had interesting thoughts about how to make WP activities more appealing and useful to young people, as well as more convenient for schools to participate in. Suggestions included organisations involving younger, relatable staff in session delivery; introducing structured, overarching WP programmes that could be tracked through the pupil's school journey; and more activities related to the curriculum or with a subject-specific slant. In general, there was an appetite for greater engagement in activity development, and school representatives expressed a desire that their voices be heard in this regard.

An area for potential joint development that was highlighted was in evaluation of the impact and efficacy of WP activities. Schools reported that very little was currently done to assess this, although some had begun to introduce processes that would facilitate this in the future; many were interested in the possibilities for collective endeavour with Future U on this point.

An important takeaway is that some schools expressed a sense of 'overload' with the amount of external providers that were offering their services. Concerns were raised about the activities provided by some organisations other than Future U, in areas such as their ability to fit in with school routines, quality of provision, and the identity and motivations of providers. Leading on from this, schools indicated a need for some sort of 'hub' or 'filter' model whereby providers could be vetted or recommended. In some cases Future U was seen to fulfil this role.

Another point to ponder is the structure of the relationship between schools and Future U/other WP providers. There is some complexity about how this should be viewed: whether there is, or can be, a sense of partnership between the organisations, or whether a provider/end user relationship applies. Although there are practical limitations as to how involved schools can be in the operations of external providers, in many cases there was an enthusiasm for a closer, more collaborative relationship; some, however preferred the existing relationship due to time constraints.

Finally, the strength of the personal relationship between schools and Future U contacts was commented on repeatedly. Although the study's recruitment was biased towards schools who had such a relationship, the value of this in terms of communication, problem-solving and quality assurance was manifest. Whilst schools, as mentioned, would in many cases like more consultation and joint endeavour to take place, a continuing informal dialogue in part served this purpose and in some cases facilitated a level of personalisation of activities.

The above analysis leads us to make the following recommendations, some of which are relevant for WP providers generally, some for Future U specifically, and some for schools.

1. Many school contacts are eager to collaborate more with WP providers and to feel more of a sense of 'partnership' with their endeavours. Both parties should consider whether it is possible to make time in busy schedules for some brief periods of joint reflection on what works and what could be improved.
2. Collaboration on evaluating the impacts of WP activity could be beneficial to both schools and providers, and could also contribute to the wider understanding of 'what works'.
3. The school participants in our study suggested the following practical steps that providers could take to improve WP activity:
    a. More campus visits, offered to a wider range of groups including younger ages, and potentially over longer timeframes;
    b. Emphasis on involving younger/more junior members of staff, who pupils may relate to, in activity delivery;
    c. Overarching WP programmes with an ongoing structure that tracks pupils through the school cycle;
    d. A greater range of activities which are related to the school curriculum or are subject-specific.
4. Selection of pupils to participate in WP activity remains a controversial issue, as it has been for the last two decades. Providers who are able to be slightly more flexible about their target cohorts will find it easier to work with schools to deliver sessions. For those whose targets are government-mandated, a continued dialogue with schools will be necessary to smooth over such difficulties.
5. As schools begin to return to normality in 2021/22, it may be that it is beneficial to keep some WP activity online, both from the perspective of easing issues with selection and fitting in better with the school curriculum. However it is important that any permanent move online does not reduce the impact of activities. Consultation between providers and schools will be necessary to find the optimum outcome.
6. Issues of 'overload', together with concerns about the approach of some external WP providers, lead schools to seek a 'hub' or 'filter' organisation that can signpost them and provide some assurance of quality. Future U already fulfils this role to an extent; it may be beneficial to explore whether it is possible to expand or further publicise this function.
7. Schools have a variety of structures for organising WP provision, and there are benefits to both a centralised and more diffuse model. However they should consider the importance of making a single point of contact available for external providers if they wish to fully benefit from the activities and programmes which are available.

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