

Situating the evidence for impact of outreach strategies: A systematic review for improving access to higher education

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Abstract Efforts to widen participation into higher education (HE) are having an impact with increasing numbers of diverse students accessing HE. Outreach is a key strategy within widening participation (WP), yet there has been little peer reviewed, published evidence regarding how outreach is identified, situated and understood. This paper addresses this gap, presenting a systematic review of published research examining how the impact of WP outreach is identified and understood in UK research. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) checklist was used to frame the review and empirical studies focusing upon outreach (2005–15) were included. Papers excluded were focused on international, part-time students or those not focused upon WP outreach. Twenty-six papers were identified for inclusion and these were analysed thematically. The analysis identified themes of person-centred impact, raising aspirations, and social capital, addressing ‘how and why’ questions rather than the ‘what works’ question judged by the impact of outreach on student numbers. Doing so can enable improvements in the design of outreach activities addressing individual experiences alongside structural barriers. Ultimately, this analysis suggests there is insufficient systematic evidence regarding the impact of outreach on the underlying structural factors shaping access to higher education.

Key words Widening participation; fair access; outreach; higher education

Background and policy context

Funding of higher education (HE) within the United Kingdom (UK) is complex; devolved nations (Scotland and Wales) manage and fund HE differently to England. Within England, the Higher Education Act 2004 heralded a new tuition fee regime, enabling universities and colleges to charge variable fees, provided they could articulate how they would use the higher fee income to support disadvantaged students to enter and progress through HE (Wardrop et al., 2016). This provision is assessed and monitored annually through access agreements and monitoring returns, introduced in 2005 by the regulatory body, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). In 2018 this responsibility moved to the new Office for Students (OfS) which amalgamated the responsibilities of both OFFA and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Evidence by OFFA (2015) highlights that young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are now much more likely to enter HE, than they were a decade ago. Yet despite this success, evidence persists regarding inequity of opportunity and outcomes for some student groups. Data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) identifies that individuals from the most advantaged groups remain 2.4 times more likely to apply to HE than their less advantaged peers (UCAS, 2017) and 6.3 times more likely to attend a prestigious high tariff Russell Group university (BIS, 2016). In addition to inequity of access, there is also evidence that students from WP groups are less likely to succeed at university: for example, the HEFCE (HEFCE, 2016) review of non-continuation rates revealed that black entrants have the highest percentage of attrition (11 per cent in 2012–13 compared with white entrants at 6.5 per cent), even though they may have entered HE with similar entry grades. These structural factors clearly demonstrate more work is needed to ensure fair access to and support within HE.

In response to these continuing contextual and structural inequities, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) (BIS, 2016) identified specific

goals for WP: to double the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering university in 2020 compared to 2009 and to increase the number of black and minority ethnic (BME) students by 20 per cent by 2020. Additionally, the BIS report (2016) identifies the need to increase participation among young white males from lower socio-economic groups, who are currently five times less likely to enter HE compared to advantaged white males, and to support participation of students with disabilities.

Raising aspirations to, and encouraging participation in, HE for students demonstrating potential to succeed, are central tenets for fair access and WP and initiatives and activities undertaken are often referred to as 'outreach'. While we have identified outreach as a central component of WP activity, the term itself is rather nebulous and can be seen from a specific activity focused perspective, encompassing any initiatives designed to raise aspirations to HE, to a more generic structural perspective which seeks to understand the socio-economic inequalities that exist in education. Outreach is defined by the Higher Education Academy (2014; 3) as 'any activity that involves raising aspirations and attainment and encouraging students from under-represented groups to apply to higher education'. For the purpose of this review, outreach is defined as a range of activities between HE institutions and stakeholders designed to raise aspirations towards HE from WP groups beyond the normal provision of careers information and guidance. Examples include HE students visiting schools and working with pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds or residential summer schools where young people from disadvantaged backgrounds spend time at a university to expose them to undergraduate life experience. The central purpose is to raise aspirations and break down contextual and structural barriers for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds which ultimately may prevent them applying to HE.

Such widening participation outreach initiatives are not new; between 2005–2011 HEFCE funded the AimHigher scheme which aimed to raise aspirations and develop the capabilities of young people from lower socio-economic groups, BME

groups and people with disabilities. However despite this national initiative, the majority of outreach activities were locally led and delivered; either part of a competitive marketing and admissions process (Harrison and Waller, 2017), or driven by policy initiatives such as access agreements, introduced in 2005 with returns monitored through OffA but geared to individual institutional targets. As such, sharing of knowledge and information regarding the effects and impacts of outreach strategies largely lay within the gift of individual HE institutions rather than being publicly shared due to the nature of competition between different HE providers to attract more students or concerns regarding reputational risk. This lack of collaborative practice has contributed to the limited evidence base regarding the impact of outreach activities, identifying not only what approaches were successful and why but also what approaches were not successful and why.

Between 2014 and 2016 there was an increased focus on national approaches to outreach promoting collaborative practice through the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) scheme set up to provide coordinated outreach to schools and colleges (BIS, 2016). In 2017 this was superseded by the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), which focuses on increasing progression of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to HE, and has shifted outreach activity from raising aspiration towards an emphasis on impact of actual numbers of young people from disadvantaged groups attending HE. This programme consists of 29 partnerships of stakeholder groups (HE, further education, schools, employers and third sector organisations) working together to undertake outreach activity to young people (aged 13–16) in local areas where participation in HE is lower than would be expected given local GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) results. Critiques of these schemes challenge their focus on secondary education, ignoring the impact of primary schooling on young people's aspirations to attend HE. That said, this paper enables a timely review on how outreach is being situated, identified and understood so that lessons can be shared. Understanding how universities and colleges can work

more effectively with other sectors to achieve impacts in outreach is of real importance both socially and economically.

Reviews on outreach

Systematic reviews usually focus on questions of ‘what works’, drawing on experimental and quasi-experimental studies of the effects of interventions (Torgerson et al., 2014; Evans et al., 2017). Torgerson et al.’s (2014) study funded by Sutton Trust charity (which focuses on improving social mobility and addressing educational disadvantage) examined evidence supporting effective outreach strategies and reported a significant lack of robust research evidence identifying what actually works to support disadvantaged young people to access and succeed in HE. They focused on evidence which tested these strategies using systematic review, meta-analysis, experimental, regression discontinuity and other quasi-experimental designs intended to ensure rigour. The research included was undertaken mainly in the United States, where the context and sample populations for university access differ from England, making for limited generalisability to the UK context; it found no UK-based evaluations of university access strategies and approaches using randomised experimental designs. In contrast, Evans et al. (2017) argued for realistic evaluation, asking a more nuanced question: ‘what works for whom in what circumstances?’, widening the scope of reviews to reveal components for reproducible impacts and adaptations to accommodate different contexts. Our systematic review builds upon the work of Torgerson et al. (2014) and Younger et al. (2018) by examining not what works, but how the impact of outreach is being situated, identified and understood in the diverse contexts and settings that UK WP research takes place. While our criteria for inclusion focused on specific activities, our analysis and interpretation of findings identified, or sought to identify and respond to the deeper structural barriers. We argue that explicating how outreach initiatives are identified and understood can lead to more focused, nuanced and integrated improvements in the design of outreach activities which can address both individual experiences and structural barriers.

Method

The research question guiding this review was ‘how does current research identify and understand impact in outreach?’. The aim was to provide a systematic review of published studies on outreach initiatives in WP in the UK. The objective was to examine the degree and depth to which the studies indicated and explained the impact of outreach activities.

Eligibility criteria

When conducting any review, it is paramount to ensure the correct identification of search terms. As this review did not include comparators, search terms were identified using the PEO format (Methley et al., 2014), terms were identified and agreed across all inter-disciplinary members of the research team (for full search terms used, see Table 1). The review adopted the four stage Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to manage the search process, flow of information, and reporting (Liberati et al., 2009). Inclusion criteria included UK peer reviewed, published research focused on outreach with full-time undergraduate UK/EU students, and that was published in English. Exclusion criteria included international, mature and part-time students as well as papers which focused on retention, attrition, continuation and lifelong learning. These criteria steered the focus of the review which was to explore how impact of WP outreach is identified and understood in current UK research.

Search strategy

In the first stage (identification), searches were conducted using the university’s iteration of the EBSCO Discovery Service, enabling concurrent systematic searching of numerous bibliographic databases (e.g. Business Source Complete, CINAHL, Education Source, ERIC, PsychINFO, Scopus, SocINDEX and, Web of Science). Searches were undertaken on papers published between 2005 and 2015. 2005 was chosen as a starting point, being the year that OFFA was established. Searches were limited to English language and focused on outreach research in WP undertaken in the UK. The UK was chosen as a limiter to enable the focus on

impact of outreach activities promoted as a key aspect of UK WP policy. 847 records (Figure 1) were identified through the initial searches, which were screened for relevance.

Screening and selection

Throughout the screening and eligibility stages (stages 2 and 3) of the screening and selection process, various quality assurance mechanisms were introduced ensuring consistency of the screening process. Initially in stage 2 (screening), thirty papers were shared across three of the research team [VH, MH, AW] who reviewed them individually and then collectively in order to develop a clear set of agreed criteria (see Table 1) by which the rest of the papers would be reviewed. Following this, all of the identified records (after duplications were removed n=847) were shared across three of the research team [VH, AW, MH], who reviewed them individually against the set of agreed inclusion/exclusion criteria. Following the independent review, there was another group meeting to randomly assess and quality assure individual decisions made at stage 1. At this stage, 754 records were excluded: due to duplication, being non-UK based, not focused upon the population (WP) or upon exposure (outreach) – see Figure 1.

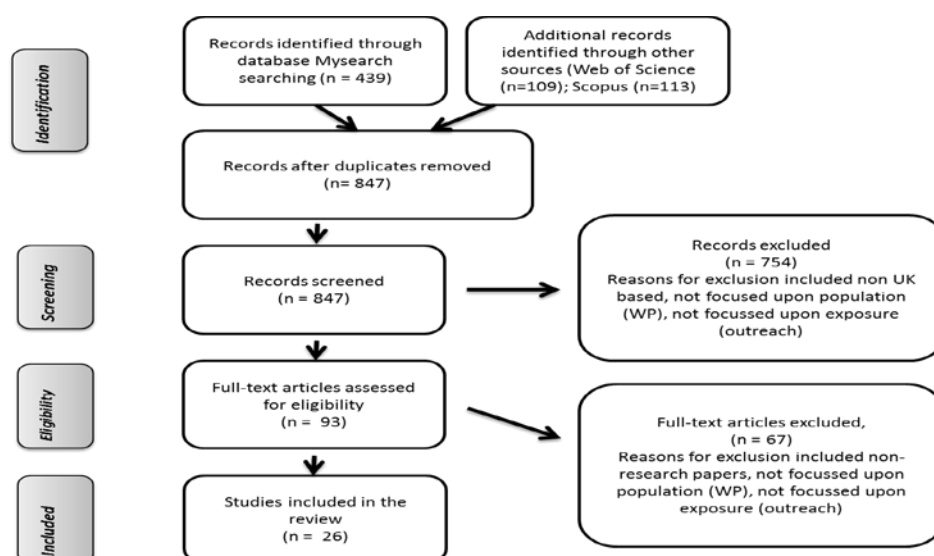


Figure 1: PRISMA (Liberati et al., 2009)

Confirming eligibility

In stage 3 (eligibility), the full text of each paper (n=93) was reviewed separately by three authors [AW, VH, MH] to validate judgements on the pre-determined inclusion/exclusion criteria (Table 1) and to minimise the possibility of researcher bias (Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 2009). At this stage each author was allocated papers they had not reviewed during stage 2 (papers MH reviewed in stage 2 were assessed by VH and AW; papers VH reviewed in stage 2 were assessed by AW and MH; and papers AW reviewed in stage 2 were assessed by VH and MH), thus further ensuring the rigour of the review process. At this stage a further 67 papers were excluded as being non-research based, not focused upon the population (WP), or the exposure (outreach).

Table 1: PEO framework, inclusion/exclusion criteria

Population (P)		Exposure (E)	Outcome (O)
Target groups experiencing widening participation		Outreach activities	Access to higher education
Low income Low participation Socio-economic group Working class Black and ethnic minority BAME/BME Ethnic minority Care leavers Looked after Disabled Young carers Disadvantaged Pupil premium Free school meals Deprived	Widening participation Fair access Widening access Education equity Education justice Access Outreach	Outreach Mentoring Residential programmes Summer schools Tutoring Community Engagement Taster days School visits (Aspiration) (Attainment)	Higher education University HEIs Degree Undergraduate Russell Group Elite Pre-1992 Post-1992
Inclusion/exclusion criteria			
Inclusion		Exclusion	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-time undergraduate • Home/EU students • Outreach (not retention) • English language • UK research 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International students • Mature students • Retention • Attrition • Non-continuation • Lifelong learning • Part-time 	

This resulted in 26 papers being included in the final review. During this stage a deeper, more critical analysis of the texts was conducted, highlighting different research designs, sampling methods, conclusions and recommendations (Table 2). The papers were also reviewed using critical appraisal tools (CASP, 2013 for qualitative studies and Moule et al., 2003 for quantitative or mixed methods studies) to assess the research quality. This critical appraisal process led to assessments being made regarding the quality of the research studies (Table 3). For example, if the review scored yes for all of the critical appraisal criteria (e.g. clearly addressing a focused research aim or question, using an appropriate research design and methods, demonstrating robust data collection processes and analysis) it was considered of high quality. Conversely, a judgement of low quality was made when the critical appraisal process identified the paper did not clearly articulate the research aim/question or did not demonstrate robust methodology or data analysis. Following the critical appraisal process the papers were then analysed thematically [by AW, VH, MH] to identify themes which were discussed with the wider research team to minimise researcher bias.

Table 2: Papers included in the review

Key lower socio-economic groups (LSE), black and minority ethnic groups (BME), low participation groups (LPG)

Source	WP group & outreach type	Aims	Methods	Findings	Limitations and critical appraisal tool using either CASP or Moule et al. (2003)
Basit, T. (2012)	BME/lack of outreach support	Exploring educational, career aspirations and experiences of young BME	Qualitative in-depth interviews (n=20) with BME aged 14–24	Social and cultural capital plays significant role in enabling young BME citizens to succeed in education and career	Based in one city, limited information regarding analysis
Baxter, A. et al. (2007)	LPG/Aimhigher	Examining extent policy evidenced in attitudes/aspirations of WP pupils	Mixed method; questionnaire to Year 11 pupils/parents (n=240). Interviews with pupils and focus groups with teachers/Aimhigher coordinators	Themes included focus on university, the 'deficit' model, economic rationalities and attitudes to university. Whilst Aimhigher interventions welcomed for deciding about HE but should include rejection of HE	Based in one region, limited information regarding analysis
Bradley, J. and Miller, A. (2010)	LSE/outreach not specified	Viewpoints of Year 12 pupils from lower socio-economic groups	A Q-methodological study with 53 Year 12 pupils	Five distinct viewpoints re HE (positive, put off, perplexed, pragmatic and other plans)	Based in two schools and one college
Brown, G. (2011)	LSE/Aimhigher	Exploring aspirations	Discourse analysis on reports & policy documents (2008–2009). Secondary analysis of interview transcripts (12 WP practitioners) and a focus group with 14-year-old working class students	Four approaches to aspiration (orientation to future, aspiration raising, emotional disposition and entanglements). Young people were aspirational, but this did not solely focus on HE	Single site, limited information regarding analysis.
Burke, P. (2006)	Gender/outreach not specified	Ways male students talk about aspirations	Qualitative, (n= 38) men taking access and foundation programmes	Aspirations were complex and linked to structural, cultural and discursive relations and practices. Danger of exacerbating social inequalities further through deficit construction	Small single site study

Burke, P. (2011)	BME, mature students/outreach not specified	Exploring men's educational experiences and aspirations	Qualitative, in-depth interviews (n=39) with men from twenty different countries	Men's educational access and participation linked to fluid and contradictory constructions of masculinity. Aspirations to HE were related to history, culture and power	Five different universities in the same region
Byrom, T. (2009)	LSE/summer school	Experiences of young people considering HE	Qualitative, (n=16) students at Sutton Trust summer school. Multiple methods of data collection	Teachers influential in consideration of/application to HE. Transition is a complex process through mediation of the habitus	Single site study
Casey, R. et al. (2011)	LSE/outreach intervention programme	Analysis of a gifted and talented programme	Mixed methods (n=80) Year 8 students. Questionnaires, analysis of attainment data, and interviews	Programme benefited students at a personal level. Some parents recognised benefit of programme but engagement limited due to lack of confidence and discomfort. Deficits in knowledge in English and maths identified	Single site study, with no comparison group. Limited information regarding analysis
Greenhalgh, T. et al. (2006)	LSE and BME/summer school	Review summer school for LSE/BME considering medical school	Action research (n=40 pupils). Interviews (pupils), focus groups (pupils, parents, teachers, medical student assistants, NHS staff)	Raised confidence and motivation to apply to medical school. Critical success factors were respect; group work, inclusion of medical students and vision/leadership from senior staff	Limited information regarding analysis. Single site study
Haight, A. (2012)	LSE/outreach not specified	Analysis of attitudes and experiences of engineering students and teachers	Case study (n= 94), engineering students. Mixed methods, questionnaire and interviews with engineering teachers (n=6) and students (n=10)	Strong preference for practical, hands-on aspects of their engineering courses	Limited information regarding analysis. Single site study
Hatt, S. et al. (2008)	LSE/Aimhigher	Teachers' perceptions regarding Aimhigher	Questionnaire to target schools (n=98, response rate 56%)	Built learner confidence and self-esteem. Impact on learner identities went beyond attitudinal gain towards altering behaviour, promoting educational progression	Limited information regarding analysis. Study in one city

la Velle, L et al. (2013)	LSE/mentorship scheme	School/HE partnership to encourage HE	Mixed method. Questionnaire to secondary (n=487 pupils) and primary (n=78 pupils) schools. Focus group/interviews with teaching staff	While pupils had high aspirations to HE, they perceived their teachers had low aspirations for them to attend HE	Short period between pre/post questionnaires. Regional focus
Loughrey, D. and Woods, C. (2010)	LSE/arts-based programme	Enhancing educational opportunities of young people	Qualitative study, primary school (n=3) in socio-economically disadvantaged area. Interviews (teachers, artists and parents)	Learning occurred in/through, the arts, raising motivation and self-esteem. Limited parental involvement but those who did reported positive changes in children's attitudes to school and increased confidence in their role in supporting education	Limited information on parental involvement, children not interviewed. Study in one area
Loveday, V. (2015)	Working class/open book (Aimhigher)	Relationship between working class and social/cultural mobility	Qualitative narrative interview study (n=8)	Moving landscape of HE, perspectives of class and mobility. Participants did not necessarily aspire to social mobility	Limited information regarding analysis and sampling.
Maras, P. (2007)	WP group not specified/Aimhigher	Changes in students attitudes towards HE	Longitudinal study. Two cohorts (total n=2526); cohort 1 (2003 n=1074), cohort 2 (2004 n=1452). Questionnaire and data analysis on attainment	Students aged 14-15 were more negative than older or younger students. Girls were more positive than boys about education generally but boys more positive about Aimhigher activities	Study in one city
Marcenaro-Gutiérrez, O. et al. (2007)	Socio-economic backgrounds/outreach not specified	Changing association between socio-economic background and HE	Youth Cohort Study (YCS) data set between 1994-2000 (4 cohorts of individuals aged 18 in 1994, 1996, 1998 and 2000).	Social class inequality in HE participation, students from higher socio-economic groups had a 6 percentage point higher probability of HE participation than students from LSEs	Non-response and attrition problem in YCS
Morrison, A. (2010)	LSE/outreach not specified	Exploring educational experiences and ambitions of working class students	Part of a larger study. Qualitative in-depth ethnographic interviews (n=2), of young working class women	Students struggled with school education. Personal effort and familial support were crucial in overcoming these	Very small scale study

Morrison, A. (2011)	Socio-economic groups/outreach not specified	Exploring educational experiences and ambitions of middle class students	Qualitative study (n=3) middle class students who rejected HE	Financial considerations influenced decision making to attend HE and not all young people want to attend HE	Very small scale
Richardson, M., Hunt, J. (2013)	Mature/summer school	Exploring family based summer school approach	27 mature students attending summer school with childcare. Questionnaire and feedback sessions from 24 participants	Barriers to HE included personal (fitting in, anxiety and confidence) and structural (childcare)	Single site study
Robb, N. et al. (2007)	LSE/summer school	Aspiration to consider medical school.	Qualitative study, biographical life narrative interviews (n=38) with students from LSE groups considering medical school	Academic success depends upon construction of a coherent identity, supporting concept of 'ethnic capital' driving educational achievement	Small scale, single site research
Singleton, A. (2012)	LSE/geography ambassador scheme	Exploring GCSE geography rates across the UK	Secondary data analysis of National Pupil Database, Acorn geodemographic classifications and records of the Geography Ambassador scheme (n=500)	Students living in affluent areas are 1.5 times more likely to study GCSE Geography and get higher grades than students in LSE areas. Impact of the ambassador scheme is not known	No analysis of impact of mentoring scheme
Smith, S. et al. (2013)	LSE/e-mentors	Describing/evaluating e-mentoring strategy providing support and advice regarding medical school	Questionnaire over three year period (n= 147) evaluating e-mentoring strategy	Of 40 students responding, 73% applied to study Medicine or Dentistry; remaining applied to bioscience-related degrees. E-mentoring was seen as positive	Small scale, single site study. Limited information regarding analysis
Taylor, Y. (2008)	WP group not specified, mentorship and summer school	Exploring how students market their university, and promote the worth of studying at HE	Qualitative study (n=8) interviews with student ambassadors in WP schemes	Student ambassadors' motivation linked to developing skills; knowledge and experience to benefit CVs. They identified challenges between rhetoric and reality of aspiration	Single site study. Limited information regarding analysis

Wilson et al. (2014)	LSE/mentoring	Intergenerational mentoring for young people from LSE communities	Qualitative study in large secondary school. Mentors from university alumni. Interviews with mentors and pupils on three occasions	Young people were unfamiliar with HE and also lacked personal contacts to help in consideration and application to HE. Intergenerational mentoring can ameliorate this	Single site study. Limited information regarding analysis
Ylonen, A. (2010)	WP group not specified/Aim higher /student ambassadors	What motivated HE students to participate in student ambassador schemes	Qualitative study interviews with (n=11) student ambassadors and (n=2) coordinators	Motivation was linked to altruistic and instrumental reasons (wanting to help people but being paid and positive impact on their CVs). Confusion regarding what the role entailed	Single site, small scale study
Ylonen, A. (2012).	WP group not specified/student ambassadors	What motivated HEI students to participate in student ambassador schemes	Mixed method study over two years (2006/07); interviews (n=30) with ambassadors and (n=2) coordinators) and online survey	Reasons for participating were varied, including work experience, desire to improve CV, enhance communication skills and boost self-confidence. Financial considerations were also important	Single site study

Table 3: Critical appraisal of papers in the review

First author and date	Overall quality rating	Appraisal tool used
Basit T. (2012)	Moderate	CASP
Baxter, A. et al. (2007)	High	Moule et al.
Bradley, J. and Miller, A. (2010)	High	Moule et al.
Brown, G. (2011)	Low-moderate	CASP
Burke, P. (2006)	Low-moderate	CASP
Burke, P. (2011)	Moderate-high	CASP
Byrom, T. 2009)	Moderate	CASP
Casey, R. et al. (2011)	High	Moule et al.
Greenhalgh, T. et al. (2006)	High	CASP
Haight, A. (2012)	Moderate	Moule et al.
Hatt, S. et al. (2008)	Moderate	Moule et al.
la Velle, L. et al. (2013)	High	Moule et al.
Loughrey, D. & Woods, C. (2010)	Moderate-high	CASP
Loveday, V. (2015)	Moderate	CASP
Maras, P. (2007)	High	Moule et al.
Marce naro-Gutierrez, O. et al. (2007)	High	Moule et al.
Morrison, A. (2010)	Moderate-high	CASP
Morrison, A. (2011)	High	CASP
Richardson, M., Hunt, J. (2013)	Moderate	Moule et al.
Robb, N. et al. (2007)	High	CASP
Singleton, A. (2012)	High	Moule et al.
Smith, S. et al. (2013)	Low-moderate	Moule et al.
Taylor, Y. (2008)	Moderate-high	CASP
Wilson, A. et al. (2014)	Moderate-high	CASP
Ylonen, A. (2012).	High	Moule et al.
Ylonen, A. (2010)	Moderate	CASP

Findings

Three main themes identified in the review were: person-centred impact, raising aspirations and social capital.

Nature of the evidence and study design

Of the 26 studies reviewed, 16 were designed to harvest qualitative outcomes, five were designed to harvest quantitative outcomes, and five were designed to harvest mixed methods outcomes. Most of the research focused on a region or city (n=13) or single site (n=10), exploring and evaluating a project implemented within that locality. As such there were minimal multi-site, cross-region studies. In addition, as most of the research was focused on evaluating a single site outreach initiative, there was a lack of focus on the longer term impacts of outreach on either individual participants, key stakeholders or those delivering the outreach

programmes. Instead, the majority of the research focused upon experiences of participation in outreach either during or at the end of the projects. There was a distinct lack of long term follow-up (one year post engagement) regarding the impact of the outreach. As a consequence, the 'effectiveness' of such interventions, in terms of success in producing a desired result from cost or human perspectives, cannot be derived. Only two of the studies with quantitative outcomes used national data sets from the National Pupil Database and Youth Cohort study (Singleton, 2012 and Marcenaro-Gutierrez et al., 2007). As the review scope (2005–2015) covers the period of the government funded regional partnership programme Aimhigher (2005–2011), this no doubt influenced the numbers of regional research partnerships identified. There does, however, appear to be a strong London-based focus, as 13 studies undertook research activity in that locality (Brown, 2011; Burke, 2006; Burke, 2011; Casey et al., 2011; Greenhalgh et al., 2006; Haight, 2012; Maras, 2007; Morrison, 2010; Morrison, 2011; Robb et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2013; Ylonen, 2010; Ylonen, 2012).

Studies designed to harvest qualitative outcomes utilised interviews and focus groups (n=19), or questionnaires and surveys (n=11). The studies were analysed using grounded theory, thematic coding and analysis, and discourse analysis to shape interpretation. Frameworks rooted in emancipatory social or cultural theory (for example, feminist, anti-racist and social capital critiques) were also identified as being used to underpin almost half of the studies. These studies enable us to explore what works and for whom, which Evans et al. (2017) argues is currently missing. Most studies (n=18) focused on researching an explicit outreach intervention or programme of activity, with a specific WP group. Consequentially, sample sizes were small (20 of the 26 papers included in the review consisted of research studies with participant sizes smaller than 100) and tended to be focused locally. While some studies analysed changes over more than one year, only two (Maras, 2007; Marcenaro-Gutierrez et al., 2007) were framed as longitudinal analyses, highlighting trends over a number of years. The most frequent types of outreach examined emanated from sustained

programmes or partnerships, such as Aimhigher (n=6), summer schools or bespoke programmes (n=6), mentoring (n=7), and non-specified outreach activities (n=5). The studies focused upon describing the activities, the individual experiences and perceived benefits of participation, for both WP participants and those delivering WP outreach. Little research specifically examined the impact of strategies.

When examining which WP groups the research focused on, lower socio-economic groups (n=14) were strongly represented, followed by black and ethnic minority students (n=3), mature students (n=2), gender (n=1), and low participation groups (n=1). Five of the 26 papers did not specify a particular WP group focus. Lastly, six studies were conducted by the same authors using data from the same intervention or student cohorts (Burke, 2006; Burke, 2011; Morrison, 2010; Morrison, 2011; Ylonen, 2010; Ylonen, 2012).

Themes

This research aimed to determine how (if at all) the impact of outreach is being identified, explained and understood in published research. As such the findings describe how research, in particular academically-led, peer reviewed research, is engaging with the how and why of outreach impact. Three major interlocking themes emerge from the literature: person-centred impact, raising aspirations and social capital (Figure 2).

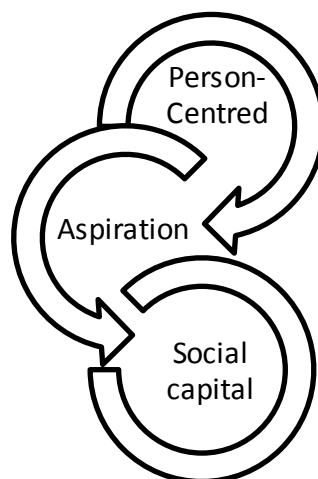


Figure 2: Themes
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During the presentation of the findings, links will be made to Bourdieu's (2003) economic, social and cultural fields of capital, a sociological perspective which has been widely used to explain how social inequalities occur and are perpetuated in society and specifically applied within widening participation research and practice. Where the 'field' describes the social milieu or social networks in which individuals or social agents operate, Bourdieu identifies the concept of 'habitus' as an underlying set of dispositions developed by the individual in relation to the objective conditions encountered. These objective conditions include cultural capital as embodied, objectified and institutionalised assets, or more simply, what is known, social capital which provides the social networks through which individuals may negotiate their pathways, and economic capital based on relations to the means of production and property rights, following Marx. The potential for the individual to freely make choices or develop strategies is constrained by the objective conditions of these fields. While Bourdieu's theory has been criticised as being overly deterministic (Grenfell and James, 1998; Reed-Danahay, 2005), nevertheless it does offer a theoretical framework for explaining the persistence of social inequity despite the potential of change evidenced for individual agents influenced by outreach initiatives.

Person-centred impact

The review established that impact is being identified more in terms of individual person-centred changes rather than structural changes that might be measured through tracking improvements in numbers of young people recruited from WP backgrounds. The majority of studies elicited how outreach interventions impact upon the individual lives of pupils, teachers, practitioners (including student ambassadors) and current students. This included changes to sense of self, ideas of belonging, confidence and conceptions of the future. As such, clear links can be made to Bourdieu's fields of capital, both cultural through an exploration of individual beliefs and values and social through the possibilities offered for making choices and developing strategies through the formal and tacit knowledge associated with the outreach programmes. Provision of HE students as role

models supporting young people to make decisions regarding their future was identified in nine of the papers (Brown, 2011; Greenhalgh, et al., 2006; Hatt et al., 2008; la Velle et al., 2013; Singleton, 2012; Smith et al., 2013; Taylor, 2008; Ylonen, 2010; Ylonen, 2012). Three papers specifically evaluated the role of student ambassadors within WP (Brown, 2011; Ylonen, 2010; Ylonen, 2012); one study (Taylor, 2008) investigated the 'students into schools programme'. These initiatives focused on students visiting schools to promote HE and the research examined experiences of student ambassadors themselves, rather than the impact of these types of roles on the young people they visited. A considerable influencing factor in becoming a student ambassador was finance. Student ambassadors were paid, and many identified that this supplemented their income while they studied in HE. Another contributory factor in deciding to participate was to develop one's skills and attributes in preparation for the career market. In contrast, Wilson et al. (2014) worked with mentors from HE alumni who were paired with young people, meeting them weekly. While numbers presented in the study were small (n=22), it demonstrated some clear impacts for the young people involved. Mentors provided both clear instructional, practical support concerning careers and navigating the HE system, and were also emotionally invested in promoting self-esteem and self-belief among young people as well as operating as positive role models. Formal and informal mentorship is not a new strategy in education; indeed this was at the core of the Aimhigher initiative, locating 'mentors' in schools to raise the aspirations of young people. The securing and nurturing of relationships of trust between a young person and a more experienced other is a fundamental principle in supporting young people in negotiating their pathways. The value of mentoring schemes continues and is recognised in the principles of Bourdieu's social capital referring to the benefits that can emanate from increasing access to social networks of individuals who have been or are in the HE sector.

Raising aspirations or troubling structures

This theme of person-centred impact is premised in many studies by ideas of raising aspirations for young people from WP backgrounds. Brown (2011) argues

that young people are aspirational, but that these aspirations may not be geared to entering HE. Instead they tend to have more holistic aspirations associated with emotional security and happiness. Yet one of the ways that impact of outreach is being identified is how participants' aspirations or ideas of their futures have changed as a result of outreach (Hatt et al., 2008). This links with Bourdieu's *Habitus Clivé*: here he notes a potential mismatch between one's habitus and new opportunities (outreach), shifting one's direction (to attend HE). While it can be argued that outreach, as with all aspects of education, is essentially about transforming lives, Burke (2012) contends that this perception of change is often considered in light of a neoliberal deficit model. The pejorative discourse presented in the papers included in the review was that, within the context of increasing admissions of students from diverse backgrounds, admission to HE equated to success. If this is the case, then what can be deduced from what is not said? Individuals who do not attend HE at 18 could be seen as lacking aspiration and were therefore unsuccessful. Baxter, Tate and Hatt (2007) recognise the contrasting approaches at work in the policy, theory and practice of WP between a 'deficit model' which aims to change the students, to raise their aspirations, to make them fit into the existing provision, and one that focuses on structural issues, which acknowledge the need for changing existing provision. Burke (2006) challenges what she describes as simplistic notions of raising aspirations embedded in discourses of individualism, meritocracy and neo-liberalism. She recognises that aspirations are not solely constructed at individual levels but interlinked with other structural, cultural and discursive relations and practices, and calls for more theorised and nuanced approaches to understanding aspirations and unsettling dispositions that can account for identity, context and social relations. The focus on the deficit constructions tends to lay the blame with the individual, rather than focusing on troubling wider structural factors which can inform improvements in outreach policy and practices. Two studies in the review identified a lack of guidance and support in some schools regarding the transition between compulsory education and HE (Basit, 2012; Robb et al., 2007), something identified by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services

and Skills (Ofsted) in 2013. Yet, provision of careers guidance is not within the remit of individual young people to address.

Likewise, two studies (Baxter et al., 2007; Bradley and Miller, 2010) highlight concerns by young people from lower socio-economic groups regarding the debt incurred by studying at HE and how they will manage financially. Yet again, as agents, these young people have little control or ability to influence this. These structural inequalities which Bourdieu referred to as economic capital have not been researched or reviewed to any extent, though some notable recent work by Cullinane and Montacute (2017) for the Sutton Trust, which recommends reforms of student finance to increase fairness and widen access, may have some impact on policy changes.

Social capital as a resource

Emerging from a deficit-based construction of WP, the majority of studies adopt an epistemological framework that draws on ideas of social and cultural capital, in particular the work of Bourdieu (2003). We have already identified how Bourdieu's model gives prominence to the concept of habitus and cultural capital to explain the reproduction of social inequality and hence we engage with Bourdieu's theoretical position with some caution. Yet Bourdieu's concept of social capital offers an enabling approach for researchers to understand the potential offered by changing the social dynamics of relationships between individuals and society when influenced by social initiatives for change. However, the dominance of a cultural way of thinking risks perpetuating a deficit-based approach, enabling blame to be placed on the individual for failing to succeed when opportunities are made available, whereby the need to reflect on how social structures can be altered through changes in practice is foreclosed.

A common theme across multiple research studies (Basit, 2012; Burke, 2006; Burke, 2011; Byrom, 2009; Casey et al., 2011; Maras, 2007; Marcentaro-Gutierrez et al., 2007; Morrison, 2010; Robb et al., 2007) was the importance of family members' perspectives regarding HE, especially mothers (Burke, 2006; Burke,

2011; Byrom, 2009; Morrison, 2010; Robb et al., 2007). What these studies highlight is the important role that mothers provide both internally (raising young people's self-belief) as well as externally (promoting social capital), both of which are important when considering HE as a life choice. In light of this, perhaps surprisingly WP activities often focus on young people themselves within a school or HE context and do not engage with young people's wider social networks. Only one study (Richardson and Hunt, 2013) adopted a whole family approach.

Discussion

This review presents a picture of how impact is being identified and understood that is far more complex than simply increased numbers of disadvantaged students, meriting deeper analysis. It recognises and works with the interplay of individual and structural factors for improving the design of outreach activities. Research highlights the impact that outreach has on the lives of practitioners, school staff and families, for example, taking a whole family approach (Richardson and Hunt, 2013). This more holistic family approach could offer opportunities to engage families and communities who are still faced with persistent barriers to education. There is a wealth of evidence of the role of habitus in WP (Heaslip et al., 2015; Grant, 2017) and yet this is not capitalised upon in respect to outreach. Studies, for example Basit (2012) highlight the role that family members, especially mothers, have in raising aspiration to HE and yet little published outreach work (apart from the Richardson and Hunt, 2013 study) focuses upon their involvement. Moving forward, it is really important to target these wider social support mechanisms, examining how to more fully embed family and wider social networks into the structures of outreach initiatives. This can have wider benefits in changing perceptions of the importance of education in communities where higher education is not recognised or perceived as a possible reality. Reciprocity of impact was also evident, whereby outreach activity becomes a way of enabling widening participation students to succeed once at university or college, as this assists in developing graduate skills which can promote employability of WP students.

The studies in the review focused on an idea of impact that was person-centred rather than trying to capture and redress structural barriers linked to improving recruitment. However, identifying impact as a person-centred change, rooted in ideas of aspiration, risks reiterating existing assumptions and inequalities. The focus on individual change and ideas of social capital is not always being mobilised to realise more structural changes. Indeed, substantial strategies for making sustainable systemic changes based on research insights were absent from the studies. There is a risk that research will not be used as a catalyst for change, but to maintain the status quo, unless there is a shift from an individual deficit lens towards the recognition and inclusion of a social disadvantage lens for understanding and recognising the impact that wider social and structural barriers for young people from diverse backgrounds face. While the theoretical knowledge is there in the work of Bourdieu (2003), this has not yet been translated into WP policy and practice.

While the studies analysed provide insights into the different ways that outreach impacts upon the lives of individuals, institutions and society, they also highlight the importance of reflecting on the structural challenges we face so that we can find ways to collectively change the ways that we learn and work together. The question of finance provides a clear example here. While some students were interested in studying in HE, financial concerns were identified as an inhibitor (Baxter et al., 2007; Bradley and Miller, 2010). Young people were concerned regarding the financial impact and consequences of accumulating considerable student debt. If policymakers are serious about addressing the lower numbers of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds accessing HE, then steps must be taken to address this structural barrier (Cullinane and Montacute, 2017). Recent research by the National Education Opportunities Network (2017) highlight that finance influences students' decisions; whether to attend a university close to home, the course they study and the degree to which they have to work part-time while studying. Ultimately, they argue that the negative

impact of the current high-cost regimes impact widening access to HE has to be recognised. Likewise, the review identified a lack of support within compulsory education focusing on the transition between school and HE (Basit, 2012; Robb et al., 2007) even though this is a responsibility for schools to provide (Department for Education, 2017). Yet for many students who are the first in their family to navigate the path to HE (visiting university open days, application process, personal statements, etc.), it can be fraught with challenges, especially where family support and/or experience is not available to support them. Both of these structural factors require careful attention and policy initiatives in order to address the current deficit of young people from poorest backgrounds – those who are 2.4 times less likely to attend HE (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016).

As identified, the majority of studies tended to focus upon describing WP activities, the individual experiences and perceived benefits of participation, for both WP participants and those delivering the outreach. There was little evidence highlighting structural or long term (post one year) impact of outreach strategies and whether they were successful in increasing the numbers of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds accessing HE. The predominate approach to the research in the papers included in the review, was that the research activity was being used as part of the lifecycle and evaluation of a particular intervention rather than as a sustained cross-regional approach. The review identifies how existing research is characterised by specific themes (person-centred, raising aspirations and social capital), yet there was a dearth of multi-site, longitudinal studies which could better inform institutional and national policy. Reasons for this are multi-faceted, however fuelled by both a culture of individual institutional WP targets and outreach being narrowly positioned as a key facet in individual HE marketing strategies. There is a need moving forward, for WP research and practice to transcend a culture of institutional success towards a culture which is focused on societal benefit by addressing the needs of WP students at multiple levels and cross-sectors: local, regional, national and international. The NCOP

partnerships create a timely juncture to learn from the former role of research in partnership outreach. Focusing on developing and evaluating larger multi-site outreach programmes enables consideration of individual experiences but importantly can also focus on examining and exploring structural barriers (which can inhibit participation) and the interplay between them to reveal mechanisms about which little is known. It should also be acknowledged that six reviewed studies evaluated interventions implemented through national funding streams (Aimhigher and Royal Geographical Society). As both funding streams have subsequently closed, questions are raised about the sustainability of initiatives. This analysis reveals a very different, more complex and nuanced picture of what constitutes impact of outreach compared to what policymakers and institutions across the sector may require. There is little evidence of impact being identified in terms of value for money or, indeed, improved participation rates. It is also unclear from the majority of the studies how research could be mobilised productively to change behaviour and impact upon institutions, schools, target communities or the sector. What are urgently needed are multi-site longitudinal studies similar to the What Works programme (Thomas et al., 2017), which builds on examples of best practice leading to wider structural change. This approach to outreach research could lead to significant structural impact for improving equity through WP. An example of a multi-site longitudinal research is the belongingness survey distributed amongst the 13 participating universities in the What Works project. This survey explored three aspects (belongingness, engagement, self-confidence) and was administered to students who entered HE between 2013–2015 at seven points in their programme (Thomas et al., 2017). Not only were institutional data feedback to individual universities enabling them to monitor impact of local initiatives, it also collectively enabled a deeper examination of belongingness, engagement and self-confidence across the 13 participating universities from students across different WP groups.

Limitations

While the review included research on outreach that was published in academic and professional journals, it could be argued that it represents a bias to published research as it did not include unpublished evaluation reports on HEI activities which could provide valuable but potentially sensitive evidence. These papers were excluded from the review due to the lack of a peer reviewed process which promotes rigour and quality in research.

Conclusion

The aim of this review was to provide a systematic review of published studies on outreach initiatives in WP in the UK focusing upon the degree and depth to which the studies indicated and explained the impact of outreach activities. While it is evident from the research reviewed that outreach strategies have increased likelihood of some individuals from disadvantaged groups accessing HE, the degree to which this approach addresses larger social inequalities has yet to be identified. Outreach initiatives can play a significant role in addressing inequalities. However, this review has identified a lack of systematic research evidence regarding how outreach is situated, identified and understood to reveal and target the underlying relationships between individuals and systemic opportunities and constraints towards improving equity and access to higher education. Long term there needs to be systematic longitudinal research examining the impact of outreach initiatives, identifying principles of the most effective outreach strategies implemented.

We contend that it is appropriate and necessary for outreach research to continue its focus on assessing person-centred impacts to build this body of understanding. Consideration of aspirations and the tailoring of outreach programmes to possibilities of entry into HE will continue to inform this discourse. However, research on outreach needs to be cognisant of and attentive to the voices of underrepresented individuals and groups, respecting and acknowledging the complexity and situated nature of decision-making with regard to life choices (Baxter et al., 2007; Bradley and Miller, 2010). The dangers of narrowly framing

government and institutional policies without acknowledging underlying structural factors can be assuaged by drawing on the ideas of habitus and cultural, social and economic capital to enable research and practice to focus on interventions that can make a difference. Using a social model of disadvantage rather than a deficit discourse could enable understanding of how outreach activity can be used to influence institutional structures. Successful strategies could include improving guidance and support consistently across schools (Basit, 2012; Robb et al., 2007), working with children in primary as well as secondary schools, focusing on parents in addition to their children (Richardson and Hunt, 2013), and building rapport and positive attitudes with teachers to move away from deficit constructions of aspirations.

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