

Partners in Progression

Engaging parents in university access

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This report was written by the education and youth development ‘think and action tank’ LKMco. LKMco is a social enterprise – we believe that society has a duty to ensure children and young people receive the support they need in order to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood. We work towards this vision by helping education and youth organisations develop, evaluate and improve their work with young people. We then carry out academic and policy research and advocacy that is grounded in our experience.

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Foreword

I have worked in widening participation for over a decade now and for many of those years I felt uncomfortable with the lack of engagement universities had with parents. As a first-generation student I remember vividly the moment someone from the University of York took the time to explain student finance to my own Mum. It was transformative to feel I had an ally on the journey to university and made everything less lonely. This report seeks to shed light on the issue of parental engagement. I hope it will act as a helpful guide to getting started in developing evidence-led programmes for parents and carers.

I am excited by the possibility of unlocking the potential of working with parents to help their children achieve higher education progression. In particular, the varied case studies should act as an inspiration to those of us working in universities, schools and charities. At King's College London our Parent Power initiative has generated a team of knowledgeable and connected Mums and Dads, Grandparents, carers and siblings who I am proud to stand alongside and work with to open up higher education to more children. Meaningful parental engagement is not a fluffy and optional extra but a fundamental part of the widening participation puzzle.

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Executive summary

This report sets out how parents' engagement in their children's education impacts on university progression, examines whether different parents have different attitudes and concerns about higher education, and illustrates how universities can best engage parents and carers in widening participation outreach. It provides schools and universities with an overview of the relationship between parental engagement, attitudes and concerns, and entry to higher education and provides practical guiding principles to shape universities' and schools' efforts to engage parents in outreach.

The report draws together findings from a literature review and four strands of primary research: a national survey of parents' attitudes and concerns; a focus group and interviews with parents; a Freedom of Information Request to 30 top tariff UK universities, and, five in depth case studies of universities' parental engagement.

1 What is an engaged parent?

The existing research does not provide a consistent definition. We therefore define parental engagement as the extent to which parents are involved with and interested in their child's education.

There are two common categorisations of different 'types' of parental engagement:

- **Practical vs. values-based engagement**
This differentiates between practical behaviours and the transmission of attitudes
- **School vs. home-based engagement**
This differentiates between activities which take place in the home and those that happen in schools, or other institutions.

Research distinguishes between these different types of engagement as some have stronger impact on education outcomes than others. However, these different forms of engagement are highly interrelated.

In order to impact on educational attainment, engagement generally needs to include direct involvement with a child's learning. Home-based activities are more likely to involve this type of engagement, although some research suggests that school-based engagement can nonetheless be strongly related to attainment.

2 Does parental engagement have an impact on university progression?

Parental engagement has a positive impact on educational outcomes including attainment, educational aspirations and higher education progression. However, parental engagement is difficult to measure. This presents a challenge for researchers and can lead to the measurement of the quantity, rather than quality, of engagement and the use of one form of engagement as a proxy for another.

Attainment

Research finds that parental engagement in home-based learning has the most powerful impact on attainment. Value-based engagement, in the form of parents' expectations and aspirations, is also important to students and has a powerful effect on achievement. There are mixed results regarding the impact of some school-based engagement activities and helping with homework, with some studies

finding a negative relationship, perhaps due to the fact that children facing more difficulties at school are more likely to require extra support.

Aspirations

Parents' engagement in their children's education can have a positive impact on their aspirations, though the relationship is likely to be mediated by children's attainment. If children attain highly, due in part to parental engagement, they are more likely to view studying beyond school and 'high status' careers as attainable. Parental engagement can be a protective factor against the potentially negative impact of material disadvantage on aspirations.

Higher education progression

Parents are key influencers on young peoples' higher education decisions and research suggests their influence is increasing. Additionally, as progression to higher education is dependent on young people's prior attainment in school, as well as their aspirations to continue in education, parental engagement has an indirect effect on university entry through its impact on attainment, aspirations and expectations. Furthermore studies, mainly from the US, suggest that parental involvement in decision making processes increases the likelihood that young people will enrol in and enter higher education.

3 What are parents' attitudes, concerns and engagement relating to sending their child to university and how do these differ between different parents?

Our survey found that half of parents (51%) wanted their child to go to university and parents from higher social grades were significantly more likely to want them to do so (55% compared to 46%). We also found that the majority of parents (71%) from all social grade groups believe it is possible for anyone to go to university. Taken together, these findings suggest that while socio-economic status has no impact on attitudes related to hypothetical aspirations it has some impact on the parents' expectation that their children will actually apply to university. Only a quarter of parents (25%) wanted their children to 'go to a top university' if they did go to university, though parents from higher social grade groups were significantly more likely to want this (30% in ABC1 groups compared to 18% in C2DE groups).

Financial concerns, including worries about debt and living costs, were among the most common concerns held by parents about universities, alongside a concern about whether university would improve future employment and earning prospects. Parents in our focus group expressed that these concerns were interlinked and explained that they worried that if their children had to get jobs while studying this may affect their experience and success at university, and that the pressure of debt on graduation could lead to them taking less well-paid employment.

The support available at university was also a key concern for a third of parents responding to our survey. In our focus group and interviews parents voiced a particular concern that universities may not deliver the support they promise and that post-entry outcomes for some pupil groups were particularly poor, suggesting that universities may not be supporting these pupils.

Parents in our focus group and interviews also expressed an additional concern not included in the survey: whether or not universities would engage parents and work in partnership with them to support their child.

Broadly, the survey findings revealed almost no difference in the concerns of parents from different social grades, although cluster analysis suggests that the most- and least-engaged parents appear to feel most concerned about their children attending university. It is possible that socio-economic disparities in attitudes toward, and progression to, higher education are not due to differences in parents' concerns, but rather in the way that parents address and resolve these concerns.

4 What are UK top tariff universities doing to engage parents?

Freedom of Information requests to the UK's 30 top tariff universities found that the majority of institutions are engaging parents in their widening participation outreach, although five universities are not. However, nearly half of the activities which do engage parents do so as part of a student outreach programme without providing anything distinct or specific for parents. A further third of the parental engagement activities are also part of a student programme but the strand of activity aimed at parents is distinct and provides information or advice beyond just informing parents about a student programme. A fifth of parental engagement activities are not part of a wider student programme and the core offer is designed specifically for parents and families.

Information, advice and guidance (IAG) is the most common type of parental engagement activity forming a third of outreach with parents. Launch and celebration events for a student programmes were the next most common activities though many of these activities were also counted as IAG.

5 Recommendations to universities

Universities beginning parental engagement outreach

As above, our FOI revealed that some top tariff universities do not engage parents in their widening participation outreach. Given that parents are key influencers in young people's decision making, are often identified as holding attitudes that form a barrier to their children's higher education progression and, as shown in this report, are keen to be involved in their children's education and progression to university, all universities should engage parents.

While the case studies of universities that do engage parents included in this report are of well-developed and often long-standing parental engagement activities, the first steps to engaging parents can be simple and can initially fit around existing activities. All universities can develop a parental engagement strategy by considering the needs of parents in all their widening participation outreach and by providing information, advice and guidance which addresses the concerns raised in this report.

All universities working with parents

This report summarises best-bet strategies and techniques for engaging parents based on existing literature and primary research with universities. These principles form the basis of these recommendations as considering each of these within a university's specific context will help universities to maximise engagement efforts. The principal things a university can do are as follows.

- **Ensure activities have a core offer for parents:** if parental engagement activities are part of student programmes, universities should ensure that the activity provides information or support that addresses parents' specific concerns or improves their ability to support their child.
- **Encourage cross-university support:** parental engagement should be seen as a key part of widening participation activities and staff from across the university should be involved in activities.
- **Address misconceptions:** parental engagement, in particular IAG, should aim to address any misconceptions about higher education that fuel parents' concerns, early and at multiple points. Particular attention should be given to common misconceptions surrounding student finance.
- **Tailor outreach:** in order to ensure that parental engagement is useful for parents, universities should avoid deeming some groups or parents 'hard to reach' and should instead tailor activities to all parents' needs.
- **Empower parents to 'overcome disadvantage':** firstly, universities must avoid using language which stigmatises or blames parents for 'disadvantage' and must recognise that parents and families have behavioural, emotional and relational assets that can be tapped into, despite the material conditions they have to work against.

- **Develop strong, multiagency partnerships:** strong partnerships with schools are key to recruiting parents and building trusting relationships. Universities should develop these partnerships with both primary and secondary schools. However, engaging solely through schools is unlikely to re-engage disengaged parents and therefore universities should also diversify their methods of recruiting and building relationships with parents.
- **Make parents comfortable:** to maximise engagement parents must be made to feel ‘comfortable’ and must be ‘met on their own terms’. Key strategies for achieving this include: providing detailed logistical information; involving current students; meeting parents off campus, and, making activities interactive or child-led.
- **Ensure interactions are sustained, multifaceted and focused on relationships:** engagement with parents should be multifaceted: universities should meet with parents multiple times, at different venues and must provide a variety of activities. This sustained and varied interaction helps build relationships with parents, which in turn makes parents comfortable and allows universities to understand parents’ needs and tailor their outreach.
- **Target specific groups:** widening participation departments already target disadvantaged or underrepresented groups, however, effective targeting of parents should include a needs analysis and a consideration of cultural factors. It is also vital to ensure that broadly targeting ‘disadvantaged’ groups does not overlook particular groups with specific needs.

Universities with well-established parental engagement

All universities, but especially those with well-established parental engagement programmes and activities, should ensure that they evaluate their parental engagement. They should publish and promote their evaluation findings. This will:

- Allow universities to make changes to future work with parents to improve impact
- Contribute to the evidence-base to inform all universities and improve parental engagement activities across institutions.

6 Recommendations to schools

Parental engagement strategies

Although this report focuses on why and how universities should engage parents it is clear that engaging parents in schools is a facilitating factor for engagement with higher education institutions. It is also apparent from our focus groups and interviews with parents that some parents do not feel that their child’s school engages or includes them, indicating that there is work to be done.

Many of the strategies discussed in the recommendations to universities above including:

- making parents comfortable;
- building relationships with parents through sustained interaction;
- empowering parents to ‘overcome disadvantage’ by focusing on skill development, and,
- taking a whole institution approach,

are also highly relevant for schools’ parental engagement activities and in some cases based on research into parental engagement conducted with schools.

Build partnerships with universities

Schools should approach local, and non-local, universities and ask for support with parental engagement. This may include:

- requesting support with a campus visit for pupils and parents;

- asking universities to regularly attend parents' evenings and other school events, and,
- asking universities to provide specific programmes or activities for pupils and parents.

Schools can also view work on parental engagement with university partners as an opportunity to reengage previously disengaged parents.

A wealth of existing research demonstrates that parental engagement can have a positive impact on children and young people's educational outcomes, though different forms of engagement have different impacts, and there is little consensus as to the optimal forms of engagement that parents can adopt. A decade ago parental engagement was at the centre of government policy, with the 2007 Children's Plan highlighting the importance of parental engagement for children's achievement and wellbeing. However, the Commission on Inequality in Education recently suggested that the role of parents and families was being neglected by policy, and called for proper recognition of the role of parental engagement in overcoming educational disadvantage and inequality. Meanwhile, although research continues to investigate the link between parental engagement and educational attainment, there is little emphasis on the role of parental engagement in higher education progression.

Parents are key influencers in young peoples' decisions about higher education and, accordingly, we found that the majority of the UK's most selective universities include parents in their widening participation outreach to some extent. However, many universities' parental engagement strategies are not well developed or, due to a lack of research in this area, strongly underpinned by evidence. In order to support universities to effectively engage parents in outreach it is important to have a detailed understanding of parents' attitudes towards and concerns about university, and how universities can base their strategies around these.

This report brings together findings from a review of the literature and a range of primary research with parents and universities to examine the impact of parental engagement on higher education progression, parents' attitudes toward, and concerns about, higher education and the landscape of parental engagement in UK top tariff universities. Each strand of research contributes to answering the following questions which structure the report:

1. What is an engaged parent?
2. Does parental engagement have an impact on university progression?
3. What are parents' attitudes, concerns and engagement relating to sending their child to university and how do these differ between different parents?
4. What are UK top tariff universities doing to engage parents?
5. What best-bet strategies and techniques are there for universities to engage parents?

This report brings together findings from five strands of research:

- a literature review;
- a national survey of parents;
- a focus group and interviews with parents of would-be first-generation students;
- a Freedom of Information request to 30 top-tariff universities, and
- in-depth case studies of five universities' parental engagement activities.

Each strand of the research was driven by one or more of the following research questions which underpin the report:

1. What is an engaged parent?
2. Does parental engagement have an impact on university progression?
3. What are parents' attitudes, concerns and engagement relating to sending their child to university and how do these differ between different parents?
4. What are UK top tariff universities doing to engage parents?
5. What best-bet strategies and techniques are there for universities to engage parents?

The literature review focuses on questions one and two, while our primary research with parents and universities focuses on questions three, four and five.

By comparing our findings in relation to parents' attitudes, concerns and experience of outreach with our findings regarding current provision, we aimed to foreground the voices of parents typically targeted by widening participation practitioners, and identify where their needs and concerns are being most directly addressed.

2.1 Literature review

We reviewed 114 pieces of existing literature in order to identify:

- the range of definitions of parental engagement in use; and,
- the link between parental engagement and educational outcomes – including participation in higher education.

The review includes research from academic publications and grey literature, including government reports and research conducted by think tanks and other organisations working in the education sector.

Due to the limited quantity of research relating to parental engagement in higher education, and the close link between higher education participation and compulsory education outcomes, the literature review draws on research examining all levels of education. The review included international literature and spanned a date range from 1991 to 2018.

2.2 Primary research with parents

2.2.1 National parent survey

We commissioned YouGov to conduct a nationally representative survey of 980 parents which included questions on two main themes:

- Parents' primary concerns regarding sending their child to university
- Parents' engagement in their child's education and attitudes towards university.

The survey also collected demographic information relating to social grade group.

Parents ranked their top three concerns about their child going to university from a set of 10 common concerns about university frequently cited in literature. These included including concerns about debt; living costs; support at university; finishing university; enjoyment of a course; living away from home; the impact of higher education on employability and future earnings; parents' knowledge of admissions processes, and, 'fitting in' at university.

Parents were also asked to indicate their response to a series of statements, designed to examine the extent to which they engaged in their children's education. The inclusion and wording of these statements was underpinned by existing research and surveys on parental engagement and encompassed a range of 'types' of parental engagement, namely:

- Value-based attitudes towards higher education
 - *'I want my child to go to university'*
 - *'I believe that anyone can go to university if they work hard.'*
 - *'If my child goes to university, I would like them to go to a top university'*
- Practical engagement relating to higher education
 - *'I have spoken to my child about university'*
 - *'I would feel confident discussing university (e.g. possible courses, the admissions process, living away from home etc.) with my child'*
- Practical home-based engagement with education
 - *'When my child was 0-4 years old, I read with them almost every day'/ 'I read to my child almost every day'*
 - *'I talk to my child about their education, e.g. what they are learning in school/college, at least once a week'*
 - *'When my child was at primary school I helped them with their homework more than once a week'/ 'I help my child with their homework more than once a week'*
- Practical school-based engagement with education
 - *'I attend most parents' evenings and school events (e.g. school fairs etc.)'*
 - *'I am involved in the school community (e.g. as parent governor; a member of the PTA or helping at a school event etc.)'*

As well as presenting descriptive statistics to assess any apparent differences in forms of engagement or concerns between different groups of parents by social grade, we also conducted hierarchical cluster analysis to determine if parents fell into potentially different target 'groups' based on their forms of engagement.

2.2.2 Parent focus groups and interviews

In order to gain further insights into the concerns, attitudes and experiences of parents, especially parents with no experience of higher education, we conducted a focus group, with eighteen parents from King's College London's Parent Power programme and a set of interviews with three parents recruited through

the Teach First Futures programme. This allowed us to draw some comparative insights between the Parent Power parents, who had received significant amounts of outreach and parents who had received limited outreach. None of the parents we spoke to had attended university, and their children would therefore be ‘first generation’ students if they progressed to higher education.

While we originally set out to conduct two focus groups, logistical challenges presented by the geographical spread of parents recruited for the second focus group resulted in us conducting phone interviews with parents recruited through Teach First Futures, in order to make sure as many parents as possible could participate.

The focus group and interview questions were structured around research questions three, four and five in order to elicit insights about parents’ concerns and their experience of university outreach, including what did and did not work well.

In the focus group, parents used prompt cards of the core questions to guide their discussion and added their key points using post-its and cards.

Two parents we interviewed had a child or children who had already been to university, as well as a child who was still in school. This allowed us to gather insights into these parents’ ongoing concerns, as well as their experience of engagement during their child’s time as a student.

It is worth noting that as we recruited parents through student and parent outreach programmes the parents who participated in this part of the research were perhaps more likely than the general population to have some interest in university.

2.3 Primary research with universities

2.3.1 Freedom of information request

We sent Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to the 30 most selective higher education institutions in the UK by sampling the top quartile of UK universities by entry tariff, based on The Guardian’s University Guide League Tables. The FOI requested information on all widening participation activities universities conducted in which they engaged or worked with parents. Specifically, we requested a brief description of each activity as well as the aims, duration, reach, recruitment and targeting methods and evaluation of each activity.

2.3.2 Case studies and interviews

Using the information supplied through the FOI, we identified five universities who provided particularly detailed accounts of their activity and/or that conducted parental engagement activities that appeared to be underpinned by a particularly clear rationale, designed specifically around parents’ needs rather than being a secondary component of a student-focused programme. We conducted case studies of specific activities at these universities, consisting of 30- to 40-minute phone interviews with a widening participation practitioner. We originally intended to sample universities and activities that had strong evidence of impact on parents, however, very few universities reported robustly evaluating their activities. Case studies were conducted with:

- The University of Bath
- King’s College London
- Lancaster University
- The University of Nottingham
- The University of Surrey

3.1 What is 'parental engagement'?

The term 'parental engagement' does not have a clear, consistent definition in existing research (Wilder, 2013). Researchers include a wide range of different attitudes and behaviours when referring to parental engagement, sometimes focusing narrowly on parents' interactions with schools and with their children to '*promote academic success*' (Hill and Taylor, 2004, p.161) but often including forms of engagement that are not clearly related to education. As the focus of this report is on young people's participation in higher education, we interpret parental engagement as the extent to which parents are involved with and interested in their child's education.

Researchers categorise different forms of parental engagement in different ways, but two main distinctions emerge: practical engagement versus the transmission of attitudes and values, and activities that take place in the school versus those that take place in the home.

The first typology is highlighted in Harris and Goodall's (2008) research into teacher, parent and pupil perceptions of parental involvement. The authors distinguish two 'types' of parental engagement justified on the basis of their differential impact on education outcomes (see section 3.2.1):

- **Practical engagement:** this refers to practical actions and behaviours in which parents either support children's learning or take part in 'school life', including:
 - doing something to support a child's learning, such as helping with homework or asking about learning;
 - communicating with their child's educational institution (often a school) about the child, including attending parents' evenings and workshops or speaking with a teacher;
 - becoming involved with the school community, such as being a parent governor or helping in classrooms.
- **Values-based engagement:** this refers to the way in which parents value education and promote its importance.

The second distinction is exemplified in the Department of Education's 2010 report on best practice for engaging parents which defined 'engagement' as encompassing a range of activities with a clear split between involvement in learning at home and taking part in the school community:

- Learning at home: homework, attitudes, values, aspirations and behaviour
- Communication between home and school
- In-school volunteering and attending events
- Decision making such as undertaking a school governor role
- Collaborating with the community (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2008).

A number of researchers differentiate between school-based and home-based engagement because the latter is generally seen to have greater impact on children's outcomes (Okpala et al., 2001; Fan and Chen, 2001; Trusty, 1998; Sui-Chu and Willms, 1996). This is primarily because many school-based forms of engagement often do not necessitate involvement in learning and therefore '*confer little or no real benefit to the individual child*' despite the community and social benefits they may offer (Harris and Goodall, 2008, p. 278; Okpala et al., 2001). In contrast, home-based activity more frequently relates specifically to learning, for example, helping with homework, talking about education related topics or school learning,

and, playing educationally beneficial games. Harris and Goodall review the research on this distinction and conclude '*it is only the engagement of parents in learning in the home that is most likely to result in a positive difference to learning outcomes*' (p.277). However, it is worth noting that not all evidence conforms with this view, with some studies finding that school-based involvement and attendance at school events is more strongly related to attainment than home-based involvement in learning (Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994). Furthermore, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) suggest a continuum between 'parental involvement with school' and 'parental engagement in learning' but stress that the goal is not to move from one point to another, leaving involvement with school behind. Instead while the goal is seen as 'engagement with children's learning', this is supported by other forms of involvement and activity, including involvement with the school.

Different types of parental engagement may affect pupils' attainment, attitudes and decision-making in different ways and to different extents, but they are also closely interrelated. Indeed, researchers sometimes use one behaviour or activity as a proxy for another, less observable, element of parental engagement. For example, The Social Market Foundation's research on the role of parents in children's educational attainment interpreted parent evening attendance (a school-based, practical form of engagement) as an indicator of parental promotion of the importance of education in the home (a home-based, values-based form of engagement). Given that the purpose of this report is to support educational institutions with their efforts to engage with their child's education we focus on parental engagement which is directly related to education but incorporate all 'types' of parental engagement in education discussed above.

Research does not present a clear and consistent definition of parental engagement. However, we interpret parental engagement as ***the extent to which parents are involved with and interested in their child's education.***

Research categorises parental engagement in two main ways:

Practical vs values-based engagement – differentiating between practical behaviours and the transmission of attitudes

School vs. home-based engagement – differentiating between activities in the home and school events or activities

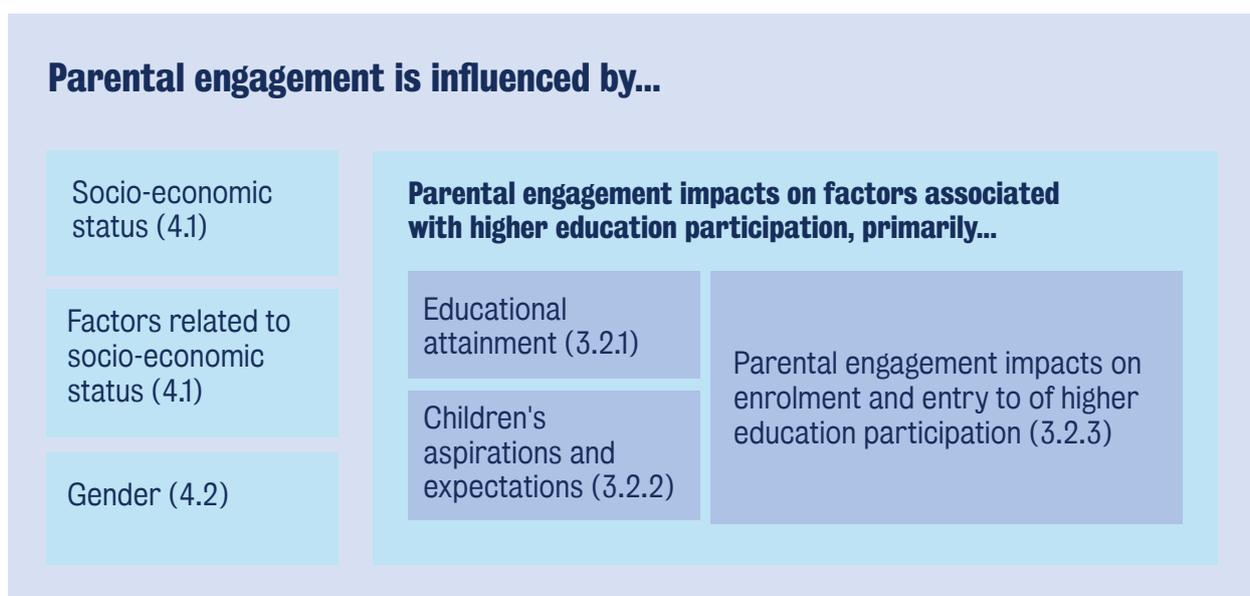
However, these different forms of engagement are highly interrelated and researchers often use one type as a proxy for another.

A third distinction emerges between activities which require involvement in a child's learning and those that do not. This distinction often aligns with the home-based vs. school-based typology. It is generally accepted that only engagement which includes involvement with a child's learning has an impact on educational attainment. This often means home-based engagement is more effective, however there is also research disputing this finding which concludes that school-based engagement is more strongly related to attainment.

3.2 Does parental engagement have an impact on university progression?

There is increasing recognition of the importance of engaging parents and families in children and young peoples' education (DEECD, 2008). Many researchers argue there is compelling evidence that parental engagement positively impacts educational outcomes, including attainment and the likelihood of continuing to higher education, although some large-scale reviews have failed to find a causal link between the two (Gorard and See, 2013).

Research into the relationship between parental engagement, educational attainment and higher education outcomes faces a range of methodological challenges. Firstly, the proxies used to explore parental engagement often measure the quantity of interactions rather than their quality (Perna and Titus, 2005) and many factors influence the quality of parental engagement and thereby mediate its impact. Secondly, there are a variety of variables beyond parental engagement that impact educational outcomes more strongly (Harris and Goodall, 2008; Fan and Chen, 2001; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). This makes it difficult to identify the 'net' effect of parental engagement itself. In this regard, studies which attempt to control for variables such as socio-economic status, ethnicity and prior attainment have particular value (Wilder, 2013). Thirdly, many studies rely on teacher or parent perceptions of involvement which may lack objectivity or be skewed by pupils' prior attainment (Punter et al. 2016).



3.2.1 The impact of parental engagement on children's educational attainment

Progression to higher education is often dependent on a threshold level of attainment in primary and secondary education and there is a wealth of research considering the impact of various forms of parental engagement on attainment throughout education.

Engagement in the early years

Parental engagement and involvement with learning is of particular importance in the early years (Sylva et al. 2004; Evangelou and Sylva, 2003; Sylva et al, 1999;). In particular, parents reading with children early is linked to early reading ability which in turn is associated with long term attainment outcomes (Punter et al., 2016; Myrberg and Rosen, 2009; Senechal and LeFevre; 2002).

The impact of home-based and school-based engagement

In general, research suggests that parental involvement in learning at home, in contrast to engagement

in school activities and events, has the most powerful effect on attainment outcomes. Engagement in school activities has very limited impact on attainment '*unless there are direct and explicit connections to learning*' (Harris and Goodall, 2008, p278; Castro et al., 2015; Okpala et al. 2001; Izzo et al, 1999; Sui-Chu and Willms, 1996). However, some research suggests that school-based engagement may have an indirect impact on attainment. Studies find that parent involvement and school-parent communication regarding in-school behaviour has a positive effect on behaviour including aggression, attention and social problems, which in turn may improve attainment (Harris and Goodall, 2008; McNeal, 1999; Leach and Tan, 1996; Gottfredson et al, 1993). Furthermore, the conceptualisation of parental involvement in school and parental engagement in learning as a continuum (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014) suggests that school-based engagement is a key part of the 'journey' toward parents' engaging with their child's learning. Therefore, to support children's education attainment, it is crucial that parents engage with activities which have clear links to children's learning. However, schools have an important role in supporting parents to do this effectively and the role of school-based engagement should not be dismissed.

Similarly, findings regarding the relationship between parents helping with homework and attainment are mixed, with some finding a negative relationship between the two (Hill and Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005). Wilder (2013) suggests this may either be due to parents' lack of skill in teaching concepts, or the influence of children with higher needs requiring more support with homework. Where the relationship between parental engagement and attainment is negative, contradicting other findings, this may be attributable to the "reactive hypothesis" by which pupils with learning or behavioural problems' parents are more involved with their children's education and have more regular contact with their educational institution. This could confound the relationship between parental engagement and achievement, especially in regard to school-based engagement. Thus, it may appear that parental engagement has a negative effect on outcomes (Punter et al, 2016; Castro et al. 2015). However, some query the existence of this effect and argue that it is invoked by researchers to mask the potentially negative impacts of parental involvement (McNeal, 2012). Overall, where parents have increased engagement in response to their child struggling with behaviour or school work, this will clearly confound the relationship between engagement and attainment, yet this does not mean that engagement itself has a negative impact. However, it is important that parents are supported to engage with their child in a beneficial way and schools and other institutions can play a key role in supporting parents to do this.

Value-based engagement

Value-based engagement, often in the form of expectations, is also linked to attainment. Parental expectations of academic achievement and parental aspirations (namely the parents' hope that a child will continue in education) have a 'powerful' effect on achievement, both directly and indirectly through discussion, (Khattab, 2015; Desforges and Aboutaar, 2003; Fan and Chen, 2001; Singh et al., 1995). Additionally, students themselves highlight the difference between value-based and practical engagement and tend to value the values-based engagement or 'moral support of their learning' more highly than their parents' involvement in practical activities. Harris and Goodall highlight that when parents take more interest in their child's learning, pupils subsequently place more value on their own education.

The influence of socio-economic status

Socio economic status (SES) has a strong impact on attainment. However, some children from materially deprived backgrounds attain well in education despite these disadvantages (Desforges and Aboutaar, 2003), and findings from the National Child Development Study suggest that parental involvement in support of schooling acts as a protective factor (Schoon and Parsons, 2002). Essentially, parental engagement can reduce the negative impact of socio-economic status on attainment.

3.2.2 The impact of parental engagement on children's aspirations and expectations to enter higher education

The relationship between parental engagement, including parental aspirations as a form of engagement, and young people's higher education and career aspirations has also been widely investigated, with mixed results. This is perhaps due to the range of different forms of parental engagement, including parents' own aspirations, that are measured in research looking at the impact on children's aspirations. The relationship between parental engagement and children's aspirations is likely mediated by attainment in general: pupils that achieve well, in part due to the engagement of their parents, are more likely to see higher education and high-status careers as realistic prospects.

The impact of parental engagement on children's aspirations

Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) reviewed a range of evidence including several longitudinal datasets and concluded that while the impact of parental engagement on attainment lessens as children get older, the impact on aspirations and the likelihood of remaining in education becomes more significant. Meanwhile, McCarron and Inkelas found that parental encouragement and involvement is '*one of the best predictors of [pupils'] post-secondary aspirations*' (2015: 536).

This relationship has been demonstrated in a number of US based studies. Parental academic involvement in both home and school contexts has been shown to impact on the likelihood that a student expects to go on to higher education and earn a bachelor's degree (Trusty, 1999). Furthermore, parental engagement, including attendance at extracurricular activities and supporting children's educational development, can act as a protective factor against the tendency for pupils from low socio-economic status backgrounds to be less likely to realise their educational potential and aspirations (Trusty, 1998). Catsambis (2001) defined parental engagement as high expectations, consistent encouragement and enhanced learning opportunities in the home, and found it to be positively associated with pupils continuing in post-16 education, regardless of students' socio-economic status or ethnicity.

The impact of socio-economic status and parents' education level on children's expectations and aspirations

However, parents' socio-economic status and level of education also have an important influence on children's expectations and aspirations, as well as their ability to realise them. Studies of longitudinal datasets in the US found that only 6% of the variance in would-be first-generation college students' educational aspirations could be explained by parental involvement, defined as help with homework and discussion of course choices, exam preparation and college (McCarron and Inkelas, 2015). This suggests that while parental involvement is an influential factor, the vast majority of variance in pupils' aspirations is accounted for by other factors.

Additionally, parents' educational status has a large impact on the realisation of university aspirations: McCarron and Inkelas find that although 40% of would-be first-generation college students aspired to attain a bachelor's degree whilst in the 10th grade, less than a third did so within the following 10 years. Of the non-first-generation students, only 28% aspired to finish a bachelor's degree but over half went on to do so.

The impact of parents' aspirations and expectations on children's aspirations and expectations

Parents' own aspirations and expectations for their children can also be seen as a form of parental engagement and these can impact on the aspirations and expectations that their children hold for themselves. In a large-scale study of Canadian adolescents, Garg et al. (2002) found that parental expectations affected students' aspirations via the effect on a students' 'personal characteristics' including:

- their perception of education;
- their perceived importance of school, and,
- the extent to which they read outside of school.

High parental education expectations increased students' scores on the personal characteristics measure, regardless of socio-economic background. In turn, a high score on this measure of personal characteristics significantly impacted students' aspirations to attain a bachelor or a master's degree.

Chowdry et al.'s (2010) analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) showed a clear association between parents' expectation that their child would go to university and their child's own expectation: 84% of young people whose parents thought they would progress to higher education also expected that they would.

However, other evidence has also highlighted that while high parental academic expectations can boost children's aspirations it is important that this translates into a personal, intrinsic motivation for the child in order for increased participation in higher education to translate into positive outcomes. Research suggests that students whose motivations to attend college are personal and intellectual (a desire to study and learn) achieve higher college grades than those whose motivations are driven by family expectations (Cote and Levine, 1997).

3.2.3 The impact of parental engagement on higher education enrolment and entry

Parents are key influencers of young people's higher education decisions: 93% of young people believe their parents influenced their key education and career choices and 57% think this influence was a 'fair amount' or a 'huge amount' (Philips and Newton, 2014). The report was based on a survey of over 1000 UK parents, and suggested that parents' influence on young people's higher education decisions is growing due to three main factors:

- the loss of the Connexions career advice service and other careers advice services in schools;
- the increasing cost of higher education and therefore '*the greater stake parents have in its funding*';
- the increase in the number of parents in each generation that have attended higher education themselves and who are therefore able to advise their children about it (Philips and Newton, 2014).

Studies from the US have shown that parents' engagement, measured in a range of ways, is related to enrolment in higher education. Parental involvement in the college planning process greatly increases the chances of young people enrolling in and attending college, regardless of parental education (Engle, 2007; Horn and Nunez, 2000). Perna and Titus (2005) found that the likelihood of college enrolment was shaped by a variety of forms of parental engagement including the frequency of education-related conversations between the parent and student, whether the parents volunteered at the school, and the frequency with which the parent contacted the school about their child's progress at school.

Engle (2007) found that both parent-child discussions about post-secondary education and parents' attendance at a course about financial aid meant pupils were more likely to enrol in post-secondary education compared to their peers whose parents did not attend an advice course or discuss college with them. The engagement of parents without college degrees had a similar impact on enrolment as the engagement of parents with degrees, although degree-educated parents were more likely to attend the course in the first place (Horn and Nunez, 2000, as cited in Engle, 2007).

How can parental engagement effectively support young people's transition to higher education?

Ultimately, progressing to higher education depends on achieving sufficiently well throughout compulsory education. It is therefore important to consider the forms of parental engagement that underpin young people's success throughout education, as well as those that facilitate entry to higher education itself. The research suggests that value- and home-based forms of parental engagement have a stronger impact on young people's educational outcomes than school-based involvement in practical activities or events.

From the evidence base we can discern a number of activities and behaviours that parents can adopt, and which educational institutions can support, in order to improve pupils' educational outcomes, these include:

- parents reading to young children and promoting a love of reading and books in the home;
- parents espousing the importance of education and demonstrating an attitude of valuing education highly;
- parents taking an interest in children's learning by discussing learning and school topics in the home;
- parents engaging with the school or educational institution to ensure a consistent response to poor behaviour between home and school;
- parents holding high aspirations and expectations for children's educational success

Parental engagement can also have a more direct impact on young people's likelihood of applying for, and entering higher education. The literature suggests that the following attitudes and behaviours may be particularly supportive here:

- parents holding high aspirations and expectations for children's participation in higher education;
- parents' balancing holding high aspirations for their children and following the child's interests and abilities to ensure that children and young people can internalise appropriate high aspirations and avoid doing something only to 'please family';
- parents and children discussing course options and exams during secondary education and options for further and higher education;
- parents engaging with information, advice and guidance about higher education opportunities.

Given the range of potential impacts that parental engagement can have on young people's educational outcomes and progression to higher education, the next section of this report examines the main factors that shape the extent to which parents engage with their children's education. Section 5 then turns to consider parents' attitudes and concerns from their own perspective, before we consider how universities can support parental engagement, in Section 6.

Factors which impact parental engagement

4.1 Socio-economic status

Research suggests there is a relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and parental engagement in education. However, the literature suggests that:

- the strength of this association differs between studies, with some studies suggesting the relationship is modest at most (Sui-Chu and Willms, 1996);
- SES only impacts on parental engagement indirectly, via other factors such as neighbourhood context and parents' attitudes to education; and,
- any link between SES and parental involvement also depends on the type of engagement that is considered (Sui-Chu and Willms, 1996).

Nonetheless, some studies suggest a direct and significant relationship between SES and parental engagement (Fantuzzo et al. 2000). Maternal education in particular is strongly associated with mothers' attitudes to education and in turn, their engagement with educational activities. According to Feinstein and Sabates (2006), even a single additional year of post compulsory schooling has a strong positive effect on attitudes, making mothers more likely to read to their children and more likely to demonstrate positive attitudes to education. This in turn affects children's attainment. Data from the LSYPE also shows that a mother who has a degree is more likely to expect that her child will go to university than a mother who does not, even when prior attainment is controlled for (Chowdry et al., 2010).

On the other hand, other studies suggest that the type, or nature of parental engagement, rather than the extent, is related to social class. Middle class parents aimed for their children to replicate their own educational journey while working class parents sought to 'transform their child's educational fate', for it to be better than their own (David et al., 2003).

There is some evidence that even where low SES parents are engaged in their child's education, they have a less powerful effect on pupils' aspirations and attainment (Hill et al., 2004). However, Jordan and Plank (2000) suggest that although low income students are less likely to progress to college, their parents are involved and aspirational but a lack of support and guidance for parents themselves lies behind the trend.

As the Social Market Foundation highlights *'it's all too easy to criticise families already living in tough circumstances'*. Researchers argue that socio-economic status is not the primary determinant of parental engagement but rather represents a proxy for *'more complex dynamics within individuals and communities'* (Waanders et al., 2007). Parents with lower socio-economic status, measured in terms of their occupation and/or level of education, tend to face specific constraints which can make them less likely to be able to engage with their children's education in the ways we outline in section 3.1 above. These factors include:

- **Parenting efficacy** or a parents' belief in their ability to achieve a desired parenting outcome is strongly associated with the level of parental involvement in education (Harris and Goodall, 2008; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Fathers' parenting-eficacy is significantly related to the frequency of home-based educational activities (Downer and Memdez, 2005) and parents that believe they are able to influence events and outcomes (internal locus of control) are more likely to be involved in educational activities both in the home and at school (Schaefer, 1991 as cited in Waanders et al., 2007)

- **Perceived economic stress** is the extent to which parents feel their income adequately covers their expenses. High economic stress is strongly associated with low socio-economic status and Waanders et al. (2007) found that economic stress has a direct impact on measures of parental involvement such as the relationship between a child's parent and teacher.
- **Neighbourhood context** including residential mobility, family disruption, housing and population density and resource deprivation 'weaken community processes' and form 'higher risk neighbourhoods'. Parents in higher risk neighbourhoods may focus on protecting children rather than engaging with educational activities. One study found neighbourhood climate was strongly associated with parental involvement (Smith et al., 1997, as cited in Waanders et al., 2007)
- **School context** in terms of the average SES intake of a school is more strongly related to parental engagement than a child's own SES background. Schools with a high SES intake had higher levels of parental engagement, regardless of the SES of the individual child: essentially, parents from a low SES backgrounds were more likely to be involved if their child went to a school where the other children were from high SES backgrounds (Sui-Chu and Willms, 1996). This could potentially be due to the fact that schools with a high proportion of pupils from low SES backgrounds, face a wider range of challenges than those with high SES pupil intakes and therefore allocate fewer resources to engaging parents. Despite this, family SES and school intake SES still failed to explain most of the variation in parental engagement, leading the researchers to conclude that factors beyond SES determine parental engagement more strongly (ibid).
- **Attitudes and behaviour towards education** differ between socio-economic groups. Parents in lower socio-economic groups are more likely to have had negative experiences of education themselves which may result in more negative attitudes towards education, including higher education (Baars et al., 2015). In turn, these attitudes could be transmitted to their own children or may influence their level of engagement in education (Sacker, Schoon and Bartley, 2002). Additionally, parents in lower socio-economic groups are likely to have had less experience of education, particularly higher education, and may therefore feel less able to support their children in decision making about post-compulsory education. Similarly, students may feel their parents were unable to provide help with higher education decision if they had not been to university themselves (David et al., 2013).
- **The home learning environment** (HLE) includes the provision of learning opportunities and interactions in the home (Sylva et al., 1999) and parents from higher socio-economic groups tend to provide a richer 'Home Learning Environment' (Melhuish et al., 2001; Chowdry et al. 2010; Sylva et al, 1999). However, where parents from lower socio-economic groups provide a supportive HLE, this can reduce the overall impact of SES on children's educational outcomes (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

On balance, the literature suggests that socio-economic status impacts on parental engagement through a range of factors which, despite being related to socio-economic status, are not necessarily determined by it.

4.2 Gender

David et al. (2003) conducted qualitative interviews with 98 year-13 students and 38 of their parents to examine the nature of parental involvement in higher education between different groups of parents. They found that both parent-gender and child-gender were associated with differences in the extent and type of parents' involvement. Firstly, mothers and parents of daughters were more likely to be involved than fathers and parents of sons. Some sons actively avoided parental involvement as they found it 'intrusive', especially if they weren't achieving well in school. Secondly, mothers and fathers tended to take different approaches to involvement. Mothers took a collaborative approach, seemingly guided

by other mothers when making decisions, some daughters emulated this approach, collaborating with friends, even wanting to choose the same institutions. Fathers took a more individualistic approach, mirroring boys reluctance to include even their parents in their decisions, and in middle class households took an intense approach, sometimes trying to control the choice process. However, given the small-scale nature of this research, findings should be interpreted with caution. While those wishing to engage parents should consider the needs and preferences of fathers and mothers and female and male students, this should not be based on stereotypes. Instead, a range of activities should be provided and feedback from both pupils and parents should be considered.

In summary, there are a range of structural factors which shape the degree and form of parents' engagement.

Although socio-economic status has the most significant impact, it is also the most complex factor and influences engagement via a range of subfactors such as school context, economic hardship and parents' educational experiences.

We examine the impact of structural factors – particularly socio-economic status – on parental engagement and attitudes in more detail in the next section.

Although universities should be aware of how demographic factors interact with parental engagement, they can do little to affect them. In contrast, universities are well placed to address the attitudes and concerns explored in the following section, which may in turn be mediated by factors such as socio-economic status.

By understanding and addressing parents' attitudes and concerns, schools and universities can improve parental engagement. Section 6 examines how universities are currently doing so as well as which strategies are likely to work best.

Parents' attitudes, concerns and engagement in higher education

We conducted a nationally representative survey of parents to examine their concerns about the prospect of their child going to university, as well as their expectations for their child's progression to higher education. We also explored various measures of their engagement in their child's education.

While some research examining parents' attitudes to higher education exists, it often focuses solely on parental attitudes as a barrier or an aid to their child's higher education progression. Here, by surveying concerns alongside parental engagement, we can explore whether addressing a parents' concerns might be a 'hook' to increase engagement; given that universities are well placed to address parents' concerns. To gain further insights regarding the nature of parents concerns, and how they want them to be addressed, we also conducted a focus group and interviews with parents from low participation areas who had not been to university themselves.

5.1 Parental attitudes towards higher education

Previous research has found that parents hold high aspirations for higher education, sometimes across all sections of society:

- Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study demonstrated that when children are born 97% of mothers want them to go to university (Education Committee Report, 2013).
- Kintrea et al. (2011) surveyed 175 parents in London, Nottingham and Glasgow, only 30% of whom had attended college or university or had a professional qualification and found that 77% wanted their child to go to college or university and 78% wanted their child to attain higher educational qualifications than they had achieved themselves.
- US studies also find that the majority of parents aspire for their child to go progress to higher education: over 80% of 13,000 surveyed parents said they want their child to obtain a college degree (Spera et al. 2008).

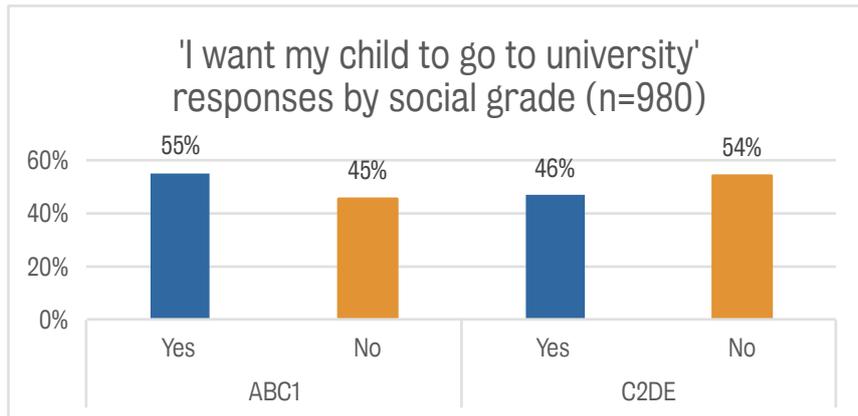
In response to our nationally representative survey of nearly 1,000 parents, with parents aged 7 to 18¹, 51% said 'I want my child to go to university', mirroring another recent survey (NCFE, 2016). In light of previous research findings this is perhaps a lower proportion of parents than we would expect. These results may represent a recent shift in parental attitudes, away from university being seen as the pre-eminent option. For instance, a 2016 survey found that 81% of parents believe a degree apprenticeship would provide their child with a better chance of getting a job than a traditional university degree (Populus, 2016). The 49% of parents we surveyed who did not want their child to go to university may be aspiring for their child to gain a vocational higher education qualification.

We found some difference parents attitudes depending on their social grades. Parents from a higher social grade (ABC₁) were significantly² more likely to 'want [their] child to go to university' (55% compared to 46%) (see Figure 1).

¹ Where there is reference to 'respondents' or 'parents' in this survey, when reporting the results of the questions relating to concerns or attitudes towards university, this refers to parents of children aged 7 to 18.

² The result is statistically significant, $p < 0.05$.

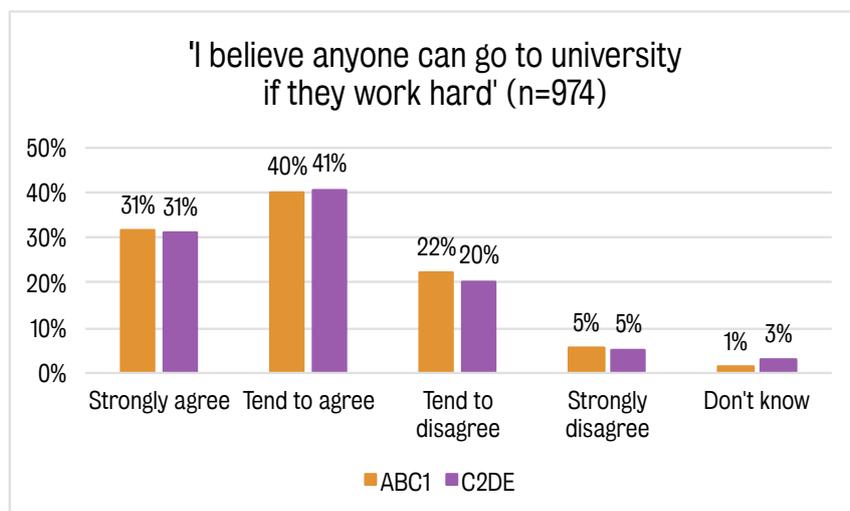
Figure 1



Again, though the difference is significant, these results are perhaps less striking than we would expect given previous research findings which frequently find a large gap between the higher education aspirations of parents from different socio-economic backgrounds. For example, Chowdry et al. (2010) find that when their children are nine years old 81% of the richest mothers hoped their child will go to university in comparison with just 37% of the poorest mothers. However, Chowdry's finding is based on more fine-grained socio-economic groupings: comparing the extremes of the socio-economic spectrum is likely to highlight a more considerable difference than the binary approach pursued in our analysis. Furthermore, our sample includes parents of children from a broader range of age groups.

Previous surveys that have examined parental expectations (rather than aspirations) for their children's university progression also found larger differences between parents from different social classes. A 2014 YouGov survey found that 70% of parents from A, B and C1 social groups thought it was 'likely' 'that [their child] will apply to go to university regardless of whether they actually go', compared to 53% of parents in C2, D and E social grade groups. However, our own survey suggests that parental aspirations are not limited by low expectations of what can be achieved, as the majority of parents (71%) 'believe that anyone can go to university if they work hard' and this proportion was nearly identical in both social grade groups (see Figure 2). It therefore seems that parents from different socio-economic groups differ little in terms of looser or more hypothetical expectations – the belief that their children could attain the university-based aspirations they may hold for them – but parents from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to expect their children to apply.

Figure 2



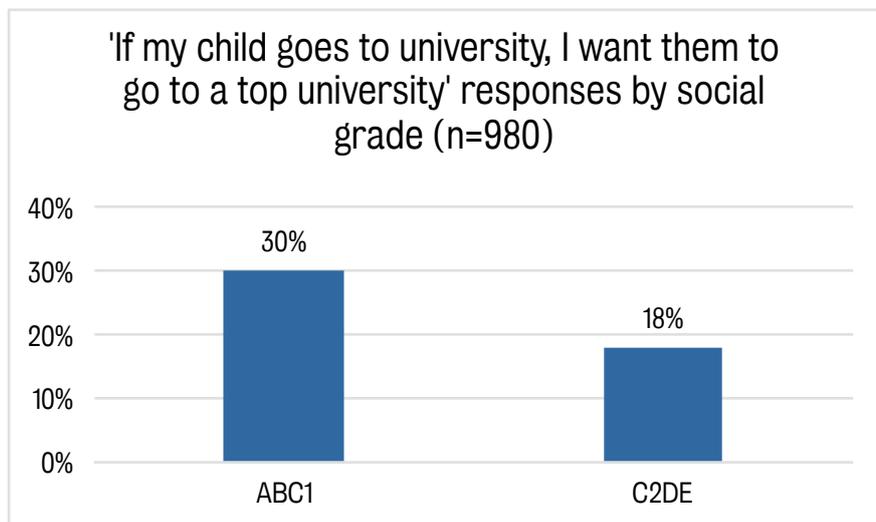
Attitudes to 'top' universities

Overall, only a quarter (25%) of parents agreed *'If my child goes to university, I want them to go to a top university'*. Meanwhile 36% of parents who stated that they wanted their child to go to university said they wanted them to go to a 'top' university. One parent we interviewed wanted their children to go to what they perceived as a 'top' university, namely, a Russell Group institution, though she referred to this as a form of 'snobbery' regarding university choice.

'[I'm concerned about them] picking a good university, I want them to pick somewhere decent... There is this snobbery around Russell Group universities and some others that are okay, I'd like him to go to a good university, the ones in the Russell Group really.'

However, responses differed significantly by social grade, with 30% of ABC1 parents selecting *'If my child goes to university, I want them to go to a top university'*, compared to 18% of C2DE parents (see Figure 3).

Figure 3



When isolating those that said 'yes' to the previous question (*'I want my child to go to university'*), the trend was similar, though with a slightly higher proportion of parents in each social grade saying they would want their child to go to a 'top university' (42% of ABC1 parents and 29% of C2DE parents).

If parents indicated they did not want their child to go to university, the prospect of their child going to a top university did not sway them. Only 13% of these parents would want their child to go to a 'top university' if they did go to university, though there was some difference between the social grade groups (16%, ABC1 and 10%, C2DE).

The finding that only a minority of parents who want their child to go to university want them to go to a top university is in line with recent surveys of parents' attitudes towards different higher education options. In a 2016 survey, 61% of parents favoured degree apprenticeships over a traditional degree from Oxford or Cambridge (Populus, 2016).

In summary, while previous research has found that a large majority of parents want their child to progress to higher education, only half of parents responding to our survey wanted their child to go to university. This might be a reflection of recently shifting attitudes towards valuing vocational options more highly or a growing concern about the labour market return on the high cost of university.

Additionally, only a quarter of parents wanted their children to go to a 'top' university and parents from higher social grade groups were more likely to want this. Parents who did not want their child to go to university overall, were less likely than those that did to want them to go, to want their child to go to a 'top' university.

Despite this, our survey found that the majority of parents believe that anyone can go to university, and there is little difference in this belief between social groups.

Taken together these findings suggest that although parents from C2DE social groups were less likely to want their children to go to university this was not due to a belief that they would not be able to.

5.2 What are parents concerned about when considering sending their child to university?

A considerable amount of outreach, widening participation programmes and IAG offered by universities attempts to address parents' misconceptions about higher education and allay their concerns. However, there is a paucity of research evidence examining exactly what parents are concerned about and whether this differs for parents whose children are targeted by widening participation programmes. In particular, there is a lack of up to date research exploring whether parents' concerns have shifted as the university and labour market landscape (including the cost of higher education) has changed. We have therefore used our nationally representative survey of parents to examine parents' concerns and supplemented this with findings from in depth discussions.

Our survey asked parents, of children aged 7 to 18, to rank their top three concerns about the prospect of their child going to university. The three most commonly selected concerns related to financial considerations, including: debt and living costs, and the value that the financial investment would confer on their children in terms of their future employment prospects. The 'amount of debt' that their children will leave university with was selected most often as the top concern by 36% of parents and within the top three concerns, by 65% of parents.

Knowledge of admissions and concerns about their children finishing university were among the least commonly selected concerns. Meanwhile, a small minority (5%) of respondents were not concerned about any of the given options.

Figure 4

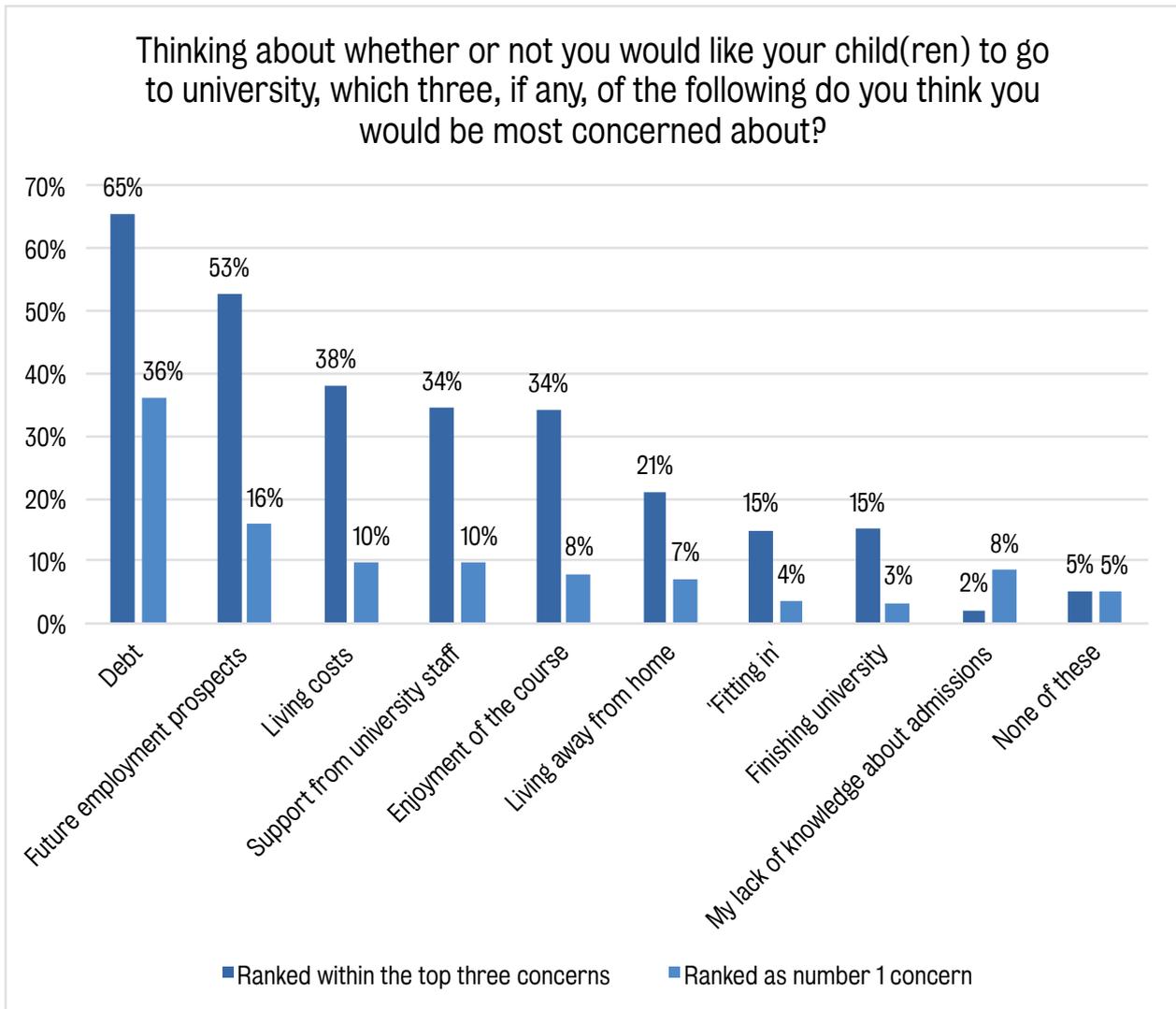


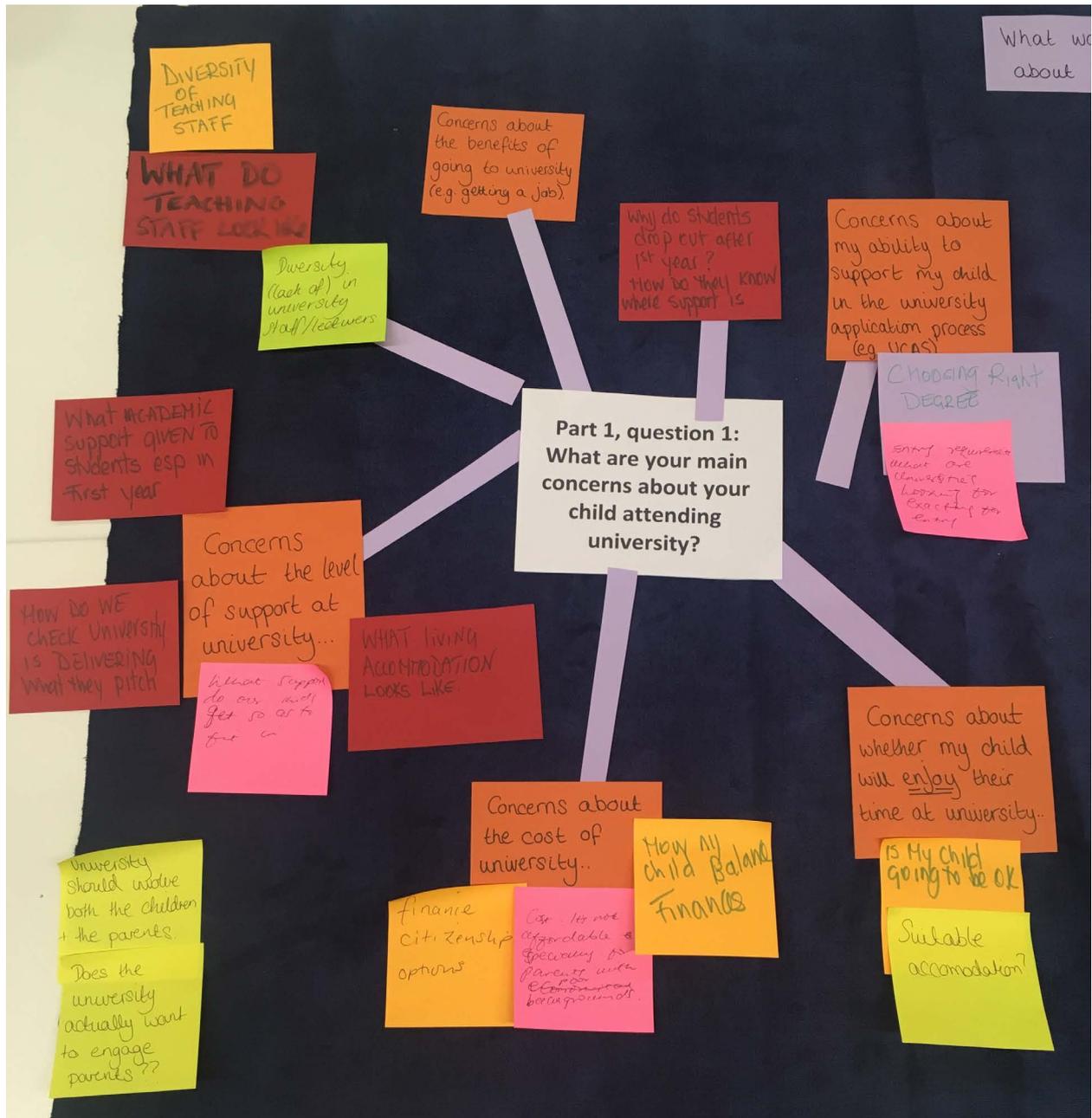
Figure 5

Key	Survey statement
Debt	'The amount of debt my child(ren) will leave university with'
Future employment prospects	'Whether attending university will improve my child(ren)'s future employment/ earning prospects'
Living costs	'If student loans will cover my child(ren)'s university living costs'
Support from university staff	'If my child(ren) will get the support they need from tutors and other university staff (e.g. academic support, personal support, pastoral care etc.)'
Enjoyment of the course	'If my child(ren) will enjoy their university course'
Living away from home	'My child(ren) living away from home for university'
'Fitting in'	'If my child(ren) will 'fit in' at university'
Finishing university	'If my child(ren) will finish their university course'
My lack of knowledge about admissions	'My lack of knowledge about the university admissions process'

Parents' discussions in focus groups reflected many of the same concerns but also frequently exposed an additional concern that was not included in the survey: whether or not universities would engage parents, work in partnership with them to support their child and ensure that the issues identified by other concerns did not impact on their child's experience or wellbeing.

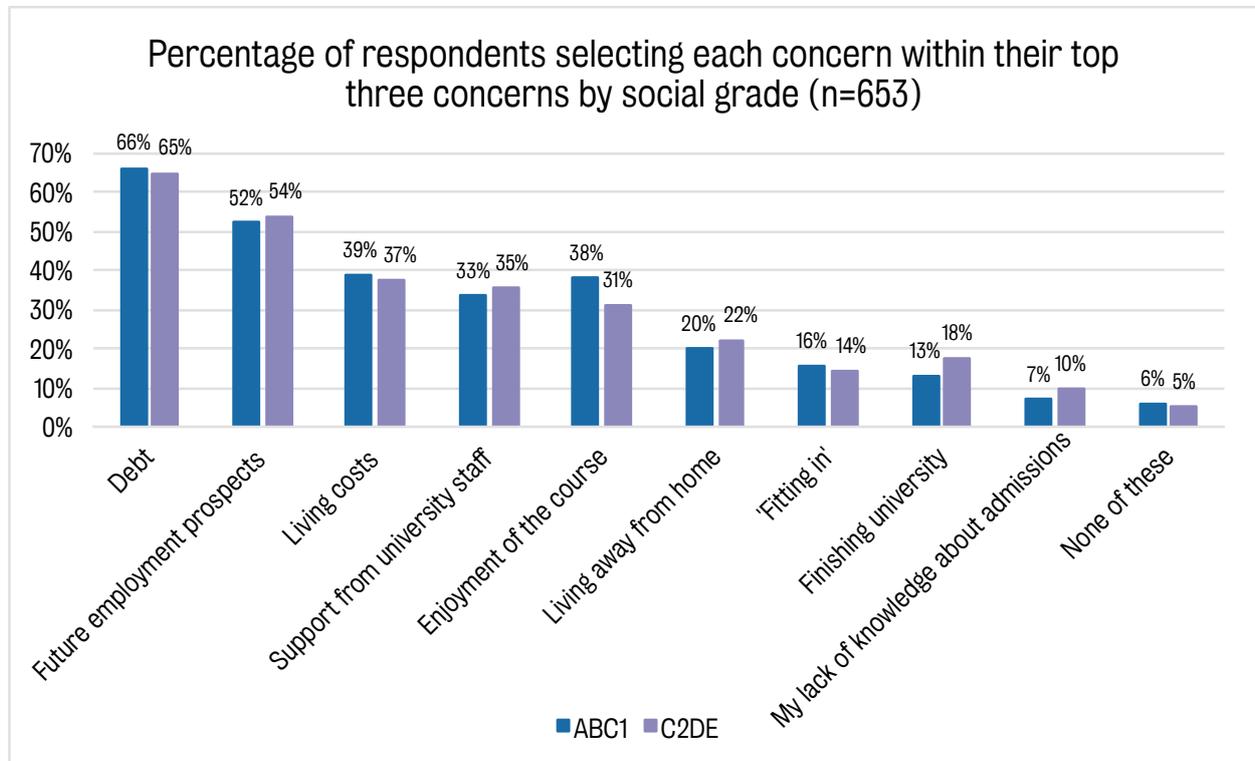
Figure 6 summarises the discussion about concerns held by one group of parents in the Parent Power focus group in which the primary concerns - around the cost of higher education and the support available at university - echoed our survey findings.

Figure 6



The survey results suggested there was almost no difference in parents' concerns across different social grades (see Figure 7). ABC1 parents appeared to be slightly more likely than C2DE parents to be concerned about their children's enjoyment of their course (38% compared to 30%). Meanwhile C2DE parents were slightly more likely to be concerned about whether their child would finish their university course (18% compared to 12%), though they were not more likely to rate this as their primary concern.

Figure 7



It is possible that differences in parents across different social grades were masked by the use of two broad social grade categories rather than more granular categorisations. However, as they stand these results suggest that parents from different socio-economic backgrounds have broadly similar concerns regarding their child going to university.

Our focus groups and interviews allowed us to interrogate each type of concern in more detail.

5.2.1 Financial concerns

Nearly two thirds of parents surveyed (65%) were concerned about their child's future debt burden and over a third (38%) were concerned about whether loans would cover their children's living costs.

One parent explained his financial concerns regarding university by highlighting his worries about both the level of debt his children would amass and his concerns regarding the cost of supporting them. This was exacerbated by his belief that student debt would affect his son's ability to get a mortgage. Notably, this is one of the primary finance-based misconceptions that universities seek to dispel in their IAG (see section 6.2.1), suggesting that universities have perhaps selected their focus appropriately.

'The way my parents were was that you didn't have debt, I've always believed you pay your way... my son wants to be a dentist and the course is about 7 years. He will come out of that with a big debt, he'll be in his mid-twenties he might want to buy a house and he will be trying to get a mortgage with a big debt around his neck. It feels uncomfortable... Having talked to both my children I think the concern is more in my head than in theirs so that's just a generation thing really.'

As a single parent of teenage twins his concern was exacerbated by the fact that he would have to support both children at the same time. However, his relatively high earnings meant he would not qualify for a high maintenance loan.

'My biggest concern is around the cost of it, I earn a reasonable amount of money but I am supporting them primarily on my own, I won't get any grants so it's just the cost of both going to university really...£9,000 a year without accommodation so that's my big fear; the cost implication.'

However, our parent focus groups revealed further nuance within parents' concerns about debt and living costs. Some parents explained that the reason they were worried about the cost of living at university was that their inability to provide financial support meant their children would have to work alongside their studies. Some parents expressed concern about the impact this would have on their child's university experience, especially if their peers had more parental financial support and did not have to work.

'My friend's granddaughter went to college away from home and she was with people that didn't have to work to supplement their income, they were out and she was having to go to work and she found it so difficult, she was excluded from all that... she was always working and that totally ruined her experience. That's a big thing because if our kids have to have a job to survive, what's the effect of that?'

Financial concerns have been widespread since tuition fees and loans were introduced at a cost of £1,000 per year in 1998. A study conducted in 2000 found that 70% of parents were unhappy about the prospect of their children taking out a loan to pay for university (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000). However, the steep rise in tuition fees to over £9,000 per year in 2012 appears to have amplified this concern, despite having little impact on participation rates. A 2014 survey found that 58% of parents believe degrees are not worth their cost, though two thirds maintained that a traditional university course was still a good route for their children to achieve their desired career (YouGov, 2014).

The same survey showed no difference between parents of different social grades in their view of whether university is worth the cost and, similarly, our survey found no difference by social grade in the proportion of parents placing financial concerns in their top three concerns. However, one parent in the focus group expressed concern that young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds or some ethnic backgrounds (where they thought debt might be viewed as being problematic), might be less likely to enter their career of choice after university because of financial concerns.

'What more children are now doing because they are worried about the cost of university... is getting a job at university in order to survive...then when they leave university, they are not waiting to get a higher paid job, because they are worried about the high cost and the debt so they are settling for lower jobs.'

Indeed, recent research based on an analysis of the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS), which includes questionnaire and panel data, highlights that this concern is valid (Hoskins et al., 2017). Most of the employed graduates included in the study were not working in their desired careers due to financial pressures: *'the precarity of the labour market and a need to support themselves financially combined to mean that, after completing their studies, many felt they must take any job...putting future ambitions on hold'* (ibid, p.). In many cases graduates continued with the work they had as a student despite the fact that it did not require, or make use of, their qualifications. This was particularly the case for students from less wealthy backgrounds who could not afford to take part in the unpaid internships required by so many graduate careers.

University practitioners recognised financial concerns and misconceptions as a key factor needing to be addressed as part of their outreach.

'I think it's important to start softly, gently introducing these ideas to parents. Particularly with finance, you see the scales fall away from their eyes because all they know is what the media promotes and they see the scary figures of fees and they think, well that's not for us because we don't have that money, we can't afford it. Even just to dispel that myth early is important.'

Primary Schools Engagement Manager, The University of Nottingham

However, the need to address parents' concerns about future employment opportunities was mentioned less frequently. Where they did practitioners highlighted the fact that graduate earnings are, on average, higher over a lifetime, but did not acknowledge the more specific concerns about the difficulties faced by more recent graduates or by graduates from less wealthy backgrounds.

Existing research suggests that most students are also concerned about the debts they will incur as a result of attending university. In 2015, 77% of recent graduates were worried about their debt and 56% believed that their degree had not been worth the cost (NUS, 2015). The parents who attended our focus group were aware that their children held these concerns, though most – perhaps as a result of the outreach they had participated in – felt able to reassure their children and encourage them to go to university anyway.

'I reassure my son, I say to him, see it as an investment in your life, your education, you have it for life. Don't worry about the money, once you achieve that qualification you will be able to pay this back.'

'Someone needs to explain to these children that this is not a debt that you can't pay, this is not a debt that is going to strangle you or kill you, this is a debt that you need so you can have education and live your life.'

However, parents reported that for some young people, concerns about debt had led them to consider other options besides immediately entering university. Though these parents still encouraged their children to aspire to whatever they wanted the fact that university decisions caused worry for their children translated into an additional concern for parents.

'My daughter, she is saying, 'Mum, I don't want to be in debt, I don't want you to be in debt'. I just say 'I don't want you to stop thinking about university if that is your aspiration but also, there are other options, there's apprenticeships and other options or you can wait a bit.' But I still tell her to aspire. It's heart breaking that a child at this age, 16, is... worrying about this.'

5.2.2 Future employment prospects

Research shows that individuals from groups that are underrepresented in higher education are less likely to see university as a valuable pursuit that will improve their career trajectory. In our survey, just over half (53%) of parents were concerned about 'whether university would improve [their] child's future employment prospects.' However, there was no difference between the proportion of parents from different social grades who were concerned about this. This concern is closely related to concerns about the cost of higher education, and whether university is seen as 'value for money'. Indeed, over a third of parents (36%) selected both concerns about debt and future employment in their top three concerns. As discussed in section 5.2.1, parents in our focus group were concerned about the impact that the cost of university would have on their children's employment prospects if graduates from poorer backgrounds felt trapped in or settled for lower paid careers in order to pay off debt.

Additionally, some parents were concerned that as the proportion of young people progressing to higher education had increased, degrees had become less valuable. One parent explained his concern that degrees held less value today than in previous years. This was despite the fact that he felt university was appropriate for his very academically able children, and confident that his children would succeed in the labour market:

'I think I'm not 100% convinced [that it will improve employment prospects], it won't do them any harm. But when I was at school it was the top 5 or 10 per cent of kids that went on to uni and they went on to do the bigger jobs... in the last 20 years the majority⁴ of people go and the degree doesn't have the gravity it once had.'

5.2.3 Available support at university

A third of respondents to our parent survey were concerned about whether their *'children will get the support they need from tutors and other university staff'*, though only 1 in 10 ranked it as their top concern.

Focus group participants and interviewees shared this concern. Parents were unsure about the amount of support available and, crucially, whether universities would actually deliver the support they advertised.

'Support as in academic support if they are struggling I would like to think they could get some extra help. Pastoral care as well if they are struggling with mental health as well I'd like to think there was something there. I don't know if it's there, I'd like to think it is...that there is somewhere they can go...I'm unsure there is anything and how available it is and how approachable these people are.'

Figure 8

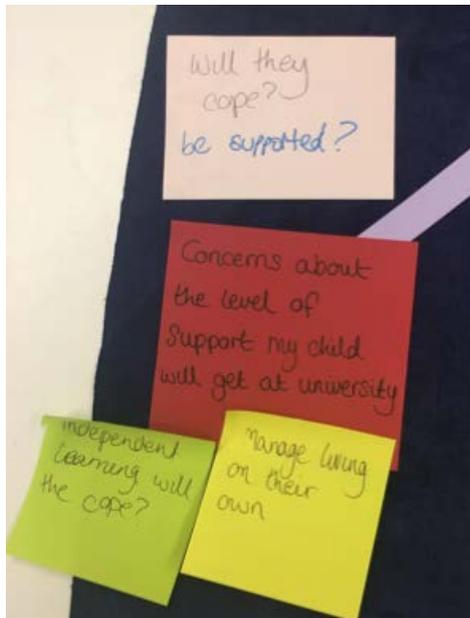
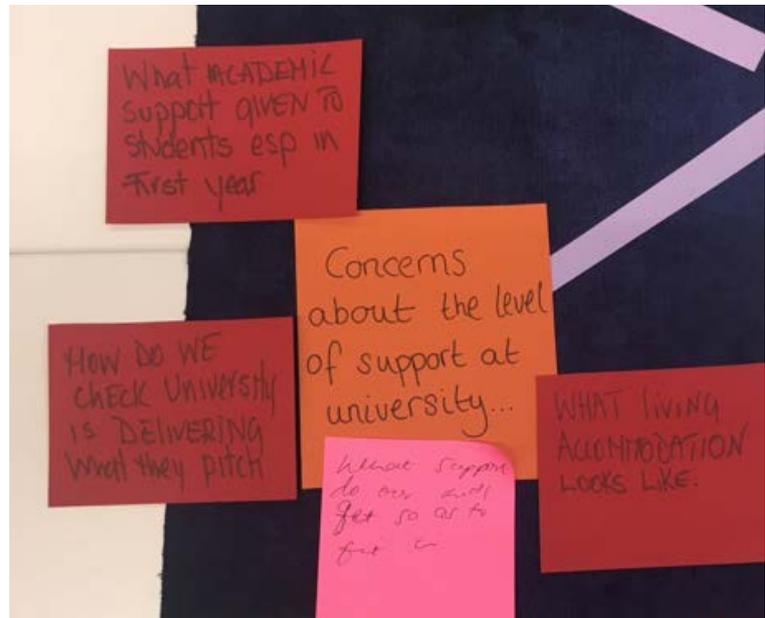


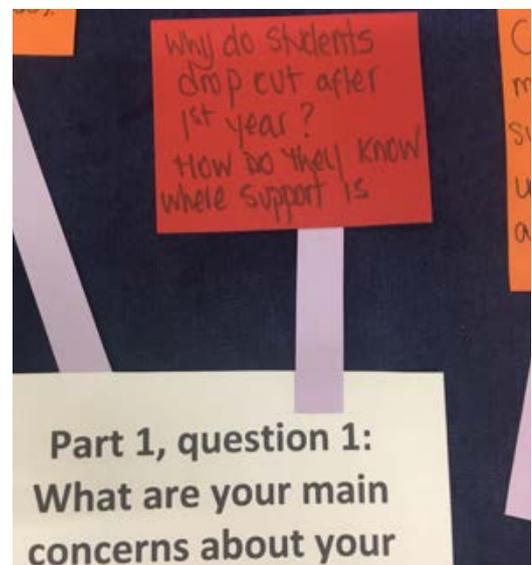
Figure 9



Our survey did not reveal notable differences between parents from different social grades' likelihood of expressing a concern about the support available at university. However, the parents who attended our focus group felt particularly concerned about the support available for students from ethnic minorities, particularly Black students, and students from working class backgrounds. They were aware that outcomes and dropout rates for these groups are comparatively poor.⁵

'How do we make sure that the university is actually providing what they pitch? They are very good at pitching but what about following through? ...We know that a lot of students from working class backgrounds and Black backgrounds drop out after the first year of university so we're asking that question, why do they

Figure 10



drop out and how do they know where the support is? What academic support is given, especially in the first year?’

Despite concerns about dropout rates expressed in the focus group, only 15% of survey respondents selected ‘whether my child will finish their university course’ amongst their top concerns. However, parents from C2DE social groups were more likely to be concerned about this than parents in ABC1 social groups (18% compared to 12%), perhaps reflecting this awareness of the increased likelihood of dropout for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Parents’ concerns about available support often sat alongside a feeling that schools and universities do not allow parents to provide the support they want to, or notify them if their children are struggling. Parents emphasised that one of the main reasons why they want to be ‘engaged’ by universities was to allow them to support their children themselves. They were particularly concerned about the notion that a university would not be able to communicate with them about how their child was coping and emphasised that, despite being aware their children would be classed as ‘adults,’ they would be in a major transition and consequently, might need their parents’ support.

‘University should involve both the children and the parents. At secondary school we as parents are left at the school gate and only brought in when there is trouble or when there is a review... and we know that at university it’s the same, or it’s worse.’

Others felt that because universities might not reach out to parents, parents would not be given the opportunity to inform the university about the support their child might need. They recognised that universities are eager to support students but felt frustrated that they might not be able to provide useful insight into their children’s needs.

‘Trying to get my children to talk [about their feelings] is taking time and they’re good now at talking to me but trying to get them to talk to support [services], they think ‘I don’t want them to think that I’m not coping because it will reflect badly on my parents.’ I’m saying ‘no, talk’. So... universities want to know about this shit [how our children are getting on] but what they don’t want to do, is talk to us [parents]. We’re the ones that [the students] are talking to but even when we try and talk to [the university] they’re not changing anything.’

Notably, these parents did not yet have children attending university but their concerns seemed to have arisen as a result of their experiences with their child’s school and from hearing about the experiences of other parents with children in university. This highlights the role that schools have to play in engaging parents in a way which prepares both young people and parents for the transition to university. The concerns of parents whose children were not yet attending university were corroborated by those with children who were studying, and had not been engaged:

‘There’s nothing. No nothing at all. Well, there will be graduation but while they’re there absolutely nothing.’

It is clear that parents hold considerable concerns about the extent to which they will be included in their child’s journey through higher education, long before this becomes a reality.

5.2.4 Students’ enjoyment and desire to go to university

A third of survey respondents (34%) said they were concerned about ‘*whether their child would enjoy their course*’. Parents from ABC1 social grade groups were slightly more likely to express this concern than C2DE parents (37% and 30% respectively). Parents in the focus group were also concerned about whether their children would enjoy university and their course. Their concerns highlighted that it was not just about choosing the ‘right subject’ but also whether university was ‘right for their child’ and

whether their child would be taught in their preferred way.

'One [information session] was about how good the course is and what the course is like, how it is taught. I know that for a lot of it they have to be independent learners, they have a library... but the concern was, if they aren't taught in the right way for them, they won't enjoy it and they won't make the most of it...and that could ruin their whole experience.'

'And does my child actually want to go to university? What we don't want to do is say that's the only avenue because then it puts pressure on them and they can end up doing something that's not really what they enjoy.'

Again, parents' concerns about university were related to their experience of their child's school. Parents seemed troubled by schools' tendency to encourage pupils to choose subjects early and to pick certain subjects, or types of subjects over others. For example, one parent was unimpressed by teachers not having included her in the decision-making process during GCSE choices, and how the school had restricted her son's choices.

'The school tries to force the child to pick their [the schools' suggested] path, not what they want or what the parents want. We had this with GCSE selection, the teacher was looking at my 13-year-old and talking to him and I said, 'talk to me too!'. When they are saying you can't do a language and a humanity... I was outraged.'

Some parents were concerned both that this had led to a narrowing of their children's experience with different subjects and that schools could apply a similar pressure when children were making their choices about university.

5.2.5 Living away from home

Just over a fifth of respondents (21%) said that their '*child living away from home*' was among their top three concerns, although very few (7%) rated it as their top concern. Given that we provided parents with a separate option to raise concerns about living costs, concerns about children 'living away from home' were more likely linked to concerns about their child's safety or their ability to take care of themselves. As parents in our focus group explained:

'When they go to university they've got a lot to think about, it's not just about their course and their learning, they are learning how to look after themselves and that can be quite a big step when they leave home.'

One parent explained that her primary concern was around her son living far away and struggling socially.

'The main concerns would be going on their own, completely, not knowing anybody, how far away from home they would be... My son is quite quiet and socially reserved, I would worry about him initially and being away from home. I'm sure he'd be fine eventually but just a little concerned as a mum.'

Although we cannot infer a causal connection, the proportion of parents concerned about their child living away from home is closely aligned with the overall proportion of students who live at home while studying at university. In 2006/7, 21% of students lived in their parental home, an increase of over 50% in the previous decade. Since then, the proportion of home-based students has remained around a fifth, though certain groups, including Bangladeshi and Pakistani students, females, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, are considerably more likely to be at home (Hefce, 2009). US studies have also found that students whose parents did not attend higher education were more likely to choose a university or college close to their home to allow them to live at home (Engle, 2007). This suggests that

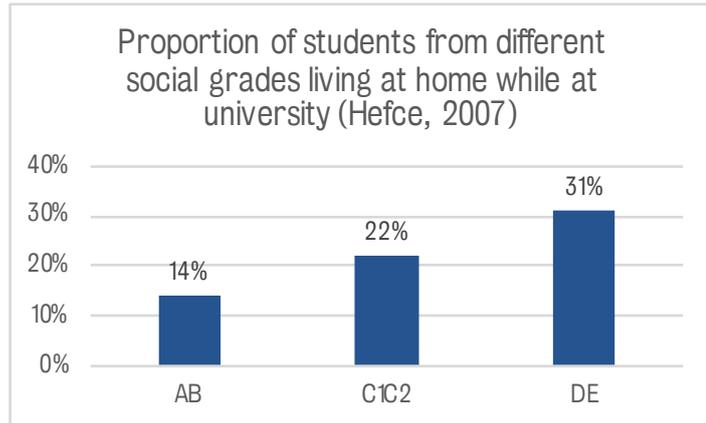
certain groups of parents may be more likely to be concerned about the prospect of their child living away from home. Although, studying from home may be the ‘right’ choice for some students it is important that parents’ and young people’s concerns are addressed so that students from different backgrounds have equal opportunity to choose where to live while they studying, be that at home or independently.

Although living at home may have significant benefits in terms of cost and

may even avoid concerns about living away preventing a young person from progressing to higher education, there may also be significant drawbacks. Holdsworth (2008) raises concerns that the tendency for poorer young people to choose institutions where they can live at home ‘*will create a two-tier education system, distinguishing between those students who can afford to move away and those “forced” to stay local.*’ Young people choosing a university on the basis of location are less able to make their choice on the basis of the institution’s quality or the courses it offers. Additionally, some suggest that students living at home, especially if they face a considerable commute, are less able to enjoy the wider benefits of university such as gaining independence and accessing extra-curricular activities (Holdsworth, 2008).

It is clear that while living at home might be the right choice for some students, when it is borne out of parental concern or financial constraints attached to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, it has the potential to place some young people at a disadvantage. Therefore, universities should ensure that their outreach is addressing parental concerns about their child leaving home.

Figure 11



5.2.6 ‘Fitting in’

One commonly discussed barrier to widening participation is the tendency for students from low participation areas, or families, to feel that university is ‘not for them’ or to feel an identity conflict when they do attend university. Working class students in particular may feel the need to conceal their identity to in order to assimilate to the university environment (Loveday, 2014). Reay et al.’s (2009) research suggests that young people from lower socio-economic groups see their ‘low status’ backgrounds as incompatible with the ‘high status’ of universities, especially highly selective universities. In contrast, our survey of parents found no difference in the proportion of parents from high and low social grades who were concerned about ‘*whether [their] child will ‘fit in’ at university*’ and only 15% of parents overall selected this as one of their top three concerns.

However, parents in our focus group did express concerns about the diversity of teaching staff in universities. The majority of parents in the focus group were from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds and during a visit to Oxford one parent had asked what proportion of staff from a particular department were non-white, only to be told that all lecturers were White. They were worried about how this would impact on their children feeling they ‘belong’ at university.

5.2.7 Knowledge of admissions

Research on barriers to widening participation often references a lack of knowledge about the application and admissions process. Some research suggests that parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds have less confidence and knowledge about how to navigate university applications. This is perhaps due to a tendency to prefer informal information, referred to as ‘hot’ information, combined with a lack of

direct experience of higher education (Reay, 2001; Ball and Vincent, 1998). Our survey data appeared to confirm this theory as parents from ABC1 social groups were significantly more likely than parents from C2DE groups to say they *'would feel confident discussing university with my child'*, including in terms of *'the admissions process'* 72% compared to 54%.

However, this lack of confidence from some parents, did not translate into a top concern. Lack of knowledge about admissions was the least commonly selected concern by the parents we surveyed, in both social groups, with only 8% of parents overall indicating it was a top concern. Parents we interviewed were not concerned about supporting their child with university applications either, despite not having attended university themselves. However, one parent, despite not feeling concerned, did feel that she would benefit from more information on some aspects of the application process.

'For my son, he will need some support but I haven't got any concerns about helping him at all. I would like to know more about the personal statement, I don't know a lot about that... It's not crystal clear to me when they have to be looking at universities and when they have to apply. They seem to be informing the students at school but I don't think parents get as much information and I don't think children always relay that to their parents.'

Similarly, parents in the focus group felt that this was not a high priority concern because schools would support their child with the application process. However, some parents expressed frustration with their child's school regarding their promotion of less prestigious courses and institutions.

'Schools are taking them to visit places, my daughter comes back oh I'm really excited about this university... I looked up the prospectus and I asked her; what is it that you are attracted to... but when I read it, they are a college offering degree courses, not a university. All their lecturers are visiting, there's no one who will get to know you, no one you would establish a relationship with... what's going to happen if you don't understand something? She hadn't even thought about it like that.'

Therefore, parents wanted to be informed and to do their own research about institutions so they could support their child during the choice process. As an unusually informed audience, they were concerned that some parents, who had not been involved in outreach (as they had been), would not be able to do this.

'Because I'm an 'able' parent I was able to have that conversation, but how many parents would have felt confident to do that? Others would have said, 'if you think that's right, go for it'. If we as parents don't know what a good university is, what a good course is, how are we going to have those conversations?'

This led to a concern that universities were presenting a 'sales pitch' rather than genuine information, suggesting a degree of mistrust in some IAG and a desire to do the research themselves.

'It's like they are trying to sell you a dream but they are not telling you the flaws of what is actually going on in the university. As a seller you never ever tell anyone those flaws and so it boils down to you having to do your own research.'

In summary, the most common concern expressed by parents in our survey was related to the amount of debt that their children would leave university with.

Living costs and the impact on future employment and earning prospects were also commonly selected amongst parents' top concerns.

The parents we interviewed reflected these concerns with some highlighting fears regarding their child having to work throughout university. Others worried that the pressure of student debt would lead to their children 'settling' for less prestigious or high earning jobs in future. However, information, advice and guidance had addressed some of these concerns, particularly Regarding misconceptions about student finance.

The support available at university was also a key concern of over a third of parents and this was frequently discussed in focus groups. Parents seemed particularly concerned that universities may not deliver what they promise and that post-entry outcomes for some pupil groups were particularly poor, suggesting that universities may not be supporting these pupils. Parents in our focus group and interviews also expressed an additional concern that universities would not engage parents or work in partnership with them to support their child.

A 'lack of knowledge about admissions' was the least commonly referenced concern, in contrast to a wealth of research which highlights this as a barrier to entry for underrepresented groups.

5.3 Do different 'types' of parent engage in different ways and hold different concerns?

Our survey yielded limited evidence that parents from different socio-economic groups engage in their children's education to a different extent or have different concerns about their children going to university, in contrast to a wealth of existing research. Although it is likely that differences may have been muted by the broad categorisation of socio-economic groups we used, the similarity in parents' concerns is notable.

It may be that socio-economic disparities in attitudes toward higher education are not reflected in parents' concerns but rather in the way they go about addressing and resolving these concerns. For instance, the majority of parents in both socio-economic groups were concerned about the amount of debt their children would leave university with. However, existing literature suggests that parents from higher socio-economic groups may nonetheless view a degree as a valuable 'investment' and seek out official information about the financial aspects of higher education. This could provide reassurance about repayments, alleviating some concerns (Greenbank, 2006; Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008; Reay, 2001; Ball and Vincent, 1998). Meanwhile, parents from lower socio-economic groups are more likely see higher education in terms of 'risk' and tend to prefer 'hot' information such as 'word of mouth', (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Reay, 2001). This may result in exposure to other parents' concerns and commonly held misconceptions being reinforced (Hillman and Robinson, 2015). Their concerns may then translate into a barrier to university entry.

Given that the way in which our survey split parents into two broad social grade groups may be of limited use in capturing differences in their engagement, we ran additional analysis on the survey responses to assess whether parents fell into broad types or 'clusters' based on the forms of engagement they adopt, and whether parents that exhibit different 'types' of engagement tend to have different concerns. Our motivation here is to explore whether Widening Participation activities aimed at engaging parents can be more effectively targeted at different 'types' of parent.

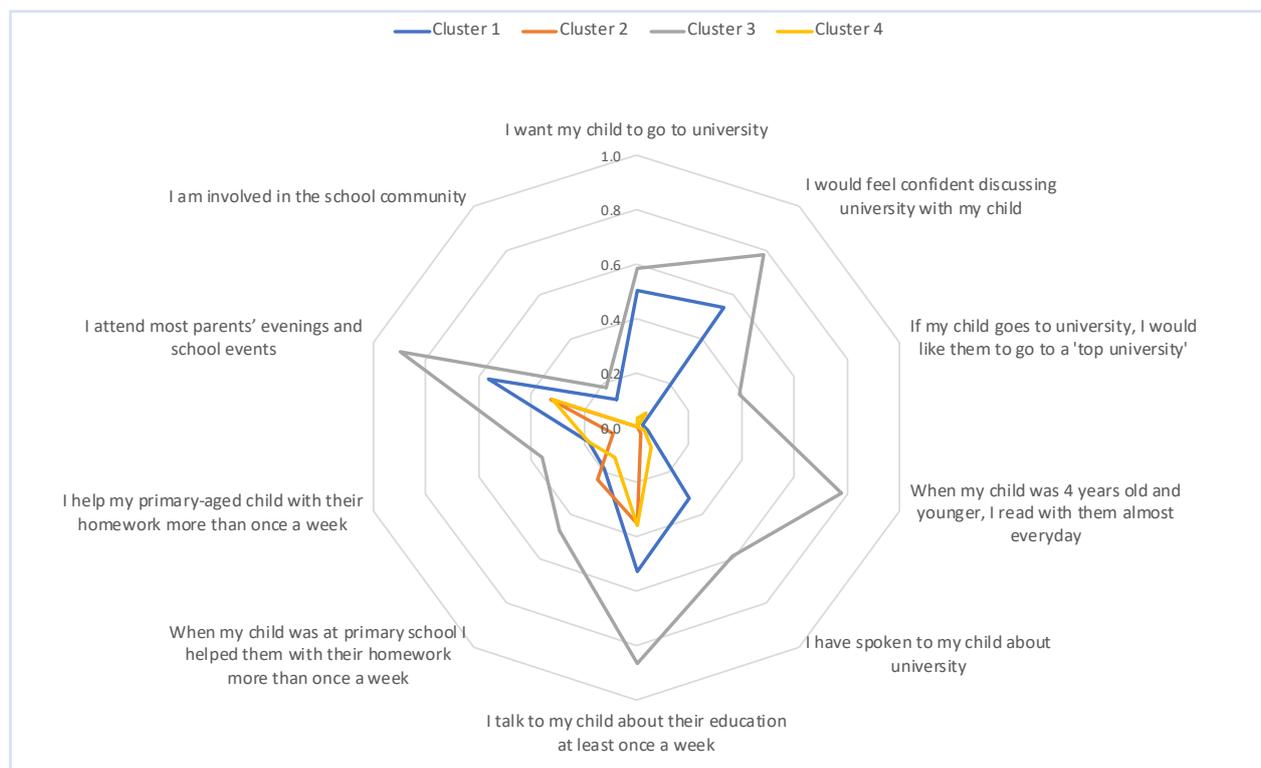
5.3.1 Types of parent based on their engagement

Our analysis suggested that parents fell into one of four clusters based on their engagement in their children’s education. Figure 12 represents these clusters as radar plots, showing the extent to which parents in each cluster reported that they engaged in their children’s education in particular ways:

- The larger a cluster’s plot, the more likely parents in that cluster were to report that they engaged in their children’s education.
- Meanwhile, the shape of a plot illustrates the relative importance that parents place on different forms of engagement; if clusters have different shapes, this indicates that parents in different clusters engaged in relatively different ways on each of the dimensions we identified in the survey.

As shown in Figure 12, the clusters we identified tend to differ in size but have a broadly similar shape. This indicates that overall, parents differ in the extent of their engagement overall, but the emphasis of their engagement tends to be broadly similar. For instance, Figure 12 indicates that parents in all clusters placed relatively more importance on attending parents’ evenings and school events, and talking to their child about their education, than they did on other forms of engagement. Overall, parents in Cluster 3 appeared to be most engaged, followed by those in Clusters 1, 4 and 2.

Figure 12



While parents in different clusters tended to place similar relative importance on different forms of engagement there were some notable exceptions:

- Parents in Clusters 3 and 1 tended to want their child to go to university and to feel confident discussing university with their child, whereas parents in Clusters 4 and 2 reported almost no engagement on these domains. These forms of engagement may be important ‘differentiators’ between more and less engaged parents.
- Parents in Cluster 3 were more likely than parents in the other clusters to want their child to go to a ‘top’ university and were also more likely to report having read to their child almost every day when they were of preschool age. These forms of engagement may be important markers of the ‘most engaged’ parents.
- Parents in Cluster 4 were far more likely than parents in other clusters to respond ‘Don’t know’ to the

survey questions relating to different forms of parental engagement, and parents in Cluster 2 were far more likely than parents in other clusters to respond that they engaged in ‘none’ of these practices.

Parents’ belief that “anyone can go to university if they work hard” appeared to straightforwardly correlate with their overall level of engagement, as shown in Figure 13. This suggests that parental engagement may be driven, in part, by a belief that a university place can be secured through hard work. To the extent that a belief in this ‘meritocratic ideal’ will be bolstered by seeing universities broaden their intakes, it may be that increased levels of parental engagement may be a product of, as well as a driving factor behind, the success of Widening Participation programmes.

Figure 13

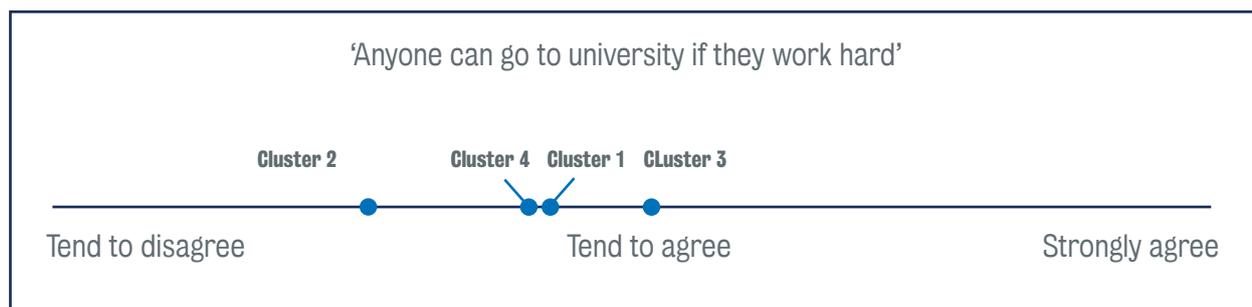


Figure 14 presents an overview of the characteristics of parents in each cluster. The most notable distinctions between the clusters are:

- A majority of parents in Clusters 3 and 1 are from the ABC1 social grade, compared to Clusters 4 and 2 which are mainly formed of parents from the C2DE social grade. This suggests that social grade, even when crudely defined, does retain some significance in shaping parental engagement when considered alongside parents’ other characteristics
- Clusters 4 and 2 contain a higher proportion of retired parents, and a higher proportion of households in which their children aged 18 or under have left home

Figure 14

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4
Number of respondents in cluster	303	41	559	35
% of respondents in ABC1 social grade	55%	34%	61%	29%
Average age of child under 18 next birthday	8	13	12	9
% of respondents unemployed	5%	2%	3%	9%
% of respondents retired	2%	12%	2%	11%
% of respondents with none of their children aged 18 or under living at home	10%	27%	12%	26%

In short, the cluster analysis suggests that there are two types of parent who tend to be more engaged, and two types who tend to be less engaged, although far fewer parents fall into these less engaged groups. As well as tending to exhibit all forms of engagement to a greater degree, more engaged parent types were distinct in that they wanted their children to go to university, felt confident discussing university with their children, and were more likely to feel that anyone can go to university if they work hard. The most engaged type of parents appeared to be far more likely to want their children to go to a ‘top’ university, and also to exhibit ‘early years’ engagement such as reading to their children regularly before they started school. Our cluster analysis suggests that there is a modest relationship between engagement and social grade, and also that more engaged parents tend to still be working – possibly because they are younger – with more of their children still living at home.

5.3.2 Patterns of concern by ‘type’ of parent

The second stage of our cluster analysis assessed whether the different ‘types’ of parent we identified above tended to have different concerns about higher education. We ranked each cluster’s concerns, based on both the number of parents who chose each concern within their top three, and the ranking they gave those concerns. Parents in all clusters appeared to be most concerned about the amount of debt their child will leave university with, and parents in Clusters 1, 2 and 3 shared a concern with their children’s employment prospects as their next most prevalent concern. On balance, different types of parent seemed to share broadly similar concerns about university. However, parents in the two less engaged clusters did appear to be more likely to raise concerns about student experience, such as whether their children would enjoy and finish their course, and that they would be living away from home.

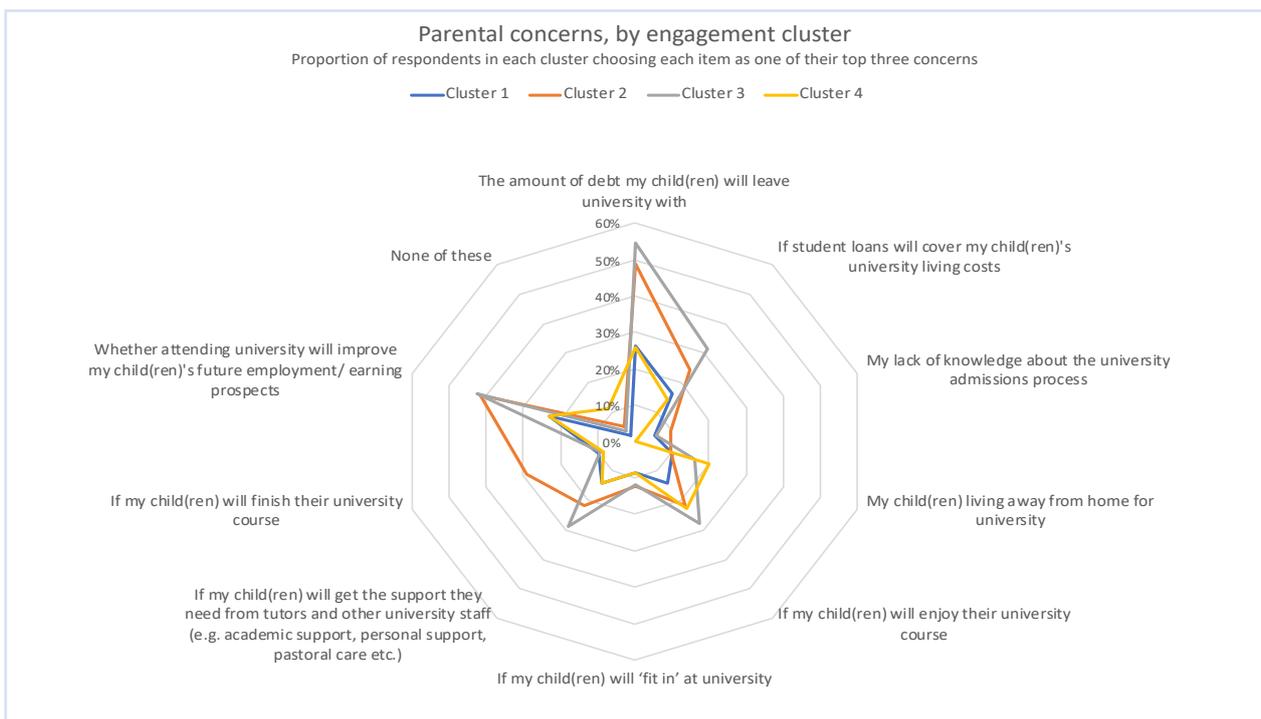
Figure 15

Main concerns for each cluster

Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4
Debt	Debt	Debt	Debt
Employment prospects	Employment prospects	Employment prospects	Whether my child will enjoy their course
Living costs	Whether my child will finish their course	Living costs	Living away

Looking across all of the concerns we asked parents to consider reveals that parents placed similar relative emphasis on each of these different concerns; the plots of concerns for each cluster have a broadly similar shape (see Figure 16). However, parents had different overall levels of concern, and these did not appear to be inversely related to parents’ level of engagement as we might expect. Instead, parents in the clusters with the highest and lowest overall levels of concern (Cluster 3 and Cluster 2 respectively) appear to have higher levels of concerns than parents in the other two clusters. This suggests that concerns relating to higher education may be more pronounced for parents who are either highly engaged or less engaged.

Figure 16



Although our analysis provides limited evidence that parental concerns relating to higher education are shaped by socio-economic status, it does suggest that there are particular groups of parents who feel concerned about specific aspects of higher education study. This provides a clear imperative for more effective Widening Participation work with parents to address these concerns.

In summary, our survey data provided limited evidence that parental engagement and concerns differ markedly by socio-economic status. Additional cluster analysis suggested that we can identify different ‘types’ of parent based on the ways in which they engage with their children’s education, but that parents tend to differ more in terms of their overall level of engagement rather than adopting different forms of engagement.

We identified two groups of parents who are relatively more engaged, and two groups of parents that are distinctly less engaged, although these less engaged groups contain relatively few parents. Wanting their child to go to university and feeling confident discussing university with their child appear to be important ‘differentiators’ between more and less engaged parents. Meanwhile, wanting their child to go to a ‘top’ university and reading to their child almost every day when they were of preschool age may be important markers of the most engaged parents.

The most engaged parents appeared to have a stronger belief that ‘anyone can go to university if they work hard’ than the least engaged parents. This suggests that increased levels of parental engagement may be a product of, as well as a driving factor behind, the success of widening participation programmes.

The ‘types’ of parent we identified appear to rest partly on differences in social grade, so our additional analysis suggests socio-economic status may have a role to play in shaping parental engagement and their concerns about higher education. However, we identify other additional factors, beyond SES, that appear to be related to differences in engagement. For instance, more engaged parents tend to still be working – possibly because they are younger – with more of their children still living at home.

Different types of parent seemed to share broadly similar concerns about university, but the least engaged parents appeared to be more likely to raise concerns about student experience, over living costs and employment prospects.

Finally, our analysis indicates that parents do not simply become more concerned about higher education as they become less engaged. Instead, concerns relating to higher education may be most pronounced for parents who are either highly engaged or minimally engaged.

6

Engagement of parents in UK higher education

6.1 How are top tariff universities in the UK engaging parents in outreach?

We submitted a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to the 30 UK universities in the top quartile by entry tariff in order to review the landscape of parental engagement outreach in the UK’s most selective higher education institutions.

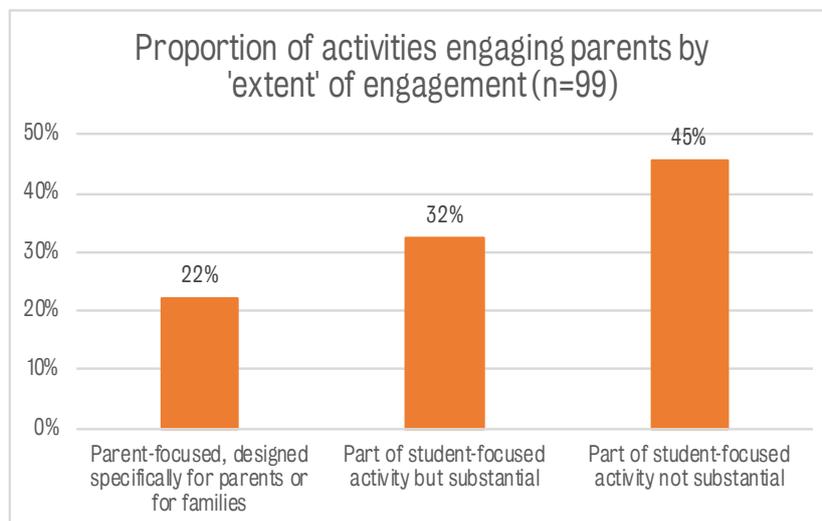
23 universities responded in full to the FOI giving details of their parental engagement activities, while a further two gave limited responses from which we were able to glean enough information to include them in our broad analysis. Five universities responded to say that they do not engage specifically with parents and therefore could not provide any information for the FOI.

Across the 25 universities that provided some information about their parental engagement activities we identified 99 programmes, activities or events and included these in our analysis of the types of parental engagement happening in this part of the sector.

6.1.1 To what extent do universities direct their outreach towards parents?

We found that the majority (77%) of outreach activities which included an element of parental engagement were additions to programmes or events that were had a core offer which was aimed at, and designed for, pupils and young people (see Figure 17). We further differentiated those activities that engaged parents as part of a student programme and found two ‘levels’ of engagement: those that offered something specific, distinct and informative to parents and those that did not. A third (32%) of activities had a parental engagement element that was distinct from the rest of the student programme they were part of and were specifically aimed at supporting parents or improving their knowledge. For example, Exeter’s offer-holder visit days, while aimed at potential students, include specific IAG sessions for parents. However, in nearly half (45%) of all activities the parental engagement activity was wholly based on a pupil focused programme and offered little to parents beyond some information about that particular programme, such as a celebration or graduation event at the end of a student programme.

Figure 17



Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100%.

A fifth of all the activities reported (22%) had a core offer which was specifically designed for parents or families and were not an adjunct to a student-focused programme (see Figure 17). These activities ranged from large-scale, public events engaging families to IAG sessions and guides specifically designed for parents. For example:

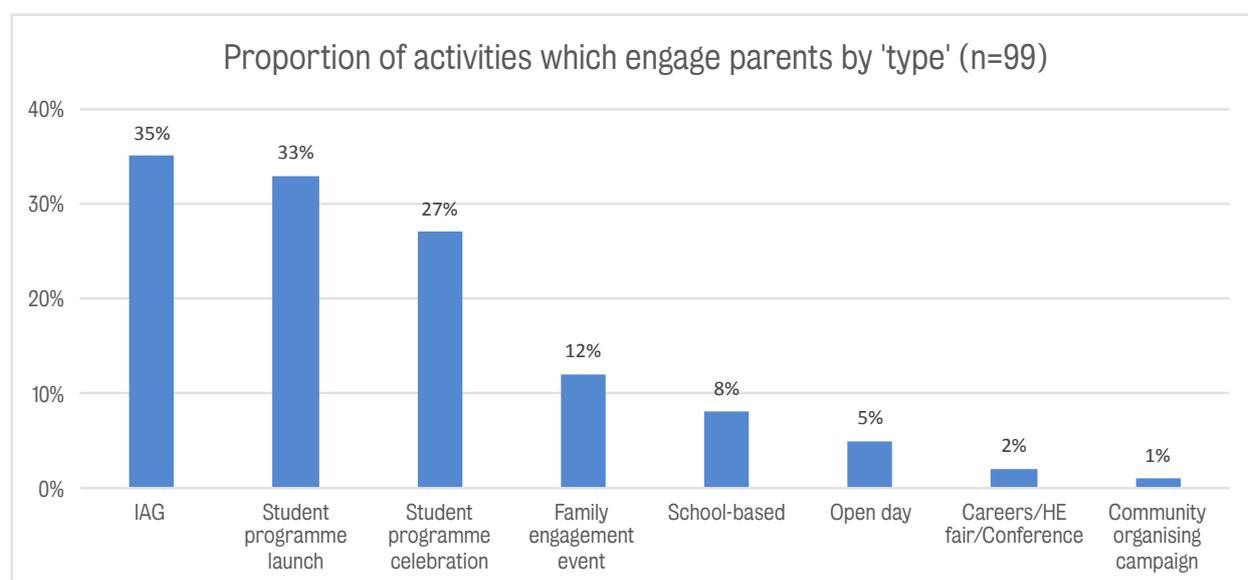
- The University of Birmingham delivers IAG presentations in schools to parents focusing on the benefits of higher education and student finance information;
- The University of Strathclyde runs sessions in schools to help parents support their child with their studies;
- Glasgow Caledonian University supports community-based family groups which provide a range of extra-curricular activities for families.

While we have distinguished between programmes that are targeted specifically at parents and those that work with parents via programmes aimed at pupils, this is not to say that the latter approach is less valuable. Engaging parents as part of a wider student programme or activity is one of five key features of effective and impactful outreach (Torgerson et al., 2014). Additionally, a pupil’s involvement in an activity could act as a ‘hook’ to encourage parents to attend and engage when they otherwise may not. However, when universities invite parents to engage they should make the most of the opportunity by ensuring they provide something that is specifically targeted at parents’ needs. The in-depth case studies in this section of the report therefore focus on activities that were designed explicitly for parents, including both those that were ‘standalone’ and those that formed part of a wider student programme.

6.1.2 What types of activities do universities engage parents in?

Information, advice and guidance (IAG) is the most common type of activity with which universities engage parents: over a third (35%) of activities analysed in the FOI were either entirely or partially based on the provision of IAG (see Figure 18). The exact type of IAG ranged from written parent guides to presentations, though activities were only counted as IAG if they covered information about university and higher education beyond just detail about a student programme or activity. The second and third most common activities which engaged parents were ‘launch’ events and ‘celebration’ events, typically taking place at the beginning and end of a student programme or activity.

Figure 18



Percentages may not add up to 100% as activities could be coded as more than one type Eg. a launch event that includes IAG.

Notably, open days and career fairs were rarely included in universities' FOI responses, however, we acknowledge that it is likely that the majority of universities do hold open days and similar events to which parents are invited. Respondents may not have included these events as they did not consider them to be widening participation parental engagement activities. Despite this, we chose to include these activities in our analysis where they were mentioned as it may indicate that these universities consider the parental engagement or widening participation elements of open days more carefully.

In summary, a fifth of parental engagement activities run by the UK's top tariff universities are have a core offer aimed at parents and are separate from a student programme. A further third, were part of a student programme but distinct and specifically tailored to parents' needs.

The remaining 45% of parental engagement activities were not distinct from the student programme they were linked to and did not provide something specific to address parents' needs, beyond informing them about the student programme. Although engaging parents through student programmes both enhances the effectiveness of the student activity and provides a 'hook' to engage parents, it is important that the parental engagement element is specific and tailored to parents' needs.

Information, advice and guidance activities are the most common forms of parental engagement, followed by launch and celebration events which offer information about a student programme. These launch and celebration events were likely to be events which were not distinct from a student programme and therefore not adapted to parents' needs.

6.2 Best practice for parental engagement

In addition to investigating which specific programmes have been successful at boosting parental engagement, researchers have also identified common patterns, pitfalls and misconceptions in approaches to working with parents, as well as basic principles, strategies and techniques that support successful approaches. However, the majority of this research is focused on school-based engagement which, while relevant, is not the primary focus of this report. We therefore sought to supplement existing research with an analysis of well evidenced practice in UK top-tariff universities. While we found that the majority of these universities were making attempts to engage parents, very few demonstrated a level of evaluation which enabled them to conclude how effective their methods of parental engagement are.

Instead, we identified some examples of practice which provided something distinct for parents, even where the activities were part of a student programme, had a clear rationale, and together, covered a broad range of different 'types' of engagement and conducted case studies of these activities. The widening participation practitioners we interviewed for the case studies identified a number of common strategies which they used to engage parents effectively as well as challenges they faced and, in some cases had overcome, in relation to their parental engagement. We draw on these interviews and the literature to highlight some key strategies that universities can use to engage parents and use the in-depth case studies to exemplify these strategies.

6.2.1 What strategies and techniques best enable universities to engage parents?

Though our case studies provide specific examples of activities, the existing research base and the interviews we conducted with widening participation practitioners identified some common underlying principles which underpin successful approaches. These principles offer a guide to engaging parents, particularly widening participation groups.

i. A core offer for parents

Where parent engagement activities are seen as a ‘bolt on’ to mainstream activities rather than part of a whole school or institution approach, they are unlikely to be successful (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). Therefore, parental engagement should not be an unconsidered adjunct to either wider widening participation activities nor to the overall aims and responsibilities of the university. Instead, universities should take a holistic approach to parental engagement whereby all widening participation activities which include parents should maximise the opportunity presented by this engagement and provide information or guidance which addresses parents’ concerns or improves their knowledge and ability to support their children. Although, providing information exclusively about a student programme could increase parents’ ability to support their child throughout that programme, once parents are engaged with this type of activity, universities should maximise the opportunity by offering further IAG about higher education to parents.

Engaging parents in student programmes improves the impact on student outcomes (Torgerson et al., 2014) and many practitioners feel that pupils’ experience and interest can ‘hook’ parents in. In order to ensure that an activity is not seen as a ‘bolt on’ and instead impacts on parents and parental engagement, rather than just student outcomes, universities should consider what an event such as a launch event or a graduation can offer to parents. As discussed in section 6.1.1, the majority of parental activities identified through our FOI were an ‘add on’ to a wider student programme. One concern is that if these activities do not offer something specific to parents beyond information about the student programme, they may not adequately address parents’ wider concerns and needs and so will have limited impact.

ii. Cross-university support

All university staff beyond those whose roles focus on outreach and recruitment, should be involved in engaging parents. Research shows that a holistic approach to parental engagement, in which all stakeholders are involved, is more likely to be effective (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011) and this can be achieved by involving other departments and academics across the university. Universities such as Bath and Nottingham felt that support from the admissions department and academic researchers allowed them to expose parents and families to a fuller range of opportunities on offer at university and meant parents had the opportunity to ask questions to different staff members.

Additionally, research in schools has found that ensuring teachers and other staff hold positive attitudes towards parental involvement makes it more likely that schools will be successful in engaging parents who are traditionally deemed ‘hard to reach’ (Epstein and Dauber, 1991 as cited in Waanders et al., 2007). A ‘cross-university’ approach is more likely to foster positive attitudes towards parental engagement across the whole institution than an approach solely focused in the outreach and widening participation departments.

The University of Bath’s engagement with parents of pupils on their student outreach programme ‘On Track to Bath’ exemplifies how institutions can run activities designed for parents as part of a student programme while ensuring that these activities are useful for parents rather than tokenistic. Providing general IAG for parents in addition to programme specific information, and support from all university staff were key in allowing the university to conduct this type of parental engagement effectively.

A holistic, cross-university approach to parental engagement in a student programme

University of Bath: 'On Track to Bath'

On Track to Bath is a two-year outreach programme for pupils who have both the academic capability to progress to the University of Bath or another high tariff university, and those who fulfil one or more widening participation criteria are given priority places. The university engages participants' parents, at multiple points throughout the student programme.

Parents are invited to the programme launch where they receive in-depth information, alongside their child, about what the programme will involve. Then, while pupils take part in other activities, parents attend sessions specifically designed for them. These sessions cover some – primarily finance focused – IAG, but are centred on what parents can do to support their child on the programme.

Parents are given contact details of the practitioners running the programme and are encouraged to stay in touch.

'We very much encourage a three-way kind of support, the schools, the teachers and the parents... We try and offer support for [parents] to be able to actively support their children to make the most of 'on track' and also for getting into university.'

Widening Participation Outreach Programme Manager

Parents are again invited to campus to at the end of the second year of the programme. As the focus of the student support changes to concentrate on decision-making and applications, parents are given information about how best to support their children with the process.

Parents are also invited to a celebratory event at the end of the first year. Many staff attend, giving parents the opportunity to 'mingle' with staff and ask questions. The support of other university departments is key to the event's success:

'We have cross-university support here. Staff from across Bath are involved... the head of admissions will come and talk to parents at the end of the two years. We have that support through the university which gives parents the opportunities to meet all those people.'

Research and Evaluation Officer

Although this programme is principally for pupils, the widening participation team recognises the role of parents as key influencers and therefore seeks to upskill them so they can effectively support their children. They also highlight that overall success of the pupil activities acts as a hook to engage parents, and the nature of the sustained interaction with pupils means the university can build relationships parents over multiple points of contact.

'We get extremely good parental support with 'On Track', because the pupils are engaging over two years...and when you have the students really liking it that means that parents are wanting to find out more. That might be harder to do on a programme that has shorter contact time.'

Science Outreach Manager

iii. Addressing misconceptions

A key aim of parental engagement, particularly IAG, is to address misconceptions about higher education that could, if unaddressed, create a barrier to university entry. Practitioners felt that the most common misconceptions are finance-based, which mirrors the high proportion of parents in our survey

who are concerned about the cost of university and student loans. The most common finance-related misconceptions mentioned by both parents and practitioners were the following.

- You must pay fees of over £9,000 up front or that you must have this in your bank account at the start of each year.
- Student loans will have to be repaid regardless of whether a graduate is earning.
- Having a student debt will make it difficult or impossible to be approved for a mortgage.
- A student loan could affect the benefits a family receives.

Evidence from our focus groups indicates that addressing these misconceptions IAG can reduce parents' concerns about finance. Parents had found that IAG from universities and other sources had alleviated concerns about the cost of higher education and debt, especially when concerns were based on misconceptions.

'The fees were something I was really concerned about, I thought we would have to pay some upfront and so when I was told, no that's not how it is, that means I can put that to one side and not worry about it.'

'I'm not worried really because I've been to some UCAS evenings on finances and it's all been explained really, really well and you know it's fine, people do worry but it's not one of my concerns... I'm not worried about the debt afterward because they'll get a job and you've just got to look at it as like a tax really.'

Likewise, universities that engage with parents and provide IAG recognise that there are myths and misconceptions need to be challenged (see section 5.2.1) and consequently, most high-tariff universities focus their IAG on finance. However, universities felt that they were 'battling' the media to reduce parents' concern as these misconceptions were frequently reinforced by the press.

'A lot of media brings misconceptions to parents around student finance... we often find that some parents can be misguided and that they have been given false information through media outlets, for example that their child won't be able to get a mortgage from having a student loan, which obviously is not true at all. Those myths, those preconceptions are still hanging around.'

Academic Enrichment Programme Manager, The University of Nottingham

iv. Tailoring outreach

Widening participation parental engagement is likely to be targeted at groups of parents who are traditionally deemed 'hard to reach' and therefore practitioners may feel concerned that they will not be able to successfully recruit and engage parents. However, schools exemplifying best practice in parental engagement tend to consider that no family or parent is 'unreachable' (Grayson, 2013, p.6) and instead tailor their approach to the needs of individual parents (O'Mara et al, 2011; Grayson, 2013).

Harris and Goodall (2008) highlight that the label 'hard to reach' is often a result of ineffective attempts at engagement which are not tailored to parents' needs rather than a lack of interest from parents. Most efforts or initiatives to engage parents in schools are homogenous and do not take into account the varying attitudes or different barriers experienced by different groups of parents (ibid). Studies have found that where schools operate this type of 'one size fits all' approach to parental engagement, they are ineffective (Crozier and Davies, 2007).

Thus, universities should avoid suggesting that groups of parents are impossible or even 'hard' to reach and instead consider how to tailor engagement activities to parents' needs. The University of Nottingham found that the most effective way to do so was to consult parents as they designed their outreach (see case study below). The University of Surrey makes considerable efforts to include parents in their evaluation process of both parent and pupil engagement activities in order to better tailor their

approach in the following year. This included consulting parents who speak English as an additional language and would therefore often be considered ‘hard to reach’ or ‘difficult to engage’.

However, other practitioners recognised a ‘catch 22’ whereby they need to engage parents initially in order to tailor outreach to effectively engage them.

‘We need to spend more time as a sector talking to parents. It’s almost a catch22 because we need to engage parents in order to find out how to engage parents, to know what it is they would like and what language they would like us to use, rather than the sector or universities assuming we know what barriers there are.’

Assistant Head of UK Student Recruitment and Outreach, Lancaster University

Making use of partnerships with schools and other institutions that have already engaged parents is key to avoiding this barrier (see section 6.2.1v).

Crozier et al. (2000) suggests that an approach to parent involvement which does not engage people to establish their needs and instead makes ‘blanket assumptions’ disregards differences between parents and ‘masks the complexity of needs’ (Harris and Goodall, 2008, p.280). Although our survey suggests that parents from different socio-economic backgrounds hold similar concerns, our interviews with widening participation practitioners indicated that parents who are less familiar with university themselves often need additional support in order to access activities that might reduce those concerns.

Notably, research also warns that when schools make considerable efforts to engage hard-to-reach groups, this can be to the detriment of parents who were already engaged (Harris and Goodall, 2008). Thus, while universities must provide tailored support to target groups of parents to ensure they engage in available outreach, they must ensure that this does not negatively impact engagement with parents more widely. The widening participation team at The University of Nottingham balances these competing objectives effectively during the university’s annual Wonder event. Although the event is open to all parents and the public, they recognise that some parents, including their target groups, need additional support. The university provides that tailored support while maintaining its engagement with over 6,000 people.

Tailored, parent-led outreach

University of Nottingham: The Family Learning Programme

The university provides family engagement sessions as part of a joint programme with IntoUniversity – an education charity – as well as specific sessions for parents and tailored outreach support during a large university public event.

Academic Support Family Learning

The university partners with IntoUniversity in order to engage the parents of primary aged pupils on the IntoUniversity Academic Support programme. Together, they run a series of events for these parents and their children, the aims of which are: to raise children and parents’ aspirations; to provide information about university and higher education, and, to encourage families to enjoy learning together, ultimately ‘strengthening family capital’. The three core family events on the programme include:

1. An introduction to higher education: this includes interactive activities to introduce university as well as some ‘aspiration raising’ activities such as creating a ‘dream jar’ or discussing what their children would like to ‘grow up to be’.

2. An academic themed session: this builds on the topic children have studied during the Academic Support sessions, and allows families to experience a subject or topic they wouldn't usually come across in school:

'The last one we did was classics. I recruited some academics to come and deliver activities...so all the families joined up to the Roman army and did things like learning how to write cursive Latin and how to decode some cursive Latin messages.'

Primary Schools Engagement Manager

3. A graduation on the University campus: both the children and the parents graduate from the family learning programme and the event includes a ceremony as well as academic and aspiration focused drop-in activities.

The widening participation team feels that the partnership with IntoUniversity is highly beneficial, as it enables them to reach a 'captive audience' of parents at an early stage in their children's education.

Parent only sessions

The family learning programme also includes sessions specifically for parents. The university designed these sessions following a survey consultation with parents. Parents requested sessions on how to support their child with Maths and Literacy so the university provides workshops on each. The widening participation team also designed sessions for parents on re-entering education in response to the questions and feedback they received in the family 'aspiration raising' sessions.

'When we delivered the aspiration raising session, lots of questions we had from the parents, rather than being about their children going to university, were about themselves going back to learning. Some of the parents didn't go to school in this country and don't have UK qualifications. They might want to do degrees themselves but don't know where to start... I set up a session with a colleague... we deliver a session for adults interested returning to education. We get relatively small numbers but you feel that the parents that do come get a lot from it.'

Primary Schools Engagement Manager

Wonder: Family Discovery Day

Wonder is a university wide community event that is open to the public. University researchers showcase their work in engaging, interactive drop-in activities to over 6,000 members of the public. As part of a strategy to broaden engagement with Wonder event, the Widening Participation team recruit families from target local primary schools and bring them to the event and provide extra support and activities for these families:

'It is often difficult to attract visitors from our target communities to come to an event such as Wonder as they do not necessarily see the University as a place that is for them. I wanted to do something to support our target audiences to participate in that event. So, I organised my own event as part of Wonder and recruited schools to bring their families. They would attend Wonder and participate in the same way as any other members of the public but I provide extra support like student ambassadors support them to access the event as it can be a bit intimidating if you don't know your way around. We have our own space and put on an afternoon tea for our families and deliver our own aspiration raising activities.'

Primary School Engagement Manager

v. Empowering parents to ‘overcome disadvantage’

Assets such as having clear, high expectations of their children and shared values and routines can help families to overcome some of the difficulties associated with material disadvantage (Gofen, 2007; Simon et al, 2005; Orther et al., 2004; Redding et al., 2004; Seccombe, 2002). Therefore, educators and those aiming to engage parents should avoid a ‘deficit discourse’ and work with the ‘behavioural, emotional and relational assets’ (Gofen, 2007, p.5) that parents bring to the table. Successful parental engagement strategies are those which empower parents, by recognising and utilising the contribution they can make and giving them the additional skills or tools they need (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011).

The widening participation practitioners we interviewed recognised that parents act in the best interests of their children and that most hold high aspirations but may need support to acquire skills and knowledge necessary to achieve these aspirations.

‘You have to be careful not to make judgements and stereotype. We believe that every parent has the best interests of their child at heart. They just might not have the knowledge, the information or the tools to be able to know what to do with that.’

Primary Schools Engagement Manager, The University of Nottingham

Crucially, this means that activities which aim to ‘inspire’ parents or families and simply ‘raise their aspirations’ without providing support to enable them to work towards these aspirations are unlikely to be effective, especially for disadvantaged groups. Instead, parental engagement activities should enable parents to understand what their children’s aspirations are and the path to achieving these and then provide practical support to allow them to do this (Menziez, 2013). Practitioners at Lancaster University reflected this in their commitment to focusing on tools and supporting skill development rather than ‘raising aspirations’:

‘We’ve made a conscious decision to change language around talking about aspirations and instead focus on making toolkits for students and [raising] attainment. Not every young person needs aspirations raising, they have aspirations, they have goals and maybe what they are lacking is the knowledge to get to those.’

Outreach Operations Manager, Lancaster University

King’s College London’s Parent Power project focuses on giving parents the skills to overcome barriers to higher education entry that their own children and other young people in their local area may face. Parent Power is a community organising project: a project whereby a local group of people organise a cooperative effort to campaign for change in their community. By taking a parent-led approach and encouraging parents to lead the project, Parent Power recognises the contribution parents can make and supports them to develop the skills they need.

Providing parents with knowledge and skills

King’s College London: Parent Power

Parent power is a parental engagement project run by King’s College London in collaboration with community organising charity Citizens UK. The project is a community organising campaign and therefore quite different from traditional widening participation programmes. It aims to support local parents from underrepresented groups to become ‘university access experts’ so they can support their own family and other parents in their local community. As James Asfa at Citizens UK explains:

‘We planned a pilot to test the same [approach] of community organising, namely: building strong relationships, actively developing leaders and running campaigns for change...to see if we could

develop a team of secondary parents who could themselves build their skills for helping their children to get into university and at the same time campaign to break down barriers in the community. That was the start of Parent Power.'

Senior Community Organiser, Citizens UK

Parents were recruited through the pupil programme 'King's Scholars' which targets pupils with high SATs scores from disadvantaged backgrounds. King's and Citizens UK organised events to inform parents about educational inequality and to promote the idea of parent power. Parents were then met one-to-one to discuss why they wanted to be involved and what they thought the barriers and solutions were. In the two-hour monthly meetings held on Saturdays the parents have been given two types of training:

1. IAG and training designed to make parents experts on university access on topics including private tuition, student finance, university access, how to encourage pupils into STEM careers and more.
2. Organiser training which supports parents to establish what the barriers to university entry are and empowers them to address these barriers through collective action.

Notable successes of Parent Power so far include:

- Campaigning successfully for Lambeth council to become the first UK council to have an 'access to university strategy';
- Persuading the universities of Cambridge and Oxford to hold bespoke open days for Parent Power parents and their children;
- Securing press coverage on Sky Sunrise and in the Times newspaper to promote the work of the programme;
- Securing bursary places on private summer schools.

Two core principles guide how the programme is run. Firstly, the concept of 'people before programme' which includes fostering strong relationships with parents, consulting parents on what they believe the barriers and solutions to be and then building 'the entire programme around what they think is important'. Secondly, the principle of 'leadership development' is key to both the success and the sustainability of the programme as James Asfa from Citizens UK explains:

'We were clear from the start that Parent Power is the parents' programme... they make decisions and it's their organisation. As much as possible, increasing over time, they chair meetings, decide on the agenda and the strategy going forward... If the parents are capable of doing something, they can do it themselves, if they're not, we can give them support... it's making sure that that is built in from the beginning and parents are given the opportunity to lead.'

Feedback from parents has been highly positive with 100% of parents saying they know more about how to access highly selective universities. One parent commented on the success of Parent Power after organising the trip to the University of Oxford:

'[Arranging] this trip, and the Parent Power programme more generally, has shown me that we really do have power. We have power to open doors which otherwise seem closed. Through building a community of parents we have the power that we otherwise wouldn't.'

vi. School partnerships

All widening participation practitioners we interviewed relied, often entirely, on schools to recruit parents for outreach. Schools were viewed as ‘gatekeepers’ to parents and while this was mostly positive, there were drawbacks, including the failure to re-engage parents who were disengaged from their child’s school.

Strong partnerships with local schools are essential for universities to reach parents, especially if they aim to work with families from an early stage. Schools can also improve parents’ engagement with universities, beyond just helping to recruit parents, by acting as a ‘character reference’ for universities.

‘Teachers can become a trusted source whereas we are an unknown entity, teachers can act as ‘character reference’ and vouch for us, reassuring parents about what it would be...They have the access, the experience and the relationship with them. We have to make sure that we live up to our side if those teachers vouch for us as a university.’

Assistant Head of UK Student Recruitment and Outreach, Lancaster University

Schools also play a role in supporting universities to target activities towards disadvantaged students and teachers.

‘All of our work goes directly through schools, we don’t contact parents directly... all our work has to be quite targeted. We don’t take a whole school approach. We need to identify and target students and have a process of collecting demographic forms, through the school and they come back to us and we identify students for activities. The promotion of parental engagement programmes is through the school... it gives the activity additional credibility as information is coming from the university but schools are gatekeepers to parents and students.’

Research and Evaluation Manager, University of Surrey

However, practitioners at the University of Bath were concerned that only reaching parents through schools means that disengaged parents remain disengaged. They had not yet found a solution to this.

‘Teachers are always acting as the gatekeepers so if parents aren’t engaging with the school, it’s really unlikely that they are going to engage with the university and the ones that aren’t engaged are probably the ones you want to engage the most.’

Science Outreach Manager, University of Bath

James Asfa, from Citizens UK also highlighted that many parents were not effectively engaged by their child’s school, but hoped that the success of the Parent Power programme would help schools see parents as a valuable resource in the future.

‘Some schools I’ve worked with in the past that see parents as a problem to be overcome, rather than a resource. Rather than seeing them as allies to support their children education, it’s like they’re an obstacle...But we’ve seen that because there isn’t much effort from secondary schools to engage parents...loads of parents were saying I’ve lost the support network since my child left primary school so they were excited to start building that network...There’s a broader lesson there for universities and schools to get parents engaged.’

Senior Community Organiser, Citizens UK

vii. Making parents comfortable

Widening participation practitioners consistently mentioned the need to ensure parents were ‘comfortable’ during engagement activities, especially in relation to parents who had little experience of university themselves. Menzies (2013) highlights that schools should meet parents ‘on their own terms’ and make them feel comfortable; universities are likely to be more intimidating to parents and therefore

must make extra efforts to do so.

Practitioners identified some strategies for ensuring parents felt comfortable:

- Universities should provide detailed logistical and practical information to ensure that parents do not feel as though ‘they don’t know what to do or where to go’.

‘We give the parents a lot of information, don’t assume that they know where to go, don’t assume they know where to park, all those little things so you can make them as comfortable as possible as it may be the first time they’ve visited the university.’

Research and Evaluation Officer, University of Bath

- Involving current students as ‘student ambassadors’ is a widely used strategy. Practitioners and parents suggested that this made families more comfortable and gave them an opportunity to ask questions which they would be unwilling to ask in front of a wider audience. Parents in our focus group highlighted concerns about whether universities would ‘deliver what they pitch’ (see section 5.2.3) but student ambassadors were seen as a more ‘trusted source’ of information than university staff themselves.

‘We try to team them up with undergraduates...otherwise, it’s just ‘someone in a suit at the front’ and that doesn’t really work. If possible, undergraduates that may have come from a WP background. It’s about familiarity, the more we can make them feel that it’s not something that’s alien to them, not something that’s outside of their children’s reach.’

Widening Participation Outreach Programme Manager, University of Bath

‘Talking to students that have been to university...it’s really useful, first-hand experience really, they give their opinion on what they’ve done.’

Parent, Bristol

This approach could be particularly effective at addressing common parent concerns (see section 5.2) as current students can explain how the university supports them or how they cope living independently on a student loan.

- Meeting parents off campus in locations they might be more comfortable in, before inviting them to the university. The widening participation practitioners we spoke to suggested that the ‘intimidating’ nature of the campus was a primary barrier to engagement.

‘A big thing is just getting people over the threshold. We’re a campus university and each end has big gatehouses with literal physical barriers. The target audience we work with do necessarily always see this as a place for them to come to.’

Primary Schools Engagement Manager, The University of Nottingham

For the University of Bath, overcoming this barrier meant talking to parents multiple times in schools and taking part in other school events before expecting parents to come to university. The University of Nottingham made use of their partnership with Into University by delivering outreach at their support centres for the first two of their series of events.

‘I think especially with our demographic, there’s a lot of ‘first in family’, we have to make them feel comfortable, whether that means us going to schools and trying to work with schools to feed into whatever programme they might be delivering to parents, going along to parents evening and parent

talks, making us a familiar aspect of the school culture...Then try and get parents to come to the university where we can.'

Widening Participation Outreach Programme Manager, University of Bath

- **Activities and events should be interactive** and should avoid formal lecture formats. Where possible, this may extend to having children lead activities which require parents' support to encourage parents to become actively involved.

'It's always difficult to engage children and parents, but we don't stand up and lecture them, everything is interactive and is designed to get them to do things together. We create activities where we get the parent to take the lead in getting the children engaged with something and by default they then become engaged themselves.'

Primary Schools Engagement Manager, The University of Nottingham

The University of Bath runs a wide variety of engaging, hands-on activities for families at its annual 'Bath Taps into Science' festival, and their approach to child-led family research projects demonstrates how giving parents the role of 'facilitator' to their child's learning can help to engage them in activities.

Child-led, interactive family engagement

University of Bath: Bath Taps into Science

Each year the University of Bath holds a Science festival which includes a programme of school activities and a broader programme of activities for the public. In 2018, the festival included 70 events and reached 5,000 participants.

The university engages families in the 'Family Science Projects' in which parents and their children undertake a research project together. Families are recruited to take part in the projects from a cluster of partner primary schools in areas of low progression and high socio-economic disadvantage. In 2018, 42 families were supported to research a project.

The aim of the Family Science Project is to support parents and children to engage together in science and consequently, to increase the 'science capital' of children. Engagement with children in their primary years and ensuring parents feel able to support their children with science is considered extremely helpful in encouraging children to aspire to science-based subjects in the future.

'It's really building the aspiration towards something science related in the future...We created these projects which... build upon the theory of 'science capital'. Basically, that children either aspire or not towards science by the end of primary school. So we know that to work with them on science it has to be in primary school and... [it has to be with] parents to support them with their science knowledge.'

Science Outreach Manager

For families taking part, scientists provide a programme of support for the whole family to build their science knowledge and confidence so they can engage in the child-led research. Families then present their project together at a celebratory family science fair alongside career researchers and industry leaders from the university and local area.

viii. Sustained interaction and building relationships

Research consistently suggests that parental engagement should be multifaceted. In other words, educational institutions should connect with parents at many points in their children's educational journeys, in various ways and in many venues (Swap, 1993 as cited in Vorhaus and Goodall, 2011).

As discussed in section 6.2.1vi, for universities, meeting with parents in 'many venues' often means first holding events in locations more familiar to parents than the university itself, and then inviting them to campus at a later time.

Engaging parents at multiple points is also important. A series of events and activities, rather than a single activity, allows practitioners to build relationships with parents. A strong foundation of trust and respect is a key quality of successful parental engagement (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Practitioners at the University of Bath also felt that building relationships and getting to know families is the best way to understand their needs and tailor outreach activities and IAG accordingly, therefore, engaging parents at multiple events was key to the programme's success.

'You have to talk with parents, the more you have a relationship with them the more you can understand where they're coming from and then you can help them feel a bit more comfortable and engaged. That's why it works so well with the 'On Track' parents.'

Widening Participation Outreach Programme Manager, University of Bath

Additionally, practitioners highlighted that some parents are initially mistrustful of university practitioners and outreach activities, parents may hold misconceptions about the outreach activity itself or about why they or their child had been targeted.

'I think there is sometimes a suspicion about why you're there and parents wondering whether there is an ulterior motive. Working with young people from WP backgrounds, you're often working with parents that potentially have no university background themselves which becomes a barrier in itself...When we started East Lancashire Scholars Programme which is for Gifted and Talented kids, some of the parents assumed that their children had been naughty...they thought it was due to under performance or a behavioural thing.'

Outreach Operations Manager, Lancaster University

Therefore, initial meetings or events should be spent building trust and setting out the purpose of the activities in order to engage parents effectively. It is not possible to do this with one-off events, therefore long-term programmes which focus on building relationships are also needed.

ix. Targeting specific groups

Widening participation work is targeted toward young people that meet criteria related to socio-economic disadvantage and low progression to higher education. Many of these criteria are derived from parental characteristics such as their occupation, earnings or education level, and so the majority of parental engagement by widening participation teams is at least indirectly targeted because it involves working with target pupils' parents. However, research on school based parental engagement activities found that targeting alone is not sufficient to ensure impact; activities should also be informed by a needs analysis and a consideration of cultural factors (Grayson, 2013; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011).

Furthermore, a broad approach to targeting, such as reaching out to 'disadvantaged' parents is less likely to give specific cultural factors or barriers significant consideration. Some groups' needs are therefore likely to be neglected. For instance, targeting families in areas of low progression and high socio-economic disadvantage may include Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, however, these groups may hold specific concerns around discrimination and inclusion which would not be specifically addressed in general IAG and outreach (Mulcahy et al., 2017). Lancaster University found that some groups of

parents in local Muslim communities had benefitted from a targeted approach which included having a Muslim member of staff deliver the outreach. Although no staff member or other stakeholder can represent a whole community or understand the needs of all individuals in a community they are part of, the university felt this was an effective strategy which helped to build trust.

‘Working in the Muslim community, there were some barriers around who they felt they could engage with. Eventually I delivered it with a Muslim colleague and those families did feel they found it easier to engage with that person being from a similar background as themselves who could understand their specific barriers, concerns and issues.’

Assistant Head of UK Student Recruitment and Outreach, Lancaster University

Additionally, broadly targeted parent programmes risk excluding the guardians of some of the most vulnerable and underrepresented groups in higher education namely, looked after children and refugees. Some universities have made particular efforts to support these groups through their parent and carer outreach. The University of Surrey runs the ‘Your Futures’ programme for refugee and asylum seeker children and young people and their parents or, in the case of unaccompanied refugee children, their foster carers. Lancaster University is currently designing and organising IAG workshops to be delivered to foster carers and social workers.

Targeting specific groups

Lancaster University: Foster carer Continuous Professional Development

Lancaster University is planning outreach for both social workers and foster carers in an effort to ensure that young people in care have access to information, advice and guidance about university and the support that is available for them.

‘Although there is some activity happening in the sector for parents there didn’t seem to be anything for foster carers and so we thought they seem to be a missed group. It will be the same IAG we would give to all parents, especially those from a WP background but we did think foster carers were being missed.’

Assistant Head of UK Student Recruitment and Outreach

In June, they held a continuous professional development (CPD) session for social workers which focused on:

- The outreach available for young people, particularly those in care, at the university
- The support available for care leavers should they choose to come to the university.

The university expect that providing social workers with this information will better equip them to support the young people they work with. They also hope it will encourage more young people in care to access the outreach and support on offer. Social workers are key influencers in the lives of young people in care, but are not experts in higher education opportunities and may themselves struggle to navigate the complex landscape of support for care leavers.

‘It’s very, very difficult for social workers to have expertise in absolutely everything and often the offer between universities will differ so actually having the opportunity to talk through what the standard offer is as a university is important.’

Outreach Operations Manager

While the university hopes that by improving social workers’ knowledge foster carers will be more likely to receive relevant information, they are also planning to extend this training offer to foster

carers directly. Foster carers must attend three CPD sessions per year. An IAG session on higher education including information on specific support for care leavers would be counted as a CPD session. The sessions will offer standard higher education IAG but will also highlight the particular packages of financial support and pastoral support available for care leavers entering higher education. Multi-agency working is crucial in such cases to ensure that the university can access and recruit social workers and foster carers. The university therefore hopes to work in partnership with the county council and other higher education institutions to create an event that could run every year.

x. Evaluation

Since 'The Office for Fair Access' (OFFA) 2015 Strategic Plan which called for higher education institutions to ensure focus on evaluation and evidence, universities are taking an increasingly evidence-led approach to their student outreach (Offa, 2018). We found that some universities also ask parents to contribute to evaluation of student programmes. However, in order to establish a strong evidence base for 'what works' in parental engagement for higher education, more universities should evaluate the parental engagement strands of their outreach work.

Evaluation will help universities shape their future programmes and crucially, will allow them to tailor their outreach.

The University of Surrey evaluates all their parental engagement using a single evaluation framework and a set of similar tools. Their evaluation has informed their practice and allowed them to make changes to meet parents and pupils needs more effectively.

Evaluation framework for parental engagement

University of Surrey

The University of Surrey engage parents in a graduation event delivering IAG to parents as part of their Year 8 Introduction to Higher Education week and parents join students for three sessions during their Year 10 sustained engagement programme. They also run a specific programme of events called 'Your Futures' for students who are refugees and asylum seekers, as well as their parents or foster carers. The university recognises the importance of evaluation in order to inform and refine their activities.

This university's evaluation model is based on a theory of change which specifies outcomes for each stakeholder group including students, teachers, parents and university staff. For parents, the outcomes are centred on the long-term goal that outreach will lead to behavioural change which will make a parent more likely to support their child to access university. A change in attitudes precedes this and in order to change attitudes parents' knowledge of higher education (HE) must be increased. The main knowledge, attitudinal and behavioural outcomes and the relationship between them are illustrated below.

Knowledge outcomes (short term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Increased knowledge of information sources about HE■ Increased understanding of different routes to HE■ Increased understanding of academic and pastoral support available in HE■ Increased understanding financial support
Attitudinal outcomes (medium term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Increased confidence to talk to their child about future educational decisions■ Increased belief in the benefits of going to university■ Increased confidence that their child will be supported in HE
Behavioural outcomes (Long term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Increased engagement with school, college and universities■ Increased likelihood of supporting and encouraging their child to progress to HE

To establish whether they have met these outcomes, the university uses: pre and post-event evaluation surveys examining knowledge and attitudinal change related to confidence and expectations; qualitative focus groups, and, the higher education access tracker (HEAT) to understand the long term impact of activities. Results from the Year 10 survey with parents showed that:

- 91% of parents agreed that they have a better understanding of the support available at university
- 100% agreed that they have a better understanding of how to find out about university;
- 94% of parents said they would encourage their child to attend university.

Individual interviews with the parents and carers of students on the 'Your Future' programme allowed the university to discern what was most beneficial about the programme and see how they could make improvements in the future. As Katherine Sela, the research and evaluation manager explained:

'For the younger ones, there was a real engagement between the parents and the children, that was really beneficial. Working with current student ambassadors who acted as translators in some cases was very beneficial... The feedback was that they would like more practical activities and a sort of extended programme so they can engage for longer.'

In summary, the literature and our interviews with widening participation practitioners revealed some core principles of effective parental engagement in university outreach. Parental engagement outreach should:

- Ensure that the activity has a core offer for parents, such as information or support that addresses parents' specific concerns or improves their ability to support their child.
- Take a cross-university approach which involves staff members from across the university;
- Be tailored to parents' needs to avoid labelling some parents as 'hard to reach';
- Address misconceptions that fuel parents' concerns. Particular attention should be given to common misconceptions surrounding student finance;
- Make parents comfortable by meeting them on their own terms including in locations off campus, providing detailed logistical information and support and ensuring activities are interactive;
- Empower parents by supporting them to develop the knowledge and skills they need to overcome 'disadvantage' and support their children's entry to higher education;
- Develop strong, multiagency partnerships including working closely with schools while also engaging parents who may be disengaged with schools through other partners;
- Target specific groups of parents ensuring that a broad approach to targeting does not overlook the needs of specific underrepresented groups;
- Engage parents in multiple ways over a sustained period of time in a variety of ways and locations to build strong relationships with parents and understand their needs;
- Evaluate outreach activities with parents to build an evidence informed approach to future activities.

7.1 Universities

7.1.1 Universities beginning parental engagement outreach

Our FOI revealed that some top tariff universities do not engage parents in their widening participation outreach. Given that parents are key influencers in young people's decision making, are often identified as holding attitudes that form a barrier to their children's higher education progression and, as shown in this report, are keen to be involved in their children's education and progression to university, all universities should engage parents.

While the case studies of universities that do engage parents included in this report are of well-developed and often long-standing parental engagement activities, the first steps to engaging parents can be simple and can initially fit around existing activities. All universities can develop a parental engagement strategy by considering the needs of parents in all their widening participation outreach and by providing information, advice and guidance which addresses the concerns raised in this report. Parents should also feed into evaluation of all activities.

7.1.2 All universities working with parents

Section 6.2.1 provides guiding principles for universities to support effective parental engagement and considering each of these within a universities specific context will help universities to maximise engagement efforts. The principal things a university can do are:

- Ensure that the activity offers information or support that addresses parents' specific concerns or improves their ability to support their child.
- Take a cross-university approach which involves staff members from across the university;
- Be tailored to parents' needs to avoid labelling some parents as 'hard to reach';
- Address misconceptions that fuel parents' concerns early and at multiple points. Particular attention should be given to common misconceptions surrounding student finance;
- Ensure that parents are made to feel comfortable by meeting them 'on their own terms' which may include meeting them off campus. Provide detailed logistical information and support and ensure activities are interactive;
- Avoid using language which stigmatises or blames parents for 'disadvantage'. Instead, empower parents by supporting them to develop the knowledge and skills they need to overcome 'disadvantage' and support their children's entry to higher education;
- Develop strong, multiagency partnerships including working closely with schools while also engaging parents who may be disengaged with schools through other partners;
- Target specific groups of parents ensuring that a broad approach to targeting does not overlook the needs of specific underrepresented groups;
- Engage parents in multiple ways over a sustained period of time in a variety of ways and locations to build strong relationships with parents and understand their needs;
- Evaluate outreach activities with parents to build an evidence informed approach to future activities.

7.1.3 Universities with well-established parental engagement

All universities, but especially those with well-established parental engagement programmes and activities, should ensure that they evaluate their parental engagement. They should publish and promote their evaluation findings. This will:

- Allow universities to make changes to future work with parents to improve impact
- Contribute to the evidence-base to inform all universities and improve parental engagement activities across institutions.

7.2 Schools

7.2.1 Parental engagement strategies

Although this report focuses on why and how universities should engage parents it is clear that engaging parents in schools is a facilitating factor for engagement with higher education institutions. It is also apparent from our focus groups and interviews with parents that some parents do not feel that their child's school engages or includes them, indicating that there is work to be done.

Many of the strategies discussed in section 6.2.1 including:

- making parents comfortable;
- building relationships with parents through sustained interaction;
- empowering parents to 'overcome disadvantaged' by focusing on skill development, and,
- taking a whole institution approach.

are also highly relevant for schools-based engagement and in some cases based on school-based research into parental engagement.

7.2.2 Build partnerships with universities

Schools should approach local, and non-local, universities and ask for support with parental engagement. This may include:

- requesting support with a campus visit for pupils and parents;
- asking universities to regularly attend parents' evenings and other school events, and
- asking universities to provide specific programmes or activities for pupils and parents.

Schools can also view work on parental engagement with university partners as an opportunity to reengage previously disengaged parents.

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This report was written by the education and youth development 'think and action tank' **LKMco**. We believe society has a duty to ensure children and young people receive the support they need in order to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood. We work towards this vision by helping education and youth organisations develop, evaluate and improve their work with young people. We then carry out academic and policy research and advocacy that is grounded in our experience.

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