

The impact of the Aimhigher Plus partnership: stakeholders' perspectives

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Recent SoESW and CSPACE publications

Khatun, F., French, M. and Smith, R. (2021). Reconceptualising student experiences: exploring embodiment and identity through differential higher education space. *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*. 7(1).

Brockmann, M. and Smith, R. (2023) 'Invested' Partnerships as key to high quality Apprenticeship Programmes as evidenced in On and Off the Job training. *Journal of Education and Work*.

French, A. and Thomas, K. (eds) (2020) [Challenging the TEF: Diversity Deficits in Higher Education Evaluations](#) Bingley: Emerald Publishing.

Smith, R. and Duckworth, V. (2022) *Transformative Teaching and Learning in Further Education: pedagogies of hope and social justice*. Bristol: Policy Press.

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1. Introduction

Background

This report is about the government funded provision called Uni Connect which has a national programme of 29 partners. This report presents research that was carried out into work undertaken by the Aimhigher West Midlands Partnership. A number of terms are used in the report that relate to the work of the partnership. See below for a clarification of each term:

Uni Connect

The Uni Connect Programme was initially called the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) (2017) and prior to this, universities and partners worked together under the Aimhigher initiative highlighting the history of university partnerships working together to support learners to make informed decisions about their future. The Office for Students (OfS) website¹ defines Uni Connect programmes as consisting of 29 regional partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners to offer activities, advice and information on the benefits and realities of going to university or college.

The Aimhigher West Midlands Partnership

The Uni Connect programme in the West Midlands is run by the Aimhigher West Midlands Partnership that has been funded by its university members since 2009. Aimhigher West Midlands is a partnership of universities in the West Midlands, working to support learners to make informed decisions about their future. It has a strong reputation across the region for providing quality, impartial information, advice and guidance. The Uni Connect programme is delivered by a strand of Aimhigher West Midlands named Aimhigher Plus. The government-funded Uni Connect programme is available to students in years 9 to 13 who live in specific postcode areas. The programme specifically targets schools and students who come from backgrounds that are under-represented on HE courses: hence there is a focus on white students from working class and low-income backgrounds and students from different minoritised ethnic groups.

Originally, Uni Connect's main goal was to increase the progression to HE of underrepresented learners. However, as of August 2022, raising attainment has become one of their priorities as well. Aimhigher West Midlands use robust evaluation tools and methodologies to determine 'what works' and these have been highlighted as good practice by HEFCE, OFFA, the Office for Students, the Sutton Trust and Advance HE. They receive regular formal feedback from students involved in any of their activities and welcome informal feedback from schools involved in the partnership.

Aimhigher Plus organisational structure

¹ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/>

The Aimhigher Plus programme is delivered by 6 HEI partners and a number of regional colleges (see Figure 1). The Aimhigher Plus ‘central hub’ is based at the University of Birmingham. The partnership is active in the following areas: Birmingham, Bromsgrove, Malvern Hills, Redditch, Sandwell, Solihull, Worcester, Wychavon, Herefordshire and Wyre Forest

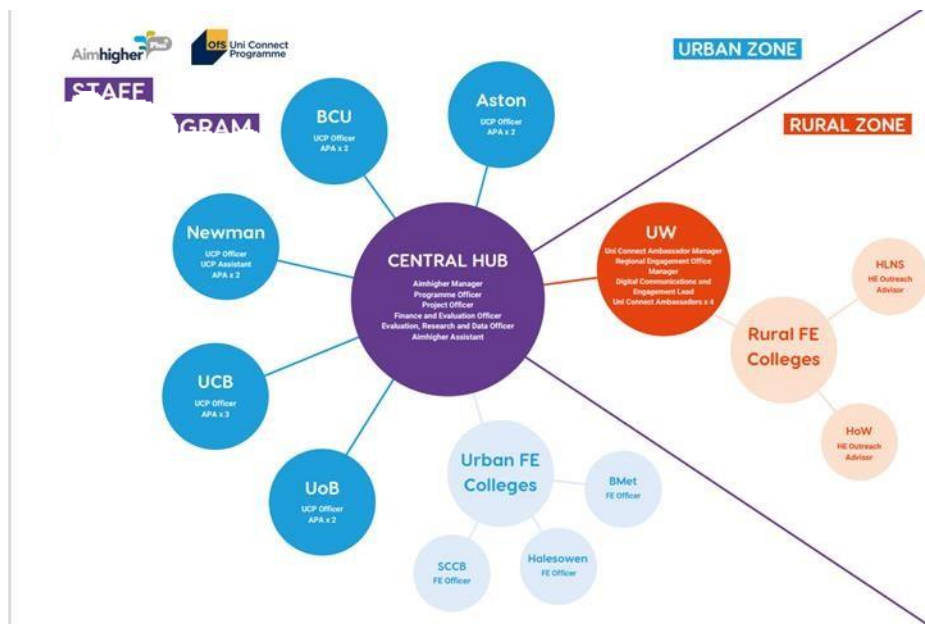


Fig 1. Aimhigher Plus partnership institutions in urban and rural areas up to August 2022

The partnership works with schools and colleges to help identify students whom schools think will benefit from support designed to improve pupils’ access to higher education courses. This report centres on the impact of the programme up to summer 2022. After this date reductions in funding affected the scope of the programme the impact of which we allude to in the concluding section of the report.

Students from across the region who are typically under-represented in higher education (HE) are the key demographic that the programme targets, so that their views, opinions and testimonies are positioned at the heart of the report. It is important to note at the start of this report that the Aimhigher Plus partnership functions to challenge common deficit discourses which often frame how WP students are perceived in HE. As McKay and Devlin (2016) write:

Literature and the discourse around students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds in higher education often adopts a deficit conception in which these students are associated with low entrance scores, decreasing standards and academic struggle and failure.

We challenge this idea of a deficit discourse which blames WP students for a lack of university specific cultural capital. In the spirit of Aimhigher we focus more positively on what students bring to and get out of the activities and trips that they participated in as part of the programme.

We have also included data from teachers at schools who are involved with the partnership and who are therefore able to provide feedback on their experiences of the Aimhigher Plus programme and insights into changes in participating students' post-school aspirations as well as their attainment and progress on their GCSE, A level and BTEC programmes.

Aimhigher Plus Delivery Model

The Aimhigher Plus partnership in the West Midlands operates through a hub-and-spoke model which covers the whole of the West Midlands region. Radiating from the 'local hub' at the University of Birmingham (which is a spoke in its own right) the spokes are staffed with account managers (AMs) working across different areas and Aimhigher Progression Ambassadors (APAs) in urban areas and Graduate Ambassadors (GAs) in rural areas

Hub Staffing in 2022-2023

Up to August 2022, each partner or spoke had one account manager and two APA/GAs, with the exception of the University of Worcester which had one manager, an assistant and a few Graduate Ambassadors. APAs were based in individual urban schools for a year. In rural areas, direct contact with schools was undertaken by GAs who because learners are more dispersed across schools in rural areas worked with several schools across a geographical area. These two front-line roles have often been recruited from recent graduates of the partner HEIs, and both have undertaken similar activities. During the period which the research refers to, whilst rural areas maintained some GAs, OfS funding for APAs in urban areas was withdrawn. This report is based on data therefore that is retrospective in some instances as it focuses on the impact of the programme prior to the contraction of resource. Contracts of staff employed as APA/GAs are subject to government funding (currently this is on the basis of one-year extensions). Unfortunately, the contraction of the Aimhigher budget this year has meant that APA posts have not been recruited. As a result, while currently much of the work has been undertaken by account managers, a significant amount of the data from this report refers to work undertaken before the contraction of the programme.

For the urban spokes, greater concentrations of target learners in specific schools make APA placement within a given school an effective mode of service delivery. However, this placement strategy was suspended for the academic year 2022/23. The APAs who are mentioned in this report were based in two schools each and conducted mentoring, delivered assemblies, talks and workshops, and organised guest speakers, career days and trips in their designated schools. While in previous years, account managers' main role was to manage the whole team of APA/GAs, since August 2022, account managers have taken on APA/ GA responsibilities in liaising with schools, delivering talks and workshops, and in arranging campus visits and additional events like outward-bound weekends.

Up to August 2022, the recruitment for the partnership used to take place at each of the individual spokes or universities. Each spoke recruited individuals for the APA/GA roles who had

undertaken a similar role or supported the university whilst studying, such as being a 'student ambassador'. As we reported in our sister report: *Aimhigher Plus: the impact of regional partnership and collaboration*:

As well as challenging common assumptions about different educational pathways in post compulsory education and training, APA/GAs were able to bridge the gap of familial social and cultural capital with students who were potential first generation HE entrants. Not only because they often came from similar backgrounds... but due to the shared values engendered by the Aimhigher Plus programme they were well-informed about widening participation (WP) issues and attuned to the kinds of barriers faced by the pupils they were working with. (Smith, Everitt and French, 2022)

Research Design

This research aims to gather evidence and build understanding about the impact and effectiveness of the Aimhigher Plus programme by gathering qualitative data from different stakeholders. As such, alongside its sister report *Aimhigher Plus: the impact of regional partnership and collaboration*, it aims to complement existing Aimhigher West Midlands evaluations by adding detailed qualitative data from stakeholders across the partnership.

The research project that this report draws on sought to enrich understandings of the impact of the Aimhigher Plus Programme to provide rich qualitative data from twelve schools benefiting from the Aimhigher Plus programme. Consequently, the focus of this research project is on the views and opinions of two primary groups of stakeholders: teachers overseeing the delivery of Aimhigher activities in their schools and students engaging in the activities. This report aims to present data that illustrates the impact of the programmes run by Aimhigher West Midlands Partnership.

Research Questions

The research project was driven by the overarching research question:

What has been the impact of the Uni Connect programme across the West Midlands partnership?

Research Methods

The project gathered qualitative data from focus groups and interviews with staff and students in schools that had participated in the Aimhigher programme. Out of a sample of twelve institutions, five schools from across the partnership responded to a request to participate. Our aim in this was to elicit examples from individual teachers and students relating to the impact of the programme and show how young people's aspirations and sense of future options were changed by their involvement in it. We interviewed school staff with responsibility for overseeing the roll-out of the programme at their institution who were, therefore, well-positioned to provide a clear perspective on its impact.

One focus group took place face to face with three members of teaching staff, and three further members of staff in participating schools were interviewed separately (one staff interview was carried by telephone at the participant's request). Three focus groups were held with students from different schools (including one ex-student). All of these pupil encounters were online, with the exception of one student focus group which was carried out face to face in a school setting. The aim of these encounters was to produce qualitative examples that provided context and illustrated the impact of the Aimhigher programme across the partnership, on students from a range of backgrounds and year groups. Data from these sources was analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006) – an approach which allowed us to look for patterns and identify 'glowing data' (Maclure 2010) as it emerged. This means that we assessed the strength of the evidence through judgements about the extent to which participants' viewpoints were validated and repeated or re-articulated by other participants.

Table 1 below outlines the staff members who took part in the focus groups and online survey. As part of the ethical approval process we agreed to anonymise all participants: students being identified by F1, M1 etc indicating gender and teaching staff in schools being identified by TSF1 / TSM1 etc. We have also captured if the staff worked in a rural or urban setting.

Table 1: Participant table

Participant (F / M)	Staff or student	Rural / urban context
F1	Ex-student	Urban
F2	Student	Urban
F3	Student	Urban
F4	Student	Urban
F5	Student	Rural
M1	Student	Urban
M2	Student	Urban
M3	Student	Urban
M4	Student	Urban
M5	Student	Urban
M6	Student	Rural
TS1	Staff	Urban
TSF2	Staff	Urban
TSF3	Staff	Urban

TSF4	Staff	Urban
TSF5	Staff	Rural
TSM1	Staff	Urban
TSM2	Staff	Urban

The focus groups and interview responses enabled comparison and critical comment on staff and student experiences across the partnership which highlighted the benefits of the programme. Importantly, they also foregrounded different perspectives on those benefits from different levels within the organisational structures of each institution.

Theoretical Framework

The following theoretical concepts are used to illuminate the data and provide insights into the impact of the Aimhigher programme as we believe local context is likely to shape the way it works in each institution.

Cultural Capital

According to Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction (see Bourdieu 1986), children from middle-class families are educationally advantaged due to their possession of cultural capital which at its most basic comprises having access to prestigious cultural knowledge and experiences due the financial and cultural resources of their well-educated (and consequently often better paid) parents. The importance of cultural capital to academic aspiration underpins the rationale for organisations like Uni Connect who aim to 'make good' cultural capital deficits around access to and knowledge of HE for pupils whose parents have, more often than not, not been to university themselves. These advantages are embodied in skills and experiences such as learning a classical instrument, travelling abroad and visiting galleries and museums. As detailed in the sections below, through activities such as trips to London, galleries and the theatre the programme seeks to address and redress, to some extent, the inequalities that WP pupils without access to cultural capital are subject to.

Figured worlds

Identity is very much about how people come to understand themselves, how they come to "figure out" who they are, through the "worlds" that they participate in and how they relate to others within and outside of these worlds. Although originally developed in terms of work-based identities this idea of 'figured worlds' (Holland et al, 1998) can be very helpful in understanding how WP students can both imagine and create positive learning identities for themselves at university when they have very little experience or understanding of what life there might be like. According to Holland et al. figured worlds have four characteristics, firstly they are constituted through specific cultural spaces and practices which people can enter (such as universities).

Secondly, figured worlds function as contexts of meaning which give the social encounters and activities that happen within them significance. Thirdly, figured worlds are socially organised, often hierarchically. This means that they reproduce those hierarchies and organise people in them relate to each other in different ways. Finally, figured worlds are inhabited by familiar 'social types' which new entrants may feel more or less comfortable with depending on their familiarity with them.

Positive learning identities/belonging

One of the key contributors to a positive learning identity is students' sense of belonging, not only to an educational institution but the extent to which they feel they belong to and can recognise peer groups within that institution (Khatun, French and Smith, 2019). Sense of belonging has been linked not only to students' social experiences at university and well-being, but also to their academic achievement (O'Keeffe 2013, Walton and Cohen 2011). Educational experiences that enable students from working class and other backgrounds that are underrepresented in HE to enhance their agency and harness their education to future life courses can be seen as transformative according to research undertaken by Smith and Duckworth (2022).

Findings

The feedback from student participants showed that they were often very interested and enthusiastic about the opportunities offered as part of the Aimhigher Plus programme. Not only that they were often thoughtful and reflective about how it had changed their thinking and outlook about what they might go on to do after leaving school. These students were not without opinions and aspirations regarding HE when they joined the programme, but importantly their comments in this report make clear how the programme helped to further inform and shape positively their feelings about how they might, in the future, engage positively with HE.

In the commentary on the findings section that follows we have combined the perspectives of the students and the staff as the themes often resonated strongly across these levels. It is important to note that while a few students were quite "chatty" and spoke in detail about their experiences and opening up about their opinions, others were much quieter and less willing to elaborate. Male students were generally quieter and contributed less detailed information, in one case, a teacher in attendance was there to reassure and encourage responses.

It should also be noted that students were often unsure as to what counted as Aimhigher funded, and what was normal school activity. For example, they often asked the teacher if something 'was Aimhigher or not'. This might account for students not speaking more about the cultural trips, which the teachers felt were a very valuable part of the programme. In one focus group, TSF3 directly asked them at the end of the session about specific trips and activities, and it was clear that students had either not thought this was part of the Aimhigher provision or had forgotten about these.

The Uni Connect mission and Aimhigher Plus partnership

Teaching staff had a holistic view of the benefits of Aimhigher Plus. In broad terms, the programme offered the students the opportunity to orientate themselves, to gain a vantage point that gave them a new and fuller perspective on society, their place within it and how the educational pathway they chose could affect that in positive ways.

TSM1: it's a bit like glue with a jigsaw. Because, like, education is about opportunity, it's about access to work, it's about improvement, it's about well-being, it's about ... more and more it's about social action and engagement, and also parents as well, and then about responsibilities. It's about all of those, so if they're all the jigsaw pieces, doing something like Aimhigher, for me it glues them together, and the kids get it, they get it then.

This theme was picked up by another member of teaching staff:

AHPF2: So we have found that by facilitating sessions around careers, around aspirations, around next steps after secondary school, that they have more of an idea of where their life can lead and they just aren't exposed to that at home.

This suggests that the benefits and the impact of the Aimhigher Plus programme reaches beyond the educational domain, illustrating how it affects students' life-courses. However, fundamentally, it impacts on students' learner identities in a positive way, affirming them and creating the conditions in which belonging can be experienced once they achieve entry into HE (Thomas, 2012).

There was strong evidence that the programme had impacted on students by encouraging them to opt for qualifications that would potentially lead to a different and better remunerated career.

Enhancing student choices

I remember that there was a student that was really high attaining, that was predicted to get like grade 7, 8s and 9s, so your top achiever, and she wanted to go to college to do a hairdressing course. Now we wouldn't have tried to take her away from her passion but I think it was more that she was trying to follow in the paths of the students that she hung around with, or influences from home, and she had the potential to achieve so much more than what that qualification would need. I remember we then had a university day, and we spoke about the different options at university for something a bit more creative, and she... I think she took on a taster session at a college, and then at a university as well, in Art Aspirations Week, all for Aimhigher, and she completely changed her career and she was going for something... I think it might be something science based... I just remember that she had got to go to university, and as a hairdresser you wouldn't need that qualification, but she did want a different career, and managed to reach more towards something that was more her potential level.
(Graduate Ambassador)

TSF3 felt that students had stayed in education longer, gone to VIth Form instead of college, and accessed university, all as a result of the programme.

TSF3: Some of our students that wouldn't have considered further education prior to working with Aimhigher have gone on to do VIth Form, have gone on to do A' levels, whereas the traditional view here was, you just went to a college. But actually, it was creating that opportunity and those pathways and making students aware of those and educating them in that and Aimhigher has been *fundamental* in that, that development, and that link with university.

TSF2: Just to develop aspirations, getting them to think about their careers, erm, and that just wouldn't have been possible before Aimhigher, with the funding that they provide.

The impact of student visits to university campuses

It was apparent that the university visits had made a deep impression on a majority of the students interviewed. However, there were exceptions to this: one student (F1) had not been on a university visit due to COVID-19. Another student (M2) said very little about the university visits, this appeared to be because he had wanted to focus more on post-school opportunities at college rather than university – which were explored by staff on other occasions. These exceptions apart, all of the other students were enthusiastic to varying degrees, with clear evidence that some students' views and aspirations had changed considerably as a result of the visits.

F2: It was, it like, really opened my eyes to what university can be like, and made me want to go to university, er, after my A' Levels.

F3: I think it [the trip] was a lot more interesting than just having a PowerPoint about university.

M5: It made me think more about the future, instead of just thinking about going on to college and getting a job, so I can go into further education and have a degree.... I think it's made the prospect of people going to university seem more accessible, even if you can't pay for it.

The visits helped students decide whether university was something that they wanted to pursue and what it might be like if they did:

M3: I think it gave me a good idea about university: about whether I want to go or not.

M4: I feel like it helped me, erm like, decide on a personal level if I want to go to university. Not being about what I'm going to do there, but how it's gonna be and how life would be different there.

F5: Yeah, they were helpful, they made me, like, get a proper feel for the unis, and helped me find out what courses they offer.

M6: I attended Birmingham University with my school, and it was a good experience to know, like, what the uni was about and what courses they gave out.

F3 and F4 were particularly enthusiastic about the trips they went on. Specifically, their comments show that the university visits dispelled fears and uncertainties that they had had about going to university. Having visited they were enabled to picture themselves as undergraduates in the future. This speaks to the importance of the in person (rather than virtual) visits offered by the Aimhigher provision. The visits are opportunities for students to develop a figured world of university life – an imagined future on campus and to imagine themselves within it. It also highlights a specific gap in the cultural capital of these WP students, in relation to their knowledge and understanding of university. If students do not know anyone in their family or peer group who has been to university then they often find it difficult to envisage themselves there.

F3: I thought it was quite big and scary, the prospect of going to university, but now that I've been on that trip, it felt a lot easier... to think about it... as me being in there. We went to a university in Birmingham, and it was really good.

F4: It felt more personal like... and less... less like a workplace. I was thinking it was going to be, like, a lot bigger, and, like, a lot more like, older... like, older, bigger, louder - more overwhelming than it actually was, but it looked a lot more like school [laughing] than I thought it would.

Some participant students focused on the physical buildings and talked about how they saw themselves within university spaces, navigating the practicalities of university life, constructing a figured world in which they were university students, actually embodying that role. It is very powerful for pre-application students to be able to do this as it gives them the confidence to follow through on their dreams and aspirations.

F4: I think going to an actual university and seeing the whole layout is really useful, and one of the students who was showing us around, she pointed out like a cyber building and said like "I've never even been in there" so, it was nice to see that, because I was always scared about how big they were, so it was nice to see that you don't have to go everywhere in the university and have, like, that put into perspective.

F3: ... I thought it was gonna be like one building, like a school. But it put into perspective for me, and things that I might not have thought about, like erm leaving early to get to classes and stuff, 'cos I thought it was all gonna be in one building. But it's like ... a little village.

The realignment of expectations with reality is reassuring for these students. Visits also helped students to think about the location and type of university that they wanted to go to. M4 said that initially he had thought all universities would be “the same”, but visiting two contrasting universities helped him to see that there were significant differences between them:

M4: I went to University College Birmingham and the University of Birmingham. And both of them were like, both of them were good, but different experiences. Because one was more like on its own, and one was in the city – and like, that would probably be the one I would go to.

This illustrates how the visits serve to de-mystify HE generally and enable students to begin their own personally constructed and practical picture of what university life is like. F5 had been to two different universities with the Aimhigher provision and visited two with her parents. She felt that going to different universities had helped her to make her choices:

F5: But, I just think that Aimhigher has made me have a feel of each uni and what’s involved.

Some students also reflected on meeting university students, and how this had changed their perspective and given them a more positive view of what it was like to be a university student rather than a school student. M4 in particular raised this; again the dispelling of myths about student experiences is apparent in the second comment.

M4: It showed me a new way of how, in general, of how students actually work, and how they... how they learn about what they did... and how they choose... it’s like what they’re doing is... it’s not like, they’re not bored with it, and they’re still liking it, they’re still enjoying it every day, and they’re still going, so it seemed as if they enjoy what they’re doing then they must be doing something right.

On one visit, students experienced the excitement of Graduation Day, and this seemed to provide F3 and F4 with a concrete vision of success, enabling them to visualise enjoying this success for themselves in a figured world in which they were successful graduates. Again, these powerful and positive visualisations help pre-university students to plan for futures with which they may be unfamiliar:

F4: I think it’s given me, like, sort of a plan for my future, like nothing really specific, but just seeing the university. And I’m pretty sure... that students were, like, graduating, and seeing them all graduate, like, kind of made me want a plan, because I was just going to go to college and get a job, but I didn’t know what job or anything.

F3: I think, on the specific trip that we went on was the day of them graduating, I think that was very important, because it let us like, see what could happen in the future for us, as well.

The impact in the passages above is clearly profound and transformative. While all of the university visits aimed to give students a broad insight into university life, allowing them to see different campuses and talk to undergraduates, there were several students who recalled attending specific lectures or workshops (e.g. on Psychology and Engineering). Viewing teaching and learning sessions had deepened the impact of visits further by giving them positive views of the lecturers and enabling them to connect their existing experiences of teaching and learning at school with HE teaching and learning.

F3: We... I think we had a presentation on Psychology and the brain, and that's what I remember the most, and... the professors... were really intuitive and... it was really very good [laughing].

... it was actually interesting, and it challenged our memory and stuff like that ...

M2: I remember going onto the same trip to university and learning about Psychology and whatnot...

M1: I went to the Coventry University trip in Year 9, and it was... it was good because we had a workshop about engineering and it was, it was really open to people that was in your group, and it was really good for building team skills and stuff.

Such approaches to teaching and learning (such as groupwork) that students found familiar offered a bridge to connect existing experience to possible futures. M4 focused on the scope of what was available at university, which seemed to surprise him.

M4: There were loads of different choices that you could choose from, and how you can basically decide what you do... Yeah, like and in terms of the courses themselves, like, you could do, if it was cooking, for example, you could do different types of the same thing, just on a different branch of it.

The university visits seemed to have the deepest impact on F3 and F4 in terms of career possibilities. F3 felt that it had opened her eyes to a new range of options, as well as a new level of self-awareness concerning her own capabilities and her overall career aspirations.

F3: It actually influenced my career, like well what I want to do when I'm older. So, my career aspirations, before I wanted to be an author or an artist, but now, after that specific trip I went on, was the Psychology lecture, I realised that being opened up to an abstract subject like that, has made it... me... aware of how eager I am to learn about it, and about how interesting more abstract university subjects are to me. So now I want to go into Psychology or Law, or something like that...

I didn't think I was very academic, like, I didn't like school that much, but now I've realised that I like it a bit more than I thought I did. So, it was more of a positive, like experience.

As she explains below, the new goal of working in Psychology or Law is a significant change from her previous thoughts of working in a “crèche or whatever”. In addition, it has motivated her to try harder with her schoolwork, because she had the goal of university to work for.

F3: ...my idea, what I thought I wanted to do before was go to college, like in the January and do English Literature and have other A' levels accompany that like a bit maybe easier, subjects I've done at high school, and then just go straight into work somehow, like a crèche or whatever. But I've realised that I do want to actually complete my academic er journey, up to university, at least, and then maybe even further.

The impact of the Aimhigher Plus provision is quite clearly transformative in this example. The transformation is seen in the widening of this student's horizon of possibility. This has, in turn, catalysed new aspirations. F4 also felt that the visits had inspired her to go to university in the future and encouraged her to plan for the future as she could now envisage herself operating successfully in the figured world of university education.

F4: I think it's given me, like, sort of a plan for my future, like nothing really specific, but just seeing the university... I was just going to go to college and get a job, but I didn't know what job or anything. I was kind of just gonna go with it, and none [of] my family's like that, none of them have been to university or anything, none of them really cared about their education, so I kind of see it as like a chance to be the first in my family to do that.

F4's comments about potentially being the first to go to university from her family was echoed by F3, M4 and M5. In addition, M5 explained that he had not thought he could go to university because of financial barriers, but the university visits in conjunction with advice from the ambassadors, had helped him to realise that he could overcome these financial difficulties, without being a burden on his family. The unique value of the informal relationships established between students and the APA/GAs and their profound impact on pupils was also picked up in the Partnership report (Smith et al 2022).

M5: Before Aimhigher I thought I would go to college and just get a job.... It was like I said, the point is, the idea that, that my family could actually afford for me to go to university.

R: So, why did it make you feel that, that you might be able to go to university now?

M5: Because they talked about like student loans and scholarships... So that, personally, has made it much more realistic for me to actually be able to go to university.

In addition to the visits, the supportive advice from a trusted source – in this case the APA/GA – is key in terms of the impact. For other students, the visits had not changed what they wanted to do, but had helped them to understand their choices, or to gain other benefits.

M4: I don't think it really changed what I wanted to do, but I think it just opened it up more. Finding new ways to learn things that you're trying to learn or the courses you're picking, so it did make it better, better and you wanna learn it more, so it's more applicable to you. And it helps you see what you want to do.

Here we see the impact on a student related to perspective and positionality. The visit has enabled the student to position himself in relation to different choices and the landscape that has been opened to him. There is a body of research literature that connects choice strongly to social class backgrounds (e.g. Ball et al 2002, Ball 2003, Reay et al 2001). M6 explained that he had decided he wanted to be a software developer and had already applied for an apprenticeship, but the university visits had helped him consider a broader range of options. He also felt that the visits had been useful because the apprenticeships included study at university:

M6: It was like, I wanted an apprenticeship, but it was, like, good to find out what courses they provided that linked to my apprenticeship.

I still want to go to an apprenticeship, but like the unis have helped me, like look at the different courses, like what's involved in them and everything, which I find very interesting, like, for example – sport, like I like doing sports a lot, and then unis do sports, and like PE teachers and everything. And, I liked that a lot.

The value of university visits as a key activity in the programme was stressed by the staff that were interviewed. All of the teaching staff discussed the importance of university visits, they felt that these had a significant impact on students, helping them in multiple ways. In particular, they felt that the visits enabled students to experience universities for themselves, and to be able to understand what it felt like to study at university. They saw these as motivating factors for students' future plans.

TSM1: When you take 'em to a university, when you take 'em out and you take 'em to a fantastic university like UoB [University of Birmingham] and, I mean they loved it when the Commonwealth Games were on, they were like "Oh yeah, that's where we went, those are the hockey pitches that we walked past." And erm, tangible, it just makes stuff tangible, I think.

TSF2: The engagement that they've had, the fun that they've had, the knowledge that they've gained, it's so engaging for them, they have always come back really positive... it's just incomparable, just how much of an impact it's had.

TSM2: ... and going to see Birmingham University, not just giving them a prospectus, which is what I got at school, but going to universities, going into a lecture theatre, speaking to other kids – like-minded kids, like them, in the same situation.

This last comment directly echoes F3's observation that university visits had much more impact than just watching a presentation about universities.

There was a commonly held opinion amongst all the teachers interviewed that students would not really understand what being an undergraduate was like without these university visits.

TSF2: Erm every year we now do a trip for year 10 students, getting them out looking at university or college, ... it would be a local college, if more suitable. Just to develop aspirations, getting them to think about their careers.

It was evident that there was a general opinion that students could often not draw on these experiences from their own families, either because they did not have family members who had studied at HE, or because they could not afford to take them to visit universities, or a combination of these issues. When these visits were complemented with another component of the programme: the Mytutor scheme (see section on **The impact of additional resources**), students were able to develop a rich and full figured world of university life.

TSM1: Because these kids will not have seen a university, they would not get an opportunity to go around a university if Aimhigher didn't help them to do that. Their parents would not talk about university.

This closely reflects what some of the students were also saying, that they had no-one in their family who had gone to university, or that they were hoping to be the first in their family to go into HE.

There was a strong sense among teachers that the university visits broadened students' horizons, giving them a much wider understanding of the possibilities ahead of them. Here, TSM2 explains the impact of realising that they do not have to just go to a university that is close to home.

TSM2: I took a group of students to Birmingham University, actually, just going to a university and finding out – there were other students there who were not from Birmingham, there were international students, there were students who had travelled maybe a hundred, maybe two hundred miles to go to that university. And looking at, not just the lecture theatre, but looking at student union, speaking to students - Why did they go to university? What's the point? – and just giving them that opportunity, there's something out there apart from going to college and doing quite a rubbish course, really, whether it's a GNVQ... they understand the stepping stones are generally to go to university: A levels – very traditional but actually we want some of our kids to do that traditional pathway – university... A levels, university and moving away from home.

This also reflects students' views that a very useful part of the visits was speaking to university students, and that this helped them better understand what being an undergraduate entailed, although none specifically mentioned the location of universities and whether this had widened their aspirations to apply further afield.

Teaching staff appreciated that resources from the Aimhigher programme provided funding for trips, they were keenly aware that these opportunities would not be possible otherwise, as their schools would not be able to fund these visits.

TSF2: because we just didn't have funding to facilitate trips or erm, we definitely wouldn't ever have had something like university based, so the aspirations that they've been able to develop towards university has been fantastic. ... and that just wouldn't have been possible before Aimhigher, with the funding that they provide. They organise the sessions at the university, provide funding for coaches, provide funding for lunches, erm, we have multiple events throughout the year that is funded through Aimhigher to improve motivation, support, academic abilities.

TSM1 also appreciated the connections and relationships that were have been formed with universities that enabled visits and other activities to take place. This resonates with other AHPs who commented on the value of these developing relationships:

TS3: You've put in an amazing package of support, you've had schools linking and making those connections with universities and raising aspirations of pupils... I suppose it's the partnership with the universities that's the other positive, I would say, and the work that we do with [uni link person]_____ and how much [he] has supported this school, and been a supporter of this school. And, that again, is another brilliant thing that's come out of it.

TSF1 emphasised that the Aimhigher programme had enabled a network of links with several local universities.

TSF1: So, we had visits to Worcester, visits to BCU, visits to Aston, visits to Warwick, erm Newman, erm sessions, lectures, taster days from Year 10 upwards really. So, we had links ... we had *good* links with our local universities.

This was echoed by TSF5, who explained that she had developed a "quite a good relationship" with the university link person, which had facilitated the university visits, and the provision of targeted workshops for students held at school.

TSF5: So, she comes, she came in to do the finance talk. I've also said to her that a lot of our kids are having mini meltdowns. They're really struggling with stress. How to revise. So, we've got them coming in again after Easter to come and help support the students, and to do that.

TSF3 explained how they had been able to work with universities to get tailored or "bespoke" packages, which she felt was a particularly valuable and rare opportunity.

TSF3: We've been able to arrange *bespoke* educational packages, say, for example, working with the university, looking at scholarly approaches and you know how do we inspire our youngsters that probably... We take them to universities, we bespoke a

scholar package where we have lecturers from Birmingham University, delivering lectures to our pupils and then pupils submitting dissertations, I mean that, you know, in a normal situation in education, you'd never have that opportunity, would you?

Although this was the only school who mentioned "bespoke" packages, the importance of the students attending sample lectures echoed comments from students from a different school (particularly F3 and F4) who reported that the university lectures had left a deep impression on them, that had changed their views and aspirations.

At the rural school, students F5 and M6 had experienced more generic university visits where they were able to tour the campuses and talk to undergraduates, but they did not go to any taster lectures. TSF5 was aware that this was not an ideal situation.

TSF5: I think because obviously you know when it's these university days, they're very generic. So, it doesn't give you specific, you know, sort of subject specific examples.

However, she still advocated their impact in helping students make decisions about their future:

TSF5: But Year 12s that, when we've taken them to these university visits, they've suddenly gone from either not being focused on university and just sort of thinking, "oh, it happens when it happens", or they've never thought of university and then suddenly now they are looking at that process and looking at whether it's something they want to do. So, it, it helps us provide those opportunities that you know, we wouldn't be able to otherwise.

She stressed that over the years, individual students had told her how the programme had changed their views about going to university:

TSF2: And it's not the case of students erm thinking that they didn't want to, it's that they thought that they couldn't, they literally thought that wasn't for them because they weren't able to. No-one else in their family ever has, why would they be able to? Why – they can't afford it, there's gonna be restrictions, it's gonna be a burden to their family, x, y, z, and through Aimhigher and the events that they've put on, we've been able to broaden their horizons, and open their eyes to all the opportunities that are available to them.

The notion of 'broadening horizons' is key here: here it means bringing into clearer focus an HE pathway that may have been dismissed due to a lack of information. In that sense, the Aimhigher Plus programme functions to refine each student's figured world of HE: to give them a fuller understanding of what studying in HE would mean for them. In some cases, teachers acknowledged that students had not been inspired to pursue university in the future, but even here they felt that the trips had been beneficial.

TSF2: And some of them have turned around and said, "I don't want to go to university now, but at least I have all of my facts and I know that that's an informed decision that

I've made." But the majority have really been surprised by it, and engaged in it really well, basically.

This closely resonates with students' (M3 and M4) comments that the trips had been useful in giving them an insight into universities and had helped them decide what they wanted to do.

The impact of Aimhigher Progression Ambassadors / Graduate Ambassadors

It was clear that the majority of teachers in urban schools valued the APA/GAs greatly and felt that they felt that they had had a really positive impact on students. However, only a few students specifically mentioned the school staff in charge of running the provision. F2 explained how the mentoring meetings she had had with an APA/GA enabled her to think carefully about her future career, and how she had felt supported by the mentor:

F2: We had the mentoring meetings where I had my one-on-one and I could really discuss what I wanted to do in the future. They... er, the woman I was with was really patient, 'cos I had multiple fields that I was interested in and she would then give me a detailed "how to get into this" and "how to get into that" and she would always, like, give me the multiple options, like "You could do A' levels, you could do BTEC," so she would take the time to explain it all. And, er, it definitely helped me to decide what I want to do now, in A' levels... I wanted to do something, but, like when she laid out the path for me, to get to where I wanted, it wasn't... what I wanted, like I'd changed my mind and she helped me find something that was more suited for me.

It is also interesting that she highlights that the APA/GA was pointing out other pathways, (A levels, BTECs, apprenticeships) rather than just focusing on university. It was clear that she really valued these interactions and felt that she was listened to, and not rushed or pressured into making decisions.

M1's comments resonate with this opportunity to discuss alternatives to university as it enabled him to change his mind about his future career. He had thought he wanted to do forensic science, but after finding out more details from the mentor about what the career and course involved, he realised it was not the right pathway for him.

M1: Erm along with the careers adviser that we have, Aimhigher, it opened my eyes to what... I wanted to do forensics, and it opened my eyes as to what I had to do to get to the career, and although I don't know what I want to do at this point now, I think, I'm actually, I'm glad that I found out to get to what I was gonna do, because I've realised – like F2 said – that it wasn't for me.

TSF5 stated that students (who attended the rural school in the study) had not had access to or engagement with the APA/GAs for a long time, and this included the students in the focus group. However, instead the Aimhigher HE representative from the partnership had visited on several occasions to provide targeted support sessions for several different issues such as

student finance, applying to university, career pathways and revision techniques. F5 recalled some of these sessions and explained that they had helped her to complete her university application forms “step-by-step”. They also offered guidance on what career pathways she could take, as she had been contemplating either nursing or being a paramedic. She finally opted for nursing.

F5: It’s definitely helped, like [to] decide what pathways that we could go down.

At different points in the focus group, she specifically commented on two separate workshops relating to student finance and revision techniques:

F5: Er, we had someone come into the school about Student Finance, erm so we attended with our parents, and like, this woman, she went through it with us, and I just thought, like that it really helped. And she explained it very well and went through it step-by-step, what we needed to know and what we needed to do.

F5: So, someone came in to do revision with us, like, revision techniques. I found that really useful, because, not having my GCSEs, I didn’t know how to revise. So, if they come in, and they kind of went through step-by-step on how to revise properly and giving us different techniques that we could try.

Three of the urban schools all talked positively about their APA/GAs and the different roles that they played in supporting the Aimhigher Programme. In particular, they talked about how they helped out at school, mentoring students, giving careers advice, as well as organising and running different activities, talks and trips, including giving talks themselves in School assemblies.

TSM1: Assemblies as well, year 10 always have, an Aimhigher assembly as well, and it’s so necessary, because, you know, kids listen to people who they they... teachers live in staff rooms, as far as they’re concerned, you know, “Well what d’you know, you’re only a teacher,” but someone comes in and they say “ooh I’m so and so” and “Ooh” they go “ooh it’s a real person”, a connection, not like “Oh, it’s Mr. ____ who’s been rabbiting on about the Battle of Hastings for 10 years”, so that sense of the real world is invaluable.

TSF2: It started with having Aimhigher Progress Plus Ambassadors, that would be assigned to the school twice a week. So, there was someone who came from the university and worked with us, and that was fantastic because it was a different face, erm talking to the students, having one-to-one meetings, talking about aspirations...

These extracts again emphasise the special role of the APA/GAs: students see them as distinct from teaching staff; they can relate them on a more informal level and to that extent can identify with them. Some felt that the APA/GAs were able to connect better with the students and in a different way. To that extent, their influence and what they are able to communicate to the students about HE – often drawing on their own recent experience is perceived as qualitatively

different by the students. There was a general agreement that they were a “different voice”, someone from outside of school, who the students could relate to:

The Programme's Lifechanging Impact

I bumped into a girl yesterday, actually, in Marks and Spencer's and erm I remember she was part of the programme, and I can't remember exactly what she did... She said she has just got her dream job as a Mental Health Nurse at a new hospital site near to where her family are, and her grandmother's quite ill, so she wanted to be working close to home. And she just said “Ah, is Mr. So and So still there? Is Miss So and So still there? And say, “thank you”, because you know, without the school I wouldn't be where I am now.” (Aimhigher

TSM1: They don't say anything different from what we say anyway, but it's the fact that they're not a teacher. And like some, some kids are just switched, attuned, to not listen. So, you know, despite, even if you're talking about their future and this wonderful opportunity, they'll go [shrugging shoulders, shaking head]... “What did you say?” So, yeah, so that makes a big difference, being able to bring people in. Erm, and they're so enthusiastic the Aimhigher [ambassadors], obviously, they've recently finished university, so they're fresh with all the up-to-date information, but they're you know, kids love enthusiasm, so that's the really good thing.

TSF2: A different voice, I don't know why it makes such a difference but it has a *ridiculous* amount of significance for our students. They hear the message from us every day, they see our faces every day. We're nothing new, we're nothing special, we're nothing shiny to them. Someone who's maybe more relevant to them, or someone that's more their age group – so our, we've had undergraduates come and put on workshops, and of the Aimhigher Ambassadors, it was always, it was only a 2 year, and it had to be straight from university, they were always under a certain age – to make them, a bit more relatable with our students, and we found that that had a massive impact, basically. That they would just listen to the message more, that they'd be more engaged, but they'd get bigger takeaways from it, erm rather than they hear it from us and just, sometimes switch off a bit [muffled, laughing], when it's from the same voice.

Teaching staff who had worked with APA/GAs also agreed that they were excellent role models for students, and because they were younger in age this made them more relatable, thus enabling students to talk to them and become inspired by them.

TSF3: I would say, because what that person [the Ambassador] did, was they were at university, you know, a graduate of that university, much closer in age than some members of staff are to our children, but actually have a really relevant experience in that field, and to bridge that gap really, with some of our youngsters, to say “Well, we do come from this area, this is a possibility for you, this is a reality, this is something” and so the impact of that and those conversations.

TSM2 agreed with this, feeling that the APA/GAs were approachable, so that students could talk to them more easily and this resulted in students' personal growth and self-confidence, and this, in turn helped them when interacting with other adults, including at university.

TSM2: when we had that Ambassador, who was here, it was almost like - not a social worker, but she knew so much more about the kids than I ever did, by just being their maths teacher, and they went to her, I think we had two females - and they went to her "Look, I'm interested in this, what advice would you give?" So, it was just somebody, a hundred per cent, in the school, based in the school, that they could really rely on, and for me, you can't measure that, you can't say well they got a higher grade, but holistically their confidence improved, their self-confidence improved, their *belief* improved, their interaction with other adults improved, so they could talk to other adults when they went to university, so ...

It was evident that the APA/GAs had been highly valued by the teaching staff, because they could help with the Aimhigher programme from multiple perspectives, as TSF2 explained:

TSF2: ...not only did they support with putting in, organising trips, making that possible, you know, collecting letters, things that staff are just *so tight on time* for, erm they would support with that, but mainly, because they didn't have teaching timetable. They could engage with students in carousel activities, put workshops on for students, have mentoring sessions with students, and that had a massive impact.

TSF3: When we've had the Aimhigher ambassadors based in school, that's obviously not happening this year due to cuts in funding, but when we had those based in school, a couple of days a week, they were mentoring students, key students in the school as well. So, it was a physical role model, presence, like you know, children were very much aware of the Aim Higher offers and those mentoring sessions that would take place to direct students and guide them and answer any of their questions.

Indeed, several of the teaching staff expressed their disappointment and frustration that the APA/GAs were no longer available, seeing this as significantly restricting the amount of support they are now able to provide students.

TSF3: We've been fortunate enough to have an Aimhigher Ambassador for the whole time that we were running Aimhigher. Obviously, we've not had that this year, and that's been a *significant loss*,

Teachers mainly gave broad examples of the types of activities and support that APA/GAs provided, but TSF5 was able to give a more detailed account of the support that was given to one student in particular.

TSF2: So, there was one student that increased across the board two grades on average because of the mentoring programme and the engagement that they had in Aimhigher. So, it was just so successful because that the Ambassador was able to have

weekly meetings, keep them on track, getting goals set, like this student was really anxious, really had low attendance because there was anxiety, there were issues with well-being. The Ambassador put in a load of time into this student and turned things around, he was worried at one point that this student would even attend their exams, their GCSE exams, but because of the time that we dedicated, erm the student completely turned around, and made massive progress and increased by two grades across the board, so that was a massive success story.

Here we can see that the APA/GA role extends to addressing pastoral concerns and, in that sense, can take on a holistic dimension – a characteristic familiar from relational pedagogy (Crowover and Jones 2018). In this sense they are taking on a ‘third space’ higher education professional role, a term which is frequently associated with those whose roles span the academic/non-academic dichotomy. In the context of Aimhigher Plus, the Aimhigher staff provided an important third space between pupils and teachers, which given their proximity in age and shared WP background mean that they could forge a different kind of relationship with the programme participants.

One teacher was very enthusiastic about Aimhigher, but also felt that she had not been using all of the opportunities that it could afford to its full potential. She expressed a commitment to formulate even closer links with and investigating more thoroughly what could be implemented from the programme in future to help students. These comments were contextualised by her attending an Aimhigher conference (online) shortly before taking part in the research interview. Another important aspect of the sustainability/legacy of the Uni Connect Programme is the upskilling of teachers/professionals in schools to support learners making better informed decisions about progression to Level 4. In this example of professional development, this teacher was supported to attend a UCAS conference, an opportunity that was made possible by Aimhigher funding. Her enthusiasm is clearly illustrated in her comments here:

TSF5: But the Aimhigher helped fund me go to the UCAS conference in Birmingham that was a couple of weeks ago, and that was two days, and that was, and that has had a massive impact on me. In terms of when we talk about careers with our kids, that we’re not leaving it to year 12, so what I’m implementing now, is a career’s programme that starts in year 9, so we’re getting the kids, we’re in the process of getting the kids actually logged onto UCAS *now*, doing at careers quizzes, looking at industries, an, an example would be, I’ve got a student in year 9 who, you know, wanted to be a primary school teacher, and she was *so excited*, you know that the career matched a hundred per cent to being a primary school teacher. And there, there’s a lot of students who, you know, they, they *do know* what they want to do, but then over years 9, 10, 11, the aspirations change and they, they fall. So, trying to get them focused now and making careers part of the curriculum is something that I’m now doing as a result of going to the UCAS conference, which wouldn’t have happened if the [Aimhigher] funding hadn’t been there.

Programme impact on students from low-income households

While the teachers tended to talk about benefits of the programme to students in general, one recalled a direct impact for a female student.

M1: One kid we helped just simply paying for travel and accommodation costs for them to go for their interview at Oxford, which was a fantastic thing that we did. [She] had been on the programme since Year 9, 'cos I remember taking them to Newman University... she would have been part of a Year 9 visit... a "Gifted and Talented, Raising Aspirations" visit. So, she would have done half a campus day's visit there in Year 9. She would have visited another university as part of half of Year 10...

R: So the money from the Aimhigher partnership enabled the travel costs and the expenses to do that? And do you know how the student responded to that?

TSM1: Yeah, yes, they got a place and they're there now... that's all she needed, you know. It was a two-day interview, she said "I can't get there and back in a day, I'll have to stay overnight, and I've got no money, what can I do?"

This student's ability to access Aim Higher funding for financial support for travel and accommodation was exceptional, however it was deemed crucial to this WP students' ability to attend her interview at Oxford University. As an Aimhigher target learner, without this support she may have missed this potentially life-changing opportunity.

This financial aspect was also commented on by TSF2, who felt that a combination of the university visits and the ambassadors' input had helped students to realise that financial barriers could be overcome.

TSF2: I've had so many students say the impact they've had on what they've, on what they've known about university, and that what that impact has had. So, a lot of students say, "Oh I didn't know that was the case with erm grants and funding, I didn't realise that you could, you know, that you don't have to have money to go to university" and then they've said "Oh, maybe I am able to go to university." ... I like, I have specific examples of like, memories of students saying, "I didn't think I'd be able to *afford* to go to university," "I didn't think I'd be able to go to university – but now I realise I can, and that funding isn't an issue." So, that's happened multiple times.

Unifest is a residential summer school for students, enabling them to live on campus and attend lectures and events at university, so that they can get a taster of life as an undergraduate. The Aimhigher Plus partnership made this accessible to students from low-income households who otherwise would not have been able to avail themselves of the opportunity. While only two of the TSs discussed Unifest, it was evident that they both valued this initiative and felt that it broke down barriers for students. TSF5 explained:

TSF5: So, it just looks at specific criteria, so it looks at whether they're an Aimhigher student, looks at whether parents have gone to university before, looks at, you know whether you live in an area of a high level of poverty, and then it looks at the school and how they perform, as well, and what [the] school's doing – [it] takes all those factors into consideration. And then students can apply to go either on residential to a university for two or three nights, or it can be just day you know, three days at university.

TSF1 also praised the scheme, seeing it as a really valuable opportunity for students.

TSF1: So, we had students access that in the summer months and the current year 10s who were sat here in front of you are having that, that's coming up...

She was planning to encourage more students to apply for places this year, after it had been suspended during the COVID lockdowns.

TSF1: Unifest, which we are resurrecting this year and pushing big, so we've always had some students, wherever we possibly could, be out at Unifest, so that's happening.

The impact is perhaps best illustrated by TSF5's comments on two students who had attended the previous year.

TSF5: One lad who was in care, who's, who's, who's in care and then another, another girl who's got some special educational needs. So, it was really good for her to, to be out of our comfort zone... they go there, they have talks about university life, they live in the dorms, they... everything's completely free! So, they don't pay for anything, any transport costs, food is free, they go bowling and they do activities, but the real focus is about getting these kids to think that actually university is potentially a path for them.

TSF5: ...[the] girl, she went to the residential one at the University of Birmingham and she, she now is so driven to want to go to university because she's had that experience.

This specifically emphasises the value of Aimhigher programmes for disadvantaged students from low-income households who may be experiencing poverty. TSF5 explained that she was really "pushing it" this year, in the hope that a lot more would be able to take part. It is clear that TSF1 and TSF5 felt that Unifest opens up opportunities for students who would not otherwise be able to benefit, again echoing other teachers comments on the overall impact of the Aimhigher programme. Both teachers were determined to make the most of the funding for Unifest in future.

Aimhigher Plus as a means to enhance students' cultural capital

This theme emerged across both staff and student groups. It was evident that schools were applying Aimhigher funding to a wide variety of trips that they linked to the development of their pupils' HE-specific cultural capital. The importance of cultural capital to student belonging and

positive student identity is well-documented (Todd 2014, Thomas 2012). Put bluntly, the less that WP students end up feeling like a 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu, 1992) the more likely they are to settle to their studies and enjoy their time at university.

TSF1: Erm, the cultural trip, they're going next week in Birmingham, we're doing Symphony Hall, erm, we've got the library, we've got the canals, we've got the historical aspect, erm as well as the local and the new architecture with Paradise Circus so they're involving what's past and present... we've done Imperial War Museum, we've done Natural History Museum, we have done a cultural trip to London...

Other teaching staff, including TSF3 and TSF4 also clearly valued the range of opportunities that trips enabled, particularly as they said they had a high proportion of Pupil Premium students who needed additional support. This was, therefore, a strong thread raised throughout the research, that these opportunities are particularly important for disadvantaged pupils, who would not be able to access them outside of school. In this way, commitment to the value of cultural capital generally and HE specific, for aspiring WP students was clearly articulated in the Aimhigher partnership activities.

TSF2: But in terms of our low attainers – we often find that they disengage in learning, that they don't keep that motivation, they don't necessarily have that career path that they're aware of, erm, and by providing the activities that we did, we could just... support that. They probably weren't having those types of conversations at home, where your high achievers you normally find that the parents, will push them, they will ask for extra, extra mile really when it comes to their revision, when it comes to them striving to be better, there tends to be that behind them with our higher ability students. But our lower ability students tend to come from that, deprived backgrounds, and this is like stereotyping, it's not always the case, but they can be quite deprived backgrounds and the parents weren't that engaged in their learning... Overall, students are *very appreciative* to be given the opportunity to, first of all to be out of school, and not having a normal school day, but they are... our students are very deprived, they come from a very deprived background, they don't have many opportunities, some of them haven't left _____[name of area] itself, you know they don't even go into Birmingham which is _____ [time given] up the road. They've never gone any further than a 5-mile radius, so to actually take them anywhere, is, is massive to some of them.

The teachers were proud that they had been able to extend these experiences to all pupils, and they were adamant that this had only been made possible by the Aimhigher funding.

TSF3: allowing our pupils to experience cultural enrichment opportunities that otherwise they might not have had. And, you know, I'm talking about from going down to London for the day, erm, to widen the breadth of their experience – we talk about cultural capital all the time, don't we, in education – and actually, our pupils, a lot of them, haven't moved from the estate that our school is based in, and so Aimhigher brought that unique opportunity to allow our pupils to have the most enriching and invigorating experiences,

which only added to their enthusiasm to develop in education. It built aspirations for a lot of our students, you know, it's provided opportunities for our children to erm develop their educational experiences.

The uniqueness of the Aimhigher approach was often mediated through students' relations with APA/GAs, who, as we have already discussed came from a WP background themselves. This, we found, meant that they were able to reassure and inspire pupils by using their own personal experiences to validate student concerns and model the benefits of HE.

TSF4: The fact that we were able to allow a hundred per cent of at least two enrichment opportunities for Years 9, 10, and 11 – that was our record, you know. All children, in those year groups, had two, at least two experiences – because of the work and the funding that Aimhigher provided.

The use of funding to create enhanced cultural experiences for participating students was important for the teachers who repeatedly highlighting that many of the students within their schools had difficult home circumstances, including financial barriers that curtailed their opportunities. Aimhigher was seen by all as a way of helping to overcome some of these difficulties and increase accessibility for students to go on trips that their peers could already afford.

TSF5: I think, you know, in terms of enabling us again, it, it comes back to cost. So, a lot of these kids haven't got a lot of money at home, you know. I've travelled to where some of them live, and it's, a one, one bedroom flat with six people in it. So, a lot of what we've tapped into, like I said, has been like the travel, to help with travel, so to reduce the cost of trips to make it more affordable.

All the teachers discussed using Aimhigher funding to provide a wide variety of cultural visits or activities that they felt not only enhanced students' experiences of the world outside their own school and communities which helped them to feel more confident about and better prepared when applying for university. M4 went on the trip to the ThinkTank, and although he did not comment on the trip itself, he felt it had been successful in motivating him in his studies, which supports TSF2's views:

M4: It gave me like a goal to achieve, to do all this revision and at the end I'll have a reward, so it's the same as university, you do all this work, and you know you've got there at the end.

In a separate interview, TSF5, from the rural school, spoke about a trip to London that had had the combined goal of giving students' access to forms of cultural capital that they might have been unfamiliar with, as well as providing inspiration for consideration of the performing arts or humanities as a potential career. The sight-seeing of London culminated in a Performing Arts workshop "in sort of using their voice," and a theatre performance. However, she was keen to emphasise the impact that the trip had on two male students, one of whom was M6:

TSF5: Yeah – they don't get out much, so the ones that went on the trip to London, some of them haven't even left _____ [hometown]. So to go to London, was really key for them. You know, the one lad who, I was going to ask to come and do this today, but he's not in, he was sending me random pictures of bus stops and buildings, because he'd just never been outside of _____ [hometown]. So, to suddenly go down to London ... helped with his confidence because, he was very, very, very nervous, so it was more about him going to help build that confidence.

It is evident from this quote, that she felt that the trips had multiple benefits for the students and that they had a significant impact, including helping them with having a wider view of the UK, and helping to improve their confidence because it was taking them to see places that they would not, ordinarily, visit and giving them a new range of social and cultural experiences.

Students who attended the rural school recalled this trip to London; M6 said that he remembered the trip, with F5 commenting:

F5: So, we actually went to the theatre, which was good.

She agreed that she had enjoyed the visit and had found it interesting, particularly because she had been previously considering a career linked to the arts and performance.

F5: ... before, when I did want to think I would want to do something with, like, the music hall or arts, and of course, that trip was linked to that. So, when I did get [there]... it was very enjoyable, so I was thinking that – it was fun, so maybe I do want to go into music hall or something to [do] with art.

The teachers from urban schools echoed the benefits:

TSM1: And then sometimes we use the money to enable a whole year group to go out of school and do something, and so that's, that's key as well.

TSF2: We've had, like, different organisations supporting in development, so we've had a couple of cultural capital events where students have had trips to London for the weekend, gone to the theatre, gone for a meal out...students wouldn't have even gone to Birmingham, I mean, let alone go to London.

The engagement that they've had, the fun that they've had, the knowledge that they've gained, it's so engaging for them, they have always come back really positive. it's just incomparable just how much of an impact it's had.

There was a shared opinion from the staff participants that such trips helped to motivate students to work harder at school, helped them to have a more rounded understanding of subjects and therefore impacted positively on their grades.

TSM1: Year 9, have always gone to the “Big Bang”... every single one of them, so we used the money there to help pay for transport for the Aimhigher kids. So that again, that’s what I like, as long as I can prove that the money will help this child, this student, get a better grade which will then go on to access to something else, it’s always approved.

TSF2: We’ve also had kind of aspirational, motivational days, where it might be a reward for participating well in a revision challenge, and then they go to something called Reach Higher... a bit of a reward, bit of an incentive... to get students to reach higher in their aspirations as well as [just taking part] in the activity.

TSF2: [They] basically had a pop-up show of science, like making science fun, basically, and they would do a bit of a performance, but it was about science and... developing students’ science knowledge whilst also putting on a show, and it was absolutely fantastic. So, loads of aspects like that, where people have come in, where we’ve been able to go out on trips all develop students’ either motivations, aspirations or attainment.

The teachers cited evidence that the students remembered these kinds of cultural events and were clearly enthused and excited about them. They recalled students being excited about trips, for example TSF5 talked about the student who sent her pictures of the trip to London, whilst TSF2 reported that students were always positive about trips and enjoyed them. TSF4 added that these events have had a “deep impact” on some students:

TSF4: ...you know, children speak about and reflect on [these trips]. A year later they’ll go “oh, remember that trip, I remember that visit, I remember what we did” and it’s hard to capture, I mean it comes across as in Pupil Voice, but you know, it has a deep impact on them in terms of experiences and what they get outside [school].

Teachers from two of the urban schools also commented on trips that targeted Modern Foreign Languages, which they felt had been of significant benefit to students.

TSF3: We’ve had a number of pupils who can access foreign travel, as a result of ... so we’ve had pupils that had to apply to be part of it – and were taken to Berlin. Amazing opportunities!

TSF2: We’ve had students go on a Modern Foreign Languages trip where it was like a massive French market – students absolutely loved that. They could actually buy things from the market and engage and that and obviously the whole day they’d be speaking in French, so, just so many interactive aspects that we just wouldn’t have been able to put on by ourselves.

This type of trip was a benefit made possible when there was more funding available. Such trips are now no longer funded. This is unfortunate as it was obvious that teachers also valued these trips because they felt that they provided students with really valuable personal experiences in

addition to addressing the issue of cultural capital in order to help them feel more confident about entering HE. They also felt that they could use trips specifically to link to careers, helping students to have a broader knowledge of what options were available and what they might mean in practice. This has already been mentioned above, where TSF5 organised a trip based around humanities and Performance Arts, but this was a frequent theme in the interviews with staff. Here TSF1 lists some of the trips:

TSF1: We've got the Skills Show in Worcester in March... we did Manchester City sport and business for the year 11 students back in October, November, we took them up to Manchester and did a whole business and sport combination, because we've got four groups of students, like classes – 'GCSEs, moving onto A' levels' – so again, we were working with that transition as well.

TSF2: And then we've had different motivational speakers come in, we've had trips out for careers-based events, so, we've had students go to the Jewellery Quarter to do a jewellery workshop and to look at the artwork and we've had students go out for Jaguar Land Rover and talk about the apprenticeships that are happening there.

TSM1 described a visit to Birmingham for a careers event:

TSM1: I created one around Birmingham. I took some kids to the NEC for a careers event and we paid for their train fare. We got off the train and we had a nice couple of hours just taking them around the city centre just before we got the train down to the NEC. [We were] really selling the praises of Birmingham. So that was really good... something completely different, and [regarding] raising aspirations we could go to the new office blocks and say, look we've got HSBC HQ here! Because they don't think [that there are job opportunities in Brum,] they think – oh Birmingham, there's a load of shops and that's it.

The last comment "They don't think *that*" refers to this opening up of students' understanding and experiences so that they can start to realise that these are not just "shops" and buildings, but living in a city offers many different career opportunities, which is why TSM1 sees the value of trips as helping them to gain a new understanding of the world around them in relation to their choices and aspirations.

Aimhigher Plus as an important source of additional funding

As well as trips out, several teachers mentioned that Aimhigher funding was used to bring people into the school and putting on events focussing on different careers. TSF1 explained that they invited motivational speakers in from different professions:

TSF1: ...just to enrich. I mean we've had GymShark in, which is just up the road, their head office, so we've been lucky that way. We've had the NHS in, who go in straight away into opportunities for nurses and midwives. They *phone in*, so they have talking with the students who are asking questions and answers *directly* with people who are on the job, really, and things like that. So, you know that is an eye-opener that we get from there, yes, so, really good.

Although high-cost, high impact activities like cultural trips could only be fully funded by Uni Connect target groups, more generally such activities could be more accessed by other pupils and partially funded: proportional to the number of Uni Connect learners attending. With this in mind, teachers commented on how the funding rules for the Aimhigher partnership could be very inclusive and thereby avoid stigmatising a 'target' group of WP students:

TSM1: We're an Aimhigher Plus school as well, you know, we've got a ridiculous [laughing] amount of multiculturalism going on in our school, we've got 74 different languages spoken at home and at school by kids and parents, so you know, *they are* at the bottom of the pile, and they need the most help. So, it's why I've got a massive enthusiasm for the project. And what I like about it is, that it doesn't exclude kids who aren't Aimhigher students, because of the 50% rule, you know, as long as you do an activity and it's got 50% of the Aimhigher kids, you can fill it with kids who aren't. So, you know, it works both ways for me.

Rather poignantly it was reported that funding had even been used was to help with costs of clothing for trips, as TSF3 explained:

TSF3: And they've had clothing, you know there was an investment in their clothing to ensure that there were *no* barriers. So, if I had to sum up Aimhigher, it's allowed us to *remove the barriers* to opportunities for our youngsters, and without it, *definitely* our children would have had a less enriching experience of this school.

Resourcing of this kind can be provided for Uni Connect Programme learners (from a targeted ward) only if certain equipment (including clothing) is needed. It becomes a resource for schools to draw on in future. Arguably, here we see how schools within the Partnership have been addressing the basic needs of students arising from governmental austerity measures and the faltering economy. Aimhigher funding, in that sense, has contributed to plugging the gaps created by reductions in resource in other areas of social welfare provision. This view is supported by direct comments from staff:

TSF5: You know funding's going down the drain for schools. We haven't got the money we used to, the cost of living is, is as its lowest point. So, you know, when I'm able to tap into this funding and help support the students with financial, whether it's transport or whatever it might be, you know it, it does make a big impact.

The impact of additional resources sourced through Uni Connect

The use of the Mytutor (www.mytutor.co.uk) programme was discussed by all of the teachers as something that they had accessed for individual students by obtaining Aimhigher funding. Mytutor is an online tutoring programme that is used to enhance school provision and to supplement teaching of specific subjects to support individual students. It provides one-to-one tuition with university undergraduates working as tutors. Some of the schools had introduced it when COVID-19 restrictions had curtailed other activities, and most teachers noted that the funding from Aimhigher for this service had been invaluable, as without it the schools would not have been able to afford to use it as widely as they had. Although, some teachers said that students only had Mytutor sessions in one subject (e.g. TSM2 discussed them having sessions only in maths), in other schools it was used more extensively. Again, this seemed to be dependent on how much funding was available, as teachers felt that it was a big outlay per student per session. However, it is clear that at least two of the student participants had benefited from multiple sessions – M1 had received sessions in chemistry and biology, and F1, talked about “three lots of sessions, so thirty sessions” altogether.

There were several students who discussed benefitting from “Mytutor” sessions; and one, F5, was looking forward to starting these sessions. All students who had engaged with Mytutor had found the experience to be very positive. The benefits ranged from specifically helping students to gain an enhanced understanding of the target subject/s, to a wider range of advantages such as: learning study skills; exam and revision techniques; generally gaining confidence; and being able to find out more about potential careers or universities.

Students all appreciated the one-to-one tuition which the sessions offered which meant that they could explore topics in depth and focus on the areas where they were struggling.

M6: I find it useful ‘cos, like, it’s on video-call and like the teacher basically explains like step-by-step on how to work out sums like equations, or whatever, on maths. And, like, it really helps, because he gives you like tasks to do on maths and different methods so you can work with your way around it.

Some students specifically praised the knowledge and experience of the undergraduate tutors, as well as their flexibility of approach:

F2: Mytutor was really really helpful. It allowed me to go and like have someone explain to me the kind of things that I couldn’t understand in class, and just have that one-on-one session and go in-depth.

F1: I can remember a lot from it, actually, I had a really good experience with it... And it was really good, actually, the tutors as well... they were experts in their field. And I really, like, learnt a lot from what they were saying. They were also really flexible, so the lesson previously, as well, I’d say, like “can we focus on this for next lesson?” And they’d

go really in-depth, like above and beyond, really, have their PowerPoints ready, have exam questions, and they really knew what they were doing.

This passage illustrates how students were able to progress at their own speed and to pursue their own chosen topics: in other words, the Mytutor sessions gave them more agency in their learning than was usually possible in the classroom. Another student, M1, felt that his sessions enhanced his subject knowledge but also enabled him to make new links between the sciences.

M1: I did science in Mytutor as well and it was good because I learnt... well, no, I didn't learn, but like, it heightened my skills on what I already did know, and like, it made bridges between each science. I did chemistry and biology for the 10 weeks that we did it, so I think it really helped, like what F2 said, with the marks and [inaudible] and that like got me a better grade than like what I could have got without it.

Another student, F2 also felt that it had helped her performance in the summer tests:

F2: I did it in biology and later when in the test like had last year biology was my strongest point...in science, and I think that's because we did an extra hour each week with Mytutor.

These comments support the views of the teachers that engaging in Mytutor increased students' achievement by one grade in the subject in which they received the additional tuition. However, a more intangible benefit was the improvement in confidence, study skills and an enhanced understanding about universities and career pathways. This links with the idea of belonging as a pre-disposition which informs students' positive learning identity when entering a new and unfamiliar education space. Here, F1 (an ex-student reflecting back on the impact of Aimhigher) felt that she had benefited in several ways:

F1: Mytutor, gave me a lot of confidence with my learning, and I think that helped me so much with my GCSEs. Also, with Mytutor I was able to ask about other things and revision, so it wasn't just kind of learning about schools, also it was learning things about universities and A' level options and things like that, which also helped me to be a lot more confident and comfortable to move on to, kind of, Higher Education.

The extract above suggests that Mytutor sessions offered a different kind of teaching and learning space: one that is more fluid, informal and attuned to students' interests. This kind of hybrid space – located between formal student/teacher relationships and student/student relationships are generative of active, autonomous and positive learner identities. This is another example of how the programme opened up a kind of third space which encouraged students to develop their skills and access learning in a different, often very productive way. In the next quote we can see that they increased F1's confidence to the point where she was able to share what she had learnt with her teacher and her class:

F1: ...it was the best, like revision techniques as well and they were instilling that in our lessons, so I can say that really helped me a lot. And, I could give feedback as well in

my lessons, so when I was in class as well, I'd be like, "Miss, in Mytutor, we did this", and I was able to bring some of the skills that we learnt through Mytutor into class and contribute that way as well. So, altogether, it was really good.

Several teachers highlighted that they felt the Mytutor programmes were particularly successful because they enabled students to build personal relationships with the tutors. This is a key aspect of the hybrid learning space they offered which was supported by students' comments, including this example below which highlights the importance to many students in the Aimhigher cohort of hearing about of what being at university is actually like. Often this kind of 'soft' information is key to helping students from social and family backgrounds that have little familiarity with HE 'imagine themselves' at university.

F1: They [the tutors] told me about their experiences at universities. I think at Mytutor, there's a little description of the tutor, it says, like, what university they're at, and what they're studying. And so, with that information I was able to ask them questions, like one of them was doing dentistry, and I was able to ask them about their steps and how they got into the university they wanted to get into, so they encouraged me to, like, pursue what I wanted to do.

While Mytutor was the predominant additional online package that was used, teachers also mentioned other packages including CAD/CAM licence (an engineering design package), and UniFrog (<https://www.unifrog.org/>) – an online careers package. Only one of the schools mentioned using the careers platform Unifrog, however, this was obviously valued as an additional tool for guiding students in their potential careers and extending the support that the school could provide.

TSF1: So, the Unifrog, having that careers programme that they can access at home as well as at school, is my back up, is my back up, because obviously, with a school of over a thousand students, I, I see most and I obviously interview most, but it's there, for them to go to and find out about, that we refer back to. So, sixth form uses it a lot, lower school is using it, year 9 options, etc., parents know about [it] that it's there and available for students to use, so it's, that's the big back up on the careers side. Careers is now part of the PSHE programme, and we've got that underway, so Unifrog is also contributing... big into that as well.

TSF2 explained that Mytutor had been a key supportive tool from the start of their involvement with Aimhigher, preceding the COVID-19 pandemic.

TSF2: Mytutor has been something that has been used from the get-go. So, Mytutor is an online tutoring platform er on a one-to-one basis with students, and we've been able to support that... That would be a *really expensive* intervention for our students because it's – I can't remember the exact cost per session, but I think it's something like 15 pounds per session for each student, and we would just never be able to afford that for one individual but Aimhigher has made that possible, and we've seen an increase of on average a grade for every student, so the impact that it has on students [against] students who don't attend Mytutor... an increase of one grade in that subject, more than for people who didn't attend, so that's fantastic!

Again, she highlights that this would have been too expensive for the school to use without the funding. This was echoed by TSF5, who said that Mytutor was used a lot more since COVID19.

TSF5: ... and they accessed the English and maths tutoring from home because obviously we weren't in school. So, you know, Mytutor has been quite a significant part of that and obviously we're tapping it into again this year.

As with the cultural trips, teachers saw provision of funding for Mytutor as a way of creating a more inclusive school, where all students – including those whose families could not afford extra tuition fees - could raise their achievement levels, giving them a better chance of reaching their true potential in the future.

TSM2: 'Cos they're not doing that at home, they can't afford private tuition, not at all, if you look at other schools in our Trust, I would say that 60% of the kids would have private tuition, but that's not, that's *not* available to our students *at all*.

There was a concern expressed that some of the funding had been reduced – for example for the APA/GAs, and that if other funding was not available in future, that this would have a significant detrimental impact on students in years to come.

TSM2: [Our students are] already at a disadvantage coming from the area they are, they are at a disadvantage because the parents haven't got disposable income to spend on tuition, so for me the Aimhigher project was... kind of bridging the gap between students who have and have not – and generally our kids *have not* – and that's a *massive* concern.

The teachers all commented that Mytutor had resulted in increased grades for students who engaged with it. TSF2 clarifies that the grade increase has occurred for students in the subject area in which they attend the Mytutor sessions, however, she also feels that it helps them with wider study skills, so it enables them to lift their performance as a whole.

TSF2: That is just one grade in that particular subject... but we have seen that it has impacted, now I don't have the figures... but I have seen it had a knock-on effect on how they improve in other subjects, and that's because they have a better understanding of how to revise and what works well for them.

Researcher: Ok, yes, so even though it's targeted at one particular subject you feel that it translates into the other subjects as well?

TSF2: Definitely. Definitely.

The teachers who discussed Mytutor all commented that students who engaged with the programme had increased their predicted GCSE grade by one grade, and in some cases more.

TSM2: They got a better maths GCSE grade, which opened *many more* doors, than they would have had.

TSF3: We found that across all subjects, so English and science they've had the benefit of the tutoring, and I'd say it was 90 per cent of pupils increased by *at least one grade* from the tutoring, so *really positive*.

TSF5's comments resonated with this, saying that the school data clearly showed an improvement in grades for all students who had engaged with the programme.

TSF5: Well, I know from seeing the data... that the impact of the Mytutor programme, was that when they looked at the data before the tutor programme and they looked at the results at the end of that year, there was progress for *all* students that have taken part. So, I know that the impact is there, that the impact is then that shows evidence that it worked.

She also recalled using a different online programme, specifically aimed at revision practice, some years before, and saying that this was funded by Aimhigher:

TSF5: When the Aimhigher programme helped fund the revision we used to do it with, with a company called Tutor2you and they do conferences around the country and the students found that very good because it just helped them focus on their subject revision. So, we used to do it for business and social sciences and we would go and that, erm the funding would help just reduce that cost because I think it was about £30 at the time, which is quite a lot of money. So, it just helped, it helped with that.

In addition, it was evident that schools were able to use Mytutor to support individual students academically, however, here TSM2 discusses using the tutoring as targeted support but also discusses how it gave students opportunities to develop positive social capital in their relationships with the online tutors:

TSM2: I think we started with maybe 6 or 7 students who we *knew* had the capabilities of getting a [grade] 7 and above, and part of the programme, was kind of matching them with a person at university who was studying maths or, or a maths subject, and *all that was amazing*. Just talking and having that hour a week with a different person outside of school, still an expert [in] the subject, rather than myself, as a teacher, but somebody who's been through that in the last few years, and somebody who could tutor, at their level. And a lot of them built up a relationship with that person, and before, they were really wary of speaking to a stranger on screen, they weren't sure why they were doing it, why wasn't I doing it with them? ...they went down to the computer room every week, and we got them stacks and they set up, and they were really into it, and there was no negativity in terms of "Oh, I don't want to do it. I don't want to do this." And some of the students that we'd chose, we thought, they might not engage with it, but actually, after a

while they came back to us and said “Actually, the person is really nice, and it was just good to talk through maths” that they wouldn’t have the opportunity to do.

Again, the above quote shows the extent to which the relationship that this student developed with the ‘third space’ Mytutor was so valuable to the development of a positive learning identity for the student. Students’ views that this had additional benefits to help them think about their future careers, also reflected TSM2’s comments, as he felt that engagement with the programme enhanced students’ awareness of their choice of university.

TSM2: ...[regarding the] Mytutor Programme, some of the students came back to me and said, “Look – this person is at Exeter University”, they didn’t know where Exeter was, they wanted to then find out, “Well, how would I go to Exeter University, what do I need to do?”

The potential here is that the Aimhigher Plus partnership is enabling the breaching of barriers that, typically, according to existing research exclude young people from some socio-economic backgrounds from attending prestigious universities (see Boliver, 2013). Like TSM2 they stressed the personal connection between student and undergraduate tutor as being a key factor in the progress that they made using Mytutor. This is, of course, in addition to the more functional aspect of the online support packages which were to improve grades. TSF5, below talks about how she hoped it would help specific students to improve their grades in subjects they were currently struggling with.

TSF5: F5, she's so desperate to be a nurse and she's struggling with Sociology. And we've got a few of our Biology students who are struggling as well, so we're again applying for some support and funding to provide tutoring for those students. So, I think that the tutor side of it has been really important.

All of the teachers discussed the use of additional resources, which had expanded significantly when other activities (such as university visits and mentoring sessions) had to be curtailed during COVID-19 lockdowns. A range of resources were mentioned, from the purchasing of physical textbooks and revision guides to accessing online educational packages or licences (e.g. Cad-Cam software licences, or Educake (<https://www.educake.co.uk>) – online personalised quizzes to support a range of GCSE subjects).

TSF1: We’ve had headphones and licences, especially in lockdown, we had to switch, it was like – well we can’t go out, we can’t have anybody in, so we go virtual and we push that as much as we possibly can – so quite a few licences for different subjects popped up, and that was Educake for geography and history, we did those, we did Mytutor mentoring...

TSM1: We’ve spent, sometimes we’ve spent money on resources. You know, especially over COVID. So, we’ve bought kids textbooks, we’ve bought kids revision guides with left over money, because, a) there’s no point in not spending the money, and b) because if they’ve got a revision guide it means they’re gonna get a better result in their

French or whatever, and if that's what they need to go onto the next level, that's raising aspirations, and that's what we're all about.

He particularly praised the flexibility of the Aimhigher funding, especially how it enabled him to apply for funding but then use it in a way that he felt would be of most benefit to the students, whether as a group, or as individuals.

TSM1: And I'm proud of the fact that I've spent it on one kid, or I've spent it on a group of kids, or I've spent it on 220 kids, or I've bought somebody a textbook, because without that textbook, they're gonna fail their A level.

The teachers all felt that the Aimhigher funding enabled them to purchase important additional resources, or support, to help individuals improve their prospects and raise their aspirations, particularly their academic performance within specific subjects.

TSM1: ...[you] know it's another source of income that they can use to promote, to raise aspirations in their own subject. And the basic philosophy of... is that that's what we do at our school, so we say "right, we use Aimhigher money to raise kids' aspirations, hopefully to go to university, but if they don't, hopefully they'll get better GCSEs anyway and that'll improve their life chances," so you know, it's a no brainer for us.

Using Aim higher funding to provide additional resources was strongly echoed by other teachers. However, while TSM1 focused on physical resources such as textbooks, others spoke about supporting online tuition and online support platforms. Clearly a mix of activities and support ensured that the maximum number of pupils, with differing needs were able to access the programme in one way or another.

Discussion and conclusions

In this section we discuss and develop some key themes from the data to provide an overview and some conclusions.

The evidence presented in this report, founded on the research data illustrates powerfully the profound multi-layered impact of the Aimhigher programme. The evidence highlights a range of elements that combine to produce this impact. These strands address the temporal and spatial aspects. They all contribute to shaping the figured worlds of HE that participating students have and flesh these out, reassuring them and allowing them to visualise themselves as future of inhabitants of HE spaces.

The importance of the role of the APA/GAs cannot be overestimated. As non-teachers, and potential role models for the students they engaged with, they offered a hybrid space: informal but located within the school setting, in which students could through discussion really explore their options and without inhibition find out more about university life and studying in HE.

APA/GAs assumed a mentoring role in many cases, forming close relationships with students that were different from those with teachers and enabling them to offer advice that was listened to in a different way and acted upon. The MyTutor scheme offered a similarly important third space relationship that was highly valued by the students. In addition, the university visits complemented the role of the APA/GAs. They embodied the experience of walking around a campus and, even better, sitting in on a lecture which was key in building students' confidence that university was an environment that they could belong and thrive in.

This report shows clearly how the Aimhigher Plus Partnership has an important impact in relation to the policy of widening participation in HE. The research evidence speaks powerfully of the positive impact on students from low-income households and under-represented groups of taking part in visits and trips to places of cultural interest outside their neighbourhoods.

The reduction in funding to the Aimhigher programme has led to the withdrawal of APAs from urban schools and, in some cases, the loss of university visits. It goes without saying that the withdrawal of these resources from schools is likely to have a detrimental effect on students' accessing HE and is likely to narrow their horizon of choice. For many, this will then impact on careers and life courses.

Recommendations

- University visits like those offered by the Aimhigher programme should be a feature of every pupil's learning journey.
- The APA/GA role is a key element of the success of the Aimhigher programme. All the schools who had had APA/GAs valued them and saw their contribution as invaluable.
- More provision and information should be made available for students interested in other post-compulsory training and education opportunities.

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