

# Supporting White Boys from Working Class Backgrounds in West Yorkshire Research Summary



# Executive Summary

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Cosmos Engagement Ltd was commissioned by Go Higher West Yorkshire (GHWY) to complete a research investigation into the educational landscape and opportunities for progression into Higher Education (HE) for white boys from working class backgrounds. While the 'working class'\* label may be subject to varying interpretations, for the purposes of our research we focused on boys from POLAR4 quintiles 1-2, i.e., locations that are under-represented in HE.

A combination of quantitative and qualitative, primary and secondary research methodologies were used to investigate key questions around these objectives. These include; an extensive review of existing background literature around the challenges for white boys from working class backgrounds in education, analysis of UCAS, HESA and CFE data and a series of in-depth interviews and discussion groups with white boys from working class backgrounds, as well as the stakeholders who work with them.

An extensive review of background literature around the topic of white boys from working class backgrounds can be found from page 6 and interspersed throughout the report. This literature brings together a discussion of the complex forces which contribute toward experiences of inequality in access to HE for these learners. Firstly, it examines discourse pertaining to the educational success of the white working class in the arena of UK policy and practice. It provides an overview of discussion over the last ten years, interrogating the validity of a persistent narrative of 'low aspiration' within such a context. Secondly, the section charts the impact of socio-economic change on the educational transitions of young men from deindustrialised working class communities. Bringing together a range of studies, the section explores the legacy of deindustrialisation on the formation of white working class males' future orientations. Finally, the review explores how, within a contemporary context, socio-economic inequality restricts the ability of working class students to access, accrue and mobilise social and cultural resources in alignment with HE progression. This extensive literature review supports many of the themes emerging in our primary research with learners and stakeholders.

\*Note: In line with the objectives of this research and the common language used in related literature, this report uses the term "working class" as a collective term for people from communities that are of a lower socio-economic status and/or from regions that are underrepresented in HE. However, this term was not used to describe participants in our research discussions and is not a term that is necessarily used by them. Indeed, the use of this term is itself a question within our evaluation (p41).

**UCAS data (p11)** shows that white students and men as a whole are more likely to be successful in their applications to HE than other ethnic groups and women respectively. Lower POLAR4 quintiles are less likely to receive offers than students from other locations, with this difference much more pronounced amongst higher tariff providers. However, when combining these variables in **HESA data (p13)**, we can see that white boys from POLAR4 quintiles 1-2 account for just 3% of total HE enrolment in the UK; considerably less than girls from similar backgrounds. Evidence from UCAS also suggests that students in years to come are likely to be negatively impacted by the disrupted education and support provision experienced since the COVID-19 pandemic; with concerns that those from underrepresented backgrounds will be most negatively impacted, potentially reversing much of the progress that has been made in the area of Widening Participation in recent years. White boys from such backgrounds, who already progress to HE in small numbers, are likely to fall even further behind.

**CFE student survey data (p16)** shows mixed performance for white boys from working class backgrounds relative to comparator groups across Knowledge, Attitude and Aspiration metrics. White working class boys express greater levels of knowledge compared to the Non-Working class equivalent, in 7/10 Knowledge attributes. However, this trend is almost reversed with regards to Attitudes, where non-working class boys score higher on 6/10 statements. Comparison between white working class boys and girls is mixed, each scoring higher than the other on 5/10 Knowledge statements and boys scoring higher on 6/10 Attitude statements. Non-white boys are the group which most consistently scores higher on knowledge than white working class boys, with higher scores on 7/10 Knowledge statements and 7/10 Attitude statements. White working class boys also express greater levels of 'motivation' than Non-white boys and Non-Working class boys. However, their belief that 'I could go to university if I wanted to' is less than girls or Non-white boys. Despite mixed to favourable ratings of Knowledge, Attitude and Aspiration statements, white working class boys express the lowest levels of Intention toward HE among the comparison groups. The previous findings suggest that is most likely due to lower ratings on the benefits of HE more so than any lack of confidence or suitability.

In our primary research with learners (p22), the white boys we spoke to generally had **mostly positive views and experiences of education**. Boys generally expressed a **practical perspective about the importance of education** and the benefit of further study as opposed to employment. The majority said that the choice to continue studying or start work earlier depended on the individual, their abilities and aspirations; that earlier employment may be better for earning money, but further study may be better for longer-term development.

Boys generally described a **positive influence and interest from parents** around their education. This would typically involve fairly regular conversations about everyday school or college life as well as occasional discussions about future options and subject choices, as and when needed. A handful of boys described parents having more of an active role in their education than others, including influencing career choices (following similar pathways). There was little evidence of any negative influence that parents may have on the education or future choices of the boys we spoke to. Boys we spoke to generally expressed **positive future intentions and attitudes toward FE and HE**, although **financial cost/debt** was commonly cited as a challenging or negative aspect of HE.

**Resources**, including textbooks, computers and subject-specific equipment, were the most commonly cited challenge facing working class children in education. Those interviewed also felt that, compared to wealthier children, working class children would be less likely to have **'connections'** who could provide **support and opportunities** to succeed in education, placing a greater pressure on working class children than on their more advantaged peers. Participants suggested that as a result of lacking these benefits, working class children might require more support in terms of **'mindset', motivation and self-belief**.

**Mental health** was mentioned by a number of students as something that they or boys in general may be more likely to struggle with, or less likely to ask for support with if they did, mainly due to **social expectations** that boys (or men) shouldn't show their emotions. **Academic stress or pressure** was seen as contributing factors to this, that have been exacerbated for many in the wake of **COVID-19**. School closures and virtual learning have also negatively impacted boys' general academic **motivation** as well as their **sense of progress** and **preparedness for HE**.

**Stakeholders' perspectives (p56)** around the experiences and attitudes of white boys from working class backgrounds were quite different to those of the boys that we spoke to, which may either suggest that those **boys who took part in our research were more engaged and had more positive attitudes towards education than other boys from similar backgrounds**, or that there are potentially harmful narratives that have developed around this group which do not necessarily reflect the lived experience of these boys. Either way, there will be significant variation within the 'working class' category, according to various characteristics, attitudes and behaviours towards education. **Stakeholders suggested that, in their experience, some boys from working class backgrounds may be disengaged from education**, and particularly academic subjects, though they were often more engaged with practical and vocational learning. Stakeholders suggested that white working class or low income parents **could be difficult to engage**, and they felt that this disengagement may be a result of their own negative past experiences with education.

Stakeholders also pointed to a number of **socio-economic factors** (supported by background literature) that influenced attitudes and aspirations toward education; including **expectations of masculinity** with regards to subject and career choice, expectations to earn money as soon as possible and an aversion to the debt associated with HE, that stakeholders suggested were deeply embedded in the communities. Although some of the feedback from stakeholders may be misaligned with that of learners in our research, or recent research around the topic, **stakeholders' descriptions of boys from working class backgrounds were observational rather than intentionally critical** and indeed those staff that we spoke to very much **sought to empower boys to succeed**, regardless of their background (see p58).

The differences between perspectives expressed by learners and stakeholders we spoke to highlight the broad range of experiences that might fall under the 'working class' label and the potential challenges of this terminology within educational and academic contexts. Some boys within this category may have supportive parents and all the essentials they need to give them an opportunity to succeed in education, while many others may not. The boys we spoke to may be at the more positive end of this scale – however they themselves frequently cite that children from working class backgrounds could succeed in education and life, and that mindset was key. The engagement and aspirations these boys expressed illustrates what could, and perhaps should, be possible for more boys from working class backgrounds if given the support and encouragement needed. To this end, the report concludes with a number of **recommendations (p71)** to help support white boys from working class backgrounds including building the necessary "mindset", motivation and self-belief, emphasising the value of education and progression, tailoring support to boys' interests and engaging parents to support in this cause. It is hoped that by addressing these needs, more boys from working class communities will see HE is a viable and appealing path to progress.

# Key Findings - Learners

White boys we spoke to generally had **mostly positive views and experiences of education**. Boys generally expressed a **practical perspective about the importance of education** and the benefit of further study as opposed to employment. The majority said that the choice to continue studying or start work earlier depended on the individual, their abilities and aspirations; that earlier employment may be better for earning money, but further study may be better for longer-term development.

**Friends and social aspects** were most commonly cited as among the most positive aspects of school or college life, followed by enjoyment of **subjects of interest**. However, fellow students could also be a negative or challenging aspect of education, particularly for the three students who were spoken to that had experienced **bullying**. A few boys also referred to school being an environment with considerable **'pressure'** and **'judgement'** from peers.

As with education in general, boys described **mostly positive experiences with teachers**, while acknowledging that they got on better with some teachers than others. Boys generally suggested that their teachers were supportive and indeed many reported positive **examples of direct support** from teachers with regards to **advice around their future plans**, most often from **teachers of students' preferred subjects**. However, boys suggested that some teachers put them under **excessive pressure**, while some appeared to **give girls preferential treatment** and support.

There was a consistent theme, mentioned by the majority of FE students, that **'college is better than school'**. Common reasons for this included a greater focus on subjects of interest, fellow students being more focused and better behaved than school and more friendly, mutually respectful relationships with teachers.

Boys generally described a **positive influence and interest from parents** around their education. This would typically involve fairly regular **conversations about everyday school or college life** as well as occasional **discussions about future options and subject choices**, as and when needed. **A handful of boys described parents having more of an active role** in their education than others, including influencing career choices (following similar pathways). There was **little evidence of any negative influence** that parents may have on the education or future choices of the boys we spoke to.

Boys we spoke to generally expressed **positive future intentions**. **Over half of FE students planned to go to university**, while another two were considering this option. **All but one KS4 students planned to go to college**, though they were typically not sure what to do after that. Three boys planned to do an **apprenticeship**, while another four were considering this as an option

Boys we spoke to expressed a **wide range of subject interests**. Sport, business and science were the most common, but there were also some that studied less ‘typically male’ subjects including art and drama. While boys acknowledged that some subjects may be seen as more for boys or for girls, they did not suggest that this had affected their own choices. Boys are primarily driven by their **interest/enjoyment** of their subject, though this often includes a view to future careers.

Boys we spoke to expressed mostly **positive perceptions of university**. ‘Education’ and **degree/qualifications** were the most commonly cited benefit of university, followed by **social aspects** and **life experience**. **Financial cost/debt** was seen as the most commonly mentioned challenging or negative aspect, followed by the **stress of studying**. Boys we spoke to generally felt that there would be people from a mix of backgrounds at university and that they would **fit in and feel comfortable** there.

Most of the boys we spoke to expressed some understanding of and identification with the **working class label**, although their descriptions of what this meant and confidence with which they stated their identification with this label varied. Most boys explained that working class people earned or had less money than ‘middle class’ or ‘upper class’ people, while several suggested that working class referred to ‘average’ people who were neither wealthy nor particularly poor. A handful of boys drew a distinction between a ‘lower working class’, who may be in poverty or financially struggling to pay for essentials, and ‘upper’ or ‘normal’ working class who were reasonably comfortable and able to afford everyday things.

**Resources** including textbooks, computers and subject-specific equipment were the most commonly cited challenge facing working class children in education. ‘**Connections**’ were also among the most common disadvantages cited for working class children compared to wealthier children, placing a greater pressure on working class children to succeed in education, with fewer **opportunities and support** if they did not. It was also suggested by participants that working class children might lack the necessary ‘**mindset**’, **motivation or self-belief** to succeed that wealthier children may have.

**Mental health** was mentioned by a number of students as something that they or boys in general may be more likely to struggle with, or less likely to ask for support with if they did, mainly due to **social expectations** that boys (or men) shouldn’t show their emotions. **Academic stress or pressure** were seen as contributing factors to this, that have been exacerbated for many in the wake of **COVID-19**. School closures and virtual learning have also impacted negatively on boys’ general academic **motivation** as well as their **sense of progress** and **preparedness for HE**.

**Teachers of boys’ preferred subjects are the most common source of advice** and support around future options. While several boys had also interacted with careers advisors in schools, these were generally not as influential as subject teachers. Boys typically need **progression support and activity** to be **tailored and relevant to their subject interests** if they are to engage. They would also benefit from ‘**relatable**’ **role models** from similar backgrounds who can show them that they can succeed.

# Key Findings - Stakeholders

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Stakeholders' perspectives around the experiences and attitudes of white boys from working class backgrounds were quite different to those of the boys that we spoke to, suggesting that those **boys who took part in our research were more engaged and had more positive attitudes towards education than other boys from similar (or more underrepresented) backgrounds**. It also points to there being greater segmentation within this demographic, with sub-groups much more clearly defined by certain characteristics, attitudes and behaviours towards education.

While the boys we spoke to in our learner discussions were generally relatively well engaged with education, stakeholders suggested that this was not typically the case with many white boys from working class backgrounds. Stakeholders suggested that many boys are **disengaged**, as evidenced by **poor attendance and behaviour** compared to other groups. It was suggested that many boys **see little value in education and particularly academic subjects** and traditional classroom learning. However, they were often **more engaged with more practical and vocational learning**.

Stakeholders suggested that white working class or low-income **parents were often difficult to engage via current communication methods** and may be less involved than wealthier parents or those from other ethnic backgrounds. It was suggested that this may be partly influenced by parents' **past experiences** with their own education – that they themselves may have had negative experiences in school or with teachers or may have **devalued education**. Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of parental engagement in order to break down barriers and expectations among working class families.

It was suggested that boys from working class backgrounds are typically **expected to work** as soon as possible and **earn money**, and that further study was often seen to detract from that goal. Stakeholders suggested that most boys tended to pursue what may be seen as **typically "masculine" subjects** – mostly **practical subjects** – and that very few boys chose to study "female" subjects such as health & social care or performing arts. Again, it was suggested that this was mostly due to **social expectations** of boys and men that were **deeply embedded** within working class communities in particular.

When discussing boys' **perceptions of HE, financial cost/debt** was again cited as the most common barrier. While many of the boys we spoke to still intended to go to university despite this challenge, stakeholders suggested that this was too big a barrier for the majority of white boys from working class backgrounds, and that HE was simply seen as **"not worth it"**. **Apprenticeships** were seen as a commonly preferred pathway for many white boys from working class backgrounds. However, a couple of stakeholders suggested that gaining apprenticeships may be more difficult and **competitive** than many boys think.



# Recommendations – Summary

Research discussions with white boys from working class backgrounds highlight the following needs for support. Note that our recommendations do not imply that efforts to address these support needs are not already under way, nor specify who may be responsible. These recommendations simply highlight the most important needs for boys as identified through our research and suggest that these be in central focus. These recommendations are discussed in depth from page 71 of our report.



**Promoting Engagement - Emphasising the ‘Value’ of Education & Progression** is key to maximising boys’ engagement with education and activities and consideration of potential future options. Boys are unlikely to engage with content or consider options unless the value (potential careers, earnings) are made clear.



**Education around Student Finance and Return on Investment** is a key barrier for boys in their consideration of HE as a viable pathway. The more education about how to manage student finance, and the long-term benefits of higher education, the more likely boys are to consider this as an option.



**Building Mindset, Motivation and Self-Belief** are seen as key disadvantages for boys from working class backgrounds, that can be built through specific activities, an aspirational culture in schools and support from relatable role models to give boys the mentality to succeed in education and life.



**Tailored and Relevant Support and Activity**, including clear links to subjects and careers of interest, is recommended for any form of progression support. Boys are unlikely to engage with any support that isn’t seen as relevant to them and their interests.



**Relatable Role Models** are a powerful channel through which boys could gain support, information and self-belief, by way of interacting with people from similar backgrounds who have overcome similar challenges and succeeded.



**Supporting Subject Choice** is critical to boys’ engagement, decision making and educational outcomes. Boys are often influenced by friends, family and social expectations to pursue a practical course and pathways that might not be in their best interests. Boys need to be shown the potential benefits of a range of subjects in order to facilitate informed decision-making.



**Support with Apprenticeships and Non-University Routes** is key for many boys who choose to pursue apprenticeships in practical areas but may underestimate and need additional support with the challenges of gaining an apprenticeship



**Connections with Employers** are cited as a common disadvantage for boys from working class backgrounds compared to wealthier children and something that should be facilitated as much as possible with interactions with employers.



**Supporting Mental Health** is critical to learners' overall wellbeing and opportunities in life and is particularly a challenge for boys from families (from a lower socio-economic background) who may experience difficulties at home and may be socially discouraged from expressing their emotions.



**Building Personal Confidence, Dealing with Social Pressures** could help to address many of the challenges facing young boys, including their mental health and choice of subjects and pathways, which could be developed through specific activities as well as one-to-one support.



**Dealing with Academic Pressure** is a common challenge for boys and one that they could benefit from being taught strategies to overcome, to the benefit of their mental health as well as educational engagement and outcomes.



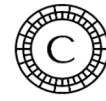
**Support with Resources** is a clear challenge for boys from lower socio-economic backgrounds who may not have the same access to resources such as computers, textbooks and subject-specific equipment that may limit their progress.



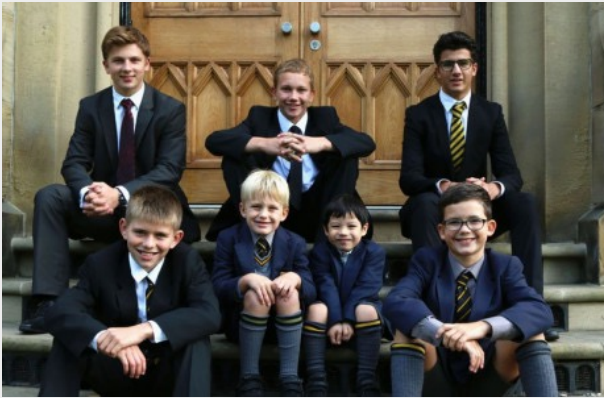
**Parental Engagement** is key to ensure that the progression support and advice delivered in schools is supported by parents who have an influential role in boys' beliefs and decisions and may be impeded by social expectations and negative perceptions around education.



**Equipping Teachers to Support Boys from Working Class Backgrounds** is important to help overturn some of the challenges facing those boys, such as gender and class expectations and mental health challenges. Informed teachers and schools can help to give boys the best opportunities to succeed. This includes listening to what learners want and need and questioning assumptions that teachers themselves may have.



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