

Project Report

The Inclusive Student Pipeline: Transitioning from statutory education through FE to HE

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March 2023

1. INTRODUCTION

This report is a summary of the project exploring the lived experiences of underrepresented and minoritized students during their transitions into and through higher education (HE). It also provides technical details of approaches adopted by the project team in delivering the project with methodological rigour and quality. The report ends with an outline of key findings on three overarching themes that emerged from various sources of data collected for this project, with evidence and recommendations for practice around each theme detailed and embedded in the developed intervention plans.

2. PROJECT SUMMARY AND AIM

A dedicated research team within the Eleanor Glanville Institute (EGI) at the University of Lincoln (UoL) was commissioned by the LiNCHigher team with the aim to develop a practical and comprehensive resource package. The main purpose of this resource package is to enable schoolteachers to run in-person sessions with Year 10 students and upwards in improving student preparedness for transitions from schools through further education (FE) colleges to university and supporting student success in higher education (HE). Based on outputs of this project, a focused workshop is to be delivered (i.e. a 'train the trainer' session) to the LiNCHigher team in supporting the team's smooth delivery of the developed resource package to their network schools across Lincolnshire.

Empowering student voices and partnering with students as research producers were key features of our research. The project aim was achieved through researching current HE students' lived transition experiences, in particular those students within six pre-identified characteristics that include BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic), Gypsy Roma Travellers, disabled students, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, Armed Forces family, and care leavers. Experiences of these

underrepresented student groups were explored through six parallel research projects co-designed with and led by six student researchers studying at the UoL and supervised by the research team. This project was interdisciplinary involving student researchers from across the four Colleges at UoL and participants from different HE institutions across the UK.

Drawing on a systematic literature review and qualitative design, three overarching themes were identified highlighting the features needed for effective school-centred interventions supporting *all* students' successful transitions to and through HE. The themes have been analysed with careful consideration given to both the content of participants' lived experiences while transiting into HE and their views on the effectiveness of school- and university- centred support, as well as the context in which these experiences happened. In seeking to inform practice, they were developed into a package of three-themed intervention plans which are underpinned by multiple theoretical perspectives related to transition, retention, and learning in HE. Each intervention plan also contains a set of practical activities encouraging collaborations between teachers and students.

3. APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGY

In addressing the project aim, this project's methodological elements included a systematic review of the literature and a qualitative design drawing on focus groups and individual interviews to collect primary data. Through triangulating data from the academic literature and participants who are current university students, we sought to identify facilitators and barriers impacting the student expectation and real experiences of HE. The outcomes were used to develop research-informed, evidence-based resources that can inform effective school-centred support needed to help *all* students' smooth transition into HE – particularly those from the six pre-identified groups. Figure 1 provides a schematic representation of this project's methodological design. Ethical approval to undertake this research project was obtained from the ethics committee of the University of Lincoln, UK.

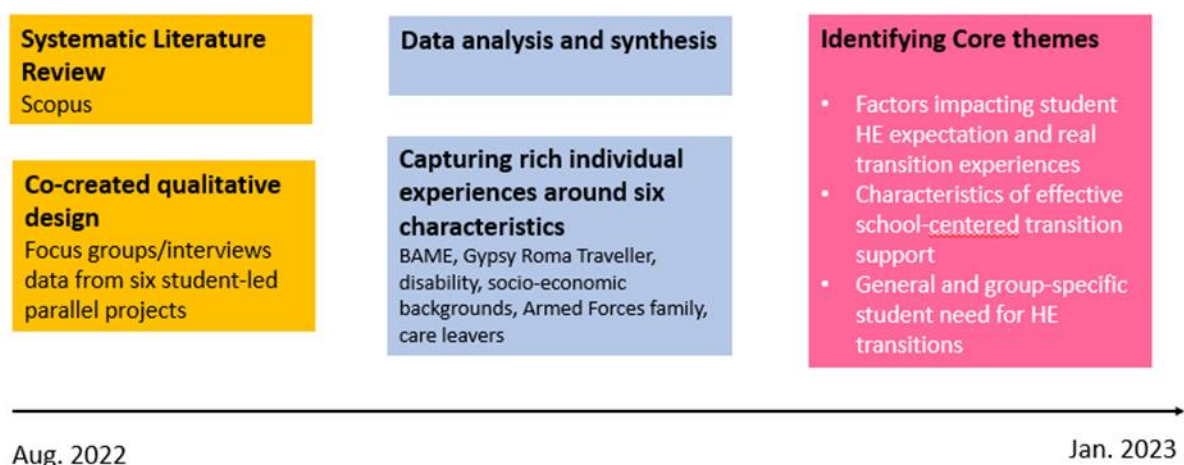


Figure 1: Project Methodological Design

3. 1 Systematic literature review

The systematic literature review involved a multi-stage process informed by Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses guidelines (PRISMA) methodology (Page et al., 2021). One database was utilised: SCOPUS as one of the largest abstract and citation databases of peer-reviewed literature.

In seeking to ensure breadth of coverage and being mindful of different languages used to describe school education and higher education, our search terms were deliberately generic. For example: *School OR Secondary School OR Compulsory School OR Statutory school OR High School AND student transition in AND higher education OR postsecondary education OR further education OR university OR college OR tertiary education.*

To ensure currency, articles were selected from the last five years (01 January 2018 – 01 August 2022). Articles that are peer reviewed and written in English were included in the review.

Process

Details of this multiple-stage process are as below:

- Stage 1: Initial searches were undertaken in September 2022 by two members of the research team. This identified 13,435 potential academic articles for inclusion, of which 13,157 articles were removed following initial analysis of titles and abstracts.
- Stage 2: A total of 278 academic articles were further scrutinised for relevance by one experienced researcher of the research team in December 2022. Exclusion criteria included: 1) not primarily focused on transitions to, and through FE or HE; 2) focused on primary and middle school students; 3) not focused on education; 4) not written in English; not peer reviewed; beyond the time frame specified above; can't be accessed online. In total 161 papers were excluded during this stage due to lack of relevance or accessibility.
- Stage 3: A total of 117 papers were reviewed in full by the project team between January and March 2023. To ensure validity and trustworthiness (Ressa, 2022), inter- and intra-rater checking were conducted in an ongoing process throughout the project span.

Summary

Within the 117 papers that have been analysed:

- **Focus:** the majority (61%) are on transitions to HE or underrepresented students broadly, followed by papers having a central focus on a specific demographic group including disability (n=24), BAME (N=9), Armed Forces (n=2), Care Leavers (n=3), and socio-economic status (n=8). No paper had a main focus on Gypsy Roma Travellers.
- **Country:** a total of 16 countries are represented. More papers are from lead authors affiliated to institutions in the US (36%), followed by 7% from Australia, 6% from the UK, 4% from Netherlands, and a smaller number of papers from authors in other countries such as Germany, South Korea, and Chile. There are few contributions from lead authors in South American, Asian, and African countries.
- **Methodology:** the vast majority are empirical studies drawing on qualitative (n=31), quantitative (n=12), and mixed methods (n=10) research designs. Interview (n=17) is the most frequently used data collection method in qualitative papers, whilst survey (n=5) is common for quantitative papers.

3.2 Qualitative design and student co-creation

A total of six student-led and co-created projects were conducted concurrently to cover the six pre-specified characteristics with participants from those backgrounds who are current university students across HE institutions in the UK. Several unexpected practical challenges, such as team sickness caused by Covid-19, train and university strikes, exam and assessment pressure, were encountered, resulting in the data collection completion being extended from January to February 2023. Difficulties in recruiting 10 participants from the small population covered by each student-led project led to adoption of a range of data collection approaches to engaging potential participants, including individual interviews (virtual), focus groups (virtual/face-to-face), and questionnaires allowing written responses (virtual). A combination of purposeful and convenience sampling strategies was drawn on to maximise participation (Palinkas et al., 2015). The project focusing on care leavers was based on a literature review containing five papers (three from the systematic review and two from a snowballing technique) on how care leavers and estranged students generally transitioned into higher education, the difficulties they encountered, and their opinions on what would have helped them. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis was conducted to establish themes from data.

The same research questions (Appendix 1) were used for data collection activities across the six student-led projects. This enabled the project team to triangulate the data collected by different techniques in an effective manner. Prior to data collection (from November 2022 to February 2023), training and support were provided to all six student researchers on ethics and research methods via the combination of ongoing individual supervision and four group meetings. Table 1 presents details of participants' backgrounds based on an intersectional analysis.

Student Characteristics	Gender	Level of Study	HEIs
Armed Forces (n=3)	Female =2 Non-binary =1	UG =2 PG =1	Other HEIs = 1 UoL =2
BAME (n=8)	Female =5 Male =2 Non-binary = 1	UG=4 PG =4	Other HEI = 1 UoL=7
Gypsy Roma Travellers (n=10)	Female =4 Male =6	UG =10	Other HEIs = 10
Disabled Students (n=10)	Female =5 Male =5	UG=8 PG=2	Other HEIs = 5 UoL = 5
Low Socio-economic Status (n=15)	Female =7 Male =6 Non-binary = 2	UG=14 PG=1	Other HEI = 9 UoL=6
Care Leavers	Literature review (LR)	LR	LR

Table 1: Intersectional Analysis of Participant Profile

4. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Triangulation of data from the systematic review and the six qualitative student-led projects helps increase the verifiability of data (Hamilton, 2011), whereby three overarching themes were derived. Detailed discussions formed the scope and content of these themes, supported by evidence from academic papers and participants' lived experiences. These are included in the developed intervention plans where recommendations are also embedded for effective school-centred support to improve transitions for all groups to and through HE and meaningful student-teacher collaborations.

- A. ***Becoming self-regulated learner*** focuses on improving students' academic preparedness and confidence for HE through supporting the development of self-regulated skills in goal setting and goal-achieving. This process needs to be based on the development of a good understanding of what is expected in HE to enable informed decisions.
- B. ***Building student identity in HE*** focuses on assisting students in exploring and building a positive identity as a university student. This process involves working with students in navigating various opportunities and support that are available at universities and importantly increasing students' awareness of how to effectively draw on these opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with peers and university staff and departments.
- C. ***Developing independent skills*** focuses on supporting the development of a wide range of skills crucial for learning and living independently for HE and beyond. This includes, but is not limited to, the skills of self-advocacy, finance management, time management and self-management.

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APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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School and college transition support (pre-HE stage)

- What do you wish you would have known from your school and college to help with your transition into university?
- What support provided by your school and college helped most when transitioning into university?

University transition support (transition to HE)

- What transition support do you wish the university provided?
- What support provided by the university helped most in your transition?

Success in university (success in HE)

- What support do you feel is most needed to help you succeed in university?