



# PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT RESEARCH REPORT

AUGUST 2021



## PARENT-CARERS AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN BRISTOL

A report offering insight into parental engagement with higher education opportunities across Bristol and strategies for improving parent-carer focused higher education resources and outreach events.

**Supported by:**



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# GLOSSARY

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**Further Education** – Education which occurs after the age of 16, but prior to higher education. Further education in some form is now compulsory for all students in England.

**Higher Education** - All optional education after the age of 18, which can either be a university or college course, or a Degree or Higher Apprenticeship with an employer.

**Higher Education Outreach** – Resources and activities that provide knowledge about higher education opportunities i.e student finance information events. Outreach may be parent-focused, child-focused, or both parent-carer and child-focused.

**Home-based Engagement** – Parental engagement which occurs in a home setting i.e a parent-carer helping their child look through university degree options from a home computer.

**Parental Aspiration** – What a parent-carer *hopes* will happen in the future.

**Parental Attitude** – How a parent-carer perceives and feels about higher education.

**Parental Engagement** – This report broadly adopts the definition provided by Malcuhy and Baars (2018, p. 15), and defines the term parental engagement “as the extent to which parent-carers are involved with and interested in their child’s education”. The term education explicitly refers to both a child’s schooling and their higher education options.

**Parental Expectation** – What a parent-carer *believes* will happen in the future.

**Possible Selves** – A term developed by Markus and Nurius (1986) to describe how individuals think about their potential future selves. This can be related to who they hope to become, as well as who they hope to avoid becoming.

**Practical Engagement** – Parental engagement with higher education which is direct and visible i.e a parent-carer taking their child to a university open degree day.

**School-based Engagement** - Parental engagement which occurs in a school setting i.e a parent-carer attending an information evening at their child’s school about higher education opportunities for young people.

**UCAS** - UCAS stands for Universities and Colleges Admissions Service and is the service people use to apply for university places.

**Values-based Engagement** – Parental engagement which occurs when a parent-carer – both directly or indirectly - transmits their own values regarding higher education onto their child i.e a parent-carer expressing worry that a university degree is worth the value for money.

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# INTRODUCTION

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“Meaningful parental engagement is not a fluffy and optional extra but a fundamental part of the widening participation puzzle”

Anne-Marie Canning MBE (2018, p. 4)

## Introduction

It is no secret that certain demographics remain underrepresented in higher education spaces. Research spanning decades sheds light onto the fact that equitable access to higher education for young people from either disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or with certain characteristics is an enduring concern (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000; Taylor, 2004; Gorard et al., 2006; Bowers-Brown, 2006; Baars, Mulcahy, and Bernardes, 2016). Recent figures clarify the enduring nature of this concern across the UK. For instance, in 2019 only 26.3% of UK pupils who were in receipt of free school meals progressed to higher education, compared to 44.9% of UK pupils who were *not* in receipt of free school meals progressing to higher education (Department for Education [DfE], 2019). Similarly, it was reported by UCAS (2018) that “young people from the most advantaged areas of the UK remain over 2.3 times more likely to start an undergraduate course than those from the least advantaged areas”. Further to this, and of particular relevance to this report, Bristol is an area where progression to university, particularly in South Bristol, remains significantly lower than the national average (Cork, 2019).

Across research on access to higher education there has been a broad shift away from considering personal aspiration as a central factor in determining young people’s pathways, and a greater focus on the significance of sociocultural context for determining what future pathways appear possible, plausible, and of immediate benefit to young people (Harrison, 2018). Indeed, research on this subject widely agrees that there are a number of intersecting sociocultural factors which influence upon – and, indeed, sometimes limit - young people’s expectations, opportunities, and choices. A key factor which is agreed to influence both young people’s educational attainment and their progression to higher education is that of parental engagement (McCarron and Inkelas, 2006; Kintrea, St Clair and Houston, 2011; Torgerson et al., 2014; Mulcahy and Baars, 2018; ICM Unlimited, 2019). The degree to which parent-carers feel able to engage with their child’s education and future options, as well as their expectations and priorities for their child, significantly shapes the decisions young people make regarding higher education progression.

How and why a parent-carer might engage with their child's education and post-18 higher education options will naturally differ according to both individual circumstance and the wider sociocultural context within which parent-carers are living. For instance, with students now commonly paying £9,250 a year for fees there are increasing conversations regarding the affordability and value of higher education (Hale, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has only served to increase these conversations, with the challenges associated with the pandemic for current students sparking debates about the value for money of university degrees, the affordability of university degrees, and the degree of pastoral support available to university students (Moore, 2021). The surfacing of these conversations might therefore influence upon parental attitudes towards higher education opportunities. Strategies for increasing parental engagement with higher education outreach thus need to be rooted in place-based, up-to-date research with parent-carers of young people; the resources and events offered to parent-carers must meaningfully respond to parent-carers' current concerns and needs. Future Quest, as part of the wider [Uni Connect Partnership](#), has therefore commissioned this research to better understand how they can increase parental engagement through responding to the current needs of Bristol-based parent-carers of young people. This research will provide insight into attitudes towards higher education across Bristol, how able parent-carers feel to be able to engage with both their children's education and future options, and what kind of resources and events Bristol-based parent-carers would like to see Future Quest provide. This research will therefore feed into an engagement framework that Future Quest will use to guide their parental engagement outreach work and resources. This report will also provide a suggested framework, as well as a set of key recommendations. The core aim of this research is to help Bristol-based parent-carers support their children to engage with good life opportunities and take relevant steps towards becoming the version of their 'possible selves' which they most wish to see.

## Research Questions and Methodology

This research explores three central topics concerning parental engagement across Bristol, namely:

- **Parent-carers' attitudes towards higher education opportunities**
- **Parent-carers' capacity to engage with and access knowledge about their children's education**
- **Pathways towards increasing parental engagement across the Bristol region and beyond**

The central research questions which guide this report are as follows:

- What are the key attitudes towards higher education across parent-carers in Bristol?
- To what degree do parent-carers perceive their attitudes towards higher education as being an influencing factor upon their children's attitudes towards higher education?
- How able do parent-carers feel to be able to engage with their child's education?
- What level of knowledge do parent-carers feel they have about higher education opportunities?
- What do parent-carers feel are barriers to further knowledge in this area?
- What would parent-carers like to see in future outreach events, activities and resources provided by Future Quest?

To answer these questions, this report draws on primary quantitative and qualitative research conducted with parent-carers across Bristol in the summer of 2021. Specifically, this report draws on data collected through a survey of 44 parent-carers and interviews conducted with six parent-carers. This mixed method approach was used to ensure that the research data provides as in-depth an understanding of parental engagement as possible, accounting for both broader trends and individual experiences or concerns of parent-carers across Bristol.

The organisation [South Bristol Youth](#) facilitated the dissemination of the survey to relevant participants: namely, parent-carers living in Bristol who have 13-18 year olds. Participants for the interviews were recruited through the survey, which provided parent-carers with the option to be contacted about further research involvement. All this research is entirely anonymous, and any identifying factors have been removed. Of the 44 parents who completed surveys, 95% identified as female and 96% were between the ages of 40-59. 82% of participants described their ethnic origin as White - British/English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish, 5% as White - Other, 5% as Black or Black British – African, 2% as Asian or Asian British – Pakistani, 2% as Asian or Asian British – Indian, 2% as Asian or Asian British – Chinese, and 2% as Mixed – White and Asian. 9% of the children of the parent-carers are currently eligible for free school meals. 50% of surveyed parent-carers had either a first or higher degree, a professional qualification or an equivalent higher education qualification.

All research questions were developed in response to both Future Quest's outlined areas of interests and wider issues identified in connection with parental engagement across the broader literature on this topic.

## Use of Report

This report has been commissioned by Future Quest to help them develop a parental engagement framework which *directly* responds to the needs of parent-carers across Bristol. The key recommendations of this report should specifically be used by Future Quest to support parent-carers of adolescents living in Bristol. However, it is important to note that this report provides a full overview of the research conducted with parent-carers across Bristol. This means that the key recommendations set out by this report may be of some benefit to a range of organisations and institutions who are actively working with young people, parent-carers, and higher education opportunities across both Bristol and the UK. In recognition of the focus of this research report on Bristol-based parent-carers, this report also includes a 'further resources' section. This is a list of particularly relevant publications for readers who may be interested in exploring parental engagement matters in a broader context.

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# WHY PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

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Parental engagement matters because parent-carers have a significant impact on their children's visions of their possible future selves. Parent-carers' level of engagement will influence young people's decisions and expectations regarding higher education progression in two central ways:

First, it is widely argued that parent-carers will impact upon a child's educational attainment which, in turn, will influence young people's expectations and decisions regarding higher education options. Although there has been calls for increased and more rigorous evaluation of the potential link between parental engagement and attainment (Gorard and See, 2013), there are a number of studies concluding that parental engagement, particularly in home-based settings, has a positive influence on people's educational attainment (Harris and Goodall, 2008; Topor et al., 2010; Lara and Saracostti, 2019; Axford et al., 2019). Whilst organisations like Future Quest are not directly involved with young people's *everyday* education, it is critical for organisations like Future Quest to be able to advise schools regarding the support parent-carers might need to increase their everyday engagement with their child's education.

Second, parent-carers' engagement with higher education outreach, whether it be in the form of values-based engagement or practical engagement, will shape the choices of young people in connection with higher education opportunities. If a parent-carer has low educational expectations for their child or if they have a negative view of higher education, their child will be more likely to disengage from higher education opportunities (Goodman and Gregg, 2010; Bowes et al., 2015, p. 13). Exploring the typical attitudes towards higher education, as well as the concerns parent-carers have in connection with their child engaging in higher education, is therefore key for understanding which areas to address through parent-focused higher education outreach. In a similar vein of thought, the degree to which parent-carers practically engage with their child as they navigate future educational choices will have significant impact upon the choices that young people make (Engle, 2007; Mulcahy and Baar, 2018). Understanding precisely why parent-carers feel unable or unwilling to access knowledge regarding higher education, as well as the options they would like to have available to them as their child considers their future options, is fundamentally important if Future Quest is to meaningfully support parental engagement across Bristol.



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# PARENT-CARER ATTITUDES TOWARDS HE

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## Introduction

Whilst parental aspiration is found to be relatively high across the board, parental expectation often differs in accordance with a number of socioeconomic factors (Gorard et al, 2012, p. 25). Indeed, the values which parent-carers transmit regarding higher education opportunities, coupled with the expectations they have for their children's potential futures, are considered significant factors for determining a child's perception of their possible selves (Mulcahy and Baars, 2018). As such, to increase parental engagement with higher education outreach it is important to understand what the pervasive attitudes towards higher education are, as well as the degree to which these pervasive attitudes might serve to strengthen existing inequalities.

This section broadly examines parent-carers' attitudes towards higher education across Bristol. This work delves into a number of issues connected to parental attitude, including how parent-carers perceive the value of higher education, how affordable they consider higher education to be, and the concerns they have in connection with higher education opportunities. This knowledge will help Future Quest develop higher education resources and activities which directly address the key perceptions or concerns that parent-carers have in connection to higher education.



## General Attitudes towards Higher Education

86% of parent-carers agree that participating in higher education will offer young people personal development opportunities that they would not benefit from otherwise

“I believe education enables understanding and connection with the world and, as someone who was late to pursue my own degree, I want to ensure my child receives all the opportunities to learn which are available”

Attitudes towards the opportunities afforded by higher education were **predominantly** positive, and it was widely agreed that higher education would provide young people with valuable opportunities and experiences: 82% of surveyed parent-carers agreed that participating in higher education will improve young people’s future prospects and 86% agreed that participating in higher education will offer young people personal development opportunities that they would not benefit from otherwise. This attitude is reflected in the qualitative research. For example, one parent-carer wrote that “I feel that higher education is something that every child should be able to access, I was unable to due to family reasons and have always regretted it. I feel it opens more doors in terms of careers and it is a life experience”. Another parent-carer expressed the opinion that “I think it is the best thing for children to go onto higher education, especially how difficult it is for them in these hard recent times”.

While attitudes towards higher education were typically positive, it was simultaneously expressed that, although higher levels of qualifications are always valuable to have, higher education should not be considered the only pathway post-18. Many parent-carers voiced that young people should not be forced to progress to higher education if it does not suit them. For example, one parent-carer wrote that “I believe everybody should have the opportunity to participate in higher education if that’s what they want to do, but equally feel it’s not necessarily the best an only route to a ‘successful’ and fulfilling career for all individuals”. Likewise, another parent-carer wrote “I think higher education is beneficial, but I would not force my child into it if they do not want this”. However, it is worth noting most parent-carers view opportunities outside of a university-setting as not necessarily counting as ‘higher education’. As one parent-carer expressed, “Higher education gives better opportunities in life but it's also not for everyone. [There]

are individual[s] that strive in apprenticeships too”.

Of the parent-carers surveyed, 66% feel that their attitude toward higher education is shared by their child or children. However, only 30% feel that they are the strongest influence on their child or children’s attitudes towards higher education. This is relatively low, showing how parent-carers might not necessarily consider themselves best placed to influence their children’s decisions about their future options. Thus, it may be worth Future Quest drawing attention to the significant influence parent-carers can have on their children’s choices.

## Affordability and Value for Money

Whilst 77% of parent-carers believe that higher education will improve a young person’s future income only 45% of parent-carers believe that university is worth the money

As previously explored, parental attitudes towards the opportunities afforded by higher are relatively positive. Concentrating on parent-carers’ perceptions of the economic value of progressing to higher education, it was generally understood that higher education pathways would improve young people’s potential future incomes, with 77% of parents agreeing that participating in higher education will improve a young person’s future income. This attitude premises on the understanding that having a higher level of qualification

will allow young people access higher paying or higher status jobs. One parent-carer, who has two children aged 16 and 18, discussed that when they applied for their current role they did not need a degree for the position, but if they were to apply for it now they “would have no chance because [they] don’t have a degree”, and that “more jobs are going down that line”. Another parent-carer discussed how higher qualifications can be thought of as a passport for certain careers which, in turn, will grow people’s confidence and put them in a better position in the job

“It is an excellent opportunity to go to university, but I think that these days the cost is prohibitive without a guarantee for employment at the end. It seems it is necessary to get a masters or PhD to stand out these days”

market. In a similar vein, one parent-carer commented that they believe that higher education “is the means to an end really. You'll need a degree of some sort for the better paying jobs in society such as medical based or government jobs”. What is clear is that higher education is widely viewed as being a necessary or important route for those young people who might hope to access certain careers or jobs with particular salaries.

However, the research also reveals that parent-carers are far less sure about the value for money and affordability of a university education: only 45% of parent-carers agree that a university degree is worth the money, and only 11% believe it to be affordable. This uncertainty was reflected through the qualitative research; despite the overall attitude that higher education *could* open up doors to higher paying jobs, there was also some concern about the likelihood of young people being guaranteed employment, despite them being qualified for it. One parent-carer wrote that whilst higher education “is brilliant from a personal development perspective . . . it has become increasingly expensive and so I think these days it's important to really interrogate whether or not it's the right way forward because you can end up in a lot of debt without the benefit of the income and career to match it after you finish”.

The debt that young people would acquire was particularly focused on by parent-carers. One parent commented that unless “the course is directly preparing the student for a career, e.g. teaching, accountancy, medicine, it is not worth getting a degree as they will start off their lives with an incredible level of debt which will be hanging over them for years”. Indeed, it was broadly expressed that higher education increasingly feels unaffordable, a viewpoint which has no doubt increased in light of the higher fees for university courses which came into force in 2012: one parent expressed how they are “very concerned that it will return to being elitist, with only those who can ‘afford’ it /cope with the concept of massive, lifelong debt, accessing it. I recognize my own privilege at having had a full grant, I would not have gone to university for my first degree or my Masters degree otherwise!”.

The financial cost of university, including both fees and everyday living costs, was clearly a key concern of parent-carers. Of the 44 parent-carers surveyed, 28 parent-carers independently commented that this was an aspect of higher education they were apprehensive about. For instance, one parent-carer wrote in the survey that “I would be concerned about the debt they may accrue and the fact that they still may struggle to get a job which brings enough money/fulfils them”. Another parent-carer similarly commented that what concerns them most is the “cost of it all and the fact [that] my son could end up in real debt, which then does not help getting on the property ladder”. The long-term financial commitment of progressing to higher education therefore needs to be a key focus in parent-focused higher education. The focus on university debt in discussions about higher

education also implies that higher education outreach could afford to focus more on alternative higher education pathways; whilst there was some mention of alternative routes to university degrees, with four parent-carers specifically writing of the value of apprenticeships and alternative educational pathways, progression to higher education remains associated with high levels of debt.

Overall, the research shows that, whilst higher education is thought of as a valuable gateway to potentially higher paying jobs and certain careers, it also saddles young people with significant debt which is both daunting and off-putting.

## Other Key Concerns about Higher Education

Only 7% of parent-carers feel they have no opinion about whether their child/children should engage with higher education opportunities. 52% feel that if their child does go to university, it should be a 'top university'.

As the survey data shows, only around 7% of parent-carers claim to not have an opinion about their child's potential progression into higher education. A parent-carer's opinion will be significantly shaped by any particular concerns they have about their child progressing to higher education. As explored in the previous section, a significant concern for parent-carers is centred around the financial implications of attending university. Another key concern is centred around young people's mental health. Parent-carers specifically mentioned the pressures of undertaking courses and the stress caused by having to move out and navigate higher education spaces. For example, one parent-carer commented that they would "be concerned about their [child's] experience during their time in higher education since they have additional needs, and sometimes people encounter difficulties that cause them undue stress during their higher education journey". Another parent-carer made a similar observation, writing that their child "suffers with social anxiety and the prospect of university at this stage is a bit overwhelming". The pastoral care available to young people progressing to higher education is thus an aspect which is of clear concern, and which should be focused on in higher education outreach.

In addition to wellbeing, the safety of children was also commented on. One parent-carer, who works at a university, commented that one they would be concerned about how their child would cope with leaving home and looking after their own safety. Another parent-carer wrote that they "would worry about the social aspects of university, worrying if [my children] are being influenced by others that would take risks that I would not wish my children to take". Interestingly, the

pandemic was not necessarily mentioned as a *key* concern for parent-carers whose children might be considering higher education. Indeed, it was even pointed out by one parent-carer that “higher education is very important for children at the moment because the last two years they have missed so much”. However, a couple of parent-carers did still voice some concern about the impact of the pandemic on higher education experiences. For example, one parent-carer who has a child

“My main concerns are regarding student debt and moving a long way from home and their support network of friends and family”

looking to begin a degree this year commented that it might be preferable for them to take a year out. Another parent-carer commented that in the current climate so many jobs have been lost and that they were concerned about what job opportunities would be available to their child at the end of their higher education experience. Fundamentally, therefore, there remains uncertainty about how the current pandemic will shape children’s futures and influence their choices.

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# ACCESSING TOOLS, RESOURCES, AND KNOWLEDGE

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## ONE IN THREE

parent-carers [36%] agree they understand what funding is available to young people entering higher education.

## SEVEN IN 10

of parent-carers [70%] feel they have enough knowledge to support their child to engage with higher education opportunities should they wish to do so.

## TWO IN THREE

of parent-carers [68%] feel they know how and where they can obtain more information about higher education opportunities.

## THREE IN FIVE

of parent-carers [73%] feel that it is their job to provide their child/children with information about higher education opportunities.

## Introduction

A key interest for Future Quest centres around the extent to which parent-carers feel they have the tools and resources to both support their child's education and guide them through their options for accessing higher education opportunities. Parental engagement with a child's education is important for higher education progression because, as previously mentioned, despite calls for increased studies regarding the link between parental engagement and academic attainment (Gorard and See, 2013), there are a significant number of studies which point to a correlation between high levels of parental engagement with schoolwork and higher academic grades (Harris and Goodall, 2008; Topor et al., 2010; Lara and Saracostti, 2019; Axford et al., 2019). Higher academic attainment in school will encourage young people to consider higher education pathways post-18 (Burr, 2017). A parent-carer's capacity to guide or support their child/children if they choose to consider higher education post-18 will also increase the likelihood of a young person considering higher education a possible future pathway. Thus, it is important for Future Quest to have a clear understanding of the degree to which parent-carers feel able to access the tools, resources, and knowledge they need to best support their child/children.

## Accessing Tools and Resources

As previously described, the likelihood of a young person accessing educational opportunities post-18 will increase with the degree of support they receive for their studies whilst still in full-time education. Whilst parent-carers broadly feel they do have the tools and resources to support their children, it was noted that it can prove difficult to provide support for children when they begin to reach higher academic levels. For example, a parent-carer of a 16 year old told me that:

“whenever I've tried to help with schoolwork I've realised a lot of it is kind of way outside of my understanding in a lot of the subjects . . . if you go to help with GCSE maths, for example, it feels way more advanced than [what] I did . . . 20 odd years ago. And I think the school definitely do try and give you resources and, you know, our school in particular have been really good at communicating and . . . providing tools for us to be able to engage in that way. But it is, it's hard to maintain that when you're kind of working full time as well . . . I feel like I've kind of left my daughter to it a little bit too much in that sense. But . . . in terms of accessing the tools, I think the tools are there. I think the resources are there, yea. I'm not sure I personally have engaged well enough with them though, in this crazy world, especially this year”.

It may therefore be relevant for Future Quest to advise schools and further education institutions that, to increase parental engagement, they should develop



easy-access parent-focused resources. These resources could detail how parent-carers might learn more about what their child is currently studying or how they might support their child in their learning despite not necessarily having expert knowledge themselves.

The stress of the pandemic and the negative impact it has had on parent-carers' capacity to support their children was spoken about by a number of research participants. A key concern discussed by parent-carers in connection with the pandemic is the lack of interaction they are having with their children's teachers. It was widely commented that parent-carers feel unable to fully support their children in their schooling as they have had few opportunities for direct feedback regarding their children's needs and progress. As one parent-carer, who has two children aged 16 and 18, told me "we've not . . . had parents evening or contact with the [teachers], like physical contact, since before Covid. So we were due to have a parents evening for my eldest which didn't happen, and then obviously I think that had been booked but it got cancelled because that was last March . . . that's the only thing I feel we are missing because I would love to sort of speak to a teacher". Another parent-carer, who has a 14 year old daughter, as well as a 27 year old son, described how they have "missed the parents consultations so that's, you know, that's quite important I think, when you're actually meeting face to face speaking to individual subject teachers. So that's, that's not been great. But I recently had some concerns with my daughter, and I've emailed the principle and she's got back to me and we're working together and it's been via sort of emails . . . It's not always the same is it, as face to face". A third parent-carer also expressed how disruptive the pandemic has been for their family, saying that they felt okay about supporting their child with their education prior to the pandemic, ever since it feels like it's "all a bit blown out the water". Evidently, having direct contact – whether this be online or in-person - with young people's teachers is a central priority for parent-carers looking to support their children's learning.

Reflecting on a similar experience, another parent-carer discussed how, even if she was able to have a meeting with her children's teacher, she was unsure if they would be able to provide any useful feedback at this point in time: "I think because of Covid . . . I guess I'm not even sure the teachers know to share it with me". This parent-carer went on to describe how her daughter had been alerted by friends at another school that she was due to have some mock assessments, but that when her daughter asked her teacher about these assessments she was informed that the teacher did not know because they have been concentrating on students in the final year of their GCSE exams. These comments from parent-carers about their experience during the pandemic broadly speak to the degree that the pandemic has disrupted normal channels of communication between teachers, students, and

parents, leaving parent-carers feeling unable to fully support their child in their learning.

This leads me to the second key concern parent-carers expressed in connection with the pandemic. This is the requirement for young people to be either entirely house-bound or be working from home. A matter that a few parent-carers touched upon was about access to the internet or computer screens. One parent-carer, who has one 17 year old as well as three children above the age of 18, told me that “in terms of internet, our internet is not brilliant in the house, partly because there are so many of us and that, from time to time that has caused a problem. And we have got a few computers but we have had issues with screens being broken and things like that”. Likewise, another parent-carer spoke of how “at one point there were four of us at home working . . . so I think . . . the capacity with our broadband was an issue, so we had to buy new equipment to sort of boost broadband capacity. And I think for some people that, that is going to be a real issue. And also the access to laptops, we were just fortunate that both me and my husband have work laptops and then we had enough for both our children to be able to do learning from home”. Evidently, the sudden requirement to be able provide young people

“At one point there were four of us at home working . . . [so] our broadband was an issue, so we had to buy new equipment to boost broadband capacity . . . for some people that, that is going to be a real issue”

with either expensive technologies or with a usable internet connection has proved difficult for parent-carers, and is a challenge which would require access to excess spending money to fix. Yet, as one parent-carer wrote “Times are hard for everyone with the past few years and money is really tight”. As Millar et al. (2020, p. 3) state “engagement with the curriculum has been disrupted for many children and young people, including those without sufficient digital access, physical space, and other resources to support their learning”.

One parent-carer, who has a 16 year old, also expressed concern about the emotional impact of self-isolation for their children. They told me how “in the Autumn term [my son] had to self-isolate about four times over that term. And then in the summer term, so the first lockdown, I would say after the half-term in May he got really disillusioned with school and just really . . . wasn't engaged at all. So I did reach out to his head of house and the school were brilliant, all his teachers got in touch within twenty-four, forty-eight hours, a few of them even phoned”. More broadly, the impacts of lockdown on the wellbeing and mental health of young people, and the secondary impacts of this on their education, is of significant and ongoing concern. As Millar et al. (2020) report, emerging evidence from studies conducted during the pandemic suggest that mental health

is worsening due to young people being worried about missing school and feeling uncertain about their futures and their careers. At a time when both young people and parent-carers are experiencing new and often difficult challenges, opportunities such as the Future Quest programme, which support and inspire young people's learning, are more important than ever.

### Accessing Knowledge about Post-18 Opportunities

Accessing knowledge is as much about obtaining the knowledge itself, as it is about knowing where to look for it. However, only 68% of surveyed parent-carers feel they know where they can obtain more information about higher education opportunities. This highlights the need for schools and other relevant organisations to not just provide information about post-18 opportunities, but to direct parent-carers to relevant resources, events, or opportunities that will allow them to deepen their knowledge regarding post-18 opportunities.

Research conducted by GTI Media shows that whilst 65% of surveyed parent-carers believe it is the school's job to disseminate advice regarding post-18 options, "a quarter of parent-carers were not aware of any careers advice given to their child at school, and over half stated "some but not enough" (Philips, 2014, p. 2). The research for this report supports this finding by GTI Media. Some 68% of parent-carers believe that it is the school's responsibility to provide advice in connection with higher education opportunities. There are mixed opinions on whether people feel that they and their children are being provided with adequate levels of advice. Approximately half of parent-carers (52%) feel their children's school provides enough information to young people about higher education opportunities. Comments regarding schools' help were mixed. One parent-carer said that "from my experience parents are given a lot of information about all the different routes that their children can take". Another parent-carer wrote that they "personally found it hard to get information about post 16 education, [and] due to the pandemic my child did not have work experience or a careers interview, so I had to do lots of internet searches to find A-level courses my child wanted to do".

In addition to 68% of parent-carers agreeing that schools should disseminate information about post-18 options, 73% of surveyed parent-carers feel it is *also* their job to provide young people with information about higher education opportunities. 73% of parent-carers also stated that universities should provide advice about university-specific opportunities. Collectively, these findings suggest that information about post-18 opportunities should not only be directed through

“I personally found it hard to get information about post 16 education, [and] due to the pandemic my child did not have work experience or a careers interview, so I had to do lots of internet searches to find A-level courses my child wanted to do”.

multiple avenues, as this is an expectation of parent-carers, but that parent-carers would generally like to be given a variety of support as they help their children navigate their future options.

The difficulty of navigating websites in connection with post-18 opportunities was also an issue that was brought up in the research on knowledge

access. One parent-carer, who works at a university, spoke of how university websites “can be a bit of a nightmare”. The same parent-carer also spoke of how difficult it is to navigate the UCAS website, citing how complex the forms can be and how you are not always able to input the correct information accurately. Indeed, it was suggested by another parent-carer that “I think a simple guide to how it works would be useful. I have looked at different websites and there is a LOT of information to digest”.

Whilst there were a few key topics which parent-carers highlighted as particularly important to address in higher education outreach (i.e finance, the application process, and the pastoral care available for students) parent-carers broadly agreed that they had some understanding of how to support their children navigate their future options. 80% stated that they understood how their child/children can apply to higher education opportunities, 100% stated they understood how higher education opportunities can lead to different career paths, 64% stated they understood the costs associated with higher education opportunities and that they understood the accommodation options available to their child/children if they enter into higher education, and 70% said that they have enough knowledge to support their child/children to engage with higher education opportunities should they wish to do so. Whilst these findings are relatively positive, there are still a significant number of parent-carers who feel uncertain about the costs associated with higher education and accommodation options. The number of parent-carers who feel they understand what funding is available to young people entering higher education is also relatively low, with only 36% saying that they understand available funding options. Additionally, only 57% feel they are up-to-date with the different words used in the world of higher education, which highlights the need for better parent-focused outreach around higher education jargon.

## A Local Picture: Higher Education Progression in Bristol

The percentage of Bristol school students going on to attend university is lower than the national average (Cork, 2019). Parent-carers who filled out the online survey were asked to consider why they *personally* thought this may be the case. The key reason suggested for this statistic by parent-carers concerns matters of social inequality across Bristol (see: Bristol City Council, 2019); parent-carers' perception was that young people from typically less-privileged areas might not be as likely to see university as a realistic possibility. For example, one parent-carer wrote that the reason for low progression rates across Bristol is possibly due to "the perception that Bristol universities are elite, therefore maybe thought of as inaccessible". However, it was also suggested that, despite the still low progression rates in Bristol, access to university is still increasing. One parent-carer, who has worked in higher education for over 20 years, wrote of how they have seen "a shift in who applies. University was always seen as an elite place to go and only 'rich/posh' families could afford to send their children. Also Bristol is a working class area, so again it would have been seen that the 'working class' have no place at a university. Thankfully this has been changing and schemes like [Future Quest] are showing the students that if they want to go to [university], then they have every chance to succeed, and more often it's these students that succeed and get higher grades than the 'rich' kid. It's also the cost of sending a child to [university] that would scare families that don't have much money, as parents' wages are taken into considering with grants etc". This reflection speaks to the importance of organisations such as Future Quest for widening access to higher education pathways in locations such as Bristol, as well as the significance of higher education outreach which specifically supports people who might not typically consider higher education as a possible pathway.

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# FUTURE STRATEGIES AND KEY FINDINGS

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## PLACES WHERE PARENT-CARERS MOST COMMONLY ACCESS HE RESOURCES

- General Online Search (91%)
- University Websites (75%)
- University Open Days (64%)
- Information Events (41%)

## RECOMMENDED FORMATS FOR HE OUTREACH

73% of parent-carers wanted a mix of online and offline resources, and 75% wanted online resources to be in both written and video format

## RECOMMENDED AREAS FOR HE RESOURCES TO FOCUS ON

- Finance and Debt (95%)
- Application Processes (82%)
- Available Support for students (80%)
- Admissions Process (75%)
- Future Employment (70%)

## RECOMMENDED ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS FOR HE OUTREACH

- HE Info Events (75%)
- Career Info Events (66%)
- University Open Days (61%)
- One-on-one meetings (52%)

## Introduction

This section combines knowledge from the previous sections to explore how Future Quest might improve their services and increase parental engagement. This section specifically explores how to improve parent-carers engagement with information activities, how to create more accessible online and offline content, and which topics to focus on when communicating with parent-carers of young people. In addition to outlining the key findings from the research data, this section includes a list of key recommendations for Future Quest and a suggested parental engagement strategy.

## Home-based Engagement

In the survey element of this research project, parent-carers were asked to consider what issues Future Quest might need to consider when designing home-based resources for parent-carers of young people. There were a few areas that parent-carers drew attention to in the context of increasing home-based engagement. The first of these centred around accessibility; a number of parent-carers suggested that online content needs to always be accessible and not intimidating or overwhelming. It was commented that digital literacy should never be assumed, and that Future Quest must ensure that their website does not have barriers that prevent people's interaction with it. There are, of course, many ways that online accessibility can be improved to cater for a wide range of personal characteristics. A useful guide on the subject can be accessed [here](#).

In the context of accessing information about post-18 opportunities, parent-carers also commented that it was often easy to feel overloaded by irrelevant information. It was suggested that Future Quest might consider ways to stop parent-carers feeling overloaded or intimidated. One parent-carer suggested that the website would benefit from having "Different levels of knowledge about the subject - it shouldn't be one size fits all as parents will need different levels of input". This parent-carer suggested having an easy way of searching for different specific topics. A similar comment was made by another parent-carer, who highlighted the need for the website to always signpost parent-carers to where they can find more information on certain topics. Another parent-carer suggested that Future Quest must work to include parent-carers as much as young people, and help parent-carers to find ways "to not feel intimidated by you know researching courses and application processes and things like that". Another suggestion put forward by a parent-carer

"... it shouldn't be one size fits all as parents will need different levels of input".

was that it would be useful for Future Quest to develop a simple newsletter which briefly outlines all higher education options, how much they cost, what funding is available, and a list of useful websites.

There was some mention of having access to local information, and it was suggested by one parent-carer that it would be useful to create a bank of knowledge specifically for parent-carers in Bristol. They commented that they would like to have a “map of all further education facilities in my local area” to make it easier for them to “trace a clear path to the career the child wants to pursue”. Having interactive maps of the local area might also help to make the information more accessible and engaging; a number of parent-carers spoke of the need to create online content which grabs people’s attention whilst still being informative.

Across the research it was commented by parent-carers online-only content can be excluding, due to its reliance on people either having access to the internet or knowledge of which websites to access. It was suggested by a number of parent-carers that Future Quest should also distribute information in paper format, which can then provide guidance about where and how parent-carers can access further information should they wish to do so.

### Organised Events and Activities

The loss of in-person events, which was a necessary restriction due to the Covid-19 pandemic, was widely commented on by parent-carers; although parent-carers spoke about how brilliant it has been to be able to connect online during lockdown periods, it was also suggested by parent-carers that in-person events are generally more informative and helpful. As one parent-carer described “I find face to face

“I've not really attended any online stuff but I know it's out there . . . for me . . . I like to be there, I like to be active and in a tactile environment where you can just sort of bumble about and work out what's going on”.

events quite helpful as you can present your personal situation to someone who can inform you on your best course of action”. Another parent-carer told me that although Zoom has been brilliant, they still definitely prefer face to face meetings. If it is deemed safe to do so, returning to a mix of online and offline events would therefore be the best method for ensuring parental engagement with events and activities. When considering what they would like from



parent-carer focused events, one parent-carer commented that they would prefer school-based engagement activities to be hosted at varying times throughout the day and in different formats (i.e both online and in-person), so as to ensure that all parent-carers are having the chance to attend them: “I think that it would be quite good to have a mix of in-person [events] and then doing things online as well, especially if people are working. And I know some of the times with the Future Quest parent events were sort of straight after work, so if it was maybe early evening where you're not having to rush to a venue, and you could just sit online”. Having different timings for parent-carer events was also suggested as useful by a parent-carer in the survey feedback. One parent-carer further suggested that they would like to have separate sessions for parent-carers to those for both students and parent-carers. This would allow the sessions to take place during school hours, as well as outside of them.

A number of parent-carers expressed how important it was that they could attend university days, and emphasised how useful these are for inspiring both parent-carers and young people’s engagement with higher education opportunities. One parent-carer wrote how “University open days were the best - we could do this with my daughter 2 years ago but due to pandemic my son has not been able to do this - which has had a big impact on his engagement with the process”. Another parent-carer similarly described how “I haven't attended a University open day as a parent, but I have been involved in them as part of my job. I find them very useful being able to talk to children and their parents, as quite often they have an opinion on a particular subject, but once they talk to us, then we can re-assure them and give them the correct information, so personally even though I've not attended as a parent, I think they are useful. I also attended a parent guided tour that Future Quest ran before covid hit, and seeing the Uni from a parent’s perspective rather than an employee side, I found useful, it's good to be shown where your child could potentially end up studying”. Indeed, a number of other parent-carers cited open days as being one of the most important opportunities for understanding higher education opportunities and for feeling enthusiastic about the idea of their child continuing their studies post-18.

### **Defining Topics of Focus**

When parent-carers were asked about which topics or areas of concern they would like Future Quest to address, there were four general areas which particularly stood out. These key areas correlate with the key concerns that parent-carers expressed in connection with their child/children progressing to higher education. The first one centres around finance and cost. Financial worries have shown to be of significant concern to parent-carers across the research data and, as one

parent-carer wrote, Future Quest needs to help “families to understand funding is available and [that it] will not need to be repaid until the student is earning a set amount”. The second key area for Future Quest to focus on centres around the application and admission processes. The UCAS website, for example, was highlighted by one parent-carer as being particularly difficult to navigate. Another parent-carer wrote that they did not feel they were clear “on the process of application and the timings”. The third key area to focus on is around mental health and pastoral care. The pastoral support available to students entering higher education, particularly due to the restrictions caused by lockdowns and the disruption young people have experienced during their formal education, was highlighted as a key concern for parent-carers of young people in 2021. Easy to access and university-specific information about the support available to students would likely go some way in encouraging parent-carers to support their child/children to progress to higher education. Finally, Future Quest would benefit at looking beyond higher education, and communicating with parent-carers about what opportunities might be open to their children in the future if they have further qualifications. For example, a number of parent-carers wanted more information about how different courses might lead to a variety of different and sometimes unexpected career opportunities. It was further suggested by one-parent carer that Future Quest could benefit from having parent-carers of people who are now post-18 come and speak with parent-carers of people who are currently under the age of 18.

“I think the pastoral care is obviously very important as finances are as well. Yeah, I mean information on everything really, but particularly those two things”.

## Key Research Recommendations

**Ensure that higher education resources for parent-carers meaningfully address key areas of concern and common misconceptions:**

These are finance and debt, application and admission processes, available support and pastoral care for students, and future employment opportunities.

**Ensure resources are fully accessible and easily available:**

Produce resources in video and written formats. Direct people to further resources, including glossaries, video descriptions etc. Do not use jargon without first explaining it. Ensure that sites follow accessible guidelines (see [here](#)).

**Provide guides for navigating relevant websites and other sources of knowledge:**

Help parent-carers navigate the world of higher education by providing them with university website guides or guides on accessing the UCAS site.

**Consider the additional support parent-carers might need:**

For example, Future Quest could provide guidance to parent-carers who are concerned about providing their children with relevant educational tools, such as laptops. This was highlighted as a particular concern since the pandemic hit, due to the need to begin working and learning from home.

**Ensure that parent-carers always feel respected and comfortable:**

Do not make assumptions about knowledge, and ensure that activities are run in such a way which respects parent-carers timetable and needs (i.e more than once, in accessible spaces, online and offline). Be sensitive to parent-carers needs and never make assumptions. Furthermore, go above and beyond, offering individual one on one sessions for parent-carers.

**Focus resources on postcode areas where progression is less:**

Parent-carers are influenced by their socio-cultural context, so focus resources and efforts working with schools and parent-carers in locations across Bristol where progression is typically lower. However, do not make people feel targeted. Rather, ensure that this is where resources are directed and that these places are being accounted for.

### **Work to bridge the connection between parent-carers and higher education institutions:**

Rather than focusing on introducing young people to university spaces, invite parent-carers along as well. Connect parent-carers with current students or university staff, and give them that opportunity to have conversation with people. Begin building this connection between parent-carers, young people, and higher education spaces from a much earlier age (when young people are still in primary school).

### **Ensure Future Quest provides information about alternative pathways or careers for young people post-18:**

Ensure that information for parent-carers about post-18 options provides guidance for parent-carers of young people who may be interested in going into full-time work or pursuing a course outside of a university setting. In particular, emphasise how higher education is not limited to university degrees.

### **Work to provide sustained involvement:**

Start conversations early and continue them throughout young people's education. Rather than only introducing parent-carers and young people to the idea of higher education at secondary level, begin working with parent-carers and young people during their primary school years.

### **Connect parent-carers with each other:**

Develop a parent-care focused space on the website, and provide them with a forum platform to ask any questions or express any concerns they might have. Ask parent-carers of young people who have progressed to higher education to come and engage with parent-carers of young people under the age of 18.

### **Keep updating parental engagement strategy:**

Keep gathering feedback from parent-carers. The concerns of parent-carers will be ever-changing, and Future Quest will need to keep abreast of current issues for parent-carers. Furthermore, any new materials or events produced for parent-carers should be tested with parent-carers first. For example, one parent-carer suggested Future Quest run a focus group with parent-carers testing out the design of their website with them.

# Suggested Engagement Framework

L O N G I T U D I N A L  S U P P O R T	<p><b>PRIMARY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Begin working with parents/carers of primary aged children, inviting them to events based in university settings, developing career and HE targeted events, and communicating with parent-carers about events and activities.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>SECONDARY &amp; FURTHER</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>DEVELOP PARENT-CARER NETWORKS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have a 'parent-carer-focused' forum that will allow parent-carers to connect with other parent-carers by posting questions and answers related to HE and post-18 options.</li> <li>Bring parent-carers whose children have worked with Future Quest to parent-carer-focused events, sharing their experiences with and providing guidance to parent-carers of people under the age of 18.</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>SUPPORT ACCESS TO EDUCATIONAL TOOLS AND RESOURCES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support parent-carers to access all the tools and resources needed to support their children's education. This includes supporting access internet services, IT equipment, and other physical educational resources (either through directly providing them or providing grant application support). This could also include advising the school about how to support parent-carers who looking to engage with their children's learning (i.e by providing parent-focused guidance sheets).</li> <li>Have a 'parent-carer-focused' website that uses a mix of formats (video, visual and written) to provide guidance on accessing knowledge and navigating the world of HE and early career roles.</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>ADDRESS KEY TOPICS OF INTEREST AND CONCERN</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offer 'one on one' sessions with parent-carers that will allow them to talk through any specific concerns or questions they have about post-18 options.</li> <li>Focus higher education outreach around key topics of concern, which include young people's access to pastoral care, the financial commitments progressing to higher education, and the processing of applying to higher education.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>POST-18</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue to engage with parent-carers of young people who are post-18. This can be through inviting them to events centred around how to support young people who have begun their career or progressed to HE, developing online toolkits which provide support for parent-carers navigating post-18 challenges, and inviting them to share their experiences with parent-carers who still have offspring under the age of 18.</li> </ul>

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# FURTHER RESOURCES

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## **Partners in Progression: Engaging parents in university access by Ellie Mulcahy and Dr Sam Baars (2014).**

This is the definitive guide into parental engagement for higher education progression. Ellie Mulcahy and Dr Sam Baars define what is meant by an engaged parent-carer, provide a comprehensive overview into the literature associated with parental engagement, outline key strategies for supporting parental engagement based on primary research, and provide insight into current best practices.

## **Perceptions of Higher Education Outreach and Access Activity by ICM Unlimited (2019).**

This report was written in connection with Uni Connect, and provides a thorough guide into the world of higher education outreach. This work highlights the importance of involving parent-carers in higher education outreach and explores the key challenges that need to be addressed in connection with parental involvement in higher education opportunities. This work draws on primary research with parents, carers, and other key actors.

## **Higher Education access: Evidence of effectiveness of university access strategies and approaches by Carole Torgerson, Louise Gascoine, Clare Heaps, Victoria Menzies and Kirsty Younger (2014).**

This report is a systematic review of literature examining the effectiveness of university strategies being used to increase higher education access amongst disadvantaged students. This research reports that there is a lack of UK-based studies commenting on this topic, but does show that US-based studies reveal there to be a number of effective strategies for increasing higher education participation. Supporting parental engagement is actively mentioned as one such strategy for increased higher education participation.

## **Parental Influence: the key role played by parents in their children's decisions about routes and pathways post-18 by Chris Phillips (2015).**

This report outlines the findings of a survey which examined how, when, and why parent-carers might influence young people's choices about their pathways post-18, how parent-carers access relevant information in connection with post-18 choices, and what parent-carers think of current information and guidance provided to both themselves and their children. These report was conducted in 2015, and worked with parent-carers across the whole of the UK.

**Review of best practice in parental engagement by Janet Goodall and John Vorhaus with the help of Jon Carpentieri, Greg Brooks, Rodie Akerman and Alma Harris (2011).**

This review offers an examination of best practice for parental engagement. The work focuses on a UK context, and considers how to support parental engagement at all educational levels. The guidance offered by this review, which is intended for school and service leaders, practitioners, and policy-makers, resonates clearly with the recommendations of this Future Quest report.

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This report was commissioned, funded, and published by Future Quest in collaboration with the University of the West of England Bristol (Bristol UWE).

This report was researched and written by Dr Rosamund Portus.

Publication Year: 2021

