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Article

Different Sides of University Life: An Exploratory Study Investigating How Multiple Visits to a Campus Nurture a Rounded View of the Setting and Strengthen Intentions Towards Higher Education Progression

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Abstract

The evidence base supporting practices to widen participation in higher education, such as campus visits and multi-intervention programs for younger students, remains limited. In order to address this gap, this exploratory study examines the impact of repeated university campus exposure on primary-aged children in the UK. We studied the influence of a campus tour on the views of a group of 78 primary school children who had visited the setting on a previous occasion. Our cohort (32M, 45F, aged 10–11) was drawn from schools with high populations of pupils from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds. Using a pre- and post-visit survey design, we assessed changes in perceptions following a second campus tour, building on a prior visit. We found that while one visit was enough to establish basic perceptions—for example, a university is big not small—a second visit allowed participants to see a different side of the university experience, adding nuance, expanding university-related vocabulary, and increasing comfort with the campus environment. Notably, repeat visits strengthened intentions to pursue higher education. We conclude that multiple campus visits benefit low-participation groups by fostering familiarity and exposing younger pupils to different motivations for university attendance. While this study provides a useful foundation from which to explore this area, further work is needed to address limitations such as the small sample size and the UK-specific context.



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Keywords: widening participation; attitudes towards higher education; multiple interventions; socioeconomic status; primary school; campus visits

1. Introduction

Widening participation in higher education (WP) has been an aim of the UK government since the expansion of the sector in the mid-1990s, and remains a key priority of the Office for Students [1]. However, although absolute numbers of young people from low-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds progressing to university have increased over the last 20 years, they have done so at a slower rate than that of more affluent groups, meaning that inequalities in HE participation have actually increased despite the efforts of individual institutions and the sector as a whole [2].

This trend, in combination with a funding squeeze being experienced by UK universities [3], makes it imperative that WP initiatives undertaken are well evidenced as

both effective and an efficient use of resources. However, the literature surrounding the impacts of such initiatives is still developing [4], and many gaps remain.

This study aims to address one relevant gap in current knowledge—the impact of repeated exposure to a university campus setting among primary school children. Although a small amount of work has been carried out to assess the impact of the physical experience of a campus visit among this age group (e.g., [5]), there has been little UK-focused research, and as far as we are aware there has been no previous study of the cumulative effect of a second visit. Evidence reviews have pinpointed multi-intervention outreach programmes [6] and engagement with younger age groups [7] as beneficial approaches, but there is a need for more evidence in the literature to support these findings. In particular, it has proven difficult to tease out the impacts of individual interventions within extended programmes [8].

In order to investigate this issue, we looked at the impact of a tour of a university campus on the views of 78 primary school children from four schools whose intakes were largely from areas of high deprivation and who had previously visited the setting. The pupils were participating in a programme of widening participation activities aimed at increasing knowledge about higher education, jobs, and careers, and had all visited the same campus several months previously during a separate interaction focused on science investigations. Using questionnaires both before and after the second visit, we analysed the ideas that participants initially held about higher education and how these changed over the course of the study.

The structure of the intervention schedule adopted by the University of Lancashire for use with its partner primary schools offers a rare opportunity to assess the impact of visiting a university campus not once, but twice, on the pupils involved. As both widening participation activities with younger children and the impact of campus visits are understudied areas, this exploratory study has the potential to lay a foundation on which future work can build.

1.1. Theoretical Background

Our study focuses on the impact of repeated campus visits for primary-aged children. In order to understand how this research can add to the wider literature around outreach activities, we consider the existing knowledge regarding the benefits or otherwise of repeated interventions conducted with the same pupils; WP focused towards primary-aged pupils; and the small amount of current analysis of the impacts of visits to university campuses for this age group.

1.2. The Benefits of Repeated Engagements

Working with the same group of young people on an ongoing basis, rather than just providing a series of one-off interactions, is a popular tactic among WP providers and there is a strong foundation for this in the existing research.

As far back as 2013, a literature review commissioned by HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England, a public body operating in the UK between 1992 and 2018) and OFFA (Office for Fair Access, a public body operating in the UK between 2004 and 2018) found that “a focus on discrete interventions may be the wrong approach. . . In the main, research recognises that it is participation in a range of activities and interventions which is key to progression, rather than there being a ‘light bulb moment’” [9].

Meanwhile in 2014, a strategy document [10] produced by the (now defunct) UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) noted that “Outreach is most effective when it is a progressive, sustained programme of activity and engagement over time.”

There are a few recent papers detailing specific progressive and sustained outreach programmes that were evaluated and found to be successful. Bainham [11] studied the University of Derby's Progress to Success framework, delivered across years 7–11 and offering at least one activity a year to the cohort, and found

...emerging strong evidence from the framework to support the view that progressive, sustained outreach programmes over a period of a number of years can have proven impacts on learners in attainment, motivation and understanding. [11] (p. 204)

Another study [12] analysed a WP programme offering three interventions, focused on knowledge of higher education, soft skills, and confidence/self-concept, over the course of a year for Y8–10. The paper found “significant improvements in post-test scores for fit and belonging, self-efficacy, academic confidence, choices and pathways, and expectations for progression, and for some questions testing financial and career benefits, and social/academic benefits.”

Although such multi-component programmes, often known as ‘black-box’ interventions, are found to be effective, their nature can make it difficult to elucidate exactly why. On its website, TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education), a charity focused on equality gaps in UK HE, notes that [6]

...participating in multi-intervention outreach seems to be associated with positive outcomes for students. However, the research methods used in the studies don't produce causal evidence. ... The existing evidence focuses on the overall efficacy of these programmes, treating them as ‘black box’ interventions. Therefore, it is not possible to identify which elements of the programmes may be most effective.

A recent systematic review of outreach programme effectiveness [8] came to a similar conclusion, stating that multidimensional interventions seem to have the most potential but that “Despite their promise, it is difficult to disentangle which elements of the intervention are particularly effective and which are not.” This finding is also supported by several other sources [4,7,13].

The above findings suggest that while progressive, sustained programmes including multiple interventions are generally impactful on HE progression, the impact of the individual elements can, by the nature of such programmes, be unclear. The current study attempts to pick out the effects of campus visits delivered as part of ongoing WP multi-stage schemes.

1.3. Engaging with Younger Age Groups

Engaging a younger audience has long been on the radar of the WP sector. As far back as 2008, the National Council for Educational Excellence [14] was advocating that

Every primary school should devote time to work on raising student aspirations to take up a place in higher education. Schools and HEIs should try to ensure that every pupil visits a higher education campus either during primary or early secondary education. ... [14] (p. 7)

A key finding of Moore et al.'s literature review [9] was the importance of consistent and sustained interventions from a young age. The authors note that “young people's attitudes to HE are often more likely to change around key transition points, such as the transition from primary into secondary school, and these transition points are an opportunity to communicate messages about HE.” This is supported by BIS [10] which states that “Outreach programmes need to be directed towards people at different stages of their education, starting at primary level.”

WP sector leaders have long argued that working with a younger age group was essential to programme success. Harrison and Waller [15] interviewed Aim Higher managers and found that many described the need to work with younger age groups: “A common prerequisite for success described. . . was the need to engage with younger age groups, given the pervasive and ingrained nature of educational disadvantage.”

There are a few evaluations of specific interventions for younger pupils in the literature. For example, a review of the Western Sydney University programme First Foot Forward [16], aimed at older primary school children, found that “students began considering university and other tertiary educational pathways as a result of the program”. However more work is clearly needed in this area.

1.4. The Campus Visit for Younger Pupils

Campus visits are a very prominent tool in the WP armoury, offered by 96% of HE providers [17] and are also popular with teachers [18,19]. There are robust theoretical underpinnings to support their use, grounded in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose thinking on habitus and capital informs much of the sector’s activity. As Maton [20] explains, the choices we are able to make are partly dependent on our habitus, or “the embodied experiences of our journey”; we have a sense of our place in the world which may lead us to exclude ourselves from certain opportunities and settings. In the educational context, a lack of exposure may lead to the feeling that our journey does or will not include university attendance; as Burnell [21] notes, “HE is a practice that is reproduced within some families,” and for others it may not be easy to access. A visit to a university setting is one way to begin addressing such imbalances and to show children for whom familial social structures do not promote these practices that they can still find a place within such an environment.

Although campus visit activity is very widespread, most is aimed at pupils in KS3/4, with Harrison et al. [17] noting that only a “small number” of providers were offering visits at primary age. Despite this, Gale et al. [22] note that programmes including campus visits can be particularly effective for the younger age group, saying that “Physically experiencing a university through a schedule of site visits designed both to inspire and familiarise young people have proven effective in many cases. . . They get to see first hand what the university looks like, how it operates and what it means to be a student in that context.”

There has been a small amount of work in this area in recent years; for example, Canovan and Luck [23] looked at parental attitudes towards university among parents accompanying primary-aged children to an on-campus event, finding that the ‘ambient information’ gathered—information collected by immersion in a university setting—“worked to make university seem ‘real’ or ‘achievable’ to parents”.

Greenaway and Terton [5], meanwhile, studied an Australian programme involving primary school students from low-SES areas which included, among other strands, a campus visit, finding that “These visits not only showcase the opportunities for study at the facilities and the many career opportunities available in the local area, but begin to demystify the assumptions surrounding tertiary education.” Despite these examples, however, it is clear that there is scope within the literature to explore this area further.

In summary, it is clear from this review of the existing literature that there is significantly more work that can be carried out to build the evidence base for WP activity, particularly when it comes to popular interventions such as multi-stage programmes and campus visits. In particular, there is a significant lack of research in these areas among younger children rather than those who are nearer to making decisions about participation in HE.

1.5. Research Questions

The above review suggests a need to expand the existing literature to study the effectiveness of specific aspects of multi-component interventions; to do this with a focus on younger age groups; and to recognise that campus visits are an under-studied intervention type for this cohort. In order to direct limited resources most effectively, it is essential to discover what understanding of university young people take from such experiences and how this impacts on their intentions towards future HE participation.

The research outlined in this paper studies the impacts of two campus visits that are part of a progressive intervention strategy for primary-aged children—in other words, it encompasses multi-intervention programmes, campus visits, and WP activity among younger pupils from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It thus has the capacity to broaden the evidence base in this area in a useful way. With this in mind, we posed the following research questions:

1. How does a second visit to a university campus modify pre-formed ideas about university in primary-aged pupils who have already experienced the setting?
2. How does such a follow-up visit modify these pupils' intentions to study at university?

2. Materials and Methods

In order to investigate the research questions above, we studied the experiences of primary Year 6 pupils (aged 10–11) who experienced a series of interventions as part of an ongoing WP programme based in the North West of England, including two visits to a university campus.

2.1. About the Outreach Programme

The structure of the University of Lancashire outreach programme for primary partners makes it an appropriate vehicle for addressing our research questions, providing a natural mechanism for exploring the experiences of primary pupils visiting a university campus setting twice. As part of the partnership offer, Year 6 classes take part in a visit to the university's Young Scientist Centre (YSC), a joint venture with the Royal Institution located on campus. They then undertake Mini Mentoring (MM), a multi-session programme culminating in a more extensive campus visit.

The Year 6 programme is structured as in Table 1:

Table 1. Structure of the widening participation programme experienced by participants.

Session Type	Location	Activities
YSC workshop (Oct–Dec)	YSC (on campus)	Pupils arrive by coach and walk through a small area of campus into the building that houses the YSC. They meet university staff and students and spend the day participating in hands-on science experiments.
MM sessions 1–3 (early summer)	In school	In sessions 1 and 2, a member of the WP team visits school and leads sessions on self-reflection and careers. In session 3, they are joined by two student ambassadors, one male and one female, who give a student life talk and Q&A.
MM session 4 (June–July)	On campus	Pupils arrive by coach. The day's schedule includes the following: • Campus tour comprising the Engineering Innovation Centre, Student Centre, library, sports centre, canteen, and halls of residence; • 'Design your own campus' activity; • Lunch, usually in the student canteen; • 'Graduation' ceremony, held in a main lecture theatre.

2.2. Participants

This study was conducted with four local partner primary schools, three of which are situated in areas of significant deprivation and have pupil premium (extra funding provided by the UK government to schools to help disadvantaged pupils perform better) levels twice or more than the average for the wider area. The fourth is broadly in line with regional averages. A total of 99 pupils participated in the research; of those for whom we had postcode data, the majority were living in IMD (English Indices of Deprivation, 2019 data) decile 1, the most deprived 10% of areas in the country, and almost all were in IMD d1-3. This cohort, therefore, was living in areas of severe deprivation, one of the most common criteria for inclusion in outreach activity.

2.3. Study Design

The study involved administering two surveys, labelled A and B, containing a mixture of structured and unstructured questions. Survey A was given in school at the beginning of MM session 1—in other words, after the pupils' YSC campus visit but before any other intervention—and Survey B was given at the end of their second visit, which constituted MM session 4.

These surveys were designed to shed light on the ideas that pupils held about universities a few months after their first, limited campus visit, and how these had or had not changed after a more extensive viewing. There was a gap of between six and nine months between the two visits. The study design and protocol was approved by the University's ethics committee (BAHSS2 0424, University of Lancashire); parents were given an information sheet and asked to give written informed consent to their children's participation before the research began, and pupils were given a specially designed graphical information sheet and asked to give written informed consent when completing the surveys.

The data collection instrument was designed to be easy to complete for the age group in question; it was limited to two sides of A4 paper and contained mainly tick-box items supplemented by a small number of free-text boxes. As the purpose was specifically to study the impact of the two campus visits, rather than the in-school information provided during MM sessions 1–3, the surveys focused on the physical experience of being in the university setting and how views on this changed over the two visits. A series of questions aimed at eliciting themes that illuminate how our cohort thought about the campus environment before their second visit, and what changed afterwards, were structured using the following sections:

- Three things I expect to see/I saw
We asked participants to list three things they expected to see when surveyed before their second visit, and three things that they actually saw afterwards. A total of 234 responses were received from our 78 participants in the pre-survey, and 252 responses were received in the post-survey. The comparison between the two sets of data is interesting in that it highlights pupils' initial image of the university, as formed by a previous brief visit, and how well this image holds up after a more sustained exposure.
- What is/was walking around the university (going to be) like?
Before the visit we asked participants what they thought walking around the university was going to be like, and afterwards we asked how they felt when they were walking around. We received 110 responses in the pre-visit survey and 94 in the post-visit survey.
- Paired-word choice.
In both pre- and post-surveys, we also asked 'Which of these words best describe what you think a university is like?' using the following pairs of words:

- Big/Small;
- Lots of people/Only a few people;
- Interesting/Boring;
- Weird/Normal;
- Scary/Comfortable;
- Noisy/Quiet;
- Friendly people/Unfriendly people;
- For people like me/Not for people like me;
- Mainly for very clever people/For everybody.

The survey was designed to promote the trustworthiness of our findings, using clear, concise questions appropriate to the age group. Items were grounded in established concepts and aligned with the study's objectives to promote accurate and meaningful responses.

Data collection took place during two academic years, 2022/23 and 2023/24. The schedule for data collection was as in Table 2:

Table 2. Data collection schedule.

Timing	Activity
Pre-Christmas	Pupils visit the Young Scientist Centre at the University of Lancashire campus.
Early summer	Survey A administered in participating schools at the start of session 1 of the Mini Mentoring programme.
Early summer	Sessions 2 and 3 of MM take place in participating schools.
Mid-summer	MM session 4 held on the university campus. Survey B administered on campus at the end of the session.

2.4. Data Analysis

The quantitative data gathered was simple and was analysed using MS Excel and appropriate statistical tests to determine the extent of any change. Before-and-after data were matched using the names and dates of birth of participants; data were then anonymised using alphanumeric codes and stored in a location accessible only to the research team. Qualitative data were analysed by two researchers using inductive thematic analysis, whereby the researchers carefully read through the whole dataset to pinpoint key ideas, using these to form initial codes. These codes were then grouped into potential themes. Comparisons between the themes identified by each researcher were discussed, with themes being refined and clarified as a result. This is an appropriate analytic approach for investigating this relatively unexamined area, as it does not start with any specific assumptions, but rather builds findings directly from the data.

3. Results

In total, we collected 89 initial pre-second visit surveys and 82 post-second visit surveys from 99 participating pupils, but we only analysed data from the 78 participants (including 32 boys and 45 girls) who completed both surveys in order to be able to examine the changes over time. Among the matched participants for whom we had postcode data, the majority (62%, 33/53) were living in IMD decile 1, the most deprived 10% of areas in the country, and almost all (91%, 48/53) were living in IMD d1-3.

3.1. How Does a Follow-Up Visit to a University Campus Modify Pre-Formed Ideas About Universities in 11-Year-Olds Who Have Already Experienced the Setting?

When it comes to basic views of university, the cohort held some very uniform views after their first visit, which were not subject to change after the second trip. This is most clearly demonstrated by the responses to paired-word items: on many of these measures, more than 90% of pupils chose the same option and less than 10% changed their view between sessions. Table 3 summarises the results. As highlighted in grey, more than 90% of our cohort agreed that universities are big, for everybody, contain friendly people, normal, and interesting, and these views are not mutable.

Table 3. Dichotomous views of the university experience, before and after the second visit.

University Is...	Before	After	Number Changing Their View
BIG rather than SMALL	78 (100%)	78 (100%)	0 (0%)
FOR EVERYBODY rather than MAINLY FOR CLEVER PEOPLE	75 (96%)	75 (96%)	2 (3%)
FRIENDLY PEOPLE rather than UNFRIENDLY PEOPLE	76 (97%)	77 (99%)	3 (4%)
NORMAL rather than WEIRD	73 (94%)	74 (95%)	3 (4%)
INTERESTING rather than BORING	74 (95%)	76 (97%)	4 (5%)
LOTS OF PEOPLE rather than ONLY A FEW PEOPLE	72 (92%)	69 (88%)	7 (9%)
FOR PEOPLE LIKE ME rather than NOT FOR PEOPLE LIKE ME	68 (87%)	71 (91%)	13 (17%)
COMFORTABLE rather than SCARY	64 (82%)	68 (87%)	16 (21%)
QUIET rather than NOISY	47 (60%)	62 (79%)	20 (26%)

It seems, therefore, that a single visit is enough to firmly embed certain ideas about university. Some other measures, however, showed less uniformity of view and greater change; these, together with the answers to the other items, allow us to draw out three key themes surrounding pupils' visions of university and how these change as their exposure increases.

a. Increased feelings of comfort

Before the event, around half of the pupils expressed positive sentiments about their forthcoming visit to the university campus, with the most common themes being that it would be 'fun' and 'interesting'. Afterwards, two-thirds were positive about their visit, but while the theme of 'interesting' remained, only one pupil described their visit as 'fun'. Instead, they used phrases suggesting that they were more comfortable in the setting than they had previously imagined, such as 'I felt good', 'safe, happy and appreciative', or 'happy calm relaxed'.

Some of the comments indicating increased comfort included the following:

- I felt comfortable because I could see things that you had to do, what jobs you might need for a course.
- Very peaceful and feeling cared about. I was interested.
- Good and it was big and I want to go back there and learn more things and very tired.

The shift in responses, becoming more positive but with less emphasis on fun, suggests that the pupils experienced their visit as something more than simply a day out of school; instead, they learned something about the university environment and their potential place within it.

This survey item also showed a decrease in responses containing the themes ‘scary’ or ‘lost/confused’. This mirrors the shift from ‘scary’ to ‘comfortable’ seen in the word-pair tests, which, together with a small move towards ‘for people like me’, is associated with wider changes towards feelings of comfort with the university setting.

On the other hand, a few pupils expressed a new theme, ‘shocked’, which, although not used in a negative way (e.g., “shocked, it was so big. One building cost 60 million!”), is not indicative of comfort.

b. From ephemeral to concrete

Before the second visit, around a quarter of the respondents (20/78) described their expected campus experience using terms that could be categorised as ‘ephemeral values’. These are not physical things that the participant can really expect to see, but rather things that they expect to *feel*; examples include ‘care’, ‘respect’, ‘comfortable’, and ‘society’.

The vast majority of these responses can be characterized as an expectation to encounter a ‘friendly environment’ during their visit. This indicates that the first, more limited visit, implanted a positive message about the university environment into pupils’ thoughts, but failed to give them a more tangible image about the surroundings. By contrast, there were only five such responses in the later survey.

In general, and unsurprisingly, the things pupils reported seeing after their second visit were rather more concrete. The largest single category, mentioned by 48 pupils, was specific facilities; the most commonly mentioned was the gym/sports centre, which barely featured in the pre-event responses but was one of the day’s visit venues. Similarly, many spoke about the library, and several mentioned the cafeteria, neither of which were mentioned at all before the day.

In a similar vein, pupils in the post-event survey were much more likely to mention specific university subjects than in the first questionnaire. Common responses included comments about architecture and art, which were the topics of some of the day’s sessions, as well as science labs in which some activities took place.

This increase in specificity is seen in other responses. For example, ‘buildings’ were highlighted as a common thing to expect to see/actually see in both surveys, but the post-session responses included more specific buildings, such as the computing centre or student centre. Both datasets also contained multiple references to what we classify as ‘objects’, such as chairs, tables, and windows, and after the visit, some of these were more specific, such as ‘giant projector’ or ‘racing cars’. We can think of this phenomenon as participants broadening their ‘university vocabulary’.

One interesting phenomenon was the rate at which pupils talked about the university being, or including things which are, ‘big’. This was mentioned by 16 pupils before the visit, using phrases such as ‘lots of places’, ‘huge’, ‘massive’, and ‘large rooms’, but only four pupils described it this way afterwards. We know from the paired-word questions that all pupils saw the university as big rather than small; furthermore, we know that participants noted the size of the campus, as the amount of walking and stairs involved in their tour was a bone of contention. This distinction, therefore, is probably attributable to the fact that participants were able to be more specific in their observations after their second visit, rather than knowing only a few things about the setting.

c. Decreased prominence of people

Before the visit, when asked to name things they expected to see when they toured the university, the most common theme, mentioned by 61/78 participants, concerned the people they might meet. Many of these responses were quite unspecific—21 pupils, for example, just said they expected to see ‘people’—but other common answers included ‘lots of people’, ‘friendly’ or ‘kind’ people, staff including teachers and professors, students, and

people doing things such as using computers or learning. By contrast, only 22 participants talked about the people they met after the visit.

A similar phenomenon occurred when we asked about what participants expected walking around campus to be like. A total of 15/84 pre-survey responses mentioned ideas about meeting people or general busyness, such as 'it's going to be crowded with nice people in my opinion' or 'hiving with activity with eager people'. By contrast, the people encountered or ideas about busyness were only mentioned by four people after their visit.

This change is also tangentially referenced in the paired-word questions; the only change that was statistically significant (calculations of statistical significance using a Chi-square test were carried out for all the matched-pair items; this was the only one which demonstrated change that was statistically significant below the 5% level) was that from 61% to 81% 'quiet' ($p < 0.01$, effect size 0.21). This and the small shift away from 'lots of people' were probably partly driven by the fact that the first visit took place during a busy time of year, while the second was once most students had left for the summer, although of course participants still encountered university staff and students. But, as will be discussed, there was probably an element of what was novel and what was familiar during the visit in play here as well.

3.2. How Does Such a Follow-Up Visit Modify Pupils' Intentions to Study at University?

Both surveys asked the question 'When you are older would you like to go to university?' Overall, we saw negligible change on this measure, with respondents being largely positive in their view; 69% answered 'yes' to this question in the first survey, and 71% in the second. Moreover, in the cohort of 78 matched responses, only 18 (23%) altered their response between surveys, with 10 becoming more positive and 8 less positive about university; in fact, a large proportion of the participants, 47/78 (61%), answered 'yes' to the question both before and after their second visit.

This lack of change occurred despite participants experiencing three in-school sessions as part of the MM programme in addition to the campus visit. However, there was some indication that views among participants solidified between the first and second surveys, which can be seen when we further consider the segment of the cohort who said they wanted to go to university on both surveys. The second survey asked the follow-up question: 'Has your visit today changed your ideas about attending university? How?'. Among this group, an important trend was that of pupils indicating that their second campus visit had strengthened their intentions to attend university; of those who answered the supplementary question, 29/43 (67%) responded along these lines. Here are some typical responses:

- Yes because I thought it was all about learning but there is actually a lot of fun stuff.
- I was previously thinking about going to university but the trip [made] me like university.
- At first I wasn't too sure about going but now I really want to go.
- Yes, at first I thought it would be a little boring but now I think it is interesting.

Alongside general indications of strengthened intentions, a number of more specific recurrent themes were expressed. As in some of the above examples, several participants indicated that their experience had made them feel that university was likely to be enjoyable. Others had learned about careers that interested them or had been inspired or interested by the facilities on offer.

4. Discussion

The results outlined above allow us to make a series of observations about the potential impact of repeat visits to a university campus on pupils from deprived backgrounds in the

upper primary age group under consideration, which in turn suggests actions that can be taken to increase the impact of WP activity. Given the sample size and certain limitations outlined in Section 4.6, the following analysis should be taken as indicative rather than definitive until further studies have been conducted.

4.1. *One Visit Is Enough to Embed Certain Simple Views*

After a single interaction with staff and students on campus, primary-aged pupils had already formed some strikingly uniform, but simple, views about what a university is like. More than 90% of pupils held that universities are big, for everybody, contain friendly people, normal, and interesting; only a tiny handful changed their mind about this after their second exposure to the setting.

Whilst it is difficult to be certain, due to being unable to survey the children before their first visit, it is possible that their trip to the YSC on campus was at least partly responsible for these views; this would align with the findings of Burgess et al. [24] who, studying an older age group, concluded that a single interaction with a WP provider was associated with increased university enrolment. Although outcomes are different for the cohorts—the younger age group gathered some basic information about HE settings, while older pupils were more likely to progress to university—the underlying message, that a single WP intervention can have tangible benefits, is the same.

4.2. *A Repeat Visit to a Campus Setting Is Associated with Increased Feelings of Comfort in the Environment*

There were certain areas of clear difference in how the cohort expressed their views of university after the second, more extensive, visit. One of the most positive findings from a WP perspective is the evidence of increased feelings of comfort in the university environment expressed by many participants. A third of pupils described emotions that suggested relaxation or wellbeing whilst on campus for the second time, far more than had expected to in the first survey. In addition, fewer respondents found the campus ‘scary’ or felt ‘lost’ than had expected to previously.

We can harness Bourdieusian thinking to understand why this might be important. Bourdieu argues that our cumulative experiences, particularly those encountered in young life, structure our *habitus* in a way that then shapes how we act. As Maton [20] notes, “habitus... captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others... Which choices we choose to make, therefore, depends on the range of options available at that moment (thanks to our current context), the range of options visible to us, and on our dispositions (habitus), the embodied experiences of our journey”.

Burnell [21] notes that a disconnect between our internalised habitus and certain situations lead to feelings of being a ‘fish out of water’ and that “Feelings of not belonging, of gate-crashing, would be common amongst learners who did not have HE as part of their habitus during up-bringing.” By taking a group of young learners, who may not have absorbed familiarity with the university setting via the home, and giving them the experience of feeling comfortable on campus, we are affording an opportunity to structure an element of habitus in such a way that they may later feel able to make a different set of choices in life than they might not otherwise have considered. As such, feelings of comfort and by extension the potential to ‘belong’ are key intermediate outcomes in terms of progression to higher education, a thesis supported by Thomson et al. [25]. The fact that we found increased feelings of comfort after a second campus visit constitutes a strong argument for including more than one such experience in an outreach programme.

4.3. Repeat Visits May Show Participants Multiple Dimensions of the University Experience

After the second visit, pupils described the campus setting in more concrete terms than they had in the first survey. Where they said they expected it to be 'big', they described the different places that they saw; where they had predicted seeing 'buildings', some specified what these buildings were, demonstrating a broadening of their 'university vocabulary'. This increase in accurate, practical description was accompanied by a corresponding decrease in what we refer to as 'ephemeral' descriptions, such as 'care' and 'respect', indicating that different information was now available to participants.

Further evidence that a second visit was associated with participants experiencing a different aspect of the university comes from the drop-off in references to people between the first and second surveys. Whereas the first survey responses contained many references to the different types of people the pupils expected to meet, these were mentioned far less after the second visit, despite the fact that the visit featured individuals such as student ambassadors and university staff.

The first visit took place in the autumn, a time when campus is generally busy, while the second was in the summer, a time when it would have been quieter. Nevertheless, several thousand university staff would still have been at work, and the pupils met WP professionals and student ambassadors, so it might seem surprising that there was such a large drop in the significance of these individuals in participants' responses.

However, it is also possible to interpret these findings differently. In this reading, the people encountered during the group's first visit to the YSC made a strong positive impression, and thus when they were asked what they expected to see on their second trip, 'people' of various sorts loomed large. However, upon a second encounter, these people may have had less novelty value, thus freeing pupils' attention to focus on other aspects of their experience, such as the specifics of buildings and the objects contained within. This demonstrates the potential value of repeated interventions of different types, which may provide pupils with a fully rounded sense of the variety of components of a university.

4.4. A Second Visit Was Associated with Strengthened Existing Intentions to Attend University

In terms of intention to access university, there was little change in absolute views, with a large proportion of the cohort stating in both surveys that they would like to attend. On the surface, one might feel inclined to question the worth of the MM intervention, given that at the start of the programme, when the pupils had experienced a single limited campus visit, they were already largely positive about university.

Further examination of the qualitative responses, however, demonstrated that the programme was associated with a clear strengthening of intentions to progress. Some participants indicated that this response was due to their second visit having provided them with additional reasons to consider progressing to HE. Pupils who had previously wanted to go to university for one reason stated additional motivations after their second visit; for example, initially, they wanted to come to learn but now had realised it might also be fun.

Being able to see multiple reasons for continuing to higher education seems to mean that an eventual decision to participate is more likely. We would argue, therefore, that the layering of experiences such as those provided by the programme under discussion enables pupils to view university from different perspectives, and can provide extra motivation to attend. However, more research is needed to investigate the progression of such motivations from the primary-aged group through to the point of university application, and how these are related to different types of intervention, such as campus visits or in-school sessions.

4.5. Practical Implications

Whilst care must be taken not to extrapolate too freely from this exploratory study, several points in the above discussion suggest practical steps that widening participation professionals can take to enhance their offer to younger pupils. Although a single campus visit was associated with the development of some basic knowledge about the HE environment, responses after the second visit suggested that young people felt more comfortable in the setting, demonstrated a more specific set of ideas about what a campus 'is like', and were more settled in their intention to apply to university. While part of this may be associated with the wider intervention rather than the campus tour, some pupils cited specific aspects of their visit in their responses. WP providers may want to consider inviting school groups onto their premises on multiple occasions, rather than just once, to increase impact, particularly by exposing children to different aspects of the experience to allow for the incremental formation of ideas and foster a sense of belonging.

4.6. Limitations

Ideally, the study design would have included a baseline questionnaire administered before the *first* occasion on which the pupils visited the campus. Due to operational factors, as well as a reluctance to over-survey children in this age group, this was not possible. However broad learnings gained from evaluation work with similarly aged comparator groups are included for context where relevant.

Additionally, between the two surveys, pupils experienced three in-school sessions discussing life goals, careers, and university, as well as their second campus visit. However, the focus of the current research is the campus visit experience, and the survey instruments were focused on the physical understanding of the university setting. Where in-school content may have impacted pupils' views of higher education more generally, this is highlighted. Given these programme-related issues, we regard observed changes as correlational rather than causal in the context of this study.

Finally, we acknowledge several more limitations of this study: the sample size is small, and the context of the research has some aspects which are specific to the UK. In addition, the young people who participated constitute a 'convenience', rather than a randomised sample. For these reasons, as well as those outlined above, the current work should be considered as exploratory, providing a base upon which future studies can build.

4.7. Future Directions

This work is intended as a first foray into building a research knowledge base to support repeated campus visit activity for younger pupils, particularly those from low-SES backgrounds. As noted, this study has certain limitations, and we would like to make some suggestions as to how future work can strengthen the evidence base.

Firstly, research with a more robust baseline is needed. Our questionnaires were given to pupils who had already experienced their first campus visit; further work that surveys children before they are exposed to an HE setting can provide a better foundation for subsequent findings.

Secondly, a larger cohort and, if ethically possible, a control group in any future studies would be advisable. In particular, our cohort was entirely low-SES; contrasting the views of such a group with those of pupils from more affluent backgrounds would give more scope to extrapolate results to a wider population.

Thirdly, the capacity to track pupils further into their educational journey, while methodologically challenging, would provide the strongest evidence for how early experiences impact final outcomes. Whilst such longitudinal studies are time- and labour-intensive, initiatives such as the HEAT educational tracker database (a collaborative

database that tracks HE providers' interactions with pupils pre-entry: <https://heat.ac.uk/>) in the UK are promising for future endeavours.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Our findings suggest that a single visit to a university campus is associated with forming certain ideas about the HE setting; at the time of the first survey, conducted a few months after the children had initially visited the campus for the first time, our group expressed certain simple, almost unanimous views about the nature of a university (e.g., big, for everybody, interesting), which then did not change to any significant extent up to the time of the second survey.

However, our data reveal a number of potential benefits to repeating the visit experience, with important qualitative changes in pupils' perceptions of the university environment seen after their second visit. An increased feeling of comfort in the setting was a common reaction, with pupils feeling, for example, 'happy', 'calm', and 'good', despite not having anticipated this at the time of the first survey. Such feelings of comfort are an important intermediate marker of desire to progress to higher education, and encouraging them at a younger age can make the formation of such structures of habitus more viable.

The value of multiple visits was also demonstrated by a number of differences between what pupils expected to see on their second visit and what they actually saw. The first visit had obviously given participants many ideas about the people they might meet on campus, as this was widely discussed in often positive terms in the first survey; the second visit added the ability to describe the physical environment in more concrete and less abstract terms, indicating that respondents had gathered a new set of information during their second visit.

There was little change in overall intention to attend university between the two surveys, with a large proportion of pupils already having formed the intention after their first visit. However, one notable trend was that such intentions were bolstered by the second visit, which often revealed further reasons to attend that participants had previously not been aware of; for example, a pupil who had initially intended to attend university in order to further their learning might also become aware that the experience could be fun.

Given the limited and exploratory nature of this study, caution is needed when extrapolating these findings beyond the impacts of the specific programme under consideration. However, when taken together, our results suggest a number of benefits to programmes incorporating multiple campus visits, in terms of developing rounded views of 'what university is like', building feelings of comfort and belonging which can aid choices to participate when older, and making confidence in intentions to progress more robust. Such considerations lead us to suggest the following measures to help make future outreach schemes more impactful:

1. For groups who may be less likely to feel comfort or belonging in the university setting—for example, those from low-participation communities or who are first-in-family—multiple campus visits can be beneficial in developing these attitudes;
2. Using a variety of visit types, for example, one which is focused on an activity and one which has a greater 'tour' element, can lead primary pupils to incrementally develop a rounded view of the university experience, both in terms of the physical campus and the associated people;
3. Repeat visits can work to develop and then strengthen intentions to apply to university by gradually exposing pupils to different motivations for progressing to higher education.

To date, the evidence for the benefits of multiple campus visits for younger children, particularly as part of a sustained programme of interventions, has been somewhat sparse.

This pilot study suggests a number of concrete benefits for such activities. However, further work remains to be carried out, particularly to address the limitations of the current study with regard to sample size and selection, as well as looking at educational contexts outside of the UK. Possibilities for future research include studies beginning with pupils who have never visited a campus, in order to tease out the effect of the first visit more robustly; disentangling the potential confounding effects of in-school and on-campus interventions; and studies which track pupils through their educational career, demonstrating what link, if any, exists between attitudes in primary school and future HE progression.

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