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**future.**



**HASCE**  
Health And Social Care Evaluations

# An asset-based approach to Widening Participation

# for young people in Cumbria

# > Introduction

**In a ‘deficit’ model of outreach, capital is identified in terms of what the student lacks. Such a model risks overlooking a number of already-existing skills, traits and characteristics, which may benefit a student at University.**

Rather than assuming a deficit model amongst Widening Participation (WP) students and potential students, work should be done to identify existing tools and predilections for engaging in cultural practice. These are the ‘assets’ available to the young people targeted by outreach programmes. As such, an asset-based approach aims at mapping and engaging with the resources – institutions, persons, activities and so on – that provide such capital; as well as understanding how young people interface with such assets, and possible enablers and obstacles for this.

This report documents the research commissioned by Hello Future to investigate the role of assets in the provision of social and cultural capital for young people in Cumbria.

## The aims of this project were to:

**1** Identify the critical facets of an asset-based approach to (WP) for young people from Cumbria.

**2** Using these facets, and other information, to create an asset-based approach to (WP) for young people from Cumbria.

## > Methodology:

### Literature Review



of a range of academic and policy literature together with evidence gathered in the Health and Social Knowledge Exchange’s previous work in this area.

### Primary data collection



from interviews with key stakeholders; namely, individuals who bridged both the current landscapes in target learner communities (ie CCOP wards) and level 4-6 settings ie FE/HE and degree apprenticeships.

### Feedback and analysis



Collection of feedback and analysis on the draft map of assets by strategic-level stakeholders in Hello Future.

# > Literature Review

(WP) objectives have evolved from a focus on getting more under-represented groups to apply and enrol at Universities, to broaden the focus to cover the whole student lifecycle: application, admission, student experience, continuation, completion and graduate outcome. These activities are commonly referred to as Access and Participation (A&P).

“equality of opportunity for under-represented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education” (Office for Students, 2019a). – Definition of A&P

## However:

higher education remains stratified, with the socio-economically disadvantaged persistently under-represented (Pickering, 2019, p.57)



There is a broad consensus that the major challenge to the whole lifecycle approach remains the framing of (WP) in terms of what people are lacking in order to enable them to gain equal access to HE, in order to be able to overcome barriers. **Problems with this “deficit approach” include:**

1

The success of Access and Participation is often framed within individualist, meritocratic frameworks that reduce the problem of (WP) to changing the attitudes and dispositions of disadvantaged individuals, rather than broader social, economic and cultural dimensions (Burke and Lumb, 2018, p. 12).

In addition, participation from rural Cumbria is particularly likely to involve physical and geographic mobility which conflicts with aspirations of many who live in the region (HASCE, 2019).

2

Discourses that blame individuals tend to exacerbate feelings of incapability in both teachers and students. Students associated with equity policies and discourses are most at risk of being perceived as ‘undeserving’ and ‘unworthy’ of higher education participation due to the ways that (WP) tends to be connected to anxieties about lowering of standards (Lizzio & Wilson 2013; Burke 2012; Smit 2012; Yorke & Thomas 2003, p. 68).

5

Deficit approaches tend to downplay the contribution of educational institutions in reproducing narratives of advantage and disadvantage (Webb, Burke et al. 2017, p. 142).

Instead, it has often been problematised as being the difference between the socio-economic advantaged and disadvantaged (Harrison, 2012, p. 39). This can be exacerbated when, as some research has identified, (WP) is seen as “increasing participation” rather than a transformational project of widening educational opportunities (Curtis et al., Sutton Trust, 2008, p. 4).

3

Deficit approaches often fail to identify, or obscure, who is defining groups as (WP). “Current approaches measuring the impact of (WP) initiatives do not challenge definitions of what and who is valued and who is empowered to make such judgements. They frequently fail to question what constitutes success.” (Hayton and Stevenson, 2018, p.7).

The understanding of student “potential” or “ability” (or, conversely, lack of potential or ability) can depend on the ways that those with the institutional authority to make such judgments construct a sense of capability from within their specific disciplinary and institutional context (Burke and McManus, 2009).

4

Methods of determining (WP) groups can overlook existing assets when framed through a deficit lens (Pickering et al. 2019, pp. 59-65).

# > From Deficit to Assets



Having access to certain material and economic resources

such as a computer, internet, transportation and books are

**important in developing the forms of 'capability'** that might be recognised by university lecturers.

“Being ‘misrecognised’ as ‘incapable’ might be exacerbated by a person’s social location and background; for example **living in a remote area might make it far more difficult to be recognised** as capable when access to Wi-Fi or transportation into university is severely limited.” (Burke et al., 2016, p. 17)

**As a result, it is important to situate these approaches in specific concepts which help to unpack the complexity of existing assets in (WP) groups.**

# > Assets and Capital



## Social capital

refers to the resources that people gain from being a part of a network of social relationships and is acquired through people's connections to groups and networks.

The meaning of social capital can be captured as “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know” (Giorgas, 2017, p. 207).

## Cultural capital

refers to social assets

(i.e. non-economic assets)

that promote social mobility beyond economic means and can be built through education, as this increases knowledge, skills and experience.



**Cultural capital is widely considered to be**

**largely inherited from the family** and has been found to be indicative of future educational outcomes, thus there is a link between cultural capital, higher education and aspiration (Turner, 2017, pp.95-96).

Family cultural capital, defined as the status, class, and cultural tastes of a person inherited from their family (Vichie, 2017 cited in Turner, 2017. p. 95) is therefore considered a key influence on decision-making by young people about their post-compulsory education choices.

# > Social and Cultural Capital in Rural Context

In a UK study on the effects of rurality on young people’s post-compulsory choices in a remote ex-mining town, **Mills and Gale (2008) described the ‘inheritance’ effect of family social capital. The history of low educational attainment**, long-term unemployment and economic marginalisation that young people observed among their parents and community, **led them to assume these were the only options available to them.**

Research on the ways in which social and cultural capital is manifested in specifically rural contexts allows a greater understanding of how assets inform the (WP) process. In short, it becomes clear that the use of such assets is not simply down to the choices of the individual, but rather exist within a network of relationships. For example, research suggests that proximity of the university appeared to be one of the most important factors affecting a student’s decision on which institution to apply for; which calls into question the extent to which students who have no familiarity with higher education are making the most informed choices. (Curtis et al. 2008, p. 5 – Sutton Trust)

# > Gated Assets



Assets exist which are not typically identified as such from the perspective of HE. Yet, such assets are able to provide a range of strengths such as **emotional intelligence and resilience, personal qualities and values, teamwork and communication skills, and cultural competences.**

However, it becomes clear from the literature that, unlike a blanket “capabilities” approach, **understanding assets (both personal and institutional) also requires identifying the ways in which assets can be accessed, encouraged or blocked.**

For example, a number of key interfaces with HE outreach is provided in a schools context; but these are also subject to a number of filtering systems (or “gates”) that potentially obstruct students engaging with them. [Gorard and See \(2013, p.84\)](#) suggested that relying on schools alone to support HE outreach overlooked more localised strategies of education, whereby outreach activities could be used as a “reward” for the most talented and hardworking, rather than those who might benefit the most.

If the objectives of the universities and the gatekeepers to school-based activities (such as teachers or careers advisors) are not aligned, the impact of outreach activities may be limited ([Pickard et al., 2019, p.70](#)).

**As a result, it is important to not only map the existing assets within a given area, but also to understand the various “gates” within these assets that affect who can draw upon them.**



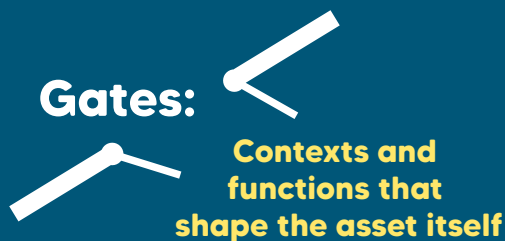
# Assets in Cumbria and Outcomes from their application

The following **table summarises the assets identified from interviews with Hello Future staff**, based on their personal and professional experiences. The data has been thematically analysed and in terms of contexts, enabling mechanisms and disabling mechanisms, and outcomes. After which, **assets can be understood as not simply “things” which exist, but rather mechanisms for improving capabilities which are gated at particular points** to either encourage or block access.

ASSET	Outcome of assets based on analysis of enabling and disabling mechanisms for a variety of contexts
<b>Careers and jobs information</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Disparity in uptake by young people for IAG opportunities that have information about careers and routes into jobs they do not know about, beyond familiarity and expectations related to traditional or locally dominant choices.</li> <li>● Additional careers experiences and information that young people have access to varies within and between different schools and colleges and areas.</li> <li>● Differences in education and careers choices by young people in different areas which may not optimise their opportunities.</li> </ul>
<b>Information sources about HE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Accessible information linking subjects studied at school to the different routes and subjects available in HE may be lacking.</li> <li>● Perceived differences in understanding of range of content, structure and delivery of different HE courses</li> </ul>
<b>Individual's skills and experience to support decision making and progression</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Varying abilities of YP to have confidence and communicate their own achievements, and know-how to demonstrate and maximise relevance of extra-curricular skills and experience.</li> </ul>
<b>HE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● If schools plan trips to HE providers further afield, these are usually more intensive and targeted.</li> <li>● Varied accessibility to information for understanding variation of University offers.</li> </ul>
<b>Employers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Experience of work can affect application for certain degree programmes.</li> <li>● Potential differences in detailed knowledge of education and careers options for young people in different areas.</li> </ul>
<b>Informal IAG</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Variations in understanding of the 'lived experience' of HE, e.g. how student debt is managed.</li> <li>● Variations in localised perceptions of HE and career progression.</li> <li>● Variations in access to relatable and/or interesting information for YP across the region.</li> </ul>

# > Discussion and Summary

The literature review demonstrated that while the deficit model is still prominent in (WP) outreach and intervention work, asset and capability-based models offer significant alternatives. At the same time, it is important to understand such assets in-depth, because these are not necessarily openly accessible. Instead, **assets will always depend upon certain forms of “gatekeeping.”**



The importance of this distinction is to identify the different wider drivers and contexts which may affect a young person's accessing of a particular asset. Neither “gate” nor “keeper” is necessarily fixed in place, and is subject to change; but change may be easier in some instances than others.

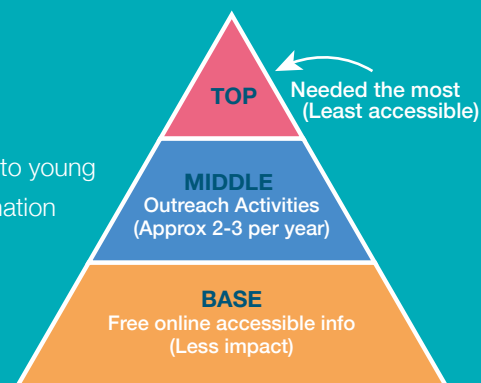
For example, in areas of high deprivation, school staff effort and focus may be largely expended on ensuring young people have access to food, shelter, safety, before they can think about facilitating access to activities such as mentoring (as one participant noted, young people most in need (of everything) are often those that get the least access).

The data collected suggests that **understanding how these gates are created and maintained is key to underpinning an asset-based approach to both (WP) and outreach work.** It allows practitioners to identify areas where asset gatekeeping can be addressed, but also to place assets in terms of the broader contexts they are subject to.

## > Asset - Mapping

During the course of data collection, one participant described how information available to young people about HE can be viewed as a triangle: the base layer, which is abundant, is information online which is accessible and free, but tends to have less impact. The middle layer of information consists of outreach activities such as those of Hello Future. Access to these is largely governed by more local asset bases (such as schools or clubs).

Practitioners commented that Hello Future's Schools & Colleges programme is designed for each year group to have 2-3 interventions per year, with the topics relating to the year groups specific needs relating to HE. The top layer, which consists of the information that target learners are asking for most, is the least available and least accessible.



## > Improving the asset map

The data collected for this project has been limited to Hello Future practitioners, managers and strategic leads.

The next question to ask is the extent to which the non-outreach assets identified here are considered as such by those involved in their delivery or maintenance. This would include, in particular, community groups and voluntary sector groups, and the parents and carers who constitute a key part of the informal IAG. These are both areas that participants in this report suggested could be key assets in supporting young people's decision-making and knowledge-based, but have not always been engaged with to the extent they might.



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