Adult learners: insights into motivations, choices and support needs



Cherry Canovan

University of Central Lancashire

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Executive summary

This document reports the results of a survey carried out with adult learners in Cumbria and north Lancashire in Nov 2021-Jan 2022. A total of 30 responses were received, 17 from individuals currently taking access courses and 13 from access course alumni. The key findings are as follows.

Returning to education

- The most common reasons for not having pursued education earlier on in life were not knowing what to do at that point, family circumstances, negative experiences in secondary education, and preferring to go straight into work/apprenticeship.
- Money worries were the biggest barrier to returning to education, cited by 22/30.
- Other commonly mentioned barriers included balancing study with paid work, time pressures, parental responsibilities and mental health issues.
- By far the most common reasons for choosing an access course were "It would enable me to go to university" and "Progression towards a career I would enjoy".
- In the case of our cohort, access course participation is strongly associated with wishing to attend university (current access students) and enrolling in university (past access students).

Support needs

- Understanding and accessing student finance was the most commonly cited support need among both current and past access students.
- Current access learners felt they needed to improve their academic skills. However this was much less prevalent among access alumni, suggesting current systems are effective.
- Most respondents, particularly those now in HE, knew where to go for support with financial issues and wellbeing.
- However less than half of current access students were sure they could access skills development support, and most respondents across both groups were unsure how to access career planning support.
- Current access students found their college the greatest source of support with their studies. Six in 10 said they did not use Hello Future at the time of completion, however increasing activity with this cohort should improve their awareness of the organisation.
- Around half of participants would prefer to receive interventions face-to-face, with a similar number preferring a blended approach. There was little appetite for fully online provision.

Progression to university

- Finding the perfect course was the most important factor in choosing a university, followed by an institution that would help to achieve career goals and one that is easy to travel to.
- All respondents were very positive that HE would help them to achieve their career goals.
- Among current access learners, six in 10 strongly felt that HE was for people like them, but only four in 10 strongly felt that they would fit in well.
- Those with HE experience were more likely to feel strongly that they can succeed academically at university, presumably because of positive experiences.

Conclusions

- These results suggest pursuing a face-to-face or blended programme of interventions including elements of student finance, exploring career options, instilling confidence in academic ability, and giving information about student life.
- It would be useful to undertake a programme of qualitative research to investigate these issues in more depth.

Introduction

This document details the results of a survey carried out by researchers at the University of Central Lancashire, in conjunction with Hello Future, the Cumbria Uni Connect. It is the first part of a piece of research being conducted into the progression and support needs of adult learners.

More outreach activity is now taking place with this cohort, defined as those learners aged 19+. These adult learners are a heterogenous group and Uni Connect branches have found that there is little research into their progression and support needs. However practitioners are aware that outreach techniques in use with school-age learners may not translate successfully to work with adults. There is therefore a pressing need for research into the motivations, pathways and choices of this group, in order that their progression may be best supported.

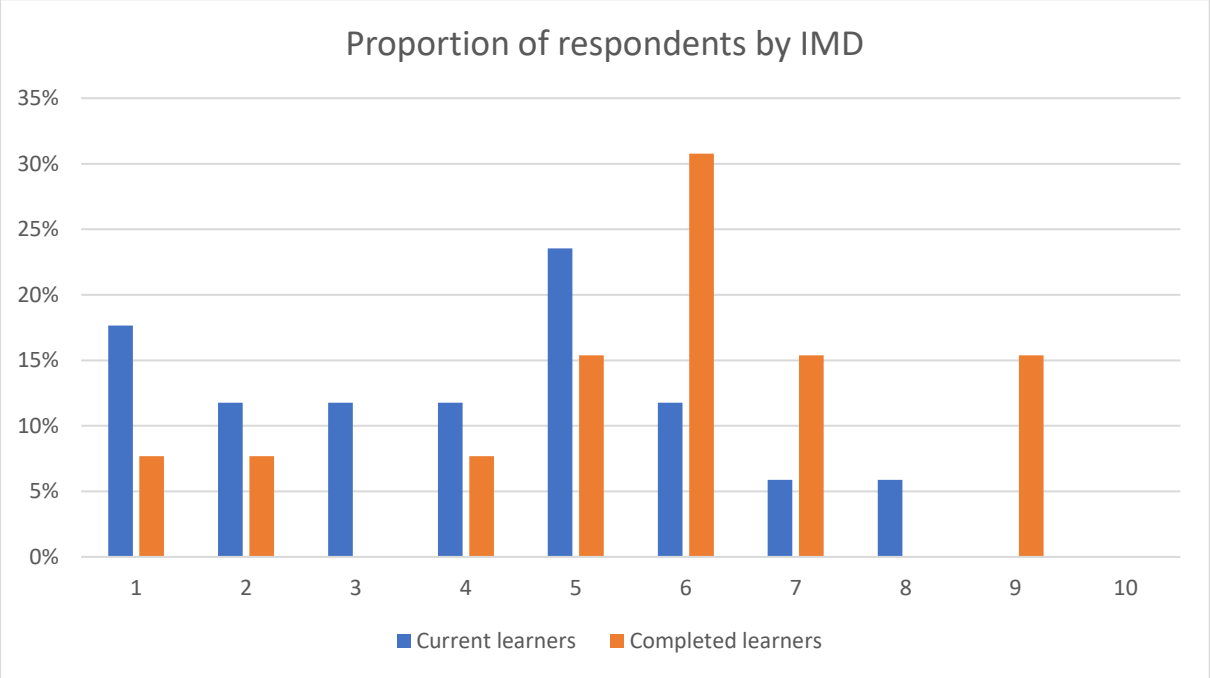
Our report analyses an online quantitative survey carried out with 30 adult learners who are either currently enrolled on access courses or who have recently completed them. This survey was disseminated by Hello Future practitioners to adult learners with whom they are currently working, as well as to access course alumni. Surveys were anonymous and were completed either within Hello Future sessions or at a time of participants' choosing. The survey was conducted between November 2021-January 2022 among adult learners in Cumbria and north Lancashire.

This document considers the specific needs of adult learners in and around Cumbria. The geographic situation of the county – sparsely populated and remote, with a few isolated large settlements – means that learners in this area may have a specific set of support needs connected with travel, available careers and skills shortages. However there are broader points of interest for those interested in working with this key group.

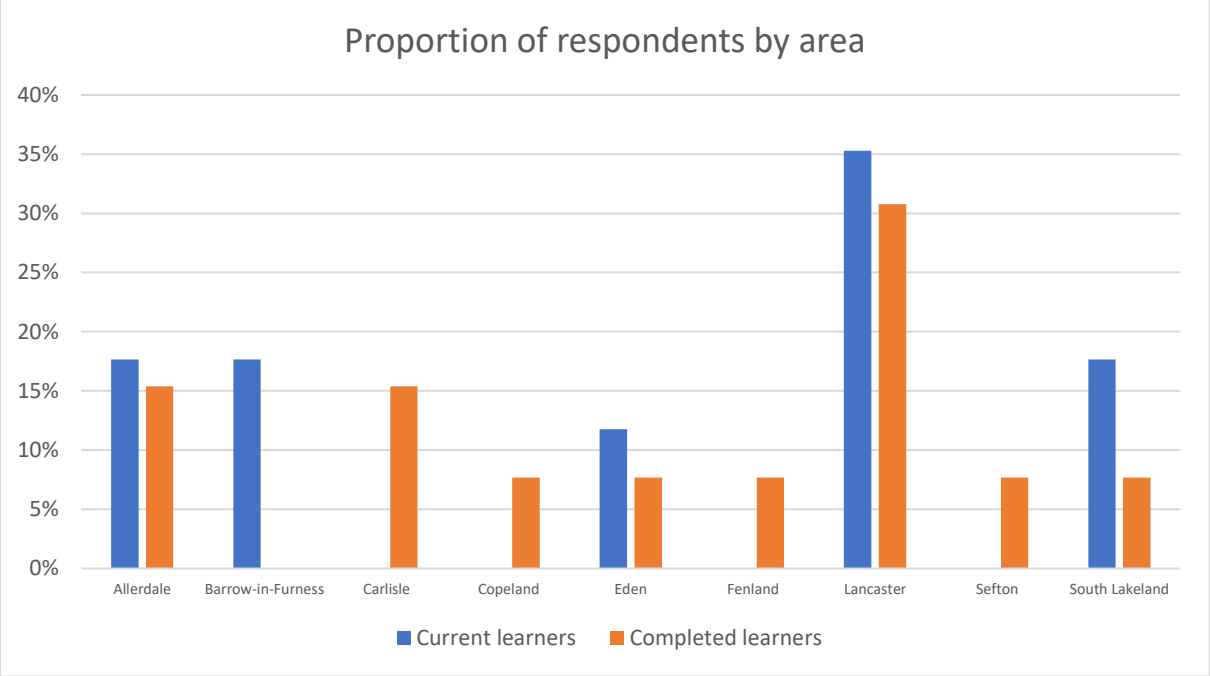
Overview of respondents

A total of 30 respondents completed the survey. Of these, 26 were female and four male. 17 were currently studying on an access course and 13 had completed an access course in the preceding five years. The four males in the sample were divided evenly across these two groups.

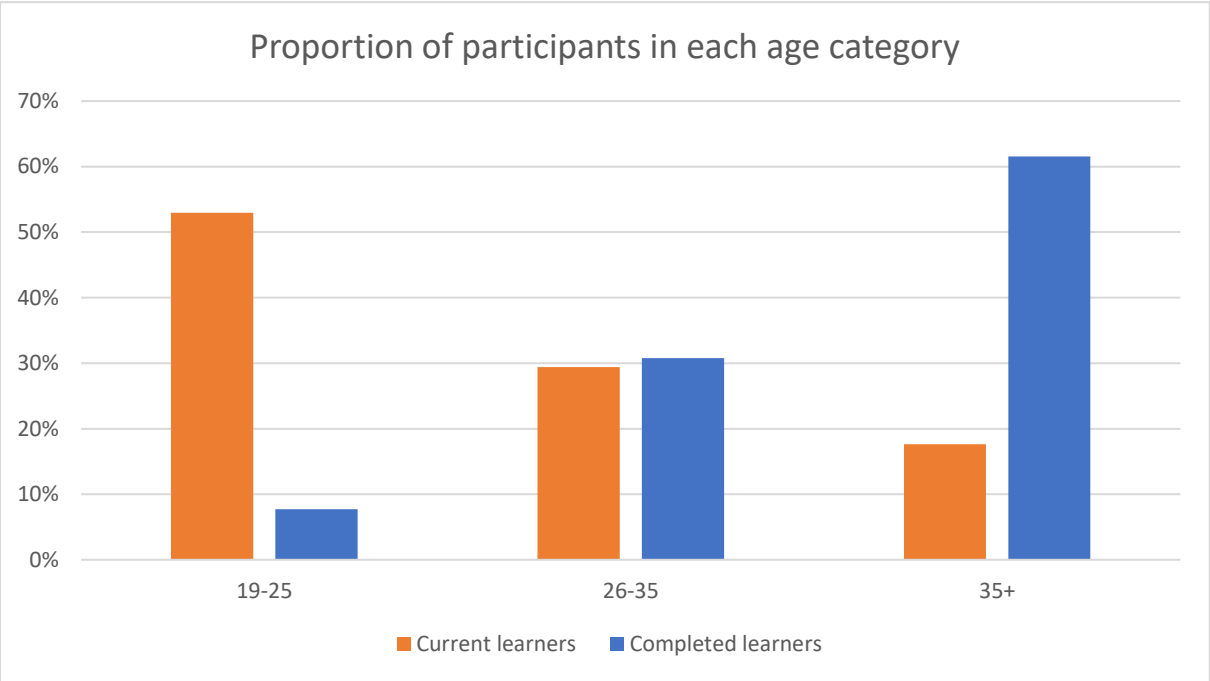
Participants gave postcodes in areas with a range of levels of deprivation. Those who had completed access courses tended to live in more affluent areas than those currently studying one:



Participants were mainly resident in Cumbria or Lancaster, with one respondent giving a postcode in Cambridgeshire. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who had completed access courses lived in a wider range of areas than those currently studying:



The age distribution of the two groups was quite different, with current learners much younger in comparison to those who had completed an access course – more than can be explained purely by the passage of time. This is likely to be a function of recruitment methods used to invite participation.



This disjuncture in age at least partly explains the discrepancy in deprivation data between the two groups, as the oldest age group of respondents had a median IMD decile of six, compared to four in the younger age groups.

Returning to education

We asked learners a series of questions designed to probe their educational experience – why they had not pursued education earlier in life, what barriers they had faced on returning to education and what had motivated them to enrol on an access course.

Earlier experiences

We first asked "Why did you originally choose not to pursue education earlier on in life?" with a series of choices from which respondents could pick as many as they wanted. The following table shows how many of our 30 respondents selected each option:

Why did you originally choose not to pursue education earlier on in life?	
Not knowing what to do at that point	12
Family circumstances	10
Negative experiences in secondary education	7
Wanted to go straight into work/apprenticeship	7
I pursued education but now wish to retrain	4
Lack of knowledge about progression routes	3
Peer Influence	2
No FE courses/colleges locally that I wanted to attend	1
Relocation concerns	1
Didn't get the right grades	1
Family influence	1
Lack of qualifications or A levels	1
Mental health issues	1

As can be seen, 'not knowing what to do' and 'family circumstances' were the biggest factors in not continuing in education when younger, each chosen by around a third of respondents. 'Negative experiences in secondary education' and 'wanted to go straight into work' were each chosen by around a quarter of respondents.

One interesting point to note is that none of our four male respondents selected the 'family circumstances' option. Although numbers are too small to draw any definite conclusions on this, it is certainly suggestive.

Barriers to returning to education

We then asked "What barriers, if any, have you encountered in returning to education?" Again we gave a series of choices, with participants free to select any that applied (PTO).

What barriers have you encountered in returning to education?	
Money worries	22
Balancing study with paid work	15
Not enough time	13
Parental responsibilities	12
Mental health issues	10
Travel/transport	6
Other caring responsibilities	2

As can be seen, money worries were a factor for nearly three-quarters of respondents. Half also cited balancing study with paid work, which one would assume is also linked to concerns over money. Lack of time, parental responsibilities and mental health were all frequently cited. More than 85% of participants listed two or more barriers to returning to education, suggesting that access learners in general face obstacles in following this route.

Why an access course?

Turning to motivations to enrol, we asked "Why did you decide to study on an access course?" The question gave participants five potential options, and asked them to choose up to two. These were the results:

Why did you decide to study on an access course?	
It would enable me to go to university	21
Progression towards a career I would enjoy	19
Progression towards a secure career	7
I was interested in the subject	3
Progression towards a well-paid career	2

Two options were by far the most popular here: to enable the participant to go to university, and progression towards a career they would enjoy. Note that 'enjoyment' is valued much more highly than security or pay levels when contemplating a new career.

We also gave participants the opportunity to give more information. The majority were on the theme of gaining qualifications in order to progress to university and/or a career. However enjoyment of learning was also mentioned, and one respondent commented that they had enrolled:

> To achieve something for myself. I was a child carer and have never stopped. This was something for me. It has not been easy as I live far from uni. But it is worth is.

Access courses and university entrance

Among our sample, access course participation is associated with a strong preference for pursuing higher education studies. We asked the 17 current access students how likely they were to progress to university/HE; 14 chose 'very likely' with the remaining three choosing 'somewhat likely'. Meanwhile all 13 participants who had completed an access course reported that they had subsequently enrolled on an HE course; this is likely due to the recruitment methods used for this study.

Support needs

Current support needs

Our next section asked "What areas do you need support in right now?", giving a series of options and inviting participants to select as many as they wished.

Because some of our respondents are current access students and some have completed access courses, they potentially have different needs at their current educational stage; we therefore separate the two groups' responses. These are the results for the 17 respondents who were current access students:

What areas do you need support in right now?	
Student finance eg loans, bursaries, travel grants	12
Higher education application process/UCAS	7
Career advice/progression	6
Time management	5
Mental health	4
Skills development	4
Household finance eg childcare costs, managing your money	4
Caring responsibilities	3

As can be seen, more than two-thirds had concerns about student finance. UCAS, career advice and time management were all selected by more than a third of participants.

Let us now turn to the 13 participants who had already completed an access course:

What areas do you need support in right now?	
Student finance eg loans, bursaries, travel grants	8
Career advice/progression	5
Mental health	5
Time management	4
Skills development	4
Household finance eg childcare costs, managing your money	3
Caring responsibilities	1
Higher education application process/UCAS	1

As participants had all continued on to HE, it is not surprising that in general, support was no longer needed with the UCAS process. In other areas support needs were remarkably similar, with more than six in 10 still feeling that they need advice with student finance.

We then asked “Which skills, if any, do you feel you need to improve?” Here are the results for the 17 current access learners:

Which skills, if any, do you feel you need to improve?	
Academic skills such as essay writing and research	11
Practical skills needed for my chosen career	6
Work experience	5
Understanding of pathways to higher education	3
Understanding of my career options	3
‘Soft’ skills eg communication, teamwork, networking	3

Academic skills were cited by around two-thirds of respondents, with practical career skills and work experience also chosen by more than a third.

Turning to participants who have already completed an access course:

Which skills, if any, do you feel you need to improve?	
Practical skills needed for my chosen career	6
Understanding of my career options	5
Work experience	3
Understanding of pathways to higher education	2
Academic skills such as essay writing and research	2
‘Soft’ skills eg communication, teamwork, networking	2

Here we find that academic skills have dropped right down the rankings; this is encouraging because it suggests that whilst this may be initially an area of concern, the current system is effective in endowing learners with these skills along their educational journey.

Practical career skills is the most popular choice among this group, followed by understanding of career options; this is understandable given the more advanced stage of education that this group is at. It is interesting to note that few respondents in either group felt that they needed to improve their ‘soft skills’.

We also asked all respondents if they would like to give any further information about skill support need, however none did so.

It is interesting to note that current access learners expressed more support needs than those who had completed a course; current learners listed an average of 2.6 areas of support need compared to 2.4 for past learners, and 1.8 areas of skills support compared to 1.5 for past learners. Due to small numbers, it would be unwise to refine too much upon this point; however it would be interesting to investigate further to see if the distinction is maintained and if so, what lies behind it.

Sources of support

The next two questions looked at participants' ability to access support with a variety of issues. Firstly, we asked whether respondents knew how to access support in a number of areas. This is what current access learners said:

Do you know where to seek support with…	Skills development	Career planning	Financial issues	Wellbeing
No	24%	35%	29%	12%
Not sure	29%	18%	12%	24%
Yes	47%	47%	59%	65%

These are the results for those who have completed an access course:

Do you know where to seek support with…	Skills development	Career planning	Financial issues	Wellbeing
No	8%	23%	8%	8%
Not sure	23%	31%	15%	8%
Yes	69%	46%	77%	85%

These are interesting results. Financial issues and especially wellbeing are reasonably well supported at access course level and very well supported at HE level. Skills development is less well supported at access level but significantly improved at HE, presumably because of the greater specialisation of the course being undertaken. Career planning, though, is not well supported at either stage, suggesting a structural issue with this aspect.

We then asked how helpful respondents had found a variety of groups and organisations in supporting them during their studies. These results are only given for current access students, as different organisations are available to university students; some respondents did not answer every question so not all figures total to 100%.

How helpful have you found these groups/organisations?	My college	Universities	Hello Future	Family & friends	Careers service
I do not use this organisation	0%	24%	59%	6%	47%
Not at all helpful	0%	0%	0%	6%	0%
Not very helpful	0%	0%	0%	24%	6%
Somewhat helpful	35%	41%	18%	29%	24%
Very helpful	65%	35%	18%	35%	18%

Note that despite the fact that recruitment for this survey was conducted by Hello Future, the majority of respondents said they 'do not use' the organisation. However levels of activity with this cohort are increasing, which should improve their awareness of the organisation.

Support delivery mode preferences

We asked learners' opinions as to the best way for support sessions to be delivered, using the question "Since the pandemic, a lot of provision has moved online, either temporarily or permanently. How would you prefer to receive support sessions?" Of 29 individuals who responded, 14 preferred face-to-face delivery, 13 blended/half and half, and two live online. This suggests that while learners have adapted to some provision being online, there is a resistance to activities moving to a fully remote model.

Progression to university

Choosing a university

We asked all participants how important a range of considerations were when choosing a university for future study. The response was as follows:

When choosing a uni/HE provider, how important are the following?	Easy to travel to	Offers distance learning	Offers the perfect course	Where family/ friends studied	Confidence the uni will help me achieve my career goals	High academic standards	Accessible to everyone
Not at all important	0%	17%	0%	70%	3%	0%	3%
Not very important	10%	33%	0%	17%	0%	7%	7%
Quite important	17%	30%	13%	3%	20%	33%	27%
Very important	70%	13%	83%	3%	73%	57%	57%

As can be seen, the perfect course is the most important factor, followed by an institution that will help to achieve career goals and one that is easy to travel to. Offering distance learning is not so much of a factor, and an institution where friends or family studied is not seen as at all important. On this last point, however, there is a distinction between choosing a university *because* a family member or friend attended, and being *influenced* by this fact; in practice, research shows that individuals are often drawn to institutions where they have personal contacts simply because of the higher levels of information this brings.

We also asked participants to give any other information about their choice of HE provider. Location was named as a factor: "I want the placements to be close to where I live [as well as the university itself]." Mental health support and understanding of family and part-time work commitments were also mentioned, as well as the overall character of the institution:

> Good university ethos. A university that welcomes working class backgrounds.

> I want to be seen as a person with a name and not just a number that attends the university.

University and me

We then asked respondents for their views about university. Because respondents who had already completed an access course have some personal experience of HE, we separated out the two groups for comparison. This is what current access learners said:

	I would fit in well at university	HE is for people like me	I can succeed academically at university	HE will help me to achieve my career goals
Strongly disagree	0%	0%	0%	0%
Slightly disagree	0%	12%	6%	6%
Slightly agree	59%	29%	47%	12%
Strongly agree	41%	59%	47%	82%

Those who have completed an access course, meanwhile, said:

	I would fit in well at university	HE is for people like me	I can succeed academically at university	HE will help me to achieve my career goals
Strongly disagree	0%	8%	0%	0%
Slightly disagree	31%	8%	0%	0%
Slightly agree	23%	38%	31%	23%
Strongly agree	46%	46%	69%	77%

As can be seen, both groups of respondents are very positive that higher education will help them to achieve their career goals. Among current access learners, six in 10 strongly felt that HE was for people like them, but only four in 10 strongly felt that they would fit in well. Meanwhile less than half felt strongly that they could succeed academically at uni.

By contrast, those with HE experience are more likely to feel strongly that they can succeed academically at university, presumably because of positive experiences; however a small number of post-access course respondents were less positive about 'fitting in', or university being 'for people like me'; again, this is presumably due to personal experiences.

Conclusions

These results hold some interesting findings which suggest how access learners might be better supported in the future.

It is clear that money worries, and associated issues of balancing study with paid work, are the most daunting obstacle in returning to education; given this, it is unsurprising that participants identified student finance as the area in which they are most in need of support.

In terms of skills, current access students were most likely to say that they needed to improve their academic skills. However those who had progressed on to HE did not express this, suggesting that existing educational systems are well adapted to tackle any deficits in this area. There may, however, be benefits in discussing this issue with learners; while under half of current access learners were sure they could succeed academically at university, seven in 10 alumni were of this view, suggesting a positive experience. This implies that instilling greater confidence in academic performance would not be misplaced.

At the other end of the spectrum, it is interesting to note that few respondents felt the need to improve their 'soft skills'. It is therefore worthwhile considering whether any such sessions currently being delivered are the best use of resource.

Asked if they knew where to go for support in various areas, access alumni were generally more likely to answer positively, presumably because they were able to access developed support systems within universities. Current access students were reasonably well supported in terms of finance and wellbeing, but less so in terms of skills development and career planning.

In fact it is in career planning that the greatest 'gap' seems to emerge. Whilst skills development support improved once access learners reached university, career support did not. Moreover, understanding of career options actually increased as a source of concern after an access course was completed. This suggests that more interventions in this area could be of real and lasting benefit to adult learners.

In terms of attitudes to university, respondents were in general firmly of the belief that university would help them to achieve their career goals. However while many current learners agreed that HE was for 'people like me', fewer were sure they would fit in. Meanwhile among access alumni, who had subsequently enrolled in HE courses, there were a small group who disagreed with both these sentiments. This suggests that more information about the student experience and what to expect at university could be beneficial both before and during the transition to HE.

As to how this support should be delivered, our respondents were open to a blended approach, with around half preferring a mix of in-person and online delivery, while half preferred fully face-to-face. There was little appetite for fully online intervention programmes.

These results, then, suggest pursuing a face-to-face or blended programme of interventions including elements of student finance, exploring career options, instilling confidence in academic ability, and giving information about student life. It would be useful to undertake a programme of qualitative research to investigate these issues in more depth.