

Institution: University of the West of England, Bristol		
Unit of Assessment: 23		
Title of case study: The Paired Peers project: Improving access to the university experience and graduate careers for young working-class people		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010 – 2017		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Prof Harriet Bradley	Professor of Gender and Employment	Jan 2013 - Aug 2018
Prof Ann-Marie Bathmaker	Professor of Applied Research in Further Education and Lifelong Learning	Jan 2007 - Aug 2012
Dr Richard Waller	Associate Professor of the Sociology of Education	Sept 1995 – present
Dr Michael Ward	Research Associate	Sept 2014 - March 2015
Dr Vanda Papafilippou	Research Associate	April 2015 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2010 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>UWE's Paired Peers research project led by Professor Harriet Bradley, resulted in socially and economically disadvantaged university students nationally having better access to the personal and professional opportunities offered by the university experience. The underpinning research, funded by successive grants from the Leverhulme Trust, revealed how social class inequality affects university admissions, student experiences and graduate outcomes. Through informing the work of prominent bodies including the Social Mobility Commission, HEFCE, OfS, Sutton Trust, and universities across the sector, the research led to changes in government guidance, third sector interventions, and improvements to widening participation practice and university admissions policies. More broadly, it has shaped institutional thinking and priorities; influencing how students benefit from university and their transition into employment.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Social class has long influenced a young person's likelihood of going to university, and for those who do, the institution attended, subject studied and graduate outcomes. This longitudinal, largely qualitative project identified the processes by which such inequalities are operationalised and maintained.</p> <p>Paired Peers consisted of Phase One (2010-2013; G1), and Phase Two (2014-2017; G2), following an initial cohort of 90 undergraduates studying one of eleven degree subjects at either Bristol's University of the West of England (UWE) or the University of Bristol (UoB). We recruited four students at each institution per subject, two working-class and two middle-class, permitting comparison between their experiences and outcomes by class, gender, institution attended and subject studied. Phase Two followed 56 of the original participants for three years beyond graduation. We examined the processes by which higher education promotes social mobility</p>		

and/or maintains existing social inequalities and made recommendations for policy-makers and practitioners to address the issues identified.

Phase One: The Student Experience

Phase One highlighted the higher rate of working-class students dropping out of university (R1), and for those remaining, the disparity in poorer students' access to activities including work placements and internships, and engagement with cultural events and/or university clubs and societies (R2, R3). This limited their opportunities for CV enhancement and for benefitting more widely from their time at university. The barriers to participation identified were partly financial (i.e. the activity's cost, or the need to spend non-study time earning money), resulting in us recommending improved financial support schemes for students from poorer backgrounds to fully access and benefit from such activities (R2, R3).

Reduced CV enhancement possibilities subsequently restricted working-class students' access to many graduate employment opportunities, which we identified as 'a shift in the rules of the game' (R2 p741). Working-class students faced cultural barriers too, with many upper middle-class students being far more cognisant of needing to undertake such activities to improve their appeal to graduate employers. This sort of knowledge was advantageous to middle-class students during the transition into graduate careers (R3, R4, R5), maintaining social inequalities despite mass participation in higher education.

Phase Two: Graduate Outcomes

Phase Two revealed post-university patterns marked by divergence regarding employment or further study (R2, R4). As we predicted, these variable experiences are significantly informed by class and, to a lesser extent, gender (R4, R5, R6). Working-class students generally settled more slowly into careers and earned less. Fewer remained in Bristol for work or moved to London where graduate opportunities were more widely available, largely for financial reasons; they often lacked the necessary monetary support or social networks to move to, or remain in, areas of high housing costs whilst earning lower graduate entry-level salaries (R4). Sharp gender differences were exposed, with greater numbers of women entering teaching, despite this not being a declared aspiration when the project started (R3, R4, R5).

We noted at the end of Phase One a strong institutional effect (R3). The UoB 'cachet' is attractive to employers and some UoB working-class students benefitted accordingly (R2, R4, R5); conversely some middle-class UWE students ended in less prestigious jobs than they anticipated. Phase Two demonstrated a compounding of these institutional effects regarding ongoing employment opportunities. We found that educational capital alone is insufficient to secure successful graduate outcomes; the 'rules of the game' have changed, continuing to advantage those from middle-class backgrounds enjoying access to informal networks.

3. References to the research

R1 Bradley, H. (2017) 'Should I stay or should I go?': Dilemmas and decisions among UK Undergraduates. *European Educational Research Journal*. 16(1), pp.30–44.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904116669363>

R2 Bathmaker, A-M., Ingram, N. and Waller, R. (2013) Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: Recognising and playing the game. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. 34 (5/6), pp.723–743. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.816041>

R3 Bathmaker, A-M., Ingram, N., Abrahams, J., Hoare, T., Waller, R. and Bradley, H. (2016) *Higher education, social class and social mobility: the degree generation*. London: Palgrave MacMillan <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-53481-1>

R4 Bradley, H. and Waller, R. (2018) Gendered and classed graduate transitions to work: How the unequal playing field is constructed, maintained and experienced. In: Waller, R. Ingram, N, and Ward, M., eds., (2018) *Higher Education and Social Inequalities: University admissions, experiences and outcomes*. London: Routledge/BSA, pp.210-230

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315449722-13>

R5 Papafilippou, V. and Bentley, L. (2017) Gendered transitions, career identities and possible selves: the case of engineering graduates. *Journal of Education and Work*. 30(8), pp. 827–839.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2017.1375088>

R6 Ingram, N. and Waller, R. (2014) Degrees of Masculinity: Working- and middle-class male undergraduates' constructions of contemporary masculine identities. In: Roberts, S., ed., (2014) *Debating Modern Masculinities: Change, continuity, crisis?* London: Palgrave MacMillan. pp.35–51 https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137394842_3

Evidence of the quality of the supporting research

G1 Bathmaker, Ann-Marie and Waller, R. (PI Harriet Bradley, then at University of Bristol) *Paired Peers: the impact of class on student university experience*, Leverhulme Trust, 2010–2013, £36,163

G2 Bradley, H. and Waller, R. *Paired Peers: Moving on up? The impact of social class on graduate destinations*, Leverhulme Trust, 2014–2017, £234,552

The Bathmaker *et al.* (2016) project book cited above (**R2**) won second place in the *Society for Educational Studies'* annual prize for book of the year.

4. Details of the impact

Policy-makers and government bodies

Paired Peers research informed OFFA's guidance supporting students to improve retention and attainment of under-represented and disadvantaged groups, helping OfS 'develop new guidance better addressing the needs of different groups' and influencing '[its] strategic focus on access, retention and success' (**S1**).

Influencing HEFCE's thinking on tackling differential outcomes, Paired Peers fed into the Addressing Barriers to Student Success programme and specification, which promotes equality of opportunity and improves student experience (**S1**).

Paired Peers' identification of the challenges faced by, and requirement to support WP students, influenced the 2014 *National Strategy for Access and Student Success in Higher Education's* focus on retention and success (**S1**; **S2**, p55). The strategy's legacy is a far greater emphasis on the full student lifecycle, with a stronger focus on continuation, attainment and progression into further study and work (**S1**).

The Social Mobility Commission (SMC)'s major *State of the Nation 2018-2019* report is 'directly influenced' by **R2** and **R3** in its conclusions on how socio-economic background affects students' experiences (**S3**, p94; **S4**), and its recommendations to government on the divided culture and access to financial support (**S3**, p103; **S4**). **R2's** findings on the importance of access to extra-curricular activities were adopted by social mobility charity The Sutton Trust in an important report, *Leading People 2016: The Educational Backgrounds of the UK Professional Elite* (**S4**), along with recommendations from **R3**. Those findings also informed SMC/Sutton Trust's report *Elitist Britain 2019: The educational backgrounds of Britain's 'leading people'*, shaping recommendations for organisations addressing the issue of associating 'talent' with

characteristics unconnected to performance. Paired Peers' findings (**R2**, **R3**) also led to SMC arguing for greater financial support schemes for students from poorer backgrounds (**S4**).

A further key impact attributed to Paired Peers is a change in working practice within OfS. OfS now works more closely with academics, finding from its experience on Paired Peers that this generates greater buy-in and has a stronger effect on behavioural change (**S1**).

R5's insights into differential gendered graduate outcomes informed a 2019 Government Equalities Office report on Women's Progression in the Workplace on the importance of support networks (**S5**, p28) and cultures of presenteeism (**S5**, pp29-30, p49).

Third sector organisations

The Chief Programmes Manager at social mobility and youth development charity Villiers Park Educational Trust states, '*outcomes from Paired Peers continue to impact on the work of third sector organisations*' (**S6**), supporting practitioners' engagement with key concepts including social and cultural capital, and facilitating '*targeted evidence-informed interventions*'. At Villiers Park,

'its discussion of the differential student experiences of social, cultural and academic transition...informs the design of our programmes, especially our focus on supporting pre-HE students to develop the skills, behaviours and knowledge needed to avoid falling foul of the 'hidden curriculum'' (**S6**).

In 2014, Debrett's established a charitable foundation to support and champion social mobility and offer opportunities to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Paired Peers research was '*a point of evidence in building awareness*' among influential individuals, helping

'demonstrate the need for the Foundation and to ensure the vital support required to launch, maintain and fund it was obtained' (**S7**).

The Bridge Group works with universities and employer groups to expand access to graduate employment opportunities. Paired Peers informed its reports (2018, 2020) into higher education, graduate careers and social mobility, '*shaped wider thinking for the charity on uneven graduate outcomes by social background*' and provided a '*much needed longitudinal research*' evidence base (**S8**).

University sector

Paired Peers intensified university sector focus on the impact of being 'first in family' into HE, in terms of access and student success (**S6**). Its findings have fed into access agreements across a wide range of universities (**S1**) with institutions changing specific policies on WP and the student experience. One WP expert testifies,

'[Paired Peers] has had a significant influence on contemporary WP practice and delivery often directly, but also through introducing evidence-informed factors that have been more broadly absorbed into sector thinking' (**S6**).

At the University of Sheffield, Paired Peers '*had a clear impact on working practices*' (**S6**), addressing disparities in HE application and decision-making knowledge; social 'fit' and first year transition; access to the 'hidden curriculum'; and work experience bursaries supporting disadvantaged students. It increased focus on a '*whole student lifecycle*' approach to WP: **R3**'s '*getting in*', '*getting on*', '*getting out*' structure influenced the University's 2012-13 Access Agreement. The research shaped the University's own longitudinal student experience project, and the success and profile of Paired Peers made a '*significant contribution*' to securing funding for additional research following students into careers (**S6**).

From 2015 onwards the University of Bristol introduced policies addressing 10 key recommendations from Phase One, including funded internships for members of underrepresented groups, a fee waiver and bursary scheme, an accommodation bursary encouraging greater social mixing in halls of residence, professional mentoring for undergraduates, and postgraduate bursaries for students from low-income families (**S9**).

At Oxford Brookes University the decision to make the building of cultural capital a core aspect of the student employability strategy in 2016 was '*directly driven*' by Paired Peers research (**S10**). Waller's research on the impact of cultural capital on student employment choices was also '*a critical strand of strategic direction*' at Bucks New University (**S10**).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1 Testimonial from Director of Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S2 Atkins, M. and Ebdon, L. *National strategy for access and student success in higher education*. Published by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. April 2014: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/299689/bis-14-516-national-strategy-for-access-and-student-success.pdf

S3 *State of the Nation 2018-19: Social Mobility in Great Britain*. Presented to Parliament pursuant to section 8B(6) of the Life Chances Act 2010: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/798404/SMC_State_of_the_Nation_Report_2018-19.pdf

S4 Testimonial from Commissioner, Social Mobility Commission, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S5 Jones, L. *Women's Progression in the Workplace*. Government Equalities Office. October 2019: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840404/KCL_Main_Report.pdf

S6 Testimonial from Chief Programmes Officer, Villiers Trust, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S7 Testimonial from Chief Executive, Debretts

S8 Testimonial from Head of Policy, The Bridge Group

S9 Testimonial from Pro Vice-Chancellor for Education, University of Bristol, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S10 Testimonial from Interim Pro Vice-Chancellor for Education Bucks New University, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team