

Does the school shape the student? Comparing pre-university educational experiences of current undergraduate home Warwick students to assess transitions to university.

Kieran Barry and Thalia Sheriff-Horner

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#stateschoolproud

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1. Introduction

Within the English education system, attending an independent school remains the gold standard of academic routes for post-16 education. The stratification of education, which separates into state non-selective, state selective, and independent schools, is thought to expose pupils to learning content that is best tailored to their ability. Of course, in reality, pupils can range in ability at any school type. In fact, discussing educational experiences with students for the duration of this project has resulted in the same idea being suggested: the difference in exposure is not in academic content – but in superior extracurricular opportunities.

This is an opportune time to review the post-16 educational experiences of students. This research starts by reviewing the current literature available and identifying key similarities/differences between the three school types. The next section describes the methodology used to carry out this research, as well as the data analysis undertaken. The following two sections review the data on the experiences of Warwick students during post-16 education and their transition to university. The final section discusses the question of schools and their lasting impact on students in attendance.

While being low in their number, state-selective and independent schools are disproportionately represented within elite university populations. Irrespective of students studying at Warwick entering with similar grades (averaging A*A*A* (The Guardian, 2022)), there is a large disparity between the skills that students transition to university with. Studies consistently display high levels of focus on non-cognitive skills at independent schools, with pupils “[prepared] to become future leaders” (Roberts, 2009). Likewise, those in attendance at state selective schools appear to share similar traits. The Department for Education, responsible for children’s services and education in the UK, stated stratification to be a feature of the English education system, “with children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds distributed unevenly across schools”.

Despite this, critics of this stratified education system have grown, particularly within the academic community (Bolliver & Swift, 2011), appearing to be the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on rates of entry to higher education by school type. School types that are few in number are routinely overpopulating elite universities, and those attending state non-selective schools appear most likely to be underrepresented, leaving many involved within higher education and education more generally asking, does the school shape the student – or not?

2. Literature Review

This section reviews a range of published articles and reports to summarise existing knowledge on the relationship between school type, access, and transition to university. This includes both evidence on the educational outcomes of these groups, and studies on related factors that might help to explain any differences in experience and transition, the aim of which is to map the educational terrain in the current study. We cannot claim to present an exhaustive review of the literature on this topic: a search of online databases produced few relevant results on the impact of post-16 institutions. This issue was also the same regarding experience in terms of wellbeing and specific subject struggles faced by Russell Group and Warwick students. We have opted instead to synthesise the findings from several selected individual reports to help illustrate a particular point.

Focusing first on the educational experience of A-Level students, this sub-section will show that knowledge about specific school types is limited and focuses on the disadvantages faced by students attending state non-selective schools, rather than the advantages gained by attending an independent school. The literature review will then consider progression to university and the support provided by the respective schools – highlighting many differences between the resources available at these schools; and that an understanding of the factors that result in a better transition to university study is necessary. A bias in terms of coverage towards literature focusing on the transition to specific degrees exists, though this is likely a reflection of the need for these specific degrees to increase the diversity of student cohorts. Readers should, however, bear this in mind since findings from one degree do not necessarily apply to overall student experiences in the university transition.

We have deliberately decided to not consider the educational outcomes of A-Level students within this literature review. Statistics have for many years shown a large disparity between the educational attainment of A-Level students at state non-selective, state selective, and independent schools generally (Department for Education, 2021). This attainment gap is better considered elsewhere in further detail as the nature of Russell Group admissions, and specifically the University of Warwick's, sees the average entry tariff of students at 170 UCAS points (A*A*A* (The Guardian, 2022)), meaning a detailed review is not relevant for this study.

2.1 Educational experiences of A-Level students

2.1.1 State Non-Selective

Formal testing influences the type of school attended (Bolliver and Swift, 2011); sorting students by ability and implicitly informing self-perception of academic performance. If students 'fail' the test and are not accepted to selective schooling, they attend non-selective schools perceived as being for students of lower ability. Therefore, low aspirations and self-esteem are common feelings in non-selective schools, where intelligence is largely seen to be a fixed quality that cannot be changed.

Negative events, such as poor academic performance, causes a feeling of hopelessness amongst students (Houston, 1995), who ultimately would rather perform poorly through a lack of effort rather than be perceived as being of low ability. Existing studies (Ahmavaara and Houston, 2011; Bouffard et al., 2003) suggest that perceptions of academic performance directly impact future performance and aspirations. Low self-esteem directly impacts results, meaning students who feel they are 'bound' to perform badly will not achieve as highly. Combined with the large emphasis on testing in the English education system, students who have experienced these feelings will begin to disengage from schoolwork for a fear of failure.

It is difficult for students to engage with extracurricular activities and the character development they encourage. Existing reports (Demos, 2015) show that state non-selective schools fail to provide these

opportunities, as a result of resourcing and curriculum restraints, forcing low extracurricular involvement. Students are therefore unable to develop their soft skills through the same opportunities their peers at independent schools can access and engage with leaving social capital skills underdeveloped (Adams, 2015).

2.1.2 State Selective

While Boliver and Swift (2011) posit that there is a marginal difference between the education provided by state non-selective and selective schools, the curriculum taught by the school has an impact on the social mobility of the student (Iannelli, 2013). An advantage is given to those attending selective schools, as their curriculum is designed to “[educate] the future leaders of society” (Iannelli, 2013, p.924), allowing them to study more academically challenging subjects. Selective schools prioritise ‘high-status’ subjects based on their level of difficulty; including languages, English, mathematics, and science (Smith-Woolley et al., 2018, p.5). The academic curriculum at these schools is, therefore, more advanced and demanding, and are the subjects preferred by the elite Russell Group institutions that are not available at non-selective schools (Broughton et al., 2014).

First coined by Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is a personal judgment of “how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations”. In the context of education, self-efficacy is a student’s belief in their ability to academically succeed. Ireson, Hallam, and Plewis (2001) argue that high-ability children have higher aspirations and better self-esteem than lower-performing students, so framed in the context of selective schooling, students in attendance have higher achievement aspirations through confidence and self-esteem. This ultimately sees students attending selective schools holding higher levels of motivation and persistence, making entry to elite universities more likely. Overall, selection based on academic performance has a clear impact on perceived performance, with students at selective schools holding higher aspirations.

2.1.3 Independent Schools

Broughton (2014, p.9) suggests that an “independent school premium” exists through the learning environment fostered by these schools. Like selective state schools, students attending independent schools have a higher achievement aspiration, allowing the development of character that “prepares its pupils to become future leaders” (Roberts, 2009). The sense of confidence and high self-esteem instilled is therefore not the feature of one independent school, but the hallmark of many.

Independently educated students ultimately leave their education as self-reliant, self-disciplined, and ambitious individuals – which partially explains the premium placed on students with strong non-cognitive skills.

Independent schools offer a wide variety of extracurricular activities, such as debating, volunteering, or outdoor activities, as they are not dictated by the same curriculum restraints as state schools. Students are therefore more likely to develop soft skills (like communication and teamwork). With no timetabling commitments, independent schools can cultivate skills valued by employers and universities alike by encouraging involvement in sports, music, and community service.

Beyond the core subjects offered by state schools, independent schools offer a greater array of subject choices, including Latin, Classics, and the History of Art (SCIS, 2021). The level of education offered to students is therefore enhanced, with greater curriculum autonomy meaning these subjects become more exclusive and can only be accessed by those in attendance to elite post-16 education providers.

2.2 Progression to University

If applying to a university in the UK, students can apply for up to five institutions, including one application to either Oxford or Cambridge. Many will rely heavily on the school they attend to support them with the UCAS process – including career advice and reference writing.

2.2.1 State Non-Selective

Studies (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018) indicate that while a large proportion of applicants to higher education attended state non-selective schools, this dramatically decreases for Russell Group applications (67%) and Oxbridge (44%). Widening participation is an issue across all elite universities, meaning that students from state non-selective schools are underrepresented. This is also seen in acceptance rates, whereby 44% of students applying from comprehensive or sixth-form colleges will gain a place at a Russell Group, and a fifth of those applying to Oxbridge will be offered a place (Bursnall, Naddeo and Speckesser, 2019).

Many non-selective schools are unable to support their students with university applications, meaning that they cannot access the same level of guidance that those attending selective or independent schools are able to. First introduced to make the university application process fairer (Paton, 2010), the personal statement does very little to ensure the performance advantage enjoyed by independent schools is curbed. Non-selective school students receive less help when writing their personal statements, struggle to reference work experience or extracurricular activities, and are significantly more likely to make writing mistakes – continuing to entrench the premiums enjoyed by particular schools (Jones, 2012).

2.2.2 State Selective

Only 8% of all HE applicants attend a state selective school, yet they account for 20% of all applications to Oxbridge (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018). Of these applications, 31% will be offered a place of study – significantly greater than non-selective applicants who hold the same A-Level grades. Non-academic indicators (the personal statement) are to account for this large overrepresentation. Jones (2012, p.13) notes that these applicants list “3.63 activities per personal statement, while those from comprehensive schools and sixth form colleges mention about 2.97”. The experiences and character development that have been encouraged in this learning environment are therefore present in the personal statement, and with more targeted guidance and support, it is unsurprising that 63% of applicants from selective schools are accepted to Russell Group institutions.

2.2.3 Independent Schools

Despite only 7% of students attending independent schools, the proportion of independent school pupils starting university in 2020/21 was 18% (HESA, 2021), meaning that independent school pupils are comparatively over-represented within the university student population. 71% of these students applying to the Russell Group will gain a place, making them over twice as likely to be offered a place as state non-selective students (Bursnall, Naddeo, and Speckesser, 2019).

At most independent schools, students can access personalised support during the application process. It is this that explains how 100 students from Eton can be offered places at Oxbridge each year (Eton College, 2022), and how acceptance rates are incredibly inflated for independent schools. With more extracurricular provisions available to develop soft skills, students at independent schools are more likely to outperform in interviews and when discussing non-academic activities within the personal statement (Jones, 2012).

3. Methodology

In order to investigate the impact of educational backgrounds on the students' university experiences, a framework was developed to compare these experiences to find the main differences (and similarities, where there were overlaps between pre-university experiences). In order to do this, 9 students were recruited for data analysis.

For control purposes, these students were taken from all the university's subject streams, in order to ensure that the experiences of students in the group were not impacted by the differences in their subject backgrounds. It was also necessary to ensure that there was a representation of all the different educational backgrounds pre-university, which were split into state non-selective (*comprehensive*) schools, state selective (*grammar*) schools, and independent (or *private*) schools. The table below shows how this was set up for data collection (with all names mentioned being pseudonyms that the participants chose in their selection process):

	State Non-Selective	State Selective	Independent
Social Sciences	Benjamin	Rose	James
STEM	John	Tom	Matthew
Arts & Humanities	Jack	Alice	Helena

These participants were chosen to participate in three separate groups, split among the subject streams. Along with the control regarding subjects, the groups also aimed to control the impact of gender, race, and age, and so participants were a mix of genders, racial identities, and from all the Warwick Undergraduate year groups.

Some limitations are noticeable:

1. All STEM subjects' participants were male.
2. All state non-selective participants were male.
3. Not all subjects at Warwick were represented in the data collection process.

While these were not envisaged to be significant in affecting the data collected, it is important to recognise that using a sample of other students may have produced differing results.

Additionally, as the topic of our research could potentially be seen as politically contentious, we realise that it is more likely that participants were already somewhat aware, and active, in identifying the differences between distinct groups of students from differing educational backgrounds. It may be valuable in future research to investigate the recruitment of students that are less aware of these 'social mobility' differences and investigate whether the 'educational gap' between students would be greater as a result.

3.1 The data collection process

Moving into the phases of the data collection, there were two stages to the research process. Both were necessary to investigate educational differences and the impact of the focus group to synthesise recommendations. Any recommendations provided in this paper are informed by the personal responses of the students involved in the research.

Firstly, these students would participate in a focus group, chosen due to the assessed need for participants to react to each other's thoughts and experiences and actively learn from the others in the group. As Leung and Savithiri (2009) identified, and this project aimed to benefit from, this "piggybacking" was emphasised due to the need for participants to interact with one another in the process. This was also utilised in the supplementary survey where responses were informed by the focus group participation.

The focus group questions were designed to investigate a range of factors, both curricular and extracurricular, for each student and how these differed, or were similar, among students from the different school types. These looked at:

1. University life in the first term of the first year
2. Resources to support educational transitions – both from the university and from schools
3. School resources for the university application process
4. Quality of classroom teaching and education
5. Usage of external organisations, such as tutoring platforms and mentor schemes
6. Availability of extracurricular activities
7. Impact of the coronavirus pandemic on participants' educations
8. Sense of belonging within the university

This list was, however, not exhaustive, and supplementary questions were asked as needed to better understand participants' experiences. Participants also occasionally asked their own questions which informed themselves, which was helpful in reflective surveys and generated further discussion.

All of the different themes delved into as part of the focus group research aimed to better understand the differences in resources and experiences in schooling systems and how they affected the transition to university, both academically and socially. The findings proved interesting in identifying comparisons between students from differing educational backgrounds within the same subject stream.

Secondly, these students would respond to a reflective survey following their focus group participation. These surveys aimed to better understand the impact of sharing and reflecting on educational backgrounds, and how these affected students from these different backgrounds. These looked at several areas:

1. Whether participants felt positive about the focus group discussion
2. Whether the focus group connected or divided students along educational lines
3. Whether the focus group changed perceptions of different students
4. Whether the focus group facilitated learning and reflection on educational differences
5. Whether anything mentioned in the focus group surprised the participant
6. Based on the group discussion, what the participant would recommend to the University of Warwick to support students from differing educational backgrounds

These questions aimed to quantify the impact of having this discussion within the group, to further understand how research and discussions on educational backgrounds can be used to positively impact the experiences of university students. The hope of this research was that these discussions could be

used as an effective learning tool on how social backgrounds shape educational journeys, and to better understand and share any insights on educational inequalities within the UK.

3.2 Data analysis

All data analysis was performed following the submission of the reflective surveys, using a thematic approach to identify the participants' thoughts on each of the aforementioned categories. Focus group responses were transcribed and encoded to investigate and identify each of the participants' thoughts on these specific areas. This was supported by the thematic grouping of the questions in the focus group and reflective surveys, which aimed to collect responses on each of the criteria we aimed to look further into.

The nature of the focus group was such that individual questions were representative of the range of themes we wished to investigate in the subsequent research and data analysis. Thus, responses to the focus group were collated together in a 3x3 matrix across educational groups to identify comparisons, both across subject streams and across schooling types. This allowed the researchers to fulfil the main objective of the research in identifying comparisons between students of the different school types across themes, and additionally accounted for potential subject bias. Focus group data was analysed with the main intention to identify where participants shared experiences or differed in targeted educational areas mentioned previously. Research findings from the focus group will be split into themes to correspond to this analysis undertaken.

The reflective surveys were collated and analysed within a spreadsheet, in which the researchers on the project identified common (and differing) responses to each of the questions to more effectively understand how participants felt about the impact of the focus group *overall*. Due to the more concise nature of many of these reflective responses, participant reflections were investigated individually, as part of their subject grouping, and as part of their educational grouping to see where there were similarities within groupings. This allowed us to meaningfully comment on the responses of groups and where they may have differed across these groupings.

3.3 Discussion

All of the areas within the discussion are informed by participant responses, particularly on the recommendations to the university on where to more effectively help students in the early stages of their degree journey. These discussion pieces aim to respond to the literature review and identify where our research consolidated any of the previous literature on schooling backgrounds. It also aimed to identify where our findings challenged the findings, particularly with the research collecting findings on unprecedented impacts such as the COVID-19 pandemic and how these have affected students.

The research often identified impacts that were unable to be delved into further due to the relatively limited scope of our research question. Any impacts will be identified in the paper in the hopes that more meaningful research can be undertaken in these areas. The researchers respect how these characteristics have affected each of the participants and potentially also affected responses, and so pedagogical research in the future may benefit from further investigations into each area identified.

4. Focus group findings

This section will replicate the findings from the participants' conversation within each of the focus groups, investigating thematically the connections and divides between participants' university and school experiences across educational backgrounds. While this investigation does involve a variety of factors to investigate these experiences and why they may occur, these are not exhaustive of the experiences of all students within the University of Warwick and do not reflect all backgrounds.

Nevertheless, across subject streams, there were notable educational differences, as well as widespread agreements which will be reported. Likewise, in subject streams across the different schooling types, there were thematic similarities. The stories of all nine participants were crucial in investigating the extent to which educational backgrounds have shaped current university student experiences, along with other significant recurring themes. All findings are the unfiltered stories and insights of Warwick students, and their university lives.

This section aims to answer two crucial questions:

1. How significant is former educational background on university students, and how does this manifest itself in their experiences?
2. Where are there similarities between students from differing educational backgrounds, and what factors may contribute to these similarities?

In responding to both, this research will aim to discuss the lone impact of school background on the current lives of university students, when disaggregated from other significant factors also shaping these experiences.

4.1 Experience of the first term of first year

Generally, the transition to the first term of first year was difficult for the students surveyed, across schooling types. Those that found the term easier in terms of academics were those who had had prior experience with university study at other institutions, and who had been told about university life by family members. 7 of the 9 students struggled in their first term as they had no sense of what the university environment would be like starting, a sentiment not strictly confined to an educational type. This was difficult for them for two different reasons.

The first was with academics; as Benjamin mentioned, there was an "immediate brick wall" and he felt like he was "told to basically sink or swim". The lack of resources to assist with essays and academic study in certain subjects was noticeable, with the major complaint within academics being that students went from an environment of being given adequate resources in A-Level to not being provided with the same level of support at the start of university.

The second was with social lives; students surveyed felt it was overwhelming having to join societies and felt that making friends and meeting new people took a lot of their energy in the first term. This had a compounding effect on academics; students who struggled with the social side of university felt like they had less support in their academics from people around them and spent time from academics focusing on socialising instead. One student who was a commuter felt that socialising was made even more difficult by not living in halls, as she did not have the chance to interact with many students outside of her course modules.

There was a general consensus that university life was difficult at the start, but became easier throughout first year as students adjusted to life with minimal support in both academics and social lives. Rather than being given the support they felt they needed at the start, there was a gradual adjustment to the specific environment of university life and what was required academically. This

did not differ among the students from the different types of schooling, but rather was an overarching theme.

COVID-19 did have a notable effect between the different year groups of students in terms of their academic and social lives in the first term of first year; these findings will be reported later in the section.

4.2 University transitional resources

Building on previous comments on university resources, the majority of the students surveyed felt that resources were difficult to come across to help with the transition to university academics. The particular problem mentioned was with advertising resources. Students generally felt like, even where the resources were available, it was a difficult search for them or they had not realised they existed.

There were positive aspects to the university's resources, particularly in the quality of teaching. Where students mentioned teaching staff, this was positively; personal tutors, along with seminar tutors and professors, appeared to be the most useful resources to help with student transitions for all surveyed. Issues were instead largely raised with sparse communication from departments themselves (by Alice, Helena, John, and Tom), and by the university on which resources were available to support students. Students across schooling types agreed strongly with each other on these themes, suggesting similarities between university academic experiences.

There was also a particular struggle in life outside academics. Several students surveyed, including James and Tom, mentioned that there were few resources for supporting health and wellbeing, and for skills such as cooking and cleaning following home life. Tom, the selective state-educated STEM student, commented that he felt there was a lack of resources for mental health, with students not having a support network finding university life “absolutely miserable”, and their subject “[not] doing much in the way of reaching out to them and supporting them”. The theme of mental health was raised by several of the other students later in the group discussions.

This sentiment was reflected across students from separate schooling types and was, again, not distinct between these. Rather, this was a general struggle from students surveyed. Benjamin personally thought that setting more expectations for independence earlier on in the degree would have helped him look for more support and “figure things out on his own” instead of being overwhelmed by the sparseness of communications. This appeared to be a common issue with transitional experiences which students navigated in their own ways. The commonality between difficult experiences appeared to be stronger than any educational differences, suggesting that once the students started university, they adjusted and experienced similar critical overarching struggles.

4.3 School transitional/application resources

There was a large divide between the state and independently educated students in this area, as surveyed independent school students reported more extensive resources for university applications than surveyed state-educated students, from both non-selective and selective schools.

State-educated students reported a strong “Oxbridge and everything else” attitude within their school application resources which they felt meant that they were under-supported in the application process for other universities such as Warwick. All of the state selective students surveyed, for example, mentioned specialised application advice and talks for Oxbridge which were not replicated for students applying to other universities. When Benjamin felt that he wanted to apply to Warwick but not Oxbridge, he reported that “they essentially forgot about [him]” due to this focus, and John stated that he “had to do everything [in the process himself]”, with fellow students having “very low aspirations” and not applying to top universities as a result.

Jack furthered this thought in his own discussion by mentioning that his school was so focused on getting students A-Level grades that all of his preparations for university were neglected, as staff focused on teaching and results rather than preparations for life following the ending of schooling. This was one of the themes where the differences between educational backgrounds did become particularly clear, as independent students reported schools “moving the academic year forwards” specifically for university applications, having “pretty much every resource [they] could have asked for”, and “one to one regular meetings with [their] full time Head of Careers”. This was a stark contrast in the discussions to the state-educated student experiences of school resources.

However, with transitioning to university, only one student, Matthew, reported having teaching on coping with life at university post-Sixth Form. This was a particularly weak area across all schooling types, with schools largely focusing on applications over transitioning to university life. In general, this was an issue for all of the different types of students surveyed. An interesting takeaway from this theme that will be further discussed later, however, is how significantly application resources differed among educational types.

4.4 Quality of school teaching

Many commonalities occurred in surveyed students’ responses, with all students either having positive views on schooling or responding that teaching quality varied across subjects and individual teachers. As with many of the other themes, this was not divided by schooling type.

This was perhaps the most surprising theme result for us, as literature and popular media heavily suggested that teaching quality and resources differed across state and independent schools. We suggest that all students being from Warwick may have had an impact on these results, as several students mentioned in the discussions that they were the “overachievers” in their school and were thus more likely to have positive reflections on academics and teaching. This is especially compounded as students often placed Warwick at the top or near the top of their university choices, meaning that outcomes of A-Level teaching and university applications were perhaps more ‘positive’ than average.

This provides a strong indicator that teachers are the most positive aspect of the student educational experience and match up heavily with the previous finding that personal tutors and teaching staff at university were the most helpful in transitions to university. The focus on educational differences should perhaps not be on teaching quality and performance, but on resources made available to students to succeed.

Every student had reflections of particular teachers who had gone “above and beyond” and made a particularly positive impact on their pre-university educational experiences.

4.5 Role of external organisations

None of the students involved in the discussions had received support from external organisations, such as with tutoring and university application mentoring. Again, this did not differ at all across any criteria.

Some students had been aware of such organisations but had never engaged with them or been accepted for support. Other students had not been aware of these organisations’ existence, with Benjamin mentioning that “when [we] said external organisations, [he] had no idea what [we] meant”.

All students had mentioned not having support from these organisations, and rather engaging with all academic support, mentoring, and extracurricular activities within their school.

4.6 Engagement in extracurricular activities

There was a heavy divide in the take-up and offering of extracurricular activities for students. State non-selective students reported the lowest number of extracurriculars being offered to them, followed by state selective students, and independent students reported a significantly larger number of these activities being available to them during their schooling. Students from independent schools mentioned charity work, playing a variety of instruments in the bands and orchestras offered, tutoring younger students, and horse riding, along with a list of other potential activities they could have been involved with. On the other end, state non-selective students mentioned karate and Duke of Edinburgh awards as the activities available to them within their schools.

John notably mentioned that he did not “do anything extracurricular, as there was nothing on offer from the school”, but that he has “done a lot more with a big society culture” at university. All students did mention that they engaged in extracurricular activities at university, with the state-educated students on average spending more time on these activities. It became apparent throughout the discussions how big a disparity this was at A-Level, with state non-selective students having fewer activities and experiences to add to their university applications. This was less of a problem starting university, as all students reported on a variety of activities which they had been involved with since beginning their studies.

One student mentioned her experience working in a part-time job alongside her studies, with this significantly impacting her ability to engage and concentrate on academics as she needed income to support herself throughout the year. This was one of the independent students surveyed, Helena.

A particularly concerning topic that was raised often in the STEM students’ discussion was how poor their engagement was in extracurricular and social activities. All 3 students involved in the discussion had mentioned how much their studies had taken a toll on their ability to socialise and involve themselves with activities they wished to, as all of their time was taken up by academics. This was a much greater problem for these students than with the students in the other discussion groups. The consequence of this lack of time for socialising and life outside of studies was a particularly stressful transition to university, as STEM students reported a lack of support throughout their studies and no opportunities to take a break from their work. As a result of the agreement between these students on their workload and opportunities to socialise, STEM students were much less likely than other students to be given time they felt they needed outside of university; this was the common response from all 3.

Nevertheless, the impact of the discussion on extracurriculars was significant. Those students with the least engagement in these activities pre-university also felt more unprepared for starting extracurriculars later and tended to start ‘afresh’ in university rather than continuing prior activities.

4.7 The COVID impact on students

This research has the benefit of being able to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected student transitions and experiences in university. This was particularly notable, with all students having felt negatively impacted by the pandemic in some way.

This did, however, differ across year groups. Those students most heavily impacted by COVID-19 were those who started university in the 2020/21 academic year, having begun university during lockdown conditions. These students mentioned being heavily negatively affected by the impact on academics. Jack cited his experience of being downgraded in his A-Level results due to his school’s past performance in exams, which made him feel like “everything [he had] done before was for nothing”. Students who started in this academic year reported the worst mental health out of all students, for two main reasons which all students did touch upon.

Firstly, the academic experience of online learning was heavily criticised. Several students mentioned gaps in learning pre-university which left them behind in the essentials they needed to know for starting their degree. They also mentioned how difficult it was to strike a work-life balance with online learning, with students “always being switched on” due to watching lectures throughout the day, being more willing to not attend lectures and seminars, along with feeling isolated from their peers and from the traditional university academic life. Though, students did also tend to agree on the positive impact of online exams on their learning and wellbeing at the end of the year, showing that there were also some positive effects on academics.

Additionally, the social experience of university under lockdowns was highlighted frequently. This was one of the largest inhibitors to students effectively transitioning to university life. Students reported feeling alone from not being able to interact with others in-person, mental health issues from the experience of months of only “eating, sleeping and working” in their university rooms, and difficulties when working from home in spaces not set up for learning with frequent distractions. Students had a very common sentiment that they lacked support during the COVID pandemic, due to the inability to interact with students outside of their immediate households. One student went as far as to say that she felt out of place with her flat mates and was disadvantaged by only being able to be around them for months during lockdown.

As mentioned previously, mental health issues among the students surveyed became particularly difficult as a result of COVID. The lack of ability to interact with others and be able to live a university life outside of studies became a particular issue, with students entering first year during the pandemic being significantly impacted by these changes. Jack mentioned that he “missed out on a lot that [he will] never get to make up for”, and this idea of losing out on the university experience was echoed. Alice faced a particularly bad experience with her mental health which led to her taking a whole year to stay at home rather on the university campus, as her experience on campus during COVID “was not working for [her]”. This led to her becoming a commuter student for the following year, living with family and studying at home despite returning to in-person teaching.

Clearly, when assessing the transition to university in the past couple of years, COVID is one of the most important considerations; this cannot be disaggregated from the results of the discussions. Our observations in this area were, like many other themes, that students struggled across all different schooling types. The main differences among schooling types were that state non-selective students tended to be the least prepared for university academics, as they were the least likely to finish their A-Level courses and faced the most disruption to their learning. By contrast, other students were able to finish their learning and were in a somewhat better place at the start of the first year academically. Other than this, however, social and academic concerns were very similar.

4.8 Student sense of belonging

Every student surveyed through the focus groups mentioned that they had felt, at least at one point, like they did not belong in the university. This was, again, not restricted to certain school types; all 9 of the respondents agreed with one another on not fitting in. This was for three main reasons.

The first was on academic grounds, in which students felt like they were unable to keep up with everyone else academically and felt like they were lagging behind. Tom mentioned, along these lines, that he felt like he “particularly had been struggling” throughout the year, in comparison to other students on his course, and had never been involved in “the culture of doing well in your degree”. This was a sentiment reflected by several other students, who mentioned feeling inadequate or average compared to people who were achieving higher grades in their course than them. This reason had led to several students having issues with their self-worth and being able to feel like they belonged on their courses. Alice mentioned that this factor of never feeling like she could keep up with others on her course had “hurt the most” in her university experience.

The second was social, in which students, particularly during their first year, had felt that they were unable to connect and form strong relationships with other students. While this generally became easier as the student progressed throughout the year, there was a notable mention of students feeling very out of place at the start of their first year; this was exacerbated for students who had started their degrees during the COVID pandemic.

There was an interesting educational divide within this category. Benjamin mentioned during his focus group that “before [he] came to university, there was a feeling already that [he] didn’t belong (...) [people were] so different that there were some instances where [he] could not relate to these people at all”, due to others having vastly different schooling and life experiences to himself. Jack mentioned thoughts along similar lines, where he felt like Warwick was known for being “middle-class, upper-class, having a different crowd of people”. A sense of ‘imposter syndrome’ was common among the non-selective state students, and this was not reflected in the responses of the other groups.

The third factor was financial, and was not strictly bound to school types, but was an interesting social mobility factor identified. Helena, for example, was a privately educated student but had worked alongside university and had been unable to afford trips that other students on her course were attending. As a Languages student, she felt that some other students had been able to perform better due to being able to take trips to other countries throughout the year to practice their language skills. Additionally, these students mentioned their experiences with bursaries in their university experience. Students who did not understand what the bursaries were for had, as Rose mentioned, made students “made to feel ashamed for the fact that [they] don’t have as much money”. Other students who interacted with these surveyed students had been vocal about not feeling like this bursary was fair, making students feel like they did not deserve it. There was also a sense that the university had only offered the bursary to tick a diversity and inclusion criteria box rather than to really help students navigate university life. This was, as expected, a particularly emotional topic for students to delve into.

Therefore, all students felt like they did not belong in the university environment, but this was for different reasons as discussed above, which are important to separate from one another in the discussion on social mobility within universities.

5. Reflective survey findings

This section will cover the findings, collected through a reflective survey, of eight of the participants' experiences within the focus groups. This was a sequential project, and only focuses on the reflective survey that was completed, post-focus group. This section is organised into four main sub-sections that discuss reflections on: the experience in discussions, connections with other participants, changing perceptions, and recommendations for university support. This will answer the third research sub-question of whether the focus groups developed relatedness and addressed preconceptions.

5.1 Experience in discussions

Thematically analysing responses to the reflective survey, this subsection address the third research question: was the focus group effective in developing relatedness and addressing preconceptions and disparities? After coding responses and contextually considering the previous section, two themes appeared consistently throughout the responses. The first is the sharing of insights, and the second is inaccurate preconceptions.

5.1.1 Sharing insights can develop relatedness between participants

Although the participants all ranged in educational experience, they all reported feeling able to contribute to discussions. However, two participants noted feelings of alienation and notions of difficulty in the transition to university and with academics. For example, Benjamin reported feeling like “the only one that was struggling” at university but that the focus group “normalises these feelings”. These two participants did, however, note the focus group allowed them to learn from other students who had been in similar situations, reducing these feelings of alienation. Therefore, the sharing of personal experiences can contribute to the feeling of relatability between participants.

5.1.2 Discussions can begin to address unreliable preconceptions

Preconceptions were referenced within the reflective survey, and participants entered the focus groups with these. For example, Benjamin categorised students in their attendance (or non-attendance) to “better schools”. Thus, it is unsurprising that some schools are viewed as being superior to others. Moreover, the view of those in attendance at independent schools was of interest. For instance, Alice stated, “generalisations of independent school students are generally unhelpful”. Allocating individuals a label was identified as inaccurate as students have “different experiences” that may not necessarily correlate with advantages.

Additionally, another preconception refers to individuals either starting at the same position and coming from similar backgrounds or, individuals feeling they had it “worse than other people”. In this instance, Rose noted that “it is important that people understand, know and realise the paths of other individuals at university”. Thus, facilitating these discussions begins to address these common and inaccurate misconceptions.

5.2 Connections with other participants

This subsection explores the connections forged between participants. Participants were asked whether they were able to connect further or if the focus group acted to further divide participants. It will first consider the finding that the shared experiences during the focus group can forge connections, and secondly, that while connections may exist, there are still large disparities.

5.2.1 Shared experiences can forge connections

Seven of the eight participants noted in the second question that the focus group helped them to connect further over the similarity of experiences. For instance, Matthew noted that the “[focus group] helped us connect as it showed that our experiences weren’t that different and that we had more in common”. Similarly, James cited this allowed the participants to “empathise with each other's own perspectives”. This indicates that there was an indirect connection between the participants, uniting them through their personal challenges and strife.

5.2.2 Disparities can exist despite connections

Question 2 of the survey did offer participants the option to state if the focus group created a further divide based on educational backgrounds. One participant, Rose, felt this divide was exacerbated. For example, they stated that they “felt almost as mediator between the state school and privately educated people”. Tom similarly felt this divide as they noted some “non-selective schools do not have as much emphasis placed on preparing someone for university”. This indicates that while connections can exist, the differences in education can still create divisions.

5.3 Changing perceptions

This sub-section explores whether the participants felt the focus group was effective in addressing preconceptions. Participants were specifically asked if the experience changed their perceptions of other Warwick students based on the discussions. It will consider the finding that perceptions can be corrected through relatedness and, secondly, that perceptions may not change as a result of frequent exposure to accurate information.

5.3.1 Correcting perceptions through relatedness

Four participants noted that their focus group experience changed their perceptions. Benjamin, in particular, reflected that their negative perceptions were “nurtured in comprehensive secondary school and sixth form”. Tom, Matthew, and Benjamin all similarly remarked that their perceptions were changed as they realised the “majority of other [...] students do struggle with their course as university life”. This implies that inaccurate stereotyping exists in educational environments, and the focus group played a role in addressing this. In agreement with this point, Alice developed this to state that “Warwick University urgently needs to reconsider its approach to providing accessible education”.

5.3.2 Non-changing perceptions

However, three participants found that their perceptions had not changed. Rose and John similarly cited working in outreach and having similar conversations frequently for no change in their perceptions. However, James reflected that their understanding was “[deepened] on an emotional and social level”. This indicates that students with experience holding conversations about outreach and social mobility would be less likely to need to address any preconceptions.

5.4 Recommendations for university support

The final question of the reflective survey asked participants what they felt Warwick University could do to assist students in their transition and time at university. The recommendations can be split into two sub-sections: preparations for incoming students are a necessity for study and independent living, and secondly, that the welfare of current students must be prioritised.

5.4.1 Preparations for incoming students

Six of the participants noted the importance of Warwick providing explicit guidance on living independently at university. Matthew stated that these opportunities were essential for “preparing incoming students for adulthood”. Both Rose and Alice mentioned that the university should also advise on “how to do basic uni things like essay writing”, allowing students to know “what is required of [students] at the outset”. This indicates a need for sessions that advise students on life and study skills prior to attending university.

5.4.2 Prioritisation of wellbeing and welfare services

A focus on individual support was also recommended by two participants. Tom reflected that they “could be in a horrible place in my life, and the university wouldn’t know or care”. This indicates a feeling of disconnect between students and the administration. Benjamin also suggested that the university could connect students to avoid the “sense of alienation”, allowing others to “seek the necessary support”. This indicates that facilitating connections and interactions between students can prevent some of the struggles described by participants.

6. Discussion of results

This research project set out to discuss the importance of educational background in the transition to university, ultimately answering the question ‘Does the school shape the student?’. As has been reported, the findings of the research were particularly interesting, and a discussion of what these mean in practice is a necessity for a better understanding of the impact of the school on the student. Therefore, this section will go on to discuss what was found in the focus group discussions, and subsequent reflective surveys.

6.1. Focus group findings

The focus group responses, given our initial expectations of the project, were remarkably similar across the students from the different schooling types.

6.1.1. Responses were largely similar, and this was sometimes surprising

Where we expected responses on teaching to differ, for example, many of the students spoke positively about their pre-university teachers, and about the quality of their personal and seminar tutors during their studies at Warwick. This was, however, noted to be a potential consequence of the types of students attending the university: it is most likely, as participants noted, that they were pursuing top grades with the highest level of support from their teachers at A-Level studies. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that there were minimal differences between students, as they looked favourably on their teaching. This is because it yielded positive results in the form of a place at the University of Warwick following their A-Levels.

Rather than focus on the similarities, as there were many between the students surveyed, we aim to focus on where there *were* differences between students from different schooling backgrounds.

6.1.2. There were also significant differences between educational backgrounds

This brings us to a discussion of the main differences found in participant responses within the focus group.

6.1.2.1 University application resources were a differentiator

Significantly, the differences in university application resources were notably very different between state and independent schools. While state-educated students reported issues with Oxbridge candidates receiving significantly more support than others and application resources being very limited, independently educated students emphasised the importance of university applications within their school. Particularly surprising within this theme, given the emphasis on continued academic success post-Sixth Form for state selective schools, was the similarity between resources for state non-selective and selective students.

Naturally, this does not cover all schools across the country but makes for an interesting discussion. Given the level of academics needed for state selective school entry in the 11+ exam, attendance at a state selective school did not appear much more helpful for university applications than attendance at a state non-selective school. The biggest gap was between state and independent schools. We suggest that this gap needs to be bridged to ensure that students from different schooling types are able to have similar opportunities for university entry, and state schools have a duty to shift the focus from Oxbridge to ensuring that all students have sufficient resources to attend their preferred universities. With the average applicant at Warwick having the highest grades possible, the quality of personal statements and enrichment is clearly significant in the admissions process to distinguish applicants.

6.1.2.2 Extracurriculars are particularly variable based on schooling

This is related to the discussion on extracurriculars, as these may be distinguishing factors for university applicants and to assist with the ‘enrichment’ of prospective students. Our research indicates that there is a significant gap in the activities available to students from state and independent students, with state non-selective students surveyed having the lowest number of opportunities available at the pre-university level.

This matches up with the literature review and is a particularly concerning area to highlight. As mentioned, with applicants having similar grades to one another, extracurricular (and supercurricular) activities becomes a more important factor in the university admissions process as universities look for a level of ‘enrichment’ and engagement with one’s chosen subject beyond the scope of academics within post-16 education. However, none of the state-educated students mentioned any opportunities for this that they were able to engage with at their school.

On the other end of the schooling spectrum, independent students mentioned having far more extracurricular opportunities. As discussed earlier in the research, this identifies in several ways: namely, the level of confidence and transferrable skills which are borne by these activities; the support provided by the ability to engage with hobbies to take a break from studies; and the ability to make connections with people with similar interests.

They also provide interesting discussions in interviews for both university and job applications. While fortunate that all students were able to engage with a wide variety of activities alongside their university studies, state-educated students are generally more behind on necessary skills granted outside of studies to talk through. The discussion made it clear that these activities were particularly lacking for some students more than others, and the importance of expansion of these activities within state schools cannot be understated for student development and welfare.

6.1.2.3 In COVID times, state academics were insufficient preparation

A particular point about academics under COVID circumstances was raised, about the level of teaching done after the announcement of A-Level examinations being cancelled in 2020.

The state-educated students were hit the hardest academically, as their schools generally did not finish teaching the content of the A-Level course. Some students mentioned that this made the transition to university academics even more difficult, as they did not have the necessary knowledge from their A-Level studies to begin their courses well-prepared. While some departments such as Mathematics factored this into their courses by introducing A-Level recap modules, others assumed some knowledge that students who had studies halted early did not have.

Meanwhile, independent students in this year had all finished their A-Level courses under lockdown. The gap in learning between the two types of schools did make a marked impact on students.

6.1.2.4 Imposter syndrome was a state non-selective phenomenon

While all students mentioned not always feeling like they belonged to the Warwick environment, there was a particular key reason limited to the state non-selective students: that they assumed university was not for people like them. In several responses, Benjamin mentioned feeling that he was out of his depth, had nothing in common with a lot of the people he met, and already felt like he was not going to fit in before he even started university. Generally, there was a sense that universities would be full of middle-class and upper-class students that those from state non-selective backgrounds would not be able to assimilate with.

This is not to say that this feeling lingered; indeed, these students reported being satisfied with their Warwick experiences and even becoming friends with independently educated students after worries that they would not fit in with that ‘crowd’.

It is, however, important to note that this feeling was felt in the application and transitioning process. This sense of imposter syndrome before even starting was a distinct takeaway for us as researchers,

and may even explain the rationale in the literature of state non-selective students having lower expectations of themselves academically. This effect of not feeling like university ‘is for them’ was a particularly damaging mindset that students had to shake off in the transitioning process.

6.1.2.5 Other effects were also significant on transitions

While the research we undertook sought to look at the educational effect in isolation, we recognise that there were other effects that participants mentioned which affected their transitions to university.

These include the impact of COVID, the ‘STEM effect’ mentioned on STEM students’ social lives, the impact of disability on learning, the impact of working alongside studies and commuting to university, and the mental health issues faced by students which restricted how much they were able to engage with studies and university life.

This research is not able to consider the significance of these factors due to our research scope. But, further research into these factors may help to create a better understanding of the complexity and breadth of issues faced by students in their transition to university. Looking into these may help universities understand and aid this transition more effectively for all students.

6.2 Reflective survey findings

The reflective surveys, as previously mentioned, aimed to determine the impact of the focus group discussion on developing relatedness and addressing preconceptions about students from other educational backgrounds which students held.

6.2.1 Allowing students to share their insights is an effective tool to better understanding

Generally, as reported, students felt better by being able to share their educational experiences and challenges faced in university life; the impact of being listened to was particularly important to students. It also normalised students’ experiences by allowing them to share where there were key similarities in the challenges of transitioning to university. Going forward, we recommend more opportunities to participate in this way within university life.

Both as a learning tool and a way to air frustrations, students generally felt like they learned some things about other students that they had not known beforehand. This allowed them to address preconceptions about students from other educational backgrounds which they held. While this discussion has not delved into where there were similarities, there was significance in most answers being similar to one another: while not necessarily helpful to understanding differences, it was key to helping participants feel comfortable talking to one another and learning from each other’s experiences. Allowing contributions for participants to agree with others was significant in feeling connected to others.

6.2.2 Focus groups were significant in creating connections among educational divides

While not true for all participants, most surveyed felt that the discussions were key in creating these connections between each other. Participants, as mentioned, felt that they were able to relate to each other beyond educational divides which were previously in some cases holding students back from accessing support from students from other backgrounds to themselves. A positive takeaway from the discussion was that students generally felt more willing to access support from students with different educational experiences where they could help with academics and development.

While disparities between the students did still exist, the positivity of embracing such differences and contributing to the discussions in different ways was key. Having students able to connect with each other despite knowing that other students had unique life experiences is, we thought, a step towards a more inclusive and supportive university environment.

6.2.3 Students generally felt unheard by the university

Those surveyed had strong recommendations for the university which were very clearly issues that had caused frustration throughout university experiences. Allowing students a forum to air such frustrations with one another and realise they were not alone with these challenges was effective where this opportunity was provided.

But, students tended to mention in both focus groups and this survey that they felt that the university administration would not listen to or care about their problems. There is a clear disconnect between students and the administration, which could be resolved by allowing these discussions to take place with senior members of staff. Recommendations on prioritising wellbeing and expanding resources for incoming students are clearly key to students to create a more supportive environment in the difficult transition to university, and being listened to in these areas was, in itself, significant to the students who participated in the research.

7. Conclusion

As with many other issues, the COVID-19 pandemic has shone an intense light on the potential disparity between post-16 education providers and their impact on transitions to higher education. While academic performance has not been the focus of this research, there are credible concerns that limited extra-curricular offerings at state non-selective schools are leaving students underprepared in the transition to university (Demos, 2015). But this should also be seen as an opportunity for universities to step up and fill the gap for students in poorly resourced schooling environments by investing in skills provisions to address the gap in non-cognitive skills for its students.

By examining the impact of school types on students, this research established that education providers can have a significant effect on the non-cognitive skills students develop, with a strong correlation between the confidence and high self-esteem of those in attendance to state selective and independent schools. However, the strength of this argument was moderated by the independent school premium: participants at independent schools were far more likely to be equipped for university applications than their state-educated counterparts. This suggests that, while there is a disparity between all three school types, it is also important to consider the constraints that state education faces: students who attend state schools are seemingly most disadvantaged when it comes to transitioning to university.

This research strongly suggests that students from state non-selective schooling backgrounds experience imposter syndrome significantly more than other students. It further raises fundamental questions about the structuring of formal testing and its impact on the self-perception of, and actual, academic performance. There is, perhaps, a case to be made for reforming the approach to the acceptance to state selective schools. Using pass/fail testing may create perceptions of low intelligence, disenfranchising students from education before they even begin the rigor of secondary school. Reform is likely to be useful in challenging the idea that intelligence is fixed and may begin to address lower perceptions at non-selective schools.

It also raises numerous questions about the similarities that exist between students from differing educational backgrounds, and why these exist. This research aims to demonstrate that hosting conversations about educational impacts on students can be an effective method of connecting students together and allowing them to access support from one another. University pedagogy may benefit from the insight of the participants into the importance of such conversations on reconciling and sharing identities and experiences to further understanding of different life experiences. With this, universities can benefit from a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for all students where such conversations are normalised.

Further research into post-16 education and transitioning to higher education should focus on establishing how education might influence young people's experiences and opportunities. Furthermore, while this research measured experiences in terms of personal accounts, larger-scale studies are required to gain more insight into the nuanced categories of students – to investigate, for instance, whether a STEM effect exists, or how different the experience of disabled students might be.

Even with further research and investment in state education, it is still not clear how the independent school premium can be minimised. Schools play an incredibly important role in the lives of their students, but even with additional resources, it is unlikely they can fully address the inequalities that exist within a stratified education system. This research attempted to answer the age-old debate of whether the school a person attends can truly shape their future, and while it plays a part, students ultimately hold the power to make their own mark.

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